

THIRD EYE EDITION

The usual suspects



As a law-abiding citizen, I admit it is very unseemly of me to be choosing to write about a character so out of favour, so universally villified, as a thief. An overwrought imagination is already on hyperactive mode, imagining the subtle and not-so-subtle ways yours truly will be rebuffed by polite society, her credibility questioned, all because of her decision to explore the world of Mister Nimble Fingers. But I am very thankful to state that the choice of subject matter – thieves, is not mine. I have only plagiarised it from Arunava Sinha, a Delhi-based media personality and translator. A vital link in the rooting-for-thief chain is my good friend, the writer Mitra Phukan. Procrastination being the thief of time, let me cut to the chase. A few days ago, Arunava sent an email to Mitra which she forwarded to me and I reproduce verbatim, “I’m turning to you for some information, in case you can help. I’m thinking of putting together an anthology of stories from different languages – all titled (or about) the thief. I’ve found a few in Bangla, and I really hope to look at other languages as well. Any suggestions for Assamese and any other language?” Those few lines had me hooked. If you consider the thief the underdog (which is indeed true most of the time) here was someone who was willing to cut some slack, as the Americans say, for the pilferer. So before you could say Alibaba and the forty-thieves..., I was on the phone with Arunava and he, enthused by my curiosity, swiftly mailed responses to my queries.

“What,” I asked, “gave you the idea for an anthology of short stories about thieves? What do you hope to achieve by it?”

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"The idea came when I happened to read two Bangla stories, coincidentally in quick succession, by two different authors, both titled *The Thief*. Inimitably, both the stories were romantic stories. All I hope to achieve is an interesting anthology that might also bring out different cultural constructs and attitudes around and about the figure of the thief. Social, political and psychological...

"What comes to your mind when you think of the word thief?" I was curious to know.

"Nothing complimentary. Small time criminals."

"Why do we continue to romanticise thieves? Robin Hood..."

"Do we really? Not if you read the papers. I'm afraid. The romantic notion of the thief is probably from a different literary era."

"What do you think of the increasing appetite for films dealing with rogues and conmen?"

"It is probably acknowledgment of how important a position thieves now occupy in our time and society."

"What are the most precious personal possessions you would guard from thieves?"

"Anything that has memories. In this case, as mundane as my camera, laptops, Ipads, phones, etc., because I cannot reproduce the pictures and medias and e-books and text messages I have in them. And all my external hard drives. Oh, and my author-signed copies of books."

"In these days of multi crore scamsters, do you think the public is not very harsh and judgemental about the common thief."

"The public is uniformly judgemental about anybody who prevents them from being a good life. We are all thieves, but there is no honour among thieves anymore, alas."

I re-read his replies. Cross-cultural studies on thieves. Hmm. That certainly throws up interesting possibilities. In the brotherhood of thieves, would a Gujrati Nimble Fingers be unusually enterprising and a Bengali one voluble as well as politically conscious? Would a Bihari Artful Dodger be argumentative and a Goanese too fond of his *feni*? Would the Assamese pickpocket be slow in making his getaway? What about the urban-rural divide among thieves? Car thieves need an entirely different set of skills from a cattle thief, would not they? Urban thieves are floaters, moving at will, rootless, vanishing without a trace. These days some even have day jobs like fish-vending or rickshaw pulling. Rural thieves are part of the community, easily identifiable. Thus, the *deja vu* element when the same villagers tie up the same thief again and again over missing betel nuts and brass utensils. A

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rural thief would find it very boring to be relocated to the city because no one will be after him. The public are not united enough, the cops have better things to do, and the combination locks will drive him crazy. In the countryside, when a thief is tied up and walloped by his indignant fellow men, I dare say he enjoys the attention, however painful it may be. The ritual tying up, the blackening of the face, the back to front ride on a donkey is an acknowledgement. Call it a back-handed compliment, if you will.

Nineteenth century Victorian literature promoted the idea that thieves are victims of circumstance, like Dicken's *Oliver Twist* and Victor Hugo's *Jean Valjean*. Jean serves 19 years in prison for a stolen loaf of bread. It was this age, too, that created the idea of a gentleman or lady thief, well-bred, aristocratic people who stole not for any need, but for the thrill of the act. Then, there are the hapless kleptomaniacs who may also be famous Hollywood A-listers who are gripped by the urge to steal items, though not for reasons of personal use or financial gain. They have an impulse control disorder which was described in psychiatry as far back as in 1816.

One grows weary of the cool dudes of Hollywood and their *desi* counterparts (in frame by frame rip-offs) pulling off heists and con jobs. It all seems so contrived and soulless that nothing surprises the moviegoer anymore. In contrast, turn to the 1948 *Bicycle Thieves* of Vittorio De Sica. A poor man searching the streets of post-war Rome for his stolen bicycle, which he needs to be able to work. From being the victim of a theft, the film unspools to the agonised moments when he himself steals a bicycle, with tragic results. Then, was Alfred Hitchcock deliberately sending out the just desserts message when Marion Crane is strangled by Norman. Bates in the iconic film noir *Psycho*? Remember, Marion had just skipped town with forty thousand dollars from one of her employer's clients. So, is the shower scene her *Judgement Day*, a very wet and brutal one at that?

This mulling over is coming to an end and we are neither here nor there. The thief continues to remain a shadowy, elusive creature, but there are a couple of things he/she could teach us. Like planning for high stakes on low investment. Keeping oneself light for sprinting over walls and shinning up pipes. The capacity to carry out thorough reconnaissance – which house is empty, who may have a dog. The elimination of risk factors. Then the ability to make spot decisions, travelling light and keeping a cool head. These days thieves are checking out Facebook accounts of folks who are dim-witted enough to advertise to the world that they are on holiday.

Well, then, maybe you have a favourite thief story you want to send across. All for a good cause, of course.