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City-born scholar helps author trace Bengal roots

Kolkata: For Kaveri Kaul, it is home-coming twice over. The award-winning documentary filmmaker, who migrated to the US at the age of five when her father won a Fulbright scholarship to Pennsylvania University, has not only returned to her city of birth on the Fulbright-Nehru scholarship, she has used the funds to help a Christian and African-American author trace her roots in Bengal.

Kaul, who is currently affiliated to the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute (SRFTI) in the city for her Fulbright project 'Streetcar to Calcutta', flew down fiction and non-fiction writer Fatima Shaik in March to document her cinematic journey from New Orleans, the city of her birth, to Kolkata — the birthplace of the Muslim grandfather she never knew.

Travelling from New Orleans to Kolkata across geographical, spiritual and cultural borders, Kaul and Fatima pooled their expertise as a New Orleans writer and Bengali-speaking Kolkata born filmmaker. In India, Fatima became acquainted with Islam in daily life and investigated what India Muslims associate with Christianity.

“Streetcar to Calcutta is a story of Christianity and Islam, America and India, New Orleans and Kolkata. Fatima’s Christian African American family has lived in Louisiana for four generations. Her Muslim Bengali grandfather Shaik Mohamed Musa, an Oriental goods trader from Bengal’s Hooghly, left India and settled in New Orleans in 1893. There he met and married Tennie Ford, an African American Catholic. Musa died in 1919, a few months before his son and Fatima’s father, Mohammad Joseph Asad, was born,” Kaul recounted, whose film is in the final stages.

But the film is just not about Musa and Fatima. It encompasses the bigger story of Indian diaspora and the making of America, contemporary New Orleans and Kolkata, Kaul told TOI on the sidelines of a pre-departure orientation programme for 160 Fulbright scholars from India, including 131 Fulbright-Nehru fellows.