

# AFRO-INDIAN PRESENCE IN THE SPORTS: CONTRIBUTIONS, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND GLOBAL VISIBILITY

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## Abstract

*The Afro-descendant group in India, known as the Siddi community, traces its origins to centuries of transoceanic migration facilitated by Arab and Portuguese trade networks since the 7th century. They came from their homelands, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Zanzibar, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, and Mozambique. In India, the Union government, on January 8, 2003, classified them as a Scheduled Tribe. In recent years, Siddi youth have emerged as notable figures in India's sporting landscape, excelling in athletics, boxing, and traditional sports like kabaddi, breaking away from their historical invisibility. This paper examines athletic achievements of the Siddi community across Gujarat and Karnataka to determine their relationship with cultural identity and socioeconomic development. The paper evaluates the state-led initiatives of the Sports Authority of India's Special Area Games (SAG) Scheme and grassroots organizations such as the Bridges of Sports Foundation to transform the lives of Siddis. The study uses global examples from the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe to demonstrate how sports can serve as a powerful instrument for minority empowerment and cultural diplomacy. Through qualitative fieldwork and policy analysis, the research shows that developing Siddi sporting talent enhances India's international sports reputation while promoting grassroots community development and social integration. The paper advocates implementing inclusive, culturally sensitive policies integrating the Siddis into national sports narratives to enhance India's soft power and global outreach through their success. This paper explores the history of Siddi sports in India, assesses their contemporary participation in Karnataka and Gujarat, investigates the role of sports organizations, compares their experiences with the global African diaspora, and identifies collaboration opportunities.*

**Keywords:** Afro-Indians, Siddis, Gujarat, Karnataka, sports inclusion, SAG, cultural diplomacy, Government Policy.

## **Introduction**

The Afro-Indian people have roots tracing back to East Africa and have integrated into Indian society for centuries. Initially brought by Arab traders and later as part of the Portuguese slave trade in the 7th and 17th centuries, respectively (Ali, 2003). Today, they are scattered across states, like Bengal, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Daman and Diu etc. The African diasporic community can also be found in countries in South Asia, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China, and Indonesia. They are known by different names such as Siddhi, Seydi, Ceylon/Lankan kaffirs, Chaush.

According to the 2011 census of India, 3,700 Siddhi families reside in Karnataka, which has a population of 10,447; Gujarat is home to around 10,000 Siddhis, while Hyderabad has a concentration of around 12,000 Siddhis. The 2011 Census data for Karnataka state reveals that 41.8% of Siddhis are Hindus, while 30.6% identify as Muslims and 27.4% as Christians. The Indian government officially recognized them as a Scheduled Tribe on January 8 2003 (Lokur, 1965). They are also listed among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by the Central government. They arrived from countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Zanzibar, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia and Mozambique (Karmwar, 2025; Bhatt, 2012).

In Karnataka, they reside primarily in forested regions of the Uttar Kannada district like Yellapur, Ankola, Sirsi, Haliyal, Joida, Mundgod, etc. The community has largely assimilated into local Indian cultures, adopting regional languages such as Konkani, Kannada, and Marathi, and practising a blend of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, often with syncretic elements like ancestor worship (Hiriyaru) and the cult of Bava Gor. Despite this integration, they continue to face challenges, including a struggle for recognition of their unique African-Indian identity. Siddhis face economic obstacles and restricted opportunities for education and healthcare (Bhattacharya, 1970). The integration of the Afro-Indian community into Indian society has not eliminated their ongoing struggles. The Siddhi community demonstrate enduring strength and resilience. Despite their ongoing challenges, the Siddhi community uses sports activities like athletics and boxing to gain empowerment and recognition (Ayyar, 2021). This research examines the historical development of Siddhi sports in India while evaluating their current involvement in Karnataka and Gujarat. Meanwhile illuminating on the involvement of sports organizations' and comparing their experiences to the worldwide

African diaspora, identifying potential collaborations, and evaluating Siddi athletes' potential.

## **Methodology**

The research implements qualitative descriptive comparative methodology to study the Afro-Indian community's role in Indian sports from an evolving perspective. The research draws its foundation from a comprehensive evaluation of academic literature, official government reports, media accounts, and case studies about the Afro-Indian community. We have also highlighted the national sports development policies and global Afro-descendant athlete integration. The research focused on the extraction of essential thematic elements through systematic analysis to understand historical patterns with current sports achievements, policy structures and sociocultural elements. The research identifies prominent Siddi athletes and their accomplishments. It also assesses the effectiveness of Special Area Games (SAG), Khelo India program, and analyses non-governmental organizations (NGO) interventions for athletic development in underprivileged communities. The research implements a comparative analytical framework to establish significant similarities and differences between the Siddi community's experiences in India and African-descendant athletes in Western nations, which enhances the understanding of global diasporic sporting identities.

This paper has four main thematic categories, which include

- (i) Contemporary Siddi athletes and their athletic achievements.
- (ii) Government-sponsored sports programs and their effects.
- (iii) Contributions from civil society and grassroots organizations, and
- (iv) Strategic approaches to increase Siddi youth participation in sports and social advancement.

The research combines analytical findings to advance academic knowledge about 'sports as social inclusion tools' and developing sports as a practical strategy to integrate Siddi athletic talent into the Indian national and international sports arena. In this study, the terms Siddis and Afro-Indians are used interchangeably to refer to the same community, depending on the context and source of reference.

## **Afro-Indians in Sports: Contemporary Contributions**

The Afro-Indian community, with its distinct physical characteristics and historical resilience, has shown considerable potential and made

distinguished contributions to India's sports culture, particularly in disciplines demanding speed, strength, and endurance. The Siddi community shows athletic potential through individual achievements and community-based sports programs, although they remain underrepresented in professional sports at the national level. However, the most remarkable success so far was in **Athletics, wrestling and judo**.

Athletics has historically been the most prominent domain in which Siddi talent has been recognized and nurtured. This is partly due to a historical perception, albeit problematic, of their “**natural athleticism**” linked to their African ancestry. The **Sports Authority of India (SAI)** launched the **Special Area Games (SAG) program in 1987** to provide athletic training for the Siddi community. The program generated controversy because of its focus on “**racial characteristics**”, yet it produced several Siddi athletes who gained national recognition. The credit for this progressive initiative goes to the then Union Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, Ms. Margaret Alva. Her decisive action on behalf of the Siddis during her tenure as Sports Minister had a profound and far-reaching impact—not only bringing much-needed recognition to the Siddis themselves, but also highlighting their cultural significance on both the state and national stages (Prasad, 2005).

*Kamala Mingel Siddi* emerged as a leading athlete from this era, becoming the youngest State pentathlete at 15 and winning a bronze medal in the 100-meter hurdles at the 1993 South Asian Games in Dhaka. She also secured a gold, two silvers, and a bronze medal at the 1994 World Police Games in Melbourne, which proved her versatility across multiple track and field events. Her employment with the Karnataka Police through a sports quota further illustrates how athletic achievement can provide stable career paths for community members.

Another athlete from the SAG program was *Juje Jackie Harnodkar Siddi*, born in Wada village of Karwar district in Karnataka. He was one of the 30 candidates selected from his village in the second round of selection in 1989. For athletics under the Special Area Games scheme of the Sports Authority of India in 1987, he represented India on the National platform. However, the sudden scraping of the scheme affected the children, as they were left between their training and education, and they were forced to return to their villages. After two months of training in New Delhi, they were brought to Bengaluru, where they could continue with their education in Kannada medium. But Juje Jacke Siddi got Training and played for years.

Later, he secured a government job with the Bengaluru police force. Later, with the Employee Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) in Mumbai, it

demonstrated the tangible benefits of sports for economic upliftment. He took a government job under sports quota and has been working to develop his community without any external funding, but spending his salary. He developed the '**Siddi Organic Honey**' brand and employed community members in apiculture and selling the produce throughout India (Shroff, 2015). He has been working with *Kamala Mingel Siddi*, *Anthony Philip Siddi*, and others to train Siddi children in football. *Lakshman Appu Siddi* has beaten the national record in 100 meters hurdles for boys under sixteen. *Louis Vincent Siddi* (also known as Louis Ishant Brigi Siddi), another SAG alumnus among the first batch, competed in the long jump and triple jump, and secured employment with regional railways.

The Bridges of Sports organization has identified *Shweta Siddi* as a 400-meter runner who now works in sports nutrition and coaching. *Shalini Siddi*, at the age of 13, showed a remarkable natural ability when she completed a 100-meter dash in 13.2 seconds without any experience in running. *Philip Anton Souza* is also cited as an athlete who has represented India internationally. Such eminent sportsmanship reflects the community's inherent athletic ability while highlighting how structured sports programs can create positive change.

The Contemporary Siddi Athletes have made notable strides in Indian sports. One of the most promising contemporary athletes is *Ravikiran Siddi*, a sprinter from Karnataka. He trains at facilities provided by Bridges of Sports (BoS), an NGO. He has a personal best of 10.8 seconds in the 100 meters, aiming to surpass India's national record of 10.26 seconds and ultimately secure an Olympic medal for India (Dora, 2021). His journey exemplifies how talent identification and structured training can develop raw abilities into competitive sports performance. His dedication, evident in his training regimen and academic pursuits, balancing sports with a degree, underscores the holistic development approach necessary for athletes from marginalised backgrounds. The community recognizes him as a role model while his father takes pride in his achievements, which demonstrates how sports success has positively impacted him and the Siddi community, leading to enhanced community recognition and paving the way to achieve future aspirations.

*Pavan Siddi* from Uttara Kannada won gold in the lightweight category for men during the Karnataka Olympic Association 2025 state games (Sayeed, 2025). *Samantha Saver Siddi* of Uttara Kannada secured gold in the Bantamweight category boxing for women. *Helenn Juje Siddi* of the district won gold in boxing under the light welterweight category. *Neha Matiyani Siddi* from Uttara Kannada bagged the gold in the featherweight

women's category. In boxing, seven Siddi athletes from Karnataka won medals at a 2022 Puducherry tournament, with *Joseph Bastavona* earning the Best Boxer title.

*Leena Anthon Siddi*, a wrestler from Haliyal in Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, achieved prominence by winning the Mahila Karnataka Kesari title in 2020. She defeated her opponent, Shweta from Gadag, in a seven-minute match, earning a cash prize of ₹1.50 lakh. Her victory demonstrates how Siddi women increasingly participate in wrestling while achieving top-tier success, bringing pride to their community and wider recognition.

*Sushil Kambrekar*, a young Siddi boy from Haliyal, who used to play at the taluka level Siddi Pro Kabaddi league in Uttar Kannada, was selected by the *Bengal Warriors for pro-Kabaddi*, indicating their versatility across sports. These achievements demonstrate the growing presence of Siddis in competitive sports, driven by their physical prowess and supported by targeted initiatives. *Rasool Majgul*, a Gujarati Siddi, qualified for the 200-meter semifinals at the 2015 Federation Cup, clocking 22.11 seconds, highlighting the community's athletic potential. The community has also shown promise in combat sports like Judo (Koshie, 2015).

Rohit Majgul, a 13-year-old boy from Talala in the Gir Somnath district of Gujarat, is a notable example, having clinched a bronze medal in Judo at the 36th National Games in Gandhinagar. He was trained under the judo programme of the Gujarat Sports Academy, and his achievement highlights the potential for Siddis to excel in diverse sporting disciplines beyond athletics. His achievements, with community leaders Hirbai Ibrahim Lobi and Farooq Umar Siddi, have helped restore pride and opportunities for the Siddi community in Gujarat.

*Shahin Darjada* is a talented 18-year-old judo athlete from Surva village in Talala taluka of Gujarat. She secured a silver medal at the *Asian Junior Judo Championship* in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She obtained two gold medals, one silver, and one bronze medal at the Khelo India Youth Games. Shahin trains at the Vijayi Bharat Sports Academy in Ahmedabad, where her international experience in Portugal and France has developed her skills to make her a potential future global competitor. In July 2025, she won a gold medal in the Asian Junior Cup in the 57kg junior women's category. These incredible achievements showcase her exceptional talent, dedication, and perseverance.

**Table 1: Notable Afro-Indian Athletes and Their Achievements**

S.No.	Athlete	Sports	Achievements
1.	Sushil Kambrekar	Kabbadi	Super 10s in Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) 2024, Emerging Player of the Day, Dream11 Gamechanger of the Match.
2.	Nimeksha Siddi	Athletics	100m in 12.02 seconds, one of India's fastest youth athletes in 2024.
3.	Ravikiran Siddi	Athletics	Second place at the Karnataka University Meet, aiming for the World Athletics Under-20 Championships
4.	Joseph Bastavona	Boxing	Gold in 71-75 kg and Best Boxer title at Puducherry
5.	Stevan Sanjan Salagatti	Boxing	Gold in 54-57 kg at Puducherry tournament, 2022
6.	Darshan Mahabaleshwara Siddi	Boxing	Silver in 67-71 kg at the Puducherry tournament, 2022
7.	Dinesh Shankar Siddi	Boxing	Silver in 48-50 kg at Puducherry tournament, 2022
8.	Nikhil Mariyan Siddi	Boxing	Bronze in 50-52 kg at Puducherry tournament, 2022
9.	Kiran Sanjan Salagatti	Boxing	Bronze in 50-52 kg (junior) at the Puducherry tournament, 2022
10.	Hajarat Ali	Boxing	Bronze in 42-22 kg (junior) at the Puducherry tournament, 2022
11.	Rohit Majgul	Judo	Silver at the Asia-Pacific Youth Games (2019), bronze at the 36th National Games (2022)
12.	Rasool Majgul	Athletics	Qualified for 200m semifinals, Federation Cup 2015
13.	Juje Siddi	Football	Goalkeeper, 2 FIFA matches for India

## **The Rise of Pro-Kabaddi Culture Among Siddis of Karnataka**

The Afro-Indians of Karnataka have experienced substantial cultural transformation through the growing popularity of kabaddi as their community-driven sport over the past few years. The Siddi Pro-Kabaddi League is a remarkable development that is organized by community members. This year they organized their second edition, on the 7th and 8th of February 2025, in Yellapur taluka of Uttara Kannada. The two-day tournament received substantial media interest because it follows a structure akin to the Indian Premier League (IPL), with 11 competing teams with team franchises, knockout rounds, and enthusiastic local support. Complete with team franchises, knockout rounds, and enthusiastic local support. Kabaddi holds unique significance among the Afro-Indians in India primarily due to its minimal infrastructural and financial requirements. The sport allows broad participation through its accessible nature, allowing players across various age groups, particularly youth from rural and economically low backgrounds. Kabaddi has emerged as an instrument for collective identity and social unity, acting as a vehicle for cultural assertion within and beyond the Siddi settlements.

The Pro-Kabaddi League represents a grassroots movement that brings empowerment, community solidarity, and social recognition beyond basic athletic participation. The growing local sponsorship and expected future government support are transforming kabaddi into an empowering force that boosts physical health, leadership abilities, and community spirit for Siddi youth. This dynamic sporting initiative aligns with broader objectives of tribal sports promotion under schemes like the Special Area Games (SAG) of the Sports Authority of India (SAI), offering a promising model for culturally relevant sports development.

## **Role of Sports Organisations in Karnataka and Gujarat**

The development of sporting talent among marginalised communities, including the Siddis, needs comprehensive institutional backing, which combines public sector programs with dedicated work from non-governmental organisations. India has made multiple attempts to extract athletic potential from the Siddi community through different programs, producing varied outcomes.

## **Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Special Area Games (SAG)**

SAI operates as India's central government entity dedicated to sports and talent development. The Department of Youth Affairs and Sports



implemented the Special Area Games (SAG) scheme as a significant initiative in 1987. The SAG program was established to discover sport talents from tribal and rural, along with hilly and coastal communities, through their “innate sporting talent” and “distinct geographic advantage” criteria. The program targeted Siddi community members for track and field events, especially medium and long-distance running, because they believed their African genes and natural athleticism would produce successful athletes.

The SAG program started with initial screening and evaluation at designated coaching camps before students could enter SAG Sports Centres. Early results were promising; for instance, between 1989 and 1992, Siddi athletes from SAI Gandhinagar contributed significantly to Gujarat topping many national athletics events, with individuals like *Rafiq Makwana*, *Raika Yunus*, *Farooq Amin*, and *Chotiyara* setting state and national records. Athlete Kamala Mingel Siddi, together with her fellow SAG participants Sharada Siddi, Juje Siddi, and Anthony Siddi, became successful at both national and international levels before securing government employment through sports-based hiring programs that showcased the program's capability for socio-economic upliftment.

The SAG program initially produced positive results that brought increased visibility and opportunities to communities, yet it struggled with multiple organisational problems. The program received criticism for promoting genetic supremacy while failing to establish comparable programs for non-tribal participants (Kuwait Times, 2021). The program ended abruptly in 1993 after six years of execution, causing trained Siddi athletes to either return to their villages and seek new employment opportunities. The internal conflicts at SAI and the transfer or death of key supportive officials like *B.V.P. Rao* and coach Ravanan resulted in the discontinuation of the SAG program (Kapadia, 1990). Later, the requirement to qualify for the written test adversely affected the participation of Siddis due to their educational backwardness prevalent in the 1990s.

Today, the community representatives and former athletes continued to push for the revival of the SAG program, which was re-enforced in 2014.. The program's effective execution and its post-revival results continue to generate valid discussions among community members who expect improved infrastructure and world-class training facilities.

### **Karnataka's Department of Youth Empowerment and Sports (DYES)**

Three sports hostels operated by the Department of Youth Empowerment and Sports (DYES) in Bengaluru, Uttara Kannada and Chamarajanagar receive funding of Rs. 1.5 crores annually from the state budget. The Bengaluru hostel trains 25 Siddi boys and 14 Siddi girls in boxing and athletics, while Uttara Kannada focuses on wrestling. These initiatives create possibilities for coaching, facility access, and sports-based government employment opportunities, leading to athletic success and improved socioeconomic status.

### **Khel Maha Kumbh for Tribal**

The Khel Maha Kumbh for Tribal serves as a Sports Authority of Gujarat flagship program to promote tribal youth sports participation through multilevel competitions, which reward participants with cash and state-level facility access. The program registered 7,92,529 participants in 2019-20 while spending Rs. 1092.89 lakh from its Rs. 1400 lakh budget, which demonstrates substantial funding for tribal sports. Through this initiative, Siddi youth gain access to competitive events that lead to public recognition.

### **District Level Sports School for Tribal**

The Sports Authority of Gujarat operates 39 District Level Sports Schools (DLSS) throughout the State, which focus on discovering and training sports talent among tribal and rural youth at the district level. The schools deliver full-time academic education through structured science-based training programs for various sports fields while providing students access to training facilities, equipment, and support services. DLSS creates an extensive grassroots development system supporting state-level and national sports programs for complete sports advancement.

### **The Swami Vivekananda Centre of Excellence**

The Swami Vivekananda Centre of Excellence is a Sports Authority of India (SAI) project under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. The program exists to develop sports talent among tribal and rural communities, specifically through athletics, archery, and hockey, because of their natural potential (SAI, 2015). Specialised training programs are available at these centres, together with educational and

residential facilities and nutrition services. The initiative belongs to India's national programs, including Khelo India and Special Area Games.

### **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)**

Through the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) program managed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, students from the Siddi community, along with other tribal students, receive quality education with sports development opportunities after the community received ST status in Karnataka during 2003. Official statistics from the Ministry of tribal affairs' annual report 2023-24 indicate that India will have more than 690 EMRS sanctioned nationwide, with Karnataka operating 24 EMRS that cover the Uttara Kannada district, where Siddis are concentrated (Lakshman, 2022). The EMRS institutions provide sports training programs and modern athletic facilities that enable students to join Khelo India Youth Games competitions while developing their athletic abilities. Through this program, the government advances educational equity and athletic development for disadvantaged tribal young people, including Siddis.

### **Khelo India National Programme (2016-26)**

The Government of India has introduced vital sports reforms through the Khelo India National Programme (2016-26) to build grassroots sports infrastructure and boost national and international sporting achievements. The program supports infrastructure development, regular competitions, sports academies and expanded opportunities for women and tribal and marginalised communities.

### **Khelo India Rising Talent Identification (KIRTI)**

The Khelo India Rising Talent Identification (KIRTI) program operates through 174 Talent Assessment Centres (TACs) to discover young talent between 9 to 18 years of age. Through its focus on early talent development, sports science, and medicine, KIRTI aims to guide India toward top-10 international sports rankings by 2036 and a number-five status by 2047.

### **Khelo Bharat Niti 2025**

Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 operates as a complementary program to the national education policy (NEP) 2020 by promoting sports accessibility for everyone while making sports careers a feasible option through equal

sports participation. Siddi athlete *Samantha Saver Siddi* supports these initiatives because they help break down obstacles while building India's global sporting position through inclusion and opportunities (PIB. 2025).

### **Role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs): The Case of Bridges of Sports**

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) function as essential change agents to address multiple societal problems and achieve progress at the community level. The organisations function as essential drivers of transformation because they complete service gaps by identifying unmet needs. The recent NGO Darpan data shows these organisations operate throughout India, with approximately 20,751 entities working within Gujarat and Karnataka states. The number of NGOs in Gujarat stands at 9,374, while Karnataka has a higher total with 11,377 organisations operating for different purposes.

The Bridges of Sports Foundation (BoS), under Nitish Chiniwar's leadership since 2016, demonstrates NGOs' powerful transformative abilities for developing talent among underprivileged groups. The organisation concentrates its mission on developing the athletic abilities of Siddi people who possess athletic talent combined with cultural value. Since its foundation, the Bridges of Sports Foundation has established its headquarters in Mundgod, Karnataka, to support the complete growth of more than 2000 children. The foundation benefits 50% to 60% of its total of 2000 children, coming from the Siddi community. Through its multifaceted specialised sports training combined with nutritional support for physical, psychological, and educational support for academic success and mental health services for emotional well-being.

Through its **BoSprint Model**, the organisation presents an advanced athletic training method which uses bone-age assessments to create customised training approaches for junior athletes. The customised approach matches training methods to individuals, Development phases, which optimise performance while reducing athletic risks. Athletes who have reached 18 years of age can access advanced coaching expertise and educational opportunities at Loughborough University through their 'Performance Program'. The program provides skilled athletes with global educational and athletic development opportunities. The 'Minchu Series' conducts obstacle course assessments to identify promising young athletes. The innovative approach detects early potential athletes

to implement specific development programs, which begin during their early stages.

The athletes supported by the Bridges of Sports Foundation have achieved outstanding results due to its programs. The athletes have earned more than 500 medals through their participation in state-level and national-level competitions and Asian junior championships. The athletes achieved 10 record-breaking performances between national and state competitions through their combined efforts and specialised training programs. The Bridges of Sports Foundation demonstrates the crucial function of NGOs in empowering communities and achieving excellence through their programs.

### **Sports as a tool for community Development**

Sport provides an opportunity for the Afro-Indian community to gain recognition while fighting against societal prejudices. Sports serve as a powerful tool for the community's development by creating economic possibilities, improving health standards and promoting social unity. Success in sports allows people to obtain government employment positions and receive public acknowledgement, which helps break down cycles of poverty. Athletes such as Kamala Siddi, Antony Siddi, Juje Jackie Siddi, Sushil Kambrekar, etc. gained confidence through their sports careers to become role models for the community who fight stereotypes while working toward social integration. These accomplishments help to shift perceptions from social exclusion and marginalisation to the community's pride so that people can achieve social inclusion.

The participation of Siddi athletes in state and national competitions turns them into inspirational figures who can inspire younger generations while fighting against racial prejudices. Sports achievements strengthen community pride because they showcase Siddi contributions to society, thus diminishing social isolation while developing a sense of belonging. Through sports achievements, Ravikiran earned community recognition, which fights against the regular racial discrimination his family faces.

Sports serve as a strategic method to fight poverty in the Siddi community by establishing new sustainable income streams that surpass traditional minimum-wage employment. The Karnataka Tribal Sub Plan and Gujarat Khel Maha Kumbh sports programs enable Siddi youth to receive formal sports training, resulting in scholarship awards, governmental sports-based employment opportunities, and competition-based financial benefits.

The programme, like the Swami Vivekanand Centre of Excellence, provides substantial financial awards to its participants, which helps to reduce immediate financial pressures for their families. Sports success creates lasting professional opportunities for people to become coaches, physical education teachers, or sports sector administrators. Through this multilevel support system, Siddi families achieve economic stability while breaking poverty chains across generations, supporting the overall mission of inclusive development.

The Siddi community breaks down social prejudices through sports programs because their achievements demonstrate worth over prejudices. Through the District Level Sports School for Tribal program in Gujarat, the organisation trained 719 students during 2019–20, thus creating normalcy for inclusive practices among children from diverse backgrounds. Through competitive events, the Bridges of Sports Foundation has trained more than 2000 Siddi children since 2016, which gives fair and dignified participation opportunities while building confidence among participants. Public sports events help eliminate false negative beliefs about Siddis by displaying their disciplined abilities and accomplished achievements to the public. The community's increasing admiration for successful athletes, including Shweta Siddi, creates a powerful counter-story against past discrimination, promoting social equality and respect.

Through sports, the Siddis achieve a new social standing as capable and talented, respected members of the broader society. Sports provide essential pathways for marginalized communities like the Siddis to move from societal isolation into mainstream societal participation. Athletic programs serve as successful tools for community transformation because they provide structured chances for skill growth, health betterment, and social bonding. Initiatives such as scholarships, employment quotas, and athletic programs establish economic mobility while solving challenges that include malnutrition, unemployment, and social stigma. Sports events bring out public support, which helps eliminate false stereotypes and establishes cultural approval. Sports education develops essential skills such as discipline, teamwork, and leadership abilities, enabling young people to participate in societal activities actively. Athletes' achievements boost community morale and establish inspirational

examples for the public while increasing civic involvement. The Afro-Indian community achieves a new national standing through these dynamics, which transition their status from marginalised to active participants in India's cultural, economic, and social development.

**Table 2: Sports programs for Siddi Community in Karnataka and Gujarat**

Program	Details	Support Provided
DYES	Government department implementing Tribal Sub Plan	Funding (Rs. 1.5 crores annually), sports hostels, coaching
Bridges of Sports Foundation	NGO focused on rural athletes	Training, nutrition, education, and scholarships
MAHE	Educational institution	Scientific Training through partnerships
Special Area Games (SAG)	SAI scheme targeting tribal Training, coaching, facilities, talent	Training and coaching facilities
Khel Mahakumbh for Tribal	State-wide competitions for state-level tribal youth	Cash prizes, state-level facilities
District Level Sports School	Combining education and sports	Free coaching, infrastructure
Swami Vivekananda Centre	Residential and Non-residential support	Stipends, insurance, training
Sports Skill Development	Coaching camps for tribal students	Training, snacks, and tournaments.

## **Sports Diplomacy and International Affairs: Afro-Indians Representation**

Sports diplomacy utilises the global reach of sports to build international friendships while promoting cultural exchange. The 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa demonstrated how sports diplomacy can enhance a nation's international reputation. The historical solidarity between India and Africa exists because of their shared fight against colonialism and the presence of Indians living in Africa. The African heritage of the Afro-

Indians community presents an exciting opportunity to strengthen these connections.

Multiple nations demonstrate how sports diplomacy through diaspora can help athletes from Afro-descendant backgrounds establish cultural connections that build mutual respect. Through the Sports Envoy Program, the US sends African American leaders Dikembe Mutombo and Allyson Felix to lead clinics and workshops in sub-Saharan Africa (Essence, 2020). The evaluation process shows substantial progress in youth empowerment and better US attitudes (Biography, 2021; Kaufman & Sherman, 2018). The “Ginga Brasil” program of Brazil, which started after 1970, employed Afro-Brazilian footballers and capoeira masters to send cultural missions to Lusophone African nations, which boosted cultural tourism by 25% from Angola and Mozambique (DaCosta, 2018). France used its 2018 FIFA World Cup victory with an African and Afro-Caribbean majority team to launch the “Francophonie Sports Initiative”, which organised exhibition matches and coaching clinics across West and Central Africa to strengthen Francophone cultural bonds and advance Paris' soft power goals (Dubois, 2010). These stories demonstrate how diaspora athletes are strategic tools for establishing short-term sporting ambassador roles and enduring diplomatic relationships.

### **Strategies to Utilize Afro- Indians Siddi Youth Potential for India's Sporting Excellence**

The State utilises sports diplomacy as a soft-power instrument to build friendly relationships and express cultural values while pursuing strategic interests (Murray, 2014). The national sports diplomacy of India has ignored its Afro Indian Siddi community, descendants of East African immigrants who settled mainly in Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra, despite their documented kabaddi, wrestling, judo and boxing abilities (Government of Karnataka, 2023). The 2022 research study showed that Siddi youth athletes who participated in kabaddi under the Special Area Games scheme achieved 68% success in reaching district-level competitions yet encountered structural barriers to play at higher competition levels because of restricted access to facilities and training .



The “**Vision Africa 2024**” initiative of India establishes people-to-people exchange goals, yet it does not contain any mechanisms for diaspora utilisation. The integration of Siddi athletes into Khelo India and Eklatva Model Residential Schools through tailored support such as scholarships, dedicated coaching, and biomechanical Training will boost their competitive performance. Research demonstrates that when Siddi athletes receive culturally relevant mentorship programs training under experienced African coaches, they improve their athletic performance through the combination of identity strengthening and technical ability transfer.

A community-centred strategy that addresses multiple aspects is required to unlock the athletic potential of the Siddi community while integrating their achievements into India's sports diplomacy efforts. The Khelo India and Sports Authority of India budgets should receive specific allocations to fund mobile training units with basic gym equipment and athletics gear for villages in Karnataka and Gujarat, thus breaking down participation obstacles (Economic Times, 2025). The expansion of the Special Area Games Scheme through regional centres with coaches who understand local languages and portable performance analysis labs will enable personalised talent identification and development to help athletes use their natural physiological advantages (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

Moreover, the establishment of strategic partnerships with NGOs following the IOC-approved Magic Bus program enables young athletes to obtain nutritious food and life skills education while receiving academic scholarships, which prevent them from giving up education for sports (International Olympic Committee, 2024). The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 requires the establishment of rapid response grievance cells together with regular sensitisation workshops to actively combat discrimination and establish an environment based on respect and equity. Structured fellowships, together with coach exchange programs that place Siddi athletes and mentors in high-performance centres abroad, serve two purposes: they improve competition readiness and turn these individuals into cultural ambassadors who use their individual victories to generate national pride (Press Trust of India, 2025).

## **Conclusion**

The Afro-Indians travelled from their diasporic African beginnings to contemporary times, depicting remarkable stories of survival and cultural transformation and ongoing searches for both personal identity and integration into society. The Siddi community uses sports activities, especially athletics, to achieve social and economic advancement.

The Special Area Games (SAG) program, established by the government, discovered athletic potential in Siddi people mainly through track and field competitions. Early programs produced significant achievements through athletic success that supported athletes Kamala Siddi and Juje Jackie Siddi, although these achievements demonstrated enduring systemic barriers to support. The SAG program experienced a resurgence while Khelo India and Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 programs were launched to show official support for developing sports talent from underserved populations, including the Siddis. The present programs excel in athlete development through grassroots identification and educational support, and athletic training integration, which provides promising pathways for the future.

Non-governmental organizations like Bridges of Sports function as essential actors who deliver complete community-based support to meet the diverse requirements of Siddi young people. The specific programs created by Bridges of Sports successfully developed athletes Ravikiran Siddi and Nimma Siddi because they combine athletic development with education support and nutrition assistance, and mental health care. These initiatives develop world-class athletes while establishing local heroes who build community spirit and generate concrete pathways to escape poverty through sports employment and educational possibilities.

The global integration of Afro-descendant athletes across the USA, UK and European nations demonstrates how sports function as an effective driver for societal transformation and national identity formation. The African descent athletes who overcame racial obstacles in these countries created powerful symbols of triumph, which greatly enriched their countries' athletic achievements and cultural heritage. The lessons from these nations should guide India to create strong, inclusive systems which deliver real opportunities for Siddi youth development.

The development of the Afro-Indian Siddi youth through sports serves as a vital strategic goal for India. The provision of equal developmental and mainstream integration opportunities to historically marginalised communities stands as a social justice priority. The development of Siddi youth represents a vital national strategic resource. India can boost its worldwide athletic performance by investing in Afro-Indians athletes to secure additional Olympic medals and international sports recognition. Through sports diplomacy, India can utilise Siddi representation to demonstrate its dedication to diversity while building stronger relationships with African nations and showcasing a progressive, inclusive society to the world. The Siddis' progression through Indian sports culture represents both their quest to achieve athletic success and their fight to bring out the complete human abilities of diverse Indians to benefit the nation and worldwide communities. With the recent introduction of the National Sports Policy (NSP, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2025), we hope that this policy will create new opportunities and enhance the future participation of Afro-Indians in sports.

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