

Lectures by Dina & Farrokh at Auckland, in May 2007

by shahrukh khambatta

- a youth perspective

hearing about lectures on religion, as one can imagine, does not quite invoke the same level of excitement as other aspects of a youngster's life. However I resisted the urge to ignore yet another opportunity to learn about my religion when I heard that two scholars from the US and UK were coming to town to tell us more about Zoroastrianism. Having seen the schedule of lectures, I picked a couple of sessions that looked interesting. At the hall where the lectures were held, I was introduced to the speakers before the lectures started and immediately realised that I might enjoy and learn something from them. Dina and Farrokh came across as very likeable, self-assured and modest people.

The first lecture I heard was about the gathas, delivered by Dina. Although the subject was very intensive and heavy, Dina articulated the key points very well and made it easy for all to understand. As the lectures were delivered it became more obvious that Dina and Farrokh have a supreme understanding of these complex subjects but in their own easy way, they managed to effectively get through to the 'simple Parsi' in us. The delivery of their content was not full of drama and fanfare that typifies some religious lectures. They simply delivered the content from their notes and entertained questions and discussion at the end. Some members of the audience did comment on the lack of animation in Dina and Farrokh's delivery and suggested that they would have had even greater impact had they not referred to their notes as much. My view on this is that this was a religious discussion, not an evening of entertainment. If one wanted a performance, one would surely go to the theatres, not expect entertainment from a session aimed at educating us and shedding more light on this wonderfully

preserved and often misunderstood religion of ours! Having said that, both Dina and Farrokh did make things entertaining with Dina illustrating the topics with stories and anecdotes, while Farrokh's dry sense of humour had us in hysterics of laughter.

Both Dina and Farrokh offered their views throughout the sessions but always qualified them with "these are my views, take them as you deem best". This was the sheer beauty of their lectures. Often religions sermons are mainly about the speaker telling the audience how things ought to be done and how if you deviated from what was preached, you would certainly have a place booked in hell (a nice spot by the beach if you really did not listen). There was none of that dictatorial tone at anytime in these lectures. In fact, both Dina and Farrokh often emphasised that our religion does not have a punitive approach to forcing people adhere to the teachings. This being a key highlighted difference between Zoroastrianism and other religions. According to the speakers, there is nothing in the scriptures of our religion that dictate that 'if you don't pray five times a day, bad things will happen to you'. The emphasis is more on learning from life, educating oneself and being able to make your own decisions between right and wrong. The teachings of our religion are meant to give you the inner strength and ability to stop at life's various crossroads, think and make the right decision. This concept did appeal to a large part of the audience as it deviated from what was handed down from generation to generation and encouraged us to become more aware of and responsible for our own decisions with the help of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment.

The speakers encouraged members of the audience to think and challenge what we have always taken for granted and

the audience who questioned age-old rituals and superstitions, wanting to know their true meaning, their cultural origins and their place in our religion. These traditions were simply passed down from generation to generation, with little understanding of their meaning. Judging from the number of questions it was evident that these traditions had lost their context or meaning and members of the audience were very keen to get a deeper understanding. People wanted to know why these rituals had to be performed and what the religious significance is, as explained in the scriptures. Dina and Farrokh talked about the origins of some of these rituals and emphasised the difference between rituals and religion. They explained the exact reasons why such rituals were born and their significance in ancient society and in our scriptures. The key point raised here was to realise that simply performing rituals without understanding their significance is of little value.

The controversial topics of conversion and inter-marriage were predictably hot topics of debate. From the discussions that ensued, it was evident that there were a variety of opinions and views on these topics. Farrokh and Dina themselves did not agree with each other in these areas and stated clearly their views and reasoning, making us, the audience think more and challenge our own opinions! A fundamental theme that did come out of these topics was the importance of tolerance and understanding. There are many arguments amongst Zoroastrians worldwide about inter-marriage and conversion, with little tolerance and respect for each other's opinions. It was a member of the youth in the audience that pointed out that it is this controversy that drives the youth of today away from the religion and community. As a Zoroastrian youth brought up partly in eastern and western societies, I am very aware that the issues and challenges that youth face today are very different from those faced by previous generations. I myself have been very put off by the acrimony created by these controversial topics as, to me, these ill feelings are a deviation from the very fundamentals of religion, especially

Zoroastrianism! It was also pointed out that a large proportion of today's Zoroastrian youth, whether in India or other countries, have partners of other faiths. The reality for these youth is that they will have to make a choice between their partner and the religion and often their families, when it comes to marriage. This forced decision is something that the youth of today would much rather not have to make and would also save a lot of heartache for many Zoroastrian families.

At the end of two days of talks, questions, debates and knowledge-sharing, I came out with a new-found enthusiasm to learn more about this wonderful, precious and pure religion of ours. Thanks to Dina and Farrokh for igniting this thirst within myself and many others and sharing with us their wealth of knowledge and experience. It truly was an enlightening weekend for which we are very grateful!



29 year-old Shahrugh Khambatta currently lives in Auckland, New Zealand. He was born in Bombay and moved to New Zealand with his family at 14. He works as a management consultant to large corporates in New Zealand and Australia.

Origin of words

In the 1400's a law was set forth in England that a man was allowed to beat his wife with a stick no thicker than his thumb. Hence we have "the rule of thumb".

Many years ago in Scotland, a new game was invented. It was ruled "Gentlemen Only ... Ladies Forbidden" and thus the word GOLF entered into the English language.

In English pubs, ale is ordered by pints and quarts. In old England, when customers got unruly, the bartender would yell at them "Mind your pints and quarts, and settle down." It's where we get the phrase "mind your P's and Q's"