

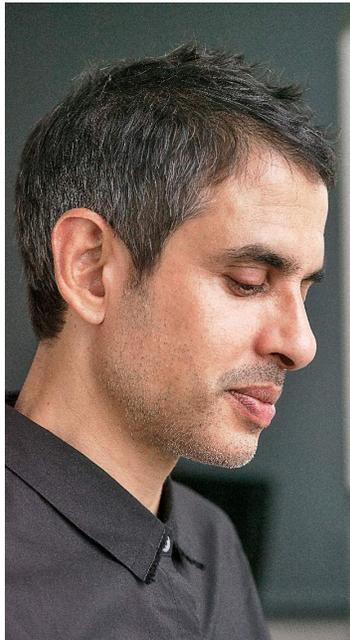
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## **‘A joyful book culture’: Rana Dasgupta scopes out prospects for the literary form of a novel in India**

The JCB Prize for Literature is being described as more than just an award, and as a platform for up-and-coming writers.



When we reached out to him earlier this week, Rana Dasgupta was out somewhere in a cottage, in an undisclosed location in the English countryside, working with “NO phone and NO internet”. While that, to us, seemed extremely heartening, we also managed to get Rana to speak about the JCB Prize for Literature, for which he serves as Literary Director. The award itself is only in its second year, and while it has already made news for being the largest prize of

its kind in the country, there's still a long way to go for the stated mission of promoting the culture of writing, and reading, in India. Here are a few excerpts from the conversation on building a strong literary culture in India, and celebrating a lot more than just the winner of a literary prize.

**The JCB Prize for Literature is being described as more than just an award, and as a platform for up-and-coming writers. A lot of that has to do with the attention you give to all the writers in the long-list and short-list, rather than showering attention only on the winner. How strategic is this, for the sake of bringing more Indian writing into a global sphere of recognition?**

It's a great strategy. It was in fact born out of my initial conversations with the people of the Booker Prize, when I was conceptualising the JCB Prize. The Booker Prize puts all of their marketing into their short-list, and one reason is that the short-list is simply more appealing to people than just one winner. In the sense that a short-list contains a range of voices, themes, etc, and it is bound to contain something that's interesting to most people. Whereas, with a winner, it's just one book, and you can never be sure if everybody likes it or not.

In the Indian context, with the JCB Prize, the same logic applies. The Indian press is very obsessed with winners, therefore the winner will anyway get good press. So we're inevitably left placing our efforts somewhere else. The prize is very committed to the variety of Indian writing today, and not just in some athletic performance of literature, where somebody wins. We're interested in promoting the full range of what is great today in Indian writing.

To that extent, in the final stages of the prize, there were people of all ages, genders, regions, and languages, etc. To me, that variety is more interesting than the fact of an ultimate winner. Contemporary writing in India is so varied that no single winner can represent everything. People are writing about so many different subjects — there are so many books that are set thousands of years in the past, there are books set in the future, and other books that travel all over the world. There are books written in every language. So, variety is very much the essence of this prize.

**Have you picked up on some of the new Indian language graphic novels cropping up from different parts of the country? Apart from novels, are there other forms of writing — poetry, comic books or even plays and scripts — that you'd like to bring into the fold of the JCB Prize?**

The current prize will always be a prize for novels. Of course, we are interested in the literary culture and landscape in general, and hopefully, other prizes will arise to reward excellence in the fields that you mentioned. But I think it's important that a prize is clear about its parameters — that we are not trying to compare poetry to a novel, and so on. The fact that the prize is for a novel makes a realistic kind of comparison possible between things that are after all, already very varied.

For instance, it was difficult for the jury last year to compare the achievement of a Shubhangi Swarup, who has written an extremely brilliant novel that is so different to what Benny (Benyamin) wrote for his winning novel. So, it's already very difficult. And, to introduce graphic novels or poetry would only make it too complex. And, if you look at prizes like the Pulitzer, for instance, there are prizes for novels, for poetry, and journalism, etc. There are lots of considerations here. Of course, you can say, the novel is not an indigenous South Asian literary form. But the novel is a literary form that has taken on enormous importance over the last two centuries in South Asia. In some ways, globally speaking, the most prestigious literary form. It is the literary form that most fully seeks to describe a society, and so, it is an interesting literary form to take as a barometer of a literary culture. And, it's always good to be clear about your parameters.

### **What exactly are South Asia's indigenous literary forms?**

Of course, the oral epics are indigenous forms, poetry of many different kinds — religious poetry, erotic poetry, these are indigenous forms. While the graphic novel is related to older forms, but I think it's really a new form. But with the novel, really anywhere in the world, there's not one that's older than two or three centuries. And the novel, I think, really is exported from the West to other parts of the world. These things are obvious, certainly, you can easily understand these sorts of histories. But clearly, the novel has become very important in lots of places. There are very important African novels, very important Asian novels, and so, I think today, it would be silly to say that novels are not an important part of South Asian culture.

### **How much of this will, in your mind, also give rise to new streams of publishing?**

Yes. For me, the idea is that, in India, we have a mature literature culture, which is to say that very large numbers of people are involved in books, journals, magazines, reading in a kind of varied way. And, I think that we are very far from it... I mean, probably after the post-Independence era was a fairly highly literary era, at least for the middle classes. But things dropped terribly after the 1990s, and now, they're picking up again. But, I think there are certain basic things that we need to have in place. And, the JCB Prize is a very basic piece of the architecture. That is to say, in any country like India, which has an extremely ancient and sophisticated literary culture, the idea that there is a great prize for a novel, is to me, quite basic.

### **Talking point**

Rana Dasgupta scopes out the prospects for the literary form of a novel in India, while distinguishing the JCB Prize from most other awards of its kind