FRONTLINE

ARTS & CULTURE » CINEMA
Published: February 19, 2014 12:30 IST | Updated: February 19, 2014 13:05 IST
INTERVIEW

Celebrating diversity

Show Caption

Yaadhum, a documentary tracing the roots of Tamil Muslims, evocatively portrays a syncretic tradition that allowed inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence. Kombai S. Anwar, the director, says the film also presents an antidote to the increasing radicalisation of society. By R. ILANGOVAN

FOR the film-maker Kombai S. Anwar, his 56-minute documentary *Yaadhum* (All) is an exciting journey that he embarked upon to trace his roots. He is quite delighted that it has strengthened his identity as a Tamil Muslim. At a time when society, sadly, is getting polarised, Anwar's attempt to trace his roots throws up many interesting facets of the Tamil Muslim community which has, over the years, evolved into a unique social group, acquiring an exclusive identity, though that evolution took place in an environment of harmonious coexistence.

To establish this syncretic identity, he banks on rich references sourced in history, literature, culture, and even architecture. He draws attention to the use of Dravidian architecture in many mosques in Tamil Nadu and to Kerala's indigenous style of construction.

Tamil literature and music have been enriched by significant contributions from Tamil Muslims. The songs of Seera Aboobacker on the Prophet in "kapi" and "bageshree" ragas, for example, are haunting ones. There is also the interesting inter-religious act in which a Muslim has, for generations, erected a protective fence around the *yagasalai* of a Hindu temple in Madurai for its annual festival. The family is proud of the hereditary practice and the man who is currently doing it says that "God willing, my son will do it after me." The temple authorities honour him for his work.

Anwar is an Indian, a Tamil, a Muslim and everything at once, *yaadhum* in Tamil. His journey, he says, continues. Excerpts from an interview he gave *Frontline*.

Your documentary attempts to tell the history and evolution of the Tamil Muslim community. But the seriousness and enormity of the subject must have made it difficult for you to compress the narrative to less than an hour in length.

True. We are talking about more than 2,000 years of history, beginning much before the Prophet Muhammad started preaching Islam. To confine it to less than an hour was impossible. So I have divided it into three parts. The first part, which was released recently, gives the background to the whole issue. See, a lot of things shown in the film are new. And when you throw so many new facts at an audience, there is only so much that a viewer can take.

Also, I have my financial constraints. I had to fund the first part from my pocket and with contributions from a few friends.

The film subtly challenges many assumptions about Muslim societies in the popular narrative. For example, it seems to overturn the widely prevalent notion of what is considered "Islamic architecture".

Yes. It challenges many popular assumptions or attempts to stereotype the Muslim community. When I moved from my village in southern Tamil Nadu to Chennai, I had to constantly fend off people accusing me of not being a Muslim since I do not speak Hindi or Urdu, which people believe to be the languages of a Muslim. I had to explain that the Quran is in Arabic and has been translated into many languages.

Islamic architecture is generally considered to be a combination of domes, minarets and arches. However, in Tamil Nadu, it was not

so. Here, they were built of stone masonry in the Dravidian architectural style. Similarly, in Kerala mosques were built with timber in the traditional architectural style of Kerala. Unlike south Indian Hindu temples, which follow the *agamas*, there are no elaborate rules to follow while building a mosque. The place has to be clean, there should be no idols inside, and the prayer must be directed towards Mecca. So wherever Islam spread, it adopted not only the local culture but also the local architecture.

So, in defining Islamic architecture as one with domes, minarets and arches and calling it Indo-Islamic, there is this danger of alienating other Muslim societies. Do you mean to say that the Islamic tradition is outside Indian traditions?

The Thirumala Nayak palace in Madurai was built by a Hindu ruler in the 17th century and it incorporates architectural elements that are similar to Islamic motifs. He and his men were Hindus. Architecture has no religion. In Tamil Nadu, the artisans who built a temple for Siva also built temples for Allah but with Islamic sensibilities.

Did this prompt you to make the film?

Certainly. We are a country with phenomenal diversity. Not all Hindus cremate their dead. Some bury them. And the majority of Tamil Hindus predominantly worship Amman, Ayyanar and other minor deities. There are Hindus who eat beef, Brahmins who eat fish. Likewise, not all Indian Muslims speak Urdu, and they could also be part of different denominations with their own cultural practices. The old order undergoes change constantly. I wanted to document that before it was too late.

The documentary also underscores the affection and reverence Muslims in Tamil Nadu have enjoyed for more than a millennium. However, today, it seems to be under strain. How do you address this issue in the film?

None can deny the fact that the community is facing a problem. And the reasons are numerous, from global to local ones. The vilification began with the Crusades. We all know that there was nothing religious about those wars. It was carried forward by the European colonisers and culminated in our own Indian history being written by them as the Hindu era, Muslim era, and so on.

I have, in my film, pointed to the coexistence of both the communities enriching each other. As M.G.S. Narayanan, Director General, Centre for Heritage Studies, Government of Kerala, says, the Zamorin, the Hindu ruler of Calicut (during medieval times), had no qualms about issuing a decree asking the Hindu fishermen families to embrace Islam so that his navy, which was manned by Muslims, could be strengthened (as Hindus then were reluctant to go to sea) and the Portuguese could be kept under check.

The increasing polarisation of society has apparently disturbed you. That can be discerned in the way you have presented your ideas in the film.

If you look at Indian history, Hindu kings had Muslim generals and Muslim kings, including Aurangazeb, had Hindu generals. Unfortunately, the problem is that in the popular discourse of Indian history, we have just bought the colonisers' account lock, stock and barrel. The European colonisers came from monotheistic societies. It was difficult for them to comprehend the bewildering diversity in the Indian subcontinent or, for that matter, in Asia. Besides, to rule over us they needed to divide us. Our history came to be written accordingly. So right-wing groups continue to harbour imaginary wounds from the past, which they use to radicalise their followers, leading to riots, which in turn create a sense of fear and alienation among Muslims. Added to this is the current international scenario. In its 1,400-year-long history, Islam finds itself in a crisis.

The documentary also shows the spice route and links it to the community. How do you relate it to present society?

Yes. Along with trade came new ideas, new thinking, etc., as the historian P.J. Cherian puts it. My film talks about the Europeans setting sail in search of pepper, considered 'black gold' then. We all know what happened after that. The societies they came across were brutalised. Our society was torn apart. From being one of the wealthiest societies in the 15th century, it has become a struggling Third World country. Similarly, the black gold of the 20th century is oil. And it is those societies that are getting brutalised now. Democratic voices have been stifled and continue to be stifled in those regions. We all know about the democratically elected Iranian government of Mohammad Mosaddegh being overthrown by the West because it tried to nationalise the oil industry. Add to this the fall of the Soviet Union and the Western armament industries' need for an enemy.

How does it all affect the Muslim community?

Muslim societies have borne the brunt. Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and closer home Ayodhya, Coimbatore, Godhra, Muzaffarpur, and so on, have made Muslims feel very vulnerable. There is a sense of fear and anger. The community feels it is under siege. In Tamil we have a saying, '*Arandavanukku irundathellam pey*' (to one who is scared, anything that is dark is a ghost). There is a lot of suspicion and some have chosen to withdraw into their own selves. These bewildering combinations of factors have left the community disturbed. *Yaadhum* presents the best of the two communities [Muslim and Hindu] to moderate a society that is fast becoming radicalised.

Has the phenomenon of identity politics that targets the minorities prompted you to expose the practice of stereotyping the Muslim community? Is that why you have made a concerted effort to convince the audience that Muslims in Tamil Nadu are as much Tamils as they are Muslims? You have also chosen to avoid looking at the role the political class has played in society.

We see the failure of the political class in India. Families have taken hold of political institutions. The Dravidian movement is also a victim of dynasty politics. The Dravidian parties, with their own internal problems of family politics, have been unable to reach out to the younger generation. There is a disconnect.

This vacuum is getting filled by the right wing, both in Islam and in Hinduism. It is an unfortunate and worrying situation in Tamil Nadu too. The bulk of Muslims are behind the mainstream political parties. But because of the factors mentioned above, these parties are not seen as guardians of the Muslim community's interests. That vacuum is being filled by radical elements. Unfortunately, the voice of the radicals is being mistaken for that of the entire community. The media and the people have to learn to differentiate between the community and Islamist Right.

Your film portrays Sufis as a major factor in the spread of Islam. However, today, there seems to be an undercurrent of tension between the radicals in the community and those who advocate the Sufi way.

It is true that Sufis were instrumental in taking the message of Islam to the masses. However, that is not the whole story. Islam took root here because of certain local social factors. Sufism, unfortunately, is a much misunderstood concept today. Sufism gained adherents among a number of Muslims as it was a reaction against the worldliness of the early Umayyad Caliphate. It was a rebellion against an ostentatious way of life. For a layman and a non-Muslim, that is their closest brush with Islam. There are still Sufis around and they go about propagating their beliefs very quietly. They shun publicity. You have to understand that by being born to a Sufi, one doesn't automatically become a Sufi. It has to be earned. But Sufi burial sites or shrines have become highly commercialised. Generations of people, calling themselves Sufis' descendants, have been living off those shrines, literally exploiting the gullible by offering various services. This is creating tension. However, this is not something of recent origin. Scholars like Susan Schomburg, with the help of Tamil Islamic literary works, have put forth the view that the tension existed in the Tamil Muslim community even in the 17th century (*History and Imagination*, TSAR Publications, Canada).

You attempt to portray Tamil Muslims as having a distinct identity, different from that of Muslims elsewhere in India and the world. Can you expand on this?

There is one aspect of the Tamil Muslim community which I think is unique and which distinguishes it from other Muslim communities. That is the familial kinship it shares with non-Muslim communities of Tamil Nadu. My film ends with Joe D' Cruz, a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer from southern Tamil Nadu, declaring that calling someone a "Muslim" is alien to him. He is used to addressing them in his village as *chacha* (paternal uncle) or *chachi* (paternal aunt). Similar kinship exists with Hindu communities also. This, I think, is unique to the Tamil Muslim community.

However, there are other communities that share many aspects shown in the film, like the Moplah Muslims of Kerala. There is the Bengali Muslim, equally proud of his Bengali origin; there are the Telugu Muslims of Andhra, and so on. What I am trying to do is dispel the myth that Muslims in India are just one monolithic community. In reality, they speak different tongues and there is a phenomenal diversity among the Muslim Umma the world over, a fact the holy Quran itself acknowledges in Surat Al-Hujurat 49:13 —(the opening lines of my film) "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another...."

The documentary carries a message too. You have lucidly depicted the symbiotic relationship between followers of various faiths and the communal harmony, which have existed for thousands of years, through rituals and festivals, and shown this as having strengthened the relationship among people of the two different faiths [Muslims and Hindus].

Our society, over a period of time, worked out mechanisms to resolve conflicts and to be inclusive of all communities. I won't say it was all fair. The position of Dalits and women in that set-up was condemnable. However, as I said earlier, festivals and rituals are a way of strengthening the relationship between various communities, including Muslims. So, in my village, Kombai, during the temple car festival of Hindus [the film opens with the scene in Kombai], Muslims are given honour, as they look after the accounts of the festival itself. Similarly, in many darghas or Sufi shrines, various non-Muslim communities are honoured during the Kandhuri festival.

However, post-1990s, as our own economy moved from being an agrarian to a service economy, many festivals and rituals have been forgotten, thanks to migration and dislocation. With that, the traditional bonds are also being lost. Many Saivite temples in Tamil Nadu have lost the "Oduvaars", the ones who used to sing hymns. As shown in my film, the Tamil traditional martial art "Silambam" too is on the wane. While change is constant, we are also losing out on the many mechanisms that society had put in place for centuries for peaceful coexistence.

Yaadhum is a journey to trace your roots, starting from your native village Kombai in Theni district, meandering through coastal Tamil Nadu and Kerala, covering Kilakarai in Ramanathapuram district and Kottar in Nagercoil, besides Pulicat near Chennai and Kochi in Kerala. While tracing them, you seem to have emphasised the communal harmony you found everywhere.

Yes. When I undertook the journey of tracing my roots, I came across many surprises. It was a recollection of many good things. All the religious functions and festivals I captured in *Yaadhum* at different places in Tamil Nadu and Kerala point to only one thing to me: peaceful coexistence. There is no mistrust and fear of alienation. That is the essential component which has, in fact, formed the underlying theme of my film too.

Besides the architectural fusion, the songs of Seera Aboobacker in "kapi" raga, a Muslim family's hereditary rights at a Hindu temple festival in Madurai, the names of Tamil months in mosques, and many such instances point to the interaction of multiple elements and underscore the harmonious existence of communities. How was that made possible?

This took more than a thousand years to evolve. The interaction of multiple elements was necessary for the harmonious coexistence of the various groups. As I pointed out, I am a Tamil and a Muslim. I have assimilated the inherent characteristics of the soil to which I belong. To drive home this point, I have to draw references from these sources. Besides, these historical, religious and architectural references in the film have been used to strengthen the visualisation of my concept.

Are you projecting the identity of Tamil-speaking Muslims as Tamil Muslims.

Yes. I am a Tamil Muslim. I am a Tamil by birth and a Muslim by faith.