

The city of LHASA (below right) has experienced rapid growth due to Chinese resettlement in the last three decades. The proposed railway, which will come down the river valley from the north west, could easily double or triple the Chinese population in the region, further marginalizing the Tibetans who are struggling to maintain their identity against a wave of assimilation.

The Second Invasion of Tibet

New Railway to Facilitate Demographic Take-over

In 1949 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded Tibet, ending centuries of Tibetan self-rule. Today, China is planning a second invasion — by building a railway line to Lhasa in a bid to consolidate control over Tibet through demographic absorption.

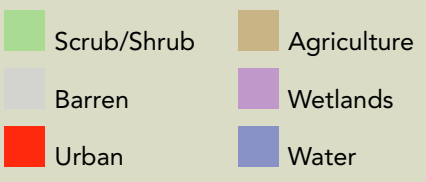
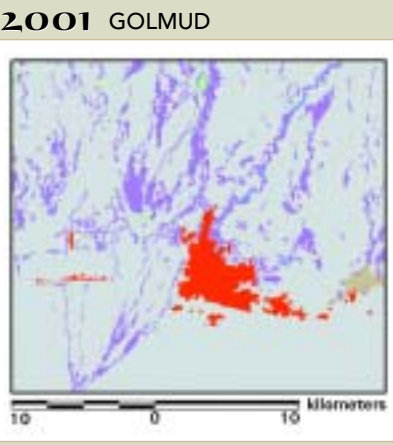
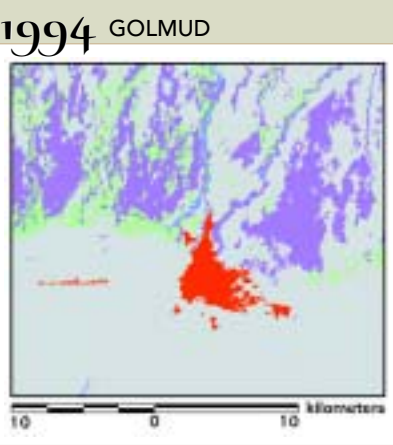
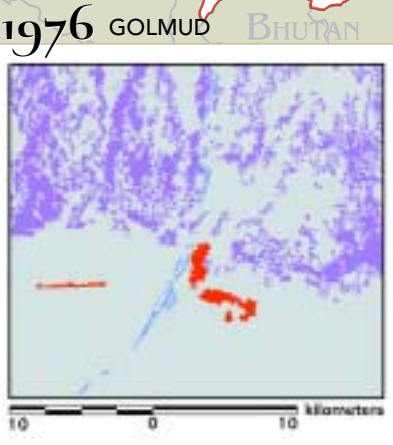
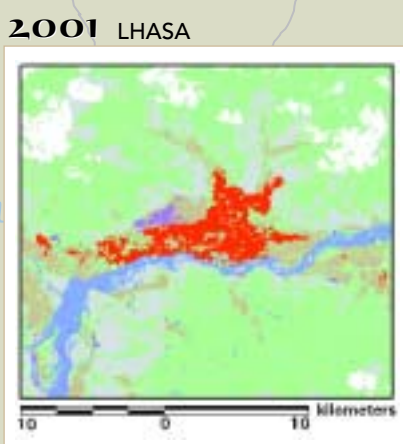
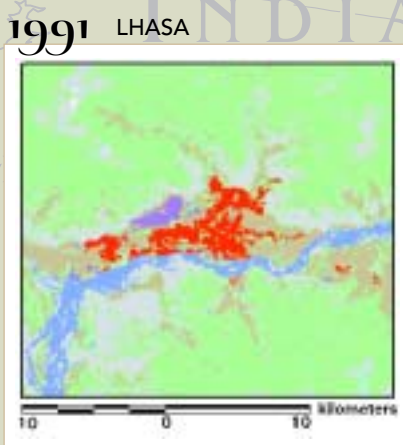
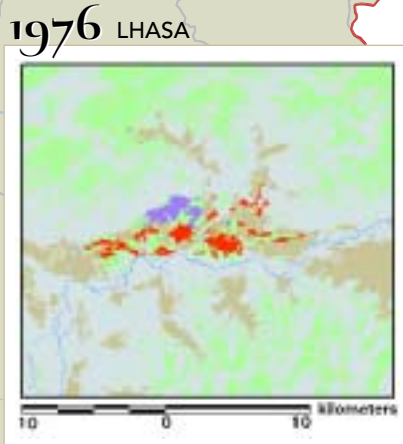


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GOLMUD

Golmud is a new industrial city, initially populated by thousands of prisoners transferred from China. As the original terminus of the railway, which arrived in 1984, it has become the second largest city in Qinghai province. Today, more than 85 percent of materials transported into the Tibet Autonomous Region come through Golmud by road, much of it rice, grain and petroleum. The horizontal red strip to the left of the city is an airfield, first used by the military, then abandoned, and recently refurbished for civilian use.

LHASA

Areas in red denote urban development, an indicator of population growth, which has been significant over the years. The images show rapid population growth between 1991 and 2001 due to a population influx of Chinese settlers. Today, the majority population in Lhasa is Chinese, even in the winter, when many Chinese enjoy extended paid leave to return to China. Wetland areas, shown in purple here, shrank significantly between the same time period.

The International Campaign for Tibet has acquired publicly available satellite images of Tibet that show the immigration impacts of building railways there. After the railway reached Golmud, which was a small trading outpost on the northern Tibetan Plateau, the Chinese migrant population skyrocketed and it became the main People's Liberation Army (PLA) supply line. When the railway reaches Tibet's capital, Lhasa, anticipated in 2007, Tibetans there can expect a similar result: an exploding Chinese population and an even stronger military presence in Tibet.

The primary beneficiaries of the new rail link will be the PLA and Chinese settlers, who rely on food and goods from China. A few Tibetan businesses will benefit from the railway but the overwhelming majority of the Tibetan population, who are subsistence farmers and herders, have virtually nothing to gain from this railway. A Tibetan trader told a reporter from the Baltimore Sun, "we're not anti-development, but we're scared of all the Chinese coming. They have the government's backing, so what can we do?" (Dec. 12, 2001)

The initial projected cost of the railway is 26 billion yuan (US\$2.3 billion), more than double the combined total spent on education and healthcare in the Tibetan Autonomous Region over the past 50 years. The economic, social, engineering and environmental impacts of the railway's construction are all troubling, making this project comparable to China's Three Gorges dam.

Jiang Zemin, the president and Communist Party leader of China, told a New York Times reporter that, "some people advised me not to go ahead with this project because it is not commercially viable. I said this is a political decision." (Aug. 10, 2001)

A FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT

Tibet is a vast nation spanning an area the size of Western Europe. With an average elevation of 14,000 feet above sea level, Tibet is the highest nation on Earth. Five of Asia's great rivers have their headwaters in Tibet; nearly half the world's population lives downstream. The high plains, forests and mountains form fragile ecosystems that are home to rare and endangered wildlife. Due to extensive resource extraction, poaching and unsustainable development, much of it along transportation corridors, these ecosystems and many species within them are now endangered.