

History of National Film Awards: The 72-year journey from Delhi to Gujarat

indiatoday.in/amp/movies/story/national-film-awards-history-state-awards-to-indias-top-cinema-honours-delhi-to-gujarat-2989607-2026-09-08

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September 8, 2026

The National Film Awards began in 1954 as the State Awards to honour Indian cinema. Over the decades, they expanded across languages, crafts and categories to become a leading national honour.



Amitabh Bachchan receiving the National Award from President Pratibha Patil at 53rd National Film Awards in New Delhi. Photo: India Today Archives

The National Film Awards, India's most prestigious film honours celebrating excellence in cinema, is set to move out of Delhi this year. While the winners were announced in July this year, the presentation ceremony will take place this month-end in Ekta Nagar in Gujarat, home to the Statue of Unity. As the National Film Awards are set to break their decades of tradition this year, let's have a look at how they evolved since the first awards in the 1950s.

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The awards were not meant to celebrate commercial success alone. The government wanted to encourage films with high artistic and technical standards, as well as those with educational, cultural and social value.

The first Best All-India Feature Film award went to the Marathi film *Shyamchi Aai*, directed by P K Atre. Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* and Debaki Bose's *Bhagwan Sri Krishna Chaitanya* received Certificates of Merit.



Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* received Certificate of Merit in 1954.

The early years

Initially, the awards mainly recognised films rather than individual actors, directors and technicians. The system included President's Gold and Silver Medals and Certificates of Merit, along with awards for regional cinema.

An important early moment came in 1956, when Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* won the President's Gold Medal for the Best All-India Feature Film for films released in

1955. The award helped establish the National Film Awards as an important platform for recognising serious and artistically ambitious Indian cinema.



Patheri Panchali won President's Gold Medal. Photo: Prime Video

When acting awards were introduced

A major change came in 1968, when separate awards for artistes and technicians were introduced for films released in 1967. The first recipients of the acting honours were:

- Nargis Dutt - Best Actress, then called the Urvashi Award
- Uttam Kumar - Best Actor, then called the Bharat Award

Over the years, more categories were added to recognise different aspects of filmmaking, including cinematography, editing, music, sound, choreography and screenplay.

Dadasaheb Phalke Award

The Dadasaheb Phalke Award was introduced in 1969, to honour a film personality for outstanding contribution to the growth and development of Indian cinema.



Legendary actor and filmmaker Dev Anand received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for 2002 from then President APJ Abdul Kalam. Photo: Reuters

It is named after Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, popularly known as Dadasaheb Phalke, regarded as the father of Indian cinema. The award is now presented as part of the National Film Awards ceremony. The first recipient of the Dadasaheb Phalke award was actor Devika Rani. Malayalam superstar Mohanlal was honoured with the award at the 71st National Films Awards.

How the awards work today

The awards have three principal sections:

- Feature Films
- Non-Feature Films
- Best Writing in Cinema

The Dadasaheb Phalke Award is also presented during the ceremony.

The winners are chosen by a jury comprising people with experience and expertise in cinema and related fields. For feature films, the selection takes place in two stages. Films are first assessed by regional panels, after which a national jury chooses the final winners.

The awards recognise more than just artistic achievement. They also honour films that have social relevance and help audiences understand India's different cultures, communities and regions. The Best Feature Film Promoting National, Social, and Environmental Values at the 71st National Film Awards (2025) was awarded to [Sam Bahadur, starring Vicky Kaushal](#).

What do the winners receive?

Each National Film Award winner receives a medallion, a cash prize and a certificate of merit. The Dadasaheb Phalke Award, along with six categories in the Feature Films section and three categories each in the Non-Feature Films and Best Writing in Cinema sections, are presented under the Swarna Kamal (Golden Lotus) category. The remaining awards are given as Rajat Kamal (Silver Lotus) honours.

Why are they called the National Film Awards?

One of their defining features is that they cover Indian cinema across languages and regions, rather than being limited to Hindi cinema or a particular film industry. This is why Malayalam, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Assamese, Kannada, Hindi and films in many other Indian languages have all competed for the top honours.

The awards have also helped give national recognition to filmmakers and performers working outside mainstream Hindi cinema.

Who presents the awards?

Traditionally, the President of India presents the National Film Awards. The ceremony has generally been held in New Delhi, most notably at Vigyan Bhawan in recent years. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting oversees the awards, with the Directorate of Film Festivals historically playing an important role. This year, President Droupadi Murmu is expected to present the awards during her Gujarat visit on September 22.

The awards are meant to recognise excellence in Indian cinema and remain among the country's most prestigious film honours.

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