

Dispossession, Environmental Degradation and Protest: Contested Development in Bangladesh

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Summary

Evidence suggests that 41% of global electricity is produced from coal. Coal is cheap, abundant, and widespread around the world in comparison to other fossil fuels, such as natural gas and oil. Due to the entails of hazardous elements, coal is considered a ‘dirty fuel’ which is responsible for greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), which has a significant negative contribution to global warming. According to the *Kyoto Protocol*, countries have agreed to reduce GHG emissions from burning fossil fuels as a climate change commitment. Nowadays, many coal power-dependent countries are stepping out of coal-fired power generation in response to the anti-coal movements at the grassroots level and due to the global pressure for climate change commitment. These countries plan to replace coal-fired power generation with renewable energy. Contradicting this move towards renewable energy, some South and South-East Asian countries, including Bangladesh are meanwhile stepping *into* coal-fired power generation. Since 2009, the government of Bangladesh has planned to construct 22 coal-fired power plants (with 1320-megawatt maximum capacity in each) based on imported coal. This initiative of the government has been contested by local people, environmental activists, and civil society members from different motivational perspectives.

The overall objective of this research is to investigate the political contestations and negotiations of different actors (government, environmental activists, civil society members, and local people) around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. From the theoretical perspective of political ecology, this research characterises how different actors engage in this contestation from different interest-based motivations within the greater debate of ‘*development.*’ As a conceptual framework, the concept of ‘social movement’ and ‘environmental movement’ has both been used to understand the manifestation of the contesting actors. The ‘actor-oriented interface approach,’ explained and elaborated by Norman Long and the ‘argumentative analytical framework,’ developed by Marteen Hajer have been used as analytical frameworks to collect and analyse data.

The Rampal (state-owned-joint venture) and Banskhalī (private joint venture) coal-fired power plants have been selected as cases in this research as these two power plants have widely been debated. Empirical information has been collected from the local people, environmental activists, civil society members, journalists, academicians, and many others using the in-depth interview, semi-structural interview, and FGD methods. Secondary information has been collected from the relevant research reports, environmental impact assessment (EIA) reports, project monitoring reports, articles, government statements, newspapers, and video content.

Collected data has been triangulated for analysis by summarising, describing, categorising, and interpreting. A qualitative content analysis method has been applied for data analysis. The results of the research have been presented narratively.

The results of this research present a contesting position of the actors around the construction of coal power plants in Bangladesh. From the government's '*developmentalist*' point of view, the country needs uninterrupted electricity to achieve its goal to become a middle-income country by 2021. The government has identified coal-fired power generation as the cheapest way to produce electricity in order to accelerate the country's economic growth, rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, and overall development activities. The country also does not have the financial, technical, and human capacity to generate electricity from renewable resources. From the '*environmentalist*' point of view, on the other hand, the environmental activists and civil society members argue that electricity generation from burning coal compromises environmental protection, human rights, and social and environmental justice. Most importantly, the environmental activists are arguing against the Rampal Power Plant, which is located close to the *Sundarbans* mangrove forest, which is a UNESCO world heritage site. However, both the '*developmentalist*' and '*environmentalist*' perspectives fail to accommodate the interests of local people who have been evicted from their land and traditional way of living due to the land acquisition to construct the power plants. The landowners were not sufficiently compensated to restore their lives and livelihoods. Furthermore, the existence of corruption and irregularities in the compensation process has created several obstacles in terms of getting a hassle-free, on-time, and the exact amount of compensation.

Vibrant protests have emerged against these two power plants from the environmental activists and dispossessed population who were different in reasoning to join the protest and adopting protest strategies. While the environmental activists protested from the sole concern of 'environmental protection,' the dispossessed population protested against the dispossession from land to restore their livelihoods along with various materialistic interests such as getting more compensation, employment, and so forth. There were several disagreements among the environmental activists and dispossessed population in reasoning to join the protests.

The government responded differently towards the protest actions by these two groups. Towards the environmental activists, the government offered technocratic solutions such as the use of advanced technology that would almost neutralise the environmental pollution that

would occur from the coal power plants. Towards the protesters from the dispossessed population, the government reacted violently - some activists were killed, while others were physically assaulted, and also several fabricated cases were filed against them. Furthermore, the existing political factions of the locality had been used along with the support of the law-enforcing agencies to neutralise the dispossessed people's protests. Due to such suppressive treatment from the government and 'project-supporting group,' the dispossessed population could not continue their protests, while the environmental protest is still alive. Despite these protests, however, the government is still determined to construct the power plants according to the planned schedule.

Zusammenfassung

Es wird angenommen, dass 41% der weltweiten Stromerzeugung aus Kohle stammt, die im Vergleich zu anderen fossilen Brennstoffen wie Erdgas und Öl billig, reichlich vorhanden und weltweit weit verbreitet ist. Aufgrund seiner Zusammensetzung gilt Kohle als "schmutziger Brennstoff", der für Treibhausgasemissionen verantwortlich ist, was einen erheblichen negativen Beitrag zur globalen Erwärmung leistet. Gemäß dem Kyoto-Protokoll haben sich viele Länder der Staatengemeinschaft darauf geeinigt, die Treibhausgasemissionen aus der Verbrennung fossiler Brennstoffe als Verpflichtung zum Klimawandel zu reduzieren. Heutzutage treten viele von der Kohlekraft abhängige Länder als Reaktion auf die Antikohlebewegung und unter globalen Druck durch die Klimaschutzverpflichtungen aus der Kohleverstromung aus. Diese Länder planen, die Kohleverstromung durch erneuerbare Energien zu ersetzen. Im Gegensatz zu diesem Trend hin zu erneuerbaren Energien setzen einige südasiatische und südostasiatische Länder, darunter Bangladesch, inzwischen auf die Kohleverstromung. Seit 2009 plant die Regierung von Bangladesch auf Basis von Importkohle den Bau von 22 Kohlekraftwerken, mit jeweils 1320 Megawatt maximaler Leistung. Diese Initiative der Regierung wird von der lokalen Bevölkerung, Umweltaktivisten und der Zivilgesellschaft aus verschiedenen Perspektiven heraus kritisiert.

Das Ziel dieser Forschung ist es, die politischen Auseinandersetzungen und Verhandlungen zwischen gesellschaftlichen Akteuren (Regierung, Umweltaktivisten, Zivilgesellschaft und lokale Bevölkerung) um den Bau von Kohlekraftwerken in Bangladesch zu untersuchen. Aus der theoretischen Perspektive der politischen Ökologie beschreibt diese Forschung, wie verschiedene Akteure, mit ihren verschiedenen Motivationen, im Rahmen der größeren Debatte über "Entwicklung" gegeneinander antreten. Als konzeptioneller Rahmen werden hier die Begriffe der "sozialen Bewegung" und der "Umweltbewegung" verwendet, um die Beweggründe der konkurrierenden Akteure zu verstehen. Es wurde der von Norman Long erläuterte und ausgearbeitete *Actor-Oriented Interface Approach* und der *Argumentative Analytical Framework* von Marteen Hajer als Rahmen für die Sammlung und Analyse von Daten verwendet.

Die Kohlekraftwerke Rampal (staatliches Gemeinschaftsunternehmen) und Banskali (privates Gemeinschaftsunternehmen) wurden in dieser Studie als Beispiele ausgewählt, da diese beiden Kraftwerke besonders im Fokus der öffentlichen Debatte stehen. Empirische Informationen wurden von der lokalen Bevölkerung, Umweltaktivisten, Mitgliedern der Zivilgesellschaft, Journalisten, Akademikern und vielen anderen mittels Tiefeninterviews,

semi-strukturellen Interviews und REA-Methoden gesammelt. Als sekundäre Informationen wurden relevante Forschungsberichte, Umweltverträglichkeitsprüfungen (UVP), Projektmonitoringberichte, Regierungserklärungen, Zeitungen, Artikel und Videoinhalte herangezogen. Die gesammelten Daten wurden trianguliert und durch Zusammenfassung, Beschreibung, Kategorisierung und Interpretation analysiert. Für die Datenanalyse wurde eine qualitative Inhaltsanalysemethode verwendet. Die Forschungsergebnisse werden in narrativer Form präsentiert.

Das Ergebnis dieser Forschung stellt eine konkurrierende Position der Akteure rund um den Bau von Kohlekraftwerken dar. Aus der "entwicklungspolitischen" Sicht der Regierung braucht das Land ununterbrochenen Strom, um sein Ziel zu erreichen, bis 2021 ein Land mit mittlerem Einkommen zu werden. Die Regierung hat die Kohleverstromung als den billigsten Weg zur Stromerzeugung identifiziert, um das Wirtschaftswachstum, die schnelle Urbanisierung, die Industrialisierung und die allgemeinen Entwicklungsaktivitäten des Landes zu beschleunigen. Außerdem verfügt das Land nicht über die finanziellen, technischen und humankapitalen Kapazitäten, um Strom aus erneuerbaren Quellen zu erzeugen. Aus der Sicht des "Umweltschützers" argumentieren Umweltaktivisten und Mitglieder der Zivilgesellschaft, dass die Stromerzeugung aus Kohleverbrennung den Umweltschutz, die Menschenrechte, sowie die soziale und ökologische Gerechtigkeit gefährdet. Vor allem aber argumentieren Umweltschützer gegen das Rampal-Kraftwerk, das in der Nähe des Mangrovenwaldes von Sundarbans liegt, der zum UNESCO-Weltnaturerbe gehört. Sowohl die "entwicklungspolitische" als auch die "umweltpolitische" Perspektive berücksichtigen jedoch nicht die Interessen der Einheimischen, die durch den Landerwerb zum Bau der Kraftwerke von ihrem Land vertrieben wurden. Die Grundbesitzer wurden nicht ausreichend für diesen Verlust entschädigt, da Korruption zu Unregelmäßigkeiten im Entschädigungsprozess führte, eine problemlose, rechtzeitige und genaue Höhe der Entschädigungszahlungen könnte nicht gewährleistet werden, was die Lebensgrundlage der Betroffenen gefährdet.

Die Protestgruppen gegen den Bau der zwei Kohlekraftwerke repräsentieren dabei unterschiedliche Interessengruppen, Motivation und Proteststrategien weichen daher stark voneinander ab. Während Umweltaktivisten ausschließlich Anliegen des "Umweltschutzes" im Auge haben, protestieren die Einheimischen gegen die Enteignung von Land um ihre Lebensgrundlage zu sichern und ihre materiellen Interessen zu wahren. Entschädigungen und Beschäftigungssicherung haben für sie im Protest Vorrang. Diese Meinungsverschiedenheiten unter den Protestgruppen prägen den Widerstand gegen die Kraftwerke.

Die Regierung reagierte unterschiedlich auf die Protestaktionen dieser beiden Gruppen. Gegenüber den Umweltaktivisten bot die Regierung Lösungen, wie die Verwendung fortschrittlicher Technologien an, welche die Umweltbelastung durch Kohlekraftwerke nahezu neutralisieren würden. Gegen die lokale Bevölkerung reagierte die Regierung heftig: Aktivisten wurden getötet, körperlich angegriffen und mit rechtsstaatlichen Mitteln verfolgt, indem manipulierte Fälle zur Anzeige gebracht wurden. Bestehende politische Organisationen haben mit Unterstützung der Strafverfolgungsbehörden die Proteste der lokalen Bevölkerung neutralisiert. Aufgrund der repressiven Maßnahmen der Regierung und der "projektunterstützenden Akteure" konnte die lokale Bevölkerung ihren Protest nicht fortsetzen, während der Umweltprotest noch andauert. Die Regierung ist jedoch entschlossen, die Kraftwerke nach dem geplanten Zeitplan zu bauen.

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Dedication

Baba (Abdul Kader) and Maa (Shamsunnahar)

It has been 10 years since you left us. There is no single moment in any day when I do not miss you. Thank you for your endless love, hope, encouragement, and blessings.

I am proud that you are my parents. I love you.

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Acronyms and Glossary of local terms

AL	- Awami League (political party)
BAPA	- Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (civil society organisation)
BDTK	- Bangladeshi Taka (Bangladeshi currency)
BELA	- Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association
BIFPCL	- Bangladesh India Friendship Power Company Limited
BNP	- Bangladesh Nationalist Party (political party)
BPDB	- Bangladesh Power Development Board
CEGIS	- The Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services
CO _x	- Carbon Dioxide
CPB	- Communist Party-Bangladesh (political party)
DoE	- Department of Environment
EIA	- Environmental Impact Assessment
GHG	- Greenhouse Gas
IUCN	- International Union for Conservation of Nature
Jamaat	- Jamaat-e Islami Bangladesh (political party)
JP	- Jatiyo Party (political party)
<i>Khas land</i>	- Government-owned land
<i>Khatian</i>	- Land record certificate
<i>Mouza</i>	- Government-recognised land area
MP	- Member of Parliament
MW	- Mega Watt
NC	- The National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports (civil society organisation)
NCSS	- National Committee for Saving the Sundarbans (civil society organisation)
NO _x	- Nitrogen Dioxide
NSM	- New Social Movement
NTPC	- National Thermal Power Corporation
PSMP	- Power System Master Plan
SO _x	- Sulfur Dioxide
UNESCO	- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<i>Union</i>	- Smallest rural administrative and local government unit
<i>Upazila</i>	- Administrative region of local government unit, greater than <i>union</i>

Chapter One

Introduction

On 4th April 2016, four people got killed and more than 100 got wounded in a clash between the police and local people of Gondamara *union* of Banskali *thana* under Chittagong district in Bangladesh because the locals were protesting against a coal-fired power plant.¹ On 7th January 2017, environmental activists worldwide observed ‘Global Protest for Sundarbans’ demanding the scrapping of a coal-fired power plant that was going to be constructed near the Sundarbans mangrove forest in Bangladesh, which is listed by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as a World Heritage site.² In this regard, international organisations such as UNESCO, Ramsar, and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) sent petitions to the Government of Bangladesh (hereafter GoB) on several occasions requesting to scrap the power plant in order to protect the Sundarbans. However, despite these efforts, the GoB seems determined to construct twenty-two coal-fired power plants in the coming years to meet the national electricity demand.

The situation that has been mentioned above depicts the controversies around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. It becomes an arena of conflict when the landowners who were dispossessed from their land protested against land acquisition and the environmental groups at the local, national, and international levels are selectively protesting against a power plant because of the risk of causing environmental pollution. After paying little attention to this opposition, the country is stepping into coal-fired electricity generation at a time when many coal-fired electricity-dependent countries are planning to step out of it as a response to global climate change commitment.³ Thus, several controversies have arisen around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh that remain unexplored. The main aim of this research is to understand the political contestation and negotiation of different actors around the development of these coal-fired power plants. This research has followed the qualitative research techniques for data collection and analysis and the findings have been presented narratively.

¹<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35967762>; accessed on March 12, 2017

²<https://apwld.org/press-release-successful-global-day-of-protest-to-protect-sundarbans/>; accessed on January 15, 2019

³Koplitz, Jacob, Sulprizio, Myllyvirta and Reid, 2017; Some of the major coal-fired electricity-dependent countries (such as France, Germany, The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada) decided to stop coal-fired electricity generation within different time periods. The European Parliament also declared the elimination of coal-fired electricity generation by 2030 (www.climate.org; accessed on October 4, 2019).

1.1 Background

Energy security is considered as the key to ensure the sustainable development of any country. The availability of uninterrupted electricity is mandatory for the effective functioning of development activities.⁴ For this reason, countries focus on ensuring energy security to keep the wheels of development moving. As Bangladesh is a power-deficit country, the government has identified the shortage of electricity as a key challenge to achieve the goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2021 and keeping the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) growth rate above seven per cent in the coming years.⁵ The government prepared a Power System Master Plan (PSMP 2010) to accelerate electricity generation to meet the increasing demand for electricity due to population growth, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and overall development activities.⁶ The PSMP recommends producing most of its electricity from coal because the government considers it as the cheapest way to produce electricity in comparison to the other sources.⁷ Moreover, the government also argues that the country does not have the financial, technical, and human capacity to initiate renewable energy.⁸ Under such circumstances, recently the country has planned to construct fifteen large-scale (1200-1320 megawatts in each) and seven small-scale (150-800 megawatts in each) coal-fired power plants by 2027 to accelerate its electricity generation.⁹

Though Bangladesh has only recently stepped into the realm of coal-fired electricity generation, coal has been widely used to produce electricity since the beginning of the industrial era (the 1750s to 1950s).¹⁰ Statistics show that, in 2018, over 65% of the global electricity was produced from fossil fuels (oil, coal, and natural gas) whereas coal contributed 38.4%.¹¹ Due to oil price volatility, coal has become the most used fuel in electricity generation since it is cheaper than other fossil fuels. It is estimated that coal would be the key component to produce electricity to meet global electricity demand in the coming years, particularly in the Global South.¹² However, since the 1970s, coal-fired electricity generation has been criticised

⁴Artmanand and Raman, 2009

⁵<http://boi.gov.bd>; accessed on December 20, 2016

⁶The PSMP-2010 has been further amended in 2016 and 2019

⁷Hossain and Islam, 2015; GoB, 2014a; GoB, 2016b

⁸GoB, 2015a

⁹GoB, 2018a

¹⁰Fernihough and O'Rourke, 2014

¹¹Coal is relatively cheap, abundant, and widespread around the world in comparison to the other fossil fuels. The reserve of coal is estimated to be around 990 billion tons, which is enough for 150 years at the current consumption rate (International Energy Agency, 2018).

¹²Arvind, 2014; Australian Green House Office, 2000 cited in Akubo, Momoh, Dongo, Okorie and Oluyori, 2013. Coal contributes the majority of the electricity production in some countries, such as South Africa (93%), Poland (87%), China (79%), Australia (78%), The United States (45%), and Germany (41%) (Nalbandian, 2015).

by environmentalists due to the environmental pollution and human health hazards it causes.¹³ A study showed that the emission of pollutant elements from the coal power plants in Southeast Asia, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan causes an estimated 20,000 excess deaths per year.¹⁴ Similarly, in the United States of America, pollution from coal-fired power plants is responsible for 38,200 non-fatal heart attacks and 554,000 asthma attacks each year.¹⁵ According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), coal is responsible for more than half of the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions from fossil fuels,¹⁶ which have a very significant contribution to global warming.¹⁷ Due to GHG emissions from the coal power plants, different international fora and scientific communities encourage the replacement of coal-fired electricity generation with renewable sources of energy.¹⁸ Pressures have been created globally to step out of coal-fired electricity generation to reduce GHG emissions as a climate change commitment.¹⁹

In addition to the pressures from these global fora, since the 1970s, environmental protests against coal-fired electricity generation have grown immensely from grassroots to international levels.²⁰ These environmental protests mostly advocate for an anti-coal position to reduce GHG emissions. Furthermore, large-scale land is required to construct a coal-fired power plant. In many cases, mainly in densely populated countries, the land-dependent population are evicted from their land to make space to construct a coal power plant. As a result, grassroots protests also emerge from these dispossessed populations against the land acquisition for the power plant.²¹ More than the environmental concerns, the dispossessed population join the protests from the viewpoint of environmental justice due to the rampant devastation of a destructive

¹³Coal-fired electricity generation is responsible for emitting different pollutants, such as a variety of toxic metals, organic compounds, acid gases, sulfur, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and particulate matter. The release of ash content with toxic heavy metals (fly ash and bottom ash) introduces additional challenges to dispose of pollutant elements. Due to the release of these pollutant elements, coal-fired electricity generation has severe negative impacts on land, air, and water, which exacerbate the whole ecosystem and human health (Kavalov and Peteves, 2007; Greenpeace International, 2013; WHO, 2002).

¹⁴Koplitz et al., 2017

¹⁵Natural Resources Defense Council, 2007

¹⁶Olivier, Janssens-Maenhout, Muntean and Peters, 2016

¹⁷Parry, Canziani, Palutikof, van der Linden and Hanson (Eds.), 2007; IPCC projected GHG emissions from energy use to grow between 40% and 110% from 2000 to 2030 depending largely on whether the coal-fired electricity generation is multiplied hundreds of times across the globe (Lee, 2009).

¹⁸According to the Kyoto Protocol, 55 countries (including Bangladesh) agreed to reduce GHG emissions from burning fossil fuels by the year 2010 on an average of 5% compared with the emissions level in the year 1990. In the Paris Agreement, 195 UNFCCC members signed to keep the global average temperature below 2-degree centigrade and to limit the increase of temperature below 1.5-degree centigrade (Grubb, Vrolijk and Brack, 1997).

¹⁹Rogelj et al., 2016

²⁰The prominent environmental activist groups are Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, 350.org, The Isaac Walton League, The Audubon Society, Environment Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, Ecology Action, Ecology Freaks, and Ecology Commandoes (Arquilla and Ronfeldt (ed.), 2001).

²¹SAHR, 2015

industry like coal power plants.²² As a result of these grassroots protests,²³ along with the global pressures from climate change commitment, coal-fired electricity generation has been decreasing in many coal-fired electricity-dependent countries, mainly in Europe and the USA.²⁴ At the same time, some South and South-East Asian countries (such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, and other neighbouring countries) recently emphasised accelerating coal-fired electricity generation, an advancement that has gotten far less attention and coverage in the global media.²⁵ Bangladesh's steps towards coal-fired electricity generation go against its climate change commitment since the country is identified as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries by the Global Climate Risk Index 2017²⁶ and claims climate change compensation to adapt and mitigate climate change effects.²⁷

The initiative to construct the coal power plants became contentious in Bangladesh since the local environmental groups have started protesting by arguing that the balance of the ecosystems, human rights, and social and environmental justice have been compromised during the procedural stages of the construction of these power plants who got support from the international organisations and environmental groups.²⁸ Similarly, the local landowners and land-dependent population also engaged in the protests because they feared losing their livelihoods due to eviction from their land.²⁹ These protesting groups adopted different protest

²²Lee, 2009; Carbon Market Watch, 2014

²³Sierra Club, 2015

²⁴Koplitz et al., 2017

²⁵The demand for electricity in these countries is projected to increase by 83% in 2035 in comparison to 2011, which is more than the global average. To meet this increasing electricity demand, these countries are constructing 120 coal power plants at present, and many more plants are planned to be constructed in the coming years (Koplitz et al., 2017).

²⁶Kreft, Eckstein and Melchior, 2016. Bangladesh is critically vulnerable to climate change due to its geographical location, flat and low-lying landscape, population density, poverty, illiteracy, lack of institutional setup, and so forth. The effect of climate change is already being felt in the country (Haque, Khan and Rouf, 2013). A cross-country survey, conducted by BBC Media Action, claimed that climate change is affecting the lives of 84% of people of Bangladesh and 36% of people already have changed their way of living to cope with the changes (Faris, Lipscombe, Whitehead, and Wilson, 2014). It is estimated that by 2050, 27 million Bangladeshis might become displaced due to climate change because of coastal flooding, bank erosion, drought, and agricultural inversion, which would negatively affect Bangladesh's overall economic progress. By 2030, it is estimated that the poverty rate might increase by 15% as an impact of climate change (IPCC, 2011). However, the country contributes less than 0.35% of global GHG emissions (Climate Analysis Indicators Tool, Version 2.0. www.wri.org; accessed on January 7, 2017).

²⁷Kotikalapudi, 2016. To meet these climate change-related challenges, Bangladesh is claiming climate change compensation from the developed world, which is mostly responsible for global GHG emissions. As climate change commitment, Bangladesh ratified the Kyoto Protocol (Rolfe, 1998) and declared Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) where it pledged that its per capita GHG emissions will not cross the average limit for developing countries and it will promote low-carbon initiatives as well as resilient development. Bangladesh has unconditionally pledged to reduce GHG emissions by 5% from business as usual (BAU) level by 2030 and has conditionally pledged to contribute to a 15% reduction subject to appropriate international support in the form of finance, investment, technology development and transfer, and capacity building (GOB, 2015a; p. 2-3).

²⁸<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/02/thousands-to-march-protest-coal-plant-threat-bangladesh-sundarbans-forest>; accessed on December 27, 2016

²⁹Bangladesh is a densely populated country with 1,222 people per square kilometre (The World Bank, 2015). As a result, a good number of people have to be evicted from their land (mostly arable land) to make space to construct the coal power plants, which has a significant negative impact on their livelihoods (Hossain and Islam, 2015).

strategies to compel the government to scrap the power plants.³⁰ In response to these protests, the government has confronted the protesters by adopting both soft and hard techniques to neutralise them. The government is determined to take forward the construction of the coal-fired power plants, keeping all these controversies aside.

1.2 Electricity Generation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a power-deficient country.³¹ The country has the capacity to produce 15,953-megawatt (MW) electricity (excluding captive) with the existing power generators. However, it could produce only 10,958 MW in 2017-2018. Of the total electricity production, public, private, and power trade shares make up 56%, 40% and 4% respectively.³² It is claimed that 90 per cent of the population is covered with electricity facilities, including renewable energy (such as connections of solar panels). Though statistics show remarkable progress in electricity generation and distribution in the last few years, the country still has a shortage in terms of providing uninterrupted electricity to all. The current government has initiated different programmes to increase electricity generation to bring the whole population under electricity facility.³³

According to the PSMP 2010, the government has planned to produce 24,000 MW electricity by 2021, 40,000 MW by 2030 and 60,000 MW by 2041 through developing instant, short, medium, and long-term projects for power generation, distribution, and transmission, aiming to provide uninterrupted electricity to all at an affordable price.³⁴ The government has formulated policies to encourage the private sector to engage in power generation along with the public sector through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Rental Power Producer (RPP), and Independent Power Plant (IPP).³⁵ As an instant initiative, the government has introduced rental and quick rental electricity generation since 2009 to meet the immediate shortage of electricity which has been extended till 2021.

³⁰Kotikalapudi, 2016

³¹Mozumder and Marathe, 2007

³²GoB, 2018b

³³*ibid*; GoB, 2018a. In 2014, the country had capacity to produce 13,095 MW of electricity while it produced only 7356 MW and reached only 62% of its population. Per capita electricity consumption was 321 KW, which was lower than many other developing countries (GoB, 2014b).

³⁴*ibid*

³⁵Hossain and Islam, 2015

Figure 1.1: The projection of final energy consumption³⁶

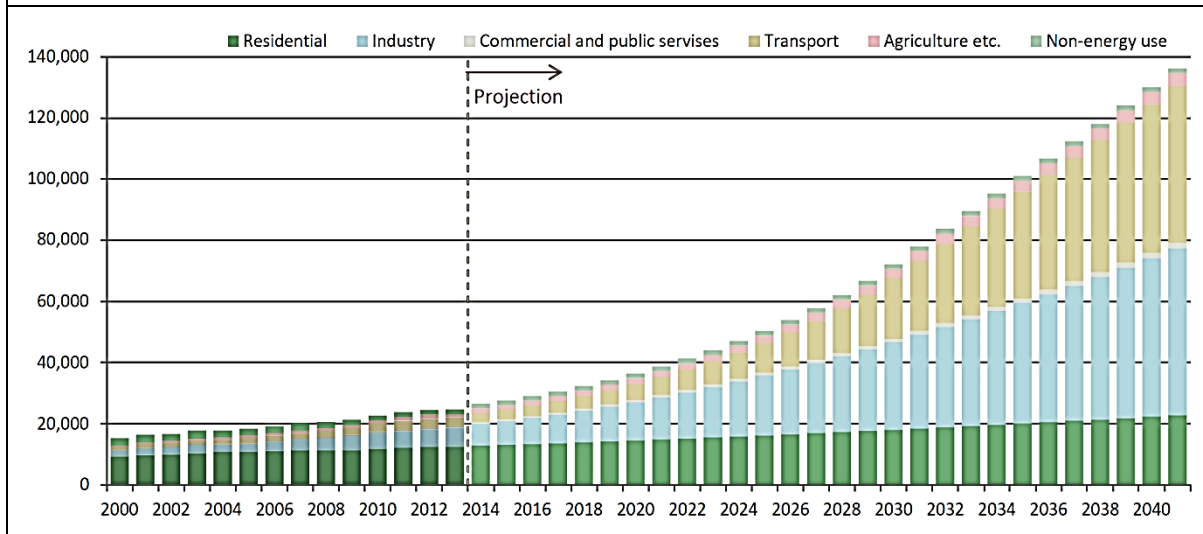


Figure 1.2: Power generation capacity by fuel types (as of November 2016)³⁷

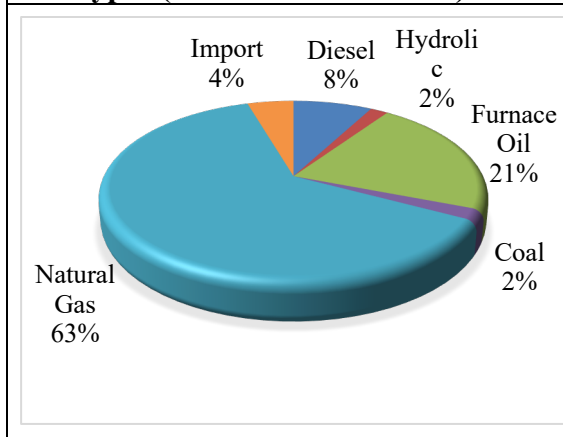
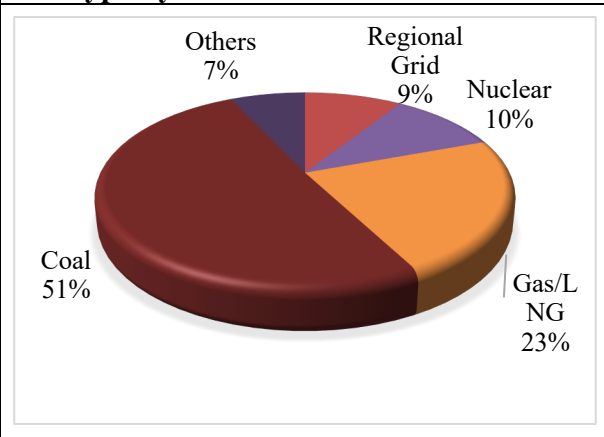


Figure 1.3: Projected power generation by fuel type by 2030³⁸



The existing electricity generation system in Bangladesh is highly dependent on natural gas for fuel.³⁹ In 2016, Bangladesh produced 63% of its electricity from natural gas and 2% from coal (see figures 1.2 and 1.3). Due to the projected decrease of natural gas production in the coming years, the government has planned to produce 51% of its electricity from coal by 2030, targeting a long-term sustainable and diversified mix-fuel method for electricity generation.⁴⁰ It has planned to produce 6,369 MW of electricity from coal-fired power plants by 2021.⁴¹ Furthermore, it has also targeted producing electricity from nuclear (1,200 MW by 2024) and

³⁶GoB, 2016b

³⁷<http://www.bpdb.gov.bd>; accessed on December 25, 2016

³⁸GoB, 2016b

³⁹ADB, 2009

⁴⁰GoB, 2016b; Hossain and Islam, 2015

⁴¹GoB, 2014a

renewable sources (2,000 MW by 2020)⁴² as well as importing electricity (9,000 MW by 2041) from neighbouring countries.⁴³ Around 1 billion and 341 million euros⁴⁴ was allocated for the development of the power sector in the 2014-15 fiscal year, which was 4.6 per cent of the total national budget of that year.⁴⁵

Bangladesh is stepping into coal-fired electricity generation at a time when the country has good potential to produce electricity from renewable sources to meet the long-term energy demand. Mondal and Denich (2010), through an intensive study, showed that Bangladesh has the potential to produce 50,174 MW of electricity by solar panels, 4,614 MW by wind power, 566 MW by biomass and 125 MW by hydropower. Recently, Bangladesh showed huge potential for solar-based electricity generation. According to a media report, 3.5 million households installed solar panels by the end of 2014, which covered 10% of the total population. 50,000 new households are getting connections to the solar system every month. Due to the long duration of sunshine and because of being isolated from the national grid, the solar system has become popular in rural areas.⁴⁶ Despite these potential alternatives, the government has planned to produce electricity from coal which has been criticised by environmental groups and international communities from the perspective of global climate change commitment.⁴⁷

The government's initiative of generating electricity from coal has been declared in the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) and the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSP),⁴⁸ where the country pledged to achieve lower-carbon emissions as well as resilient development in coal-fired electricity generation through using the advanced (*ultra-supercritical* and *super-critical*) technology.⁴⁹ Along with the advanced

⁴²The renewable sources of energy include solar power, biogas plant, wind, wave energy, and hydropower. In line with the Renewable Energy Policy 2009, the government is committed to facilitate both public and private sector investment in electricity generation from the renewable sources to substitute non-renewable power. The Renewable Energy Policy 2009 projects that renewable sources will produce 5% of the total electricity production of the country by 2015 and 10% by 2020. Currently, renewable sources contribute only around 1% of the total electricity production (GoB, 2014a).

⁴³GoB, 2018a. Along with the acceleration of electricity generation, the government is also determined to control the system loss at the power generation, transmission, and distribution stages, which was 27% in the fiscal year 2014-15 (GoB, 2014a).

⁴⁴The exchange rate of 1 Euro = 86 BDTK (as of September 11, 2019)

⁴⁵The national budget of the fiscal year 2014-2015, Finance Division, The Government of the People's republic of Bangladesh.

⁴⁶<http://in.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-solar-idINKBN0KY00220150125>; accessed on February 26, 2017

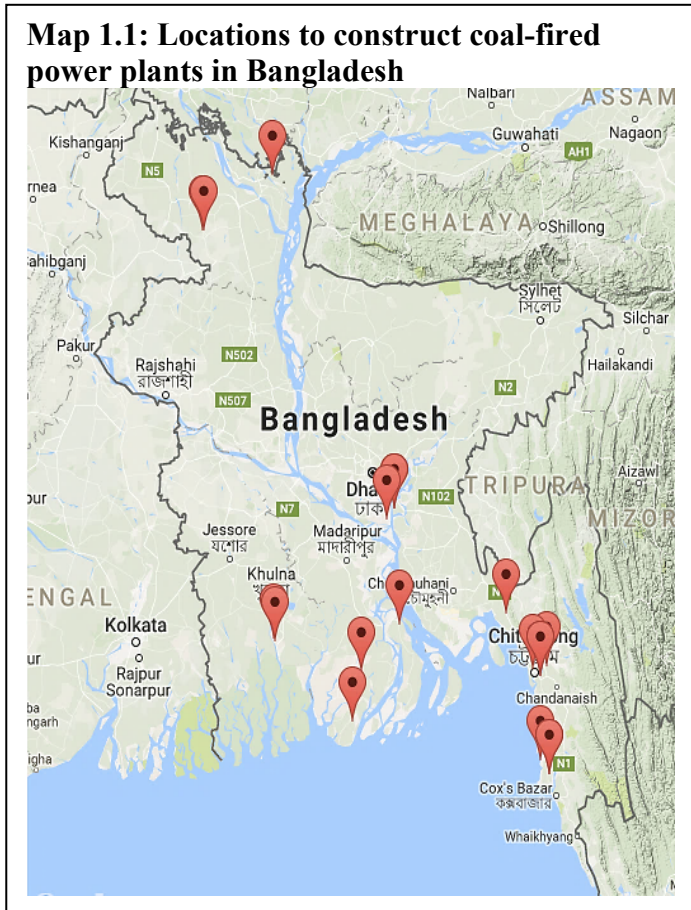
⁴⁷GoB, 2018a

⁴⁸GoB, 2015a; GoB, 2009

⁴⁹Roy, Hanlon and Hulme, 2016. The conventional coal-fired power plant (*sub-critical* technology) burns coal to boil water to generate steam, which activates a turbine to generate electricity and has an efficiency of about 32%. The *supercritical* (SC) and *ultra-supercritical* (USC) technology of the coal-fired power plant are the upgraded version of the conventional technology that have an efficiency level above 45%. This means, the SC and USC technologies need less amount of coal to produce the same amount of electricity compared to conventional technology. Fewer burns of coal also lead to lower emissions (including carbon dioxide and mercury) and lower fuel costs for electricity generation. (<http://www.greenfacts.org/glossary/pqrs/supercritical-ultra-supercritical-technology>; accessed on April 12, 2017).

technology, these power plants will be mostly run by good quality imported coal as the country doesn't have sufficient reserves of coal. Coal extraction in the country has been obstructed due to resistance from the local inhabitants and environmental groups on several occasions.⁵⁰ The government has planned to construct coal-fired power plants in different locations of the country, particularly in the coastal belt considering the waterways for coal transportation.

Among the planned twenty-two coal-fired power plants, eight power plants with a capacity of 7,158 MW are currently at the construction



phase, eleven power plants with a capacity of 13,300 MW are at the planning phase, and the remaining three power plants with a capacity of 2,071 MW are at the tendering process (as of June 2018).⁵¹ Most of these power plants are expected to come in electricity generation by 2025. The power plants that are located in Payra, Rampal, Matarbari, and Banskhalī are at the most technically advanced level. Each of these power plants has the capacity to produce 1,320 MW of electricity with two-unit steam turbines of 660 MW capacity. Each power plant has a cooling station, water intake station including intake piping and discharge channel, residential area, water treatment plant, sub-station, coal terminal, coal handling and coal silo, ash disposal area, and green belt.⁵² This research has focused on the Rampal and Banskhalī Coal Power Plants, which are at the most advanced level.

⁵⁰Nuremowla, 2012

⁵¹GoB, 2018a

⁵²*ibid*

Table 1.1: Summary of Rampal and Banskhali power plant⁵³

Name	Location (Division)	Ownership/Implementation	Acquired land (acre)	Budget (US\$)	Tentative time of operation
Rampal Power Plant	Rampal, Khulna	BPDB and NTPC (India)	1,834	1.8 billion.	July 2021 ⁵⁴
Banskhali Power Plant	Banskhali, Chittagong	S. Alam Group (Bangladesh) and SS Power (China)	660	2.4 billion	December 2021 ⁵⁵

Rampal Coal Power Plant

The Rampal Power Plant, named by *Maitree Super Thermal Power Project*, is being implemented by the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company Limited (BIFPCL) (interchangeably used as company or power plant development authority).⁵⁶ The BIFPCL is formed under a joint venture agreement (JVA) between the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) and India's state-owned National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC).⁵⁷ According to the agreement, the total cost of the power plant project is estimated at US\$ 1.8 billion, where BPDB and NTPC will invest 30% of the total cost (15% each) while the remaining 70% (US\$ 1.6 billion) will be arranged as a loan from the Exim Bank of India.⁵⁸ In addition, the GoB proposed a 15-year tax exemption to the BIFPCL, which is worth US\$ 936 million⁵⁹ and granted an effective annual US\$ 26 million subsidy for dredging the *Pashur* river to ensure uninterrupted coal transportation to the power plant.⁶⁰

The gross electricity generation capacity of the power plant is 1,320 MW with two turbines of 660 MW capacity in each and the power plant has the facility to extend its capacity for another 1,320 MW.⁶¹ However, due to objections from environmental activists, BIFPCL has cancelled its plan to construct the second phase of the power plant.⁶² According to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report, the power plant will have *super-critical* technology installed.⁶³ Along with the other eight high-priority development projects, this power plant

⁵³Prepared by the author, 2019

⁵⁴GoB, 2018a

⁵⁵*ibid*

⁵⁶<https://www.bifpcl.com>; accessed on July 21, 2018

⁵⁷Hossain and Islam, 2015

⁵⁸*ibid*

⁵⁹The Independent (newspaper), August 08, 2013

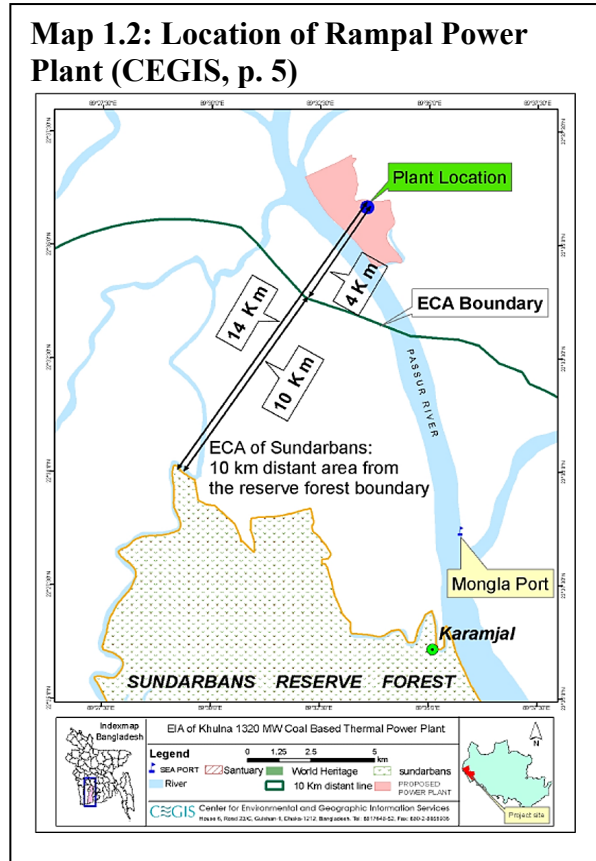
⁶⁰IEEFA, 2016

⁶¹CEGIS, 2013

⁶²IEEFA, 2016

⁶³CEGIS, 2013

project is in the list of fast-track projects of the government.⁶⁴ According to the agreements that have been signed, NTPC is assigned for the construction and operation of the power plant, and Indian Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. (BHEL) is awarded the power plant infrastructure construction works.⁶⁵ Fichtner GmbH of Germany has been appointed as ‘owners engineer’ to assist the BIFPCL. As of March 2018, according to a media report, ‘5 per cent’ of the construction work has been completed.⁶⁶ According to the Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) and power plant Installation Agreement (IA) that have been signed, the GoB will purchase electricity from this power plant for the next 30 years.



The Rampal Power Plant received ‘site clearance’ and ‘environment clearance’ certificates from the Department of Environment (DoE) based on the Initial Environment Examination (IEE) and the EIA study respectively that have been conducted by the Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS) after complying with the DoE and The World Bank’s Guideline for Environment Impact Assessment.⁶⁷ Based on the IEE study, the current location of the power plant (Sapmari Katakhal and Kaigar Daskati *Mouza* of Rajnagar *Union* under Rampal *Upazila*) was found suitable in comparison to the alternative location *Labanchara*⁶⁸ of Khulna considering the availability of land, dense of population settlement, impact on the air of the nearby city (Khulna), and the depth of the nearby river.⁶⁹ The current location of the power plant is located 4 kilometres away from the Environmental Critical Area

⁶⁴The fast-track projects of the government are Padma bridge, Padma rail track, Dohazari-Gubdum rail, Metro rail, Payra seaport, Rooppur plant 1st phase, Matarbari power plant, and Rampal power plant [The Daily Star (newspaper), June 03, 2016].

⁶⁵Aitken and BankTrack, 2016

⁶⁶The Bangladesh Post (online news portal), March 9, 2018

⁶⁷CEGIS is a state-owned organisation

⁶⁸CEGIS, 2013, p. xxviii

⁶⁹*ibid*, p. xxix

(ECA) boundary of the Sundarbans, 14 kilometres away from the Sundarbans, and 70 kilometres away from the UNESCO world heritage site.⁷⁰

Banskhali Coal Power Plant

The Banskhali Coal Power Plant, named by *Chittagong 2x612 MW Coal Power Plant* is located in Gondamara union of Banskhali Upazila under Chittagong District of Bangladesh.⁷¹ The electricity generation capacity of this power plant is 1,224 MW with two turbines of 612 MW capacity in each. The power plant is being implemented by two joint companies (SS Power I Ltd. and SS Power II Ltd.) of S. Alam Group⁷² (afterwards S. Alam) of Bangladesh and SEPCO-III Electrical Power Construction Corporation and HTG Development Group Company Ltd of China (interchangeably used as company or power plant development authority).⁷³ S. Alam is the owner of 70 per cent of these companies and the rest 30 per cent of ownership belongs to the Chinese companies. The cost of the project is estimated at US\$ 2,401 million, out of which US\$1,739.064 million will be taken as a secured loan from a Chinese bank.⁷⁴ In monetary terms, this is the biggest project in the country that a private company has got approval to produce electricity.⁷⁵ SS Power I Ltd. and SS Power II Ltd. will construct the first and second units of the power plant respectively under the *Speedy Supply of Power and Energy (Special Provision) (Amendment) Act 2015*.⁷⁶ Initially, the first unit of the power plant was expected to come to electricity generation by November 2019. Both plants will produce electricity for the next 25 years.⁷⁷ According to the agreement that has been signed, the *ultra-supercritical* technology will be installed, and good quality imported coal will be used in this power plant to increase the efficiency of electricity generation.⁷⁸ The GoB will be the sole buyer of the electricity produced from this power plant. A power purchase agreement has been

⁷⁰CEGIS, 2013, p. xxix

⁷¹The power plant construction agreement has been signed on February 16, 2016 (<http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd>; accessed on April 7, 2016).

⁷²The private business company S. Alam Group was established in the 1990s and has emerged as one of the most prominent corporate groups in Bangladesh. This group claimed to enjoy an annual turnover of US\$2 billion, which is a massive amount in the context of Bangladesh, across a wide range of industries like iron sheet, cement, vegetable oil, coil, public transport, gas, refuelling station, bags, shrimp hatchery, refined sugar, agro-firms, natural gas, heavy oil, furnace oil, real estate, hotels and resorts, import and export commercial items, banking, leasing, stock broker house, storage services, and so forth. Recently, the company stepped into electricity production by burning coal (<http://www.s.alamgroupbd.com>; accessed on March 25, 2017).

⁷³<http://rtmnews24.com>; accessed on March 25, 2018; <http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd>; accessed on April 7, 2016; <http://www.s.alamgroupbd.com/>; accessed on June 21, 2017

⁷⁴<http://energynewsbd.com>; accessed on February 16, 2016

⁷⁵<http://spbm.org>; accessed on September 1, 2018

⁷⁶A special act to produce uninterrupted electricity

⁷⁷<http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd>; accessed on April 7, 2016

⁷⁸*ibid*

signed between the GoB and SS Power-I and SS Power II to purchase electricity at the rate of US\$ 8.259 cents or Bangladeshi Taka (BDTK) 6.61 per kilowatt-hour as a levellised tariff which would go up and down based on the price of coal in the international market.⁷⁹

SEPCO-III of China was assigned as a contractor for the engineering, procurement, and construction of two units of the power plant. The feasibility study of the project has been completed by Qingdao Hongrui Electric Power Engineering Consulting Co Ltd. of China. To ensure uninterrupted coal supply to the power plant, a non-binding *Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)* including term sheets for 100% coal supply has been signed with three world-renowned coal suppliers named Glencore, Bayan, and APG that have coal mines in Indonesia, Australia, South Africa, Russia, and Colombia.⁸⁰ Around 5,000 workers will be employed during the project development phase and 600 workers will be employed during the operation phase of the power plant.⁸¹ Along with the power plant, other infrastructure such as a small port to handle coal loading and unloading will be developed in the power plant area.⁸² On 14th October 2016, the Chinese president and Bangladeshi Prime Minister jointly inaugurated the power plant. Following a mass demonstration against the power plant by the local people in April 2016, the Bangladesh Navy has been assigned to take care of the project. It is estimated that the progress rate of the construction work of the power plant project was 20% as of March 2018.⁸³ It is claimed that the CEGIS has conducted the EIA study of this power plant project and it got the 'Environment Clearance' certificate from the DoE on 18 June 2016 with 59 conditions. However, the EIA report has not been published for public scrutiny (until June 2018).⁸⁴

While the government is determined to construct these power plants on time, the environmental activists identified several irregularities and loopholes at the procedural stage of the Rampal and Banskhalī power plants that might create a risk of causing environmental pollution. Moreover, they criticised the legitimacy of coal-fired electricity generation considering its environmental and social hazards. The environmental groups are specifically criticising the Rampal Power Plant in order to protect the Sundarbans forest. They have been staging protest programmes to force the government to scrap the power plant. Furthermore, large-scale arable

⁷⁹<http://energynewsbd.com>; accessed on February 16, 2016; 1 Euro equivalent to 99 BDTK (as of August 16, 2018).

⁸⁰*ibid*

⁸¹<http://spbm.org>; accessed on September 1, 2018

⁸²*ibid*

⁸³GoB, 2018a

⁸⁴It is reported that the CEGIS submitted the EIA report to the Department of Environment (DoE) for approval on August 18, 2015.

land has been acquired to construct the Rampal (1,834 acres) and Banskhali (660 acres) power plants. A good number of land-dependent people have been evicted from these lands to make space to construct these power plants. These evicted population expressed their unwillingness to give up occupancy of the land from a fear of losing their traditional way of living.⁸⁵ They staged protests against the acquisition of land. In such circumstances, the construction of these coal power plants created an ‘arena of conflict’ between the government versus the environmental activists and dispossessed population. This research aims to explore these contentious arenas.

1.3 Political Situation in Bangladesh

In both power plant areas, the government or power plant development authorities received support from the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus for acquiring land and resolving the protests of those showing opposition to the projects. This ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus has been formed based on the antagonistic relationship between the major two political parties of the country, namely the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and their political allies.⁸⁶ Thus, the construction of these power plants has been seen as ‘political projects’ where the leaders, activists, supporters, and followers of the ruling party exercised unchallenged power with the support of the bureaucracy and law-enforcing agencies to outcast their political opponents. Anyone who opposed the power plant projects was treated as political opponent and confronted politically. These contentious arenas are intertwined in the wider political environment of Bangladesh. Shedding light on the political situation of the country is crucial to understand these contentious arenas.

The country got back into electoral democratic governance system in 1991 after two decades of civilian and military authoritarianism.⁸⁷ Afterwards, the country held regular general elections where the leadership alternated over the years between the AL and BNP. However, the political system faced many upheavals in terms of establishing democracy due to the rigid antagonism between these two political parties which permeate every single realm of Bangladeshi society.⁸⁸ The political system gradually transformed from an electoral regime to

⁸⁵Hossain and Islam, 2015

⁸⁶The BNP has long-term ally with Islamic political parties, such as Jammata-e-Islami Bangladesh while the AL has ally with leftist and secular political parties.

⁸⁷Riaz, 2019

⁸⁸*ibid*

semi-authoritarian to competitive authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism.⁸⁹ Both the BNP and AL have been alleged over the years of manipulating the democratic institutes and constitution in favour of the party to stay in power and subjugate political opponents which have been replicated in the political scenario from the national to local levels.⁹⁰

The lack of trust between these two parties regarding holding free and fair elections is the main reason for this antagonism. As a solution to this trust deficit, a ‘caretaker government’ system was introduced in the constitution in 1996 and the elections of 1996, 2001, and 2008 were held under this government. The caretaker government is a type of interim government (election time government) where the members are non-partisan and helps to transfer state power to the next government after holding a free, fair, and acceptable election.⁹¹ However, Bangladesh has experienced political unrest during each election in terms of the formation of the caretaker government, selecting its members and handing over state power. The ruling parties (both AL and BNP when they were in power) attempted to manipulate the caretaker government system to win elections while the opposition parties (both AL and BNP at different times) boycotted parliament sessions, protested on the streets, and refused to take part in elections accusing the ruling party of forming a caretaker government that is favourable to them.⁹²

Particularly in 2006, the opposition political party (AL) objected to the formation of the caretaker government and refused to participate in the next generation election. Due to the failure to reach an agreement, a military-backed caretaker government captured state power. They managed to hold a general election in 2008 and handed over state power to the AL. Later, the AL government abolished the caretaker government system in 2011, saying that it was contradictory to the constitution of the country. As a result, the BNP boycotted the general election held in 2014 from a fear of election manipulation, leading to the AL winning a landslide victory. Afterwards, the country experienced tremendous political unrest since the BNP (the then opposition party) started protesting to re-establish the caretaker government system while the ruling AL was rigid to hold elections under their leadership. The BNP participated in the general election held in 2018 and lost heavily, with the AL winning 259 out of 300 seats to form the next government. This election has been widely criticised as being rigged by the ruling political party (AL) with the support of the administration, law-enforcing

⁸⁹Riaz, 2019

⁹⁰TIB, 2014

⁹¹Islam, 2013

⁹²Khan, 2018

agencies, and election commission as well.⁹³ Therefore, election-time conflicts have become regular occurrence in the country. For instance, in 2016, more than 100 people got killed in violent clashes between the AL and BNP during the *Union Parishad* election. In addition, it is alleged that both parties (when they were in power) used the national institutes and agencies for torturing, arresting, abducting, disappearing, and killing opposition political activists. For instance, the most extreme case was the grenade attack on the chairperson of AL on 21 August 2004. Similarly, the chairperson of BNP was also detained in charges of corruption, which was alleged to have been politically motivated.

In this political turmoil, the ruling political party has restricted the free functioning of institutions and sectors of the National Integrity System (NIS) - a system which helps to engender an environment that promotes democratic practices and discourages corruption. Similarly, the NIS institutions are often used for the political interest of the ruling party.⁹⁴ For instance, the government-controlled freedom of the press, as a result, the civil society organisations don't want to criticise the government for fear of repercussions. For these reasons, Bangladesh has scored exceptionally low in all governance indicators in recent years. For instance, the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, a UK-based company, classified 167 countries according to full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid democracies, and authoritarian regimes where Bangladesh has been rated as a 'hybrid regime.' A hybrid regime is characterised by electoral fraud, preventing free and fair democratic practices, unlawful pressure on the political opposition, the partisan judicial system, corruption, control over press and media, violation of laws, limiting political participation, and non-functioning democratic institutions.⁹⁵ Hybrid regimes are essentially authoritarian masquerading as a democracy. Elections become an instrument for authoritarianism instead of democracy in a hybrid regime.⁹⁶ According to World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) 2018, Bangladesh was placed in the lowest quarter of the percentile ranks in all indicators (Voice and Accountability 27.59, Political Stability and Absence of Violence 13.81, Government Effectiveness 21.63, Regulatory Quality 19.23, Rule of Law 28.37, Control of Corruption 16.83).⁹⁷ According to the World Press Freedom Index 2020, Bangladesh possesses an abuse-score of 49.37, reflecting the control over the press by the government and

⁹³Riaz, 2019

⁹⁴TIB, 2014

⁹⁵Democracy Index 2015, <http://www.eiu.com/>; accessed March 2, 2020

⁹⁶Riaz, 2019

⁹⁷<https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>; accessed March 5, 2020

private-sector interests.⁹⁸ Similarly, according to the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, Bangladesh scored 26 out of 100 in 2019, which identifies the country as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.⁹⁹

In this fragile democratic system, the boundary between the state and the ruling party has become blurred. The leaders, activists, supporters, and followers of the ruling party have more access to the resources since they have support from the state, bureaucracy, and law-enforcing agencies. The current government has planned to construct several large-scale mega development projects such as Padma Bridge, metro rail, elevator expressways, airport, nuclear power plant, and coal-fired power plants in the midst of a situation where the options for public scrutiny about transparency and accountability of these projects are very limited. There are enormous media reports of corruption, violation of laws, and irregularities in the procedural stages of these development projects, mainly an effect of taking the benefit of the fragile democratic systems and institutions of the country.¹⁰⁰

1.4 Research Lacunae

From the aforementioned discussion, it is seen that the GoB has legitimised coal-based electricity generation seeing it as the cheapest way to produce electricity.¹⁰¹ However, this legitimization has been politically contested by both the dispossessed populations and environmental groups. These contesting groups protested against the coal power plants to force the government to step out of coal-based electricity generation which has been widely discussed.¹⁰² Though the dispossessed population and environmental groups have seen in the public discussion to protest with the ‘same target’ to scrap the coal power plants, they have different motivations to join the protest. They applied different protest strategies and faced different reactions from the government and power plant development authorities as well. However, these two protesting groups supported each other and organised some joint programmes too.¹⁰³ This research aims to explore this political contestation and negotiation of different actors, such as the dispossessed population, environmental groups, government, and power plant development authorities, around the construction of the Rampal and Banskhal

⁹⁸<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>; accessed January 12, 2017

⁹⁹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/bangladesh#>; accessed March 10, 2020

¹⁰⁰The Daily Star; December 20, 2016

¹⁰¹*ibid*

¹⁰²*ibid*

¹⁰³The Daily Star; September 29, 2013

coal power plants. It would be interesting to explore the ‘agreements’ and ‘disagreements’ between these two protesting groups.

Various environmental groups (e.g., left-leaning political parties, environmental activists, and civil society members) are protesting against the Rampal Power Plant from an environmental point of view, claiming that the pollution of the power plant would pollute the ecosystem of the nearby Sundarbans forest.¹⁰⁴ These environmental groups are seen as a ‘homogenous’ group in the public discussion.¹⁰⁵ However, these groups are ‘heterogeneous’ in terms of their reasons of joining the protests, setting demands, and adopting protest strategies because of several ideological differences among these groups. Even individual members of these groups represent divergent viewpoints that remain untold. This research aims to explore the multiple dynamics of interests, motives, formations, and protest strategies of these environmental groups to join the protest. It would be interesting to explore how the divergent ideological positions of the environmental groups shape their protest strategies and help to set a common target to protest from the viewpoint of ‘save the Sundarbans.’

The environmental groups have argued that the Rampal Power Plant would bring negative impacts to the Sundarbans forest. However, the government is determined to construct the power plant according to the planned schedule through denial of all objections of the environmental groups. To legitimise its position, the government has rejected the objections of the environmental groups by placing counter-arguments that have been further encountered by the environmental groups. Thus, the government and environmental groups have engaged in this contestation by creating argumentative storylines in support of their respective positions. This research aims to explore these ‘argumentative storylines’ to understand the discursive positions of the government and environmental groups around the construction of the Rampal Power Plant.

The local community, mostly the dispossessed population, protested against land acquisitions for these coal power plants. As it has been mentioned earlier, the concerns of the local community for protesting against the coal power plants are quite different from the concerns of the environmental groups.¹⁰⁶ However, the demands of the local people’s protest kept changing over the situation, and this blurred the motives of the protest. In addition, along with

¹⁰⁴<https://www.thethirdpole.net/2015/03/12/bangladesh-struggles-to-fund-controversial-sunderbans-coal-project/>; accessed on December 24, 2016; SAHR, 2015; Kotikalapudi, 2016

¹⁰⁵<http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/risk-losing-sundarbans-1279825>; accessed on December 27, 2016

¹⁰⁶Hossain and Islam, 2015

the landowners, many fellow villagers who were not necessarily dispossessed from their land also joined the protests. This shows that ‘dispossession from land’ was not the only reason for the local people to join the protest. Contrary to this, some landowners and fellow villagers supported the project and stood against the local protesters. In response to the protest of the dispossessed population, the government and power plant development authority followed a hard line.¹⁰⁷ The local protesters changed their protest strategies as a response to the reaction of the government and power plant development authority. Furthermore, the protest strategies of the locals were also shaped by their interactions with the environmental activists. The aim of this research is to explore the internal causes and concerns that pushed the local communities to join the protest and how the protest strategies were shaped in different situations. Thus, this research offers an analysis of in-depth micro-politics of the contesting groups of unequal power positions in order to understand the internal dynamics of place-based protest actions. Similarly, this research aims to explore the strategies of the government and power plant development authorities to resolve the local people's protests.

A few research papers (Mahmud, 2017; Mookerjee and Misra, 2017; Kotikalapudi, 2016) and reports (SARH, 2015; Hossain and Islam, 2015) are available that discussed the contested positions of the actors around the construction of the Rampal Coal Power Plant. Some relevant discussions are also available in the reports of the UNESCO reactor monitoring team and meeting minutes of the World Heritage Committee (sessions 39, 41, and 42). Moreover, since the issue of the Rampal Power Plant became more contentious, a huge number of newspaper articles have been written on the issue. No study was found except some newspaper articles in searching for the studies regarding the contestation around the Banskali Power Plant. However, none of these studies explained in detail the causes and concerns of the environmental groups and dispossessed population that motivated them to join the protest and how they got organised and engaged in the protests. No detailed explanation is available about the internal heterogeneities in interests and motives of these contesting actors to engage in the contestation. The argumentative positions of the contesting actors also remain unexplored in these research works. In this context, the overall objective of this research is to investigate the multiple realities of the political contestations and negotiations among the actors around the construction of the Rampal and Banskali coal power plants.

¹⁰⁷Hossain and Islam, 2015; SARH, 2015; Mookerjee and Misra, 2017

The specific research questions are:

1. What are the reasons and concerns of the environmental groups and dispossessed population that convinced them to join the protest against the coal power plants?
2. How are the government and protesting groups involved in the contestation through placing arguments and counter-arguments against each other to legitimise their respective positions?
3. What are the protest strategies of the environmental groups and dispossessed population? How do they organise, develop networks, and demonstrate protest programmes?
4. How do the government and power plant development authorities respond to the protests of the environmental groups and dispossessed population?

1.5 Methodology: Rationale and Power-Related Limitations

The Rampal and Banskali coal power plants have been selected for case study in this research since these two power plants are widely debated and are at the most technically advanced level in terms of construction compared to the other coal power plants. The data for this research has been collected from empirical and secondary sources. Primary data collection for this research mostly relied on tools such as in-depth interviews along with semi-structural interviews and focus group discussions (FGD).¹⁰⁸ The local landowners and non-titled land-dependent people who were dispossessed from land in both power plant areas, members of different environmental groups who are protesting against the power plants, journalists, civil society members, and academicians are the respondents of this research. Some data was also collected through participant observation of some protest events (such as protest rallies, press conferences, and seminars). A checklist (for in-depth interview and FGD) and a semi-structural questionnaire have been followed to conduct the interviews. Secondary data was collected from different sources, such as research reports, EIA reports, project monitoring reports, project documents, newspapers, articles, video content, social media, and different protest materials (such as booklets, leaflets, posters, wall paintings, and so forth).

¹⁰⁸A total of 75 in-depth interviews and 15 semi-structural interviews have been conducted. Two FGDs have been conducted with two different groups.

I will report here in detail about the research context, which reveals some important aspects of power relations. Before moving out for data collection, I prepared a list of probable respondents among the local landowners and environmental activists for the interviews after reviewing newspaper reports and articles. In addition, in 2015, I conducted research on corruption and irregularities in the land acquisition and EIA process of the Rampal and Matarbari coal power plants on behalf of my previous organisation. To conduct that research, I was introduced to some of the local landowners and environmental activists who were protesting against those power plants. Initially, I used this connection to reach the respondents that I had listed.

Immediately after landing in Bangladesh for data collection, I got to know that one environmental group called for a meeting in the capital city to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. I was privileged to join in that meeting and got a chance to introduce myself to some of the prominent environmental activists who were present there. I shared with them the aim of this research and expressed my interest to interview them. Many of these environmental activists offered their cordial support as they found my research topic interesting. In that meeting, I was successful in fixing some appointments and interviewed most of these prominent activists in the next couple of weeks. In addition to giving an interview, some of these activists helped me to get relevant secondary sources of information such as research reports, newspaper articles, and so forth. Later, some of these activists functioned as gatekeepers to reach out to other respondents and helped me to revise the respondent list that I had prepared, which had changed several times afterwards considering the availability and willingness of the respondents to be interviewed. As I mentioned before, Dhaka-based environmental activists were interviewed at the very beginning. Thereafter, I interviewed the local protesters of the Rampal and Banskhali power plant area in three and four slots respectively. I spent around 15-20 days in each visit. In the intervals of these interview slots, Dhaka-based environmental activists, journalists, academicians, and civil society members were interviewed.

However, I encountered difficulties in selecting respondents from the local community of both power plant areas. I got some names of the local people from the Rampal Power Plant area after reviewing the newspaper reports and from the environmental activists whom I interviewed first. Contacts of other respondents from the community were sourced from those who were first interviewed. In the case of Banskhali Power Plant, I listed a few names of the local people after reviewing newspaper articles. To get more respondents, I took the help of some of my friends from nearby villages of the power plant area. They helped me in getting the contacts of

the local protesters who were involved in the protest or at least who are aware of the situation that had emerged due to the inception of the power plant project. Some of these respondents functioned as gatekeepers to get the contacts of other respondents by following the snowball sampling method and I interviewed them accordingly.

Though it was relatively effortless to interview the Dhaka-based environmental activists, it was, on the contrary, quite challenging to interview respondents from the local communities. During my first visit to a village of the landowners of the Rampal Power Plant, I was accompanied by one of my friends who lives nearby. We [my friend and I] roamed around the villages and tried to talk to the people. I realised that the villagers were not interested to talk to us about the power plant issues. My friend introduced me to one landowner who was involved in the protest. He welcomed us to his home and showed interest to talk to us. However, he forbade me to talk to anyone in the village about the power plant issue. He warned me that they (landowners and protesters) are afraid to talk to any stranger because it would create a problem for them as the ‘project-supporting group,’ (interchangeably used as supporters), mostly the political leaders and their supporters, was monitoring the activities of the local protesters and entrance of strangers in the villages. He further added that the villagers were threatened and asked not to talk about the power plant issue to outsiders and they were asked not to discuss the issue among themselves. He told us that our presence in the village was not safe for us as well as for the protesters and informed us that some journalists were assaulted by the ‘project-supporting group’ a few days back when they came to the village for data collection. He told us that nobody would like to talk to me on the issue as they were threatened and monitored by the ‘project-supporting group.’

After being aware of the situation, we agreed to meet again in Khulna City where I was staying. I interviewed him the next day. This landowner worked as one of my key respondents and gatekeepers to get contacts of other landowners who were involved in the protest. He also talked to some landowners on my behalf and convinced them to come out of the village to talk to me. Many of these landowners agreed to come to Khulna city, Chulkathi Bazar, Digraj, and Mongla according to their convenience to give me an interview. I offered them travel expenses to come to the selected location, but many of them refused to receive it. Moreover, some respondents of the local community were interested to talk to me, but they could not manage time to come out of their villages as they were busy with their own business. I interviewed these respondents over phone. Afterwards, I visited the villages of the landowners twice though I did not talk to anyone about the power plant-related issues.

Following the snowball sampling method, names of new respondents were collected from the respondents I had interviewed, but I was unable to conduct sufficient numbers of interviews because it was difficult to bring them out of the villages. To overcome this challenge, a research assistant was appointed to conduct the interviews who lives in a village near the power plant area and who has good access to the villages of the landowners. For being from the same locality, he had a very low risk of being traced as an ‘outsider’ or a ‘stranger.’ I took his support to conduct the semi-structural interviews using a semi-structural questionnaire. Before sending him to the landowners’ villages, he was trained adequately on how to conduct semi-structural interviews.

From the experience of the Rampal power plant area, I felt afraid to visit the villages of the landowners in the Banskali Power Plant area. I came to know that a powerful ‘project-supporting group’ was also active in the Banskali Power Plant area and the Bangladesh Navy was deployed to take care of the project. Initially, I appointed a research assistant who lives in a village near the power plant area. As he is local, he can visit the villages without any suspicion. I communicated with the respondents that I had listed with the help of the research assistant. I got to know that some of them were living in the Chittagong city area. I interviewed these respondents at the very beginning. I collected names of new respondents with the help of the research assistant and from the respondents who I interviewed following the snowball sampling method. Later, I came to know that visiting the villages of the landowners was not risky since the protest had been resolved through the development of a ‘negotiation’ between the protesters and the power plant development authority. After being aware of safety, I visited the villages and interviewed several protesters from the local community. I conducted a good number of semi-structural interviews with the support of the research assistant.

In most cases, I could not record the interviews as I was not feeling comfortable asking them to allow me to record their voice since I saw they were worried if I mentioned their names somewhere which might create problems for them. Due to their worriedness, I did not record their voice. I, along with my research assistant, took notes of the interviews and transcribed them immediately. I got some key respondents among the local protesters and environmental groups, who I interviewed several times later on when I faced confusion with any data. I also talked to some of them over phone after coming back to Germany whenever I needed clarity on any issue.

During the preparatory phase of this field research, I had a plan to interview the government and power plant development authority officials to understand their opinions. Considering the lengthy process to get their appointment, I preferred to get their opinions from the secondary sources of information, such as power plant project documents, research reports, newspapers, video content, social media, and so forth. Also, the government produced several documents, such as the ‘Comments and Responses on the Environmental Impact Assessment’ section of the EIA report of the Rampal Power Plant, a reply sent to the reactive monitoring team of the UNESCO, the reports sent to the World Heritage Committee where they placed their arguments against the claims of the environmental activists and in support of their respective position. I also collected the documents that the government submitted to the court in response to a hearing of a writ petition against the Rampal Power Plant. Similarly, I collected information from the websites of the different government departments. Furthermore, as secondary sources of information, this research reviewed the published research reports conducted by national and international researchers and organisations, such as UNESCO, SAHR, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA), and so forth. The EIA report and quarterly monitoring report of the Rampal Power Plant produced by the CEGIS were also a good sources of secondary information.

I reviewed four news media reports considering their reliability in the public domain - two national daily newspapers, *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, and two international news agencies, BBC and DW- to understand the contesting position of the actors. I reviewed these news sources from January 2010 to June 2018, to cover the period from the inception of the power plant projects to the end of my field research. Important news articles from other news sources were also collected. A good number of video content has been collected as well. This video content includes television talk shows, video documentaries, short films, recordings of seminars, press conferences, public lectures, protest programmes, and so forth. Representatives of the government, power plant development authorities and environmental activists took part in some of these video content where they placed their arguments in support of their respective positions. In addition, the government and power plant development authorities developed some television commercials, documentaries, and ads which carried out messages supporting the government’s position. These television commercials and documentaries have been broadcasted on government-run television and different private television channels. Some of these video content also have been uploaded to the websites of the respective government departments and their Facebook pages. Similarly, the environmental activists also developed

several video content, such as documentaries and short films, in which they argued in support of their respective position. These video documents were shown to the masses and also posted on social media. Social media has been analysed as a source of information as the environmental groups, government and power plant development authorities campaigned in support of their respective positions on different platforms of social media, mainly on Facebook. The information collected from different sources has been triangulated for analysis through summarising, describing, categorising, and interpreting. A qualitative content analysis method has been applied for data analysis. The results of the study have been presented narratively.

1.6 Ethical Issues and Positionality

This research has been conducted following the ethical considerations set by Bonn University that emphasise ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ inquiry of the research subject through the confirmation of confidentiality, safety and rights of the researched population throughout the research process. As it is discussed in detail in the methodology section, the respondents voluntarily participated in this research and no one was pressurised to do so. The interviews were noted down with the permission of the respondents. To ensure the confidentiality of the respondents, the interviews were conducted in a private place that nobody could hear or access from outside. The anonymity of the respondents has been maintained throughout the research process. None of the respondents’ real names and addresses have been mentioned in this thesis through which they could be identified. However, since this research is inquiring about the contested manifestation of different actors, some actors’ roles are so prominent in the contestation that it is impossible to secure their anonymity. In such circumstances, I adopted pseudonyms to identify those respondents, and their statements and information are stated in this thesis in a manner that will not harm their confidentiality. It was also tricky to decide how to present the information provided by the respondents. To overcome this challenge, several original quotes have been used to avoid misinterpretation of the thoughts of the respondents.

It was a challenge to place my positionality as an ‘objective,’ ‘neutral,’ and ‘bias-less’ researcher in this research when I interacted with the respondents. I conducted interviews with the protesters when the spark of the protest was alive. The protesters (dispossessed population and environmental activists) were trying to negotiate to include their respective claims in the government’s development framework. My positionality as a neutral observer was challenged

when the respondents raised the question ‘how my research will help them to establish their claims.’ I could not give them any convincing answer since I knew that I will use the information that I collected to write-up my Ph.D. thesis which will be discussed in the academic arena at Bonn University where the thesis will be scrutinised by other academic researchers. Later, the information might be used for writing academic articles. I did not give them any hope that the research will help them in any way. Rather, I explained that I need the information to earn a Ph.D. degree for myself. I could minimise, but not completely remove, the confusion of the respondents by explaining the purpose of this research.

Further, my positionality as a ‘bias-less’ researcher was obstructed when the respondents asked me to support their claims in my writing. One local protester mentioned that I was ‘one of them’ as I belong to that same region and asked me to write in favour of them. Another local protester told me that I was the one who went to them to listen to their ‘pains.’ Similarly, some environmental activists also asked me to write in support of the environmental protest. They were expecting that I would write supporting their protest, and that would help them to get international support. Thus, the dilemma was how I can uphold a balance between maintaining the objectivity of the research and fulfilling the expectation of the respondents. I was confused about what content I should or should not include in this thesis due to these unexpected dilemmas.

The academic training in ZEF helped me to overcome these dilemmas regarding my positionality in this research. I kept all these dilemmas and confusion that I faced in my mind while I was writing this thesis. Being careful about my positionality, I emphasised the opinion of all actors with equal weight through addressing multiple accountabilities. I presented the arguments and counter-arguments, one after another, as a storyline that will help the reader to understand all possible arguments surrounding an argumentative topic. I was careful while writing this thesis that the content would not impact any actors in the contestation.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter One presents a short introduction and background of the research, followed by research objectives, research questions, methodology, ethical issues and positionality, and an outline of the thesis. Chapter Two describes the theoretical, conceptual, and analytical underpinnings of the research. Chapter Three addresses

the analysis of the causes and concerns that pushed the local people to join the protest against land acquisition. Chapter Four analyses the motives of different contesting groups among the local community to join the contestation to support or oppose the construction of coal power plants. Chapter Five offers an analysis of how the local people organised and operationalised protest actions against land acquisition through confronting the dominant ‘project-supporting group.’ This chapter further presents the government’s responses towards the protests of the local people. Chapter Six presents the argumentative positions of the environmental groups and government around the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. This chapter further explains the dynamics and protest strategies of the environmental groups along with the strategies of the government to legitimise its position. Chapter Seven provides the concluding remarks based on the reflection of the findings of the research.

Chapter Two

Theoretical, Conceptual, and Analytical Frameworks

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical, conceptual, and analytical frameworks that have guided this research. This research has been developed following political ecology as a theoretical framework. This chapter provides a detailed outline of political ecology as a theoretical framework to understand how it analyses the human-environment interactions and environmental struggles based on some oft-cited literature. The concepts, such as ‘social movement’ and ‘environmental movement’ have been used as conceptual frameworks in this research to analyse the contestation of actors around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. A brief outline of these two concepts has been presented in this chapter by reviewing several empirical research pieces. Further, this research has followed the ‘actor-oriented interface approach,’ developed and interpreted by Norman Long (2001, 2015) and ‘argumentative analytical framework’ developed by Marteen Hajer (1995, 1993) as analytical frameworks to analyse the argumentative positions of various contesting actors. This chapter offers a brief discussion of these analytical frameworks by reviewing the original writings of Norman Long, Marteen Hajer, and other related authors.

2.2 Political Ecology

Political ecology provides conceptual tools, rather than a coherent theory, to understand the human-environment relationship.¹⁰⁹ From the development discourse perspective, political ecology offers an analytical framework to understand the impacts of developmental or new technological interventions on the environment that affect the forms of access and control over resources, which is closely associated with the livelihoods of the nature-dependent population.¹¹⁰ The central focus of political ecology is to explore how environmental degradation takes place and how the costs and benefits of this environmental change are

¹⁰⁹Robbins, 2004; Rather than taking a grand theoretical position, the political ecology approach explores a selective engagement of political-economic-environment relations.

¹¹⁰Paulson, Gezon and Watts, 2003; Formo, 2010

unevenly distributed based on the underlying political factors and power relations of the related actors.¹¹¹ In this perspective, the human-environment relationship in the circumstances of environmental change intersects with the economic, political, and social factors from the local to global spectrums.¹¹² Due to the intersection of multiple factors, political ecology offers multiple interpretations of the human-environment relationship rather than a grand theory of single interpretation.¹¹³ To define political ecology, many authors refer to the definition given by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), which states, “*political ecology combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialect between dialectic society and land-based resources, and also classes and groups within itself*” (p.17).

However, political ecology has been seen as a continuation of several disciplines such as ecological anthropology, cultural ecology, human ecology, and geography that offer an *apolitical perspective* to analyse the human-environment relationship as an adaptive behaviour.¹¹⁴ Political ecology has emerged by critiquing these disciplines as ‘*apolitical ecology*’ for not shedding light on the wider political and economic structures of any specific locality that have an influence in determining human-environment interactions, a phenomenon that Vayda (1983) called “*progressive contextualization*” (p. 266). Peasant studies, common resource theory, post-modernism, Marxist theory and other disciplines helped to emerge the political ecology by differentiating it from the *apolitical ecology* through ‘*politicization of environmental issues and its changes*’ by linking the ‘*historical, political, ecological and economic*’ context together.¹¹⁵ A few incidents, such as human-induced environmental hazards researched by the women activists in North America and the growing concerns of ‘*environmental justice or entitlement*’ are identified as roots to the emergence of this discipline.¹¹⁶ Frank Thone, in a paper written in 1935, first coined the term ‘political ecology’ which has been widely used since then in human geography and human ecology without any systematic definition. Afterwards, Eric Wolf (1972) titled one of his articles ‘Ownership and Political Ecology’ where he discussed how the local rules of ownership “*mediate between the pressure emanating from the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem*” (p. 202). However, he also did not define the concept further.

¹¹¹Andreucci et al., 2016

¹¹²Robbins, 2004; Walker, 2006; Schubert, 2007

¹¹³Blaikie, 1985

¹¹⁴Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Ellen, 1982; Harvey, 1993; Steward, 1972; Rappaport, 2000

¹¹⁵Robbins, 2004

¹¹⁶*ibid*

Political ecologists have different viewpoints (very often exact opposite) to define the approaches of political ecology depending on their disciplinary background (e.g., geography, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, economy, management, and so forth). Thus, it encompasses a wide variety of interpretations that have been drawn from their respective ideological spectrums, from the political right (neo-classical thought) to the political left (neo-Marxist thought) based on the ideas drawn from political economy. However, both interpretations try to eliminate the deficiencies of political ecology by analysing the human-environment interactions from the perspective of political economy.

A faction of political ecologists followed the neo-Malthusian framework to analyse human-nature interactions from the ecological deterministic approach. To understand environmental degradation, this approach prescribes an '*apolitical*,' '*homeostatic*,' and '*historical*' perspective based on features like 'resource scarcity,' 'limits to growth,' 'population growth,' and 'poverty' without paying attention to the causes of inequalities in resource consumption.¹¹⁷ This '*apolitical*' approach analyses environmental conflicts as '*resource war*', where the scarcity of natural resources has been considered as natural or biological by excluding the politics behind it.¹¹⁸ This approach claims that the shortage of availability of food per capita resulted in famine, which positively effects the existence of the human race. This is called '*resource scarcity density*.'¹¹⁹ In this perspective, nature is assumed as a resource for human consumption and the population is assumed as a burden to nature.¹²⁰ The neo-Malthusian interpretation of the human-environment relationships has been criticised for its '*homeostatic*' and '*self-regulatory*' character that does not consider the role of capitalism and underlying political factors to analyse the environmental changes and environmental conflicts in the Global South.¹²¹ This '*apolitical*' approach does not question why the minority faction of rich people of the developed world consumes the majority of the world's resources.¹²² This approach also fails to accommodate the involvement of multiple actors of unequal power positions at the interface of environmental degradation and conflicts due to its apolitical nature.¹²³

To overcome the limitations of the neo-Malthusian approach, the neo-Marxist approach merges environmental studies with political economy to understand the inter-relationship between the

¹¹⁷Adams, 1990

¹¹⁸Andreucci et al., 2016

¹¹⁹Ostrom, 1990

¹²⁰Enzensberger, 1976

¹²¹Harvey, 1974

¹²²Robbins, 2004

¹²³Andreucci et al., 2016

development of capitalism, environmental changes, and environmental conflicts.¹²⁴ To understand the consequences of the capitalist endeavour on natural resources that causes environmental degradation, the neo-Marxist approach applies the analysis of local-global unequal power relation (developed/under-developed, core/periphery, metropolis/satellite) that determines the extraction of natural resources of periphery or satellite to meet the market demand of core or metropolis.¹²⁵ Following the '*dependency theory*' of Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and the '*world-system theory*' of Immanuel Wallenstein (1974), the neo-Marxist approach analyses issues such as environmental degradation, dispossession, and environmental conflicts of any place based on the unequal historical and economic relationship of that place in the global power relation.¹²⁶ This approach is called the '*political economy of the environment*' as it analyses the unequal power relations of different actors to understand the human-nature interactions and environmental conflicts.¹²⁷ This approach suggests 'putting first' the political process to understand environmental problems.¹²⁸ It links local environmental problems with wider economic and political concerns relating to production questions for capitalist consumption.¹²⁹

A ground-breaking work of Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) argues that the '*world system theory*' helps to understand the human-environment interactions in the modern world. The theory claims that natural resources are overused to make a surplus for capitalism. Based on the '*world-system theory*,' they concluded that the relationship between the patterns of land-use and environmental degradation is not just a result of human action only, but a very distinct form of societal structure also has an impact on it. They argued that the deeper cause of land degradation is more of a social problem rather than the characteristics of soil, geology, climate, and physical constraints of nature. Thus, the neo-Marxist political ecology criticises the 'resource-scarcity approach' of neo-Malthusian theory because the production from nature can be multiplied with the help of technology. In contrast to the neo-Malthusian 'resource-scarcity approach,' the neo-Marxist approach argues for a 'resource-centered political ecology' as it believes that the environmental conflict emerges because of an 'abundance of resources' rather than 'scarcity of resources.'¹³⁰ It also rejects the discourse of the 'tragedy of the commons' as

¹²⁴Bryant, 1992; Blaikie, 1985

¹²⁵Paulson et al., 2003; Patterson, 1999

¹²⁶Bailey and Bryant, 1997

¹²⁷Bryant, 1998

¹²⁸Peet and Watts, 1996

¹²⁹Blaikie, 1985; Bunker, 1985

¹³⁰Le Billon, 2001; Soysa, 2002

it is a problem of nature. Rather, it emphasises multiple dimensions of common resources and the role of multiple actors of unequal power relations around it.¹³¹

Political ecologists like Forsyth (2004), Peet and Watts (1996), Bailey and Bryant (1997), and Stott and Sullivan (2000) attempted to provide a coherent overview of the approaches of political ecology. They identified three closely related and mutually beneficial approaches of political ecology to understand environmental change and its political implications. The first approach is called the '*deconstructivist approach*,' which is derived from the post-structural theory, and questions the predominant discourses of environmental changes and policies.¹³² This approach provides an interlinked map to show how power and knowledge are inter-related to mediate environmental outcomes. It helps to understand the human-nature relationship by examining the discourses regarding environment, hazards, and conflicts in a contesting interface. According to this approach, '*discourse is not only the reflection of reality, but it also constructs reality.*' Thus, this approach does not only analyse the discourses but also analyses '*the production of the social reality through discourses.*'¹³³ As discourses are always contested with other discourses, the analysis of discourses helps to understand how one's benefit may be another's toxic dump, and why particular pieces of knowledge get privileged through subjugating other knowledge.¹³⁴ Following the *deconstructivist approach*, Peluso (1992) worked in Java, where she analysed the arguments and counter-arguments between the government and traditional knowledge regarding forest management. For instance, when the government of Indonesia talked about 'sustainable development,' it produced a discourse that re-signified the 'nature' differently than the traditional way. The dominant discourse suggested a 'structural adjustment program' that displaced the local people from their habitat. This dominant discourse characterised the local community as responsible for land degradation by neglecting their land-enriching practices.¹³⁵

The second approach is called the '*constructivist approach*,' which analyses how concepts such as 'human,' and 'nature' are constructed to define human-nature interactions. To do this, political ecologists suggest to understand how the meanings of 'nature,' 'human,' and 'environment' are constructed based on the power relations of the relevant actors.¹³⁶ Political ecologists often use terms such as 'class,' 'ethnicity' or 'gender' as analytical categories to

¹³¹Andreucci et al., 2016

¹³²Escobar, 1995

¹³³Escobar, 1996

¹³⁴Paulson et al., 2003; Schroeder and Neumann, 1995

¹³⁵Iftikhar, 2003

¹³⁶Lee, 2009

describe the unequal patterns of power position among the actors and their access to resources.¹³⁷ The analysis of unequal power relations among the related actors helps to examine how ‘the reality of environment’ is constructed in a specific society.

The third approach is called the ‘*entitlement approach*,’ which deals with concerns of access to resources, rights, and environmental justice.¹³⁸ This approach helps to analyse the complex relationship of environmental justice that focuses on the uneven distribution of environmental benefits and damages.¹³⁹ It means the economically and politically marginalised people in a particular social situation might not have equal access or control over natural resources like the more powerful groups have. Therefore, this approach examines the role of different institutions of society in mediating the relationships between social actors and components of local ecologies. This institutional arrangement and power relation make ‘*the rule of the game in society*’ that defines ‘environmental entitlement.’¹⁴⁰ As Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) said, environmental entitlement is “*a powerful lens through which to make sense of struggle*” (p. 151) to establish access over resources. It also provides a theoretical ground to analyse environmentalism in different places. The *entitlement approach* is inspired by a study by Amartya Sen, which argues that access to food rather than lack of food production causes famine.¹⁴¹ Examining the famines in Bengal, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia, Sen argued that the shortage of food was not the primary factor in causing famine in these three cases. It occurred because the marginalised group of people failed to establish access over food. Thus, the famine was mostly associated with the lack of management of food rather than the availability of food.

Environmental entitlement has localised trajectories. For this reason, Williams and Mawdsley (2006) argued that environmental entitlement cannot be universalised under one concept since it is rooted in the cultural dynamics of a society that needs to be understood within the social, cultural, economic, and political context of each location. For this reason, Escobar (1996) suggested for a need of political ecology to offer a place-based account of environmental conflicts regarding developmental interventions. He suggested that how people will engage in an environmental conflict depends on how the ‘developmental project’ affects them. A place-based account of political ecology will question the institutions, practices, processes, and language of ‘development’ to understand how it affects the contesting actors.¹⁴² This research

¹³⁷Lee, 2009

¹³⁸Schubert, 2007

¹³⁹Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Bullard and Wright, 1990

¹⁴⁰Leach, Mearns and Scoones, 1999

¹⁴¹Iftikhar, 2003

¹⁴²Moore, 1993

aims to offer a place-based account of the contesting actors and their politics regarding environmental change due to developmental interventions.

From the discussion of different approaches of political ecology, it is clear that political ecology criticises the dominant narratives of environmental problems as ‘simplistic,’ and ‘inaccurate’ through seeking out the underlying political factors in construction of these narratives, Thus it offers counter-narratives.¹⁴³ Political ecology warns that the policies that have been formulated based on these dominant narratives are unfavourable for the people who are dependent on natural resources for their living.¹⁴⁴ As a solution to this problem, political ecology offers a counter-narrative to include the concerns of all actors who are engaged in environmental contestation. Further, political ecology criticises the analysis of environmental degradation, exclusively in the rural setting, in an isolated manner as ‘incomplete’ because many actors connected to the problem are from outside of the specific area.¹⁴⁵ To solve this limitation, political ecology investigates the human-nature relationship in two layers. The first one is ‘*the local layer,*’ which explores how the disadvantaged group of people struggle to protect the foundations of their livelihoods due to environmental degradation. The impacts of environmental changes on the life of nature-dependent people and their struggles to protect nature are analysed in this layer. In this layer, the political ecologists also analyse how the power relations within the community and household influence the control over land, labour, capital, and natural resources.¹⁴⁶ The second one is ‘*the global-national layer,*’ which explores how the local environmental degradation happens due to the influence of global capital markets. This layer analyses the local-global interactions regarding resource extraction from natural sources that causes environmental degradation.

In this way, the environmental problems have been seen in political ecology as a result of the acts of multiple actors beyond class identity rather than the acts of the marginalised population.¹⁴⁷ Although political ecology, as a theoretical approach, originated to study the ‘Third World’ environmental problems due to developmental interventions,¹⁴⁸ has started studying environmental problems of the ‘First World’ as well where the context is different, but the issues of power, access and knowledge are mediated similarly.¹⁴⁹ Political ecology is

¹⁴³Formo, 2010

¹⁴⁴*ibid*

¹⁴⁵Moore, 1993

¹⁴⁶Carney, 1993; Schroeder, 1993; Bailey and Bryant, 1997

¹⁴⁷Fernandes, 2006

¹⁴⁸Bailey and Bryant, 1997

¹⁴⁹Campbell and Meletis, 2011

increasingly extending its scope of application as the societies are facing new realities such as acceleration of the globalization process due to the expansion of capitalism, cultural neo-imperialism and political neo-colonialism inspired from the neoliberal ideology.¹⁵⁰ In addition to the political and economic sphere, physical changes of the planet such as global warming and sea level rising also affect the life of the people. This extends the scope of study of political ecology.

However, the main limitation of political ecology in terms of becoming a coherent theory is that it emerged through articulating diverse ideas, objectives, epistemologies, and methods from different disciplines without any coherent theoretical approach.¹⁵¹ Vayda and Walters (1999) criticised political ecology as it is highly social science-based and does not pay adequate attention to the physical aspects of environmental changes. Moreover, while political ecology emphasises more on the political factors behind the environmental changes, it ignores the non-political factors that influence these environmental changes and conflicts. Some authors identified that political ecology pays a lot of attention to the politics of ecology rather than the ‘ecology’ itself. By indicating this limitation, Forsyth (2004) asked, ‘*where is ecology in political ecology?*’ Similarly, political ecology has been criticised for paying less attention to the internal dynamics of environmental conflicts in a situation of environmental degradation. Thus, Peet and Watts (2004) wrote about a need for political ecology to focus on in-depth analysis of micro-politics of the contesting actors in environmental conflicts to understand the internal dynamism in motives, interests, and protest strategies. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of political ecology through presenting an analysis of in-depth micro-politics of contesting actors around environmental conflicts.

2.3 Conceptual Frameworks

This research has used concepts such as ‘environmental movement’ and ‘social movement’ as conceptual frameworks to analyse the protests of the dispossessed population and environmental groups against the coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. The following sections present a brief outline of these two concepts after reviewing the relevant empirical research.

¹⁵⁰Escobar, 2010

¹⁵¹Walker, 2006

2.3.1 Environmental Movement and the Relevance of Entitlement

Political ecology is increasingly paying more attention to environmental movements which offer a *'political ecology from below'* to which Peet and Watts (2004) described as, “*a practical political engagement with new social movements, organizations and institutions of civil society challenging conventional notions of development, politics, democracy and sustainability*” (p. 6). Political ecology studies ‘environmental movement’ as an arena of conflicts of different actors to get access over land, assets, and entitlements in a situation of environmental changes because of developmental interventions.¹⁵² It suggests a set of narratives to understand the nature and dimensions of struggle to access natural resources from a variety of strategies ranging from ‘everyday resistance’ to global networked social movements and its connection with the cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental condition of a particular locality.¹⁵³

Thus, the environmental movement, which is identified as a ‘new social movement,’ emerged as a struggle to access and control environmental resources as a foundation of livelihoods of the affected communities. The livelihoods of any community have economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions that are intertwined with each other.¹⁵⁴ Bebbington (2004) relates this livelihood concerns with the concept of ‘*capability*’ and ‘*freedom to choose of different way of living.*’ To him, people’s capability and freedom of living are hampered if their livelihoods are affected due to environmental changes. Further, he connected these livelihood concerns with the economic and political dimensions of society analysing the uneven distribution of costs and benefits as a result of prevailing unequal power relations of the related actors in the arena of environmental changes.¹⁵⁵ How people will respond to the environment depends on how they interact with the environment, which Escobar (2006) termed ‘*constructing worldviews.*’ This ‘constructing world-views’ determines how actors of a certain place value the natural environment. Similarly, the biophysical features of the environment of a locality are closely associated with the mode of livelihood of the nature-dependent community.¹⁵⁶ Thus, the nature-dependent community engages in environmental movements based on their underlying social, cultural, and political factors to protect the environment as a foundation of their livelihoods. Along with the livelihood concerns of the nature-dependent community, civil society members

¹⁵²Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987

¹⁵³Escobar, 2001; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Robbins, 2012; Bailey and Bryant, 1997

¹⁵⁴Bryant, 1998; Bebbington, 2004

¹⁵⁵Martinez-Alier, 2002; Escobar, 2006

¹⁵⁶Peluso and Watts, 2001

and organisations are also engaged in the environmental movement from a non-materialistic point of view (e.g., saving world heritage sites, environments, biodiversity, and so forth).¹⁵⁷

Political ecology points out that the '*accumulation by dispossession*' is a result of the overuse of natural resources to meet the increasing demand of the capitalist market through making serious environmental degradation. Thus, '*accumulation by dispossession*' is one of the main reasons for environmental conflicts as it is directly associated with the vulnerability of livelihoods of the nature-dependent people.¹⁵⁸ Harvey (1993) termed the '*accumulation by dispossession*' as an alternative to 'extractivism' since it is responsible for massive environmental degradation due to excessive resource extraction. Currently, there are several examples of environmental degradation in the world due to excessive resource extraction. As an example, Bunker (2005) showed that serious environmental degradation happened in the Amazon due to the extraction of raw materials for the capital market. He also showed that the costs and benefits of environmental degradation were not equally distributed among the related stakeholders, which resulted in the destruction of livelihoods of some communities who have been living there. Environmental conflicts emerge as a result of '*accumulation by dispossession*' when several actors engage in the contestation, all of whom want to take control over resources.

Joan Martinez-Alier (2002) described that due to the extraction of raw materials from natural sources, (known as '*commodity frontiers*'), the local inhabitants suffer all the costs, such as displacement, eviction, environmental pollution, loss of traditional livelihoods, etc., whereas the capitalist world enjoys all the benefits. The '*commodity frontiers*' work in many forms, such as resource extraction, infrastructural development (farm agriculture, dams, mining, power plants, etc.), conservation, and so forth. Political ecology considers the '*commodity frontiers*' as a hegemonic act that subjugates the interests of the nature-dependent local people. After being subjugated, the local people are deprived from establishing access and control over natural resources. This forces them to join the contestation in the arena of environmental conflict through creating counter-hegemony based on their values and ideas¹⁵⁹ to defend their

¹⁵⁷Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (Eds.), 2009; Oliver-Smith 2006

¹⁵⁸Andreucci et al., 2016

¹⁵⁹Jhuang, 2018

identity, autonomy, territory, livelihoods, and resources through rejecting the hegemonic act of 'commodity frontiers.' Martinez-Alier (2002) called this 'the environmentalism of the poor.'¹⁶⁰

Thus, the costs and benefits are not equally shared among the actors in the frontiers of developmental interventions that need to change the physical environment. This creates the ground for environmental conflict. Power relations among the contesting actors in the arena of environmental conflict play a vital role because the more powerful groups occupy the majority of the benefits of the developmental interventions, leaving the bulk of the costs to the marginalised groups.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the 'development intervention' has been used as a hegemonic power of the state or private company to subjugate the marginal or powerless people with the 'techno-expert' explanation to control or minimise environmental degradation.¹⁶² Due to such subjugation, a new development project or new technological intervention results in upheaval for the local people whose livelihoods are hampered because of environmental degradation. The project affected people, whose traditional way of living is often jeopardised due to such developmental interventions, join the arena of conflict to protect the environmental foundation of their livelihoods from a shared concern of 'environment protection' which is identified by Ingalsbee (1996) as "*new oppositional counter-discursive forms of consciousness and action*" (p. 265). In contrast to the 'techno-expert' explanation of the more powerful groups, the marginalised groups, based on their cultural and social values, raise their respective claims to get the equal opportunity, which Escobar (2006) termed 'assimilation.' The marginalised population normally do not engage in conflict if the 'developmental intervention' fulfil their expectations.¹⁶³

Though there are multiple dynamics of environmental movements, political ecology literature finds out some common characteristics, such as the environmental movements are often identified as separate, localised, stand-alone, particularistic, and culture-embedded, which Horowitz (2012) termed 'nimbyism.'¹⁶⁴ Most particularly, environmental movements are identified as a '*new way of doing politics for social change without challenging the state power.*' This kind of movement only challenges the developmental interventions that are responsible for environmental degradation. It does not question the political system of the

¹⁶⁰John Martinez-Alier offered the idea of 'the environmentalism of the poor' by opposing the idea that only well-to-do people can afford the environment and its preservation. It also opposes the post-materialistic interpretation of environmentalism and the risk of causing environmental degradation is impartial to class division (Martinez-Alier, 2002).

¹⁶¹Fuentes and Frank, 1989

¹⁶²Robbins, 2004

¹⁶³Escobar, 1996

¹⁶⁴NIMBY refers to *Not In My Back Yard*

country under which the developmental intervention is functioning. As the government is not challenged, it does not pay serious attention to the environmental movement until it creates a reputational concern for the government.

The environmental movement revolves around social equity and justice, both issues arise from international rights concerns. As a result of these international rights concerns, along with the cultural struggles of the affected population against exploitation and oppression due to developmental interventions,¹⁶⁵ different groups such as non-partisans, apolitical urban-based middle class-led NGOs, civil society organisations and communities also join the environmental movement as 'environmental group.' These environmental groups engage in the environmental movement from a non-materialistic target, such as creating mass awareness among the citizens to promote public ownership in developmental interventions and pro-public policy formulation.¹⁶⁶ In recent years, various NGOs, such as Friends of the Earth, The Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Earth First, World Wildlife Fund, and various formal and informal groups have also been formed to lead the environmental movement. These environmental groups have formed global networks (vertical expansion) allied with other groups to organise joint campaigns.¹⁶⁷ With the help of internet facilities, the local protesters can easily communicate with these global networks to form a local-global network to raise support for their claims.¹⁶⁸ Sometimes, these global networks shape the agendas of the local people's protests.¹⁶⁹ The environmental activists also take legal action side by side of demonstration at public places. The exercise of the public litigation system has also become a part of the environmental movement to take the existing law of the country as a safeguard.¹⁷⁰ Also, they organise campaigns to create awareness among the citizens and develop several national and global networks.

The range of actors in the environmental movement is too wide to be able to categorise all of them under a single class, ethnicity, or any other social or economic group. Because of this difficulty, political ecology counts all the actors in the arena of environmental conflict and analyses how they act within the cultural and power dynamics of the society.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, political ecology criticises the 'monolithic portrayal' of the contesting actors involved in the

¹⁶⁵Fuentes and Frank, 1989

¹⁶⁶Petras and Veltmeyer, 2007

¹⁶⁷Diani, 1992; There is a criticism that, some of these organisations get funds from the international financial organisations though they, on some occasions, shouted against neo-liberalism.

¹⁶⁸Edelman, 2005

¹⁶⁹Nuremowla, 2012

¹⁷⁰Rajagopal, 2005

¹⁷¹Peluso and Watts, 2001

conflict where little attention was given to their internal complexity.¹⁷² To overcome this limitation, political ecology provides a framework to study various types of environmental struggles including issues such as environmental resources (land, forest, mineral, etc.), activities (mining, conservation, land acquisition, infrastructure projects, etc.), actors (displaced communities, peasants, women, etc.), and organisations and networks (companies, governments, international organisations, NGOs and local level organisations, etc.). This framework offers a guideline to explore the motivations, interests, and actions of different contesting groups, such as the local communities, governments, business groups, multinational companies, NGOs and civil society organisations who are involved in the arena of environmental conflicts. This is termed as ‘a chain of explanation’ by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987). As the environmental conflicts emerge due to differences in values and power among the contesting actors, political ecology emphasises understanding the underlying power dynamics of the contesting actors in the arena of environmental struggles.¹⁷³

During the 1970s, the first-generation environmental movements were analysed from the perspectives of class-based theories, such as Marxist, neo-Marxist, and functional theory. In contrast to these traditional class-based movements, during the 1980s, political ecology introduced a new form of environmental activism of peasant and tribal communities that was mostly led by women, lower castes, and indigenous groups.¹⁷⁴ By criticising the class-based analysis, this new approach emphasises analysing the ‘everyday resistance’ and power relations among the contesting actors to understand human-environment interactions. As an example, political ecology analyses the day-to-day resistance of the marginalised groups when they have to contest against powerful counterparts.¹⁷⁵ This approach provides a new spectrum of social movement that opposes the production of hegemony in the society regarding the accumulation of natural resources through creating a space outside or beyond capital-based relations.

In contrast to the class-based movements, the environmental movements of the marginalised people emerge from the concern over ‘entitlement’ which is associated with the political, economic, and cultural features of the society. For this reason, environmental movements interplay within the ‘cultural discourse’ of any given society.¹⁷⁶ Thus, political ecology suggests understanding the discursive field of knowledge of the contesting actors who are

¹⁷²Moore, 1993

¹⁷³Homer-Dixon, 1999

¹⁷⁴Williams and Mawdsley, 2006b; Omvedt, 1993; Bryant, 1992

¹⁷⁵Guha, 1989

¹⁷⁶Kosek, 2009

engaged in environmental conflicts. It argues that the deprived groups get involved in the contestation based on their values and ideas and they argue in support of their respective position through criticising the ‘experts’ view of the dominant top-down approach.¹⁷⁷ The ‘expert’ knowledge regarding the environmental problems is not neutral but political, which is used as a tool to legitimise the claims of the powerful factions of the confrontation. This is called ‘techno-politics.’¹⁷⁸ To understand this ‘techno-politics,’ political ecology prescribes to re-politicise, re-historicise, and re-contextualise environmental problems through investigation of everyday environmental problems. To place a counter-argument against the hegemony of ‘techno-politics,’ political ecologists offer ‘activist knowledge’ that is derived from the everyday experience of the contesting actors.¹⁷⁹ As the struggle for access to natural resources is linked with the social, economic, political, and cultural process of the society across time and scale, the context of environmental conflict is important for political ecology.¹⁸⁰ In this perspective, political ecology analyses the practices and discourses of the contesting groups that prescribe an approach to see the ‘environmental movement from below.’¹⁸¹

2.3.2 Social Movement and Environment-Related Engagement

The concept of ‘social movement’ is characterised by a collective effort of a group of people to send a message to the society by opposing the prevailing system to achieve shared goals.¹⁸² In other words, a social movement is a form of action by which a group of people challenges the government or authority to solve a problem of the society with which they are dissatisfied.¹⁸³ Turner and Killian (1958) defined a social movement as “*a collective acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or organization of which it is a part. As a collectively, a movement is a group with indefinite and shifting membership and leadership whose position is determined more by informal response of adherents than by formal procedures for legitimizing authority*” (p. 223).

According to Wilson (1973), social movements emerge to bring a change in a tangible government system through public participated demonstrations. Saxton and Benson (2006)

¹⁷⁷Martinez-Alier, 2002

¹⁷⁸Mitchell, 2002

¹⁷⁹Bebbington, 2012

¹⁸⁰Peluso and Watts, 2001

¹⁸¹Escobar, 1998; Peet and Watts, 2004

¹⁸²Ratliff and Hall, 2014

¹⁸³Tilly, 1983

said that social movements originate from grievances, worst socio-demographic, economic, and structural conditions. Group cohesion or uniform ideological construction helps to frame-out the protest. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) emphasised creativity and the cultural dimensions of the social movement and defined it as “*temporal public spaces, as moments of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities, and even ideals*” (p. 4). Porta and Diani (2006) characterised the networks of actors engaged in social movements as a collective action as the actors have a clear idea about their respective claims and opposition and share a collective identity. Alain Touraine (1985) located the root causes of social movement in the social reality that gets formed based on social construction. The social reality is contested around the interests of the contesting actors. To him, the social and material production of a society is determined by the social contestation that leads to a new way of behaving to solve the practical puzzles of society. Similarly, Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998) also argued that all social movements are ‘*inevitably bound up with culture,*’ which means social movements can be seen as cultural struggles too. They emphasised cultural politics to understand the dynamics of social movements where different individuals of society participate in a single movement from their different interest-based motivations.

There have been several shifts in the patterns of social movements over the years, such as peasant movements to indigenous movements, class-based movements to identity-based movements, individual rights movements to collective rights movements.¹⁸⁴ The major differences in social movements are that it either demands for better facilities or benefits from the existing system, or it demands to change the system itself.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the target of social movements is multi-dimensional, such as (1) seeking political reforms and claiming the right for political participation,¹⁸⁶ (2) seeking justice against human rights violations, autonomy of territory, demanding economic security, social justice, inequality, and capitalism,¹⁸⁷ and (3) seeking justice against lack of transparency, corruption, and lack of freedom of expression.¹⁸⁸ However, the main focus of all types of social movements is to bring changes in the political culture and political drives.¹⁸⁹

Chua, Mosley, Wright and Zaman (2000) classified social movements into two groups- institutional-conventional and non-institutional-collective. Institutional-conventional

¹⁸⁴Collier and Collier, 2007

¹⁸⁵Singh, 2001

¹⁸⁶Yashar, 1998

¹⁸⁷Ghos, 1991

¹⁸⁸Stepanova, 2011

¹⁸⁹Bearman and Everett, 1993

movements are identified as a traditional form of movement which is perceived from the fundamental and Marxist paradigms that emerge from class consciousness of deprivation. Tilly (2004) claimed that issues like war, parliamentarization, capitalization, and proletarianization create a ground for the emergence of the institutional-conventional social movements. This institutional-conventional social movement attempt to bring changes in the political system of the country (such as communism, socialism, democratisation, and so forth).¹⁹⁰

After the 1960s, the dynamics of social movements changed and turned to the non-institutional-collective pattern that emphasised the establishment of social rights rather than political change. This new pattern of social movement arises when people are oppressed in the social, economic, political, and cultural sphere, which creates grievances, dissatisfactions, frustrations, and aggressions to the individuals that influences them to engage in the social movements for rapid structural change.¹⁹¹ In this pattern of social movement, domination and movement are understood through a 'binary clear-cut position' as '*domination versus movement*' where 'domination' is considered as a relatively fixed and institutionalised form of power and 'movement' emerges to challenge this formalised power.¹⁹² The actors of the movements are a 'mixed-up heterogeneous group' rather than representing an economic class. According to the strategies of protest actions, some social movements are advocacy-based. They operate non-violent demonstration programmes (e.g., Anna Hazare's movement in India) whereas some other social movements are resistance-based hindering the existing situation (e.g., Arab uprising). Some social movements are localised, whereas some others are globalised.¹⁹³ The lifetime of social movements also varies from movement to movement. Some movements run for a few months whereas some others last only for a few days.

Wiltfang and McAdam (1991) said that people participate in social movements when they have some level of political interests. Without some level of interest in politics, people probably would not participate in social movements. Some of the existing literature also argued that political engagement is usually captured by the level of perceived political efficacy, which enhances the sense that one's actions can make a difference.¹⁹⁴ This sense of making a difference influences people to participate in social movements. Some other literature pointed out that the flow of information of violation of civil rights (through rumours, circular reactions,

¹⁹⁰Oliver, Cadena-Roa and Strawn, 2003; Willems and Jegers, 2012

¹⁹¹Crossley, 2002

¹⁹²Ortner, 1995

¹⁹³Stolley, 2005

¹⁹⁴Paulsen, 1991

contagion, diffusion, and so forth) plays an important role to encourage public participation in the social movement, which is considered as a psychological response towards the breakdown of familiar social norms.¹⁹⁵ The individuals participate in the social movements to restore social norms that protect their civil rights.

Ming-sho Ho (2005) claimed that organisational capabilities such as the presence of organisation, leadership, and interpersonal networks are important for the emergence of a social movement. Individuals rarely participate in protest and other political activities unless they are explicitly asked to do so by any organisation or leader. The organisation provides the background and institutional format of the protest, which encourages people to join the protest. Other important roles of the organisation is the dissemination of information and creating awareness about the issue of the protest. Similarly, according to Schussman and Soule (2005), leadership is an important factor in social movement that plays a vital role to create awareness about an issue, encourage people to participate, resource mobilization, frame protest strategies and tactics, and formulate and secure the goals of the protest. Some authors have argued that many social movements follow a script authored by the protest leaders but in some other cases, unpredictable events unfold.¹⁹⁶

Anna Tsing (2000) demonstrated with an example from Indonesia that due to globalization, social media, telecommunications, internet, and satellite TV became an integrated part of a social movement to develop linkages among the protesters from local to national to international levels. People from every corner of the world are connected through the internet.¹⁹⁷ Local protests travel across boundaries through various channels and networks.¹⁹⁸ Through these networks, the protest of one place moves to other places. This connection helps to reorganise protest ideas and reshape protest strategies. Harlow and J. Johnson (2011) argued that social media works as a strong network to connect individuals in social movements. The declaration or call for protests through social media rapidly connects everyone and helps to organise protest programmes without formal organisation and leader (e.g., Arab uprising, Gonojagoron Mancha in Dhaka).¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵Chua et al., 2000; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1996

¹⁹⁶Snow and Moss, 2014

¹⁹⁷Stolley, 2005

¹⁹⁸Kapelus, 2002

¹⁹⁹New terms are used to call these protests, such as New Generations Movement, or Facebook, or Blog, or Twitter Movement, etc.

In contrast to the traditional social movement, in the 1980s, a new type of social movement emerged, called ‘New Social Movement’ (hereafter NSM) that questioned the dominant political interpretations and practices since the traditional movements were unable to respond according to the needs of the citizens. From several dissatisfactions, new social actors formed new collective actions that challenged the class-based category of social movement through recasting and redefining the political system and underlying power structures.²⁰⁰ The NSM has some core characteristics that differentiate it from the traditional social movement, such as it emphasises collective identity through developing a new strategy of movement. It forms organisations and social networks to spread the message of the movement to a diverse group of people. However, the collective identity of the NSM is very fluid and takes form according to the interactions of members of the movement. Some movements have institutionalised social actors at the local level who offer a platform to the NSM to oppose the government policy with which they are unhappy.²⁰¹ The NSM emerges in the contemporary changing reality that focuses less on material satisfaction but more on the quality of life, autonomy, and democracy.²⁰² It politicises everyday life by questioning the prevailing system and pays less attention to instrumental rationality.²⁰³ The NSM creates a public space where people can express their dissatisfaction with various issues such as gender, ethnicity, race, environment, human rights, sexuality, and so forth which are very far different from the political parties and class-based movements.²⁰⁴ From the experience of Latin America, the NSM emerged from the concerns over environmental protection, mainly in the Amazon, where serious environmental degradation took place due to the commodity extraction policy under the neo-liberal economies. The political struggle of the local people to protect the Amazon forest received international attention through the network of international NGOs.²⁰⁵

2.4 Analytical Frameworks

This research has followed the ‘actor-oriented interface approach’ and ‘argumentative analytical framework’ as analytical frameworks to analyse the argumentative positions of various contesting actors around the construction of coal-fired power plants. The following

²⁰⁰Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998

²⁰¹Yashar, 2005

²⁰²Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts and Whatmore (Eds.), 1994

²⁰³Dalton and Kuechler, 1990

²⁰⁴Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998

²⁰⁵Turner, 1993

sections present a short outline of these two analytical frameworks after reviewing the works of Norman Long, Marteen Hajer, and other related authors.

2.4.1 Actor-Oriented Interface Approach

According to Norman Long (2001), ‘actor-oriented interface approach’ has developed from an understanding that different interest groups engage in contestation around new developmental interventions or social change in any structural circumstances. In this approach, the developmental intervention is seen as ‘social situation’ or ‘social arena’ in which different interest-based actors interact, leading to structural discontinuity, which Long termed as *‘battlefield of knowledge’*.²⁰⁶ These interest-based actors are linked into a series of intertwined battles over the resources, meaning, institutional legitimacy, and control over the changes that confront them. These actors covered both ‘local’ and ‘external’ actors, pertaining to a particular geographic or target area who eventually forged together as an interventionist team.²⁰⁷ Long (1989) offers this ‘actor-oriented interface approach’ to analyse the role of these interlinked actors when they collide over developmental interventions.²⁰⁸ To define the interface, Long (2001) wrote, “*a social interface is a critical point of intersection between lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in value, interests, knowledges and power, are most likely to be located*” (p. 243).

The actor-oriented interface approach offers an actor-based analysis to explain how actors struggle to establish control over resources and meaning that leads to social discontinuity in a particular social arena.²⁰⁹ Actors’ role in the interface situation differs based on discrepancies in values, realities of life, interests, knowledge, power position, along with multiple additional external factors.²¹⁰ Beyond the role of actors, the interface approach analyses different organisational and cultural forms that have an influence on the production and reproduction of social continuities and discontinuities. To understand these continuities and discontinuities, the interface of developmental intervention has to be analysed covering the whole span of the intervention as an integral part of the process of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation of meaning. It focuses on the linkages and networks that have developed within the groups,

²⁰⁶Long and Long (Eds.), 1992

²⁰⁷Long, 2015

²⁰⁸Long (Eds.), 1989

²⁰⁹Hebinck, Ouden and Verschoor, 2001

²¹⁰Long, 2001

though the actors necessarily do not represent the group in which they belong to. Some actors might have some common interests, or some might have disagreement due to having contradictory interests. In the contestation of developmental interventions, the deprived faction negotiates with the beneficiary faction based on their power position. According to this approach, actors are not neutral receivers in the interface situation. Rather, they have an agency based on which they assess the problematic arena and present appropriate responses that offer interface encounter which works through cooperation, conflict, and alliance.²¹¹

The actor-oriented interface approach as an analytical framework focuses on identifying the key actors in a particular interface situation, mapping the links and argumentative discourse flows between them, and looking at how they exhibit support or opposition towards any developmental intervention or social change.²¹² According to Long (2001), an interface situation is an arena of cultural and power struggle of actors within the situated social practices which works through creating meanings. The actor-oriented approach, which is driven from the constructionist perspective of political ecology, analyses the discursive practices to understand how meanings have been given by the actors in support of the respective claims.²¹³ The actors in the interface situation create alternative discourses to create meanings through rejecting the existing discourses.²¹⁴ This research has followed the actor-oriented interface approach to analyse the contesting positions of the actors around the construction of coal-fired power plants through an in-depth understanding of actors' identity, networks, agency, and argumentative discourse analysis.

2.4.2 Argumentative Analytical Framework

Marteen Hajer (1995) applied the 'argumentative analytical framework' to analyse environmental conflict among different actors regarding acid rain controversies due to coal-fired power plants in Great Britain. From the social constructivist standpoint, this framework offers analytical tools to analyse the inter-relationship between discourses, actors' behaviour, and institutional patterns regarding any controversial situation.²¹⁵

²¹¹Long, 2015

²¹²Matsaert, Ahmed, Islam, and Hussain, 2005

²¹³Long, 2015

²¹⁴Long, 2001

²¹⁵Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Selbman, 2015. Constructivist perspective believes that there is no single 'truth,' rather multiple truths exist in the society that have been constructed through 'social interaction and rational assembled knowledge' (Bingham, 2010).

The analysis of ‘discourse’ is the central concern of the argumentative analytical framework. Hajer (1995) defines discourse as *“a specific ensemble of ideas, concept, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities”* (p. 44). The framework emphasises the analysis of practices in the society where discourses are produced and reproduced. Hajer (1995) argued that discourses are produced and reproduced based on the interpretation of an argumentative topic, which he identified as ‘discursive practice.’ Following the Foucauldian concept, he believes that discourses and discursive practices are regulated through a ‘discursive order.’ According to him, *“what is discussed and, who can take part and the rules of interaction become imbedded in the practices through which discourse is formulated and can both limit and enable individual actors by ascribing them subject positions”* (p. 48-9). Thus, discourses are produced and transformed when those are constrained by other discourses. However, ‘particular discourse becomes dominant and particular practices are reinforced’ due to the discrepancies of power among the contesting actors who produced these discourses.²¹⁶ The analysis of discourse examines the argumentative structure of the contesting ‘interplay of interests, institutions, and cultures’ on a certain issue.²¹⁷ This way, the argumentative analytical framework does not restrict itself to the analysis of the ‘linguistic turn’ of discourse that constructs meaning only. Rather, it emphasises the ‘argumentative turn’ also to understand how counter-arguments are placed.

To explain the argumentative analytical framework, Hajer (1995) introduced two central and interlinked concepts, discourse coalitions and storylines. According to him, any argumentative situation is a political project where conflicting actors or institutions form several ‘discourse coalitions.’ These ‘discourse coalitions’ create their own ‘storyline’ to justify their political agendas rejecting the storylines of counter-discourse coalitions. A topic of conflict can create multiple discourse coalitions that make their own storyline. A discourse coalition is a unity of the actors or institutions around a particular type of discourse. Hajer (2010) defines the discourse coalition as *“[...] a group of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, share the usage of a particular set of story lines over a particular period of time”* (p. 302). Discourse coalitions work beyond the institutional context within which the actors are located. The actors in the discourse coalitions are diverse and have different values and objectives. However, they share the same storyline surrounding an argumentative position to

²¹⁶Bingham, 2010

²¹⁷Fischer, 2003

come to a mutual coalition.²¹⁸ The actors, with a high level of flexibility, find solidarity to form alliances where they need each other's support to sustain their claims.

Discourse coalitions develop their own 'storyline' to construct the reality, credibility, acceptability, and trust through effective exercise of power and 'discursive practice.' Hajer (1995) defines a storyline as "a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena" (p. 56). A storyline offers a simplified narrative of a complex conflicting debate through summarising the most common perceptions of an argumentative topic. It defines the actors and their positions in the discourse coalitions.²¹⁹ Characteristically, the storyline offers an ambiguous meaning of reality that obscures the discursive complexity. It legitimises the policy formulation through undermining or negating the counter-storylines.²²⁰ Power discrepancies among the actors in the contesting discourse coalitions shape the discursive structure through which storylines get developed.²²¹ According to Hajer (1995), at least two distinct discourse coalitions exist in a controversial situation based on two argumentative storylines - the dominant storyline and the alternative storyline. The dominant storyline has been legitimised through policy formulation in support of their respective claims, which Hajer (1993) termed as '*discourse institutionalization*.' Discourse institutionalisation happens when actors are successful in using a particular discourse in support of their construction of reality and when the discourse has been translated into practice through policy formulation. Hajer termed this as 'hegemonic discourse.' Through the production of 'hegemonic discourse,' the dominant discourse coalition excludes the alternative storyline from the process of institutionalisation of policy formulation. The alternative storyline is created when the dominant storyline overrides other storylines. The argumentative analytical framework offers an analytical lens to uncover the whole spectrum of the discourse coalitions and their storylines of an argumentative situation through analysis of discursive practices.

2.5 Conclusion

The theoretical, conceptual, and analytical frameworks that have been discussed in this chapter cover the dimensions that have been identified as relevant to understand the contesting position

²¹⁸Hajer, 1995

²¹⁹Selbmann, 2015

²²⁰Hajer and Versteeg, 2005

²²¹Bingham, 2010

of the actors around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. However, political ecology as a theoretical approach is too broad and complex to draw a complete map to analyse the relationship between developmental intervention, environmental degradation, displacement, and conflict. The discussion in this chapter attempts to draw general trends of political ecology to analyse social movement and environmental movement in a contentious situation of developmental interventions and environmental degradation. These trends suggest that there is still a need for an in-depth analysis of micro politics of contesting groups in a situation of conflicting arena. This research aims to contribute to this area by presenting a micro-level analysis of the political process of contesting groups around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. Furthermore, this chapter also presented two analytical frameworks, such as the actor-oriented interface approach and argumentative analytical framework to analyse the argumentative positions of the contesting actors aiming to present an in-depth analysis of the political contestation. The following empirical chapters have been developed based on the theoretical, conceptual, and analytical frameworks that have been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Three

Dispossession from Land: Causes and Concerns of Dispossessed People's Protests

“S. Alam appointed goons in the power plant project who forced the unwilling landowners to sell their land. I think S. Alam had an ill-intention. Otherwise, why did they appoint these ill-behaved goons in the project?”²²²

“I could not purchase even half an acre of land in the surrounding areas with the amount of compensation that I got for my two acres of land. Where will we go and what will we do? How will we survive?”²²³

3.1 Introduction: Land Acquisition from a Political Ecology Perspective

Land is considered to be state property. Thus, the land under private ownership can be acquired by the state or a private company subject to the permission of the state, to construct dams, conservation areas, highways, power plants, ports, and other infrastructure for the use of ‘public purpose.’²²⁴ The term ‘public purpose’ becomes questionable when the state-land or private land acquired by the state is transferred to private companies owned by the elites, particularly political party affiliated members and political sympathisers, for ‘capital accumulation.’²²⁵ The concept of ‘capital accumulation’ by land acquisition can be analysed from the neoliberal economic perspective, where land is considered as a ‘commodity’ rather than a source of livelihoods for many land-dependent people. From the neoliberal perspective, land-dependent people are often categorised as a ‘disposable object’ who can be dispossessed from their land as a result of land acquisition for the purpose of constructing development projects. The intervention of development projects by dispossession of land-dependent people brings

²²²A respondent in Gondamara, age 45

²²³A respondent in Rampal, age 65

²²⁴Hall, 2011; Demssie, 2013; Gingembre, 2018

²²⁵Abbink, 2012; Lavers, 2012

changes in land use. The land-dependent people become vulnerable due to land use changes through ‘simplifying the complex land-based social, economic and cultural relations of the society’²²⁶ at the endeavour of capital accumulation. In political ecology, land acquisition in the Global South is seen as a ‘contentious arena’ due to dispossession of land-dependent people from their land, inadequate compensation, corruption, irregularities, environmental changes, negative impact on livelihoods, and unavoidable conflicts that can be analysed following Harvey’s theory of ‘accumulation by dispossession.’²²⁷ The landowners and land-dependent people, who are dispossessed or supposed to be dispossessed, showed resistance against such land acquisition and land-use-changes to protect their traditional way of living, which formed the ‘contentious arena.’

The state and private companies used several discourses, such as ‘development,’ ‘economic development,’ ‘state-building,’ ‘public purpose’ and many others to justify large-scale land acquisition for development projects, which Prno and Slocombe (2012) termed as ‘social license to operate.’ The land that has been acquired for development projects is often categorised as ‘abandon,’ ‘marginal,’ ‘empty,’ ‘free’ to create a discourse that ‘the unproductive land is turning to productive’ through developmental intervention.²²⁸ The state and private companies also offered several promises, such as ‘creation of employment by land-use changes’ as a strategy to get ‘community engagement,’ which later turned out to be a farce in many cases.²²⁹ From this perspective, dispossession of people from their land and traditional way of living is not a consequence of development (development by dispossession), rather it is due to the development itself (dispossession by development).²³⁰

The potential risks of dispossession due to land acquisition for development projects are disproportionately distributed where marginalised groups, indigenous people, rural communities and small farmers are the ultimate sufferers of all the social, economic and environmental disadvantages, which influence them to protest against the development projects and land acquisition as well.²³¹ The authoritarian and top-down approaches of land acquisition in the Global South threaten the traditional land-use patterns and access to land that impact the livelihoods of land-dependent people through spreading social and economic insecurity.²³² For

²²⁶Scott, 1998; Jewitt, 2008

²²⁷Harvey, 2003 cited in Verhoog, 2013

²²⁸Lavers, 2012; Makki, 2012

²²⁹Rogers, 2012 cited in Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

²³⁰Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

²³¹Pichler and Brad, 2016; Gironde, Golay and Messerli (Eds.), 2016

²³²Ndi and Batterbury, 2017; Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014

this reason, the land-dependent people are unwilling to accept the transformation of the agricultural land to non-agricultural use from a fear of ‘losing livelihoods due to the absence of transferable skills’ and ‘lack of entitlement of fair share of compensation.’²³³ The amount of compensation for land was inadequate to restore their lives in many cases. Moreover, only the titleholders of land are entitled to get compensation whereas there are several other non-titled but land-dependent people, such as the agricultural workers (from cultivation-to-harvesting-to-processing), sharecroppers, and indirectly land-dependent people, who remain out of compensation.²³⁴ Similarly, the occupiers of government land are dispossessed without compensation when the land has been allotted to the development projects.²³⁵

The contestation around land acquisition mainly rotates around land price deals. In political ecology, the involuntary land acquisition is identified as ‘land grabbing’ when the state forcefully acquires private land with the power of existing laws. In many cases, the state transferred the state land and acquired private land to the private companies in exchange of pre-decided prices, which is called ‘privatization of public resources.’²³⁶ In involuntary land acquisition, the landowners have limited access in land price dealing. However, both parties (state and landowners) adopt several tricks and techniques to benefit themselves, which creates a contentious arena.²³⁷ Different land-related interest groups, such as large-landowner elites, capitalist landowners, brokers, small landowners, workers, share-croppers, renters, hunter-gathers, pastoralists and others participate in the arena of land price deals from different power positions.²³⁸

In land price deals in voluntary land acquisition, the marginal landowners are often seen as victims of unfair negotiation due to the domination of powerful nexus of the companies, elites, and political alliances, who combine to take advantage of the weak governance structure.²³⁹ Land price deals are fixed after preserving the benefits of the powerful nexus. Thus, the marginalised or deprived factions of land price deals join in protesting against the ‘unfairness’ of the deals.²⁴⁰ Studies showed that because of ‘unfair deals,’ the landowners were not compensated adequately considering the attributes of the land, such as financial security, livelihood, identity, and social prestige. On many occasions, no effective rehabilitation

²³³Roy, Roy and Choudhury, 2013; Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014

²³⁴Jewitt, 2008; Gingembre, 2018

²³⁵Jewitt, 2008

²³⁶Thakur, 2014; Hall, 2011; Borrás and Franco, 2012

²³⁷Verhoog, 2013; Thakur, 2014

²³⁸Hall et al., 2015; Thakur, 2014; Scott, 1990

²³⁹Jewitt, 2008; Verhoog, 2013; Gingembre, 2018

²⁴⁰Gingembre, 2018

packages were offered to the dispossessed population.²⁴¹ In involuntary land acquisition, the landowners are deprived from getting an adequate compensation due to the calculation of the amount of compensation based on the ‘unrealistic’ market price (*mouza* price) benchmark, which does not reflect the actual value of the land. Studies showed that the ‘market price’ is not the right benchmark to calculate the amount of compensation since it is affected by several misconduct and irregularities in a weak political structure. Besides, all types of land are compensated equally based on land grading according to the government record while the prices differ in the local market based on the productivity and location of the land.²⁴² Moreover, the practices of corruption and irregularities in the compensation process prevented the landowners from getting on-time and an adequate amount of compensation.²⁴³ Studies showed that a large amount of compensation remains undistributed in Bangladesh because of the practices of irregularities and corruption in the compensation process and because of discrepancies in the record of land ownership.²⁴⁴

However, as the landowners are a heterogeneous group, they do not react towards land acquisition and development projects similarly. The landowners who are merely dependent on the land for their livelihoods are willing to sell it to get the ‘expected amount of compensation’ and employment facilities in the development projects.²⁴⁵ On the contrary, the non-titled and solely land-dependent landowners are unwilling to sell or give up occupancy of the land as they feel ‘physically, culturally, economically disconnected’ due to the conversion of agricultural land for industrial use, which Cross (2014) termed ‘economy of anticipation.’²⁴⁶ This feeling of ‘disconnection’ influences the land-dependent people to join the protest against land acquisition and development projects rejecting the compensation.²⁴⁷ In response to the protest of the land-dependent people, in many cases of land acquisition, a nexus has been developed among the project development company, political leaders, local elites and NGOs with exchange of multiple offers who worked as the ‘project-supporting group’ to convince the protesters to bring them ‘on the side.’²⁴⁸ As the ‘project-supporting group’ belongs to the powerful faction of the society, the protesters, who belong to the marginal group, could not

²⁴¹Hall, 2011; Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014; Jewitt, 2008

²⁴²Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014

²⁴³Murugesan, 2012

²⁴⁴Hossain and Islam, 2015

²⁴⁵Roy et al., 2013; Murugesan, 2012; Cross, 2014

²⁴⁶Ahasan and Gardner, 2016; Murugesan, 2012

²⁴⁷Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014

²⁴⁸Hall, 2011; Hall et al. 2015

continue their resistance until to get success due to suppressive treatment from the ‘project-supporting group’.²⁴⁹

In the arena of developmental intervention when it has been contested by the project affected people in the context of the Indian sub-continent, the ‘project-supporting group’ has been formed based on existing political factions of the locality.²⁵⁰ Factions refer to rival groups that get formed centring competition for resources and power in the formal political structure. Factions are fluid groups that emerge temporarily around an issue of conflict when institutional mechanisms fail to resolve it and the groups break up when the conflicting issue is resolved.²⁵¹ Studies showed that factionalism appears with particular characteristics in the Indian sub-continent. In the caste-based society of the Indian sub-continent, factions are vertical groups that are tied in with the class, caste, and community where they conflict with other equal groups. Thus, factions emerge around quarrels, feuds, social tensions, rites, rituals, ceremonies, community activities, and so forth that operate in the social and cultural level of the society. Primarily, factions are not political groups, but they play an important role in the local political structure. As a quasi-group, factions become active in conflicting situations but remain invisible in other situations.²⁵² The political factions that function around supporting the political parties have become more visible in Bangladeshi society since the introduction of the parliamentary electoral system. Though the voters in the rural areas are never seen as firm supporters of any political party in electing the public representative of the local government unit, it has become more visible nowadays as the local government elections are being held under the banner of political parties.²⁵³ In this political power spectrum, the political faction of the ruling party belongs to the dominant faction that has more access to resources and power positions.²⁵⁴ In the arena of developmental intervention with the support of the state, this powerful political faction emerges as a ‘beneficiary faction’ that works in favour of the powerful ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus. In return, this faction avails most of the benefits and opportunities that occur due to the inception of the development projects. On the contrary, the ‘deprived’ group emerges as an ‘opposition faction’ that confronts the dominant faction as they are negatively impacted or get less access to the benefits. Thus, the project development

²⁴⁹Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

²⁵⁰*ibid*

²⁵¹Vincent, 2009

²⁵²Yadava, 1968; Lewis, 1958; Singh, 1959

²⁵³Khan, 2010

²⁵⁴Kuper, 2087

authorities utilise these existing political factions of the locality in favour of developmental interventions.²⁵⁵

As an example, Ahasan and Gardner (2017) showed that mining companies took help from the local political leaders, *mastaans* (goons) and NGOs to purchase land and control the resistance of the landowners in Bangladesh. They found that the local wings of the ruling political party were persuaded to resolve the resistance of the landowners due to pressure from the higher authorities of the party. In return, these political leaders, *mastaans* and NGOs were offered contracts and patronage by the company which financially benefited them. The landowners' protest lost its direction and potency when the local political leaders and elites joined the nexus of 'project-supporting group.' This pushed the protesters to 'cross the threshold of fear and insecurity' and forced them to leave the protest.²⁵⁶ Along with the 'project-supporting group,' on many occasions in the countries of the Global South, the state or the project development authority deploy law-enforcing agencies for the protection of the development project and to resolve the resistance.²⁵⁷ As an example, in Sompeta in India, with the assistance of the 'project-supporting group' and hired goons of the company, the police attacked the spontaneous and non-violent resistance of the local people that led to the death of two protesters and left many others wounded.²⁵⁸

Since land is considered as state property in Bangladesh, the government has the authority to acquire the land in private ownership for itself or for any requiring person or organisation with the condition of using it for 'public purpose.' To acquire private land, the landowners have to be compensated or rehabilitated or both following the rules and regulations set by the associate acts.²⁵⁹ To construct the Rampal Power Plant, the GoB acquired private land under the *Acquisition and requisition of immovable property ordinance 1982*. In this involuntary land

²⁵⁵Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

²⁵⁶Adnan, 2007, P.214

²⁵⁷Reyes and Begum, 2005

²⁵⁸Jewitt, 2008

²⁵⁹The Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Act, 2017 has annulled the previous Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance 1982. This new act increases the amount of compensation to three times of the land value according to the government record. Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance 1982 was followed to acquire land for the Rampal Power Plant where the compensation was calculated at 1.5 times of the land value. (Other associate acts, rules, and ordinances related to land acquisition in Bangladesh: British India enacted the Land Acquisition Act, 1894; The (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act, 1948; Acquisition of Waste Land Act, 1950; Town Improvement Act, 1953; The Rehabilitation Act, 1956; Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Act, 1994; Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Project (Land Acquisition) Act, 1995; Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project (Land Acquisition) Act 2007; The Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Act, 2017; The Cantonments (Requisitioning of Immovable Property) Ordinance, 1948; Chittagong Hill Tracts (Land Acquisition) Regulation, 1958; Hats and Bazaars (Establishment and Acquisition) Ordinance, 1959; The Municipal Committee (property) Rules, 1960; The Union Council (property) Rules, 1960; The Agricultural Development Ordinance, 1961; Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance, 1982 (amended in 1989, 1993, 1994).

acquisition, the government took ownership of the land from private owners through sanctioning notices under this ordinance. The acquired land was handed over to the BPDB on 2 January 2012 to construct the power plant.²⁶⁰ To construct the Banskhali Power Plant, private business group S. Alam purchased land directly from the landowners.²⁶¹ In this voluntary land purchase, the landowners were free to sell their land and fix the price for the land. There was no legal obligation to sell land if anyone was unwilling.

However, it was contentious to acquire or purchase land in both places since the land-dependent people were unwilling to leave possession of their land. Furthermore, it is not easy to acquire or purchase land as there are several challenges and complexities in the land management system in Bangladesh, such as inconsistency in the record of ownership and possession, loopholes in the legal procedures and corruption-prone land management system.²⁶² In both power plant areas, the landowners felt victimised due to practices of several misconduct and irregularities in the process of land acquisition or purchase that forced them to join the protest against the dispossession from land. In such circumstances, the government (in Rampal) and S. Alam (in Banskhali) applied different strategies to displace people from their land. However, the contentious situations appeared differently towards the land acquisition by the government and land purchase by S. Alam (a private company). This chapter explores the causes and concerns of the local people associated with the land acquisition or purchase that led them to protest against the coal power plants in Banskhali and Rampal.

3.2 Land Purchase for Banskhali Power Plant

S. Alam has been purchasing land in Gondamara and the surrounding areas since 2013. They bought around 855 acres of land directly from the landowners in Char Borguna, Paschim Borguna, Purbo Borguna, and Alokdia *mouza* in Gondamara *union* under Banskhali *thana*.²⁶³ The landowners were informed that S. Alam will develop industries named *Genesis textile, Apparels Ltd.* and *S. Alam Vegetable Oil Ltd.* on the purchased land. Furthermore, S. Alam applied to the GoB for an approval to purchase an additional 5,032.14 acres of land (3,303.17 acres of private land and 1,728.97 acres of *khas* land) to construct two coal power plants with

²⁶⁰Hossain and Islam, 2015

²⁶¹Jugantor (newspaper); April 6, 2016

²⁶²Rahman and Talukder, 2016

²⁶³S. Alam circulated an advertisement in a daily newspaper where they claimed to have purchased 855 acres of land [The Daily Sun (newspaper); April 10, 2016].

1,320 MW capacity in each and other industries. In response to that application, on 5 November 2015, the surveyor and *kanungo*²⁶⁴ of the local land office submitted a report to the Assistant Commissioner of Land where the proposed 3,303.14 acres of private land was categorised as ‘empty land’ and assurances were made that the approval to purchase that land would not hamper the habitat of the local people as only 150 families were living there.²⁶⁵ However, the report hid the information that the livelihoods of a few thousand inhabitants were dependent on the requested land. The land that was categorised as ‘empty land’ was actually fertile to cultivate paddy, salt, and shrimp. Also, the requested 1,728.97 acres of *khas* land were being used by the local people for cultivation and housing.²⁶⁶ S. Alam mentioned in the application that they had already purchased 660.40 acres of land in Gondamara, which means they had purchased land before getting government approval.

Table 3.1: Land Price in Banskhali Power Plant Area (per bigha in BDTK)

	Local market price	Price offered by S. Alam	Price received by landowners
Before protest	3-4 hundred thousand ----- (Depending on location, productivity, communication, and other infrastructural facilities)	8 hundred thousand ----- (For all types of land)	2-8 hundred thousand ----- (Depending on accuracy of the paper of ownership, occupancy, and bargaining capacity of the landowners. The agents keep the money in difference from the price offered by S. Alam)
After protest	3-4 hundred thousand	15-20 hundred thousand or more	15-20 hundred thousand or more ----- (Due to withdrawal of agents)

In this voluntary land acquisition process, S. Alam purchased land through direct negotiations with the landowners. Initially, they offered eight hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha (40 decimal) of the land of each type, such as arable land, homestead, bare-land, canal, pond, and the land at shore.²⁶⁷ The local market price of the land was three-four hundred thousand BDTK based on the location and productivity of the land. That means, S. Alam offered a price for the land which was higher than the local market price. Furthermore, the landowners could bargain with S. Alam to fix a higher price than the price they had offered. Also, S. Alam purchased land that had problems in the papers of ownership and occupancy. Additionally, the landowners

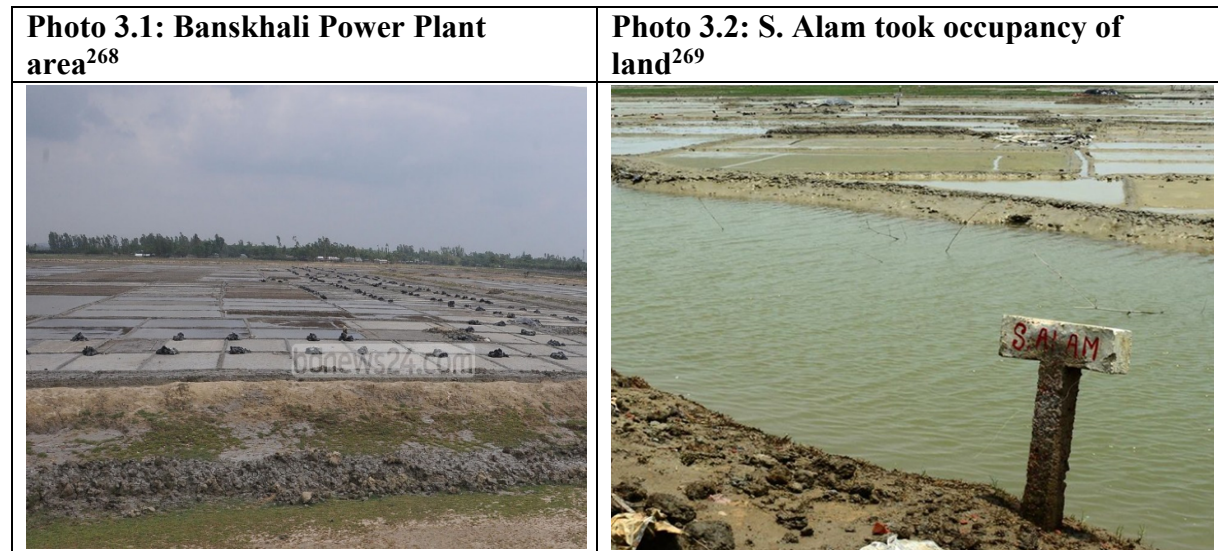
²⁶⁴*Kanungo* is sub-assistant settlement officer, a revenue position.

²⁶⁵Though the report mentioned that there were only 150 households, several other reports claimed that there were around 700 households along with several mosques, schools, bazars (marketplace), graveyards, cyclone shelters, and health clinics (The Daily Star; April 13, 2016).

²⁶⁶The Daily Star; April 11, 2016

²⁶⁷Later (in 2017) the price has increased to 15-20 hundred thousand BDTK.

were able to continue using their land after selling it as S. Alam did not claim occupancy immediately after purchase. These offers were lucrative to the landowners in Gondamara who proactively approached S. Alam to sell their land at the very beginning (in 2013) and S. Alam did not face any challenge to purchase land.



However, S. Alam started facing challenges in purchasing land in Gondamara since a group of people started opposing it from the very beginning. These people demanded a higher price for land than the price offered by S. Alam. To overcome these challenges, S. Alam applied various strategies such as appointed *agents* (broker) and *goons* (musclemen)²⁷⁰ to persuade the landowners, and in some cases, to force them to sell their land. The agents and goons were alleged for exercising power and involvement in several misconduct and irregularities that displeased the landowners as well as the local people, who were not associated with the land-related conflicts. This convinced the landowners and the local people to join the protest against the power plant project. The following section analyses the land purchase process of S. Alam in Gondamara and the concerns of the dispossessed population to engage in the protest.

²⁶⁸www.bdnews24.com; accessed on October 10, 2019

²⁶⁹<http://www.greennewsbd.com>; accessed on October 10, 2019

²⁷⁰Goon (derived from *goonda*, *mastaan*, brutal fellow, hooligan, gangster) is used in Bangladesh as a term for a hired thug. In general use, 'goon' means criminals. Along with many other grounds, Control of Disorderly and Dangerous Persons (Goondas) Act (East Bengal Act IV of 1954) of Bangladesh declared a person to be a goon when he or she is alleged to use obscene or abusive language in public or is involved in affray, rowdyism or acts of intimidation or violence in any place, private or public, so as to cause alarm to the people living or frequenting the neighbourhood. In the present day, goons are political activists under the patronage of political godfathers (United News of Bangladesh; July 27, 2002).

3.2.1 Use of Political Factions to Purchase Land

The purchase of land in Gondamara by S. Alam was opposed by an influential and popular leader of the BNP (opposition political party), named Kabir.²⁷¹ Kabir had been elected as chairman of the *Gondamara Union Parishad* in the previous election and he is also the current chairman as well. He and his fellow supporters who were known as the ‘project-opposing group’ (interchangeably used as protesters) opposed the land purchase in Gondamara. They convinced the landowners not to sell their land to S. Alam at the price offered to them. As the leader was popular, he got tremendous support from the local people who were unwilling to sell their land and were displeased with the activities of S. Alam. To oppose selling land, initially, Kabir pointed out that S. Alam was paying a low price for the land considering the prospects of the land. Later, he included the concerns of environmental pollution to sensitise the issue to forbid the landowners to sell their land.²⁷² For example, he called for a meeting at the very initial stage of the land purchase where he highlighted that S. Alam was not paying a good price for the land. In that meeting, he said,

*“Many companies are coming to our place to purchase land. Our locality is very important due to its geographic position. Many mega-projects are developing around our locality, like the Sea Port in Moheshkhali and the Marine Drive Road from Cox’s Bazar to Chittagong. I believe that our land will become very precious soon if these developments happen. Don’t sell your land to S. Alam now and you can sell it later with a good price”.*²⁷³

To deal with the opposition from the ‘project-opposing group,’ S. Alam took support from the majority of the local political leaders of all parties (AL, Jamaat, JP and BNP) and their supporters who were known as the ‘project-supporting group.’ This ‘project-supporting group’ helped S. Alam to purchase land through confronting the opposition of the ‘project-opposing group.’ It created a contentious situation when the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ stood against each other. This contestation between the ‘project-opposing group’ and ‘project supporting group’ had been created based on the prevailing political

²⁷¹S. Alam took the support of the local leaders of the ruling party to purchase land in Banskali. They started purchasing land in Banskali since 2010 to build a dockyard at the shore of the Bay of Bengal with the support of the local parliamentarian. It is also claimed that S. Alam was invited to construct the coal power plant in Gondamara by the local political leaders who were hoping that an industrial expansion in the locality will boost up the economic conditions of the local people.

²⁷²The protesters were not concerned about environmental pollution due to the coal power plant at the beginning. The landowners and local people were not even interested in what types of industries S. Alam was going to construct in the locality, but this became a major concern later on.

²⁷³A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

factions of the locality. According to the results of the previous *union parishad* elections, the majority of the voters had voted for the Jamaat and BNP.²⁷⁴ The chairman of the *union parishad* got elected from these two parties for the last three terms (in 2003, 2009, 2017). Among these three elections, Kabir was elected as chairman for two terms (2003 and 2017), which showed his popularity among the voters. However, the greater parliamentary seat belongs to the ruling political party (AL). Thus, due to competition in the political spectrum, several factions exist between these political leaders. S. Alam took the support of these existing political factions to purchase land in Gondamara. Since Kabir was from the BNP and he opposed the land purchase, S. Alam took support from the counter-political factions (AL, JP, Jamaat) to resist the ‘project-opposing group’ led by Kabir. S. Alam got proactive support from the leaders of the AL, JP, and Jamaat since Kabir was their political opponent. The local AL leaders were very active in supporting S. Alam to construct the power plant as their party supported the power plant project. Moreover, the political leaders of other political parties (some leaders from the BNP also) supported S. Alam as some of them believed that the project would bring positive outcomes for the locality. Some of them wanted to get benefits from S. Alam by supporting the project. Some other leaders did not explicitly support the project, but they also did not explicitly oppose it to avoid being termed as ‘anti-development’ or ‘anti-government’ by the ruling party. There was also a rumour spread that S. Alam offered financial benefit to many of these political leaders and influential individuals to get their support.

Similarly, the land purchase process of S. Alam was also intertwined in the prevailing political factions of the locality. For example, there were some large landowners who were influential in the local power dynamics beyond their political identity. Some of these landowners had illegal occupancy of private and *khas* land too. At the very beginning (in 2013), S. Alam first approached these large landowners and requested them to sell the land that they had outside of the WAPDA embankment,²⁷⁵ mostly canals, and underwater land. These landowners were convinced to sell their land that is located outside of the embankment and is under water due to the rise of sea level. They were interested to sell those lands because they were not getting any benefits out of those lands. S. Alam successfully purchased these lands. After purchasing

²⁷⁴ The voters of Gondamara were not visible as firm supporters of any political party in electing the local chairman in the past that has become more visible nowadays as the union parishad elections are taking place under the banner of political party. In this new system, the candidates are nominated by the political party whereas the option still exists that one can participate in the election without support of any political party.

²⁷⁵ The Gondamara *union* is located in an island that is protected by the WAPDA embankment through restricting the seawater from getting into the island. The local people cultivate paddy, shrimp, and salt inside the embankment through controlling the flow of seawater. The embankment is gradually approaching towards the island due to the rise of sea level. The embankment was located far towards the sea earlier than where it is located today.

the land that is located outside of the embankment, S. Alam again approached them to purchase the land that they had inside of the embankment and successfully purchased those. In this way, S. Alam purchased the maximum amount of land from the large landowners without facing any challenges, rather these landowners were proactive in selling their land. Afterwards, S. Alam focused on purchasing the land of the small landowners and faced challenges because they, motivated by the protests of the ‘project-opposing group,’ were unwilling to sell their land. This created a contentious situation.

To face the challenges in purchasing the land of the small landowners, S. Alam appointed some of the large landowners who had already sold their land and political leaders as ‘agent.’ These agents were responsible for persuading the landowners to sell their land to S. Alam and recommending S. Alam to purchase a piece of land after checking the accuracy of the paper of ownership and status of occupancy of the land. This recommendation from the agents was mandatory to purchase land since S. Alam generally did not purchase land without this recommendation (until the mass protest by the ‘project-opposing group’). To work for S. Alam, these agents were offered a monthly salary from S. Alam. In addition, they earned around one to three hundred thousand BDTK as ‘commission’ from S. Alam for purchasing every *bigha* of land. They also received many other extra facilities from the landowners for recommending their land to be purchased by S. Alam. S. Alam formed four local committees of twenty members each, named ‘*Jomi Kroy Komity*’ (land purchase committee) headed by the agents. These ‘*Jomi Kroy Komity*’ were locally known as ‘*syndicate*’ or ‘project-supporting group.’ The agents and their supporters were the members of these ‘syndicates.’ They proactively supported S. Alam in their land purchase efforts through confronting the opposition of Kabir based on his political identity. These agents are the political opponents of Kabir in the local political competition that helped them to confront Kabir politically.

Because of Kabir’s political position (a local leader of the BNP, an opposition political party in the national parliament), the agents or ‘project-supporting group’ received support from the police and government administration since the government and ruling political party were in support of the project.²⁷⁶ The government administration and ruling political party treated Kabir based on his political identity. As an example, on several occasions, the government representatives and the leaders of the ruling political party labelled the anti-power plant protest led by Kabir as ‘*an act of opposition political parties to hamper the development of the*

²⁷⁶Manabkantha (newspaper), April 5, 2016; www.somoyerkonthosor.com; accessed on January 17, 2017

country.’ On the contrary, because of his political position, Kabir received support from the BNP. The chairperson of the BNP delivered a statement in support of Kabir where she claimed the coal power plant project is ‘a harmful development project’ and she supported the position of the ‘project-opposing group’ as well. One respondent in Gondamara said,

“It was a non-political protest of the local people of Gondamara as we were disturbed due to the irregularities done by the agents and goons of S. Alam to purchase land. Kabir was the only leader from our locality who supported the protest. Though he did not get any active support from the BNP, because of his political identity, the protest got a political face. Because of his [Kabir] engagement, the protest had been treated politically by the government.”²⁷⁷

In summary, S. Alam utilised the prevailing political factions of the locality to purchase land and overcome the prevalent challenges to construct the coal power plant. Thus, the whole contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ regarding the land purchase in Gondamara rotated around the existing political factions of the locality that are intertwined in the greater political spectrum of the country. The landowners were divided into two groups as a response to these political factions. The landowners, who supported Kabir, did not sell their land till the end and they convinced others to do the same. On the contrary, S. Alam got support from the powerful political factions who were not only proactive in selling their land but also convinced other landowners. As Kabir was from a political party (BNP) that was not in power, he and his supporters were politically labelled as ‘anti-government’ or ‘anti-development’ by the government and ruling political party. Thus, the contestation related to the land purchase turned into political contestation. Furthermore, the ‘project-supporting group’ actively opposed the ‘project-opposing group’ as they were creating obstacles in their way of getting financial benefit through purchasing land for S. Alam. This has been discussed in the following chapters.

3.2.2 Misconduct and Irregularities in Land Purchase

To purchase land, the members of the ‘syndicate’ and S. Alam officials were involved in several misconduct and irregularities, which made the landowners angry and led them to join the protest. Along with the agents, S. Alam also recruited around 360 young men from the

²⁷⁷A respondent in Gondamara, age 53

locality as local musclemen, locally called ‘goons.’ These goons were offered a monthly salary. They acted as an armed force for S. Alam to take control over the land that S. Alam bought and remove any obstacles that would harm its activities. They worked under the guidance of the agents and S. Alam officials who were particularly assigned to confront the ‘project-opposing group.’²⁷⁸ These goons also persuaded the landowners who were otherwise unwilling to sell their land to S. Alam. The local people identified these ‘goons’ as ill-behaved people as most of them were accused in several criminal cases. They patrolled the villages on motorcycles on a regular basis to exhibit the strength and power of S. Alam to the local people. They were also alleged of carrying guns that they got from S. Alam. Through these activities, they showed the landowners that they could do anything they wanted and placed fear into the hearts of the landowners. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“These goons are not good people. They all are ill-behaved people. They are vagabonds. They always remain busy with stealing and robbery. Nobody likes them. S. Alam appointed them in the project and provided motorcycles and guns. [...] They [goons] warned us that we would not live within 10 km of the coal power plant because of its pollution. They asked us to sell our land to S. Alam to get some money to buy land in other locations.”*²⁷⁹

As the goons worked under the direct supervision of the agents and S. Alam officials (who had support from the police and government administration), they exercised unchallenged power in the locality and spread fear among the local people. The local people feared to deal with them due to their ill-behaved nature and criminal records. The activities of these goons created anxiety among the landowners and local people as they could take illegal occupancy of anyone’s land. The landowners and the local people felt ‘hostage’ because of such power exhibition by the goons.

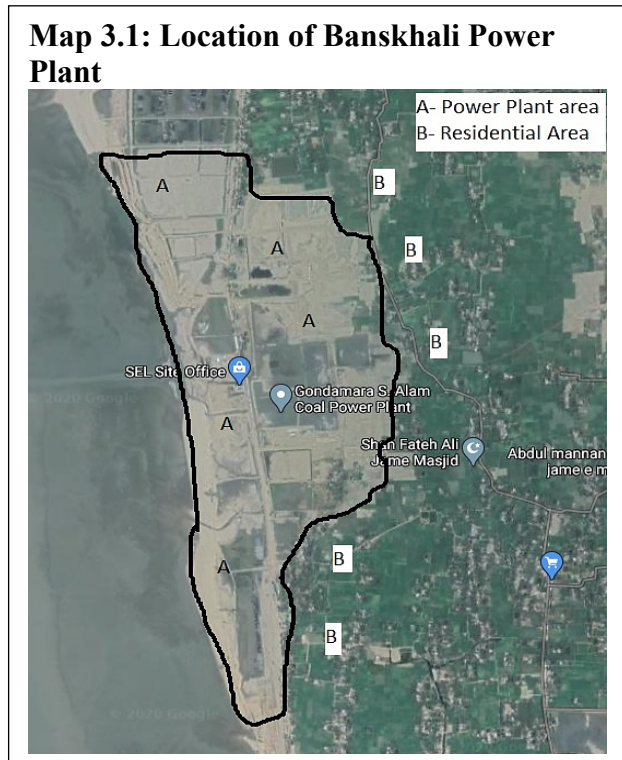
As the agents were offered a ‘commission’ to purchase each plot of land, they were restless to persuade the landowners to sell their land. At the beginning, the agents and goons persuaded the landowners to sell their land highlighting the good land price (eight hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha of land) which was higher than the local market price (three-four hundred thousand BDTK). They presented this offer as a good opportunity for the landowners as they could sell their land at this higher price and could purchase more land elsewhere. As these

²⁷⁸www.newmatilda.com; accessed on January 21, 2017

²⁷⁹A respondent in Gondamara, age 40

agents were large landowners and belonged to the dominant political faction of the locality, they used their social reputation and influence to persuade the landowners.²⁸⁰ Sometimes, they used social connections, such as influencing other family members of the landowner who was unwilling to sell their land.

When the attempts of persuasion failed, in some cases, the agents and goons exercised power to compel the landowners to sell their land. They warned the landowners that nobody else would purchase the land except S. Alam with that amount of money and S. Alam would not purchase land if their requirements were fulfilled. They spread a fear that the unsold land would be trapped in a way that it would not come for any use. Sometimes, they threatened the landowners



who were unwilling to sell their land by saying that nobody could live in the locality in the future because of the pollution of the coal power plant. In addition to these warnings and threats, the agents and goons applied different techniques and strategies to compel the landowners to sell their land. As a common strategy, they trapped some landowners from accessing their land. As an example, they bought the land surrounding an individual's land and restricted the individual from accessing his land. Similarly, they bought some portions of land under a *khatian* and illegally occupied the entire land and forced the other owners to sell their portions of land. In some other cases, they bought land from one owner among several other owners under a *khatian* and illegally occupied the entire land. In such circumstances, without being able to access their land, the landowners were compelled to sell their land. Moreover, if any landowner wanted to sell his/her portions of land after falling into such a trap, the agents asked for a higher amount of commission from him/her to recommend that land to S. Alam to purchase.

In official record, S. Alam bought more than one thousand *bighas* of land from private landowners while it got occupancy of around 560 *bighas* in the specific power plant area in

²⁸⁰They motivated the other family members of the landowners to motivate him to sell his land.

Charborguna, Paschim Borguna, Purbo Borguna, and Alokdia *mouza*.²⁸¹ This discrepancy happened because of several misconduct and irregularities conducted by the agents, goons, landowners, illegal occupiers, and S. Alam officials in a collusive manner. As like the agents and goons were interested in earning more money as a ‘*commission*’ by purchasing land for S. Alam, the officials of S. Alam were also interested in showing how many plots of land they could purchase for the company in the paper. To get ‘*commission*,’ the agents misused their recommendation authority by making recommendations to S. Alam to purchase several plots of land that had problems in the paper of ownership or occupancy. Since S. Alam officials were also involved in these misconduct and irregularities, they ignored it and allowed it to happen. Later, S. Alam faced difficulties to get occupancy of many of these plots of land. One landowner in Gondamara said,

*“S. Alam allocated sufficient money to purchase land in Gondamara. I do not think that S. Alam had any ill intention to victimise the landowners. Whatever misconduct and irregularity had happened, it was done by the persons who were assigned to purchase land. S. Alam appointed the agents and goons to purchase land. These people were only interested in getting more commission. To get the commission, they purchased land that had problems in the papers of ownership. Similarly, they purchased land from unauthorised owners. Later, they failed to get occupancy of many plots of land that they had purchased since the legal owners refused to leave occupancy.”*²⁸²

Though S. Alam offered eight hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha of land (for all types of land), the agents, goons, and S. Alam officials often ended up purchasing land that had a problem in the papers of ownership or occupancy. An ownership problem happens when someone else also claims ownership of the same plot of land. Similarly, there were some other landowners who had no problem in the paper of ownership, but their land was illegally occupied by other people. The agents and goons contacted the landowners who had land with these problems and convinced them to sell the land to S. Alam. Also, as S. Alam was purchasing land with problems in the paper of ownership or occupancy, the landowners who had land with such kind of problems were very proactive in selling that land as they were unable to use it. As an example, in Haserguna, a large number of *khas* land was allotted to

²⁸¹Charborguna has 560 bighas of land. S. Alam bought most of this land. There are only 150 bighas of land that S. Alam could not purchase yet (as of May 2018).

²⁸²A respondent in Gondamara, age 44

landless people. Some of them received the papers of ownership and some others were trying to get their papers following legal procedures. However, an influential group of people of the locality illegally occupied most of these lands by evicting the allottees. These non-occupant landowners sold their land to S. Alam because they could not establish occupancy on that land. Similarly, according to the *Muslim inherent law*, daughters get property from their parents which is generally occupied by their brothers and rarely handed over to them. These non-occupant daughters were proactive in selling their land to S. Alam. One landowner in Gondamara said,

*“I got around two bighas of land from my father which was occupied by my brothers since my father died. I was not getting any benefit out of that land since then. I was not even aware of how much land I would get. Later, some people from S. Alam talked to my son, and they said that I would get around two bighas of land. They offered me a good price. My sons decided to sell that land as my brothers were not giving us occupancy. I sold that land to S. Alam. [...] They (brothers) are angry with me, but what can I do? My sons were forcing me to sell.”*²⁸³

While S. Alam offered eight hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha of land, the agents offered less than this amount to the landowners who had any problem in the paper of ownership or occupancy. As an example, one *bighas* of land with a problem in ownership or occupancy was paid four to seven hundred thousand BDTK considering the difficulty of getting its occupancy. The agents kept the rest of the money (difference from eight hundred thousand BDTK), and this worked as a motivational force for them to recommend land with problems in the paper of ownership or occupancy to S. Alam. The owners of land with problems in ownership or occupancy were happy to sell their land for any amount of money as they were not getting benefits out of the land. One respondent in Gondamara depicted the situation by the following statement,

“Yes, I am getting one to three hundred thousand BDTK less (from S. Alam offered price) when I am selling my land which is not in my occupancy to S. Alam with the help of the agent. Though I think it is better for me because I have no control over that land. One powerful group of the village occupied my land

²⁸³A respondent in Gondamara, age 55

since long ago. I think it is good for me whatever amount I am getting, no matter if it is five, six or seven hundred thousand BDTK."²⁸⁴

In addition to recommending S. Alam to purchase land with ownership or occupancy problems, the agents also misused their recommendation authority to earn extra money in different unethical ways. As an example, they recommended S. Alam to purchase some plots of land with false documents. In most cases, this kind of misconduct happened with the involvement of the agents, goons, S. Alam officials, and government officials of the land registration section in a collusive manner. In such circumstances, they made a secret agreement with the unauthorised land seller to recommend that land to S. Alam to purchase in exchange of money. According to this agreement, the agents received the maximum amount of the price of that land. The unauthorised land-sellers were happy to receive any nominal amount of money since they were selling land with false documents. As S. Alam officials also wanted to purchase as much land as they can, they blindly relied on the recommendations sent by the agents. They did not attempt to check the location of land in the field as they had confidence that they could establish control over the land with the help of the agents and goons. They were reluctant to check the papers of ownership as they were also involved in this misconduct. One respondent in Gondamara depicted this misconduct by the following statement,

*"Suppose; one bigha of land has been sold to S. Alam by someone, then his son sold it again. S. Alam [officials] could not identify this misconduct as the agents of S. Alam who were appointed to check the accuracy of the paper were involved in this conspiracy. For that reason, S. Alam had to buy a piece of land from different owners. In some cases, the S. Alam officials were also involved in this misconduct (by overlooking it)."*²⁸⁵

Through taking these illegal practices as opportunity, it is alleged that some agents and goons sold some other's land to S. Alam by making false documents after paying bribes to the government officials. They also helped others to do the same.²⁸⁶ This happened mostly with the landowners who were not aware or did not update their documents of land ownership. These unauthorised land sellers worked in favour of S. Alam as they were paid by S. Alam after being

²⁸⁴A respondent in Gondamara, age 53

²⁸⁵A respondent in Gondamara, age 38

²⁸⁶Some people produced false land record (*BS khatian*) by bribing the government officials and sold that land to S. Alam while the land was originally recorded (*khatian*) in other's name.

aware of their conspiracy. This group of people proactively supported the activities of S. Alam in the locality. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“Since S. Alam paid them [unauthorised land sellers] after being aware of their conspiracy, they would slap anyone if S. Alam asked them to. They acted like pet dogs of S. Alam. They needed this favour from S. Alam to sustain the conspiracy that they were a part of. This group of people was against the people's protest in Gondamara since the very beginning.”²⁸⁷

Due to the purchase of land with problems of ownership or occupancy or from unauthorised owners with false documents, complications arose when the legal owners or the powerful occupiers refused to give up occupancy of the land. For these reasons, S. Alam failed to occupy many plots of land that had problems in the paper of ownership or that were bought from unauthorised owners. Similarly, it was hard for S. Alam to get occupancy of the land that was purchased from the legal owners without occupancy when the land was occupied by a powerful group of people. While most of the illegal occupiers belonged to the powerful group of people, S. Alam also had to pay the occupiers of the land to get occupancy of that land. That means, S. Alam had to purchase the paper of ownership from the legal landowners and the right of occupancy from the illegal occupiers. It was alleged that, in general, S. Alam paid around three to four hundred thousand BDTK for per *bigha* of land (even for *khas* land) to the occupiers to hand over the occupancy. This amount of money got fixed based on the bargaining capacity of the occupiers.

Furthermore, the agents made S. Alam purchase land in a scattered way, although what S. Alam really wanted was to buy the land in the same area where the power plant was being constructed. In many cases, S. Alam bought land that was located far away from the power plant area. This happened because of the land record system in Bangladesh. From the legal perspective, a record (*khatian*) may have land in different locations along with the plot of land in the power plant area. If S. Alam bought a plot of land from a *khatian* targeting the plot that is located in the power plant area, it is not confirmed that they would get occupancy of that plot if it was already occupied by another owner. However, S. Alam is entitled to claim the plot under that land record that may be located elsewhere. Similarly, due to the successional ownership of land, people have ownership of land in different locations. If S. Alam bought land from a landowner, it would get occupancy of the land according to the ownership record that

²⁸⁷A respondent in Gondamara, age 42

may be located outside of the power plant area. Some landowners intentionally approached S. Alam to sell their land that was located outside of the power plant area. In exchange of a commission, the agents recommended S. Alam to purchase that land. In these ways, S. Alam purchased a good number of plots that were not located within the power plant area.

The arbitrary pricing of land created an anarchic situation among the landowners in Gondamara. Though S. Alam set a price of eight hundred thousand BDTK for per *bigha* of land of all types as a flat rate, the agents further fixed-up the price through hard bargaining with the landowners. If they could set a lower price than the price offered by S. Alam, the agents kept the money in difference. In fixing the price, the agents bargained with the landowners based on the status of occupancy and accuracy of the paper of ownership of the land. For example, a landowner could bargain to make a good land price deal if the paper of ownership was accurate, and the land remained under his occupancy. The landowners could not make a good deal if there was any discrepancy in the paper of ownership or occupancy. It was also alleged that the agents and S. Alam officials tried to find out errors in the paper of ownership or occupancy of the land. If they found any, they bargained to pay less price for the land. In some cases, they claimed to identify several problems in the paper of ownership or occupancy of the land of some landowners though there was no problem actually. The agents asked for a ‘*commission*’ to recommend that land through overlooking the problems that they claimed to identify. As S. Alam did not purchase land without the recommendation of the agents, these landowners were forced to negotiate with them to get the recommendation in exchange of a ‘*commission*.’ To justify why these landowners were paid less, one respondent in Gondamara said,

*“He [a landowner without occupancy] can only sell the paper of ownership. He has no control over the land. S. Alam needs to establish control over the land. Sometimes they also need to pay the occupier. Alternatively, sometimes they [S. Alam] have to collect people to fight with the illegal occupier, which has a cost. The agents keep the money from the price of the land to bear these expenses.”*²⁸⁸

After the protest of the ‘project-opposing group,’ [April 2016 onwards] S. Alam increased the land price to 15-20 hundred thousand BDTK. However, this price was not fixed anymore, and the landowners could bargain to increase it further. The land price got fixed based on the bargaining capacity of the landowner. The voiceless landowners could not fix a good land price

²⁸⁸A respondent in Gondamara, age 38

deal. Some landowners, who had strong bargaining capacity and had no error in the papers of ownership or occupancy, sold their land at a price of 20-30 hundred thousand BDTK for per *bigha* of land, which is more than the price offered by S. Alam. One landowner was able to sell his one *bigha* of land at a price of 1 crore 60 lac BDTK. Another landowner is bargaining with S. Alam to fix a price of 2.5 crores BDTK for his one *bigha* of land. These examples proved that the land price got fixed based on the bargaining capacity of the landowner.

To purchase land, normally, the landowners were given bank account payee cheques as a price of the land after completion of registration work. The landowners cash the cheque after depositing it to their bank account. In general, it took one to more than six months to get the money after depositing the cheque.²⁸⁹ However, some landowners experienced that the cheque was dishonoured when they deposited it to the bank due to insufficient balance in the source account.²⁹⁰ To some other landowners, the agents received the cheque from S. Alam by their names on behalf of the landowners. They withdrew and handed over the money to the landowners after deduction of their commission. In this case, some landowners were not paid as much amount of money as they were promised after showing several difficulties in the papers of ownership or occupancy of the land. As a reaction to this, some of those landowners refused to give up occupancy of their land as they did not get money as much as they were promised. Similarly, the landowners who sold their land at the rate of eight hundred thousand BDTK for per *bigha* of land at the beginning, later, became unhappy since the land price was increased later. The landowners who already sold their land at the earlier rate of price were claiming the increased price and refused to give up occupancy of their land to S. Alam until they get it.

Thus, the land purchase process of S. Alam in Gondamara created an anarchical situation that forced the landowners and local people to protest against the power plant project. This anarchical situation was created due to practices of several misconduct and irregularities by the agents and goons that victimised the landowners. Especially, the provision of earning a '*commission*' against the purchase of each plot of land worked as a motivational force for the agents and goons to follow unethical ways to purchase land. This deprived many landowners from selling their land according to their will and getting an appropriate price. Many landowners could not fix a good land price in the hurdle-some bargaining process, particularly the voiceless landowners. Furthermore, the landowners felt hostage due to forcing to sell land,

²⁸⁹Jugantor, January 28, 2018

²⁹⁰<http://www.cplusbd.net>; accessed on March 28, 2017

taking illegal occupancy of land, and paying less amount of money than the promised amount by the agents and goons.

3.2.3 Concerns of Dispossessed People's Protests in Banskhali

From the discussion of the previous section, it has seen that the landowners and local people of Gondamara were unhappy with the process of land purchase by S. Alam. However, there were several other concerns, such as the loss of livelihoods due to eviction from arable land, displacement from ancestral land, and environmental pollution because of the coal power plant, which worked as influential factors to push the landowners and local people to join the protest. The following section explores these multiple concerns that fuelled the protest in Gondamara.

The local people (landowners and land-dependent non-titled people) were afraid of losing their livelihoods as S. Alam purchased a good amount of arable land of the locality. Due to eviction from arable land, the local people feared losing their sources of livelihoods. Especially, this fear spread when the local land office requested the government to permit S. Alam to purchase additional 3,303.17 acres of private land and lease 1,728.97 acres of *khas* land based on an application from S. Alam.²⁹¹ This *khas* land was in occupancy of the local people and was the main source of livelihoods of many people in direct and indirect ways.²⁹² The local people used this land for housing, farming, salt production and aquaculture. A fear spread among the local people that they would lose this *khas* land if the government leased it to S. Alam. From a legal perspective, the occupiers of this *khas* land are not entitled to claim compensation.²⁹³ Thus, the concern of losing arable land and *khas* land without compensation, which would impact on livelihoods of the local people, played an important factor to push them to join the protest.

Similarly, a fear spread among the local people that they would be displaced from their ancestral land if S. Alam constructed the power plant. The local people did not have any idea about how much land S. Alam would purchase in the locality. They feared that S. Alam might purchase all the land of the locality through displacing them from their ancestral land. They got this concern when they saw the engineers of S. Alam were putting pipes and bamboos (for soil test) in different locations of the villages, even in the land that was not purchased.²⁹⁴ Seeing

²⁹¹Bhorer Kagoj (newspaper), April 17, 2016

²⁹²The daily star, April 17, 2017

²⁹³Bangla Tribune (newspaper), April 5, 2016

²⁹⁴The daily star, April 17, 2017

this, they thought that S. Alam would purchase all the land of the locality through demolition of their homesteads, mosques, madrasas, and graveyards. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“They [engineers of S. Alam] were pilling everywhere in the villages. They were accompanied by some Chinese people. They even didn’t talk to us. We thought they have a plan to acquire the entire area. Where would we live if they acquire the entire area? I was afraid and restricted them from pilling in my land.”*²⁹⁵

Furthermore, a fear of displacement spread when the local people saw that S. Alam took occupancy of some residential areas and graveyards within the demarcation of the power plant area. Though S. Alam did not attempt to purchase residential areas, it still got ownership of some residential areas due to the successional ownership system of land. For example, S. Alam bought the entire land under a *khatian* of someone’s sister that she got from her parents as successor and took occupancy of the land that was located in the power plant area. According to the successional ownership system, this sister has her part in the residential area where her brothers are living. S. Alam claimed that sister’s part in the residential area when their claim was not fulfilled with the plot of land in the power plant area. The brothers of that sister became worried about being displaced when S. Alam claimed her part of the land in that residential area. Similarly, a few graveyards and mosques were also included within the demarcation of the power plant area. The local people have an emotional connection with the graveyards as their ancestors are buried there. They became worried thinking that they would not be able to offer pray by standing in front of these graveyards if S. Alam occupied those. They became emotional and unhappy thinking of losing their ancestors’ graveyards which triggered them to join the protest.²⁹⁶ One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“They (S. Alam) are taking our present by acquiring our cultivable land, and they are taking our past through destroying our graveyards. We cannot live without our present, and there is no meaning of life if we cannot protect the graveyards of our ancestors. [...] All my ancestors are buried in the graveyard that S. Alam is going to occupy. How can I leave this [graveyard] to S. Alam? It will be a careless act towards my ancestors.”*²⁹⁷

During the inception of land purchase (in 2013), S. Alam officials and political leaders informed the local people that S. Alam was going to establish a cotton factory and a readymade

²⁹⁵ A respondent in Gondamara, age 38

²⁹⁶ Jugantor, April 5, 2016

²⁹⁷ A respondent in Gondamara, age 55

garment industry in the locality where the local people would be appointed as worker. S. Alam officials also assured the local people on several occasions that the industrial expansion of S. Alam would bring economic prosperity in the locality by creating new employment opportunities. Due to these promises, the local people were hoping that they would get employment in these labour-intensive industries. It was alleged that the local people were not informed about the construction of a coal power plant at the beginning. However, after purchasing most of the required land (around 400 acres), the local people came to know that S. Alam was going to construct a coal-fired power plant that could offer a few employment opportunities. Further, S. Alam officials assured the local people that they would be employed in the coal power plant project. Despite this assurance, the local people didn't hold high hopes about getting any employment in the power plant project. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“On several occasions, the political leaders and company [S. Alam] officials told us that this project [coal power plant] would create employment opportunities for the villagers. What does it mean? Does it mean that we are unemployed now? I think nobody is unemployed here, some are farmers, and some are fishermen. They have created their own jobs. Everyone is happy with his or her own life. This coal power plant might create employment for 600 people at the cost of un-employing more than thousands. [...] What kind of job are you going to offer us? Is it of a security guard in the coal power plant? Are you kidding?”*²⁹⁸

Along with the concerns of displacement and losing sources of livelihoods, the local people (landowners and local people who were not associated with related issues) felt disturbed because of the exercise of power by the agents and goons. The agents and goons were involved in several furious activities such as forcing landowners to sell their land, purchasing land from unauthorised owners, taking occupancy of land before making payment, illegal possession of land after evicting the legal owners, and so forth. As the agents and goons worked as mediators for S. Alam to purchase land, they created obstacles to the landowners to talk to S. Alam officials directly to negotiate about selling their land.²⁹⁹ Moreover, sometimes the goons patrolled around the power plant areas with 200-300 motorcycles, cars, and micro-buses to show their power and strength to the local people. The local people felt ‘hostage’ due to such exercise of power by the agents and goons. They even did not dare to talk against the power

²⁹⁸A respondent in Gondamara, age 42

²⁹⁹Jugantor, April 5, 2016

plant project amongst themselves due to fear of repercussions from the agents and goons. Because of these unlawful activities of the agents and goons, the local people were worried that they would have to leave the locality if they allowed these activities to continue further. They thought that the unlawful activities might reach an extreme level if S. Alam could construct the power plant. Thus, the concern of getting relief from these exaggerated activities of the agents and goons also forced the local people to join the protests. To depict the unlawful activities of the goons, one protester in Gondamara said,

“There were no more than two to three motorcycles in our locality. Now we have so many motorcycles. S. Alam provided these motorcycles to the goons. They got a new one if anyone was not functioning properly. They had weapons too. They were doing whatever they wanted to do. As the powerful political leaders and police were in support of them, there was no one to stop them. The local people felt disturbed by these activities of the goons. They joined the protest to stop them [goons].”³⁰⁰

Along with the concern of getting relief from the disturbing activities of the agents and goons, the local people became worried about environmental pollution because of the coal power plant. This encouraged them to join the protest from the environmental protection concern as well. Before the inclusion of the environmental concerns, the local people protested against the power plant project to protect their land from the concerns over livelihood and displacement. The local people became aware and concerned about environmental pollution because of the coal power plant through the environmental campaigns led by the local students and the leader of the protest (Kabir) at the local level. Furthermore, the national-level campaigns of the NC against the Rampal Power Plant also helped to turn the local people’s protest for the protection of land to protest for the protection of environment. Due to these campaigns, the local people got to know about the negative side of the coal power plant which became a central concern of the protest at the end. From these environmental campaigns, the local people got to know that *‘they would not get sunlight properly because the sky would be clouded with the smoke produced from the coal-fired power plant; they would suffer from different diseases like cancer; they would not be able to breathe; and children would take birth with disability due to toxic releases from the coal power plant.’* They were also informed that *‘there would be acid rain from the sky and they would not get water in their pump when the power plant will start*

³⁰⁰A respondent in Gondamara, age 42

*electricity generation which would hamper their cultivation.*³⁰¹ One day during these campaigns, the local people did not get water in their tube-wells when S. Alam tested a tube-well with a 3,800-foot depth that made the local people worried that they would not get drinking water if S. Alam starts pumping water from the ground. They became concerned about their survival in the locality due to environmental pollution because of the coal power plant and this encouraged them to join the protest. At the end, the ‘environmental protection’ became the central concern of the protest instead of the protection of land. In such circumstances, the people were ready to accept any other project except the coal-fired power plant.³⁰² One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“We will not allow this coal power plant in our locality. I am not talking about my land; I will not accept a coal power plant in our area that will not let us live here. We requested S. Alam to build any other project. If they come with any other project; we will support them. We will work for it without a wage. If they need, we will give them more land. However, we will not accept coal-fired power plant that will harm the environment. We have no problem with the hydraulic power plant, gas-based power plant and solar-based power plant. Our only reservation is the coal power plant.

The inclusion of the concern of environmental protection helped to engage a good number of people in the protest who were not associated with the land-related issues in any way. People from the neighbouring *unions* also joined the protest when they came to know that the coal power plant would harm the environment of the surrounding areas as well. One inhabitant of a nearby *union* of Gondamara said,

“We don’t have any land in the power plant area. We heard that the coal power plant would pollute our environment. If it pollutes the environment, how will we live here? I joined the protest to restrict the construction of the coal power plant in our area. The NC said that the Rampal Power Plant is harmful to the Sundarbans when it is 10 kilometres away. If it is true, then what will happen to us? This power plant [Banskhali Power Plant] is on our head. How will we live here?”³⁰³

³⁰¹<http://chalamansongbad24.com>; accessed on March 02, 2017

³⁰²*ibid*

³⁰³A respondent in Gondamara, age 40

In summary, along with the misconduct and irregularities in the land purchase process, several concerns such as displacement from ancestral land, negative impact on livelihoods due to dispossession from arable land, disturbance due to exaggerated exercise of power by the agents and goons, and the risk of causing environmental pollution triggered the landowners and local people as well to join the protest against the Banskali Coal Power Plant.

3.3 Land Acquisition for Rampal Power Plant

To construct the Rampal Power Plant, the GoB acquired 1,834 acres of private land in Sapmari Katakali and Kaigar Daskati *Mouza* of Rajnagar *union* under Rampal *upazila* of Bagerhat district in Bangladesh. The government sanctioned notices under sections 3, 6 and 7 of the *Acquisition and requisition of immovable property ordinance 1982* to the landowners to accomplish the land acquisition process.³⁰⁴ The land acquisition was completed after sanctioning notice under section 7 of the ordinance, meaning the government got ownership of the land and the landowners were asked to withdraw the compensation for their land from the district land acquisition (LA) office. The landowners were compensated with a 50 per cent premium on the *mouza* price (local market price) of the land. *Mouza* price is calculated based on the average land selling price of the last twelve months under any specific *mouza* in the government record.³⁰⁵ Also, the landowners and occupiers were compensated for the losses of immovable properties and crops. In addition to these private lands, the power plant development authority got occupancy of around 800 acres *khas* land within the demarcation of the power plant area. This *khas* land included shrimp projects, canals, and parts of the *Pashur* river and riverbank.

In this involuntary land acquisition, the landowners were not happy with the amount of compensation set by the land acquisition ordinance. In addition, there were practices of several misconduct and irregularities in the land acquisition process that deprived the landowners from getting hassle-free and on-time compensation. The dispossession from land also negatively impacted the livelihoods of the landowners and land-dependent people. Furthermore, the local people became worried about environmental pollution because of the emission of pollutants from the Rampal Power Plant. Thus, the concerns of inadequate compensation, displacement,

³⁰⁴The notices under sections 3, 6 and 7 were sanctioned on August 23, 2010, January 26, and September 16, 2011, respectively.

³⁰⁵“*Similar description and with similar advantages in the vicinity during the twelve-month proceedings the date of publication of the notice under Section-3,*” (Section 8, The Requisition of Immovable Property Ordinance, 1982).

loss of livelihoods and environmental pollution pushed the landowners as well as the land-dependent people to protest against the power plant project. The following section analyses the misconduct and irregularities in the land acquisition process and multiple concerns of the dispossessed population that convinced them to join the protest.



3.3.1 Misconduct and Irregularities in Land Acquisition

During the inception of land acquisition for the Rampal Power Plant (in 2010), the landowners were promised by the political leaders and power plant development authority on several occasions that they would get compensation for their land at a rate which would be 5-6 times higher than the *mouza* price.³⁰⁸ Because of such promises, the landowners were happy with the land acquisition at the beginning hoping that they would be able to purchase more land in the surrounding areas with this higher amount of compensation. However, later, they were compensated 1.5 hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha of land based on 1.5 times of the *mouza* price according to the land acquisition ordinance which made them unhappy and forced them to join the protest against land acquisition.

³⁰⁶<https://cdn.thewire.in/>; accessed on October 12, 2019

³⁰⁷<https://tunza.eco-generation.org/>; accessed on October 06, 2019

³⁰⁸The landowners got to know about the amount of compensation from the notice sanctioned under section 7 of the Land Acquisition Ordinance 1982.

Table 3.2: Land Price in Rampal Power Plant Area (per bigha of land in BDTK)

<i>Mouza</i> price	Local market price ³⁰⁹	Compensation according to the ordinance 1982 (adding 50% premium on the <i>mouza</i> price)
1 hundred thousand ----- (For all types of land)	2 -3 hundred thousand ----- (Depending on location, productivity, communication and other infrastructural facilities)	1.5 hundred thousand ----- (For all types of land)

The amount of compensation (1.5 hundred thousand BDTK, after adding 50% premium on *mouza* price) that was offered to the landowners was lower than the local market price (2-3 hundred thousand BDTK) which disappointed them. This happened due to the calculation of compensation based on the inaccurate *mouza* price as a benchmark according to the involuntary land acquisition ordinance. As the *mouza* price is calculated based on the average land sell price of a year of a specific *mouza*, however, people recorded a lower price compared to the actual price during the land ownership transaction to reduce the amount of payable government fee. In every land ownership transaction, the government gets a fee which is calculated based on the transaction cost. The government gets a higher fee if the transaction cost is higher. As many people record lower ownership transaction cost compared to the actual cost to reduce the payable government fee, it affects the valuation of the *mouza* price. Furthermore, land ownership transactions were not very frequent in the power plant area which also impacted the calculation of the *mouza* price. Besides, the landowners were unhappy because all types of land (residential, arable, and bare land) were compensated at the same rate whereas the price varies in the local market. In addition, the *khas* land (around 800 acres) that had been acquired for the power plant project was in occupancy of the landowners, landless people, and shrimp producers. The occupiers of this *khas* land used it for cultivation and shrimp production. These occupiers had been evicted from this land without paying compensation as they were not entitled. Similarly, there were practices of several manipulations and irregularities in the calculation of compensation for the immovable resources and crops. For example, some were awarded compensation for shrimp projects though they did not have any shrimp project under the acquisition. Again, the compensation for some shrimp projects was over calculated than the resources they had. These misconduct and irregularities happened in a collusive manner with the involvement of the compensation receivers and government officials.

³⁰⁹ The frequency of landownership exchange was very rare in the power plant area.

In addition to the inadequate amount of compensation, the landowners were victimised due to the complex and corruption-prone compensation process which made it difficult for landowners to withdraw the compensation on time. The landowners had to produce several documents to claim compensation, which was costly and time-consuming as well. Moreover, the landowners had to pay 3-10% of the compensation amount as a bribe to the officials of the district land acquisition office to complete the compensation process.³¹⁰ Due to the existence of such corruption and irregularities, complex process of compensation claim, conflicts of land ownership, and so forth, till January 2018, around 10% of the landowners could not withdraw their compensation. Delay in the withdrawal of compensation hampers its productive use.

Finally, the amount of compensation that the landowners were paid was not sufficient to purchase an equivalent size of land in the surrounding areas. An industrial expansion takes place in the surrounding areas due to the establishment of the coal power plant and many other companies are building industries, leading to a hike in the price of land in the area, which upset many landowners.³¹¹ They felt upset and vulnerable because the amount of compensation that they received was not enough to restore their life compared to what they lost. One landowner in Rampal said,

“No landowner is happy with the amount of compensation they received. There is no reason to be happy with this. [...] I had 14 bighas of land in the power plant area. I could not purchase even a single decimal of land with the amount of compensation that I received for 14 bighas. Now the people in the nearby areas are selling their land at the price of 40-50 hundred thousand BDTK for per bigha. Some people, who had land outside of the power plant area, sold those land at that high price. They got a good price. We did not get anything. We are vulnerable in every sense.”³¹²

The landowners did not feel comfortable to give up the occupancy of their land in exchange of compensation. They were not interested to compare the value of the land with the amount of compensation they received. In their view, land is like a ‘fixed deposit’ which is durable when the compensation is very much temporary. Similarly, they think that the land has a re-use value that compensation does not have. To explain this, one landowner in Rampal said,

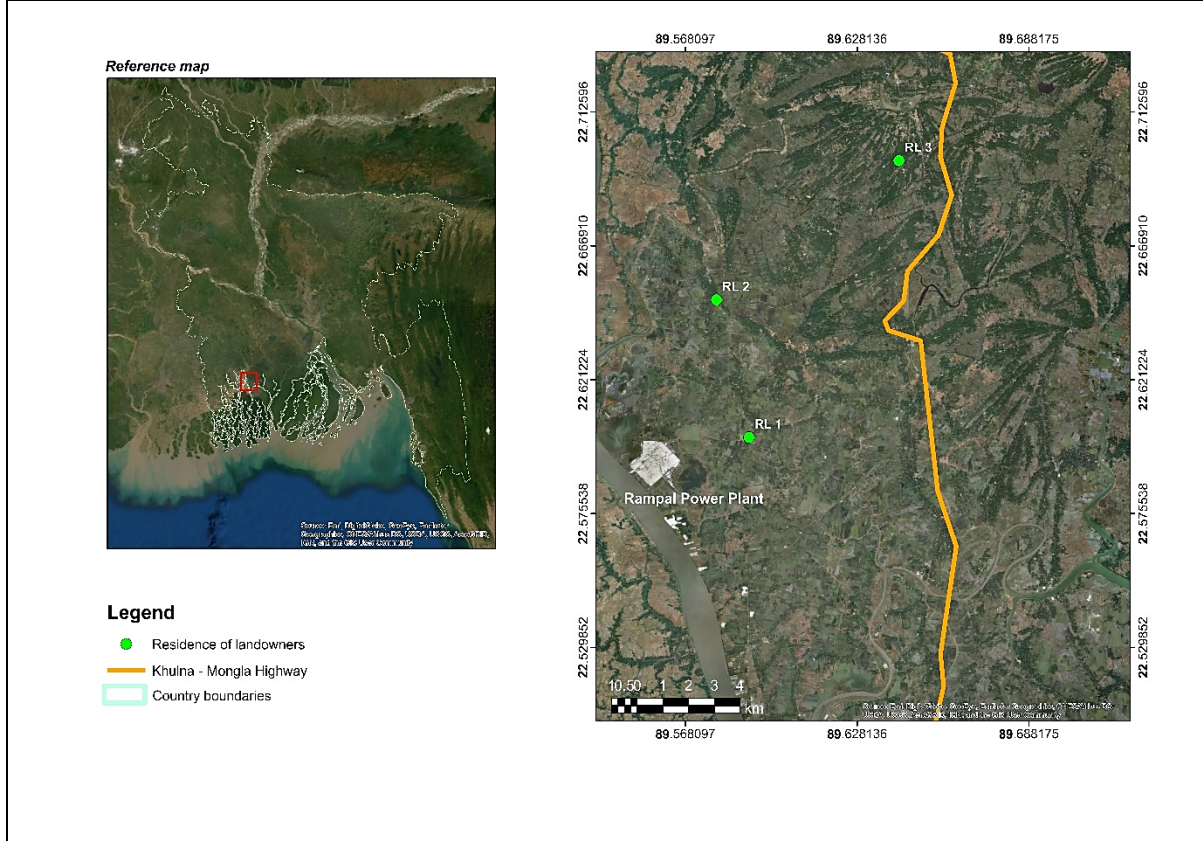
³¹⁰Hossain and Islam, 2015

³¹¹The government permitted more than 320 industries to be constructed in areas surrounding the Sundarbans (Prothom Alo, August 11, 2017).

³¹²A respondent in Rampal, age 65

“You can never compare the value of land with the amount of compensation that has been offered. Land is like a permanent resource. I can get regular rent if I lease my land to someone. I can use it for cultivation. I can keep it mortgage if I require money in an emergency and I can get it back after paying back that mortgage. What is the use of compensation? It does not have any re-use value.”³¹³

Map 3.2: Residential areas of the landowners of Rampal Power Plant area



There were some landowners who had a large size of land under the acquisition. These landowners received a good amount of compensation in total. Many of these landowners deposited this money in the bank as they could not find out any suitable business for investment. However, the majority of the landowners were small landholders who received a small amount of compensation, which was insufficient for any productive investment. The landowners who did not have an alternative source of income except the land in the power plant area, used most of this money for their daily expenditure instead of any productive investment. To explain the situation, one landowner in Rampal said,

³¹³A respondent in Rampal, age 68

*“What would we do with the compensation? I am not a businessman. I did not see any business to invest that money. Many landowners withdrew the compensation and spent it to purchase food only. Now, they don’t have money. [...] For that reason, I did not apply to withdraw the compensation. Moreover, we heard that a coal power plant got scrapped in Singur [India] where the farmers got their land back. We are also waiting for something like that to happen in our village. If we withdraw the compensation, then we will not have any right to get our land back. I do not want compensation; I want my land back.”*³¹⁴

In summary, the landowners were not adequately compensated for their land to restore their livelihoods in the process of land acquisition by the government to construct the Rampal Power Plant. In addition, due to the existence of misconduct and irregularities in the compensation process, the landowners could not withdraw their compensation on time. This impacted their livelihoods negatively and forced them to join the protest against land acquisition for the power plant project.

3.3.2 Concerns of Dispossessed People’s Protests in Rampal

The discussion of the previous section depicts that the landowners of the Rampal Power Plant area felt vulnerable due to inadequate amount of compensation and practices of corruption and irregularities in the land acquisition process. In addition to these vulnerabilities, there were other concerns such as losing the source of livelihoods due to dispossession from arable land and environmental pollution, which motivated the landowners and local people to protest against the power plant project. The following section analyses these concerns of the local protesters in Rampal.

Primarily, the landowners and land-dependent people (mostly landless people) became worried about sustaining their traditional way of living due to eviction from their land. In their views, the land that has been acquired for the power plant project was very productive where they cultivated paddy and shrimp in a rotating system. Some landowners were solely dependent on these lands for their living. The livelihoods of these people were negatively affected due to dispossession. Besides, they did not want to leave the land that they got from their ancestors.

³¹⁴A respondent in Rampal, age 55

They have an emotional connection with the land. Moreover, the power plant development activities created lots of problems in the cultivation of the land in the surrounding areas. For example, due to the earth filling activities, the power plant development authority blocked the canals that come from the *Pashur* river, which resulted in water logging in the surrounding areas during the rainy season. Thus, the cultivation in the land in the surrounding areas got hampered because of increasing salinity in the water due to the blockage in the regular water flow from the river. One protester in Rampal said,

*“Most of my lands have been acquired for the power plant project and the rest of the lands that I have outside of the power plant area cannot be used for cultivation because of waterlogging since the last rainy season. How will we live? It was better to kill all of us instead of taking our land. If I was killed, then I wouldn’t need to think about the future of our children. Now I see nothing to do for the future of my children.”*³¹⁵

The landowners who had other sources of income to cope with the loss due to the land acquisition did not react as vehemently against the power plant project. Although they were not very proactive in the protest, they supported the protest of the landowners. The protesters initially attempted to get their land back through protesting against the power plant project. Later, they included issues like increasing the amount of compensation and concern over environmental pollution. However, their main target was to get their land back to re-establish their traditional way of living. One landowner in Rampal depicted the picture clearly saying,

*“Our main target [in the protest] was that we would not leave our land. This is two-crop land. We cultivated paddy and shrimp in this land in a rotating system. The land was so productive that we never had a loss. We did not want to leave this land. For that reason, we did not focus to get more compensation at the beginning. Later, we included issues like increasing the amount of compensation and concern over environmental pollution in the protest to strengthen our claim. We did all these things to get our land back.”*³¹⁶

Along with the landowners, around 600 families of landless people were evicted from the power plant area. These people were living on the *khas* land that had been acquired. They worked as wage labourer in the shrimp projects and agricultural fields in the power plant area

³¹⁵A respondent in Rampal, age 50

³¹⁶A respondent in Rampal, age 65

for their living. Due to eviction, they had to leave occupancy of the *khas* land where they built their houses. These landless people became very vulnerable due to losing their place of living and main source of earning. Besides, they were not compensated as they were not entitled to claim compensation for the *khas* land. However, some of them got compensation for their immovable resources such as houses, crops and trees and some of them were rehabilitated by the power plant development authority. These evicted landless people proactively joined the protest of the landowners from the concern over losing their livelihoods and residence. Through protesting, they wanted to keep occupancy of the *khas* land and protect the arable land where they worked for their living. To state the situation of the landless people, one landowner in Rampal said,

*“We lost our land, but we got compensation. What about the landless workers? They lost everything. They were evicted from the khas land where they were living and from the land where they were working for their earnings. They had no way. They joined the movement of the landowners because their life became vulnerable due to the land acquisition for the power plant project. They wanted to resist it along with the landowners.”*³¹⁷

During the inception of land acquisition (in 2010), the political leaders, government officials, and power plant development authority promised the landowners that the power plant would be constructed on the abandoned *khas* land on the side of the *Pashur* river to protect the arable land under private ownership from the acquisition. They promised that the landowners would get employment in the power plant project on a priority basis. They also informed the local people that many companies would develop industries in the locality centring the coal power plant, which would create employment opportunities for the locals. However, all these promises and offers turned out to be a farce later, which made the landowners and local people frustrated. For example, the government acquired most of the arable land under private ownership and the *khas* land that was under private occupancy.³¹⁸ Similarly, the local people felt betrayed since they did not get employment in the power plant project as they were promised. There were a few local people who got appointment as wage-labourer for the earth-filling activities in the project. They were recommended by some influential people. Generally, the contractors who were working in the project appointed labourers from outside. The contractors were reluctant to appoint local people as they could pay a less wages to the

³¹⁷A respondent in Rampal, age 50

³¹⁸<http://www.shaptahik.com>; accessed on January 11, 2018

labourers from outside. However, whenever the local people met the power plant development authority or political leaders, they asked to appoint them as workers in the project. In response, the political leaders and power plant development authority asked the employment seekers to submit their biodata (cv). Some of the local people submitted their biodata several times but none of them got employment in the project. One protester in Rampal said,

*“Whenever we asked for employment, they (power plant development authority or political leaders) asked us to submit biodata. We submitted our biodata several times to them, but none of us gets employment in the power plant project. I think this is [asking for biodata] an eyewash to keep us calm.”*³¹⁹

The landowners who were involved in the protest against the power plant project were strictly restricted by the local political leaders from getting employment in the power plant project. As a result, the prominent protesters did not approach anyone to get employment in the power plant project as they knew that they would not get employment. However, the few local people who got employment in the power plant project did not feel comfortable with the earth-filling activities that they had to do. Some of them left the work after some days of appointment as the work was hard for them. Later, the landowners and local people realised that there was very little opportunity remained for them to get employment in the power plant project as it needed workers with technical expertise. The inhabitants of the surrounding areas do not have the technical expertise that the coal power plant needs. One landowner in Rampal said,

*“They [political leaders and power plant development authority] said that we would get employment in the power plant project. I am not sure about what kind of employment we would get in the project. We are mostly uneducated people. What can we do in the power plant? We do not know anything about it. They need engineers. So, I think there is no employment opportunity open for us except for some positions of ‘security guard.’ How many security guards would they need? [...] I am sure that we are not getting any employment in the power plant project.”*³²⁰

Initially, 425 acres (out of 1,834 acres in total) of the acquired land had been used for the construction of the power plant and the rest of the land remained unused (till 2016). The landowners and shrimp producers expected to keep the unused land in their occupancy to

³¹⁹A respondent in Rampal, age 35

³²⁰A respondent in Rampal, age 52

cultivate paddy and shrimp until the land was required for the power plant project. They went to the local political leaders and power plant development authority and requested to permit them to use the unused lands. The request was denied. However, as soon as the acquired land was handed over to the BIFPCL,³²¹ the local political leaders of the ruling party took occupancy of the unused land and started aquaculture after evicting the original occupiers.³²² The occupancy of this unused land by the political leaders made the landowners angry that encouraged them to join the protest. As an exception, some landowners were allowed to use their land by themselves under a negotiation with the local political leaders and influential people with whom they had a good relationship. One landowner in Rampal said,

*“We requested them [political leaders and power plant development authority] to allow us to cultivate in our own land until they need the land for the construction of the power plant. We were not allowed to do so, but they allowed the ill-behaved political leaders the same facility. What kind of justice was it? We were evicted from our land before getting compensation, but the political leaders got occupancy of all the land where they did not have a single plot. They were making money by using our land, but we were not allowed to go close to the land. How could we tolerate this? This was unbearable.”*³²³

To avoid controversy, the occupiers of the unused land did not cultivate paddy in this land which could be seen from the outside. Instead, they did aquaculture there until the power plant development authority completed earth filling in the entire area (by 2016). Getting occupancy of this unused land worked as a motivational force for the local political leaders to support the power plant project. In return, they helped to construct the power plant project by resisting the anti-power plant protest of the local people and environmental activists. To justify the occupancy of the unused land, one political leader told a newspaper,

*“We played a key role to acquire the land for the power plant project. We stopped the groups of bandits who came to the villages and staged movements and long marches against the power plant. We will use this land [unused land] until the implementation of the power plant project has happened.”*³²⁴

³²¹The acquired land was handed over to the power plant development authority on January 12, 2012.

³²²Dhaka Tribune (newspaper), February 4, 2017

³²³A respondent in Rampal, age 50

³²⁴Dhaka Tribune, February 4, 2017

Later, the landowners and land-dependent labourers became more worried about environmental pollution when the environmental activists informed them that the power plant would pollute the environment of the surrounding areas, which triggered them to join the protest. From their common understanding, they also started believing that the place will not remain liveable when the power plant will start electricity generation. After being aware of environmental pollution from the campaigns of the environmental activists, the local protesters included the concern of environmental pollution as an issue in the protest. Furthermore, they were inspired to include the issue of environmental protection when they came to know that two coal power plants in Anowara and Gozaria were scrapped due to reservations from the local inhabitants over the concerns of environmental pollution.³²⁵ Later, they included the concern of the protection of the Sundarbans forest to get emotional support from the neighbouring people. The inclusion of the ‘protection of the Sundarbans forest’ as an issue in the protest worked as an important factor to get national and international attention. After the inclusion of the environmental concerns, the protest got support from the local people of the surrounding areas and got national and international attention as well. Though they included the concern of environmental pollution in the protest, they were not seen as serious about the effects of the environmental pollution due to the coal power plant but were rather more interested in scraping the power plant project from the concern over environmental pollution to get their land back.

In summary, in addition to the inadequate amount of compensation, the existence of corruption and irregularities in the compensation process and dispossession from arable land negatively impacted the livelihoods of the landowners and landless population of the Rampal Power Plant area. The power plant project could not create employment opportunities for them as they were promised. In addition, being unable to use the unused land in the power plant area created grievances for them. More importantly, the concern over environmental pollution motivated the landowners and local people to join the protest against the Rampal Power Plant.

³²⁵The government attempted to construct coal-fired power plants in Anowara and Gozaria. However, it stepped back as a response to the protest of the local people (<http://www.banglanews24.com>; accessed on August 15, 2017; Manab Zamin, July 13, 2016).

3.4 Conclusion: Dispossessed People as Disposable Objects

The discussion of this chapter focuses on the causes and concerns regarding land acquisition and dispossession to construct the coal power plants in Rampal and Banskali, such as inadequate land price, misconduct and irregularities in the process of land acquisition, dispossession from land, loss of traditional foundations of livelihoods, and the risk of causing environmental pollution, which forced the dispossessed population to protest against the coal-fired power plant in these two places. In both cases, the land-dependent people were considered as ‘disposable objects’³²⁶ who were evicted from their land, which brought about a significant negative impact on their livelihoods. The concerns of land-dependent livelihoods of the dispossessed population did not get a place in the discourse of ‘public purpose’ to legitimise land acquisition to construct these two power plants.³²⁷ The acquired land has been considered as a ‘commodity’ rather than a source of traditional livelihoods of the land-dependent population. In the involuntary land acquisition in Rampal, the landowners were not happy with the amount of compensation to restore their livelihoods and their concerns were not taken into consideration in the land price negotiations.³²⁸ The inaccurate ‘*mouza price*’ benchmark was followed to calculate the amount of compensation for the land according to the land acquisition ordinance, which did not protect the security of the landowners livelihoods.³²⁹ Non-titled but land-dependent people, such as landless wage labourers remain out of the compensation process that made them vulnerable.³³⁰ Due to the ‘privatization of public resources,’ *khas* land has been leased to the power plant development company without compensating the occupiers.³³¹

In the voluntary land acquisition in Banskali, the arbitrary pricing of land spread anxiety among the landowners. The marginalised and voiceless landowners were the victims of unfair land price negotiation compared to the elites and capitalist landowners.³³² Besides, the existence of discrepancies in the ownership record of land also created the ground for misconduct and irregularities in the land purchase process. A nexus had been developed among the business groups, political leaders and elites, who worked together as part of the ‘project-supporting group’ in exchange of several material benefits. This ‘project-supporting group’

³²⁶Scott, 1998; Jewitt, 2008

³²⁷Pichler and Brad, 2016; Borrás and Franco, 2012; Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

³²⁸Verhoog, 2013; Thakur, 2014

³²⁹Ghatak and Mookherjee, 2014

³³⁰Hall et al., 2015

³³¹Thakur, 2014; Hall, 2011; Borrás and Franco, 2012

³³²Gingembre, 2018

created several disturbances for the landowners, such as forcing them to sell land, threatening and trapping them to sell land if they were unwilling, taking occupancy of land before purchasing it, and so forth. This created an anarchical situation in the locality. On the other hand, the landowners also formed the ‘project-opposing group’ to confront the ‘project-supporting group.’ Social factors that were rooted in the political and cultural dynamics of the society, such as the prevailing political factions among the inhabitants worked as the background of the contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group.’ The power plant development authority took the support of the ‘project-supporting group’ to purchase land through subjugating the ‘project-opposing group.’

In both cases, it has seen that due to misconduct and irregularities in the land acquisition process, the landowners were deprived from getting an adequate compensation on time.³³³ As a strategy of ‘community engagement,’ the landowners were offered several promises such as a higher amount of compensation for land, employment in the power plant projects, and so forth. These promises turned out to be a farce or unrealistic later.³³⁴ Primarily, the landowners became worried to sustain their traditional livelihood due to the dispossession from arable land. This land was the main source of income for many landowners and land-dependent people. This fuelled their grievance against the power plant projects. However, the reaction towards the land acquisition is heterogeneous as some landowners were interested in selling their land to get the ‘expected amount of compensation.’³³⁵ On the contrary, the solely land-dependent people were unwilling to leave occupancy of their land from a feeling of alienation, as Ahasan and Gardner (2016) said, ‘*physically, culturally, economically disconnected,*’ due to the land acquisition. In addition, the exercise of power by the ‘project-supporting group’ spread fear among the landowners that triggered them to join the protest. Later, the concern of environmental pollution due to the coal-fired power plant worked as momentum for the landowners to engage in the protest. This also helped them to get support from the fellow inhabitants of the surrounding areas who were not associated with the land issues.

³³³Hossain and Islam, 2015

³³⁴Rogers, 2012 cited in Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

³³⁵Roy et al., 2013; Murugesan, 2012; Cross, 2014

Chapter Four

Development by Dispossession: Contestation for Materialistic Interests

“They [agents and goons] were taking everything; money, employment, and other benefits, leaving the ash and garbage of the coal power plant for us.”³³⁶

“This coal power plant is necessary for our development. The government is kind enough to choose our locality to construct the power plant. We should help the government to implement it”.³³⁷

4.1 Introduction: Development by Dispossession in Commodity Frontiers

Developmental intervention by dispossession of people from their land is identified by Moore (2000) as ‘commodity frontiers.’³³⁸ Commodity frontiers is characterised as a neoliberal capitalist expansion that is often alleged for unequal distribution of costs and benefits where the powerful faction of the population enjoys most of the benefits, leaving the costs (such as dispossession from land, losing the source of livelihoods, and so forth) to the marginalised faction.³³⁹ The expansion of the commodity frontiers becomes contentious because marginalised groups resist the developmental intervention which negatively impacts their traditional livelihoods. However, the investors of the development project exercise power with the support of a powerful faction of the society to get access to the resources and control the resistance of the marginalised group.³⁴⁰

The marginalised group stands against the expansion of the commodity frontiers because it brings a negative impact on their life from multiple directions due to the dispossession from

³³⁶A respondent in Gondamara, Age 47

³³⁷A respondent in Rampal, Age 50

³³⁸Moore defined commodity frontiers as “production and distribution of specific commodities, and of primary products in particular, that ha[s] restructured geographic spaces in such a way as to require further expansion,” (Moore, 2000; p. 410).

³³⁹Cross, 2014

³⁴⁰Jewitt, 2008

their land. Firstly, the dispossessed population is not adequately compensated to an amount which would allow them to restore their livelihoods. Secondly, the order of law has been violated in several ways with the support of the state to implement the development project, such as dispossession of the landowners before getting compensation and construction of the development project before getting required approvals (such as location certificate, environmental certificate, etc.).³⁴¹ Einzenberger (2016) argued that in a weak governance system, the state works hand-in-hand with the investors in the commodity frontiers and gets involved in the manipulation of citizens' property rights through transferring ownership of the private and state resources to the investors (private or state-owned company). The state transfers state property (such as government land, river, forest, offshore) to the investors by dispossession of the occupiers or users without paying an adequate compensation, which is known as 'enclosure of commons.'³⁴² Moreover, the investors have a keen interest in getting ownership of the common properties in the commodity frontiers as they do not need to pay compensation to the occupiers or users.³⁴³ The marginalised group becomes victimised due to the 'enclosure of commons' as they use this property as a source of their livelihoods.

Peluso and Watts (2001) described, in their edited book 'Violent Environments,' how the commodity frontiers followed violent strategies to dispossess land-dependent population from their land and how the dispossession impacted their livelihoods. According to the book, dispossession from land affected the access to resources that constitute the material and cultural basis of livelihoods of the land-dependent population. Particularly, restriction from access to resources hindered the livelihoods of the marginalised group from multiple dimensions, such as material, capability, identity, prestige, and sense of belonging.³⁴⁴ Thus, dispossession from land has resulted in losing their source of income, crops and livestock productivity, and so forth, which are intimately connected with the feeling of social and cultural alienation and insecurity.³⁴⁵ For this reason, Ribot and Peluso (2003) argued that the loss of land cannot be assessed with the loss of property rights only but have to include the loss of property relations too. The struggle to get access to land in the commodity frontiers is not only for the monetary value of the land, but it is also because of property relations, which are normally ignored in land acquisition for capital accumulation.³⁴⁶ The power relation of the contesting groups shapes

³⁴¹Einzenberger, 2016

³⁴²Bene, 2018

³⁴³*ibid*

³⁴⁴Peluso and Watts, 2001; Schlosberg, 2004; Murugesan, 2012

³⁴⁵Bryant, 1992; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Andreucci et al., 2016; Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

³⁴⁶Campbell and Meletis, 2011; Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Andreucci et al., 2016

the access to resources in the commodity frontiers where the powerful group often controls more access to the resources in such a way that ‘socially disadvantaged groups are deprived from getting access.’³⁴⁷

Most importantly, the developmental interventions in the commodity frontiers are being criticised for environmental degradation. Environmental degradation affects the access to resources of the marginalised population through damaging their foundation of livelihoods.³⁴⁸ It restricts the ability of an individual to derive benefits from natural sources. Ribot and Peluso (2003) used ‘the theory of accesses’ as a term to understand how ‘environmental justice’ has been violated in the commodity frontiers through restricting the marginalised group from accessing resources. In their view, the structural and relational means of a society shape the ability to access resources. Since marginalised groups have less structural and relational means, they are able to establish less control over resources. Political ecology identified multidimensional environmental justice failure due to environmental degradation in the commodity frontiers.³⁴⁹ As an example, Baker (2015) showed that the construction of dams in Himachal Pradesh of India damaged the infrastructure of the community managed irrigation system by leaving the canals dry. This greatly hindered the livelihoods of the local population. Similarly, Bebbington (1999) analysed the multidimensional environmental injustice that threatened the livelihoods of the marginalised population, who eventually protested to establish environmental justice. According to him, due to losing the ability to access resources, the marginalised population would become landless, jobless, and homeless and would feel insecure about their future. This creates a feeling of identity and cultural alienation that weakens and limits the capability of the individual.³⁵⁰ For this reason, the dispossession of the marginalised population from their land is not only associated with the loss of livelihoods, rather it is also closely associated with the capability, cultural identity, and the concern of future security, which he identified as ‘*lifeworlds*.’ The marginalised group opposed such dispossession to protect the foundation of their livelihoods and ‘lifeworlds.’

The intervention of development projects in the commodity frontiers in a weak governance system is always contentious as one group supports the project while another group opposes it.

³⁴⁷Bryant, 1992

³⁴⁸Escobar, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Bailey and Bryant, 1997. Due to environmental degradation, the marginalised population lose access to resources by physical dispossession such as eviction from land, being locked out from access to resources and relocation, or by the transformation of the environment, which destroys the foundation of their livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999).

³⁴⁹Schlosberg, 2004; Escobar, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2002

³⁵⁰Marin, 2014

It is important to understand which group is supporting the project and which group is not. Studies have suggested that the reactions of the related stakeholders (dispossessed, non-dispossessed, elite-poor, beneficiary-victim/deprived) towards development projects vary according to the distribution of the economic, social, and environmental costs.³⁵¹ That means how people will react towards a developmental intervention depends on how the project approaches them. Escobar (2006) argued that developmental intervention approaches the local population in three ways - accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by contamination (cost-shifting), and assimilation. According to him, there are fewer chances of conflict in the 'assimilation' approach as the economic, social, and environmental costs are equally distributed among the associate stakeholders. However, the developmental intervention through accumulation by dispossession and accumulation by contamination carries higher risks of conflict as the costs and benefits are distributed disproportionately. Similarly, Hall et al. (2015) also argued that when the land is needed but not labour that creates a 'surplus population' (accumulation by dispossession) who join to protest because they are excluded from getting the benefits of the developmental intervention. On the contrary, people do not protest when they are included in the development project in the form of labour or contracts (assimilation).

The powerless and powerful groups engage in conflict against each other in the commodity frontiers by adopting different strategies to establish their access to resources.³⁵² To get uncontested access to resources and resolve the resistance of the powerless or marginalised group, the investors (company or state) create a nexus with the powerful faction of people of the locality (elites, political leaders) through offering several benefits, such as money, employment, sub-contracts, etc.³⁵³ This kind of nexus, which works as 'project-supporting group, is created to get a 'social licence' to establish the development project. In this nexus, the investors, state, and elite class of the society work for each other to protect their beneficial position, which Feldman and Geisler (2011) termed 'crony capitalism' where the elite class derived most of the benefits of the development project. This is also known as 'elite capture' that takes place from a materialistic interest after subjugating the marginalised community.³⁵⁴ This nexus, in support of the state, broadens and deepens their opportunities to extract resources

³⁵¹Martinez-Alier, 2002

³⁵²Borras, Franco and Wang, 2013; Bebbington, 2012. The actors in the struggle to get access to resources are too many to fit in an analytical category such as class or ethnicity. Because of this problem, political ecology analyses all of these actors to understand their differentiated roles based on their political position in the power spectrum of the society where they belong (Martinez-Alier, 2012).

³⁵³Feldman and Geisler, 2011; Klein, 2007; Ahasan and Gardner, 2016; Huff, Orengo and Ferguson, 2018

³⁵⁴Andreucci et al., 2016

through ‘accumulation by dispossession.’³⁵⁵ In return, this powerful group (mostly elites) uses their social influence and reputation to persuade other people of the society to support the project with ‘imaginary’ promises such as, development project for public purpose, creating employment opportunities, and so forth to legitimise land acquisition for the development project, which Ferguson (1990) describes as ‘anti-politics machine’ about a case in Lesotho. Due to these promises, as Franco, Carranza, and Fernandez (2011) argued, the expansion of commodity frontiers receives support from the local population when there is an absence of government investment for the economic improvement of the locality. Delivering ‘offers’ and ‘promises’ as strategies to get community support in the commodity frontiers is identified by Andreucci et al. (2016) as ‘depoliticization to undermine public debate’ which blurs the concerns of the marginalised group. However, studies showed that the promises that had been offered before the construction of development projects often do not materialise or do not meet the demands of the marginalised population.³⁵⁶ In addition to these strategies to get a social licence, the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus is also found to be proactive in their attempts to control the anti-project protest of the marginalised group.³⁵⁷

In contrast to the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus, the marginalised faction of the society stages resistance against the development projects in the commodity frontiers to establish the equal distribution of economic, social, and environmental costs.³⁵⁸ They are dissatisfied because of unequal distribution of resources due to developmental intervention that negatively impacts their livelihoods.³⁵⁹ Thus, they join in protesting against the development projects to establish access to resources to restore their foundation of livelihoods, which Hall et al. (2015) termed as ‘political reaction from below.’ Because of the fear of retaliation from the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus, the marginalised group also forms alliances among themselves such as the ‘project-opposing group’ to fight against the powerful alliance.³⁶⁰ Thus, the contestation plays out according to the unequal power positions of the contesting groups as both groups are interested in deriving material benefits out of the developmental intervention.³⁶¹ As the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus is interested in getting uncontested access to the resources, services, and goods of the company, they exercise extreme power with the support of the state to control the resistance of the marginalised group. Furthermore, the local elites and political leaders also

³⁵⁵Levien, 2011

³⁵⁶Andreucci et al., 2016

³⁵⁷Feldman and Geisler, 2011; Klein, 20017

³⁵⁸Bene, 2018

³⁵⁹Campbell and Meletis, 2011

³⁶⁰Huff et al., 2018

³⁶¹Bebbington et al., 2008; Andreucci et al., 2016; Gingembre, 2018

have a political pressure to support the project as the government is also part of the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus.³⁶² To respond against this powerful alliance, the marginalised group applies different resistance strategies considering their power positions. To get access to resources, sometimes they appeal to the authority, sometimes they involve in bargaining, and sometimes they join in face-to-face contestations.³⁶³

The primary motive of protest of the marginalised group in the commodity frontiers is to establish access to resources through preventing dispossession and avoiding the burdens of environmental degradation that are rooted in the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, which is called ‘environmental justice.’³⁶⁴ Environmental justice is violated because of the transformation of land use that damages the environment which provides the physical, social, cultural, and economic basis on which the marginalised group’s livelihoods depend.³⁶⁵ From the environmental justice perspective, the marginalised group engages in the environmental movement to protect the foundation of their livelihoods.³⁶⁶ However, political ecology warns us not to be romanticized about the environmental movement of the marginalised population.³⁶⁷ Martinez-Alier (2002) defined the protest of the marginalised group for environmental justice in the commodity frontiers, as ‘the environmentalism of the poor’ because the motive of such protest comes from the material interests as a requirement for their livelihoods rather than sacred reverence for nature.³⁶⁸ From this perspective, the marginalised group engages in protest for ‘ecological distributional justice’ to protect the environment to meet the material demands of their livelihoods. The actors of ‘the environmentalism of the poor’ often use ‘ecological’ or ‘environmental’ idioms in their protests that do not emerge from the community rather they learnt those from the campaigns of external sources, like NGOs or environmental activists. However, the people who practice ‘the environmentalism of the poor’ often do not consciously regard them as ‘environmentalists.’³⁶⁹ According to Martinez-Alier, preservationist environmentalism is a luxury for the poor, which is a capitalist idea that does not question the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits. For the poor people, environmentalism is not for

³⁶²Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

³⁶³Ribot and Peluso, 2003

³⁶⁴Escobar, 2006; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Campbell and Meletis, 2011; Andreucci et al., 2016; Bebbington et al., 2008

³⁶⁵Marin, 2014

³⁶⁶Bebbington, 1999

³⁶⁷Andreucci et al., 2016

³⁶⁸‘The environmentalism of the poor’ is different from the environmental preservationist (cult of wilderness). ‘The environmentalism of the poor’ is not concerned about the rights of other species and future generations of humans, but instead focuses to derive resources to meet their present demands. Thus, ‘the environmentalism of the poor’ is a convenient umbrella term for social concerns and for forms of social action based on a view of the environment as a source of livelihoods (Martinez-Alier, 2002).

³⁶⁹Martinez-Alier, 2002

‘quality of life’ rather it is to retain the environmental resources for their livelihoods, which are associated with their economic, ecological, and cultural life as well. The questions of environmental justice become prominent when the concerns of dispossessed people are rarely taken into account in the schematised technocratic dogmas of ‘development,’ ‘economic development,’ and environmental management’ regarding developmental interventions.³⁷⁰ The dispossessed people become frustrated and feel ‘physically, culturally and economically disconnected’ in the top-down approach of the developmental intervention where they do not find out any place for themselves.³⁷¹ Due to the multi-dimensional threats of environmental justice, the dispossessed population adopt different strategies to defend their access to resources. From the human rights framework, they raise different concerns of environmental justice, such as the equal distribution of resources, recognitions, uninterrupted access to resources, equal participation, freedom of livelihood, and so forth to legitimise their claims.³⁷²

The establishment of environmental justice is interconnected with the power dynamics of a society where the state policies protect the interests of the super-ordinate class. For an example, du Monceau de Bergendal Labarca (2008) in her Ph.D. research showed how the national policies of Chile related to land use plan, natural resource management and protection of the indigenous culture facilitate the Mapuche community to engage in conflict to bring changes in the policies. This community joined to protest against landscape transformation because they did not find out any place for themselves in these policies. Similarly, Scott (1985) stated that the sub-ordinate class joined to protest in a contentious situation to bring two changes in the policies in general, (1) to include their respective claims in the policies (such as rent, tax, prestige) and (2) to claim more opportunities (such as employment, land, respect). From these examples, it has seen that the marginalised group does not protest against the development project or land acquisition in all cases rather they struggle to get access to the opportunities, such as more compensation, employment, and so forth that have emerged due to the inception of the developmental project.³⁷³ The protesters consider it is better to negotiate instead of protesting with the investors if these benefits are offered to them, which is termed ‘assimilation’ by Escobar (2006) where material welfare is taking the broader focus of protest of the marginalised group.³⁷⁴

³⁷⁰Andreucci et al., 2016

³⁷¹Huff et al., 2018; Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

³⁷²Marin, 2014; Adeola, 2016; Schlosberg, 2004; Kosek, 2009

³⁷³Borras and Franco, 2012; Huff et al., 2018

³⁷⁴Foster, 2002

The members of the marginalised group represent heterogeneous characteristics in adopting strategies and setting motives of the resistance based on how their economic, social, and political conditions are impacted by the dispossession. Since the development projects in the commodity frontiers do not impact all members equally, their reactions towards the development project also differ. Thus, the members of the marginalised group join to protest against a development project with different motives and interests and the protest actions play out according to their power positions. In some situations, they even engage in conflict with themselves to get control of resources.³⁷⁵

The dispossessed segment of the population is not unwilling to support a development project in all cases. Studies showed that the people supported a development project if they received a good amount of compensation for their land that had been acquired. Tembhekar (2008) depicted a case of a Special Economic Zone in India where the landowners welcomed land acquisition because of good land price deals and employment opportunities for the landowners. Thus, assimilation of the local people into a development project helps to get community approval. In a case of biofuel expansion in Mexico, Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen (2017) showed that the local people accepted the intervention as it provided economic returns to them and helped them in getting political gains through strengthening their rural organisations. Similarly, in a case of the Philippines, Franco et al. (2011) showed that the landless people, small landholders, and migrant workers rejoiced a developmental intervention in their locality that incorporated them as labour contracts or grower contracts when they did not have any alternative for subsistence. These ‘assimilated’ groups joined to fight against other community members who were opposing the developmental intervention.

As discussed in chapter three, the inception of the coal-fired power plants in Banskali and Rampal brought several opportunities (such as employment, contracts, using the un-used land in the power plant area for cultivation, etc.) and damages (inadequate amount of compensation, misconduct and irregularities, dispossession, loss of the source earning, environmental pollution, etc.) which were not equally distributed among the local people. As a characteristic of ‘commodity frontiers,’ a powerful group of the local people, mostly the elites, political leaders, and their supporters, captured most of these benefits and left the costs and damages to the marginalised group, mostly the dispossessed population. These two groups contested against each other to avail the opportunities or avoid receiving the losses in both power plant

³⁷⁵ Andreucci et al., 2016; Franco, 2014

areas. Thus, a ‘materialistic interest-based motivation’ fuelled this contestation between the ‘deprived’ and ‘beneficiary’ group.

Though the protest of the dispossessed population against the power plant projects in both locations got an environmental face later, however, the motives of the protest were ‘rarely’ environmental in nature. Rather, several materialistic interest-based motivations shaped the dynamics of the protest. On the contrary, the beneficiary group highlighted the issue of ‘necessity of electricity generation for the development of the country’ to legitimise their support to the power plant projects. However, the concerns of getting benefits from the projects convinced them to engage in contestation against the dispossessed population. This chapter analyses the motives of these two contesting groups to understand the multiple realities and reasons for engaging in the contestation around the construction of coal power plants in Rampal and Banskhali.

4.2 Banskhali Power Plant: Materialistic Contestations Between the Supporting and Opposing Group

As discussed in chapter three, to purchase land directly from the landowners in Gondamara, S. Alam applied different strategies that brought both opportunities and damages to the local people. A group of people received most of these opportunities, leaving the damages to the other group. These two groups contested against each other to either avail these opportunities or avoid receiving the damages. In this contestation, the beneficiary faction of the local people acted as the ‘project-supporting group’ while the deprived faction acted as the ‘project-opposing group’ (different types of deprivation have already been discussed in chapter three). As the ‘project-supporting group’ received most of the benefits, they engaged in the contestation to protect the power plant project through resisting the ‘project-opposing group’ in order to continue receiving those benefits. On the contrary, the ‘project-opposing group’ opposed the project as they did not get a chance to avail those opportunities and felt victimised due to the misconduct and irregularities in the land purchase process by S. Alam. However, the motives of the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ changed several times afterwards taking into consideration the responses from the counterpart. For example, at the beginning, they did not protest against the power plant project. Rather, from a materialistic interest, they protested to be ‘assimilated’ into the beneficiary group. Later, the environmental protection point of view

took the central focus of the protest, which helped to turn the motive of the protest from ‘materialistic interest’ into ‘anti-power plant project.’

This materialistic interest-based motive of these two groups to be engaged in the contestation can be seen through analysing the heterogenous opportunistic reactions of the members of these groups towards the power plant project. For instance, some members of the ‘project-opposing group’ later joined the ‘project-supporting group’ when they were offered some benefits (money or employment) by S. Alam. Similarly, some members of the ‘project-supporting group’ joined the ‘project-opposing group’ when their beneficial positions were withdrawn. Thus, the materialistic interest-based motivations shaped the role of the contesting actors. To explain this materialistic motivation, one inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“Who are supporting and who are opposing the power plant project can be identified based on their interest-based reaction towards the power plant project. Some people started protesting against the project as they were not getting benefits from S. Alam like the agents and goons were getting. Some other people worked for S. Alam, but later started protesting against the project since they were terminated from their previous beneficial position. Again, there were some protesters who started supporting the project since they were offered some benefits. [...] Earning money was the main concern. They were with S. Alam when they got a chance to earn money and they were against S. Alam when they did not get that chance.”³⁷⁶

Thus, the whole contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ rotated around the materialistic interest-based motivations of these two groups which have been analysed in the following sections.

4.2.1 The ‘Project-Supporting Group’

As analysed in chapter three, S. Alam took the support of a powerful faction of people (elites, political leaders, influential individuals, and others) of Gondamara to purchase land in exchange of several benefits and opportunities. Some of them were appointed as agents and goons and were offered monthly salaries. In addition, there were several other illegal sources

³⁷⁶A respondent in Gondamara, age 55

to earn money through misconduct and irregularities in the process of land purchase.³⁷⁷ There was also a rumour that S. Alam offered financial benefit to many individuals to get their support to construct the power plant. This powerful faction (a nexus of S. Alam officials, political leaders, influential individuals, agents, and goons) was the ‘project beneficiary group’ as they received various benefits and opportunities offered by S. Alam. This beneficiary group considered the inception of the coal power plant in the locality as an opportunity for them because they were able to earn a good amount of money by working in support of the project. They captured most of the benefits of the project and worked as the ‘project-supporting group.’ They supported the construction of the power plant from multi-dimensional materialistic interests. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“S. Alam appointed the agents and goons to get their help in purchasing land. They were offered monthly salaries. As they were getting financial benefit, they were ready to do anything for S. Alam. They even misbehaved with the local people who were not in support of the project. [...] They supported the project because they were getting benefits from the company.”*³⁷⁸

However, it is important to state that not all the political leaders and influential individuals of the locality who supported the power plant project received material benefits from the company. For instance, the local wings of the ruling political party supported the project as their party supported it. Moreover, as the project was opposed by a leader of the opposition political party, the local political leaders of the ruling party were pressurised from the higher authority of the party to support the project since it is one of the priority development projects of the ruling government. Thus, the power plant project had been counted as a ‘political project’ and the opposition of the project had been confronted politically. As an example, seven days later the killing of 4 protesters, the local member of parliament (from the ruling party) called for a meeting in the power plant area in support of the project and said that the local people who joined in protesting against the power plant project were ‘misguided’ by the opposition political party. He expressed his cordial support to the project. He said in the meeting,

“Some leaders of the other political parties are opposing the power plant project because they are jealous with the development activities of the government. They misguided the local people to protest against the power plant

³⁷⁷The practices of corruption and irregularities in purchasing land such as purchasing land from unauthorised owners, selling other’s land through creating false documents, etc.

³⁷⁸A respondent in Gondamara, age 42

*project. All of those who are playing this brutal game will have to face a trial.*³⁷⁹

This political position of the local political leaders and government towards the power plant project discouraged many others from opposing it. As an example, there were some political leaders and influential individuals in the locality who did not support the power plant project due to the dispossession of the local people. They were worried about environmental pollution as well. However, though they did not support the project, they did not take a stand against it to avoid being targeted by the government as being part of the ‘anti-project group.’

Along with the political leaders, influential individuals, agents, and goons; S. Alam also received support from some landowners, mostly the large landholders who first sold their land to S. Alam taking into consideration that they were financially benefited by selling their land. They believed that they were overpaid in comparison to the valuation of the land in the local market. It was also lucrative to the landowners that S. Alam purchased unproductive, abandoned, and bare land and the land that remains under water with the same price. They took it as an opportunity to sell their unproductive land to S. Alam at a good price. Particularly, the landowners who had problems in the papers of ownership and occupancy of the land, considered it as an opportunity for them to earn money by selling those lands to S. Alam as they were not getting benefits out of them. In addition, the landowners could continue to use their land after selling it as S. Alam did not take occupancy immediately after purchase. These offers created a hive among the landowners who proactively sold their land to S. Alam. One landowner in Gondamara said,

*“At that time [in 2013, 2014], the landowners were desperate to sell their land to S. Alam as they were paying a good price. Besides, S. Alam purchased papers only. They did not take occupancy of the land. For these reasons, the landowners were proactive in selling their land (to S. Alam). Many landowners of our village contacted the S. Alam office to sell their land from their self-motivation. It happened that if the landowners saw someone wearing shirt and pant [formal dress] in the village, they ran behind him to sell their land with the papers of land ownership thinking that he might be an officer of S. Alam. At that time, S. Alam did not need to force anyone to sell their land.”*³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹Somokal (newspaper), April 10, 2016

³⁸⁰A respondent in Gondamara, age 44

In this regard, another landowner in Gondamara said,

*“I had a plot of land in the power plant area that was occupied by a powerful group. I was not getting any benefit out of that land as I failed to get occupancy. I had no strength to fight with them [occupier]. I sold that land to S. Alam. It was good that S. Alam purchased that land. I got a price by selling that land to S. Alam and I did not need to fight with anyone.”*³⁸¹

These landowners supported the power plant project because they were able to sell their land, which was not offering any benefits to them. Though these landowners supported the project, many of them did not resist the ‘project-opposing group’ to the extent that the ‘project-supporting group’ did. Apart from these landowners, S. Alam got support from some members of the community as well. As a characteristic of developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers, to get support from the community, S. Alam promised to the local people that the power plant project would bring economic prosperity for the locals. Most importantly, the local people were promised that the industrial expansion of S. Alam would create employment opportunities for them. Due to these promises, the local people were hoping to get employment in the industries of S. Alam. Some of them believed that the industrial expansion of S. Alam would bring economic prosperity for the locality. S. Alam got support from these groups of people of the community. To describe the promises that were offered by S. Alam, one inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“They [S. Alam officials] came to our bazaar [marketplace] and said that they were going to develop several industries like garments factories in our locality. They promised that the local people would get employment in these industries. [...] One officer said ‘Gondamara will develop like Singapore. No one will need to go abroad to work. These projects will change the locality in a prosperous way.’”*³⁸²

Similarly, S. Alam offered several benefits to the community, such as donations to the institutes like mosques and madrasas. They offered financial support to the community people on

³⁸¹A respondent in Gondamara, age 38

³⁸²A respondent in Gondamara, age 35

occasions, such as marriage and funeral ceremonies. They also offered financial support to needy people. It was seen that the project coordinator of S. Alam was often invited as a special guest or chief guest in the annual programmes of the local schools, sports events, and religious programmes which proved the acceptance of the company by the local people. The project coordinator offered donations wherever he was invited as a guest. Some of the local people considered these acts of S. Alam as good because they were getting financial support. This group of people supported the power plant project to continue getting those benefits.

Photo 4.1: An S. Alam official invited as chief guest in a programme at an educational institute in Gondamara



Source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/rukhedaraobanshkhali/photos/?ref=page_internal; accessed on December 22, 2018

In summary, there were multiple groups of people who acted as the ‘project-supporting group’ to support the power plant project. They were inspired by various materialistic interest-based motivations. For example, the agents, goons, and some large landholders proactively supported the project as they were financially benefited by S. Alam. Some local political leaders also supported the project because either they were financially benefited by S. Alam, or they were pressurised from their political party. At the same time, there were some other political leaders who supported the project to avoid being victimised for opposing it. Similarly, the project also got support from some members of the community as they received financial support from S. Alam. Thus, getting some sort of benefits from the power plant project worked as a motivational force for this ‘project-supporting group’ to support the power plant project.

4.2.2 The ‘Project Opposing Group’

The ‘project-opposing group,’ mostly the landowners and local people of Gondamara, protested against the Banskali Power Plant from multi-dimensional materialistic interest-

based motivations. Analysing the motives of this ‘project-opposing group’ to join the protest over different time periods, it has been seen that the central focus of the protest had changed several times afterwards depending on the materialistic interests-based motivations of the protesters. The following section analyses these various materialistic motives of the ‘project-opposing group’ for protesting against the Banskhali Power Plant.

As S. Alam did not take occupancy of the land immediately after purchase, the landowners, who sold their land, were able to keep using it for cultivation or other purposes. They hoped that they would have the occupancy of the land for a longer duration. However, at the beginning of 2016, the landowners were asked by S. Alam to leave occupancy of the land. In such circumstances, the landowners started protesting against the power plant project from a motivation to keep occupancy of the land or at least to prolong it. Interestingly, S. Alam had been purchasing land in this locality to construct the power plant since 2013 whereas the protest had emerged at the beginning of 2016 under some circumstances, such as (1) deals were signed between the power plant company and the GoB regarding the construction of the power plant project, (2) inauguration of the power plant project by the president of China and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, (3) S. Alam asked the landowners to leave occupancy of the land, (4) construction of a helipad had started in the power plant area for the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to come for inauguration of the project and (5) landfilling activities had started in the power plant area. All these events took place at the beginning of 2016, which delivered a clear message to the landowners and local people that S. Alam was going to construct the power plant project without any delay. Before that, the landowners were not sure about whether the power plant was going to be constructed or not. The landowners who sold their land to S. Alam and expected to keep occupancy of the land forever or for a longer duration became unhappy with the order to leave occupancy of the land. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“S. Alam has been purchasing land in the surrounding areas since 2010. They purchased land but did not take occupancy. The landowners could continue using their land after selling it to S. Alam. The landowners in Gondamara also thought that S. Alam would purchase land in Gondamara but would not take its occupancy. They sold their land to S. Alam with an expectation that they would have occupancy of the land for a longer duration. [...] These landowners became worried when S. Alam ordered them to give up occupancy of the land

at the beginning of 2016. They started protesting against S. Alam because they wanted to keep occupancy of the land."³⁸³

Though there was no legal way to get back or keep occupancy of the land that had been sold to S. Alam, some landowners thought that since S. Alam is a private company, they could get their land back if they could force them to scrap the power plant project from the locality. They had a piece of information that S. Alam bought some plots of land in a nearby area to construct a shipyard in 2010. Later, they did not construct the shipyard and the occupancy of the land remained at the hands of the landowners. The landowners in Gondamara were expecting that a similar thing would happen in their locality if they could force S. Alam to scrap the power plant project through protesting against it. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*"The landowners were thinking that since they had already sold their land to S. Alam, they would not get it back. They thought if they could force S. Alam to scrap the power plant project, they could keep occupancy of the land forever. Many landowners who sold their land to S. Alam joined the protest, keeping this aim in their mind."*³⁸⁴

The protest of the landowners, whose aim was to prolong their occupancy of the land, received support and solidarity from the occupiers of the *khas* land as they were also unhappy because they were evicted from the *khas* land without compensation. These occupiers also joined the protest of the landowners with the aim to keep occupancy of the *khas* land. These protesters also got support from the direct and indirect land-dependent people whose livelihoods were dependent on the land that had been acquired for the power plant project.

Along with the landowners who wanted to keep occupancy of the land, a good number of local people joined the 'project-opposing group' to protest against the power plant project because they wanted to get benefits (such as employment, financial support, etc.) of the project like the 'project-supporting group' was getting. They felt 'deprived' because they were not able to earn money like the agents and goons were earning by working for S. Alam. Through protesting, they attempted to put pressure on the company to assimilate them into the beneficiary group. That means, this group of people did not protest to scrap the power plant project, but rather they protested so that they could get benefits out of it. As S. Alam is a private company, this 'deprived' group thought that they could put pressure on it to assimilate them into the

³⁸³A respondent in Gondamara, age 30

³⁸⁴A respondent in Gondamara, age 38

beneficiary group. For instance, it was remarkable that not all the protesters who protested against the power plant project were landowners from whom S. Alam purchased land. Similarly, not all the protestors had been dispossessed from their land or negatively affected due to the inception of the power plant project. In fact, many of them had no association whatsoever with the power plant project. Thus, they joined the protest not because they were victimised due to land purchase, but to gain the materialistic benefits that had occurred due to the inception of the power plant project. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“A group of people initiated the protest against the power plant project using the emotion of the local people. The aim of this protest was to get money and other benefits from S. Alam. Most of these protesters do not have land in the power plant area. On the contrary, most of the large landholders sold their land to S. Alam from their self-motivation and they supported the project. They [large landholders] did not have any complaint against the power plant project, whereas mostly the non-landowners protested against the project to get benefits from S. Alam.”*³⁸⁵

Most importantly, S. Alam appointed a person from a neighbouring *union* as ‘project coordinator’ to purchase land in Gondamara. It was alleged that this project coordinator appointed his relatives and his fellow villagers to work for the power plant project, and that these people became financially rich in a short space of time. They made luxurious houses in their villages, which can be seen from the road on the way to Gondamara. The office of the power plant project was also set up in the project coordinator’s village. The inhabitants of Gondamara became unhappy to see that the people from other *unions* were earning a good amount of money by working for the power plant project that was going to be constructed on their land. They expected that the local people would be given priority in getting employment in the project as it was promised by S. Alam during the inception of the project. They felt betrayed and deprived since the people from other *unions* got employment in the project, leaving them unemployed. They joined the protest demanding to appoint all workers from the power plant area.³⁸⁶ In this regard, one inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“The power plant project is being built on our land. We were dispossessed from our cultivable land to make space for the project. However, the workers for the

³⁸⁵A respondent in Gondamara, age 42

³⁸⁶Most of the construction works in the project were done by machines. Thus, the project required very few workers.

project were appointed from his [project coordinator] village. S. Alam's office was also set up in his village. They were taking all the benefits out of the project, leaving many of us unemployed. We did not support this. We thought it was an injustice to us. We protested against this injustice."³⁸⁷

It was also alleged that S. Alam successfully convinced several protesters to change their side by offering money and other benefits. There were several examples that S. Alam offered employment in its industries to some protesters who were very vocal against the project. Similarly, some protesters who were proactive in the protest were given money. As a result, these protesters became inactive in the protest later. After being motivated from these examples, some other protesters also attempted to find out ways to try and get those benefits from S. Alam. For instance, there were a few young people's sporting clubs in the villages. They occasionally organised sports events. These clubs claimed donations from S. Alam on several occasions. The members of these clubs started protesting against the power plant project when they did not get an expected amount of donation. However, they remained silent when they got their expected amount of donation. To explain this, one inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*"S. Alam was ready to pay (money) the protesters to bring them in their support. They tried to convince them to change their side by offering money and other benefits. [...] It was a game of money. People only needed to trap S. Alam to ask for money. Many protesters used this technique and got money and changed their side. Thus, the target to get benefits from S. Alam was the main concern for some protesters to join the protest. However, after the inclusion of the environmental protection point of view, an innumerable number of people suddenly joined the protest. In that situation, the protest went out of the control of S. Alam and the leader of the protest."*³⁸⁸

Furthermore, most of the land that had been acquired for the power plant project was used for salt production. There were a few syndicates associated with salt production, processing, and marketing (salt producers, wage labourers, chainmen, businessmen, and manufacturers etc.). There was a rumour that these salt business-centric syndicates patronised the people who were associated with salt production, processing, and marketing to protest against the power plant

³⁸⁷A respondent in Gondamara, age 55

³⁸⁸A respondent in Gondamara, age 40

“We joined the protest when we came to know that the coal-fired power plant would hamper the environment of our locality. We came to know that we would not be able to cultivate in our land and we could not breathe if this power plant starts electricity generation. For these reasons, we asked S. Alam to construct any other project except the coal power plant in the acquired land. We said that we would give more land to S. Alam and work without wage if they come with other industries like garments factories or EPZ. We said that we would not accept the coal power plant in our locality.”³⁹²

Later, the ‘project-opposing group’ staged robust protest programmes against the power plant project on a regular basis from the environmental protection point of view, where they got massive support from people of the surrounding areas who were not even associated with the land-related issues. Even though initially it seemed that local people had joined the protest because of concerns over the environmental protection, the deeper analysis showed that the demands made by the leaders of the protest were often made with the view to get benefits from S. Alam, meaning that the ‘environmental concerns’ were used as a mask to get sympathy from the local people to pressurise the company to fulfil their material demands. As an example, the local people were informed about environmental pollution because of the coal-fired power plant from the environmental campaigns organised by local students. However, the demands that the student campaigners raised in their demonstration programmes were rarely environmental in nature. For example, they demanded (1) to ensure sufficient/appropriate compensation or price for land, (2) to acquire land by the government instead of a private company,³⁹³ (3) to shift the power plant project to the *khas* land to the west of Gondamara to keep private land out of the acquisition, and (4) to ensure that the power plant would not harm the environment by installing advanced technology. Analysing these demands, it has seen that the concerns of environmental protection were given less importance. Rather, they included the concerns of ‘environmental protection’ to strengthen their demands that were related to compensation or land price when they came to know that the government was determined enough to construct the power plant at the pre-decided location. Similarly, at the end, the leader of the ‘project-opposing group’ gave up protesting after initiating a negotiation with S. Alam that was mediated by the Bangladesh Navy. To give up the protest, the leader placed twelve-

³⁹²A respondent in Gondamara, age 45

³⁹³ They raised this demand since they realised that they would get a higher amount of compensation than the S. Alam offered price if the government acquired land according to the land acquisition act (compensation is three times of the land value in the local market).

point demand to S. Alam to fulfil. These demands were mostly compensation-related and were rarely to ensure the protection of the environment. One activist of the students' campaign said,

*“We wanted that the landowners would get some money for their survival. At that time, the land price was arbitrary. Some landowners were getting three hundred thousand BDTK and some others were getting eight hundred thousand BDTK depending on the bargaining capacity of the landowner. We wanted to develop a system by which everyone would get an adequate amount of compensation for their land. Similarly, we also demanded to adopt environmental protection measures to protect the locality from the pollution of the coal power plant.”*³⁹⁴

In summary, the ‘project-opposing group’ protested against the power plant project from multidimensional materialistic interest-based motivations, such as prolonging occupancy of the land that they had sold to S. Alam, keeping occupancy of *khas* land, and getting employment in the project to earn money. From these opportunistic motivations, they attempted to create pressure on the company through protesting against the project to fulfil their expectations. As a result of these opportunistic motivations, it was not an anti-power plant protest at the initial stage. They did not raise the demand to scrap the power plant project, rather they attempted to prolong the construction of the power plant to keep the acquired land in their occupancy or be assimilated into the beneficiary group like the agents and goons. However, the motives of the protest changed several times afterwards. At the end, the materialistic interest-based protest had turned into an ‘anti-power plant protest’ after the inclusion of the environmental protection point of view. At this stage, the protesters protested to scrap the power plant project. However, the demands raised by the protesters were rarely related to environmental protection, but rather those were mostly related to getting financial benefit from the company. That means, they used the concern of ‘environmental protection’ as a mask to trap the company to comply with their materialistic demands. However, after the inclusion of the environmental concern, the protest got support from a good number of people who joined the protest from the sole reason to protect the environment.

³⁹⁴A respondent in Gondamara, age 28

4.2.3 Changes in Position: ‘Project-Opposing Group’ Turned into ‘Project-Supporting group’ and Vice-Versa

From the discussion in the previous sections, it has seen that the ‘project-opposing group’ protested against the Banskhali Power Plant based on multiple materialistic interest-based motivations and they had been confronted by the ‘project-supporting group.’ The contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ centred around the materialistic interest-based motivations, which can be analysed through tracking the role of Kabir, the leader of the ‘project-opposing group.’ In 2013, Kabir started protesting against the land purchase by S. Alam because of concerns over land price. Later, in 2016, he protested against the power plant project from the environmental protection point of view. However, at the beginning of 2017, Kabir gave up protesting after initiating a negotiation with S. Alam. According to the negotiation, S. Alam agreed to fulfil the twelve-point demand raised by Kabir on behalf of the protesters. After the negotiation had made, Kabir ended the protest and promised to ‘support’ the project and publicly asked the landowners to sell their land to S. Alam. Later, he participated in the *union parishad* election held in 2017 and got elected as chairman. Afterwards, he developed a good relationship with S. Alam and helped them to overcome whenever they faced challenges in the power plant area. In return, S. Alam withdrew the positions of the project coordinator, agents, and goons. On the contrary, the agents and goons, later, started opposing the power plant project since they had been withdrawn from the beneficial positions.

Regarding this changed position, several controversies spread among the local people about the motive of Kabir to join the protest. One group of people, mostly the ‘project-supporting group,’ felt that Kabir capitalised the protest of the local people to gain personal benefits, such as winning the *union parishad* election, getting financial benefit from S. Alam, and so forth. They believed that Kabir used the emotion of the local people to trap S. Alam to gain personal benefits for himself. The role of Kabir in the protest also corroborates this claim. Analysing the life-circle of the protest, it has seen that Kabir started protesting against land purchase from the very beginning (in 2013) over the concern of ‘inadequate’ land price. However, at that time, he did not get support from the landowners. Particularly, the large landholders were against him as they were interested in selling their land. Afterwards, he was not seen in the protest for the next two years (2014 and 2015) and again started protesting at the beginning of 2016. He was not seen opposing the power plant project during this interim period, even he was not seen

in the locality. In this interval, S. Alam purchased most of the land that they required. However, he joined the protest in 2016 when the landowners and local people were organised by themselves to protest against the project and engaged in clashes with the ‘project-supporting group’ on a regular basis. In this situation, the local protesters asked for Kabir’s support when some protesters got arrested by police in charge of a case filed by S. Alam. At that point of time, Kabir actively involved himself in the protest again from the concern over ‘environmental protection.’ Thus, it was controversial to some people why Kabir withdrew himself from the protest in 2014 and 2015 and why he joined the protest again in 2016.

According to some of the local people, Kabir withdrew himself from the protest in 2014 and 2015 because he was ‘managed’ by S. Alam. This allegation spread because Kabir did not protest against the project and was not seen in the locality in those two years. Even, he did not support the environmental campaigns organised by the local students and the local protesters who engaged in clashes with the ‘project-supporting group’ on a regular basis. Some others believed that Kabir received around ten million BDTK from S. Alam to help them in purchasing land. S. Alam also promoted this controversy by fitting posters and distributing leaflets in the villages claiming that Kabir received money from the company in the name of helping the poor people, developing of mosques and madrasas, and helping the company to purchase land.³⁹⁵ As a prove of payment of the money, bank cheque numbers were also written in those posters and leaflets. Furthermore, on several occasions, S. Alam officials openly claimed that Kabir received money from the company to help them to construct the power plant in Gondamara. A good number of local people believed this allegation against Kabir considering his position in 2014 and 2015. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“I heard that S. Alam paid more than ten million BDTK to Kabir to withdraw him from the protest against the power plant project. It means he was sold to S. Alam. At that time [in 2014-2015], people were selling their land to S. Alam. Kabir did not forbid them to sell their land as he was ‘managed’ by S. Alam. Similarly, S. Alam paid everyone whoever sought against the power plant project. Kabir was not an exception.”*³⁹⁶

There are some other people who believed that Kabir might had received money from S. Alam, but they supported him because, according to them, he did not work against the interests of the

³⁹⁵Bhorer Kagoj, April 9, 2016

³⁹⁶A respondent in Gondamara, age 40

local people. In their view, though he received money, he did not help S. Alam to purchase land in Gondamara and did not do anything against the local protesters. However, Kabir refused the allegation of receiving money from S. Alam. He argued that S. Alam offered him money, but he did not take it. Again, he claimed that he was in support of the local people's protest for the entire time. Speaking on remaining silent in 2014 and 2015, he said that he was frustrated since the landowners sold their land to without listening to his request. To challenge the allegation against him, Kabir said,

“S. Alam fitted some posters claiming that I received money from them to support them in purchasing land in Gondamara. It is not true. If it is true, then why are they not going to the court? They mentioned bank cheque numbers on those posters. So, it is easy for them to prove that I received money from the company. They are not going to the court, which proves that I did not receive money. It is true that they offered me money, but I did not take it.”³⁹⁷

Kabir was elected as *union parishad* chairman in the election held on 16 April 2017 where he got around 12,000 votes out of a total of around 25,000 votes.³⁹⁸ The ‘project-supporting group’ alleged that Kabir joined the protest against the power plant project at the beginning of 2016 targeting the forthcoming *union parishad* election. He was alleged for using the emotion of the local people through joining the protest just before the election was held when he knew that the local people were against the power plant project. Also, he was accused to support the protest of the local people to get their votes in the election. At that time, Kabir was in a politically vulnerable position as he was suspended from his political party (BNP) because of participating in the *upazila parishad* election as a rebel candidate since his party did not nominate him as a party candidate to participate in the said election. However, the suspension was withdrawn later, and he was nominated as a party candidate to participate in the Gondamara *union parishad* election. Some of the local people also supported this allegation that Kabir used the protest as a strategy to win the election by relating his role in 2014 and 2015 and joining the protest just before the election was held. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“He (Kabir) disappeared himself for two years after forbidding the landowners to sell their land to S. Alam. Suddenly he joined the protest when the union

³⁹⁷A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

³⁹⁸The Daily Sangram (newspaper), May 1, 2017. The original schedule of the election was June 4, 2016.

parishad election was forthcoming. He joined the protest because he knew that the local people were against the project. He supported the protest to get the vote of the protesters. That means, it was a pre-planned game of Kabir to engage in the protest targeting to win the forthcoming election.”³⁹⁹

However, some protesters disagreed with the allegation that Kabir used the protest as a strategy to win the election. In their view, Kabir is a popular political leader in the locality who was also elected as chairman in the previous term (in 2003). Thus, they think that Kabir did not need to play tricks to win the *union parishad* election as he was popular to the local people. To some other protesters, if Kabir had an ill intention with the protest, though they supported his position as he was the only political leader who stood with the demands of the local people. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

*“Kabir was the only political leader who supported our protest. We did not care about his ill-intentions. He is famous in the locality. He did not need to do anything to be elected as chairman in this union parishad. He had been elected as chairman before. [...] During the election campaigns, he promised that if he would get elected as chairman of the union parishad, S. Alam would have to comply with all his demands. They would have to make an agreement that they would not do anything that would pollute the environment of the locality. Otherwise, he would not let them construct the power plant.”*⁴⁰⁰

Kabir ended the protest under a ‘negotiation’ with S. Alam. In that negotiation, he placed a twelve-point demand to S. Alam to fulfil based on which he promised to ‘work in support of the project’ after ending up the protest (1st February 2017). After the negotiation had made, he turned into a ‘supporter’ of the project. He was seen to lead a rally welcoming the Chinese president in Bangladesh to inaugurate the power plant project. Afterwards, Kabir was successful in negotiating with S. Alam on various concerns of the local people, such as increasing the land price, withdrawal of the project coordinator, agents, goons, and so forth. After this change in stance, Kabir asked the landowners to sell their land to S. Alam at the increased price. On one occasion, Kabir urged the landowners,

³⁹⁹A respondent in Gondamara, age 50

⁴⁰⁰A respondent in Gondamara, age 45

“Sell your land to S. Alam at the increased price. Nobody would purchase your land even at a minimum price when S. Alam would stop purchasing land in the locality.”⁴⁰¹

There were various reactions of the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ regarding Kabir’s negotiation with S. Alam and ending up the protest. Some protesters supported that Kabir ended the protest through development of a negotiation with S. Alam as they thought there was no way left for him to escape from the protest. They mentioned that it was gradually becoming difficult for Kabir to continue protesting due to the suppressive treatment from the law-enforcing agencies. He was living the life of a fugitive as several cases were filed against him and the police raided his home to arrest him on a daily basis. There was a rumour that the police might put him into ‘cross-fire’ if they could arrest him.⁴⁰² Furthermore, the protesters who guarded Kabir were leaving his side as they needed to find out an earning. In such circumstances, according to some protesters, Kabir was becoming less protected, and this forced him to negotiate with S. Alam to give up the protest. One inhabitant in Gondamara said,

“What could Kabir do except go for a negotiation with S. Alam to give up the protest? All political leaders were against him. The government was against him. Several cases were filed against him. He was living the life of a fugitive and would be arrested at any time. He could not stay even a single day in his home for five to six months. He had tremendous pressure from the police to surrender himself. Besides, the protesters who were guarding him left his side. How many days could they guard him? They had their own business. So, he [Kabir] was right to go for the negotiation to give up the protest. Otherwise, he would be killed by the police.”⁴⁰³

However, many protesters did not support the ‘negotiation’ that was developed between Kabir and S. Alam. It was surprising for some protesters that Kabir ended the protest and promised to work in ‘support of the project.’ They considered it as a betrayal of Kabir to the protesters who followed him to oppose the power plant project. The protesters, who were protesting from the environmental protection point of view, were not convinced with the terms of the negotiation. They were not ready to accept the power plant under any condition. In their view,

⁴⁰¹ A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

⁴⁰² ‘Crossfire’ refers to extra-judicial killing under the custody of the law-enforcing agencies.

⁴⁰³ A respondent in Gondamara, age 58

Kabir was either forced or was offered benefits to go for the negotiation to give up protesting. However, Kabir considers the ‘negotiation’ as a strategy of the protest. He said,

*“I am against this power plant project till now [May 2018]. I ended the protest based on my 12-point demand. They [S. Alam] promised that they would comply with these demands. I understand that the environmental pollution due to the coal power plant would not be too much if they comply with my demands. In that case, I have no problem with the power plant project. But if they do not comply with my demands in the future, I will resume the protest again.”*⁴⁰⁴

Photo 4.3: A clash between the supporting and opposing groups⁴⁰⁵



The ‘project-supporting group’ created an obstacle to the negotiation meeting that was held between the ‘project-opposing group’ and S. Alam. Both groups engaged in a clash when the ‘project-supporting group’ attempted to postpone the negotiation meeting as they thought that they would be removed from their beneficial position if the negotiation meeting was held. They were worried that there would be no role remaining for them if the ‘project-opposing group’ and S. Alam could reach an agreement. They wanted to keep the conflict between the ‘project-opposing group’ and S. Alam unsolved in order to keep receiving benefits out of that. One died and several others were wounded in that clash between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’. After resolving the conflict between the ‘project-opposing group’ and S. Alam based on the terms of negotiation, the agents and goons were removed from their

⁴⁰⁴ A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

⁴⁰⁵ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/02/02/clash-power-plant-dead-injured/>; accessed on October 25, 2018

previous role as beneficiaries. Thus, they started opposing the power plant project like the ‘project-opposing group’ did before. They were demanding to sustain their role in the project. They created several disturbances in the construction works of the power plant project as well. However, they could not make any impact by protesting against the project as they did not have public support.

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ around the construction of the Banskali Power Plant was created based on the concerns of getting materialistic benefits. Both groups engaged in the contestation to derive the material benefits that had occurred due to the inception of the coal-fired power plant. Though the materialistic interest-based protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ got an environmental face later, their main concern was to derive benefits from the project by using the protest as a trap. They eventually ended the protest and turned into ‘project-supporting group’ after coming up to a negotiation with S. Alam to comply with their demands which were mostly related to compensation and employment. On the contrary, the ‘project-supporting group’ was proactive in confronting the ‘project-opposing group’ to sustain their beneficial position. As a result of the negotiation, when the agents and goons were removed from their beneficial positions, they turned into ‘project-opposing group’ and started protesting against the power plant project to put pressure on the company to protect their previous beneficial positions.

4.3 Rampal Power Plant: Materialistic Contestations Between the Supporting and Opposing Groups

The contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ at the Rampal Power Plant interplayed differently from the case in Banskali. There were, however, some similarities. For example, like the Banskali Power Plant, the inception of the Rampal Power Plant also brought several opportunities and damages for the local people. The local people competed against each other to avail those opportunities or avoid receiving those damages. The group of people who received most of the benefits and opportunities were part of the ‘project-supporting group’ whereas the deprived and vulnerable group were part of the ‘project-opposing group.’ The ‘project-opposing group,’ mainly the dispossessed landowners and land-dependent wage labourers, was forced to join the protest because the dispossession from land negatively impacted their livelihoods. They wanted to minimise their losses through

protesting against the project. On the contrary, the ‘project-supporting group,’ mainly the political leaders of the local wings of the ruling political party and their supporters, proactively supported the project because they were ‘ordered’ to do so from the higher authority of their party, and they also wanted to show their loyalty to the party through supporting the power plant project. In addition, this ‘project-supporting group’ was financially benefited because they could use the unused land of the power plant project (details discussed in chapter three). Thus, these two groups engaged in a contestation from a materialistic interest point of view, similar to the situation in Banskali, as discussed in the previous sections. However, as the process of land acquisition was different from Banskali, the materialistic interest-based contestation between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ worked out differently in Rampal. This has been analysed in the following sections.

4.3.1 The ‘Project-Opposing Group’

As discussed in chapter three, the landowners and land-dependent wage labourers who formed the ‘project-opposing group,’ were victimised in several ways due to being dispossessed from their land, which was acquired to construct the Rampal Power Plant. The ‘project-opposing group’ initially protested against the land acquisition to protect their arable land to restore their traditional way of livelihoods. Later, they protested from the environmental protection point of view, particularly to protect the Sundarbans forest from the pollution of the power plant. However, the motives of the ‘project-opposing group’ to join the protest had changed over time based on their materialistic interest-based motivations and as a response to the reaction of their counterparts (mainly the ‘project-supporting group’). The following section analyses these various materialistic motives of the landowners and land-dependent people to protest against the Rampal Power Plant.

At the very early stage, the ‘project-opposing group’ demanded the relocation of the power plant project from its current location to get their land back to sustain their traditional livelihoods. To rationalise the relocation of the power plant, they mostly focussed on the productivity of the acquired land. They argued that the acquired land was the main source of earning for many landowners and land-dependent wage labourers. Considering the productivity of the land, the ‘project-opposing group’ argued for relocating the power plant to the *khas* land in the nearby area to keep the private land out of the acquisition. More importantly, the occupiers and the users of the *khas* land that had been acquired for the power plant emphasised

the relocation of the power plant from its current location so that they could continue to keep occupancy of these lands. At this stage, the protesters did not concentrate on demanding for increased compensation or environmental protection due to the coal-fired power plant.

However, the demand to relocate the power plant had been refused, and the government was determined to construct the power plant at the pre-decided location. After being refused to relocate the power plant, the protesters started demanding to increase the amount of compensation for land. The amount of compensation that was offered to the landowners was insufficient to restore their livelihoods (details discussed in chapter three). In this situation, the landowners communicated with the political leaders, influential individuals of the locality and government officials, to whom they requested to increase the amount of compensation. They were asking for an amount of compensation which is sufficient to purchase an equivalent size of land in the surrounding areas. However, the 'project-opposing group' was unsuccessful to increase the amount of compensation. At this stage, it was not an 'anti-Rampal Power Plant' protest, rather they were seeking benefits out of the project, such as getting land back, increasing the amount of compensation, using the unused land, and getting employment in the power plant project. At the later stage, the protesters started protesting against the power plant project from the environmental protection point of view and turned the protest into 'anti-Rampal Power Plant. Later, the protesters included the concern of 'protection of the Sundarbans' as an issue in the protest that turned the 'anti-Rampal Power Plant protest' into 'protest for protection of the Sundarbans.' They used environmental idioms in their protest actions (which they learnt from the environmental activists) to get external support to strengthen their respective claims to relocate the power plant from its current location to save the Sundarbans.

Though the protesters included the environmental protection point of view in the protest, their demands were 'rarely' environmental in nature. Rather, their demands were mostly associated to gain material benefits. For instance, on several occasions, the protesters suggested relocating the power plant to the *khas* land which is located within 3-4 kilometres of its current location. The construction of a coal power plant at that location would have the same impact on the Sundarbans and surrounding areas. This means, the 'protection of the Sundarbans' was not the main concern of the protesters behind demanding for relocation of the power plant. These kinds of claims prove that the concern of the 'environmental protection' was not the primary concern of the protesters. Rather, they were more interested to get their land back by relocation of the power plant to restore their traditional livelihoods. They used the concerns of 'environmental

protection’ or ‘protection of the Sundarbans forest’ as a mask to get sympathy and support from the external forces to create pressure on the government to scrap or relocate the power plant to get their land back. One dispossessed landowner of the Rampal Power Plant area said,

“We understood that we could not protest for land as the government has full right to acquire anyone’s land. It is illegal to protest for land when the government acquires it. We included the ‘environment issues’ to sustain the protest. Otherwise, we could not stand on the road. The protest had extended from national to international levels because of the inclusion of the environmental issues. What do we know about the environmental pollution due to the coal power plant? I do not know anything. The main target of our protest was to get our land back in any way.”⁴⁰⁶

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ had started from multidimensional materialistic interest-based motivations. At the earlier stage, they did not raise the demand to scrap the power plant. Rather, they were seeking benefits out of it. Thus, it was not an ‘anti-Rampal Power Plant’ protest at this stage. However, the protest turned into ‘anti-Rampal Power Plant’ after the inclusion of the ‘environmental concern’ when their materialistic interest-based protest failed to get success. Finally, they only focused on the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ to get support from the masses. Though they included the ‘environmental concern’ in their protest to give it an ‘environmental face,’ their main target was to get their land back through scrapping the power plant.

4.3.2 The ‘Project-Supporting Group’

The protest actions of the ‘project-opposing group’ against the Rampal Power Plant were confronted by the ‘project-supporting group.’ Several materialistic interest-based motivations helped the ‘project-supporting group’ to play an active role to support the power plant project through resisting the ‘project-opposing group.’ The following section analyses these various materialistic interest-based motives of the ‘project-supporting group’ to support the Rampal Power Plant.

Initially, the ‘project-supporting group,’ mainly the local political leaders of the ruling party and their supporters, was ordered from the higher authority of the party to remove all obstacles

⁴⁰⁶A respondent in Rampal, age 65

to construct the power plant as it was one of the priority projects of the ruling government. Furthermore, as the project was criticised nationally and internationally from the concerns over environmental pollution, the government was very proactive to resist the local people's protests. The government took the support of the local political wings to resist the local people's protests and restrict the development of bridging between the local protesters and national level environmental activists. Thus, the 'project-supporting group' was pressurised from the top of the ruling party to resolve the local people's resistance. Along with the order from the top of the party, the local political leaders were proactive to support the power plant project to show their loyalty to the party which can be understood from the wider political practices of the country. They were prompted to support the project to get the attention of the central leaders to get good positions in the party.

Besides this political intention, some of these political leaders and their supporters also believed that the power plant project would bring economic prosperity for the locality. They thought that an industrial expansion would take place around the power plant, which would create employment opportunities for the local people as it was promised by the power plant development authority, political leaders, and government officials on several occasions. In addition, these local leaders and their supporters got access to use the land that remained unused in the power plant area. They used this land for shrimp farming, through which they were financially benefitted (details discussed in chapter three). This opportunity to use the unused land to gain financial benefit motivated the local leaders to evict the landowners from their land.

From these materialistic motivations, the leaders, supporters, and activists of the local political wings of the ruling party were proactive to resist the local people's protest with the support of the law-enforcing agencies. They were successful in resisting the local people's protest through different suppressive tactics, such as threatening, scolding, beating, filing fabricated cases, helping police in arresting the accused, and so forth. About the suppressive attitude of the 'project-supporting group' towards the 'project-opposing group,' one local protester in Rampal said,

"I attended a meeting that was called by the local political leaders. One leader said in the meeting, 'I brought this project to this locality to create economic opportunities for the local people. Who are those people asking to scrap the power plant from the locality? The power plant will not be scrapped, and the

compensation will not be increased. This is a priority project of our government. The power plant will be constructed at the pre-decided location. I will see who will protest against it.''⁴⁰⁷

From the discussions above, it has been seen that the 'project-supporting group' proactively resisted the protest of the 'project-opposing group' from various materialistic reasons, such as showing loyalty to their political party to get a better position through supporting the Rampal Power Plant project. In addition, the opportunity to get financial benefits by using the unused land in the power plant area also worked as an incentive for them to be ruthless to resolve the protest of the 'project-supporting group.' Thus, the overall contestation between the 'project-supporting group' and the 'project-opposing group' centred around various materialistic interest-based motivations.

4.4 Conclusion: Contestations Around Costs and Benefits

In the public domain, the protests of the 'project-opposing group' in Banskhal and Rampal have been seen as they were protesting from the concerns over environmental pollution because of the coal-fired power plant in their locality. However, a deeper analysis shows that the protests in these both places were focused on various materialistic aspects such as getting land back, increasing compensation, getting employment, and so forth. This ties in with Martinez-Alier (2002), who said that the 'environmentalism of the poor' is very different from the 'conservationist movement' of the environmental activists. As the interventions of the coal-fired power plant in both Rampal and Banskhal bear the characteristics of the 'commodity frontiers,' the reactions towards these interventions were not the same from all members of the society. As commodity frontiers, the costs and benefits of these developmental interventions were disproportionately distributed. The powerful group of the society, mainly the political leaders, elites and their fellow supporters emerged as the 'beneficiary group' who captured most of the benefits of these developmental interventions. They developed a nexus with the power plant development authorities and together worked as the 'project-supporting group' to get a social license to construct the power plant project and control the resistance of the 'project-opposing group.' On the contrary, the marginalised group, mainly the landowners and land-dependent population, became vulnerable due to eviction from their land, which negatively impacted their traditional foundations of livelihoods. This is also connected with

⁴⁰⁷A respondent in Rampal, age 65

their cultural and social insecurity.⁴⁰⁸ This dispossessed population was forced to form the ‘project-opposing group’ to protest against the power plant project from the feeling of alienation from their property rights and property relations. From the lens of ‘the environmentalism of the poor,’ it has seen that the target of the protest of the dispossessed population kept changing over time due to emerging different types of materialistic motivations in different circumstances, such as getting employment, compensation, and so forth. Thus, the protest of the dispossessed population was not always against the project, rather it was also to include them into the beneficiary group of the project, which Escobar (2006) describes as ‘assimilation’ in the developmental intervention.

Thus, the contestation between these two groups centred around materialistic interest-based motivations. For example, the ‘beneficiary’ group supported the power plant projects to continue getting benefits and the ‘deprived’ or ‘marginalised’ group created obstacles to the projects to create pressure on the government or power plant development authorities to include them into the beneficiary group. In the case of Banskhali, the ‘project-opposing group’ turned into the ‘project-supporting group’ and vice versa which shows the materialistic interest-based motivations behind the contestation between these two contesting groups. However, the protesters included the ‘environmental concern’ as an issue in the protest to get support from the masses and national and international attention. Though the protesters were influenced by the national level environmental activists to include the ‘environmental idioms’ in their protest, their demands were rarely environmental in nature, but rather focused on trying to protect their economic livelihoods under the ‘environmental mask’ through rejecting the land use change.

⁴⁰⁸Ribot and Peluso, 2003

Chapter Five

Interface of Developmental Intervention: Protest Strategies of Dispossessed People

*Four protesters got killed since the police fired on the protesters without any provocation.*⁴⁰⁹

*The police were attacked by the protesters. They [the police] were compelled to fire on the protesters to save themselves.*⁴¹⁰

5.1 Introduction: Protest Strategies Against Dispossession from Land

Rather than acting as ‘passive victim,’ the marginalised population who are expelled from their land due to large-scale land acquisition in the commodity frontiers engage in protesting against the dispossession to protect their land as a foundation of their livelihoods.⁴¹¹ According to Schneider (2011), rather than a few exceptions, the dispossessed population represent as a ‘powerful and potentially transformative agent’ who form resistance to establish access to resources to restore their livelihoods. Hall et al. (2015) also identified the agency of the dispossessed population, which they defined as ‘reaction from below,’ against the transformation of land use patterns in the commodity frontiers that destroy their traditional way of living. Through the ‘reaction from below,’ the dispossessed population advocate for a counter-hegemony against the capitalist-developmental hegemony of the government or corporate in the commodity frontiers. The ‘reaction from below’ demands a structural change in society.⁴¹² The dispossessed population adopt multi-dimensional protest strategies to express their ‘reaction from below’ which depicts their wider range of reactions towards the commodity frontiers. They join to protest against large-scale land acquisition from different interest-based motivations. For instance, all of them do not protest against land acquisition. Rather some of them protest to ‘assimilate’ or ‘capture’ the new opportunities (employment, sub-contracts, and

⁴⁰⁹A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

⁴¹⁰A comment made by an additional superintendent of police; published in The Daily Star, April 6, 2016

⁴¹¹White, Borras, Hall, Scoones and Wolford, 2012

⁴¹²Escobar, 2008

so forth) that occur due to the developmental intervention.⁴¹³ However, the protest strategies of the dispossessed population get shaped according to the political and cultural practices of the society where they belong. How the dispossessed community is affected as a result of the new developmental interventions shapes the nature of conflict in the commodity frontiers. Borrás and Franco (2013) categorised three types of conflicts in the commodity frontiers such as poor versus corporate/landlords, poor versus state, and poor versus poor.

The dispossessed population in the commodity frontiers does not automatically get organised to protest against land acquisition. There are several factors and conditions that trigger and shape the ‘reaction from below,’ such as unity among the protesters, leadership, external support, and determination to achieve a common goal.⁴¹⁴ Ming-sho Ho (2005) explained that the presence of leadership helps to create awareness, consciousness of deprivation, formulates the goals of the protest, and frames the protest strategies. The protest gets an organisational form under the presence of leadership, who motivates others to join the protest. For instance, Samina Luthfa (2011) showed in her work on the Phulbari movement in Bangladesh that the local leaders motivated the local protesters to join the protest against the open-pit coal mining project. Also, Anthony Oliver Smith (2006) showed that along with the interest-motivated people, other people who were not affected due to developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers also joined the protest as they were inspired by the leader of the protest.

The protest strategies of the marginalised population in the commodity frontiers represent a heterogeneous character, such as individual-collective, organised-unorganised, with leader-without leader, with specific goal-without specific goal, and so forth. Schneider (2011) categorised the protest strategies of the marginalised population such as unplanned and indirect (covert) and organised and direct advocacy-based (overt). The protest strategies are shaped based on the social structure, strength and defensive capacity of the protesters.⁴¹⁵ For example, in a situation when the marginalised population is less powerful than their counterpart (state, corporate or elite), they are more likely to adopt the covert form of protest strategy as there is a risk of being targeted by the dominant group and fear of being economically marginalised.⁴¹⁶ To analyse the covert form of resistance, most of the scholars adopted James Scott’s (1985) concept of ‘everyday form of peasant resistance,’ which he defined as “*the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents, and*

⁴¹³Hall et al., 2015

⁴¹⁴*ibid*

⁴¹⁵Cited in Ndi, 2017

⁴¹⁶Jhuang, 2018

interest from them [...] They require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (p. 29). In the context of land grabbing in Malaysia, Scott showed that the marginalised groups expressed their resistance through their daily activities as ‘weapons of the weak,’ such as “foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct confrontation with authority or with elite norms [...]” (p. 30). This covert form of resistance is embedded in the daily life activities of the subordinate group that expresses through individual and collective behaviour, material and symbolic form, and successful and unsuccessful actions.⁴¹⁷

However, Adnan (2007) showed in a case of Bangladesh that resistance may easily transform from covert to overt or vice versa as a response to circumstances. That means the covert form of resistance can turn into the overt form of risky and direct contestation through “*cross the threshold of fear and insecurity*” (p. 214) when the protesters feel that the covert form of resistance is not enough to put pressure on the counterparts. The ‘overt form of resistance’ in the commodity frontiers has been identified as ‘the environmentalism of the poor,’ when the marginalised group engages in protesting against any developmental intervention that has a risk of causing environmental degradation.⁴¹⁸ In the overt form of resistance, the marginalised group expresses their reservations towards the developmental intervention in different ways, such as massive demonstrations at public places, blockades on roads, lawsuits, uprooting trees, and so forth. These are the common features of the overt form of resistance that work through networking across the scale from local to national to international levels.⁴¹⁹ As an example, in the *Normada Bachao Andolon* (the movement to save Normada river) in India, the protesters expressed resistance through non-cooperation to the development project, refusing to leave occupancy of the land, developing networks with external sources, such as academics, human rights activists, environmental activists, and NGOs, and organising campaigns to get national and international support.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷Holmes, 2007

⁴¹⁸Guha, 2000

⁴¹⁹Nielsen, 2009

⁴²⁰Murugesan, 2012

The overt form of resistance interplays within the power asymmetries between the marginal and dominant groups.⁴²¹ In the commodity frontiers, the state or corporate or ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus acts as a dominant group who gets legitimised authority to extract resources in the name of ‘development’ through depriving the marginalised groups. The marginalised group adopts their protest strategies against the dominant group after counting the fear of becoming more vulnerable.⁴²² However, the protest strategies remain unpredictable as it gets shaped and re-shaped over time based on the reactions of the counter-groups. In the case of dispossession, along with the dominant counter-group, the dispossessed population faces difficulties to protest in the commodity frontiers when some factions of the community work in support of the developmental intervention as part of the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus.⁴²³ Moreover, many individuals of the community do not support or join the protest because they are not affected by the dispossession. This is known as ‘*nimby*’ (not in my back yard). Similarly, due to the collective action problems, there are some other people who want to take ‘free ride’ to enjoy the positive outcomes of the protest without participating in it. In addition, sometimes it becomes difficult to carry on the protests when some protesters become willing to accept the development project.⁴²⁴ For instance, Larder (2015) showed that civil society was against ‘land grabbing’ for the Malibya project in Mali while the farmers were not. Rather, the farmers were more interested to be assimilated into the project as workers. Some of the landless farmers supported the project as they thought it would bring positive outcomes in their lives.

The marginalised group develops several alliances with the external actors (such as academics, civil societies, activists, environmental groups, NGOs, and so forth) to strengthen their respective claims of protests.⁴²⁵ In the commodity frontiers, when there is a risk of causing environmental degradation due to developmental interventions, various environmental groups are usually proactive in joining and supporting the protest of the dispossessed population, which Sawyer (2004) mentioned as ‘indigenous-environmentalist coalition.’ The actors in this ‘indigenous-environmentalist coalition’ join from different interest-based motivations. For example, the environmental groups join the protest after being inspired by the global discourses of environmentalism to protect nature, whereas the marginalised group join to protect their environment to restore their livelihoods.⁴²⁶ The environmental groups deliver environmental

⁴²¹Marin, 2014

⁴²²Bebbington, 2012

⁴²³Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

⁴²⁴Nielsen, 2009

⁴²⁵Andreucci et al., 2016

⁴²⁶Nuremowla, 2012

messages to the local marginalised groups, which make them aware about the disastrous aspects of the developmental intervention.⁴²⁷ While these two groups have different interests to join the protest, they create a common ground of shared ideas that encourage the actors to function collectively as the targets of the protest fulfil everyone's demands.⁴²⁸

The protest strategies of the dispossessed population get shaped by the interaction of different environmental groups. For instance, Kapelus (2002) discussed how the local dispossessed people's protests travelled from the local to the global levels through developing networks with external actors. This local-global connection bring new issues, concerns, terms, and vocabularies to the protests of the dispossessed population, which strengthens their claims. The dispossessed population use the lessons that they learn from global environmental groups in their protests. They use idioms such as 'environment,' 'pollution,' etc., which become the main slogans of their protest later.⁴²⁹ As an example, Martinez-Alier (2002) showed that the people who were living near the mangrove forests in India and Bangladesh felt threatened to be dispossessed from their land due to the expansion of shrimp farming. They protested against the expansion of shrimp farming in the coastal belt. They used terms such as 'environment,' 'ecology' and so forth in their protests to strengthen their claims. They learnt these terms from the NGOs who connected them with the wider networks of national and global environmental groups and activists. Similarly, Nuremowla (2012) showed that the national level environmental groups developed networks with the local protesters who made them aware about the risk of possible environmental pollution because of an open-pit coal mining project in Phulbari in Bangladesh. Thus, the local people became aware of the 'environmental protection' from the campaigns of the environmental groups, which shaped their protest strategies as well.

The developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers gets support from the 'state-corporate-elite' nexus to displace people from their land.⁴³⁰ For this reason, the protest of the dispossessed population is confronted by the 'state-corporate-elite' nexus. This nexus plays a dominant role in the contestation as they are capable to use the legal authority and support of the law-enforcing agencies to resist the protest of the dispossessed population. The nexus gets institutional incentives from the state to achieve and control access to the resources in the commodity frontiers, which Ribot and Peluso (2003) identify as 'bundles of power.' For an

⁴²⁷Murugesan, 2012

⁴²⁸Porta and Diani, 2006

⁴²⁹Andreucci et al., 2016

⁴³⁰Wolford, Borras, Hall, Scoones and White, 2013

example, Ahasan and Gardner (2016) showed that the incorporation of the local elites into the ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus through offering contracts and other benefits helped to lose the potency and direction of the dispossessed people’s protests who were protesting against mining projects in Bangladesh. They also showed that the local political leaders and government officials were ordered by the government or high ranked political leaders to resist the protest.

As the contestation in the commodity frontiers interplays within the unequal power positions, both contesting groups shape and reshape their protest strategies based on the reactions of their counterparts.⁴³¹ However, Borrás and Franco (2010) noticed that protesting against the developmental interventions through confrontation of the dominant alliance is not easy and smooth as it is risky for the marginalised groups in multiple ways. Studies showed that the dominant ‘state-corporate-elite’ nexus exercised exaggerated power in the contestation to neutralise the protest of the marginalised groups with the help of the legal authorities, law-enforcing agencies, and bureaucracies. Bene (2018) categorised four types of reactions that the marginalised group get from the dominant group in conflicts in the commodity frontiers, such as repression in a violent way, criminalization, targeting for violence, and assassinations. These types of suppressive treatment demoralise the marginalised group to continue protesting against the dominant faction. As an example, the protesters against the construction of dams in the Eastern Himalayas faced fearsome obstacles when the government came out in support of the corporate groups. In another case in Arunachal Pradesh, the local protesters who blocked the mandatory public hearing as a strategy to protest against the construction of a dam faced heavy-handed responses when the government deployed paramilitary forces to resist the protest. In that clash, the police fired on the protesters, who eventually gave up the protest later.⁴³²

A case in Singur (India) showed that the protesters who were protesting against land acquisition for construction of an industry received repressive treatment from the police. The police raided the villages of the protesters and attacked the leaders of the protest.⁴³³ They brutally handled the protest through arresting hundreds of protesters in fabricated charges. It was alleged that the police were accompanied by the local goons when they attacked the protesters. They raped and burnt a 16-year-old protester to spread fear among the protesters. It was also alleged that the goons took part in that attack wearing the uniform of law-enforcing agencies. Similarly,

⁴³¹ Andreucci et al., 2016

⁴³² *ibid*

⁴³³ Pesticide Action Network Asia and Pacific, 2013

Ahasan and Gardner (2016) showed that the armed police escorted the official of the mining projects in Sylhet while they visited the project areas, which sent out a clear message to the local people that the government was in support of the project. In addition, the government officials also threatened the protesters for opposing the projects. The police arrested some protesters and tortured others to spread fear among them. Fonjong, Sama-Lang, Fombe, and Abonge (2015) also showed in a case of Nguti and Mundemba in Cameroon that the police violated civil and political rights through arresting and beating the local protesters while they were staging a peaceful protest programme against a development project that displaced them.

Alongside the exercise of power to resist the protest of the dispossessed population, the government or corporates deliver one-sided information of the development project about how it will bring positive outcomes for the community and the state to get support from the community. This is known as '*depoliticization of the debate*.'⁴³⁴ In general, to acquire private land, the government claims that they are converting the 'bare land' for industrial development where the local people will get employment. They claim that this conversion of land will bring economic prosperity for the local people. The government or corporates attempt to legitimise the development project from a scientific explanation. They offer a top-down and technocratic proposal to get community support through hiding the concerns over environmental pollution.⁴³⁵

The protest of the 'project-opposing group' in Banskhali and Rampal was confronted by the dominant 'project-supporting group' (state-corporate-elite nexus) and law-enforcing agencies, which created an 'interface' situation. In this 'interface' situation, the 'project-opposing group' applied different protest strategies to express their reservations that got shaped and reshaped in response to the reactions of the dominant 'project-supporting group.' In some situations, they adopted soft strategies (covert form) whereas, in some other situations, they adopted violent strategies (overt form) to express their reservations towards the power plant projects. On the contrary, the 'project-supporting group,' who had support from the government, ruling political party, and law-enforcing agencies, also applied divergent strategies to neutralise the protests of the 'project-opposing group.' Thus, the construction of the power plants in Banskhali and Rampal became an '*arena of conflict*' between these two contesting groups. This chapter analyses this arena of conflict by explaining how the 'project-opposing group' got organised and staged protest actions against the power plant projects through confronting the 'project-

⁴³⁴Andreucci et al., 2016

⁴³⁵*ibid*

supporting group.’ It also analyses the internal dynamics of the ‘project-opposing group’ along with the strategies that were adopted by the dominant ‘project-supporting group’ to neutralise the protest.

5.2 Protests Against Banskhali Power Plant

At the very initial stage (in 2014, 2015), the local protesters started protesting against the Banskhali Power Plant in an informal and unorganised way. They mostly expressed their reservations towards the power plant project from their individual level rather than as a protesting group. However, at the beginning of 2016, they started protesting in an organised and formal way through forming the ‘project-opposing group’ after being informed about the concerns over environmental pollution because of the coal-fired power plant from different environmental campaigns of the local students and NC. Also, the leader of the protest (Kabir) helped to set a target of the protest and motivated the protesters to stage protest actions. There were different types of motivations behind the formation of the ‘project-opposing group’ to lead the protest in a formal and organised way that have been analysed in the following sections.

5.2.1 Formation of the ‘Project-Opposing Group’

Since early 2013, the local students (mostly those were studying in the Chittagong city area) organised campaign programmes in Gondamara to raise awareness among the local people about the negative impacts of coal power plant on the environment when they first came to know that S. Alam was going to construct a ‘coal-fired power plant.’ These students were inspired to stand against the coal power plant from the national level anti-Rampal Power Plant campaigns of the NC and NCSS. Furthermore, they collected information by themselves about environmental hazards as a result of the emission of pollutants from coal power plant from different sources, such as websites, research reports, and many others. Various publications (research reports, newspaper articles, leaflets, posters) of the NC and NCSS, television talk shows, press conferences, and so forth had been the sources of information for these students to educate themselves about the issues of environmental pollution. Based on this information, they produced several leaflets that were distributed to the local people of Gondamara and

surrounding areas to make the local people aware about the impact of coal power plant on the environment.

These students organised several formal and informal information dissemination programmes where they spoke about the issues. They spoke to the local people in different public gatherings, like in daily bazaar (marketplace), annual festivals in *madradas*,⁴³⁶ mosques, and schools. In these information dissemination programmes; they mostly highlighted the negative impacts of coal power plant on the environment to raise awareness among the local people. They utilised Facebook to organise protest programmes and maintain communication with each other. They created several Facebook group-pages where they posted content about how the coal power plant would bring negative impacts to the environment and how it would hamper the traditional way of living of the local people in order to motivate them to engage in protesting against the power plant project. The local people of Gondamara first came to know about the negative impacts of a coal-fired power plant on the environment from these campaigns and information dissemination sessions organised by the local students. To explain how the students got involved in these environmental campaigns, one student campaigner said,

“We had no idea about coal power plant. It was new to us. We came to know that some educated people were protesting against the Rampal Power Plant. We decided to protest in a similar way against the power plant that was going to be constructed in our locality. To do that, we needed to educate ourselves before organising campaign programmes in Gondamara. A boy from our village was studying in a technical university at that time. He prepared a leaflet about the negative impacts of coal power plants on the environment. At the very initial stage, this leaflet was distributed to the local people. We first came to know about how a coal power plant would pollute the environment from that leaflet. Later, we learnt a lot from the campaigns of the NC. We disseminated this information to the local people to make them aware.”⁴³⁷

However, the students could not continue their environmental campaigns for a longer duration due to opposition from the ‘project-supporting group.’ Though the students were successful in distributing leaflets to the local people, they could not organise mass gatherings around the power plant areas due to objections from the ‘project-supporting group.’ For instance, at one

⁴³⁶In the Bangladeshi context, *madrada* refers to a specific type of educational institute for the study of Islamic religion.

⁴³⁷A respondent in Gondamara, age 28

point, the students were threatened by the ‘project-supporting group’ while they were trying to organise a mass gathering. Later, they were not even allowed to distribute leaflets to the local people. At that point of time (in 2013, 2014), the project affected people (the group of people who formed the ‘project-opposing group’ later) were not organised to support the students. As the students did not get support from anywhere, the ‘project-supporting group’ exercised unchallenged power to restrict them to continue their environmental campaigns. Due to such suppressive treatment from the ‘project-supporting group,’ the students could not continue environmental campaigns in the power plant area. Moreover, the students were demoralised to continue their environmental campaigns as they could not see any positive outcomes since the government was determined to construct the power plant at the pre-decided location. Though they stopped organising environmental campaigns at public places, they continued social media-based campaigns until the end of the protests (in 2017). As a result of the students’ environmental campaigns, the local people became aware about the negative impacts of coal power plant on the environment and were motivated to protest against it.

Along with the students’ campaign, since the beginning of 2016, the activists of the left-leaning political parties (who are leading the anti-Rampal Power Plant movement) maintained communication with the local people of Gondamara and motivated them to protest against the power plant project. These activists developed contact with the local people when they came to know that the local people were against the power plant project. They visited the local people, distributed leaflets, and encouraged them to stand against the power plant project. In the meanwhile, the local people became aware about the negative impacts of coal power plant on the environment from the anti-Rampal Power Plant campaigns of the NC and NCSS. They learnt about these campaigns from television and newspapers. In addition, the local people also tried to understand the impacts of coal power plant on the environment from their own initiatives. For instance, sometimes they asked the educated people of the locality about the impacts of coal power plant. There were some educated people who collected information on the issues from different sources and disseminated the information to the local people. This made the local people aware about the environmental concerns of coal power plant. Mobile phones with internet connections became useful tools to spread information from one person to another. If someone downloaded a video about the environmental hazard due to a coal power plant, he shared it to others through mobile phones. They talked about the issue among themselves while they were sitting or watching television in the tea stalls or other places. To explain this, one activist of the NC said,

*“When I visited Gondamara, I was quite surprised to see that the local people of Gondamara were aware about the environmental risks because of coal power plants. They said that they came to know about the negative impacts of coal power plant from the campaigns of the NC that they watched on television and read in the newspapers. [...] I saw the local people were encountering the arguments of S. Alam with the logics that the NC used for its anti-Rampal movement.”*⁴³⁸

Though the local people became aware of the environmental hazards due to coal power plant from the campaigns of the environmental groups (student, NC, and left-leaning political parties), they were not motivated enough to protest against the power plant project. At the beginning of 2016, Kabir (the leader of the protest) joined the protest and motivated the local people to protest against the power plant project in an organised and formal manner. To motivate the local people, Kabir went from one person to another and explained how the power plant would hamper the environment of the locality and warned that they would not be able to live in the locality when the power plant would start electricity generation. On some occasions, he used the projector to show videos on environmental pollution because of coal power plant in the annual festivals of the mosques, madrasas, and schools. On one occasion, Kabir said,

*“We will not be able to live in this locality if the coal power plant is built here. Tube-wells will not get water from the ground. We will not get sunlight because of the fly ash that will be produced from the coal power plant. It will pollute our water, which will hamper our cultivation. People will suffer from several diseases. In such a situation, we will have to leave our ancestors’ locality.”*⁴³⁹

The concerns over environmental protection were the main reason for many of the project affected people to protest against the power plant project. They got support from the people of the surrounding areas, even though these people did not have any land-related conflict with the power plant project.⁴⁴⁰ They became worried about their existence in the locality due to environmental pollution, which encouraged them to join the protest.

The presence of Kabir encouraged the protesters to express their reservations following the overt form of protest strategy. He helped the protesters to get organised as the ‘project-opposing group’ to provide the protest an institutional framework. On the contrary, rejecting the claims

⁴³⁸ An environmental activist, age 37

⁴³⁹ A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

⁴⁴⁰ As explained by Oliver-Smith (2006)

of the protesters from environmental concerns, S. Alam also attempted to convince them in different ways that the power plant would not harm the environment. As an example, with the help of video technology, S. Alam presented the positive sides of the power plant project to the local people. They attempted to give an assurance to them that due to the installation of advanced technology, the coal power plant would not pollute the environment. They also issued a statement in the news media claiming the protest against the power plant project as a *'conspiracy by self-interested groups'*.⁴⁴¹ One S. Alam official told a newspaper,

*"This power plant project will not harm the environment in any way. This power plant will not even release as much smoke as a cigarette does."*⁴⁴²

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that there were multiple factors that helped to form the 'project-opposing group' and convinced the local people to protest against the Banskhal Power Plant project in a formal and organised way. The local people who suffered from various deprivations and vulnerabilities due to the misconduct and irregularities in the process of land purchase by S. Alam got to know about the environmental hazards of coal power plant from different environmental campaigns organised by the local students and left-leaning political activists. After being aware about the environmental concerns, the local people showed their reservations towards the power plant project following the covert form of protest strategies since they were not organised and motivated enough to protest publicly. Finally, Kabir motivated them to form the 'project-opposing group' and engage in protesting against the dominant 'project-supporting group' following the overt form of protest strategies. Due to the inclusion of the environmental concerns, the protesters got support from non-interest groups as well.

5.2.2 Protest Strategies of 'Project-Opposing Group'

Since early 2016, the 'project-opposing group' had been staging protest programmes against the Banskhal Power Plant project on a regular basis through confrontation with the dominant 'project-supporting group.' Confronting the 'project-supporting group,' the 'project-opposing group' applied both covert and overt forms of protest strategies. These strategies were shaped and reshaped in response to the reactions of the 'project-supporting group.' The following

⁴⁴¹<http://energybangla.com/banskhali-power-plant-dispute-call-programmes-on-sunday/>; accessed on November 12, 2018

⁴⁴²<http://www.banskhali.com>; accessed on June 04, 2018

section analyses these various protest strategies of the ‘project-opposing group’ to protest against the power plant project in Banskhali.

At the beginning (before 2016) when the protesters were not organised as the ‘project-opposing group,’ they protested against the power plant project in a very informal manner, such as showing reservations, arguing with the ‘project-supporting group,’ showing non-cooperation, creating obstacles to the power plant development activities, and so forth. They staged protest rallies and chanted slogans against the project when they were asked to leave the occupancy of the land. As the protesters were not organised as a group at that time, in most cases, they expressed their reservations from their individual level, not as a group. However, the protesters got an organisational form since early 2016 with the help of Kabir who formed a protest committee of 61 members, named ‘*Committee to protect habitation and graveyards.*’ This committee functioned as the ‘project-opposing group,’ and started protesting against the power plant project in an organised and formal way. After formation of this committee, the protesters started staging protest programmes on a regular basis in different parts of the Gondamara *union* which continued till May 2016.⁴⁴³ At this stage of the protest, they staged protest rallies at public places with the participation of hundreds of protesters. They chanted slogans against the power plant project. On some occasions, the protest programmes turned into clashes when the protesters were confronted by the ‘project-supporting group.’

Photo 5.1: Local peoples’ protest against Banskhali Power Plant⁴⁴⁴



Photo 5.2: Women’s participation in the protest against Banskhali Power Plant⁴⁴⁵



The ‘*Committee to protect habitation and graveyards*’ was successful in staging some protest programmes with a mass gathering in the locality, which got national and international media coverage. The protesters emphasised engaging more protesters in the protest programmes.

⁴⁴³<http://www.newspangladesh.com/details/25421>; accessed on January 5, 2017

⁴⁴⁴The Daily Ittefaq (newspaper), March 28, 2016

⁴⁴⁵The Daily Star, April 13, 2016

They went door to door to convince fellow villagers to join the protest. They raised the concerns of environmental pollution because of the coal power plant to encourage the villagers to join the protest. In this way, the protesters got tremendous support from the local people and people from the neighbouring *unions*. It was seen that the women of the community were also engaged in these protest programmes, something that had never been seen in Gondamara before. It was a new feature in the locality that the women came out to the public places to protest against the power plant project.⁴⁴⁶ The protesters encouraged these women to join the protest as it was relatively safer for women to protest because the police or the ‘project-supporting group’ would not attack them as they did against the male protesters due to the social and cultural context.

As a protest strategy, the protesters mainly showed non-cooperation through creating obstacles to the power plant development activities to put pressure on S. Alam to comply with their demands. For instance, at the very beginning of 2016, they created obstacles when S. Alam started landfilling in the power plant area to build a helipad to bring the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to inaugurate the project. On another occasion, it was alleged that the protesters attacked two site offices of the power plant project in Gondamara and torched furniture and other goods. Similarly, on 26 March 2016, the protesters put a blockade on the road while S. Alam was transporting goods to the power plant area. The protesters were also alleged to have torched two CNGs (auto rickshaw) and three motorcycles and assaulted the ‘project-supporting group’ when they made a vehicle showdown in the project area with more than 100 motorcycles, CNGs, private cars, and minibuses on the muddy-road of the village to exhibit their strength and power to the local people.⁴⁴⁷ Describing the situation, one protester in Gondamara said,

“We forbade them [S. Alam] to use the muddy road of the village to transport goods to the power plant project. The heavy vehicles of S. Alam were damaging the road. After being forbidden, the goons and agents took it as a challenge. They staged a vehicle showdown on that road to show their strength to the protesters. During that showdown, the protesters and agents and goons

⁴⁴⁶Normally adult women do not come out at public, and they use a veil if they do so.

⁴⁴⁷<https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/12/bangladesh-anti-coal-tensions-rising-after-police-shoot-four-dead/>; accessed on July 25, 2018. There were several controversies about who torched the vehicles of S. Alam. S. Alam and their support group claimed that the supporters of Kabir damaged the resources of S. Alam based on which the police filed a case and arrested some protesters. However, Kabir and others claimed that the protesters did not torch the vehicles and that it was done by one particular group of goons of S. Alam who felt that they were not getting enough benefits in comparison to other group of goons.

exchanged hard-talk which turned into a clash, which forced the protesters to attack the supporters."⁴⁴⁸

From the aforementioned discussion, it has been seen that the protesters adopted various types of protest strategies ranging from informal-unorganised to formal-organised to protest against the Banskali Power Plant. As the protesters were confronted by the dominant 'project-supporting group,' they applied both covert and overt forms of protest strategies considering their strategic position. At the initial stage when the protesters were not organised, they showed their reservations through non-cooperation towards the development activities of the power plant project. They adopted soft strategies (covert form of protest) because it was risky to protest against the dominant 'project-supporting group.' Later, the protesters adopted the overt forms of protest strategies when they got organised under a proper structured leadership. In this overt form of protest, the protesters engaged in face-to-face confrontation with the 'project-supporting group.' They created obstacles to the construction activities of the power plant project on several occasions. Eventually, the protesters engaged in clashes when they were confronted by the 'project-supporting group' and police, which resulted in the killing of four protesters.

5.2.3 Contestations Between 'Project-Opposing Group' and 'Project-Supporting Group'

As discussed in the previous sections, the protest of the 'project-opposing group' was confronted by the 'project-supporting group' who exercised power with the support of the government and law-enforcing agencies.⁴⁴⁹ To confront the 'project-opposing group,' the 'project-supporting group' formed a committee to take care of the project from the *'harmful acts of a vested group of people.'* The political leaders, elites, agents, and goons of the locality were members of this committee and were assigned to take care of the resources of S. Alam and resolve the protest of the 'project-opposing group.'⁴⁵⁰ As a result of this powerful alliance, the 'project-supporting group' was proactive in their efforts to resolve the protest against the power plant project. Sometimes, they adopted violent strategies to resist the protesters. On several occasions, the protest programmes of the 'project-opposing group' turned into clashes when

⁴⁴⁸A respondent in Gondamara, age 52

⁴⁴⁹<http://www.newsbangladesh.com/details/25782>; accessed on January 23, 2017

⁴⁵⁰The Daily Ittefaq, April 9, 2016

they were challenged by the ‘project-supporting group.’ The attitude of the ‘project-supporting group’ towards the ‘project-opposing group’ is clearly understandable from the following statement given by the coordinator of the project (S. Alam official) when he was speaking in a public consultation meeting,

*“If I play [fight] for an hour, I have the power to destroy Gondamara. I will ask for the help of the MP [Member of Parliament] later. Nobody can do anything against me. If I wish, I can deploy the RAB [Rapid Action Battalion] and army also. Allah blessed me with so much power. However, I do not do anything without the consent of the MP. I can neutralise this protest in a moment if I wish.”*⁴⁵¹

From the statement above, it is clear that the ‘project-supporting group’ was empowered and motivated enough to confront the ‘project-opposing group’ in a violent manner since they had support from the ruling political party and law-enforcing agencies. As an example, on 18 March 2016, a contestation between these two groups turned into violence when the ‘project-supporting group’ shot 7-8 rounds of ammunition at the protesters (around 200 in number) when they (protesters) put a blockade on the road to restrict the transportation of goods to the project area. It was alleged that along with the ‘project-supporting group,’ the Ansar (paramilitary force of the state) also took part in that clash. The Ansar were also alleged for shooting at the protesters.⁴⁵² This type of face-to-face contestation between these two groups became a regular occurrence from January to April 2016, when the protesters were desperately trying to resist the construction of the power plant project. In addition to these face-to-face contestations, the ‘project-supporting group’ used the support of the law-enforcing agencies to resist the protesters. Several general diaries (GD) and cases had been filed to the police against the protesters in charges of obstructing the development activities of the power plant, extortion, torching vehicles, and looting assets of S. Alam, and so forth.⁴⁵³ The police arrested some protesters in charges of those cases. Arresting of these protesters forced the protesters to stage robust protest programmes demanding to scrap the power plant project.

As a reaction to arresting the protesters, on 4th April 2016, the protesters called for a massive protest assembly at Mujibkilla, a ground of the Hadirpara Government Primary High School.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵¹The Daily Ittefaq, April 9, 2016

⁴⁵²<http://www.dhakacourier.com.bd/nightmares-in-development/>; accessed on January 17, 2017

⁴⁵³The Daily Purbokone (newspaper), March 7, 2016

⁴⁵⁴The Daily Inqilab (newspaper), April 8, 2016

On the same day, the ‘project-supporting group’ (led by a leader of the ruling party) also called for a separate meeting at the same place (Mujibkilla) under the banner of ‘*supporters of the power plant*’ to show their support to S. Alam. Since two rival groups had called for a gathering at the same place, the administration sanctioned section 144 at Mujibkilla, meaning the suspension of any gathering at that place. On that day, the police and ansar, accompanied by the political leaders of the ruling party and ‘project-supporting group,’ took possession at Mujibkilla before the ‘project-opposing group’ gathered.⁴⁵⁵

As section 144 was sanctioned, the protesters decided to make a protest rally along the main road of Gondamara instead of staging the pre-decided protest assembly at Mujibkilla to avoid clashes with the police and ‘project-supporting group.’ However, these two groups engaged in clashes when the protest rally was passing by the side of Mujibkilla. It was alleged that the police fired at the protesters when they (protesters) approached to attack them, which resulted in four deaths (including two from the same family) and around 100 others being wounded. After the clashes, on their way back, the police randomly fired at the villagers without targeting anyone in particular, which wounded many men, women (including pregnant women), and children. Most of these wounded people were not part of the protest rally. After escaping from Mujibkilla, the police along with the ‘project-supporting group’ took possession at the bridge, the main entry point of the island, from where they continued firing at the protesters. In response, the protesters were throwing stones and bricks towards the police and ‘project-supporting group.’ Describing the incident at Mujibkilla on 4th April 2016, one protester in Gondamara said,

“The protesters did not have any intention to gather at Mujibkilla as section 144 was sanctioned there. They planned to make a protest rally along the main road and gather at the Gondamara Bazar. The goons of S. Alam provoked the protesters to involve in clashes by throwing stones and bricks towards the protesters when they were passing by Mujibkilla. The police also fired at the protesters. The protesters became reckless since the police fired at them. They [protesters] were saying ‘let’s have a game with the police since they fired at us.’ They were reckless to attack the police, even after having bullets in their body. [...] Those four people who died, they got killed because they tried to

⁴⁵⁵Section 144 was sanctioned two hours before the event time. The protesters alleged that the legal procedures were not followed in sanctioning section 144. As an example, in their view, the police did not take permission from the District Commissioner to sanction section 144, which is mandatory from a legal perspective, and also did not announce it properly in the locality. The majority of the protesters did not know about the sanction of section 144 before gathering at the event spot.

*snatch the guns of the police. [...] Everything happened so suddenly that nobody had control over it, neither the supporters nor the protesters.*⁴⁵⁶

The protesters alleged that along with the police, the goons of S. Alam also carried guns and fired at the protesters in the clashes at Mujibkilla. It was also alleged that some goons wore police uniforms, and some others wore helmets to hide their faces. Also, their faces were covered with masks. Though the goons tried to hide their identity, the protesters claimed that they could identify them by seeing their body gestures and hearing their voices since they are from the same locality.

Photo 5.3: A wounded person in the clash in Gondamara⁴⁵⁷



The ‘project-opposing group’ claimed that the protesters got killed and wounded in the clashes at Mujibkilla because the police along with the goons of S. Alam fired at them. In their view, the police and goons were responsible for the deaths of the protesters. However, rejecting the allegations of the protesters, the government officials claimed that the police did not fire ‘*at all*’ in the clashes and the protesters got killed because of internal clashes among the ‘project-supporting group,’ and ‘project-opposing group.’ The government and police attempted to establish that ‘*three groups*’ (project-supporting group, project-opposing group, and police) were engaged in the clashes at Mujibkilla. They said, however, that the police were in a neutral

⁴⁵⁶A respondent in Gondamara, age 40

⁴⁵⁷<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35967762>; accessed on January 4, 2018

position.⁴⁵⁸ They alleged that the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group’ were responsible for the clashes and deaths of the people. Furthermore, the police and ‘project-supporting group’ claimed that the protesters killed other protesters to gain ‘*cheap materialistic interest*’.⁴⁵⁹ However, some high-level government officials admitted that the police fired at the protesters in the clashes. For instance, the additional superintendent of police said, “*the police were attacked (by the protesters) and compelled to fire at the protesters to save themselves.*”⁴⁶⁰

Later, the contestation in Gondamara had been explained from a political perspective. The ruling party members claimed that the opposition political parties were the motivational force behind the protest against the power plant project to create obstacles to the development activity of the ruling government. They alleged the opposition political parties for ‘*misguiding*’ the local people with ‘*imaginary*’ information about environmental pollution due to coal-fired power plant to motivate them to join the protest. As an example, on several occasions, the political leaders of the ruling party and government officials labelled the contestation in Gondamara as a ‘*conspiracy of the opposition political party due to jealousy of the development activity of the ruling political party*’.⁴⁶¹⁴⁶² Through these types of comments, the contestation in Gondamara was given a political face. Afterwards, the protest against the power plant project was treated politically. As an example, to comment on the protest in Gondamara, one minister of the government said that the government would not tolerate ‘*any kind of anarchy in the name of the movement*’.⁴⁶³ Further, the energy advisor of the government also supported the project saying,

*“Though the villagers have some reservations, the government has full support to this project. The government is fully supporting this power plant project at this location [Gondamara] because the location is near the sea and the habitat is not so dense.”*⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁵⁸Prothom Alo, April 5, 2016

⁴⁵⁹Samakal (newspaper), April 10, 2016

⁴⁶⁰The Daily Star, April 6, 2016

⁴⁶¹Samakal, April 10, 2016

⁴⁶²Prothom Alo, April 10, 2016; April 11, 2016

⁴⁶³Amader Somoy, April 11, 2016

⁴⁶⁴*ibid*

Photo 5.4: The supporters demanding to hang the leader of the protest blaming him for spreading rumours against Banskhali Power Plant⁴⁶⁵



Photo 5.5: The supporters asking to stand against conspiracy of opposition political parties against Banskhali Power Plant⁴⁶⁶



However, the protesters rejected this political interpretation and claimed that it was not a political party-motivated protest, but rather it was a common people’s protest. They claimed that the local people joined the protest for reasons beyond their political identities. Two probe committees were formed by the government to investigate the killing of the protesters in Gondamara.⁴⁶⁷ These probe committee reports claimed that the protest emerged in Gondamara since the local people were ‘misguided’ by Kabir, who used the protest issue as a tool to win the *union parishad* election. It was reported that the local people were not aware about the impacts of coal power plant on the environment which created an opportunity for the ‘vested group of people to misguide them.’⁴⁶⁸ It was also reported that the police fired at the protesters to protect themselves when the protesters attacked them. However, the protesters and civil society members rejected these probe committee reports saying that ‘it [probe committee report] was prepared as it was asked by the government.’ Rejecting the claims of the probe committee reports on the incident of 4th April 2016, the protesters claimed that it was a peaceful demonstration programme of the ‘project-opposing group,’ but the police and goons fired at them without any provocation.

After the clashes at Mujibkilla, the police along with the ‘project-supporting group’ set checkpoints at the main access points of the island to arrest the protesters who were involved in the protests. By setting these checkpoints, the police restricted the mobility of the local people. They even did not allow the protesters who were wounded in that clash to go to the hospitals. Further, it was alleged that the wounded were not offered treatment at the local government hospital since the police forbade them to offer treatment. The police also did not allow the

⁴⁶⁵<https://bangla.bdnews24.com/ctg/article1132495.bdnews/>; accessed on April 21, 2017

⁴⁶⁶<http://thedailynewnation.com/news/89661/>; accessed on September 25, 2018

⁴⁶⁷Prothom Alo, April 10, 2016, June 4, 2016, The Daily Star, April 10, 2016

⁴⁶⁸<http://energybangla.com.bd>; accessed on October 12, 2018

doctors to come to the villages to offer treatment to the wounded. The protesters even faced difficulties in taking the dead bodies to Chittagong city for post-mortem since the police restricted them. One of the deceased was alive after the incident also, but he died later because he was not taken to the hospital immediately. To explain the situation, one protester in Gondamara said,

*“He (one wounded protester who died later) might have survived if he was taken to the hospital immediately. We could not do that since the police restricted us to go out of the island. They took possession at the bridge [main access point]. They were saying ‘you [local people] cannot go anywhere. We will kill all of you.’ We were afraid of being arrested. So, we did not take the risk to take him to the hospital. As a result, he had to give up his life.”*⁴⁶⁹

Three cases were filed in connection to the clashes on 4th April 2016, where the protesters were charged of killing, possession of illegal weapons, resisting the police from performing their duty, robbing arms from the police, and so forth. One case was filed by a brother of two of the deceased, accusing six named, including Kabir, and 1,500 unnamed protesters. Another case was lodged by the wife of one deceased, accusing 1,500 unnamed protesters. The third case was filed by the police, accusing 57 named and 3,200 unnamed protesters.⁴⁷⁰ However, the protesters alleged that the relatives of the deceased were hostage by the police to lodge cases against the protesters since they were not allowed to take the dead bodies from the police station for burial. It was also alleged that the police threatened them to put their and their relatives’ names in the accused list if they did not file a case against the protesters. The brother of two of the deceased who filed a case against the protesters reported to a newspaper,

*“Two of my brothers were killed. [...] I was forced by the police to file a case against my villagers. Now they (police) arrested my son from the hospital who was wounded also. The police detained him in the case that they filed against the protesters. What was my fault?”*⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁹ A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

⁴⁷⁰ The Daily Star, April 6, 2016

⁴⁷¹ Bhorer Kagoj, April 17, 2016

Photo 5.6: A wounded protester receiving treatment at hospital under police custody⁴⁷²



The police raided the hospitals and health care centres to arrest the protesters who were receiving treatment there. To avoid of being arrested, some of the wounded protesters got admitted in the hospitals and healthcare centres after hiding their identities. Similarly, the most active and well-known protesters did not get admitted to health care centres for treatment out of a fear of being arrested. They mostly stayed in their relatives' houses outside of the locality and received treatment from private doctors. However, the police arrested some protesters from the health care centres while they were receiving treatment. These arrested protesters were detained in charges of the cases filed against them. Some wounded protesters were seen receiving treatment under the custody of the police.⁴⁷³ It was alleged that the police tortured those who got arrested under the guise of 'remand.' One protester in Gondamara said,

“One of my cousins was admitted in the Chittagong Medical College Hospital. He got a few bullets in his body. One day I went to see him, but the police did not allow me to get into the hospital. Later, I heard that he was taken to the police station and kept there for three days. He was tortured a lot in those days. Later, he got released but got some physical disabilities. He cannot stand straight.”⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷²<https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/12/bangladesh-anti-coal-tensions-rising-after-police-shoot-four-dead/>; accessed on August 20, 2018

⁴⁷³<https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/12/bangladesh-anti-coal-tensions-rising-after-police-shoot-four-dead/>; accessed on August 20, 2018

⁴⁷⁴A respondent in Gondamara, age 48

Photo 5.7: A police raid in Gondamara⁴⁷⁵



Photo 5.8: Protesters dug up road to block police vehicles⁴⁷⁶



The police operated a massive raid in the villages of the protesters on 16 May 2016, six weeks later the incident (the clashes of 4th April 2016), to arrest the accused in the cases that had been filed against the protesters. On that day, the police patrolled the villages with a fleet of more than 110 cars and with innumerable number of police staffs. The high-level officials of the police and administration took part in that raid. The police searched house to house to arrest the protesters (mainly the male protesters). However, they could not arrest anyone from Gondamara. They arrested some protesters from the health care centres and some other locations outside of Gondamara with the help of the agents and goons.

After the clashes of 4th April 2016, the protesters had been staging protest rallies almost every day in different locations of the villages. Mostly the women and teenagers took part in these protest rallies.⁴⁷⁷ The male members did not take part in these protest programmes to avoid being identified by the agents and goons. Since the police raided the villages to arrest the protesters, the protesters remained united to avoid being arrested. As an example, the male protesters did not stay in their houses at night for the first few weeks out of a fear of police raids at night. They stayed the whole night in the paddy field, some stayed on the embankment areas where police did not go out of a fear of being attacked by the protesters. They monitored the entrance of the police for 24 hours. When someone saw that the police were approaching towards the villages, they used the mics of the mosques to alert the protesters saying, “*the police are crossing the bridge . . . move to your safest place.*” The protesters dug up the roads to block the entrance of the police vehicles to the villages. They also set a checkpoint to restrict the entrance of the strangers to the villages and set black flags at different points of the villages.

⁴⁷⁵The Daily Ittefaq, May 17, 2016

⁴⁷⁶<https://bangla.bdnews24.com/ctg/article1131999.bdnews>; accessed on October 20, 2019

⁴⁷⁷The Daily Sangram, April 6, 2016

The protesters were successful in protecting themselves as the police could not arrest anyone from the villages. One protester in Gondamara said,

*“We were united. [...] We became brothers to each other. We understood that we had to save ourselves. [...] If anyone among the villagers saw that the police were coming towards the villages, they alerted other villagers using the mics of the mosques. No one was particularly assigned for this. It was everyone’s responsibility.”*⁴⁷⁸

The police raided the villages with a target to arrest Kabir. They patrolled the villages at daytime and the protesters let them in and out without any obstacle. However, the protesters kept preparation to join in a clash with the police if they could arrest Kabir. A good number of the protesters guarded Kabir constantly. For that reason, once Kabir threatened the police saying, *“arrest me from my village if you can. To do that, you have to kill a few thousand people.”* Kabir constantly changed his station to keep him safe from being arrested. Sometimes, he even hid himself from his bodyguards as well. One protester in Gondamara said,

*“One day, the police cordoned Kabir’s house to arrest him. They searched his house, but he was not found. [...] The protesters were observing the whole operation from a safe distance. They were prepared to attack the police if they could arrest Kabir. Later, the police arrested his father. The protesters dug up the road to block police vehicles when the police were taking him out of the village. It took several hours to repair the road and take him out of the village.”*⁴⁷⁹

However, on several occasions, the government attempted to reduce tension between the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘project-opposing group.’ For example, once the high-level government officials (ASP, UNO, and OC) called for a ‘*peace meeting*’ in Gondamara to listen to the concerns of the ‘project-opposing group.’ In this meeting, the ‘project-opposing group’ raised several demands to them to fulfil, such as (1) to relocate the power plant to the less populated area at the west side of its current location, (2) to suspend the goons and agents of S. Alam, and (3) to increase the amount of land price and ensure proper handover of the money. The government officials assured that they would take necessary measures to comply with the demands of the protesters.⁴⁸⁰ Similarly, just after the clashes of 4th April 2016, a five-member

⁴⁷⁸ A respondent of Gondamara, age 42

⁴⁷⁹ A respondent of Gondamara, age 47

⁴⁸⁰ <https://www.anumuhammad.net/anumuhammad.net/article/251-2016-04-06-04-51-17>; accessed on June 12, 2018

delegation of the ruling political party met the protesters on behalf of the Prime Minister and assured them that the government would take measures regarding the concerns of the ‘project-opposing group’ about the coal power plant.⁴⁸¹ Also, they promised to dismiss the cases that had been filed against the protesters. However, later the government did not take any measures to fulfil the demands of the protesters, but rather the law-enforcing agencies were deployed to resolve the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ through the exercise of power.

Photo 5.9: A mass gathering of protesters against Banskhali Power Plant⁴⁸²



From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ turned into clashes when the ‘project-supporting group’ attempted to resist them with the support of the law-enforcing agencies, which resulted in the killing of four protesters and wounding many others. The protesters received violent responses from the law-enforcing agencies, who restricted the mobility of the protesters, filed fabricated cases accusing the protesters of killing fellow protesters, and raided the villages to arrest the accused. In response to the violent treatment from the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies, the protesters remained united to protect themselves. They remained organised to avoid being arrested in the police raids. As a result, none of the protesters got arrested from the villages, which proved that the police were not serious to arrest the protesters, but rather they raided the

⁴⁸¹Samakal, April 10, 2016

⁴⁸²<https://bangla.bdnews24.com/ctg/article1133543.bdnews>; accessed on October 24, 2018

villages to keep pressure up on the protesters. Furthermore, the government confronted this contentious situation from a political perspective since the leader of the protest was from the opposition political party. From this political perspective, the government counted the protest as an act motivated by the opposition political parties, which encouraged them to follow a hard-line response to resolve the protest.

5.2.4 Connections and Disconnections: Support from External Actors

Several networks had been developed in different situations to support the ‘project-opposing group’ in the contestation against the ‘project-supporting group.’ Mainly, the left-leaning political parties, BNP, NC, and many civil society members expressed their support towards the protesters after the clashes on 4th April 2016. Since Kabir is a leader of the BNP, the protesters got moral support from this party. For example, immediately after the clashes on 4th April 2016, some senior leaders of the BNP visited Gondamara and expressed condolences towards the deceased. They declared that they were in support of the local people’s protest. One senior leader of the BNP said in that visit,

*“The massacre [deaths of the protesters] had happened due to the exaggerated attitude of the police. [...] We are demanding a judicial probe of the killing. The peaceful demonstration of the people will continue until the criminals are punished. The people cannot be deprived from their rights. [...] We are here [Gondamara] on behalf of the chairperson of the party (BNP). The BNP is in support of the villagers in any situation.”*⁴⁸³

Similarly, the protesters received support from innumerable civil society members. It was reported that twelve respectable civil society members expressed condolences to the deceased in the clashes on 4th April 2016. They demanded to ensure appropriate punishment for those who were responsible for the killing of the protesters. They asked to “*stop killing for development*” in a statement that they sent to the news media.⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, many civil society organisations and lawyer associations also expressed condolences towards the deceased. They were worried that ‘*the government took the side of the private company while people were protesting against the project with concerns over environmental pollution.*’⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³The Daily Sangram, April 7, 2016

⁴⁸⁴Prothom Alo, April 9, 2016

⁴⁸⁵Bhorer Dak (newspaper), April 9, 2016

Most importantly, the left-leaning political parties were always in contact with the protesters. They motivated them to protest against the power plant project (details discussed in chapter three). Some leaders of the left-leaning political parties and NC visited Gondamara after the incident on 4th April 2016 and expressed condolences to the deceased and wounded. Later, they organised seminars and human chains in the big cities, wrote newspaper articles, and participated in television talk shows where they supported the positions of the protesters. They alleged that the existing laws and regulations of the country were not followed in constructing the Banskhal Power Plant. They urged the government to follow the laws and regulations in constructing the power plant and establish neutral judgment of the killing of the protesters. The secretary of the NC commented to a newspaper,

*“We do not want to see any probe committee that will cover up the whole issue. We will not accept any investigation which would turn out to be a farce. S. Alam Group must bear all the medical expenses of the injured and compensate the families of the deceased. Moreover, the false and fabricated cases alleged against hundreds of villagers must be withdrawn without any delay.”*⁴⁸⁶

<p>Photo 5.10: Left-leaning political parties protesting against killing in Gondamara⁴⁸⁷</p>	<p>Photo 5.11: NC leaders visiting Gondamara⁴⁸⁸</p>
	

Though the BNP, left-leaning political parties, NC, and civil society members supported the position of the protesters, the concerns of the protesters were rarely echoed from these supporting groups. Because of concerns over environmental pollution, the protesters demanded to scrap the power plant project from its current location unless the national and international experts confirmed that the project would not harm the environment. In addition, they demanded the suspension of the goons and agents from the activities of land purchases and increase the

⁴⁸⁶<https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/12/bangladesh-anti-coal-tensions-rising-after-police-shoot-four-dead/>; accessed on July 25, 2018

⁴⁸⁷https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news/2016/04/160408_banskhali_power_plant_protest; accessed on April 15, 2018

⁴⁸⁸<http://www.nirapadnews.com/print-page/?id=144808>; accessed on March 12, 2018

amount of land price. However, none of the BNP, NC, left-leaning political parties, and civil society members raised the demand to scrap the power plant from its current location, which was the main demand of the protesters at the end. Rather, they mostly emphasised ensuring neutral judgment of the killing of the protesters and providing sufficient compensation to the landowners. Similarly, the civil society members criticised the role of the government to resolve the protest, but they did not push the demands of the protesters. The left-leaning political parties and NC, who were protesting against the Rampal Power Plant, did not take the same position against the Banskhal Power Plant. For an example, in the case of Rampal Power Plant, the NC demanded to scrap the power plant from the concerns over environmental pollution. However, in the case of Banskhal Power Plant, they demanded to ensure the legal procedures regarding human rights and environmental issues instead of demanding to scrap it. The NC further criticised that S. Alam started the construction of the power plant before getting the required environment clearance certificates and public concerns were not taken to conduct the EIA study.⁴⁸⁹ Moreover, the protesters requested the BNP and NC to call for a long march from Dhaka to Gondamara to protest against the Banskhal Power Plant like they did against the Rampal Power Plant. However, none of these political parties and environmental organisations ever called for a massive protest programme against the Banskhal Power Plant. One protester in Gondamara said,

“At the beginning, they [activists of the left-leaning political parties and NC] joined and supported our protest. But they disappeared later. [...] What does it mean? Were they also sold [managed] to S. Alam like the leaders of the other political parties? If they were not, then why they disappeared? [...] Till now they are very vocal against the Rampal Power Plant because it would hamper the life of the animals of the Sundarbans forest. The Rampal Power Plant is 10 kilometres away from that forest. They are not saying anything against the Banskhal Power Plant which is located within our residential area. Are we worse than the animals of the Sundarbans?”⁴⁹⁰

Later, the left-leaning political parties and NC did not maintain communication with the protesters because they were in doubt with the position of Kabir. They had a fear that Kabir might misuse their support for his personal gain as they did not have control over him. Similarly, there was no strong local committee of the NC or the left-leaning political parties in

⁴⁸⁹The Daily Sangram, April 9, 2016

⁴⁹⁰A respondent of Gondamara, age 32

the surrounding areas of Gondamara to lead the protest by themselves. In addition, the location of Gondamara is in a very remote area, which hampered the development of bridging between the relevant stakeholders. One activist of the NC said,

“We had genuine support towards the protesters in Gondamara. It was a self-motivated protest of the local people. However, we were in doubt with the intention of Kabir as he was from the BNP. We could not believe him because there was a chance that he could mess up the protest which we would not control. We had reservations with his motives. For that reason, we remained silent towards him, but we were in support of the protesters. We expressed our stand on different occasions. [...] We did not have the organisational strength to take the lead of the protest by ourselves.”⁴⁹¹

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the protest against the Banskali Power Plant got support from the BNP, left-leaning political parties, NC, and civil society organisations. Some of these groups had regular contact with the protesters who motivated them to protest against the power plant project. Immediately after the deaths of the protesters, these groups expressed condolences to the deceased and supported the protests. However, none of these groups actively engaged in the protests. Though they supported the protest, none of them raised the demand to scrap the project from its current location, which was the main concern of the local protesters. Rather, they demanded for a judicial probe of the killing of the protesters and following the rules and regulations to construct the coal power plant, which were not the main concerns of the local protesters. Later, these external actors did not maintain contact with the protesters.

5.2.5 Outcomes of the Protests Against Banskali Power Plant

The protesters gradually became demotivated to continue protesting against the power plant project due to the suppressive treatment that they received from the law-enforcing agencies and ‘project-supporting group,’ which has been discussed in the previous sections. They became frustrated because they could not see any positive outcomes of the protest as the government was determined to construct the power plant at the pre-decided location by any means. Since the majority of the protesters were living on cultivation, their livelihoods were greatly

⁴⁹¹A respondent of Gondamara, age 38

hampered because they could not work freely due to the fear of being arrested by the police. In such circumstances, Kabir was pressurised from the political parties and law-enforcing agencies to go for a negotiation with S. Alam to give up protesting. Finally, on 1st February 2017, Kabir made a negotiation with S. Alam and agreed to give up protesting based on the condition to fulfil his twelve-point demand. After the negotiation had made, Kabir gave up protesting and expressed his support to the power plant project. S. Alam also agreed to fulfil the demands of the protesters. The protesters considered this ‘negotiation’ as a way out from the contestation. One protester in Gondamara said,

“Gondamara became a jail at that time. The police set checkpoint at the bridge and restricted our mobility. They did not even allow us to go to the hospital. There was a cyclone alert at that time. The villagers did not go to the cyclone centres to take shelter after crossing the bridge out of a fear of being arrested by the police when cyclone ‘Nargis’ hit. Though the police did not restrict anyone on that day, the villagers did not attempt to cross the bridge. This kind of situation continued for five to six months. We were looking for a way out. The negotiation with S. Alam was a way out.”⁴⁹²

After the ‘negotiation’ had made, to comply with the demands of the protesters, S. Alam suspended the coordinator of the project and found him guilty of creating the chaotic situation in Gondamara. S. Alam also withdrew the agents and goons and set up an office in the power plant area. The Bangladesh Navy was deployed to take care of the project and mediate the complaints of the local people regarding the power plant project and land purchase. Afterwards, the landowners could go to the S. Alam office directly if they wanted to sell their land. The recommendation from the agents no longer required to sell land, which had been mandatory earlier. The landowners were happy with this new system since it removed the misconduct and irregularities in the process of land purchase. Moreover, Kabir successfully negotiated with S. Alam to increase the land price from 8 hundred thousand BDTK to between 16 and 20 hundred thousand BDTK. However, the price was no longer fixed, and the landowners could settle a higher price than the offered price through bargaining with the S. Alam officials. One protester in Gondamara said,

“It is very good that the Navy is deployed to take care of the project. The Navy ordered S. Alam not to put even a single step on those lands that they did not

⁴⁹²A respondent in Gondamara, age 47

purchase yet. For that reason, they [S. Alam] cannot occupy anyone's land without purchasing it. More importantly, there is no more role of the goons and agents persisting in the locality to force the landowners to sell their land. Now, the landowners can say that they will not sell their land. [...] The goons and agents are people from our village who showed weapons to us. They harassed us when we were demanding our rights. Now, these government officers [The Bangladesh Navy] are working for us. They are not our relatives, but they can be trusted."⁴⁹³

The cases that had been filed against the protesters have not been dismissed yet as was promised by the government and S. Alam on several occasions. However, all the cases have been halted. Afterwards, the police did not arrest anyone charged in those cases. The protesters think that the government did not withdraw those cases to keep pressure up on the protesters. The protesters who were arrested earlier got bail from the court.

Since the 'negotiation' had held, S. Alam did not face any resistance from the 'project-opposing group' to construct the power plant. No such 'project-opposing group' exists anymore in the locality. Whereas the leaders of the protest declared their support towards the power plant project, the general protesters are still in doubt in terms of accepting it. They engaged in the protest with a demand to scrap the power plant project from the locality. Some of them are still expecting the power plant to be relocated from its current location over the concerns of environmental pollution. They are not convinced with the promises that had been offered by the government or S. Alam in terms of taking measures to control environmental pollution. These protesters are also in doubt about whether S. Alam will comply with the demands that they had raised. Moreover, they are not sure who will check whether S. Alam installed the most advanced technologies or maintained the appropriate procedures to keep the environment safe from the pollution of the coal power plant. Keeping all these doubts in mind, they ended the protest since they realised that they have nothing to do to scrap the project. One protester in Gondamara said,

"It was a massive protest with zero results. It was a protest that costs lives. [...] If it [coal power plant] is good, then it is good; if it is bad, then it is bad. What can I do? Nobody can force to scrap the power plant project since the government is in support of it. Allah [God] knows what will happen. I

⁴⁹³A respondent in Gondamara, age 54

understand that I have nothing to do. I tried, but it did not work out. I will suffer the same as everyone will do. I depend on Allah. Let's see what happens."⁴⁹⁴

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the protesters were pressurised from the law-enforcing agencies to give up the protest. They ended the protest after getting assurances from S. Alam to fulfil their twelve-point demand. In response to the demands of the protesters, S. Alam withdrew the agents and goons and increased the land price. The landowners were happy with the new system because they could sell their land based on the price that they could settle on after bargaining with the S. Alam officials and there was no one to force them to sell their land. However, the local people are still against the power plant project over the concerns of environmental pollution, but eventually ended the protest since they realised that they could not do much about it

5.3 Protests Against Rampal Power Plant

To protest against the Rampal Power Plant, the 'project-opposing group' applied both covert and overt forms of protest strategies based on the reactions from the 'project-supporting group.' This 'project-supporting group' had support from the government and law-enforcing agencies to resist the 'project-opposing group.' The following section analyses the protest strategies of the 'project-opposing group.'

5.3.1 Protest Strategies of the 'Project-Opposing Group'

At the initial stage (during 2010-2011), the 'project-opposing group' did not protest against the power plant project, but rather lobbied to relocate it from its current location to protect their cultivable land. In this covert form of protest, the protesters communicated with the responsible stakeholders, such as the government officials, political leaders, and influential individuals of the locality and requested them to relocate the power plant from its current location by emphasising the productivity of the land and the negative impacts of dispossession on the livelihoods of the landowners and dependent labourers. In support of their argument, the protesters used a quotation of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh who said, "*conversion of agricultural land for any other kind of use is not allowed.*" The protesters sent a note to the

⁴⁹⁴A respondent in Gondamara, age 58

government offices and political leaders requesting them to relocate the power plant project. They titled this note *'Prime Minister's quote should be implemented with success.'* After being refused to relocate the power plant project, they lobbied the political leaders and government officials and requested them to increase the amount of compensation, which also got refused. In some situations, the protesters were intimidated and threatened by the political leaders for opposing the *'dream project'* of the government. One protester in Rampal said,

*"We did everything that we could. We wanted to protect our productive land from the destruction of the power plant project. First, we requested them [political leaders and government officials] to relocate the power plant project. Later, we requested them to increase the amount of compensation to purchase at least the same size of land in the surrounding areas. We went to everyone, but they did not listen to us. Instead of listening to our pain, they humiliated us because we opposed the power plant project."*⁴⁹⁵

At this stage, the protesters, mostly the prominent leaders, followed the covert form of protest strategies as they were not organised as a protesting group. They raised their demands in a very informal way. However, after being refused to relocate the power plant project or increase the amount of compensation, the protesters followed the overt form of protest strategies to force the government to scrap the power plant in a formal and organised way through the engagement of the masses. The protesters formed a protest committee, named *'Krishi Jomi Surakkha Sangram Committee'* (The Protest Committee to Protect Arable Land) with 13 executive members and a few hundred others as general members. This protest committee worked as the *'project-opposing group'* to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. The executive members of this committee were the well-off landowners and shrimp project owners. The general members were the small landholders and landless wage labourers. They selected a leader to lead the protest in a formal and organised way. To engage the masses in the protest, the protesters encouraged the landowners, dependent labourers, and local people of the villages to join the protest. They went from one person to another and informed them about how the power plant project would bring negative impacts on their livelihoods. To encourage the landowners, they mostly highlighted the less amount of compensation, loss of government land without compensation, productivity of the land, and so forth. They also warned them about how the dispossession from arable land would impact their livelihoods. Though the protesters' main

⁴⁹⁵A respondent in Rampal, age 55

target was to get their land back, they included the concern of environmental pollution, particularly the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ as an issue of the protest, to get popular support from the masses. From the environmental protection point of view, the protesters warned the local people that the environment of the Sundarbans and surrounding areas would be polluted due to the emission of pollutants from the Rampal Power Plant. They further informed them that they would get disease and abnormal babies would take birth due to the pollution of the power plant. They also presented some devastating stories of environmental pollution due to the coal power plants of other countries. To disseminate this information, the protesters called for meetings in the villages. They went from one person to another and requested them to join the protest programmes.

Interestingly, the concern of environmental pollution was accidentally included as an ‘issue’ of the protest. The protesters were not aware of it at the beginning. Mainly, a lawyer, who filed a writ petition on behalf of the protesters that sought the court’s directives to stop the construction of the Rampal Power Plant, brought the ‘environment’ issue when he noticed that the construction of the power plant had started before getting the required environment clearances. In that writ petition, the lawyer highlighted the risks to the protection of the Sundarbans forest due to the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant since it is located near the forest. Afterwards, the ‘project-opposing group’ included the concern of the protection of the Sundarbans as an issue of the protest, which got support from the landowners, land-dependent labourers and other local people who were not affected due to the land acquisition. Furthermore, they also received support from several environmental groups such as the NC, NCSS, NGOs, and civil society groups who started protesting against the Rampal Power Plant project at the national level. A network was developed between these environmental groups and local protesters. The environmental groups delivered information to the local protesters about the negative impacts of the coal power plant on the environment. This information helped the local protesters to engage in a knowledge-based protest against the power plant project. Later, instead of productivity of the land, the local protesters highlighted only the protection of the Sundarbans to legitimise their demand to scrap the power plant project. One protester in Rampal said,

“We are sure that this coal power plant will pollute the environment of the Sundarbans and surrounding areas. People will get diseases. We will have to leave this place in the future because of the pollution of the power plant. I am sure about it. For that reason, we were suggesting relocating the power plant

to another location. We cannot let the Sundarbans gets destroyed. They can build thousands of coal power plants, we have no objection, but they cannot build it near the Sundarbans."⁴⁹⁶

The protesters raised funds by themselves to run the necessary expenditures of the protest such as for food, travel, filing writ petition, making banners, and paying the journalists to publish the news. They organised different types of protest programmes, such as human chains, protest meetings, protest rallies, blockades on the roads, press conferences, and so forth. Most of these protest programmes were organised in different locations surrounding the power plant area, such as Chulkathi, Dhigraj, Bhorshapore Bus Stand, Foyla Bazar whereas Chulkati was the main centre of the protest since it is located close to a village of the landowners. They emphasised organising most of the protest programmes along the *Khulna to Mongla* highway to get media coverage. The protesters also organised some protest programmes at different places in the capital city, such as the national press club, engineering institute, and high court to get national attention. They participated in the public consultation meeting held in the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resource (MoENR) which was organised by the government. They also participated in some protest programmes organised by the NC, NCSS, NGOs and civil society groups.

Along with demonstrations at public places, the protesters filed three writ petitions that sought for the court's directives to scrap the Rampal Power Plant. Among these three petitions, only one petition moved for further hearings based on which the court sanctioned a stay order on the construction activities of the power plant until it gets environmental clearance. However, the stay order was withdrawn after nine months, during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. Afterwards, further hearings on those writ petitions had been halted since the protesters could not find out any lawyer who was interested to lead the hearings on behalf of the protesters. One protester in Rampal said,

"We appointed a lawyer to lead a writ petition who was successful to lead a similar petition that resulted in scrapping a power plant in Chittagong from the concerns over environmental pollution. He attended a few hearings of the petition and got a stay order on the construction of the power plant. However, later, he stopped running the petition. [...] I thought the government might had pressurised him to leave the petition. Later, no lawyer was interested in running

⁴⁹⁶A respondent in Rampal, age 50

the petition. Some NC and NCSS members ran a few hearings of the petition, but they also did not continue it further. They also might had been pressurised from the government to leave the petition. I do not know exactly what happened.”⁴⁹⁷

Photo 5.12: Local protesters protesting against Rampal Power Plant⁴⁹⁸



Photo 5.13: Local protesters protesting against Rampal Power Plant⁴⁹⁹



As a protest strategy, a good number of the landowners, mostly the leaders of the protest, refused to apply for compensation for their land which was acquired for the power plant project. They thought that they would lose their right to get their land back if they withdraw the compensation. However, most of them withdrew their compensation by 2015 and left the protest. Some landowners continued protesting even after the withdrawal of the compensation. The protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ continued till 2015, where they got a gathering of a few hundred protesters in most of the protest programmes. However, the number of participants gradually decreased. Eventually, the ‘project-opposing group’ did not stage any mass protest programme after 2015. Some protesters still participate the protest programmes organised by the environmental groups in the surrounding areas of Rampal.

In summary, at the initial stage, the protesters in Rampal adopted the covert form of protest strategies, where they lobbied the influential people requesting to get their land back through relocation of the power plant or increase the amount of compensation. At this stage, the landowners did not withdraw their compensation. When the covert form of protest strategies failed to fulfil their expectations, the protesters adopted the overt form of protest strategies through the formation of the protest committee and selecting a leader of the protest. In this overt form of protest, the protesters started protesting from the concern over environmental pollution where they got support from the masses and environmental groups. They staged

⁴⁹⁷ A respondent of Rampal, age 55

⁴⁹⁸ <http://www.shaptahik.com/v2dev/details.php?id=6459>; accessed on February 25, 2018

⁴⁹⁹ <http://www.bagerhatnews.com/?tag=>; accessed on March 28, 2018

protest programmes on a regular basis to show their reservations. However, the participants of these protest programmes gradually decreased due to suppressive treatment from the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies. Along with the non-violent protest programmes, the protesters filed writ petitions and developed networks with the NC, NCSS and other environmental groups to create pressure on the government to scrap or relocate the power plant from its current location.

5.3.2 Contestations Between ‘Project-Opposing Group’ and ‘Project-Supporting Group’

As discussed in the previous sections, the ‘project-supporting group’ adopted different strategies to neutralise the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ where the ruling political party, administration, and law-enforcing agencies worked hand-in-hand. The police and ‘project-supporting group’ threatened the protesters that they would be in trouble if they oppose the power plant project, and that it would be seen by the government as ‘*an act against the state.*’ The protesters were treated as ‘anti-state,’ ‘anti-development.’ Furthermore, the protesters were obstructed by the police and ‘project-supporting group’ wherever they staged protest programmes. The police and ‘project-supporting group’ created disturbances in the protest programmes in several ways. On some occasions, the protesters were beaten by the police and ‘project-supporting group,’ and some protesters were arrested while they were protesting at public places.⁵⁰⁰ On many other occasions, the protesters did not get permission from the police and administration to stage protest programmes. As an example, the protesters once called for a protest programme in front of the *Gouramba College*. The ‘project-supporting group’ also called for a separate programme in support of the power plant project at the same location. Since two contesting groups called for a programme at the same location, the government sanctioned section 144 which sustained for two days. One protester in Rampal said,

“The police and administration were not in support of the local people. They were acting according to the instructions of a local leader of the ruling party. They sanctioned section 144 in a remote place that has only eight shops, which proved how serious they were against the local people’s protest. We could not

⁵⁰⁰The protesters were beaten by the police and project-supporting group while they were staging protest rallies in *Batiaghata bridge, Chulkhati bazaar, Foyla bus stand, and Gouramba.*

*continue protesting because of such opposition from the police and administration. The police treated us like we were perpetrators.*⁵⁰¹

To neutralise the protest, the police filed several cases against the prominent leaders of the protest to create pressure on them to stop protesting. The protesters identified these cases as ‘fabricated.’ In these cases, the protesters were not directly charged of protesting against the power plant project. But rather they were charged of stealing, robbery, and many other issues. In each case, 20-30 protesters were charged by names, while others remained unnamed. If someone was found proactive in the protest later, the police put their name in the accused list. Some protesters got arrested in charge of those cases. Out of a fear of being arrested, the accused protesters were living a fugitive life since the cases were filed. They did not stay in their homes at night. Some leaders shifted from the village to the nearby city areas to avoid being arrested. However, though some protesters were arrested, the police were very reluctant to arrest the protesters. As the protesters were not charged with serious crimes in these cases, most of the arrested protesters got bail from the court. One protester in Rampal said,

*“These are normal cases. We are accused of stealing and robbery. I am charged in six cases. I took bail from five cases, and still, I have to take bail from one more case. If I go to court, I will get bail easily. However, I am not going to take bail. [...] Now I am not worried about anything. Let’s see what will happen.”*⁵⁰²

Along with the suppressive treatment from the police, the ‘project-supporting group’ also adopted different strategies to neutralise the protest of the ‘project-opposing group.’ At the beginning, they used soft techniques, like sitting with the protesters to listen to their concerns. They attempted to convince the protesters to give up protesting against the power plant project saying that the project would bring economic prosperity in the local people. Further, the protesters were assured that they would get employment in the industries that are going to be developed in the surrounding areas as a result of the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. Later, the ‘project-supporting group’ adopted hard strategies when their soft strategies failed to convince the protesters to give up protesting. One protester in Rampal said,

“He (a powerful local leader of the ruling party) called us for a meeting. We (protesters) joined that meeting, but he did not allow us to say anything. He said that he brought this project (Rampal Power Plant) to the locality to bring

⁵⁰¹A respondent in Rampal, age 24

⁵⁰²A respondent in Rampal, age 52

economic prosperity for the local people. He said that it is a high priority project of the Prime Minister and warned that he would not allow anyone to oppose this project. He did not even listen to our concerns. [...] He confirmed that the power plant would be constructed at the pre-decided location. He warned that he would take out their tongue who would oppose the power plant project.”⁵⁰³

As a strategy to demotivate the ‘project-opposing group,’ the ‘project-supporting group’ spread several rumours such as that seditious cases would be filed against those who were protesting against the ‘development activities of the government’ and that they would not get employment in the power plant project. They urged the protesters to ‘accept some difficulties for the sake of development of the country.’⁵⁰⁴ As a result of these kinds of campaigns, the local people who were not affected due to land acquisition for the power plant project left the protest as they were scared to get in trouble as the government was in support of the project. Some other protesters left the protest with a hope of getting employment in the power plant project. While the majority of the landowners were united and agreed not to apply for the compensation, the ‘project-supporting group’ split them through spreading a fear that they might lose their right to claim the compensation if they did not apply within a cut-off-date, though there was no such cut-off date in reality. Out of a fear of losing the compensation, some landowners applied for the compensation and left the protest later. One protester in Rampal said,

*“I was in the protest since the very beginning. I did not apply for the compensation because I wanted to get my land back. Later, some political leaders warned us that the compensation might be withheld if it was not withdrawn within a cut-off-date. I was scared that I had already been evicted from my land and I did not want to lose the money also. At least I can try doing some business with that money. [...] I applied for the compensation and got it. To me, withdrawal of the compensation means I sold my land to the government. After that, there was no good reason to join the protest. I knew that I would not get my land back and I accepted it.”*⁵⁰⁵

The protesters were confronted by the ‘project-supporting group’ whenever they staged protest programmes. They had to postpone their protest programmes at public places on several

⁵⁰³ A respondent in Rampal, age 50

⁵⁰⁴ Shokaler Khobor (newspaper), March 22, 2017

⁵⁰⁵ A respondent in Rampal, age 51

occasions due to disturbance from the ‘project-supporting group.’ As a result, they staged protest programmes mostly in their villages. The protesters fitted posters and banners in many places, which were removed by the ‘project-supporting group.’ In addition, the protesters were tortured and threatened, and their resources were destroyed to spread a fear of opposing the power plant project.⁵⁰⁶ The ‘project-supporting group’ monitored the activities of the protesters in the villages constantly and informed the police or the senior political leaders if they saw anything suspicious. Mainly, they controlled the entrance of outsiders into the villages, particularly the activists of the NC, journalists, and researchers to resist the protest from getting national attention and developing a linkage between the local and national level protesters. In this regard, the ‘project-supporting group’ were alleged to have harassed some environmental activities, journalists, and researchers who visited the villages and talked to the protesters. One protester in Rampal said,

*“It was a horrible situation. The leaders and supporters of the ruling party kept following us constantly. They kept following us wherever we went, whom we talked to, and everything else. There was no way to stay out of the house since we were always under their surveillance. The police ordered the project-supporting group to report them if they noticed any activity against the power plant project.”*⁵⁰⁷

Along with preventing the ‘project-opposing group’ from protesting against the power plant project, the ‘project-supporting group’ organised several programmes to get community support for the Rampal Power Plant. Among these programmes, they organised a human chain (6 km long) along the *Khulna-Mongla* highway to show the citizens of the country that the local people were in support of the power plant project. The leaders, supporters, and followers of the ruling party mostly participated in this human chain, which was organised with the help of government administration where the police ensured security. These leaders, supporters, and followers were ‘ordered’ from the higher authorities of the party to participate in it. Similarly, these leaders and supporters pressurised other inhabitants of the surrounding areas to participate in the human chain. They threatened the inhabitants that they would be in trouble if they did not participate in it. Some public representatives of the local government also warned the social protection benefit (such as VGD and VGF) receivers to join the human chain,

⁵⁰⁶The ‘project-supporting group’ threw stool on the roof of the house and in the tube-well, stole fruits from trees, poured water on the cement storehouse, and burnt the house of the leader of the protest.

⁵⁰⁷A respondent in Rampal, age 65

otherwise, they would not get those benefits further. The teachers and students of the educational institutes at the surrounding areas were also forced to join the programme. The participants were offered free food after the event and some of them wore similar t-shirts and caps. They held banners with various slogans such as ‘we want power plant for the development of the locality.’

Photo 5.14: Supporters attending a human chain demanding immediate implementation of Rampal Power Plant⁵⁰⁸



From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the ‘project-supporting group’ adopted both soft and hard strategies to confront the ‘project-opposing group.’ As a soft strategy, they attempted to convince the protesters to give up protesting considering the potential economic prosperity of the locality as a result of the Rampal Power Plant. Later, they adopted hard techniques such as beating and threatening the protesters and destruction of their resources. The mobility of the protesters was monitored consistently to keep them under pressure. In addition, the protesters also received suppressive treatment from the law-enforcing agencies. They did not get permission to stage protest programmes on several occasions. Fabricated cases were filed against the protesters and some of them got arrested in charge of those cases, which discouraged them from carrying on the protest. Thus, it gradually became difficult for the

⁵⁰⁸<https://www.jugantor.com/news-archive/online/country-news/>; accessed on November 25, 2019

protesters to continue protesting due to such reactions from the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies.

5.3.3 Connections and Disconnections: Support from External Actors

To protest against the Rampal Power Plant, the ‘project-opposing group’ received support from some NGOs, civil society members, and environmental groups, such as the NC and NCSS. Initially, the local protesters contacted the local NGOs that have been working on environmental and human rights issues, such as Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), BAPA, and so forth for their support towards their protest. These NGOs helped them to file a writ petition against the power plant project and get in contact with the NC. In 2011, the local protesters requested the NC to call for a protest programme demanding the relocation of the power plant from its current location due to the concerns over the protection of the Sundarbans. However, at that time, the NC was reluctant to accept ‘protection of Sundarbans’ as an issue for protest as it was not directly aligned with the mandate of the organisation. Two years later (in 2013) after being requested, the NC started protesting against the Rampal Power Plant from the concerns over environmental pollution from their own initiative. The protest of the NC got support from the local protesters whenever they organised protest programmes in the nearby areas of the power plant. The NC prepared several leaflets and booklets that were distributed among the people living around the power plant areas, which helped to turn the local people’s land-rights protest into an environmental protest. The NC activists motivated the local protesters to stand against the power plant project and they also participated in some of their protest programmes. Later, the NCSS also joined the protest against the Rampal Power Plant. The NC and NCSS mostly organised national level awareness campaigns and protest programmes that helped the anti-Rampal protest to get national and international attention and recognition.

Though the NC and NCSS have been protesting against the Rampal Power Plant, the concerns of the local people such as to get their land back by the relocation of the power plant or increase the amount of compensation never got highlighted as demands in their protest. Later, the NC paused its protest in 2014 due to the upcoming national election. At the time, the NC was observing the actions of the government regarding the power plant project to adopt the necessary protest strategy. During 2014-2015, the government could not make much progress in the construction of the power plant project because the BIFPCL did not get external funding,

which made the project uncertain. This pause of the NC created difficulties for the local protesters as they were suppressed by the police and ‘project-supporting group’ in such a way that they could not emerge again. However, the NC and NCSS started protesting again since 2015 when the local protesters became inactive. Afterwards, the NC and NCSS organised city-based non-violent protest programmes like human chains, protest rallies, press conferences, and so forth (details discussed in chapter six). The local protesters were not happy with the soft protest strategies of the NC and NCSS. They were expecting that the NC and NCSS would stage some robust protest programmes to force the government to scrap the power plant project. Furthermore, the BNP also supported the protest against the Rampal Power Plant since August 2016. The chairperson of the party declared her support for the protest while she was delivering a speech on television and radio. However, the BNP never called for any protest programme against the power plant project. One protester in Rampal said,

“I am not happy with the protest strategies of the NC and NCSS. Their protest strategies are very soft and mostly Facebook and projector (seminar) based. You cannot compel the government to scrap the project with these soft strategies. [...] Similarly, the leaders of the NC and NCSS said that they were in support of our protest. How did they support us? We were accused in several false cases. Was anyone of them accused in those cases? We did not get them in our sufferings. I think they [the NC and NCSS] could not achieve anything with their Facebook-based protest.”⁵⁰⁹

In summary, the ‘project-opposing group’ received support from several environmental groups and NGOs to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. These environmental groups, mainly the NC and NCSS, provided information regarding the impacts of coal power plants on the environment to the local protesters and encouraged them to engage in protesting. They jointly organised several protest programmes. They also participated in each other’s protest programmes. However, the ‘project-opposing group’ were unhappy with the ‘soft protest techniques’ of the environmental groups, particularly because their demands never got highlighted in the protest of the environmental groups.

⁵⁰⁹A respondent in Rampal, age 50

5.3.4 Outcomes of the Protests Against Rampal Power Plant

Though the ‘project-opposing group’ is still against the power plant project, they could not continue protesting since 2015 in a very effective way due to intimidation, harassment, and the suppressive attitude of the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies. Filing fabricated cases and arresting some protesters spread a fear among them that forced them to leave the protest. Furthermore, as a good number of the landowners are Hindu, and belong to the religious minority group in the locality, they feared protesting against the project that was being supported by the ruling political party. One protester in Rampal said,

*“You cannot do anything when the government is so intolerant towards its citizens. The government does not care about anything. They do not listen to anyone. We tried a lot to make our voices heard, but it did not work out. Our protest had lost to the desperateness of the government. Otherwise, the opposition of the local political goons could not have stopped us.”*⁵¹⁰

In addition to receiving suppressive treatment from the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies, the protesters became demotivated to continue protesting when the government signed the contracts to construct the power plant project and loan agreement with the Exim Bank of India, which delivered a clear message to them that the government was determined to construct the power plant. The protesters became hopeless when they saw that the power plant construction activities had been started. This made many of them to leave the protest. Moreover, most of the protesters were in hardship to earn their living since they were evicted from their land. Many of them did not have alternative sources of income. Thus, it was difficult for some protesters to continue protesting as they had to engage in earning their living. One protester in Rampal said,

*“We are poor people. We had all our earnings from the land that had been acquired. We joined the protest to save our land. [...] I could not participate in the protest programmes later as I had to work to earn my living. This happened to many of the protesters.”*⁵¹¹

Thus, the local protesters were demoralised from carrying on protesting as they could not see any positive outcome of the protest since the government was determined to construct the

⁵¹⁰A respondent in Rampal, age 53

⁵¹¹A respondent in Rampal, age 45

power plant despite the objections from the dispossessed population and environmental activists. Though the local protesters are still against the power plant project, they were not seen to organise any protest programme since 2016.

5.4 Conclusion: Developmental Intervention in the Arena of Conflict

As the process of land acquisition to construct the power plants in Banskali and Rampal was different, it impacted the dispossessed population differently. As a result, the dispossessed population reacted differently towards the land acquisition and dispossession from their land in Banskali and Rampal. In both places, the dispossessed population engaged in protesting against the dispossession rather than acting as ‘passive victims,’⁵¹² which depicted them as ‘*powerful and potentially transformative agents*’ as explained by Schneider (2011). They formed the ‘project-opposing group’ to lead the protest in a formal and organised way, which Hall et al. (2015) termed ‘reaction from below.’ As the ‘project-opposing group’ was not happy with the offers, prospects and promises of the ‘project-supporting group’ (state-corporate-elite nexus), through the ‘reaction from below,’ they offered a ‘counter-hegemony’⁵¹³ against the dominant ‘developmental hegemony’. It has seen that the ‘project-supporting group’ was formed with a combination of the government, corporates, elites, political leaders, and their supporters in both places to support the power plant project through resisting the ‘project-opposing group.’ As categorised by Ribot and Peluso (2003), this ‘project-supporting group’ represents as ‘bundles of power’ who exercised extreme power to resist the opposition against the power plant projects with the support of the government, bureaucracy, police, corporates, and local goons.⁵¹⁴ In addition, the government and corporates offered several promises, such as employment creation, contracts, and infrastructural development of the locality to get community support for the power plant projects which Andreucci et al. (2016) termed ‘*depoliticization of the debate.*’ Along with the ‘depoliticization of the debates’ that had emerged from the ‘counter-hegemony’ of the ‘project-opposing group,’ the ‘developmental hegemony’ also offered top-down, scientific, and technocratic proposals to convince the local people in favour of the power plant projects.

⁵¹²White et al., 2012; Wolford et al., 2013

⁵¹³Escobar, 2008

⁵¹⁴Bene, 2018

Initially, the ‘project-opposing group’ protested against the land acquisition as they were victimised due to the dispossession. The primary motivation of the protest was to get their land back or get a higher amount of compensation. However, in both places, the land rights protest turned into an environmental protest as a result of different campaigns by educated people, left-leaning political parties, and environmental groups. As a result of these campaigns, the local people became aware of the environmental pollution because of coal-fired power plants. After being aware of environmental pollution, later, the protesters only emphasised the ‘environmental protection’ in their protest actions which helped them to get support from the ‘non-interest-based’ masses, as explained by Anthony Oliver Smith (2006). The ‘project-opposing group’ in Rampal developed several networks with the NGOs, civil society organisations and environmental groups, which Sawyer (2004) termed as ‘indigenous-environmentalist coalition.’ This ‘indigenous-environmentalist coalition’ helped the protest to get national and international attention. The environmental groups who were inspired by the global discourse of environmentalism, helped to make the local people aware about environmental pollution.⁵¹⁵ These environmental groups also started protesting against the power plant project from the concerns over environmental pollution. However, the demands of the local protesters did not get highlighted in the protest of the environmental groups. Even though these two groups were protesting from two different points of interest, they helped each other as they both were against the coal-fired power plant.

The ‘project-opposing group’ adopted different protest strategies based on the reactions of the ‘project-supporting group,’ which interplayed within the asymmetrical power relations between these two contesting groups.⁵¹⁶ Initially, the protesters were unorganised and followed the ‘covert’ form of resistance, such as showing non-cooperation, creating obstacles to the power plant development activities, refusing to leave occupancy of the land, refusing to withdraw the compensation, bargaining with the ‘project-supporting group,’ and so forth. In the Rampal case, the protesters lobbied the government officials, political leaders, and influential people to relocate the power plant or increase the amount of compensation. However, the protesters adopted the ‘overt’ form of resistance when they failed to get their desired success with the ‘covert’ form of resistance.⁵¹⁷ They formed a protest committee and selected a leader to lead the protest, which helped them to get an organisational form to adopt

⁵¹⁵Nuremowla, 2012

⁵¹⁶Hall et al., 2015; Andreucci et al., 2016

⁵¹⁷Adnan, 2007

the 'overt' form of resistance, such as staging protest rallies and human chains on a regular basis through face-to-face contestation against the police and 'project-supporting group.'

With the support of the police and bureaucracy, the 'project-supporting group' behaved violently towards the protesters to disengage them. The protesters were labelled as 'anti-state,' and 'anti-development' due to opposing the government-supported development project. The protesters were harassed, tortured, and killed in the clashes where the police took the side of the 'project-supporting group.' The police filed several fabricated cases against the protesters and many of them got arrested. The protesters could not continue their protest due to such suppressive treatment from the law-enforcing agencies and local 'project-supporting group.' Moreover, the protesters were also in a marginalised position due to losing their arable land. It was difficult for them to continue protesting as they needed to work to earn their living. Similarly, the starting of the construction works of the power plant projects carried a clear message to the protesters that the government was determined to construct the power plant projects, which discouraged them even further regarding continuing the protests.

Chapter Six

‘Environmental Protection’: Argumentative Storylines Around Rampal Power Plant

“I would not construct the Rampal Coal Power Plant if it were harmful to the Sundarbans.”⁵¹⁸

“Based on several scientific research works, we are convinced that the Rampal Power Plant would destroy the Sundarbans. We are protesting against the power plant to save the forest.”⁵¹⁹

6.1 Introduction: Environmental Protests at the Interface of Developmental Intervention

Environmental protests emerge from concerns over ‘environmental protection’ at the interface of developmental intervention, which has a risk of causing environmental degradation, in the commodity frontiers.⁵²⁰ Environmental protests adopt different protest strategies to challenge the ‘developmental hegemony’ of the commodity frontiers and to protect the environment. Political ecology offers an analytical framework to analyse the environmental protests, ranging from everyday forms of resistance to formal and organised forms of resistance through the development of global networks, which Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) defined as ‘a chain of explanation.’ This framework analyses the internal dynamics of the environmental protests through questioning what are the motives and interests of the environmental groups to engage in the protests, how they organise and operationalise the protest actions, and so forth.⁵²¹ Analysing the environmental protests using this framework, studies showed that environmental protests interplayed through confrontation of the dominant ‘developmental hegemony’ of the

⁵¹⁸This message was written on a poster of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh that was fitted in Dighraj, a place near the Rampal Power Plant area.

⁵¹⁹An environmental activist, Age 52

⁵²⁰Escobar, 2001; Martinez-Alier, 2002

⁵²¹Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987

state or corporates and offered a ‘counter-hegemony,’ which Peet and Watts (2004) defined as ‘political ecology from below.’ The strategies of the ‘political economy from below’ get shaped according to the reactions of the dominant faction.

The ‘developmental hegemony’ becomes dominant because the state offers several incentives and legal safeguards to the corporates in favour of the developmental interventions in the commodity frontiers. For this reason, Borras and Franco (2013) explained this ‘developmental hegemony’ phenomenon as ‘the access to resources is the same as access to authority.’ For instance, in Bolivia, the legal terms were formulated in favour of the mining companies to extract natural resources by compromising the environmental and social protections.⁵²² Similarly, in a case of Ethiopia, the government offered cheap land rent, tax exemption, and long-term lease of land to the corporates to initiate developmental projects.⁵²³ For these reasons, the ‘developmental hegemony’ of the state or corporates exercises unchallenged power in favour of the developmental intervention when it has a risk of causing environmental pollution. In such circumstances, the environmental protests interplay within the ‘political economies of power and accumulation,’ which Ribot and Peluso (2003) identified as ‘bundle of power.’

The developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers is often blamed for environmental degradation, uneven distribution of costs and benefits, unsustainable and undemocratic resource allocation, and exploitation. The government and corporates present a ‘techno-expert’ explanation, such as managing the environmental degradation with the help of using the most advanced and appropriate technology, to legitimise the intervention. They promise to follow this ‘state-of-the-art’ to get support in favour of the development intervention.⁵²⁴ Besides, this top-down ‘techno-expert’ explanation, which is identified as ‘techno-politics,’ is also used to subjugate the alternative voices through discursive practices.⁵²⁵ In this ‘techno-expert’ explanation, the terms of technology have been used in such a way that can be analysed with Karl Marx’s concept of ‘fetish’ that refers to something fascinating but unable to see the truth behind it.⁵²⁶ For instance, the intervention of a tree plantation project in Chile was justified to control soil erosion and native forest degradation. However, the project failed to control soil erosion and native forest degradation due to extensive cutting down of native trees for large-

⁵²²Andreucci et al., 2016

⁵²³Borras and Franco, 2013

⁵²⁴Roberts, Badwal, Wibberley and Bhattacharya, 2017; Andreucci et al., 2016

⁵²⁵Mitchell, 2002; Robbins, 2004

⁵²⁶Marx, 1992

scale plantation and replacement of native trees with new species of trees where the local people's concerns were not accommodated.⁵²⁷ Similarly, in a case of Assam, the state and corporate companies confirmed that the hydropower dams that were going to be contracted there were technologically advanced and unbreakable, which had been criticised by the local academicians. They reviewed the overall dam construction design and concluded that there were several safety loopholes, such as the sites that were selected for the dams were prone to earthquakes and landslides.⁵²⁸ Criticising the 'techno-expert' explanation of the 'developmental hegemony,' Andreucci et al. (2016) argued that the environmental conflicts emerge when the decisions of 'development,' 'economic growth,' and 'environmental management' have been made from the scientific-technocratic dogmas without considering the well-being of the population at stake. From such experiences, political ecology considers that the 'techno expert' or 'scientific knowledge' is not neutral, but rather political. Shedding light on 'techno-politics,' political ecology re-politicise, re-historicise, and re-contextualise environmental issues to understand the internal dynamics of the environmental conflicts at the interface of developmental interventions.

Environmental groups, such as NGOs, civil society members, and environmental organisations, protest against developmental interventions that have a risk of causing environmental degradation to protect the cultural heritage and environmental quality through criticising the dominant 'techno-expert' explanation.⁵²⁹ The environmental activists join the environmental protest from non-materialistic concerns, such as for saving the heritage sites, environment, biodiversity, and so forth, which are quite different from the concerns of 'the environmentalism of the poor' where the dispossessed population join the environmental protest from materialistic concerns of protecting their livelihoods.⁵³⁰ Along with the concerns over environmental degradation, the environmental activists also stand against the capitalist intervention in the commodity frontiers. They want to establish citizens' ownership on the state resources. Recently, the issues like human rights and indigenous people's rights become common concerns of environmental conflict at the interface of developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers. In this conflict, the environmental activists raise questions regarding the unequal distribution of costs and benefits. They scrutinise the deals that have been signed between the corporate and state and propose 'alternative vision' to restore people's access to

⁵²⁷Andreucci et al., 2016

⁵²⁸*ibid*

⁵²⁹Campbell and Meletis, 2011

⁵³⁰Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2009; Oliver-Smith, 2006

the resources.⁵³¹ Studies show that the systematic violation of laws and regulations to initiate development projects welcomes the environmental activists to engage in protesting. For instance, 12 out of 17 first-track development projects in India violated laws and regulations and most of these projects were initiated without EIA reports, which encouraged the environmental activists to protest against these projects from the concerns over environmental protection.⁵³² Similarly, analysing the root causes to emerge the environmental protest against a mining project in Phulbari, Luthfa (2011) showed that ‘unplanned and unnecessary coercion’ attracted the local, national, and international environmentalists to engage in protesting.

The environmental protest against the developmental intervention in the commodity frontiers is identified as a ‘*new way of doing politics for social change without challenging the state power.*’⁵³³ Since the government is not challenged, it does not pay serious attention to environmental protest until it becomes a reputational concern. For this reason, the local environmental activists always take support from the environmental activists at the regional, national, and global levels to strengthen and legitimise their respective claims and put pressure on the government from multiple directions.⁵³⁴ For instance, Nuremowla (2012) showed how the local protesters developed networks with the trans-local environmental activists to protest against a coal mining project in Phulbari in Bangladesh. Beyond the environmental activists, he found, the university professionals, human rights defenders, lawyers, and other groups also supported the local protesters.

The environmental protest does not limit itself to a local environmental conflict. Instead, it extends to the global level through the development of several networks and channels with other like-minded organisations, activist groups, and individuals to protest from a wider scale and help each other in multiple ways.⁵³⁵ From the concerns over ‘global environmental justice,’ the environmental activists, academics, and NGOs around the world work in a network. This network helps to exchange dialogues on the theories and practices to develop a bridge between the environmental scientists and environmental protesters.⁵³⁶ Political ecology explores how the local environmental activists are connected with the ‘global process of environmentalism’ and how they (re)interpret their respective claims after being influenced by the global network. Studies showed that the interactions of the local and global environmental networks have

⁵³¹Fisher, 1995; Oliver-Smith, 2006

⁵³²Bene, 2018

⁵³³Horowitz, 2010

⁵³⁴Andreucci et al., 2016

⁵³⁵Diani, 1992

⁵³⁶Bene, 2018

resulted in two ways; firstly, the local concerns of environmental degradation reached the international level through ‘trans-nationalization,’ and secondly, the global environmental arguments reached the local level through ‘diffusionism.’⁵³⁷

Many studies in political ecology have focused on the local-global interactions of environmental activists. From the perspective of agency against developmental intervention, these studies analysed the divergent interests, values, and politics of the environmental activists. These studies further analysed the whole spectrum of the protest, ranging from the discursive articulation of actors, valuation of language, local-global dimensions of protest strategies, and the results of the protest.⁵³⁸ According to these studies, the global networks provide informative support to the local activists, which sometimes shape the logic and strategies of their environmental protest.⁵³⁹ The local environmental activists adopt ‘glocal’ strategies of resistance after being influenced by the local-global networks and use the terms of ‘global discourse of environmentalism’ that they learn from the global networks.⁵⁴⁰ After being inspired by the global community, the local environmental activists use new vocabularies of ‘environmentalism’ according to the international standard of environmental protection, which Anna Tsing (2000) defined as ‘unexpected alliance.’ Swyngedouw (1997) used the concept of ‘scale’ to understand the intensity of the local-global interactions as a central concern of political ecology. In his view, the scale is never fixed, but constantly reconfigured based on the extent, content, and interactions of actors. Some other studies showed that the influences of the global process in favour of the expansion of commodity frontiers determine the country-specific trajectories at the local level. These trajectories define the context of the interface situation and power positions of the contesting actors in which the expansion of commodity frontiers is ‘defined, negotiated and contested.’⁵⁴¹ For instance, in a case of Cameroon, the international organisations, such as WWF, Greenpeace, WCS and others sensitised the local people and informed the global community about the possible negative effects of a development project on the environment and livelihoods of the local people.⁵⁴² Similarly, Anna Tsing (2000) showed how the Bolivian mining protesters were connected with the international community and how they were influenced by this global network to adopt different vocabularies and protest strategies. Luthfa (2011) also showed that the interactions

⁵³⁷Gingembre, 2018

⁵³⁸Escobar, 2008; Martinez-Alier, 2002

⁵³⁹Diani, 1992

⁵⁴⁰Escobar, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1997

⁵⁴¹Peet and Watts, 1996

⁵⁴²Ndi and Batterbury, 2017

between the national and international environmental activists helped to make the local protesters aware about the possible negative environmental impacts of coal mining in Phulbari in Bangladesh. These protesters engaged in protesting against the mining project and used various ‘environmental dogmas’ that they learnt from the global networks. Sometimes, the local environmental protesters take support from the international forums, such as UNESCO, to put pressure on the government, particularly if the development project has any threat to a site of the World Heritage list. As an example, the local environmental activists lobbied the government officials and UNESCO against swiftlet farming in the world heritage site George Town in Malaysia.⁵⁴³

Several environmental groups, including left-leaning political parties, environmental activists, academicians, NGOs, and civil society members have been protesting against the Rampal Power Plant from the concerns over environmental protection, particularly the Sundarbans mangrove forest. The motives of these environmental groups to engage in the protest are different from the motives of the dispossessed population that have been discussed in chapters three, four, and five. These environmental groups have different ideological positions to engage in the protest, but they have a common consensus to protect the Sundarbans mangrove forest from the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. They placed various arguments challenging the legitimacy of the power plant project, while the government (representatives of the government, departments of the state, BIFPCL, and so forth) also placed counter-arguments to legitimise its position. Thus, both groups (the government and environmental activists) joined in the contestation through placing their own argumentative storylines to legitimise their respective position and denying others. This chapter examines these argumentative storylines of these two contesting groups to understand the ‘environmental protection’ based contestation around the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. This chapter also analyses the different dynamics and protest strategies of the environmental groups along with the analysis of the government’s reactions towards the environmental protests.

6.2 Formation of Environmental Protests Against Rampal Power Plant

There are several organisations and platforms, such as the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports (NC), National Committee for Saving the

⁵⁴³Andreucci et al., 2016

Sundarbans (NCSS), Left Alliance (*Bam Morcha*), CPB-BASAD, *Upacolio Paribesh Surokka Nagorik Committee*, Waterkeepers Alliance and others who are protesting against the Rampal Power Plant from the concerns over environmental protection since 2012 to till now. An innumerable number of civil society groups and individuals also became part of these environmental groups to protest against the power plant project. Some of these environmental groups do not have an organisational structure and they organised themselves as a ‘protest group’ to execute a particular protest event when it is needed. These various types of environmental groups have been formed based on ideological differences of the environmental activists of these groups though some activists are member of several groups. Though these environmental activists are different in reasoning to oppose the power plant project and adopting protest strategies, they have a common consensus to protect the Sundarbans mangrove forest. As a result, sometimes they organised separate programmes and sometimes joint programmes. As they have a common consensus, they often joined and supported each other’s programmes. One activist of the NC said,

*“This is not a movement of the NC or NCSS only. This should be a movement of every citizen of the world as the Sundarbans is a world heritage. It is everyone’s responsibility to protect the Sundarbans. We are trying to include everyone to create a mass movement to force the government to scrap the power plant project. We welcome everyone who ever stands against the power plant project. For this reason, we never count who calls for a protest programme, we just join and support them. They also do the same with us.”*⁵⁴⁴

Among these environmental groups, the NC and NCSS are leading the environmental protest against the Rampal Power Plant. The left-leaning political activists, professionals, academicians, and civil society members formed *the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports (NC)* in 1998 to establish public surveillance on the government agreements/deals that were signed with foreign and multinational corporations for leasing natural resources like oil and gas, to create public awareness about the impacts of such agreements/deals on national interests, and motivate citizens to protest against such agreements/deals that go against national interests.⁵⁴⁵ The main objective of the NC is to

⁵⁴⁴An environmental activist, age 47

⁵⁴⁵Initially, the name of the organisation was *National Committee for Protecting Oil-Gas for National Interest*. Because of increasing imperialist aggression in the power and port sector, the name of the organisation was changed to *National Committee for Protection of Oil-Gas resources and Power-Ports* to bring those sectors under its jurisdiction. After being informed about the conspiracy around the mineral resources, the name of the organisation was changed further as *The*

establish the citizens' authority on natural resources and institutions of the state through the cancellation of the anti-national-interest agreements. It further demands for effective utilization of natural resources of the country for the benefit of the citizens instead of leasing them to foreign companies.⁵⁴⁶ It has several branches in the country and different cities around the world. The left-leaning political activists and intellectuals are the prominent members of the NC. It collects funds to run its programmes from the donation of the members, like-minded individuals and organisations, and by selling publications.

For the last two decades, the activists of the NC have been protesting to protect the natural resources of the country from being 'looted' by foreign companies by means of unfair deals. They are successful in compelling the government to withdraw or withhold some contracts that have been signed with the foreign companies, such as natural gas export from the *Bibiana* gas field, gas field exploration by TATA, oil and gas exploration in the *Bay-of-Bengal* by ConocoPhillips, *Phulbari* open-pit mining by Asian Energy, leasing the *Chittagong Port* to a private company, export of fertiliser, and so forth. They successfully staged nation-wide protest programmes on the issues mentioned above by engaging the masses, which received national and international attention.⁵⁴⁷ The activists of the NC started protesting against the Rampal Power Plant from the concerns over the protection of the Sundarbans forest since 2012, even though 'environmental protection' is not a mandate of the organisation. They legitimised this by stating that the '*protection of the environment is crucial for national interest.*' However, this is not the first time that the NC has stood for the protection of the Sundarbans. In 2004, the NC called for a long march towards the Sundarbans with the slogan "*Save the Mongla port, Save the Sundarbans.*"

The *National Committee for Saving the Sundarbans* (NCSS) is a citizens' committee of 53 organisations and like-minded individuals with a very loose structural formation. This committee was formed in 2012 targeting to organise awareness and advocacy campaigns to protect the Sundarbans forest. Since the 'protection of the Sundarbans' is a primary concern, the NCSS is not only worried about the Rampal Power Plant for the protection of the forest but also about all other types of devastating activities around the forest, such as industrial expansion, deforestation, river dredging, salinity intrusion, transportation through the channels

National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports to include the mission to protect mineral resources (<http://ncbd.org>; accessed on October 26, 2018).

⁵⁴⁶Nuremoula, 2012

⁵⁴⁷Prothom Alo, February 14, 2016

of the Sundarbans, and so forth.⁵⁴⁸ Some member organisations of the NCSS have been working for the protection of the Sundarbans for a long time. One activist of the NCSS said,

*“Organising protest programmes to protect the Sundarbans is not new for many member organisations of the NCSS. Some member organisations, such as BELA and BAPA have been organising protest programmes since the 1980s. Thus, the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ is an ongoing movement of many member organisations. The NCSS has been formed as a platform after the inception of the Rampal Power Plant targeting to organise awareness and advocacy campaigns in collaboration with like-minded organisations. The NCSS has merged the ‘protection of the Sundarbans movement’ and ‘anti-Rampal movement.’”*⁵⁴⁹

The dispossessed population of the Rampal Power Plant area, who were protesting against the power plant project since 2010 targeting ‘to save their arable land,’ requested some of these environmental groups to support and participate in their protests. These environmental groups hesitated to join and support the local people’s protest since the government has full rights to acquire private land for public purpose from a legal perspective. Later, the dispossessed population included the concern of ‘environmental protection’ as an issue of the protest and requested the environmental groups to join and support it (details discussed in chapter five). However, the environmental groups did not join and support the protest since the issues of the protest were not interesting to them. Particularly for the activists of the NC, they were looking for some political agendas to join the protest rather than the ‘apolitical’ concern of ‘saving arable land’ or ‘environmental protection,’ which goes beyond their organisational jurisdiction. At that point of time (in 2010), though the environmental groups did not join and support the protest of the dispossessed population as a group or platform, some activists of these groups supported the protest and participated in the protest programmes individually. These activists visited the villages of the landowners and motivated the local people to protest from the concern over ‘saving arable land.’ At that point of time, the dispossessed population and environmental groups did not have any clear idea about the possible impacts of coal-fired power plant on the environment. For this reason, the environmental groups hesitated to join the protest from the

⁵⁴⁸The *Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon* (BAPA) has been working to save the Sundarbans for a long time as part of its regular activities. It formed the NCSS after including like-minded organisations and individuals to protest against the Rampal Power Plant to avoid being traced as single ‘opponent’ as the government is in the support of the power plant project. BAPA provides financial and logistic support to the NCSS and its office has been used as the head quarter (<http://ncssbd.org/ncss/>; accessed on October 27, 2018).

⁵⁴⁹An environmental activist, age 51

concerns over ‘environmental protection.’ However, later, they became interested to join the protest when they got to know that there is a risk of causing environmental pollution to the Sundarbans forest because of the emission of pollutants from the Rampal Power Plant. Because of such interest, they took time to understand about the possible impacts of the Rampal Power Plant on the environment, particularly on the Sundarbans. The environmental groups, mainly the NC, took help from two local academicians to generate evidence about the possible impact of the Rampal Power Plant on the Sundarbans. Furthermore, they also communicated with foreign experts and researchers and requested them to conduct research on the Rampal Power Plant. These researchers conducted several studies on the issue and found that the coal power plant will bring significant negative impacts to the Sundarbans. These researchers produced evidence for the environmental activists, which motivated them to join the protest. Some environmental activists visited India to see the impacts of coal power plants on the environment. They also gathered information on the issue from several secondary sources as well. Eventually, the NC joined the protest against the Rampal Power Plant in 2012, when the activists were ‘confirmed’ that the power plant will hamper the balance of the ecosystems of the Sundarbans and surrounding areas. Following the NC, other environmental groups also joined the protest from 2012 onwards. In addition to the concerns over ‘environmental protection,’ the environmental activists were careful to choose issues for protest that would attract the support of the masses. They found the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ as a ‘lucrative’ issue for protest because the citizens have an emotional connection with the forest since it is a matter of national pride. They considered that since the issue of ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ is sensitive; it had a greater chance to create a mass protest by engagement of the masses. One environmental activist said,

“We took time to qualify ourselves to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. We took time to understand the impacts of the coal power plant on the environment from the experiences of other countries and different research works. [...] To select an issue for protest, we calculate the chances to get support from the masses. For that reason, normally, we do not move with an issue about which the masses do not have a serious concern. We decided to protest against the Rampal Power Plant when we found the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ as an issue for protest that citizens are sympathised with. It is effortless to reach people with concern over something like the Sundarbans. Thus, the concern over the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ motivated us to join

*the protest. For the same reason, we are protesting against the Rampal Power Plant only, not against the other coal power plants in the country.*⁵⁵⁰

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the environmental groups hesitated to join and support the protest of the dispossessed population against the Rampal Power Plant even after being requested because they thought that protesting against the land acquisition was beyond their organisational jurisdiction. Eventually, they joined the protest after being certain that the power plant will bring negative impacts to the ecosystem of the Sundarbans forest. Moreover, the environmental activists were careful to choose the issue for protest considering the chances to get support from the masses. They became interested to join the protest when they found a sensitive issue like the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ as it was easy for them to get the attention of the citizens. At the same time, the construction of several other coal-fired power plants was going on in other parts of the country. The environmental activists chose not to protest against those power plants because they did not find any suitable issue for protest like the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ to attract the support of the masses. Thus, the issue of ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ worked as a strong motivational force for the environmental activists to join the protest.

6.3 Major Concerns of Environmental Activists in the Protests Against Rampal Power Plant

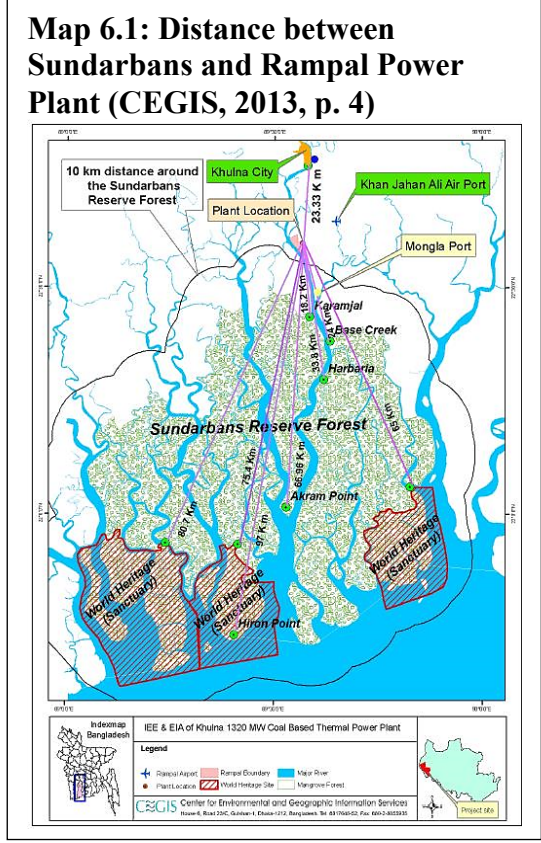
As discussed in the previous sections, the environmental groups have different ideological positions in reasoning to join the protest against the Rampal Power Plant. For example, while the NCSS is protesting from the sole reason to protect the Sundarbans forest, the NC has more broader agendas, such as the protection of national interests, energy security of the country, and so forth along with the protection of the Sundarbans (details discussed in the following sections). Similarly, there are various disagreements among the members of these environmental groups as well. However, the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ is a common concern of all the activists of these environmental groups, which brings them under the same

⁵⁵⁰An environmental activist, age 48

umbrella.⁵⁵¹ The following section analyses the main concerns of the environmental groups to protest against the Rampal Power Plant.

After reviewing the EIA report, tender documents, and research works conducted by the independent researchers, the environmental activists got to know that the Rampal Power Plant would release pollutant gases, heavy metals, particles, ash, and so forth which would have a significant negative effect on the environment of the surrounding areas, particularly on the Sundarbans.⁵⁵² The Sundarbans is one of the largest single-track mangrove forest of the world that lies on the delta of the Ganges on the Bay of Bengal. The total area of the forest is 6,000 km² (the forest is 3,956 km² and the rest of the area is water bodies). The forest has a very especial ecosystem as it has been created in brackish water (at the mix point of saline and sweet water) at the intersect of tidal waterways, creeks, and upstream rivers. The forest is rich with natural resources, particularly with flora and fauna (more than 66 species of plant, 200 species of fish, 42 species of mammal, 234 species of birds, 51 species of reptiles, and 8 species of amphibian).⁵⁵³ It has the

largest number of biomasses in per km², only after the Amazon forest. This is the only forest in Bangladesh that exists with its natural characteristics and still, the ecological development



⁵⁵¹The environmental activists considered that the Sundarbans is already being affected due to salinity intrusion in the water as a result of disruption of water flow from the upstream river because of the *Farakka Barrage* build by India over the *Teesta River* (Wahid, Mark and Rahman, 2002). Moreover, some other man-made factors such as cutting trees and encroachment towards the forest are gradually decreasing the size of the Sundarbans. In these circumstances, the environmental activists are claiming that the Rampal Power Plant will fuel the disruption of the Sundarbans which is already in danger.

⁵⁵²The direct impacts, such as (1) air pollution due to the emission of SO_x, NO_x, CO_x, bottom ash, fly ash (0.94 million tons of ash in a year) and many other chemical elements, (2) water pollution due to water withdrawal from the Pashur river to run the power plant and discharging (with little bit high temperature water) to the river after treatment, (3) Toxic metal pollution due to release of heavy metal (mercury, lead, chromium, arsenic and so many) in the form of ash. Among the indirect impacts, the environmental activists are worried about the safety of the ash pond that might wash away due to rainfall and hit by tropical cyclone which might pollute the surrounding environment. Coal transportation through the Sundarbans would pollute the river and channels of the Sundarbans due to fall of coal by over-flow and accidental reason (according to the EIA report, each year a ship of 10 thousand tons capacity of coal will run 470 times through the channels of the Sundarbans). The impact of dredging of the Pashur river to keep necessary depth for coal transportation is not measured in the EIA report. Similarly, transportation through the channels of the Sundarbans will beam light and make sound, which will create disturbance to the Sundarbans (Prothom Alo, April 2, 2016).

⁵⁵³Choudhury, Waliuzzaman and Nishat, 2001 cited in Chowdhury, 2017

process is ongoing.⁵⁵⁴ Some parts of the forest have been declared as Ramsar and Natural World Heritage site by UNESCO considering its uniqueness.⁵⁵⁵ The Rampal Power Plant is located 4 km away from the environmental critical area (ECA) boundary of the Sundarbans.⁵⁵⁶ One of the major concerns of the environmental activists is that the power plant is not located at a safe distance to keep the environmentally sensitive mangrove forests out of danger.⁵⁵⁷ They are more worried about the pollution of the *Pashur* river due to water withdrawal and discharge to run the power plant, coal transportation, dredging, and several other activities. They are concerned that the pollution of the *Pashur* river would spread throughout the entire areas of the Sundarbans.⁵⁵⁸ They believe that any small level of disruption would hamper the balance of the ecosystems of the Sundarbans because of its sensitive nature. One environmental activist said,

“The Sundarbans forest is already in danger. The size of the forest is gradually decreasing. It has been destroyed for manmade, natural disasters, and many other reasons. [...] Why are the tigers of the Sundarbans coming to the locality nowadays? They come because they do not get food in the forest. That means, the forest is already in danger. We are not agreeing to add one more reason [coal power plant] to destroy the forest. Thus, we are protesting against the

⁵⁵⁴ Prothom Alo, December 22, 2014

⁵⁵⁵ Chowdhury, 2017

⁵⁵⁶ CEGIC, 2013. p. 5

⁵⁵⁷ 10 kilometres of the surrounding areas of the Sundarbans was declared as the Environmentally Critical Area (ECA) by the government in 1999 with an order under section 5 of the Environment Act 1995. The Rampal Power plant is located 14 km away from the Sundarbans and 4 km away from the ECA boundary. From the experience of other countries, no country approves a coal power plant within 15-25 km of the outline of reserve forests, national parks, and human settlement due to serious environmental pollution (as an example, India and Malaysia does not approve coal power plant within 25 and 20 kilometres of reserve forest respectively). That means, the Rampal Power Plant would not get environmental clearance in India if it were within 25 km of the reserve forest. The NTPC did not get approval to construct a power plant in Narsinghpur District in India due to objection by the Expert Appraisal Committee reasoning ‘*the site comprises a vast portion of double crop agricultural land which is unacceptable*’ (The Hindu, October 8, 2010). Similarly, a few other coal power plants were scrapped in Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa in India due to the concern of environment pollution and objection from the citizens (Muhammad, 2013). However, the law of Bangladesh approves such project within a 10 km radius from human settlements and reserve forests. Furthermore, there are several controversies regarding the distance between the location of the power plant and the Sundarbans. Some environmental activists calculated the distance using GIS and found the distance is between 9-13 km. (Wahiduzzaman and Salam, 2013). It is also mentioned in the EIA report that the location of the Rampal Power Plant was ‘*once the part of the Sundarbans*’ (CEGIC, 2013; p. 214).

⁵⁵⁸ According to the EIA report (CEGIC, 2013) of the Rampal Power Plant, 4.72 million tons of coal will be transported to the coal power plant through the river and channels of the Sundarbans (236 days in a year) (p. 113). The environmental activists estimated that there are chances of pollution of water of the river due to oil spillage, coal spillages, and coal dropping. The vessels will create waves that will cause shore erosion. Beaming light from ships and the activities at night will hamper the sensitive ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Furthermore, the power plant requires to withdraw 9,150 cubic metres of water per hour from the *Pashur* river to operate the power plant which was shown to be less than 0.5% of the lowest flow condition of the river (p. 117). 5,150 cubic metres of water per hour will be discharged to the river after treatment (p. 285). The environmental activists are worried that the discharge of water from the power plant will pollute the hydrological characteristic of the entire region of the Sundarbans due to change of temperature and velocity and entails of other chemicals. The environmental activists are concerned that the pollution of the *Pashur* river will spread throughout the Sundarbans.

Rampal Power Plant because we believe that it would be the final nail in the coffin of the Sundarbans.”⁵⁵⁹

The environmental activists criticised the violation of laws and regulations of the state to construct the Rampal Power Plant. Particularly, the EIA report of the Rampal Power Plant has been alleged as ‘impartial,’ ‘tactically presenting false and misleading information,’ and ‘underestimating many adverse impacts’ to justify the construction of the power plant at the current location. According to them, the EIA report used words like ‘unlikely,’ ‘hardly,’ ‘very little,’ ‘may,’ ‘may not’⁵⁶⁰ regarding the measurement of different pollutant elements. As a result, the report failed to suggest appropriate measurement of the pollutant elements to understand how they would impact on the environment.⁵⁶¹ The report has been alleged as ‘incomplete’ and ‘questionable’ due to presenting several inaccurate pieces of information (e.g., air data) and unsubstantial promises to keep the environment safe.⁵⁶² They further criticised the EIA report for presenting several data in a tricky way to show the level of pollution under the standard level (e.g., emissions of SO_x, NO_x, CO_x) and hiding several other important information (e.g., declaration of some parts of the forest as the wild sanctuary, information of flora and fauna of the Sundarbans, and so forth). Many information has not been considered and many other information has been considered lightly.⁵⁶³ The environmental activists also objected that the EIA study was not carried out in a neutral manner, and it failed to offer a satisfactory pollution management plan to keep the environment safe. They rejected the report saying that it failed to meet international standards.⁵⁶⁴ These claims of the environmental activists regarding the EIA report have been supported by UNESCO, IUCN, SAHR, TIB, independent researchers, and many others.⁵⁶⁵

Apart from the concerns over environmental pollution because of the Rampal Power Plant, the environmental activists are more worried about the industrial expansion which is taking place around the Sundarbans. They considered that the construction of the Rampal Power Plant

⁵⁵⁹An environmental activist, age 58

⁵⁶⁰Mustafa, 2013; Aitken and BankTrack, 2016

⁵⁶¹Prothom Alo, April 2, 2016

⁵⁶²Muhammad, 2013; UNESCO, 2017

⁵⁶³The EIA has been alleged not to have mentioned several important pieces of information, such as the possible impacts of withdrawal and discharge of water from the Pashur river, coal transportation through the channels of the Sundarbans, pollution due to emission of pollutant gases and heavy metals, river dredging, sounds and light, and so forth.

⁵⁶⁴It is reported in the EIA report that the CEGIS received ‘instruction’ and ‘guidance’ from the government to conduct the EIA study, which raised questions about the objectivity and neutrality of the report. Further, the CEGIS was assigned to conduct the EIA study without any competitive process. In addition, the CEGIS is a government organisation, which conducted the EIA for a government-funded power plant project. The environmental activists are worried that there remains a risk of ‘conflict of interest.’

⁵⁶⁵UNESCO, 2017; SAHR, 2015

brought this industrial expansion around the Sundarbans by violating the laws and regulations of the country. The Environment Conservation (Amendment) Act 2010 prohibits any factory within the ECA of the Sundarbans.⁵⁶⁶ When the High Court noticed some attempts to set up industries in this area, based on this Act, the court issued an order on 24 August 2017 to the respective authorities to not approve any industry within 10 km areas of the Sundarbans. However, the National Committee on Environment (a government body) gave a ‘go-ahead’ permission to 320 industries⁵⁶⁷ within 10 km radius of the ECA of the Sundarbans after violating the Environment Conservation Act 2010 and the order of the court.

Many of these industries got environmental and site clearance certificates from the DoE.⁵⁶⁸ Some RED category industries also got similar approval. To approve these RED category industries, the government shifted some RED category industries to GREEN category by changing the rules of the Act. Later, the court changed its previous position and ordered the DoE to give approval to some other industries to set up in the Sundarbans area on the ground of ‘equal opportunity for all.’⁵⁶⁹ In most cases, the political leaders and alliance members of the ruling party are the owners of these industries. Since the owners are in a powerful position, the environmental activists are worried that there might be more chances to violate the environmental rules and regulations during the operational phase of these industries, which would bring terrible disaster to the Sundarbans and surrounding areas. One environmental activist said,

“[...] I have a problem with the government’s understanding of ‘development.’ The government is approving pollutant industries to set up in the surrounding areas of the Sundarbans. That means, the government is compromising the environmental, economic, and social aspects of the Sundarbans for the sake of ‘development.’ This [industrial expansion] is taking place around the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. This power plant is working as a ‘departure point’ of the industrial expansion around the Sundarbans. From this

⁵⁶⁶Clause number 7 of the Environmental Conservation Rules 1999 classified industries into four categories- green, orange a, orange b and red according to their potential impact on the environment. The highest polluting industries due to emission of several pollutant elements are categorised as red. According to a declaration under section 5 of the Environment Conservation Act 1999, no red category industries are allowed to set up inside the ECA area (DW, October 28, 2016).

⁵⁶⁷These industries include silo, cement factories, tourism, hotels, shipbreaking, shipyard, rice mill, shaw mill, food processing, auto mill, saline water purify, and others (Prothom Alo, August 11, 2017; DW, October 28, 2016).

⁵⁶⁸The Daily Star, April 5, 2018

⁵⁶⁹Dhaka Tribune, August 27, 2019

perspective of 'development', the Sundarbans has been considered by the government as an 'empty land' rather than a sensitive ecosystem."⁵⁷⁰

The environmental activists also calculated the economic aspects of the Rampal Power Plant project and found it economically unprofitable for the country. They claimed that the national interest has been compromised in the joint venture, project implementation and electricity purchase agreements that have been signed between Bangladesh (BPDB) and India (NTPC).⁵⁷¹ They argued that whereas both countries own 50% of the project,⁵⁷² the GoB alone gave the 'sovereign guarantee' to get US\$ 1.6bn loan from the EXIM Bank of India.⁵⁷³ They supported a report prepared by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) where it has been claimed that the Rampal Power Plant project is not cost effective for many reasons. Firstly, the electricity production cost of the Rampal Power Plant is 30% more than the average electricity production cost in Bangladesh. Secondly, the EXIM Bank of India is giving a below-market-rate loan, which is worth US\$ 988 million. This is the taxpayers' money of the citizens of India. Thirdly, the GoB offered a 15-year tax holiday to the BIFPCL, which is worth US\$936 million. Fourthly, the GoB granted an annual US\$26 million subsidy for dredging the *Pashur* river to assure smooth coal transportation.⁵⁷⁴ Moreover, the GoB relaxed the liquidated damage, performance guarantee and corporate guarantee clauses in the deals that have been signed and agreed to purchase electricity from the BIFPCL at a price that will be fixed by an independent firm of India.⁵⁷⁵ Based on these facts, the environmental activists argued that the GoB compromised the environmental, economic, and social aspects of the country to construct the Rampal Power Plant. One environmental activist said,

"The Rampal Power Plant project is like 'intaking poison with my own money.' I don't see the project is bringing any positive outcomes for the country. I examined the deals that have been signed and found that the national interests have not been protected in those deals. In my understanding, in this project, the government has created opportunities for the Indian and Bangladeshi businessmen to make money with the cost of the Sundarbans. [...] The price of electricity of this power plant is higher than any other source of electricity in

⁵⁷⁰An environmental activist, age 45

⁵⁷¹The Daily Star, June 11, 2013

⁵⁷²According to the agreement that has been signed, Bangladesh (PDB) and India (NTPC) are investing 30% of the total costs (15% each) while the remaining 70% per cent has been taken as loan (IEEFA, 2016).

⁵⁷³The Daily Star, March 19, 2017

⁵⁷⁴IEEFA, 2016

⁵⁷⁵Muhammad, 2013

the country. The citizens of the country have to bear the burden of this extra price. Thus, along with environmental concerns, we are also protesting against these unequal investment deals."⁵⁷⁶

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that, based on the findings of some research works, the environmental activists are worried that the emission of pollutant elements from the Rampal Power Plant would pollute the Sundarbans forest and surrounding areas. They identified the EIA report as faulty and incomplete to suggest an appropriate pollution management plan for the power plant. Along with the power plant project, they are more worried about the industrial expansion that is taking place surrounding the Sundarbans area (by violating the laws and regulations). Furthermore, the environmental activists calculated the financial aspects of the Rampal Power Plant and found it unprofitable for the country. They also argued that coal-fired electricity generation would make the energy sector of the country highly insecure in the long run. These various concerns motivated the environmental activists to join the protest against the Rampal Power Plant.

6.4 Argumentative Storylines: Government vs Environmental Activists

In response to the criticisms of the environmental activists, the GoB and BIFPCL attempted to legitimise their support to the Rampal Power Plant by placing counter-arguments, while the environmental activists also placed anti-counter-arguments. In reply to the concerns of environmental activists about environmental pollution because of the Rampal Power Plant, the GoB and BIFPCL assured that adequate measures would be adopted to keep the level of pollution at a nominal level to keep the environment safe. Primarily, the GoB and BIFPCL offered a technocratic solution of following the '*state-of-the-art*' to construct the power plant, which refers to the instalment of the '*most advanced and appropriate technology to minimise the level of pollution.*' For instance, it was promised on several occasions that the technologies,

⁵⁷⁶An environmental activist, age 56

such as the Super-Critical Technology, Electrostatic Precipitators (ESP), Flue Gas Desulphurization System (FGD), Advanced Low NOx burner, and so forth would be installed in the power plant to reduce the level of pollution and proper pollution management procedures would be followed according to the standard set by the Environmental Conservation Rules 1997, WB and IFC.⁵⁷⁷ In addition, the government assured everyone that they would use the ‘best quality’ imported coal in the power plant to reduce the level of pollution. They also promised to monitor the level of pollution of the power plant on a regular basis and take necessary measures if

any measurement of pollution is found above the standard level.⁵⁷⁸ Further, the government promised to do ‘everything’ to mitigate the emission of pollutant elements from the power plant.⁵⁷⁹ Based on the measures mentioned above, the government and BIFPCL officials claimed that the level of pollution because of the Rampal Power Plant would be reduced at a nominal level and would not affect the Sundarbans and surrounding areas ‘at all.’⁵⁸⁰ On one occasion, one official of the BIFPCL said,

“The claims of the environmental activists about pollution of the Sundarbans because of the Rampal Power Plant are not true. [...] The power plant is located 14 km away from the Sundarbans. The chimney is 902 feet high. Because of this high chimney, the smoke of the power plant will not go towards the Sundarbans. So, it will not affect the Sundarbans at all. Besides, we face 2-3 tropical cyclones

⁵⁷⁷The GoB and BIFPCL promised to install Electrostatic Precipitators (ESP) with above 99% efficiency to control fly ash and particle matters. Flue Gas Desulphurisation System (FGD) and Advanced Low NOx burner will be installed to reduce pollution of SOx and NOx. The power plant will have a 275-metre-long chimney to reduce the effect of the inversion layer, shoreline fumigation and deposition of high ground level concentration of pollution. It is expected that the combination of the above technologies will arrest other heavy metals like mercury, and will help to keep the level of COx, SOx, NOx emission under the standard level prescribed by the ECR 97, WB and IFC. It is also planned not to release heated water in the open sources and maximum treated water will be re-used in the power plant. Furthermore, coal will be transported with covered barges and transportation will be done in the most modern and environment-friendly floating transfer station according to IMO classified norms to avoid water pollution due to the coal transportation and handling process. Coal transportation would be only 2.8% of the existing number of vessels (GoB, 2015b).

⁵⁷⁸DW, May 01, 2013

⁵⁷⁹Muhammad, 2013, GoB, 2015b

⁵⁸⁰Prothom Alo, September 26, 2013

Photo 6.1: Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India commented on Rampal Power Plant (The Daily Star, October 06, 2013).

Rampal gets rolling

Hasina, Manmohan jointly unveil foundation plaque of coal India begins, 250MW by next month

Hasan Jahid Tusher and Amanur Aman, from Kushti:



Rampal will do no harm to Sundarbans and the livelihoods in the area

SHEIKH HASINA



Maintain highest environmental standards in implementing the project

MANMOHAN SINGH

*in every year that come from the Bay of Bengal. These cyclones will take the smoke towards the Himalayas. [...] We will use the super-critical technology that requires less amount of coal than the ordinary coal power technology. This technology does not produce smoke. For these reasons, it is not true that the ash and smoke of the power plant will go towards the Sundarbans as the environmentalists are claiming.”*⁵⁸¹

However, the environmental activists rejected this ‘technocratic assurance’ of the government and BIFPCL by arguing that there is no such technology available that can neutralise the pollution of a coal power plant. They are not ready to accept even 1% of pollution of the Rampal Power Plant as the Sundarbans has a very sensitive ecosystem. Further, the environmental activists identified several discrepancies between the EIA report and the types of technologies that have been called in the tender documents. After reviewing the tender documents, they claimed that the ‘state-of-the-art’ has not been ensured according to the technologies called for the power plant.⁵⁸² Similarly, they are not confident with the claim of the government to install ESP, FGD, Advanced Low NOx burner, to use good quality coal and to take other necessary measures to keep the level of pollution at a nominal level since it will increase the electricity production cost. Thus, they are in doubt that the BIFPCL would install all these advanced technologies which would not be feasible from the financial point of view.⁵⁸³ One environmental activist said,

“Some people have a problem. They believe that they can do everything with science. The government is claiming that they will reduce the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant at a nominal level with the help of using advanced technology. Some people are convinced with this claim. For them, science is like a religion. They believe in science without any doubt. We [environmental activists] are not interested to talk about ‘technology’ since it is like showing an elephant to a blind person. We are not convinced with the technological assurances of the government because we know that there is no such technology

⁵⁸¹An official of the BIFPCL

⁵⁸²The World Heritage Committee commented on the decisions of the government of Bangladesh that “while the State Party provides a long list of measures taken to limit and mitigate negative impacts on the environment, the concern remains that there is insufficient supporting evidence that these measures would prevent impacts on the property from air emissions, coal ash hazards, and shipping and dredging plans to transport coal to the project site,” (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3563>; accessed on July 12, 2020).

⁵⁸³To install all the technologies that were promised by the GoB and BIFPCL, the cost of the electricity (14-18BDTK for per KW) would be almost double than the regular price.

*available in the world that can neutralise the pollution of a coal power plant.”*⁵⁸⁴

The government and BIFPCL officials claimed on many occasions that they will install ‘*ultra-super-critical*’ technology in the Rampal Power Plant, which they identified as ‘the most advanced technology’ for coal-fired electricity generation.⁵⁸⁵ The Prime Minister of Bangladesh also mentioned that the ‘*ultra-super-critical*’ technology will be installed in the power plant while she answered a question of the former USA vice president Al Gore in a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in 2017. She said the same on several other occasions as well.⁵⁸⁶ However, the environmental activists lost their trust on the government and BIFPCL when they noticed that the tender documents of the power plant called for ‘*super-critical*’ technology instead of ‘*ultra-super-critical*’ technology. In response to this confusion, the managing director of the BIFPCL, who is an Indian citizen, made a comment that fuelled the anger of the activists. He commented, “*There is no technology that exists in the world in the name of ‘ultra-super-critical technology’. [...] We did not know that you [protesters] have so many scholars. Anti-Rampal protesters are protesting without knowing anything. We do not need to do so much drama. We mentioned at the beginning to install ‘ultra-super-critical technology’ in the Rampal Power Plant because you [protesters] do drama.*”⁵⁸⁷ The environmental activists felt insulted and humiliated to hear this comment from a foreign citizen.⁵⁸⁸ One environmental activist said,

“Since the very beginning, it has been said from the top level of the government that they were going to install ‘ultra-super-critical’ technology in the Rampal Power Plant. Now they are saying that there is no such technology exists. But we know that such technology exists. So, why did they lie? Was it an ‘ultra-super-bluff?’ They are asking us to rely on them. Whom to rely on, who doesn’t

⁵⁸⁴An environmental activist, age 45

⁵⁸⁵Four types of technologies are available for coal-fired power plants depending on the efficiency of burning coal. These technologies are Sub-critical (efficiency <35), Super-critical (35-40), Ultra-super-critical (40-45) and Advanced ultra-super-critical (45-52). The more efficient technology needs less amount of coal to produce the same amount of electricity in comparison to the less efficient technology (Nicol, 2013).

⁵⁸⁶The Daily Star, January 20, 2017. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh mentioned about installing ‘ultra-super critical technology’ in the Rampal Power Plant in different forums. For example, she mentioned the same in a meeting in Chittagong on January 28, 2017, and in a press conference held on August 27, 2016. The GoB also mentioned to install the ultra-super-critical technology in the report that has been sent to UNESCO as a response to the reactor monitoring report (GoB, 2015b, p. 3).

⁵⁸⁷Naya Diganto, November 2, 2016

⁵⁸⁸The independent, November 13, 2016

understand the difference between fossil coal and charcoal? Or, who said that coal has been used to purify water?”⁵⁸⁹

In response to the criticism of the EIA report of the Rampal Power Plant, the government claimed that the EIA study had been conducted following the neutral manner after taking stringent environmental protection measures according to the international standards (e.g., WB, IFC) and in line with the laws of the country. It was also claimed that all scientific methods had been followed to conduct the EIA study. The government and BIFPCL are confident that the EIA report offered sufficient guidelines and measures to control the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant to keep the environment safe.⁵⁹⁰ At the same time, the government criticised the studies that had been conducted by the national and international researchers regarding the possible negative impacts of the Rampal Power Plant on the environment as ‘biased.’ They blamed that ‘likeminded researchers’ conducted those studies on request from the environmental activists. They also claimed that these researchers prepared all those reports supporting the claims of the environmental activists because they were ‘paid’ by them (environmental activists). However, the environmental activists rejected this claim and argued that the studies had been conducted following the scientific manners and without any bias. One environmental activist said,

“We placed research-based arguments. The government is not listening to our arguments. [...] They are not answering according to the questions that we are asking, instead of that, they are saying that we do not have facts. What can we do if they [government and BIFPCL officials] do not understand scientific logic? They are dealing us politically. How can you deal scientific facts with politics? Politics cannot reduce the pollution of a coal power plant, only science can do that.”⁵⁹¹

Against the criticism of stepping in coal-fired electricity generation, the government legitimised it saying that it is the cheapest way to produce electricity in comparison to the other existing sources (e.g., hydraulic, gas or oil-based electricity production).⁵⁹² At present 62% of

⁵⁸⁹ An environmental activist, age 54. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh claimed in a meeting that coal is harmless, and she saw to use coal to purify water. Giving an example of the Borpukuria Coal Power Plant, she claimed that no environmental damage occurred due to the coal power plant. Rather, she claimed that the fertility of the land has increased after the inception of the coal power plant (Prothom Alo, April 10, 2016).

⁵⁹⁰ The Daily Star, July 7, 2015; GoB, 2015b; GoB, 2016c

⁵⁹¹ An environmental activist, age 53

⁵⁹² ‘Strategic Vision 2021’; <http://boi.gov.bd>; Accessed on December 20, 2016

the electricity of the country is produced from natural gas.⁵⁹³ Due to the prediction of a shortage of natural gas production in the coming years, the government planned to replace gas-based electricity generation with coal-based electricity generation (51% of total electricity generation).⁵⁹⁴ Similarly, the government considers that the country does not have the financial, technical, and human capacities to adopt renewable energy at the moment.⁵⁹⁵ Many foreign investors showed their interest to invest in coal-based power generation, which also worked as a motivational force for the government to stepping in coal-based power generation.

Overall, the respective officials of the government and BIFPCL criticised the concerns of the environmental activists as ‘irrelevant’ and ‘unrealistic.’ They alleged the environmental activists as ‘emotionally motivated’ who do not have facts to support their claims.⁵⁹⁶ It was claimed that the environmental activists are protesting against the power plant because they ‘do not have a clear idea about the updated technology of coal power plant’ to control the emission of pollutant elements.⁵⁹⁷ It was also said that the ‘confusion’ arose regarding the environmental pollution due to coal-fired power plant because of ‘misunderstanding of science.’

Also, the environmental activists were alleged as ‘anti-Indian,’ ‘anti-development,’ ‘anti-electricity production,’ ‘anti-state,’ and so forth. On several occasions, the environmental activists were blamed as ‘motivated by the BNP and Jamaat’ to protest against the power plant project because they were jealous with the ‘development initiatives’ of the ruling government. The two local academicians who conducted research on the possible impacts of the Rampal Power Plant on the environment were labelled as ‘*Rajakar*.’⁵⁹⁸ One minister of the government raised a question about the qualification of the environmental activists. He said,

“There is no single ‘environmentalist’ among the activists against the Rampal Power Plant. Most of them are economists and engineers. So, they are not environmentalists by education, but are living by selling the environmental issues. We are not interested to listen to them. Moreover, the environmental

⁵⁹³Hossain and Islam, 2015

⁵⁹⁴At present, Bangladesh produces 62% of its electricity from natural gas and 2% from coal. Due to the projected shortage of natural gas resources in the coming years, the country plans to produce 51% of its electricity from coal by 2030 (Hossain and Islam, 2015).

⁵⁹⁵GoB, 2015b

⁵⁹⁶Kaler kontho, August 31, 2016

⁵⁹⁷Dhaka Tribune, March 5, 2017

⁵⁹⁸‘Rajakar’ was a paramilitary force formed by the Pakistan army during the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971. Rajakars worked against the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. Since the independence war, the term became a pejorative to identify someone alleged for acting against the interests of the country.

protest is running with the support of foreign funds. The protest will stop automatically when there will be no fund."⁵⁹⁹

In response to the government's position, the environmental activists felt that they were treated 'politically' since 'the government failed to answer the questions that they raised based on the scientific research about the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant.' Further, they argued that they were labelled as 'motivated by the BNP or Jamaat,' 'anti-Indian,' or 'anti-electricity production' to politicise their position to the citizens of the country.⁶⁰⁰ One environmental activist said,

*"The government claims that we [environmental activists] are anti-Indian as we are protesting against the Rampal Power Plant [India is investing in this power plant], which is not true. It is not a matter of who is investing in the Rampal Power Plant. We are protesting against this power plant from the concerns over the protection of the Sundarbans. This kind of labelling is to politicise our position."*⁶⁰¹

Along with the government and BIFPCL, there are some academicians, engineers, scientists, and civil society members who defended the claims of the government, though they are few in number. They participated in television talk shows and seminars and wrote newspaper articles in support of the government's claims. They mostly argued along the lines that electricity is needed for the development of the country. Some of them believe that the power plant project will bring positive outcomes in the locality, such as meeting the demand for electricity, enforcing industrialization, creating employment opportunities, and so forth. Though this 'pro-project group' believes that there are some risks of environmental pollution because of the coal power plant, they hope that the pollution level could be reduced with the help of advanced technology. They are convinced that the necessary measures have been taken by the government to minimise the level of pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. One pro-project supporter said on a television talk show,

"Every industry has some levels of pollution. We are driving cars on the road which also has pollution. We are breathing, which is also polluting the environment. Shall we stop breathing for the sake of the environment? We

⁵⁹⁹ An environmental activist, age 38

⁶⁰⁰ The government labelled the leftist environmental activists as anti-Indian as they are pro-Chinese.

⁶⁰¹ An environmental activist, age 45

cannot do that. We have to accept some levels of pollution for the sake of development.”

From the aforementioned discussion, it has been seen that the government, BIFPCL and environmental activists engaged in contestation regarding the concerns over ‘environmental protection’ through placing argumentative storylines against each other to legitimise their respective positions. The respective officials of the government and BIFPCL rejected the concerns of the environmental activists that the Rampal Power Plant would pollute the environment of the Sundarbans and surrounding areas. They claimed that the objections of the environmental activists are irrelevant because the use of advanced technology would almost neutralise the pollution of the coal power plant. They assured that all necessary measures would be taken to mitigate the pollution of the power plant. Furthermore, they criticised the position of the environmental activists, claiming that they were politically motivated to protest against ‘the development of the country.’ However, the environmental activists rejected the assurances of using advanced technology to minimise the level of pollution because they are not ready to accept a nominal level of pollution which would negatively affect the sensitive environment of the Sundarbans.

6.5 Divergent Views of Environmental Protests

Due to the ideological differences in reasoning to join the protest against the Rampal Power Plant, the various environmental groups raised various demands which are different from each other. Since the activists of the NCSS have been protesting from the sole reason to protect the Sundarbans forest, they are demanding to relocate the power plant from its current location. Along with the power plant project, they are also concerned about the other devastating activities (e.g., transportation through the channels of the Sundarbans, river dredging, industrial expansion, and so forth) around the Sundarbans that would hamper the environment of the forest. For an example, the activists of the NCSS raised their concerns regarding the protection of the Sundarbans when oil and coal carrier cargos capsized in the *Shella* River on several occasions. Though these activists are concerned about the protection of the Sundarbans forest, they are not seriously concerned about the social, political, and economic aspects of the Rampal Power Plant like the NC. To explain their position, one activist of the NCSS said,

“We are looking at the issue [Rampal Power Plant] from the forest protection perspective. So, we are not focusing on other issues, such as the national energy policy or protection of the national resources like the NC. Since our aim is to protect the Sundarbans, our protest started before the inception of the Rampal Power Plant. [...] We have been protesting against all types of devastating activities, including the Rampal Power Plant, that would harm the Sundarbans. So, our protest ‘to save the Sundarbans’ is not new; however, we were encouraged to form the NCSS to protest in an organised way after the inception of the power plant.”⁶⁰²

While the NCSS looks at the Rampal Power Plant issue only from the environmental protection perspective, the NC looks at it from a greater political perspective. For an example, they are concerned about the protection of the national interests along with the protection of the Sundarbans. From this political perspective, the NC relates the Rampal Power Plant issue with the energy security, energy policy, energy pricing, and overall development policies of the government. Further, the activists of the NC analyse the overall parameters of the power plant project, such as investment, costing of electricity, and deals that have been signed from the national interest perspectives. Along with the concerns over environmental hazard to the Sundarbans and surrounding areas, the NC is arguing that the coal-fired electricity generation would not ensure energy security of the country due to the high pricing of electricity production in comparison to other sources. They also criticised the deals that were signed saying ‘national interests were compromised in those deals.’ To legitimise their position, one activist of the NC said,

“We are the left-wing politicians. Thus, our agendas and goals are also political. We are protesting against the Rampal Power Plant not only from the environmental protection viewpoint, but also from the social, political, and economic aspects. We noticed that the electricity generation from the Rampal Power Plant is not cost effective and the interests of the country are not protected in the deals that have been signed. We are opposing the Rampal Power Plant after analysing all these issues. For us, it is not only an

⁶⁰²An environmental activist, age 65

*environmental movement but also a political movement. We believe that a movement to protect the national interests cannot be apolitical.*⁶⁰³

However, there are several disagreements among the activists of these environmental groups regarding reasoning to join the protest and adopting protest strategies.⁶⁰⁴ For example, since the NC is an umbrella platform of different leftist political parties, there are several disagreements among these parties regarding adopting protest strategies. For instance, the Workers Party (Menon) and Jasad (Inu) were reluctant to force the government to scrap the power plant project as these two parties are in a political alliance with the ruling party. These parties did not actively participate in the protest programmes of the *Bam Murcha* (left alliance). Similarly, some activists of the NCSS left the platform since they were not satisfied with its motives and protest strategies. However, these disagreements were not strong enough to divert the target of protesting against the Rampal Power Plant.

Because of ideological differences among the environmental activists, they raised different demands in the protest against the Rampal Power Plant, which are different from each other. Some environmental activists (mostly the members of the NCSS) support coal-fired electricity generation since they consider it the cheapest way to produce electricity in comparison to the other existing sources. They consider that the country has the ‘full right’ to produce electricity from coal since it does not have the technical, financial, and human capacity to produce electricity from renewable or other sources. At least, in their view, the country should be allowed to produce electricity from coal until it achieves the financial and technical capacity to replace it with renewable sources of energy. However, no one supports the Rampal Power Plant since it has a risk to pollute the Sundarbans because of its close proximity to the forest. Thus, these environmental activists are not against coal-fired electricity generation in general, but they are demanding to relocate the Rampal Power Plant elsewhere following the existing rules and regulations.⁶⁰⁵ One environmental activist, who supports coal-fired electricity generation but not the Rampal Power Plant, said,

“The government planned to produce around 9,000 MW electricity by using coal as fuel. They planned to produce 1,320 MW from the Rampal Power Plant.

⁶⁰³ An environmental activist, age 55

⁶⁰⁴ As the members of the NC and NCSS have different political ideologies, they had disagreements among themselves to determine their protest strategies. In NC, two major parties, Workers Party (Menon) and JASAD (Inu) did not participate in demonstrations at public places to force the government to scrap the Rampal Power Plant because these two parties belong to the political alliance of the ruling party. They did not even join the protest programmes of the *Bam Murcha* (left alliance).

⁶⁰⁵ They are referring to follow the rules and regulations to construct ‘red category’ industries according to the environmental protection regulations.

1,320 MW is a very nominal amount in the context of 9000 MW. We have only objected to this 1,320 MW since there is a risk to pollute the Sundarbans. We are asking to spare this 1,320 MW or relocate the power plant elsewhere for the sake of the Sundarbans. We are not against coal-fired electricity generation, but we do not want it at the cost of the Sundarbans."⁶⁰⁶

These environmental activists who support coal-fired electricity are quite silent about other coal-fired power plants in the country. According to some of them, they have no objection to produce electricity from coal if the power plant is located anywhere else in the country except the Sundarbans. On the contrary, there are some other environmental activists (mainly the members of the NC), who are against coal-fired electricity generation in general since it is harmful to the environment. According to them, 'the environmental movement should not support coal-fired electricity generation from an ethical point of view.' They are recommending replacing coal-fired power plants with renewable energy as renewable energy technology is gradually becoming cheaper. One environmental activist with an anti-coal position, said,

*"Some environmental activists would not say anything against coal-fired electricity generation if the Rampal Power Plant is relocated elsewhere, but I would say. I don't support coal power plant anywhere in the country because it is harmful to the environment. I am not concerned about the Sundarbans only. I am concerned about the overall environment. If a coal-fired power plant is harmful to the Sundarbans, then it is equally harmful to other places too. For this reason, I don't support coal-fired electricity generation."*⁶⁰⁷

However, none of these environmental activists publicly voiced their anti-coal position as a strategy to avoid being labelled by the government as 'against power generation,' or 'against the development initiatives of the government.' Furthermore, a part of the citizens of the country also supports the coal-fired electricity generation because they want uninterrupted electricity. Thus, the environmental activists do not want to go against the public sentiment by voicing their 'anti-coal' position. However, they indirectly criticised the coal-based energy policy of the government. They demanded a revision of the energy policy and recommended replacing coal-fired electricity generation with renewable sources.

⁶⁰⁶An environmental activist, age 42

⁶⁰⁷An environmental activist, age 47

The government criticised the anti-coal position of the environmental activists and asked, ‘what would be the alternative of coal-fired electricity generation.’ In response to this question, the NC proposed an ‘alternative energy master plan.’ In this ‘alternative energy master plan’ the NC pointed out that the country has the potential to produce electricity from renewable sources such as sunlight, wind, and waste to meet the country’s demand of electricity. In support of their position, they argued that the technology for renewable energy is becoming cheaper in the global market. They suggested importing electricity to solve base-load problems if necessary. Moreover, as an alternative to coal-fired electricity generation, the environmental activists also suggested exploring new gas fields and restoring the existing power stations that were out of order to meet the immediate shortage of electricity. However, the environmental activists with the ‘anti-coal’ position, do not want to move forward with it for the time being. They want to settle the Rampal issue first and then they have a plan to take an ‘anti-coal’ position regarding the other coal power plants in the country. In their view, ‘this is not the right time’ to take a position against the coal power plants in other locations. One environmental activist said,

“We are against coal-fired electricity generation. However, this is not the right time to place this demand in the public sphere. This is a strategic position because the government is convincing the citizens that coal is the cheapest way to produce electricity. The citizens also have a demand to get uninterrupted electricity. Thus, there is a risk that the citizens might go against us if we place an anti-coal position at the moment. We are not taking that risk right now. However, we will place an anti-coal position soon. Let’s settle the Rampal issue first.”⁶⁰⁸

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the environmental activists have different motivations to engage in the protests against the Rampal Power Plant. One group of activists have been engaged in the protests from the sole concern to protect the Sundarbans forest from the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant and other devastating activities in surrounding areas of the Sundarbans. These activists are not against coal-based electricity generation in general, but they are against the Rampal Power Plant. However, other group of activists looked at the Rampal Power Plant issue from political, economic, and social aspects, along with environmental concerns. These activists have an anti-coal position, but they are not placing the

⁶⁰⁸An environmental activist, age 65

issue right now out of a fear of losing the support of the citizens who need uninterrupted electricity. In general, the environmental activists turned the ‘anti-Rampal protest’ into ‘save the Sundarbans protest’ where the Rampal Power Plant is one of the many issues considered that would bring negative impacts to the Sundarbans forest.

6.6 Environmental Protests: Protest Strategies of Environmental Groups

The environmental groups, mainly the NC and NCSS, adopted different protest strategies to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. They organised protest programmes from their own platform, and they supported and participated in each other’s programmes. The NC adopted different protest strategies ranging from non-violent awareness and advocacy-based campaigns to robust protest programmes at public places. The activists of the NC have been staging protest programmes such as long marches, civil-marches (*Jono Jatra*), strikes (*hartal*), human chains, cycle rallies, torch rallies, theatre shows, public hearings, signature campaigns, symbolic memorandums, painting competitions for children, and so forth on a regular basis since 2012. Particularly, the NC organised two long marches (in 2013 and 2016) from Dhaka to the power plant area (400 km) demanding to “*stop the Rampal Power Plant and all other activities that would destroy the Sundarbans forest.*”⁶⁰⁹ Along with the activists, supporters and followers of the NC, a good number of citizens also participated in these protest programmes. They produced several position papers, documentaries, posters, and leaflets that have been shared with the masses. They organised several seminar-symposiums, meetings, and press conferences to state their respective position and criticise the legitimacy of coal-fired electricity generation. The activists of the NC participated in television talk shows and wrote newspaper articles where they defended their respective claims. In addition to the protest programmes at public places and in seminar rooms, the NC included the ‘*Save the Sundarbans*’ slogan in different cultural programmes and festivals to expand its reach. For example, on 16th December 2017, they celebrated the national victory day with a slogan of “*the protection of the Sundarbans means the protection of the country, the protection of the Sundarbans means the independence of the country.*” Similarly, they celebrated the Valentine’s Day on 14 February 2017 saying, “*Love for the Sundarbans.*” The ‘*Save the Sundarbans*’ slogan became a

⁶⁰⁹Muhammad, 2013

‘trademark’ in the programmes of the leftist political parties, who used the symbol of the Sundarbans in the banners and posters of their political programmes.

The activists of the NC organised most of these protest programmes in the capital city to get media coverage. They also organised some protest programmes in the nearby cities (Jessore, Khulna, Bagerhat, Mongla) around the power plant area in collaboration with the dispossessed population. However, they could not continue staging protest programmes around the power plant areas as they were obstructed by the police and ‘project-supporting group.’

Photo 6.2: Mass protest programmes organised by the NC⁶¹⁰



In addition to these protest programmes, the activists of the NC organised several awareness campaigns to raise awareness among the citizens to create a citizen-centric mass protest. In these awareness campaigns, they highlighted the importance of the Sundarbans, possible impacts of the coal power plant on the environment and Sundarbans and criticised the arguments of the government and BIFPCL in their support of the Rampal Power Plant. To highlight the importance of the Sundarbans, they shared several pieces of information, such as (1) the Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world, (2) it is a world heritage site,⁶¹¹ (3) the livelihoods of millions of people depend on the Sundarbans, (4) it is a habitat of rich diversity of flora and fauna, (5)⁶¹² it acts as a safeguard from natural calamities,⁶¹³ (6) it is a source of carbon sink, (7) it is the only forest in the country that exists with its natural characteristics, and so forth.⁶¹⁴ They also raised awareness about the negative impacts of

⁶¹⁰(Left)<https://www.facebook.com/SaveSundarbans.SaveBangladesh/photos/a.715616978576598/1527691124035842/?type=3&theater>; accessed on November 17, 2019, (Right) The Daily Star, September 29, 2013

⁶¹¹A world heritage site is a United Nations designated area of specific cultural and natural significance. A part of the Sundarbans has been designated as World Heritage Site in 1997 decrypting the area as “*supports exceptional biodiversity in its terrestrial, aquatic and marine habitats,*” (The Washington Post, July 18, 2016; Prothom Alo, April 13, 2017).

⁶¹²The Sundarbans is a habitat of numerous endangered or threatened species, like the Royal Bengal Tiger, Indian python, and so forth. It is a habitat of eight types of dolphins, nine types of kingfishers, more than 100 thousand spotted deer, and 334 species of plants (Prothom Alo, December 22, 2014).

⁶¹³They mostly highlighted the role of the Sundarbans as a safeguard against cyclones, storms, and other natural disasters (Muhammad, 2013; Prothom Alo, May 7, 2015).

⁶¹⁴Prothom Alo, December 22, 2014

‘unplanned development activities’ indicating the industrial expansion that is taking place in the Sundarbans area. One environmental activist said,

*“We tried to make people aware about pollution of the Rampal Power Plant and its impact on the Sundarbans. We informed them that the water, air, and overall ecosystem of the Sundarbans would be damaged because of the pollution of the power plant. We also informed them about the impacts of fly ash and bottom ash on the environment. We delivered a message to them that to ensure our existence, we have to save the Sundarbans by rejecting the coal power plant. The Sundarbans saved us from the Sidr and Aila [tropical cyclone]. Now, it is our turn to save the Sundarbans.”*⁶¹⁵

The environmental activists utilised internet-based social media (particularly Facebook) to extend the protest to distant actors.⁶¹⁶ They created several Facebook groups, such as ‘Sundarbans dhongsho kore Rampal Biddut Kendra Chai Na,⁶¹⁷ ‘Say “NO” to Rampal Power Plant,⁶¹⁸ ‘Stop Rampal Project Save Sundarbans⁶¹⁹ and many others. Among these Facebook groups, ‘Sundarbans dhongsho kore Rampal Biddut Kendra Chai Na’ (Do not want Rampal Power Plant by destroying the Sundarbans) is a prominent group and has been used as a dashboard of the anti-Rampal protest. The main motto of this group is ‘save the Sundarbans, save Bangladesh’ and the objective is ‘to inspire those who want to stop Rampal Power Plant.’⁶²⁰ This group was created on June 4, 2013. It had 126,651 followers and 126,445 ‘likes’ as of 2 January 2019. Till 2 January 2019, this group has posted 6,492 photos, 390 videos and an innumerable number of posts. These Facebook groups have been used for event announcements, to share protest programme activities, to deliver information in support of the environmental activists, and to criticise the position of the government and BIFPCL in support of the Rampal Power Plant. In addition to these group pages, the environmental activists also posted regarding their opposition to the power plant project on their personal Facebook pages. Similarly, they also used several *hashtags* to spread the message to distant actors.⁶²¹

⁶¹⁵An environmental activist, age 54

⁶¹⁶Lopes, 2014

⁶¹⁷The group created on June 4, 2013

⁶¹⁸The group created on September 27, 2013

⁶¹⁹The group created on April 19, 2013

⁶²⁰<https://www.facebook.com/SaveSundarbans.SaveBangladesh/>; accessed on January 2, 2019.

⁶²¹Hashtags included #no_to_rampal, #SaveSundarbans, # SaveSundarban, #StopRampal, #antifa, #NoToRampal, https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/notorampal?source=feed_text&epa=HASHTAG#thinkgreen, #notgrey, #CoalExit, #StopCoal, #no to coal, # NoToRooppur, #NoNuke, #RooppurNuclearPowerPlant, #NotoRosatom, #Global_Protest_Day_for_Sundarban, #ThinkGreen, #NotGrey.

While the NC staged robust protest programmes at public places, the NCSS⁶²² mostly followed ‘research-based’ advocacy campaigns (such as meetings, press conferences, dialogues, and so forth) to make citizens aware about the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant and influence policymakers to scrap or relocate the power plant. To lead a ‘research-based’ advocacy campaign, the activists of the NCSS reviewed the EIA report and tender documents to understand the pollution management system of the Rampal Power Plant. They produced several documents based on the analysis of the EIA report and tender documents that were disseminated for public awareness through press conferences. The activists also communicated with national and international researchers and encouraged them to conduct research to explore the possible impacts of the Rampal Power Plant on the Sundarbans. As a result of this communication, thirteen studies have been conducted where the activists of the NCSS provided technical support and helped the researchers to get information and disseminate the research findings. They submitted all these research-based reports to the government to get their comments on the findings. However, the government has not made a comment on these research reports yet (till May 2018). The activists also participated in several dialogue sessions with the government representatives, where they placed these research-based findings in support of their respective claims. Some member organisations of the NCSS have been working closely with the community surrounding the power plant areas for a long time. Particularly on ‘Tiger Day’ and ‘Sundarbans Day,’ these organisations organised different programmes in the surrounding areas of the Sundarbans to make local people aware about the importance of the Sundarbans expecting that they will stand against all devastating activities against it. However, they did not say anything directly against the Rampal Power Plant to avoid being obstructed by the ‘project-supporting group.’ One activist of the NCSS said,

*“We are trying to convince the government to scrap the Rampal Power Plant based on research-based findings. The research-based findings proved that the power plant will destroy the Sundarbans forest. We disseminated these findings by arranging seminars and meetings to make citizens aware. [...] Our protest strategy is different from the NC. The NC is a political organisation, it has branches and supporters around the country. We do not have that. We do not protest at the public places like the NC. We do non-violent research-based advocacy campaigns.”*⁶²³

⁶²²NCSS does not have branch, activists, and supporters like the NC.

⁶²³An environmental activist, age 65

Photo 6.3: The NCSS activists attending press conferences ⁶²⁴



Along with arranging protest programmes and research-based advocacy campaigns, the environmental activists (both NC and NCSS) communicated with the environmental activists and organisations at the international level to create global pressure on the GoB. They wrote to UNESCO, Ramsar⁶²⁵ and IUCN requesting to take steps to force the GoB to scrap the Rampal Power Plant indicating that the Sundarbans is in the list of the UNESCO World Heritage sites. UNESCO, Ramsar and IUCN responded to the call of the environmental activists and sent petitions to the GoB requesting to relocate the power plant from its current location.⁶²⁶ UNESCO sent a strong reactive monitoring team (jointly with IUCN) to the Sundarbans to ‘assess the overall state of conservation of the property.’⁶²⁷ This monitoring team prepared a report based on the assessment where they recommended the GoB to relocate the power plant for the protection of the World Heritage site. The issue of ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ was also discussed in the annual convention of the World Heritage Committee where the GoB was asked to prepare a report about the measures that are going to be adopted to protect the Sundarbans.⁶²⁸ Along with the Rampal Power Plant, UNESCO is worried about all other devastating activities around the Sundarbans.⁶²⁹ Similarly, organisations such as Bank Track⁶³⁰, SAHR,⁶³¹ TIB,⁶³² and many others also conducted research on the Rampal Power

⁶²⁴(Left) <http://www.banginews.com/web-news?id=9bfa6542af869a03b4ea04e7be9bc383c84adb23>; accessed on November 11, 2019, (Right) The Daily Star, May 7, 2017

⁶²⁵<https://www.ramsar.org/>; accessed on April 4, 2017

⁶²⁶Aitken and BankTrack, 2016

⁶²⁷<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1470>; accessed on October 15, 2017. This visit of the joint reactor monitoring team was made according to a request of the World Heritage Committee (in the 39th session).

⁶²⁸Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention); sessions 37, 40 and 4; (source: <http://whc.unesco.org>).

⁶²⁹Prothom Alo, September 24, 2016

⁶³⁰BankTrack, a Netherlands-based coalition of organisations targeting the operations and investments of private sector banks and their effect on people and planet (<https://www.banktrack.org/>).

⁶³¹The South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), a regional network of rights activists from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan. SAHR suggested the GoB to suspend the construction of the Rampal Power Plant until a comprehensive EIA is being conducted by independent and impartial experts and criticised the existing EIA report as being faulty (<https://www.southasianrights.org/>).

⁶³²Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) is the country chapter of Bangladesh of the corruption watchdog organisation Transparency International.

Plant issue from their own initiative and suggested the GoB to relocate the power plant from the concerns over environmental pollution.

As a result of this communication from the environmental activists, global environmental groups, such as the Friends of the Earth, Sierra Club, 360.org and many others jointly submitted petitions to UNESCO and IUCN asking to place the Sundarbans in the world heritage danger list due to the construction of the Rampal Power Plant.⁶³³ Various Indian environmental groups also organised protest programmes in India against the Rampal Power Plant as India also shares the Sundarbans forest with Bangladesh. Some of them joined the long march organised by the NC in 2016. One environmental activist said,

*“We wrote a letter to UNESCO to know their position about the Rampal Power Plant as the Sundarbans is in the list of the world heritage sites. We expressed our concerns about the protection of the Sundarbans in the letter. In response, UNESCO asked for the supporting documents of our claims. We provided those documents. Afterwards, a team from UNESCO visited the power plant area and made a report where they requested the government to scrap the power plant project from its current location. Along with UNESCO, other international organisations also joined and supported the movement. [...] In a meeting with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the former USA vice president Al Gore requested her to scrap the power plant project. How did the message reach Al Gore? It means there are lots of talks on the issue in the global community.”*⁶³⁴

The NC organised protest programmes in different cities around the world with the help of its branches in different countries to engage the global community in the protest against the Rampal Power Plant. For example, the activists of the NC observed ‘Global protest for Sundarbans’ on 7 January 2017 in different cities, such as London, Berlin, The Hague, Gwangju, Paris, Toronto, Melbourne, Tokyo, New York, and many others.⁶³⁵ Along with the activists and supporters of the NC, non-resident Bangladeshis and local citizens participated in this protest programme.

⁶³³These environmental groups have cumulatively collected 50,000 signatures in support of the petition (<http://www.bangladeshcircle.com/petitions-saving-sundarbans/>; accessed on June 18, 2018).

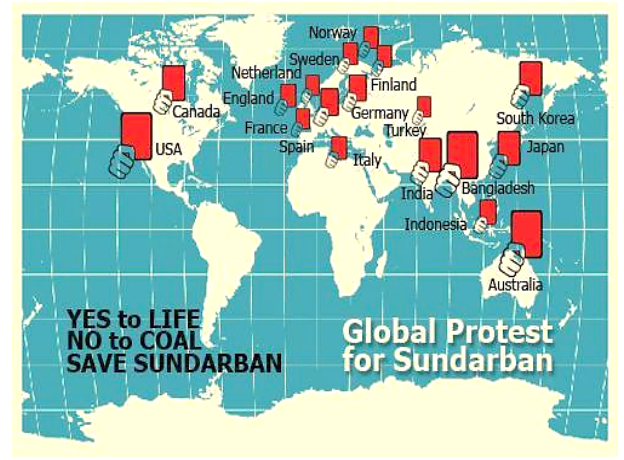
⁶³⁴An environmental activist, age 54

⁶³⁵‘Press Release: Successful Global Day of Protest To Protect Sundarbans’ (<https://apwld.org/press-release-successful-global-day-of-protest-to-protect-sundarbans/>; accessed on January 15, 2019).

Photo 6.4: Sierra Club activists protesting in front of EX-IM bank due to financing coal power plant⁶³⁶



Photo 6.5: A poster of Global Protest for Sundarbans



From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the environmental activists adopted different protest strategies ranging from violent protest programmes at the places to non-violent research-based advocacy campaigns to protest against the Rampal Power Plant. Through these protest programmes, they attempted to create awareness among the citizens about the importance of the Sundarbans forest and how it would be damaged as a result of pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. They also attempted to convince or force the government to scrap the power plant project. Along with the protest programmes, the activists communicated with respective experts at the international level to conduct research on the Rampal Power Plant issue. Furthermore, they communicated with international organisations and activists and asked them to stand against the power plant to create global pressure on the government. As a result of this communication, several international organisations and platforms engaged in the protest and requested the GoB to scrap or relocate the Rampal Power Plant from its current location from the concerns over the protection of the Sundarbans.

6.7 Government's Responses Towards Environmental Protests

In response to the protest of the environmental groups, the government adopted different strategies to neutralise the protest and prove that the concerns over environmental pollution because of the Rampal Power Plant are 'irrelevant.' The government and BIFPCL representatives formally sat with the environmental groups to listen to their concerns on three

⁶³⁶<https://sierra.secure.force.com/actions/National?actionId=AR0047581>; accessed on September 9, 2019

different occasions (in BPDB office, Biddut Bhaban, and parliamentary standing committee). They also took part in television talk shows, seminars, and other events where they rejected the concerns of the environmental groups and attempted to convince them that the Rampal Power Plant would not pollute the environment. As a strategy to convince the environmental activists, a team of journalists was sent to India to show how pollution of coal power plants is being managed. Similarly, a group of environmental activists was also taken to the Rampal Power Plant area to show the overall planning of the power plant project. However, the environmental activists were not convinced with the arguments of the government and BIFPCL. They were sceptical with the motives of the dialogue sessions arranged by the government and BIFPCL. They realised that the government was not ‘really interested’ to listen to their concerns in these dialogue sessions. One activist of the NC said,

*“It is true that the government officials sat (in dialogue sessions) with us on different occasions. However, I realised that these dialogue sessions were not to listen to us, but rather to show people that they sat with us. In these dialogue sessions, they always rejected our scientific arguments claiming them to be ‘baseless.’ They were not ready to accept that the power plant could pollute the environment. They never replied according to the concerns that we raised. For that reason, those dialogue sessions were not successful in terms of reaching a solution.”*⁶³⁷

The position of the government towards the protest of the environmental groups can be understood by analysing some comments made by the respective government officials on different occasions. For example, during the inauguration of the Rampal Power Plant, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh said, *‘I want to say firmly that Sheikh Hasina [herself] will not do anything that will harm the country and its environment.’*⁶³⁸ On several other occasions, she also claimed that *‘The power plant would not pollute the Sundarbans.’*⁶³⁹ The Prime Minister of India also virtually joined the inauguration session of the power plant project where he promised to *‘Observe the highest environmental standards in its [Rampal Power Plant] execution as the Sundarbans are a common heritage of both Bangladesh and India.’*⁶⁴⁰ A minister of the GoB commented on one occasion, *‘Fears about damage to Sundarbans are*

⁶³⁷An environmental activist, age 48

⁶³⁸Dhaka Tribune, October 5, 2013

⁶³⁹Prothom Alo, October 23, 2013

⁶⁴⁰The Daily Star, October 6, 2013

*unfounded. [...] We don't think Rampal will pose any threat to Sundarbans.*⁶⁴¹ In reply to a question raised in the national parliament, another minister of the GoB said, *'The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forests, will not face any environmental hazard due to the establishment of the Rampal Power Plant.'* To justify his position, he further added, *'According to the feasibility study and the environmental impact assessment outcomes, the establishment of the Rampal Power Plant will not create any environmental risk for the mangrove forest. [...] The power plant is 14 km away from the Sundarbans, the plant would have the ultra-supercritical technology for power generation.'*⁶⁴²

Photo 6.6: Prime Minister showing a picture of greenery of a power plant area to claim that Rampal Power Plant would not harm the environment⁶⁴³



The secretary of the power division of Bangladesh said, *'We initiated the Rampal Power Plant after keeping in mind that we need to be careful that it would not pollute the environment.'*⁶⁴⁴ The managing director of the BIFPCL said, *'We are setting up a power*

*plant which is environment-friendly. As far as the environment is concerned, we are not making any compromises.'*⁶⁴⁵ He also promised that they have a plan to spend a good amount of money for preventing the emission of toxic gases.⁶⁴⁶ A big size poster of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh had been fitted in different locations near the power plant area with a message, *'I would not construct the coal power plant if it were harmful to the Sundarbans.'* Analysing these comments, it has seen that the government and BIFPCL are confident that the Rampal

⁶⁴¹The Daily Sun (newspaper), June 18, 2019

⁶⁴²The Daily Sun, May 4, 2016

⁶⁴³Prothom Alo, August 27, 2016

⁶⁴⁴DW, May 1, 2013

⁶⁴⁵The Daily Star, July 7, 2015

⁶⁴⁶*ibid*

Power Plant would not harm the Sundarbans in any way since adequate pollution management measures have been adopted to keep the environment safe.

A few Television Commercials (TVCs) were produced and broadcasted on different television channels and ads were circulated in the newspapers supporting the claims of the government about the Rampal Power Plant. Aiming to ‘remove confusion’ of the citizens about the Rampal Power Plant, these TVCs and ads mentioned that the power plant is an ‘environment-friendly project.’⁶⁴⁷ To support this, these TVCs and ads claimed that (1) the Rampal Power Plant is located at a safe distance from the Sundarbans, (2) the level of pollution of the power plant would be very nominal because of using advanced technology, (3) the power plant will use good quality coal as fuel to minimise the level of pollution, (4) the government would not do anything that may harm the Sundarbans.⁶⁴⁸ In addition to supporting the position of the government, these TVCs and ads alleged the environmental groups for delivering ‘misleading information.’⁶⁴⁹ To protest against the production and circulation of these TVCs and ads, the environmental activists called for a press conference and wrote articles in the newspapers where they claimed, ‘*the government hired an advertising company to produce TVCs and ads with the taxpayers’ money to get the support of the citizens after failing to reply to the questions raised by the environmental groups.*’⁶⁵⁰ Along with these soft strategies, such as dialogues with the environmental activists, the government also adopted hard strategies to neutralise the environmental protest. The government enacted the Speedy Supply of Power and Energy (Special Provision) Act 2010, which is widely known as an ‘indemnity act.’ This act indemnifies the actors and their actions in the power and energy sector against prosecution by keeping them above customary law.⁶⁵¹ The environmental activists consider this act as a ‘safeguard’ for the officers to violate the respective rules and regulations. This act also restricts the activists to raise their concerns regarding irregularities in the energy sector. The government also enacted the Electricity Act 2017, which keeps a provision of 10-year jail in terms for subjugating electricity-related infrastructures.⁶⁵² The environmental activists alleged these acts for being responsible for restricting public scrutiny in the power sector.

⁶⁴⁷<http://www.dhakatimes24.com>; accessed on February 12, 2018

⁶⁴⁸Prothom Alo, May 7, 2015

⁶⁴⁹Prothom Alo, February 14, 2016

⁶⁵⁰<http://www.dhakatimes24.com>; accessed on February 12, 2018

⁶⁵¹The government enacted the Speedy Supply of Power and Energy (Special Provision) Act 2010, which is widely known as an ‘indemnity act’ on October 12, 2010 for two years. However, the tenure of the act was extended for two years until October 2014 and then for a further four years until 2018. Recently, the act has been extended for three more years until October 2021 (The News Age, July 4, 2018).

⁶⁵²Electricity Act 2017, GoB

Moreover, the police restricted the environmental activists from staging protest programmes on several occasions. Mainly, the activists were restricted from staging protest programmes in areas surrounding the power plant (e.g., Jessore, Khulna, Bagerhat, Mongla, and Rampal) from a fear of developing bridging among the local protesters, environmental activists, and international communities. The police and ‘project-supporting group’ harassed the environmental activists, calling them ‘anti-developmental’ on many occasions.⁶⁵³ For example, the police restricted the environmental activists from distributing leaflets to the local people in Bagerhat. Similarly, in a programme in Hadis Park in Khulna, the police did not allow the activists to show a video documentary on environmental pollution due to coal power plant. The environmental activists fitted several posters in different locations in Khulna, Bagerhat, Rampal and surrounding areas with messages about environmental pollution due to coal power plant to make the citizens aware. The ‘project-supporting group’ removed these posters, and in some cases, they painted on the posters so that nobody could read it.

Photo 6.7: Environmental activists were restricted from protesting by police in Bagerhat and Jessore⁶⁵⁴



The second long march (2016) of the environmental activists was obstructed by the police and ‘project-supporting group’ in some places on their way to Rampal. For example, the activists were restricted from entering and staging protest programmes in Jessore. Similarly, another long march organised by the *Bam Murcha* was attacked by the police and ‘project-supporting group’ when they attempted to stage a protest programme in Jessore. In some other protest programmes, such as the march towards the Prime Minister’s office, cycle rally, photography exhibition, theatre show on the Rampal issue, strike for Sundarbans and many others, the police

⁶⁵³Prothom Alo, May 7, 2015

⁶⁵⁴(Left) <https://www.facebook.com/SaveSundarbans.SaveBangladesh/photos/a.255129371292030/868176473320647/?type=3&theater>; accessed on November 12, 2019, (Right) <https://www.5darianews.com/news/109409-Bangladesh-police-foil-anti-Indian-long-march>; accessed on November 12, 2019

and ‘project-supporting group’ charged the environmental activists with batons. Some environmental activists were severely beaten in Narayanganj.⁶⁵⁵ Moreover, the environmental activists realised that their protest activities were being monitored by the police and intelligence personnel constantly to keep them under pressure. One environmental activist said,

“They [police] monitored our activities constantly. [...] They called [by mobile phone] us and wanted to know what we were planning to do. Sometimes they called us more than thirty times in a day. They remained seated in front of our office for the whole day, and sometimes they came into our office without notice. They asked for the list of our committee members. They did this to keep us under pressure and give us a message that we are under their surveillance. [...] The police surrounded us whenever we staged protest programmes. Sometimes they warned us that we shouldn’t say anything against the Rampal Power Plant.”⁶⁵⁶

Photo 6.8: Responses of the police towards the environmental protest⁶⁵⁷



From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the government adopted different strategies, both soft and hard, to convince or neutralise the environmental activists from protesting against the Rampal Power Plant. Initially, the government adopted soft strategies, such as participating in dialogue sessions to listen to the concerns of the environmental activists. In these dialogue sessions, the government attempted to convince the environmental activists that the Rampal Power Plant would not pose any threat to the Sundarbans. However, the government also adopted hard strategies, such as obstructing, harassing, beating, and

⁶⁵⁵The Daily Star, September 18, 2017

⁶⁵⁶An environmental activist, age 45

⁶⁵⁷(Left) Bangla Tribune, July 28, 2016, (Right)

<https://www.facebook.com/SaveSundarbans.SaveBangladesh/photos/a.255129371292030/805096462961982/?type=3&theater>.

threatening the environmental activists to restrict them from protesting against the power plant project.

6.8 Outcomes of the Environmental Protests

Though the environmental protest is continuing even now, the government has progressed the construction activities of the Rampal Power Plant according to the planned schedule. The environmental activists could not protest effectively to resist the government from constructing the power plant. They identified two main reasons for not being able to make their protests more effective. Firstly, they could not motivate and encourage the common people to join the protest and secondly, the common people were confused with different kinds of ‘developmental campaigns’ and ‘promises of environmental protection’ by the government. It was seen that the environmental protests got tremendous support from the common people at the beginning (e.g., long marches). However, later, the participation of the common people in the protest programmes decreased remarkably. The government’s determination to construct the power plant discouraged the common people to join the protest. Also, the suppressive treatment of the law-enforcing agencies towards environmental activists discouraged common people to join the protest.

However, the environmental protest is successful in bringing the concern of the ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ to the national and international limelight. As a result, international organisations, such as UNESCO, IUCN, and Ramsar engaged in the debate and pressurised the GoB to take measures to protect the Sundarbans. As an example, the 41st meeting of the World Heritage Committee asked the GoB to conduct a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) on the entire southern zone of the country, including the Rampal Power Plant, and asked ‘not to construct any industry’ in the surrounding areas until the SEA has been completed and reviewed by the World Heritage Committee.⁶⁵⁸ It further recommended conducting a separate EIA on the *Pashur* river before dredging it and to submit an ecological monitoring report to UNESCO. It also warned that the decision to place the Sundarbans in the danger list of World Heritage sites will be taken at the 42nd meeting of the World Heritage Committee based on the actions taken by the government.⁶⁵⁹ One environmental activist said,

⁶⁵⁸Prothom Alo, July 7, 2017

⁶⁵⁹*ibid*

*“The most important achievement of the environmental protests against the Rampal Power Plant is that the concern of ‘environmental protection’ has become an issue of public and political discussion. Young people have become aware about environmental protection and some of them have become environmental activists as well. This is a new trend in Bangladesh.”*⁶⁶⁰

More importantly, the GoB had been asked and had to clarify its position regarding the Rampal Power Plant in different national and international forums. For instance, the Prime Minister attended a press conference where she particularly addressed the government’s position regarding the power plant project.⁶⁶¹ The respective government representatives also took part in television talk shows and seminars to clarify their respective position. The environmental activists considered this as a success of the environmental protest. One environmental activist said,

*“It became a headache for the government to clarify its position regarding the Rampal Power Plant project in different forums. The government is currently not accountable to anyone. In such circumstances, the fact that it had to clarify its position regarding the power plant project to the people and international community on several occasions. I believe this is an achievement of the environmental protest.”*⁶⁶²

Due to objections from the international communities, some financial institutes withdrew their decision to invest in the Rampal Power Plant. As an example, at the beginning, French banks Crédit Agricole, BNP Paribas, and Société Générale showed interest to invest in the power plant project. Later, these banks did not fund the project due to ‘sustained public opposition over its social and environmental effects.’⁶⁶³ Later, Norway’s state-owned Government Pension Fund Global Investment showed interest to invest in the project. However, they also withdrew their decision because Norway’s Council of Ethics did not recommend funding the project due to ‘unacceptable risk of the company contributing to severe environmental damage.’⁶⁶⁴

Due to criticism from environmental groups and the recommendation of UNESCO, the government cancelled the second phase of the Rampal Power Plant. Instead of that, the

⁶⁶⁰An environmental activist, age 54

⁶⁶¹Prothom Alo, August 27, 2016

⁶⁶²An environmental activist, age 42

⁶⁶³The Guardian, June 25, 2015

⁶⁶⁴The Guardian, March 10, 2015

government planned to install solar panels.⁶⁶⁵ Several changes have been made in the design of the power plant to reduce the level of pollution. Also, the government cancelled another power plant named ‘Orion Power Plant,’ which was proposed to be constructed near the Rampal Power Plant. One environmental activist said,

*“The government already cancelled the second phase of the Rampal Power Plant. That means, they understand that the power plant would hamper the environment of the Sundarbans. Thus, we are asking the government to scrap the whole project as it has a risk to pollute the environment.”*⁶⁶⁶

While the government is determined to construct the Rampal Power Plant according to the planned schedule, the environmental activists are also determined to continue the environmental protests to keep the voice alive. They planned to continue their ongoing protest programmes and awareness campaigns on a regular basis. Particularly, they have a plan to organise awareness campaigns around the coastal belt of the southern part of the country to create a mass protest against all devastating development activities in that area. The environmental activists are ‘confirmed’ that if the Rampal Power Plant starts electricity generation, then the people can see the direct impact of it on the environment. If it has happened, they can then use this evidence to force the government to scrap the project. In that situation, it would be easier for the environmental activists to organise evidence-based protest programmes. They have a plan to conduct research to measure the level of pollution of the power plant when it will start electricity generation and make the masses aware about the facts on a regular basis. They expect that the masses will join the protest to scrap the power plant project if they see the impacts of such pollution on the environment. They further expect to enforce an anti-coal position if they are successful in convincing the masses that coal-based power generation is harmful to the environment. Similarly, they also have a plan to maintain communication with the international community, researchers, and organisations to put pressure on the government to scrap or relocate the Rampal Power Plant for the sake of the Sundarbans. One environment activist said,

“We are not giving up protesting even if the power plant comes to electricity production. We will continue our protest until the end. If it comes to operation, then it will be easier for us to show the negative sides of the power plant to the

⁶⁶⁵Prothom Alo, May 21, 2017

⁶⁶⁶An environmental activist, age 54

people. We have to continue our protest for own our interest to save our environment.”⁶⁶⁷

From the aforementioned discussion, it has seen that the environmental protests could not stop the government from continuing the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. However, there are some successes of the environmental protests, such as gaining the attention of the international community, who pressurised the government to take the necessary measures to protect the environment of the Sundarbans from pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. Due to such pressure, the government reduced the size of the Rampal Power Plant. Though the environmental activists were not successful to force the government to scrap the power plant, they are, however, determined to continue their protest even after the power plant starts electricity generation.

6.9 Conclusion: Clash of ‘Environmental Protection’ Narratives

The government has legitimised the construction of the Rampal Power Plant by saying that coal-fired electricity generation is the cheapest way to produce electricity. However, the environmental groups criticised the power plant project from the concerns over environmental degradation and unequal distribution of costs and benefits according to the deals that have been signed with the foreign counterpart. The government and environmental activists engaged in this contestation through placing argumentative storylines in support of their respective positions. As Bene (2018) and Luthfa (2011) showed, systematic violation of laws and regulations to construct the Rampal Power Plant encouraged the environmental activists to engage in the contestation. The risk of causing environmental degradation (particularly on the Sundarbans), several loopholes in the EIA report, and unplanned industrial expansion around the Sundarbans attracted environmental activists to engage in the protest. However, different groups of environmental activists joined the protest with different motives and interests. Some joined from the concerns over environmental degradation, while others included the concerns of the national interest regarding the incentives and subsidies (tax holiday, indemnity act, etc.) offered to the company as explained by Borrás and Franco (2013). However, the environmental activists have a common concern to protect the Sundarbans, which helped them to protest jointly to achieve a common goal.

⁶⁶⁷An environmental activist, age 46

Furthermore, the environmental activists identified the issue of ‘save the Sundarbans’ as fancy to get support from the masses, because the people have an emotional connection with this one and only mangrove forest of the country. As the Sundarbans is in the list of World Heritage sites, it was easy to get the attention of the international community as well. Thus, the environmental activists picked up ‘save the Sundarbans’ as an issue to protest when they felt that it had a good chance to be successful. For the same reason, the environmental activists were not vocal against other coal power plants (Banskhali, Matarbari, Patuakhali, and so forth) in the country that had similar risks of environmental degradation because they did not find anything that had an ‘emotional connection’ like the Sundarbans. In the protest against the Rampal Power Plant, the environmental groups placed various demands. For example, some of them placed an anti-coal position from the viewpoint of environmental pollution, while some others did not place an anti-coal position but were against the Rampal Power Plant as it has a risk to pollute the Sundarbans.

The environmental activists adopted different protest strategies ranging from non-violent advocacy and awareness campaigns to robust protest programmes that interplay within the ‘*political economies of power and accumulation*,’ which Ribot and Peluso (2003) identified as ‘bundle of power.’ The environmental protests emerged through confrontation of the ‘development hegemony’ of the government and offered a ‘counter-hegemony,’ which Peet and Watts (2004) defined as ‘political ecology from below.’ For instance, by criticising the coal-fired electricity generation-based energy policy of the government, a faction of the environmental activists proposed an ‘alternative energy master plan’ where they emphasised producing electricity from renewable sources. To confront the dominant ‘development hegemony’ as explained by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), the environmental activists developed several networks with various national and international environmental activists and organisations. These networks supported the protest from the viewpoint of ‘global environmental justice’ through staging protest campaigns and sending petitions to the government to relocate the power plant. This global connection brought new knowledge to the local environmental activists, which Tsing (2000) called ‘unexpected alliance.’

However, the government was not serious towards the environmental protest as it was not challenging the legitimacy of the government as explained by Horowitz (2010). The government only started dealing the protest seriously at a time when it became a reputational problem due to the engagement of the international community and organisations. The government adopted different strategies to confront the environmental protest. They subjugated

the 'counter-hegemony' of the environmental activists through offering a top-down 'techno-expert' explanation to minimise and manage the pollution of the coal power plant. To convince citizens, the government produced and broadcasted TVCs and circulated ads where they argued that the claims of the environmental groups were 'irrelevant,' 'unrealistic,' and 'biased.' To politicise the position of the environmental activists, they were labelled as 'emotionally motivated,' 'anti-Indian,' 'anti-development,' 'anti-electricity production,' 'anti-state,' and so forth. Apart from these soft techniques, the environmental protest programmes were obstructed by the police and 'project-supporting groups' on several occasions. As a result, the environmental protests could not stop the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. However, the government had been compelled to clarify their position regarding the objections raised by the environmental activists on several occasions. More importantly, as a result of the environmental protests, the issue of 'save the Sundarbans' was successful in developing networks with distant actors such as UNESCO, IUCN, and others. These distant actors put pressure on the government to adopt environmental protection measures to construct the Rampal Power Plant. The environmental protest is continuing even now, and the protesters are determined to keep their voices alive.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: Contested Narratives Around the Construction of Coal Power Plants in Bangladesh

“We have taken the maximum measures so that Rampal Power Plant project would not cost any adverse impacts on the Sundarbans. High quality coal and latest technology will be used to minimise the air and water pollution.”⁶⁶⁸

“Based on scientific data and logic, we showed that the Rampal Power Plant would have adverse impacts on the Sundarbans. [...] The Sundarbans is the lung of Bangladesh. Bangladesh will be severely affected if the Sundarbans is destroyed.”⁶⁶⁹

“I lost my land. I got some money as compensation but could not use that money in a productive way. I cannot do paddy and shrimp culture, which I used to do for my living in my entire life. I became handicap like many others.”⁶⁷⁰

7.1 Introduction: Research Approach

Large-scale land acquisition for developmental interventions has been a contentious issue in the Global South as the land-dependent people often refuse to be dispossessed from their land because it negatively impacts their traditional way of living. Similarly, the environmental activists also stand against any developmental interventions that have a risk of causing environmental degradation.⁶⁷¹ The situation turns to an ‘arena of conflict’ when the state or corporate groups are determined to carry forward any developmental interventions in the

⁶⁶⁸A statement of the Prime Minister of the GoB (Dhaka Tribune, October 6, 2013)

⁶⁶⁹An environmental activist (DW, August 20, 2017)

⁶⁷⁰A respondent in Rampal, age 54

⁶⁷¹Abbink, 2012

commodity frontiers despite objections from the local dispossessed population and environmental activists. The contestation may turn to clashes if the state exercises exaggerated power to neutralise the opposition against ‘development project.’⁶⁷² This research aims to explore the political contestation and negotiation between the actors, such as the local dispossessed population, environmental activists, government, and power plant development authorities around the construction of the Rampal and Banskhali power plants in Bangladesh. To understand the multiple realities of the political contestation and negotiation, this research focuses on the various causes, concerns, motives and interests of the dispossessed population and environmental activists to engage in protesting against the power plant projects. To explore the dynamics of the protest strategies, this research investigates how they got organised, developed networks with the external groups, and demonstrated protest actions. As an embedded part of this contestation, this research also examines the concerns of the government to stepping in coal-fired electricity generation despite opposition from multiple actors. It further explores how the government responded towards the protest of the dispossessed population and the environmental activists. The argumentative positions of the contesting actors have been analysed in this research following the concepts of ‘social movement’ and ‘environmental movement’ according to the theoretical understandings of political ecology. The primary information of this research has been collected using qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, semi-structural interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. The information that has been collected from different sources has been triangulated for analysis by summarising, describing, categorising, and interpreting following the ‘actor-oriented interface approach’ and ‘argumentative analytical framework’ as analytical frameworks. The aim of this concluding chapter is to address the contribution of this research to the theoretical and conceptual understanding of political ecology. Further, this chapter presents the key findings of the research, recommendations for the policy makers, and suggestions for the future research.

7.2 Contribution to Theoretical Understanding of Political Ecology

As discussed in chapter two, political ecology as a theoretical approach offers the conceptual and analytical tools to understand the argumentative positions of the contesting actors around

⁶⁷²Fonjong et al., 2015

the expansion of developmental interventions in the commodity frontiers.⁶⁷³ To understand a conflicting situation, the political ecology approach mostly emphasises how the ecological, socio-economic, and political processes interplay in the commodity frontiers. This contesting interplay shapes the access and control over natural resources and the distribution of costs and benefits due to developmental intervention.⁶⁷⁴ It also emphasises the analysis of unequal power positions among the contesting actors to understand the dynamics of the argumentative positions that determine human-nature interactions.⁶⁷⁵ Several studies had been conducted following the political ecology approach to analyse the contesting interplay between the argumentative actors in the commodity frontiers. These studies mostly argued that the land-dependent marginalised groups established less access and control over resources since they belonged to less powerful groups. This less powerful group has to bear the burden of the disadvantages which result from environmental degradation due to developmental interventions.⁶⁷⁶ After being negatively affected, the marginalised group engages in protesting against developmental intervention to establish access and control over natural resources that construct the foundation of their livelihoods.⁶⁷⁷ This is another focus point of political ecology which explains how the marginalised group expresses their reservations towards developmental intervention through confrontation against the dominant counterpart. To understand the protest mechanisms of the marginalised groups, political ecology analyses the organisations, strategies, and instruments of the protest. It also emphasises understanding the influences of the state, expansion of capitalism, neoliberal economic policies, and globalization process in commoditization of natural resources through developmental interventions that creates conditions to encourage or restrict the emergence of protests.⁶⁷⁸

However, political ecology has been criticised for paying less attention into the internal dynamics of the contesting actors around the developmental interventions in the commodity frontiers. Peet and Watts (2004) asked for a need for political ecology to focus more on in-depth analysis of micro-politics of the contesting actors in the commodity frontiers to understand their internal dynamism in motives, interests, and protest strategies. Furthermore, they asked the political ecologists to shed light on how the conflict of actors of unequal power positions plays out in the commodity frontiers. Similarly, Escobar (1996) also asked for a need

⁶⁷³Jewitt, 2008

⁶⁷⁴Campbell and Meletis, 2011

⁶⁷⁵Andreucci et al., 2016; Franco, 2014

⁶⁷⁶Bryant, 1992

⁶⁷⁷Jewitt, 2008

⁶⁷⁸Guha, 2000; Emanuel and Greenberg 2000; Bryant, 1998

for political ecology to investigate the place-based or context specific concerns of the marginalised population to engage in protesting against the developmental interventions that are responsible for environmental change. He asked to investigate how the marginalised population challenge developmental intervention through questioning the institutions, practices, processes, and language of ‘development’ when it failed to fulfil their expectations.

By criticising the ‘monolithic portrayal’ of the actors involved in a conflict, political ecology offers a framework to analyse all actors, activities, organisations, and networks to understand the internal diversity of the contestation.⁶⁷⁹ This framework works as a guide to explore the motivations and interests of different contesting groups involved in the arena of environmental conflicts. This is termed as ‘a chain of explanation’ by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987).⁶⁸⁰ This framework asks to re-politicise environmental problems to understand the role of the contesting actors. To re-politicise, re-historicise, and re-contextualise the environmental problems, political ecology asked to focus on ‘activist knowledge’ which is derived from the everyday experiences of the contesting actors.⁶⁸¹ To do this, political ecology analyses the practices and discourses of the contesting groups to understand the ‘environmental movement from below.’⁶⁸² In this regard, the findings of this research offer an important contribution to the theoretical and conceptual understanding of political ecology through presenting an analysis of in-depth micro-politics of the contesting actors in the interface situation around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. The following section presents a place-based analysis of discourses and practices of the actors engaged in the contested interface of the construction of coal-fired power plants to re-politicise and re-contextualise the contestation, which can provide new insights to understand ‘developmental intervention’ as an arena of conflict in the commodity frontiers.

The findings of this research suggest a contradicting and contesting position of the actors, such as the dispossessed population, environmental activists, government, and power plant development authorities, around the construction of coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. In this contradicting and contesting interface, the conflicting actors placed their own argumentative storylines to support their respective claims and oppose the counter-argumentative storylines. For example, from the ‘*developmentalist*’ point of view, the government identified coal-fired electricity generation as the cheapest way to produce

⁶⁷⁹Moore, 1993

⁶⁸⁰Martinez-Alier, 2004

⁶⁸¹Bebbington, 2012

⁶⁸²Escobar, 1998; Peet and Watts, 2004

electricity in comparison to other fossil fuels in order to accelerate the country's economic growth, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and overall development activities. On the contrary, from the '*environmentalist*' point of view, the environmental activists and civil society members argued that electricity generation by burning coal compromises environmental protection, human rights, and social and environmental justice. In particular, environmental activists are concerned about the protection of the Sundarbans forest because of the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. They are protesting against the construction of the power plant from the concerns over environmental protection. However, both the '*developmentalist*' and '*environmentalist*' perspectives fail to accommodate the interests of the dispossessed population who have been evicted from their land and traditional ways of living due to land acquisition to construct the power plants. This dispossessed population also engaged in protesting against the power plant projects from the concerns over livelihood and materialistic opportunity-based interests. Though both the dispossessed population and environmental activists are engaged in protesting against the power plant projects, there are several connections and disconnections among these two groups regarding in reasoning to engage in the protests and adopting protest strategies. There are also several dissimilarities among the members of these protesting groups. This research explores these fragmented features of the protest to understand the internal dynamics of the protesting groups along with the analysis of the government's response towards the protesters.

The political process of imposing 'developmental discourse' by the government to construct the power plant projects welcomed unexpected reactions from the dispossessed population and environmental activists since their concerns were not considered at all, or, in some cases, not considered seriously enough. Initially, the attempts to acquire private land to construct the power plant projects received strong reservations from the landowners and land-dependent population. For instance, to legitimise large-scale land acquisition, the government used several discourses, such as '*development of the locality*,' '*creating employment opportunities for the local population*,' '*contribution to the state-building*,' and so forth in order to get 'social license' to acquire private land.⁶⁸³ To get support from the local community, the government claimed that the land acquisition to construct both the power plants was for 'public purpose.' Furthermore, the government categorised the acquired land as '*abandon*,' '*marginal*,' '*empty*,' and '*free*' to create a discourse of '*turning unproductive land to productive*' through the

⁶⁸³Pmo and Slocombe, 2012

transformation of agricultural land for industrial use.⁶⁸⁴ The government and power plant development authority promised to the landowners to offer a higher amount of compensation for their land (in Rampal). As a result of these offers and promises, at the initial stages of land acquisition, the landowners were not against the land acquisition because they were expecting to get a higher amount of compensation as they were promised. For instance, the landowners in the Banskali Power Plant area were proactive in selling their land to the power plant development authority since they were offered a price for their land that was higher than the local market price. Similarly, the landowners in the Rampal Power Plant area were also hoping to get a higher amount of compensation than the local market price of the land as they were promised. However, in the process of land acquisition, the landowners and land-dependent people were treated as '*disposable object*' who were evicted from their land without giving proper compensation to restore their livelihoods. As Harvey (2003) said, in the process of land acquisition, the land has been considered as a '*commodity*' rather than a source of financial security, livelihood, identity and social prestige of the land-dependent people. The top-down, techno-expert-dependent 'developmental discourse' of the government failed to protect the traditional foundations of livelihood of these land-dependent people.⁶⁸⁵

The landowners were unhappy because they did not get the promised amount of compensation, which triggered them to join the protest against land acquisition. For example, the landowners in the Rampal Power Plant area became economically vulnerable because they were offered an amount of compensation which was less than the local market price of land. This amount of compensation, which was calculated based on the '*inaccurate*' and '*unrealistic*' mouza price benchmark, was not enough to purchase a similar-size plot of land in the surrounding areas. Due to the existence of corruption and irregularities in the compensation process, most of the landowners also had to pay bribes to withdraw their compensation. Furthermore, the non-titled but land-dependent people remained out of the compensation process according to the land acquisition act of the country. In addition, due to the '*enclosure of commons*',⁶⁸⁶ the government land (*khas* land) was offered to the power plant development authorities by evicting the occupiers without offering them compensation. Similarly, in Banskali, the landowners were victimised to get an adequate compensation due to the arbitrary pricing of the land. The landowners with less power and bargaining capacity could not make a good land price deal due to the practices of corruption, irregularities, and malpractices by the officials of

⁶⁸⁴Lavers, 2012; Makki, 2012

⁶⁸⁵Stringer, 2009

⁶⁸⁶Bene, 2018

the power plant development authority. Some landowners who were unwilling to sell their land were forced or trapped to do so. In both power plant areas, the dispossession from land negatively affected the livelihoods of the land-dependent population. Due to a shortage of arable land, many dispossessed people had to change their occupations. The construction works of the power plant projects also hampered the cultivation in the land that is located outside of the power plant boundary. Some people migrated to other places in search of a living. Thus, the concerns over economic vulnerability of the dispossessed population due to eviction from their land remain muted in the 'developmental discourse' of the government. As a result of imposing 'developmental discourse' as a political process that ignores the concerns of the dispossessed population created the 'contentious arena' which encouraged them to join the protest.

Further, the inception of the power plant projects in Rampal and Banskali bears the characteristics of '*commodity frontiers*' that have been explained and elaborated by Moore (2000), where the costs and benefits are disproportionately distributed. As Ahasan and Gardner (2016) said about the '*state-corporate-elite*' nexus, the government and power plant development authorities developed a nexus with the local political leaders, elites, and businessmen in both power plant areas. This nexus worked as the 'project-supporting group' who supported the power plant projects to get implemented. The social dynamics and political inherent of the locality had been used to form these 'project-supporting groups' who appeared as a powerful group in comparison to the dispossessed population since they had support from the government, power plant development authority, ruling political party, and law-enforcing agencies. This 'project-supporting group' functioned as the '*beneficiary group*'⁶⁸⁷ who had access to all the materialistic opportunities that had occurred due to the inception of the power plant projects (such as financial incentives, employment, working contracts, using the land in the power plant area for cultivation, and opportunities to earn in several illegal ways). For example, in Banskali, some members of the 'project-supporting group' were appointed in the power plant project based on a monthly salary to purchase land and take care of the resources of the power plant development company. In return, the 'project-supporting group' in Rampal and Banskali supported the activities of the power plant projects through resisting the protest of the dispossessed population.

⁶⁸⁷Ahasan and Gardner, 2016

In contrast, the dispossessed and project affected population belong to the *'deprived group'* as they had no chance to avail those materialistic opportunities. Thus, the feeling of deprivation to get access over the materialistic opportunities triggered them to protest against the power plant projects, where they demanded to be *'assimilated'* into the beneficiary group. They formed the *'project-opposing group'* to protest against the power plant project in a formal way to create pressure on the power plant development authority to assimilate them into the beneficiary group (in Banskhali) along with the demand to increase the amount of compensation for land. Some protesters also joined the *'project-opposing group'* to force the power plant development authority to assimilate them into the *'beneficiary group'* through protesting against the power plant project. It was also seen that some protesters left the *'project-opposing group'* after getting some material benefits from the power plant development authority.

Thus, through the formation of the *'project-opposing group,'* the local people, on the one hand, showed resistance, and, on the other hand, showed adaption (assimilation) towards the power plant projects. As a result, from the perspective of the power plant development authority, it was not always a case of *'accumulation by dispossession.'*⁶⁸⁸ Rather, it was case a of *'accumulation by assimilation'* also. However, the *'project-opposing group'* was more concerned about the distribution of discriminatory costs and benefits which disadvantaged them economically, culturally, and politically as well. In summary, the contestation between the *'project-supporting group'* and the *'project-opposing group'* centred around materialistic and opportunistic interest-based motives. The *'project-supporting group'* tried to protect the power plant projects to keep getting those benefits through resisting the *'project-opposing group'*, while the *'project-opposing group'* tried to be *'assimilated'* into the beneficiary group through opposing the power plant projects. This materialistic contestation is embedded in the social-political context of the locality where the powerful section of people gets access to most of the opportunities through leaving the disadvantages to the marginalised group. As Nuremoula (2012) said, the materialistic contestation between the contesting actors of different power positions in an open-pit coal mining project in Phulbari centred around *'greed versus grievance,'* which was influenced by the existing social and political features of the locality.

Later, the dispossessed population (landowners and land-dependent population) included the concern of *'environmental protection'* as an issue in their ongoing *'materialistic interest-based'*

⁶⁸⁸Escobar, 2006

protest at a time when they became aware (through various environmental groups) of environmental pollution because of coal-fired power plant. Afterwards, they staged several protest programmes against the coal-fired power plants where they mostly highlighted the concerns over environmental protection, which got support from the neighbouring people who did not have any land-related conflict of interest due to the land acquisition. Though the dispossessed population highlighted the concerns over environmental protection, they were actually not serious about the issue of ‘environmental protection,’ but rather they used it instead as a ‘shield’ or ‘mask’ to hide their materialistic interest-based motives, such as to get their land back, to increase the amount of compensation, and to be assimilated into the beneficiary group. They adopted this ‘mask’ because they were unsuccessful in compelling the government to comply with their materialistic demands. As Martinez-Alier (2002) explained, the environmentalism of the dispossessed population is not to protect the beauty of nature, but rather to protect the environment as a foundation of their livelihoods. However, the inclusion of ‘environmental protection’ as an issue in the protest helped the dispossessed population to get popular support from their fellow villagers, people from neighbouring villages, environmental activists, and civil society members at the local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, they developed several collaborations with external groups from whom they got knowledge and vocabularies about environmental protection. They used these knowledge and vocabularies in their protests programmes to strengthen their claims. Thus, the aim of the environmental protest of the dispossessed population is quite different from the protest of the environmental activists. This research refines the concept of ‘environmentalism of the dispossessed population’ by explaining the protest strategies of the dispossessed population in Rampal and Banskali power plant areas.

It was challenging for the dispossessed population to protest against the power plant projects by opposing the dominant ‘project-supporting group’ who worked in favour of the projects as they were motivated by the ‘*developmental discourse*’ of the government. Some of them supported the projects because they believed that the power plant projects would bring economic prosperity in the locality, as was promised by the government. Thus, the ‘project-opposing group’ protested against the power plant projects through challenging the ‘project-supporting group’ and ‘*developmental discourse*’ of the government. Due to power difference, the contestation between the ‘project-opposing group’ and ‘project-supporting group’ interplays according to their power position where the ‘project-supporting group’ exercised

unchallenged power as they had support from the government, ruling political party, and law-enforcing agencies.

As the process of land acquisition was different in Rampal and Banskali, it impacted the dispossessed population of these two places differently. As a result, the dispossessed populations reacted differently towards the construction of these power plant projects. As a political process, the 'project-opposing group' adopted different protest strategies to protest against the power plant projects considering their power position in the contentious arenas. These protest strategies were shaped and re-shaped according to the reactions of the dominant 'project-supporting group.' Initially, the 'project-opposing group' in both power plant areas adopted the 'covert' form of protest strategies where they followed non-violent protest techniques. The protesters were not organised as a 'protesting group' at this stage and thus adopted unplanned, indirect, and informal protest strategies to avoid the risk of confronting the dominant 'project-supporting group.' For instance, the dispossessed population showed non-cooperation in the land acquisition process and to the power plant development activists. The landowners refused to withdraw compensation and leave occupancy of their land. Later, the protesters adopted the 'overt' form of protest strategies when they realised that the covert form of protest strategies were not enough to put pressure on the government to fulfil their demands. At this stage, they were organised as 'project-opposing group' and staged protest programmes, such as human chains, protest meetings, blockades on the road, and press conferences on a regular basis. In these protest programmes, they expressed strong reservations towards the construction of the power plant projects. On several occasions, these protest actions turned into clashes when they were confronted by the 'project-supporting group' and law-enforcing agencies.

The 'project-opposing group' developed several networks with the environmental activists, left-leaning political parties, civil society members, NGOs, and others to get external support. They got new ideas, concepts, and vocabularies from these networks, which shaped their protest strategies. The 'project-opposing group' and environmental activists supported and participated in each other's protest programmes. On some occasions, they organised joint protest programmes (mainly in Rampal). In this collaboration, the universal concern of 'environmental protection' became a point of agreement and commonality between these two protesting groups. This is known as *'unexpected coalition.'*⁶⁸⁹ Though the environmental

⁶⁸⁹Tsing, 2000

groups and left-leaning political parties also started protesting against the Rampal Power Plant later, the demands of the dispossessed population (getting their land back, higher amount of compensation, and other materialistic benefits) never got highlighted in their protests.

The ‘project-opposing group’ could not continue their protests due to suppressive treatment from the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies. In both power plant areas, the ‘project-supporting group’ exercised power to neutralise the protest of the ‘project-opposing group’ with the support from the government, power plant development authority, local wings of the ruling political party, and law-enforcing agencies. The law-enforcing agencies and local wings of the ruling political party were used as ‘*development tool*’ to construct the coal power plants. The protesters were intimidated, harassed, obstructed, threatened, and beaten by the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies on several occasions. To criminalise the protesters, several fabricated cases were filed against them in both power plant areas. Particularly in Banskali, four protesters were killed in a clash between the ‘project-opposing group’ and ‘project-supporting group,’ where the police were in support of the ‘project-supporting group.’ The local people felt hostage since the police restricted their mobility and raided the villages to arrest them.

The protesters were labelled as ‘anti-state,’ and ‘anti-development’ and the protest activities were considered as ‘acts against the state’ by the government. Further, the ‘project-supporting group’ adopted several strategies to bring a breakdown in the unity and motivations of the protesters. As a result, the ‘project-opposing group’ was demotivated to continue protesting because they could not see any positive outcomes. They became frustrated when they saw the government was determined to construct the power plant despite their opposition. Moreover, the protesters became economically vulnerable due to losing their arable land. Some protesters were unable to continue protesting since they needed to engage in earning their living. In Banskali, the ‘project-opposing group’ gave up protesting after signing an agreement with the power plant development authority in which the authority agreed to take measures to control pollution of the coal power plant, withdraw the ‘project-supporting group,’ and increase the land price.

Particularly, to oppose the Rampal Power Plant, the environmental activists engaged in the contestation through creating argumentative storylines in supporting their respective claims and opposing the claims of the government and power plant development authorities. They claimed that they were worried about the protection of the Sundarbans forest due to the

pollution (from both direct and indirect sources) that would occur from the Rampal Power Plant, such as emission of pollutant gases, heavy metals, fly and bottom ash, coal transportation through the channels of the Sundarbans, dredging of the Pashur river, and others. They alleged the EIA report of the Rampal Power Plant was ‘unacceptable’ as it failed to meet international standards to suggest appropriate measures to keep the Sundarbans safe from the pollution of the power plant. They also criticised the legitimacy of the Rampal Power Plant analysing its financial aspects, which they alleged to be unprofitable for the country. Furthermore, as an issue to protest, the concern of ‘protection of the Sundarbans’ was ‘lucrative’ to the environmental activists to attract the attention of the citizens of the country as they have an emotional connection with the forest since it is a matter of national pride. For the same reason, they are not vocal at the same level against other coal power plants that are going to be constructed around the country. They did not get any sensitive issue around those power plants to protest and attract the public sentiment.

In response to the concerns of environmental pollution raised by the environmental activists, the government and power plant development authority placed counter-argumentative storylines to legitimise the construction of the Rampal Power Plant. The government criticised the claims of the environmental activists, calling the claims ‘irrelevant’ and ‘unrealistic.’ To reject the claims of the environmental activists, the government offered several pieces of proof that the Rampal Power Plant would not bring any negative impacts to the Sundarbans forest. The government offered ‘techno-expert’ explanations to manage the pollution of the Rampal Power Plant. For example, the government claimed on several occasions that the coal power plant will install technologies following the manner of ‘state-of-the-art’ to reduce the emission of pollutant elements at a nominal level. Further, the government criticised the environmental activists as ‘emotionally motivated’ and that ‘they do not have a clear idea about the updated technology of coal power plant.’ However, the environmental activists rejected this ‘techno-expert’ explanation arguing that technology cannot neutralise the pollution of a coal power plant. They are not ready to accept even a nominal level of pollution of the Rampal Power Plant since the Sundarbans has a very sensitive ecosystem.

The environmental activists (mainly the NC) adopted different protest strategies ranging from non-violent awareness and advocacy campaigns to robust protest actions to express their reservations towards the Rampal Power Plant. They staged long marches, civil marches, strikes, human chains, cycle rallies, theatre shows, signature campaigns, and so forth to create public awareness and force the government to scrap the power plant project. Similarly, some

other environmental activists (mainly the NCSS) adopted several soft protest strategies, such as ‘research-based’ advocacy campaigns (research findings dissemination, meetings, press conferences, dialogues sessions, and so forth) to create awareness among the citizens and influence the policy makers to scrap or relocate the power plant from its current location. Social media has also been widely utilised as a medium of the protest. The environmental activists also participated in television talk shows and wrote newspaper articles where they placed their arguments opposing the government’s claims. Furthermore, to get external support, the environmental activists developed several networks with international organisations (UNESCO, Ramsar, IUCN, and others) and environmental groups (Friends of the Earth, Sierra Club, 360.org, and many others) to create global pressure to force the government to scrap the power plant project. They gleaned new ideas and concepts from these global networks. These international organisations and environmental groups sent petitions to the GoB to relocate the power plant from its current location.

The government and power plant development authority adopted both soft and hard strategies in response to the protest of the environmental activists. As a soft strategy, the government officials sat with the activists to listen to their concerns. They produced several TVCs and ads aiming to ‘remove confusion’ of the citizens about the Rampal Power Plant. Besides, as a hard strategy, the government enacted some favourable laws that have been identified as ‘indemnity acts,’ which restrict public scrutiny in the power sector. In addition, the ‘project-supporting group’ and law-enforcing agencies restricted the protest programmes of the environmental activists on several occasions. On some other occasions, the environmental activists were harassed and beaten by the law-enforcing agencies while they were protesting. Though the environmental protest against the Rampal Power Plant is still alive, it could not stop the government from constructing of the power plant. However, the environmental protest has been successful in creating awareness about the protection of the Sundarbans forest at both the national and international levels. As a result of the protest, the government has reduced the size of the Rampal Power Plant and cancelled another power plant which was proposed to be constructed near the Rampal Power Plant.

7.3 Conclusion: Key Messages, Policy Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research

Throughout this research, an effort has been made to capture the views and experiences of the dispossessed population and environmental activists in their protests against the power plants in Rampal and Banskhali. The findings of this research show that a contentious situation arises around the construction of coal power plants in Rampal and Banskhali because of the failure to incorporate the concerns of the local people, who were evicted from their arable land, and the concerns of the environmental activists, who were worried about the protection of the environment. The findings show that large-scale land acquisition is a challenge in Bangladesh since it is a densely populated country. The livelihoods, material benefits, capability, identity, prestige, and sense of belongingness of the rural population are mostly associated with the land. The interests of the land-dependent population were not protected in the process of land acquisition while constructing the Rampal and Banskhali coal power plants since they were evicted from their land without being given sufficient compensation to restore their livelihoods. The existing laws and regulations of the country have limitations when it comes to protecting the interests of the dispossessed population. In addition, the practices of corruption and irregularities in the execution of the existing laws and regulations to acquire land also victimised the landowners when it comes to getting an adequate compensation and rehabilitation. The dispossessed population joined the protest against the power plant projects over concerns of losing their traditional livelihoods, while several other materialistic motivations also influenced them as well. Similarly, the environmental activists were worried about the protection of the environment due to emission of pollutant elements from the coal power plants, which influenced them to join the protest. Furthermore, the systematic violation of the existing laws and regulations to maintain the environmental protection measures to construct the coal-fired power plants also influenced them to join the protest. Similarly, there is no specific guideline to conduct EIA for industry like coal-fired power plant that has a risk to pollute the environment, which made the environmental activists worried about the protection of the environment. However, despite all these controversies and criticisms, the government was determined to construct the power plant projects on time.

As a result, the dispossessed population and environmental activists protested against the construction of the coal-fired power plants from different motivations and interests and adopted different protest strategies. They received harsh reactions from the government and power plant

development authorities. The government and power plant development authorities took help from a particular group of people of the locality who were offered several benefits to resist the protest of the dispossessed population. The law-enforcing agencies were also used to resolve the protest against the power plant projects.

The key findings stated above show that the contentious situation arises due to the gap in policies and the realities at the local level. This research believes that the contentious situation around the construction of coal power plants in Rampal and Banskhalī can be avoided through accommodating the concerns and interests of the relevant stakeholders, such as the dispossessed population and environmental activists. To do this, the research recommends adopting policies (regarding any developmental intervention) that accommodate the local realities and protect the traditional way of living of the land-dependent population in a social setting where they feel most comfortable. Similarly, the policies should accommodate provisions to ensure the protection of the environment. Finally, to avoid the troublesome situation regarding land purchase by private entity as seen in the Banskhalī case, the government should acquire private land after protecting the interests of the landowners.

From the perspective of political ecology, this research presents an in-depth analysis of the micro-politics of the contesting actors in the arena of conflict regarding developmental intervention that is responsible for displacing people and has a risk of causing environment pollution. This research also examines the contested manifestation of the actors in a complex socio-political setting which has a long-term impact that remains out of the scope of this research. Thus, this research begs additional systematic research about the impact of dispossession on the dispossessed population and the impact of the coal power plants on the environment. This further research could have a significant contribution to answer the following questions: How do the dispossessed population cope with the changing situation? What initiatives have been adopted by the power plant authority to protect the rights of the dispossessed and the local people? Do the coal-fired power plants have an impact on the environment? Are the local people impacted from environmental pollution because of the coal-fired power plant?

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