

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Outlaw
Roy Moxham

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About the Book

'I did a very strange thing today. I wrote to a bandit in an Indian jail.'

In the summer of 1992, Roy Moxham posted a letter to Phoolan Devi, India's 'Bandit Queen', who had voluntarily surrendered to the authorities a decade earlier. Appalled by the harshness of her life and inspired by her determination to achieve change for her people, Moxham contacted her in prison. To his surprise, she replied.

They exchanged more letters and, when Phoolan was finally released on parole, they met. In the following years, they travelled together in India while Phoolan pursued her political career, which was cut tragically short by her assassination in 2001.

Drawing upon private diaries and correspondence, this fascinating memoir offers a slice of modern history in the making, an intimate portrait of an extraordinary young woman, and the country that helped shape her. Compelling, honest and vivid, it also describes the unusual friendship between two people from two utterly different worlds.

About the Author

Roy Moxham is the author of *The Great Hedge of India* and *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire*. Born in Worcestershire, he became a tea planter and spent thirteen years in Eastern Africa, opened a London gallery, and trained as a book and paper conservator. Working for a time at Canterbury Cathedral's archive, he later became Senior Conservator of the University of London Library and taught on an MA course. He lives in London.

Also by Roy Moxham

The Great Hedge of India
A Brief History of Tea

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Phoolan Devi's family tree
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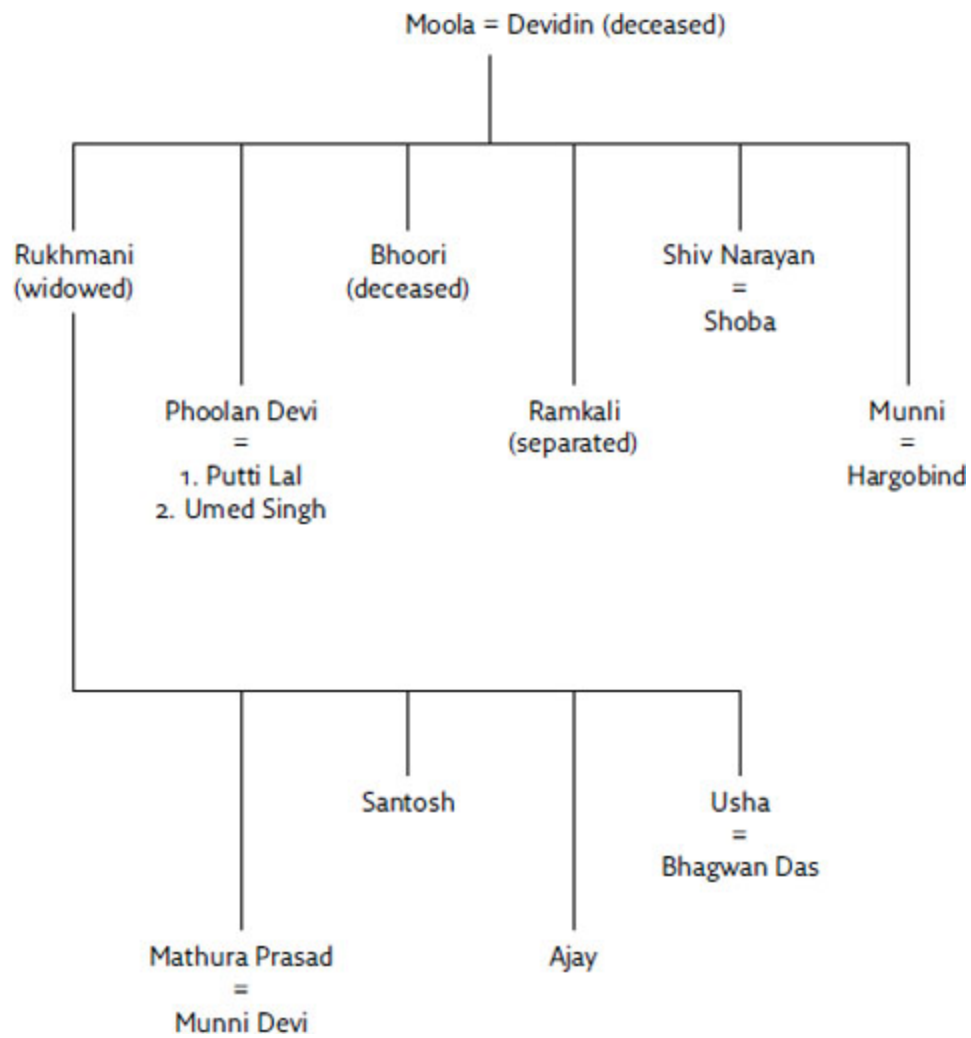
Black and white plates

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1. Phoolan Devi formally surrenders at Bhind, 12 February 1983 (© Sondeep Shankar/AP/Press Association Images).
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PHOOLAN DEVI'S FAMILY TREE



THE STATE OF UTTAR PRADESH



OUTLAW

India's Bandit Queen and Me



Roy Moxham



RIDER

LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND JOHANNESBURG

1

A Letter from India



'If I am released alive, then I will surely meet you ...

If I die, then in my next birth.'

IN JUNE 1992 I did a very strange thing. I wrote to a bandit in an Indian jail. In the *Independent* the previous day there had been an article about Phoolan Devi, the 'Bandit Queen'. It was prompted by her standing as a candidate in a by-election to the Indian parliament. She wanted to draw attention to her own plight and also to give the Indian poor, the lower castes and 'Untouchables', a voice, particularly women. Apparently, she had surrendered to the authorities after being accused of killing twenty-two upper-caste landowners who had raped her, but though it was agreed that she would be released after no more than eight years in jail, this had not happened. She was still in prison. I had never heard of her before but was immediately struck by the harshness of her life, much of it spent in wild ravines, and by her determination to do something about it - both for herself and for others.

This impulsive gesture was so unlike me. Why did I do it? I suppose that my first visit to India in February had been such a shock. Hiring an auto-rickshaw from Mumbai (Bombay) airport to the city centre, I had been taken on a

'short cut' through India's biggest slum. A population of a million or more in pathetic makeshift huts had no proper water supply or sewage system. Children in rags and pigs playing in open cesspits. There was an overpowering smell of filth.

The hostel I stayed in was not far from the luxurious Taj Mahal Hotel. This was surrounded by fabulously expensive jewellers and boutiques, which for the most part catered not to tourists, but to Indians. Rich Indians were driven there in expensive imported cars. The contrast between the lives of the rich and the poor was the same in many other cities. In the villages, the poor were even poorer. It became obvious to me that India had no shortage of money; it needed no overseas aid. The problem was in how its wealth was distributed.

Since that first visit, I had been looking for something that I could do to make an impact. I gave a little money to charities but really I knew that political power for the poor, the majority of Indians, was what was needed. So, with that in mind, and perhaps for other reasons that I was never fully able to explain, I sent Phoolan Devi a letter of support. I offered some help with her legal fees if needed. I also enclosed a postcard of the Houses of Parliament with 'good luck' written on the back. Having no proper address, I sent it by recorded delivery, with an international reply coupon, to:

Phoolan Devi
c/o The Governor
Gwalior Jail
Madhya Pradesh
India

I wondered, would she get it? Would she reply?

A few days later the newspapers reported that Phoolan Devi had lost the by-election in Delhi, and her deposit of 500 rupees (£11). The other two candidates were film stars.

A political party that represented those at the very bottom of Indian society had backed Phoolan's campaign. I was glad that I had sent my letter since it must have been a bad setback for her.

That weekend I was browsing in Hatchard's Bookshop when I came across *India's Bandit Queen - the True Story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen. I stayed up reading it until 2 a.m., completely gripped. What a story. There were good photographs of Phoolan Devi, her family and of various bandits.

*

It seemed that Phoolan Devi had been born into a very poor low-caste family in a village in the north-central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Unable to raise an attractive dowry, her parents married her off when only eleven to Putti Lal, a man in a distant village. He was twenty years older than her. He continually beat her, and sexually molested her even though she had not reached puberty. After three years of this, she became ill and he returned her 'in disgrace' to her family. Social stigma forced her family to return her to the husband. He, meanwhile, had acquired another woman. The two of them treated her as a slave - beating and starving her for several years - before returning her once again to her village. This time she was allowed to stay.

In the village, Phoolan became embroiled in a conflict with some richer relatives over family land. They arranged for bandits to kidnap her. Despite asking for police protection she was abducted. The gang was led by one Babu Singh, who made it clear that he wanted Phoolan as his mistress. One of the gang, Vikram Singh Mallah, who came from the same low caste as Phoolan, then killed the high-caste Babu Singh and Phoolan became his mistress.

The gang - now all low-caste - carried out many raids. They were based in the wild ravines of the Chambal river

valley. Dressed as police, they ventured out to stop trucks and rob landowners. They took money from the rich and bought support from the poor. Eventually, knowing that now she could never return to her village, Phoolan joined in.

Vikram's gang joined up with an upper-caste gang. They seemed friendly but it was a ruse. Vikram and many of his men were shot. Phoolan was captured, confined in a village called Behmai, and constantly raped. Eventually, a sympathetic priest smuggled a shotgun into her and she escaped.

Phoolan Devi then met with the gang of one of Vikram's friends. They united together with a bandit called Man Singh, and formed a new gang that Phoolan would command. After some time, Man Singh and Phoolan became lovers. This gang carried out many raids in both Uttar Pradesh and the adjacent state of Madhya Pradesh. In one notorious incident they captured a town, looted the bazaar and distributed the goods to the poor. Phoolan became a folk hero. The government offered a reward for her, dead or alive.

In 1981 the gang attacked Behmai, where Phoolan had been imprisoned and raped. Twenty-two upper-caste villagers were rounded up and shot. Although Phoolan denied being directly involved in the massacre, she became the most wanted suspect. The government mobilised thousands of police to catch her. They tortured, raped and killed many innocent people. Phoolan, with the aid of the lower castes that she had always taken pains to help, evaded capture. In the wake of this and other reverses, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (politically the most important state in India, with the huge population of 140 million) was forced to resign.

The Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, then authorised the Madhya Pradesh police to negotiate a surrender deal. Eventually an agreement was concluded

whereby none of the gang would be kept in jail for longer than eight years. In February 1983, Phoolan and her men ceremonially surrendered to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. Without ever appearing in front of a court, they were taken to Gwalior Jail.

(According to Mala Sen's book, Phoolan was twenty-six when she was jailed, which would make her about thirty-five in 1992. The *Independent* article had put her age at thirty-two. Later in her life, most reports dated her birth as 10 August 1963. This would have made her only nineteen at her surrender and imprisonment, and still in her twenties when I first wrote to her in 1992. Earlier reports put the year of her birth as 1957. Exactly when she was born is unclear.)

I had some vague knowledge of the Hindu caste system but, as it appeared to figure prominently in Phoolan's story, I read more about it. There were four main caste divisions. At the top were the Brahmins, traditionally the priestly caste. Below them were the Kshatriyas, originally the rulers and warriors, now the main landowners. In some parts of India they were called Rajputs; in Uttar Pradesh they were known as Thakurs. Below them were the Vaishyas, the merchants and farmers. At the bottom were the Sudras, to which Phoolan belonged, the labourers. Each of these main castes had a multitude of sub-castes, often confusingly themselves described as castes. Phoolan, for example, was from the Mallah, the sub-caste originally composed of boatmen and their families. Even lower than the Sudras were the Dalits or Untouchables, who were assigned to 'unclean' work. In the cities the caste system was beginning to break down, but in the countryside it remained largely intact. To a large extent the upper castes were the wealthy and the lower castes the poor. In theory it was possible to escape the caste system by converting to another religion, but even then the stigma of a low-caste origin tended to linger.

*

On 30 June I received a postcard from India, an 'Advice of Delivery'. It had a Gwalior postal stamp. There was a signature on it that looked like it might be in Hindi script. Of course, I could not read it, so I did not know whether it was Phoolan Devi's.

A fortnight later a letter from India arrived, written in what I assumed was Hindi. The signature was in a different hand, the same as on the earlier postcard. I needed someone to do a translation. This posed a problem, since it seems that Phoolan Devi was so hated by many Indians that I could get myself into serious trouble - perhaps even be attacked. Although seen as a Robin Hood figure by the poor, who idolised her, the wealthy upper castes saw her as a criminal and a dangerous threat to their traditional power. By chance, my friends Nick and Helen came round to my flat in the evening. Helen, who was teaching in London, said that one of the teachers she worked with knew Hindi. We photocopied the letter and Helen said she would ask her colleague if she would translate it.

At that time, I was working as a book and paper conservator for the Passmore Edwards Museum in East London. There had been a fire in West Ham Town Hall. This, and the water used to extinguish it, had severely damaged the archives of the old borough. Parish registers, including those recording the deaths in the plague of 1665, had been particularly affected. I had been engaged on a five-year contract to save the most important items. One evening, later in that week when I received Phoolan's letter, a group of us from the museum went for a colleague's leaving-party meal in Brick Lane. We met up in a pub. Before we went on to the Clifton restaurant, I nipped across the road to a cafe full of Asians. I asked if anyone knew Hindi and managed to find a man to look through the copied letter. He told me that it was from Phoolan herself.

She wrote that she was grateful for my message, as she was very depressed. The letter then went on about how badly women were treated in India. The translator, and the men gathered around him, began to look angry. I made my excuses and rushed off. I needed a proper translation quickly. Unfortunately Helen's colleague was away, so I would need to wait for anything from her. At supper, one of my museum colleagues, Nerina, told me that her aunt had a friend who might help. I gave her the copied letter to see what she could do.

Next week Nerina came to see me.

'I gave the letter to my aunt,' she told me. 'She was with a friend from India, who has fluent Hindi. When this friend started to translate, she came to a sentence - "I curse God that I was born in India!" My aunt then leapt out of her chair, grabbed the letter, and shredded it!'

That same day, I received a phone call from the archivist at Canterbury Cathedral offering me the conservator's post that I had recently been interviewed for. I was delighted, since it was such an amazing archive and it would be wonderful to be working on such important medieval documents. They seemed to be keen to have me too, and wanted me to begin earlier than we had discussed. I agreed to start mid-September. I also managed to get the archivist to honour my 'holiday arrangements' so that I could go to India over Christmas. Perhaps, I thought, I could meet Phoolan. That would be really something.

The translation of Phoolan Devi's letter by Helen's colleague was further delayed by the onset of the school holidays. This was very frustrating. Throwing caution to the winds, I decided to try the Indian restaurant at the end of my road, where they seemed friendly. I photocopied the letter but, to keep it anonymous, without the signature. A young waiter there, Ajit, who seemed very well educated, offered to translate it for me. He immediately exclaimed, 'This is from Phoolan Devi!' Apparently it started off 'to Mr

Roy from Phoolan.’ So much for my attempt at concealment. Actually, both he and the other staff turned out to be very sympathetic to her and very supportive of my efforts. I thought that this was probably because they were Sikhs. Following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards, the Sikhs had been treated badly by Indian governments. They tended to be sympathetic to others who had been discriminated against. I discovered later that the restaurant owner was active in Amnesty International. Whatever the reason, they insisted on giving me free beer.

The letter was from Gwalior Jail, dated 29 June 1992:

Hail God

To Mr Roy from Phoolan - a lot of thanks.

Received your letter - I felt so happy I cannot express it in words. It is very good of you to have given respect to a woman like me. I am myself helpless and destitute - whatever I had was spent in the election. I don't have a rupee for court fees. In India lawyers are very costly. Also in India no one listens to women. Nobody cares to give them justice. Sometimes, I curse God that I was born in a place like India. When I die, I shall be reborn in London, or some other such place, where women are given equality. Due to being a woman I am not able to get justice. I don't think I shall ever receive justice.

I request that you help me as much as possible. I should be grateful if you could print an appeal in the press there - that all brothers and sisters donate 'just one day's cigarette money' to help a desolate woman like me. It would be very kind and helpful. I can then fight against the injustice being done to me - to any woman.

I know you will definitely help me. I received your letter at a time when I had lost all hope in life. At such a time, reading your letter gave me the will to live. That is all. My heartfelt good wishes to you and your friends. Whoever wants to send something should send it to the address below:

My address: Phoolan Devi Nishad
Self Surrendered Dacoit
Central Jail
Gwalior
M. P.

Please reply at the earliest. Anybody sending anything should write to the jail address by registered post - otherwise the jail officials play their

tricks.

Phoolan Devi

The Indian Government has done great injustice to me.

The signature was in a different hand, which I assumed was hers. I imagined, therefore, that she had to get someone to write the letter on her behalf because she was illiterate. I was elated to have received such a reply, especially such a forceful one. I resolved to do my best to help her and to try and find some money for a lawyer. I would also make sure that I wrote to her regularly so that she felt she had some support.

I wondered again why I had written to a woman in an Indian jail. There were vaguely political reasons, but maybe others too. I had sometimes thought that my life, compared with that of others I had met, had been rather mundane. When I voiced this to friends, most looked astounded. I had begun to realise that, viewed dispassionately, my life had been far from ordinary. I had also begun to realise that I had a strong streak of romanticism.

I remembered that in 1960, when I was only twenty, I had put an advertisement in *The Times* seeking a post on a tea or tobacco estate. Given that I had no connections with that world, and indeed had never met anyone with knowledge of it, it was a quixotic act. Nevertheless, things worked out well for me. I received only one response and became a tea planter in Malawi (then Nyasaland). After a few very enjoyable years, I joined a company marketing agricultural machinery. With them, I subsequently moved to Kenya and Tanzania. I travelled all over those beautiful countries, living in romantic locations such as Dar es Salaam and Kilimanjaro. I liked to boast that I had driven along every road in those countries. I was in eastern Africa for thirteen happy years.

Similarly, in the 1970s, I had established a shop in London to sell African art. True, I was interested in art, but actually, I now realised, it had been largely to provide a vehicle for me to travel that continent more widely. It was the love of travelling not the love of art that drove me. I visited most countries in Africa, often buying a one-way ticket to somewhere in west or east Africa and then travelling back overland.

Foreign places, especially those in the tropics, held a strong fascination for me. Why I should have felt this pull - alone in my family and among my school-friends - was a mystery. For someone brought up in a quiet town in Worcestershire, by a widowed mother who had run a shop selling knitting paraphernalia, it was a strange obsession.

Financial pressures forced me into a settled life in London. I went to college for the first time in the late 1970s. Close to my fortieth birthday, I graduated as a book and paper conservator. (Even choosing that offbeat occupation had an element of romanticism. I had found a pile of dilapidated old books in a skip on Southampton Row, purchased them from the men clearing the building for £5, and sold most of them for quite a lot of money. I then enrolled in an evening class in book restoration in order to repair the remainder as a keepsake. I enjoyed the novelty of working with my hands and decided to pursue conservation as a career.) Throughout the 1980s I hardly travelled. At the beginning of that decade, busy with my new career, I was happy to be in London, with the occasional visit to friends in Spain. By the end of the decade, however, I was more restless. I longed to revisit the tropics. My trip to India in early 1992 had resuscitated my love affair and I was keen to engage again with the exotic.

*

I sent out a résumé of Phoolan's life, together with an appeal for support, to a few close friends. I wanted to be able to tell Phoolan that others here besides me were concerned for her welfare. However, not everyone, I supposed, would be as enthusiastic as I was to give help to a jailed bandit. It would be interesting to see who responded.

Helen's colleague finally sent her translation. This was much the same as Ajit's. Various friends promised small donations, which pleased me. Some friends seemed to find it hard to relate to Phoolan's story. It was so far from their own experience that it was as though they saw it as fiction. Or perhaps not even so realistic as that. One friend in particular switched our conversation about Phoolan to the latest episode of *The Archers*. He became so emotionally involved in what had happened in that radio serial that it was obvious to me, surprising though that was, that he found it more realistic than a real event.

One friend made a half-joking remark about my writing to a young Indian woman. I angrily rebutted the insinuation. When I first wrote to Phoolan Devi it had not struck me that my motives might be misconstrued. I regarded older men who went to south-east Asia for sex with young women as repulsive. It had not crossed my mind that I might be seen in the same category, even though I was at least twenty years older than her. Perhaps this was partly because I knew from pictures I had seen that Phoolan was not particularly good-looking. In Mala Sen's book the photographs of her showed a woman with rather coarse features. I had come across another book about Phoolan - *Devi: The Bandit Queen* by Richard Shears and Isobelle Gidley, published in 1984. It contained some particularly unflattering photographs of Phoolan. Moreover, it contained a reproduction of an artist's impression that the police had used when they were trying to capture her. This photograph was of a much more attractive woman.

Apparently it was based on the features of Phoolan's sister Ramkali, the family beauty. This error had enabled Phoolan to pass close to police officers and remain unnoticed. Certainly, at her surrender, Phoolan's plain features had been a disappointment to many. Of course, when I wrote that first letter to her I had no idea what she looked like. Later, had she been more beautiful, I might perhaps have had second thoughts about our future relationship. As it was, I thought of her as if I were some kind of relative, unlikely as that was. This was made easier, although it was common usage in India, by her signing herself as my sister.

*

I sent off a registered letter to Phoolan with postal orders for £100. Goodness only knows how she would manage to cash postal orders from jail. I also enclosed a postcard of Canterbury Cathedral, telling her that I would start my new job as archive conservator there next month. I imagined that to her it would seem a very strange occupation.

In September, I received a letter in poor English from a Dr Abdul Majid.

Aerogramme from Delhi, dated 1 September 1992:

With the name of God merciful & beneficent.

Dear Brother,

Adab (I respect you)

I am well here and hope you are also quite well. You do not know me and I am writing you letter so I define myself. I am Dr Abdul Majid and Phoolan Devi's brother. Phoolan do not know English and you are Englandian, so I am replying.

First of all we are grateful and thanking you have sympathy for Phoolan in favour of humanity. We are also grateful and thanking to every gentleman and lady of London who have given place in their hearts and respect to Phoolan as brave woman, not remember as a robber. This sentence gave great satisfaction after reading your letter. Unfortunately

Phoolan Devi's enemies and their relatives are more in number in cabinet of ruling team in India.

In this condition we feel very unsafety for Phoolan out of jail. Though she is in jail in present but I think day and night how I can safe her if she will be relieved from jail in future. We have not any overseas journey in our life, so we demand your mercy more and more.

I do not know so good English, so neglect my writing errors. I will send Phoolan's photograph in next letter because envelope for overseas mail is not available this time in my city. Please write about your profession also. I am addressless nowadays. I am also fighting against criminals and social exploiters.

Yours,
Dr Abdul Majid

He asked for a reply to be sent both to Phoolan in Gwalior and to himself care of a schoolteacher in Uttar Pradesh.

I was shocked, as it had not occurred to me that Phoolan's life would be in danger if she was set free. There was, of course, little likelihood of her being allowed to enter Britain. There would not be much point in my aiding her release if she was then to be killed. Nevertheless, in her own letter she had seemed very keen to get out of prison. She must have considered the consequences, I reasoned, so I decided to go along with that.

I sent off a reply to Dr Majid. I told him that the British government was unlikely to let Phoolan stay here as a refugee. I suggested that a lawyer might be able to obtain an undertaking from the Indian government to give her protection when she was released. I asked if he knew whether Phoolan had received the postal orders. I also asked if he knew whether she had engaged a lawyer and that if she had, to send me the name and address.

In October, nearly two months after sending off the postal orders, I wrote to Phoolan, to say that I'd had no response and that I was wondering whether she had received the money. I asked her for the name and address of her lawyer. I told her about the letter from Abdul Majid and enclosed a