
A DESIRE TO SEE PHOOLAN DEVI

It was the first day of December 1982 in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. The harsh winter was sweeping over north India. My close friend Rajesh and I were heading towards the Elite cinema hall around 2:30 p.m. I was sitting on the rear carrier of his bicycle. Rajesh was pedaling hard to reach there in time for the matinee show. We were teenagers then.

The weather was cold, but we were sweating as we were over-dressed for that sunny afternoon. Another reason was our excitement. We had dared to go to watch a movie in the same cinema hall where the notorious and dreaded bandit queen Phoolan Devi was also set to come to view *Namak Halal* starring Amitabh Bachchan.

After the massacre at Bahmai, a village located in Kanpur Dehat district of Uttar Pradesh, by bandit queen Phoolan Devi and until her surrender to the authorities, several times we had heard all sorts of rumors about her. That day we had heard that Phoolan Devi, dressed in a burqa, was coming to the Elite cinema to watch the movie.

As we crossed Rani Lakshimibai Park, the statue of Jawaharlal Nehru, installed at the Elite junction, could be seen. In a few minutes, we reached the theater.

There was a long queue at the ticket window and there were a few burqa-clad women standing in the queue. As we were about to join the queue, a police Jeep stopped near the entrance. These were not uncommon, but for us, that day every burqa-clad lady was a suspected Phoolan Devi and the police presence also seemed to be because of her.

We had read stories in newspapers about police encounters with the outlaws. We genuinely feared from getting caught in the crossfire between the police and the bandit queen. Rajesh suggested going for some other movie. I agreed readily. We changed our plan and went to another theater that day.

Phoolan Devi surrendered in February 1983. After she surrendered, the rumors stopped. Now people were more curious to know about her life. I too wanted to see her, as the media had always added adjectives like “Dacoit beauty” or “bandit queen” before her name. After Phoolan Devi surrendered, her photograph appeared in newspapers. She looked very young and thin, dressed in a pair of pants and a shirt with a scarf tied around her forehead, holding a rifle in one hand. She looked like a normal young woman, but for her attire and gun.

I found it fascinating that such a small, scrawny woman had allegedly killed 20 men to avenge her dishonor by them. After the Phoolan Devi’s surrender, there was peace in the Chambal region for a few months.

Later, fresh struggles started among different Dacoit gangs in a bid to establish their domination in the Chambal ravines and the surrounding area. With her surrender, Phoolan Devi had attracted the attention of the national and international media and had received

support from some political and social groups, who considered her a victim of oppression by the upper castes. Seeing the fame, facilities, and political support extended to Phoolan Devi, a few Dacoits started thinking of surrendering, but not before committing a crime as big as that done allegedly by Phoolan Devi. They had their own interpretation of the things witnessed by them.

BECOMING A POLICE OFFICER

Seven years later-

After obtaining my Bachelor of Science degree, I appeared for the UPSC examinations. In my second attempt, I was selected for the Indian Police Service (IPS).

After my training, I got my first posting as assistant police superintendent at Gwalior. I had not expected to be posted so close to my hometown, Jhansi. I was happy, but my family members were not very happy as I was attached to the Dacoit eradication program of the Chambal region.

The ravines of Chambal, spread over three states, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, were known as the playground for the most notorious Dacoits of India.

My family started pushing me to sit for the UPSC examinations once again, and try for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), considered several notches above the IPS. Actually, I too would have liked an IAS officer's job, but I was not sure that I would be able to find adequate time to prepare for the examination. However, I was excited about the challenges of my current job.

As a kid, I had heard various tales of the Dacoits. These tales depicted the Dacoits as brave, rebellious, and compassionate towards the hapless. Later, I read that in earlier times simple villagers had rebelled against the exploitative zamindars and other upper-class people. They were called as Baaghis or rebels. Soon, people started calling them Dacoits.

The Dacoits or bandits of Chambal area still preferred to call themselves Baaghis instead of the Dacoits. Stories about the cruelty and ruthlessness of some Dacoits also spread, adding to their notoriety.

I took over as ASP at Gwalior, but before my career really took off, I had my first encounter with the Dacoits in a bizarre way.

