

AWARDS FOR WORDS: ON THE SAHITYA AKADEMI AWARDS

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Literary borders should be porous and the [Sahitya Akademi awards](#), which have been honouring writers of 24 Indian languages down the years, should be seen in that light. This year the Akademi has picked nine books of poems, six novels, five short stories, three essays and one literary study in Dogri, Gujarati, Kashmiri, Manipuri, Odia, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Assamese, Bodo, Bengali, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Santali and others. It is a prize to be welcomed just for the sheer linguistic diversity it acknowledges in a country where there is a change in dialect every few square kilometres, and no dearth of marginalised communities or languages facing extinction. The possibilities are immense: in a country where not everyone has the ability to whip up a PR frenzy, a Sahitya Akademi award is encouragement to keep pursuing the craft; writers can expect to see a rise in sales and be taught in schools and universities; and readers can hope to discover some hidden gems. Writers also have the opportunity to be translated into other regional languages, and into English too. Neelum Saran Gour, who has won this year for her English novel, *Requiem in Raga Janki*, which had also bagged [The Hindu Fiction Prize in 2018](#), can look forward to her story being translated into other Indian languages.

However, it is a pity that the Sahitya Akademi awards, first conferred in 1955, do not have top-of-the-mind recall such as the Booker Prize or the Pulitzer. The National Academy of Letters was established in 1954 and its stated goal was to be “the central institution for literary dialogue, publication and promotion in the country and the only institution that undertakes literary activities in 24 Indian languages, including English”. To that end, the Sahitya Akademi does hold lectures, readings, discussions, exchange programmes, and workshops, including all communities, but it is so woefully promoted that few get to know of the programmes. Though the Sahitya Akademi award is the pinnacle, there are other awards such as the Bal Sahitya award, the Yuva Puraskar and the Bhasha Samman or translation prize. But not enough is being done to promote its activities. The Akademi’s website is not updated and is bristling with grammatical errors; its social media presence is abysmal. It has brought out thousands of books, but the fact is that the publications, though affordable, are hard to come by. At a time when children particularly are glued to screens and losing their reading habits, the Sahitya Akademi with its extensive network should do more to spread the word about India’s rich literary tradition.

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