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The Vikram Sarabhai Medal Goes to Annapurni Subramaniam

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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The Vikram Sarabhai Medal Goes to Annapurni Subramaniam

5 August 2026 · 5 min read ·

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

Professor Annapurni Subramaniam, Director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru, has been awarded the COSPAR Vikram Sarabhai Medal for 2026. The medal was presented at the award ceremony of the 46th COSPAR Scientific Assembly at Florence, Italy, on August 3, 2026, and was reported in India on August 4 and 5. She is the first Indian woman and the fourth Indian to receive it.

THE AWARD

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Medal	Vikram Sarabhai Medal
Conferred by	COSPAR jointly with ISRO
Frequency	Biennial
Instituted	1990 , commemorating Dr Vikram Sarabhai, founder of India's space programme
First recipient	Vladimir A. Kotelnikov (1990)
Awarded for	Outstanding contributions to space research in developing countries
Eligibility	Open to candidates of any country; the relevant work must fall mainly in the five-year period ending one year before the Assembly
Additional honour	Since 2018, COSPAR award recipients also have a minor planet named after them
Presented at	46th COSPAR Scientific Assembly , Florence, Italy, 1 to 9 August 2026 , at the Fortezza da Basso

INDIAN RECIPIENTS

YEAR	RECIPIENT
1996	U.R. Rao
2014	Gurbax Singh Lakhina
2024	Anil Bhardwaj
2026	Annapurni Subramaniam

She is therefore the **fourth Indian** and, on the medal's full recipient roll since 1990, the **first Indian woman**.

THE RECIPIENT AND THE WORK

Professor Subramaniam is **Director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA), Bengaluru**. Her recognised contributions include work on **AstroSat**, India's first dedicated multi-wavelength space observatory, and in **ultraviolet astronomy**.

The AstroSat connection is worth fixing precisely, because it is separately examinable:

ASTROSAT	DETAIL
Launched	28 September 2015 , on PSLV-C30
Significance	India's first dedicated multi-wavelength space observatory
Capability	Simultaneous observation in visible, ultraviolet, and soft and hard X-ray bands
Payloads	Five, including the Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (UVIT) , in which IIA had a central role

Ultraviolet observation is the specific reason a space observatory is necessary at all in this band. The Earth's atmosphere absorbs ultraviolet radiation almost completely, so UV astronomy cannot be done from the ground at any altitude. An instrument like UVIT is therefore not a convenience over ground-based observation; it is the only access there is.

WHAT THE AWARD ACTUALLY MARKS

There is an argument embedded in this item, and it is the reason it is worth more than a line in a persons-in-news list.

India's space programme is measured, in public discussion and in most examination answers, by **launch and mission milestones**: successful launches, payload mass, cost per kilogram to orbit, landing sites, constellation size. By those measures India performs strongly and the record is well known.

Recognition in space **science**, as distinct from space **engineering**, is considerably rarer. Four Indian recipients of this medal in thirty-six years, on a biennial award, is a thin record for a country with India's launch capability. The distinction matters because the two capabilities are built differently: launch capability is built through mission programmes with defined deliverables and visible outcomes, while scientific capability is built through sustained instrument development, guaranteed observatory time, long-horizon funding that survives between missions, and a post-doctoral pipeline that retains people.

That last item connects directly to the retention question raised by recent reporting on departures from ISRO. A country can commission observatories and still lack the people to use them, and the people are the slower thing to build.

COSPAR ITSELF

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Full name	Committee on Space Research
Established	1958
Parent body	A committee of the International Science Council (formerly ICSU)
Not	A United Nations body. This is the standard trap
Function	Promotes international scientific cooperation in space research; convenes a Scientific Assembly every two years

COSPAR was created in 1958, in the immediate aftermath of Sputnik and during the International Geophysical Year, precisely to keep scientific cooperation in space open across the Cold War divide. Its non-governmental character is the reason it could do so, and it is why candidates should not describe it as a UN agency.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Science and technology, developments and their applications; achievements of Indians in science and technology; awareness in the field of space.

Prelims pointers:

- The **Vikram Sarabhai Medal** is conferred **jointly by COSPAR and ISRO, biennially**, for outstanding contributions to **space research in developing countries**; instituted **1990**.

- 2026 recipient: **Annapurni Subramaniam**, Director, **Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru**; first Indian woman, fourth Indian.
- Prior Indian recipients: **U.R. Rao (1996)**, **Gurbax Singh Lakhina (2014)**, **Anil Bhardwaj (2024)**.
- Presented at the **46th COSPAR Scientific Assembly, Florence, Italy, 1 to 9 August 2026**.
- **COSPAR** was established in **1958** and is a body of the **International Science Council**, not a UN body.
- **AstroSat** launched **28 September 2015** on **PSLV-C30**; India's first dedicated multi-wavelength space observatory; five payloads including the **Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (UVIT)**.
- Since 2018, COSPAR award recipients also have a **minor planet named after them**.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Vikram Sarabhai Medal, instituted 1990, conferred jointly by COSPAR and ISRO, biennially, for outstanding contributions to space research in developing countries. First recipient Vladimir A. Kotelnikov (1990).

Prof. Annapurni Subramaniam, Director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru. First Indian woman, fourth Indian. Presented at the 46th COSPAR Scientific Assembly, Florence, 1 to 9 August 2026, at the ceremony of 3 August.

U.R. Rao (1996), Gurbax Singh Lakhina (2014), Anil Bhardwaj (2024), Annapurni Subramaniam (2026).

Committee on Space Research, established 1958, a body of the International Science Council. Not a UN organisation.

launched 28 September 2015 on PSLV-C30; India's first dedicated multi-wavelength space observatory; five payloads including UVIT. UV astronomy requires a space platform because the atmosphere absorbs ultraviolet almost entirely.

Sources: COSPAR, Indian Institute of Astrophysics, ISRO

Source: The Vikram Sarabhai Medal Goes to Annapurni Subramaniam — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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