

# THE TIMES OF INDIA

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## NRG is king of Indian spices in US

Ahmedabad: While working as a quality controller in Jefferson Electric, Chicago, in the 1960s, Mafat Patel often missed Indian food. Gujarati spices were slowly fading from his taste buds and cravings for home-cooked food was becoming a thing of the past. That is when Patel and his brother, Tulsi, started their little Indian grocery store named 'Patel Brothers' in the Windy City where most spices were sourced from Ahmedabad. Today, there are about 55 stores of the brand which sources spices from Gujarat as well as different parts of India. The 'Patel Brothers' stores can be called the Mecca of Indian spices for NRIs across the US.

Patel, 70, a native of Bandu village, belonged to a farmers' family near Visnagar. At 23, armed with a diploma in electrical engineering, he left for Chicago and pursued a degree in mechanical engineering. He also completed his MBA. But as work took its toll on his routine, Patel along with his wife and brother, realized that real Indian food was missing from their palate. The first Patel Brothers grocery store was set up in Devon Avenue in 1974. Today, this shop is ten times its size and still owned by the two founding brothers, while the business is run by Mafat's sons, Swetal and Rakesh.

"We are essentially grocers. From ingredients like turmeric, red chilli powder to snacks like khakras, gathiyas and theplas, we are a truly Indian brand and cater to almost all NRIs in the US," said Patel.

The thought of a food store came to the brothers because of pure Gujarati business acumen; "This is an industry that will never face any crisis. We have worked hard, taken loans to set up so many stores, but now the dream is to establish a hundred stores," Tulsi, the elder Patel brother said.

The company imports 90% of its goods from India, especially Ahmedabad. Everyday, two containers of products travel to various stores in the chain from India. "While 70% of our clientele comprises of Gujaratis, we have a healthy flow of American, Mexican consumers too. Indian palate appeases most taste buds," said Patel. Barack Obama, much before he became the president of America, had visited Patel Brothers to get a zayka India ka.

The brothers, who have over 250 family members in the US today, were welcome hosts to any relative who wished to set up a store under their banner. "We tried setting up a business in India but got no space in Mumbai, as that's where we first looked," he said.

In India, the veteran brothers have donated around Rs 2 crore to the Kadi Sarv Vidyalaya in Gandhinagar and are also behind the Chicago township; the 160 housing units built after the Kutch earthquake.

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