



PHOTO: STAR FILE

## PHULBARI MOVEMENT OF 2006 WHERE WE STAND NOW

ABDULLAH NADVI

“This success is the first step towards victory. And all the credit must go to the brave people of Phulbari,” said Engineer Shekih Muhammad Shahidullah, Convener of the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Ports, and Power, to the thousands gathered on the streets of Phulbari, Dinajpur. The government had finally conceded to the demands of the Phulbari protesters on August 30, 2006, and the people were out to celebrate this victory. Of course they were joyous—at last they had ousted Asia Energy, the company that wanted to take away their land. But none of them had ever imagined that victory would come at the cost of so much bloodshed.

On August 26, 2006, three were killed and hundreds injured when protesting against Asia Energy’s open-pit coal mining project at Phulbari. It took these deaths and injuries, four days of strikes and blockades, and nationwide agitation to finally persuade the government to stop the destructive project.

The Phulbari movement is perhaps the first instance when the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Ports, and Power went beyond preserving national economic interests and brought environmental concerns into the public discourse. Since the late 1990s, left-leaning political parties and other stakeholders working under the banner of the Committee had been vocal against the government handing over national mineral resources to foreign companies. Since its inception, the key concern of the National Committee was to ensure utilisation of natural resources for industrialisation in the country, instead of exporting them away. But in the case of the USD 2 billion open-pit coal mining project at Phulbari proposed by Asia Energy, the concerns were not limited to economic interests only. The National Committee was not

only against exporting coal or allowing a foreign company to mine in the country, but also against open-pit mining on the grounds of it being too harmful to the environment.

While serving national economic interest and protecting the environment provided the impetus for the National Committee to move against the project, the people of Phulbari had a more ‘local’ reason to be part of this movement. Implementation of the project would result in thousands of families losing the land they lived on and cultivated. There were promises of lucrative rehabilitation packages from Asia Energy, but people simply did not trust them. The people of Phulbari were not willing to give up their land to the coal mining project, no matter how lucrative the offers of compensation were. So they started to mobilise with support from different political groups and civil society organisations. The first large-scale demonstration against the project took place on July 9, 2005, when thousands of protesters formed a 5 km-long human chain on the Dhaka-Dinajpur highway, halting traffic for several hours.

The protesters of Phulbari identified the Committee as a worthy ally as it had already earned a nationwide reputation

for protesting against multinational corporations by then. Consequently, the National Committee received an unprecedented level of support from the people living in the project area.

When the first Dhaka-Dinajpur road march of the National Committee reached Phulbari at 3 pm on March 25, 2006, it was greeted by thousands of locals. The call from the event was simple and strong: “The government must cancel the deal with Asia Energy. There will be no open-pit mining here. Coal will not be exported and no foreign companies will be allowed here.”

Asia Energy tried many tactics to protect its interests. For example, there were attempts to use some of the local elites to intimidate the community; staged polls were held to prove people were not against the project. But in the end, the people prevailed and the open-pit coal mining project was halted.

Over a decade has passed since those days. It is perhaps time to review the achievements of Phulbari with logic rather than emotions. The people of Phulbari were willing to sacrifice anything to protect their land from Asia Energy. This willingness provided critical strength to the movement and resulted in their victory back in 2006. Perhaps that is why the Convener of the National Committee gave “all the credit” to the people. But he also mentioned that it was only “the first step towards victory”. It is natural for people from a primarily agrarian society to want to

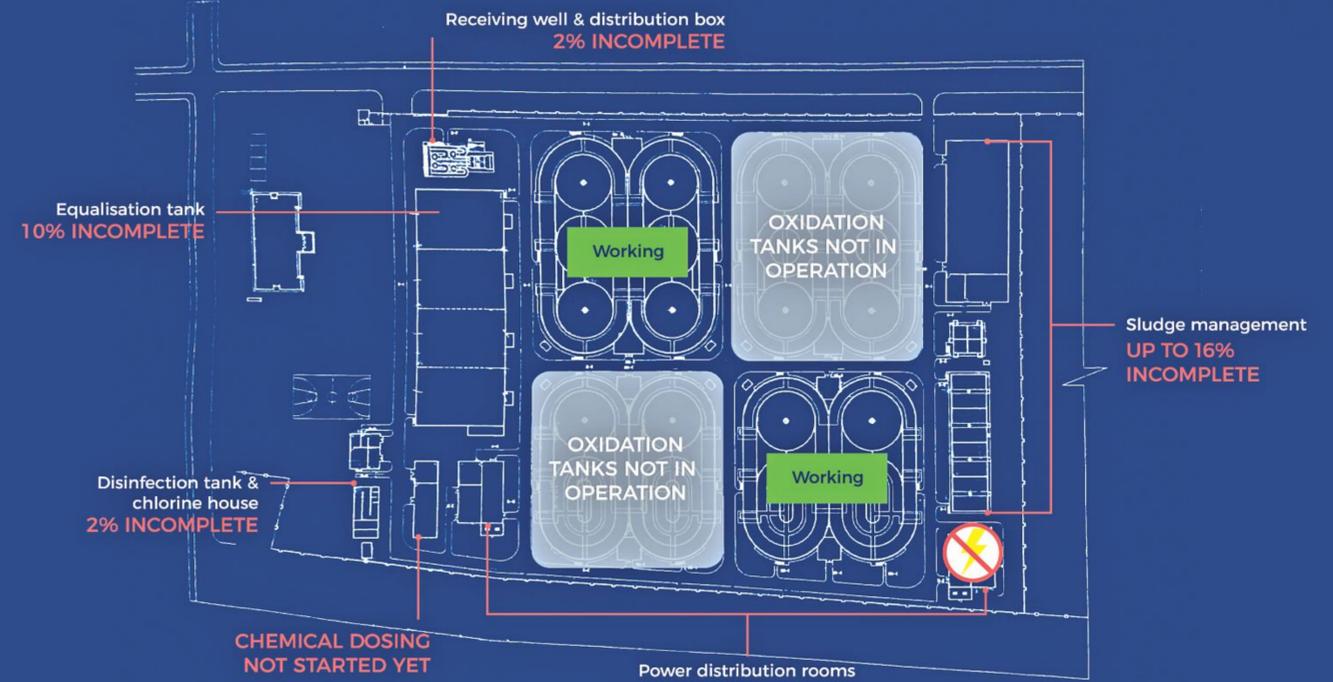
protect their land, and all progressive forces must support these people in doing so. But the National Committee and any other likeminded groups/individuals must admit that the cause goes far beyond protecting land rights. Realising this is more important now than ever.

Presently, the National Committee is striving to stop a coal-based power plant from being built in Rampal near the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest on earth. Compared to the days of the Phulbari movement, the support the National Committee is getting from the people living around the Rampal project is meagre. A prime reason for this may be the fact that not many people are going to lose their land to this project. But that does not make the Rampal project any less dangerous. In fact, its economic and environmental costs are estimated to be several times larger than those of the Phulbari project. There is probably just one strategy to ensure support from the people in stopping the Rampal power plant—making people understand what is at stake. The economic implications as well as the environmental costs of this project have to be communicated to the people to bring them on-board. Only if this can be done will the masses look beyond short-term interests and strive to secure national economic interests and protect the environment.

Abdullah Nadvi is General Secretary, Ecology Movement

## FACTORIES RUNNING, CETP INCOMPLETE

(information as of July 30, 2017 provided by BSCIC)



The plant has **NO UNIT** to remove salt from the waste that is ultimately **DUMPED** in the Dhaleshwari.

Hide tanning requires its equal weight in salt.

The factories were relocated in April. The plant has been **POLLUTING** the Dhaleshwari for **5 MONTHS** now.



Infographic: Amiya Halder

## LEATHER FACTORIES POLLUTING AGAIN WHOSE FAULT IS IT?

ZYMA ISLAM

Summer last year *The Daily Star* published a report titled “CETP at Savar yet to be ready” outlining how leather factories in Hazaribagh were being pressurised to relocate to the proposed tannery estate despite the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) being incomplete.

A year later, this report can be titled exactly the same and it would technically be correct, save for one change—the factories already moved there last April. A report however shows that the tannery zone has been functioning for five months—salting hides, processing leather, making finished products—without a fully operational waste management system.

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