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The Leva Patidar Patels of Charotar. A Community History. By Anjana N Patel & Natvarbhai D Patel. London: Charotar Patidar Kutumb, 2001. ISBN 0954157702. Price £14.95.

This book provides a fascinating insight into the political and social events that shaped the lives of one community, many of whose members now live in Britain. It is about a community with its roots in Charotar in central Gujarat, which had to face the challenge of two major migrations – first to East Africa in the early part of the twentieth century, then in the late 1960s to Britain.

Having moved no further than two hundred miles from Manchester to London, and that by design, I have an enormous admiration for a people who have been forced to start again from scratch, not just once but twice. They, like many forced migrant communities the world over, have shown a resilience and resourcefulness, which is nothing short of extraordinary.

This is a history that was worthy of the effort put in by its two authors: a father and a daughter who, between them, have personally experienced both those migrations. It is worthy not just in and of itself – because any history is worth documenting – but worthy because it is a history that was in danger of being forgotten and hence not understood. Two forced migrations in extremely painful circumstances led to the loss of much community memory and documentation, and the hard work required to settle into a ‘new’ country left little time and energy for thinking about the ancestral homeland.

That the authors have taken the time and trouble to do this – and do it so thoroughly – is a credit to them, and the Leva Patidar Patels of Charotar and their descendants are fortunate to have such a valuable source of information at their fingertips. For those members of the community who have little idea of where their grandparents and parents came from – and more to the point why – this book is a lifeline. A lifeline because no one can live life in its fullest

sense without understanding the past. You may think you can, but your glass will only ever be half full.

But this book deserves a wider readership. Anyone wishing to gain an insight into the history of a migrant community from the Indian subcontinent will find it interesting. It could also be useful for people from other migrant communities wishing to get an idea of the work involved to research their own histories, as well as students of social anthropology and similar disciplines who are engaged in academic research.

At a personal level one of the many things I learnt from this book was the meaning and origins of the surname Patel. We all know the importance of our names, but to the uninformed person of English origin, Patel is like Smith and I had no idea that there were so many different communities of Patels.

More broadly, issues of community, family, home and roots lie at the heart of much of what it means to be human and are assuming an ever greater significance in this transient, sound- byte world. Our world has millions of exiles, both forced and voluntary, who can no longer call anywhere “home” in the geographical sense of the word. By writing this book, the authors have shown that being at home does not mean being in a certain place, but in knowing where you came from, and hence where you are going to. In short, home is a spiritual, psychological and emotional concept, not a geographical one and this is a lesson many of us need to learn in the modern world.

Oh, and for those who want to know how their ancestors travelled from Gujarat to East Africa in the early part of the twentieth century, look at the logo of the little sailing boat on the front cover – think about its significance. It speaks volumes.