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So **BAZAAR**



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*Why translation is critical, explains Rana Dasgupta, director of
India's newest and richest prize for literature*

What defines the pulse of a country? Often, it's great literature. The undercurrent of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is the aftermath of Independence, while Ali Smith's recent *Autumn* (2016) is as much a chronicle of post-Brexit Britain as it is an unconventional love story. But if that's the case, India's narrative is limited—what we call 'Indian literature' doesn't take into consideration the volume of writing in regional languages. As literary director of the JCB Prize for Literature, author Rana Dasgupta looks to make a difference. The country's newest—and richest, at ₹25 lakh—prize for literature not only accepts translations but encourages them. Of four entries a publisher is allowed, two are reserved for translated works. "What's going to happen, I think, in the first year is that many will only have two books to enter. In subsequent years they'll ensure to have at least two translations. Which means it'll start to create translations where there weren't before," he says. Beyond that, Dasgupta has created a diverse jury of people engaged in contemporary society, from different fields and age groups—filmmaker Deepa Mehta, entrepreneur Rohan Murty, theoretical physicist Priyamvada Natarajan, novelist Vivek Shanbag, and translator Arshia Sattar. Here, Dasgupta talks to *Bazaar* about widening the scope of Indian literature.

How was the prize conceptualised?

We wanted to create a great fiction prize—there's something about novels that really represents the character of the country. This is only open to Indian citizens, which is a significant decision because it excludes a lot of people who are thought of as great Indian writers, whether it's Salman Rushdie, who is British, or Jhumpa Lahiri, who is American. From the very beginning, this was supposed to reflect, to the greatest extent possible, the real India, not just what few people are writing or talking or thinking about. So it not only rewards translation, or is open to translation, but actually forces publishers to enter translations.

What is the significance of translated literature in India?

It's pathetic, to be honest, that a country defined by the diversity of its languages has such little translation going on. In a place like France, which is monolingual, about 25 percent of all books sold are translations, which means French people are in touch with what Germans are thinking, what Italians are thinking, what Mexicans are

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award as well. In the long term we also want to create systems for translators to find good work, pay, and prestige. It's critical.

What is the larger goal behind the award amount?

It says that the value we ascribe to a great novel from this country is the same kind we ascribe to great novels from any other place. We want to strip out the idea that a novelist who writes in English is more valuable or viable. If the prize is won by someone writing in English, they will win the same amount as someone writing in any other language. In a lot of prizes, if you write in another language the amount is split between the author and translator. But the implication there is that the other language is half as valuable.

What excites you most about being involved with the prize?

We haven't seen great prestige attached to new writers of literary fiction. Still today the most prestigious writers became so in the 1990s because of things that happened outside the country—they won major prizes outside India. There aren't many figures who have achieved the same level of literary fame in the last 20 years, and certainly no one because they won an Indian prize. This is a literary country—the binding fabric of this country is text—where poetry and folk tales and mythology are things that 1.2 billion people carry as Indians. The exciting thing is to put the missing piece of this literary puzzle into place to see that great writing gets recognition. ■ **EM**
Entries close end-May, and the winner will be announced in November.

thinking. Here, we don't know the debates in Tamil or Kannada or Bengali. That essentially means none of us is reading Indian literature. No one has the full picture.

What are the challenges of translation, and how does the award address them?

Vivek Shanbag's novel [*Ghachar Ghochar*] is part of a new wave wherein we rediscover that translation is a part of our culture. And he worked very closely with his translator. To translate from Kannada to English is not straightforward—they're different universes. It wasn't that the translator took Vivek's novel and rendered it in English; Vivek actually rewrote bits of his novel in order for it to appear in English. That was a labour of love and care. We want to inform people what complicated, loving, expert work translation is. It's almost like writing a novel yourself. So if a translated work wins the prize, the translator get a separate