It is interesting to note that the commission of theft by a person was sometimes believed to be the result of the influence of evil spirits upon him. (1) It is said that when Kali entered the body of Kizig Nala, he appropriated the wealth of others unjustly. (2) Another belief was that a man became a thief or a robber as a result of his work in a former life. (3) For calling some innocent men thieves, a person became a thief in his next life. (4) It was also believed that a man became a thief or a robber because he was cursed to be so in a former life.

At the time of the birth of a child, the astrologers made the declaration that he would be a thief. In such cases, in spite of a very careful bringing up, the child ultimately became a thief. The thief grimly observed: 'For who is able to alter the action of a man in his previous birth?' (5) It is said that when the robber Angulimala was born, all the armours in the town shone brilliantly. His father 'consulted the stars and concluded that his son was born in the conjunction of the Thieves' constellation'. (6) He became a dangerous robber.

The real causes of theft and robbery, however, lay elsewhere. According to the Dīghanikāya, (7) when land was divided among the people and boundary marks were set up, some greedy men misappropriated other men's plots. Thus theft originated from greed. This is also supported by the Mahābhārata: (8) According to Mana, anger leads to unjust seizure of property. Overcome by a violent desire, man steals others' property. (9) Aversion for the labour involved in tillage or cattle-tending led the eldest of the Panda brothers, who ultimately founded the Panda dynasty, to become a
The allurement of the profession of thieving or robbery which promised much profit in lieu of comparatively less labour was irresistible to many. The thief Sarvilaka in the Mrochakatika, preferred theft to service under somebody because the former guaranteed independence while the latter demanded servility.

Bad association, addiction to gambling, connection with prostitutes and extravagance often led a man to steal. Mahabala was born in a good family and was well-educated. Gradually, however, he lost his relatives, led a dissolute life, became addicted to gambling and from a gambler became a thief. Srigupta turned into a thief owing to bad association, gambling and other vices. Vasanta, a merchant’s son, was a spoilt child. For committing many indiscretions, he was driven from home. He became a vagabond and indulged in gambling and other vices. Or seeing people enjoying themselves, he felt a craving for pleasure and committed theft. In the Mrochakatika, Sarvilaka committed theft for the sake of a courtesan. In the Basakum-pracarita, Apabharavarna stayed in the house of a prostitute and decided to fill her house with wealth by robbing the rich men of the city. According to the Mahabharata and other works, extravagance forced a man to have recourse to theft.

For the sake of romance, adventure and bravado, princes and sons of the rich, as pointed out earlier, sometimes took to thieving. It cannot be gainsaid that there is thrill in the thieving business which attracted young men of adventurous spirit. The romance of the adventurous life of the bandits led the eldest
Narada to seek admission to the brotherhood of robbers. Poverty was one of the most important causes of theft and robbery. A Rgvedic verse shows that sometimes a debtor was forced to steal in order to pay off his debt and thus avoid severe punishment. The thief Sarvilaka broke into others’ houses because he was too poor to purchase the freedom of his beloved who was the maid of a prostitute. He cursed poverty, which led a man of good family to commit an act of sin. King Udayana’s minister, Yaugandhaرerc, said ‘Poverty makes men steal’. According to the Dighanikaya, poverty, a product of bad government led a man to steal. According to the आचार्यं सुत्रं, unemployed men took to stealing. Generally speaking, anarchical condition, weak administration, oppression of the people by the royal officers, natural catastrophes, etc. would breed thieves and robbers. The condition of a kingdom unrighteously governed is thus described in a जातक tale:

By night to thieves a prey are we, to publicans by day,
Lewd folks abound within the realm
When evil kings bear sway.

People stricken by drought or famine sometimes took to theft as a last resort. As pointed out already, the यज्ञवर्त्तमान clearly says that thieves and robbers thrive in a country where there is no strong government. They often recruited their followers from amongst the poor and the vagabonds. Sometimes men stole things to satisfy the wishes of their wives or their cravings of the better for something during pregnancy. A pious Lingayat used to break into the houses of people of other
other faiths with a view to distributing the loot among the followers of his own creed. Prostitutes' sons and bastards who generally grew up in a very uncaring atmosphere, without affection and care, learnt all sorts of vices and took to theft and robbery to maintain themselves. The arch-thief Muladeva, the robber-chief Cilātī and others were the sons of whores.

In ancient India, political stability was rare. In the absence of a paramount ruler, the country was divided into a number of petty states which engaged in constant internecine warfare. Besides, the rivalry between the monarchical and republican states also led to frequent wars. War was often fought for cattle and women. In later ages, kings fought wars for winning glory, spoils and territories. These wars greatly weakened the defeated countries and gave a rude blow to their governments and led to anarchical conditions and insecurity of life and property. Wars meant loss of lives, destruction of crops and property. Agriculture, trade, etc. became almost impossible. The kings were also forced to tax their subjects more heavily to meet the expenses of wars. So the poor became destitutes and were forced to take to stealing to maintain themselves.

Foreign invasions which were many only aggravated the sufferings of the people. All these produced a sense of frustration and an all-round degradation. Standard of morality sank low. Drinking, gambling and infatuation for prostitutes became widely prevalent. Indeed 'loss of character in all societies is the main cause for people turning thieves'.

Class-pride and rigidity of caste system kept the Cāndālas and other 'low classes' of people out of association,
marriage, etc., with those belonging to the higher castes. The society compelled the Cardálas to perform menial works and did not give them any privilege. These despised untouchables often took revenge by kidnapping the women of the twice-born and pillaging their houses, and it was these people who often swelled the ranks of the thieves and robbers.

The unsubdued tribes living in dense forests or hilly areas and the disbanded army of a defeated Non-aryan chief earned their livelihood by robbing travellers and caravans and raiding villages and towns.

Theft and robbery became the hereditary professions of some people whom even the severest punishment failed to deter and it was almost impossible for a person born in a thief's or robber's family to pursue any other calling than the hereditary one. The case of Rauhineya is an instance in point.

The forest-robbers were often hereditary criminals. Some sort of caste pride made these criminals determined to follow their dangerous avocation. They did not see anything wrong in it. Absence of economic equality which characterised all ancient societies and the resultant accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few who lolled in luxury, might have led some ambitious poor men to rob the rich. Sajjalaka, as mentioned before, felt no compunction to rob a rich merchant. Apabhāravman, the Indian Robin-hood, tried to bring some economic equality by robbing the rich and helping the poor.

In spite of severe punishment, social disabilities, the fear of suffering in the hell and the next world and universal hatred towards them, thieves and robbers remained almost unaffected
and their ranks swelled steadily. They were indeed too numerous
to be got rid of by banishment or capital punishment. The follow­
ers of Gautama disapproved of banishment as a mode of their punish­ment because it would cause loss of population in the country.
Their harmful activities affected the life of people to such an
extent that serious attempts were made to rectify them. There were
attempts to make them humane and lessen their cruelty, as far as
practicable, by law and moral teachings. It is refreshing to
note that they were after all considered to be corrigible. As
pointed out before, one of the objectives of punishment was to
reform the character of the criminal, probably it succeeded to some
extent in the case of the Brāhmaṇa criminals who were comparatively
lightly punished. The Great Religious preachers like Mahāvīra,
Buddha and their disciples played a great part, as pointed out
earlier, in reforming the notorious culprits by converting them to
their religions. Indra, according to the Mahābhārata, told Mandhātṛ
about the social and religious duties of robbers which show what
was expected of them in ancient India. According to Indra, the
robbers should serve their parents, preceptors, superiors and her­
mits, render services to the king, observe Vedic duties and rites,
perform sacrifices in honour of the patriarchs, dig wells, make
cisterns for public use, give beds to the guests, make gifts to the
twice-born in proper time, abstain from injury, observe truth,
suppress anger, keep up the means of livelihood and inheritance,
maintain sons, wives, purity and peacefulness, give honorarium for
all sacrifices and perform highly expensive Pāka-yajnas. At another
place, the Mahābhārata says that robbers who observe the rules of
the Dharmasastras attain spiritual power speedily in spite of their being robbers. (34) Sukra asks the king to teach bad men, after punishing them for their crimes, the good ways of life. All the scriptures advised men to abstain from theft and violent activities. Preachers of religions, especially Mahavira and the Buddha seriously tried to reform the thieves and robbers by converting them to their faiths and giving them shelter in their churches. According to an inscription (13th century A.D.) king Sundara-Pādya took steps for the spiritual welfare of some Bhrāhmans who turned robbers. When his officers failed to check them by beating, imposing fines, pulling down their houses and keeping them under surveillance, the king 'issued stringent orders that they be captured wherever found and punished according to the rules applicable to the lower classes, that their houses and other hereditary property be sold to temples and other charitable institutions, that the money thus realized be credited to the treasury in payment of the fine imposed on them, and that the balance, if any, be presented to the temples as a permanent charity in the name of the criminals'. It has been said, 'The religious instinct ... which ... prompted Sundara-Pādya ... to order a portion of the money realized by the sale of criminals' property to be set apart for charities on their behalf in order that these misguided people may, as a consequence, improve in their character and become at least in the future useful and loyal citizens is indeed noteworthy'.
(1) Markandeya Purana, Chap. 51.
(6) Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 82.
(8) Dighanikaya, III. 80ff.
(9) Mahabharata, Santi Parvan, Chap. 158.
(10) Manu, VII. 48. 51.
(11) Uttaradhayaya Sutra, XXXII.
(13) Mrchakatika, III. 11.
(16) Bloomfield, loc.cit.
(17) Mrchakatika, trans. Ryder, p. 50; Skanda Purana, Vismukhanda, Chap. XVIII.
(18) Dasakumaracarita, pub. Ramaswamy, p. 111.
(19) Mahabharata, Sarti-parvan, Chap. 28.
(20) R.K. Mookerji, loc.cit.
(21) Rgveda, VI. 12. 5.
(22) Ryder, Mrchakatika, p. 51.
(24) Dīhanīkāya, III. 58ff.

(25) Acārānga Sūtra, I. 2, 3.


(36) Radha Kumud Mookerji, Local Government in Ancient India, pp. 213ff. Asoka Granted (Pillar Edict IV) three days' respite to prisoners on whom the sentence of death had been passed. His intention was that during that period, their relatives would plead for their lives to the officers 'by appealing to the latter's mercy or by adding fresh evidence in the convict's favour, or by paying ransom for their

contd. ....
release; but, failing to secure the release of the prisoners
by those means, the relatives would console them by observ­
ing fasts and giving gifts with a view to securing their
happiness in the next world. See D.C.Sircar, Inscriptions of
Asoka, Delhi, 1957, p.21.