

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

THIEF, THIEF (THIRUDA, THIRUDA) 1993

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Thief, Thief is an action-packed, heist-caper movie following the fortunes of two petty thieves who stumble upon a huge supply of cash. With some resemblance to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Mani Ratnam's film is thoroughly and skilfully Indianised, written with at least half a tongue in cheek and featuring engaging performances. Some of the plot does strain credibility, even for this most permissible of genres, but the songs more than make up for this narrative shortcoming.

A London-based gangster (Vikram) has hired a gang to steal a large amount of government money, but a the contained with the case can only be opened with coded card held by a woman named Chandralekha. While an Inspector of police tries to trace the whereabouts of the money, Chandralekha ends up fleeing from the police and joins with two petty thieves and a girl, who has run away from her abusive uncle. The thieves protect the two women, kill Vikram and the police recover the cash.

CULTURAL SIGNIFANCE

The story was, in part, inspired by real-life financial scandal in 1992, as well as by other heist movies. Although it was not a critical success—critics preferred Mani Ratnam's more serious political films (*Bombay* and *Roja*)—audiences were captivated by the cinematography and the musical score. The film also played on themes that appeal to many, especially the lure of money and the cultural divide between the city and the village.

STORY

Money The credits roll over shots of a machine printing Reserve Bank of India currency notes. After the words and digits are printed on the notes and the ink mark stamped, thousands and thousands of high-value notes roll off the machine. They are bundled with pink ribbons and stored behind heavy steel doors of a shipping container, which is escorted by ten armed guards onto a goods train bound for New Delhi. This is a signature Mani Ratnam opening: hyper-realism, the grinding sounds of machine, no dialogue, tension and mystery.

Heist As the train moves off camera, we see a man with a walkie-talkie (this is 1998, before mobile phones were common in India). In a tense voice he issues an order into the big receiver: 'Go! Go!' Men crawl along the top of the train, attach explosives under the carriages and shoot one of the guards. The bombs explode, separating the carriage with the cash from the rest of the train. The thieves find the storage container with 'Reserve Bank of India' printed on the front.

New Delhi At an emergency board meeting in New Delhi, the Reserve Bank directors take stock of the situation. The amount lost is enormous, but the container can only be opened with a secretly coded card, which has also been stolen. They can't withdraw the notes from circulation, they say, because they've already been signed by the relevant authority. They decide to hush it up and contact the head of the CBI (Criminal Bureau of Investigation) to solve the case. That man is Lakshminarayan, (whom I will refer to as the 'Inspector'). He has to recover the money before the finance minister announces a new budget. He has ten days.

Ashok and Vikram A man named Ashok has the crucial card that will open the container with the cash. Minutes after posting the card in an envelope to a woman named Chandralekha, Ashok is arrested. That news is then conveyed by telephone to a man in London named Vikram. He is the mastermind behind the heist. He takes the next plane to India.

SFK 1138 Ashok, the man who sent the card, is subjected to intensive interrogation by the Inspector. He wants to know what 'SKF 1138' refers to. He found that phrase in Ashok's handwriting when he searched his office. Another mystery is the identity of a young woman in a photograph also found in his office. Eventually the police trace the woman, who is Chandralekha, but she succeeds in hiding the coded card and eludes them.

Petty thieves Next, we meet two petty thieves, Kadhira and Alagu, who engage in a series of cops and robbers incidents in the countryside. They steal, but it is all light-hearted, more in the vein of Robin Hood than ruthless thugs. In a key scene, they save a young girl named Rasathi from committing suicide. Abused by her uncle, she was about to hang herself. These two narrative strands—the cash theft and petty criminals—converge when Chandralekha meets Kadhira and Alagu on a train.

Vikram Vikram arrives in India and is assured by Ashok (whom he has bailed from police custody) that the money and the card is safe. Then he kills Ashok and tracks down Chandralekha, who is on the run with the others. He forces her to give him the card and demands to know where the container with the cash has been hidden. She, in turn, demands to know the whereabouts of Ashok (unaware that he has been killed). In the standoff, a crowd of villagers on their way to a festival cause chaos, allowing Chandralekha to regain the card and to flee with the other three fugitives.

SFK 1138 The inspector realises that SFK 1138 must refer to the number of the carriage with the container filled with cash. But it could be anywhere now. Vikram and his thugs are also trying to find the same carriage. What they don't know is that the four desperados have found the carriage loaded on a lorry, which later falls into a river. They pull it out, with the help of villagers, and then Chandralekha uses the card to open the container. Kadhira and Alagu are dumbfounded by the huge amount of loot they see inside. Vikram finds Chandralekha and the container with the cash, but the two thieves fight with his thugs and manage to drive off with the container.

Inspector The Inspector traces the container to the village where it is hidden, and where the local people believe it contains only spices. When the Inspector asks for their help in recovering the government's money, they all run off in search of this fortune.

Finale Vikram finds the container and orders his men to fire on the villagers who try to take the money away. Dozens are killed in a bloody massacre. Vikram manages to get the container loaded onto a train headed for the port of Cochin, from where he will load it on a ship and take it to Europe. This information is given to the Inspector by Chandralekha and the police try to stop the train. In the end, the two thieves beat up Vikram, stop the train and flee with Rasathi when the police arrive. The Inspector recovers the cash and arrests Vikram.

THEMES

Money If there is a serious theme in this hugely entertaining but somewhat frothy film, it is the importance of money. The film opens with shots of the 'green stuff' rolling off the printing press. And for the remaining three hours all the characters are, in one way or another, pursuing that goldmine. Vikram is obsessed by money, which he constantly calls 'my cash,' while the two rural thieves are only interested in stealing a few rupees to help them eat. The Inspector is committed to recovering the stolen cash so that the government can present a budget without admitting such an enormous loss. And when the villagers learn that the lorry hidden in their forest is full of money, they are delirious with joy at such a windfall. 'It's our money,' they shout. 'It's ours. We can repay our debts.' The only characters not interested in the money are the two women, Rasathi and Chandralekha. In the end, after all the chases, rescues and escapes, the killings, threats and beatings, is they who retain our respect because they remain above the crass love of cash.

Town and country The other theme that runs underneath all the shenanigans of this enjoyable film is the contrast between city elites and rural rustics. Several of these contrasting pairs are found in the story. Primary among them is the pairing of the sophisticated criminal Vikram and the village thieves Kadhira and Alagu. Both are after money, but the city thief is truly evil, ready to kill whoever gets in his way. Kadhira and Alagu, on the other hand, are in it for the adventure as much as the monetary gain. Second, there is also tension between the Inspector, who comes from Delhi, and the local police, who are shown to be less than efficient. This contrast is handled more with humour than rancour, though. There is also a third pairing of the two lead women: Rasathi, the country girl, and Chandralekha, the urban educated woman. As the story unfolds, these two become closer and closer and finally achieve a rapport that crosses the barrier of their backgrounds. The city-village divide is mentioned several times in the film, especially when Rasathi is pursued by Vikram. A humble bullock cart driver expresses the underlying sentiment of the film when he tells Vikram, 'Hey, don't speak like that to a village girl. She's innocent of your bad ways.'

CHARACTERS

Vikram Vikram is the slick and ruthless criminal behind the theft. Vikram is the generic 'bad guy' (the first scene shows him in bed with another man, reinforcing a deplorable stereotype). He is the boss who orders the heist and the man who kills those who get in his way. If he has a flaw, it is his maniacal lust after money. He trusts no one, confides in no one and ends up with nothing but a long prison sentence.

Ruthless Vikram is never less than brutal, heartless and murderous, admirably fulfilling his role as the 'villain.' His ruthlessness is illustrated in the second scene in which he appears. After being told that his planned theft of cash is successful, but that Ashok (his associate) has been arrested, Vikram flies from London to India. There, he meets Ashok in an isolated spot, where they can talk freely. 'Thanks for bailing me out,' Ashok says to his boss. 'I never said a word to the police. The cash and the card are safe.' 'Good,' says Vikram eyeing him closely. 'Now, don't worry. I'm here, so you're safe.' When they embrace, Vikram shoots him three times. It's all over in two minutes. Vikram eliminates his chief accomplice because he is now dispensable; the job has been accomplished and he is too much of a risk. It's a chilling introduction to a ruthless character.

Greedy The only quality deeper in Vikram's character than ruthlessness is his greed. He will scheme and kill and betray in order to obtain cash, which he repeatedly calls 'my money.' This aspect of his character is revealed toward the end of the film when he has tied up Rasathi and Kadhira and has them dragged behind a jeep, trying to force them to tell him where the cash-filled container is. Unable to bear their physical torture, Alagu rips away the straw hiding the container and says to Vikram, 'Here it is! Here's the money!' When Vikram sees the container, his eyes widen and he loses all interest in his sadistic torture. He smiles, he laughs and then he cries out, 'I've found it! My money!' This brings a crowd of villagers, who are also anxious to get the cash and who also claim the money. In the chaos, Rasathi and Kadhira escape from the ropes tying them to the jeep. They get away only because Vikram's greed is greater than his sadism.

Chandralekha Chandralekha is the city girl, in league with Vikram. At the beginning of the story, Chandralekha is the hit attraction in a highly sensual dance-music extravaganza. She is brash and tough and imperious. Later, we see that she has other feelings, is vulnerable and is capable of feeling empathy for people who come from different backgrounds.

Loyal The sexy, city girl is not without depth of character. Her most endearing quality is her loyalty, which she displays towards both her saviours (the two petty thieves) and her fellow-female fugitive, Rasathi. The most dramatic illustration of that loyalty comes toward the end when Kadhira and Alagu are held at gunpoint by Vikram, who demands to know the whereabouts of the container with the cash. It is a desperate situation, in effect, a standoff between her and Vikram, her former lover. She knows that Vikram will not hesitate to kill whenever he feels it is necessary. She also knows that the two thieves will not divulge the information he demands, if only because they want that money themselves. Even Chandralekha herself is keen to get her hands on some of that vast amount. Vikram grows louder in his demands and has the two men whipped. At that point, Chandralekha gives in and says, 'Let them go. I'll tell you where the container is.' When she gives Vikram the precise information he wants, he pulls the gun away from the men's heads. She has chosen to throw

her lot in with the two rustics rather than the slick Vikram because they have treated her fairly. Her loyalty to them is now unbreakable.

Vulnerable One of the best scenes in this long movie occurs on a riverbank. Chandralekha and Rasathi have taken a bath and are trying to fry some fish to eat. The two women, so far apart in background and experience, have been thrown together in the company of the two petty thieves. At first, they are suspicious of each other, but by now they have recognised the admirable qualities in their opposite number. Rasathi asks Chandralekha why she got involved with 'scum' like Vikram. 'You seem like a good girl, brought up right and all,' she says. Chandralekha throws back her hair and looks directly at Rasathi and says, 'It's like riding a tiger. The tiger will eat me if I get off.' Rasathi wants to know why she got on in the first place. 'When I was young, I didn't know the tiger was dangerous, she says. 'It happened when I was 17. I fell madly in love with Vikram. He took advantage of me. Taught me everything that's wrong in life. And I learned it all.' This revelation adds layers to Chandralekha's character. The tough woman is just a girl who loved a bad man and suffered. But hearing this, Rasathi says, 'I don't understand why you're so courageous. I mean, you should be weak.' Chandralekha smiles at her, and we see that her courage is fragile, only a covering for her self-doubt.

Inspector Lakshminarayan is the Inspector (which is the title used for him in this essay) The Inspector is a capable, dedicated man, who is given a weighty job of finding the stolen money. He may be a common family man in the first scene, but once in New Delhi he becomes an engine of activity. He never loses focus and uses his intelligence and management of resources to capture both the cash and the culprit.

Comic Although the Inspector is a high-ranking officer, he appears less than dignified in his first scene. In fact, he is decidedly comic. He and his wife are hurrying down a railway station platform, trying to find their carriage before the train leaves. He is overweight and puffs heavily, carrying suitcases, while his wife strides ahead. They are, we learn, on their way to a famous temple to perform a ritual in the hopes of having a child. 'Don't run, dear,' he says. 'I'll die of a heart attack.' She doesn't slow down and says, 'Just take your medicines.' They finally find their carriage, climb in and settle down. 'Phew!' he says, 'That was like a scene in a movie!' We laugh, but only after the movie is over do we realise the true significance of the scene. For the rest of the story, the overweight Inspector will be looking for another train carriage, SFK 1138, which contains the stolen money.

Clever Once he is tasked with the responsibility of recovering the stolen cash, however, we see a different man. Focused, decisive, un sentimental and intelligent. He takes action as soon as he learns of the theft, but his cunning is revealed in a much later scene at the end of the film. The Inspector has figured out that train carriage SFK 1138 has been hidden away in the forest around a village. He arranges a large public meeting, at which he tells the villagers that he wants to find that carriage. 'How much money is in it, sir?' one local man asks. 'Hundreds of thousands of rupees,' the Inspector answers, truthfully. The crowd then disperses in a rush of excitement to find the cash. The Inspector's assistant says, 'That was a mistake, sir. Now, they'll run crazy and we won't be able to control the situation.' 'Precisely, lieutenant,' the Inspector says with a little smile. 'That was my intention. With so much public interest, Vikram will never be able to smuggle the lorry out of here.' The overweight man (whom many call 'fatso' out of his earshot) is a clever man.

Confident The Inspector is a dedicated family man summoned to the capital to take on the huge responsibility of recovering stolen cash and safeguarding the government's reputation. At the outset, he does not appear up to the job. When the minister in New Delhi tells him that the amount stolen is 1000 crores, the Inspector looks baffled and wants to know how many zeroes that means. Ten zeroes, he's told. And he has ten days to accomplish the task. 'I don't know,' he says. 'Ten zeroes in ten days. That's one zero a day.' The minister frowns, and the Inspector adds, 'Do not misunderstand me. We will find the money. Count on me.' That trust is not misplaced. On the ninth day, the money is found and the government is spared embarrassment.

Kadhir	Kadhir is one of a pair of village thieves.
Alagu	Alagu is the other village thief.
Rasathi	Rasathi is the country girl, who runs away from her abusive uncle.



(The Inspector and his wife rush to catch a train)



(The four fugitives, left to right: Chandralekha, Rasathi, Kadhir, Alagu)



(Chandralekha holds up the secret card, with Kadhir and Alagu beside her)