

## **Siddis in India: Diasporic Identity and Syncretism**

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**Abstract.** Siddis, a diasporic community of African-Indians which has approximately 50, 000 members, is spread chiefly in three states of India—Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra. Siddis are descendants of Bantu people of Southeast Africa who first left their homelands in 628 AD from East and North East Africa due to Arab invasion while successive waves of them came to India as slaves with Arabs, Portuguese etc. Due to their stay in different parts of India an interaction between African heritage of Siddis with the host cultures of India has taken place, giving rise to syncretic intangible cultural heritages such as Goma/Dhamal dance form, folk songs, religious customs and folk lores. The collision of African culture with dominant cultures in India led to collusion between different ways of life and hybrid forms of behaviour were constructed. In the intermingling of these different cultures which shared same space and time, the identity concerns of Siddis can be seen only a stream in the ocean of shared behaviours and patterns. Further, to evaluate Siddi heritage which this community came to possess due to its location in a distinct culture separate from its own, it is necessary to investigate the slow process of emergence of the syncretic heritage over time. Siddi belief-system shows the influence of Hindu/Muslim host culture while preserving traces of a culture which faced the twin challenges of migration and integration in an alien cultural space. Their cultural expressions in the form of Goma/Dhamal music and dance, folklores, superstitions, customs, sayings etc. are channels through which their syncretic culture finds expression. The essence of Siddis's belief system shows vestiges of their African descent along with a layering of host culture thus showcasing the intensity of the cultural encounter. My paper would investigate cultural transformation undergone by the Siddis during their stay in India and how they have faced the challenges of acculturation.

**Keywords:** Heritage; Syncretism; Diaspora

African diaspora is as old as human history, with earliest humankind traced to have been originated in Africa 1, 00, 000 years ago from where they spread to different parts of the world. With the rise of Homo Erectus or Homo Habilis in around 2.6. million B.C. in African continent, it is believed that human population migrated to different continents, including India. The presence of 'small blacks' also called 'Negrito' or 'Proto-Australoid' who are proposed to have been migrated from Africa in about 60, 000 BC in the communities of Jarawas, Onges, the great Andmanese and Sentinelese in the Andaman Islands of India attests to this phase of migration who are considered to be remnants of "that Negritic race which inhabited a considerable part of Asia in pre-historic times" (Rashidi 120). Beginning with this earliest wave of migration, there had been constant contact between Asia and Africa

going back to the times of pre-Christian era. Most of these migrations were voluntary in search of trade or occupations in the other continent, with a few in the nature of slaves imported from Africa to Indian sub-continent. Carole Boyce Davies makes distinction between four kinds of diasporas related to African people:

(1) voluntary (economic and Pre-Columbian exploratory journeys); (2) trade, servitude and military (early Indian Ocean trade journeys from the sixth century); (3) forced migrations (transatlantic slavery over at least four centuries in the modern period 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries); and (4) induced, the more recent 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries migrations of African peoples based on world economic imbalances. (Davies 86)

With its associations to the original Jewish dispersal, the term 'Diaspora' contains meanings of victimhood which may not be applicable to different contexts of migrations. Gwyn Campbell categorises four kinds of diasporas viz. trade, labour, imperial and cultural with each needing different analytic pattern. While it is sometimes necessary to use the terminologies and concepts borrowed from the African Diaspora to the west under slavery system of modern era to the eastern migration of Africans, we must be wary of the divergence of contexts and motivation of this movement. Although the context of African migrations to India was quite different from the Atlantic and Caribbean slaveries, due to modern day concentration on Atlantic slavery, the concepts and categories have been indiscriminately imposed on Eastern movement of Africans.

The origin of Siddis has bewildered critics and scholars who attempt to trace their initial home in different regions of Africa. The Swahili coast and Ethiopia along with Zanzibar are considered some of the probable regions of their origin. It is more probable that Indian settlements of Siddis is a result of free seamen and trader movement which resulted into many parallel movements as well as distinct currents located in different time scales to different geographical locations. Rekha Pande mentions five sets of Siddi transfers to Indian subcontinents. The first three comprise those slaves which were sold by Muslim Arab traders to Hindu South Indian and central, western and eastern Indian Princes, as well as to Catholic Portuguese seafarers in Goa and Ceylon. The last two streams were of migrants from Eastern and North Eastern Africa to NW Frontiers in Pakistan and in Gujarat. (Pande 193-194). J. de V. Allen proposes that Siddis of Zanzira and Bengal who played such an important role in Indian history are not the same as those of the Gujarat who are of later origin, brought by Europeans. The Earlier wave of Siddis belonged to those who migrated of their free will from the Swahili coast who migrated to Indian coast in an attempt to colonise the coast:

It seems plausible that some Habshis and a rather larger number of Sidis (who formed a core group of Sidi community as it evolved) were not, as is commonly supposed, ex slaves of (in most cases) indeterminate origins, but voluntary migrants from the East African coast to India and the Maldiv Islands. Such people would have been sedentarised Muslim pastoralists living on the edge of the Swahili settlements who were yet perceived as illegitimate in terms of a descent-set system which they had inherited from their pre-Islamic past. (Allen 146)

African Indians played a significant role in the chequered history of India beginning from the middle ages. One of the first prominent Africans who played an important role in Indian history is Jalal ud din Yakut, the alleged paramour and Amir-I-Akhur, Royal stable master, of Queen Razia. Razia was the daughter of Iltutmish, the first king of Delhi Sultanate who ascended throne after the death of her father in 1229 A.D. Yakut was later killed during the battle against Malik Altunia, the Governor of Bhatinda, and the affair, as reported by Ferista, became the cause of downfall of Razia. African Indians played prominent roles in five major regimes—Deccan states of the Bahmani (1347-1538), Bijapur (1580-1627), Nizam Shahi (1589-1626), Delhi Sultanate (1399-1440) and Bengal (1486-1493). The following complaint about the power of Siddis points out the role of importance in Bahamani kingdom:

The power and authority of the people of Habsh and zangbar in the service of the sultan[...] increased a thousandfold, and other state officials no longer had any power except in name. The whole country and the offices and political affairs of the kingdom and government treasuries they divided between themselves, and, arrogantly ignoring the sovereign, themselves governed the kingdom. (Allen 131)

There can be found two broad tendencies in the study of African diaspora by social scientists. While the first tendency is to locate the 'original home' of these communities through collection of empirical evidences and by collating it with the language, belief systems extant in these communities, the second is to see how these communities have reconfigured their identities in an alien culture and absorbed their belief systems. While the importance of the first tendency in the study of any migrant community cannot be devaluated as the original location with its socio-economic and cultural conditions provides important insights into the relocated community, it can be seen that in case of Siddis, it has little relevance due to lack of

available research on the roots of these communities as well as due to multiplicity of their origin in different ethnicities and migrations. It would leave us to explore more fully the present position of Siddis vis-a-vis the environment of their reseeded and the responses of the community to it. At the same type institutions such as slavery which left an indelible impact on their status as well as was the cause of their relocation directly or indirectly would also be explored. Ruth Simms Hamilton defines diasporic community as a “global aggregate of actors and subpopulations differentiated in social and geographical space, yet exhibiting a commonality based on shared historical experiences conditioned by and within the world ordering system”(Moore 394). What makes a diasporic group distinct from other social groups can be enumerated in three historical characteristics:

A. Geo-Social Displacement and the Circularity of a People (The historical dialectic between geographical mobility and the establishment of ‘roots’); B. Social Oppression: Relations of Domination and Subordination (Conflict, discrimination and inequality based primarily, although, not exclusively, on race, colour and class); and C. Endurance, Resistance and Struggle: Cultural and Political Action (Creative actions of people, a subject of their history; Psychocultural and ideological transformations; social networks and dynamics). (Davies 89)

Now, it would be pertinent to see how these constant displacements have affected African Indians sense of identity and how they have been instrumental in shaping his world-view regarding their culture. It has been rightly pointed out about diasporas that the “non-Eurocentric cosmopolitan world of the Indian Ocean produced (and continues to produce) cultural fusion and hybridity long before these terms became fashionable in the colonial and post-colonial world views” (Singh 286). Further, it is important to note the different direction in which the Indian Ocean slave trade developed as compared to trans-Atlantic one. While in Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slave remained an outsider in the society with remembrance of his unique identity as a displaced person from his homeland, in case of Indian Ocean world, the Africans were integrated into the host societies and were synthesised into local customs and traditions due to a variety of social, political and religious reasons. Campbell concurs, “slaves in the IOW were heavily affected by forces of assimilation and integration that had major repercussions for the identity of slaves and their descendants and thus on the viability of the concept of an African diaspora”. (Campbell 21)

It is interesting to note that the identity formation of Siddis is not located exclusively upon their ‘Africanness’ but has been an ongoing process wherein the

encounter of diverse elements gave rise to new formations. The fluidity of their identity goes against the approach undertaken by Pashington Obeng wherein he decides to examine “the processes and factors that motivate some African Indians to reject the local Indian identity classifications based on religion and resort to their ‘Siddiness’ or ‘Africanness’ as the basis of their own identity”. (Obeng, *Shaping Membership* 2) I would rather insist on the strategic formation of this identity wherein the elements from diverse traditions are fused to create a new working identity. This identity as a tool and a way of living is a mobile one and questions the rigidity of any formation which is sought to impose upon it. In the cataclysm of events, the Africanness is only one of the elements wherein even the African too, becomes a hegemonic term displacing the regional elements with a creation of over-arching identity. Further the identity is seen not as a static phenomenon but changes over the geo-temporal plane and thus can be understood only in its local variants. The attempts by some essentialist critics to create a pan-African identity and to see it in opposition to Indian/local ones seek to situate their position on the racial features, while neglecting the fact that within India, there is a huge variety in skin colour, hair and physical features. The reason why these African Indians remained ‘hidden’ until ‘discovered’ by academicians, was that physically there is not as much difference between an ‘African Indian’ and dalits, tribal or Dravidians. Further there has been so much mingling of blood and races that a search for distinctiveness based on race is a futile attempt.

Keeping in view the diverse nature of the movement of African Indians within Indian subcontinent and its diverse implications, one question which assumes significance is whether one can call Siddi community a diasporic one and whether it has the markers of a community at all. Gwyn Campbell questions the basic criterion of diasporic community for Africa Asians. By contrasting victim diaspora of Atlantic region with the Indian Ocean world (IOW) diaspora, she points out that IOD Diaspora was markedly different from its counterpart in Atlantic Ocean. She identifies six main characteristics of a diasporic community and finds them lacking in African Asian community:

Displacement from homeland to two or more peripheral or foreign regions; the formation of a relatively stable community in exile; social rejection by, and alienation from the locally dominant society; an awareness, real or imagined, of a common homeland and heritage, and of the injustice of removal from it; efforts to maintain links with and improve life in that homeland; and a desire ultimately to return permanently to the homeland. (Jayasurya 37)

In the formation of diasporic consciousness, there are three pre-requisites: “geographic concentration; common living and working conditions markedly different from the politically dominant group; and a leadership which articulates the diaspora’s interests”. (38) Except the first one, Campbell finds all these factors missing in the experience of African Asians and concludes that the consciousness of diaspora is of recent origin through the diasporic studies and has no real link with people’s lives who are more content to be assimilated in the society of their region. Campbell concludes that external pressures such as tourism, academic interest in diasporic studies and intervention of governments tend to accentuate the foreign origin of African Asians and ignore their integration into the host societies:

In contrast to the Americas, where communities of African descent either underwent creolization or developed an ‘African’ diasporic consciousness, the overwhelming majority of people of African-Asians quickly, and often deliberately, shed consciousness of their African origins, and sought *assimilation* into local society where they assumed a new ‘local’ ethnicity. Individual slaves sought to forge linkages not with other slaves but with slaveholders who alone could ameliorate their conditions and station.[...] Indeed, most African-asians continue to deny an African, and instead affirm, a local Asian identity. (50-51)

Beheroze Shroff also refers to this notion of essentialism inherent in the academic studies of Siddis who impose their own notions of diasporic consciousness onto Siddis, thus creating realities where perhaps a different type of experience exists within the community. It is akin to producing reality through a network of theories, wherein the reality is seen through pre-figured spectacle of well-defined categories, “Where is home and how is belonging constructed by Siddis? While thinking on this, I often found myself wondering if I am pushing the Siddis to define home based on the questions I have posed and am I perhaps imposing my own constructs upon them”. (Shroff 133) For the Siddis of Bombay the home is Gujarat from where they have migrated to Bombay in search of jobs wherein their community space exists. The connection of home with the location of community in Gujarat raises the important equation of not only identification of home with the place of their community but also the sense of connection as well as an awareness of chronology and descent from forefathers. Since the fact of migration from Africa was a violent one which disrupted the conscious memories and awareness, the chain of being was lost. Further due to the difference in culture of two continents, the mind perhaps find comfort in creating a connection with the existing surroundings which can give a meaning and sense to life. Siddis had to create a semblance of

culture since their arrival from Africa was so final, they could never think of going back due to not only the legal, aspect of slavery, except some adventurous, rebellious one whose examples are very rare, but also due to their sense of being brutally ripped apart from the communities. As adaptation is at the core of human existence, Siddis when faced by this challenge created their own network of sympathies, connections and existence which was place-centric and community-centric. When due to pressures of economic compulsions, they had to leave their 'home', it was to this place of community which they looked back and not to the obscure place of their origin in Africa. That is how Beheroz Shroff reports:

Most of the Siddis I interviewed are Gujarati-speaking and see themselves as migrants from Gujarat. They consider 'home' to be their town, or village in Gujarat. They continue to maintain a productive relationship with Gujarat by regular visits to the extended family and the family home and land there and by continuing to marry their children to Siddi men and women in Gujarat. (233)

Further, it would not be fit to romanticise an African identity in the name of derived distinct African cultural markers. Most of these identities have been acquired through the process of social and religious acculturation in the neighbouring communities. An examination of the treatment of women in Siddi communities finds a striking parallel with Indian dalit communities which leads to the suspicion that these characteristics are more of a result of socio-economic conditions than racial differences. The treatment of females and the afflictions arising out of male alcoholism pose a striking parallel to the situation faced by women in their communities who also like their counterpart in Siddis are vocal, assertive and still are exploited by strong male bias in their communities. The selection of Anjali Salu Siddi as a *budavanta* of Ugingeri, Karnataka faced the opposition of male members of the community like her many counterparts in other communities :

The Siddi community was slow to accept the leadership of the first female—and a relatively young female—budavanta, even though our people elected her. The Siddis had a difficult time accepting a woman, as a budavanta was traditionally a male post. (Obeng, *Rural Women* 101)

As against Campbell's assertion that African Indians lacked a distinct Siddi identity, Pashington Obeng argues for a distinct cultural identity forged by Siddis in resistance to hegemonic forces around them and pitches for "syncretic religious

beliefs and practices” (McLeod 253) in the Siddis of North Karnataka. Obeng refers to the statement of Imam Siddi, General Secretary of the Siddi Development Board that “about 70-80% of Siddis appear to identify themselves as Siddis first, before their religious affiliations” (Obeng Rural Women, 41). John McLeod, arguing that the sense of identity in a community depends upon its “membership in an imagined community” (McLeod 254) and finds that this sense of identity as a distinct unit though lacking in the great majority of Siddis who lacked the knowledge that their ancestors came from Africa can be found in the elite families of Janjira and Sachin. His conclusion that through the families of Janjira and Sachin who preserved a distinct identity and their integration into princely Indian and upper class Muslim communities makes them “a constituent of the cosmopolitan Indian Ocean cultural world” (McLeod 269) puts the question of identity concerns within a sense of cohesiveness produced by inter-marriages and the line of descent which is primarily Siddi.

The question of identity for Siddis of Gujarat is further complicated by the fact that many of them are of from mixed racial heritage of Arab and Africans. At the same time the places of their origin are spread through the different provinces of Africa with multiple locations and relocations. Any search for authentic identity can be either Pan-African which seems difficult keeping in view the diversity of beliefs and languages:

The retention of African culture on the part of the Siddis was made difficult by the diversity of their linguistic and social backgrounds; the principal cultural aspect they shared was Islam which was not indigenous to Africa. In addition, the fact that individual Africans were sometimes sold and resold several times in both Africa and Asia before arriving in India probably caused them to modify or add to their original culture. (Harris 112)

The Afro-Asian heritage is a complex structure, with multiple layers in it due to inter-mingling and multiple migrations. Since slave trading took place at different places within a long span of time, the amnesia affected the racial memories. Here the race plays an essential role in keeping Africans a separate community despite intermarriages. This racial identity becomes a source of discrimination due to racial stereotyping in an Indian mind, “Siddi’s racial identity is, in some contexts, a social stigma in India, and Siddis are treated as a homogenous people who are historically, culturally and socially as ‘outgroup’.” (Obeng 41) Though there are clear racial stereotypes connected with black colour in India, the origin of these stereotypes, is sometimes traced in the Aryan invasion theory wherein the aboriginals called Dravidians, who were of black colour and short statured were defeated and



pushed towards the South or were enslaved through caste system as untouchables. Though controversial, this theory is still cited by its advocates in dalit movement to explain the persecution of dalits within the brahmanical caste system. Harris refers to influence of European prejudices towards Africans in the construction of eastern racial prejudices and stereotypes, "It is, therefore, highly probable that when Europeans extended the slave trade into India, their derogatory attitude towards Africans affected the attitude of Indians." (Harris 117). The African labour was instrumental in keeping up of the economic structure which benefitted the trading countries. The ideological structure in which the African was seen as inferior, racially and cerebrally, was a product of an exploitative structure wherein ideology became a helpmate of economic interests, "Asians, like Europeans, were primarily interested in exploiting African labour; therefore, they nourished ideas in support of social and political systems that protected and perpetuated those interests". (119)

The survival of African heritage can only be seen in its constant modifications and renewal. The experience of slavery deeply mutated the language, dress, custom and religious beliefs of Africans who underwent the process :

The problem of cultural survival is a complicated one. Only with the greatest difficulty could even the symbols of an African culture survive the destructiveness of slavery. [...] This harsh experience, together with life as a bonded person in a dominant, alien, and generally hostile society, gradually caused the African to forget most of his native language, and to modify his traditional way of life, his religious beliefs, and indeed his psyche. But that experience, as decisive as it was in many ways, did not destroy his consciousness of the African heritage. His heritage was what bound him to slavery and denigration, even after manumission. (Harris 120)

Though we might agree with Harris, what is more important is that it would be futile to search for an authentic kernel of this heritage. This heritage can be located only in its spacio-temporal dimension wherein the mutual adjustment and modifications are two way process. The integration of Siddis in local communities would be able to ameliorate their social and political exclusion which would be a better option against the exclusionary identity politics which would further alienate them from the local communities. A recognition of the syncretic heritage of Siddis would make them partners in the mosaic of communities in Indian nation. Further, the use of African heritage should not be seen in isolation, but rather a part of the assimilative process, "while African-Asians employed practices and a vocabulary

that sometimes demonstrate an African affiliation, these were employed in a local context, in which the local language and traditions dominated". (Campbell 46)

The denial of African identity and an identification with Indian and local one is connected with the desire of the community to raise itself on the social ladder of identity. Due to poor opinion of Africa as a land of poverty and underdevelopment, the Siddis infer an identification of Africanness with backwardness. This is common in diasporic communities which migrate to a society with better socio-economic conditions to deny their roots with their mother culture and identify with the host one, sometimes through fabrication of identities. A parallel can be seen in the African Arabs of Qatar who identify themselves with Arab and deny their ancestry in Africa. While the local Arabs put them in the fifth and lowest tribe according to purity of descent, the descendants of African Arabs struggle for identity based on their identification with Arabic language and culture and insist that "they were integrated into the ranks of noble tribes, as soldiers (male) and concubines (female), and thus lie second in the tribal ranking". (64) Due to imbedded nature of Hindu Siddis into caste hierarchy, multiple conversions and migrations, the claim of African identity loses its sheen and does not have any gains in terms of economic or social advantages.

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