

Awards in the world of performing arts

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The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), the apex body for performing arts under the Ministry of Culture, also has as its mandate the selection and awarding of senior and young artists across the fields of dance, music and theatre in the annual national awards. This year, the SNA awards timed with the yearly March-April appraisal across sectors.

As human beings, many of our goals for success and self-actualisation are intrinsically linked with recognition, growth and awards.



For a sportsperson, a medal, a victory or a ranking define achievement. For bureaucrats, career advancement is determined by the Annual Confidential Report (ACR), which are enumerated and graded. ACR's are transparent evaluation process, with an individual also being able to access them and even appeal and seek correction or change in them.

In the corporate world, though April is appraisal month, employee assessment is a continuous process.

At the SNA, an eminent group of musicians, dancers, theatre personalities and bureaucrats constitute the executive board and the general council that select artists across disciplines from all over the country. The SNA has many unambiguous caveats in place to ensure transparency, for example, a sitting member cannot receive an award, a family member cannot be recommended, etc.

However, the process of selection of awardees is understood to be based on consensus and collective decision of the SNA members, based on a show of hands, causing more angst than happiness to artists.

This subjective procedure, besides being opaque, does not provide a level-playing field to either the selecting members or the artists being selected or otherwise for the award.

Firstly, performing arts in themselves are not easy to evaluate. Add to that an extensive spectrum of art forms from across the country, a range of performers, gurus and maestros spread across wide age groups, to be evaluated by members from diverse art backgrounds, varying levels of

understanding, aesthetics and ground knowledge of a particular art form; a sure recipe to complicate and obfuscate the evaluation process.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi ringing in transparency in all areas of governance and in a digitally-enabled world, it is prudent, nay, imperative for the SNA to put into place clear systems and processes for transparent evaluation in the selection of artists for the SNA's national awards.

Some ideas: clear parameters to be prepared for every field with a written recording by all members and the same tabulated and graded, members' recommendations—positive or otherwise—regarding artists of their own field to be given special weightage, recording dissent with negative enumeration, a final weighted average and grading be drawn for final selection of the awardee and making the proceedings available online, etc.

An exercise in transparency will only enrich and embellish the prestige of the SNA awards and the awardees. For an artist, it's not medals won or the ACRs that decide their calibre and further growth, but an endorsement and approbation of an artist's many decades of dedication, commitment and contribution to the field by gurus and maestros in the select field, which is the leitmotif of the SNA national awards, an award that can only become more prestigious and sought after, when such a selection process is transparent.

It is a time for the SNA to ring in some systemic improvements. Jayant is a bureaucrat and classical dancer, choreographer and dance scholar ananda.jayant@gmail.com

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