CHAPTER 14

Invisible People, Pollution, and Places: Nuclear Contamination on the Tibetan Plateau, Himalayan Rivers, and Water Users

Abigail Brown

I Introduction

The 11 March 2011 nuclear catastrophe in Japan is still fresh in the minds of many people. A 9.0 magnitude mega-earthquake shook the northeastern coast of the country, resulting in a tsunami and multiple hydrogen explosions at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant. Only a month after the meltdown, 10,000 tons of radioactive wastewater was released into the Pacific Ocean and fallout was found in tap water as far away as Tokyo. Proponents of nuclear energy often claim that it has fewer human health and environmental risks than fossil fuels. These statements fail to consider human health hazards encountered by people mining radioactive materials or living near nuclear facilities; pollution originating from unsafe nuclear practices including mining, milling, conversion, enrichment, or storage; and places disproportionately impacted by nuclear activities, often rural locations inhabited by marginalized communities. Equally alarming is a lack of data about nuclear contamination of surface and groundwater sources. Regulatory organizations have had difficulty setting consistent limits for radionuclides in waterways as well as describing negative health effects experienced by humans from low-dosage ionizing radiation exposure. Yet nuclear development continues amidst...

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2 Id., 427.
this dearth of information about radioactive contamination of surface and groundwater sources.

This article describes “invisible people,” “invisible pollution,” and “invisible places” in Tibet impacted by nuclear contamination of waterways and associated negative human health effects. It also considers the likelihood of nuclear contaminants entering Himalayan rivers and reaching downstream users. It makes visible connections between people, pollution, and places rendered invisible through power and colonialism, which may facilitate ideas for holistic solutions to complex nuclear problems in Tibet and elsewhere. First, this article shows how the Chinese government made Tibetans “invisible people” through conquest. Next, it details how “invisible pollution” (i.e. radionuclides) in waterways leads to negative health effects, providing examples in Tibet and contemplating threats to downstream users. Then, it acknowledges “invisible places” in Tibet where the Chinese government engaged in nuclear activities, and it demonstrates how the United States (US) government, a US-based nuclear technology corporation, and two international environmental protection organizations ignore these places.

II Invisible People

Tibetans were made “invisible people” through assimilation and oppression initiated by the Chinese government, even though the region has a written history of over 2,000 years. Tibet, once a theocracy with an appointed religious-political leader, was fairly autonomous until the mid-seventeenth century. After the late-seventeenth century, imperial China attempted to assert authority in the region. The Qing Dynasty stationed an official in Lhasa with approximately 1,500 soldiers, but this delegate was viewed merely as a figurehead by most residents. Tibetans only periodically recognized imperial Chinese officials, and these authorities caused little interference in their daily


6 M.G. Chitkara, Toxic Tibet under Nuclear China (New Delhi: AP H Pub., 1996), 1, 135.


8 Id., 33; Lawrence Davidson, Cultural Genocide (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 162.

9 Davidson, supra note 8, 91.