

Immigrant America and Patel Tales

U.S has more than 145,000 Patels; and 72642 Singhs

Washington: When word emerged last week that there was a single winning ticket for the \$ 338 Powerball lottery that had rolled over without a winner for several weeks, it seemed a no-brainer that the ticket would have been sold by a Patel. They appear to own every other convenience store in America, and since the winning ticket was sold in New Jersey, a desi haven, chances were even greater that the seller would be a Patel. For the lucky sale, the Patel store would get a wee slice of the money and few seconds of fame that would propel the place as lottery manna for a few months. It had happened before.

A quick search of Patel and \$ 338 million disproved the speculation. It turned out a Patel had indeed sold a winning ticket, but it was for one of the many second prizes of \$ 1 million each – this one sold by Bob Patel, manager of a 7-Eleven in Mahwah, New Jersey. No big deal. Last year, a \$ 61 million Mega-Million ticket that was won by two people (who each claimed \$ 30.5 million) was sold by Chetan Patel of AM-PM Convenience Store in Hyannis, Massachusetts. And in a happy coincidence for desis, one of the winners of \$ 30.5 million was a fellow desi immigrant -- Sandeep “Sunny” Singh, who worked two jobs as a bank teller and a store clerk in Hyannis.

Now, before you write off the desi lottery connection as a one-off, here’s what unfolded next. It turned out that our search terms for the \$ 338 million lottery were slightly off-mark. Last week’s winning ticket was indeed sold by a desi store, but it was owned by a SETHI, not a Patel, in what must be a rare Punjabi triumph over Gujarati dominance in retailing. And true to form, the winning ticket was sold at a liquor store, more likely to be owned by a Punjabi than a Gujarati – Sunil Sethi’s Eagle Liquors in Passaic, New Jersey. Remarkably, the winner of the \$ 338 million (\$ 221 million after taxes), the fourth largest prize in Powerball history, was a Dominican immigrant named Pedro Quezada.

But come to think of it, it is not really all that surprising. Asian-Indians and Hispanics are among the fastest growing population segments in the United States. Patel was listed 172nd among the most frequently occurring last names in the U.S in the 2000 census, up from 591st in 1990. The 2000 census counted 145,066 Patels, up from 49,470 in 1990. Considering that the Indian-American population in the U.S was only around 1.6 million in the 2000 census, it would seem that nearly one of every ten people of Indian-origin in the U.S is a Patel. Of course, many Patels have come to the U.S from East Africa, United Kingdom and other places, but their ethnicity is undoubtedly Indian.

Patels incidentally outrank Singhs in the 2000 U.S Census last names list, and outnumber them two to one. Singh, with 72642 of them, is listed as the 396th most common last name in U.S. This could be because many Sikhs use their family name or village name as last name. But then, not all Singhs are Sikhs. And Like Patels, Singhs too home in on America from all over the world, not just from India. The only other sub-continental sounding last names in the Top1000: Khan (46713) ranked 665, Shah (37833) ranked 831, and Ali (36079) at 876, although all three could be from regions beyond the subcontinent.

Patels though are outranked by several other oriental-sounding Asian-American last names, attesting to the earlier immigration to the U.S from East Asia and South East Asia. Lee takes the lead, at 22nd place. There are 606860 last-named Lees in the U.S. They are followed by the Vietnamese Nguyen (57th place with 310125) and the Korean Kim (109th with 194067). But surprisingly, Patel trumps Yang, Chang, Wang, Zhang, and Li, Lin, Liu, and Chen, Chung, Choi, and Wu and Yu, all of who making the Top 1000.

However, the Asian brigades are no match for the Hispanics, clearly the dominant immigrant community in the U.S. And the Census Bureau's last names count says it all. Garcia and Rodriguez are in 8th and 9th position in the list of Top Ten last names which is led by typically Caucasian monikers: Smith, Johnson, Williams, Brown, Jones, Miller, Davis, and rounded off by Wilson at tenth place. But take the Top 25 and there's Martinez at 11th, Hernandez at 15th, Lopez at 21st, and Gonzalez at 23rd --- each with more than 500,000 people bearing that last name. Perez, Sanchez, Ramirez and Torres make the Top 50.

Any surprise then that a Sethi sold a lottery ticket to a Quezada – or a Patel could be selling one to Martinez?