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lights, camera, conversation...

A road movie about roots

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A journey within: The shooting of the documentary

Special Arrangement

A documentarian sets out in search of his identity and comes up with the untold story of Tamil Muslims

“O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other...” *Yaadhum*, a documentary by the filmmaker Kombai S Anwar, opens with this quote from the Quran, and the image that follows is practically a counterpoint — the procession of Lord Ranganatha along the streets of Kombai, in the Theni district of [Tamil Nadu](#), accompanied by traditional temple sounds from the *nagaswaram* and a large drum.

Then, as the procession passes the local mosque, we see the reason for this juxtaposition of word and picture: the investigation into the arrival of Islam in a place of Hindus and Tamils. In a voiceover, Anwar says, “While ‘who am I’ is never a question that bothered me during my growing-up years, it became quite important to me and to countless other Muslims, especially in these increasingly troubled times.” The documentary is labelled ‘A Tamil Muslim’s Journey In Search Of His Roots And Identity.’

Anwar told me that the idea for the film took shape from a paper he presented — *Tamil Muslims: The Untold Story* — at a national seminar. The paper was well received, and he was invited to give more talks on the subject. “After every presentation,” he said, “there would invariably be a few from the audience asking if a CD of the same material was available, so that they can pass it on to friends. With many such requests, and tired of the stereotyping of Muslims as well as the increasing polarisation, I thought I should make this the subject of a [documentary film](#), so that it can reach a bigger audience.”

When he started about four years ago, he found it difficult to get funding, as *Yaadhum* was seen as a “religious project.” So he went ahead on his own, with money from his sister, a few friends, and his professional assignments in photography and filmmaking, which included a series of short films on the Big Temple at Thanjavur commissioned by the ASI.

Yaadhum, which loosely means “all” or “everything,” showcases the close relationship between Muslims and those from other communities. In one stretch in Madurai, we meet the Muslim family that has, for generations, been building the fence around the sacrificial pit in Puttu Koil, the site of one of the Thiruvilaiyadals of Lord Shiva. “These relationships have evolved into kinship in southern Tamil Nadu,” says Anwar, who found it difficult to get permission to shoot inside mosques and temples. To film the prayers at the Kombai mosque, for instance, he had to ask the *jamaath* leaders (office bearers of the mosque), who, in turn, asked the congregation during the Friday-afternoon *Jumma* prayer. Only after they agreed could Anwar go ahead. The officials at the temple, on the other hand, wanted some time to think about it; eventually they said he could go ahead. Later on, when they got to know him, they admitted that they were initially wary about a Muslim showing interest in the temple, so they checked with a friend from the CB-CID. Anwar told me, “It was my luck that the CB-CID asked them not to worry.”

It is precisely these rifts that the film intends to bridge, by showing how, once, these rifts didn’t exist at all. At the site of a dig near Kodungallur, a major port of the Chera kingdom, Prof. PJ Cherian, Director, Kerala Council for Historical Research, speaks of its “multi-cultural character 2000 years back”, and how “people belonging to different cultural groups, different belief systems, different practices, different traditions had an opportunity to come together and have interfaces. They all may have come here as traders. But you know trade doesn’t carry just goods. It brings in ideas, technology and new thinking... Multiple groups from the Mediterranean, from the Saudi Arabian region, from West Asia, from the Mesopotamian region, from the Indian Ocean rims, all were active here.”

This cultural overlap is found in Tamil Nadu too — say, in the Vaishnavite pilgrimage town of Alwar Thirunagari, where the mosque is built in the Dravidian architecture style. Dr. Raja Mohamad, Asst. Director of Museums (Retired), Govt. Museum, Chennai, says that there are no regulations with respect to Islamic architecture. “All that’s needed is a quiet place for prayer. And while building this space, the builders adopted the local architectural style.” *Yaadhum* is some sort of [road movie](#), and Anwar’s stops along the way illuminate various aspects of Islam in the South and even Goa. He goes to Chola country, establishing the presence of Muslims through an inscription that refers to “Ahmed the Turk.” He goes to Kayalpattinam, which belonged to the Pandyas, and finds an almost 1000-year-old mosque to which additions have been made at different times. He narrates the history of the Tamil Muslims of Pulicat, most of whom are boat builders. He goes to Calicut, home of the Mapilla Muslims. Prof. MGS Narayanan, Director General, Centre for Heritage Studies, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of Kerala, talks about a law which is supposed to have been passed by the Zamorin that at least one member of the fishermen families in Calicut must get converted to Islam so that there will be enough people to support naval warfare against the Portuguese who wanted to conquer Malabar in the 16th Century. (Hindus were generally reluctant to go to sea.)

We see venues, like Kottar in Nagercoil, where Tamil-Muslim literature flowered. The Arabic, Persian and Urdu influences introduced many new genres to Tamil literature — Kissa, Nama, Padaipor, and Munajaath. Among the most pleasant surprises of the film — and one that underscores the narrative crux of cultural osmosis — comes in these portions. We see a palm-leaf manuscript of *Mihraj Maalai*, poems written by Aali Pulavar in the 16th Century in memory of the ascent of the Prophet, and then we hear Isai Aruvi Seera Aboobacker sing these verses like a *virutham* (a free-style rendition, not set to a beat) in the Carnatic *raga* Kapi.

At the end of the film, Anwar says, “I am only halfway through my journey.” He still has many more miles to go and oceans to cross, this time in search of the Tamil Muslim Diaspora — but he has no more doubts about his roots. “I am a Tamil, a Muslim, and so many other things. In short, I am all of this — *Yaadhum*.”

Keywords: [lights](#), [camera](#), [conversation column](#), [cinema](#), [documentaries](#), [Tamil Muslims](#), [Yaadhum](#)

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