

Scarring the land, scraping the wounds*

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The number of Tibetans setting themselves ablaze is increasing at an alarming rate. So far, over 100 Tibetans have self-immolated since 2009, constituting one of the biggest waves of self-immolation as political protest in the history of mankind. Most of them called for the freedom of Tibet and the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama from exile. 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.

ON Tuesday 20 November 2012 a Tibetan in his mid-30s got up early in his hometown in Amchok (eastern Tibet), walked up the hill to the entrance of gold mining site in Gyagar Thang, poured kerosene over his body and set himself on fire. He died at the scene of the protest. Tsering Dhundup was the 78th Tibetan to self-immolate inside Tibet since the fiery protest first began in 2009. He is survived by his parents, wife and three children aged sixteen, fifteen and eight. He was an agro-pastoralist from Sangchu county (Ch: Xiahe), in eastern Tibet. According to Dharamshala-based Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, through his burning protest Dhundup ‘wanted to highlight the hardship and suffering of the local Tibetans harmed by mining activities.’

Six days later, on 26 November 2012, a teenager followed his trails up to the mining site and set himself ablaze near the same spot as Dhundup’s in a protest against the mining activities in the region. He died on the same day from severe burn injuries. Eighteen year old Kunchok Tsering was the 84th Tibetan to carry out self-immolation. He is survived by his wife, parents and elder brother.

Earlier in the same month, twenty six year old Chakmo Kyi from Khagya village called for ‘racial equality and freedom to protect environment’ before setting herself on fire in Dolma Square near Rongwo Monastery in

Rebgong county in Eastern Tibet. Kyi, who died on the same day, was a mother of two and the 75th self-immolator on the Tibetan Plateau.

Since 2009, close to 100 Tibetans, including monks, nuns, farmers, nomads, intellectuals and businessmen have set themselves on fire. Judging from the circumstances and calls made by these brave Tibetans, it is evident that the flaring up of burning protests raging across Tibet is a direct result of six decades of deep-seated resentment caused by China’s political repression, cultural assimilation, social discrimination, economic marginalization and environmental destruction. Over eighty eight self-immolators died expressing outright rejection of the counter-productive policies pursued and expanded by the Chinese government that continue to destroy the natural environment of Tibet and cultural traditions of its people. Among others, the unbridled exploitation of natural resources and its impacts has been a cause of major concern for Tibetans in several terms – ecological, economical, social and spiritual.

Historically, ordinary Tibetans have both religious and economic objections to the exploitation of natural resources. The conscious awareness about environmental protection has been deeply rooted in Tibetan religious beliefs, customs, moral obligations and taboos. The idea of protecting nature dates back as early as 8th century BC, when

Tibetans followed the indigenous Bön religion. According to Bön, every-thing in the world – mountains, water, trees, animals among others – has its own deity, who can protect and punish human beings based on their behaviour towards nature. Later in the 7th century AD when Buddhism was introduced into Tibet, Buddhist principles of interdependence made the people an integral part of the whole system, holding life in all its forms sacred. Tibetans prohibited killing and advocated protection of forests, and living beings. In his book *The People of Tibet*, Charles Bell, who was British India's ambassador to Tibet, wrote, 'In Tibet, there is an old-established objection to mining on religious grounds.' There was almost no mining as it was also believed to impact the fertility of the soil.

As early as 1642, an environment protection law called *Ri-rlung Tsa-tsig* or Mountain Valley Edicts existed in Tibet that prohibited felling, hunting, mining and so on. The edict was issued every year by the government of Tibet after the Tibetan New year and served as an important and useful ecological guideline to protect wildlife and the environment (forests, grasslands, lakes and streams). This was one of the reasons that helped maintain Tibet's pristine highland with its diverse flora and fauna for centuries.

But China's occupation of Tibet in the 1950s opened the door to systematic exploitation of Tibet's rich minerals. Due to its tectonic formation and settings, Tibet has 132 different types of mineral resources. Big mining companies in Tibet have shown great interest in copper, gold, coal, crude oil, natural gas, chromite, arsenic, asbestos, aluminum, iron ore, boron, potassium, lead, zinc and lithium. According to the Article 9 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Tibet's resources are state assets available to be exploited to meet the needs of national development.

Over the past sixty years, however, mineral exploitation has evolved from a marginal endeavour to a major phenomenon in

China's economic growth driven by industrialization and urbanization. The large-scale and capital intensive exploitation of resources in Tibet has also been aided by the advancement in geological information (in 2005, China Geological Survey compiled geological map on the scale of 1:250,000 and first map of metal and nonmetal deposits on the scale of 1:1.5 million) and rapid infrastructural development (including the world's highest Gormo-Lhasa Railway completed in 2006) under the 'Great Western Development' (GWD) strategy adopted by Beijing in 1999.

With plans to further advance the GWD strategy in its 12th five year plan (2011-2015), a new network of railway lines is in the pipeline, including an extension of the ongoing Lhasa-Shigatse further east to Eastern Turkestan (Ch: Xinjiang), extension of Lhasa-Nyingtri train to Chengdu and Dali, and Gormo-Chengdu line linking the two major economic centres. These development plans will further intensify the exploitation of natural resources as the pattern of the proposed railway networks mirrors the location of major mineral reserves and strategic interests in Tibet. Additionally, construction of a number of new hydro-dams across major rivers in Tibet will provide the much needed power to boost mining operations. For instance, the Jinhe power station on Jinhe river (a tributary of Zachu or Mekong) is being built to power development of Yulong copper mine in Chamdo (Ch: Qamdo) prefecture. The new urban centres and roadways will bring more Chinese migrant workers into Tibet to thrive in the mining industry, already dominated by the Chinese – particularly in skilled and managerial sectors.

According to China's official *Xinhua* news agency (13 August 2011), Zhang Qingli – the then Communist party secretary of the so called Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Regional Committee – reportedly told *Xinhua's Economy and Nation Weekly* that Tibet has abundant mine reserves but little exploration has been done so far. Zhang

pledged to increase investment in exploration of mineral resources in TAR in the coming five years (2011-2015). Recently, nine special zones for the mineral industry have been marked in Tibet and the mineral industry is expected to contribute 30-50 per cent of TAR's GDP by 2020.

Mining is an important sector of growth for any country but the rampant mining in Tibet, with few environmental guidelines, has caused enormous problems with little or no benefit to Tibetans. It has led to the destruction of sacred sites and world heritage sites. Environmental pollution and land degradation have caused great harm to livestock and wildlife, including biodiversity. The influx of Chinese migrants has resulted in lack of employment opportunity and benefits to Tibetans, with pasture and arable land being expropriated to facilitate mining operations. All this has aggravated the already brewing resentment among Tibetans leading to protests, direct action and other drastic measures, including self-immolations.

Khawa Karpo (Meili Snow Mountain) is one of the most sacred mountains and a major pilgrimage site in Tibet. It is located in Three Parallel Rivers, designated a Unesco World Heritage site in 2003. Since 2004, iron ore mining has been taking place on river slopes disregarding the spiritual and cultural sentiments of the people. In 2011, a small gold mining operation in the western side of the region provoked direct action from villagers, who threw the mining equipments into Gyalmo Ngulchu River (Salween). The tension continued after the resumption of mining, leading to the arrest of a village leader in early 2012. This led to a confrontation with security forces during which villagers were seriously injured. In late 2012, hundreds of villagers from the surrounding areas have joined in the protest.

Millions of Tibetan nomads and farmers have been forcibly evicted or compelled to abandon their centuries-old lifestyle to make way for extractive industries and

hydropower projects. In the last decade, the Chinese government has aggressively implemented the policy to remove nomads from their ancestral pastures and force them into concrete camps resulting in increasing poverty, environmental degradation and social breakdown. Once the nomads are removed in the name of 'environmental protection', the mining companies inevitably move in and start operations with no resistance. Radio Free Asia (13 January 2013) reported that Tibetan herders were forced to move away from traditional grazing areas by mining operations located near Dun village in Khartse township of Lhundrup (Ch: Linzhou) county in 2005.

Most of the protests related to mining and environmental pollution occurred after repeated complaints and petitions made by Tibetans to protect the environment were ignored by the authorities or construed as recalcitrance or silenced using force. A positive response at this stage seems unlikely, as it will be at odds with the self-interests of many officials who make quasi-legal financial gains by protecting mining enterprises. With no room for legal and administrative procedures, Tibetans have resorted to demonstration and sometimes direct action to disrupt mining activities.

Over nineteen protests related to mining activities and environmental pollution have been reported across Tibet since 2009. Three took place in 2012. Radio Free Asia reported on 26 August 2010 that three Tibetans were killed and thirty others severely injured when Chinese security forces opened fire on a group of Tibetan petitioners who had gathered outside a government building in Palyul County (Sichuan province) to protest against the environmental damage caused by the expansion of a gold mine in the area.

The large-scale mining activities have been causing significant damage to Tibet's fragile ecosystem, including land degradation, pollution, harm to livestock and wildlife biodiversity. Huang and her associates (2010) conducted research on the

environmental impact of mining activities on the quality of surface water in Gyama town near Lhasa and found that the 'high content of heavy metals in the stream sediments as well as in a number of tailings with gangue and material from the ore processing, poses a great potential threat to the downstream water users.' Similar reports of environmental pollution leading to water contamination, illness of local Tibetans and loss of animals are common. A case in point is the lead poisoning of the water supply around Kumbum Monastery due to pollution from the Ganhetan industrial district in Rushar (Ch: Huangzhong) county in Amdo (Ch: Qinghai) province. The poisoning led to over 100 children falling ill in 2006. Such events clearly demonstrate the lack of environmental governance among mining operations in Tibet, most of which are incidentally carried out by China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

The environmental impact of mining in Tibet is an issue of global consequences. The Tibetan plateau, also known as The Third Pole, is home to around 46,000 glaciers, storing more freshwater than any other region except the North and South Poles. As the rivers originating from Tibet have been the lifeblood of Asian civilization, any impact on this high plateau upstream environment will affect the livelihood of at least 1.3 billion people living downstream. The glaciers, snow capped mountains, permafrost soils and alpine wetlands of the Tibetan plateau hold a large reserve of carbon. If left unchecked they will become a source of greenhouse gases that would further accelerate the global warming crisis.

Any development in Tibet can be useful and sustainable only if its resources are used within its capabilities and ecological limits. Tibetans should be guaranteed the fundamental rights to the environment and involved in all decision-making processes. Mineral development in Tibet must ensure prior investigation of the social, environmental and cultural impacts. Any transfer of the ownership of Tibetan land and resources to non-Tibetans large-scale capital-intensive and commercial projects should be forbidden. However, the present top-down approach to development in Tibet puts Tibetans on the fringe and threatens not only their livelihoods, land and resources, but also their very survival. Such dire circumstances have forced them to take extreme measures.

Thus far the Chinese government has responded to the escalating incidents of fiery protests with greater restriction and relentless crackdown in Tibet. Instead of seriously addressing the real cause of self-immolation, Beijing blames 'the exile forces for instigation' and has criminalized this act of sacrifice. Recently, some families and friends of brave immolators have been charged with 'intentional homicide' and handed down severe sentences, including death and lengthy jail terms. It is time that the Chinese government acknowledges that the burning protests are a direct result of its destructive policies. Criminalization of the protest and failure to address the grievances of the people will only aggravate the already volatile situation in Tibet.

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