

An Invitation

by
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NOW this may sound like a bi-zarre tale, a figment of my feverish imagination or a reinvention of his-tory, but as you know 'truth is stranger than fiction.' In fiction the truth can be concealed, amplified or totally suppressed, but in reality there are no redeeming graces. Pirandello, Kurosawa, Shakespeare, and every great writer and artist said so. I do hope you will let me share this true life story.

I thought of selling the story to - yes — who else, Ted Turner. The American media are so progressive. After all, in Ninja Turtles, for ex-ample, I once heard a feminist state-ment. April had gone to cover the latest adventure of the perpetual war between the righteous Turtles and the evil Shredder. This time the conflict was real fierce with all kinds of robot-ized war equipment at Shredder's command to annihilate the Ninjas. Now April was caught real bad

in this conflict. She was supposed to cover the news for the T.V. Centre, but did not reachin time... A slimy well-heeled colleague of hers back-bites and wants to step in as the anchor-man. The boss reminds him of the dangers of live-reporting when the action is real hot... rebuffing him Turner style. The back-biting opportunist is of course a coward and just retreats saying, I believe in equal opportunity and all that and walks out of the T.V. Headquarters.

The Boss says, I know a backboneless man when I see one... or some such thing berating this profes-sional breed. Meanwhile, April fit as Jane Fonda, courageously fights the hi-tech war through the spiri-tual

and martial arts tactics of Donatello, Michaelangelo Leonardo and Raphael.

I could have sold the story I am about to narrate to the Turner Corporation. But my patriotism prevailed, and so here's the story for you, my very own

Indian readers. I know how deeply we Indians feel about spiritual and moral matters.

One morning, when I finally got permission from the jail authorities to interview Phoolan Bai - the great feminist dacoit, there was a foreigner who had beaten me to this game of one-upmanship. But of course, when we use the word 'foreign' we always mean the whites - and in India they are almost always of American citizen-ship. So this white man was already there beckoning Phoolan Bai to come to the U.S.A.

Let me describe the power and beauty of Phoolan Bai to you. She was in her khakhi military outfit, leaning meditatively - a bit like Rodin's

Thinker - on the machine-gun. The machine-gun was seemingly given back to her to boost her authentic image for the foreign media. The cartridges were taken out of the machine-gun, of course.

In his pronounced American accent, I heard him say, "Phoolan Bai. May I call you Phoolan. We want you to come to America. Hamare desh me aoo."

With her sharp jungle instinct she just stared at the foreigner. Then she said, "Uh".

"See, my country has always welcomed the suffering people. Dussreka dukh samajata."

Like a newly initiated lover he put his hand on his heart and declared further, "We love courageous people... bahadur logo ko mohabbat karta."

By now Phoolan had begun to look interested. She noticed my presence and mumbled a barely audible namaste. The foreigner acknowledged me too. Perhaps he had come too far in this discussion to retrieve. Despite my unexpected and untimely presence he continued.

"See these photographs. Dekhiye dekhiye."

Here was my chance to grab a story for my newspaper, I thought. I am up for promotion, nothing will help as much as this unusual tale. With the professional acumen of an avid reporter, I grabbed the photographs before they reached Phoolan Bai.

"Let me show these photographs to Phoolanji," I said.

Unsure of my official status or role, the gentleman let me hold the photographs. From his controlled behaviour, I began to get a hunch about who he was. But let me deal with that later.

Regal as she is, what with her head-band and all, Phoolan Bai hadn't moved an inch during these proceedings. Used to the hardships of a dacoit's life in Chambal Valley, her days in the jail were a lark.

Suspicious of all the media attention she was getting all of a sudden, she watched the drama unfold as an interested observer.

"Pholanji ye dekhiye."

There were some black and white photographs and just three coloured photographs. Now I know a thing or two about America and so I could tell you whatever I saw quickly. First of all, they were all black and white portraits of different people with guns in their hands. There was a Red Indian with long hair, a head-band and decorative feather astride a horse holding a gun. Then there was a handsome cow-boy shooting a target. Some more pictures of a black shooter, an Italian mafia type gun-lord, a decorated army-general with gun. The coloured pictures were different. One of them had a curvaceous blonde on the hood of a huge car. Another one was a snap of a car-ridden highway. A third one of a palatial mansion with lots of flowers brightening the pretty landscape.

I was really getting as interested as Phoolan Bai about the undeclared reason behind the photographs. But it was not so easy to get to facts.

The foreigner got up abruptly and said, "Alright Phoolan Bai, I will see you later. Bad ko milenge."

Phoolan Bai looked disapproving but did not say anything except an "uh" and continued to sit with her chin on the upturned gun.

He turned to me and brusquely said, "Thank you M'am." This was kind of hard. I nosed some strong stuff here. While my brain was furiously working out the possibility of spying on this hulk of a man, I continued my official interview with India's most famous dacoit. If Phoolan Bai seemed brusque and rude it was quite understandable. She was a victim of the horrors of the feudal system. Being a low caste woman and poor and a dacoit in the harsh terrain of Chambal can destroy anyone's

softness. She didn't speak much but whenever she did she seemed like a hungry tigress jumping on its prey.

But when she got to hear of my acquaintance with her family members Phoolan did relax a little. She condoned my urban sareeized appearance, but didn't really say anything that could make a sensational story.

Emboldened by her friendly smile I told her a story about a local amateur dacoit - an educated man whose maiden bid of robbing a bank failed. This could open her up I thought. In a nutshell, this is how the story goes." There was this English Professor, whose wife always pestered him for 'filthy lucre.' The man had principles or sanskaras as we say. His parents were famous judges. He resisted his wife's nagging for many years. No one knows what she threatened him with, but seemingly under duress he decided to rob - of all the banks - The Bank of India. He sat on his Vespa scooter donning a false moustache and a false beard. He entered the Bank and held the employees at the point of a gun. The employees promptly gave him whatever money they had in the Bank at that time - some ten thousand rupees - and our English Professor got out, sat on the scooter and dashed off. Now he wouldn't have been caught but for the fact that his beard flew off and he tried to catch it. He lost precious time, so much so that the sleepy police of the town caught up with him false mous-tache, beard, toy-gun and all!!!"

Phoolan burst out laughing. The laughter was so loud and hysterical that the Jail Officer came rushing. I suspect Phoolan was greatly amused by the total inadequacy of the educated, middle-class, pampered English Professor to carry off his evil designs. In the dacoit lore there are examples of great dacoits like Daku Amritlal who not only looted with skill but also had a humane and

literary side to him. Daku Amritlal read great writers like Phanishwarnath Renu and abducted Meena Kumari for a literary tete-a-tete. I did not know if Phoolan had a hidden literary and humanitarian side to her or not, but I knew I had gained her confidence somewhat.

I said to the Jail Officer, "Bhai Saheb, I want just one more minute with Phoolanji."

"Okay hurry up please."

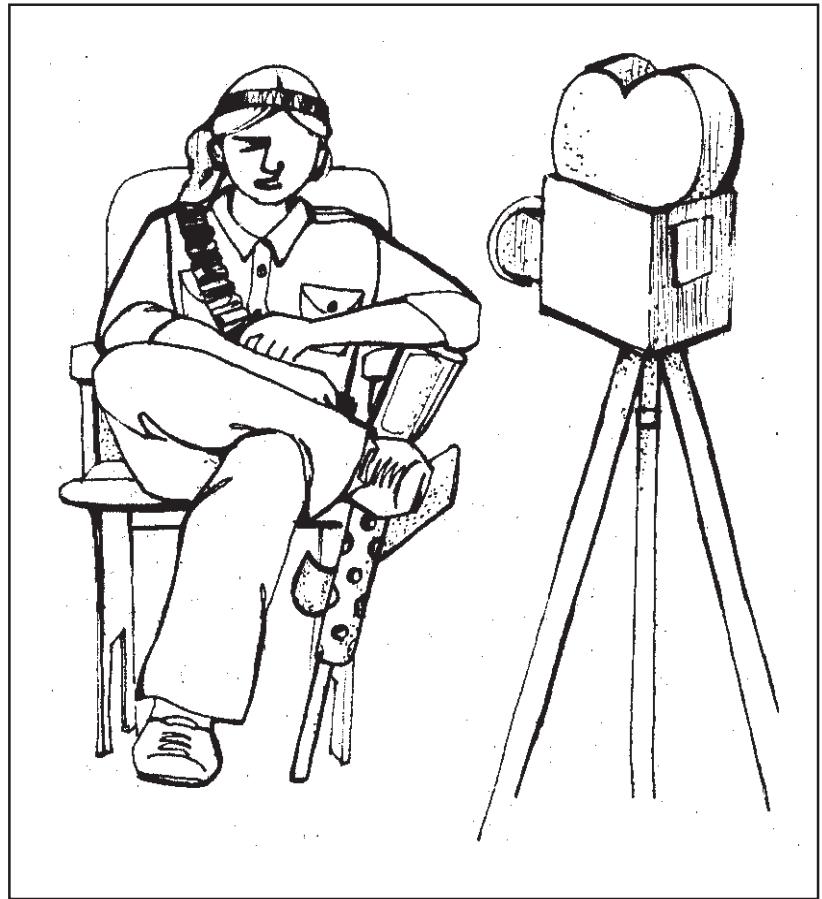
"Phoolanji, ine foreigners se bach ke rahiye. Accha phir milenge."

The presence of the foreigner was noticed by everyone in that small town. There were many reactions to him. Many children ran after him calling him, "CIA agent, CIA agent" teasingly. In offices he was given VJP treatment. In restaurants he was seen as a free ad. He must be important because the Collector called him for tea.

My efforts to find out his reasons for befriending Phoolan Bai remained unanswered. But I kept a tab on him. After all, everything is ninety per cent labour and ten per cent inspiration. It was my inspired guess that the man was up to something very important.

For the next ten days I shadowed the man carefully, donning a burka sometimes, becoming a coolie, a male taxi-driver, and even a cabaret artiste in a night-spot. I had never worked so hard on any assignment before. My American education and the role model of April and of Sister Stephanie in Father Dowling did me awful lot of good.

The frenzied efforts came to a halt when Phoolan Bai - the dear woman - sent a verbal message through a contact. He merely said, "Pach baje jail mei." To ward off any barrier, I wore a Police Officer's uniform and entered the Jail premises without any hitch. The contact took me to Phoolan who was sitting in the specially appointed interview-room. A woman of few words, she said to me, "isme chup



jao."

There was this large stuffed tiger that she pointed out. It was hollow inside and that's where I was when the foreigner arrived on the scene. This time he had a white woman with him. It soon turned out that she was an interpreter. She was wearing a printed tie-and-dye saree awkwardly.

Both of them said "namaste" reverently and settled down on the steel chairs.

"Please tell her that I have come to extend the invitation to come to the States."

"Apko Amerika bulate hai."

"It's an official invitation from the Govt of United States."

"Sarkarbulati hai."

"We have listed many important assignments for her."

"Bahut zaruri kam hai."

"Ask her if we should proceed. Tell

her she will be housed in the kind of house I showed her. She will have a swanky car. And a large sum of money."

"Aap ranee ki tarah rahengi: hire moti ap per barsenge. Aage baat badhaye kya?"

Phoolan paused. I could hear her take a deep breath. Finally she said, "Uh"

The gentleman took a walk around the room almost as a matter of profes

sional habit. But I don't think he suspected any intruders or intrusions in a sleepy jail. He once again settled on the steel chair.

"Tell her that she will have to perform a number of tasks. First of all we want to organize a government supported lecture tour of our great universities. We want her to speak of her ordeal as an oppressed Indian

woman. And her courageous battle with con-vention. After this tour we would like her to apply for U.S. Citizenship on the ground that our country offers greater freedom for expression of tal-ent. After that she would have to go underground so far as the public is concerned. Meanwhile we would ex-pect her to train our newly recruited women soldiers in the art and craft of waging battles in barren and difficult lands and surviving as women. As she is busy with this official work, we would publicize her legend through the good offices of the Dept. of Cre-ative Survival. We would portray her as the new universal woman who has come to America to create a new fu-ture for herself. A woman with West-em frontier spirit and Asian feminin-ness. Films and television shows will be made on her. Books will be written about her heroic saga. And that way she can earn more dollars from private enterprise. There is no limit to what can happen out there. I can see a whole series of female toys called "Phoolan The Great American" based on her T.V. portrayal. She will inspire a new generation of Americans to fight the battle for personal rights tooth a nail. Through America it will

inspire the rest of the world to celebrate these militant, enterprising individualists. We will resurrect her whenever and wherever necessary. All she has to do is to say

yes. I will see to the rest."

I was shivering inside the tiger. The whole world at her feet, what is this Kali going to decide? Do I or don't I divulge the story to the world? Or maybe I can negotiate ,a deal... My mind was in a delirium. The inter-preter tried to convey the excitement of this offerwithin the cultural context that Phoolan was familiar with. My mind kept wavering between the interpreter's efforts, my own inten-tions and the white man's lethal pow-ers.

There was a loud "Uh" from Phoolan which to me sounded like a yes. But I, could be wrong. From the tiger's carcass I could not hear all that clearly. From the glassy eyes I

couldn't see that clearly. The white duo left shortly. Phoolan had disappeared, too.

I slithered out somehow, and dashed to reach the newspaper head-quarters by phone. The editor asked me to file a report immediately.

Next morning I saw the headline: **Phoolan Bai the Great Woman Dacoit Disappears Mysteriously**

The news item did not cover the details as I had faxed them... Instead the editor summoned me to Delhi and interrogated me about the veracity of my statements. The real story was never printed. The editor perhaps was bought off by the American media. The story appeared there first without my name.

I got my promotion alright, but dear reader I have written this story now to expose the hard brittle truth about cultural politics.

Instead of filing a newspaper report, I decided to write afictionalpiece. If this story reaches you somehow after all the channels of censorship that are euphemistically described as editing, you can be sure that Phoolan Bai has a l r e a d y invaded the University Circuits to conquer new frontiers. □

