

The Rise of Phoolan Devi: from Demon to Divine Incarnation



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Elizabeth Press

Thesis

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February 14, 2012

¹ Shree Ganesh, JPG, http://rlv.zcache.com/shree_ganesh_sticker-p217514346482747280z85xz_400.jpg

Sing of my deeds
Tell of my combats
How I fought the treacherous demons
Forgive my failings
And bestow on me peace²

Phoolan Devi (August 10, 1963 to July 25, 2001³) is recognized affectionately, not only throughout her home state of Uttar Pradesh but also throughout the entire country of India, as the Bandit Queen. Though she came from humble beginnings as the daughter of a passive Mallah man named Devidin, Phoolan's inner goddess aided her in her rise as a powerful dacoit, and later, respected Member of Parliament. Phoolan Devi is a remarkable woman and the topic of this paper for many reasons. First, from a young age, Phoolan stood out from others. She rejected her grim destiny as a submissive girl from a low caste and began speaking out for justice at the early age of ten, as she recalls in her autobiography. Her aggressive behavior was unusual not only for her caste, but also for her gender. This caused her to become somewhat of a protective male figure for her family from this young age, but these actions were not glorified until much later in her life. Secondly, Phoolan is recognized as only the third female dacoit leader in India, and has become, moreover, one of the most well known dacoits in the history of her country. She and her gang carried

² Phoolan Devi with Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali, *The Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman's Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend* (Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press, 2003), 497.

³ Due to the fact that Phoolan's early life is not well documented, her birth date is contested. It is now generally accepted that August 10, 1963 is the day and year of her birth, but some sources believe her birth year to be 1957, which would put her at 43 years at the time of her death instead of 37 years.

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out modern-day “Robin Hood” acts, by stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Furthermore, unlike most women in India, Phoolan took on the powerful brahmanical goddess, Durga, not only as a divine mythological inspiration, but also as a role model for her own life. Phoolan took it upon herself to punish the demons of society—the rapists, the abusers, and so on—in protection of defenseless people. These deeds assisted in Phoolan’s identification as an incarnation of the warrior goddess, Durga.

Though Phoolan Devi’s actions go against normative Hindu role models for women, such as Sita in the *Ramayana*, Phoolan still manages to have consolidated her memory as an incarnation of the brahmanical goddess, Durga. This paper explores how Phoolan was able to escape India’s judgment of her as a demon and instead become an image of divinity. Additionally, this paper hypothesizes that this divinity is due not only to Phoolan’s modern embodiment of the myths describing Durga as a protective warrior goddess, but also to her enactment of Durga’s masculine power.

Because the subject of this paper is a historical figure, many sources give conflicting information about Phoolan. One of Phoolan’s lawyers, Sunil Sethi, is quoted, “I don’t think her past can ever be absolutely corroborated now. So many of her close associates are dead, killed in sticky encounters; her family changes its story every day, as she does; so much of her past has been deliberately obscured.”⁴ Dates of events and Phoolan’s outlook, as well as her involvement in certain issues are unclear and, therefore, must be taken with a

⁴ Mary Anne Weaver, “India’s Bandit Queen,” *The Atlantic*, November 1996.

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grain of salt. Since her autobiography, *The Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman's Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend*, is directly based on and translated from several recorded sessions of Phoolan herself explaining the events of her life, I find this source to be one of the most trustworthy. Therefore, I will base many of my "facts" and analysis on this book.⁵ Articles, movies, and outside sources looking in at Phoolan Devi's life are also important to this paper because they give insight into the way the public viewed Phoolan on her path to divinity, so these sources, as well, are taken into great account throughout this paper.

Durga

Phoolan says:

For centuries every dacoit has honored the goddess Durga. And she is what sustained me: whatever she has, I have; whatever she wants, I want. And all of the men in my gang considered me to be a reincarnation of Durga.⁶

Durga is a brahmanical goddess, known throughout the Hindu religion for her heroism, composure, and immense *shakti*, literally defined as 'power' and thus, a form of empowerment. She symbolizes "the ultimate destroying power"⁷ and is also "the Prime Power under whose command the deities of the Trinity

⁵ I do recognize here that Phoolan's testimony is not absolutely reliable; however, due to the fact that she was the only one present throughout every event of her life, I do give it the utmost prestige.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ B. K. Chaturvedi, *The Supreme Mother Goddess Durga: mythological references, tales of glory, hymns, orisons, and devotional songs* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 1999), 10.

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function.”⁸ During Phoolan Devi’s life, many people compared her to the divine goddess and even called her an incarnation of Durga. Though Phoolan never explicitly identified herself as an incarnation, she did acknowledge this idea.

Traditional images of Durga⁹ picture the goddess as a beautiful woman. She is decorated as a female with extensive bangles, facial jewelry, headdress, and, in more modern depictions, henna tattoos on her feet and sometimes hands. A lavish *sari* is draped over her voluptuous female figure, which traditionally symbolizes fertility in Hindu iconography. Her bodily appearance is all woman. She is mounted on her vehicle that is portrayed as either a tiger or a lion, which symbolizes power and ferocity. Interestingly, Durga is not identified with any male consort, making her a single and an independent woman. In her ten hands, Durga carries an assortment of weapons derived from several other deities: “Lord Vishnu’s discus, Lord Shiva’s trident, Lord of Water Varuna’s conch-shell, Agni’s (fire-god) flaming dart, Vayu’s (wind-god) bow, Surya’s (sun-god) quiver, Indra’s (king of gods) thunderbolt, and Kubera’s (Lord of Wealth) club.”¹⁰ There is some variation on these objects, but these are the articles typically associated with images of the goddess used during Durga *puja*, or worship. Durga’s accumulation of these weapons, that are traditionally associated with various male deities, symbolizes Durga’s supreme power that emanates masculinity. Her masculine power, combined with her female

⁸ Ibid., 11. The Trinity referred to here are Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer. This Trinity is what maintains balance and order on Earth in Hinduism.

⁹ See appendix 1 and 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

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appearance and immense presence of *shakti* exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the goddess. This unification of both femininity and masculinity that is found in Durga is also evident throughout Phoolan Devi and her story.

Durga in Ancient Text

Though the Mother Goddess makes a brief appearance as early as the *Rig Veda*¹¹, Durga becomes the central deity in the *Devi Mahatmya* and various Durga Stotras, devotional hymns. The *Devi Mahatmya*, literally translated to “Glory of the Goddess”, is a Sanskrit scripture that was composed in approximately the sixth century CE. Through its stories, the Hindu people have become better acquainted with Durga. Many scholars suggest that the text implies that Durga’s creation was to bridge the gap between ancient mother goddess practices and the more modern male-dominated pantheon of Hindu gods. Whether this is true of Durga’s roots or not, she has become an exceedingly well-respected and included figure in Hindu culture. The *Devi Mahatmya* tells three main stories, in all of which the Goddess triumphs over enemies of the gods.

In the first story, two Asuras,¹² Madhu and Kaitabha, both of whom were birthed from Lord Vishnu’s ear, began plotting to slay the god Brahma. Unable to defeat these Asuras alone, Brahma prays for Durga’s protection and help in killing them. In response, Durga takes the form of Vishnu and engages in a

¹¹ The *Rig Veda* is an ancient text written in approximately the 18th century BCE. It is thought to have been central to the Vedic religion, which preceded Hinduism and greatly influences the religion.

¹² Asuras are power hungry former deities that often engage in war with current deities. Asuras are often demonized and simply referred to in English translations as demons.

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battle with these Asuras, which lasts five thousand years. Without fault, Durga conquers the Asuras and defends Brahma from his death. This myth describes Durga slaying demons and protecting someone in need, just as Phoolan Devi claims to do throughout her dacoit years. Also just as Durga takes on the male form of Vishnu, Phoolan dresses masculine in a police uniform as a dacoit. Both goddesses abandon their *sari* and outward female appearance while in combat. This may be because, while at war, both Durga and Phoolan truly abandon their feminine qualities and become consumed by their masculine ones. Females are not typically accepted as warriors and, perhaps, during actual violent acts, they no longer are women.

The second myth tells about Durga's defeat of Mahisasura. After a hundred year battle between the Asuras, led by Mahisasura, and the gods, led by Indra, the Asuras won. With his newly gained power, Mahisasura expelled the gods from heaven and put them on earth as mortals. This displacement greatly angered the gods and caused them to summon the powers of Durga to help overcome Mahisasura. With that, Durga was formed from different body parts of the expelled male gods and fueled with their various weapons. With the combined powers of the male deities, as well as her own, Durga crushed the Asuras and killed Mahisasura, who was in the form of a buffalo. Here, Durga again takes on masculine traits, but this time these traits are compiled from various male deities instead of just Vishnu. Similarly to this story of Durga, Phoolan Devi is continuously backed by the male members of her bandit gang. Without their help, Phoolan would not have been successful in her exploits, just

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as Durga would not have been successful here in killing the Asuras and their leader without the provided powers of her fellow gods.

In the third story of the *Devi Mahatmya*, the arrogant Asuras, Sumbha and Nisumbha capture the kingdoms of the gods and throw them out. The gods employ deep prayer to evoke Durga, and in this tale, the bloodthirsty goddess, Kali, emerges from Durga's head in order to aid in battle. Additionally, the *shaktis* of the gods are summoned to help in the fight. Eventually, Kali defeats the two demons and the gods are placed once again as rulers of their respected kingdoms. This myth highlights the *shaktis* within the gods, which are represented as their female counterparts in the text: "Came forth the sakti of Brahma: she is known as Brahmani."¹³ Though the gods' *shaktis* are personified as female, this does not suggest empowerment for females universally. Instead, it displays the great power that lies behind each individual's *shakti*.

Shakti

Shakti is an important Sanskrit word within our context. It has a complex meaning that is understood as a form of empowerment and many texts describe Durga as the divine embodiment of *shakti*. Cynthia Ann Humes defines *shakti* as, "a pre-eminently moral and creative power, possessed primarily by women and/or by individuals of moral purity."¹⁴ Traditionally, women who are pure and act according to customary codes of *dharma*, accrue *shakti*. *Dharma* in

¹³ Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of its Interpretation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 1991), 64.

¹⁴ Cynthia Ann Humes, "Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?" In *Is the Goddess a Feminist* (New York: New York University Press: 2000), 123-124.

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Hinduism is seen as the natural laws that govern *karma*¹⁵ and rebirth. If one upholds their *dharma*, then they will be happy and be protected from suffering. Female role models that uphold *dharma* exemplify actions of good wives, mothers, and sisters such as Parvati, Lakshmi, and Sita. These models do not include the fierce warrior goddess, Durga. Therefore, the fact that Durga embodies *shakti* comes as a contradiction to the societal norm of how to accumulate *shakti* as a human woman. Durga's masculine presence and power is balanced by her immense *shakti*. Perhaps it is the fact that Durga possesses both these traits so predominately that makes her the Mother Goddess. Durga does not act impulsively, but instead always procures a sense of calmness and composure throughout her myths in both verbal and physical battle. With tremendous bravery, Durga slays demons and protects the defenseless. It must be Durga's poise of both masculine and feminine traits that make her "the supreme . . . the queen (governing) all who have power."¹⁶

Ramayana

Though Phoolan Devi embraced Durga as her role model, traditionally, Durga does not serve this function for women in Hindu culture. "Indeed, rather than being a direct model of women's nature, in important ways Devi's [Durga's] nature tells us what ordinary women are not."¹⁷ There are many reasons that Durga is identified as the opposite of a role model. First, Durga is not identified with a male consort, making her a perpetual bachelorette. Marriage in Hindu

¹⁵ *Karma* in Hinduism connects positive actions with positive outcomes and likewise, negative actions with negative effects into a chain of causality.

¹⁶ Thomas Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess*, 35.

¹⁷ Cynthia Ann Humes, "Is the *Devi Mahatmya* a Feminist Scripture?" 125.

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culture is an imperative stage of life. Traditionally, a woman is constantly in care of a presiding male: as a child her father, in middle age her husband, and as an elder her son. Without marriage, once a female's father dies, she will be left to her own means, which makes it virtually impossible to live for the typical Hindu woman. Furthermore, without marriage, a woman is unable to fulfill her *stridharma*¹⁸ and this in turn jeopardizes her *karma*. Secondly, Durga's job as a warrior goddess contradicts that women should not be violent. Hindu women are supposed to be submissive and wholly obedient to their male superior. Durga's violent behavior points to her masculine traits, which throughout her mythological life is what truly sets her apart from mortals and into the divine.

Sita, Rama's wife in the *Ramayana*, on the other hand, is the epitome of Hindu femininity. She sets the Hindu standard for both wifely and womanly righteousness by means of her undying faithfulness and servitude to her husband throughout the epic. The second chapter of the *Ramayana* begins with the announcement that Rama would be crowned king of Ayodhya, after the queen, Kaikeyi, became enraged with jealousy. In the hopes that her own son, Bharata, would be crowned she demands that Rama be exiled into the wilderness for fourteen years. When Rama shares the news of his exile with Sita, instead of being upset by their separation, she becomes angry at Rama's presumption that she would not be joining him in exile. Sita says:

"I'm coming with you; my place is at your side wherever you may be. . . After fourteen years! What would be the meaning of my existence? I could as well be dead. It will be living death for me without you. I am alive

¹⁸ *Stridharma* is the *dharma*, or natural law, specifically applied to the virtues that females are expected to uphold.

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only when I am with you; a forest or a marble palace is all the same to me."¹⁹

This quote depicts Sita's complete devotion to her husband. Though joining Rama in his exile is not the most comfortable decision, it is the correct one insofar as this enables her to continue to serve Rama during these fourteen years of banishment.

Later on in the epic, Ravana, the powerful demon king of Lanka, kidnaps Sita with the plan to marry her. Sita, however, refuses Ravana's advances since she is eternally devoted to Rama. After many months apart and a vicious battle, Rama and Sita are reunited. At this time Rama questions Sita's purity, "I must tell you that it is not customary to admit back to the normal married fold a woman who has resided all alone in a stranger's house."²⁰ With this, Lakshmana, Rama's brother, prepares a large fire for Sita to prove her innocence.²¹ After jumping into the fire, instead of being consumed by the flames, "From the heart of the flame rose the god of fire, bearing Sita, and presented her to Rama with words of blessing."²² Sita here withstood the ultimate test of faithfulness and triumphed as the supreme wife to Rama.

The previously explained examples describe Sita's superior wifely and womanly virtue. It is because of her tremendous success in this virtue that Sita is depicted throughout Hinduism as divine. Similarly, Durga's divinity stems from her success at war. Just as male gods rule over different kingdoms for their

¹⁹R. K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 56.

²⁰ Ibid., 162.

²¹ Fire-tests of purity are common knowledge within Hindu and Indian culture. This practice, however, is seemingly obsolete.

²² R. K. Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 162.

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success in various areas, female deities are represented likewise. For example, Ganesha, the elephant headed god, is known as 'the Remover of Obstacles'. His name undoubtedly is derived from numerous achievements doing just that, removing obstacles. Though Durga may not be advocated as a role model for the typical Hindu woman, she is still certainly divine due to her immortal warfare triumphs over evil Asuras. Durga's blend of femininity and masculinity make up her unique divine character and, therefore, her uncanny mixture of these traits found elsewhere, like in Phoolan Devi, would not be demonized, but rather divinized.

Masculinity

Once, power was considered a masculine attribute. In fact, power has no sex.²³

Throughout time and across cultures, masculinity has always been an integral part of humanity and continues to greatly define society. According to Stephen Whitehead in *The Sociology of Masculinity*, "masculinities are those behaviors, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males."²⁴ In Indian Hindu culture, a behavior commonly associated with masculinity throughout mythology and history is being a successful and capable warrior. Manly men achieve this through display of *savas*, or physical strength, and *virata*, bravery.

²³ Katharine Graham, *Personal History* (New York: Knopf Inc, 1997), 507.

²⁴ Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, ed., "Introduction," *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 15.

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Both of these traditionally masculine qualities happen to also be possessed by Durga and Phoolan Devi, even though they are female in form.

Durga and Phoolan's eagerness to engage evildoers in battle is a prominent sign of masculinity and has been since the start of Hinduism. Says the *Rig Veda*: "The brave man (*vira*) looked forward to (his) masculine act (*paumsya*), to battle (RV 10.113)."²⁵ Durga is, in fact, affectionately called the "warrior goddess" and is famously called upon for protection when in battle. This is because Durga is known for both her success in battle and her enthusiasm for the act of war against evil. Similarly, Phoolan is motivated by the ill actions of others to dominate them in battle as a dacoit.

Phoolan Devi

There are two ways through life, the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself . . . Nature only wants to please itself and others to please it too . . . No one who ever loves the way of grace, comes to a bad end.²⁶

Before her life even began, Phoolan's perhaps most damaging mistake was to be born to a family of the Mallah caste. Her second mistake was to be born of the female gender.²⁷ This combination put Phoolan at an irreversible disadvantage. The Mallah caste, traditionally viewed as a caste of boatman laborers, is seen as part of the lowest caste within the recognized *varna*

²⁵ Jarrod L. Whitaker, *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 48.

²⁶ *The Tree of Life*, dir. by Terrence Malick (2011; Fox Searchlight, DVD).

²⁷ In the Hindu *karma* system, Phoolan's low birth status is understood to be due to a chain of causality from past lives. Positive effects reward positive actions, whereas negative effects penalize negative actions. Phoolan's birth status is therefore reflective of somewhat negative past *karma*.

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system of India, the Shudra caste. The hierarchy of caste includes the Brahmans, priests, the Kshatriyas, kings and modern-day landowners, the Vaishyas, merchants, and Shudras, laborers that traditionally serve the highest three castes. Additionally, the Dalit group is below the Shudra caste on the hierarchy, but is traditionally excluded from the *varna* system.²⁸ Though by Phoolan's time, the caste system was beginning to show signs of progression in urban areas, the system remains to this day very much intact in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, where Phoolan spent the first half of her life. In this area, the Kshatriya caste, modern-day landowners, are referred to as Thakurs and throughout Phoolan's life were the caste to enlist her help in tilling the fields, caring for their livestock, and carrying out any other menial tasks they asked of her. Many times these tasks were followed by both verbal and physical abuse, as well as no compensation for her labor. In turn, for the most part, from a young age, Phoolan had negative associations with the people of the Thakur caste. Across the board, people of the Shudra caste experience a great amount of abuse in their day-to-day lives. Members of the highest three castes use their feeling of god-given supremacy due to their birth status to exercise power over labor servants of the Shudra caste such as Phoolan. Phoolan herself explains the terrors of caste and the violence it produces: "What you call rape, that kind of thing happens to poor women in the villages every day. It is assumed that the

²⁸ Rather than the *varna* system, people in India are typically identified according to their *jati*, which literally translates to 'birth'. A person's *jati* usually delineates a type of job within traditional Indian culture, for example jeweler or scribe. *Jati* is many times identified by a person's surname. Unfortunately Phoolan Devi's true family name is unknown, so her *jati* cannot be identified.

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daughters of the poor are for the use of the rich . . . We are the property of the rich.”²⁹ Phoolan’s caste and gender would, thus, typically leave her with a bleak destiny and virtually no ability to escape the destitute conditions of her upbringing.

Early Life³⁰

In 1963, Phoolan was born in the rural village of Ghura Ka Purwa, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, along the banks of the Yamuna River. She was born on the day of the flower festival, August tenth, so her parents named her the feminine word for flower, Phoolan, in Hindi. Phoolan grew up with an older sister, Rukmini, two younger sisters, Choti and Bhuri, and a younger brother, Shiv Narayan.³¹ Phoolan’s father, Devidin, was a devotee of Durga and performed daily *puja* to the goddess, which Phoolan and her siblings inevitably observed. When the fourth daughter, Bhuri, was born, Phoolan’s mother, Moola, refused to nurse her and left her survival on the shoulders of Phoolan and Choti. In addition to caring for her infant sister, Phoolan’s early years consisted of sneaking around the village in hopes of avoiding both unrewarded labor and humiliating abuse. Her two biggest persecutors were her uncle, Bihari, and the community leader, or the Pradhan, of her village, who was of the Thakur caste. When Phoolan’s grandfather passed, Bihari stole a large amount of land from her father, which in turn mobilized him with power over Phoolan and her family. This action made

²⁹ Mary Anne Weaver, “India’s Bandit Queen,” *The Atlantic*.

³⁰ For a condensed and comprehensive timeline of Phoolan Devi’s life, see appendix 3.

³¹ This information about Phoolan’s family is inconsistent. The information above is based on the names and birth order given in her autobiography, but see family tree alternatives (see appendix 4).

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Bihari Phoolan's first demon. Because of Phoolan's uncharacteristically outspoken nature, Bihari found her to be both a nuisance and a disgrace to the family name. At the age of ten, the community gave Phoolan and her family permission to eat hora plant freely off of Bihari's land. This solidified Bihari's campaign for her departure from the village. At this age, Phoolan's mother, Moola, began to notice her divine masculine power, "You never fight back, Devidin! Phoolan fights harder than you!"³²

When Phoolan was eleven, Bihari arranged her marriage to a thirty-five year old widower from a distant village, named Putti Lal. Even though Phoolan was too young to legally get married in India³³, her parents agreed to go through with the marriage due to the financial burden Phoolan put on her family. At first, Phoolan's marriage to Putti Lal was seen as an opportunity, due to the fact that he was a decently wealthy man that agreed to marry such a poor girl without a promising dowry.³⁴ Female children of the Shudra or Mallah caste like Phoolan are seen as financial hardships due to the dowry necessary for marriage, which has led to the devastating problem of sex selection³⁵ throughout India.

³²Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 63.

³³ In 1940, an amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 stated that the minimum age of marriage was fifteen years old. Furthermore, the couple has to wait until *gauna*, a traditional ceremony, to move in together. This was the enacted law at the time of Phoolan's marriage to Putti Lal. See Lakshmanan, *Government of India, Law Commission of India: Proposal to Amend the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and Other Allied Laws*, Report No 205: Feb 2008, 33.

³⁴ In India, dowry is a gift given in forms such as money, livestock, or property, to the bridegroom and his family by the wife's family.

³⁵ Sex selection is the favoring of male children. Boys are preferred for many reasons; not only do they make money unlike females, but they also bring wives into the family. Wives provide labor and the possibility of more male children.

Soon after the marriage ceremony, Phoolan was ordered to leave her home village and live with her new husband, even though she was still years away from puberty. Within weeks of her arrival to her new village, Putti Lal asked Phoolan if she would like to learn a new game. When she bowed her head in agreement, Putti Lal striped naked and mounted her: "I felt his weight on my back, heavy as a buffalo. He began beating me in a way I had never been beaten before. I couldn't even scream at the pain of the serpent pressing at my flesh."³⁶ This was the first of many times that Phoolan would be raped. After a couple months, Phoolan attempted an escape from Putti Lal in the hopes of returning to her home village. However, no one in Putti Lal's village aided her escape and instead she was returned to her husband by a group of women. Due to this escape attempt, Phoolan spent most of her remaining time with Putti Lal, locked in shed in order to insure she would not attempt to leave again.³⁷ Three years after her marriage to Putti Lal and her arrival to this foreign village, Phoolan became extremely ill. It is unsure what ailment she had, but she describes her skin covered in boils, a high fever, hair loss, and severe stomach pain. A month into her sickness, without signs of recovery, Putti Lal sent for Devidin to come

Sometimes in poor families, sex selection leads to death of female infants or abortion of female fetuses. Moola's reaction to the birth of her fourth female child, Bhuri, is one example of sex selection.

³⁶ Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 100.

³⁷ Even facing such abuse, in India, a woman cannot end a marriage on these grounds. Women are seen as their husband's property after marriage, and because of this, only the man in the relationship that can end their contract. Furthermore, separation is exceedingly taboo in India, especially in rural areas such as these, where Phoolan spent the first half of life. Though Putti Lal's release of Phoolan would be seen as a blessing to her, Phoolan's family would be faced with tremendous disgrace if indeed her husband terminated their marriage contract.

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retrieve his daughter both for medical care and for her disgraceful release from him with claims that she was unable to fulfill her wifely duties. With a shot from the hospital, Phoolan made a full recovery. Some months later, Putti Lal, or “the demon” as Phoolan now referred to him, returned for Phoolan, but due to a public show of abuse and various breaches of the marriage contract, such as failure of Putti Lal to celebrate the *guana* ceremony, the police for once aided Phoolan’s cause and insisted that Putti Lal leave without Phoolan.

For about two years, Phoolan lived in her home village with nothing more than the normal disturbance of being a Mallah girl. One remarkable incident that happened during this time was a confrontation that Phoolan had with the Pradhan of the village, her second successful revenge against a demon. When the Pradhan’s daughter asked Phoolan, Choti, and her mother to complete a chore, Moola responded by saying that they would get to it later. The Pradhan’s daughter did not like this answer, so she threw a brick at Moola’s head. In response, Phoolan punched the daughter in the arm. This reaction caused the Pradhan and his two sons to run after Phoolan and to whip her with iron tipped *lathis*.³⁸ But while they were beating her, Phoolan instinctually grabbed hold of the Pradhan’s serpent. The tears in his eyes gave Phoolan the chance to capture the Pradhan’s *lathi*. Though Phoolan’s family was beaten and punished for Phoolan’s outburst, this incident still disturbed the order of the village and called the Pradhan’s authority into question. This kind of behavior is traditionally viewed as a powerful masculine trait, rather than that of a proper lady.

³⁸ A *lathi* is a thin stick used for whipping in India.

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After two years of a more or less stable existence, Phoolan was sixteen years old and feisty as ever. At this point, Phoolan's uncle Bihari had died and bequeathed to his son, Mayadin, both the land and his dislike for Phoolan. Phoolan's forward and outspoken nature was just not characteristic for an Indian woman; in fact, it was frowned upon. Indian culture put women in a subordinating role to the man in their life, father, husband, or son. Only males of respected castes traditionally possess her outspoken qualities. Such behavior, therefore, enraged Mayadin and, in hopes that she would be out of his life forever, he accused Phoolan of stealing valuables from his home. Phoolan was put in jail in the small town of Kalpi, where she was tortured and raped throughout her stay. At one point, a police guard beat and raped Phoolan in front of her father in order to remind Devidin of his inferior position within the *varna* system. Devidin reacted by only passively lowering his head in shame. At this time, Moola was busy seeking out finances to aid the family in paying for some kind of legal representation. By the grace of Durga and the charity of a high caste gentleman from Kalpi, Moola was able to hire help for Phoolan. Her lawyer was able to track down the supposed valuables that Phoolan had stolen to prove that Phoolan should be released. With that, Phoolan was freed and returned to her home village again. However, this episode in jail spurred a deep distrust, resentment, and fear of police officers in Phoolan, as well as a want for revenge. At this point, Phoolan describes herself as, "My whole being had been fired with rage and rebellion."³⁹

³⁹ Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 225.

Life as a Dacoit

Since sending Phoolan to jail did not work, Mayadin quickly conjured up another plan. In the middle of the night, when Phoolan was still sixteen years old, a gang of dacoits in police uniforms came to kidnap Phoolan. Though Phoolan fought back, the mens' strength overpowered her and within minutes, Baboo Gujar Singh's gang had taken Phoolan Devi. The gang raced deep into the nearby ravines where they typically would have killed her right away,⁴⁰ but Babbo Singh, who was born to the upper Gujar caste,⁴¹ took an immediate liking to Phoolan and began formulating a plan to make her his mistress. Babbo Singh's second in command, Vikram Mallah Singh, who was of the Mallah caste like Phoolan, also was instantly attracted to her and he made it his mission to protect Phoolan.⁴²

One night, Babbo ordered Phoolan to join him in his tent, but when he began to molest Phoolan, she prayed to the goddess, "I closed my eyes and prayed to Durga to whisper in my ear when the moment was right to flee."⁴³ Luckily, Vikram came to her rescue and shot Baboo, making himself the new

⁴⁰ Dacoits usually kidnap for ransom, but Mayadin most likely already paid them to take Phoolan and they were not expecting any ransom money worth waiting around for from such a poor Mallah family. See Shyam Sunder Katare, *Patterns of Dacoity in India: a case study of Madhya Pradesh*. (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1972), 73.

⁴¹ The Gujar caste is the equivalent of Thakur just originated from the Indian state of Maharashtra instead of Uttar Pradesh. Gujars are derived from the Kshatriya caste and are composed mainly of powerful landowners, just like the Thakurs.

⁴² Both Baboo and Vikram's attraction to Phoolan would suggest that she was physically striking, however, various texts describe her as an average looking teen. Unfortunately, no photos of Phoolan Devi exist from this stage of her life. The first known photo of Phoolan was taken at the time of her surrender.

⁴³ Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 256.

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leader of the gang. With a Mallah in charge, what was left of the upper-caste bandits left the group, leaving mostly low-caste dacoits. Also soon after Vikram took power, he married Phoolan, making his point even more explicit—no one touches Phoolan.

As a way of releasing himself from the guilt of killing Baboo Gujar Singh, Vikram went to a *sadhu*⁴⁴ he frequented in a place called Ghatapara. Vikram told the *sadhu* about the events of Baboo and the *sadhu* responded that Vikram had done the right thing. Afterwards, the *sadhu*'s eyes glazed over as he turned his attention to Phoolan, "You have vanquished the demon, you are the incarnation of Kali the goddess herself!"⁴⁵ This recognition as a spawn of Durga undoubtedly fueled Phoolan in both her identification with the goddess and her want for revenge.

Vikram decided that Phoolan was ready to carry out her first act of revenge as a dacoit, punishment of her first husband, Putti Lal. She stabbed him, crushed his serpent, and left him humiliated on the streets of his village. Putti Lal was reduced to tears and exclaimed, "She [Phoolan] is a goddess, a good woman. I am the guilty one."⁴⁶ Once she was done beating him, Vikram left a letter on his body that read: "Warning: this is what happens to old men who

⁴⁴ A *sadhu* is a kind of religious ascetic that leaves behind the comforts of householder life with the goal of achieving liberation or *moksha*. *Sadhus* are many times viewed as auspicious for their supposed ability to relieve negative *karma* with donations. Some however, fear *sadhus* for their believed ability to cast cures.

⁴⁵ Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 277.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

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marry young girls!"⁴⁷ After this initial act of sheer violence, Vikram began initiating Phoolan into the world of being a dacoit. He taught her how to use a rifle properly and allegedly gave her some infamous words of advice, "'If you are going to kill, kill twenty, not just one. For if you kill twenty, your fame will spread; if you kill only one, they will hang you as a murderess."⁴⁸ This allowed Phoolan to start to playing a larger role in the gang's raids and lootings. When announcing into the loud speaker the name of the dacoit gang that was about to invade the village, Vikram began declaring, "I am Vikram Mallah, and Phoolan Devi is here with me!"⁴⁹

Soon after Phoolan rose to the status of active dacoit, Vikram explained that she needed to pick an emblem. Phoolan chose Durga because, "Like the goddess, I was driven by my hunger for justice, for revenge over demons."⁵⁰ From that time on, Phoolan began carrying a small figure of Durga in her pocket with her and after each crime, Phoolan would leave offerings and prayers at Durga's temple in exchange for her protection. At this time, the gang's men began addressing Phoolan Devi as Phool Singh,⁵¹ the masculine version of her name, in order to show respect for her as more than just a woman and as a

⁴⁷ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁸ Mary Anne Weaver, "The Bandit Queen," *The Atlantic*.

⁴⁹ Phoolan Devi, *The Bandit Queen of India*, 288.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 293.

⁵¹ During Phoolan's life, it seems that the name 'Singh' is attached to a person's first name in order to identify respect and leadership to a male. Similarly, the name 'Devi' acts in the same way for females. Throughout India, the word 'Singh' means powerful one, hero, or lion. The lion may give particular significance in Phoolan's situation since she so closely identifies with Durga, whose vehicle is depicted as either a tiger or a lion.

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recognized leader of the gang. Phoolan notes it as “testament to my strength.”⁵² Furthermore, calling Phoolan Phool Singh, symbolized Phoolan’s deep presence of masculine power within, as well as the start of her ascent to divinity. Though the goddess Durga is a feminine figure, on the hierarchy of respect, Durga is at the top for Phoolan. In order to reach that high level of admiration, Phoolan must first be elevated from powerless female to a symbol of masculine power, on route to raising herself to the goddess who resides in and over everyone and everything. Being simply a female human in India’s caste-bound society does not allow Phoolan the power necessary for her to act on her need for revenge.

For about a year, Phoolan and Vikram led this gang of dacoits. They orchestrated numerous raids and lootings of upper-caste villages, train robberies, and kidnappings. Though much of the money they won was split amongst the bandits, much of the money was also given to the poor of low-caste families. Thus, the gang became known for its ‘Robin Hood’ acts. The group was exceptionally lucky and skilled at escaping the police that constantly patrolled the Chambal ravines in search of dacoits. Phoolan attributes this to many omens and intuitions that Durga presented to her. Sometimes a snake would rub up against her pant leg as a hint that they must leave the area, or sometimes a little girl’s whisper would tell Phoolan to hide in an obscure abandoned building to avoid being captured. She attributed all of these signs to the goddess Durga as her way of protecting Phoolan.

⁵² Mary Anne Weaver, “India’s Bandit Queen,” *The Atlantic*.

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However, all good things must come to an end. In 1980, Vikram's bandit *guru*, Shri Ram joined the gang. Shri Ram was a Thakur and with him, he brought several other Thakurs to join the gang, including his brother, Lala Ram. With these new members, a divide between castes began to widen. Phoolan, along with some of the original gang members, began to doubt the Ram brothers' intentions. Some members of the gang left for fear that they were on the brink of an inter-gang war. One August evening, after setting up camp, the goddess Durga purportedly sent Phoolan a bad omen; a black crow perched on a dead tree trunk. Phoolan urged Vikram that they needed to either separate from the Ram brothers that night or kill them, but Vikram trusted Shri Ram and felt an eternal debt to him for teaching him all he knew about dacoity. Unfortunately, Phoolan's intuition was correct: in the middle of the night, the Ram brothers shot and killed Vikram along with several other low-caste gang members. It is understood that the Ram brothers had planned this assassination from their initiation into the gang. The fact that Vikram, a Mallah, had killed Baboo, a Thakur, and taken over his gang of bandits was not right in their eyes. The Ram brothers are thought to have killed Vikram as punishment for gaining control of an upper-caste member's gang. Next, the Ram brothers kidnapped Phoolan and brought her to a small village down the Yamuna River called Behmai.⁵³ There, the Ram brothers blamed the death of Vikram on Phoolan and threw her into a shed for the next three weeks. Each night Phoolan spent in the shed, she was raped repeatedly, many times until she became unconscious. On the twenty-

⁵³ Behmai is a village located in the Kanpur Dehat district in the state of Uttar Pradesh, near the larger town of Sikandra.

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third day, a priest⁵⁴ from a nearby village and Santosh Pandit, a friend of Phoolan's, snuck into the shed and helped her escape. The humiliation that Phoolan endured while in Behmai would not go unpunished. The Ram brothers and her numerous abusers had just become a group of demons that Phoolan would have to conquer.

Soon after her escape from Behmai, at the age of eighteen Phoolan met up with a gang of Vikram's friends led by a man named Man Singh. Together, Man Singh and Phoolan Devi carried out several violent lootings and raids throughout both Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.⁵⁵ At this time, Phoolan's actions were most reflective of the fierce warrior goddess, Kali, rather than Durga, Kali's more civil and composed counterpart. Phoolan's endless search for the Ram brothers had made her war crazed and bloodthirsty like Kali. She would not rest until the Ram brothers had been punished for both murdering the love of her life, Vikram, and forcing her to endure such misery in Behmai.

On February 14, 1981, Phoolan Devi led her gang back to the village of Behmai in search of the Ram brothers. The events of this day are especially clouded with countless theories of how these events transpired. Police reports and civilian descriptions, however, explain that thirty Thakur men were shot that day, twenty-two killed, for a crime they did not commit. These men are said to never have partaken in the multiple rapes of Phoolan Devi some months earlier, but it is unknown whether these men were killed with that motive or for harboring

⁵⁴ Soon after her escape, the priest was punished for helping Phoolan by being doused in gas by her assailants and burnt to death.

⁵⁵ Madhya Pradesh is a southerly neighboring Indian state to Uttar Pradesh.

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the Ram brothers. After the Massacre of Behmai,⁵⁶ the police of Uttar Pradesh put a high price on Phoolan's head, the rough equivalent to \$10,400. This made Phoolan begin to question the loyalty of her fellow bandits, afraid that they might kill or capture her themselves to turn into the police and collect the money.

For two years, Phoolan successfully dodged the police with the help of low-caste families. The gang however was hardly ever united due to fear of being caught and they were unable to carry out many raids, making Phoolan and her men broke. Many of the members dropped out, but Man Singh stayed at her side, as by this time, they had become romantically involved. In 1982, something strange happened: Phoolan stopped receiving helpful signs and omens from Durga. Phoolan in turn took the lack of signs as an indicator that she must surrender.

Jail and Political Career

After many months of negotiation, Phoolan Devi⁵⁷ surrendered in Bhind to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in February of 1983 at the age of nineteen. Her surrender came with many conditions, including: pictures of both Gandhi and Durga must be present at the time of her surrender; she and none of her men would be hung or tried in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and each of their jail sentences would not exceed eight years; Phoolan and her men would have a private VIP area to themselves while in jail; she would not get the death penalty; her father would receive a plot of land in Madhya Pradesh; and her brother would

⁵⁶ Massacre of Behmai is also known as the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre of India, since it happened the same day as the holiday.

⁵⁷ See appendix 5 and 6.

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be given a government job. Without trial, Phoolan and her men were incarcerated in the Gwalior Jail.

From this point forward, it became apparent through numerous interviews and reports that in general high-caste Indians demonized Phoolan, while low-caste Indians as well as knowledgeable people worldwide divinized her. The divine incarnation of Durga is in large the way people remember Phoolan Devi to this day; however, many Thakurs and higher-caste members only see Phoolan as the mistakenly empowered Mallah girl who stole from them and killed their men.

In jail, Phoolan remained extremely religious. She created a shrine to Durga in her cell where she gave *puja* to the goddess everyday. It seemed however that Durga did little to help Phoolan while in jail. Most of her men spent less than the prescribed eight years in jail, whereas Phoolan was jailed for eleven. Throughout her stay, Phoolan received many letters from her supporters as well as her contesters. About a year before her release, Phoolan began experiencing severe stomach pains. She soon after was diagnosed with tumors covering her stomach. Phoolan was then transferred to the Tihar Jail in Delhi for surgery. Here, Phoolan's luck seemed to be turning around. Fortunately, the tumors were not malignant and on February 19, 1994, Phoolan Devi was released from jail.

Phoolan spent the remainder of 1994 getting reacquainted with family and friends as well as getting settled into a more urbanized lifestyle. Later that year, in part by a communal family decision, Phoolan married a man with low scale

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political aspirations named Umed Singh. Umed and Phoolan had an unconventional Indian marriage. Instead of Umed being the protector and head of the household, Phoolan filled those masculine roles within the relationship. It is said that Phoolan often referred to Umed in Hindi as “my wife.”⁵⁸

At this time, a movie advertised as a ‘True Life’ depiction of Phoolan Devi’s life, *The Bandit Queen*, was released without Phoolan’s consent. In fact, Phoolan appealed to numerous legal courts to ban the film in India and other countries around the world. The film producers and writers never even reached out to Phoolan during production for her first hand opinion on the film’s content. The release of *The Bandit Queen* greatly offended Phoolan Devi and for many years she fought for its banishment.

In 1995, Phoolan briefly converted to Buddhism in hopes of escaping the caste system that she despised. Phoolan says however, “I asked if it was true, what I had heard . . . that a Buddhist should forgive her enemies. When they told me, “Yes, it is,” I decided not to convert!”⁵⁹ Also that year, Phoolan made her first public political move and began to organize a consciousness-raising group she called the Eklavya Sena.⁶⁰ Phoolan hoped this group would empower

⁵⁸ Mary Anne Weaver, “India’s Bandit Queen,” *The Atlantic*.

⁵⁹ Roy Moxham, *Outlaw: India’s Bandit Queen and Me* (London: Rider, 2010), 87.

⁶⁰ Eklavya is a character in the *Mahabharata* who was an archer of low-caste. He pleaded with Drona, Prince Arjuna’s instructor, to teach him to become an outstanding archer, but because of his low-caste, Drona refused him as a pupil. Eklavya taught himself the skill of archery and developed into the best. Some say he even surpassed the technique of Prince Arjuna himself. When, Eklavya displayed his skill to Drona, Drona asked for Eklavya’s thumb as a gift to his teacher to symbolize the end of his training. Lowly, Eklavya cut off his own thumb even though he knew it would forever ruin his ability as an archer. See Roy Moxham, *Outlaw*, 89-90.

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people of low-caste, like herself. Later, she aligned herself with the Samajwadi Party⁶¹ and made her intentions to run for Parliamentary election known. The leader of the Samajwadi Party at the time was the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh. Phoolan has later explained that running for election into Parliament was a strategic choice. If she won, then she would also have won Parliamentary immunity, which was very attractive to Phoolan due to the numerous charges she still had held against her in Uttar Pradesh at the time.

Phoolan's⁶² campaign generated a lot of passion and chatter amongst Indian citizens. Though the high-caste voters opposed her election, Phoolan had many of the low-caste voters, who compose eighty-five percent of the electorate,⁶³ rooting for her. Phoolan was catapulted to the head of the race in great part due to her extraordinary charisma and deep-rooted strength, but also for the hope she stood for as a low-caste woman. One of Phoolan's lawyers describes her as, "one of the most astute women I've ever met; she has an unerring instinct about people, and is vastly intelligent."⁶⁴ Due to her many strengths, on May 12, 1995, Phoolan won, by a majority vote of 37,000, a seat in the Indian Parliament. This victory was exceptional in many ways, because Phoolan Devi was illiterate, known by many India as a criminal, and born to the Mallah caste. Phoolan however, was not the only illiterate, low-caste person with

⁶¹ The Samajwadi Party is the socialist off-branch of the Janata Dal, people's party in India.

⁶² See appendix 7.

⁶³ Mary Anne Weaver, "India's Bandit Queen," *The Atlantic*.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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a seat in Parliament: both Shobhawati Devi and Bhagwati Devi had also succeeded in securing a seat in Parliament despite their lowly background.

Though Phoolan had security men with her at all times, her life was still constantly at risk. Her whole life, death had always been just around the corner for Phoolan. Whether as a child, due to deadly beatings, or as a dacoit in the ravines the stakes were always high, and now as a grown woman, Phoolan had numerous threats directed at her from very angry high-caste members. Many Thakurs had not forgotten or forgiven for the Behmai Massacre that took so many men from their caste and for this they blamed Phoolan. While she was running for election, a Times article stated that, "Thakur leaders say they will not rest until she [Phoolan] is dead."⁶⁵

On July 25, 2001, three masked men assassinated Phoolan outside of her home in New Delhi. She was killed on the spot by five bullets, three to the head and two to the side.⁶⁶ The men's homicide plan was very secure and because of this the three have to this day never been positively identified. Phoolan Devi's death soon became national news, a relief to some and heartbreaking to others.

Conclusion

Phoolan Devi was a greatly disputed figure in Indian culture throughout her life and in her death. A goddess to most and a demon to some, Phoolan did not fail in making herself recognized worldwide. She rose out of her bleak destiny as a low caste girl from a small fishing village, to a successful elected Member of Indian Parliament.

⁶⁵ Roy Moxham, *Outlaw*, 99.

⁶⁶ Anurag Prasad, "Phoolan Devi Shot Dead," *The Times of India*, July 25, 2001.

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Though Phoolan's close identification with the warrior goddess, Durga, was not the encouraged or typical path for most Hindu girls, Phoolan was never a traditional or rule-abiding person. From a young age she was inspired by Durga's mixture of femininity and masculinity that gave her the respect necessary to carry out revengeful violent acts while still embodying both the female form and the female creative power of *shakti*. Phoolan constantly publicized her complete devotion to Durga: throughout her years as a bandit with a loudspeaker, "*Jai Durga Mata!* (Victory to Durga the Mother Goddess!),"⁶⁷ and later heading letters with, "Victory to Goddess Durga."⁶⁸ These public declarations in addition to her personification of the goddess in her actions and mannerisms caused Phoolan to develop into a divine incarnation of the Mother Goddess, Durga, in the eyes of the public. With Durga's grace, Phoolan maintained a calm composure and profound air of *shakti* throughout most of her career as well as an immense appetite for retribution. Phoolan exhibited key masculine attributes within Indian culture, *savas*, or physical strength, and *virata*, bravery, as well as an eagerness for war, while still maintaining her feminine form, composure, and innate *shakti*. Phoolan is a woman who was divinized not due to her ideal upholding of *stridharma*, like Sita in the *Ramayana*, but rather due to her divine acts of war, protecting the defenseless in their time of need. Her divine revengeful accomplishments began at the early age of ten when she began the fight against her uncle, Mayadin, continued throughout the 'Robin Hood' acts carried out by her and her gang as a dacoit, and remained apparent

⁶⁷ Mary Anne Weaver, "India's Bandit Queen," *The Atlantic*.

⁶⁸ Roy Moxham, *Outlaw*, 33.

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until the end of her life as an elected Member of Parliament. Though numerous factors went into Phoolan Devi's divinization, the fact that the public does not look back on Phoolan as a demon is somewhat of a miracle. A miracle possibly bestowed upon Phoolan Devi by her idol, her savior, and her incarnation, Durga.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1:



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An image of Durga with her traditional iconography

Appendix 2:



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Relief of Durga with her lion and weapons at the Kailāsanātha Temple in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu

⁶⁹ Durga, JPG, http://www.maransdog.net/TVG/Velukkudi_Sri_Krishnan-Srimadh_Bhagavadham-Podhigai_TV_Audio/img/KRISHNA_CHARITAM/durga.jpg.

⁷⁰ Photo by Tracy Coleman, Durga Relief, JPG

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Appendix 3:

Timeline of Phoolan Devi's Life⁷¹

August 10, 1963: Born

1974: Married to Putti Lal

1977: Returned to her home village

1979: Falsely accused of stealing from her cousin, Mayadin, and subsequently held in jail in Kalpi

July 1979: Captured by Baboo Singh's gang of bandits

August 1980: Vikram was killed and the Ram brothers kidnapped Phoolan

February 14, 1981: Behmai Massacre (Saint Valentine's Day Massacre of India)

February 1983: Surrenders to the Madhya Pradesh police

February 1994: Released from prison

September 9, 1994: *The Bandit Queen* movie is released, without Phoolan's consultation and against her will

1995: Converted to Buddhism for a stunted period

Created the Eklavya Sena

May 12, 1995: Elected to Parliament

1996-1998: Served as 11th Lok Sabha from Mirzapur in Indian Parliament

1999-2001: Served as 13th Lok Sabha

July 25, 2001: Assassinated outside of her home in Delhi

Appendix 4:

*See attached PowerPoint file

⁷¹ As stated before, the events of Phoolan Devi's life vary from source to source.

Appendix 5:



Phoolan Devi and her gang at their surrender in Bhind

Appendix 6:



Phoolan Devi praying at the time of her surrender

⁷² Phoolan and Gang at Surrender, JPG, http://farm1.static.flickr.com/31/62644603_3456bf0dd1.jpg
⁷³ Phoolan at Surrender, JPG, http://s2.hubimg.com/u/164537_f260.jpg

Appendix 7:



Phoolan Devi during her campaign to become an elected member of India's Parliament

⁷⁴ Phoolan Campaigning, JPG,
http://farm5.static.flickr.com/4125/5052160557_a292bbec25.jpg

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