



The Bandit Queen.

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ASIA

The Bandit Queen. Produced by Sundeep S. Bedi; directed by Shekhar Kapur; screenplay by Mala Sen. 1995; color; 119 minutes. Hindi with English subtitles. Distributor: Film Four International and Kaleidoscope.

"This is a true story": printed on the screen, these words begin director Shekhar Kapur's foray into the dehumanizing mentalities of patriarchy and hierarchy that persist in Indian society. The subject is Phoolan Devi, a low-caste Mallah woman who turned to a life of banditry in the 1970s and became famous after a killing spree that included an alleged revenge massacre of twenty-two high-caste (Thakur) men in the village of Behmai. The objective of the film is to expose, for Indian as well as Western audiences, the everyday acts of violence that sustain gender and caste relations in much of north Indian society today.

Notwithstanding the powerful lesson it conveys and the noble intentions that undergird it, there is a problem with this picture: it is not wholly true. The unambiguous message of the film is that Phoolan Devi was driven to commit ever more violent crimes solely as a result of a series of increasingly horrific rapes, first by her husband when she was but a child, then by the police while in prison, then by the chief bandit (*dakoit*) who kidnapped her, and finally by locally powerful, high-caste Thakurs. In fact, as was widely reported in the Indian press during the controversial showing of the film in New Delhi and as is made clear in the detailed biography on which *The Bandit Queen* is ostensibly based (Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* [London, 1991]; the author also wrote the screenplay), rape was, by Phoolan Devi's own account, only an incidental factor in her transformation into an outlaw. Phoolan Devi first found herself on the wrong side of the law and the target of bandit attacks when she tried to prevent a conniving, influential cousin from stealing her father's land—a complicating episode that is entirely absent from the film but crucial to understanding the trajectory of her life. Ironically, the only cousin depicted in the film is a comic, well-intentioned oaf who comes to Phoolan's aid at key moments of crisis in her crisis-ridden life. No doubt these and other errors will be pointed out in detail in Phoolan Devi's forthcoming autobiography (*I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen* [London, 1996]).

The decision to make rape, inflected by caste, the driving force in the film precipitates a host of additional minor and major falsifications too numerous to detail (but see the review by Madhu Kishwar, *Manushi* 84 [September–October 1994]: 34–37). The result is a further mythologization of a persona that had already experienced extensive deification in local legend and the popular press by the mid-1980s. Sadly, this artistic choice prevents Kapur from seriously exploring the transformation of Phoolan into Phoolan Devi (the honorific "Devi" literally means "goddess") into Bandit Queen, which would have endowed the characters with greater depth and the narrative with some badly needed nuance and complexity. Instead, we are presented with a one-dimensional protagonist, a sexually wronged woman hell-bent on revenge—a kind of rampaging Kali cleverly styled to suit both Western and Indian action-drama appetites. Phoolan Devi thus becomes a goddess who acts out a well-worn myth of redemption through violence and vengeance. And, as with other myths, when the film approaches closure, the unreality of the plot overwhelms it: a desperate Phoolan Devi, fleeing a take-no-prisoners police dragnet and on the brink of physical collapse in a bleak, ravine-pitted landscape, is able to conjure up a politically star-studded surrender before a cheering crowd of thousands and to dictate terms regarding land and jobs for her family members, police protection, and special prison conditions for herself and her fellow bandits. The surrender spectacle, complete with pre-conditions, really occurred; the depiction of her desperate flight, however, is pure fiction. In fact, she kept the police forces of two state governments guessing where she was until the end.

The film works better as historical fiction, particularly when Kapur looks beyond the travails of Phoolan Devi to evoke the culture of banditry in the north Indian hinterlands. In depicting outlaw worship of Hindu deities and propitiation at local shrines, Kapur begins to examine one way bandits have coped with difficult circumstances and bound themselves to settled village society despite their unsettled, peripatetic existence. In the colonial era, the imperfect perception of this kind of religious symbolization of crime rooted in local belief and practice gave rise to fantastic imaginings among the nineteenth-century British public about secret Indian *thuggee* cults devoted to sacrificial murder to appease an insatiable, libidinous goddess. The Western fascination with *thuggee* produced a varied post-Victorian literature as well, including James Sleeman's *Thug; or, A Million Murders* (London, 1933), John Masters's *The Deceivers* (New York, 1952), and George Bruce's *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and Its Overthrow in British India* (London, 1968). Kapur seems equipped to comment on the religious and cultural dimensions of banditry and to dismantle and reassemble the *thuggee* genre in the process. But, although he makes a respectable beginning here, he fails to rise sufficiently above the fray. His energies are dissipated elsewhere, namely, in replacing one angry goddess (Kali) with another (Phoolan Devi).

The fact that *The Bandit Queen* does not stand up as history and is only equivocally successful as historical fiction does not mean, however, that it is not historically significant. With all its flaws, the very fact that this film, replete with blunt depictions of sex, violent or otherwise, and a heavy use of several all-too-common vernacular profanities (usually alluding to sex with one's mother or sister), has been shown in India is altogether remarkable, given the ridiculously antiquated censorship restrictions there. Its collection of images and sounds will reverberate in collective Indian memory for years to come—and none more so than that of a bloodied, raped, and beaten Phoolan, stripped naked by a bandit boss and forced to fetch water from the village well, with the entire village looking on in deafening silence. Finally, this may well be the first serious Indian, and Indian-made, drama devoid of the usual "Bollywood" (Bombay + Hollywood) song-and-dance routines and boilerplate *masala* plot to achieve both critical success in the West and box-office (and video) success in India.

For better or worse, Indian film has entered a new era. One could say this of Indian politics, too, inasmuch as the real Phoolan Devi was this year elected to parliament from a constituency not far removed from her home in the ravines of north-central India. As with Mahatma Gandhi, to whose image she insisted on symbolically surrendering in 1983 (along with that of the goddess Durga, the benevolent manifestation of Kali), whose own life has been mythologized in film by director Richard Attenborough (*Gandhi*, 1982) only to be examined in closer detail by Shyam Benegal (*The Making of the Mahatma*, 1996), we probably have not seen the last of the Bandit Queen on the silver screen.

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The Gate of Heavenly Peace. Produced by Peter Koller, Orville Schell, and Lise Yasui; directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton; screenplay by John Crowley and Geremie Barmé. 1995; color; 180 minutes. Copyright Long Bow Group, Inc.

This documentary is a powerful and engaging visual history of the Chinese pro-democracy student movement that occupied Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989, which figured large in China's century-long quest for modernity and has rightfully received extensive, multidisciplinary attention from historians, political scientists, sociologists, and others. When one is watching the individual faces and the collective behavior unfolding in front of the camera, however, the questions raised far exceed any adequately answered by existing theory. Why did