

The real Bandit Queen... An angry rebel

by Danielle M. Murphy
Editor in Chief

She left a legendary trail of revenge that included kidnapping, dacoity (banditry) and murder. Challenging the Indian caste system and its mistreatment of women, Phoolan Devi emerged a heroine.

Devi was born into low-caste poverty, where being a woman is a burden. Women of her caste are not educated. When struck with illness, they blame it on evil spirits lurking in trees.

Producing sons and working in the fields are their only worth. A woman's work earns a meal and the equivalent of 50 cents a day.

They marry young, at the age of fourteen or fifteen. Their lives are fixed, their future and their mothers' past are the same.

Devi's village, Gorha Ka Purwa, is not unlike others in northern India. Life in the village revolves around caste.

The caste system defines what a family may eat, how marriage is performed, the length of a woman's sari and what jewelry she may wear, whether she can draw water from the village well and what doors she may use to enter the temple.

Whether or not a man may carry an umbrella is determined by caste.

Devi's father, Devidin, had been fortunate to inherit 15 acres of land. But he lost the land to an elder brother and his son, Maiyadin. Maiyadin and his father had better political connections in the village than Devidin. While Devi's father did not protest, she did.

At the age of ten, Devi

undertook a long and lonely battle to reclaim the family's land. She taunted Maiyadin in the town square and embarrassed him in front of his upper-caste friends. With her elder sister, Devi arranged a sit-in on Maiyadin's land. According to Devi, he beat her with a brick until she was unconscious.

At the age of 11, at Maiyadin's insistence, Devi was married to a widower in exchange for a cow. He was three times her age, and despite that, forced himself upon her and beat her repeatedly.

Devi left him soon after she turned 12. Terrified, she walked across an area the width of Texas back to her parent's home.

"What can we do?" her mother cried. "You have heaped disgrace upon us all. There is no alternative: you must commit suicide. Go jump in the village well!"

Women don't leave their husbands in India.

Although she considered it, Devi didn't jump. She spent her adolescence in Gorha Ka Purwa, alternating running away and returning over the next four years.

During this time, Devi was married, briefly, to her cousin Kailash, who was already married.

Devi continued her battle with Maiyadin and argued her father's case before the Allahabad High Court. In 1973, when she was 21, Devi was arrested for what she calls fraudulent charges of robbery at Maiyadin's home.

During a month in police custody, she was beaten and raped—as a large number of Indian women are. Many of the policemen were Maiyadin's friends.

In early July of that year, during the festival of Sawan Dui, Devi's life changed dramatically.

Rumors circulated throughout the village that a band of dacoits led by Babu Gujar were camped by the river. Allegedly, they were



Goddess of Flowers: Seemas Beemus stars as Phoolan Devi in the *Bandit Queen* (1994), a romantic tale of violent vengeance. The film can be seen at Behrend on Tuesday, April 15 at 7 p.m.

ordered to kidnap Devi.

Devi's accounts of that night vary. She may have been marched into the ravines or kidnapped. Maiyadin may have paid the dacoits to take her away, or maybe she just left.

During the next 72 hours she was brutalized by Gujar. On the third day, Vikram Mallah, Gujar's chief lieutenant and deputy, who had admired Devi, shot Gujar dead. Mallah, a member of Devi's caste, assumed control of the gang and Devi became his mistress.

From Mallah, Devi learned to fight. According to a popular ballad sung in the villages, Mallah told her, "If you're going to kill, kill twenty, not just one. For if you kill twenty, your fame will spread; if you kill only one, they will hang you as a murderess."

Mallah and Devi lead their gang through the badlands of India until August of 1980. While in bed with Devi, Mallah was shot. He died

with his head in her lap.

Mallah was shot by two dacoit brothers, Sri Ram and Lala Ram in revenge of Gujar's death. The brothers, like Gujar, were upper-caste. Caste also controlled the dacoit gangs.

The brothers kidnapped Devi and took her to the village of Behmai. For 23 days she was repeatedly beaten and raped into unconsciousness.

On the evening of the 23rd day, a priest helped Devi escape. She then formed her own gang with Man Singh, a fellow dacoit.

Seventeen months later, on St. Valentine's Day, Devi returned to Behmai. Devi and her gang, dressed as police officers, entered the village and rounded up upper-caste Thakur men. The men were taken to the riverbanks and shot. Twenty-two men were killed.

Two years later, with a \$10,400 bounty on her head, Devi and her gang surrendered. Terms included

land for her family and a government job for her brother.

Devi spent 11 years in prison without trial. "I rotted in jail," said Devi. "Everyone forgot I was there."

Riding the tide of low-caste politics, Devi campaigned for Parliament. She vowed to work for the "uplift of women, the downtrodden, and the poor." She was elected in May 1996.

A film illustrating Devi's life was released in 1994. *Bandit Queen* has stirred controversy with Devi denouncing the film for omitting her feud with Maiyadin and its depiction of her. She does not, however, dispute the story.

Bandit Queen can be seen at Behrend on Tuesday, April 15 at 7 p.m. in the Reed Lecture Hall.

Information courtesy "India's Bandit Queen" by Mary Anne Weaver, *The Atlantic Monthly* November 1996

Bandit Queen Limited engagement

BEHREND-Phoolan Devi overcame repeated abuse beginning with the marriage her father sold her into at the age of seven.

Devi, India's famed outlaw, merged a heroine of the lower caste from a life of abandonment, despair and crime. Once the leader of a gang of bandits, she is now a candidate for public office in India.

Bandit Queen (1994) chronicles the life of Devi beginning in 1968 with her forced marriage, to her eventual surrender in 1983. *Bandit Queen* is based on Devi's diary, *Goddess of Flowers*, dictated during the prison term following her surrender.

Adventure and suspense fill the screen as Devi, the Bandit Queen, escapes from her abusive marriage and is then banished from her poverty-ridden village. She finds solace with a gang of bandits, evading police and attempting to avenge the beatings

and gang rape she endured at the hands of the upper-caste Thakurs. Amidst the violence, Devi finds love in the arms of bandit leader Vakrim. Together Devi and Vakrim struggle fighting violence with violence.

The cinematography of *Bandit Queen* captures many facets of Indian culture. From villages without plumbing, across the Indian countryside to large urban centers, *Bandit Queen* takes its viewers on a roller coaster ride through India.

Bandit Queen was directed by Shekhar Kapur and stars Seemas Beemus as Devi. The film is not rated, but contains violence and brief nudity.

Bandit Queen can be seen Tuesday, April 15 at 7 p.m. in the Reed Lecture Hall. The film is at Behrend for a one night showing as part of the Women's Film Series. There is no charge for admission and the film is open to the public.

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April 10, 11, 12 and 13
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13 - SUNDAY

MEMORIAL SERVICE HONORING HERB LAUFFER 2 PM REED COMMONS

MOVIE - 10:00 PM JERRY MCGUIRE

10 - THURSDAY

REALITY CHECK 5:30 PM REED 112 NEWMAN 8:00 PM REED 3 SOCIETY OF WOMEN ENGINEERS 12:30 NICK 165

MOVIE - 10:00 PM JERRY MCGUIRE

11 - FRIDAY

IVCF 2:00 PM REED 113 BRUNO'S: COMEDIAN BOB GOLUB 8:30 PM

MOVIE - 10:00 PM JERRY MCGUIRE

12 - SATURDAY

MARTIAL ARTS 10:00 AM NIAGARA BASEMENT BRUNO'S: COMEDIAN MIKE CHESELKA 8:30 PM

MOVIE - 10:00 PM JERRY MCGUIRE

14 - MONDAY

Debate: Dr. Michael J. Behe vs. Dr. Niles Eldredge, Creation vs. Evolution: Challenging Darwin Reed Commons 7:30 pm

15 - TUESDAY

FILM: BANDIT QUEEN REED LECTURE HALL 7 PM PERSONAL GROWTH GROUP FOR WOMEN 6:00 PM COUNSELING CENTER

16 - WEDNESDAY

ALCHEMY AND STAMP COLLECTING REED COMMONS 12 NOON Commuter Council 1:00 pm Reed 112

SGA MEETING 5:15 PM REED 114