

# BROADENING THE FIELD: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON SCIENCE AWARDS AND THE SHANTI SWARUP BHATNAGAR PRIZE WINNERS

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After a delay of nearly a year, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has announced [winners of the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar \(SSB\) Prizes](#). With a legacy of over half-a-century, the awards — they comprise a cash prize, citation and salary perks — are awarded annually to scientists under 45 with outstanding work in the fields of biology, chemistry, engineering, mathematics, medicine, earth sciences and physical sciences. Some of India's most accomplished scientists have been awardees and it is not a stretch to say that they are akin to an "Indian Nobel" and fairly coveted. It was unusual then, last year, when the CSIR did not announce awards despite the winners having already been picked before September 26, the institute's foundation day and traditionally the date on which the year's winners are announced. The background to this was the [government's decision to prune prizes to scientists](#). There were too many awards by various ministries, thereby reducing its prestige, a Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) communiqué suggested. There were plans to announce one 'big award' akin to a 'Nobel Prize', but none has been announced so far. While the MHA ultimately decided to retain the SSB prizes, the government's long silence on its future did foment concern among scientists of their likely discontinuation.

Science awards, unlike those given for say athletics, are not meant to fete the outcome of a defined, demarcated contest such as a match or a race but are a recognition for industrious work done over time, that have led to significant advances in science or technology. They are meant to encourage the winners to persevere, against the uncertainty inherent in the scientific enterprise, which on average is a financially less rewarding career than several other options a trained scientist could have embarked upon. This year's 12 winners are all male, with 11 from centrally-funded institutions. Within these too, the winners are largely from the Indian Institutes of Technology. While the chosen candidates are certainly deserving, there are surely many more women or researchers from state universities who deserve recognition for their work. And so, rather than reducing the number of awards, there is actually a stronger case for expanding the remit of these awards, given the government's tireless espousal of its commitment to diversity and expanding opportunities to those beyond enclaves of privilege. The success of India's Chandrayaan-3 mission demonstrates that great victories and moments of triumph are built on consistent encouragement while plodding along the dark alleys of uncertainty and failure.

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