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Bandit Queen: Cinematic representation of social banditry in India

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Its long history and destabilising impact notwithstanding, banditry has received scant academic attention in India. Confined mostly to occasional and incident-driven media reportage, the socioeconomic factors that fuelled insurgencies and banditry and the milieu which provided a context for the operations of these outlawed movements received little attention. Cinematic representation of the social banditry phenomenon in the country, based on little or no first-hand research, as a result, suffered from ingenuousness and failed to emerge from the romanticised depiction of insurgency and terrorism which Bollywood, India’s movie industry, is known for. Bandit Queen, the biopic of Phoolan Devi, in contrast, stands apart. Scathing criticisms regarding its use of sex as a tool for commercial success notwithstanding, the movie succeeds in drawing the viewers’ attention to the persisting social cleavages in India. Using rape as its central theme, it shocks its audience into acknowledging the reality and relevance of social banditry in a country where governance remains an absent entity for a vast majority of its people. That most Bollywood movies depicting social issues have continued to remain aground in romanticism and irrelevance makes Bandit Queen even more relevant in times to come.

Keywords: social banditry; India; Phoolan Devi; insurgency; Bandit Queen

Introduction

Banditry and thuggee have a long history in India in general and in its central and northern parts in particular. The colonial British administration claimed to have suppressed the thugs. Yet the phenomenon continued long after the official year of suppression, 1839,1 and into independent India. However, even with banditry’s destabilising impact on India’s north and central parts, the subject has attracted scant academic attention from Indian scholars. Confined mostly to occasional media reports, banditry and its representation in popular media, as a result, remained deeply erratic, with little focus on the socioeconomic and structural inequalities that surround these phenomena. Within this intellectual milieu, Bandit Queen, a movie that explored the life of Phoolan Devi in the early 1990s,
remains a unique effort. Whether it did justice to the subject and whether the controversy it generated and the commercial success it achieved raised awareness or stimulated a serious debate on the causal factors surrounding banditry, however, remain deeply divisive subjects.

The article attempts to explore the cinematic representation of social banditry in India using the case study of the movie *Bandit Queen* in four sections. In the first section, it explains and applies Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘social bandit’ model to analyse the transformation of Phoolan Devi into a bandit. The article argues that Hobsbawm’s framework, some of the broad generalisations notwithstanding, provides a useful tool not just for understanding Phoolan Devi’s exploits during her career as a bandit in the Chambal ravines, but also to explore her transformation from a helpless village girl to a much-feared bandit. The second section provides a brief profile of Phoolan Devi. In the third section, the article critically analyses the movie *Bandit Queen* and examines whether such cinematic representation was able to depict fully the social circumstances within which banditry in general and Phoolan Devi’s career graph in particular could be situated. The fourth section summarises the findings by providing a brief narrative on the current state of banditry in India. While examining the subject, the article confines its analyses to Phoolan Devi’s career as a bandit and makes only passing remarks on her post-release career as a politician and her subsequent demise. The research methodology adopted, thus, is analytical, historical, as well as contemporary.

‘Avenging’ social bandit

In 1959, Eric Hobsbawm, the British social historian and expert on social protest movements, coined the term ‘social banditry’. He wrote,

> The point about social bandit is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and the state regard as criminals, but who remain within the peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.2

Hobsbawm asserted that social bandits, hence, are robbers of a special kind and the phenomenon is universal and unchanging, embodying a primitive form of organised social protest of peasants against oppression.

In a way, bandits came close to being confused with insurgents. However, unlike insurgents, who nurture a political objective and hence could fall under the broad category of revolutionaries, bandits are reformers.3 Programmes of social bandits do not go beyond the restoration of the traditional order, which leaves exploitation of the poor and oppression of the weak within certain limits. Examples of social bandits cited by Hobsbawm include Robin Hood, who tried to redress injustices within a society ‘by taking from his Norman overlords and giving to the oppressed saxon’.4 Plunder of the rich, hence, amounts to a kind of proto-revolutionary action, as a result of which rural anarchy is represented by a class conflict element.5
Hobsbawm, aware that not all types of banditry may conform to the broad classification of social banditry, went on to introduce subsets of the phenomenon. These included noble robbers, freedom fighters, and avengers. ‘Where “noble robbers” and freedom fighters have always tended to calibrate their use of violence and retain some connections to the ethical strictures about the use of force, avengers feeling terribly wronged, strike back without restraint against their tormentors.’ 6 The very identity of avengers is closely tied to their ability to ‘prove that even the poor and the weak can be terrible’. 7 Author John Arquilla provides the example of Al Qaeda and its affiliates as an example of the weak proving to be both strong and terrible. In the context of this article, Phoolan Devi conforms neatly to the ‘avenger’ subset of social banditry, distinct from being either a criminal operating for monetary gain or an insurgent.

Phoolan, the goddess

Among the several books providing narratives on Phoolan’s life, three books stand out. French authors Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali teamed up with Phoolan herself to write I Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India’s Bandit Queen. The same book is available under a different title, The Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman’s Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend. Writer Mala Sen, on whose book, India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi, the movie Bandit Queen is predominantly based, sourced her information from detailed third-party interviews with Phoolan when she was serving her prison term. The third book, Outlaw: India’s Bandit Queen and Me was written by Roy Moxham, who had first-hand opportunity of exchanging notes with Phoolan and travelling with her as she pursued her political career. His book mostly dwells on Phoolan’s post-release political career. With minor differences regarding the details depicted in these books, following is the brief life story of Phoolan Devi.

Phoolan was born in Gorha ka Purwa village in the state of Uttar Pradesh, the north central Indian state, in August 1963, roughly in the same region where banditry had enjoyed a long history. ‘Its terrain is sculpted in part by the Chambal and Yamuna rivers, and is dominated by a nearly six-hundred-mile-long swath of mostly rough country replete with labyrinthine gorges, mazes of ravines and small connecting rivers’, 8 thereby making it an ideal region for dacoits. Phoolan was not the first woman to turn into a bandit in that region. Before her, Putlibai, the one-armed daughter of a famous Muslim dancing girl, reigned as bandit queen, albeit with relatively meagre coverage in print and visual media. 9

Phoolan’s transformation into a bandit, however, was not a natural progression. Born to an untouchable family of boatmen, the lowest in the Indian caste hierarchy, Phoolan witnessed her family and herself being subjected to systematic abuse, deprivation, and torment by the higher caste landlords and youths in her village. Incidentally, her tormentors also included relatively wealthy relatives within her own caste. One such relative, Mayadin, was instrumental
in arranging her early marriage to Puttalal, a widower far older than her, which resulted in a temporary dislocation from her native village. Ten-year-old Phoolan’s forcible violation by her husband and subsequent ill-treatment brought her back to Gorha ka Purwa. She returned to her husband three years later only to be abused and sent back. Life in her own village, however, became unbearable as she was preyed upon by young men. Mayadin in the meantime, angered by Phoolan filing a court case against him, filed a complaint of theft against her. This led to Phoolan being detained in a police station and being raped by the policemen. After being released, Phoolan was abducted by a dacoit gang led by Babu Gujjhar, probably at Mayadin’s instance.

In Gujjhar’s gang, which consisted largely of a higher caste band of dacoits, she was repeatedly raped by Babu Gujjhar until Vikram Mallah, who belonged to the same caste as Phoolan, shot Babu Gujjhar dead and claimed leadership of the gang. Vikram married Phoolan and trained her to master the art and trade of banditry. Their affair, which lasted for about a year, was cut short when brothers Sri and Lala Ram, who belonged to the higher *thakur* caste, returned to take charge of the gang after serving prison terms. Subsequently, Vikram was killed by the brothers for having killed Babu Gujjhar. The brothers took Phoolan to their native Behmai village where, for three consecutive days, she was gang raped and on the last day paraded naked in front of the villagers. She was humiliated and punished for dissent and for supporting Vikram in breaking away from higher caste domination in the group. Phoolan managed to escape with the help of some men of her own caste, regained her strength, and went on to set up her own gang of dacoits. Learning from her previous experience of caste differences and leadership struggles, Phoolan did not want to share power that would lead to fractious infighting and dilution of power. Over the years, the gang grew formidable and was responsible for a number of raids. Phoolan’s exploits raised her profile immensely in the region; she was revered by lower caste people and feared by the upper caste. On 14 February 1981, Phoolan carried out a raid of retribution on Behmai village in search of the Ram brothers. Failing to finding them, she executed 22 villagers, all belonging to the upper caste. ‘It was the largest dacoit massacre since the founding of modern India. And it was triply shocking: because of its scale, because it was led by a woman, and because a woman of lower caste murdered men of a vastly higher one.’ The incident led to a massive operation against her gang by the state and in two years later, having lost many of her cadres to police bullets, she surrendered to the authorities in February 1983.

Phoolan spent the next 11 years in jail without a single charge being brought against her. None of her acts of violence and theft had witnesses, among either the lower or the upper caste. She was pardoned in 1994, at a time when a wave of political mobilisation and resultant awareness among the backward caste was sweeping through the region. After her release, Phoolan entered politics and was twice elected to the Indian parliament, in 1996 and 1999, representing the Samajwadi Party. Her political career, marked by intermittent attempts to work
for the backward and downtrodden classes, and also by instances of abuse of power, was more or less insignificant. On 25 July 2001, Phoolan’s past acts caught up with her: she was shot dead in her official residence in the Indian capital New Delhi by three men hailing from Behmai village. After prolonged litigation, in August 2014, one of the three men, Sher Singh Rana, was convicted of her murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment.12

The movie: Reality vs fiction

The 120-minute-long movie Bandit Queen, based on the life of Phoolan Devi – a US$1.4 million production, financed by Britain’s Channel 4 Television and directed by Shekhar Kapur – was released in 1994. It is based on a book by Mala Sen13 a writer and television researcher who lived in Balham, south London. During her research into the oppression of women in rural India, Phoolan had become her central case study and it took her ‘years to coax the full story from Phoolan Devi’.14 She approached Phoolan, during her days of imprisonment, through third parties, who smuggled Sen’s questions into the prison and smuggled out Phoolan’s responses. Sen also wrote the draft screenplay for the movie. The screenplay was edited by her ex-husband, Farrukh Dhondy, then a commissioning editor at Channel 4. However, on a number of occasions the movie strayed from Sen’s book to include narratives produced by several other writers and journalists. In addition, some of the scenes, as director Kapur was to admit during his interviews, were results of artistic imaginations.

Upon submission in 1994, the movie was rejected by the Central Board of Film Certification in India, the statutory Indian government body whose certification is mandatory before commercial release of movies. While the actual grounds on which the Board members based their decision is not known, the abusive language used in the movie, scenes of frontal nudity, and rape and molestation sequences were reportedly found objectionable and unfit for an Indian audience. The filmmakers appealed the decision to a revising committee of the Board and, thereafter, to an Appellate tribunal. The latter cleared the movie without any cuts, leading to its release on 26 January 1996. However, following a public interest litigation, screening of the film was stopped by the Supreme Court, before finally being cleared by the apex court in May 1996.15

Thematic representation, popular narrative, and commercial compulsions

Whether movies are true portrayals of the central protagonists and if they have stuck to the facts as narrated by the literary work they base themselves upon have remained topics of intense debate throughout the world. Movies about living persons tread on more sensitive ground because what they portray could face rejection if untrue. Director Kapur, however, began by insisting that the movie represents facts. In his introductory remarks on the film at its premier screening, Kapur spoke of being confronted with a choice between truth and aesthetics.
‘I chose Truth, because Truth is Pure’, he insisted. He went on to assert, in different forums, that the movie is indeed an honest portrayal of the facts. In the subsequent years, however, Kapur seemed to have accepted that not all that was shown may have been absolute truth: ‘My film starts with the note: “This is a true story”. This cannot be construed to mean the Absolute Truth. In any case, when a lifetime is compressed into two hours, everything that is left out can be construed as a denial of the Absolute Truth’, he said during an interview. His insistence that he has made an honest attempt to portray Phoolan’s life remained. Years after the release of the movie, Kapur wrote,

Bandit Queen is guerrilla film making at its very hight [sic]. It was adventurous, dangerous, rebellious, exploratory film making. But it was honest film making. All I asked for from my crew and actors was moments of honesty. And they gave me back more ... And more ... And in the midst of the expansive desert of high end, big studio film making, I remember Bandit Queen as an oasis of the truest, the most instinctual expression possible. I ache to go back there. Kapur contested the Censor Board’s decision to ban the movie by declaring that he ‘would not agree to a single cut and appealed to the select gathering to join him in retaining the integrity of this piece of art’. He went on to claim that the Board’s decision was due neither to the vulgar and crude language used by the characters of the movie, nor to the depiction of the rape of the female protagonist. The decision, he feels, was to do with politics. ‘Where a society and a government controlled by the higher castes saw this film as a potentially subversive film that could lead to political disruption’, Kapur wrote in his blog.

In any event, Bandit Queen was a remarkable movie of its kind. India’s Hindi movie industry, Bollywood, arguably produces the largest number of movies in the world per year, and yet only a handful depict the country’s deep-rooted economic and social inequalities that exist in spite of its economic progress. Bandit Queen did stir up a series of controversies, which in a way contributed to its success. Media reports from 1997 provide ample evidence of Bandit Queen being released even in theatres in the most remote Indian towns and running for weeks to full houses. A movie critic asserted, ‘Every Indian must see it to learn about the living hell they call India.’ The late Kushwant Singh, India’s well-known newspaper columnist, called Bandit Queen the best Indian movie he had ever seen in many years. Singh, who was to later remark that as a politician Phoolan Devi’s illiteracy and lack of vision prevented her from acquiring any greater role, commented that the movie ‘was a masterpiece and everything it showed fully justified, as it dealt with Phoolan Devi’.

The movie was released again in 2001 after Phoolan’s killing, in an apparent attempt by the distributors to exploit the curiosity of the viewers about the legendary bandit. Times of India reported that the movie ‘witnessed a surge in box-office collections with the audience in Uttar Pradesh queuing up outside theatres’. The Uttar Pradesh state government accorded the movie tax-free status, resulting in cheaper tickets for the audience.
Kapur’s claims to honesty and his insistence that the movie represents truth, however, have been extensively contested, both by critics as well as by Phoolan Devi herself. In September 1994, days before the movie’s showing at the Toronto film festival, Phoolan Devi issued an unsuccessful appeal: ‘I request the public not to participate in my humiliation. I would not go and watch you being raped, if I knew you didn’t want me to.’ Phoolan also threatened to immolate herself outside the censor board or at a movie theatre where Bandit Queen was being shown if it was not immediately banned. However, she withdrew her objections after she was paid £40,000 by Channel 4.

Criticisms of the movie are based on three grounds: Firstly, it unabashedly depicts Phoolan’s sexual exploitation as its central theme at the expense of the underlying social conditions such as land alienation and caste divisions, which constitute a far worse curse on women of the region and were, in a way, the setting in which Phoolan was transformed into a bandit. Secondly, much of the movie’s contents were based on the vivid imagination of the director, which at times was far removed from reality. The moviemakers used rape and nudity as titillating tools for the audience with a view to ensuring the commercial success of the movie. The third criticism, made albeit to a lesser degree, alleged that the movie violated an individual’s right to privacy.

Notwithstanding Kapur’s explanation that Bandit Queen contained ‘less than five minutes of footage of actual rape in a two-hour film’, arguments that the moviemakers used rape to attract an audience has been made by a number of publications and writers. Author Arundhati Roy wrote two long essays, entitled them ‘The Great Indian Rape-Trick’, scathingly critiquing the movie. Kapur explains that he intended ‘to bring you the reality of rape. It is a violent crime. Of men quelling their inadequacies and wielding power over easy preys – low caste women and children.’ Roy accuses Kapur of being a ‘rape diviner’.

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… 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.

Similarly, Karen Gabriel writes,

One of the strengths of Bandit Queen, the story of Phoolan Devi’s life, was its willingness to consider the intersections of caste and gender in constituting structural inequalities. Its greatest weaknesses were that it sexualised vulnerability, and then converted that vulnerability into a feminine trait, and effected a masculinist appropriation of the meanings and truths of a woman’s life.

Both Roy and Gabriel point to the fact that the moviemakers never attempted to meet Phoolan Devi even once to hear her side of the story and attempted to justify their ‘fetishized imagination of rape’ and their project to reduce the viewer to a voyeur by what is essentially a movie that is ‘about gaze and perception’. Making a similar charge, feminist writer Madhu Kishwar wrote, ‘For all the
sophistication in handling rape and sex scenes, the film makers have an unhealthy obsession with sex and sex related violence. Posing several questions regarding ethical representation of facts in the movie, she concluded that the movie, though ‘undoubtedly a well-made film and is very powerful in its impact’, fails on all counts of objectivity. She wrote, ‘It is a powerful and technically competent film. It could have indeed become a landmark in the history of good cinema had it not blundered so grossly in taking liberties with a living person’s life story.’

Other criticisms are about the liberty taken by Bandit Queen’s makers to switch between Mala Sen’s narrative and other lesser-known descriptions, and even Kapur’s own imagination, which are seen as unnecessary digressions. Roy highlights the vivid depiction of Phoolan’s rape in Behmai. For the rape scene, Kapur reportedly fell back on American journalist Jon Bradshaw’s vivid description in Esquire magazine. Similarly, the movie depicts a lovemaking scene between Phoolan and Vikram in a hotel in Kanpur, and another in which Phoolan bathes by the river with Vikram looking on. Neither of these were part of Mala Sen’s book. Phoolan claimed that the couple neither stayed in a hotel in Kanpur, nor indulged in lovemaking. ‘How could he do that? Vikram had a bullet in his back until the end’, she commented in a media interview. Kapur, however, underlines the vital importance of the lovemaking scene, even though it was not part of Sen’s book: ‘It was not by accident that I showed this. Sex had always been imposed on her, it was associated with violence and rape. This allowed her to flower.’

Notwithstanding Kapur’s defence, it is difficult to prove that bandit Queen adequately sensitized its viewers to the ground realities of social oppression. Commercial success of movies in India is generally unconnected with the central message they attempt to deliver and is more guided by the presence of specific actors, scenes depicting glamour, songs, and dances that appeal to the common Indians seeking a retreat from their mundane lives. In some of the movies that Bollywood has produced, depicting either social issues or insurgency and terrorism, the directors have felt obliged to trivialise the subject casually by introducing song and dance sequences involving the central protagonists. An offbeat movie exploring social issues like Bandit Queen without any of the leading actors of the day always risked being ignored by audiences. Ironic though it may sound, as a result, sex became an essential tool to generate interest among the viewers in the movie. A media report that interviewed a woman in the small town of Chhapra in eastern India’s Bihar state quoted her as saying, ‘How can I see that dirty film? There is a scene where she (the actor playing Phoolan Devi) walks nude. Only men sat and stared at the screen.’

**Social banditry revisited**

Beyond the charges of using sex and nudity to further commercial gains levelled against the makers of the movie, the purpose of this article is to analyse the extent to which Bandit Queen succeeded in portraying the causal factors that led to Phoolan Devi becoming a social bandit. Was the movie only a caricature of the
central protagonist and her transformation through incidents of sexual exploitation as the critics allege? Or did the director through such cinematic representation make any attempt to situate Phoolan’s exploits within the framework of social banditry? This section examines the extent to which the movie was able to represent three crucial elements of social banditry: reformist agenda; survivability and social acceptability; and use of ruthless violence.

Reformist agenda

‘Banditry is freedom, but in a peasant society few can be free. Most are shackled by the double chains of lordship and labour, the one reinforcing the other’, 39 wrote Hobsbawm. In her autobiography, Phoolan provides a number of instances of exploitation and social segregation inflicted upon the lower caste by the thakurs. The lower caste women were allowed neither to walk through the fields or courtyards of the upper caste nor to draw water from the same well as the upper caste. Mallah children were regularly beaten up by the village head for stealing mangoes from the trees owned by the thakurs. Banditry was a source of empowerment for Phoolan. It provided liberation from a hapless and tormented existence. The power of the gun offered Phoolan an opportunity to avenge not just her personal trauma, but also pursue, albeit limitedly, an agenda that militated against the social order.

The movie provides several references to the prevailing caste divisions. Newly married child Phoolan is shown using an earthen pot to collect water from a well in sharp contrast with the brass pots used by the thakur women. She is told to move to a separate side of the well meant for the lower caste. She and Vikram are repeatedly abused by Babu Gujjar and the Ram brothers as low caste people. After the Behmai massacre, the background voiceover between police and the media refers to her being a low caste woman. In her dialogues Phoolan refers, on a number of occasions, to the range of societal segregation and sexual violence lower caste women are subjected to. Phoolan’s angry outburst in front of her father also details her tortured experience as a low caste woman. However, Phoolan’s attempts to rebel against this environment of subjugation receive scant attention in the movie. In her autobiography, Phoolan claims that the first time in her life she wanted to kill somebody was when a man withheld her wages on orders from Mayadin. In anger, she waved a sickle and ensured that a big bundle of grain is given to her. 40 The movie ignores such episodes. Only a couple of scenes like the one in which Phoolan makes a statement against child marriage after killing her husband Puttilal and another where she hands over a piece of looted jewellery to a girl represent her reformist agenda.

Survivability and social acceptability

Critics of Hobsbawm such as Anton Blok have questioned the role of bandits as champions of the poor. ‘Rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak, bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise,
and thus helped to suppress them." While Blok may have been correct with regard to certain categories of bandits, especially the urban based mafia-like gangs, Phoolan Devi did remain a champion for the mallahs and other lower caste people in the region. She ensured that no attack or killing led by her ever targeted low caste people. The proceeds of her gang’s crimes were regularly distributed among the poor. Her popularity created a crucial layer of security for her. As detailed in her autobiography, she was worshipped as a goddess in some villages. In others, she was asked to be the chief patron in marriages, offering the bride to the groom. The mallahs nurtured her to recovery after she was gang raped in Behmai. Phoolan mentions, ‘It was because of the money of the rich went to help the poor that the villagers protected us.’

Phoolan’s ability to operate for over two decades was also due to the crucial patronage she generated from police and local politicians. While Blok points out a complex nexus between the social bandits and established power holders, accusing Hobsbawm of overemphasizing ‘the element of social protest while at the same time obscuring the significance of the links which bandits maintain with established power holders’, in Phoolan’s case, such a nexus was a reality, but not necessarily an abandonment of the reformist cause. ‘The intelligence network she had created by bribing local politicians and policeman proved so useful in helping the gang select juicy targets and also served as an early warning system against the many sweeps designed to track her down.’ This explains why a strong contingent of over 2000 policemen on her trail during the height of the hunt continuously failed to deliver results. At the same time, the linkages she shared with politicians and the police also explain why her tenure came to an abrupt halt when the state managed to break those nexuses. The movie includes none of these instances. Neither her popularity nor the diligently established network mechanism for survival receives any attention in the movie. The busting of her gang, which receives fairly extensive coverage towards the end of the movie, is merely seen as a sudden discovery of purpose among the police personnel.

Ruthless violence

Thugs, John Sleeman explained, are not driven to crime by pragmatic reasons but by ‘sheer lust of killing’. Sleeman’s description, however, remains oblivious of the social conditions that produce banditry. Violence perpetrated by Hobsbawm’s social bandit is ruthless. However, apart from avenging a personal trauma, it is also a ‘class’ and reforming act. Hobsbawm writes,

the bandit is often destructive and savage beyond the range of his myth, which insists mainly on his justice and moderation in killing. Vengeance, which in revolutionary periods ceases to be a private matter and becomes a class matter, requires blood, and the slight of inquiry in ruins can make men drunk.

Phoolan unleashed bloody retributive justice not just on her rapists, but also on people who witnessed in silence her being paraded naked in Behmai village. In her autobiography, the male organ is repeatedly described as a serpent and its
violent destruction as the source of ultimate satisfaction for her. For example, she narrates, 'I beat them between their legs with my rifle butt. I wanted to destroy the serpent that represented their power over me.' Such violence is unleashed not just her own tormentors, but also on all sexual offenders. On one occasion, Phoolan kills a man who had outraged village women, raped his daughter-in-law, and violated young boys in the village. 'His serpent first, then his hands, then his feet... I cut them off. I did it before the image of Durga to give her peace', she mentions.

On two occasions, the movie captures such violence, although neither of these scenes is as graphic as Phoolan’s naked march through the village. In the first, Phoolan together with Vikram visits the house of her first husband. Putilal is dragged out of his home, tied to a pole, and assaulted with the butt of a rifle by Phoolan. Even as Vikram insists that they must leave the place quickly, Putilal is repeatedly hit in his groin by a screaming Phoolan. The second instance captures the infamous Behmai massacre. An abandoned child is shown crying near a well as villagers scamper for safety after Phoolan’s gang surround the village. Villagers are then pulled out of their homes and lined up in front of Phoolan who chides them for being silent witnesses to her rape earlier. Furious at not being able to find the main culprits, the Ram brothers, she hits the lined up men with her rifle butt, shoots them in their knees, kicks them on their chests, and pulls their turbans down before ordering their massacre. After the killing, the same child is shown walking on the blood spills as the gang withdraws. An enraged and avenging Phoolan, importantly, is not shown as taking part in the killing, but merely walking behind the blazing rifles.

In sum, of the three examined elements of social banditry, *Bandit Queen* has been comparatively successful in depicting the last, i.e. the use of ruthless violence as an instrument of retributive and restorative justice in a deeply structured and unequal society.

**Conclusion**

Unlike Phoolan who enjoyed a stint in politics and had a chance to relive her past in national limelight, albeit for a short while, banditry in the north and central Indian badlands is a phenomenon of the past. According to one estimate, over 500 dacoits have been killed in police encounters, while scores of others have surrendered to the police. In July 2007, Dadua alias Shiv Kumar Patel, one of the most notorious bandits in the country, was killed by the personnel of Uttar Pradesh special task force. Dadua belonged to the socially backward Kurmi caste and was immensely popular among the local populace. His activities spanned three decades and he is known to have enjoyed patronage from all the leading political parties in the state. Successive state governments have pursued the bandits with vengeance leading to their neutralisation in encounters. Police officers ascribe a bandit-free Chambal to a policy of ruthless killings of the outlaws by the police and also liberal provision of arms licences to the villagers.
by the government. The success achieved by the Uttar Pradesh state police is prominently displayed in a 50-page album of 182 slain dacoits.

Political mobilisation, urbanisation, and spread of education continue to transform the social landscape that produced banditry. And yet socioeconomic and gender differentiation in all its crudest forms exists and torments a sizeable section of Indian society. This makes Bandit Queen, with all its shortcomings, an important movie in the history of Indian cinema. While the rape of Phoolan remains its central theme and has been used a tool to explain her transformation from village girl to feared bandit, the movie manages to break free from the stereotypical romanticised depiction of insurgency and terrorism in Indian movies. The movie succeeds in drawing the viewers’ attention to the persisting social cleavages. It also succeeds in its attempt to shock the viewers by the portrayal of gruesome chain of violence and counter violence. It is unfortunate that in subsequent years, India’s countless and unceasing experience with insurgency, small wars, and festering social conflicts has failed either to find competent portrayal or to generate a serious discourse through its cinematic representation.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes
1. The thugs ‘were a fraternity of ritual stranglers who preyed upon travellers along the highways of nineteenth century India’. See Wagner, Thuggee, 1.
3. It is, however, possible for some movements to display characteristics of banditry as well as insurgency. For example, in Colombia, the peasant-based rebel insurgency, which has continued for over half a century, demonstrates both bandit and Marxist characteristics.
5. Hamnett, Roots of Insurgency, 65.
7. Hobsbawm, Bandits, 64.
8. Arquilla, Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits, 244.
10. According to Arquilla, ‘such gangs exist because the attraction of easy access to wealth and emotional release through violence have an appeal that goes well beyond the poor and dispossessed’. See Arquilla, Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits, 245.
11. Weaver, ‘India’s Bandit Queen’.
13. Entitled India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi, the book explores Phoolan’s life from her childhood till her surrender. Sen died at the age of 63 in 2011.
15. Under the procedure, a rejection by the censor board’s examining committee can be challenged by the filmmakers with a revising committee of the board, then with an Appellate Tribunal, and thereafter with the courts. See Kapoor, ‘A New Lease of Life for Bandit Queen’.


20. Dahlburg, ‘’The Bandit Queen” Still an Outcast in India’.

21. Singh, ‘With Malice Towards One and All’

22. Kapoor, ‘A New Lease of Life for Bandit Queen’.

23. Dahlburg, ‘’The Bandit Queen” Still an Outcast in India’.

24. Weaver, ‘India’s Bandit Queen’.


26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.


30. Ibid., 159.

31. Ibid., 158.


33. Ibid., 34–35.

34. Ibid. p. 37.


37. Ibid.


39. Hobsbawn, Bandits, 34.


43. Ibid. 502.

44. Arquilla, Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits, 248.

45. Quoted in Wagner, Thuggee, 4.


47. Devi, Cuny, and Rambali, The Bandit Queen of India, 396.

48. Ibid., 398.


50. Wilson, ‘UP Cops Kill India’s Most Wanted Bandit’.

51. Chakraborty, ‘Grenades Get Chambal’s Last Bandit King’.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

Bibliography


