

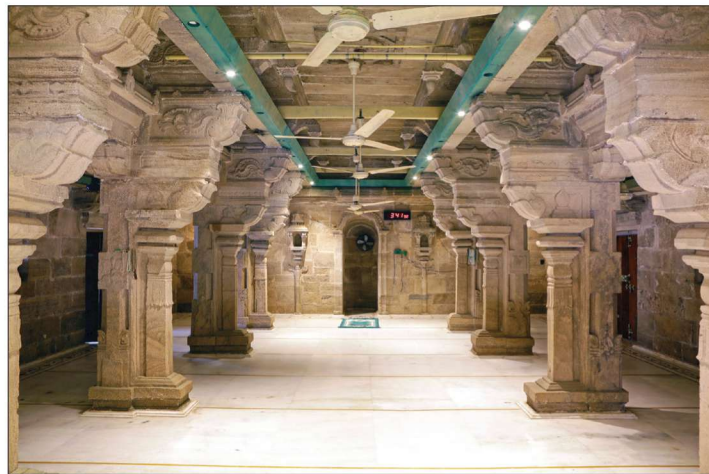
A DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER FINDS THAT TAMIL MUSLIMS' HERITAGE DATES BACK CENTURIES

IN SEARCH OF ROOTS

Amrith Lal | TNN

Who am I is an old question in philosophy. In our times, the question has assumed political overtones. For Kombar S Anwar, a journalist-turned-filmmaker, the question of identity became important in the 1990s, particularly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. A committed follower of the Dravidian movement, Anwar had defined his identity, until then, merely as Tamil. In the '90s, he was forced to confront his Muslim identity and its place in the larger context of being an Indian and a Tamil. It prompted him to look back in history, to the roots of his multiple identities.

Yaadhum (Everything), a 50-minute documentary, in Anwar's words a Tamil Muslim's journey in



search of his roots and identity, is the outcome of that quest. The film is a documentation of the history and the character of the Tamil Mus-

lim community. It affirms that traditions are syncretic through local stories, architecture and cultural practices. It shows Tamil Muslims



PAST PERFECT: Kombar S Anwar's film documents the history of Tamil Muslims; (left) the Kilakkarai masjid near Ramnad is built in the style of Dravidian architecture; (below) the edict at Udayamarthanda Perumpalli



have a history that dates back centuries and that their faith came with mystics and preachers who travelled with traders from West Asia.

The film begins in Kombai, a village near Theni on the foothills of the spice-rich Western Ghats, where Anwar, 48, was born. Faith, in the past, travelled on the spice route. From the coasts of North Africa and West Asia, once part of the Roman Empire, traders came to Muziris, the port city on the Kerala coast. With them came Christianity and Islam. The first mosque in India came up near present day Kodungallur, close to Muziris of yore, a thousand years ago. Anwar takes us to Korkai near Tuticorin, the grand port of the Pandyas. With trade came new goods, new food and clothing practices, and new faiths.

When Islam arrived in new lands, its followers embraced the local architecture, musical and linguistic traditions. Near Pulicat, an old trading post, we learn about Arabu Tamil, like Arabi Malayalam, born from the synthesis of Arabic and the local language. The old places of worship have a distinct Dravidian look. The old mosque near Uraiyur, considered one of the oldest in Tamil country, the masjid in Kilakkarai near Ramnad, are in the Dravidian architecture tradition with Islamic sensibilities.

Islam came to the heart of Tamil country, to towns like Nagore, with Sufi preachers. They attracted the devotion of even non-Muslim rulers. The stone edict of the 14th century Venad king, Uday Varma Marthandan, at the Udayamarthanda Perumpalli (big mosque) near Kayal-

pattinam, close to Tiruchendur, lists the grants he made to the mosque. Muslims officials like Sonakan Savor served under Raja Raja and Rajendra Cholas. Seera Puranam of Umaru Pulavar, a narration of the life of the Prophet written in the classical Tamil epic tradition, is an example of the rich literary heritage of Tamil Muslims.

In Madurai, on the banks of the Vaigai, Anwar discovers Puttu koil, a temple that blends features of both Dravidian and Islamic architecture. He meets Moideen Pitchai, a Muslim, who conducts an important ritual during the annual festival. This temple is a site of one of the Tiruvilaiyadal stories. The temple custodians and Pitchai are unable to explain the hoary history of the ritual, but Pitchai, pointing to his son, tells Anwar that he has carried on the family tradition of being associated with the temple and wants his son to continue the same.

These local histories and living traditions need to be remembered and retold to keep the social fabric from getting torn apart by communal elements. The journey, Anwar says, never ends. Yaatham, indeed, is just the beginning of a journey. A website of local histories and cultural expressions that, Anwar says, tells a history of peaceful co-existence of communities and of syncretic traditions, that distinguish the Tamil Muslim community as the proud inheritors of both an Islamic and a Dravidian heritage, is next.