

Instruments of war: Bandit Queen to Manipur

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I knew what the video from Manipur that was widely circulated earlier this week contained, so I did not need to watch it. The ethnic clash in the state that has resulted in at least 142 deaths and many more injured started nearly two months back and shows no sign of abating. But the most recent video has provoked such a nationwide outrage that even Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been criticised by the Opposition for not speaking at all on the violence in the North-eastern state, condemned it categorically before the start of the monsoon session of the parliament on Thursday. The state's police force have arrested several people allegedly responsible for the assault.

British feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn has argued that a gendered perspective on conflict is not “optional but a stark necessity”. She has shown that in times of conflict there are three major gendered elements: “mobilization into the armed forces; the catastrophic disruption of everyday life; and brutalization of the body”. Sexual violence during war, also known as “war rape”, is often deployed as a tool of war, as we have seen in conflicts such as Bangladesh’s war of independence in 1971, ethnic conflict in Rwanda (1994) and Sierra Leone (1991–2002), and in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1995), among others. Though laws against gendered violence during conflict have been in place since ancient times and the United Nation Security Council in 2008 recognised sexual violence has a war crime similar to genocide, implementing these laws continues to be a challenge, as legal scholars such as Bharat H Desai and Balraj K Sidhu have shown.

American journalist and novelist Helen Benedict, who has written extensively on rapes committed by the army, has compellingly argued that the hypermasculine culture and

discourse in armies around the world are responsible for sexual violence against enemy combatants and civilians, but also within the military. It is also responsible for human rights violations like in Abu Ghraib. As all these examples show us, sexual violence is weaponised as a war strategy not only during international warfare but also during civil conflict — as in the case of Manipur. In India, rape is often strategically used during religious, caste, class, and ethnic conflicts.

The 1994 Hindi film *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Gupta, controversially depicted acts of sexual violence against dacoit-turned-politician Phoolan Devi. Based loosely on writer and human rights activist Mala Sen's biography of Devi, it depicted the latter's early life in her village in Uttar Pradesh and her career as a dacoit in the late-1970s. Born into a "lower"-caste family in western Uttar Pradesh, Devi (Seema Biswas) is married off to a much older man in her teens. Abandoned by her husband and constantly in conflict with her relatives who allegedly usurped the family land, Devi is kidnapped by a gang of bandits. When the gang's leader, Babu Gujjar (Anirudh Agarwal) rapes her repeatedly, another gang member Vikram Mallah (Nirmal Pandey), who has started liking her, kills him. The two of them grow into a mature and mutually respectful relationship.

However, when the gang's real boss Thakur Shri Ram (Govind Namdeo) is released from prison, he covets Devi and gets Vikram Mallah murdered. Devi is kidnapped, assaulted, and repeatedly raped by Shri Ram and his gang members as she is held in the village of Behmai. When she is finally released and recovers, Devi teams up with another dacoit Maan Singh (Manoj Bajpai), and forms her own gang. As Devi and Singh attack and loot "upper"-caste villages and help out Dalits and other "lower"-caste people, her legend grows in the ravines of Bundelkhand. "For eight centuries India's dacoits have been imbued with roguish romance. But none was more romantic — or roguish — than Phoolan," wrote journalist Mary Ann Weaver for *The Atlantic*. "The imagination of an entire nation had been captured by Phoolan."

On 14 February 1981, Devi and her gang, on receiving news that a Thakur wedding was taking place in Behmai, returned to the village and shot down at least 20 men, including some who had allegedly tortured and raped her. The incident led to the resignation of then Uttar Pradesh chief minister V P Singh, who would later become India's prime minister, and sparked a massive operation by the police to nab her. Devi, however, eluded capture and finally surrendered after careful negotiations in 1983.

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“(W)hen her impending surrender at a lavish public ceremony was announced, nearly all the foreign journalists based in New Delhi (some seventy of us in all), accompanied by an equal number of Indian journalists, television-crew members, human-rights officials, feminists, and socialites, rushed to the village of Bhind,” wrote Weaver. “Of course, nobody knew who Phoolan Devi was, and none of us had ever seen the Bandit Queen before. Not even the police had a photograph of her.” Though Devi was never put on trial, she was in jail for nearly a decade before being released and contesting elections. She was still a member of parliament from the Samajwadi Party at the time of her assassination on 25 July 2001. Her alleged killer, Sher Singh Rana, was convicted in 2014, but released on bail by the Delhi High Court in 2016 — his life, too, could soon become the subject of a biopic.

The film *Bandit Queen* was initially well-received, with some critics even comparing it to *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and radical Westerns from the Global South, such as Brazilian director Glauber Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* (1969). It won the Best Feature Film in Hindi at the 43rd National Award as well as Best Actress for Seema Biswas, and was India's official entry into the 67th Academy Awards for the Best Foreign Film Category. However, both Devi and Sen protested against the depiction of sexual

violence in the film. Novelist Arundhati Roy, who had not yet won the Booker, in her landmark essays “The Great Indian Rape Trick I” and “The Great Indian Rape Trick II” took the makers of the film to task for restaging her rape and humiliation “without her consent, without her specific, written, repeated, whole-hearted, unambiguous consent”. “I cannot believe that it is not a criminal offence,” she wrote.

Building upon Roy’s arguments, journalist Neha Dixit writes that the “film portrays sexual violence as the primary reason behind Phoolan’s trajectory as a bandit. But the larger socio-economic context is given a miss to make her story of simple binary of rape and revenge.” This is, as film scholar Ranjani Mazumdar had shown, the standard formula of depicting violence against women in commercial Hindi cinema of the 1980s. Dixit also points out that in the post-2012 anti-rape movement society, “it is at least possible to have a public debate about a woman’s agency.” The rape and murder of a 23-year-old paramedical student in December 2012 in New Delhi led to widespread protests around the country and fundamental changes to laws relating to sexual crimes in India.

Three decades have passed between the debates around *Bandit Queen* and the emergence of the horrific videos from Manipur this week. What remains unchanged is the targeting of women’s bodies in times of conflict. In July 2004, 13 women in the state stunned the world by staging a startling protest in which they stood naked in front of an army camp in Imphal while waving a banner: “Indian Army Rape Us”. They were protesting against the alleged rape and murder of a 32-year-old woman by paramilitary soldiers. Manipur had been roiled by sectarian and separatist violence over the decades and was governed under the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. The protest’s “quiet aggression exposed the naked predatoriness of the Indian state against its own female citizens,” writes feminist scholar Paromita Chakravarti. It led to significant reckoning and changes on the ground.

Yet, as the video from Manipur shows us, a continued engagement with such violence is necessary to prevent its repetition. As journalist Priyanka Dubey writes in her book *No Nation for Women* (2019), there has been an unprecedented 873 percent rise in crimes against women since the 1960s. “Patriarchy is the nucleus of this problem and all other factors contributing to violence against women [class, caste, religion] manifest themselves around it.” It is essential to address all these contributing factors because violence against women is not an outcome of strife, rather it is a perpetual condition of conflict.

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