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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Padma Awards – Who Does India Honour, and What Does That Say About Us?

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SUBJECTS COVERED**POLITY****SOCIAL ISSUES****PERSONS & AWARDS****GS PAPERS****GS2****GS1****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS2

GS1

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The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 1



INTERVIEW ANGLE

""Padma Awards 2026 were announced with 131 honorees. Critics argue that the awards favour Bollywood and cricket over grassroots contributors. Should national honours have a more transparent, independent selection process? What does the pattern of Padma Awards reveal about India's understanding of merit and service?""

WHY IN NEWS

The announcement of 131 Padma Awards 2026 — including posthumous Padma Vibhushan for actor Dharmendra and former Kerala CM V.S. Achuthanandan — has renewed discussion about how national honours reflect India's collective values, who gets recognised, and whether the selection process serves democratic purposes.

A MIRROR, NOT JUST A LIST

When the government announces Padma Awards, it is doing more than distributing certificates. It is — whether consciously or not — making a statement about which lives and contributions India considers worth honouring. The awards are, in the best sense, a national self-portrait.

Examining that portrait honestly is not an act of ingratitude toward the awardees — most of whom are genuinely deserving — but of democratic seriousness.

THE CELEBRITIES VS. CONTRIBUTORS PROBLEM

The numbers first: In 2026, of 131 awards, approximately 19 went to women. Maharashtra leads with 15 — a combination of its large population and political weight. Tamil Nadu and UP follow closely.

The pattern across years is consistent: **cinema and cricket dominate the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan** categories. This year is no exception — Mammooty, Alka Yagnik, Rohit Sharma, Harmanpreet Kaur, R. Madhavan. Every one of them is genuinely accomplished and nationally beloved.

But the unresolved question is about proportionality and visibility. The Padma list is finite. Every cricketer who receives a Padma Shri is, in a real sense, displacing a potential recipient in fields where public recognition is the only recognition available — a Bhojpuri folk musician who kept an oral tradition alive for 50 years; a tribal healer whose knowledge of medicinal plants has never been documented; a rural schoolteacher in a Naxal-affected district who educated three generations of children despite threats.

The “unsung heroes” category — introduced in recent years — was a genuine attempt to address this imbalance. Whether it has succeeded is debatable. A handful of grassroots contributors per year, in a list of 100+, does not fundamentally shift the symbolic weight of the list.

THE POSTHUMOUS AWARD QUESTION

16 of 131 awards in 2026 were posthumous. This is a welcome trend — better late than never. But the posthumous nature of many awards for freedom fighters and cultural figures raises an uncomfortable question: **Why did they not receive recognition while they were alive?**

V.S. Achuthanandan passed away before the award. Dharmendra Singh Deol, who died at 89, received the Padma Vibhushan at the end of his life. The pattern suggests that the awards process is better at catching cultural figures whose legacy has been comprehensively established — through time — than at recognising contemporary contributors whose work is transformative but not yet canonised.

An awards system that excels at honouring the past is valuable. One that can also identify the living Bhimsens and Lata Mangeshkars of the future — before their windows close — would be more valuable still.

THE SELECTION PROCESS: TRANSPARENT ENOUGH?

The Padma Awards Committee is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and reports to the PM’s Office. The criteria are publicly stated: eminence, contribution, longevity, impact. The nominations portal is open throughout the year to any citizen.

What is not transparent:

- Which nominations were received
- How many nominations were submitted for each awardee
- The reasoning behind inclusions and exclusions
- Whether state-level political considerations influence the final list

The Supreme Court has ruled that Padma Awards are not “titles” under Article 18 — they are honorary recognitions. This means there is no judicial review of the selection decisions. The opacity is by design.

Comparison with the Nobel committees: The Nobel Prize — the world’s most respected civilian honour — has a transparent, multi-year, peer-reviewed nomination and selection process. Its awardees have independently verifiable records of contribution that can be scrutinised and contested. The Padma selection lacks this institutional framework.

THE CASE FOR AN INDEPENDENT PADMA COMMITTEE

The reform proposal that would most improve the Padma Awards is structural: an **independent Padma Awards Authority** — at arm’s length from the government — with a multi-year nomination process, peer review by domain experts, and some element of public transparency about the shortlisting criteria.

This does not require constitutional amendment. It requires political will to change an executive process. The fact that no government has made this change — across parties — is itself revealing about the incentive structures.

The political value of patronage: As long as the awards process remains within political discretion, it serves as a soft power tool for the incumbent government — rewarding cultural figures associated with its ecosystem, managing sensitivities with regional and caste identities, and generating goodwill without any of the political costs of harder decisions.

WHAT PADMA AWARDS CAN AND CANNOT DO

National honours cannot substitute for national investment. The unsung folk musician needs a Padma Shri — but she also needs a Sangeet Natak Akademi grant, a platform, and a recording infrastructure. The tribal medicinal plant expert needs documentation, patent protection for traditional knowledge, and fair compensation when pharmaceutical companies use that knowledge.

The awards system is a signal. The policy system delivers substance. Democratic recognition matters — but it matters most when it accompanies, not substitutes for, structural support.

A Padma Shri for a Dokra tribal artisan from Chhattisgarh is a beautiful statement about what India values. But if the artisan returns to poverty and anonymity after the ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the statement becomes hollow.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Padma Awards: instituted 1954; PV (exceptional) > PB (distinguished high order) > PS (distinguished); max 120/year excl. posthumous/foreign; suspended 1978–79 + 1993–97; selection: Cabinet Secretary committee → PM → Home Minister → President; not “titles” under Article 18 (SC); Bharat Ratna = 1st civilian; max Bharat Ratna: 3/year.

*National honours and democratic legitimacy; transparency in award selection; Article 18 — abolition of titles; Padma Awards as soft power tool; gender and regional representation; comparison with global honours frameworks. **GS-1:** Culture, arts, and national recognition — the grassroots contribution problem; protecting intangible cultural heritage (oral traditions, folk arts, tribal knowledge).*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

AWARD HIERARCHY (CIVILIAN):

1st: **Bharat Ratna** (max 3/year; no field restriction since 2011; for services of highest order)

2nd: **Padma Vibhushan** (exceptional + distinguished service)

3rd: **Padma Bhushan** (distinguished service, high order)

4th: **Padma Shri** (distinguished service)

PADMA AWARDS 2026 KEY STATS:

Total: **131** | PV: **5** | PB: **13** | PS: **113**

Posthumous: **16** | Women: **19** | Foreign/NRI: **6**

Max/year: **120** (excluding posthumous + foreign)

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS:

Article 18: Prohibits State from conferring “titles”; Padma = NOT titles (SC ruling)

Article 18(1): “No title, not being a military or academic distinction, shall be conferred by the State”

Bharat Ratna and Padma Awards: Honorifics, NOT hereditary; no privileges conferred

PADMA AWARDS HISTORY:

Instituted: **1954** (same year as Bharat Ratna)

Suspended: **1978–79** (Morarji Desai govt) + **1993–97** (PV Narasimha Rao govt)

Restored: **1998** (continuously since)

NOBEL PRIZE COMPARISON:

Nobel: Multi-year peer-reviewed process; transparent criteria; no government role

Padma: Government committee; PM’s Office oversight; no independent peer review

SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI: INDIA’S NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR PERFORMING ARTS (MUSIC, DANCE, DRAMA, FOLK); ESTABLISHED 1952; AUTONOMOUS BODY UNDER MINISTRY OF CULTURE; GIVES AKADEMI AWARDS (FELLOWSHIP = HIGHEST = RATNA SADSYA)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

“Unsung heroes” category in Padma: Introduced to recognise grassroots contributors in recent years

Bharat Ratna nominees include: C. Rajagopalachari (first), S. Radhakrishnan (2nd); last awarded: Karpoori Thakur (posthumous), M.S. Swaminathan, L.K. Advani, PV Narasimha Rao, Chaudhary Charan Singh (2024)

Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL): India’s effort to document traditional medicinal knowledge and prevent bio-piracy

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of Home Affairs, PIB

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