

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## Not growing on trees

There comes a time in life when you can actual-ly surprise yourself. It happened to me this week. Mulling over a theme for this piece, I recklessly decided to write about money. This is surprising, because I've had a somewhat uneasy equation with money: Having said that, I hasten to add that this is not the squeamishness of a snob. It is just that more than anything else, it is money – rupees, yens, euros, pounds, dollars, the whole shebang which reminds me of my sheer idiocy in relation to anything numerical. Which is why my visits to the bank are stressful, brief and intermittent, and you are not at all likely to see me in the vicinity of a stock exchange, a casino, a race course or an auction house. Nor does the annual Forbes lists of the richest people in the planet make my pulse race in the slightest.

Much as I want to have very little to do with money, it sadly does not have the same attitude towards me. Money gloats before me that it makes the world go round. It is the word money I hear most frequently when I am on the streets. The beggar wails for it, extending his enamel bowl. Housewives are stridently haggling over tomatoes. A lad is sprinting away from a trekker, evading the fare. The whole world is out to entice you with the cheapest prices, the best bargains. Everyone is in this giant conspiracy to empty your pockets. It is really scary and intimidating at the same time, especially as you know that when your last coin is spent, the world will want to have nothing more to do with you. You will be expendable.

One of the aspects that divide childhood and adult life is, of course, money. Our parents forgot to, or deliberately refrained from mentioning the importance of money, or how you would spend the rest of your life making enough of it so that your kids, in turn, could take it away from you. With kiddy logic we understood chocolates were bad because our teeth would rot and fall off (must have happened that way to Grandpa). We also figured out talking to strangers was actually kind of dumb and that monsters wouldn't really like to stuff themselves under the bed. But what wasn't at all clear was why money was bad, why we were not even allowed to finger the coins and notes on adult wallets and purses. It was always implied that money could take us down the long, slippery road to perdition. We were told that going to bed early made us healthy, wealthy and wise. I could understand healthy and the wisdom that came from all that resting of the mind. But wealthy? When you are asleep? That seemed a bit far-fetched even to me, unless you were winning the jackpot in your dreams. Waking up would then be a kind of anti-climax, wouldn't it? Then, about this saving for a rainy day. Why would anyone have to save for a rainy day? Rainy days, as I still see it, are times when you stay put in your homes. The rains actually save your money for you. So, why put aside money for such a day at all? If you believe a fool and his money are soon parted, then Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and the Rockefellers are the most cerebrally challenged people who come to mind.

If money is considered a vulgar thing, and the pursuit of it not befitting a person of culture, on the other hand, literature, music and films are replete with allusions to it. If at the age of five, I was happily chanting *Sing a song of six pence*, in my teens, I was swearing by the

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Beatles' credo that money can't buy love and believing Long John Silver deserved to lose a leg for all that skullduggery over gold. If Fieldings' Tom Jones became the classic charming and penniless hero winning over his rich lady love, Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, with the force of a sledgehammer, brought home how greed can be so dehumanising. Chichikov's travels through Russia buying up dead souls of poor serfs for his elaborate scam sadly doesn't seem far-fetched in twenty-first century India, where farmers kill themselves and children die of hunger, in spite of countless government schemes proudly advertised in the media. Coming back to money in literature, one of the greatest English writers of all times, Charles Dickens knew very early in life the importance of money. With a father thrown into a debtor's prison, Dickens prose is permeated by thieves, convicts, cheats, orphans, the dispossessed who live in the margins of society, fending for themselves with their wits. Even Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is destroyed not just by unrequited, forbidden love, but her inability to manage her finances. Shakespeare's Shylock the money lender, despised for demanding his pound of flesh, is today seen as an anti-semitic depiction. The Jew is only carrying out his profession and yet, it is the carousing, idle Antonio who comes up looking as pure as driven snow.

In Tagore's *Kabuliwallah*, however, the Afghan moneylender is interpreted with compassion as a man who misses his daughter in faraway Afghanistan and discovers her in little Mini. One of the grimmest epochs of American history, the Great Depression gave us classics like Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The Joads, a poor family of sharecroppers are driven from their Oklahoma home by drought and bankruptcy. Their trek from the Dust Bowl to faraway California for jobs, land, dignity and a future is a saga that will find resonance across all cultures in our own post-recession world, when wealthy Greeks, suddenly impoverished, are lining up outside soup kitchens and angry Americans have occupied Wall Street.

I have lost count of bad Bollywood movies where the villain dies with the briefcase flung in the air, scattering a shower of currency all over the landscape. But films like *Mother India* and *Pathar Panchali* depicted with heartrending pathos what poverty could do to families. Also, who can forget Balraj Sahni in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, as he pulls his rickshaw, chasing a horse carriage? The rider on the rickshaw keeps on promising more money if he is able to catch the carriage. All through this, Balraj keeps smiling in anticipation of getting more money, unmindful that he is pushing himself to the limit. In Dev Anand's *Guide*, Raju the guide loses the love of Rosie (Waheeda Rahman) because he lives off her earnings as a dancer and forges documents related to her jewellery. As for Hollywood, they have a whole genre called dollar Westerns to beam in on cowboy greed and their use of every trick in the book to get the green bucks. Bank heists are eternally favourite with movie scriptwriters and if the earlier films focused on remorse and redemption, in recent times it's all about pulling it off and retiring to a tropical island for a life of leisure. No apologies.

Not surprisingly, the American artists are far ahead when it comes to use of money as a theme. Master painter John Haberle's paintings of dollar bills were such a hit that they were hung in salons, office walls and club houses for manly amusement. More subtly, European

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art has for so long sent across the message that wealth makes one a higher mortal, gives one a morality the poor cannot lay claim to.

All of us are then in tacit agreement that money should not be talked about in polite society, and should only be pursued in a circumspect way. Thank God money doesn't grow on trees, because we have very few trees left anyway. And if you keep harping that time is money, more people will be angrily tooting their horns at traffic jams or God forbid, even coming to blows. My favourite take on money is the tongue-in-cheek quip by the inimitable Jerry Seinfeld. "Dogs have no money. Isn't that amazing? They're broke their entire lives. But they get through. You know why dogs have no money? They have no pockets."