An International Workshop on **Southern Silk Route: Historical Links and Contemporary Convergences** was organized in Kolkata by the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta from August 2-4, 2008. The workshop was sponsored by the Asian Scholarship Foundation, Bangkok, in collaboration with the University of Calcutta; India-China Institute, New York; Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies, Kolkata; and ORF India China Centre, Kolkata.

**Southern Silk Route**

At the workshop, the actual existence of the southern silk route was a matter of debate. Prof. Tansen Sen of City University, New York and a member of the Expert Group on ORF India China Centre, Kolkata, questioned the terminology "silk route" when, according to him, there was no such route. He argued that there was no archeological evidence to support the contention that the route existed. Prof. Elizabeth Moore of School of Oriental and African Studies, London, however, claimed that there was archeological evidence in the form of artifacts found in central Myanmar to suggest that links between China's Yunnan province and Myanmar had existed. However, questions were raised whether the finding of similar artifacts in Yunnan and Myanmar could actually establish the existence of a silk route. Prof. Sen even argued that historical interactions could be "local rather than long distance". It was pointed out that the most "interesting" interactions began only after 7th century AD and that there was inadequate research on the preceding period.

Participants were also divided on whether the term "Shendu" used in history by Chinese scholars refers to today's India. Prof. Sen pointed out that some communities both in India's Northeast and China's Yunnan province have the same name and that the reference could be to those communities.

The participants agreed that more evidence may be needed to prove the historical existence of a silk route between China and India via Myanmar. They felt that the silk route could be seen as a "metaphor" and not necessarily a historical silk road. It was also pointed out that trade routes had appeared and disappeared in history.

One of the panels discussed possible consequences of and inherent constraints in a "southern silk route" in terms of health, political economy, data availability concerning the region on which thoughtful observations were made by the panalists, including Prof. Falguni Sen of Fordham University, New York and an Advisor to ORF on Healthcare and the ORF India China Centre.

**Myanmar**

Some important points were made on Myanmar during the discussion. The existence of a Chinese intelligence base in Myanmar's Coco Islands was refuted by Dr. Marie Lall of University of London, who claimed that top Indian military officers had confirmed to her that there was no such base in Myanmar. Dr. Lall also urged the gathering "to put the myth to rest." A participant claimed that when Myanmar planned to develop the Coco Islands, it first approached India. But as India did not show much interest, China was then approached to develop the islands. Dr. Lall further noted that there was increasing concern among some of the Myanmar's military generals of Chinese growing presence in their country. It was pointed that China does not have territorial interest in Myanmar but wants to have influence and sea access. Former Indian diplomat C.V. Ranganathan pointed out that Myanmar does not consider itself an exclusive area of development for China. Few points were raised by participants to show why India's trade with Myanmar has still not taken off as compared to China's.
Problems of currency in border trade.

All of India's trade with Myanmar is routed through Singapore.

The list of items permitted for border trade between India and Myanmar has not only been very limited (now 32 items) but also the most demanded goods in the border region, such as rice, have not been included in the list.

The influence of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar compared to the Chinese Diaspora is weak.

China and India's relations with Myanmar have been described not as a zero-sum game but an "unequal game".

Possibility of "cooperative sharing arrangement" between China and India in Myanmar have been suggested.

Bangladesh-India Relations

Countering a view that Indian government has been "hostile" to the Kunming Initiative (comprising Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar), Amb. Ranganathan argued that India was not "hostile" to the initiative but was reluctant about full-scale participation. Mr. Shahidul Islam of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, citing an influential Indian minister, claimed that Bangladesh finally agreed to a pipeline from Myanmar to India but the Indian defence ministry rejected it on the grounds that they would not be able to provide security for the pipeline. In the face of Bangladesh's intransigence for allowing transit to India, BCIM was initiated to "increase the comfort level of Bangladesh". The problem between India and Bangladesh was political and not economic, Mr. Islam argued.

India-China Relations

A point was made that China has been more active in the Kunming Initiative than India. This view was countered by Amb. Ranganathan who said that the Indian government had taken a number of policy directions but the implementation had not been up to the expectation. It was, however, noted that China has been more active in regional and sub-regional trade than India. An Indian military officer who had served in the Northeast pointed out that India has worries about China and therefore would not open the Pangsau pass on the India-Myanmar border. It was also pointed out that India had two main fears: it was concerned about China's goods swamping the Northeast and that it could use its diaspora to change the political demography of the Northeast. Amb. Ranganathan further pointed out that the interests of China and India overlap, but to realize the common interests China has to transform its "regime-base policy" to "human-base policy".

Theoretical Concepts

A long discussion was held on the discourse of borders. Prof. L.H.M Ling of The New School, USA argued that borders were not "fixed places" but they evolve. Furthermore, it was pointed out that there was a need for "human element of borders." Prof. Ling and Dr. Payal Banerjee of Syracuse University talked about new concepts such as "borderlands" to provide an alternative model to understanding borders.

A presenter pointed out that the BCIM or the Kunming Initiative was exclusively based on economic terms. Prof. Prasenjit Duara of National University of Singapore and a member of the Expert Group on ORF India China Centre, Kolkata, noted that while the workshop was an academic exercise, it could also be seen as a track II exercise. During the three-day workshop, five panels were formed on different themes. Each panel consisted of four/five presenters. The paper presenters included historians, archeologists, sinologists, economists, and other social scientists.