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Award Wapsi

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Why is in news? Wrestlers return Padma honours: Looking back at ‘award wapsi’ during Indira Gandhi regime

Wrestler Bajrang Punia on December 22 said he was returning his Padma Shri, India’s fourth-highest civilian award, to oppose the election of Sanjay Singh, a close aide of BJP MP and sexual harassment accused Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, as president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

About:

Award wapsi refers to a trend in India where **artists, writers, and filmmakers returned their national or state awards** as a form of **protest against the government or to draw attention to social or political issues**.

This movement **gained prominence in 2015**, when several prominent figures returned their Sahitya Akademi awards to protest against what they perceived as a **climate of growing intolerance** in the country.

The gesture of returning awards was a way for these individuals to express their dissent and to highlight their concerns about the state of affairs in India.

History:

The “award wapsi” is by no means a recent phenomenon in India.

One of the earliest examples of this goes back to 1919, when **Rabindranath Tagore** returned his knighthood (the title of ‘Sir’), granted by the British, **in response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre**.

In post-independence India, too, many recipients have returned awards and honours granted by the government. This is not counting those who have refused to accept the awards.

Two notable examples of ‘award wapsi’ are from the **Emergency period**. Eg. Writer **K Shivarama Karanth** from Karnataka returned his Padma Bhushan, while author **Phanishwar Nath “Renu”** from Bihar gave up his Padma Shri.

In 1984, poet and novelist **Khushwant Singh** returned his Padma Bhushan, awarded in 1974, to protest Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple.

In the same year, Kashmiri writer **Akhtar Mohiuddin** returned the Padma Shri, which he received in 1968, over the hanging of Kashmiri separatist Maqbool Bhat.

Parliamentary Standing Committee report on “award wapsi”:

A parliamentary panel, constituted **after the 2015** award return controversy, wants Sahitya Akademi awardees to promise not to return awards in political protest. The findings includes

Writers chosen for the Sahitya Akademi award should **commit not to return** their awards in political protest.

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Such acts of returning awards **negatively impact the award's** prestige and reputation.

It **undermines the achievements** of other awardees.

The committee **wants to get agreement** from shortlisted candidates before finalizing the award.

Main reasons for award wapsi:

Many participants in the award wapsi movement **expressed concerns about** what they perceived as a rise in religious and cultural intolerance in the country.

They criticized incidents of violence and the perceived failure of the government to address these issues effectively. They believed that returning their awards would draw attention to these concerns and send a message about the **importance of secularism and inclusivity**.

The movement also aimed to **highlight the importance of freedom of expression** and the **right to dissent**. The people felt that there was a growing climate of censorship and an atmosphere that discouraged critical voices and alternative viewpoints. They believed that by returning their awards, they could emphasize the need to protect and preserve the freedom of expression enshrined in the Indian constitution.

Some were **dissatisfied with the response of the government** to incidents of violence and religious polarization. They believed that the government's actions and statements did not adequately address the concerns of marginalized communities and failed to promote a sense of inclusivity and equality.

The act of returning awards was **seen as a symbolic gesture** to express disappointment and register a protest against the perceived injustices. It aimed to attract public attention and generate a broader debate on issues of social harmony, freedom of speech, and cultural diversity in India.

Significant consequences:

Public Awareness and Debate:

The movement drew significant media attention, sparking a national debate on **issues related to freedom of expression, cultural diversity, and the role of artists and intellectuals in society**.

It brought these issues to the forefront of public consciousness, leading to discussions and dialogues on the importance of dissent and inclusivity in a democratic society.

Government Response:

It **puts pressure on the government** to address the concerns raised by the participating artists and intellectuals.

The government faced criticism for its perceived failure to address incidents of violence, religious polarization, and intolerance effectively.

It prompted discussions within the government and among policymakers on the need to uphold constitutional values and protect the rights of citizens.

Polarization and Criticism:

Some critics accused the participants of being politically motivated and questioned the effectiveness of returning awards as a means of protest.

There were debates regarding the credibility and impact of such symbolic gestures, with arguments that alternative methods of engagement and dialogue might be more effective in addressing societal issues.

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Impact on Artists and Intellectuals:

The decision to return awards had **personal and professional repercussions** for the participating artists and intellectuals.

Some faced criticism and backlash for their actions, while others received support from like-minded individuals and groups.

The movement also highlighted the challenges faced by artists and intellectuals who expressed dissenting views in a polarized environment.

Reflection and Activism:

The movement encouraged introspection among artists, intellectuals, and the general public about the state of affairs in the country.

It motivated individuals to reflect on their roles and responsibilities as citizens and prompted some to engage more actively in social and political activism.