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Patel Tales

A Gujarati friend who visited the United States some time back boasted that he could travel all over America and find free boarding anywhere simply by looking up the local phone book and calling any Patel listed there. The comment speaks to not only to the Patel hospitality (which is probably one reason they are in the motel business), but also their spread. There are said to be more than 200,000 Patels scattered across the world outside India, including some 50,000 each in Britain and the United States.

All Patels are of Indian origin, but not all are Indian nationals. A gent by name Dipak Patel represented New Zealand in Test and one-day cricket in the 1990s. Brothers Ramesh and Mohan Patel played for the Kiwi Olympic hockey team way back in 1976. Min Patel played a few cricket matches for England more recently, and there was a Brijal Patel in the Kenyan national cricket team. Ugandan Praful Patel is the World Bank's vice-president for South Asia.

Patels are of more recent vintage in the U.S, many of them having emigrated from East Africa via the United Kingdom. But they have made a mark very quickly. According to the year 2000 U.S Census, there were 49,740 Patels in the U.S. The Patel surname ranked 591 in the list of most common last names, ahead of such notables as Dalton, Roth, and Nixon.

In fact, here's a surprise: Patels outnumbered Singhs by more than 2 to 1 in America. There are only 22,383 Singhs in the U.S, making it the 1306th most common last name (presumably many Sikhs use their family or village name as last name). Needless to say, not all Singhs are Sikhs.

Patels are represented in a wide range of activity besides their significant presence in the motel, fast food franchise and convenience store business. Pradeep Patel, a structural engineer with the Philadelphia firm of Ewing

Cole is one of two popular local Indian-Americans (the other is M.Night Shyamalan) for building two of the city's best known stadiums. There are two well-known Gordhan Patels in the U.S -- one is a Dean of Grad school and vice-president of research at the University of Georgia and another heads a research lab that makes radiation dosimeter -- a credit card-sized badge that measures exposure levels in human bodies. Ajay Patel was recently named Dean of Wake Forest's Babcock Graduate School of Management.

There is a Patel on Vice-President Dick Cheney's staff (Neil Patel), another who became Miss Delaware last year and took part in Miss America (Shoha Kirti Patel), one who is currently serving U.S in Iraq (University of Iowa medical student Soundeep Patel with the National Guards 109th Area Support Medical Battalion) and another (Minal Patel) who was sworn in as the first Indian-American cop in Edison, New Jersey, a Little India if ever there was one.

With so much success comes a bit of notoriety. The past few weeks have not been good for some Patels. Dr Jayant Patel of Oregon has earned the epithet Dr Death in a widely-reported case of possible medical malpractice, a young California lad named Chirayu Patel was busted by the FBI last week on charges of internet piracy, and a patter of Patels (to bestow on them a collective noun) is in the clink in Georgia, accused of knowingly selling meth-making medication to addicts.

So who are the Patels? Word is that Patel derives from "patedar," the record-keeper named by princely rulers to keep track of crops, "pat" being a parcel of land. Evidently, their patedari now extends beyond crops and across countries and continents. They have earned more than just a pat.
