

Syncretic heritage of Africans in India: Identity and acculturation



What often constitutes a surprise for Africans and many Indians is the discovery of largely forgotten settlements of Siddis, descendants of African diaspora in India, who number around forty-five thousand and live in closely knit communities spread out in the states of Gujarat, Karnataka and Telangana. Siddis possess a lively culture as revealed in their famous dance *Dhamal* and are often seen as symbolic of the rich, syncretic heritage of India. The cultural heritage of these Siddis is located within the historical process of their migration into the socio-economic landscape of India and has been reshaped by strong currents of acculturation and synthesis.

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Arrivals

The ethnonym Siddi, used for African communities living in India, is considered a derivative of either 'Saydi', signifying a captive of war in Arabic, or 'Sayyid', an honorific term for a person of noble descent.¹ *Sayyid*, as a root of their ethnic name, also refers to Bilal, the first African disciple of Prophet Muhammad, while simultaneously designating owners of African slaves under the Omani Sultanate. Siddis are often called Siddi *Badshah* by local communities, a term that indicates their carefree, pleasant nature, though sometimes it may also carry connotations of carelessness and lack of responsibility.

Although largely a consequence of Indian Ocean World (IOW) slave trade, Siddis arrived in India as mercenaries, sailors and traders also. During the peak of IOW slave trade, African slaves were transported to India through ports of Cambay, Cutch, Bharuch, Surat, Diu, Cochin, Goa, etc., from different entrepôts on the coastal areas of East and Northeastern Africa, the Horn of Africa as well as through the Red Sea. Some of the slaves entered India via the Middle East, in the company of Mughal and Turk armies, as elite soldier slaves or as domestic slaves, purchased by Muslim nobles from markets in Oman, Yemen, Baghdad or Mecca. Some of these elite soldier slaves played quite an important role in the history of India and their presence was felt in five major regimes of Medieval India: the Deccan states of the Bahmani (1347-1538), Bijapur (1580-1627), Nizam Shahi (1589-1626), Delhi Sultanate (1399-1440) and Bengal (1486-1493). Malik Ambar, perhaps the most famous Siddi elite slave became regent of Ahmednagar Sultanate and successfully resisted the attempts of powerful Mughals to annex the kingdom during his lifetime.

Deities and dancing

There is a remarkable vein of syncretism in the religious beliefs and cultural values of Siddis, who frequently married with native communities in India and participated in regional cultural and political systems. In Gujarat, the shrine of Bava Gor situated at Ratanpur, near Bharuch, constitutes a nucleus of the religious beliefs of the community and is a mosaic of elements from Brahmanic Hinduism, Sufi traditions, tribal beliefs and Zoroastrianism. Bava Gor, who has been mythologized as an Abyssinian commander is credited with the defeat of a local demon Makkhan devi with the help of his brother Bava

Habsh and sister Mai Mishra. Bava Gor is also believed to be a merchant who pioneered the agate bead industry in Gujarat and his shrine is located next to mountains of Agate stones. The memory of Bava Gor is commemorated by wandering ascetics belonging to the Siddi fakir tradition, who sing devotional songs about him.

The shrine of Bava Gor in Ratanpur has three main functions: the curing of spirit possession, removal of barrenness and impotency in devotees, and delivering of justice through ordeals of truth. The shrine is visited by Siddhis, Muslims, Hindus, and Parsis who seek blessings from the saint. The eclectic nature of the shrine attained the limelight when a court case was filed by some Siddi ritual specialists for greater control of the shrine. Their main contention was that Siddis assumed a distinct caste, separate from the more orthodox Muslim communities like Bohras, because of their closeness to eclectic syncretic traditions. The cult of Bava Gor thus gives Siddis a ritual power and cements their identity as a part of local milieu. While Muslim devotees see Bava Gor as a Sufi saint, Hindus see him as a *bhagat*, a spirit medium who exorcises evil spirits. At the same time the ritual fire burning in the shrine reveals Zoroastrian traces. Through the appropriation of common religious vocabulary and rituals, Siddis in Gujarat assert their right to reinterpret beliefs and ideas from different communities in a common symbolic language. Helene Basu rightly notes that by "eclectically combining and mixing Sufi, Bhil, Hindu and African cultural elements, the cult of Gori Pir can be understood as a new, uniquely creolized cultural production that has been brought about by the interactions of Sidi with their social environment."²

Siddi Nash is another celebrated community deity in Karnataka, whose annual festival in Satunbail is attended by Siddis of all faiths – Muslims, Christians and Hindus. Siddi Nash is a consortium of three deities: male deity Nash, female deity Achakane and their disciple Bhanta. The three deities are symbolized by stones with Tulsi plant separating them. While Tulsi has a mythical connection with Vishnu in Hinduism, the stones of Siddi Nash resemble Shiv linga, a phallic representation of the Hindu god Shiva. Siddis have contested and amalgamated some of the mythical elements from the host culture with insertions of their own rituals from their tribal past, such as offerings of blood sacrifices, cigarettes and

alcoholic drinks during the annual festival of Nash. The spirit possession on this occasion is used as a medium to stimulate common identity concerns among Siddis. The audience is often reminded by the priests that they have come from Africa and through their worship of ancestors (*Hiriyaru*), they empower one another.³ The festival of Siddi Nash has acquired a multi-faith and poly-functional significance for the African Indians who assert their individual and collective identity through it.

One of the most illustrious markers of Siddi identity in India is their well-known dance called *Dhamal* or Siddi Goma. *Dhamal* has been projected as a symbol of the diverse cultural heritage of India on Republic Day celebrations as well as in the advertisements undertaken by Gujarat tourism to attract foreign tourists. *Dhamal* has many similarities with the East African Swahili *Ngoma* tradition in its presentation, use of instruments as well as conception. The dance is traditionally used for annual *urs* by Siddi fakirs and thus also has a historical connection with the Sufi syncretic tradition of associating virtue and sacred breath. During *Dhamal* there is a use of musical instruments such as *Mugarman* (drum), *Malunga* (musical bow) and *Mai Mishra* (coconut rattle). *Mugarman* and *Ngoma* drums are constructed on similar principles, both are long wooden drums, open at one end, with heads attached by pegs. *Malunga*, which is a musical bow, has also many similarities with various African instruments such as *Lungunga* of Bembe (eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and western Tanzania), *Malongu* of Blesé people of Congo and *Mbulumbumba* of Angolans.

'Creation' of an identity

The Afro-Asian heritage of Siddis is a complex structure, with manifold layers, due to an inter-mingling of Africans in the Indian culture, as well as due to multiple migrations of Africans from different regions and tribes in Africa. It was further reshaped by their settlements in Central Asian communities, the multi-religious nature of Indian society and the diverse nature of their masters under the slavery system. Syncretism in Siddis can be read in consonance with the fluidity of their identity formation in a socio-cultural space of shifting locations, multiple religious affiliations and a sense of dislocation. This conflict and consequent alignment between ethnic African identity and normative Islam, Christianity and Hinduism has many similarities with liminal communities living on the Swahili coast of East Africa. Here the contestation between *dini* and *mila*, theological orthodoxy of 'Arab' culture with African tribal past, typifies on a macro level the conflict between local and African heritages in the Indian cultural space. Further, since the experience of slavery deeply mutated the language, dress, custom and religious beliefs of Africans who underwent this cataclysmic process, the survival and eventual celebration of African heritage in Siddis becomes a vehicle for their search for identity in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural space of India.

Spurred by recent academic interest in the 'genuine' African identity of Siddis, African-Indians are becoming increasingly conscious of their African roots. It has led to a situation wherein critics have started to decry the 'creation' of this identity as reactionary and reductionist in its hampering of the process of assimilation and integration of Siddis in Indian cultural space.⁴ Hence, the enthusiasm for distinctiveness of African identity needs to be carefully tempered with their integration in local communities, otherwise it might become detrimental to their socio-economic development in their adopted land. The integration of Siddis in local community space must take place in harmony with their sense of uniqueness within the history of India, as it would then be able to ameliorate their social and political exclusion. It would save them from the dangers of exclusionary identity politics, which carries social, political and economic risks by alienating them from the local communities. A recognition of the syncretic heritage of Siddis would make them partners in the mosaic of communities in the Indian nation and would preserve their identity not in separation but as a part of the assimilative process.

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Above:
Dhamal Dance.