

Socio-environmental conflicts in Tibet (FULL INTERVIEW)

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“The number of Tibetans setting themselves ablaze is increasing at an alarming rate. [...] In addition to several political, social, religious and economic factors, the impact of mining and environmental pollution has been one of the major causes that drive fiery protests across Tibet”; an article from 2013 by the Research Office of the Environment and Development Desk of the Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala makes in this way the connection between self-immolations and environmental distress in Tibet; “On Tuesday 20.11.12 a Tibetan in his mid-'30s [...] walked up the hill to the entrance of gold mining site in Gyagar Thang, poured kerosene over his body and set himself on fire”¹. According to the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, based in Dharamsala, this young man wanted to denounce the hardship of local communities affected by mining operation of the Chinese companies. As in many other countries, pain caused by the deterioration of the local ecologies and the disruption of traditional ways of life leads to resistances and constructive struggles but also to extreme acts of dissent and frustration. Moreover, China's occupation of Tibet since the 1950s opened the door to systematic exploitation of Tibet's rich minerals (copper, gold, chromite, aluminum, iron ore, boron, lead, zinc, lithium), but also crude oil, potassium, asbestos, natural gas and coal. Pollution of water bodies and additional impacts on the territories due to hydropower stations to provide energy to the mines are aggravating living conditions. Railways and roads made access to local cultural sites and natural amenities much easier and tourism is bringing along severe cultural and environmental impacts. Also, to facilitate extraction of natural resources and to control their movements and use of resources, Chinese authorities are forcing Tibetan nomads to settle down in ad hoc built villages where they are losing their traditional practises and therefore part of their culture.

In December 2014 in Dharamsala, I discussed these issues with Tempa Gyaltzen Zamlha, Environment Research Fellow at the Tibet Policy Institute. Here I'm sharing our conversation. After more research, some of the conflicts narrated here will soon appear on the Ejatlas (www.ejatlas.org)

-Can you please introduce your work at the Environment and Development Desk and your main objectives?

The Environment and Development Desk has been set up under the Tibetan Policy Institute; we monitor current environmental situation in Tibet, research on the impact of climate change and damage caused by human factors, and then we try to disseminate an unbiased and true information about the global significance of the Tibetan Plateau and its current state of environment to the international community and governments; we especially target the Chinese government and public about the current state of Tibet's environment and need for a genuine conservation effort.

Our objective is to protect the world's highest and largest plateau, which is home to largest concentration of glaciers beyond two poles and also source of Asia's most important rivers. So that the Tibetan civilization which has thrived on this beautiful plateau for thousands of years could continue to live a happy and healthy life, and also downstream nations continue to enjoy fresh Tibetan rivers on which much of their civilization depend.

We also try to attend different environment related conferences, such as Conferences of Parties organized by UNFCCC. For Tibetans, environment issue is one of the most urgent tasks. His Holiness (the Dalai Lama) once said that political issue can wait but not environment. Since Tibetan plateau is very fragile, any major damage to its ecological state would be very difficult to restore.

-What are the major environmental challenges you are facing now in Tibet?

The major threats are of course climate change but also human factors; excessive mining in Tibet especially in the last few years as Chinese government has declared mining one of the two most important industries along with tourism in Tibetan areas. Both have strong environmental impact on the fragile ecosystem on the Plateau.

As Tibetans, we have a very intimate relation to nature because we believe there is presence of God everywhere, on the mountains, in the rivers, so we try to minimize the impacts as much as possible.

Things have changed ever since Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950s. Intentionally or unintentionally, there have been lots of environmental damages in the Tibetan areas under Chinese rule. China has already built railway lines, which makes mining much easier, cheaper and profitable. Then, they have constructed many hydropower stations which is indispensable for mining.

But I have to be precise here: Tibetans are not against mining per se, they are against mining when it happens near a village, close to water bodies, sacred mountains or nomadic grasslands. There are mining activities also in the vast northern plain where there is less population and almost no protest because of mining activities.

So you can ask why are Tibetans against mining on sacred mountains? Well, it's because mountains have strong historical, cultural, political and spiritual connection to Tibetan people's way of life. Let me give you an example: There's a mountain in Central Tibet not far from Lhasa, called Mount Yarlhashampo. There's no mining there yet, but it's important to understand the connection with our culture. In fact, Mount Yarlhashampo was the royal god of the most powerful and longest ruling dynasty in Tibet in the 7th century. The first of the seven noble ministers in Tibetan history who helped in re-establishment of the Kingdom was said to be a son of Yarlha Shampo; there are many similar sacred mountains in Tibet which are respected and protected by locals. Summer picnics and horse races are the most popular festival in Tibet, horse riders first visit sacred mountains to pay respect and thank the sacred mountains and lakes for providing good health, good weather, good harvest and lots of grass for the yaks.

-What's the connection between sacredness of the mountains and environmental resistance?

Look, I've recently read lots of papers on research done in the sacred mountains. The result by different scientists is unanimous; they acknowledge that they cannot state if there really is something there in the sacred mountains but that the belief in sacredness plays an important role in conservation and protection. Biodiversity is in fact higher and people try not to cut tree or hunt animals or harm the ecosystem in the vicinity around sacred sites. See, not all mountains are considered sacred, so if we carefully study the location or designation of sacred sites we'll be pleasantly surprised to notice that sacred sites are actually some of the most important areas of a local ecosystem, say the most glaciated mountain, lake that is source of many rivers, a wetland that sustains

vegetation in the region. So I would say that the belief in sacred mountain is at the same time very scientific and has a religious approach, which is very smart and that is why Tibetan have been able to preserve ecosystems for thousands of years despite its fragile state and harsh climatic condition at an extreme high altitude.

-Now things are changing rapidly, you said...

Chinese mining companies are entering in these territories, from where Tibetan nomads were removed by Chinese government, they are very powerful actors.

Often, investors in these mining companies are central and provincial government officials. So every time local communities resist, they are first asked to just go away; if they insist, the companies try to convince that it's meant for community's development; if they still meet opposition, they try to divide the community and bribe members; lastly, they just deploy police forces to brutally repress resistance (by tear gas, rubber bullets, or opening fire). We managed to document at least 20 big protests against mining since 2009, although there could be many more.

Such news will never come up in the Chinese media, so locals have no option but to send such information out to the world at great risk. So it's very important for us to make this information known to the outside world and the Chinese government, the world has a responsibility to act.

There have been occasions where the Chinese government in Beijing took some positive actions, but these positive actions never materialize in Tibetan areas as local governments manipulate and exploit Tibet and Tibetan people in the name of stability.

In recent years, there have been many large scale mining projects happening, there are very few Tibetans working there as gate keepers or drivers, most of the workers are brought in from Chinese provinces. It's the local governments who benefit from mining in Tibetan areas not the community. So there's neither employment nor compensation.

Local governments and mining companies always operate in collaboration and are far too powerful actors.

-Mining and infrastructure construction have been causing lots of social distress worldwide, also because of large scale displacement. Is that the case in Tibet as well?

Yes, massive displacement due to mining and infrastructure construction happens in Tibet too but in a very different way or should I say in a more dangerous way. For example, Tibetan nomads who normally move to a different pasture site every three months in order not to exhaust local resources constantly confront Chinese mining companies invading their pasture land, so confrontations happens and government almost always side with the mining companies and brutally suppress Tibetan nomads. To accelerate mining in Tibetan areas and remove Tibetan nomads from such areas, China introduced policies to completely resettle Tibetan nomads into poorly planned concentrated village, so that mining companies could have a free hand in the vast resource rich grassland at the cost of Tibetan nomads. So, we can say it's another type of displacement, not from a precise spot to which you have official entitlement but from a whole area and way of life.

The Chinese government argues that nomads have to be modernized, children educated, which is easier in a village. But we have proof to show that the lives in these villages have been deteriorating because of poor and irresponsible planning, there are no

schools, clinic and jobs as promised. People become dependent on short-term government's subsidies and lose their sources of economic independence (livestock, grasslands, jobs, etc), which results in rise of alcoholism and prostitution.

If Chinese government sincerely wishes to provide jobs and education for the Tibetan nomads, they don't need to force nomad into settlement villages. Instead first create proper long-term planning by building schools, hospitals, markets, jobs and other facilities that would attract nomadic community to voluntarily settle and carry on a prosperous life. What the Chinese government has done is pushing nomads into absolute poverty. What will happen to the young nomad living in these resettlements who neither gets proper education to live an urban life nor equipped with nomadic skills that has sustained a generation of happy and self-sufficient nomads

-You also mentioned tourism as an urgent environmental issue.

Yes, the problem is that tourism in Tibet is concentrated in a few areas during a very short summer season, with massive numbers. Recently, China has built routes for tourists to visit sacred lakes and important environmental sites, such action would hurt both people and the land. Also, the way outsiders relate with the territory is very different. They do things we would never do and this offends the local communities. Like taking pictures of everything, shouting aloud, climbing and throwing garbage everywhere. Opening of eco-sensitive sites like lakes, glaciers, grasslands, wetlands, peaks would increase tourism pressure there and could bring catastrophic damages.

Tourism creates very little wealth and job for the local Tibetans, most of the tourists in Tibet are Chinese. They mostly book travel packages through a Chinese Travel Agencies who books Chinese hotels to stay, a Chinese driver for local travel and a Chinese guide, and mostly eat in a Chinese restaurant. So most of the money spent by Chinese tourist travelling into Tibet goes into a Chinese pocket or back into China, Tibetans receives a tiny portion of the benefit.

-Your work in documenting socio-environmental resistances in Tibet is quite unique. Can you recall any interesting case you learnt about and their outcomes?

The most known case is probably a copper mine closed to Lhasa, called Gyama (in Chinese, Jiama) Copper Gold Polymetallic Mine, in an area rich in copper, zinc, lead, lithium. The mine was once declared as a model mine by the Chinese government. How ironic that the Tibetan communities around it have been protesting for over 5 years now as the mine brought disruption to the nomadic life on the mountains in that valley. It also caused river water pollution. Most notably the massive mine induced landslides in 2013 that killed more than 80 workers in the same mine. Though the Chinese government claims that the landslide was due to natural factors and not caused by the Gyama mine, we at the Environment Desk have strong evidenceⁱⁱ to prove that the 2013 landslide was caused by mismanagement of the mine.



Landslide in Gyama mine – Credits: tibet.net

There was another protest in August 2013 in Dzatoe County when mining companies marched into a mine on one of the local sacred mountains, the mountain was not only sacred but was also located within the boundary of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve or the Three Rivers Source National Nature Reserve established in year 2000 by the Chinese government. Local Tibetans strongly protested against the mining company for disruption of cultural belief and violation of nature reserve policies. Despite been very peaceful protest by the local Tibetan of Dzatoe, Chinese police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, also arrested key members of the protesters. A protester attempted suicide with his knife (traditionally, Tibetan nomads always carry a knife with them) because he felt so much helplessness when the local government and police who should be protecting them instead brutally suppressed local resident to appease mining companies.

This case is absolutely absurd; in 2000 when the area was declared Nature Reserve, Tibetan nomads living in the area were removed but in 2013 the Chinese government brought in mining companies in the same area. Why this double standard? Why nature reserve policies are not applied to the mining companies as well? Such situation creates doubts about China's real intent behind nomad resettlement policies.

Fortunately, there have been even scientists and environmental NGOs voicing concern about the issuing of mining license inside the nature reserve.

In another case people protested for river water pollution due to mining. A government official maintained that the river was fine and not polluted. One of the protesters shouted "if it's clean, then prove it to us by drinking water from the river by yourself". The local official was embarrassed and quickly left the scene by saying "you'll all pay for it". This became a joke in the community; it clearly shows how local officials collaborate with mining companies to cover-up environmental damages.

- Is there a network of people who work on environment and environmental justice issues in Tibet? Do you think environmental NGOs in China and Tibet can become allies to put forward an environmental (justice) agenda?

There are good environmental NGOs in Tibet but most of them were forced to shut-down after 2008 Protest in Tibet. There are also some good Chinese environmental NGOs working in Tibet. The problem in Tibet is that when an NGO is doing great social and environmental work, the local government would try different ways to shut them down by labeling separatist or influence by separatists. Any collaboration will therefore be quite problematic.

-We are introducing now in Europe and elsewhere challenging concepts like degrowth or other alternative visions to “development”. What's your thought on that?

This is something the five-six of us here debate a lot. We say “what is development all about? Isn't it being happy? What if someone is not happy with your way of understanding development, like the nomadic way of life?”

So, development should be about how happy you are as a person. For Tibetans, nomads are happy people because they have their resources and freedom. So we say we shouldn't try to impose your definition of happiness to everyone. Let everybody find his/her way and respect life. Of course, not all that is ancient is good per se, but let's chose the good part and preserve it. Sometimes Tibetans feel they are not Chinese enough to do Chinese things, and not Tibetan enough to live as their forefathers did. Between the two, they feel they are nobody.

For more information:

Gyama Mine conflict in the EJAtlas

<https://ejatlas.org/conflict/gyama-mine-landslide-in-tibet>

Environment and Development Desk, <http://tibet-edd.blogspot.com.es/>

Shielding the Mountains documentary movie, directed by Kunga Lama. Produced by Emily Yeh.

Tibet Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, “Imposing Modernity with Chinese Characteristics”, Dharamsala 2011

Jampel Dell'Angelo, The sedentarization of Tibetan nomads: conservation or coercion?, p. 309-332 in H. Healy et al, Ecological Economics from the Ground Up, Routledge, London, 2012.

“We are here to stay”, a LAMCA-EJOLT documentary movie

ⁱTsering Dhundup “Scarring the land, scraping the wounds”, available at: http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/644/644_tsering_dhundup.htm

ⁱⁱ<http://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/AR-Gyama-9-April.pdf>