



[Jackie Green](#)

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Phoolan Devi, the Bandit Queen

For Women's History Month Jackie tells us the "her-story" of India's Phoolan Devi, popularly known as the Bandit Queen.

In my city there is a cinema that is known for playing non-mainstream films. I had intended to see one film (I cannot recall what it was) but ended up seeing another: "Bandit Queen", the story of a real-life Robin Hood.

Phoolan Devi carved a tumultuous yet empowering path through India's history, leaving an indelible mark on the narrative of women's struggles and resilience. Born into poverty in 1963, Devi faced early challenges, including child marriage, abuse and social discrimination. However, her story took a dramatic turn when she took matters into her own hands to challenge the social standards that oppressed women in rural India.

Phoolan was driven by a desire for justice against those who had wronged her. Leading a group of bandits in the Northern Indian hinterlands, her actions were symbolic of resistance against the deeply entrenched class and gender hierarchies. Despite the criminality of her actions, more and more saw her as a symbol of rebellion against a system that had marginalised and oppressed her and them. Her oppressors feared her and the wave of revolution she brought.

What amazed me was that Phoolan arranged the terms of her eventual surrender and ensured that those in her outlaw group suffered no punishment. To me that demonstrates her power. In 1983, after her surrender, Phoolan Devi embraced politics, advocating for the rights of marginalised communities and women. In 1996 she was elected to the Indian parliament. Phoolan created a significant shift in the landscape of women's participation in politics.

For me the film gave me insight into Phoolan's life and her journey to her emancipation of the shackles the ruling minority had placed on her. She challenged deep-rooted, long held beliefs and gave the mute a voice. Phoolan Devi's impact on women's history lies in her defiance against a patriarchal and class-ridden society. Her life, marked by struggles and resilience, was one faced by countless women in India. She was controversial and a complex symbol of rebellion, empowerment, and the ongoing fight for justice in the face of adversity.

I read Phoolan's autobiography, ghost-written because she could not read or write. She was incredible. We are not outlaws, well, at least I think not, but being in the union, having our collective voice, empowers us to effectively negotiate and advocate for better rights inside and outside the workplace.