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Can India's richest prize, JCB Prize for Literature, save literary fiction?

The JCB Prize for Literature, worth Rs25 lakh, has 'enormous ambitions'



The most promising development in the current scenario is translations from Indian languages, some of which are crossing over into foreign markets. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

JCB group, a multinational company specializing in manufacturing construction equipment, has appeared as an unlikely beacon of hope for literary fiction in India—

or that's what the recently announced JCB Prize for Literature has led us to believe.

Pledging Rs25 lakh to the winner, the prize is not only the most generous in the country (the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature began with a prize money of \$50,000, before it was slashed to \$25,000 in 2017), but is also perhaps the most inclusive. JCB will offer Rs1 lakh to each of the shortlisted titles, and Rs5 lakh to the translator of a work in case it happens to win. Publishers can nominate up to four titles each, but two of those must be in translation.

The jury will change each year and draw on distinguished names from diverse fields of expertise. For the first year, filmmaker Deepa Mehta, founder of the Murty Classical Library Rohan Murty, astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan, novelist Vivek Shanbag and classical scholar and translator Arshia Sattar have been appointed for the task. To keep the prize free of nepotism and personal prejudice, the process will be scrupulously audited by Ernst & Young.

The JCB Prize ticks all the right boxes. As its director Rana Dasgupta told *Lounge*, the committee has “*enormous ambitions*” and the prize money is but a fraction of the budget allotted to the publicity of the project. It's a strategy that is also employed by international prizes like the Man Booker, where the marketing machinery perks up the public's interest significantly. The idea is not only to promote the prize but also to kickstart a conversation about reading and literature. Apart from using

social media channels, the JCB Prize intends to lean on radio as a mode of dissemination. “*We want to speak to millions of Indians,*” says Dasgupta, who is optimistic about the influence the prize could have on the literary landscape of the country. Let’s pause here for a moment to contemplate what literary publishing in English looks like in India now. Having worked as an editor and a critic for over a decade, the only word that comes to my mind is “*dwindling*”.

Each year as publishers’ catalogues begin to hit my desk, I hunt through the literary fiction segment, only to find it shrinking rapidly. Debuts are hard to come by and established writers are usually published abroad first, reaching India through circuitous routes. The print run for a title is routinely 3,000 copies, or less in the case of relative newcomers. Even the best don’t fly off the shelves any longer.

The last major best-selling literary fiction title in English in India was Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, which appeared 10 years ago. Even so, its popular success came only after it had won the Man Booker Prize and sales picked up, as happens to most books that win the award. Till date, the novel has sold over 200,000 copies in India alone, where it was rejected by several publishers, before HarperCollins acquired it. Did the advent of commercial fiction in the last 10 years, led by Chetan Bhagat and his ilk, really sound the death knell for literary publishing? Future PhD scholars: we are looking at you for answers. The most promising development in the current scenario is

translations from the Indian languages, some of which are crossing over into foreign markets. Vivek Shanbag's *Ghachar Ghochar*, translated from the Kannada by Srinath Perur, found publishers in the US and the UK, and was critically acclaimed by a cross-section of the Indian media. Almost every major trade publisher in India, and a couple of academic ones, have imprints dedicated exclusively to publishing translations, though marketing these titles still remains a challenge. By a perverse neo-capitalist logic, the bulk of the publicity budget gets diverted to promoting mass-market writers, who already have a wide and assured readership, and don't need as much of a push as emerging literary writers do.

Literary fiction, by contrast, seems to make news these days by virtue of igniting a controversy—Perumal Murugan is a case in point, as is Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar—or because of a prize. In the case of the latter, the conversation then tends to get hijacked by the value of the prize, as was the case when Jerry Pinto won the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize for fiction, valued at \$150,000. The staggering sum made for clickable headlines. Money can, no doubt, make a palpable difference to someone's life, especially that of a writer who wishes to be freed from the shackles of a day job, but this underlying logic of conferring a prize didn't seem to bring the Indian public's attention back to literary publishing. Will the advent of a new prize for literary fiction encourage publishers to invest more in

the genre and find ways of making it appealing to readers once again?

To wonder whether the decline of literary publishing is due to the lack of publishable talent or the industry's hesitation with taking risks with the genre is like revisiting the chicken-and-egg conundrum. But the third party in this equation, which usually escapes without the rap that it deserves on its knuckles, is the media. Over the last two decades, mainstream English media in India have phased out much of their culture sections, book reviews have become scarce, and often excuses for settling personal scores, favours to return, and axes to grind. The insular playing field, with an ever-increasing number of people scrambling for the same (and woefully limited) resources, doesn't bode well for a healthy culture of criticism.

The few writers of Indian origin who end up being global celebrities—Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy—attain their hallowed stature not only because of their work but also because they are “*regularly written about in the press*”, as Dasgupta pointed out. “*Writers are reclusive people,*” he added, “*the challenge of the JCB Prize will be to make them part of the general conversation.*”

It's true that the path to public memory is paved by a robust and evolving public discourse. And a prize, at its best, can only be a catalyst for it.