



Kombai S. Anwar, Director, *Yaadhum: A Tamil Muslim's Journey in Search of His Roots and Identity*

Chennai, India, 2013. 51 Minutes, color. Media Kombai. \$30.00 (individuals); \$160.00 (institutions). www.yaadhum.com

THE MENTION OF Islam in the South Asian context conjures up a rather predictable set of images: the majestic monuments of Shahs and Sultans, delicate miniature paintings, the rhythms of Qawwali music, Urdu poetry, kebabs and biryanis, to which are added in an academic context the intellectual pursuits of a Persian-writing intelligentsia and the various calls for renewal, reform, and counter-reform that emanated from Delhi and the towns of the North Indian plains. On the flipside of these reflections of splendor, similarly set images of violence flash onto the scene: conquests and invasions, India's bloody partition of 1947, and the continued plight of religious minorities across South Asian countries, with Muslims finding themselves both in the role of the marginalized minority and the persecuting majority. Kombai Anwar's documentary film *Yaadhum: A Tamil Muslim's Journey in Search of His Roots and Identity* manages to capture a section of South Asian Muslims beyond these familiar narratives by engaging with the past and present of Muslim communities in India's extreme south, the filmmaker's own homeland.

Yaadhum is a straightforward documentary film, following the leads of history across much of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, with occasional forays into Kerala. The narration is provided by the filmmaker himself as he describes different localities and his own engagement with the local past, interrupted by quotations from Tamil and European sources and interviews with scholars and intellectuals, among them noted historians Y. Subbarayalu and J. Raja Mohamad. This journey to different sites of the Tamil Muslim past and present—among them Thanjavur, Nagore, Kayalpattinam, Kilakkarai, Pulicat, and Madurai—is held together by three main themes. The first of these is, so to speak, the *raison d'être* of the community's very existence, namely their extensive networks of trade that have spanned the Indian Ocean for more than two millennia. Anwar's documentary follows the flows of spices, horses, and cloth between South India and the Middle East, a trade that first brought Muslims to the shores of South India and that engaged many of them in centuries to come. The filmmaker does not limit himself to Tamil Nadu, but includes the Malabar Coast with its early Muslim communities into his conversation on Muslim trade in the region, a move that greatly enhances the narrative. The way Anwar handles the beginning of his story deserves particular mention. Rather than presenting the advent of Islam and Muslims in South India as a sudden event, and encounter, even a rupture, he rather depicts how Islam emerged into a world that had for long been interconnected and shared by Hindus, Jews, and Christians; a world to which Islam was not alien, but an internal development.

The second theme of the film is of a more political nature, depicting the historical patronage that local, non-Muslim rulers and states extended to Muslims. Whether it was the Chera dynasty on the Malabar coast in the ninth, the Chola kings of the eleventh, the Calicut Zamorins in the fifteenth, or the Thanjavur Nayakas of the

sixteenth century, local rulers supported Muslim notables and institutions in their attempts at channeling trade and controlling societies in India's southern tip. In this depiction of former state patronage, Anwar introduces a subtle criticism of present-day Indian political depictions of history. He sets out to engage with questions of his own identity, a question that was of no concern to him as a child, but that "became quite important to me and countless other Muslims, especially in these increasingly troubled times." Contextualized in this hint at the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the increase in pogroms and violence against Muslims in the country, Anwar's presentation of the strong support for Muslims by many Hindu kingdoms as well as the dependence of Hindu dynasties on Muslims appeals to an Indian past that Hindu nationalists invoke as proof of Hinduism's supposed tolerance, but which they themselves do not seem ready to follow.

But perhaps the most prominent theme of this film is the flipside of the political support given to Muslims by local rulers, namely, the close participation of Muslims in local society. Anwar documents the composition and recitation of Tamil literature by Muslims, dwelling at length on the hardly known but sometimes strikingly beautiful details of local mosque architecture. He also follows Muslim families, who maintain close relationships with Hindu temples, and records the creation of "fictive kinship" between Muslims and certain Hindu castes, and it is indeed through this theme of the film that the inadequacy of language for talking about Tamil Muslims becomes evident. For to talk about these processes as the "adoption" of cultural aspects or as "integration" into local society simply ignores how Muslims participate in all these cultural aspects themselves; they do not "participate" as a group of outsiders in need of "integration." As the filmmaker declares at the end of the film: "I have no doubts as to who I am. I am a Tamil, a Muslim, and so many other things. In short, I am all of this."

Fifty minutes of film are hardly enough to describe every aspect that highlights this unique identity of being a Tamil Muslim. The film succeeds in a charming and unpretentious manner to evoke a generally overlooked world. While some aspects of the film have been covered by academic study, such as the narrative of trade and patronage, or the common participation of Muslims and Hindus in each other's shrines and festivals, the film adds an important visual and aural dimension to these narratives: the recitation of the first stanza of one of the oldest Tamil poems with an Islamic theme, the presentation of a manuscript in Arabic script being read out aloud, revealing its language to be Tamil, and the many shots of mosques that appear unassuming from the outside but reveal beautifully carved pillars on the inside, making the world of South Indian Islam more immediately accessible to the senses.

There are, however, some gaps in the narrative. While some are acknowledged, like the absence of the Tamil Muslim diaspora in Southeast Asia, others are less obvious, like the absence of large swathes of northern and northwestern Tamil Nadu from the narrative. Here, in places like Vellore and the tannery belt of the Palar river, Tamil-speaking Muslims have come into much closer contact with Urdu-speaking Muslims, who make up a not unsubstantial part of Tamil Nadu's Muslim population. The harmonious picture of Tamil Muslims being both Tamil and Muslims is perhaps more strained in regions such as this, where a certain amount

of “Urdu-ization” and shifts in Muslim identification have occurred. And yet, this region can hardly be ignored when describing Tamil Muslims either, given its importance for Muslim politics in the state, the economic significance of its tannery industry, and the religious impact of the Madrasa al-Baqiyat as-Salihah in Vellore, which, founded in the nineteenth century, is today Tamil Nadu’s most important institution of religious learning. The film is mainly concerned with documenting harmony, not discord or even violence, and so does not engage with topics such as the temporary conquest of parts of the region by North Indian sultanates, and the participation of Tamil Muslim merchants not only in the trade in horses, spices, and cloth, but also in slaves. Neither does it document the contemporary frictions both within the Muslim community and between them and local Hindu society, which is also increasingly becoming a feature of present-day Tamil Nadu, even if less so than in comparison to other places in India.

Yet stating this, one should also not lose sight of the fact that this is precisely the politics of the film: the presentation of an Indian Muslim community beyond the all-too-common discourses and narratives of conflict. For anyone truly interested in acknowledging the pluralism of Islam and Muslims in India in teaching and research, this film is indispensable, and I hope that it will find its way into the libraries of many institutions of higher education. It is also essential for anyone interested in a facet of South Indian society that too often lingers in the shadow of its temple towers. And for those who, like myself, are already students of Tamil Muslim society, the film provides a wealth of documentation of sources and practices, revealing once again how much still remains to be discovered about this fascinating society.

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