

Siddis of Patthar Kuan (Ahmedabad): A Diasporic Connect From Africa

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Through the ages number of Africans were shipped to India on teeming dhows. They considered this country (India) as their own and rose to become rulers, generals, administrators, soldiers and architects. Their involvement in court politics strengthened their political and social position. There have been numerous instances where they have emerged as king-makers as well. In Janjira and Sachin kingdoms, they had ascended from king-makers to Emperors. African dispersal in India covers several states/provinces namely, Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Daman and Diu, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. In Gujarat, they are found in the districts of Surat, Ahmedabad, Amerli, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Rajkot, and Bhavnagar, Broach/Bharuch near Ratanpur and the former kingdom of Kutch/Katchch. They are usually settled in areas of their own but in Ahmedabad, Broach and Kutch they live in mixed areas as they do in parts of Andhra Pradesh. Siddis of Gujarat traces the roots of their saint and community ancestor, Gori Pir, who is usually described as an Abyssinian who came to Gujarat to trade in the 14th century. Oral histories and retentions of African languages, religions, music, and dance rekindle memories and myths about dying ancestral African homeland.

According to the recent census, the population of Siddis in India is approximately 60,000. The Siddis, Indians of African descent, are a small minority in Gujarat. Probably around ten to twelve thousand population lived in various parts of Gujarat 500 of which Siddis are in Ahmedabad. The African presence in India particularly in Ahmedabad and their cultural and social assimilation provide the primary framework for the present work. Understanding the history of migration traditions, rituals, educational practices and economic goals are the main objective of this work. The paper has also advocated the concept that Indian

culture has been endowed and enhanced by the African culture; and African Diaspora played a pivotal role in India. The paper has endeavoured to discuss the contemporary position of the Siddis at Patthar Kuan (Ahmedabad). The data has been collected from Ahmedabad city only. Observation and interviews are used for data collection. The paper is based on primary and secondary sources.

Numerous Africans occupied a significant role in various Indian reigns. The initial Habshi, of whom there is an ancient record, was possibly Jamal al-Din Yaqut, a noble courtier in the empire of Delhi, in the north of the sub-continent. Habshis established in the interior of northern India. Ibn Battuta recollected that at Alapur, the Governor was the Abyssinian Badr. A man whose courage was accepted as a proverb. Some of the Africans who rose to places of significant reputation were: Malik Ambar, Malik Sarwar, Mubarak Shah, Ibrahim Shah, Malik Andil, Malik Sandal, Yaqut Dabuli Habshi, Ikhlas Khan, Dilawar Khan, Khavass Khan, Ulugh Khan. Their role in the history of India is noteworthy. The Africans, who arrived in Hyderabad, Deccan, were recruited as Nizam's private bodyguards apart from playing their traditional role as bonded guards and servants. The SiddiRisala (African Regiment) was retained until 1948. Other Siddis were raised to the rank of Khanazahs (protégés) and grow into reliable counsellors of the Nizams (Karmwar, 2010).

Research Works

In October 2020, three research papers were published in the *Journal of South Asian History and Culture (TF)*. The paper enriches our understanding of Siddis in India (Gujarat). The First paper is about, Siddi voices and the Siddi Sayyid Mosque: narratives of space and belonging by Beheroze Shroff and Sonal Mehta. In this essay, they focus on the Siddis of Gujarat, and their oral narratives, to establish a genealogy, a counter-history, under which space is imagined as a way of belonging and claiming cultural citizenship. Babubhai Siddi's story of Siddi soldier, Siddi Sayyid, of the famous Siddi Sayyid Mosque in Ahmedabad, recounts the act of sacrifice by which the Hindu Goddess of Wealth, Lakshmi was detained forever, in the city of Ahmedabad. The second paper is written by Khatija Sana Khader on Trans local notions of belonging and authenticity: understanding race amongst the Siddis of

Gujarat and Hyderabad. Based on fieldwork among Siddis in Hyderabad and Gujarat, this article elaborates on the idea of how race is constructed in a non-western location. The meanings immanent in race as a category do not preclude understandings borrowed from western discourse. Another piece of work authored by B.B. Cohen from soldier to spectacle: Africans and the langar procession in Hyderabad. Bhatt (2018) explores the subject of the African presence in India. She focuses on cultural assimilation and the survival of the Siddis, who occupies a unique place in Indian history. Several issues regarding Africans in Asia, their role, prospect and future are discussed in uncovering the history of Africans in Asia edited by Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya (2008). Hawley (2008) touches on the long-lasting contact between these two areas, showing that the Indian Ocean world offers numerous instances of traditional movements that accept our understanding of globalization as a fresh spectacle. African Elites in India: HabshiAmarat (2006). Each part begins with a detailed account of African engagement in the political history of the region under study. Eaton's (1978) observation is special in this regard as he points out that African slaves were prized in India for their martial prowess. Their military ability was one of the main reasons for their upward mobility on the social scale. "Siddis and Scholars" (2004), which is a collection of essays, Edward A. Alpers provides a survey of the African presence in India by placing those experiences in the wider context of the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean world. Ali (1996) provides a historical overview of the African heritage in India from medieval to modern times. She focuses on African dispersal in the Deccan region covering modern Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, the Coromandel Coast and western coastal India. Chauhan (1995) brings to light an authentic account of the wonderful story of the African Diaspora in India from the earliest period till 1992. Banaji has worked on the topic "Relations between the Marathas and the Siddis of Janjira". Ivan Van Sertima and Runoko Rashidi (1998) argue that blacks were a formative civilizing influence on Asian societies.

Harris in *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* has made an invaluable contribution to the ongoing discovery of Africa's central role in human history (1971). Harris (1982) central premise is that the global heritage of African people needs to

be understood as “an Extension of African history”. A comprehensive study of the Eastern slave trade is done by an eminent British scholar Ronald Segal (1996) a companion volume of his work “The Black Diaspora”, which describes the fascinating and horrifying story of the Islamic slave trade. Shihan De S. Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst (1964) edited book (2003) is a collection of scholarly work. Edward A. Alpers compares the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean with that of the Atlantic Ocean. In perceptive and arresting analysis, Robin Cohen (1999) illuminates the changing meanings of Diaspora and the contemporary diasporic condition. This volume serves to introduce a major new series, *Global Diasporas*. Omar Khalidi’ (1989) article lists additional literature on the African presence in the zone from Arabia to the Indian subcontinent. Fitzroy A. Baptiste (1998) examines African-descended communities in contemporary India. Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi (1992) has worked on African settlements in India. His works are based on the dialectal sign of the Bantu backgrounds of the Siddis of India. He found that the Siddis of India are uneven societies of generally East African lineage. Gupta’s (1991) edited book is a collection of essays which in the editor’s own words attempts to present “historical profiles of some minorities on the coast.” Jayanti Patel attempted study of African settlements in Gujarat.

Journey From Africa to Gujarat: Port, Trade and Slaves

Pre-colonial Gujarat under Muslim domination was, at least in its coastal urban centres, rather cosmopolitan. The lively interaction between people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds involved in overseas trade not only entailed the violence of slavery but also resulted in a great heterogeneity of local populations all along the countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

Arab traders settled in India; Gujarati merchants settled in East Africa. After they arrived in India, many Siddi was employed by traders as domestic servants and thus remained in the heterogeneous urban milieu of Gujarat. Across the ocean, Gujaratis “virtually monopolised overseas trade in east Africa, collecting gold and ivory and slaves in exchange for their cloth” (Pearson, 1976).

Since the thirteenth century and after the rise of Muslim power, Gujarat’s

large and small ports; Surat, Bharuch, Cambay in the east, Mundra and Mandvi in the west (Kacch) - were increasingly engaged in overseas trading relationships with similar ports along the countries bordering the shores of the Indian Ocean. From the fourteenth century onwards, Arab and Portuguese sources make repeated mention of the slave-trade carried on by traders in Kilwa and the selling of black slaves to India and other places in Asia. The merchant town of Cambay was then the major port of the Sultanate of Delhi and one of the major ports as was Mundra in Kacch some centuries later through which African slaves reached Indian soil. In the fourteenth century, a regular market (nikka) for the selling of slaves was held in Cambay. In the mid- sixteenth century, after the Portuguese had conquered Goa, they maintained a regiment at Diu, a port on the shore of the peninsula of Saurashtra, consisting of 600 Africans as soldiers.

In the eighteenth century, Muscat became a flourishing centre of the slave trade, providing slaves to Arab societies along the coast of the Persian Gulf. From Muscat and, later, Zanzibar an estimated number of ten thousand slaves were annually dispersed to the Middle Eastern world. A small number of these slaves reached western India as well, through a port either in Sindh, Kacch or in South Gujarat (Basu, 2001).

In the nineteenth century, the British campaign against the Arab-dominated slave trade met with resistance. Gujarati merchants settled on the Swahili coast and proved to be as averse to the abolishment of slavery as Arab traders. Almost 6,000 slaves owned Indians in East Africa. In the late 1860s, the slave trade was formally abolished by the British, although in Saurashtra and Kacch the selling of slaves continued till 1936. The British attempted to enforce their policy by controlling Arab and Gujarati slave ships (dhows) for the transport of slaves (Beachey, 1976).

Hence, the comparatively smaller number of African slaves reaching the west coast of India till the early 20th century were generally displaced individuals. In the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, the importation of slaves was acknowledged unlawful as late as 1936. Till then, Africans arrived in Gujarat individually or in low numbers. At this point, they were working at local royal courts or by rich traders like other domestic servants of low status. Relatively, noble Siddi fused themselves with

the elite class of Muslims of past rulers.

The second medium of African influence was also tied intimately to the history of Islamic expansion. One example of this convergence is found in the figure of Bava Gor. A series of shrines extending from sending to Gujarat is dedicated to him. Local traditions indicate that BavaGor was a Muslim Abyssinian who came with several family members perhaps by way of Arabia to this area in about the 14th century. BavaGor is associated with the introduction of Islam in western parts of India and its shrines are dedicated to his memory as a Muslim pir or Saint. The tomb of Bava Gor at Ratanpur makes this the most important dargah among all the shrines dedicated to his cult. It remains an important pilgrimage site to this day. Bava Gor is also said to have introduced the agate bead trade to this part of western India (Catlin & Alpers, 2004).

Gujarat Kingdom (1407-1572) and the Rise of Siddis

One prominent feature of the declining years of the Gujarat kingdom was the rise to power and influence of several nobles of 'Habshi' origin who played no insignificant part in the civil strife of the time. Among these, we may mention the Amirs who enjoyed the titles of Ikhtiyar-ul-Mulk, Jhujhar Khan, and Ulugh Khan. The term Habshis, though generally applied to Abyssinians, no doubt includes other Negroid races of the African continent. The race appears to have shown the same capacity, as did the Turks, to rise from slavery to the highest positions. The Habshi commanders who rose *to* fame in Gujarat in the 16th century were the prisoners or descendants of prisoners captured during the Muslim invasion of Abyssinia in 1527. Taken first to *Kamran*, they were subsequently brought to Gujarat in 1531 by Mustafa bin Bahram, when the latter received orders from Constantinople *to* proceed at once *to* India to help Bahadur against the Portuguese. In the disorders that began with the accession of Mahmud III, the more able members found scope for rising to favour and prominence. Their rivalry with the local nobility, and with the leaders of other foreign mercenaries, brought about a state of dissension which enabled Akbar to conquer Gujarat almost without a blow in 1572-73. At one time the Habshis in Ahmedabad are said to have numbered 5,000 persons (Commissariat,

1938).

The careers of three Habshi nobles who successively bore the high title of Ulugh Khan and who played a prominent part for twenty years during the declining period of the Sultanate. The first was Dilawar Khan who rose to notice under Mahmud III and was appointed in 1553 Captain of the Bodyguard and put in command of the Arab. He was killed in battle in the same year and his wazir YaqutSabit Khan Habshi received the title of Ulugh Khan and succeeded to his military commands. Yaqut commanded the Habshi force under Imad-ul-Mulk Arslan and obtained Imad's rank when the latter became chief minister to Ahmad III. He died in 1558, his funeral being attended by all the nobles as also by the Sultan, and he was buried at Sarkhej by the side of Bilal Jhujhar Khan, another famous Habshi noble of the day. The third to receive the title of Ulugh Khan was Yaqut's son Muhammad who as wazir to his father was known under the style of Khayrat Khan. He was the patron of Hajji-ad-Dabir, the famous author of the *Arabic History, of Gujarat*, who was in this nobleman's service from 1556 to 1573. Muhammad Ulugh Khan thus naturally plays a very important part in this author's detailed history of Gujarat over the years. He secured the same devotion as his father had enjoyed from the Habshi troops in Gujarat and was thus able to take an active part in the confused politics of the time. We find him alternately on the side of Itimad Khan and of Imad-ul-Mulk Arslan during this reign (Commissariat, 1938).

In 1561-62 it is reported that there were five thousand African slaves in Ahmadabad, the capital of the sultanate, and in 1500 in another major city, Baroda the Mughal emperor Akbar subjugated the kings of Central India and Rajasthan in the 1560s, Gujarat in 1572, Bengal in 1576, and Khandesh in 1601. At the time of the Mughal conquest of Gujarat, the twelve thousand horsemen in the sultan's army are said to have included seven hundred Habshis. A well-known painting of the surrender of Itimad Khan, governor of Ahmadabad and Surat for the last sultan of Gujarat shows Africans, presumably some of the slaves whom Itimad Khan handed over to Akbar; and Haji ul-Dabir's history of Gujarat claims that following the Mughal victory, the new masters incited the common people of Gujarat to kill the Habshis, who numbered

five thousand in Ahmedabad alone (Robbins and Mcleod 2006).

Population of Siddis in Gujarat

According to the 1981 census, the population of Siddi in India was 54,291. The Siddis, Indians of African descent, are a small minority in Gujarat. Probably around ten to twelve thousand population lived in Various parts of Gujarat in which according to the census 2011, 8,661 (4273 Male and 4388 Female) belong to Schedule Tribe (ST) in six districts of Saurashtra region (Chandramouli, 2011). The total population of Siddis in 1961 were 3645 (Census of India Vol. 5, 1961). This shows the substantial growth in population and social security through different governmental plans after 1956. The status of ST gives them various governmental benefits. For the Siddis living elsewhere in Gujarat, an important issue has been their wish to be recognized as ST like the Siddis of Saurashtra, if not as a 'Primitive' group too, and they have yet unsuccessful struggles to obtain this status. A good number of Siddis live in Ahmedabad, Surat and Baruch as well; in fact, there is a settlement of Siddis in Ahmedabad city itself. Siddis outside Saurashtra is classified as one of the OBC.

City of Ahmedabad

Cities appear and disappear only to reappear in the representations of Indian civilization. It was established in 1411 AD by a noble, Ahmed Shah, who had rebelled against his overlords in Delhi. The new rulers of Gujarat, keen on establishing their superiority in the material realm, had undertaken a frenzied program of building activities in their new capital of Ahmedabad. Their model was the impressive Hindu architecture of the previous centuries which they wanted to outshine. The result, after one and a half centuries, was the 'Sultanate Architecture' of Ahmedabad, considered a high point of world architectural heritage. This architecture along with the Jain, Swaminarayan and Hindu temples of the city is a veritable safari of monumental architecture which attracts lovers of beauty from across the world to the city. That it was the seat of a splendid court is testified by a French traveler, Tavernier. A treaty with the then rulers of western India, the Poona Peshwas, brought Ahmedabad under British rule in 1817. The British were keen on annexing Ahmedabad because of "the commanding influence which

the sovereignty over the city of Ahmedabad confers on its possessor in the estimation of the country at large.” At the time of the British arrival, the medieval economy of Ahmedabad had hung on three threads: gold, silk, and cotton. The British rule of law helped to flower the strength of the Ahmedabad Mahajan (trade guilds), and aided by the opium trade to China, by 1839 the town was “in a most flourishing condition and progressing rapidly.” Modern textile technology further oiled the Gujarati virtues in ‘reinventing’ Ahmedabad. Its booming business in textiles had given Ahmedabad the status of ‘Manchester of India’. Mahatma Gandhi staying on in the town for thirteen years after his return from South Africa and directed the historically unheard-of non-violent movement. Their successes in textiles turned the 19th-century Ahmedabad Mahajan into a fine institution-builders; they played important role in creating institutions like PRL, IIM, NID, ATIRA and CEPT during the middle of the 20th century. The buildings of these institutions attracted modern masters of world architecture like Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier to the city in the 1950s (ahmedabadcity.gov.in).

Siddis in Ahmedabad

Once 5000 to now 500 Siddis are the story of this city. Occupations and income-generating activities, such as driver, mechanic, security guard/watchman, computer trainer, computer engineer, musician, dancer, boxer, meat shop owner, shoe shop sales assistant, and street hawker. Patthar Kuwa, Kalunpur, Sarkhej, Gomtipur, and Sardarnagar are the areas where we find siddis in Ahmedabad. Pattharkuwa is the largest amongst all, there is 30 cluster of households. Siddis in Ahmedabad are aware that Siddis have been in the city for a very long time: they say six or seven hundred years. They say that all the Siddis now in Patthar Kuwa have come from various other parts of Gujarat: ‘everyone staying here has come from outside’. Unlike Siddis of Saurashtra, who speak Gujarati as their mother tongue, Siddis in Patthar Kuwa say they speak Hindi in their homes. Apart from the Bava Gorchhilla, dargah of Siddi Sultan, who was army chief, the dargah of Siddi Bashir, Siddi and Saiyad Masjid, or Siddi Saiyad’s Darga, are important historical identities. Siddi Saiyad was responsible for building this mosque in Ahmedabad, which is world-famous for the unique artwork of its perforated window screens or jali of carved sandstone. One of these

jali screens is almost like a symbol of the city of Ahmedabad (Micklem, 2000).

In medieval Ahmedabad, there were 12 gates or entry points to the city built by Ahmed Shah and it was siddis who guarded the entrances to make certain that the goddess of wealth, Lakshmai, won't abandon the city. These gates are Tripolia gate, Delhi gate, Estodiagate, Kalupurgate, Sarangpurgate, Dariyapur gate etc. Recent research shows that the Siddis of Gujarat, and their oral narratives, to establish a genealogy, a counter-history, by which space is imagined as a way of belonging and claiming cultural citizenship.

Babubhai Siddi's story of Siddi solider, Siddi Sayyid, of the famous Siddi Sayyid Mosque in Ahmedabad, recounts the act of sacrifice by which the Hindu Goddess of Wealth, Lakshmi was detained forever, in the city of Ahmedabad. The tale functions as a moral fable about the syncretic harmony of Muslim and Hindu worship in India (Shroff, 2020).

Mosque Today

This mosque is today a globally conspicuous construction exclusively known for its antique perforated (jail) windows that are carved out of sandstone. However, the denizens of Gujarat sense a high degree of pride to have such a monument in their domain, but they have often overlooked the fact that an African built this milestone structure. And the iconic jail screens are symbolic of Ahmedabad city. It's overwhelmingly a grim situation that there are no traces of the craftsmen who constructed this art piece in the history of Ahmedabad. At Siddi Sayyad's dargah here perseveres reference of 'Abyssinian', though it's worth might have vanished on visitors' minds. The majority of them are oblivious that this historical name refers to a location that is somewhere lying in the contemporary country of Ethiopia. There lies a minutely painted sign at the Siddi Bashir Mosque which does not make a deserving indication of Siddi's legacy.

In conclusion, Siddis of Ahmedabad are few in numbers and perceived as entirely different individuals compared to the other Siddis population of different parts of Gujarat. Recently I visited and interviewed Siddis

communities of “Pattharkuva”. People of this community in this region feel that they are still not the part of mainstream society even after almost five hundred years of settlement in India. They want to get education and work, especially work for female. They are in demand of Scheduled caste status so that they can avail benefits of reservation. Siddis are the part of composite culture of Ahmedabad. As a researcher I feel that as Sultans of medieval India placed them in army, sports, and in other such areas, currently also they should be placed in such positions rather than being connected with the fields of music and dance.

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