



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE

## *Jasmine Days* by Benyamin wins inaugural JCB Prize for Literature

*Rs 25-lakh award goes to searing novel about south Asian migrants to the Gulf*

New Delhi, October 24, 2018:

**Benyamin** was announced as the winner of the first edition of the JCB Prize for Literature. Distinguished by superior writing and profound contemporary relevance, *Jasmine Days* was the unanimous choice of the jury. The book was translated from Malayalam by **Shahnaz Habib**.

The winning author received 25 lakhs, India's richest award, as well as a magnificent trophy, created by Delhi artist duo Thukral & Tagra, entitled *Mirror Melting*. The winning translator collected an additional prize of 5 lakhs.

Benyamin has written close to 20 books across multiple genres – from short stories to novels to memoir - and is already one of the leading literary voices of our time. The innovation and experimentation of his Malayalam novels masterfully demonstrate the inherent ability of regional writers to grapple with contemporary issues and lived realities.

Benyamin migrated to Bahrain in 1992 and returned to his native state of Kerala in 2013, two years after the revolution. *"I loved mathematics. I did not take literature seriously until I reached Bahrain,"* he says. Having already picked up the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the hard-hitting *Aadujeevitham* or *Goat Days*, his latest winning novel is equally uncompromising and morally complex, confronting some of the difficult questions of our time. *Jasmine Days* is a story of a young woman in a city where the promise of revolution turns into destruction and division. It is around the Jasmine Revolution that sprang up in December 2010 and was quelled in the Middle East by January 2011. Benyamin calls his novel *"a metaphor for the world today, full of fanatics."*

The judges were also impressed by Shahnaz Habib's skilful translation of the Malayalam novel. Born and raised in Kerala, Shahnaz now lives in New York, teaching writing at Bay Path University and consulting for the United Nations. Given Benyamin's profile, Shahnaz attracted much attention when working on the translation, declaring that translating Benyamin was *"as a first-time translator, both auspicious and intimidating in equal measure."*

Members of the esteemed jury were unanimous in their praise for Benyamin's *Jasmine Days*:

**Vivek Shanbhag**, chair of the 2018 JCB Prize for Literature judging panel, comments:

*"The courage shown by Benyamin in Jasmine days in examining some of the most important conflicts of our times is exceptional. The novel provides powerful insights into the violence associated with change. It*

*also raises profound questions about the relationship between crime, punishment and forgiveness. A brilliant and intense novel.”*

**Priyamvada Natarajan**, theoretical astrophysicist at Yale, comments:

*“Jasmine Days captures the essential and active tension between inner and outer lives that pervades the diaspora, while dealing with the larger and deeper moral questions of our times. It renders beautifully the small acts of unanticipated defiance negotiated by individuals trapped in oppressive circumstances, and their various paths to personal freedom.”*

**Arshia Sattar**, leading translator and author, comments:

*“With courage and clarity, Benyamin's Jasmine Days points to the complex moral issues that define our times. Through its characters and situations, the book raises uncomfortable questions, but leaves it to the reader to answer them.”*

**Rohan Murty**, Harvard University fellow and founder of the Murty Classical Library of India, comments:

*"Benyamin's writing is deeply moving. He weaves a heartfelt story, while touching upon contemporary themes on immigration, labour, freedom, and human rights. And at the end of it, he will leave you in a better place than where you started."*

The winner’s trophy, **“Mirror Melting”** was designed by **Thukral & Tagra**, with its polished, yet rippled surface both reflecting and transforming the world. The sculpture, like literature itself, comes alive because of its relationship with the world around it. The distinctive trophy will be presented each year to the winner of this prestigious literary award. Thukral & Tagra reflected:

*“We were very happy when the JCB Prize for Literature approached us about this trophy, and we wanted to make something to represent the abstract effects that words and stories have on us. ‘Mirror Melting’ is like a mirage in metal. When you look at it you may see the organic form of a human body, or some future biological engineering, or just many reflections of yourself. This is not like a sports trophy. True to literature, it is otherworldly, like a dream.”*

To learn more about The JCB Prize for Literature, please visit: [www.thejcbprize.org](http://www.thejcbprize.org)

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## **ABOUT THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE**

Founded in 2018, the JCB Prize for Literature celebrates distinguished fiction by Indian writers. It is India's richest literary award.

The prize aims to enhance the prestige of literary achievement in India, and to create greater visibility for contemporary Indian writing. With a special focus on translation, it also aims to introduce readers to works of Indian literature in languages other than their own.

The Literary Director of the JCB Prize for Literature is the novelist and essayist, Rana Dasgupta. One of the responsibilities of the Literary Director is to appoint, each year, a Prize jury of distinguished individuals from a variety of backgrounds. All members of the jury read all novels entered for the Prize; they then jointly select a longlist (of ten books), a shortlist (of five), and a winner.

The 2018 jury consists of: novelist Vivek Shanbhag (chair), Yale University astrophysicist and writer Priyamvada Natarajan, entrepreneur and scholar Rohan Murty, and author and translator, Arshia Sattar.

All shortlisted writers receive Rs 1 lakh. The winner receives an additional Rs 25 lakhs. If the winning book is a translation, the translator receives an additional Rs 5 lakhs.

## **ABOUT JCB**

A leading global manufacturer of earthmoving and construction equipment, JCB has been active in India since 1979. Through its subsidiary, JCB India Ltd, the UK company today employs 5,000 people in India, and operates five state-of-the-art factories: in Ballabgarh (near New Delhi), in Pune, and in Jaipur. Products made in these factories have been exported to more than 93 countries around the world.

Through its products, JCB has contributed significantly towards the development of India's infrastructure over the last four decades. JCB carries out significant CSR activities in the country, with a focus on the communities close to its factories. Today its outreach extends to fifty-four government schools and nine vocational training centres, through which it assists 16,000 students and trainees.