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India's most valuable literature prize announces its first winner



India's most valuable literature prize has crowned south Indian writer Benjamin its inaugural winner for his novel "Jasmine Days," a story of a young women caught up in the Arab Spring protests of 2011.

[The prize](#), funded by UK construction giant JCB, awarded Benjamin \$34,000 at a lavish event in New Delhi on Wednesday evening, with an additional \$6,000 for Shahnaz Habib, who translated the book from Malayalam into English.

"The courage shown by Benjamin in 'Jasmine Days' in examining some of the most important conflicts of our times is exceptional" said Vivek Shanbhag, author and chair of the 2018 JCB Prize for Literature judging panel. "The novel provides powerful insights into the violence associated with change."

Benjamin has described the book as a "metaphor for the world today, full of fanatics."

Organizers hope the prize will increase accessibility to literary fiction across a range of Indian languages and expose people to new ideas outside of their so-called "linguistic ghettos," where they are unaware of what other segments of Indian society are talking, writing and thinking about.

India has 22 official languages and a host of other unrecognized tongues and dialects. "We live in frantic times and translation is one of the things that can bring us together," said author Rana Dasgupta, literary director of the prize, in a speech at the awards ceremony.

He also spoke out in support of India's burgeoning #MeToo movement, which recently [rocked the country's political, media and entertainment establishment](#), and applauded those who had the courage to speak up.

Real test

The JCB award has been modeled on the [Man Booker Prize](#), a prestigious annual award for English language books published in the UK, with an extensive marketing campaign that aims to stimulate book sales for all works short- and long-listed.

"You can't just hand a fat check to someone and go home," said Dasgupta, adding the true success of the prize would be measured by how it drives book purchasing going forward.

That may be difficult in a country where literary sales are low and national prizes tend to have little effect on the market.

Industry veteran Karthika VK, who heads the Amazon-owned Westland publishing house, said she was still waiting to see if the award has a material impact on sales, though she added "everybody is taking notice" of the prize's high-profile marketing campaign.

With submissions opening in March, novels were entered from 42 different publishers in eight languages, with a jury of five whittling submissions down to a final winner.

As well as Benyamin, other shortlisted authors included first timer Shubhangi Swarup, another translated work from Perumal Murugan, and a book by Anuradha Roy, whose work has previously been nominated for the Man Booker Prize.

"In their different ways, (the shortlisted) novels all depict the collision of richly contemplative beings with the rapidly changing outer world," the jury said in a statement.