

Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Issues: An Encyclopedia

Tibet

Bruce E. Johansen

Professor of Communication and Native American Studies
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Introduction

Environmental colonization can be large-scale, as evidenced by Chinese plans to build a railway into Tibet, over some of the world's most rugged terrain. Oppression also may be very personal, as in the case of one Tibetan monk who protested gold mining near his monastery, only to find himself ousted from his home, and his sanctuary turned into a Chinese center for "patriotic education," following his torture by Chinese authorities.

China's Tibetan Railway

The Dalai Lama in mid-summer, 2001, said he believes that China's plans to connect the Tibetan capital Lhasa with three Chinese cities by rail is an attempt to forcibly change Tibet's indigenous demography and environment. Speaking to journalists at a Delhi hotel July 14, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, the head of state (in exile) as well as the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, said: "[The] Chinese are setting up the railway tracks, but it is not for economic development. They have plans to transfer 20 million Chinese into Tibet. The purpose of the railways is basically to facilitate the transfer of population." The Dalai Lama also said that the railway will "Do serious damage to the environment" (Dalai Lama, 2001). The Dalai Lama said that the railway devastate traditional Tibet because it will strengthen Chinese rule, inundate Tibet with ethnic Chinese settlers, and draw Tibet's natural resources into China.

The Dalai Lama did not deny reports that young Tibetans inside the country might organize armed resistance to the railroad and other manifestations of Chinese domination. He said: "There are individuals who do not believe in my [non-violent] approach. In fact some of them, who are staying inside Tibet, say 'that family [China] does not understand truth, but only violence'" (Dalai Lama, 2001).

China's government plans to construct the world's highest railway, at elevation sometimes exceeding 4,500 meters (14,500 feet). The 1,120-kilometer stretch of steel rail will advance the Chinese government's 50-year-old goal of linking Tibet to China's interior, economically, politically and culturally. The railway was started in June, 2001, and at that time was scheduled for completion in 2007, at an estimated cost of U.S. \$2.5 billion. Engineering and construction have been challenged by high altitudes, steep grades, frigid temperatures, howling winds and soils that can expand or contract more than a meter depending on the season (Tibet Railway, 2001). The region's fragile ecosystem could be damaged if promised protective measures fail. According to a report by the *Knight-Ridder*

News Service, "Some Tibetan groups have complained that the railway will also accelerate China's exploitation of Tibet's natural resources and the destruction of Tibetan culture" (Tibet Railway, 2001).

The line will run from Tibet's capital, Lhasa, to the Chinese Qinghai provincial city of Golmud, near the Kunlun Pass. The Chinese government's official position is that the rail line "will bring prosperity to impoverished Tibet, where average annual incomes are about half of what they are in the rest of China" (Tibet Railway, 2001) High altitudes will require specially adapted engines that will allow the train to function at low levels of oxygen and pressurized cars that will shield passengers from altitude sickness. The trains also will have to be powerful enough to negotiate some of the steepest terrain negotiated by any railroad on Earth. Parts of the rail bed also are prone to earthquakes and landslides. The rail line also will traverse 286 bridges and ten tunnels (one of them about a mile long), according to the project's senior engineer, Zhang Xiuli (Tibet Railway, 2001).

Before it is completed, the Chinese estimate that its Tibetan railway will tap the time and talents of about 50,000 laborers and engineers, "many working just a few hours a day because of weakness and health problems caused by lack of oxygen" (Tibet Railway, 2001). Chinese officials expect eight trains a day to ply the line once it opens, with many of the passengers being tourists. The Chinese also have been rather open about the Dalai Lama's objections, telling reporters that the railway will hasten Chinese access to Tibetan timber and minerals, as well as allowing easier transport of troops to "control . . . a still-restive population" (Tibet Railway, 2001). The railway will replace a rocky, partially paved two-lane road that is known locally as one of the world's most treacherous highways. The drive from Lhasa to Golmud routinely consumes six bone-rattling days.

Project director Zhao Xiyu said extensive efforts would be made to protect the delicate plants as well as the wildlife in the area. He said new technology would be used to stabilize frozen soils, and that "some areas of track would be elevated to allow migratory species, including the endangered Tibetan antelope, to pass under the line" (Tibet Railway, 2001).

Chinese President Jiang Zemin said on Friday the government would seek to develop Tibet's economy while at the same time cracking down on separatist activities. "We will continue to pay attention to two major issues in Tibet -- economic development and social stability," Jiang was quoted as telling Xinhua, China's state-run news agency. He added that anyone who uses "religion as camouflage" to support independence for Tibet would be punished (Tibet Railway, 2001). Exiled Tibetans, in response, pointed to an historical irony: the first railroads were introduced into China a century ago by European powers, notably the British, co-operating with the Japanese, to strengthen their imperialist control over China, including foreign military control and transit of Chinese resources out of the country.

A Monk Pays the Price of Protesting Gold Mining

Kabukye Rinpoche, head of Nubzur monastery in Kardze, Tibet, was jailed by Chinese authorities during 1999 for expressing his opposition to gold mining near his monastery. The mine, opened in 1992, quickly brought more than 300 Chinese miners to the area. According to a report in *Drillbits and Tailings*, Tibetans believe that the area is a holy mountain and the dwelling place of many protective earth spirits.

Rinpoche, who suffers heart problems, sent letters of protest to local authorities, raising concerns that explosions used to loosen rock on the hillside were causing problems for the nomads herding their livestock. He also asserted that the mining was leading to erosion of nearby grasslands necessary for local herders.

On July 10, 1996 Rinpoche was arrested, according to the Tibet Information Network, a support group in London. Immediately after his arrest, Chinese security personnel visited the monastery and broke into Rinpoche's room where they said posters and a camera were confiscated. The monk wasn't charged with opposing gold mining, but for hanging posters advocating the independence of Tibet from China during 1995 (Tibetan Monk, 1999). The Chinese forbade display of photographs of the Dalai Lama and listening to Tibetan language broadcasts on the Voice of America.

Two days after Kabukye Rinpoche's arrest, Chinese security personnel returned to Nubzur monastery and arrested Pantsa, the caretaker of the monastery. Both men then were reportedly interrogated and tortured. A source told TIN that the men were held in a small cell without windows or light, given very poor food and were repeatedly beaten and denied sleep at night (Tibetan Monk, 1999).

The same report added that Rinpoche also was forced to strip naked and stand next to a burning fire, "on one occasion losing consciousness and falling into the fire, causing severe burns to his left arm" (Tibetan Monk, 1999). In addition, Rinpoche was forced to kneel for hours, damaging his knees so badly that he could not stand up properly. Rinpoche remained in detention until he was formally charged and sentenced on October 27, 1996 to six years imprisonment with a fine equal to almost U.S. \$1,000 for the crime of "counter-revolutionary splittism". A Chinese government "work committee" has taken up residence in the dissidents' monastery and turned it into a center for "patriotic education" (Tibetan Monk, 1999).

FURTHER READING

- "Dalai Lama Slams Lhasa Rail Link; Basharat Peer in New Delhi." *rediff.com*, July 21, 2001.
[<http://www.tibet.net/eng/diir/enviro/news/>]
- "Tibet Railway to Fast-track Political and Economic Goals. *Knight-Ridder News Service*, July 23, 2001.
[http://www.tibet.ca/wtnarchive/2001/7/22_1.html]
- "Tibetan Monk Tortured for Protesting Chinese Gold Mining." *Drillbits and Tailings*, January 21, 1999.
[<http://www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/drillbits/990121/99012103.html>]

Bruce E. Johansen, Professor of Communication and Native American Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, is working on a worldwide survey of indigenous peoples and environmental issues for Greenwood Press. Publication of this work is expected to be in late 2003.