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### **“Everything changed after the 26<sup>th</sup>”: Repression and Resilience against proposed Phulbari Coal Mine in Bangladesh**

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*Impact of repression on follow up protests is an area in social movement literature shadowed with contradictory findings. Whether any repression would result in a ‘backlash’ that increases protests instead of dampening it - is difficult to support or refute, due to the availability of findings that supports both effect. By exploring the aftermath of violent repression of a community resistance against an open cast coal mine in Bangladesh, this working paper supports ‘backlash’ under certain conditions. The case illustrates that even after violent repression by state forces, protestors did not refrain from ‘costly’ high-risk protest behaviours. This paper provides two explanations: first, emotions over-shadowed costs of high-risk behaviours leading protestors to ignite sparks of risky protests. Second, after being violated; protestors’ community obligation to stay together and keep protest alive was a crucial determinant of further mobilization. By using qualitative interviews of activists, supporters and company beneficiaries, I illustrate how after the violent repression - emotion, community obligation, strategic leadership and media performance helped the protestors to use the weakness of the regime’s unplanned violence.*

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## Introduction

It was 2006. In a small town called Phulbari in Bangladesh, local inhabitants were protesting against development of an open-cast mine with a group of national allies. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, around 70000 people gathered to blockade the company that proposed the mine encompassing 5600 hectares of arable land in Dinajpur district where Phulbari lies. Law enforcers opened fire with live ammunition that killed three and injured hundreds. This harsh repression by a democratically elected government was followed by curfew and other coercive repressions. Despite scholars like Rasler (1996:149) would predict that such repression will have immediate negative impact on subsequent protest events, in case of Phulbari resistance (as is popularly called now), the opposite was evident. Protest escalated to the highest degree and defeated government's initial plan of mining within four days of resistance in Phulbari. Moreover, negative press coverage in national and transnational media tarnished the UK based company's goodwill permanently. Hence, this resistance warrants further investigation. It is important to explore: how an apparently powerless community continued resilience against the backdrop of violent repression by state forces?

Francisco (2004) suggested that only reduced-risk techniques (non-violent strike) of dissent during post-massacre event days would increase participation by masses. To him, those days are so heightened with threats of coercion that any chance of protest is high risk, that is, any such activity has a high risk of being crushed. Nonetheless, the case of Phulbari resistance again provided contrary evidence showing sustained participation of masses in post-massacre event days. To explain all these, I shall analyze protestors' perception of the violence on the mass rally in Phulbari on 26 August 2006 and what led them to high-risk protest activities for four consecutive days. Second, I shall also elaborate how media exposed the weakness of the state-led violence paving the way for global strategic alliance as well as community's resilience against state.

Drawing from the cultural and emotional explanations of social movement and politics (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2004: 469-518, Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000:65-83, 2001:1-24, 2003, Melucci 1980:199-226), people's perception of the violence is necessary to understand why protestors, despite being repressed did not refrain from 'costly' high-risk protest behaviours. This paper provides two explanations: first, after state forces killed citizens which, ideally is supposed to protect them; massive emotional turmoil overshadowed costs of high-risk behaviours. At such a juncture, protestors perceived high-risk protests as the most obvious response to state-led violence regardless all follow-up protests had high risk of being crushed. Second, violent repression killing innocent protestors is regarded as a violation of the community, and protestors transformed this violation into community's sense of duty to dissent. In the paper, I conceptualize it as *Fard - e - Kyfia* (community obligation to the deceased) to stay together and keep protest alive. For example, in the aftermath of 26<sup>th</sup>, it was the protestors' duty to dissent which metaphorically resemble with participating in a *Janazah* (funeral procession where community participation is a *Fard/obligation*).

In this paper, basing on protestors' and media perception of the event, I shall investigate: after repression, do emotions influence sparks of protest? What capacity and tactics of mobilizations can generate more participation in the post-massacre days? And, how had the performance of state and media influenced the events unfolding after the violence?

## Confronting ‘Development’ and Global Capital: Phulbari Resistance

Phulbari resistance was one of the most widely publicized local resistances against extractive industry in Asia in the last decade<sup>1</sup>. This coverage served as a negative blow to the reputation of the company<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, in five years after the violence in Phulbari, successive governments could not start the mine faced with follow-up resistance. This shows how successfully protestors utilized ‘26<sup>th</sup> August’ to delegitimize state’s use of force to push development (at gun-point) and thereby presents a critique to ‘development’ (Sarkar 2010: 202-209). Through elaborating the case of Phulbari resistance, this paper draws attention to how protestors’ perceptions, emotions, strategies reinforced a popular critique of ‘development’ in the repertoire of resistance against global capital.

Phulbari is one of the sub-districts (bordering with Indian state of West Bengal) within the northern district of Dinajpur in Bangladesh. Though the mine spread across parts of four sub-districts (Phulbari, Birampur, Parbatipur and Nawabganj), the resistance mounted in Phulbari against the company’s Phulbari Coal Project (PCP). Within the mine footprint, local resistance began in April 2005 and achieved momentum (3 months later) through tying bonds with a national citizens’ group called National Committee to Protect Oil-Gas-Minerals-Power-Port (a predominantly leftist alliance established in 1998). After a year of activities, in August 2006, a blockade of local office of the company was planned by the Phulbari branch of the National Committee popularly called Oil-Gas Committee of Phulbari (OGCP).

As mentioned earlier, on 26 August 2006, government forces opened fire on a rally. Minutes after the violence, leaders of the protest declared indefinite *Hartal*<sup>3</sup> in four sub-districts opposing the brutality. Following that declaration, protestors kept Phulbari under a four-day long dawn to dusk *hartal* supported by follow up protests nationwide. The resistance reached its apex after three days of protest when Phulbari was under the control of thousands of protestors. On the fourth day (30.8.2006), protestors managed to achieve a remarkable victory against the company where national government suspended all its activities and accepted all the demands of the National Committee (Das 2009). This paper focuses only on the events after the repression till the government retreats about Phulbari Coal Project to illustrate two things: one, overall impact of the violence on further resistance success and two, the micro-politics of the local dissent full of sparks of resistance against powerful state. Through this I present a people’s critique of ‘development’ through the lenses of transversal politics.

### Repression, Backlash and Passionate Politics

This section details earlier research explaining behaviour of protestors resisting powerful authorities after the outbreak of violent repression from state or government or elites of the

<sup>1</sup> search terms ‘open cast’, ‘mine’ and ‘protest’ was looked up with a regional limit to Asia. Retrieved on 14.12.2010 through NEXIS UK)

<sup>2</sup> The company had to change its name from Asia Energy to Global Coal Management (GCM) in 2007. This was done to by-pass the negative image. However, local respondents still uses the name Asia Energy while it is actually GCM now. I shall refer it as the ‘company’ in this paper to avoid confusion of names.

<sup>3</sup> Hartal is a complete shut-down of an area where no transport, offices, market places can operate as usual. It is graver than a strike – more encompassing in its influence. In India, it is referred to as a *Bandh* with a literal meaning ‘closed’. Hartal is when everything is closed in protest.

society. I shall discuss protest control, effect of repression, the dynamics of ‘backlash’, emotions, media performance, community obligation and their contributions to identify the limit of such analysis in explaining contemporary protests against global capital.

In Phulbari resistance, local police, paramilitary forces (BDR Bangladesh Rifles, now Border Guards) and elite police forces called Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) executed repression. Local police departments’ counter-intelligence and denial to permit the protest event by issuing a ‘section 144’ (a ban on congregation of more than 4/5 people at a time) around the protest venue was topped by private threats made by hired assailants. Large number of paramilitary forces and police were deployed. However, the local police was allegedly engaged in manufacturing rumours and spread informers to get information on the protestors’ plans. The police also tried to stop national supporters to join the event by stopping buses carrying these activists from the capital. According to police reports the other faction of the resistance withdrawn their support at the last moment and filed a complaint to the police denying any responsibility of the event. This faction, acting as a counter-movement distributed copies of their complaint contesting the event. The local and national leaders also received threats over phone. If we look at the different types of protest policing detailed by Earl (2003: 131), della Porta (1996) and della Porta and Fillieule (2004), Phulbari resistance was one of the most non-democratically repressed protest. However, according to Das (2009) and Muhammad (2007), intensity of the brutality varied temporally. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the frequency and intensity of repression was very high. It declined on the next day and diminished over the next two days forcing government to lose all control over this territory.

The question now is - why was the dominant entity, that is, the state so coercive in the beginning had bowed down by only four days of resistance? Boudreau (2005:33-55) suggested that precarious regimes attempt to allocate their scarce repressive resources as efficiently as possible considering the breadth and depth of regimes’ versus challengers’ power. Therefore, the weaker the state is the more likely it would be to crush dissent (Boudreau 2005: 49-55). This can explain the rationale of repressive policing against people in Phulbari. Weak regime perceived the local and national movement against Phulbari mine as a weaker threat and the regime was confident to crush the protest to show its power. The regimes perception was completely misjudged. Instead of being crushed the protest fumed further. So, on the eve of national election, the regime was beaten by an apparently weak group (the leftists) in the national politics. Therefore, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of what happened after state failed to curb the protest, we need to unearth the internalities of the protestors’ agency and how it led to the success of ousting the mine.

Explaining effects of protest control is the most difficult task as reported earlier for the presence of contradictory evidences. One school of thought suggested an increase in protest after violent repression. From the opposing school, repression is expected to dampen further mobilization by indicating the high cost of protest behaviour in the face of harsh repression. Alternative formulations either propose a curvilinear relationship (Earl 2006: 134), or suggests switch from negative to positive over time (Rasler 1996), or supports null effects of coercion (Earl 2006: 134). As such, empirical evidence is still inconclusive. More recent research shares the same level of heterogeneity of findings. However, there are two important points that strengthens my argument: one is the impact of emotion (Francisco 2004, Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta 2001, 2003, Hess and Martin 2006, Seigel 2011) and two is the capacity of the movement to withstand the repression (Seigel 2011, Bob and Nepstad 2007).

Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta (2003) suggested after protestors are repressed affective bonds (emotions) sprung out as reflexive bonds such as anger and fear. This moral outrage

(Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta 2003) or public outrage (Hess and Martin 2006) is regarded as one of the accelerators of further mobilization (Reed 2004:653, Schrodt and Yilmaz 2007). This anger can lead to backlash (Francisco 2004) or backfire (Hess and Martin 2006). A harsh variant of repression can create widespread sympathy for a movement and result in substantial later mobilization charged up by widespread media coverage of an 'unjust' control of protest. According to Siegel (2011), a little bit of anger produces threefold increase in participation. Now, in our case, follow-up dissent is definitely evident. A thorough analysis into the case is needed for unveiling a collage of emotions and events that has led this apparently powerless community to transform (Barker 2003) these variegated emotions towards one accelerator to fight a victorious struggle stopping the powerful state, company and their 'development'.

Discussion on impact of repression through emotion is not sufficient to understand the backlash completely. The capacity of the movement to arouse the sense of duty among aggrieved people of the four sub-districts has to be analyzed in context of ritualized media performance during those days of high dissent. The role of media in exposing the repression and imaging it as a gross injustice to Phulbari was crucial. Francisco (2004) and Hess and Martin (2007) showed that depending on the control mechanism - information transmission and leadership tactics increases efficiency of dissent after repression.

Following another strand of research - media studies, I would like to bring the media in the scene since this was an exceptionally 'medialized' phenomenon. According to Cottle (2006: 411), 'mediatized' rituals are integral parts of resistance after repression takes its toll. He defined such rituals as an identifiable and variegated class of performative class of media enactments in which solidarity is sought and moral idea of 'social good' prevail. After a phenomenal event, the media performs ritualistic mediations. To do so, the media will be 'doing' things more than simply 'reporting news and information' which is scripted in a ritualistic way (Matthews and Cottle 2011:1-21). To put it simply, there are some templates (dominant, contentious, contest, myth making, campaigning frame etc.); which all media follow and these templates of news presentation shapes the way news is produced during events of special significance like the Phulbari Resistance. I argue that after massacre, emotional turmoil and arousal of sense of obligation was significantly entwined with media's ritual performances making it a fundamental point of discussion of this paper.

Given earlier research suggested a non-conclusive result for effect of repression on further mobilization; I propose a qualitative narrative of the case. This case will exemplify possible answers to what happens after a protest is repressed. The following questions are crucial: does emotions matter, which ones and how? What capacity and tactics of mobilizations can generate more participation in the post-massacre days? And, what roles did state and media played after the violence?

## **Data and Methods**

The paper is based on qualitative data I have collected through my seven month long ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh. The data includes fifty six long, semi-structured interviews taken in Phulbari, Dhaka and London. Twenty-two of these are transcribed in-vivo first and then translated into English. I have transcribed and translated the rest of the interviews simultaneously but selectively. For example, this paper uses narratives of the

blockade on 26<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath. Therefore, among the thirty four interviews that were not transcribed wholly, I selected the sections of the interviews that described the period of 26<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> August 2006 and translated these directly. The qualitative data gathered was coded and analyzed using MAXQDA.

While going through the perception of protestors'/ non-protestors' of what happened on and after 'Chhabbishe' (26th), I realized that protestors had very heterogeneous perception about what happened and why such unprecedented events unfolded. Therefore, I refer to a conceptual tool of 'transversal' positioning to unearth the patchwork of emotion and obligation protestors had experienced during those days. In Phulbari resistance, by examining the perception of the activists and company supporters I propose to draw the context and differing positioning of what happened, how it happened and why it happened.

The idea of transversal politics is developed from feminist paradigms. However, I am using this as a methodological tool (a kaleidoscope) than a theoretical one. The basic analytical spine of this paper is not feminist. I only used tool developed by the feminists who proposed that transversal politics entails absence of oppressing differences. This is done by recognising differences, by rejecting totalising unity by domination or unity by incorporation. For example, where campaigns about women's control of their own body might prioritise struggles for the legalisation of abortion in some location, they might prioritise against forced sterilisation in another (Mulholland 1999 in Assouline 2004, Yuval-Davis 1999, Yuval-Davis 2010:261-280). This concept can effectively assemble the different standpoints within the activists as well among activists and their opponents to present us with a more encompassing collage of the aftermath of repression on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August in Phulbari.

With the help of this collage of different standpoints, I shall present a patchwork of the four days of protest. I propose the following answers to my questions posed earlier. Firstly, emotional rollercoaster overshadowed the cost of protest after the massacre and led people ignite the micro sparks of protests after the violence occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup>. Secondly, sense of community obligation initiated by the local leaders resonated throughout the region and motivated masses to join the funeral procession. I conceptualize this mobilization as a *Fard-e- Kyfia* or community's obligation to the martyrs. Third, unplanned coercion and its weak management by the regime were complicated by the worldwide dispersion of the 'image of injustice' towards the people of Phulbari through ritualistic media performance.

### **Background of Chhabbishe (26<sup>th</sup>): Protestors' Positionings**

The event on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2006 was not unplanned. Local leaders have proposed to the central National Committee for an 'aggressive' program after a year-long mobilization in Phulbari, and the neighbouring sub-districts. Months of planning, weeks of small localized yard meetings, *haat* (weekly market) meetings, public gatherings, *miking*<sup>4</sup>, people of four sub-districts were ready. Meanwhile, the first ally of the coalition Phulbari Protection Committee severed all relationships with the OGCP. They took position against the event.

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<sup>4</sup> activists with a microphone/mike on a rickshaw or flat van sang or chanted slogans and read information about the adversity of the proposed mine

### Protestors' Positionings Exemplified

The event was planned and publicized to be held at Sujapur School ground inside the town. This venue was close to the company office to be blockaded. The day before the event, Phulbari was a town of rumours about possibility of violence. According to one local activist, curfew was declared at the venue precluding the possibility of violence. There were other versions of the story about the venue, such as, the company had planted a bomb, or it was too close to company offices and therefore more prone to violence, the venue was inside a residential area and could not accommodate so many protestors, or it was very close to one of the *dalals'* (collaborators) house or police ordered to change the venue. For any of the above reasons, it was regarded unwise to hold the event in Sujapur School ground. The venue was shifted from Sujapur School to GM Pilot School (Figure 1: p 10) on the night before the blockade. From this, it is clear that the national committee or their local counterparts did not want any violence. The official version declared "Blockade on the 26<sup>th</sup> was a non-violent program". Eye witness' accounts from several sources suggested that two hundred volunteers were repeatedly briefed for being vigilant against any instigation to violence by the *dalals* or spies.

The next day, turnout exceeded the most optimists' projections. The procession held at least 70000 people. More than half of the rally joined from the outskirts of Phulbari town and were from the villages of Nawabganj, Parvatipur and Birampur. There were people from Dhaka, Rajshahi and other districts. Santals, Pahans and Mundas (ethnic minority) came with their traditional bows and arrows and drums. Bangalis (majority ethnic group) also came. Women came with brooms<sup>5</sup> and sticks, men came with bamboo sticks and poles. Leaders were on a mobile stage – a make-shift one, on a truck. The procession was jovial but tense. According to the organizers, these bow-arrows were all symbolic, not for real use. However, many of these villagers were not very convinced of this non-violence. A peasant in his 70s described it as follows:

"...we cannot go to Phulbari every day. Give us one day ...we will show you and the government what we can do. That day will be the decisive one. Either we or they. No retreat. No peace deal. We want them out, we will ...wipe them out of Phulbari forever."

According to a town-based local activist,

"People did not come here for this farce of non-violence. They came and they wanted to finish it for once and for all. They were revolutionary. They did not listen to the leaders no more ... they did not even want to return home after the national leaders declared an end of the event with assurance from government officials that the company will leave...they went on and were shot and died".

So, some were not even hesitant to start violence. This was a part of the mass, may be not the typical part; however, there is no reason to render their emotions invalid. Though for some local leaders, these non-typical parts were *dalals* of the company.

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<sup>5</sup> Broom- sticks connotes they will sweep the 'dirt' (the company and *dalals*) out of Phulbari. One of the most popular songs of the day was as follows: "Sweep them all, O' mothers and sisters of Phulbari; sweep them all, sweep them off our land quickly" (collected from one of the local singers).

## Unpacking the violence

At 3 pm the rally started from the GM Pilot School grounds towards the river *Chhoto Yamuna*, the destination was the office of the company at the other side of the river. Figure 1 (p 10) shows GM Pilot School and path of the rally through the town across the river towards Dinajpur. BDR and police heavily barricaded on the bridge over Yamuna and the leaders knew they will be stopped before the bridge in front of the Urbashi Cinema Hall<sup>6</sup>.

As the procession approached the bridge, near Neemtola Morh, police threw tear gas. Part of the procession dispersed and gathered back again. When they reached the first barricade on the east side of the bridge, a magistrate came and told them to stop and disperse. Leaders went to negotiate and asked him to contact higher authorities to inform them about the massive resistance against government's decision to mine the area and they also demanded to remove the company immediately. The magistrate did not have the authority, and therefore, he talked to the District Commissioner over phone. After being authorized by the district commissioner, the magistrate assured the leaders that the company will leave Phulbari within forty-eight hours. The national leaders returned to the truck and declared that the government has accepted people's demand and the company will leave Phulbari in forty-eight hours. Then they declared future programs and ended the blockade.

According to Das (2009), when these leaders got off from the truck and were returning to the local office of OGCP and the blockade was peacefully dismantling, shots were fired. Within minutes, local and national leaders gathered in Neemtola Morh and declared indefinite *hartal* in Phulbari against the retaliation of peaceful demonstration. Then the national leaders were taken to the OGPC's office and from there to hideouts on their way to the national capital. The top local leaders as well went on hiding. The next level of local leaders was still on the streets, trying to fight back. According to the top leaders, it was a strategic decision to save lives of the leaders, without whom the resistance might have dampened.

## What (actually) might have had happened?

As discussed earlier, some people did not like the ending. They thought they came to blockade the office and they were not even close. However, for both the leaders and the magistrates it was part of a performance. The leaders were already happy and thought that the battle was over by seeing the turn out. So their aim was fulfilled since they followed the 'script' of 'contentious performance' of claim making; if I may borrow the term from Tilly (2008:19). To the leaders, they have mobilized a massive amount of people, did their procession peacefully, and made their claim to the magistrate who was the symbol of authority. For the magistrate, such a huge gathering must have been a fearful experience since he was responsible of the protest control<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, he finished his part of the performance by calling higher authority and assuring the protestors which must have been the end of a

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<sup>6</sup> When the procession was passing the company information centre, allegedly someone from that building/ from among the protestors pelted stones to the procession or vice versa. Caught in this indiscriminate stone pelting, one of the regional leaders who were trying to appease the youngsters got wounded. Later, other leaders intervened and brought everyone on the same track.

<sup>7</sup> without his signature live ammunition could not be fired



very tense performance. The assurance was an empty one and that was clear to the commissioner, to the magistrate and to some of the top leaders, probably. But it was not at all clear to the local peasants and villagers who might never have seen let alone participated in a scripted contentious performance like this.

Moreover, according to several other respondents, the microphone being used on the make shift stage was very weak and no match for the 70000 people it was addressing. Therefore, the leader's speech about the victory and completion of the blockade might have not reached all the protestors. Many of them might have decided to go for the blockade by crossing the river regardless of what the leaders said or did. According to another local leader (a businessman), protestors who lived on the west side of the river thought it was okay to cross it since the event ended. They started to cross the river on foot (the river is very shallow in that spot) and may be at that point police fired. The protestors' version of the story was that BDR guards were bribed to kill protestors and therefore one of these guards forced the magistrate on gun point to sign the consent to open fire on the mass.

It is probably impossible to know what had really triggered the BDR to such violence. I argue that, first, this moment was filled with confusion and lack of communication on both sides. Villagers who were completely unaware of repressive tactics<sup>8</sup> were already very angry and afraid. Second, state authority was completely un-prepared for such a huge mobilization and that aggravated the situation with tension and misjudgement. Third, the chance of company's involvement in the instigation cannot be completely ruled out since several of the eye-witnesses have reported to see company officials on the bridge with the BDR.

#### **Aftermath of *Chhabishe*: Cost of Protest after Massacre**

This was one of the most dangerous times. Even after the shooting, some people continued to resist the law enforcement. According to most eye-witness accounts, some of the protestors still holding ground were brutally beaten. Three people were shot from close distance at the east side of the bridge. People trying to hide in the hospital were beaten and arrested. Some hid in the mosque. Most people who came from outside fled or were hiding. People were suffering from small wounds and cuts, some were sick with tear gas.

The leaders and many protestors believed that at that juncture, hiding the leaders was a strategically important decision; since otherwise they might have been killed or arrested and then 'cross-fired'<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, some people had a different position as follows: there were only innocent people beaten by the BDR while others (leaders) were safe. According to one eye witness, 'they [leaders] ran hearing the first shots' or 'this was not planned, why shots were fired'. Some of the victims wanted to blame this whole violence on the leaders of the protest saying: "Why did you not die, instead of the innocent villagers?" From a different perspective, another eye witnesses reported,

"a man all on a sudden came up and slapped ~local activists writer~ and said that people are killed because of you and you are having fun here now?" I thought, but it is not ~local activist writer's~ fault, is it?"

<sup>8</sup> a lot of them experienced tear gas for the first time and thought government was throwing gas to kill them

<sup>9</sup> a popular term to denote extra-judicial killing by Rapid Action Battalion

Conversely, local leaders did interpret such reactions as part of *Dalal's* activities to confuse people and to sabotage the protest outcomes.

### Blood, Sweat and Tear: Emotional Numbness

Given these events were unfolding very quickly, what is important for our argument is what emotions were present and how was it being channelled to dampen or motivate further mobilization. Drawing from all eye witnesses' account, my position is as follows: These four days were like emotional roller coasters (Figure 3: p 12) which ended up with normalization through pacification of collective emotion. I shall discuss how it happened in the following paragraphs.

One local leader said: "I thought I was in Palestine, young boys pelting stones at the authorities and the law enforcers answering with bullets. Three young lives were sacrificed for the sake of our whole community's right to live on our lands. How can we not be resilient!" Similar analogies were drawn by several other protestors.

When the shots were fired an unidentified but overwhelming emotion took grip over the protestors – emotional numbness prevailed for a while. This can be exemplified by the following responses: 'did not know what to feel', 'I was running to and from the bridge mouth', 'I did not know where from did I get the anger or was it panic!', 'I did not know what happened there', 'I still could not figure out', 'how could they have shot us'.

Figure 1: Phulbari 26<sup>th</sup> August 2006: what, where?

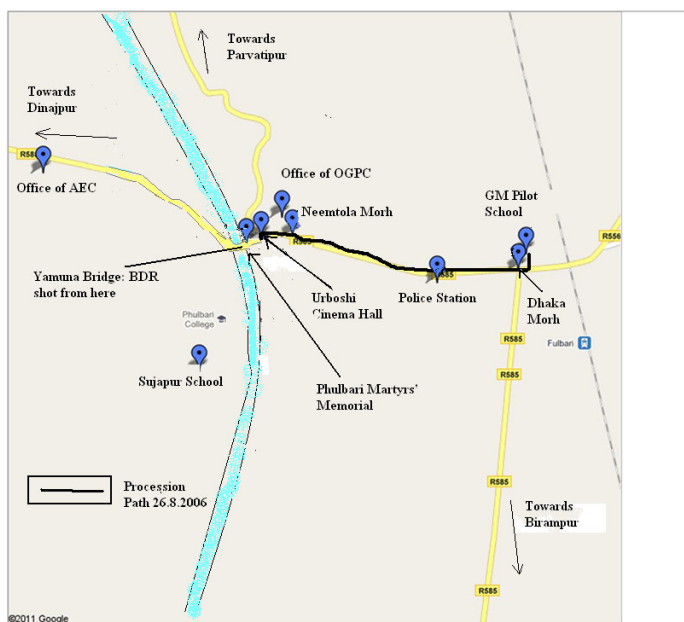
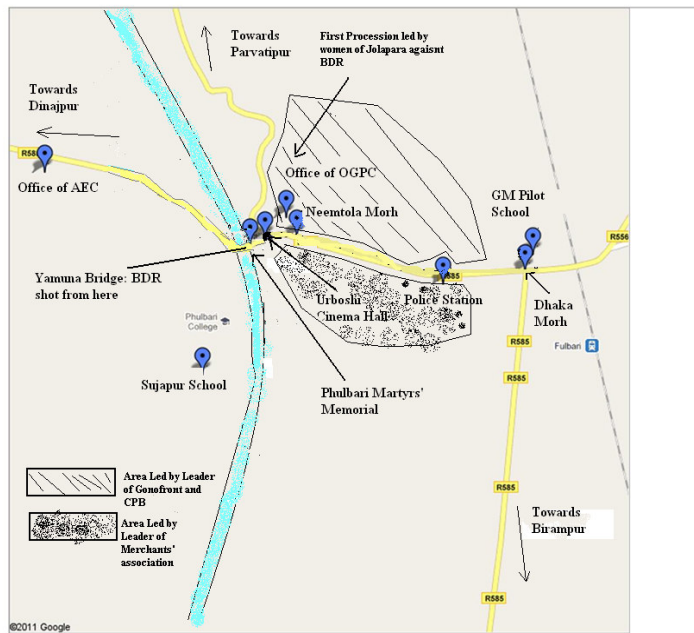


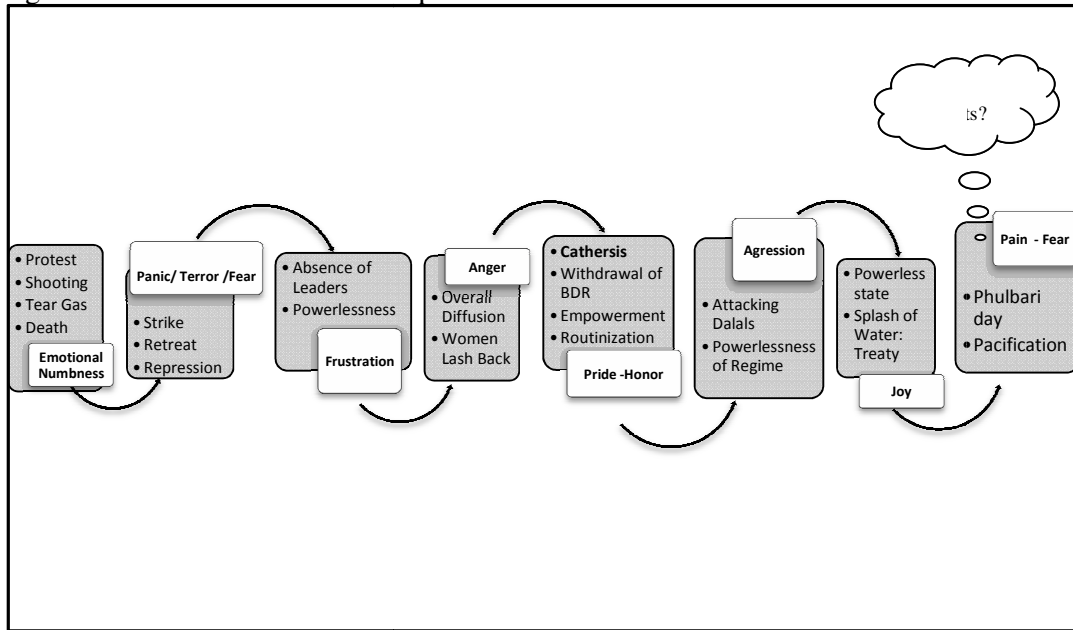
Figure 2: Phulbari 27<sup>th</sup> August – who, where?

Then, a wave of panic/ terror/ fear of being killed/ injured/ arrested/ beaten/ anxiety to lose family/friends washed away all the valour from the massive demonstration. These emotions led to the retreat of most people, and completely shocked leadership announced indefinite strike. Although according to Francisco (2004), strikes are low risk activity after massacre; I contend that anything but running away for life is high risk at that juncture. In the town and the vicinity, people were dispersed, confused, terrorized and frustrated about the situation since nothing was in their control. Anxiety and powerlessness prevailed. The national leaders while retreating reached out to national media. Within hours not only the whole country but also the world came to know about the atrocity. Local leaders turned their cells off, they were not staying home in fear of arrest. However, they did not forget to announce the *hartal* repeatedly through the microphone of the local mosques. The town was covered with the blanket of fear and frustration after curfew was declared.

Being unable to reach the local leaders as well as seeing on TV that the national leaders had left for the capital made some of the protestors angry and most others were disappointed. This had immediate negative effect on participation leading to a feeling of powerlessness where there is no one left to lead. This frustration is important to deduce why some protestors would ignite apparently non-related but spontaneous sparks of protests the next morning. However, I need to clarify that I do not intend to say that such sparks were solely led by unleashed emotions of heroic individuals. The management of the protest control mechanisms by the regime was equally to be blamed. Since right after the killing, state forces were indiscriminately beating up everyone, not protesting did not seem to be beneficial. Regardless of whether someone was protesting or not they were been beaten. If one did not protest one would still not escape the chance of being repressed which made people more powerless and fear gave way to anger.

Media, specially the electronic ones were very significant on that night. Few national activists, who were strategically hiding in Phulbari, contacted and updated the national media houses through cell phones about night raids, and reign of terror brought by BDR.

Figure 3: Path of Emotion after Repression



These types of news aroused anger and portrayed the image of injustice against people of Phulbari in the hearts of the countrymen.

**Dawn of Anger and Resilience**

Next morning, frustrated locals had to vent out their powerlessness. For them, the reign of terror and continuous injustice to innocent people had to be stopped. Led by two working class women (from Jolapara, North side of the town), a seemingly powerless community lashed back. In one of these women’s own testimony:

“The next morning I was outside in the alley ... I was not feeling well. Then, I saw seven BDR (guards) were unnecessarily beating up a young boy. All of a sudden anger took grip over me. I was not even thinking I guess. ... at that moment ~local female activists ~ came back from her night trip... she and I started to shout at the BDR. What do you think you are doing? You come in our neighbourhood and beat innocent people! You kill our boys and we would let you go? She brought a *Boti* (traditional kitchen knife) and I took a bamboo pole ...then we cursed them like anything (laughs) and chased them away like criminals. We also gave them good deal of beating. They were very scared, they never saw women like this, I guess.”

This might seem apparently unusual. However, even ‘ruthless’ BDR would not dare harming women easily due to the fear of retaliation arising from wounded pride of a community where women were violated. I argue here in favour of the effect of emotional

overshadowing that shrouded the cost of dissent from the protestors' mind and led them towards risky protest behaviours.

Couple of hours later, through other local leaders, the protest diffused in the town (Figure 2 Map: p 11). Anger pushed forward the overpowering kick that diffused the protest to stand against the injustice. At this point, the women of Jolapara were at the forefront of the processions trying to break the curfew and to proceed to the main road. They carried red chilli powder to throw on the face, traditional kitchen knife and brooms to scare off the BDR and police. Local leaders were behind them trying to gather more people to join the procession to break the curfew. The noted leaders of the OGPC tried to mobilize north side. Local leader of Gono Front (left political party) and another one from the local Communist Party pushed the BDR barricade and reached the main road. However, the participation was still dwindling. At the same time, the leader of the merchants' association was trying to get out and organize processions at the south side of the main road. He also utilized women to be at the forefront so that men were safe from the wrath of the BDR (Figure 2).

While analysing these events we arrive at two points: one, the way things were unfolding has a transverse angle since North and South side of the town was completely detached from each other (due to BDR patrol on the main road, Figure 2, p 11), making it difficult to know the effect of repression from either of the two sides of the town. And secondly, women were agents of ignition in both sides<sup>10</sup>. At one point, in Phulbari both the processions managed to enter and overcome the main road from the possession of the law enforcement. The moment of catharsis was achieved by the resilience established through the retreat of the powerful opposition at least symbolically from the streets to police station. Around noon, BDR were withdrawn and pride, feeling of power and joy of venting out took over the frustration and anger.

### **Pride and Aggression**

The event of *Gayebana Janazah* (funeral prayer in absence of the dead bodies) took place that afternoon. I shall discuss this in a later section on collective sense of duty and shall continue to describe the effect of emotion. The process of digestion of this sense of renewed control over own lives and partial win against powerful enemies was crucial in changing the emotional turmoil into a separate path. On 28<sup>th</sup> of August, pride of empowerment versus routinization of protest by leaders who already returned to mobilize the protests in most areas led to small scale aggressions against the *dalals* which quickly got diffused in the vicinity. In the beginning, aggression was entwined with pride and community honour which led to arson but no plunder to the houses of *dalals*. Young protestors were seen to put bundles of currencies on fire instead of taking a penny from the *dalals'* houses. Nonetheless, complicated by the uninterrupted power of community in the absence of visible law enforcement, aggression took a different turn. There was massive turnout on these days, giving the aggressors the benefit of lack of identification as an individual<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Such strategic uses of women's agency to protect men from state coercion are historically common: reported in Russia during soviet collectivization (Viola 1986:23-42) and in England during 18<sup>th</sup> century food riots (Thompson 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile the national committee held nation-wide half a day *hartal* and the then-opposition party (Awami League) also observed nation-wide *hartal* protesting the use of force in Phulbari

The only way for the state to come back and regain its control over its constituent region was quick pacification of the dissent. Calming this fire down by a sudden and timely splash of water was needed from the part of the state to protect the ruling elite or in that way the rule of law. This was perceived to be possible by the temporary transfer of power to people: the treaty on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August<sup>12</sup>. This was welcomed with joy and pride and was labelled as the preliminary victory of Phulbari against the company. As a result, pacification was easily possible within days after government has taken all responsibility of its deeds and promised to throw the company out of the country. Then routine state business of investigations, compensations, martyrs' memorials had normalized the whole situation at a level where people were no longer angry. They were back to their emotional status prior to the repression. Ultimate catharsis was reached.

### ***Janazah and Fard-e- Kyfia: Mobilizing Community Obligation of Protests***

While looking for answers to what role did funerals have as markers of conflicts and controversies in early Muslim communities, Zaman (2001: 27-58) provided an interesting theoretical tool for our analysis. Funeral prayer or *Janazah* is one of the rights the deceased has over other Muslims. It is a *Fard Kifaya*, an obligation that at least some Muslims must discharge on behalf of the community as a whole. Participation in a funeral procession for Muslims is thus a necessary one for at least some who would stand for the rest (*Fard Kifaya* or a community obligation) (Zaman 2001: 28-29). Question of dissent and conflict follows from this religious scripture. As has been seen in most of the conflict and massacres in Palestine, the *Janazah* becomes one of the major events for protesting against the injustice<sup>13</sup>.

By noon of 27<sup>th</sup>, when the processions from the North and the South of the town could push to the main street of the town, they were joined by few more people from the outskirts and villages. However, the protests marked with high risk tactics of dissent since morning was yet to influence more turn out. Therefore, a community resistance mostly led by non-religious left activists, came up with one of the most resonant event of the four day long protest: a *Gayebana Janazah*<sup>14</sup> after the Assar (afternoon) prayer on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2006. The leaders were back into action and by that time press was very sympathetic to this peoples' movement. Therefore, movement organizations, leaders and activists regained their confidence and contacts with their national allies. However, at that point they needed to showcase participation from the local people in enormous capacity. Therefore, the closest and most relevant strategy for the leaders were to try to mobilize town people who were already angry through a common and more innocuous event to detour the wrath of the state forces.

So, the *Janazah* was at one hand a camouflage on the other a symbol of community duty. According to local leaders: “*gayebana janazah* was crucial. Only through this event people could have dodged the curfew or police or BDR”. For another: “how could the BDR stop us from the *Janazah* in an Islamic country?” Another account suggested that this was their only chance

<sup>12</sup> The government signed a document declaring compensation for injury and loss of lives, suspension of all activities of the company until further notice, expulsion of the company from the country, promise of never permitting open cast mines anywhere in the country and establishing a martyrs' memorial in memory of the three protestors killed.

<sup>13</sup> Rasler (1996) while explaining the Iranian revolution reported similar effects of mourning processions six weeks after the political deaths.

<sup>14</sup> funeral procession and prayer in absence of the dead bodies

since the shooting to gather all the activists at the same time. State forces might just have to allow this for religious reasons. It was not only a religious event; it was an emblem of protest; of breaking the curfew *en masse*. Breaking the curfew or protesting against their deaths by being present in the funeral and by promising to dissent until justice is served was the *fard kyfia* that community of Phulbari had done for their martyrs. In order to respect them truly, the community could not stop at praying for their redemption to God rather they would have to continue their protest and resistance to pay tribute to those who gave away life for a greater common cause. Therefore, although not all protestors were Muslims, the *Fard* resonated well in the community.

### **Government and the Company: the powerful ally of ‘development’**

In 2005, when Phulbari Resistance started the country had passed 15 years as a parliamentary democracy and with ‘Not free’ press (Freedom House Index 2010). Nonetheless, local and national leaders of Phulbari resistance suggested that though media was apparently free from government intervention they had been attached to the corporate interest and undermined the people’s resistance over the company’s interest. The third factor is the level of corruption in the government indicating how trustworthy the government was to people when the governments had successive highest rank as the most corrupt country of the world (Transparency International 2006). The police, the BDR and RAB as mentioned earlier are ill-reputed for numerous human rights violence while trying to safeguard the interests of ruling elite or multinational capital.

Within this context, mobilization after 26<sup>th</sup> August brought a massive defeat from the part of the government for the following reasons: one, their reputation in front of the multinational investors was tarnished badly since they could not contain the protest quietly. Second, the power of state over the constituent population was threatened by the temporary success of the protestors in Phulbari and third, state-led ‘development-at-gun-point’ was proved useless in the face of the popular protest. State was rendered useless, so was development. Lastly, this was detrimental for the ruling party’s reputation given the national election was looming in few more months.

The state wanted to push ‘development’, on the contrary, people of the region decided to dissent. For a democratic regime, the right response would have been to let the non-violent protest finish uninterrupted. However, weak administration misjudged the strength of the mobilization and tried to crush it with unplanned violence. Nonetheless, most of the tactics were wrong for the following reasons: first, protest policing was a mistake. Even graver was to control in an un-planned way. Two, the strength of the movement was misjudged. Three, instead of planned removal of key nodes of the resistance, the random repression had no lasting effect on the dissent. Four, with states’ overt support to the company; it became impossible to disentangle, state from the company and people’s wrath against the company also fell on state.

### Positioning Media and its 'Rites': Finishing the Patchwork

I argue here that positioning media in this movement is crucial for two reasons: one, through news reports of the atrocity during the night of *Chhabbishe* (26<sup>th</sup>) people of Phulbari came to know about numbers of death toll, position of the leaders as well as the night raids. Footage of innocent people being brutally beaten by the police, RAB and Border guards in all satellite networks was presented as a 'mediatized ritual' (Cottle 2006:411-432) of the violent repression that had successfully infused emotion against the injustice. Two, Phulbari resistance diffused beyond the local and national boundary mediated through the local, national and transnational press and proved to be very fatal for the regime. Therefore, justification of media role in the aftermath is fundamental to this analysis.

The journey of media's position about the Phulbari coal project was a non-consistent one. We can term this as a journey of an inverted 'U': from a position favouring the company, then after the massacre, against the company and then again within weeks back to its original pro-'development' position. From the newspaper headlines (Appendix 1) about Phulbari resistance it is evident that most local and national newspapers were pro-mine during 2005. In 2006, until June - this strand was still quite strong. After June, the scenario started to shift which peaked during the violent days of August.

This tendency may have sprung from two reasons: one, most of the print and electronic media was pro-development and in favour of corporate interests. As such, they, in most cases, have supported the mining project. And after violence they had to give attention to the people simply because of the potential news-value of the conflict. However, the second explanation, more essential for this paper, is related to the change of the positioning of the media performance. I propose here that positioning changed along the inverted 'U' not because of media's evil motive favoring the corporate interest instead due to the very nature of media performances<sup>15</sup>.

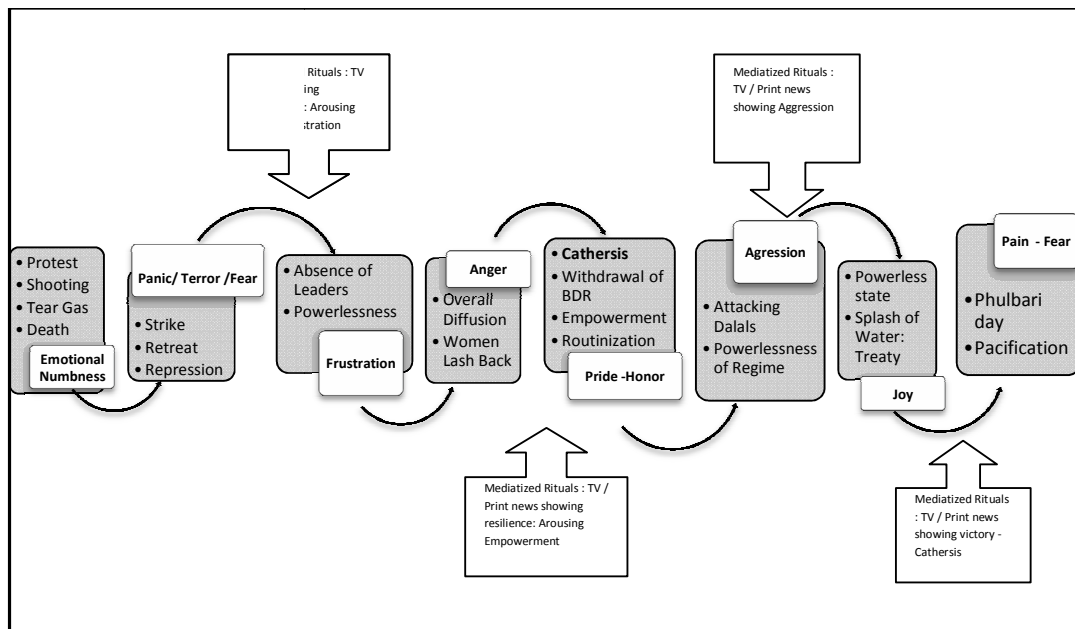
Violence always has a potential 'news-value' or 'sensationalism' and more so when state violence killed citizens. Cottle (2006) detailed mediatized rituals as media activities when it is 'doing' something more than simply 'reporting or mediating them', media would be performatively enacting them. As Cottle (2006) differentiated between six types of mediatized rituals, in the aftermath of repression in Phulbari we witnessed what he called a 'media disaster'. Disasters that are publicly signalled by different media as major, often traumatic and in some occasions historically momentous happenings; also frequently exhibit high media performativity, circulate potent symbols; and invoke solidarities. To qualify, a disaster needs victims, or collapse of certain technological advancement or government's policy etc. These signifies that something has gone out of control and in such situations only journalists can be trusted as the watch dogs against whatever wrong is being done against people.

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<sup>15</sup> According to Cottle (2006: 420), media performs 'mediatized rituals' that are: "...exceptional, symbol-laden and subjunctively oriented phenomena serving to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities" when needed.



Figure 4: Emotional Roller coaster revised by impact of media ‘rituals’



In case of Phulbari resistance, after *Chhabbishe* (26<sup>th</sup>) media’s broadcast reached a point of ‘ritual’ where through showing the injustice to the people, emotions and solidarity was aroused and sustained for days. Television and newspapers presented the country with a marathon of events unfolding that was disastrous for the company and the government. It enacted a performance where tragedy was the emotional motor which sizzled with conflict, emphasizing anxiety, argument and resilience.

However, this does not seem to be an intentional one supporting either protestors or miners; instead it was for media’s eternal hunger for sensationalism and its own repertoire of performative rituals. Such hunger comes from a rite of passage after any atrocity in the national scene. Therefore, when the days of post-massacre dissent passed and pacification and reconciliation of the conflict was achieved, media went back to its initial position.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrates the power of emotion and community feeling to promote wave of anger that prompts backlash after a non-violent protest is violently repressed by the state. In doing so, I have attempted to use a kaleidoscope of transversal politics where standpoints, no matter how different they are equally respected. This provides a more nuanced sight of the patchwork working behind making any resistance work. While sewing together these patches, I have shown that the protest against the mine was not homogenous. People had different positioning about how and why the protest was taking place and therefore they perceived the unfolding events in a way that was different from people who were watching it form a

different positioning despite the fact that neither of them wanted the mine. In this paper, I critically engaged with the social movement literature that deals with post massacre protests and the mechanisms of control.

Consequently, in this paper, I proposed a narrow but qualitative focus on one case of protest where harsh repression led to backlash protests leading the way to partial success that stopped the threat against which it was protesting. By examining the case of Phulbari Resistance, I have demonstrated how, emotional rollercoaster overshadowed the high risk and cost associated with further dissent in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. I have also shown that emotional roller coaster travelled through a path and diminished after the catharsis is achieved. In addition, I propose that leaders of the protest, after the first phase of smoke and tear were cleared - mobilized large number of protestors through arousing a feeling of obligation to dissent or *Fard Kyfia*. Protestors were motivated to keep protest alive with high risk activities even though the regime exerted unplanned and ill-managed coercion. As such, I illustrate how emotion, community obligation and ritualized media performance helped the protestors to use the gap and weakness of the regime's unplanned violence.

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## Appendix 1

### News headlines

- 2005: 'Phulbari: attempts to extract coal again', 'Bangladesh has coal that measures as much as 53 TCF of gas', 'Bangladesh can get 7 billion dollar benefits from Phulbari Coal mine: an international survey report says'.
- 2006 until June: 'Coal mine starts soon: Expert team in Phulbaria, Dinajpur', 'Mass conspiracy against Phulbari Coal Mine', 'People of Phulbari needs to know in light whether darkness is descending', 'Blockade of UNO office if Phulbari coal mine is NOT implemented' etc.
- 2006, after June: 'Speakers at the Phulbari Rally: We'll fight till death to scrap the treacherous lease of the mine', 'Set Trial for those who has signed the deal with Asia Energy: Phulbari Declaration', 'Greater movement if AEC programs are not halted in Phulbari after 21 July', 'Asia Energy office blockade on 26th August' etc.
- 2006, after violence: 'Phulbari Alight: people have seized AEC offices and blazed homes of Dalals', 'DC Fails to appease the masses', 'Phulbari Tragedy 1: 7 killed hundreds injured as BDR fired at peaceful demo at Phulbari', 'Administrations' apathy to be blamed: Phulbari tragedy 2', 'Phulbari people has shown what true patriotism is', 'Thousands Defy Ban, Stage Protest: Phulbari Coal mine killing', 'Probe Committee report will be delayed: Phulbari Tragedy 4'.