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A Tamil and a Muslim

T.SARAVANAN

Documentary filmmaker Kombai S. Anwar talks to T.SARAVANAN about how an identity crisis led him to research the history of Tamil Muslims



IN SEARCH OF ROOTS Kombai S. Anwar Photo: G. Moorthy

“If you don’t speak Hindi, what Muslim are you?” This question prompted Kombai S. Anwar to make a documentary. Called *Yaadhum*, it traces the roots of Madras Muslims. “It questioned my identity and pricked my religious consciousness,” says Anwar who has researched on the origin and history of Tamil Muslims for four years.

“When there are so many layers to one’s identity, religion alone cannot be a determining factor. I may be a Muslim by birth, but I also carry several other identities. I am also a Tamilian, an environmentalist and a ‘Maduraikaaran’,” he says. Anwar comes from Kombai in Theni district.

He wrote a 40,000-word article on the history of Madras Muslims for the Madras Gazetteer project in 2008. And this project inspired him to make a full-fledged documentary on the subject. The documentary was released last November and was screened at The American College, Madurai, recently. The film originally shot for 60 hours was edited to 56 minutes.

The documentary opens with a procession of a Hindu deity passing through a mosque in Anwar’s town. The voice-over explains the religious harmony of the place and how accommodative religion was in the olden times.

The film moves on to a madrasa in which Tamil translation of the holy Quran is taught.

“Islam acknowledges diversity,” says Anwar. He points to the verse from Surat-al-Hujurat 49:13 which celebrates a multi-cultural society.

The film talks of the spice trade that brought Arabians to the Indian subcontinent. Tamizhagam, in those days, which included Kerala, was a major transit point for seafarers proceeding to Sumatra and it became a resting place for the Arabian traders.

“Impressed by their sailing skills, Muslims were also employed as Admirals in the local kingdoms here,” says Anwar. The mosque in Muziris (now Kodungallur) is a standing example of the confluence of cultures, says Anwar.

“The interiors of the mosque have visible Dravidian architectural style. Mosques in China reflect Chinese architecture,” he points out. “Some of the oldest mosques in the state do not have any minarets or domes that are identified as Muslim elements. Architecture was always independent of religion. For example, the Tirumalai Nayak Palace in Madurai is often shown in films to lend a Muslim ambience,” he says.

Anwar quotes P.J. Cherian, Director, Kerala Council for Historical Research in his film. According to Cherian, the artefacts excavated in the Malabar Coast point to the existence of a pluralistic society, where people from various social and religious backgrounds including those from Mediterranean and Central Asian regions, coexisted.

“Trade not only brings commodities, but also ideas, technology and new thinking,” comments Cherian.

Yaadhum also delves into legends, myths and temple festivals. The puttuvizha in Madurai is cited as an example where generations of a Muslim family has worked for the festival.

Anwar refers to the Thiruvilayadal Puranam, where an episode talks about the Pandiyan King fetching Arabian horses

for the army.

“This shows the trade links that existed between the Tamil land and Arabia,” he says. Even today, music in mosques in the state bear Tamil influences,. The film shows a person singing songs based on Carnatic ragas at a mosque in Nagercoil.

There are Islamic literary works in Tamil, such as the *Mehraj Malai* , which talks about Prophet Mohammed’s journey to Mehraj.

The film depicts the harmonious relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the Tamil society.

“What I have done is just the tip of the iceberg. Now, I am sure of my roots. I belong to this place,” declares Anwar.

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