

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 70
Phoolan Devi

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast!

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women, both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast.

I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined by DLS co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hello there!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan!

SUSAN STONE: In this episode, we are going hear from Madhvi Ramani and Rina Grob from the Berlin-based feminist podcast, Ms Informed. Ms Informed talks about news, books, and other things that matter from a feminist perspective.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right. We had a very recent show with them just a couple of weeks ago, so this is very fresh for you. Let me tell you a little bit about the two of them. Madhvi Ramani writes articles, essays, plays, and prose, including books for children. And her work has been published in *Asia Literary Review*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

Then we have Rina Grob, who has worked in film and theater and is now a producer and podcaster, focusing on the nexus between feminism and pop culture — right up our streets.

SUSAN STONE: Indeed!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: They'll be telling us about the life of an extraordinary Indian woman called Phoolan Devi. We do have to note, Phoolan Devi had a very challenging existence, particularly when she was younger, and her story is marked by multiple incidents of violence and sexual abuse. So please use caution when listening.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, please do, but it's a little rough, but it's a story worth listening to. So here are our presenters live from the stage in Berlin's ACUD.

Madhvi speaks first, followed by Rina.

MADHVI RAMANI ON TAPE FROM ACUD: We've been fans of the Dead Ladies Show forever.

RINA GROB: That's true. We're also very nervous. Maybe that's just me.

MADHVI RAMANI: Yes. This is a bigger and better podcast than ours.
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But somehow we've made it here, so that's great.
[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS] And yeah, we're super excited to talk about this Dead Lady. Her name is Phoolan Devi, otherwise known as India's Bandit Queen.

RINA GROB: So before we start, we just — this episode is gonna be a little bit *full-on*.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

MADHVI RAMANI: Oh, people laughed.

RINA GROB: Thanks guys, thank you so much. Because she had a pretty, pretty wild life, so we're just gonna start with a couple of trigger warnings. So in this episode, we will talk about violence, assault, child abuse, rape, kidnapping, sexual violence, and murder. So feel free to step out, switch off if you need to. At any point, if it gets too much, please feel free to leave. And with that, I hand over the mic to Madhvi.

MADHVI RAMANI: Thank you. We might curse a bit too.

RINA GROB: Oh, yes. I think that's everything.

MADHVI RAMANI: So the reason we chose this amazing woman is, yes, she was very special, but what she went through is kind of representative of what a lot of women in the world are going through even today. But those women's stories are kind of undocumented, those voices are unheard. But with Phoolan Devi, we have her autobiography, which is really special because like a lot of women who come from Uttar Pradesh in North India, she was illiterate. Even at the moment, I think the illiteracy rate in Uttar Pradesh, which is super poor, is at 63. No, the literacy rate for women is at 63%. So it's a lot of women who can't read and write.

But the reason that we have this amazing autobiography is because a publisher came to her in 1994 after she was released from about 11 years in jail.

Before that, she was playing this cat-and-mouse game with the police for about three and a half years. She had a price of \$10,000 on her head. The Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi knew who she was, and she was wanted for 48 counts of murder. No, 48 counts of major crime, 22 murders only. Sorry. It's all the same after you get to a certain point. I'm not talking from experience. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Looting, kidnappings, and just generally being a bandit.

She had captured the imagination of a nation. She was known as the female Robin Hood, and was really praised and welcomed by thousands. One of our friends that we spoke to, who should be here now, but he's Indian, so he's kind of unreliable, I guess. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

RINA GROB: No, no, he's here.

MADHVI RAMANI: Oh, he's here. I didn't see him. Sorry. Let's edit that out. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

RINA GROB: He's here and he's reliable.

MADHVI RAMANI: He's here. He's reliable like all Indian people. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

He said that when he was growing up in India as a child, if he didn't behave, his mother would tell him that Phoolan Devi would come and get him.

How did this woman who was shorter than me, which is about, I'm over five foot, but she was under five foot. She was illiterate. She was very slight. She came from an absolute impoverished background. How did she become larger-than-life figure? I think it starts really in her childhood. She was born in 1963 in a village near the Yamuna River.

[RINA FAILS TO CHANGE SLIDE]

RINA GROB: I'm forgetting my duties. I'm sorry.

MADHVI RAMANI: That's okay, you had one job, Rina. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Her family was poor. She had one dress and no shoes. In fact, no one in her family had any shoes. And much of her childhood is characterized by hunger. There's just never enough to eat. She remembers eating handfuls of mud from the riverbanks as a child. And in the next slide...

RINA GROB (CHANGING SLIDE): I remembered.

MADHVI RAMANI: We see that one of her chores was making dung cakes, which she used to do with her mother. So her mother used to squat down in front of the dung pat and knead these cakes. And then they would take these cakes, the girls, and put them up in piles to dry. And then they would carry them on their heads from the field, back to the village.

This is actually practice that is still done today, because dung cakes are used to burn as fuel, to keep people warm in the winter, and as cooking fuel also, and then also to fertilize the crops. So when she wasn't doing this or working in the fields, or collecting the water, or doing her chores in the house as a child, she had to do any chores that any of the other villagers asked her for, so that she could maybe get something to eat.

And one of her earliest memories is when the Pradhan, who is this village head, asks her to massage his head. So she's a child and she's doing this. And in front of her in the courtyard is this big pile of mangoes from his tree. And she's never seen mangoes so amazing before because they're poor; they only get the shittiest mangoes. And she's hungry. She's a child. The smell of these mangoes sort of overcome her. And she asks him, "Hey, can I have maybe a little piece of mango?" His response to this is to slap her so hard that it resonates in her head. She's dizzy. She falls over. She's really scared. She wets herself.

And she manages to run back to her mother. She tells her mother what happened. And she's pretty sure she's going to get beaten by her mother too because she gets beaten by everyone all the time. In fact, one of her games that she plays with her sisters to kind of compare the bruises and marks on their bodies. But her mother doesn't beat her. Her mother has a kind of different response. Her mother is really fiery and really angry.

So she drags her by the hand back to the house of the Pradhan, and she shouts at him. She says, "You think we bring children into this world to be your slaves. Why don't you just kill her instead of hitting her? Because then she wouldn't ask for your mangoes. Here, kill her if you like."

So her mother's a little bit extreme. And it's a very different response from what she gets from her father, who is really ashamed about this entire incident. Because he says it's their duty to serve other people in the village who are of a higher caste.

Now, when it comes to caste in India, this is kind of a common belief. Because in Hinduism, you're born into a certain caste. And there are four main castes and

one non-caste, which is the Dalits, which are, if you've read Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, she's talking about them then.

And it's believed that if you're born into this caste, it's based on your previous lives and your deeds in your previous lives. So your position in society is kind of part of a divine order, really. So it's determined by God. And even if you treat people of a lower caste kind of badly, you're sort of enacting their karma, so it's all good.

There's this idea that you should just like live with your lot in life. And Phoolan is from a lower caste. She's from specifically a sub-caste called the Mallahs, who are fishermen and boatmen. So her father tells her to just submit to it and she has to do her duty. But Phoolan is already a fighter. She just can't in her mind come to terms with this.

One day she takes a *lathi* or a stick and she plans to go to the ravines, which is like in the Chambal Valley, this big sort of vast no-man's land, to find God because she's kind of convinced that that's where God lives. And she wants to ask him a lot of questions.

She wants to ask him, this God who made her born here in this caste, in this village, how can people like the Pradhan treat her badly? How is it possible that her father's brother cheated them out of the land that was rightfully theirs, which means that they are especially destitute?

So she sees all this injustice and she actually starts to wage a war on her uncle and her older cousin brother, who's called Mayaddin. And at the age of 10, she starts picking nuts from their fields and eating them. And she gets caught and she's beaten and she's dragged in front of the village elders. And she waits there by herself as a 10-year-old child, just seeing what these old men are going to decide is her punishment.

But surprisingly for her, she actually wins. They say that since the land is in dispute and it's kind of family land, she can eat all the nuts she wants from this land. And so it's her first victory. To be fair, she doesn't have many victories. She's trying to like save this neem tree once with her body and she gets beaten with a brick. None of the villagers help her, all of this kind of stuff. So it's very bad. But she is a bit of a troublemaker by this age.

And by the age of 11, because she is kind of making waves, but her cousin conspires to arrange a marriage for her at the age of 11 to a man who is three times her age. So he's like 45. And in India—this might again sound a bit weird.—but UNICEF says that 27% of girls in India today are marriage before the age

of 18. And in the 70s, when this happened to Phoolan Devi, when she was married, the figure was at more than 50%.

And normally, what happens is when you get married at the age of 11, you stay at your parents' house until you're kind of of age to go to your in-laws' house. And that's what was agreed. But this guy, who's a total bastard, broke this agreement and decided to just that he wanted to take her and they couldn't really do anything about it because it's tradition. So she's taken to this house of a 45-year-old man. He rapes her, beats her, tortures her. It's terrible.

At the age of 12, she manages to run away and she crosses a vast expanse of arid land on foot to get back to her village. When she gets back to her village, she's kind of not welcomed because it's not what is expected. Like it's a big shame to leave your husband. So she's sent back eventually because she's a shamed woman. And then again, when she goes back, her husband has married a new woman, a new wife, and both of them torture her almost to death.

The only reason she's able to survive this is that word gets back to her village, her father goes and begs for her to be taken to the hospital, and then they bring her back to the village. For the next few years, her life is terrible because now she is a spoiled woman. It's her fault, basically, all the blame is on her. And she's not protected by her husband, and she is repeatedly abused and raped by all of the people of higher castes around her.

Her strife with her cousin continues. He says — at one point he accuses her of theft. We don't know whether this is true or not, but she is taken into police custody. And again, she's held there for about three weeks. She's beaten, she's raped by all the police. And so, yeah, I know what you're thinking. She's still a teenager. She's been subjected by all this unspeakable violence, but it's also not unusual. According to one recent poll, 23% of low-caste women said that they were raped in what is caste rape. And this is vastly under-reported because, like I said, if you go to the police, you're likely to face kind of assault again.

Phoolan Devi, in her own words, told one reporter, “Do you have any idea what it's like to live in a village in India? What you call rape, that kind of thing happens to poor women in villages every day. It's assumed that the daughters of the poor are for the use of the rich. They assume that we are their property.”

So that's her life that she's condemned to and that she's still fighting for somehow in her village until one rainy night, a group of police officers surround her house.

RINA GROB: Dun, dun, dun.

Now you get to listen to me for a while. So what happens next is sort of a really turning point or a new chapter in Phoolan's life. So she is kidnapped by a group of bandits, also called *daicots*. At this point, Phoolan believes that *daicots* are four-legged and four-armed monsters that live in the ravines. So imagine it's quite a shock when she's kidnapped by them. They come to her parents' house dressed as police officers. Phoolan suspects that they are sent by her cousin Mayaddin. The exact date of her kidnapping is not known, but we know she was roughly around 16 years of age.

The gang is made out of two groups. One, there are the Mallah, which are the same caste as her, and then there are the Thakur, which are of a slightly higher caste than she is. She lives in the ravines with them as their captives. The Thakurs, they want to keep her as a sex slave. However, one night when a Thakur is about to rape her, he is literally on top of her, he is shot in the back of the head by a Mallah named Vikram.

Vikram becomes the de facto head of the gang after this happens and the gang split into two, the Thakur going in one group and all of the Mallah following Vikram. Vikram later on becomes Phoolan's husband. We don't know exactly when this happened, but we know that he was roughly five years older than she was. So she's roughly 16 at this age. That would make him about 20, 21.

With Vikram and the gang, Phoolan kind of becomes an apprentice to being a bandit. She enacts revenge upon her first husband by beating him up, stripping him naked and leaving him outside for all to see with a sign pinned to his chest that says, this is what happens to men who marry children.

She also gets revenge upon the police officer who allowed her to be beaten and raped by shooting him in the face. She also enacts her revenge upon her cousin, Mayaddin, but Vikram tells her to keep him alive because he is family and you do not kill your family. [AUDIENCE GIGGLES]

So by this point, she's become a very valuable member of the group. She is very highly attuned to danger and she's also a crack shot with a rifle.

She also feels like she is being protected by snakes and she feels like she hears the voice of a little girl leading her to safety and warning her whenever she gets into danger. So she also starts praying to the goddess Durga who rides a tiger and carries a sword and is really, really fierce. [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] And she prays to her before raids and she sees herself as a force for good who is carrying out vengeance.

They join together with another Thakur gang led by a man who was Vikram's mentor when they were both in prison and he has recently been released. Phoolan has this premonition that he's up to no good and that they shouldn't trust him and she feels like Vikram is going to be betrayed by his mentor and she wants to shoot him in the face.

Vikram, however, tells her, "let's not do that, we shouldn't do that," because apparently there's a bandit code and Vikram is really loyal and he wants to follow this code. It is this loyalty that will eventually get him killed.

So in an assassination attempt, Vikram is injured by a bullet which was shot by a Thakur. So together Phoolan and Vikram go to Nepal. They kind of hide out there for a while for him to recover and this is like a very important moment in Phoolan's life because it's her first kind of moments of happiness.

She gets to go to the cinema for the first time and her relationship with Vikram really gets to develop. He is the first man with whom she ever feels safe. He's also the first man who has ever protected her. However, upon his recovery, they return to the gang and lo and behold, just as Phoolan predicted, he is then killed by the Thakur gang.

And on the site of his death, Phoolan is then gang raped by the members of the Thakur gang. They then hold her hostage for about a month. They torture her, they rape her, they drag her naked from village to village, allowing anyone who wants to rape her. She is finally freed by a friendly old man who is an ally of Vikram's. And for helping her, he is set on fire and burns to death.

So after she escapes, she sort of hides out in the ravines and takes her time to recover. After which she seeks out a man called Baba Mustakim, who is a Muslim bandit and asks him for men. He allows her to pitch herself to the men present and she picks the men who are motivated by revenge, not by money, to join her gang. And this again is a really, really pivotal and important moment in Phoolan's life. Because now she becomes the leader of her own gang.

So with her gang, she castrates child rapists. She cuts off their penises and hangs them around her neck. [AUDIENCE MURMURS]

MADHVI RAMANI: Their neck.

RINA GROB: *Their* neck, yeah. She raids the houses of rich men and takes all the money they stole and returns it to the poor. She becomes kind of like a mythical hero to the people and people will actively seek her out and complain to her and she will enact their revenge. However, all of this is leading up to one

major event, which is the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

So on February 14th, 1981, in the village of Behmai, in Uttar Pradesh, Phoolan Devi rounds up all of the men in the village. Everyone who was responsible or who allowed her to be repeatedly raped takes them down to the river and kills 22 men.

She kills all the men she can find, even the ones who did not actively take part in the rape, because she says that even if they didn't take part, they knew about it and they allowed it to happen and none of them helped her.

Around this time, she goes really close with her gang member, Man Singh, and together they start to discuss that maybe surrendering is a good idea, because as Madhvi mentioned at the beginning, there was a prize of \$10,000 on her head, like the police are drawing in, she's actively being hunted, she's not having that good of a time anymore.

This all culminates in a really epic standoff and shoot off with the police, there's machine guns and helicopters involved, it's very dramatic. At one point, Man Singh is even buried beneath the rubble, but he survives.

However, this is Phoolan, so she's going to do things on her own terms. So she negotiates the terms of her surrender. These negotiations take about a year. Phoolan is taken to jail and then several days later, she does a very public surrender to the Madhya Pradesh police. Her surrender happens exactly two years after the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

And something really surprising happens during her public surrender, she's hailed as a hero, the people are cheering for her. She is also hailed as a hero among women when she gets to prison.

So Phoolan is brought to prison. She is never formally charged with anything. There is no trial, she's not charged with anything, she's just taken to prison, where she will be for the next 11 years. During her time in prison, she becomes incredibly sick. She's therefore transferred to a jail in New Delhi, where she undergoes surgery for a burst ovary. During this time, her womb is also removed, without her permission or without her knowledge.

When a biographer of Phoolan asked the doctor why this was necessary, he laughed and said, "We don't want her breeding anymore Phoolan Devi." So she has essentially been raped again, and this time by the state.

Eventually, after many, many years in prison, a man comes to see her. He is a

member of the Samajwada Party. He urges Phoolan to join his party. Shortly after this, she hears on the radio that she is going to be released from prison. She doesn't hear it herself. She has to find out from the radio that she will be released. February 1994, Phoolan Devi, she has been in prison for 11 years without being charged of anything, without any trial, is released from prison.

So here comes the next sort of chapter in Phoolan's life, her life after prison: From 1994 to 1995, she really, really struggles with integrating into society or, you know, she's never really been in society before, so this is kind of her first stab at really being a member of the public. And she struggles with the stigma attached to being a former bandit and all of the controversy surrounding the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

However, she receives a lot of support from individuals and organizations, including activists and politicians, who really recognize her power as a symbol of social change.

In 1995, Phoolan formally joins the Samajwadi Party and therefore has entered the political stage. She runs, you know, she's really influenced by her desire to address social injustice and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities, in particular women and members of the lower caste.

In 1996, Phoolan contests the Lok Sabha election from the Mirzapur constituency in Uttar Pradesh. Despite facing criticism and opposition due to her criminal past, she wins the election. This is an incredibly historic moment because she is, you know, the first person with a bandit past to hold public office in India.

So from 1996 to 1998, she is an MP and participates in parliamentary proceedings and she uses her platform to really advocate for social justice, for women, for the poor, for members of the lower caste.

In 1998, however, her term comes to an end and unfortunately she is not reelected. However, she continues to focus on her activism, now more on a grassroots level. In July 2001, she is surprisingly arrested for her involvement in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. This is 20 years after it happened, and it sparks a whole lot of controversy and the conversation starts all over again.

After a couple of days, she is released. And then the most tragic moment. On July 25, 2001, Phoolan is assassinated outside of her house in New Delhi. She is shot dead by a man claiming to seek revenge for the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. She is shot nine times. At this time, she is 37 years of age.

Following her assassination, he is arrested and charged with her murder. He stands trial in 2014 and he is convicted and sentenced to life in prison. However, there are some questions surrounding his guilt, as there are many people who think that he is kind of a scapegoat, it was pinned on him and really it was just officials that wanted to get her out of the way because she was becoming a nuisance.

MADHVI RAMANI: And today, Phoolan Devi has become a symbol for the larger anger, vengeance and injustice against women in India, as well as an inspiration for the lower classes.

I would recommend Elizabeth Flock's new book, *The Furies: Three Women and Their Fight for Justice*, where she interviews An-goori Daha-riya, who was born also in 1963 in Uttar Pradesh, but to a Dalit family. And she took Phoolan Devi as an inspiration when she formed her own gang of women who went around with *lathis*, these sticks, punishing men for their abuses.

And along those lines, we have both watched and really recommend *Daughters of Destiny* on Netflix, which again follows five girls from the Dalit classes who enter Shanti Bhavan, a school that educates the poorest children in India. And also the Mann Deshi Foundation is a woman-founded charity that set up a rural... [AUDIENCE GIGGLES]

RINA GROB: It's a hard word.

MADHVI RAMANI: Jesus. A rural...I can't do it.

RINA GROB: A rural bank.

MADHVI RAMANI: A bank for people who are not in cities, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] for women specifically, in India, and they generally help the women in these areas. And these charities have really been set up as a result of, you know, knowing about Phoolan Devi's story and the spotlight that she shared on this particular group of people. Anything that we, the Ms Informed team, take from the door will be given to this foundation here. And I wanted to end, as is appropriate, on Phoolan Devi's own words.

“Sing of my deeds.
Tell of my combats.
How I fought treacherous demons.
Forgive my failings.
And bestow on me peace.”

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Madhvi Ramani and Rina Grob on Phoolan Devi, recorded live by the wonderful Betty Kapun. Thank you also to Thomas Beckman and Lettrétage for their hospitality and assistance. You can find photos and links with more information about Phoolan Devi in our episode notes over at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

SUSAN STONE: And you can also hear us over on the Ms Informed podcast, talking with Madhvi about Dead Ladies and feminism and more in an episode that they'll be dropping April 14th.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, we're just going to go and record it now. We have a couple of shows coming up, in fact. In fact, we'll be in Münster on May the 5th at the Burg Hülshoff Center for Literature's Droste Festival, where we've been before. Susan and I will be on stage with Esra Canpalat talking about witches and translators. And we'll be back at ACUD in Berlin on May the 16th. We'll add links to all these things so you can find them nice and easily.

SUSAN STONE: Very good. This just in: we made the news! If you haven't seen it, we were interviewed for a CBS News Report on the Dead Ladies Show that starts with some wonderful scenes of our friends at Dead Ladies NYC. Their show looks amazing and we all really want to go now. And you can find that pinned on our social media feeds @deadladiesshow and in the episode notes.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: If you're in New York, lucky you, you can see a Dead Ladies Show regularly as well. Follow them on Instagram at @deadladiesnyc to get the latest news and show dates. They also have a newsletter, as do we, and we'll put links to both in our show notes.

SUSAN STONE: You can additionally find us over on patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, where we have exclusive content for our subscribers.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. Thank you so much to everybody out there listening, and we'll be back again next month with another Fabulous Dead Lady.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)