In class recently, it was mentioned that the common Indian surname Patel derived from the state of Gujarat and that they were well represented in the city of Mumbai, both in number and success. But who were these people, what does this last-name imply, what was their caste and why are they typically so successful in the ventures abroad?

Typical of most surnames, in which a family name often reflects the profession or occupation of their forbears during the Middle Ages, last-names such as Patel derive from the position the family held within the village or community in which they worked. Patel is an occupational name meaning “village chief” and denotes a landowning status. It is a typical surname of the agrarian Hindu-castes in the West Indian, most notably found in the state of Gujarat. When one searches the surname Patel on the internet, it is common to find a variety of occupational interpretations for the name, such as “farmer,” “village headman,” or “landowner.” In truth, these terms all tend to describe the general history of the family’s that bear this name. It appears that their forefathers were a group of people living in Punjab, when the Afghani force of ‘Mahmud of Ghazni’ attacked and displaced them around AD 1000. As refugees they eventually settled in the Solanki Rajput territory of Gujarat. The Solanki were a Hindu-Gujjar ruling dynasty that granted each of these immigrant families, uncultivated land in region of Patlad. However, the kind gesture came with the stipulation that a portion of their crops would be set aside for the king in return for the land. Therefore, the king appointed a ‘headman’ from each of these new found villages, to collect the portion of the crops to be turned over. The family members of the ‘headman’ were to keep records concerning the transaction of crops, on a “Pat” or log book, and the act of writing it down was called “Likh”. As a result, the person who kept and recorded these notes became known as “Patlikh,” which was shortened over time to Patel.

In addition, the name Patel has become quite common globally, due to the industrious business-like nature of the people who bare this surname. Their historic benefit of ‘landowning’ gave them added advantages in Indian society, which allowed them to properly educate and provide for their young. Yet, a ‘proper education’ often meant sending ones child overseas to study abroad, resulting in a diaspora of the Patel family name. India has often been noted for “brain drain,” in which an Indian student is sent to a Western country for higher-education, conversely resulting in these bright technically skilled off-spring remaining abroad to start a new life. Consequently, the name Patel is associated with entrepreneurship both at home and overseas, and is highly represented in the fast-food, convenience store, gasoline and hotel industries in areas worlds-away from their home state of Gujarat. In fact, the name Patel now ranks as the 20th most common surname in Great Britain and a staggering ‘third’ in greater London alone, even though it is still the second most common name in India. In the United States, Patel has moved up to be the 140th most common name, outranking other notables such as “Fox” and “Gonzales” (Which fall in behind at 141 and 142). A “White Pages” internet website http://names.whitepages.com/Georgia/last/Patel declares that there are over 8,143 Patel’s in the state of Georgia alone, ranking the famous Indian surname as the 68th most common name in all of the Peach State. Using this same website tool, my own family name “McMillan,” (a name which has been associated with the state for generations), ranks as 507 in Georgia or 1,746th most common if you factor in the funny spelling given unto me with an additional vowel, “McMillian”. The popularity of “Patel” has lead to fun being made of the Patel clan. In the 2003 comedy entitled “Dude, Where’s the party?” starring Kal Penn (of ‘Harold and Kumar fame), a character is able to clear out an Indian filled restaurant by stating “Mr. Patel, your Toyota Camry’s lights are on !!!”