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EDITORIAL

There was a time when the Kanwariyas walked quietly along the sides of roads, keeping to the pavements if they could. They walked barefoot, only occasionally taking other means of transport for some distance. They carried a pole across the back of their shoulder, earthen pots tied at both ends, in which to carry the holy *ganga jal* when they reached the end of their pilgrimage. I am told that these devotees of Shiva were traditionally a small group who believed that this simple pilgrimage was the appropriate felicitation of a simple (Bhola/Bhole, as Shiva is also known) god.

How things have changed. The humble pole has been replaced with bats which are of course not carried across the shoulder but serve a different menacing purpose. They travel on tempos and trucks for the better part of their journey, bhajan-turned-Bollywood music so loud it actually shook the window panes in my room. Food and rest is provided by both NGOs and the state, which funds some of these camp sites. This gives them a sense of impunity and they can turn extremely violent without fear of punishment. Even a non-practising Hindu like myself is affronted by this mockery of religion.

The condemnation of the Rohingya and the violence perpetrated against them is a more complicated issue with political ramifications, but is also based in religion and ethnicity. This issue of the *IIC Quarterly* has a section comprising three papers on a few of the problems faced by the Rohingya in Myanmar and in the region. Two of these are first-hand accounts by Rohingya themselves. Tapan Bose calls the Rohingya 'a persecuted people, abandoned again', and examines the various players in the present crisis—international bodies, Bangladesh, China, India, and of course the Myanmar government that staunchly denies any wrongdoing.

In an interview with Rita Manchanda, Razia Sultana, a leading Rohingya human rights activist, lawyer and feminist, shares

her experience in working for the rights and welfare of the refugee women in camps in Bangladesh. The plight of the Rohingya is not new, and goes back several decades; but ‘first it was slow genocide... now it is endless genocide’, she says. What has been a great let-down for her is their abandonment by Aung Sang Suu Kyi. ‘She was my idol, but I haven’t any hopes of her,’ she says with disappointment.

Khin Zaw Win is vocal in his fight for human rights and has paid for it as a political prisoner for many years. He firmly believes that Rohingya alone cannot fight this battle; he hopes that by telling the general population of Myanmar the real truth, they will join the resistance.

In other papers in this issue, Partha Ghosh’s reading of the novel, *Chinatown Days* by Rita Chowdhury, looks at migration, international relations, inclusion and citizenship differently and in a unique way. Interestingly, it comes at a time when this very debate is currently taking place.

An age-old, vexed debate is around religious conversions. In a detailed paper on conversions by the Church, Ravi K. Mishra examines Gandhi’s responses to the missionaries.

This year, the 35th C. D. Deshmukh Memorial Lecture was delivered by Justice Rohinton Nariman. Law is his profession, but music and history his passion. He writes about Akbar, Suleiman and Elizabeth I, whom he describes as ‘great contemporaries’; great because they were not merely rulers, but philosopher-kings.

This issue also carries an interview and two photo essays. Sukrita Paul Kumar in a dialogue shares her creative journey as a poet. Sukrita has often spoken about the neglect of poetry in the world of Indian publishing, and her conversation makes inspiring reading. Two brilliant artists, photographer Parthiv Shah and painter Deviprasad C. Rao, exhibit their works in these pages. Parthiv’s photographs of M. F. Husain are accompanied by an essay by Geeti Sen, who knows the iconic artist’s work well.

The annual *IIC Experience* is taking place as this issue is published. We hope you enjoy the Festival and the winter months ahead.



OMITA GOYAL