A People's Movement

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It slowly started unfolding at the beginning of the year in 2006. The small agrarian community of Kansat in Chapainawabganj had been getting increasingly agitated. Corruption and exploitation by the government authorities led to this community being deprived from electricity for a long time. The villagers needed power for irrigation at the height of the Boro season but the Chapainawabganj Palli Bidyut Samity (PBS) was only getting 2mw of power supply against a peak hour demand of 8mw. What should have been resolved by the PBS officials poured out in the form of a street movement onto the roads of Kansat. The angry men and women came out with sticks in their hands against an army of police, armed with guns -- rubber and real.



Tareque and Catherine Masud's latest venture 'The Road to Kansat' highlights the people's movement in 2006 against the oppressive police. The documentary follows the story through a series of interviews with people who had taken part in the movement. The convener of the Palli Bidyut Unnayan Sangram Parishad (PBUSP) Golam Rabbani, a popular, people's leader and his wife turned out to be the main initiators of the demonstrations. The people of Kansat knew that if anyone had the bargaining power with the authorities to bridge the gap between demand and supply of power and his eventual arrest showed that the corrupt powers were starting to play dirty. Infuriated, the people led by Rabbani's wife decided to bring an end to this corruption. The documentary very successfully portrayed the grass-roots level activism that, according to many of the interviewers, reminded one of the people's movement in 1971. In fact, according to Arep Ali Tisu, who was a freedom fighter himself, Kansat had remained mostly untouched by the Pakistani Army in 1971, but it was in 2006 that they faced real state-led brutality. The tragic irony of that juxtaposition reminds us of all the freedoms that independent Bangladesh has failed to provide its citizens.

Although the Masuds reiterated during post-screening discussion that it was a non-violent people's movement, the documentary did not mention the fact that the angry protesters did damage several vehicles during the clashes. This gap between filmmaker's description and off-screen reality was brought up by another onstage guest, who did not agree with the 'non-violent' tagline. Also missing was the fact that BNP activists were also involved in the attacks on the villagers. At one point it is mentioned that the villagers laid down a 14-point demand to the government, but it does not mention what those demands were. In fact it would have made the documentary much easier to follow, especially for someone who is completely unfamiliar with the movement, if there had been a chronological narration.

The interviews were carried out by noted TV journalist Munni Saha. Her interview of Golam Rabbani's wife revealed a feminist spirit that was quite admirable, coming from a relatively obscure and small village. Rabbani's wife chastises female journalists for not coming during the siege, to witness the role of women in the movement. As this conversation is going on, Saha's car is surrounded by dozens of curious women, all with their children. This reminds the viewer that, at the height of the confrontation, women of the village took to the roads alongside the men. One of the most moving images was of a woman carrying her young child in one hand and a stick in the other.

The nana-nati characters from the traditional art form of North Bengal Gambhira made sporadic appearances reiterating every segment of the story -- which at first seemed poetic, but after a time just seemed repetitive. The Masuds other projects include Adam Surat (1989), Muktir Gaan (1995), Muktir Kotha (1999), Cannes Award winning Matir Moina (2002) and Ontorjatra (2005). They are currently working on a new feature film.