

The Pickpocket's Letter

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Your Highness Mr Narendra Modi,

You are the Prime Minister of India, one of the world's largest democracies. They say you know many famous people, such as Xi Jinping, Obama, Putin, Merkel, and Trump. They invite you to their countries and welcome you like a VIP. When they come to India, you wear your best suit stitched by tailors in London and go to the airport to greet them with garlands of flowers. I have heard you even gift them beautiful marble replicas of our Taj Mahal. Once, I saw you in a big black car rushing to the Kolkata airport for one of those visits. I ran forward between two policemen and waved to you. Did you wave back? No. Another time I saw you on NDTV news. You were giving a speech to thousands of people assembled at the Maidan. I was impressed. However, my friend Sanju was not. He said it was all a political *tamasha* organised with a rent-a-crowd audience. Offer these people a hundred rupees and a cup of chai, and they will go anywhere. For two hundred rupees, they will even start a riot.

You said so many things that day, but none of them interested me. However, when you started talking about children, I asked Sanju to turn up the volume. You were saying every child in India is like your own son or daughter; you will give them the education they deserve and help them achieve their

ambitions in life. You went on to say that children were the future of the country; no child should live in poverty, fear, or ignorance.

That is when I said to myself, Deenu, you must write to Mr Modi, tell him all about yourself. If anyone knows about living in poverty, fear, and ignorance, it is I. With due respect, sir, however good your intentions, you won't succeed in this noble venture unless you look deeper into why there are so many abandoned children in this country. Do you know what happens to them? I can tell you. They end up living on pavements, at railway stations, or at bus shelters. The lucky ones find themselves in orphanages, like the one I was in, until gangsters kidnapped me when I was fourteen.

I will tell you absolutely everything about myself, including how often I use the toilet and when. I hope you are not of a delicate nature, sir, not easily offended by violence and bad language. That's because I am going to be brutally honest. Like you, I am a man who likes to speak his mind.

When I said I would write to you, I didn't mean it in a physical sense. That's because I haven't learned to write, although I can read a bit. I am going to dictate everything to a Sanyo voice-recording machine. About twenty years old, made in Japan, it still works like a dream. My friend Sanju has promised to type the story on his HP 250 laptop.

I am in Kolkata as we speak, sitting in a tiny room above *halwai* Baldev's sweet shop. Sanju lives in the next room. A musician occupies the third room. His name is Roby. More about him later. First, let me tell you about Sanju.

Sanju went to school in Dhule village, studied up to class VI. He said he had to leave school when his father died of a *bhang overdose*, and then his mother kicked him out, saying she did not want a man in the house anymore. She said she had had enough of men; they are all lazy fuckers. She did not use that word exactly, but something similar in Marathi. You will never catch me using bad language. Well, very rarely. Once I did. That is because someone had made me truly angry and sad. Let me tell you about that.

At the time, I was in Bengaluru. I had a steady job working as a pickpocket. Now, Mr Modiji, sir, please don't be mad with me. I had to do what a man has to do to survive. I had no choice in the matter. If you meet Vikram Bajrang and Father Petre, you will understand. Big, powerful gangsters they are. You may be interested to know they are also your *bhakts*, devotees. They claim to have a big reach within the BJP party and that no one can touch them. It may be true because once I saw them send a bundle of thousand-rupee notes to an important man in your government, whose name I have forgotten. However, I have seen him on television a few times. He is a small man with greasy hair and a saffron tilak on his forehead, his head bowed, performing a *namaste* to the camera like a very moral and saintly human being.

So, when they offered me the job of *phoketmar*, how could I refuse? I was not alone, though. There were four of us on the team: Ramesh, Gokul, Bhushan, and me. My name is Deenu. They also call me Deenu Cobra. Why Cobra? You will find out later. Ramesh was my best friend. I loved him like a brother. One night, he went missing from the house. It was a surprise because no one had heard him leave. We assumed he had left early to work the crowd that had gathered in Cubbon Park for Guru Ramdev's darshan. In the evening, back home, we found Vikram sitting on the white leather sofa, drinking Black Label. However, Ramesh wasn't there. That's when I began feeling uneasy. I couldn't shake off the fear that he may have come to some harm. Have you ever faced this kind of fear, sir?

'Ramesh has run away. We have looked for him everywhere. We can't find him,' Vikram said, just like that, casually, as if announcing tomorrow we are going to eat mutton biryani for dinner.

My heart stopped when I heard those words. I knew Ramesh so well. He never went anywhere without first letting me know. If he wanted to leave Bengaluru, I would have known.

I said to Vikram, 'Boss, no way he would have run away. Something bad must have happened to him.' Ramesh's favourite song, *oye Raju pyar na kariya kariyo - dil toot jata hai*, began ringing in my ears. He often sang it to me, replacing 'Raju' with 'Deenu'.

However, Vikram was adamant that Ramesh had left of his own free will.

'Forget about that double-crossing *sarak ka kuta*,' he said. Calling my brother a dirty wild dog was out of order. That's when I swore at him. I called him *bahnchoot*, sister-fucker. Luckily, he did not hear me, or I would not be here dictating this letter to you.