ASU Learning Engineering Institute
Arizona State University

*August 12, 2024*

Dear Members of the Padma Awards Committee,

It is a great honor to nominate Professor Sudhakar Nadkarni for the *Padma Award*. I have known Professor Nadkarni for over 37 years, since I was a student at the *Industrial Design Center (now IDC, School of Design)* at the *Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay*. Today, as a professor and director at Arizona State University, I draw on his influence daily in my work at the intersection of technology, creativity, learning, and design.

Professor Nadkarni's impact on my own career has been profound, but this nomination goes far beyond the personal. His life's work has transformed the discipline of design in India and created an institutional and intellectual legacy that continues to shape national practice and global discourse.

Professor Nadkarni's contributions are foundational. As journalist Phalguni Desai noted in *The Hindu*, "Sudhakar Nadkarni pioneered 'design thinking' in India, and set up not one but three institutions that train young minds in the field." In 1969, he established the *Industrial Design Centre (IDC)* at *IIT Bombay*, India's first postgraduate design program with a revolutionary curriculum where students spent 70% of their time in authentic practice rather than lectures. After decades building IDC as a hub for design innovation, he created the *Department of Design at IIT Guwahati*, embedding design in the Northeast's socio-economic fabric through pioneering work with bamboo and cane as sustainable materials. He also founded the *Business Design program* at the *Welingkar Institute in Mumbai*, creating India's first curriculum integrating design thinking into management education.

To create one nationally influential institution is creditworthy. To have created three is testimony to Professor Nadkarni's talent, vision, institutional intelligence, and persistence. As it happens these three institutions continue to train and inspire thousands of designers who are now the messengers responsible for many creative solutions for products that India needs and problems the country faces.

Alongside his leadership in building institutions, Professor Nadkarni maintained an active and influential design practice, producing work that has left a lasting imprint on India's visual and material culture. Originally trained as an illustrator and painter, he went on to become a professional product designer, with many iconic products that became a part of the Indian landscape. From fans to medical units, his work was deeply functional and aesthetic. But again, this was not all. His approach has always been transformational — expanding the scope of design from the "making of things" to the solving of complex social, cultural, and functional problems. From urban interventions like street furniture and mobile shops in Navi Mumbai, to national exhibitions such as *Tryst with Destiny* at the *Asia '72* exposition, his work has consistently addressed real human needs in both rural and urban contexts.

He brought an international perspective, shaped by his education at the *Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm*, into deep dialogue with Indian traditions and realities. He recognized the value of both, of the traditions and crafts that are deeply rooted in Indian culture and history, as well as the need for modern approaches that speak to today's globalized, interconnected world. As the renowned architect Charles Correa observed, his work is "completely Indian and completely contemporary" — a rare and exceptional balance.

And Professor Nadkarni was never one to rest on his laurels. He was always experimenting, playing, and learning. One of the most telling examples of his openness and adaptability came late in his career. When he moved to Assam to establish the *Department of Design at IIT Guwahati*, he encountered the region's abundance of bamboo, a material long seen as rustic, peripheral, and "low-tech" in mainstream design. He immersed himself in the local context, working alongside artisans and students to explore bamboo's

potential for school and hospital furniture that could be produced, repaired, and maintained locally. This was not just material innovation: it was a design philosophy in action, emphasizing the local, both in terms of the needs being met and the resources and processes being used. It demonstrated his willingness to learn anew, to experiment without ego, and to model for the next generation of Indian designers that indigenous materials, in the right hands, can offer world-class solutions.

Professor Nadkarni's influence is global as well as national. He has represented India in UNESCO and UNDP initiatives, contributed to the *International Council of Societies of Industrial Design*, and maintained enduring exchanges with some of the world's leading design thinkers. His ability to invite and host international design luminaries in India helped place IDC and India firmly on the global design map.

What makes his impact enduring is that it is embedded in institutions, ideas, and people. The graduates of the institutions he founded carry forward his philosophy: that of design as a tool for nation-building, for sustainable economic development, and for elevating everyday life. His legacy is visible in products and systems across the country, and in the mindset of an entire generation of Indian designers.

And yet, for all his stature, Professor Nadkarni remains approachable, humorous, and humble. To this day, he engages with everyone he meets, from students to staff, from local artists to international designers, with the same curiosity, warmth, and respect. His laughter and sense of humor are infectious, but it never gets in the way of the importance of the work. This is a lesson I hold for myself to this day, to take the work extremely seriously, but not to take oneself too seriously.

I was recently awarded the *Distinguished Alumni Award* from *IIT, Bombay*. In my acceptance speech I spoke to IDC's and Professor Nadkarni's influence on me and my career. As I said, "It is clear to me that everything I've accomplished since then (including this award) traces back to those transformative years in the Master of Design program." He is a teacher who inspires by example, a mentor who opens doors, and a colleague who makes room for others' voices.

To honor Professor Nadkarni with the Padma award is to acknowledge the architect of India's modern design education, the creator of institutions that continue to define the profession, and a visionary whose work has brought design into the heart of India's development story. His influence is profound, his legacy secure, and his example enduring, and deeply deserving of this award.

Sincerely,

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*Punya Mishra: A Short Bio*

Punya Mishra (punyamishra.com) is *Director of Innovative Learning Futures* at the *Learning Engineering Institute* and Professor at the *Mary Lou Fulton College of Teaching & Learning Innovation,* and the *Design School,* at *Arizona State University*. He is internationally recognized for his work in educational technology, creativity, and the application of design to educational innovation. A *TED-Ed* educator he is ranked in the top 2% of scientists worldwide. He is a podcaster, award-winning instructor, engaging public-speaker and an accomplished visual artist.