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Why do we need an Indian literary prize?



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It intends to become India's very own Booker or Pulitzer Prize.

With a prize money so “*generous*”, a jury so “*distinguished*” and a selection criteria so “*transparent*”, the newly-constituted JCB Prize for Literature promises to bring out the best in the Indian literary landscape. “*Many great books die an early death because there's not enough done for them,*” says award-winning author and essayist Rana Dasgupta, who is the literary director of the award. “*It's simply not true that people are not interested in books in our country because they go out in thousands to buy Booker-nominated books. So we need a prize that draws attention to literary fiction in this country. We need a prize that has enormous impact on sales. And we need a prize*

that bestows prestige to literary writers. And that is what the JCB Prize for Literature intends to do.”

A formal event was organised earlier this week in the national capital, where the

who’s who of the literary world gathered to hear what the JCB group, a

multinational company specialising in manufacturing

construction equipment, has in store for the Indian publishing

world. The JCB Prize for Literature, which opened for entries

last month with a prize money of Rs 25 lakh, is billed as the

country’s richest literary prize. But why a literary prize? Why

not promote young writers through residency programmes or

promote good writing by publishing

new writers? *“Money often is a good motivator,”* says Lord

Bamford, chairman, JCB group. Speaking to Financial Express,

he says, *“Creative people like writers or artists often don’t get*

much reward. And we wanted to reward them. We will have

thousands of entries... publishers will put forward the writers

whom they consider the best.”

Bamford also gives credit to the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF)

for JCB group’s interest in literature. *“We witnessed the Jaipur*

Literature Festival, which is one of the world's largest litfests. It seemed an obvious choice to start this prize and give back to India," says Bamford, adding that he fell in love with India when he first visited it five decades back as a student. The group also plans to have a tie-up with the JLF. *"A kind of energy surrounds the Booker Prize even in this country. Many of them are new authors, but it leads to sales of upwards of 30,000-40,000. That is what a prize does. It draws attention to a book that no one has heard of... and, because of a prize, everyone wants to read it,"* says Dasgupta.

Responding to why JCB is putting a large corpus into a prize, the author says, *"It's not that we don't have enough space for training writers or getting them published... The prize is the missing element in our country. We plan to raise the prestige of literature and draw the attention of the common man to the award through a rigorous publicity campaign. Also, money and prestige can appeal to teenagers and that can give them a vision to write a novel."* An eclectic jury will pick out the best in fiction by an Indian writer for the inaugural edition of the prize. The jury comprises filmmaker Deepa Mehta, Rohan Murty

(founder, Murty Classical Library), astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan, novelist Vivek Shanbag, and scholar and translator Arshia Sattar. To keep the process transparent, it will be closely audited by Ernst & Young. A longlist will be selected in September and a shortlist will be announced in October, followed by the winner announcement in November.

While the Pulitzer is only for American citizens, the Booker is not open for translations. It's this gap that JCB is looking to fill by creating a space for Indian writing with an award that is as prestigious as its American or English counterpart. Both Bamford and Dasgupta, in fact, hold translations close to their hearts. *"I want people to read what an Indian writer may have to write in an obscure language. Think of a Naga writer getting translated into English and winning the JCB prize,"* says Bamford.

Agrees Dasgupta: *"We are trying to introduce incentives to publishers to translate much more than what they are currently doing. As soon as publishers start making more money, they will start putting more money into translations. We hope that one of the impacts of the JCB prize will be to have far more*

translations in existence.” So will JCB unearth the next Arundhati Roy or Aravind Adiga? Only time will tell.