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**AFRICAN DESCENDANTS IN INDIA**  
**A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION IN GUJARAT**

**Akhilesh Kumar & Naresh kumar**



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# **African Descendants in India**

## ***A Quest for Identity and Assimilation in Gujarat***

**Akhilesh Kumar & Naresh kumar**

**Centre for Study in Diaspora, Central University of Gujarat**



**Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism**

**K-1/114, First Floor, C R Park, New Delhi-110019,**

**Email: [contact@grfdt.org](mailto:contact@grfdt.org), Contact: +91-9818602718**

**Website- [www.grfdt.org](http://www.grfdt.org),**

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## Abstract

India has been one of the important destinations of the many foreign Diasporas. African diaspora is one of them. Africans migrated from their ancestral homeland i.e. the northern African Countries to several places in India before and after under the British System. In India, a majority of them are found near the coastal states of India such as Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. In Gujarat, these tribes are known as Siddis, and most of them inhabited the villages of Gir-Somnath District of Gujarat. It can be inferred from a perusal of various texts and journals that Siddis may have been brought to India by Portuguese sailors when they were on their way to India in the late 15th century. The age of discovery, new sea routes were discovered by European sailors connecting African and Asian sub-continent and with the rest of the world. Discovery of new sea routes gave birth to colonial ambitions, which in turn led to the growth of the desire to rule others who were supposed to be inferiors, socially and culturally.

When Siddi arrived in India, they faced various socio-economic and cultural problems in the host country. Afterwards, they were to mingle in Indian society which was not easy in any way. Initially, they had to live in forest or jungle inhabited by ferocious animals. But, over the years situations have improved and they developed their own society. This paper is based on the empirical work carried out in different villages of the GirSomnath District of Gujarat. This paper explores the history of African migration to India with their various issues related to identity and assimilation in India.

## Biodata

**Akhilesh Kumar Upadhyay** is a research scholar of M.Phil/Ph.D. in Centre for Study of Diaspora, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies at the Central University of Gujarat, India. He has completed his M.A. in History from the Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi in 2010 and also awarded 2nd M. A. in mass Communication in 2012 at MGKVP, Varanasi. He has also graduated from MGKVP, Varanasi, India. He has already published papers in the –India's Internal and External Security and Nepal. His research interest includes Diasporic History and literature, Colonial writings, Political History, Socio Economic Contest of Migration, and issues of Communication. Email: 2akhileshupadhyay@gmail.com

**Naresh Kumar** is currently working as Assistant Professor & incharge in Centre for Study of Diaspora at Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar. He has joined in the department in 2011. He has completed his M.A, M.Phil. And Ph.D. form Centre for Study of Regional Development (CSR), School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and New Delhi. His areas of research interest area are International migration & Development, Indian Diaspora, History and Migration. He has published several research papers in reputed journals. He is been associated with national and international organisations such as PAA, APA, IUSSP, RGS, IIPS and ISLE. Ha has presented several research papers on his research interest areas in National and International Conferences in India and aboard. Email: nareshcug@gmail.com

Statement: All the views expressed in the paper are of the author(s).

# African Descendants in India

## *A Quest for Identity and Assimilation in Gujarat*

**Akhilesh Kumar & Naresh kumar**

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION:

India has been one of the important destinations of the many foreign Diasporas. The African diaspora is one of them. Africans migrated from their ancestral homeland in the northern and eastern African Countries to several places in India in the medieval age and under the British System. Siddis are largely settled as tribe near the coastal states of India such as Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. In Gujarat, these tribes inhabited in the villages of Gir-Somnath district of Gujarat. It can be inferred from a perusal of various texts and journals that Siddis may have been brought to India by Portuguese sailors when they were on their way to India in the late 15th century. The age of discovery, new sea routes were discovered by European sailors connecting African and Asian sub-continent and with the rest of the world. Discovery of new sea routes gave birth to colonial ambitions, which in turn led to the growth of a desire to rule others who were supposed to be inferiors, socially and culturally. Initially, they had to live in the jungle inhabited by ferocious animals. But over the year situation have been improved and they developed their own society.

### 1.2 OBJECTIVES, DATA SOURCES AND METHODS:

This paper explores the history of migration of Siddis as African descendants in India along with their issues related to their identity and assimilation over the period of time in India. Both the primary and secondary sources data have been collected and analysed. Primary data has been gathered with the help of participant observation

and questionnaire scheduled methods among the people from the village of MadhupurJambur located in Talala Tehsil of GirSomnath District of Gujarat, India. The total geographical area of the village is 1663.9 hectares. MadhupurJambur has a total population of 4,292 peoples. There are about 827 houses in MadhupurJambur village. Talala is the nearest town to MadhupurJambur which is approximately 8km away.

1981-census-of-India records show that the population of Siddi tribe was 5291 in India. As per 2001-Census records Siddi population grew to 8662, out of which 4417 are male and 4245 female. According to Census data of 2011, a total population of Siddi Tribes in the MadhopurJambur Village in the district of GirSomnath district has reached 4292. Total 83 respondents households have been randomly surveyed in the village in so as to collect information about their history of migration, their social, economic, and cultural life as well current problems faced by them. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to interpret the primary data. MadhupurJambur village has lower literacy rate compared to Gujarat. In 2011, the literacy rate of MadhupurJambur village was 72.44 % compared to 78.03 % of Gujarat. In MadhupurJambur Male literacy stands at 78.71 % while female literacy rate was 65.73 %.

### 1.3 GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF SIDDIS TRIBES IN INDIA:

Siddis are the important segment of the tribal population in India. They are mainly settled in four states of India namely Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Siddis' largest concentration

is found in Junagadh District of Gujarat (Bhat-tacharya 1970; Singh et al. 2000). The first documented record of Siddis in India dates back to 1100 AD, when the Siddis settled in western parts of India. In the 13th century, substantial numbers of Siddis were imported by the Nawabs and the Sultans of Indian states to serve as soldiers and slaves in their presidencies or states. The major influx of Siddis in-migration occurred during the 17th–19th centuries when the Portuguese brought them as slaves to India. Siddis are originally Bantu people of Sub-Saharan Africa, but now, they exist as an important ethnic group of population in various parts of India. Today, they exist as Indian citizens of India as the tribe under the Constitution of India and they are known as Scheduled Tribe (ST). Earlier, they had to work in the different capacities like a farmer, labourer in the construction works and as unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Some of them have also served in the army. But over periods of time, many of them, as their skill improved, engaged in various services in cities.

Stories of Siddis arrival are many, but two of them hold more ground as compared to the rest. The first one is that a small group was brought to India as slaves by the Portuguese and their descendants stayed back even after the Portuguese left and made India their home. The second one holds that they came to India as soldiers with the Arab community. The first story is proved that Siddi community is only found near the Gir forest in Gujarat and near the Yellapur forest of Karnataka, which is both in close proximity to Goa, Daman and Diu which were under the rule of the Portuguese.

#### **1.4 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SIDDIS TRIBE:**

Compared to the fate of Africans taken as slaves to the new world, the history of Africans in India is still largely unknown. Scanty literature is available on the exclusive history of Siddhis written by any author. Hence various literary works have to be consulted to carve out a general history of Siddhis who came to India with their masters in various capacities, as merchants, sailors, soldiers, and rulers.

Elie Kedourie (1970) book on Nationalism in Asia and Africa, says that, Herodotus, the father of History, who travelled to Egypt and the neighbouring countries, wrote, “for the Eastern Ethiopians are straight haired but those of Libya (or Africa) have hair more curly than that of any other people.” Homer who lived still earlier than Herodotus confessed the same. Similar East-African descendants, we found in India. Long before the transatlantic slave trade, Africans travelled voluntarily throughout much of the world (Shirodkar). Joseph (2001) has written a book on “The African Diaspora in World History and Politics” in which he argued that Africans travelled as ancient merchants and sailors, many of whom settled in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia; “some fought as soldiers in those areas and remained there permanently. Others served as missionaries for Islam and Christianity and settled in the Middle East, Asia and Europe. Several Ethiopian monks accompanied European Crusades to Rome, Florence and Venice as well as to Portugal and Spain.” According to Boxer (1961), the important aspect here is that Africans have travelled abroad as free persons, settled down, and made important contributions to many host places or kingdoms. Due to slave trade which made the African presence more global and side-lined the glory of the African presence in various quarters of the world. “Slaves from the South-East coasts of Africa, for reasons of geography, were taken mainly to the Indian Ocean region, where they were required mainly as domestic works or servants and bodyguards.

The Siddis also were of African origin, though not all of them were slaves; they held various positions as per their masters’ liking and needs and were in different places. Though it is difficult to trace the exact period of their arrival, they have lived in India definitely for about five hundred years. Arab slave traders also brought slaves as early as the first century AD from Africa (Shirodkar 1998).

African in Zanzibar and Gujarat seem to have become unconsciously linked by related ritual practices that in Zanzibar are called Goma and are known as Goma in Gujarat. From the 18th and

19th centuries and perhaps earlier, former slave and migrant seafarers from Africa gradually evolved their own forms of social organisation in Gujarat in which Goma music played an important role. (Basu 2008)

Malik amber, the Ruler of Ahmednagar between 1601 and 1628 was reported of Ethiopian origin, while Sidi Sayyid, a wealthy ex-slave built the Jama Masjid of Ahmedabad in 1753 with the help of African architect and craftsman.

Pashington Obeng (2007), wrote book on *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia*, in which argued that commercial contact, cultural, linguistic and religious exchanges, and population movements have had a long history around the Arabian Coast, the Red Sea region, the Saharan trade routes, the East African Coastal states and India. Though coming from different states from East Africa at different periods, the Africans arrived in India from the eighth and ninth centuries until the twentieth century. He further argued that some of them were traders who travelled to India on their own, but most others arrived enslaved and were taken western Indian ports such as Mumbai (earlier known as Bombay), Cutch, Kathiawar, Porbandar, Sind, and the Portuguese ports of Goa, Diu & Daman. Some of them were en-routed to the eastern coast of Indian ports at Bengal, Calcutta (Present Kolkata), and Puducherry (earlier known it as Pondicherry). According to Athar (2001) study shows that it is estimated that only a few thousand slaves were taken each year from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coast. They were sold throughout the Middle East and India. This trade accelerated as superior ships led to more trade and greater demand for labour on plantation economies.

### **1.5 IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION OF SIDDIS IN GUJRAT:**

Madhupure Jambur is the main villages in the Gir-Somnath District of the Gujarat where the largest concentration of Siddis lived. In these villages, Siddis are not well in terms of their socio-economic conditions. These villages are well

connected by road and transport services to the nearby town Talala and other cities. Many of them are poor backwards, landless and less educated. Living conditions are very poor as most of them are engaged in low profile economic activities. It has been observed that Siddis are don't have linkages to their ancestral home i.e. Africa. Although they have acclimatised themselves to host society, they have managed to keep their traditional and cultural values intact. Siddis even today take great delight in their inherited cultural practices and occupation. Quilt-making is one of the best-known professions of Siddis which is popular not only in India but also abroad. Besides, Siddis are also known for their artistic work like dance (known as Dhammal) and song performance. Dance, songs, agricultural activities and small skilled and semi-skilled profession are the main sources of their daily earnings and hence it is a means of livelihood. Siddis in India are known for their physical strength, honesty, loyalty, innocence, wholesomeness and so on.

Since Siddis in Gujarat are living over the hundred-year the villages of Gir-Somnath district. Earlier many of them inhabited in the Gir forest (Gir National Park) area famously known as for Asiatic lions in the world. But over the period of time some of them have settled in the cities of nearby and assimilated into the host places through the local ways of food, culture and language and citizenship and become the important part of Indian community in the country They have adopted the language and practices of the religion they have come to inhabit and belong to a number of religions (Basu 2008). The physical features of these people are typical looks African with their dark skin tone and thick curly hair. The major reason why their features have remained so strong over the past 400 years of their existence in India is because the Siddis tribal marry only within their community. It is extremely rare for a Siddis person to marry anyone outside their community. Their Physical features, song and Goma dance and the related material object serve as the only remainder of their history. (BBC 2000).



(Plate No:1 Above pictures depicts that in Madhupur Jambur village, Gir-Somnath, there are a number of dargahs of different pirs of which four are very important for them, namely Nagarshipirdargha, Baba Gor Ki dargha, Dasalbakukidargha and Mai-Parsa Ki dargha at Jambur village of Junagadh district.)

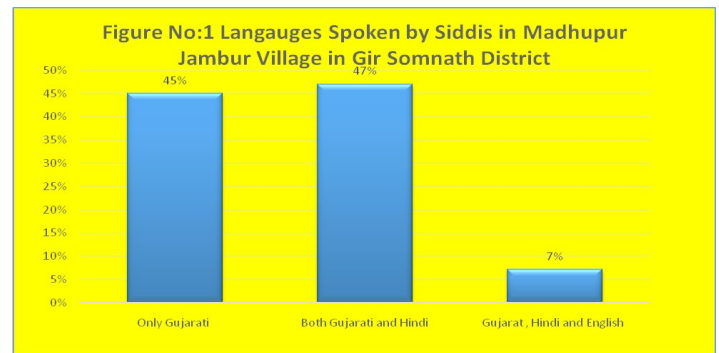
A clan is an Important unit for Siddhis of Gujarat, social organisation which is an exogamous as well as patriarchal and is locally called Shakh or Atak. One of the important functions of a clan is the regulation of marriage and as after marriage girls are accepted into the clans of their respective husbands. A good number of clans were identified among the Siddhis of Gujarat like Mosgul, Mokwana, Chotiyara, Mori, Sirwan, Parmar, Morima, Makava, etc. There is no ranking of clans as such, rather all have equal status. Siddhi of Gujarat seems to have taken few Gujarati titles such as Parmar or Makava which the local Gujaratis bear as their surnames. Hence they may not be original to their ancestral clan division rather made in due course of time while they assimilated into the local culture as rulers.

The Siddhis of Gir Somnath district mainly belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam. As they have embraced Islam, they do not have any family deity or village deities. During the time of crisis, they visit dargah (tomb of Pir) and offer Chadar. In Jambur village, Gir-Somnath, there is a number of dargahs of different Pirs of which four are very important for them, namely Nagarshipirdargha, Babaghor Kidargha, Dasalbakukidargha and Mai-Parsa Ki dargah at Jambur village of Gir-Somnath district. Each and every sakh of the Siddhi is affiliated to

one or the other Pir. Siddhis of Gujarat have been following Eid, Ramjan and Moharram. Some of the Siddhi offer Namaj every day. They also believe in supernatural powers: They have Bhua (a spirit possessed man) who has the power to cure various ailments of the people.



(Plate No:2 Picture depicts Dhamal dance and music performed by Siddhis. Siddhis are well versed in tribal dance and music. Their unique way of dancing and music leave spellbinding effects on audiences).



According to Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1924) argued that assimilation is one of the four major categories of social behaviour, the others being conflict, competition, and accommodation. It is "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life."D. Finally, H. G. Duncan defines assimilation as follows: "a process, for the most part conscious, by which individuals and groups come to have sentiments and attitudes similar to those



held by other persons or groups in regard to a particular value at a given time.”

The term ‘assimilation’ in the context of Siddis relates to the process whereby large numbers of migrants from Africa were absorbed in Gujarati population after their arrival in India by Portuguese sailors, Arab Merchants and Nawab of Junagarh. Portuguese sailors and Arab Merchants brought with them Siddis and on their return they sold them to the Nawab of Junagarh. And from then on they settled in Gir-Somnath and over a period of time got assimilated into the host society.

The marginalisation and assimilation of the African diaspora in India have been the product of various factors such as slave trade, colonialism, globalisation etc. The crafting of the African diaspora in India was very much determined by slave system and it got limited options for assimilation. In the case of Karnataka, the Diaspora was the primary product of Portuguese trading diaspora. Further, the plantation of British trading diaspora in India, as a political power, restricted the space available to the marginalised section in India. The forestation of Siddis had a negative impact on their cultural assimilation. That is to say, Siddi in GirSomnath right from the day of their settlement has been forced to live in the forest as a result of which pace of cultural assimilation of Siddis in Indian society became slow.



(Plate No:3 These pictures portray the educational aspects of Siddis. Earlier there were only one primary schools as there was no inclination for education on the part of Siddis communities. In the course of time, however, with the efforts of government and growing interest of Siddis for education led to opening of schools, colleges and voca-

tional centres)



(Plate No:4 These pictures depict handicraft skills of Siddis women. Siddis women are well versed in painting and knitting. Siddis women profitably utilize their leisure period. That is to say knitting and paintings in free hours brings them modest earning to support a quality life.)

Almost all the Siddis in present day India are mixed indo-African. Many of them have lost their original African names and culture however they have retained some forms of African traditions in the form of dance and music. These include the Goma music and dance form, which is sometimes called Dhamaal . The term is believed to be derived from the Ngomadrumming and dance forms of Bantu East Africa. The Goma also has a spiritual significance and, at the climax of the dance, some dancers are believed to be vehicles for the presence of Siddi saints of the past.

It also evident that in a case of Siddis in Gujarat that they are not only part of social cultural assimilation but now they are also enjoying political assimilation. That is to say, the inclusion of the community in the tribal category is the landmark development in the history of Siddi community. The Scheduled Tribe(ST) status provides socio-cultural-economic and political space for integration in the mainstream society.

Through the field survey, it became established that Siddis of Gujarat in the course of time has managed to adapt themselves to Gujarati social environment. They are now equally Gujarati in their conduct and behaviour. Initially, that is when Siddis arrived in India for the first time; Siddis ex-

perienced a lot of problems as long as their assimilation to a new improved society and culture was concerned. However, in the course of time Siddis acclimatised themselves to a new society and thus their assimilation followed over the years.

For any sports stamina of a person is very important, be it athletic or any other. Siddi is very strong people that have high stamina and healthy physique that can be channelized in the sports field provided they are trained well. Their eating habits, food consumption that is devoid of chemicals and pesticides but of pure natural items such as roots, wild animals etc., keep their physic strong and ready for any kind of challenges in the sports field. Most of them were selected and sent to various places for special training. Siddi children and youth reached not only Bangalore but also as far as Shimla for their sports activities and training.

#### Conclusion:

Siddis in the Jambur and Madhupure villages of the GirSomnath district are still facing problems related to their identity issues. It is not very clear the actual of their migration. But it's true that they are the descendants of African people as per the responses get from the oral history of migration. None of them has any connection in any form with the ancestral homeland. Now, they considered Gujarat or India their home. Many of them are engaged in an occupation in the form of agriculture and allied activities but they are well connected in terms of school education providers and some of them also got the position in the police and sports services. Siddis are still struggling for a livelihood. They are assimilated into the Indian society over the period of time except for physical appearances. They know about their history of migration very little. They are sharing an oral history which is transferred from one generation to other.

#### Notes:

- Quilts Making: Traditionally, Siddi quilts are created for family members and used as sleeping mattresses in warm weather or as covers during the cool, damp monsoon season. Large

quilts come in sizes based on one, two or more family members.

- Pir: Peer Baba is common in Hindi term used to give a salutation to Sufi masters or similarly honoured persons. After their death people visit their tombs (dargah).

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