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So, what does it mean to be a Patel?

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NRI Special Offer!

Scientists have mapped the rice genome. Researchers have devised drugs aimed at a specific ethnic population for congestive heart failure, works exclusively on Blacks).

Somewhere between these developments I began to wonder if they will start studying the make up of communities renowned for specific skills – such as entrepreneurship.

My own favourites are Patels, a clan I am increasingly fascinated by and about whom I boned up a little bit re their remarkable success in East Africa, UK and now the US.

The name Patel, I gather, derives from 'patedar', the record-keeper named by princely rulers of Gujarat to keep 'pat' being a parcel of land. So obviously, they are good at numbers, but their area of interest now extends far beyond fact, it appears to extend in almost every sphere of human endeavour.

According to the year 2000 census, there were 49,740 Patels in the US. The Patel surname ranked 591 in the common last names, ahead of such notables as Dalton, Roth, and Nixon, and ahead of the Singh, which one would be more common (there are only 22,383 Singhs in the US).

A majority of the Patels are entrepreneurial types, mostly in hotel, convenience store, and fast food franchise. Of the 52,000 hotels and motels in America, roughly 18,000, nearly one-third, are owned by Indians, a majority by Chinese, a majority among them Patels (hence the term Patel Motel). They are also muscling into gas stations, convenience liquor store business.

What gives here? Well, one of course their legendary sense of clannishness (they are, after all, said to be the Ram's sons Lav and Kush). So one Patel brings his brother, who brings his brother-in-law, who brings his cousin – low attrition, low overheads, no overtimes, no hand in till etc.

But Patels are also blessed with an extraordinary business sense. I now know of many Patels, including success stories who are diversifying into other business (hotels, restaurants, real estate, packaged food etc), and the reason is not of medical malpractice insurance (which is driving other physicians out of private practice).

The most famous example is of course Florida cardiologist Dr Kiran Patel who parlayed a modest practice into healthcare empire with interests so wide and varied that some months back he gave a \$18.5 million donation to a university to establish a centre for global solutions (that came on top of \$5 million he gave for an arts centre.)

Last week, I came across another intriguing example of an entrepreneurial push by a professional Patel. Michigan's Asha Patel, from all accounts, has a successful internal medicine practice near Detroit. She and her psychiatrist husband have two small kids, and lead a busy life.

Not busy enough, it seems. Inspired by a passion for food, and what she says are her 'Patel genes', she has Tasha Foods, starting with a modest line of curry sauces which she herself delivered to some 40 stores.

In no time, it attracted the attention of the local Detroit Free Press, and a subsequent article by the paper's food editor (the headline "Curry in a Hurry", which is fast becoming a fashionable name for new restaurants) has sparked interest (the local TV station called next, Dr Patel said).

It won't surprise me to see Asha's Tasha on my supermarket shelf in Washington DC in a few weeks time because the doctor is already set on growing her business – without giving up her medical practice. She's banking on her fan base in the spice trade (they have been exporting for a century) and her own knowledge of medicine to crank up healthier, less calories and less salt than what are currently on the shelves.

More importantly, she has vision. "Forty years ago, there were no pasta sauces in the US," she told me over the phone now...there are dozens. The same thing is going to happen with curry sauce." Yes, only if she can sell beyond local stores, I remarked, recalling the growing Asian food section, including many curry sauces, in my local Whole