

Padma stories

From 'anar dada' of Banaskantha to Vadodara's 'highway messiah' and the oldest woman exponent of Kalaripayattu, this year's award-winners can inspire us all



M VENKAIAH NAIDU

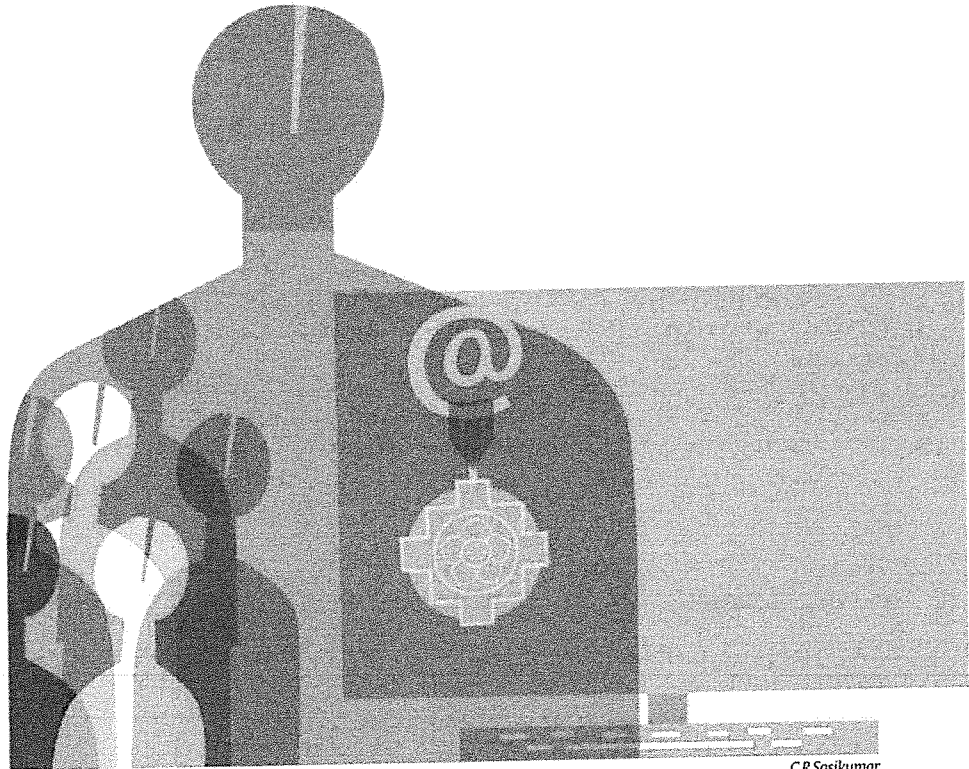
CONFERRING NATIONAL HONOURS on the truly deserving should be a part of any establishment's functioning, regardless of its political leanings. In the past, however, questions have been raised on the political nature of certain Republic Day honours and awards. But thanks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this year, merit was the sole criterion in conferring these awards; one can say with justifiable pride that for the first time in the 62-year-old history of the Padma awards, the NDA government made the entire nomination process online and transparent — this has sent out a clear message that merit, and merit alone, matters.

This has been a complete departure from the past when only chief ministers, Union ministers, ministers of state, MPs and former recipients used to nominate persons of their choice for the awards. This year, with no offline nominations or recommendations, regardless of whether these come from chief ministers or anybody else, the process was made completely visible and clear.

And the results are there for everyone to see. Unlike the usual list of 100-plus awardees, the number was pruned to just 89. And many unsung heroes, who contributed selflessly to nation-building in their respective fields, were conferred with the prestigious Padma awards. Such deserving persons were apparently glossed over in the past or were elbowed out by others in case they were in contention at all. Here, I am reminded of the famous American writer Mark Twain's typically satirical remark on honours: "On the whole, it is better to deserve honours and not have them, than to have them and not deserve them".

I am truly glad that talent, hard work and commitment to service across fields were the only guiding principles on which the final selection for the 2017 awards was predicated. The focus was on recognising the sterling contributions of unsung heroes to nation-building at the grassroot level and in making a difference to people and the environment at large. Citizens were also pleased that the heroes of the surgical strikes were honoured with gallantry medals.

The awards given encompassed diverse areas and vibrant people. Take Genabhai Dargabhai Patel, a disabled farmer who transformed drought-hit Banaskantha district into an abundant producer of pomegranates by adopting drip irrigation. With Banaskantha now exporting pomegranates to the Middle East, Patel is popularly called "Anar dada". V. Koteswaramma from Vijayawada, who, since 1955, has been working relentlessly for empowerment through education, particularly of the girl child, and who is the director of Montessori Educational Institutions, has been among the unsung heroes honoured with a Padma award — the 92-year-old reformist was the first woman to earn her undergraduate degree in Vijayawada Taluka way back in 1945 and was honoured with the national teacher's award in 1971. Her passion for imparting education should serve as a great inspiration to all.



C R Sasikumar

Another such individual who has worked silently and tirelessly is Bipin Ganatra. The 59-year-old unofficial firefighter of Kolkata voluntarily plunges into action to save lives during fires. He has participated in more than 100 firefighting rescues and saved many lives. Hats off to this individual's spirit. The unselfish service rendered by Dr Subroto Das to accident victims is similarly exemplary; also known as the "highway messiah", Das set up the Lifeline Foundation in Vadodara, his organisation providing prompt relief to highway accident victims in four states.

Years before scientists began talking about climate change and the environment, 70-year-old Daripalli Ramaiah from Reddipalle village in Telangana made it his passion to plant saplings and seeds on a daily basis. Over the past four decades, he has planted an astonishing number of over 10 million saplings and seeds, contributing hugely to the greening of Telangana. Yet another truly deserving unsung hero is Chintakindi Mallesham, also from Telangana. He invented a mechanised Pochampalli silk saree-weaving machine, which reduces the weaver's drudgery and cuts the time for weaving a saree from five hours to one and a half hours.

There is another remarkable story of inspiration around 74-year-old Meenakshi Gurukkal, the oldest woman exponent of Kalaripayattu, the ancient martial art from Kerala. Meenakshi, who has been practicing Kalaripayattu for 68 years, has trained hundreds of girls in particular without charging a fee; by imparting training selflessly, she has taught self-defence techniques to scores of girls.

Another unknown hero who would be rubbing shoulders with the likes of Virat Kohli while receiving his Padma award is

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50-year-old Karimul Haque from West Bengal. Popularly known as "bike-ambulance dada", the tea garden worker converted his bike into an ambulance, offering free service to those in dire need of medical attention; he's saved more than 3,000 lives. His vehicle is called a lifeline for 20 villages in and around Dhalabari in Jalpaiguri district. He joins a list of selfless heroes that includes Dr Bhakti Yadav, the 91-year-old gynecologist from Indore who has served the poor selflessly for more than six decades without charging a paisa.

Environmental activist Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal has also been honoured with a Padma award for rejuvenating the 165-km rivulet Kali Bein and developing a cost-effective underground sewerage system. Alongside, well-known spiritual guru Jaggi Vasudev, popularly known as "Sadhguru", has been conferred a Padma Vibhushan.

There are many motivating tales of great passion and complete dedication to different public causes which have emerged as the hallmark of such heroes. Each story shows that amazing outcomes can be achieved by sheer hard work, dedication and missionary zeal, even if the mission is undertaken by a single individual determined to make a difference by embracing a cause larger than his own self.

The prime minister is keen to bring about a major transformation in India — this is fundamentally about a change of mindsets on various issues. The transparency introduced in selecting Padma awardees is one such initiative. I am placing this information about the awards in the public sphere for everyone to have a better understanding.

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