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India's most famous bandit to run for seat in federal parliament

NEW DELHI, India (AP) — A lower-caste woman both revered and reviled as India's "Bandit Queen" said Sunday she will run for a seat in the federal parliament.

Phoolan Devi allegedly murdered 20 upper-caste men to avenge her rape and the death of her boyfriend. She spent 11 years in jail awaiting trial before being paroled in 1994.

Her life story was the basis for a 1994 film, *Bandit Queen*, which won international acclaim and was a box-office hit in India.

Devi said she would run as a Socialist Party candidate representing the city of Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, the nation's most populous state. She said she will file her nomination on Tuesday.

"Time has come to do some serious work for the people and I think the best way to do it will be from the seat of power — the Parliament," Devi said, speaking in the state capital, Lucknow.

Mirzapur is dominated by lower-caste voters and Devi expects she has enough support there to win, *The Asian Age* reported.

"In fact, it is the people of Mirzapur who asked me to contest," she said.

India's voters go to the polls in April and May to elect representatives to the 545-seat lower house.

Devi caused a sensation in 1981 for her alleged role in the attack in the Uttar Pradesh village of Behmai.

As the story goes, two outlaws killed her lover then took her against her will to the village, where she was raped repeatedly. Set free, she returned to the village with her own gang, intent on

Stranger Than Fiction

vengeance.

Newspapers at that time reported that she lined up all 26 upper-caste men of the village at a river bank and emptied out her carbine. Twenty men died on the spot; the others survived with serious injuries.

Devi denied committing the Behmai massacre, but her reign as a bandit for 10 years in the Chambal ravines of central India made her the idol of low-caste Hindus.

Upper-caste people reviled her and were enraged when she was released from prison.

Inmate scams women from death row cell

MIAMI (AP) — Manuel Pardo Jr. is profiting from the long, empty hours he's spending on death row.

Pardo, 39, a former Sweetwater police officer awaiting execution for nine 1986 slayings, places lonely-hearts ads in tabloids and carries on torrid correspondences with lonely, vulnerable women. Then, he scams them out of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars, prison officials say.

Twenty-six women have sent Pardo money since January 1995, according to prison records.

At one point, Pardo had \$3,530.08 in his prison canteen account. Prison officials say they are powerless to stop him because nothing in the Constitution prohibits Pardo from requesting or receiving small sums of money.

"I know it sounds cruel, but basically our hands are tied," said Debbie Buchanan, spokeswoman for the state Department of Cor-

rections. "He has broken no rules."

But he has broken many hearts. Barbara Ford, 46, an Ohio resident who earned \$7,500 last year cleaning houses, sent Pardo \$430 from May to November after reading an ad he placed in a newspaper.

"FLA. 116-156 CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTE INMATE," the ad began. "Ex-cop Vietnam vet. Took law into own hands and ended up on Death Row. He needs letters from sensitive-understanding female, for real-honest relationship."

About three weeks after Ford responded, a letter arrived from Pardo, along with some favorable clippings from his career as a police officer.

"I want one special lady in my life," he wrote. "I don't play emotional games 'cause I hate emotional games. I also hate liars and users."

Ten months earlier, he had written pretty much the same thing to Betty Ithem, 54, of Oklahoma.

By the time Ford answered Pardo's ad, Pardo and Ithem were calling each other husband and wife, though they never met face to face or heard each other's voice.

Ithem had received 275 letters from Pardo — and sent him \$1,200, sometimes in money orders of \$3 because she worked only part-time at Wal-Mart and was impoverished.

Then, in October, a letter Pardo sent Ford mysteriously ended up in Ithem's mailbox. The two women contacted prison officials, who explained they weren't the only ones who had been duped.

"I could kick myself, but I've learned one thing — there are a lot of diabolical people out there," Ithem said. "From now on, before I deal with a man, I want to see wings sprouted on his back."

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