



BOOKS

DIRECTOR'S CUT

Rana Dasgupta, author and literary director of the **JCB Prize for Literature**, tells us how the plush new award, the richest of its kind, will move mountains for Indian literature

What sets the JCB Prize apart from the existing literary awards?

For starters, the prize money (₹25 lakh) is a marker of the significance we've attached to literature from India. It's restricted to Indian citizens too, which surprises those who attach "Indian literature" with, say, Jhumpa Lahiri – but the idea is to give people a cohesive idea of what's going on in the country. Which is also why we've put a lot of emphasis on translation: Indian literature is multilingual. So we have a secondary prize (₹5 lakh) for the translator, should the winning title be a translation.

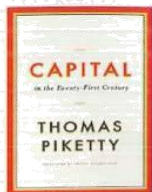
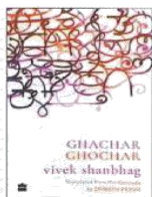
But we're also not about just handing a cheque to an author. We have a large marketing budget to get a conversation going around their work and, through it, Indian literary fiction. Take the Booker Prize: The prize money is £50,000, while the annual budget is actually about £1.5 million. The Booker-winning titles' sales multiply 8-10 times. It's that sort of impact that we're trying to create.

Why the emphasis on literary fiction?

It's the space in which a society learns about itself. Despite literary festivals, people don't know about this genre in India, and consequently, people don't write it. They'd instead choose to create romance or spy novels that might be extremely well-written and great entertainment, but may not necessarily add anything to the conversation.

The entries are now closed – what's the next step?

The jury [Deepa Mehta, Rohan Murty, Vivek Shanbhag, Arshia Sattar and Priyamvada Natarajan] will read the 80-odd books we've got, each on their own. And we'll announce a winner this November over a celebratory dinner in Jaipur.



How have you seen the Indian publishing industry evolve?

I've watched it grow since 2000, when I moved to Delhi. It was fairly amateur then, but now there's lots of great formulae for publishing, great design, great writing. What we still don't have though is the infrastructure, or the mechanisms to absorb all these fantastic products: from retailing structures to what gets taught in schools. How do you make the lives of writers significant? How do you make books live?

Do you sense a renewed interest in translation?

If you go back about 50 years, people were more aware of regional literature.



A still from *Wild Wild Country*

AK Ramanujan was a big figure; Mahasweta Devi, who wrote primarily in Bengali, is generally regarded as the greatest author of her time. In a sense, the country was a lot more cosmopolitan then. I do think publishers now are seeing the value of investing in translations again. Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* is a great example of what can happen when a book is well-translated.

What other projects are you working on?

All that I'm reading right now is connected to what I'm writing. [For *After Nations*, his non-fiction title expected in 2019] I've been reading economists to understand the nation-state. Thomas Piketty, Branko Milanovic, Gabriel Zucman – they're brilliant. I also recently watched a couple episodes of Netflix's *Wild Wild Country* for a project on that moment of contact between America and India in the Seventies. Americans didn't understand the first thing about the East and this culture, rushing into the spirituality thing, giving up their lives for it. But, what's more interesting to me is that this was happening at the same time that America was destroying Asia, with the bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, to begin with. It's fascinating. ☺

