

Siddis in India: the unexplored legacy of Africa's diaspora

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ABSTRACT: India's *Siddi* tribe, with an estimated 150,000 members, are a large Afro-descendant community based in rural areas of Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat. They have unique tribal and cultural characteristics, practicing different religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. However, some cultural practices and rituals are shared, such as remembering elders once a year. Men wear lungis/dhotis and shirts, while women wear sari and blouse. Most *Siddi* are devotees of the deity Yallamma, and they may practice openly or perform puja at home. The percussive musical instruments known as dammam, duf, and gumte are popular among *Siddi*, both men and women, who also dance to the accompaniment of these instruments. *Siddi* from the three main religious groups speak either Konkani, Urdu, or Marathi as their main language, but both men and women generally speak at least one other language in addition to their mother tongue. After India's independence, Christians in one area spoke Marathi, while Muslims living close by spoke Urdu. Hindu *Siddi* tend to be more isolated and scattered, speaking mainly Konkani and often not knowing other languages. Socially, the *Siddi* are considered one of the most marginalized communities, largely settled in villages and smaller settlements. While the caste principle of hierarchy is non-existent among the *Siddi*, they are treated as on par with the Dalits. Although there is no general practice of 'untouchability', the upper castes and a few other communities at the individual house level do observe practices akin to 'untouchability'.

KEYWORDS: *Siddis*, Africa, Colonialism, Slavery, Poverty, Diaspora, Marginalized

Introduction

With an estimated 150,000 people, the *Siddi* tribes of India are a sizable Afro-descendant population that have lived for generations in rural Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat. There are very few *Siddi* families in other regions of the nation. There isn't a trustworthy official source that provides information on the socioeconomic status, standard of living, and issues faced by the *Siddi* community in India. Scattered over Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, and Tamil Nadu, the *Siddi* people have their own distinct tribal and cultural traits and are often found in remote villages and inner woods. While they follow several faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, they also share some cultural customs and traditions, such as commemorating elders (*hireru* or *hiriyaru*) once a year. Women wear saris and blouses, while males wear shirts and lungis or dhotis. Even while they observe the procedures of their various faiths, which are performed in front of their individual religious leaders, they afterwards rejoice in accordance with their traditions; for example, almost all *Siddi* share identical marriage ceremonies and customs.¹

Regardless of their individual faiths, the majority of *Siddis* are followers of Yallamma, a goddess they may worship publicly or at home via puja. Men and women of the *Siddi* community enjoy playing the *tambmam*, *duf*, and *gumte*, three percussion instruments, which they also use for dancing. Konkani, Urdu, or Marathi are the primary languages spoken by *Siddi* belonging to the three major religious groups; however, both sexes typically know at least one additional language outside their native tongue. Following India's independence, Christians in one region spoke Marathi, while nearby Muslims spoke Urdu. Despite this, both groups were able to communicate in their native tongues, Goa and Karnataka. But Hindu *Siddi* are often more dispersed and solitary; they use Konkani as their primary language and frequently do not know any other languages. Even still, there are clear distinctions even though the *Siddi* clan includes all three religious sects and there is a great deal of clan kinship. This is seen to be a significant barrier keeping people from banding together as a community to look for support, solidarity, and mutual aid. This is made

worse by the fact that none of their separate religious communities has done anything to address the problems the *Siddi* are facing. Mostly living in villages and minor settlements, the *Siddi* are regarded as one of the most marginalized groups in terms of society. The *Siddi* community does not adhere to the system of castes, yet they are still regarded equally with Dalits. The higher castes and a few other groups at the individual home level do follow behaviors similar to “untouchability,” despite the fact that this is not a widespread practice. Food will be provided separately to *Siddi* during events and rituals, such as marriages, and they will be expected to clear the floor after the meal is served.²

Origins and Early History of *Siddis* in India

The exact origins of the *Siddi* community in India are not well documented, but it is believed that they have been living in the country for over 500 years. The *Siddis* are believed to be descendants of Bantu peoples from Southeast Africa, who were brought to India as slaves and mercenaries by Portuguese and British colonial powers. They were highly valued for their physical prowess and fighting skills and were often employed in the armies of colonial powers. Over time, many *Siddis* were able to earn their freedom, and some even rose to positions of power and influence within Indian society. Despite their contributions to Indian society, the *Siddis* were often discriminated against and marginalized by the dominant Hindu and Muslim communities. They were considered to be outsiders and were subjected to a range of social and economic restrictions. *Siddis* were often forced to live in segregated communities and were denied access to education and other opportunities.³

***Siddi* Culture and Traditions**

Despite the challenges they have faced, *Siddis* have developed a rich and vibrant culture that reflects their African heritage as well as their Indian experiences. *Siddi* culture is characterized by a fusion of African and Indian traditions, and includes a diverse range of musical, dance, and other artistic forms. One of the most well-known aspects of *Siddi* culture is their music. *Siddi* music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and the use of traditional African instruments, such as the djembe and

kalimba. *Siddi* music is often performed at weddings and other social events and has gained a following among music enthusiasts in India and beyond.

Siddi dance is also an important aspect of their culture and includes a range of traditional African and Indian forms. One of the most popular *Siddi* dances is the *dhamal*, which is performed to the beat of the *dhol*, a traditional Indian drum. The *dhamal* is often performed at Sufi shrines and other religious events. *Siddi* culture also includes a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history. Many *Siddi* communities have their own traditional stories and legends, which are passed down from generation to generation. These stories often reflect *Siddi* experiences of migration, slavery, and exclusion, as well as their resilience and creativity in the face of adversity.⁴

Challenges and Opportunities for *Siddis* in India

Despite the richness of their culture and history, *Siddis* continue to face a range of challenges and struggles in contemporary India. *Siddis* are often excluded from mainstream Indian society and are subject to discrimination and marginalization on the basis of their race and ethnicity. One of the key challenges facing *Siddis* is the lack of access to education and other opportunities. *Siddis* are often denied access to quality education, and as a result, many struggle to find meaningful employment or achieve economic stability. This lack of access to education and opportunities can also lead to a sense of social isolation and exclusion. Another challenge facing *Siddis* is the loss of traditional knowledge and culture. As younger generations become more assimilated into mainstream Indian society, there is a risk that traditional *Siddi* culture and knowledge will be lost. This loss of culture and heritage can have a profound impact on the sense of identity and belonging of *Siddi* communities. Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for the *Siddi* community in India. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of *Siddi* culture and history, and efforts have been made to promote their inclusion and recognition.⁵

***Siddis* in Karnataka**

Karnataka is one of the states in India where the *Siddi* community has a significant presence. The *Siddis* in Karnataka are concentrated in the northern parts of the state, particularly in the districts of Uttara Kannada, Haveri, and Dharwad. The *Siddis* are believed to have arrived in Karnataka in the 16th century, when they were brought to the region as slaves and soldiers by Portuguese and British colonial powers. They were often employed in the armies of these colonial powers and were valued for their physical prowess and fighting skills. Over time, many *Siddis* in Karnataka were able to earn their freedom and settle in the region. They established their own communities, which were often located in remote and forested areas. These communities developed their own unique culture and traditions, which reflected a fusion of African and Indian influences.

Siddi culture in Karnataka is characterized by a strong emphasis on music and dance. The *Siddis* in Karnataka have developed their own unique musical traditions, which draw on both African and Indian influences. *Siddi* music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and the use of traditional African instruments, such as the djembe and kalimba. *Siddi* music is often performed at weddings, festivals, and other social events. *Siddi* dance is also an important aspect of their culture in Karnataka. One of the most popular *Siddi* dances in the region is the *dhumal*, which is performed to the beat of the *dhol*, a traditional Indian drum. The *dhumal* is often performed at religious events, particularly at Sufi shrines.

Siddi culture in Karnataka also includes a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history. Many *Siddi* communities in the region have their own traditional stories and legends, which are passed down from generation to generation. These stories often reflect *Siddi* experiences of migration, slavery, and exclusion, as well as their resilience and creativity in the face of adversity.⁶

Siddis in Karnataka continue to face a range of challenges and struggles. They are often excluded from mainstream Indian society and are subject to discrimination and marginalization on the basis of their race and ethnicity. One of the key challenges facing *Siddis* in Karnataka is the lack

of access to education and other opportunities. *Siddis* in the region often lack access to quality education, which can make it difficult for them to find meaningful employment or achieve economic stability. There are also opportunities for the *Siddi* community in Karnataka. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of *Siddi* culture and history in the region, and efforts have been made to promote their inclusion and recognition. *Siddis* in Karnataka have also formed their own organizations and community groups, which work to promote their rights and interests. These organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness of *Siddi* culture and history, and in advocating for greater inclusion and recognition of *Siddi* communities in Karnataka.

***Siddis* in Gujarat**

The *Siddis* arrived in Gujarat around the 16th century as slaves and mercenaries. The Portuguese brought *Siddis* to Gujarat and employed them in their navy, and later the British also brought them as soldiers to their armies. Some *Siddis* managed to escape slavery, and others were granted freedom after serving as soldiers for many years. Over time, *Siddis* established their own communities in Gujarat, and developed a unique culture that reflects a fusion of African and Indian traditions.

The *Siddi* community in Gujarat is known for its unique culture and traditions. *Siddi* culture in Gujarat is characterized by its rich musical and dance traditions, which have been influenced by both African and Indian influences. *Siddi* music is characterized by its intricate rhythms and the use of traditional African instruments such as the kalimba and ngoma. *Siddi* music is often performed at weddings, festivals, and other social events in the community. *Siddi* dance is also an important aspect of their culture, with the *dhamal* being one of the most popular *Siddi* dances in Gujarat. The *dhamal* is performed to the beat of the *dhol*, a traditional Indian drum, and is often performed at religious events, particularly at Sufi shrines. *Siddis* in Gujarat have also preserved their traditional art forms such as embroidery and weaving. They produce intricate textiles and handicrafts, which are sold in local markets and contribute to the local economy.⁷

Despite their cultural richness, *Siddis* in Gujarat have faced a number of challenges over the years. *Siddis* have been subject to discrimination and marginalization on the basis of their race and ethnicity. They are often excluded from mainstream Indian society and denied access to education and other opportunities. However, there are also opportunities for the *Siddi* community in Gujarat. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of *Siddi* culture and history, and efforts have been made to promote their inclusion and recognition. *Siddi* organizations have been working to preserve and promote their cultural heritage, and to advocate for greater inclusion and recognition of the *Siddi* community in Gujarat. Additionally, the government has undertaken initiatives to provide education and vocational training to the *Siddi* community, with the aim of improving their economic opportunities and promoting their social inclusion.

***Siddis* in Maharashtra**

The *Siddis* are believed to have arrived in Maharashtra in the 16th century, when they were brought to the region as slaves and soldiers by Portuguese and British colonial powers. They were often employed in the armies of these colonial powers, and were valued for their physical prowess and fighting skills. Over time, many *Siddis* were able to earn their freedom and settle in Maharashtra. They established their own communities, which were often located in remote and forested areas. These communities developed their own unique culture and traditions, which reflected a fusion of African and Indian influences.

Siddi culture in Maharashtra is characterized by a strong emphasis on music and dance. The *Siddis* in Maharashtra have developed their own unique musical traditions, which draw on both African and Indian influences. *Siddi* music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and the use of traditional African instruments, such as the djembe and kalimba. *Siddi* music is often performed at weddings, festivals, and other social events. *Siddi* dance is also an important aspect of their culture in Maharashtra. One of the most popular *Siddi* dances in the region is the *dhamal*, which is performed to the beat of the *dhol*, a traditional Indian drum. The *dhamal* is often performed at religious events, particularly at

Sufi shrines. *Siddi* culture in Maharashtra also includes a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history. Many *Siddi* communities in the region have their own traditional stories and legends, which are passed down from generation to generation. These stories often reflect *Siddi* experiences of migration, slavery, and exclusion, as well as their resilience and creativity in the face of adversity.⁸

Despite the richness of their culture and history, *Siddis* in Maharashtra continue to face a range of challenges and struggles. They are often excluded from mainstream Indian society and are subject to discrimination and marginalization on the basis of their race and ethnicity. One of the key challenges facing *Siddis* in Maharashtra is the lack of access to education and other opportunities. *Siddis* in the region often lack access to quality education, which can make it difficult for them to find meaningful employment or achieve economic stability. However, there are also opportunities for the *Siddi* community in Maharashtra. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of *Siddi* culture and history in the region, and efforts have been made to promote their inclusion and recognition. *Siddis* in Maharashtra have also formed their own organizations and community groups, which work to promote their rights and interests. These organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness of *Siddi* culture and history, and in advocating for greater inclusion and recognition of *Siddi* communities in Maharashtra.

***Siddis* in Andhra Pradesh**

The *Siddis* arrived in Andhra Pradesh in the 16th century, when they were brought to the region as slaves and soldiers by Portuguese and British colonial powers. They were often employed in the armies of these colonial powers and were valued for their physical prowess and fighting skills. Over time, many *Siddis* were able to earn their freedom and settle in Andhra Pradesh. They established their own communities, which were often located in remote and forested areas. These communities developed their own unique culture and traditions, which reflected a fusion of African and Indian influences.⁹

Siddi culture in Andhra Pradesh is characterized by a strong emphasis

on music and dance. The *Siddis* in Andhra Pradesh have developed their own unique musical traditions, which draw on both African and Indian influences. *Siddi* music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity and the use of traditional African instruments, such as the djembe and kalimba. *Siddi* music is often performed at weddings, festivals, and other social events. *Siddi* dance is also an important aspect of their culture in Andhra Pradesh. One of the most popular *Siddi* dances in the region is the *dhamal*, which is performed to the beat of the *dhol*, a traditional Indian drum. The *dhamal* is often performed at religious events, particularly at Sufi shrines.

Siddi culture in Andhra Pradesh also includes a rich tradition of storytelling and oral history. Many *Siddi* communities in the region have their own traditional stories and legends, which are passed down from generation to generation. These stories often reflect *Siddi* experiences of migration, slavery, and exclusion, as well as their resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. Despite the richness of their culture and history, *Siddis* in Andhra Pradesh continue to face a range of challenges and struggles. They are often excluded from mainstream Indian society, and are subject to discrimination and marginalization on the basis of their race and ethnicity. One of the key challenges facing *Siddis* in Andhra Pradesh is the lack of access to education and other opportunities. *Siddis* in the region often lack access to quality education, which can make it difficult for them to find meaningful employment or achieve economic stability.¹⁰

However, there are also opportunities for the *Siddi* community in Andhra Pradesh. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of *Siddi* culture and history in the region, and efforts have been made to promote their inclusion and recognition. *Siddis* in Andhra Pradesh have also formed their own organizations and community groups, which work to promote their rights and interests. These organizations have been instrumental in raising awareness of *Siddi* culture and history, and in advocating for greater inclusion and recognition of *Siddi* communities in Andhra Pradesh.

Issues faced by *Siddis*

The majority of *Siddi* people lack literacy, and although school enrollment is rising, the number of school dropouts is also rising. In all three faiths, females are discouraged from continuing their education once they enter puberty; Muslim girls are the most limited in this regard. One of the main justifications cited for their educational abandonment is often widespread taunting due to their unique physical characteristics. One of the main causes of females quitting school is the widespread practice of child marriage at the age of 14 or 15.

Alcoholism is pervasive in the community as a result of this prejudice. As a consequence, drinking may consume a significant amount of family money, which may result in poor health, poverty, violence against women, and child neglect. This adds to the need of taking out loans with outrageous interest rates. The following issues still exist: illiteracy, a high school dropout rate, child marriage, child maltreatment, disregard for girls' education, school bullying of *Siddi* children, and racial prejudice in society. Within this framework, young people with education from the *Siddi* community have started to take action to solve these problems.¹¹

To make ends meet, *Siddi* people work at a variety of jobs. For instance, men and women gather small forest products like honey, cinnamon, cloves, tamarind, pepper, and soft gum. They also work at traditional jobs like weaving baskets and crafting bamboo chairs, cots, and other items. Despite the fact that all of these goods need labor-intensive gathering and preparation, the lack of market facilities results in their being sold to local merchants for very cheap rates. Daily wage labor is an alternative; it may be found in industries like construction, agriculture, and fishing, all of which are seasonal and not year-round. Furthermore, none of them generate enough money to cover daily expenses, so people who participate in them are forced to borrow money from local money lenders at excessive interest rates. *Siddi* labor is common, with women in particular earning poor pay, while child labor is also common. While many males are employed as bonded laborers, some men operate tractors, vehicles, and trucks, or they work on boats, while some women do household chores.¹²

Certain families have relocated to Goa, Maharashtra, Udupi, Mangalore,

and even Bangalore due to seasonal work and poor salaries. The majority of male migrants work in construction, farms, and mutton stands, whereas the majority of female migrants work as domestic helpers and assistants to dressmakers. When they return home, they use the money they make to pay back their debts, which include interest. Their community's ability to grow has been seriously hampered by this cycle of exploitation and poor pay, which has contributed to solidify their marginalization.

A primary obstacle has been the community's inadequate organization, which prevents them from having a unified voice to express their complaints. However, there have been recent initiatives to revive the community's feeling of common identity, spearheaded by a younger generation of *Siddi*. The *Siddi* community is now concentrating on ways to forge its own identity, realize its full potential, and encourage more youth access to education. It is anticipated that a thorough survey may be conducted to have a better understanding of the community and its needs in order to achieve these goals. Along with encouraging economic options, advocating for fairer markets for forest products and other items, and providing material help and awareness-raising campaigns, there are plans to assist families with enrollment and reduce school dropouts.¹³

In the long run, organizers want to create a nationwide Federation of *Siddi* in order to unite disparate groups under a single roof and advocate for common anti-discrimination problems. Based on the survey's results, a thorough development plan will be created to encourage *Siddi* people's broader integration into mainstream society. Additionally, legal action will be taken to enhance land and livelihood rights and stop unlawful encroachments. To further guarantee that the requirements of the *Siddi* community are met, schools, sport centers, and other amenities will be constructed. Additionally, under the Karnataka Sauhardha Sahakari Act, an autonomous multipurpose Co-operative Society would be formed.

In order to achieve these objectives, several actions have already been performed so far with the help of community activists. These consist of, among other things, a variety of studies and consultations to evaluate local needs, including poor access to basic services and education, organizing community members and creating organizations, providing

care for sick or elderly *Siddi*, and encouraging the study of English and other educational opportunities. In addition, many civil society organizations have joined together to fight several unlawful land seizures and other violations in court. Even if things are still moving slowly, they are encouraging indications for the neighbourhood.¹⁴

Conclusion

Siddis have been living in India for many centuries, however, most of the Indian population is not aware of their existence. Like other rural communities, *Siddis* face several challenges such as lack of access to education, healthcare, adequate housing, and finance. Despite being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe and having access to certain government benefits and protection against discrimination, *Siddis* still frequently face discrimination based on caste, religion, and race, especially in regions far from their homeland. Due to this, *Siddis* have a deep attachment to their homeland and feel a strong sense of belonging to India, where they have integrated into the socio-cultural landscape by speaking the same languages, dressing the same way, eating the same food, and practicing the same religions as other Indians in the area. *Siddis* have very little cultural connection to Africa, and they consider themselves to be Indian, with a profound sense of attachment to the surrounding forests and landscapes.

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