

THE film *The Bandit Queen* on the life of Phoolan Devi has raised a major storm even before its formal release. At the high profile film premier, director Shekhar Kapur introduced his film as depicting the brutal "truth" about the oppression of women and lower castes in India. It is supposedly a sympathetic account of her life — an attempt to justify her taking to banditry on account of oppression and maltreatment by her own family (father, husband), as well as the upper caste Thakurs of the region.

However, the person most upset about the film is Phoolan Devi herself. The director and the producer have refused to show her the film despite repeated requests. She feels, based on the accounts she has heard from people and little clips of the film she saw on television, that the film seriously dis-torts and falsifies her life and invades her sexual privacy by showing her raped and re-raped even though she has never talked about this aspect of Phoolan Devi's life with her biographer Mala Sen, on whose book the film is supposed to be based.

Even those of us who were initially impressed with the film have been disappointed to find that though the film claims to be a true account of Phoolan Devi's life, the film-makers have not once bothered to talk to Phoolan Devi to get their facts right. The director Shekhar Kapur is known to have said on more than one occasion that he did not feel the need to meet Phoolan Devi after he embarked on the film because that would interfere with his "conception" of Phoolan Devi. This is strange logic considering that the film claims to be based on Phoolan's authentic life story rather than a fictionalised account. But worst of all, the film makers have refused to show Phoolan the film they made on her life. When she protested against the misrepresentation of her life in the film, based on what she heard

## FILM REVIEW

# The Bandit Queen

**Director: Shekhar Kapur**

**Producer: Bobby Bedi Commissioning**

**Editor: Farookh Dhondy for Channel Four**

**Madhu Kishwar**

from people, the film-makers responded by saying that she had no right to protest since she had not seen the film. But they would not still show her the film. When her repeated requests failed, Phoolan finally appealed to the Delhi High Court to intervene and get access to the film. It has been weeks since the High Court passed an order that Phoolan Devi be provided with a copy of the film, but the film-makers have not yet done so.

Predictably, several people have objected to the violation of elementary ethical and professional norms expected of a film-maker and have joined Phoolan Devi in her protest. The churlish manner in which the film-makers have reacted to the criticism makes their case even weaker. They have called Phoolan Devi names and

countered the criticism by saying that anyone who is opposed to the film is both anti-feminist and casteist. They allege that since theirs is a strong statement in favour of women and against caste oppression, the so-called upper castes have a vested interest in ensuring that the film does not get screened in India. According to Dhondy and Co., Phoolan's criticism is motivated in that she has been pressured into denying certain unpleasant facts of her life by vested interests as well as due to her own new found concern for "respectability." This is total baloney because the film does not even stick to the facts as put together by Mala Sen in her biography of Phoolan which was commissioned by Channel Four itself.

The distortions are not just a matter of stringing Phoolan's life together through rape scenes. They falsify the basic texture of her life story. The film-makers would not have dared taking such liberties with the story of her life if she were not a poor and illiterate woman. Instead of resorting to politically fashionable postures, the film makers need to answer simple questions: "Has the film got the facts of the situation right? Does it take into account the many sided versions of the situation or does it oversimplify reality to fit into a pre-conceived notion of what the situation ought to be? Does it aid the much wronged Phoolan to survive with dignity or add to her problems? Is it ethical in its



**The real Phoolan**

*Courtesy: India Today*

presentation of facts? Does it take responsibility for the ideas proposed? Or is it just an opinionated exercise?

*The Bandit Queen* fails on all these counts even though technically it is undoubtedly a well-made film and is very powerful in its impact.

The film has changed, oversimplified and even cooked up incidents in order to create a *film* version of Phoolan Devi's life making it a for-mula-ridden Rape-Revenge story, thus robbing her life of all its richness and complexity. The book, with all its limitations of having been written without actually meeting Phoolan Devi, except for a brief, dramatic en-counter, is a far more complex and insightful account of her life—though it is by no means an authoritative ac-count or the last word on it. Mala Sen herself admits that she met Phoolan only once for a few minutes in Gwalior Court. Phoolan Devi did not narrate her story directly to the author, nor did she herself pen down her "diaries" because Phoolan Devi is literally illit-erate. Her account was penned down surreptitiously by fellow prisoners whom she neither knew nor trusted very well. She communicates her dissatisfaction with this mode of commu-nication to Mala Sen because she had no way of knowing what was being written on her behalf. However, since Mala Sen shares these limitations with the readers and is also careful in giving us the various versions of controver-sial events, it emerges as a far more credible account of Phoolan's life than anything else written so far.

The film tells us that Phoolan Devi took to banditry because she was sexually abused by upper-caste Thakur men in her village and that they got her arrested on trumped up charges when she resisted their sexual abuse. Then a Thakur paid up her bail money and "bought her" for further sexual abuse. Not satisfied with that, they got her kidnapped by a gang of dacoits

whereby she herself became a bandit because there was no going back to normal life after that. This is a bowd-lerized version of Phoolan's life. The film makers have interpreted her life as a saga of caste warfare and her banditry primarily as a revenge against her sexual abuse by Thakurs. Phoolan Devi insists that this is not how things actually happened. She has repeatedly said that the chief cause of all her and her family's misery was her father's brother and her cousin Maiyaddin who robbed Phoolan's family of their legitimate share of the land and pushed them into poverty. Mala Sen's book corroborates this ac-count. One of Phoolan's earliest acts of defiance was to challenge her uncle's robbery of her father's share of land. To teach her a lesson, Maiyaddin beat her up and had her put in jail on trumped up charges. It was her father who arranged for her bail through a friend of his—a Thakur from a neighbouring village. (But the film shows her being bailed out by Thakurs of her village for the purpose of further exploiting her). Soon after, Maiyaddin had her kidnapped by a gang of dacoits which led to her finally becoming a dacoit herself. Thus in Mala Sen's book Phoolan's becoming a bandit has nothing to do with caste or rape.



The *filmi* Phoolan

Why has all this been glossed over and the story presented in terms of caste warfare? One suspects that it is largely to satisfy the western palate which delights in seeing non-western people as exotic species very different from themselves. A more educated brother cheating his illiterate brother out of his land or the story of a wily cousin using his money to buy support in the village panchayat and with the local police has nothing "oriental", "exotic" or "third world" about it. Make it a case of upper caste tyranny over a lower caste woman and it becomes an instant hit formula in the West. Phoolan Devi has objected to this deliberate distortion saying that such an irresponsible portrayal will needlessly inflame communal feelings and incite enmity between castes. She also fears that this might make her own and her family's life even more vulnerable.

In the film there is very little else to Phoolan's life except rape and beatings. Her career as a raped woman is launched soon after her childhood marriage when her husband forces sex on the unwilling child bride after beating her up. Consequently, she leaves her husband's house and is then molested and beaten by Thakur hoodlums of her village. None of this exists in Mala Sen's book. If you care to listen to Phoolan Devi she will tell you that there were no Thakurs in her village which was inhabited pre-dominantly by Mallahs—her own community. The village sarpanch was also a Mallah and whatever harassment she suffered was inflicted by her own community because theirs was a poor family.

Even though the film is supposed to be a true life account of the lives of Chambal valley dacoits, we see very little of banditry considering that Phoolan Devi is supposed to have spent three and a half years in the ravines during which time she manages

Courtesy: India Today

to keep politicians and the police force of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in a constant tizzy. She is charged with 48 major crimes including kidnapping-for-ransom, looting and 22 murders; the police go on a killing spree but cannot nab her despite a large scale ferocious offensive to hunt her down. In fact, with all their resources they did not even know what she looked like. And when she surrendered she dictated her own terms to the police and politicians. This defiance of the powers that be is the stuff that gave rise to the Phoolan Devi legend.

But what do we see in the film of her life as a bandit? There is a brief scene of the Phoolan Devi-Vikram Mallah gang holding up a truck for loot and another one where her gang goes on a looting spree while she casually roams around the village *gallis* even while the police comes firing at them. This is followed by the famous Behmai massacre. From then on she is hounded until she finally surrenders in desperation. For the rest of the time she is either getting raped or making love. There is very little of her relationship with Vikram Mallah, the man she loved — except for a couple of love-making scenes. Thus for all the sophistication in handling rape and sex scenes, the film makers have an unhealthy obsession with sex and sex-related violence.

That is all the more unacceptable since Mala Sen repeatedly says in her book that Phoolan Devi was not willing to talk about her supposed rape whether by the police or by the Thakurs. In the context of the police rape the farthest she goes is to say, '*un log ne mere saath kafi mazaak ki* — *khub mara bhi* (They had a lot of fun at my expense and beat me up a lot). About the famous gang rape Mala Sen writes: "There are various versions of what happened to Phoolan Devi after Vikram Mallah's death. When I spoke to her she was reluctant to speak

of her *bezathi* (dishonour) as she put it, at the hands of the Thakurs. She did not want to dwell on the details and merely said: 'Un logo ne mujhse bahut mazak ki' ... Phoolan Devi, like many women all over the world, feels she will only add to her own shame if she speaks of this experience."

The question is not whether she was raped or not, but that Phoolan Devi does not wish to talk about it and therefore, certainly wouldn't want it re-enacted it on screen in such a manner that those rapes become the focal point of her existence. Even if the film-makers felt they had to deal with the rapes because they supposedly led to a major turning point in her life, they could have made an allowance for her right to sexual privacy by allowing the multiplicity of versions to have come through and leave the issue as delicately ambiguous as Mala Sen's book does. Apart from the ethics of it, their act is blatantly illegal because the Indian Penal Code (Section 228A) considers even disclosing the identity of a victim of rape without her explicit permission as a criminal offense punishable by up to two years in prison.

Similarly, despite her repeated assertions that she was not involved in the Behmai massacre, the film makers have shown her as being responsible for and present at the scene of the Behmai massacre. Two survivors of the massacre also deny Phoolan's presence there though many others allege she led the massacre. The matter can only be decided in a court of law. By leaving no ambiguity in the matter and by showing her as being responsible for and present at the scene of Behmai massacre, the film makers have prejudged things. Phoolan is right in fearing that it might prejudice the trial against her.

Phoolan is equally angry about the deliberate falsification in presenting her family. The film tells us that her father

"sold" her to her first husband in return for a bicycle and a cow. He is shown as a hard hearted, greedy fellow who has no sympathy for the suffering of his daughter. When she runs away from her husband's house, according to the film, he wants to get rid of her. Phoolan says he was a caring father, a "*devtaa samaan*" (godly/saintly) person and that he provided her with the expected dowry. Even in Mala Sen's book there is no mention of bride sale.

Further, the film shows her being maltreated by her mother-in-law. Phoolan says there was no mother-in-law to maltreat her. She died much before Phoolan got married. Why do Dhondy and Kapur introduce this distortion? Once again to pander to the stereotype images the West has of India — a land of female infanticide where parents are brutal in their treatment of daughters and where evil mothers-in-law torture their daughters-in-law to death. If the film-makers were only interested in creating a fantasy creature of their own, why take a living woman's story? Why not make a fictional account so that the characters can be manipulated at will? They used Phoolan Devi's name because they could cash in on the legend that has grown around her and spread far and wide.

I am sure that the famous police officer Rajendra Chaturvedi who played the most crucial role in negotiating Phoolan Devi's surrender will also want to sue Channel Four when he gets to see the film. Mala Sen's book shows him as a concerned and caring person who tried his best to get Phoolan dignified terms for surrender. In the film the brief scene dealing with the politics of surrender, shows the police officer in charge of it as part of a villainous plot by the political bosses — another instance of making reality fit into a stereotype mould.

The most distressing part of this

whole controversy is the manner in which the film makers have gone about heaping a string of abuses on Phoolan Devi. They have called her "manipulative", "greedy" "a liar", "a criminal capable of anything" and have dis-missed her objections to the film as an attempt to "blackmail" them into pay-ing more money.

Is it that they have discovered a new Phoolan after making a film on her which projects her as a touchingly vulnerable and a much wronged woman rather than a manipulative, greedy criminal? Who is the real Phoolan Devi? If she is the latter, the film better be scrapped altogether because it presents a mythical Phoolan. Or is it by simply asking them to show her the film and demanding that they pay her the money they promised her in writing that she becomes a greedy manipulator in their eyes? By now it is well known that the script writer, the director and the producer earned vast fortunes for themselves as compared to the measly 4.5 lakhs they gave Phoolan and her entire family for their story and the right to use their real names. The contract entitles them to make a film on her life and not to cook up her life for her. The simple facts are that if any rewriting has been done, it has been done by the film makers with an eye for what sells best.

The Delhi Court has responded to Phoolan's petition by stopping all fur-ther screenings of the film. The film makers have responded to this move by indulging in the most brazen of lies. In their interviews to foreign press the film makers have alleged that they are being persecuted in India for their sup-posed courage in showing the

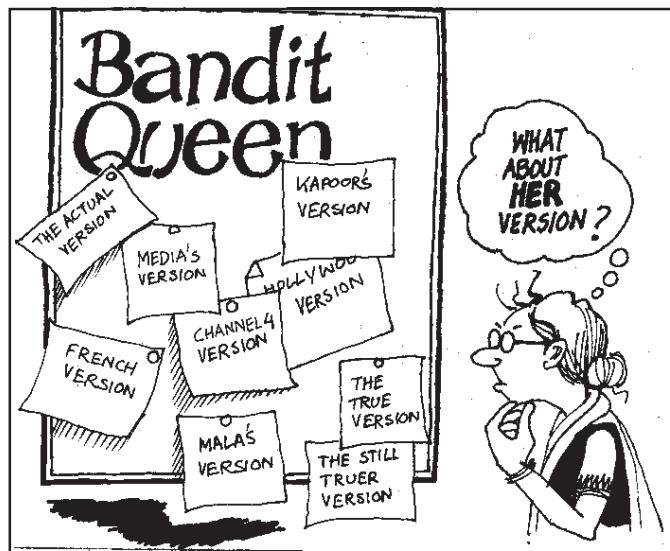
brutal reality of caste oppression and they are victims of *Khomeinivad*. It is dis-graceful that the producer and director of this film should lie so brazenly about their fellow countrymen and women just so that they can appear heroic crusaders for social justice. All this with a view to get a nomination for the Oscar. There has been no upper caste retaliation against the film. If anything, all the upper caste, super upper class people they gathered for the high profile premier show at Sri Fort Auditorium, wrote rave reviews about the film and called it "a major land mark in the history of Indian

Devi with such contempt and aggression. Today, if anyone is treating Phoolan Devi badly, it is Dhondy, Bedi and Co. who cannot stomach the real life Phoolan, so enamoured they are with the *filmi* version they have created.

All this is not to deny that 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. This is the main reason why many of us who would have otherwise gladly supported it against needless censorship, cannot defend it on grounds of freedom of expression.

Introducing the film at the premier, director Shekhar Kapur declared that since his *Bandit Queen* was a statement of unadulterated truth, 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. I had felt elated at the prospect of being able to join in this crusade to change our stupid and outdated

censorship laws. One feels terribly let down at the film-makers' needless dishonesty in tampering with basic facts even while claiming to be champions of truthful story-telling. The controversy over this film serves as a warning that those who wish to be seen as crusaders for truth and freedom cannot afford to be liars or distorters. Also that those who wish to project themselves as champions on behalf of the poor and oppressed ought to learn to carry those whose cause they are championing, at least behind them, if not with them. □



cinema." Likewise, Phoolan Devi is being treated as a celebrated heroine by the much maligned upper castes. For instance, the Rotary Club of Delhi invited her to hoist the national flag and be their chief guest on Independence Day. In Bhiwani, a crowd of 50,000 people showed up to see her. This year she has been invited to be a star speaker at the prestigious Navaratri Vyakhyan Mela held every year in Burharipur along with celebrities like T.N. Seshan. No other upper castes, apart from the film-makers, have responded to Phoolan