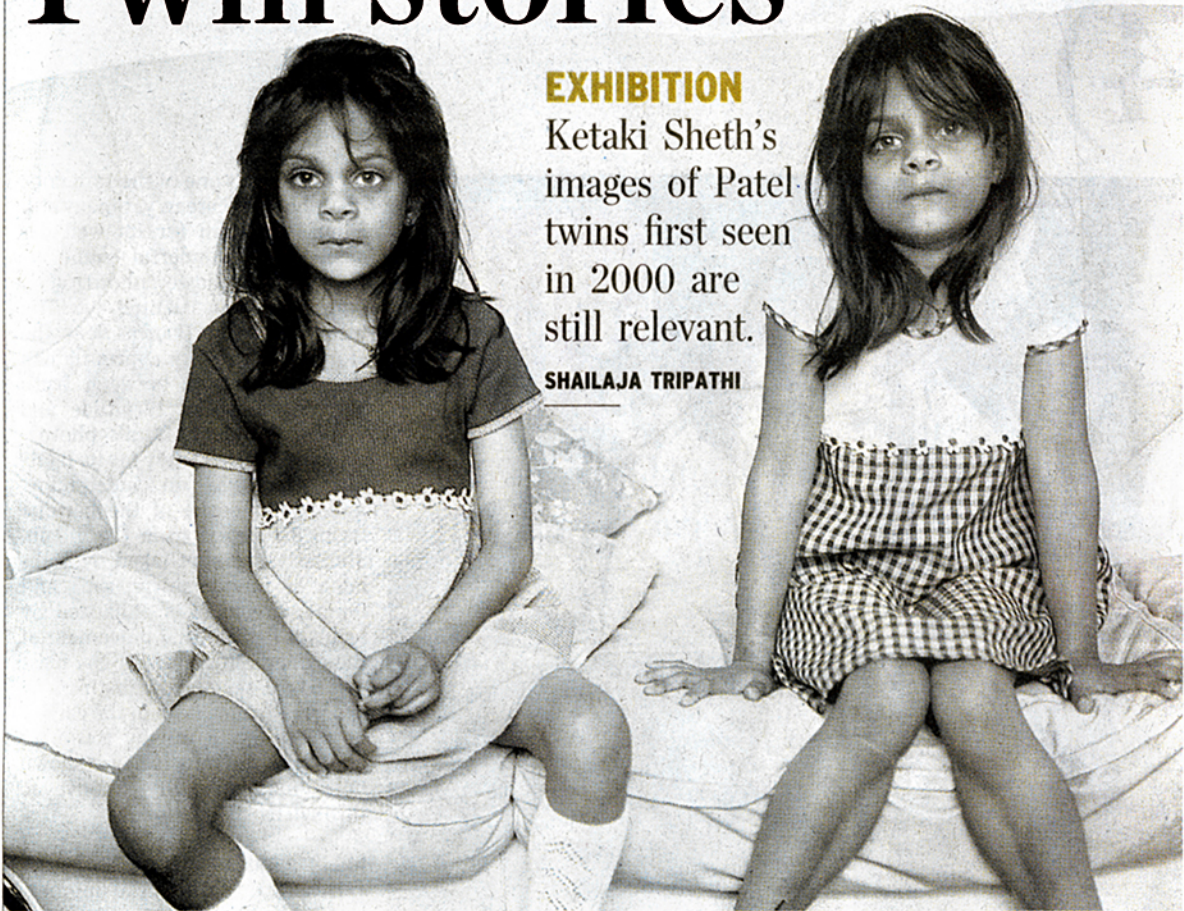


# Twin stories



**EXHIBITION**  
Ketaki Sheth's images of Patel twins first seen in 2000 are still relevant.

SHAILAJA TRIPATHI

**T**wins invariably invite a second glance and well they receive it too. But that wasn't the reason why Mumbai-based photographer Ketaki Sheth devoted four years of her life to chasing 125 pairs of Patel twins for a project that resulted in a book and exhibition named "Twinspotting". The lot, some of which are fraternal, many identical, belonging to different age groups and settings in Britain and Gujarat, stare at the viewer from various frames mounted at Devika Daulet-Singh's Photoink, an exclusive gallery for photographers.

Soon after the newly married Sheth moved to London with her husband in the '90s, she began scouting around for a subject. She discovered it at a party in Kent when she came across a directory listing only Patels, with 25 Patel twins. "I thought photographing twins would be a unique way of photographing a community. My husband made database of all the Patel twins in the U.K. and I started writing to all of them. We didn't have a car those days so every weekend we would set out on a train to do four sets of twins. I saw the country in a way I would have never seen," says Sheth, one of the leading woman photographers of the country



**PATEL WRAP** Riddhi and Siddhi, in their living room, Norbury, London, and Ram and Lakhan, outside their tobacco field in Ode, Gujarat

PHOTO COURTESY: KETAKI SHETH/PHOTOINK

who was mentored by the legendary Raghubir Singh. The famous lensman also contributed to Sheth's coffee-table book on the topic which preceded the exhibition.

It's a given that in any large population, one in every 300 people is an identical twin, while one in 99 is a fraternal one. And Patels, she says, constitute the largest immigrant community in the world. Many from this enterprising community from 55 villages of Gujarat emigrated to Uganda in the 1950s where they prospered until expelled by Idi Amin in 1972 and forced to migrate to the U.K. leaving all their riches behind. A farming community traditionally, its members set up small businesses to rebuild their lives.

Shops selling newspapers, chocolates, phone cards, stationery, etc. sprang up at street corners in English cities and towns. "And they did well because most of them lived above their shops. While all the shops there would close by 6 or 7 in the evening, Patels kept their shops opened till 10:30 at night," points out the photographer.

The images, wherein the twins appear in their shops, in swanky cars, affluent homes or even in the village of Charotar in Gujarat, are a testimony to the resilience and industrious nature of the Patels — like in the case of Suresh and Ramesh, middle-aged twin brothers dressed in identical suits, sitting on sofa in a picture. "Their father was thrown

out of Uganda by Idi Amin. They came to the U.K. where they ran a post office, saved money to start a business but didn't get their shop insured. The shop caught fire and they lost everything overnight. It had been five-six years since then and they were on their way up again," recalls Sheth.

Irrespective of the setting, be it the Indian Patels in Charotar village or the British Patels in the U.K., the photographer found similarities in their various practices. "They eat the same food, in England. I even found that their kitchens were designed the same way. And most of them only marry within Patels," remarks Sheth.

Among the Patels her lens captured in Charotar, some are sari shop owners, some teachers or farmers. Not all are affluent, like the two girls photographed on a swing, whose father Sheth says owned less than an acre of land. "It's like re-launching the photographs because it's the first time I am showing them this large. It also reminds me of those rich times for a photographer. Also, Raghubir Singh was alive; he would look at my contact sheets," she reminisces.

**(The exhibition is on till September 16 at Photoink gallery, New Delhi)**