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In conversation with Benyamin, the winner of the JCB Prize



Talking to Malayalam writer Benyamin, whose book 'Jasmine Days' has won the inaugural JCB Prize

Malayalam writer Benyamin shot to global acclaim with *Goat Days*, a haunting novel that mapped the trauma of a migrant worker in West Asia. *Jasmine Days*, translated into English by Shahnaz Habib, has just won the debut ₹25 lakh JCB Prize for Literature, India's most valuable literary award today. On a busy day, Benyamin spoke about the award, the novel and his life as a writer in search of his marginalised brethren. Excerpts:

You have won what many call the Booker Prize of India. How do you see this? A burden or a boon?

No to both. I take awards, big or small, just as a way of encouragement, and nothing more. I don't feel compelled to write just because I may become successful or win awards. Frankly, I am not thrilled by the success. The writer in me will continue looking for new characters, plots and creative geographies that excite me and my readers.

But you're a writer the market has recognised. Arguably, a first for a Malayalam writer.

The market never influences the writer in me. I can't do such writing even if I try to. I have been writing for more than two decades now and till date I have never written for the "market". I don't look for a particular theme that will work commercially. I've always written about people and issues that have haunted and troubled me.

Why do you write?

In the very beginning of the Bible we encounter a haunting question, when God asks Cain: "Where is thy brother?" I think the question forms the crux of my literary quest. I am constantly in search of an answer to that question and I search for my brother among the marginalised, oppressed, discarded, abandoned, murdered and mauled. I want to find them and tell their story to the rest of the world. This mission keeps me writing.

How do you prepare for this mission?

I was an expatriate for long, which gave me access to an abundance of experience. But more than that, I find fodder for my writing in the marginalised people I come across. Their experiences motivate me. I would say not enough has been documented of such experiences, especially in mainstream literature. I am a humble ambassador of the marginalised. I don't need any extra tools or methods; all one has to do is to keep oneself down to earth, eyes open, listening to the people around. Their stories will barge into you and start choking you so much that you'll be forced to bring it out in words.

Writing is how you respond to the world...

Exactly. All my writing is a reaction to the events I witness. Cross-border disputes, political tumult, migration, discrimination against minorities, religious conflict and the like. I think these themes bear a certain universality and when I tell my stories they are read and appreciated by people who do not know my language or my people. I consider my books a means to disseminate my ideas to the larger world.

Many of your readers, especially in Malayalam, say your language uniquely blends old and new forms of writing. They are simple, but carry within them the complexity of the narrative.

I give a lot of importance to readability. A writer cannot ignore that. Today, there are umpteen ways a person can be entertained. So to draw him to a book is a big task. It's the responsibility of the writer to get the reader hooked.

Simple language helps a lot in this. This language is the result of a long process that involves many years of reading, and understanding human life and its myriad ways. I've not been

influenced by any specific form of literature or writing style. My language comes to me organically. I don't forcibly simplify my writing.

What about plot and structure then? Do they also just happen?

No. I intentionally and carefully choose the narrative structure for all my novels. In my quest for finding the best way to tell my stories, I want my readers to engage with my works wholeheartedly. I believe each subject demands its own narrative structure. As a writer, your duty is to get there and find it. With *Jasmine Days*, I felt the idea of a 'twin novel' — where two characters look at the same event in two different ways — would appeal to readers. In *Jasmine Days* a Malayalee writer tells the story of a Pakistani girl living in West Asia. He finds a book written by her and translates it.

The fact that the book is set in West Asia has also helped trigger curiosity.

I don't think the Gulf region has been represented enough in literature. There are many reasons for this. For one, sparing a few aberrations, literary activity was not quite possible there till a while ago. That is changing now. Many expats are now enjoying access to a vocabulary and infrastructure to produce literature that mirror their realities and experiences. I am happy to be part of that. A lot has to be written about the Gulf.

Tell us about Shahnaz Habib who translated the book from Malayalam into English.

I'm happy that my publisher has found a great translator for *Jasmine Days*. She has translated the book keeping in mind the fact that the story should address a global audience. I am extremely happy with the way it has come out.

You have inspired a new crop of writers.

Writing is not a simple exercise. I know many people think they can use it to earn money and fame. But to me writing is a very painful process. I'd say all new writers should try to look at the society around them through various lenses and derive meanings with which to frame their writing.

Writing takes a lot of patience. It is a meditative process. You get your raw material and meditate on it for long before it turns into fiction. Else, writing becomes only a form of documentation.

But writers face tremendous pressure these days...

State, religion and caste have always exerted pressures on writers. I believe literature happens when a writer resists such pressures and goes ahead with creating. A writer's duty is to continue writing even when attacked by the dark forces of power, politics and pelf.