



Phoolan Devi

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[Arundhati Roy on Shekhar Kapur's Bandit Queen](#)

The Great Indian Rape-Trick I

At the premiere screening of *Bandit Queen* in Delhi, Shekhar Kapur introduced the film with these words: "I had a choice between Truth and Aesthetics. I chose Truth, because Truth is Pure."

To insist that the film tells the Truth is of the utmost commercial (and critical) importance to him. Again and again, we are assured, in interviews, in reviews, and eventually in writing on the screen before the film begins. "This is a True Story."

If it weren't the "Truth", what would redeem it from being just a classy version of your run-of-the-mill Rape n' Retribution theme that our film industry churns out every now and then? What would save it from the familiar accusation that it doesn't show India in a Proper Light? Exactly Nothing. It's the "Truth" that saves it. Every time. It dives about like Superman with a swiss knife - and snatches the film straight from the jaws of unsavoury ignominy. It has bought headlines. Blunted argument. Drowned criticism.

If you say you found the film distasteful, you're told - Well that's what truth is - distasteful. Manipulative? That's Life - manipulative. Go on. Now *you* try. Try...Exploitative. Or.. Gross. Try Gross.

It's a little like having a dialogue with the backs of trucks.
God is Love.
Life is Hard.
Truth is Pure.
Sound Horn.

Whether or not it *is* the Truth is no longer relevant. The point is that it will, (if it hasn't already) - *become* the Truth.

Phoolan Devi the woman has ceased to be important. (Yes *of course* she exists. She has eyes, ears, limbs hair etc. Even an address now) But she is suffering from a case of Legenditis. She's only a version of herself. There are other versions of her that are jostling for attention. Particularly Shekhar Kapur's "Truthful" one, which we are currently being bludgeoned into believing.

"... it has the kind of story, which, if it were a piece of fiction, would be difficult to credit. In fact, it is the true story of Phoolan Devi, the Indian child bride..."
Derek Malcolm writes in *The Guardian*.

But *is* it? The True Story? How does one decide? Who decides?

Shekhar Kapur says that the film is based on Mala Sen's book - *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. The book reconstructs the story, using interviews, newspaper reports, meetings with Phoolan Devi and extracts from Phoolan's written account, smuggled out of prison by her visitors, a few pages at a time.

Sometimes various versions of the same event - versions that totally conflict with each other i.e: Phoolan's version, a journalist's version, or an eye-witnesses version - are all presented to the reader in the book. What emerges is a complex, intelligent and human book. Full of ambiguity, full of concern, full curiosity about who this woman called Phoolan Devi really is.

Shekhar Kapur wasn't curious.

He has openly admitted that he didn't feel that he needed to meet Phoolan. His producer Bobby Bedi supports this decision "*Shekhar would have met her if he had felt a need to do so.*" (*Sunday Observer August 20th [1994]*).

It didn't matter to Shekhar Kapur who Phoolan Devi really was. What kind of person she was. She was a woman, wasn't she? She was raped wasn't she? So what did that make her? A Raped Woman! You've seen one, you've seen 'em all. He was in business.

What the hell would he need to *meet* her for?

Did he not stop to think that there must have been something very special about her? That if this was the normal career graph of a low-caste village woman that was raped, our landscapes would be teeming with female gangsters?

If there is another biographer any where in the world who has not done a living subject the courtesy of meeting her *even once* - will you please stand up and say your name? And having done that, will you (and your work) kindly take a running jump?

What does Shekhar Kapur mean when he says the film is based on Mala Sen's book? How has he decided which version of which event is "True" ? On what basis has he made these choices?

There's a sort of loutish arrogance at work here. A dunce's courage. Unafraid of what it doesn't know.

What he has done is to rampage through the book picking up what suits him, ignoring and even *altering* what doesn't.

I am not suggesting that a film should include every fact that's in the book. I am suggesting that if you take a long hard look at the choices he has made - at his inclusions, his omissions and his blatant alterations, a truly dreadful pattern

emerges.

Phoolan Devi (in the film version), has been kept on a tight leash. Each time she strays towards the shadowy marshlands that lie between Victimhood and Brutishness, she has been reined in. Brought to heel.

It is of consummate importance to the Emotional Graph of the film, that you never, *ever*, stop pitying her. That she never threatens the Power Balance.

I would have thought that this was anathema to the whole point of the Phoolan Devi story. That it went way beyond the *You-Rape-Me: I'll-Kill- You* equation. That the whole point of it was that she got a little out of *control*. That the Brutalized became the Brute.

The film wants no part of this. Because of what it would do to the Emotional Graph. To understand this, you must try and put Rape into its correct perspective. The Rape of a *nice* Woman (saucy, headstrong, foul-mouthed perhaps, but basically *moral, sexually moral*) - is one thing. The rape of a nasty/perceived-to-be-immoral woman, is quite another. It wouldn't be quite so bad. You wouldn't feel quite so sorry. Perhaps you wouldn't feel sorry at all.

Any policeman will tell you that.

Whenever the police are accused of custodial rape, they immediately set to work. Not to prove that she wasn't raped. But to prove that she wasn't *nice*. To prove that she was a loose woman A prostitute. A divorcee. Or an Elopee - ie: She asked for it.

Same difference.

Bandit Queen -the film, does not make a case against Rape. It makes its case against the Rape of *nice* (read moral), women. (Never mind the rest of us that aren't "nice").

[??The film is consistently??] it's on the lookout, like a worried hen - saving Phoolan Devi from herself. Meanwhile we, the audience, are herded along, like so much trusting cattle. We cannot argue, (because Truth is Pure. And you can't mess With that).

Every time the Director has been faced with something that could disrupt the simple, pre- fabricated calculations of his cloying morality play, it has been tampered with and *forced* to fit.

I'm not accusing him of having planned this.

I believe that it comes from a vision that has been distorted by his own middle-class outrage, which he has then turned on his audience like a fire-fighter's hose.

According to Shekhar Kapur's film, every landmark - every decision, every turning-point in Phoolan Devi's life, starting with how she became a dacoit in the first place, has to do with having been raped, or avenging rape.

He has just blundered through her life like a Rape-diviner

You cannot but sense his horrified fascination at the havoc that a wee willie can

wreak. It's a sort of reversed male self absorption.
Rape is the main dish. Caste is the sauce that it swims in.

The film opens with a pre-credit sequence of Phoolan Devi the child being married off to an older man who takes her away to his village where he rapes her, and she eventually runs away. We see her next as a young girl being sexually abused by Thakur louts in her village. When she protests, she is publicly humiliated, exiled from the village, and when she returns to the village, ends up in prison. Here too she is raped and beaten, and eventually released on bail. Soon after her release, she is carried away by dacoits. She has in effect become a criminal who has jumped bail. And so has little choice but to embark on a life in the ravines.

He has the caste-business and the rape-business neatly intertwined to kick-start that "*swift, dense, dramatic narrative*" (Sunil Sethi, *Pioneer* August 14th [1994])

Mala's book tells a different story.

Phoolan Devi stages her first protest against injustice at the age of ten. *Before* she is married off. In fact it's the *reason* that she's married off so early. To keep her out of trouble.

She didn't need to be raped to protest. Some of us don't.

She had heard from her mother, the story of how her father's brusher Biharilal and his son Maiyadeen falsified the land records and drove her father and musher out of the family house, forcing them to live in a little hut on the outskirts of the village.

The angry little girl accompanied by a frightened older sister marches into her uncle's *hora* field where the two of them hang around with a combative air, munching *hora* nuts and plucking flowers (combatively). Their cousin Maiyadeen, a young man in his twenties, orders the children off his premises. Phoolan refuses to move. Instead this remarkable child taunts him, and questions his claim to the land. She *was* special.

She is beaten unconscious with a brick.

Phoolan Devi's first war, like almost every dacoit's first war, was fought for territory. It was the classic beginning of the journey into dacoitdom.

But does it have rape in it?

Nope.

Caste-violence?

Nope.

So is it worth including in the film?

Nope.

According to the book, her second protest too, has to do with territory. And it is this (not the sexual harassment by the village louts, though that happens too), that lands Phoolan Devi in jail and enters her name in the police records.

Maiyadeen, the book says, was enraged because the property dispute (thanks to Phoolan's pleas to the village panchayat) had been re-opened and transferred to

the Allahabad High Court.

As revenge he destroys Devideen's (Phoolan's father) crop, and is in the process of hacking down their Neem tree when Phoolan intervenes and throws a stone at him. She is attacked, trussed up, and handed to the police.

Soon after she's released on bail, she is kidnapped by dacoits. This too, according to Phoolan's version (upto, this point, there *is* no other version), is engineered by Maiyadeen as a ruse to get her out of his hair.

Maiyadeen does not figure in the film.

Already some pretty big decisions have been made. What stays, what goes. What is high-lighted, what isn't.

Life is Rape. The rest is jus' details.

We then see Phoolan in the ravines, being repeatedly raped by Babu Singh Gujar, the Thakur leader of the gang she has been kidnapped by. Vikram Mallah, the second-in-command is disgusted by his behaviour and puts a bullet through him. According to the book the killing happens as a drunken Babu Gujar is threatening to assault Phoolan. In the film he's actually at it, lying on top of her, his naked bottoms jerking. As he breathes his last, Phoolan blinks the blood out of her eyes and looks long into the eyes of her redeemer. Just so that we get the point.

After this we are treated to a sequence of After-rape-romance. The touching bits about the first stirrings of sexual desire in a much-raped woman. The way it works in the film is *If-you- touch-me-I'll-slap-you-but-I-really-do-want-to-touch-you.*

It's choreographed like a dusty dance in which they rub against each other, but whenever he touches her she swats his hand away, but nevertheless quivers with desire. It is such a crude, obvious, doltish depiction of conflict in a woman who is attracted to a man, but associates sex with humiliation. It's not in the book, so I'm not sure whose version Shekhar has used. From the looks of it, probably Donald Duck's.

Vikram Mallah and Phoolan Devi become lovers. While the book and the film agree that he was her one true love, the book does not suggest that he was her only lover.

The film does. She has to be portrayed as a One Man Woman. Otherwise who's going to pity her? So it's virtue or bust. One lover (a distant cousin) is eliminated completely. The other (Man Singh), is portrayed as what used to be known in college as a Rakhi-brother.

From all accounts, Vikram Mallah seems to have been the midwife of Phoolan's birth into dacoitdom.

He supervises her first act of retribution against her husband Puttilal.

The film shows him bound and gagged, being beaten by Phoolan Devi with the butt of her gun, whimpering and crying with remembered rage.

At having been raped. In the Retribution bits, she is allowed a little latitude. Otherwise, (as we shall see) none at all.

But there's a sly omission here. According to the book, according to Phoolan Devi herself, there were two victims that day. Not one.

The second one was a woman. Vidya, Puttilal's second wife.

The film hasn't told us about a second experience Phoolan has with Puttilal. The time that Maiyadeen forced her to return to Puttilal. Phoolan arrived at her husband's house to find that he had taken a second wife. Vidya harassed and humiliated Phoolan and eventually forced Puttilal to send her away.

Her humiliation at Vidya's hands is more recent in Phoolan's memory.

Phoolan, in her written version says she wanted to kill them both and leave a note saying that this will be the fate of any man who takes two wives. Later she changed her mind and decided to leave them alive to tell the tale. She beat them both. And broke Puttilal's hands and legs.

But what *nice* woman would do that?

Beat up another woman?

How would you feel sorry for someone like that?

So, in the film, Vidya is dumped.

Phoolan's affair with Vikram Mallah ends tragically when he is shot.

She is captured by his Thakur killers, gagged, bound, and transported to Behmai. The stage is set for what has come to be referred to as the "centerpiece" of the film. The gang-rape.

It is the scene by which the film is judged.

Not surprisingly, Phoolan herself is reticent about what happened. All she says is *un logo ne mejhse bahut mazaak ki*.

She mentions being beaten, humiliated and paraded from village to village. She mentions another woman dacoit Kusuma -- who disliked her, and taunted and abused her. (Of course there's no sign of her in the film. It would only serve to confuse the Woman-as-victim moral arithmetic.)

Since Phoolan isn't forthcoming, it is the vivid (vicarious) account in *Esquire* by an American, journalist, Jon Bradshaw that has been enlisted to structure this scene.

"... Phoolan screamed, striking out at him, but he was too strong. Holding her down, the stranger raped her. They came in one by one after that. Tall, silent Thakur men -- and raped her until Phoolan lost consciousness. For the next three weeks Phoolan was raped several times a night, and she submitted silently turning her face to the wall... she lost all sense of time... a loud voice summoned her outside. Sri Ram ordered Phoolan to fetch water from the well. When she refused, he ripped off her clothes and kicked her savagely...at last she limped to

the well while her tormentors laughed and spat at her. The naked girl was dragged back to the hut and raped again."

Whatever Shekhar Kapur's other failings are, never let it be said that he wasn't a trier. He did his bit too. He (*Pioneer Aug 14th, India Today August 21st [1994]*)locked himself up in a room - the door opening and closing as one man after another strode in - imagining himself being sodomized!!! After this feat of inter-sexual empathy, he arrives at some radical, definitive conclusions. " There is no pain in a gang-rape, no physical pain after a while," he assures us "It is about something as dirty as the abject humiliation of a human being and the complete domination of its soul."

Thanks baby. I would never have guessed.

It's hard to match the self-righteousness of a film-maker with a cause. Harder when the film- maker is a man and the cause is rape.

And when it's the *gang-rape* of a *low-caste* woman by *high-caste men* .. don't even try it. Go with the feeling.

We see a lot of Phoolan's face, in tight close-up, contorted into a grimace of fear and pain as she is raped and mauled and bugged. The overwhelming consensus in the press has been that the rape was brilliantly staged and chilling.

That it wasn't exploitative.

Now what does that mean? Should we be grateful to Shekhar Kapur for not showing us the condition of her breasts and genitals? Or theirs? That he leaves so much to our imagination?

That he gave us a *tasteful* rape?

But I thought the whole *point* of this wonderful film was its no-holds-barred brutality? So why stop now? Why the sudden coyness?

I'll tell you why. Because it's all about regulating the Rape-meter. Adjusting it enough to make us a little preen-at-the-gills. Skip dinner perhaps . But not miss work.

It's *us*, We-the-Audience, stuck in our voyeuristic middle-class lives who really make the decisions about how much or how little rape/violence we can take/will applaud, and therefore, are given.

It isn't about the story. (There are ways and ways of telling a story) It isn't about the Truth. (There are ways around that too. Right?) It isn't about what Really Happened. It's none of that high falutin' stuff.

It's good old Us. We make the decisions about how much we would like to see. And when the mixture's right, it thrills us,. And we purr with approbation.

It's a class thing. If the controls are turned up too high, the hordes will get excited and arrive. To watch the centrepiece. They might even whistle. They won't bother to cloak their eagerness in concern like we do.

This way, it's fine, It's just Us and our Imagination.

But hey, I have news for you - the hordes *have* heard and are on their way. They'll even pay to watch. It'll make money, the centrepiece. It's hot stuff

How does one grade film-ropes on a scale from Exploitative to Non-exploitative? Does it depend on how much skin we see? Or is it a more complex formula that juggles exposed skin, genitalia, and bare breasts?

Exploitative I'd say, is when the whole point of the exercise is to stand on high moral ground, and inform us, (as if we didn't know), that rape is about abject humiliation.

And, as in the case of this film, when it exploits exploitation. Phoolan has said (*Pioneer, August 15 [1994]*) that she thinks they're no better shall the men who raped her. This producer/director duo.

And they've done it without dirtying their hands. What was that again? The complete domination of the soul? I guess you don't need hands to hold souls down.

After the centrepiece, the film rushes through to its conclusion.

Phoolan manages to escape from her captors and arrives at a cousin's house, where she recuperates and then eventually teams up with Man Singh who later becomes her lover, (though of course the film won't admit it).

On one foray into a village with her new gang, (one of the only times we see her indulging in some non-rape-related banditry), we see her wandering through a village in a daze, with flaring nostrils, while the men loot and plunder. She isn't even scared when the police arrive. Before she leaves she smashes a glass case, picks out a pair of silver anklets and gives it to a little girl.

Sweet.

When Phoolan and her gang, arrive in Behmai for the denouement, everybody flees indoors except for a baby that is for some reason, left by the well, The gang fans out and gathers the Thakurs who have been marked for death. Suddenly the colour seeps out of the film and everything becomes bleached and dream sequency. It all turns very conceptual. No brutal close-ups. No bestiality.

A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

The twenty-two men are shot The baby wallows around in rivers of blood. Then colour leaches back into the film.

And with that, according to the film, she's more or less through with her business. The film certainly, is more or less through with her. Because there's no more rape. No more retribution.

According to the book, it is really only after the Behmai massacre that Phoolan Devi grows to fit her legend. There's a price on her head, people are buying for her blood, the gang splinters. Many of them are shot by the police. Ministers and Chief-ministers are in a flap. The police are in a panic . Dacoits are being shot down in fake encounters and their bodies are publicly displayed like game. Phoolan is hunted like an animal. But ironically, it is now, for the first time that she is in control of her life. She becomes a leader of men. Man Singh becomes her lover, but on her terms. She makes decisions. She confounds the police. She

evades every trap they set for her./ She plays daring little games with them. She undermines the credibility of the entire UP police force. And all this time, the police don't even know what she really looks like.
Even when the famous Malkhan Singh surrenders, Phoolan doesn't.

This goes on for two whole years. When she finally does decide to surrender, it is after several meetings with a persuasive policeman called Rajendra Chaturvedi, the SP of Bhind, with whom she negotiates the terms of her surrender to the government of Madhya Pradesh.

Is the film interested in any of this?
Go on. Take a wild guess.

In the film, we see her and Man Singh on the run, tired, starved and out of bullets. Man Singh seems concerned, practical and stoical.
Phoolan is crying and asking for her mother!!!

The next thing we know is that we're at surrender. As she gives up her gun, she looks at Man Singh and he gives her an approving nod.
Good Girl! Clever girl!
God Clever Girl

Phoolan Devi spent three-and-a-half years in the ravines. She was wanted on 48 counts of major crime, 22 murder, the rest kidnaps-for-ransom and looting. Even simple mathematics tells me that we've been told just half the story. But the cool word for Half-truth is Greater-truth. Other signs of circular logic are beginning to surface.
Such as: Life is Art

Art is not Real

How about changing the title of the film to: *Phoolan Devi's Rape and Abject Humiliation: The True half-Truth?*
How about sending it off to an underwater film festival with only one entry?

What responsibility does a biographer have to his subject? Particularly to a living subject?
None at all?
Does it not matter what she thinks or how this is going to affect her life?

Is he not even bound to show her the work before it is released for public consumption?

If the issues involved are culpable criminal offenses such as Murder and Rape - if some of them are still pending in a court of law -- legally, is he allowed to present conjecture, reasonable assumption and hearsay as the unalloyed "Truth?"

Shekhar Kapur has made an appeal to the Censor Board to allow the film through without a single cut. He has said that the Film, as a work of Art, is a whole, if it were censored it wouldn't be the same film.

What about the Life that he has fashioned his Art from?

He has a completely different set of rules for that.

It's been several months since the film premiered at Cannes. Several weeks since the showings in Bombay and Delhi. Thousands of people have seen the film. It's being invited to festivals all over the world.

Phoolan Devi hasn't seen the film. She wasn't invited.

I met her yesterday. In the morning papers Bobby Bedi had dismissed Phoolan's statements to the press -- " Let Phoolan sit with me and point out inaccuracies in the film, I will counter her accusations effectively, " (*Sunday Observer, August 21st [1994]*). What is he going to do? Explain to her how it really happened?

But it's deeper than that. His story to the press is one thing. To Phoolan it's quite another. In front of me she rang him up and asked him when she could see the film. He would not give her a definite date.

What's going on?

Private screenings have been organised for powerful people. But not for her. They hadn't bargained for this. She was supposed to be safely in jail. She wasn't supposed to matter. She isn't supposed to have an opinion.

"Right now", the Sunday Observer says, "Bobby Bedi is more concerned about the Indian Censor Board than a grumbling Phoolan Devi."

Legally, as things stand, in UP the charges against her haven't been dropped. (Mulayam Singh has tried, but an appeal against this is pending in the High Court).

There are several versions of what happened at Behmai. Phoolan denies that she was there. More importantly, two of the men who were shot at but didn't die say she wasn't there. Other eye-witnesses say she was. Nothing has been proved. Everything is conjecture.

By not showing her the film, but keeping her quiet until it's too late to protest (until it has been passed by the Censors and the show hits the road), what are they doing to Phoolan? By *appearing* to remain silent, is she concurring with the film version of the massacre at Behmai? Which states, unequivocally, that Phoolan was there. Will it appear as though she is admitting evidence against herself?

Does she know that whether or not the film tells the Truth it is only a matter of time before it *becomes* the Truth. And that public sympathy for being shown as a rape-victim doesn't get you off the hook for murder?

Are they helping her to put her head in a noose?

On the one hand the concerned cowboys Messrs Bedi & Kapur are so eager to share with us the abject humiliation and the domination of Phoolan Devi's "soul",

and on the other they seem to be so totally uninterested in her.
In what she thinks of the film, or what their film will do to her life and future.

What is she to them? A *concept*? Or just a cunt?

One last terrifying thing. While she was still in jail, Phoolan was rushed to hospital bleeding heavily because of an ovarian cyst. Her womb was removed. When Mala Sen asked why this had been necessary, the prison doctor laughed and said " We don't want her breeding any more Phoolan Devi's."

The State removed a woman's uterus! Without asking her .Without her knowing. It just reached into her and plucked out a part of her!

It decided to control who was allowed to breed and who wasn't.

Was this even *mentioned* in the film?

No. Not even in the rolling titles at the end

When it comes to getting bums on seats, hysterectomy just doesn't measure up to rape.

August 22nd, '94

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anand Dhalgi". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized script.