

For Immediate Release: Friday 4th October 2019

The 2019 JCB Prize for Literature shortlist announced

- Two debut authors in the running for India's richest literary award
 - Shortlist reflects great diversity of Indian writing today
 - Five bold novels share a deep sense of justice and injustice

4th October 2019, New Delhi: **Roshan Ali, Manoranjan Byapari, Perumal Murugan, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Madhuri Vijay** were announced today as the five authors shortlisted for the 2019 JCB Prize for Literature.

The shortlist was announced this morning by Pradip Krishen, Chair of the 2019 jury, and Rana Dasgupta, Literary Director of the Prize, in a press conference at Oxford Bookstore in New Delhi.

The shortlist was selected by a panel of five judges: **Pradip Krishen**, filmmaker and environmentalist (Chair); **Anjum Hasan**, author and critic; **K.R. Meera**, author; **Parvati Sharma**, author; and **Arvind Subramanian**, economist and former Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India.

The JCB Prize for Literature celebrates the very finest achievements in Indian writing. It is presented each year to a **distinguished work of fiction by an Indian writer**, as selected by the jury.

The 2019 shortlist is:

- *Ib's Endless Search for Satisfaction* by Roshan Ali (Penguin Random House India, 2019)
- *There's Gunpowder in the Air* by Manoranjan Byapari, translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha (Westland Publications, 2018)
- *Trial by Silence and Lonely Harvest* by Perumal Murugan, translated from the Tamil by Aniruddhan Vasudevan (Penguin Random House India, 2018)
- *My Father's Garden* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar (Speaking Tiger Publishing Private Limited, 2018)
- *The Far Field* by Madhuri Vijay (HarperCollins India, 2019)

Commenting on the shortlist, the chair of the 2019 jury, Pradip Krishen, said, "Bringing voices from across the country, these novels address the many specific difficulties of living a life in Indian society. With a combination of lyricism and humour, the five novelists portray characters who are at odds with their - very different - worlds. Their private struggles help illuminate larger themes, including patriarchy in rural southern India, religious and political conflict in Kashmir, and social and sexual marginalization in eastern India. Taken together these novels remind us that fiction remains the most powerful way for a society to examine its fundamental concerns."

Rana Dasgupta, Literary Director, added: *“This year’s shortlist displays a satisfying diversity of voices, as is appropriate to the scale and variety of this country. These five books transport us to very different parts of India, and give us access to very different kinds of life. Each of them is imbued by the spirit of its moment, which is perhaps why the shortlist has such an unsettled, turbulent flavour. But literature contains wisdom too, and the deep sense of justice in these books reminds us why, whatever our reality, we continue to care, hope and strive.*

Each of the five shortlisted authors will receive Rs 1 lakh; if a shortlisted work is a translation, the translator will receive an additional Rs 50,000. The winner of the **Rs 25 lakh** JCB Prize for Literature will be announced at the awards dinner on **2nd November 2019**. If the winning work is a translation, the translator will receive an additional Rs 10 lakh.

The **2018 JCB Prize for Literature** was awarded to *Jasmine Days* by Benyamin, translated from the Malayalam by Shahnaz Habib and published by Juggernaut Books. Through the life of radio jockey Sameera Parvin, it describes the lives of foreign workers caught up in the turmoil of the Arab Spring, a subject that few Indian writers have previously approached. Since it appeared on the JCB Prize for Literature longlist, *Jasmine Days* has reached new audiences in India and abroad and has seen a dramatic rise in sales.

For information about the Prize, please visit: www.thejcbprize.org
For updates, look for @thejcbprize on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Shortlisted books: Jury comments, synopses and author biographies

***Ib’s Endless Search for Satisfaction* by Roshan Ali**
(Penguin Random House India, 2019)

The jury says

“A well-sculpted debut novel about an ennui-ridden, disaffected, unmoored youth in contemporary urban India. Full of dark humour and wise-cracking angst, its laid-back style comes back and smacks you in the jaw as you realise you are in the midst of a fascinating experiment with language. An anxious, brilliant read.”

Synopsis

Ib is a strange young man who is alienated by the rhythms of modern life and finds little in his circumstances that is worth redemption. Stuck between his mentally ill father, timid mother, and a domineering grandfather who intends to push Ib into a life of convention, Ib retreats to his imagination. As he drops out of college, follows a wise man to the Himalayas, and spends an inordinate amount of time in his favourite pub, he tries to make sense of the world around him.

Ib’s Endless Search for Satisfaction is Roshan Ali’s debut novel. Powered by the rhythmic influences of Saul Bellow, this novel is a wry look at Ib’s nihilistic tendencies and the lies we tell ourselves to navigate contemporary life.



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Roshan Ali, 32, was born and raised in Bengaluru. He dropped out of college in 2008 and began working on a novel. To him, the role of a writer is emblematic of his generation as a whole: *“To dissent when the powers become more authoritarian in nature. It’s not just to directly oppose authority, but to celebrate freedom and pluralism and truth and justice. This in itself is a kind of victory.”*

The protagonist of *Ib’s Endless Search for Satisfaction* has a journey very close to Roshan’s own, emerging victorious over self-doubt, self-hate and anxiety. “This will be the last book where the relationship between the writer and the protagonist is so transparent,” he says.

***There’s Gunpowder in the Air* by Manoranjan Byapari, translated by Arunava Sinha**
(Westland Publications, 2018)

The jury says

“Telling the story of a jailbreak during the Naxal days in Bengal, this novel reminds us of the magic of grand fiction. Beginning as a series of vignettes in a prison, it builds up, through a narrative of controlled anger and humour, into a devastating critique of what it means to be free. It leaves us with no answer, but just a sense of dread.”

Synopsis

The only thorn in the flesh of newly appointed jailer Bireshwar Mukherjee, a formidable man with a spotless twenty-five-year record are the inhabitants of Cell No. 12, the prison within a prison, which houses five Naxals, fiery young men dedicated to demolishing class society. When Bhagoban “Bhogai” Sardar, a thief who has committed a petty crime returns to jail, where he feels at home, Bireshwar Mukherjee has an idea. Bhagoban will secretly function as his pair of eyes on the inmates of Cell No. 12 and detect their nefarious plans. Slowly, however, Bhagoban gets drawn to the empathy of these strange young men. As the Naxals plan a daring escape that will either win them freedom or cost them their lives, he has to make a decision about a purpose that’s bigger than him.

Published in 2013 as *Batashe Baruder Gondho* in Bangla, *Gunpowder in the Air* is a darkly comic indictment of the Indian prison system as well as a deeply empathetic historical document of Naxalism in West Bengal.

Manoranjan Byapari was born in 1950 in East Pakistan. After he migrated to West Bengal at the age of three, he lived in two refugee camps before he moved away at the age of fourteen to work. At twenty-four, he became politically active with the Naxals after meeting famous labour activist Shankar Guha Niyogi. In and out of prison, he held various jobs over the years: cook, porter, *chandal* (corpse-burner in a crematorium).

In prison, he taught himself to read. He learnt and practiced writing with a twig in the dirt in the jail courtyard. During this time, he developed a great passion for literature. Later, when he was working as a rickshaw puller, he had a chance encounter with Mahasweta Devi, who asked him to contribute to her journal *Bartika*. He has since then published eight novels, four volumes of memoirs and over fifty short stories. His essay ‘Is there Dalit writing in Bangla?’ which was translated into English by Meenakshi Mukerjee for *Economic and Political Weekly* launched him into mainstream prominence. He worked until recently as a cook with the Helen Keller Institute for the Deaf and Blind in West Bengal. He won the 2019 *Hindu* Prize for Non-Fiction for his autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (translated into English as *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*).

Byapari’s writings aim not to evoke guilt or sympathy, but to reclaim the rights denied to large sections of the Indian population.



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Arunava Sinha translates Bengali fiction and nonfiction into English. Fifty-one of his translations have been published so far. Twice the winner of the Crossword translation award for Sankar's *Chowringhee* (2007) and Anita Agnihotri's *Seventeen* (2011), respectively, he has also won the Muse India translation award (2013) for Buddhadeva Bose's *When the Time is Right*. He has been nominated for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and the Best Translated Book award in the US. He is a recipient of an English PEN translation grant for

Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay's *The Yogini*. Besides India, his translations have been published in the UK, the US, and in several European and Asian countries. He has conducted workshops at the British Centre for Literary

Translation, UEA; University of Chicago; Dhaka Translation Centre; and Jadavpur University. He is an associate professor of practice in the Creative Writing department at Ashoka University.

***The Lonely Harvest* by Perumal Murugan *Trial by Silence* by Perumal Murugan. Both novels translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan**

(Penguin Random House India, 2018)

The jury says

"It is unusual for any writer to release two novels in one year, and we have taken the unusual decision of including both on the longlist. Both novels are sequels to Perumal Murugan's own *One Part Woman*, both therefore start from the same situation - and both are equally compelling and equally true."

"In one way, these novels try and answer an eternal question: when hurt by love, does one respond by hurting back, or hurting yourself? In another way, and taken together, they provoke another thought: how much do we control our future, if at all?"

Synopsis

At the end of Perumal Murugan's trailblazing novel *One Part Woman*, readers are left on a cliffhanger as Kali and Ponna's intense love for each other is torn to shreds. What is going to happen next to this beloved couple?

In *A Lonely Harvest* – one of two inventive sequels that pick up the story right where *One Part Woman* ends – Ponna returns from the temple festival to find that Kali has killed himself in despair. Devastated that he would punish her so cruelly, but constantly haunted by memories of the happiness she once shared with Kali, Ponna must now learn to face the world alone.

In *Trial by Silence*, the other sequel, Kali is determined to punish Ponna for what he believes is an absolute betrayal. But Ponna is equally upset at being forced to atone for something that was not her fault. In the wake of the temple festival, both must now confront harsh new uncertainties in their once idyllic life together.

Perumal Murugan was born in 1966 in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu. His first novel, *Eru Veyyil (Rising Heat)* was published in 1991. Since then, he has written ten novels, and five collections each of short stories and poems, as well as ten books of non-fiction relating to language and literature, in addition to editing several fiction and non-fiction anthologies. Several of his novels have been translated into English. He has also written a memoir, *Nizhal Mutrattu Ninaivugal*.

His novel, *Madhurobhagan* (2010) translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *One Part Woman* (2013) found itself in the midst of a controversy in 2014 after vociferous protests by local caste-based groups alleging that the author had hurt community sentiments, defamed women, and outraged religious feelings. Soon

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after that, he publicly announced that he has given up writing. He decided to take up agriculture, an activity he enjoys very much. *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat*, also shortlisted for the 2018 JCB Prize for

Literature, was his first book after the self-ban. He now thinks of censorship as a creative challenge towards discovering new forms of expression. Murugan lives in Namakkal and works as a professor of Tamil literature in a college.

Aniruddhan Vasudevan translates Tamil fiction into English. His much-lauded translation of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* has become an award-winning bestseller. He has translated other works by Perumal Murugan to wide acclaim, including *Pyre* and *Songs of a Coward: Poems of Exile*. He is also a Bharatanatyam dancer and experiments with interpretations, infusing a queer perspective into traditional

pieces. In the US, he has collaborated and worked with Lakshmi Sriraman of Shree School of Dance in Kentucky and Daniel Phoenix Singh of the Dakshina Dance Company in Washington DC. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Anthropology at The University of Texas at Austin. His research involves looking at caste practices, use of language, and sexual orientation.

***My Father's Garden* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar**

(Speaking Tiger Publishing Private Limited, 2018)

The jury says

"This is a writerly reflection on loss and disenfranchisement, both romantic and political. Shekhar handles big and complicated questions about social privilege, everyday corruption, sexual desire and community ties with beautiful ease, and produces a slim book that nevertheless delivers powerful blows."

Synopsis

The novel, narrated in first person by an unnamed medical student and doctor, is divided into three sections.

The opening section, 'Lover', finds him studying medicine in Jamshedpur. After a string of affairs, he discovers an all-consuming, unrequited passion for Samir, a junior at the college. In 'Friend', the young doctor, escaping heartbreak, finds relief in Pakur where he meets Bada Babu only to uncover a sordid tale of apathy and exploitation. And in 'Father' he takes refuge in his parents' home in Ghatshila and wonders if his father's obsessive gardening has anything to do with the choices his son has made.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a doctor and an author. He was born in Ranchi, grew up in Ghatshila and Chakulia and went to school in Musabani. His debut novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) won the Yuva Puraskar.

His second book, a collection of short stories titled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) was banned in Jharkhand on the grounds that it portrayed Adivasi women and Santhal culture in a bad light. He was also suspended from his job. "During that time, I wrote *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* (a children's book) and started putting together the manuscript of *My Father's Garden*. And I wrote essays, book reviews, did some translations. I just knew that I had to write, no matter what."

Sowvendra currently works as a medical officer with the government of Jharkhand and lives in Chandil.



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***The Far Field* by Madhuri Vijay**

(HarperCollins India, 2019)

The jury says

“It is a wonderful experience for a reader to be inside the head and heart of this flawed, fallible but always plausible narrator-as-protagonist, protagonist as perpetrator, observer and (sometimes) victim. Without referring to overt politics, this personal story captures all the moral complexities - and the attendant hubris - of outsider intervention in Kashmir.”

Synopsis

In the wake of her mother's death, Shalini, a privileged and restless young woman from Bengaluru, sets out for a remote Himalayan village in the troubled northern region of Kashmir. Certain that the loss of her mother is somehow connected to the decade-old disappearance of Bashir Ahmed, a charming Kashmiri salesman who frequented her childhood home, she is determined to confront him. But upon her arrival,

Shalini is brought face to face with Kashmir's politics, as well as the tangled history of the local family that takes her in. Soon, all the novel's characters — Riyaz, Amina, Bashir Ahmed, Shalini's father — arrive at a moment of crisis and decision, where they must change something vital about their lives or perish. In the end, Shalini herself is forced to make a series of choices that could hold dangerous repercussions for the very people she has come to love.

Madhuri Vijay is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the recipient of a Pushcart Prize. Her writing has appeared in *Best American Non-Required Reading*, *Narrative Magazine* and *Salon*, among other publications.

For her, writing is not therapy or catharsis, but the only way she knows how to consume the world. “When I come across a story or character, there's no question of not doing something about it,” she says. “Nobody is waiting for a writer to write a novel. She is writing because she wants to, and so she must write what she wants—as long as it is consistent with the internal logic of what she's attempting, as long as it's honest. A novel should be allowed to create its own moral order, which may not perfectly align with the moral order of the world in which we live. A writer should be independent to serve a story and be deaf to the call of any manner of allegiance or authority.” In 2010, she wrote a short story about a mother and a daughter and a Kashmiri man. “It was a maudlin story—abysmal, really—but I grew interested in writing a novel about Kashmir.”

Madhuri was born and raised in Bengaluru and now lives in Hawaii where she teaches children at a school. *The Far Field* is her first book.

NOTES TO EDITORS

ABOUT THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

The JCB Prize for Literature was set up in 2018 to enhance the prestige of literary achievement in India and create greater visibility for contemporary Indian writing. The prize encourages translations and aims to introduce new audiences to works of Indian literature written in languages other than their own. It is funded by JCB and administered by the JCB Literature Foundation.

For information about the Prize, please visit: www.thejcbprize.org. For updates, look for [@thejcbprize](https://www.facebook.com/thejcbprize) on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.



PRESS RELEASE

KEY 2019 DATES

Longlist announcement: 4th September 2019

Shortlist announcement: 4th October 2019

Winner announcement: 2nd November 2019

2018 WINNER

Jasmine Days by Benyamin, translated from the Malayalam by Shahnaz Habib.

ABOUT JCB

JCB is a leading global manufacturer of earthmoving and construction equipment, the JCB Group 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. Over its journey of close to four decades in India, JCB, through its products has contributed significantly towards the development of Infrastructure in the country. JCB is committed to being a socially and ethically responsible company at both a global and local level. For the past 20 years, JCB India has been working across India with vulnerable communities with the aim of providing them access to a better quality of life through education, enhanced income, business and skill development, and supporting traditional arts, culture and heritage.

ABOUT THE JURY

Pradip Krishen (Chair) is a filmmaker who taught himself botany and became an ‘ecological gardener’, restoring degraded habitats with native plants, mostly in the desert regions of western India. He is currently Project Director of the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park, Jodhpur, the Abha Mahal garden, Nagaur and Kishan Bagh, Jaipur, and he curates the garden of the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad. He has written *The Trees of Delhi: A Field Guide* and *The Jungle Trees of Central India: A Field Guide For Tree-Spotters*. His films include *Massey Sahib* (1986), *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* (1988) and *Electric Moon* (1991).

Anjum Hasan is the author of the novels *The Cosmopolitans*, *Neti, Neti* and *Lunatic in my Head*, the short story collections *A Day in the Life* and *Difficult Pleasures*, and the poetry collection *Street on the Hill*. Anjum was, until recently, Books Editor at *The Caravan*. She has been Charles Wallace Writer-in-Residence at the University of Canterbury and visiting professor of creative writing at Ashoka University. She is currently a Homi Bhabha Fellow. Her short stories, essays and poems have been published in *Granta*, *Baffler*, *Five Dials*, *Wasafiri*, *Drawbridge*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Asia Literary Review*, *Caravan*, and several anthologies.

K.R. Meera writes fiction in Malayalam and essays in English, and has published four novels, five novellas, six collections of short fiction, two children’s novels and two collections of essays. She has won all the major Malayalam literary awards, including the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (for best novel and for best short fiction), the Vayalar Award and the Odakuzhal Award. Her works in translation include *Hangwoman*, *The Poison of Love*, *The Unseeing Idol of Light*, *Yellow is the Colour of Longing* and *The Gospel of Yudas*.

Parvati Sharma began her writing career with *The Dead Camel and Other Stories of Love*, which earned her praise for its depictions of love and sexuality in urban India. Her novella, *Close to Home*, was acclaimed as ‘tender, acute and pulsing with real Indian life’. She has also written a book for children, *The Story of Babur*, and, most recently, a historical biography, *Jahangir: An Intimate Portrait of a Great Mughal*. Sharma lives in New Delhi, where she has worked as a travel writer, editor and journalist.

Arvind Subramanian was Chief Economic Adviser to the Government of India and is now a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University. His award-winning book *Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance* was published in September 2011. In 2011 *Foreign Policy* named him one of the world's top 100 global thinkers. He has written on

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India, growth, trade, development, institutions, aid, climate change, oil, intellectual property, the WTO, China, and Africa. He has published widely in academic and other journals.