

WOMEN AND ISLAM

A Fireside conversation at Vichaar Manthan's Sustainable Narratives Conference 2020

With **Drishti Mae**

by Anusha Kasture

In this raw and thought-provoking fireside conversation, Drishti Mae shares her extraordinary journey of religious identity through Islam, agnosticism, atheism and Hindu Dharma. The poignant discussion takes us through various stages of her life, from early childhood years to present day.

Growing up in a Muslim household, Drishti describes in detail how her childhood was set against the backdrop of a self-policing Islamic community and the Madresa school which introduced her to concepts in the Quran at a young age. The emphasis was on doing the mandated 'right' thing, combined with an upbringing "governed by fear"; fear of punishment for deviation from this path was made clear as early as at the age of 5. Examples of hell and the wrath of God were vividly described as punishments for breach of religious norms. Drishti describes feeling and being "limited" in the context of questioning ideas. She goes on to explain that although questions were permitted, this was only true if it fit the narrative of Islam and hence, strengthened one's faith rather than brought doubt (shak). The Fireside contains a recurrent theme of the tight-knit Muslim community in which adults pooled knowledge and were suspicious of deviations by any member.

Exploring these complex religious rules from a female perspective, Drishti contends that girls' development of a 'sense of self' during adolescent years could be affected by proscriptive environments. For example, girls might be discouraged from attending swimming lessons to avoid revealing skin; or feel compelled to hide facets of their personality from the rest of the world. Drishti provides insights into the concepts of Hijab, identity and sexuality, and how each can impact a woman's self-image. She draws on the fact that the "burden of accountability is thrust upon the woman". Discussion around the differing ages of maturity for boys and girls also explored how responsibility for actions can be placed upon children at varying ages based on their gender, leading to girls potentially feeling "unseen".

Freedom of thought is another recurrent theme emphasised in this Fireside. Drishti shares her experience of being sent to Iran for a month when her natural curiosity led her to ask questions that critically challenged

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established norms. Events around the world including protests against Salman Rushdie's novel, 'The Satanic Verses' (met with death threats and book burnings) sparked Drishti's curiosity further as she questioned why open discussion and critical thought were stifled when it came to religious texts. A turning point for Drishti was her time studying Philosophy, when she explored fundamental ideas of existence in an open classroom space without the fear of being labelled 'rebellious'. She gained further interest in Greek and Hindu philosophy at the age of 18 and came across a Hindu teacher who introduced her to a diametrically novel point of view. Plurality, acceptance and spirituality were some of the elements which drew Drishti to practising Hindu Dharma; she felt that she could 'transcend the politics of religion' through this new lens.

The Fireside ends with a reminder to 'question, explore and never stop', encompassing a profound message that the search for knowledge is never-ending. The audience is left with a reminder that continuous dialogue and challenging the status quo is essential to exploring new ideas and attaining a better understanding of our nuanced world.