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Two new Indian literary prizes promise different agendas

The JCB Prize purse: Rs 25 lakh. It will award the winner, those who make it to the shortlist and a fat shorRs 5 lakh should the winning entry be a translation



Rana Dasgupta, author and director, JCB Literature Award. (Vipin Kumar/HT PHOTO)

Barsha Sen was 19 when she stumbled upon *The God of Small Things*. Living on the outskirts of the city then known as Calcutta, she had heard of debutant author Arundhati Roy's book after it made waves across the world on its way to the Man Booker award. The book had just started triggering

raucous conversations across city colleges and Sen says she remembers finishing the book at a feverish pace. It was then that she decided to use the Booker prize as a guide for future reads.

Fast forward 20 years and the situation hasn't changed much. The Booker and the Pulitzer continue to be the most important guides for discerning Indian readers for English fiction, buoyed by the several Indians and people of Indian origin who have won these prizes. Sen herself credits the Booker for discovering Aravind Adiga's 2008 novel *The White Tiger*. Ask which Indian prize she follows, and she draws a blank. But this might soon change.

Two big literary awards were launched earlier this month, both carrying enough prize money and prestige to make a splash in a market where new English fiction is fast losing its sheen and popular titles, guides and celebrity memoirs are grabbing headlines once reserved for literary superstars.

The bigger of these two, indeed the biggest prize in Indian literature, is the Rs 25 Lakh JCB Prize, financed by the eponymous British construction equipment manufacturing firm. The other is the New India Foundation Prize for non-fiction valued at Rs 15 lakh.

But what can prizes do to boost literary culture in a country like India? According to Rana Dasgupta, author and director of the JCB Prize, a lot.

“The prize imagines a world that doesn’t exist yet, where Indian readers know what is going on in every language. It implies a new kind of India, where people know far more about what other people are thinking, writing,” he says on the sidelines of the prize’s launch in Delhi this week. *“We don’t know that very well because we’re not reading each other. This prize is part of the attempt to create that.”*

Dasgupta has grand plans. The JCB Prize will award not just the winner but also shortlisted books, and a separate prize of Rs 5 lakh should the winning entry be a translation. The campaign will be mounted on television, and curiously, radio to reach out to outliers and expand the conversation around books. *“We want the books talked about and sold outside bookshops, we want to create new Indian literary superstars,”* Dasgupta adds.

These are lofty ambitions in an increasingly difficult market for Indian writing in English. Dasgupta himself admits average print-runs of fiction titles have shrunk to around 1,500-2,000

and books are disappearing from the public conversation faster than ever.

The market, comprising around 18,000 books annually and which data management firm Nielsen estimated in 2017 to be around \$ 6.5 billion according to Bloomberg, is dominated by guides, education books, memoirs and popular fiction – where writers such as Chetan Bhagat sell more than a million copies of their latest release. It is the middle of the market that is the problem.

MANY PRIZES, LITTLE IMPACT

India's fiction landscape is cluttered with prizes for fiction and non-fiction given out by both the government and private agencies – with the Sahitya Akademi and the Jnanpith among the oldest and the most prestigious. In recent years, many awards have mushroomed in English writing as have literary festivals, even in smaller, more far-flung cities such as Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh. But they may have done little to expand the culture of discussing and buying new books, owing partially to the focus on celebrity authors, filmstars and politicians.

“Indian literature prizes haven’t been bigger than the literature scene. And with that space shrinking, and the diminishing impact by an individual book, the impact of a literary prize is decreasing too,” says translator Arunava Sinha.

Sinha says in many cases, people don’t even appear to know there is a prize, let alone be curious about who won it. *“Prizes give the author and the publisher some satisfaction but make no difference to sales or to people’s preferences,”* he adds. Indeed, the only times writers have hit newspaper headlines in recent years are during violent protests – think Perumal Murugan or Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

This is where prizes such as the JCB can make a difference, feels author Vivek Shanbag, who is on the jury of the award along with filmmaker Deepa Mehta, founder of the Murty Classical Library of India, Rohan Murty, astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan; and author and translator Arshia Sattar.

“A prize brings lot of attention to the book, more people read it and it is discussed. All that is good for a book. JCB Prize will help writers in English,” says Shanbag.

Harper Collins India publisher Diya Kar Hazra agrees. *“The two prizes that have been recently announced, the New India*

Foundation Prize and the JCB Prize, are fantastic initiatives. There aren't enough serious prizes in the subcontinent that reward and recognise. These will encourage writers and good writing, and contribute greatly to literature centred on the subcontinent," she says.

Shanbag, whose Kannada novel Ghachar Ghochar was translated into English to widespread acclaim in 2016, is excited by the thrust on translation – two of the four JCB nomination spots are reserved for translations.

"Translation always get you a new reader and new responses. People who do not share the same culture and ethos also respond. When a work goes beyond its original language, it acquires a new and different meaning, which is always a pleasure for a writer," he adds.

DEEPER PROBLEM?

Can literary prizes, which have existed for English writing in the country since at least 1960, solve the readership problem?

In the early 2000s, there was great enthusiasm about English writing. With a booming economy, hordes of new and young

people entering colleges and learning English, and a phalanx of new authors fronted by Bhagat, it was imagined that India's famed youth bulge – two-thirds of the country is under 35 – will manifest itself in bigger audiences for fiction and non-fiction.

Since then, some of that hope has gone bust as first-time readers and fans of popular fiction haven't transitioned into more serious writing and the blockbuster success of new genres, say mythological fiction, hasn't helped others.

Moreover, as Sinha says, the culture of reading might be slowly eroding. *"Prizes can help augment when there is an existing culture of reading, as with the Man Booker. But if there are few books to begin with, what will a prize do?"* he asks.

There are other challenges, say, that of diversity that Sujatha Gidla's 2017 memoir *Ants among Elephants* underlined adeptly. *"There has never been reservation of any sort in literature. Literature doesn't need it. It defeats the very purpose of writing. However it is very important to have writers from all castes and classes to bring diversity and different worldview into literature,"* Shanbag says.

In some ways, writing in Indian languages has not only survived this, but has also forged its separate path ahead by inculcating a fierce culture of debate and dissent. In languages such as Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, Assamese, Marathi and indeed Hindi, little magazines feature vibrant discussions on new releases, and writers are popular figures in everyday cultural life.

Prizes such as the Bankim Purashkar in Bengali or the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in Malayalam are both coveted, talked about and popularly discussed. “*Engagement of the readers with the writers. I see that more direct in Indian languages. Indian language writers are more accessible,*” argues Shanbag. Maybe the way ahead is more inward.

INDIAN LITERARY PRIZES

The JCB Prize

Rs 25 lakh

Each of the five shortlisted books of fiction in English get Rs 1 lakh; the winner gets Rs 25 lakh; if the book is a translation, the translator gets Rs 5 lakh.

The New India Foundation Prize

Rs 15 lakh

The prize will be given every year to the best non-fiction book about modern/contemporary India.

The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature

\$ 25,000

(Rs 16.3 lakh under current exchange rates)
Awarded to the best full-length novel written in

or translated into English about South Asia.

The Hindu Prize

Rs 5 lakh

Awarded to the best novel in English.

Crossword Book Award

Rs 3 lakh

Given to each of the 4 jury categories (fiction, non-fiction, children, translation) and Rs 1 lakh to 6 popular categories (fiction, non-fiction, business, health, children, biography).

The Sahitya Akademi Prize

Rs 1 lakh

Each given to works in 24 languages, ranging from fiction to literary criticism and travel writing.