

Pratibha Patil: From ping-pong to presidential palace

Rajasthan Governor Pratibha Devisingh Patil was a table tennis champion who studied law before taking to politics to build a career that is set to catapult her into Rashtrapati Bhavan as India's first woman president.

Born in the small town of Jalgaon of Maharashtra on Dec 19, 1934, she was an athletic teenager when India became independent. She studied both in Jalgaon and [Mumbai](#) to earn post-graduate degrees in arts and law, and practised as an advocate in Jalgaon.

She was a champion in table tennis during college days, winning shields in inter-college tournaments.

Social work drew her to politics, and the Congress was the first choice in a state where the party held sway. She was elected to the Maharashtra assembly in 1962 for the first time.

A Rajput, she married Devisingh Ransingh Shekhawat, a Maratha of Rajasthani origin, three years later.

From 1972 to 1978, the soft-spoken Pratibha Patil was cabinet minister in Maharashtra four times holding such portfolios as social welfare, public health, prohibition, rehabilitation and cultural affairs, and education.

When the Congress got dethroned in Maharashtra in 1979, she became the opposition leader in the assembly and came to be seen as staunch loyalist of the Gandhi family.

Pratibha Patil returned as cabinet minister in 1982, heading the urban development and housing ministry, and also held charge of civil supplies and social welfare.

She was elected to the Rajya Sabha, parliament's upper house, in 1985, after nearly a quarter century of state politics.

She became deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha from 1986 for two years. She was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1991 in a general election marred by the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Pratibha Patil became the Rajasthan governor Nov 8, 2004 -- one year after the state went into the hands of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

One of her most noteworthy actions as governor was her refusal to sign the controversial Rajasthan Freedom of Religion Bill that banned religious conversions.

She argued that it contained provisions that directly or indirectly affected fundamental rights related to religious freedom.

Her husband Devisingh's family had migrated to Amravati in Vidarbha region more than a century ago. They have a son and a daughter.

Pratibha Patil headed the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) from 1989-90.

Pratibha Patil has been involved in the cooperative movement in Maharashtra. She also set up an industrial training school for the blind besides starting sewing classes for poor and needy women.

She set up hostels for working women in [New Delhi](#) and Mumbai, an engineering college for rural youths in Jalgaon, a sugar factory also in Jalgaon and also a cooperative bank for women in Jalgaon.

A widely travelled person, she has been part of various Indian delegations that went abroad. She attended the International Council of Social Welfare Conference in Nairobi and Puerto Rico and led a delegation to Austria on status of women.

She was a member of a Congress delegation to Bulgaria in 1985 and attended the Commonwealth Presiding Officers Conference in London in 1988. She has also traveled to China to attend the World Women's Conference.

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