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Purushottam Das Tandon: The Rajarshi

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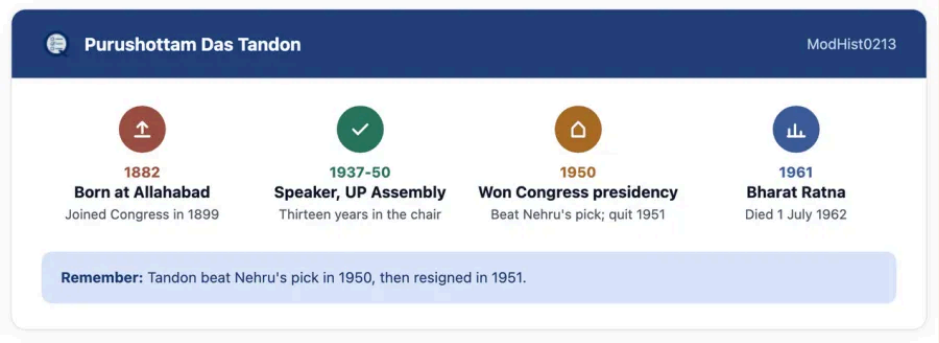
Purushottam Das Tandon: The Rajarshi

In 1950 he beat the candidate Nehru had backed. A year later he was out. Few Congress presidents have had a shorter or more dramatic term.

His name was Purushottam Das Tandon. Gandhi’s circle called him Rajarshi, the royal sage. He lived simply, loved Hindi, and argued hard with the Prime Minister.



Purushottam Das Tandon on the 1982 commemorative stamp of India Post. Government Open Data Licence, via Wikimedia Commons.



Key moments in the life of Purushottam Das Tandon, from standard sources.

Who. Purushottam Das Tandon, called Rajarshi.
Born. 1 August 1882, Allahabad, in a Khatri family.
Speaker. United Provinces Assembly, 1937 to 1950.
Congress. President in 1950; resigned soon after.
Honour. Bharat Ratna, 1961.
Died. 1 July 1962.

Rajarshi: “royal sage”, a title for a leader who lives like a saint.

Devanagari: the script used to write Hindi and Sanskrit.

Speaker: the officer who presides over a legislative assembly.

1 Who was Purushottam Das Tandon?

Tandon was born in Allahabad on 1 August 1882. His family was middle class and Khatri. He joined the Indian National Congress in 1899, while still a student.

He took a law degree and an M.A. in history. In 1908 he joined the Allahabad High Court bar. His senior there was Tej Bahadur Sapru. Accounts add that a nationalist protest once got him expelled from his college for a year.

In 1921 he gave up his legal practice. He wanted to work full time for the freedom movement. That choice set the course of his life.

- Born **1 August 1882**, **Allahabad**.
- Joined **Congress** in **1899**.
- Joined the **High Court bar** in **1908**.
- Left law in **1921** for public work.

> **Quick check 1.** Tandon defeated Jawaharlal Nehru himself in the 1950 Congress presidential election. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did he serve the freedom struggle?

Tandon was arrested during the Non-Cooperation Movement. He was arrested again during the Salt Satyagraha of 1930. In 1931 he and Jawaharlal Nehru were jailed even before Gandhi came back from the Round Table Conference in London.

He also studied the Jallianwala Bagh killings as part of a Congress committee in 1919. He worked among farmers too. In 1934 he was president of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha.

Lala Lajpat Rai founded the Servants of the People Society in 1921. It did social service work. Tandon later became its president after Lajpat Rai.

- Jailed in the **Non-Cooperation** and **Salt Satyagraha** years.
- **1931**: arrested with **Nehru** before Gandhi returned.
- **1934**: president, **Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha**.
- Later led the **Servants of the People Society**, founded by **Lajpat Rai** in 1921.
- Read about the Salt March.

3 What did he do as Speaker?

From 31 July 1937 to 10 August 1950, Tandon was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces. That is about thirteen years. The province is today's Uttar Pradesh.

In 1946 he was elected to the Constituent Assembly. Later he sat in the Lok Sabha from 1952. He joined the Rajya Sabha in 1956.

A story shows his style. A Speaker is meant to stay neutral, yet Tandon attended his party's meetings. When members questioned this, he offered to step down. No one pressed the matter.

- Speaker for **thirteen years**, **1937 to 1950**.
- **1946**: elected to the **Constituent Assembly**.
- **Lok Sabha** in **1952**; **Rajya Sabha** in **1956**.
- Read about the Quit India Movement, the last big struggle of his era.

4 Why did he push for Hindi?

Tandon wanted Hindi to become the official language. Gandhi and others favoured Hindustani, a mix of Hindi and Urdu. Tandon wanted Devanagari script only. He wanted words from Arabic and Persian left out.

He also wanted Devanagari numerals instead of the international ones. He argued this in the Constituent Assembly. Dravidian leaders were annoyed by the push. Nehru called him a political reactionary on the language question.

Accounts say he led the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan for years. That body was his platform for Hindi. Treat the details of his offices there as secondary.

- Wanted **Hindi** in **Devanagari** script.
- Opposed **Hindustani** and the **Urdu script**.
- Debated for Hindi in the **Constituent Assembly**.
- Linked with the **Hindi Sahitya Sammelan**.
- See Official Language of the Union.

5 Why did he clash with Nehru?

In June 1947 the Congress Working Committee accepted Partition. At the AICC meeting on 14 June, Tandon dissented. He called the resolution a surrender and a sign of weakness. He said Partition would help neither community.

He then lost the 1948 race for Congress president to Pattabhi Sitaramayya. In 1950 he tried again. This time he beat Acharya Kripalani, the man Nehru preferred.

He soon resigned. His views differed from Nehru's, and Nehru's popularity was needed to win elections. Nehru himself became Congress president for 1951 and 1952. The episode shows the limits of party democracy in those years.

- Opposed **Partition** at the **AICC**, **14 June 1947**.
- Lost to **Pattabhi Sitaramayya** in **1948**.
- Beat **Acharya Kripalani** in **1950**.
- Resigned; **Nehru** became president for **1951-52**.
- See the Mountbatten Plan.

6 What are the exam traps?

Keep the rivals, the years and the titles straight.

- He beat **Kripalani** in **1950**, not **Nehru** himself.
- He lost to **Sitaramayya** in **1948**.
- The title **Rajarshi** means **royal sage**.
- He backed **Devanagari** Hindi, not **Hindustani**.
- Awarded the **Bharat Ratna** in **1961**, a year before death.
- See Lala Lajpat Rai, founder of his Servants of the People Society.

> **Quick check 2.** Tandon wanted Hindi in Devanagari script to be the official language. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Tandon beat Kripalani, Nehru's pick, for Congress president in 1950. He resigned soon after. He backed Hindi in Devanagari script. He received the Bharat Ratna in 1961.

Think it through: Why was a 1950 Congress election worth Nehru's worry?

The party president helps pick candidates and shape policy. Nehru feared a president with opposite views on language and minorities. So the result mattered beyond one post.

Quick check 3. Tandon won the Bharat Ratna in 1950, the year he became Congress president. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. In the 1950 Congress presidential election, Purushottam Das Tandon defeated which candidate, whom Nehru had backed?

A. Rajendra Prasad

B. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel

C. Govind Ballabh Pant

D. Acharya Kripalani

See answer ↓

2. Mahatma Gandhi gave Purushottam Das Tandon which title, in recognition of his simple, ascetic lifestyle?

A. Sarvodaya

B. Deshbandhu

C. Lokmanya

D. Rajarshi

See answer ↓

3. Purushottam Das Tandon was a lifelong champion of Hindi in which script, opposing the use of Urdu script?

A. Devanagari

B. Kaithi

C. Modi

D. Gurmukhi

See answer ↓

4. In which year was Purushottam Das Tandon awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour?

A. 1947

B. 1961

C. 1971

D. 1951

See answer ↓

5. After his 1952 Lok Sabha term, which house of Parliament did Purushottam Das Tandon join in 1956?

A. He did not serve in Parliament again

B. The Lok Sabha, for a second term

C. The Rajya Sabha

D. The United Provinces Legislative Council

See answer ↓

6. In 1948, Purushottam Das Tandon unsuccessfully contested the Congress presidency against which leader?

A. Rajendra Prasad

B. Maulana Azad

C. Pattabhi Sitaramayya

D. Acharya Kripalani

See answer ↓

7. For how many years did Purushottam Das Tandon serve as Speaker of the United Provinces Legislative Assembly, from 1937 to 1950?

A. Five years

B. Thirteen years

C. Eight years

D. Twenty years

See answer ↓

8. At the AICC meeting of June 1947, Tandon spoke against which decision of the Congress Working Committee?

A. Accepting the partition of India

B. Adopting Hindustani as national language

C. Joining the Cabinet Mission plan

D. Launching the Quit India Movement

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** He defeated Acharya Kripalani, Nehru's preferred candidate, exposing a real ideological rift in the Congress party. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** Gandhi called him 'Rajarshi' (royal sage) for his ascetic lifestyle despite his political stature. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** He championed Hindi in the Devanagari script and pushed for Sanskritised vocabulary over Urdu. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** He received the Bharat Ratna in 1961, a year before his death, for his contributions to the freedom movement. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** After serving in the Lok Sabha from 1952, Tandon was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1956. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** Tandon lost to Pattabhi Sitaramayya in 1948. He won the 1950 contest against Acharya Kripalani. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** He held the Speaker's chair from 31 July 1937 to 10 August 1950. That is about thirteen years. ↑ Q7
8. **A.** The Working Committee accepted Partition on 12 June 1947. Tandon was among the dissenting voices when the AICC met on 14 June. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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