

Lhasa, a Chinese town in Tibet

30 August 2002

A news item titled 'Tibetans to become a minority in Lhasa' appeared in The Pioneer on August 9. The report stated that a Chinese Communist Party official had informed 12 foreign correspondents who were on an arranged visit to Tibet that: *"There are more and more people from other provinces of China who are coming to Tibet to open up their business or make investments here."* The Agency added: *"Tibetans will become a minority in their own Capital in the next few years as ethnic Chinese migrants pour into the city to take part in a new drive to develop Tibet's economy."*

It surprised me very much because I remembered writing an article on the Chinese population in the Tibetan capital 10 years ago. I had just returned from Lhasa which was already a Chinese town.

I still recall taking a rickshaw on my way to back to our hotel. The rickshawallah was a Chinese. I wrote at that time: *"While watching my Chinese rickshaw driver pedaling, I was in deep thought. There are now tens of thousands of such Chinese men doing petty work in Lhasa. For many years, the Chinese in Tibet were only PLA personnel and bureaucrats posted by Beijing, but since a few years the Chinese policy seems to have changed and now there is an organised transfer of population from China to Tibet.*

This population occupies even the lowest jobs in society, which in practical terms leaves very little scope for the local Tibetan people. If the Chinese are tailors, shoemakers, rickshawallahs, coolies, what is left for the Tibetans to do except to beg?"

On August 9, the People's Daily, quoting an interview with Mr Gao Jinlong, secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Regional (TAR), denied this: *"The Chinese Central Government has never considered a so-called immigration plan to the TAR; Tibetans make up 95 per cent of its population of 2.6 million and cadres from the local region account for over 75 per cent."* However, this is contradicted by the earlier admission which implies that the Chinese Government plans to pour into Tibet what the Dalai Lama once termed as "a vast sea of Chinese migrants".

This vast sea of migrants is part of what the Dalai Lama calls a 'cultural genocide'. Having failed for more than 40 years to solve the Tibetan issue by force or persuasion, Beijing now believes that the population transfer, bringing waves after waves of Chinese colons, might solve the question of their rebellious 'minority'. The 'Go West' campaign to Tibet is a carefully orchestrated plan to annihilate the Tibetan identity. A factor which is going to accelerate the process is the construction a railway line between Golmud in Qinghai province and Lhasa.

Already in October 1995 Xinhua News Agency had announced the "Third Railway Construction Boom." The new railway construction drive is expected to bring new hope for the "economic development of land-locked southwest China". However, this is no consolation for the Tibetans! Certainly, better communication links can be instrumental in developing the economic potential of a remote region, but it has also been the best way to strip the local population of their agricultural and mineral resources and destroy their cultural uniqueness.

For example, the easy road access to certain parts of eastern Tibet has given a tremendous boost to forest logging. Vast areas of Kham and Southern Tibet have become barren with dramatic consequences for the land erosion. The increase and recurrence of floods in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam (as well as in China), have been the direct result of the new migrants' greediness. For India also these developments should be watched closely. It will be far more dangerous to have a Han majority in Tibet, rather than a Tibetan population which has always been culturally close to India. Another source of worry is the railway line coming closer to the Indian border. It may pose a strategic threat to North India. Recently, China's Vice Minister of Railways Sun Yongfu declared that the rail link was a way to *"promote the economic development of the Tibet Autonomous Region and to strengthen national defense."* Similar words were pronounced by Mao when he invaded Tibet in 1950. Twelve years later, India was invaded.