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Months before elections, Modi govt gave awards to dozens who pushed its pet schemes

The awards helped publicise the Modi government's flagship schemes, sharpening its political posturing in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

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File photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi | PIB

New Delhi: The Narendra Modi government gave away hundreds of awards to state officials, field workers and individuals for efficiently implementing its flagship schemes in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections.

The awards, spanning ministries, states, districts and other new categories, consisted of certificates and a shield.

Multiple government officials and political observers told ThePrint that the awards were not just for mere optics but helped instil a “sense of competition” within the government departments through this recognition mechanism. It also helped establish direct contact with district officials and grassroots workers, senior government officials said.

But more importantly, said some of the officials, the awards helped the government publicise its schemes and served as a good outreach measure that sharpened its political posturing in the run-up to the 2019 general elections.

Talking to ThePrint, a senior official from Niti Aayog said that practically every social sector ministry had instituted an award of its own. He, however, warned that their proliferating number would make the entire system useless.

“While these awards may motivate many, too many of them will make the purpose of the award system redundant as states may not want to compete over every other government scheme, especially those governed by the same political party,” the official said.

Retired IAS officer Anil Swarup, who was secretary, school education, however, defended the awards system saying good work does need recognition.

“Getting awards definitely motivates people to do good work. If it’s implication is political for the government, so be it,” he said. “As long as the process is transparent, which to my knowledge it always is, awards are always welcome. It’s human nature to be motivated by recognition or a pat on the back.”

The awards

In September 2018, ‘National Awards’ were given away by Rural Development Minister Narendra Singh Tomar for “outstanding work in RD schemes”.

These included the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) for rural housing, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) for rural roads, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM) for rural livelihoods, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU GKY) for skill development of rural youth and the National Rural Mission (NRuM).

Moreover, the rural development ministry also awarded those who managed and implemented the Gram Swaraj Abhiyan between 4 April 2018 and 5 May 2018 across 533 districts and the Extended Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (EGSA) between 1 June 2018 and 15 August 2018, in over 117 aspirational districts.

“Many officials kept their regular work on hold and were drawn into organising the scheme in their areas,” a state government official said.

The ministry's national awards were followed by the Poshan awards of the Ministry of Women and Child development in October last year. They were given away to field-level functionaries such as Anganwadi workers, ASHA and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANM) workers, among others.

"It's no secret that Anganwadi, ASHA and ANM workers wield tremendous influence at the ground," a senior state government official said. "Keeping them happy by recognising their efforts was a good political move."

Modi also personally interacted with the ASHA, Anganwadi and ANM workers in September last year through video conferencing and had announced a Diwali gift for them by hiking their monthly honorarium.

No end to awards

The PMAY-Urban awards for implementing and innovating the government's Housing for All scheme instituted this year by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs is another example of the Modi government's 'recognition policy'.

The awards, tentatively to be given out in June, are handed to states/UTs and urban local bodies (ULBs) for performance on the housing mission and will comprise a separate competition among municipal corporations.

Other awards include those that were handed to states in January by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. It was for those states and organisations that contributed in its Eat Right movement and Swasth Bharat Yatra, a 100-day consumer outreach programme.

Other awards include the Kayakalp awards by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare since 2015, the National Swachh Survekshan Grameen awards commissioned by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation and given away in October last year by PM Modi and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao awards given away in January by WCD minister Maneka Gandhi for those implementing the scheme.

Govt continued awards of the UPA era

Even awards that existed in the previous governments, such as the PM awards for excellence in public administration, have been expanded by the Modi government to include its schemes.

“Earlier, these awards were primarily for innovation in public administration,” a top government official said. “But now, it has been expanded by instituting more awards for implementation of priority programmes that comprise flagship schemes of the government.”

For instance, this year’s PM Awards included four priority areas: National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Mission Indradhanush, e-National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) and Saubhagya (Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana) — all flagship Modi government schemes. The awards are yet to be given out.