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# JCB Prize for Literature: Two debut writers shine among literary giants

India's richest literature prize has just announced its inaugural longlist of the ten books that will compete for the top honours, including a Rs 25 lakh cash prize



**Mumbai:** India's richest writing award, The JCB PRIZE for Literature, has just announced the longlist for its inaugural edition. The names on it are a mix

of works by literary stars, debut novels and powerful translations. Predictably there is Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints*, a vivid fictional biography of poet-painter-rake, Newton Newton Francis Xavier. Other heavyweights include Amitabha Bagchi for *Half the Night is Gone*, Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by Day* and Kiran Nagarkar's *Jasoda*.

Chandrabhas Choudhury's second novel *Clouds* about Odisha's mining community and their various conflicts is on the list as is debut writer Shubhangi Swarup's dreamy and lyrical *Latitudes of Longing* which is a book that traces a journey through myriad landscapes and emotions. Another first time writer Devi Yesodharan also finds place on the list with her ambitious historical novel, *Empire* that charts the story of an 11th century Greek woman in the court of the Cholas.

From its inception the JCB PRIZE has focused on translations of regional works and of the longlist of ten books, two are translations – *Perumal Murugan's Poonachi* or *The Story of a Black Goat* (translated from Tamil by N Kalyan Raman) and Benyamin's *Jasmine Days* (translated from Malayalam by Shahnaz Habib).

Novelist Rana Dasgupta, the literary director of this prize, hopes that it will impact literature and culture in India by moving the interaction with books beyond the literary circles.

“The idea is to provide a wider audience with access to the great books that are being written in the country today. We are particularly interested in bringing together all Indian literature in the different languages that it is written in so translation is a key thing in the prize.” Going forward, Dasgupta hopes that the books on the JCB lists will become part of the archive of modern Indian writing and give voices from the subcontinent a larger platform.

The jury for the award for 2018 comprises a diverse list of personalities including filmmaker Deepa Mehta, Rohan Murty, entrepreneur and founder of the Murty Classical Library, astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan, novelist Vivek Shanbhag and scholar and translator Arshia Sattar. For Dasgupta the decision of this jury is fresh and exciting to a lot of people. “Literature is not an academic activity and societies need literature if they are to have any kind of a real conversation with themselves and that is why there it is a jury comprised of people who are deeply in touch with the different currents of contemporary life,” he says.

While each brings a different perspective and contexts on board, the one thing that they all agree on is the idea of the projected afterlife of each book

highlighted by the award. They hope that it will open up the market for literary fiction as well as draw in new readers.

In a note penned by all the jury members they mentioned, “We read books by writers from nineteen states, who wrote in eight languages about every conceivable subject. We noted the strong attention to Indian history and mythology, an increasing focus on themes of land, water and ecology, and some interesting experiments in genres such as science fiction.”

For Vivek Shanbhag the experience felt like “travelling to different parts of the country, meeting different people and living with them” while Mehta felt that the process of reading books from all over India familiarized her with a country she had left many years ago. “I felt like someone had opened a door to today’s India,” she says.

For them the ten books chosen for the longlist stood out simply because of “their powerful storytelling and their unique view of the world” and were books that they hoped would continue to be read long into the future. The short list for the prize will be unveiled on 3rd October and each of them will be awarded Rs 1 lakh while translations will receive Rs 5 lakhs. The final winner whose name will be announced on 27 October will take home Rs 25 lakh.