

Voices of Resistance:

PHULBARI SPEAKS TO THE WORLD

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Phulbari, a region in northwestern Bangladesh, holds the memory of a movement that reshaped national politics and continues to inspire environmental activists across Bangladesh and the world. In 2006, tens of thousands of people marched in protest against a proposed open-pit coal mine backed by the UK-based company GCM Resources. The project threatened to displace innumerable people, ruin farmlands, pollute water sources and destroy a way of life.

Police met the protest with violence. Three young people were killed, more than a hundred were injured and many were left traumatized¹. Historically, violence has failed to silence people's calls for dignity, and Phulbari was no exception. It backfired, drawing more into the struggle. That resistance, after nine years, brought the mine to a halt in 2014².

The threat, however, persisted. GCM Resources continues to operate on the London Stock Exchange's AIM market. The company has repeatedly extended its mining licence. In fact, GCM renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with PowerChina in December 2024, extending it through December 2025, and continues to present Phulbari as an active project in its investor reports³.

The people of Phulbari, however, have not ceded ground and continue to organize protests in resistance. And this resistance is not driven by ideology but by survival. In villages like Borogram, families built homes on empty or abandoned land after being displaced by river erosion elsewhere. They cleared forests, dug irrigation canals, planted rice and vegetables and created a local economy. These are their homes, not temporary settlements. People here may not have "paperwork," but they carry decades of presence and connections in the area. Strip away the land, and you strip away those lives woven into it. In addition, the coal project would dry up the water table, damage nearby rivers, and pollute soil. Nearly all the coal was intended for export, and the people of Phulbari were never meant to benefit⁴. That is why thousands mobilized in 2006 and why they continue to do so today.

Over the years, these actions have been met with heavy repression. Some villagers lost their livelihoods and faced lawsuits or police threats. Authorities followed, harassed and arrested activists. One of the earliest advocates, Nasreen Huq, died in a suspicious accident shortly after organizing public opposition⁵. Despite it all, the movement adapted and pressed forward. Every year on Aug. 26, Phulbari Day is observed with vigils, marches and speeches⁶. It is a promise that will endure as long as the people and their land do.

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TAKE ACTION

If you care about land and climate justice or Indigenous rights anywhere in the world, then Phulbari's struggle is yours. Connect with activists in similar movements. Share their stories. Write to officials and companies still trying to profit from such excavation projects. Support those on the front lines. Remember: resistance works, but only when we keep showing up, together.

Solidarity is also what keeps the movement ongoing. The people of Phulbari are not alone. Environmental groups in Bangladesh, student organizers, women's networks, Indigenous activists and labour unions have stood with them. Across the world, campaigners have amplified their voices, challenged investors and demanded accountability. This fabric of conscience and solidarity has made it harder for GCM to move forward. This is not just one village resisting one project, but a global consensus of people refusing to let power, exploitation and capitalism disregard them.



PHOTO: Phulbari Solidarity

Phulbari's story is unfinished, and it is not isolated. The fight speaks to a demand for justice that Canadians, too, will recognize—one echoed in Nova Scotia, where Mi'kmaw leaders and allies fought to stop industrial dumping and now work to restore the tidal estuary at Boat Harbour.

Together, these struggles remind us that defending land and water is a collective ongoing work, especially in a world where climate change disregards every border we have drawn.

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