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THE PERIL OF CHINA'S RENEWED DRIVE TO URBANIZE TIBET

Tseyang Lhamo

Research Associate, CAPS

The announcement was made on China's decision to increase the permanent urban population of Tibet by 30% in next five years or specifically by 2020 on January 14, 2015 as per the Xinhua news. The plan was initially conceived by TAR local government and received approval from the Central government of China. The Chairman of the TAR, Lobsang Gyaltsen stated that urbanization in Tibet is still lagging behind compared to rest of China. He further emphasised the need to improve public services in urban areas in order to attract more talent and to boost local economies.ⁱ

As the decision to urbanize Tibet was announced recently, the details of the project are unknown as it has still not been revealed as to the manner in which this project would be implemented and what it would actually entail. These are critical issues that pose primary concerns for Tibetans. There is no denying that Tibet should receive facilities, services, infrastructural developments like rest of China provided that these facilitate empowerment of local people along with preserving the very character of the region, hence ensuring meaningful growth of the region and people of Tibet.

If we were to deduce from the statement of the TAR Chairman (owing to lack of concrete details of the project) where he mentioned about attracting more talented people, undoubtedly these talented people would be Han Chinese. This decision implies that China plans to send huge Han Chinese population to Tibet who would permanently settle in cities and towns of Tibet. This would have grave implications on Tibet and Tibetans.



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The Dalai Lama, in his five point proposal made in 1987, had however, demanded that China should abandon its population transfer policy. Urban areas form the epicentre of vital political and economic structures and its diverse activities. In this respect demography of these vital urban areas matter significantly.

Urban areas in China, including Tibet, started growing rapidly since the 1980s. Additionally official cadres and Han migrants in urban areas of Tibet are the main beneficiaries of development programmes.ⁱⁱ Tibetans lag behind in the field of education and employment. Migrant labourers from impoverished regions triumph over local Tibetans in various urban employment opportunities. Moreover, language barrier works in favour of these migrants.

Tibetans living in Tibet and those in exile, exhibit alarm over China's act of sending Han Chinese or non-Tibetan nationals into Tibet which China has undertaken since establishment of its control over Tibet. This would inevitably lead to swamping of these vital urban areas by Han Chinese and rendering the Tibetans a minority in their own land. This phenomena of government initiated population invasion is currently underway, however, with boost from this recently declared new initiative in this direction would make the end result of huge demographic shift in urban areas much nearer and at an increased pace.

As mirrored from a glimpse of China's history, China had successfully employed a similar method to consolidate its control over minority areas. For instance, in Inner Mongolia, as per the 2000 census, ethnic Mongolians constitute only 17% of the population. Xinjiang also depicts quite a similar story, where Han population of the region has shot up from 6% in early 1950s to 40% in 2000 census.ⁱⁱⁱ It is clear that Beijing has resorted to Han migration towards cultural assimilation of minorities with a view to dilute their ethnic identity. Some have even referred to such process as sinicization and cultural genocide. In this respect, Tibetans, who are ethnically and culturally distinct from Han Chinese, fear disappearance of their language, religion, culture and identity.

Moreover, Beijing government has promoted and encouraged Han migration into Tibet by providing various incentives like providing subsidized education, healthcare, housing, higher



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salaries and other services for urban residents.^{iv} Additionally, robust integration of periphery areas with mainland China via well connected highways and railway lines have acted as impetus with smooth and convenient transportation means. The volume of Han Chinese movement into Tibet can be gauged from the fact that around 2000-3000 Han nationals enter Tibet on a daily basis through Golmud-Lhasa Railway since its operation in 2006.^v

China's policy of flooding urban areas in Tibet with Han Chinese is viewed as one out of the many negative fallouts of Chinese rule over Tibet. Chinese government would label such process as urbanization or development. Nevertheless, China's policy of Han migration leads to marginalization of Tibetans. It further exacerbates Tibetans' resentment against migrants. However, the most significant implication of perpetuation of such policy is the eventual disappearance of Tibet's distinct identity and culture. Hence, the larger question is the very survival of Tibetans' identity and culture. China seems to increase the pace of urbanization in Tibet as evident from recently announced policy. How this policy would be implemented by the government and how it would shape urban areas of Tibet in all respects remains to be seen in the coming years.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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ⁱ"China says to increase urban population in Tibet 30% by 2020", <http://www.thetibetpost.com/en/news/tibet/4399-china-says-to-increase-urban-population-in-tibet-30-by-2020>, 24 January 2015, accessed on 9 February 2015.

ⁱⁱ Tashi Nyima , "Development Discourses on the Tibetan Plateau: Urbanization and Expropriation of Farmland in Dartsedo," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, Article 16, 2010, p. 80

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Martin Fischer, "Population Invasion versus Urban Exclusion in the Tibetan Areas of Western China", *Population and Development Review*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2008, p. 632



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^{iv}“Crossing the Line: China’s Railway to Lhasa, Tibet”, A Report by the International Campaign for Free Tibet, Washington D.C., [www. Savetibet.org](http://www.savetibet.org), p.32.

^v China's Announces Increase in Urban Tibetan Population (In Tibetan)

<http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/2618259>, 29 January 2015, accessed on 10 February 2015.

