

# Medicine and Society

## Doctors and Padma awards

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** The announcement of the annual Padma awards in January always generates a great deal of interest as well as controversy and, some believe that many good candidates are excluded and many less deserving ones included. We analysed the recipients in the field of medicine to determine whether or not a pattern emerged regarding who were bestowed these honours. We were not able to objectively evaluate whether or not the honours were 'deserved'.

**Methods.** We obtained and then analysed the list of awardees from newspapers and the official website of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Between 2000 and 2010, a total of 1166 awards were announced, of which 157 (13.4%) were in the field of medicine. We excluded foreigners and those from 'alternative' fields (20), and evaluated the remaining 137 in detail.

**Results.** Sixty-two (45.3%) recipients were from Delhi, 18 (13.1%) from Maharashtra and 17 (12.4%) from Tamil Nadu. Of the 137 awardees, 31 (22.6%) were cardiologists or cardiac surgeons. Many large states of the country, such as West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, did not have a single awardee.

**Conclusion.** The over-representation of Delhi and cardiology in the Padma awards for medicine suggests that their distribution is not entirely fair.

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### INTRODUCTION

On the morning of each Republic Day on 26 January, many eagerly wait to see the newspaper to scan the front page, which carries a list of 'distinguished and meritorious' individuals who have earned the nation's highest civilian honours—the Padma Awards. The list of Padma awardees in 2010 generated the usual interest as well as considerable controversy among many of our colleagues, who felt, perhaps, that they should have been included and not others. As it was difficult to objectively quantify excellence and merit, we studied the 'pattern' of awardees over a decade to see whether it might yield any evidence of bias.

### METHOD

The list of all Padma awardees for 2010 was obtained from the newspapers<sup>1</sup> and the list for the years 2000–2009 was downloaded

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from the official website of the Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>2</sup> The awardees in the category of medicine and related fields were then identified. The list contained the names and their states of domicile or residence (corrections were made in the case of persons whom we knew had worked for a major part of their professional career in a place other than that listed). These conversions were mainly to the capital, New Delhi. Since the official list did not indicate the field of specialization, a Google search was done for individuals whose area of specialization was not known to us. The data were then tabulated and analysed. We did not attempt to objectively evaluate the quality of the contribution made to the specialty, the profession, the nation or even the world by individual awardees.

### RESULTS

During 2000–2010, a total of 1166 awards were announced. Of these, 157 (13.4%) were in the field of medicine. These persons included one awarded for 'Trade and industry', which was actually for healthcare. A total of 137 awardees were evaluated, excluding 5 overseas awardees and 15 who were from alternative systems of medicine, such as ayurveda, siddha and homoeopathy. Of the 137 evaluated, we were unable to ascertain the area of specialization for 2 recipients, despite an extensive Google search.

Of the 1166 awardees, 92 received the Padma Vibhushan. Seven (7.6%) of these were in medicine. There were 334 Padma Bhushans, 25 (7.5%) of them in medicine, and 740 Padma Shris, 105 (14%) of them in medicine. Only 7 (5.1%) of the awards in medicine went to women.

Of the 137 awardees in medicine, 62 (45%) were from Delhi, 18 (13%) from Maharashtra and 17 (12%) from Tamil Nadu. The other states had less than 10 representatives (Table I).

TABLE I. State-wise distribution of the Padma awardees in medicine and related fields

State	Vibhushan	Bhushan	Shri	Total
Delhi	4 (57.1)	16 (64)	42 (40)	62 (45.3)
Maharashtra	1 (14.3)	3 (12)	14 (13.3)	18 (13.1)
Tamil Nadu	1	3	13 (12.4)	17 (12.4)
Kerala	—	—	6	6 (4.3)
Andhra Pradesh	—	—	9	9 (6.6)
Uttar Pradesh	—	—	5	5 (3.6)
Bihar	—	—	5	5 (3.6)
Karnataka	1	1	5	7 (5.1)
Chhatisgarh	—	—	1	1
Manipur	—	—	1	1
Chandigarh	—	2	2	4 (2.9)
Jammu and Kashmir	—	—	1	1
Uttarakhand	—	—	1	1
Total	7	25	105	137

Values in parentheses are percentages

Among the 7 Padma Vibhushan awardees, 4 were from Delhi. Among the 25 Padma Bhushans, 16 were from Delhi, and of the 105 Padma Shris, 42 (40%) were from Delhi. Interestingly, doctors from large states, such as West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, did not receive a single award.

An evaluation by specialty (Table II) showed that 31 of the 137 awardees (23%) were cardiologists or cardiac surgeons. They were followed by ophthalmologists (15/137, 11%) and orthopaedic surgeons (14/137, 10%). Cardiologists received a greater proportion (3 of 7) of the Padma Vibhushan awards, the other awardees being from orthopaedics, neurology, general medicine and the health industry. Similarly, 36% of the Padma Bhushans and 18% of the Padma Shris went to cardiac specialists. In one instance, a cardiologist received the Padma Bhushan in one year followed by the Padma Vibhushan 6 years later. Another physician recipient of the Padma Vibhushan had earlier been bestowed the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan in consecutive years 20 years previously.

**DISCUSSION**

The Padma Awards were instituted by the Government of India in 1954 and have been announced every year on the Republic Day, except for brief interruptions between 1978 and 1979, and 1993 and 1997. These awards are given in three categories, namely, Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri. The Padma Shri is awarded for 'distinguished service'; the Padma Bhushan for 'distinguished service of a high order'; and the Padma Vibhushan for 'exceptional and distinguished service'.

The awards are in recognition of work of distinction and exceptional achievement in all fields of activity, such as art, literature and education, sports, medicine, social work, science and engineering, public affairs, civil service, and trade and industry. There is no cash allowance or any facility attached to these awards. The award is not a title and cannot be used as a suffix or prefix to the award winner's name on letterheads, invitation cards, posters and books. In case of any misuse, the defaulter can forfeit the award.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE II. Specialty of the Padma awardees in medicine and related fields

Specialty	Vibhushan	Bhushan	Shri	Total
Cardiology	3 (42.9)	9 (36.0)	19 (18.1)	31 (22.6)
Ophthalmology	—	3 (12.0)	12 (11.4)	15 (10.9)
Orthopaedics	1	2 (8.0)	11 (10.5)	14 (10.2)
Neurology	1	2	6 (5.7)	9 (6.6)
Gastroenterology	—	1	7 (6.7)	8 (5.8)
Medicine	1	—	8 (7.6)	9 (6.6)
Surgery	—	1	4	5
Nephrology	—	1	3	4
Oncology	—	1	6	7
Dental	—	1	3	4
Gynaecology	—	—	4	4
Paediatrics	—	—	4	4
ENT	—	—	2	2
Transplant	—	—	2	2
Imaging/laboratory	—	—	3	3
Urology	—	—	5	5
Plastic surgery	—	—	2	2
Entrepreneur	1	1	1	3
Could not ascertain	—	—	2	2
Others (leprosy, nutrition, administration)	—	3	1	4
Total	7	25	105	137

The total number of awards that are to be given in a year (excluding posthumous awards and those to foreigners) should not exceed 120. A higher category of Padma award may be conferred on a person only where a period of at least 5 years has elapsed since conferment of the earlier Padma award. This rule can, however, be relaxed by the Awards Committee in highly deserving cases.

The process of selection of the awardees as outlined in the ministry website is as follows: 'Recommendations are invited every year from all State/Union Territory governments, Ministries/ Departments of the Government of India, Bharat Ratna and Padma Vibhushan awardees and Institutes of Excellence. Other people who can recommend names include Ministers, Chief Ministers/Governors of State, Members of Parliament and private individuals. These recommendations are then placed before the Padma Awards Committee, which is constituted by the Prime Minister which sends a list of deserving individuals to the Prime Minister and the President for their approval'.

This method of selection suggests that:

1. The process is not transparent.
2. There are no clear guidelines on how the Awards Committee is to be constituted.
3. There are no defined criteria on how the Awards Committee should evaluate the hundreds of recommendations it receives.
4. The process of nominating and selecting each year's awardees is obviously heavily loaded towards politicians and bureaucrats, so that doctors who have looked after members of this group tend to be recognized more often than their colleagues who may have excelled in other fields.

There have been, of late, many controversies relating to these prestigious awards. In the past 2 years, there were 135 and 130 awardees, respectively. This exceeds the stipulated maximum number of 120 laid down in the scheme. The major controversies have centred around the question of some deserving candidates being left out of the list and other undeserving candidates being included. Some have refused the awards, saying that they were given the recognition too late in their career, often after a junior in the same profession had already been decorated, or saying that the awards committee 'wasn't competent enough to judge him (the recipient)'. One notable historian rejected it, saying, 'I only accept awards from academic institutions or those associated with my professional work, and not State awards.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps members of the medical profession need to follow in the footsteps of this historian and keep away from these awards.

These data are interesting on many accounts. Nearly half the awards were bestowed on Delhi doctors, who were more likely to have treated the politicians and bureaucrats who made the decisions. Many other large states of the country did not have even a single awardee. Nearly a quarter of the awardees were cardiologists, who also accounted for a bulk of the higher Padma awards, the Padma Vibhushan and Padma Bhushan. This skewed bias towards Delhi and towards the specialty of cardiology raises some questions about the representative nature of these awards and the selection process.

What we have not been able to do is to look at each awardee's credentials and identify whether the award was 'deserved'. Excellence in patient care, teaching and research, as well as contribution to the nation's good, is not easily assessed and many deserving individuals working quietly far from the city of Delhi are unlikely to be recognized. Further, since information about the constitution of the awards committee and its members is not

available, we will not even be able to assess the credentials of the individuals who selected the awardees. There is also no way of knowing why the committee rejected some deserving candidate. Is it because they were loath to lobby for themselves or had not treated an eminent personality? We end with a passage from the autobiography of the eminent lawyer, Fali Nariman,<sup>5</sup> describing his thoughts after receiving the Padma Vibhushan in 2007.

‘...after the announcement of the Padma Awards, Vice-President B. S. Shekawat (also Chairman of the Rajya Sabha)—who was very kind to me during my sojourn as MP—came over to our home to offer his personal congratulations. At that time he said something very significant. He said in his fluent Hindi (he always—or at least generally—spoke in the national language, whether inside or outside the House, even though he was quite proficient in English) that though I undoubtedly deserved the honour, “*but do consider how these honours are being given. I*

*have come to tell you that my own doctor, as well as the President’s doctor, was given a Republic Day award.” His suggestion was that the system of patronage should end (our italics)’.*

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