

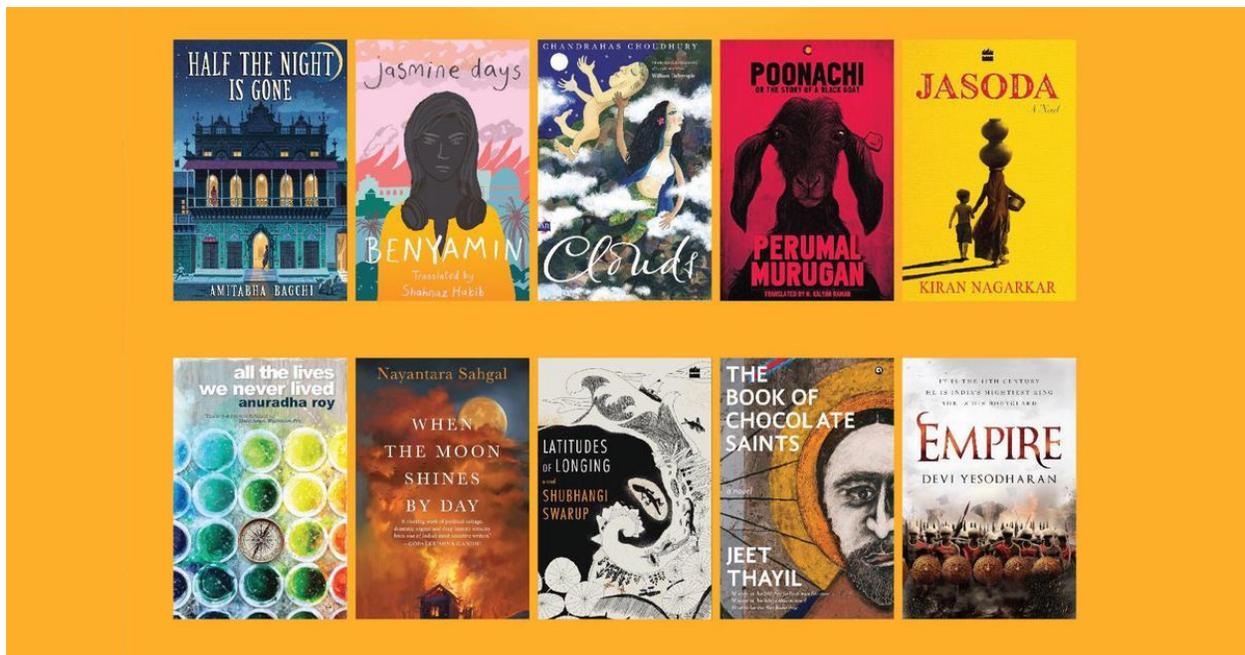
Publisher: Scroll

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Date: September 09, 2018

JCB Prize longlist: What we think about when we think about contemporary fiction from India

Ten novels that offer both common themes and unique points of divergence.



When we talk about literary prizes, we sometimes tend to talk in numbers: the number of heavyweights versus debutants, the number of books in translation, the number of male and female writers, and so on. If we were to do the same thing about the newly-minted JCB Prize for Literature, which has just announced the longlist for its inaugural 2018 edition, the five-member jury, comprising Deepa Mehta (chair), Rohan Murty, Priyamvada Natarajan, Vivek Shanbhag, and Arshia Sattar, read 80-and-odd entries, featuring books from across 19 states – of which 22% were in translation and 35% were by women writers.

As for the ten-strong longlist, it features two books in translation (*Poonachi*, by Perumal Murugan, translated from the Tamil by N Kalyan Raman, and *Jasmine Days*, by Benjamin, translated from the Malayalam by Shahnaz Habib), and two debut

women authors (Shubhangi Swarup for *Latitudes of Longing* and Devi Yesodharan for *Empire*). In terms of publishers, Juggernaut Books dominates the list, celebrating three nominations.

But what if we didn't talk in numbers? What if we focus on the words that the jury read, using the longlist as a proxy to discover the themes and concerns of contemporary Indian literature?

When asked about the criteria for submissions in an interview with Scroll.in, Rana Dasgupta, the literary director of the prize, had [said](#): “How enduring is this novel? Is it something that will still be read in twenty years' time? The only other criteria is – does it speak of this moment? Is it a work of 2018?” This, then, is fiction of the here and now, capturing the socio-political pulse of contemporary India.

Politics, past and present

This is evident in novels such as Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines By Day* and Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*. While the former comments on an all-too-familiar dystopian world of banned books (and art), and the terror and torture of totalitarian regimes, the latter, written in the shadow of the author's own self-exile, examines silencing and surveillance, power (and abuse thereof). Through these books, both resilient and quietly revolutionary, the novelist writes back to power.

Then there are the stories of the past, told, perhaps, for us to understand why we are where we are today. The 11th century court of the Cholas is featured in Devi Yesodharan's *Empire*, colonialism and Southeast Asia of the 1930s and beyond in Anuradha Roy's *All The Lives We Never Lived*, and the world of the Bombay poets in Jeet Thayil's *The Book of Chocolate Saints*. Yesodharan chases the capture of a young Greek woman Aremis; Roy plays out the interplay between independence for a country and personal freedom for women; and Thayil gestures to more modern moments in history such as 9/11. This is fiction that transcends time, but also bypasses boundaries (geographical and genre-wise).

India in the world

Although Indian citizenship is essential to be eligible for the JCB Prize, the ten books on the longlist are by no means insular in their imagination. Taken together, they turn inward into India's concerns and crises, but also fit them into a larger, global matrix, besides being cosmopolitan in their sensibilities and peripatetic in settings. While some are grounded in the Indian landscape, honing in on the story of a single family, others point their literary compass to other cities, countries, cultures, latitudes and

longitudes – even take multiple routes, as in *Latitudes of Longing* or migrant workers in West Asia in Benyamin’s *Jasmine Days*. Others still travel and seek to return to their Indian roots, such as Thayil’s protagonist Francis Newton Xavier or the allusions to classic Hindustani literature in Amitabha Bagchi’s magnificent multi-generational novel, *Half The Night Is Gone*.

The books contain the thoughts and themes that have and continue to preoccupy the current generation of Indian writers and thinkers – history and class, gender inequality, religion and myth, family and society, the colonial past and political commentary – but they also point to bigger, more universal ideas and ways of understanding and documenting the world we live in. These are rendered in historical fiction and ecological fiction, social realism and magical realism, poetic and polemical prose – and this range reflects inventiveness in form and style, catalysed by our times.

In debut author Shubhangi Swarup’s *Latitudes of Longing*, which can also be tagged under the increasingly-relevant genre of ecological fiction, the “landscape, earth and sea [are] principal characters”, commented the judges, while the protagonist of *Poonachi* is a goat. Kiran Nagarkar’s *Jasoda* is a moving story of survival amidst a decade-long drought – and like Roy’s novel, is also centred around a strong female character. Can ten books represent the richness the subcontinent holds? Certainly not, but with the variety and multiplicity of voices in these novels, sharing stories of the human, technological, animal, and natural worlds, they do provide more than a glimmering of what we can talk about when we talk about contemporary Indian literature.