



13th Giri Deshingkar Memorial Lecture Series

The Historical Silk Road and the Belt & Road Initiative

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**Giri Deshingkar
Memorial Lectures
were begun in
2001, as a tribute
to the work and
contribution of
one of India's
leading China
experts, a
philosopher of
science and an
exceptional
scholar on the
history of China
and India**

Sanjiv Kumar, Director of Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), set the stage for the evening, by welcoming everyone to the 13th edition of the Giri Deshingkar Memorial Lecture. He went on to invite Amb. Ashok K. Kantha, Director of Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS), to give a brief introduction to the man this lecture series serves to honour. Amb. Kantha spoke of Giri Deshingkar as having been a formidable pioneer of China studies in India. By involving himself in the study of the social, cultural, political, economic aspects of China, he sought a civilizational perspective in his research. Prof. Deshingkar was more than just an independent voice, as he was also an unparalleled teacher and an institution-builder (having served as Director to both CSDS and ICS). Amb. Kantha spoke of the energy and vigour that Prof. Deshingkar infused in succeeding generations of China scholars. Having said this Amb. Kantha welcomed the featured speaker of the evening, Mark C. Elliott, and invited him to the dais.

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Before commencing with his lecture, Elliott took a moment to remember Roderick MacFarquhar, who recently passed away. MacFarquhar was a consummate China Scholar at Harvard University among his many other distinctions and honours. With this Elliott began his presentation on drawing out the historical connection between the 'old' Silk Road and President Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

When the BRI was announced, it seemed too fantastic and too ambitious to be taken seriously. President Xi Jinping was newly appointed to his position, and to a western observer like Elliott, the true potency of his leadership was still relatively unknown. But at this juncture, by most standards of measure, the BRI can be deemed very successful. Most importantly, it has captured the attention of people around the world. Elliott emphasized that this measure of success necessitates a thorough and well-rounded understanding of what the BRI is trying to achieve. Being a historian, Elliott was intrigued by the naming of this ambitious project and sought to explore the connection between the 'new' Silk Road and the 'old' Silk Road. With this introduction, Elliott laid out a brief description of the scope and size of the BRI - 81 countries, US\$ 1 trillion and spanning a tremendous geographical expanse. Elliott noted that the economics of the BRI projects don't always add up, and in several circumstances, the BRI has faced challenges and problems in different facets. Challenges faced range from qualms of environmental impact/sustainability, questions of Chinese motives/perception problems and the political fallout in partner countries. In the most critical of challenges, questions emerge whether BRI serves a 'new kind of colonialism', as critics draw parallels between the 99-year lease agreement of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Hong Kong in the late 19th century. However, Elliott is quick to admit that, the BRI is viewed very positively in other quarters, and welcomed as 'badly needed investment'. The coverage of BRI in Chinese media is obviously positive, making linkages with the idea of a 'Chinese dream' and the revival of an old Silk Road. Elliott argued that the projection sought for the BRI is framed as a legitimating claim. This claim suggests that the new Silk Road is nothing but restoration of a historical norm of economic relationships.

In order to assess this claim, Elliott traced the origins of the historical concept of the Silk Road. The idea of the Silk Road was a European invention, being first coined in 1877 in a paper presentation to the German Geological Society by the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen. Richthofen arrives at this idea, not by sifting through ancient Chinese texts but by applying his geographical knowledge of that terrain, and supposing the existence of such a trade network. Richthofen theorized that this trade was



directly reflective of political power and singled out the role silk played in arranging this trade network. Richthofen inferred that trade on the historical Silk Road stepped into high gear as the Han dynasty established its power in the region around 120 CE. Since then the notion of a historical Silk Road, along which goods, people and ideas travelled far and wide has taken over. However, silk didn't matter as much as a good, but as a store of value - a currency used across towns and marketplaces along the Silk Road. Along with Richthofen, Elliott mentioned figures like Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein, and Paul Pelliot whose works have built upon the idea of the historical Silk Road. Materials found in Dunhuang show that music, fabrics, textiles, dance, scripts, ideas, and religion moved along this network and changed cultures in very significant ways. It was the 1980 joint documentary television series on the Silk Road by Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) and China Central Television (CCTV) that catalysed the currency of the Silk Road idea. The romance of the idea has since then blown up and propelled the tourism industry in the region. With this, Elliott argued, that the Silk Road is firmly planted in everyone's imagination - including Xi Jinping's imagination.

All the documentation and excavation done on the subject has allowed for a better understanding of history and Elliott averred that there was not so much trade taking place on the Silk Road. The little trade that took place, didn't involve silk much either. Recent work on the subject argues that powerful nomad groups extorted enormous amounts of silk from the Han Chinese and redistributed them along the Silk Road network. This is contrary to the picture of power-relations drawn by Richthofen, and goes to show that the economic angle on the Silk Road might have been incidental. Instead, the Silk Road for the Han was about getting political and military allies in Central and West Asia. In this pursuit, the Silk Road facilitated movement of political emissaries and the gifts being carried with them in diplomatic missions. Elliott contends that the historical Silk Road wasn't about commerce; instead it was about diplomacy and geopolitics. In this way, the 'new' Silk Road does have a very deep connection with the 'old' Silk Road. Keeping in mind that economics isn't the only aspect of BRI, there is significant stress on connections between states, and positioning of political power. Elliott concluded his lecture by noting that while the scale of infrastructure projects undertaken doesn't find basis in history, the geopolitical strategy underpinning the BRI does have ample precedent.

On this note, Amb. Kantha thanked Elliott for the fascinating presentation on the connection between the 'old' and 'new' Silk Roads. He opened the floor for questions from the audience. One audience member asked whether the BRI could be compared to the Marshall Plan. Another question was posed on the need for BRI, when other initiatives like the SCO already existed. Elliott answered the first question by distinguishing the level of involvement of US in



partner countries in comparison to BRI. The Marshall Plan followed a more no-strings attached policy and did not involve any repossession of territory. To the second question, Elliott contends that perhaps BRI was started because it is personally attached to Xi Jinping, while the SCO was 'someone else's baby'. One member of the audience made a comment about roads not being unidirectional, and asked Elliott to what degree China is exposing itself to external influences. Elliott agreed with this statement, and stated that in understanding BRI, we must leave room for the impact of unintended consequences. The Historical Silk Road explains how such networks allowed for the movement of people, culture and ideas that left a transformative impact on the Chinese civilisation. In understanding BRI, Elliott suggests we would be better served to not over-estimate the impact of trade while under-estimating the impact of culture and ideas.

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