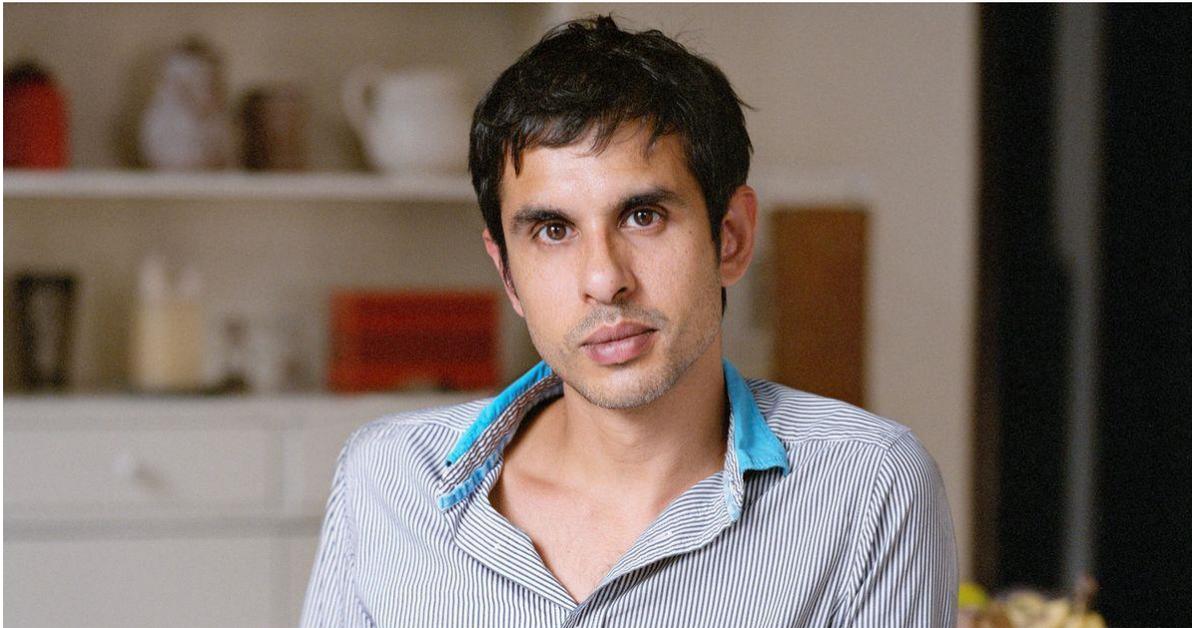


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Rana Dasgupta on why the newest and richest literary award for Indian fiction will be a gamechanger

An interview with the writer and Literary Director of the new JCB Prize for Literature worth Rs 25 lakh, which opened for entries on March 1.



The recently announced JCB Prize for Literature is an exciting and path-breaking new feature in the Indian literary landscape. Recognising a distinguished work of fiction – written in English or translated into English – by an Indian author, [the prize](#) is a long-term commitment to energising the Indian literary scene, the place of writers in cultural life, and access to regional language literature.

Coming with a cash amount of Rs 25 lakh for the winning writer (and Rs 5 lakh for the translator if it is a translated work), the JCB Prize is the newest entrant to a parched literary award landscape in India. Entries are open till May 31 and the winner of the first instalment of the award will be announced on November 3.

The prize, along with the JCB Literature Foundation which supports it, stemmed from the personal vision of the JCB Group's chairman and Literary Director Rana Dasgupta came on board early in the process to help design and conceptualise the prize. Dasgupta spoke to Scroll.in about the JCB Prize for Literature and its larger goals in relation to Indian readers, writers, publishing and cultural conversations. Excerpts from the interview:

One thing that struck me as extremely unique about the prize is that it will recognise shortlisted authors, as well as the translator should the winning work be a translation. Why do you feel this is important?

Both aspects are very important. As regards the shortlisted authors, we will come to a winner in the end, but our real objective is to get five great pieces of work out there and not just the winner. If we give people five books, they will definitely find something that speaks to them. So in the way we designed our publicity and prize money, the shortlist is very important in that it will give people a selection of what's great in their country.

As for the translator prize, from the moment I began discussions with JCB it was clear to all of us that we needed to represent the literature of the country, and not just one language in the country. For the JCB Literature Foundation, translation is a key concern. In order to be an Indian reader, you need to know what's going on in Kannada literature and Bangla literature, for instance. You can only do that if there's a vibrant translation scene. With this prize, we also want to create incentives for more translations. Publishers are allowed four entries, but two of them are only for works in translation – if they don't have that, they forfeit this quota.

Discussion about Indian literature in regional languages is becoming increasingly relevant. Why do you think this is so? Is this a turning point for regional Indian literature?

There are all kinds of things behind it. Publishers are hungry for more quality books. If the thriving publishing industry has to make money and produce great books, they must look at everything that's going on rather than being limited to one language.

But I think there have also been cultural changes in the country at large. With things that have been going on in the last twenty years, the English-speaking urban class has come to realise that it doesn't speak for all the country; there are many other important and exciting conversations and literary traditions. It's not just translations from other languages into English. Ultimately, we want a far more dynamic translation environment in general between any languages so that we can actually speak about an "*Indian*" reader and "*Indian*" literature.

Apart from fostering translation, the prize aims to enhance the prestige of contemporary Indian literature and writers. Can you tell us more about the place of writers in Indian society and the significance of this objective?

In India writers are almost invisible in the cultural conversation. The most prominent writers are those who have been made famous in other countries, like Salman Rushdie or Jhumpa Lahiri, and who have then become celebrities in India. But Vivek Shanbhag is not a celebrity – because writers are not an easy subject for the Indian media to treat. Whereas in the US, for instance, Philip Roth would be a major celebrity, and in Britain, Martin Amis. People understand that what writers have to contribute to the social conversation is different from what actors or politicians have to say. They are quiet, reflective people who bring a different sensibility.

So JCB is a much more profound project to get India to pay attention once again to writing and literature. I say “*once again*” because India is a very literary country with established literary foundations. It’s not about creating something that doesn’t exist, it’s about bringing to light something that does. That said, of course we’ll be making sure that people across the world pay attention to authors who are shortlisted and win the prize. But the primary reach of the prize is to people in this country. We want to make sure that the greatest work of literature to come out of our country in one year doesn’t sell 3,000 copies and then disappear into oblivion. It should sell hundreds of thousands of copies, and still be in print and celebrated in twenty years’ time.

While book awards offer recognition to authors, they don't always increase book sales. How will the JCB Prize impact the commercial success of winning titles?

If you look at the Booker Prize, a majority of their budget is spent on marketing. One of the main responsibilities of a prize is to tell people about the great book it has selected. By giving somebody a cheque, nothing in the outside world has changed in any way. We're not a publishing house with our own products to sell – we don't have any stake. The money comes from our generous funders, JCB, and their only objective is to promote literature in India. So yes, we have put together a marketing campaign to make sure that not just people who always follow books know about it, but everybody else too. It's crucial we don't limit our audiences. We should be confident of our own judgement.

Could you tell us about the jury for the prize and the judging criteria?

We wanted to put together a jury full of dynamic people in touch with contemporary life. There's sometimes a sense that literature is a closed kind of world, so we didn't want just people from the Delhi publishing industry to judge books published by the Delhi publishing industry. We wanted people who would bring a fresh perspective to books. Of course, we have people respected in literature. There's Arshia Sattar, the eminent translator and scholar, and the great author Vivek Shanbhag, but we also have Priyamvada Natarajan, an astrophysicist who is herself a writer and an art collector, the great film director Deepa Mehta who's our chair, and Rohan Murty, who founded the Murty Classical Library of India, and who has a deep passion himself for translation. So we wanted to get exciting individuals whose

opinions, judgements and tastes would be exciting to lots of people.



The Jury for the 2018 JCB Prize for Literature (From left to right): Arshia Sattar, Priyamvada Natarajan, Deepa Mehta, Rohan Murty and Vivek Shanbhag

As for the criteria, it's just literary. We're not interested in what religion, gender, region or language an author is about. We're looking to compare all novels on the basis of literary quality. How enduring is this novel? Is it something that will still be read in twenty years' time? The only other criteria is – does it speak of this moment? Is it a work of 2018? We'd have a preference for novels that are not necessarily contemporary in their subject, but are very fresh and contemporary in some way.

We also take integrity and transparency very seriously because we want people to trust what our jury says. We have Ernst & Young monitoring and documenting all our processes. This is a key aspect of the prize.

Finally, as an award-winning author yourself, do you think there are certain elements that go into the making of a prize-winning work?

No, I don't. If a writer ever tried to follow such a formula they'd write a very boring novel! What is common to most great writing is that people have tried to do something that no one else can imagine, therefore they don't follow a formula of any sort.