

## From sand fields to snow fields: Smita's journey to Clinton

When Smita looks back on her journey, it still surprises her how many miles she has covered—from milking cows and buffalo in rural India to running a variety store in the small town of Clinton, Ontario.

Smita grew up in India with a brother and three sisters in a small city where she finished secondary school and married Kaushik Patel.

After their wedding, she moved into his family home — a compound where 25 family members lived in a farming community of about 4,000. Life revolved around the rhythms of agriculture, and Smita contributed by tending to the family's household and the farming chores.

When their first child, a daughter, was born, Kaushik began to talk more seriously about a dream he had carried since school: moving to Canada.

"It was always his wish," Smita recalls. "He learned about Canada in school and wanted us to go."

The young family made the move in 2000, first settling in Toronto, adding a new family member, their son soon after. Smita found work at a clothing factory.

"It was hard work. I took Tylenol almost every day for the first month," she remembers. The long shifts and tense workplace environment left her exhausted and depressed.

Seeing the toll it was taking, Kaushik made a decision. "I told her, okay, for you, we won't work like this—we'll find a business. We both came from farming and business backgrounds. We can try having our own business," he explains.

By 2007, their search led them to Clinton, where they purchased a variety store. The adjustment wasn't easy at first. Smita remembers struggling to learn the ropes of the store and even battling severe allergies when they arrived in the fall.

"I was determined to stay there and keep learning," Smita says.

Slowly, the family settled in—and discovered the warmth of their new community. Neighbouring business owners welcomed them with flowers. Customers offered gentle advice about small town living, the importance of greeting everyone and listening kindly.

Language presented its own challenges.

“At the factory, there wasn’t much talking. But in the store, I had to talk every day and understand customers. Slowly, slowly, I learned the language,” Smita says.

Their integration deepened in unexpected ways. Smita remembers fumbling through condolences when customers shared personal losses, and her children often guided her in the right words to say.

“We became part of people’s lives,” she says.

But the journey wasn’t without pain. The family had to struggle through some negative encounters both at the store and at school. However, the Patels learned that people were willing to listen even if they had opposing viewpoints. Additionally, the school addressed an incident that their daughter faced and apologized to the family.

Those instances were few, Smita emphasized, and they found many people very helpful.

The longer the family stayed in the community, the more they felt accepted.

Over time, Smita and Kaushik built a life rooted in Clinton. They raised their children, grew their business, and celebrated another milestone with a small, sweet home.

For Smita, one of the greatest joys is gardening.

“We grow chillies, tomatoes, and cucumbers,” she says with a smile.

Now, after nearly two decades in Clinton, the family feels at home. “It’s a peaceful life, one perfect for families.”

From the fields of India to the storefronts of Huron County, Smita’s story is one of resilience, community, and the quiet determination to make a new place home.

For her entrepreneurial spirit, her determination to adapt to small-town living and her commitment to her family, Smita was selected as an I Am Huron recipient, an award that celebrates how immigrants contribute to Huron County’s communities.