



BOOK CLUB KIT

# Author's Note



Dear Reader,

On February 14, 2013, I repaid the last of my law school loans. By that May, I'd quit my firm in Los Angeles to move to Austin, Texas to write. That summer, before I began my MFA program at UT, I visited my family in India.

While in Gujarat, my father, my brother, and I drove to the village of Samadra, to attend a women's meeting of microloan group my father was involved in financing. I'd viewed my debt as shackles to a job for which I wasn't particularly suited. To these women, however, loans were a boon, a buoy offering life and independence. Money lent them agency—so long as the men around them permitted it, that is.

By the time I was on a plane to Texas, Geeta and Farah were born within a short story and had forged an economic alliance to “get rid” of Farah's money-siphoning husband. They were unsuccessful back then and the story ended with a quiet fizzle.

It was not until years later that I had the thought: *But what if they actually did it?* Not only that, what if other women wanted in on the action?

This book is set in a fictional village in Gujarat, where its denizens have recently acquired city comforts such as toilets and solar power. Despite these struggles specific to developing countries, this Indian village is reminiscent of any small neighborhood or community, where such intimacy can feel comforting . . . or claustrophobic. Families have known each other for generations, reputation is one's currency, gossip runs amok, and it's all but impossible to keep secrets—especially ones about murder. The close-knit bonds within such a village, however, are also what drive these characters to their ultimate actions and choices.

I wrote this novel in 2020 and its pages were a cozy bolt-hole in the grim pandemic days where I, like so many of us, deeply missed my friends. Once the ensemble cast of female characters had been drawn, there was no stopping these rambunctious women. Isolated, they felt powerless; but together, the strong bonds of their female friendship made the impossible suddenly achievable. It was then that I realized the heart of this book isn't about what money can do, it's about what friendship can.

Each day, I loved returning to these sassy, fierce women and their escalating antics. It is my hope that you will feel just as heartened when you join their world. They embody so many of the traits I admire in the women around me: unapologetic, clever, strong, insightful, kind, generous, and just plain damn *fun*.

With gratitude,  
Parini Shroff

# Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the title, “The Bandit Queens.” How do you think it relates to the overall story? How does it apply to each of the characters in the book?
2. India and the village Geeta lives in are intrinsic to the narrative. Discuss the ways in which the setting functions as a character in the novel and how each of the other characters relates to it.
3. The caste system has existed in some form in India for at least 3,000 years. It is a complex social structure wherein social roles like one’s profession and status became “hereditary,” resulting in fixed hierarchies. Were you familiar with India’s caste system before reading *The Bandit Queens*? In which ways did the pervasive societal structure appear within the novel? Are you familiar with any other caste systems across the globe? How are they like—and how do they differ from—India’s caste system?
4. In what ways does the past seem to control, or at least influence, the present in *The Bandit Queens*? How do the characters try to repress or escape the pain of their pasts?
5. Discuss the significance of the following quote from the book:

“It was, Geeta felt, just another example of women living within the spaces that others defined. Farah’s words came back to her: *They don’t get to make all the choices. We get to make some, too.* It was pretty but it wasn’t true.”

In what ways are the women in the novel limited in their choices? Did you find that Geeta’s view on the matter in the quote above evolved over the course of the story? How?

6. What role does gossip play in the narrative? To what extent does it change the course of the characters’ lives and help drive the plot within the story?
7. The author infuses snark, wit, and humor into a devastating storyline about women wanting to escape their abusive marriages. Explore ways in which you use humor in your own life to deal with difficult situations. Do you find this method to be effective?
8. How are female relationships depicted in *The Bandit Queens*? How does the novel play with and subvert female stereotypes and archetypes? How would you position Geeta in relation to contemporary feminist discourse?
9. Love, family, friendship, and feminism are all major narrative themes. What other overarching ideas did you notice? What did you take away from reading the book overall?
10. What did you think about the ending—were you satisfied or disappointed? How do you picture Geeta’s life after the story closes?

# Character Profiles

## Geeta

Village pariah and admirer of Phoolan Devi, the real Bandit Queen of India. She is rumored to have killed her husband.

## Saloni

Geeta's childhood friend and adulthood nemesis. She is ambitious, blunt, and terrified of all animals except spiders.

## Farah

Geeta's frenemy and blackmailer. Has the uncharming habit of finding amusement in everything, even premeditated murder.

## Karem

Father to four kids, his wife passed away at the same time Ramesh went missing. Sells ugly costume jewelry out of a small kiosk, and bootleg liquor.

## Priya & Preity

Identical twins who Geeta says are neither kind nor cruel, they always defer to a leader. Preity was the victim of an acid attack and was then made to marry the man who committed the crime.

## Ramesh

Geeta's husband who disappeared five years earlier (rumored to have been murdered). Enjoys drinking and stealing money.



# Authentic Homemade Indian Chai

**Serves 2**

**Ingredients:**

1 ⅓ cup water  
¾ cup milk  
1-inch ginger, freshly grated (about 3 oz.)  
3 tsp. tea leaves  
2 tsp. sugar, adjust to taste  
Chai masala spices (can be replaced with ½ tsp. prepared chai masala)  
2 green cardamom (elaichi)  
2 cloves (laung)  
½-inch cinnamon (dalchini)  
8 black peppercorns

**Instructions:**

Heat water in a pot on medium-high heat.

While water is heating, crush spices using a mortar and pestle or a coffee/spice grinder. Add the crushed spices to the water.

Grate the ginger directly into the pot of water. Reduce heat to medium and bring the water to a boil.

Add the tea leaves and let it boil for a minute. You can also add sugar at this time or add it in the cup when serving. Add milk and stir it in.

Bring the tea to a boil. The tea can overflow easily, so keep a close eye. Once the tea comes to a boil. Turn off the gas and cover with a lid for one minute. Strain the tea in a cup and enjoy!

Source: [pipingpotcurry.com/indian-masala-chai](http://pipingpotcurry.com/indian-masala-chai)





# Instant Pot Khichdi

Geeta's Favorite Childhood Comfort Food

**Serves 4**

**Ingredients:**

½ cup basmati rice washed (125 ml)  
½ cup split yellow lentils (moong dal) washed (125 ml)  
1 tbsp. ghee plus more for topping, or oil for vegan  
1 tsp. cumin seeds (Jeera)  
⅛ tsp. asafoetida (hing) optional, skip for gluten-free  
4 cups water  
1 tsp. salt adjust to taste  
½ tsp. ground turmeric (haldi powder)  
Cilantro leaves chopped, to garnish

**Instructions:**

Add basmati rice and moong dal to a bowl and rinse with water a few times till the water runs clear.

Heat the instant pot in sauté mode and add ghee in it. Add cumin seeds and asafoetida.

When the cumin seeds start to sizzle, add rice, moong dal, and water. Add the salt and turmeric powder. Give it a stir. Then close lid with vent in sealing position.

Change the instant pot setting to manual or pressure cook mode at high pressure for 6 minutes. When the instant pot beeps, let the pressure release naturally (NPR).

Khichdi is ready to serve. Serve in bowls topped with a dollop of ghee, along with a side of papad and pickle.

Source: [pipingpotcurry.com/khichdi-instant-pot](http://pipingpotcurry.com/khichdi-instant-pot)



# Who was the original Bandit Queen?

## THE LEGENDARY PHOOLAN DEVI

The notorious “Bandit Queen” who became legendary in India both for her acts of revenge and her aid to the lower castes.

“She’d been born Phoolan Mallah, a Dalit and a woman, therefore twice-trodden. Even in a gang with no regard for civilization or law, caste reigned. Her husband Vikram was slaughtered over caste, she was gang-raped because of her caste. She killed twenty-two upper-caste men in revenge. And only then did she cease being a woman and become a legend; the country dropped her caste-marked surname “Mallah,” and made her a Devi instead.”

—*The Bandit Queens*

Phoolan Devi was born to a low-caste household in 1963 in a village on the banks of the sacred Yamuna River in the vast north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

At the age of 10, in what would be the first of her many acts of protest, she confronted her cousin, a man in his twenties, for fraudulently stealing her family’s land. He beat her unconscious with a brick.

When she was 11, Phoolan’s family married her to an older man. After being abused by her husband for several years, she managed to escape him and fall into the company of a gang of bandits. Devi participated in gang activities until she was kidnapped and taken to Behmai where she was repeatedly tormented and publicly humiliated over the course of 3 weeks. She was 17 years old.

In 1981, several months after her escape from Behmai, Phoolan and her new gang returned to the village of Behmai to seek revenge. She demanded that her tormentors be produced before her, but the two men could not be found. She rounded up 22 young men from the village and ordered them killed. The massacre sparked outrage and Devi became the most wanted person in India, with a \$10,000 price on her head.

In 1983, Devi surrendered to the Indian government (then under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) and was accused of 48 criminal offenses. She was imprisoned for 11 years until she was pardoned in 1994 at age 31.

Devi became a female rights activist and was elected a member of India’s Parliament from 1996 to 1999—the first low-caste woman to hold that distinction.

On July 25, 2001, Phoolan Devi was assassinated by 3 masked shooters outside of her Delhi home. She was rushed to a hospital but was declared dead.

Source: Based on “The Life and Legend of India’s Bandit Queen” published on RoadsAndKingdoms.com at [roadsandkingdoms.com/2017/indias-bandit-queen](https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2017/indias-bandit-queen)