

Padma Awards 2026 – The Social Sector's Unsung Heroes

On 26 January 2026, the eve of India's 77th Republic Day, the Government of India announced 131 Padma Awards — 5 Padma Vibhushan, 13 Padma Bhushan, and 113 Padma Shri — with 19 women awardees and 16 posthumous honours. Social Work is again prominently represented, with one Padma....

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A

sector-spotlight

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The awards were conferred in two Civil Investiture Ceremonies at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 25 May and 26 May 2026, by President Droupadi Murmu.

Notable Padma Bhushan awardees across fields include singer Alka Yagnik, actor Mammooty, cricketer Rohit Sharma, and banker Uday Kotak. Padma Vibhushan went to veteran actor Dharmendra Singh Deol (posthumous), former Kerala CM V.S. Achuthanandan (posthumous), classical violinist N. Rajam, former Supreme Court judge K.T. Thomas, and writer P. Narayanan.

This Sector Spotlight covers every social work awardee — with substantive profiles on the most significant.

Padma Bhushan — Social Work (1 Awardee)

Shri S.K.M. Maeilanandhan — Tamil Nadu

Padma Bhushan | Social Work | Age 80 | Erode, Tamil Nadu

Born Mayilsamy Maeilanandhan Gounder on 18 June 1945 in Saminathapuram village near Modakurichi, Erode district, Tamil Nadu, S.K.M. Maeilanandhan is an industrialist, social activist, and founder of the S.K.M. Group of companies.

He grew up in a poor agricultural family and pursued his education only to the school final level. From these modest beginnings, he went on to build an agri-business empire — SKM Egg Products Export (India) Limited is among India's leading poultry companies — while simultaneously dedicating decades to social service in rural Tamil Nadu.

His social work spans multiple dimensions. He founded the Poultry Farmers Welfare Association in 1983 and became its founding President, pioneering a modern rural marketing barter system that was subsequently adopted by traders across the region. He championed self-employment for educated and uneducated rural youth, creating year-round employment opportunities. He has served for 37 years as Editor and publisher of "Manavalakkalaigan" and "Anboli" — monthly spiritual magazines. He is the current President of the World Community Service Centre founded by Vethathiri Maharishi — a global organisation promoting yoga, meditation, and holistic community development.

He received the Padma Shri in 2013 for social work. The 2026 Padma Bhushan represents the government's recognition of a lifetime of sustained contribution — from rural employment creation to spiritual development and consumer awareness — elevating him to the third-highest civilian honour.

What his work represents: Maeilanandhan's trajectory — from a poor agricultural family through industry to social service — is the model of the socially responsible industrialist who does not compartmentalise business and community. His rural marketing innovations in the 1980s improved the bargaining position of poultry farmers a generation before FPOs became policy language. His three-decade commitment to spiritual publishing reflects a dimension of social work — mental wellness and inner development — that conventional welfare frameworks rarely recognise.

Padma Shri — Social Work (Full List and Profiles)

1. Shri Anke Gowda M. — Karnataka

Padma Shri | Social Work | Age 75 (approximately) | Pandavapura, Mandya district

A former bus conductor who spent 80% of his career earnings and sold his family home to build what is now described as one of India's largest free-access personal libraries. He set up the world's largest free-access library — Pustak Mane — housing more than 2 million books in 20 languages, along with rare manuscripts, roughly 5 lakh rare foreign books, and around 5,000 dictionaries across multiple languages. The library is accessible to all with no membership fees.

Born into a farming family in Chinakurli, Pandavapura, Gowda worked as a bus conductor, then completed a Master's degree in Kannada literature, then spent three decades as a sugar factory timekeeper — collecting books throughout. The nearly 1,500 square metre Pustak Mane library in Pandavapura now holds a collection spanning almost 200 years of publication history. Anke Gowda, his wife Vijayalakshmi, and son Sagar live inside the library itself.

His passion was rooted in deprivation: he built the library he had wished existed when he was a book-hungry child who could not afford books. From schoolchildren to researchers to UPSC aspirants, Pustak Mane welcomes everyone free of charge. No membership. No fees. Ever.

What his work represents: The most durable institutions are not always the best-funded. Pustak Mane was built by one person with a clear conviction and the stubbornness to act on it for fifty years. It is the definitive answer to the question of what an individual can achieve when they stop waiting for institutions to solve the problems they can see.

2. Shri Brij Lal Bhat — Jammu & Kashmir

Padma Shri | Social Work | Jammu & Kashmir

Brij Lal Bhat is a distinguished social worker from Jammu and Kashmir recognised for his sustained community welfare work across J&K's districts. His grassroots contributions span education access, community development, and social reform — carried out over decades in a geography where civil society has operated under consistent security challenges. His recognition reflects the government's acknowledgment of persistent, unsung service in one of India's most difficult operating environments for civil society.

3. Dr. Budhri Tati — Chhattisgarh

Padma Shri | Social Work | Known as "Badi Didi" | Dantewada district, Bastar

Dr. Budhri Tati, known as "Badi Didi," has spent over forty years travelling on foot across 570 remote tribal villages in the Bastar region to promote literacy, maternal health, and economic independence for women.

Born into a Scheduled Tribe family in Hiranar village in Dantewada — the heart of Naxal-affected Bastar — she lost her father at age one. At six, she reached an ashram run by a social reformer and studied to Class 10. In the mid-1980s, when escalating conflict caused external welfare agencies to leave Bastar, she was 15 years old and moving toward the communities everyone else was retreating from. "In 1984, at the age of 15, I set out to work for society, for the suffering people of such areas and villages," she said.

Four decades later: 570 villages reached on foot, over 500 tribal women helped to become self-reliant, decades of maternal health awareness in an area where institutional healthcare was functionally absent. The Chhattisgarh Chief Minister said: "It is especially noteworthy that all of them have been serving for years in remote and Naxal-affected areas of the Bastar region."

What her work represents: The model of a community-rooted woman walking to villages rather than waiting for villages to come to her is the highest-impact facilitation approach in remote tribal India. Budhri Tati's four decades in Bastar are proof that it works — and that the social sector's most important infrastructure is sometimes a single person with an unbreakable commitment and a pair of walking feet.

4. Shri Hally War — Meghalaya

Padma Shri | Social Work | Age 69 | Siej village, Sohra, East Khasi Hills

Shri Hally War of Siej village, Sohra, Meghalaya has been conferred the Padma Shri Award 2026 for his contribution to social work and environmental conservation, particularly in the field of afforestation and preservation of indigenous practices. An unsung guardian of indigenous knowledge, he has been conferred the Padma Shri for his extraordinary contribution to conserving and promoting the traditional bioengineering wisdom of the Khasi people. Through his lifelong dedication to the art of bio-weaving living root bridges in the East Khasi Hills, he has preserved a rare ancestral practice and strengthened community bonds, enhanced ecological resilience and promoted sustainable tourism.

Inspired by his grandfather's wisdom at the age of 10, War has spent over 50 years guiding aerial roots into bridges that require 15 to 30 years to mature but can last for centuries. His Umkar Living Root Bridge now attracts thousands of visitors annually, contributing significantly to Meghalaya's burgeoning eco-tourism sector. By mentoring local families in root bridge weaving and environmental stewardship, he has ensured the intergenerational transmission of this indigenous knowledge system.

Speaking on receiving the award, he said: "Being a farmer who cultivates betel nuts, betel leaves, black pepper and many types of fruits, first of all I want to thank God for this opportunity to receive this award."

What his work represents: Living root bridges — natural structures grown from the roots of rubber fig trees — are among the world's most extraordinary indigenous

engineering achievements. Hally War has spent 50 years growing them, teaching others to grow them, and ensuring that a knowledge system his grandfather taught him will survive another century. His work is simultaneously environmental conservation, cultural preservation, community livelihoods, and sustainable tourism — all from one farmer's patient, lifelong commitment.

5. Shri Inderjit Singh Sidhu — Chandigarh

Padma Shri | Social Work | Retired DIG of Police | Chandigarh

Inderjit Singh Sidhu is a former Indian police officer and social worker — a retired Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police known for personally cleaning public spaces in Chandigarh as part of a long-running civic cleanliness effort. Sidhu's daily street cleaning activities gained national attention for promoting citizen responsibility and public hygiene.

A senior police officer who chose, in retirement, to pick up a broom and clean the streets of Chandigarh every morning — making the point by example that civic responsibility belongs to every citizen, not just to sanitation workers. His sustained, visible, personal civic action in a city known for its planned orderliness inspired community participation far beyond what any government campaign could achieve.

6. Shri Janardhan Bapurao Bothe — Maharashtra

Padma Shri | Social Work | Maharashtra

Janardhan Bapurao Bothe has been recognised for sustained community welfare work in Maharashtra spanning education, tribal welfare, and grassroots social development across multiple districts. His decades of field presence in Maharashtra's underserved communities reflect the sustained, place-rooted commitment that characterises this year's social work awardees.

7. Shri Khem Raj Sundriyal — Haryana

Padma Shri | Social Work | Haryana

Khem Raj Sundriyal has been recognised for social service contributions in Haryana. His grassroots community welfare work, carried out over decades across Haryana's districts, reflects sustained commitment to social reform and community development.

8. Ms. Kollakal Devaki Amma G — Kerala

Padma Shri | Social Work | Kerala

Kollakal Devaki Amma G has been recognised for her contributions spanning social work and environmental afforestation in Kerala. She has been associated with environmental conservation and community welfare over decades, contributing to both ecological and social sustainability in her region.

9. Shri Mohan Nagar — Madhya Pradesh

Padma Shri | Social Work / Environment | Madhya Pradesh

Mohan Nagar has been recognised for community welfare and environmental conservation work in Madhya Pradesh — his work spanning social development and ecological sustainability across the state.

10. Shri Nilesh Vinodchandra Mandlewala — Gujarat

Padma Shri | Social Work | Gujarat

Nilesh Vinodchandra Mandlewala has been recognised for sustained community welfare work in Gujarat, contributing to social development and community empowerment across his region over multiple decades.

11. Ms. S.G. Susheelamma — Karnataka

Padma Shri | Social Work | Karnataka

S.G. Susheelamma has been recognised for decades of social work contributions in Karnataka. Her grassroots welfare work, focused on community development and women's welfare, reflects sustained service at the field level.

12. Shri Swami Brahmdev Ji Maharaj — Rajasthan

Padma Shri | Social Work | Sri Ganganagar district, Rajasthan

Swami Brahmdev Ji Maharaj is an Indian social worker from Sri Ganganagar district of Rajasthan. He is associated with social welfare activities, particularly for persons with visual and hearing impairments. In 2026, he was awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, in recognition of his contributions to social work. His decades of service for visually and hearing-impaired communities in Rajasthan — providing welfare, rehabilitation, and integration support — reflects a lifetime of quietly filling the gaps that formal disability services rarely reach.

13. Shri Techi Gubin — Arunachal Pradesh

Padma Shri | Social Work | Born 1 November 1964 | Arunachal Pradesh

Techi Gubin, a retired Chief Architect and noted social worker from Arunachal Pradesh, received the Padma Shri in recognition of his contribution to public service, indigenous heritage preservation and social work. Born on November 1, 1964, Gubin obtained his Bachelor of Architecture degree from the Chandigarh College of Architecture in 1988. He worked in the Arunachal Pradesh Public Works Department and eventually retired as Chief Architect. Apart from his professional career, Gubin has been actively associated with several socio-cultural organisations in Northeast India. Since 2000, he has served the Arunachal Vikas Parishad (AVP) in different capacities, including as President.

Techi Gubin, a retired chief architect, has been continuously involved in social service with Kalyan Ashram for the past 26 years. Speaking about the recognition, he expressed: "I had never even dreamed that I would receive such an award." His

parallel life — professional architect in government service, cultural activist and social worker in community life — is the model of the public servant who gives more than the job requires.

14. Dr. Uma Tuli — Delhi

Padma Shri | Social Work | Born 3 March 1943 | New Delhi

Uma Tuli is an Indian social worker, educationist and the founder of Amar Jyoti Charitable Trust, a Delhi-based NGO working for the rehabilitation of physically disabled people. Tuli founded Amar Jyoti Charitable Trust with the savings she accumulated from her salary as a teacher, in 1981.

Over four decades, Amar Jyoti has grown into a single-window provider of inclusive education, healthcare, vocational training, employment, sports, and cultural facilities for physically disabled people, with campuses in Delhi and Gwalior. She taught for 30 years in University Colleges of Delhi and Gwalior while simultaneously building Amar Jyoti — a parallel life of teaching and institution-building.

She was the first non-bureaucrat appointed as Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disability by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for a four-year term from 2001 to 2005. She led the Indian contingent to the 5th Abilympics in Prague in 2000 and organised the 6th International Abilympics in New Delhi in 2003. She received an Honorary Doctorate in Laws from Roehampton University, London, for her commitment to inclusivity.

What her work represents: Amar Jyoti's model — starting from a teacher's personal savings in 1981 and growing to a multi-campus rehabilitation institution — is the proof-of-concept that individual initiative, sustained over decades, can create the institutions the state should build but often doesn't. Dr. Tuli's appointment as Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disability during a previous Padma Shri tenure demonstrates how grassroots institutional credibility can inform national policy.

What the 2026 Social Work Awards Tell Us

The geography of recognition is reaching India's most challenging welfare frontiers. Arunachal Pradesh (Techi Gubin), Meghalaya (Hally War), Chhattisgarh's Naxal-affected Bastar (Budhri Tati), and Jammu & Kashmir (Brij Lal Bhat) dominate this year's social work list. The government is specifically tracking and honouring grassroots work in exactly the areas where institutional welfare is most absent. For NGOs working in remote and conflict-affected geographies — the message is that this work is seen, even when it feels invisible.

Duration is the primary credential. Anke Gowda's five decades of book collection, Budhri Tati's four decades in Bastar, Hally War's fifty years of growing root bridges, Uma Tuli's four decades at Amar Jyoti, Techi Gubin's 26 years with Kalyan Ashram — none of these are recent achievements. The Padma Shri in social work in 2026 is recognising careers, not campaigns.

Disability and inclusion are prominent this year. Swami Brahmdev Ji Maharaj (visual and hearing impairment, Rajasthan), Dr. Uma Tuli (physical disability rehabilitation, Delhi) — two of fourteen social work awardees work specifically with disabled communities. This signals national-level recognition of disability welfare as a distinct, underserved priority.

Indigenous knowledge is social work. Hally War's living root bridges are classified as Social Work, not just Environment. This is an important framing: the preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge is simultaneously a cultural, economic, and community welfare intervention. For NGOs working with tribal communities on FRA, NTFP, and traditional knowledge systems — this framing validates an approach that conventional social sector categories often cannot accommodate.

About the Padma Awards

The Padma Awards were instituted in 1954. Announced annually on Republic Day, they are conferred by the President of India in three categories: Padma Vibhushan (second

highest civilian award), Padma Bhushan (third highest), and Padma Shri (fourth highest). The Government announced 131 Padma awards for 2026, comprising five Padma Vibhushan, 13 Padma Bhushan and 113 Padma Shri, with 19 women and 16 posthumous honours.

Nominations for the 2027 Padma Awards will open in March 2026 through the Rashtriya Puraskar Portal (awards.gov.in). NGOs working with grassroots social workers who have given decades of unrecognised service should formally nominate them — Budhri Tati, Hally War, and Techu Gubin were all nominated by others, not by themselves.

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(mha.gov.in/Padma_Awards2026); Government Padma Awards Dashboard (dashboard-padmaawards.gov.in); PIB Press Release (PRID 2218547); PIB profile of Hally War (PRID 2218580); Arunachal Observer; The Logical Indian; Business Today; Organiser; News on Air (Government of India); The Print (Chhattisgarh PTI report, 25 Jan 2026); The Wire; New Kerala; SKM Egg Products BSE filing (28 Jan 2026).

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