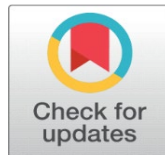
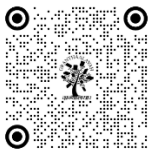


PRESERVING THE AFRICAN-INDIAN LEGACY: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE SIDDI TRIBE'S CULTURAL PRACTICES, TRADITIONS, AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India is home to diverse tribal communities, each with unique cultural practices and traditions. The Siddi tribe, an African-Indian community, has preserved its distinct heritage while integrating into mainstream Indian society. The Siddis, believed to have arrived in India during the colonial period, were brought as slaves and later settled in Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, particularly in Haliyal, Yellapur, Sirsi, Mundagoda, and Karwar. Despite centuries of displacement, they have maintained a nomadic lifestyle, relying on forest resources and areca nut cultivation. Their rich cultural heritage, which includes Goma dance, Ngoma drumming, spiritual rituals, and oral traditions, showcases a unique blend of African and Indian influences. This research examines the cultural existence of the Siddi tribe, specifically focusing on those residing in Yellapur and Ankola taluks of Uttara Kannada. The study delves into their linguistic patterns, social structures, art forms, and belief systems, highlighting how they negotiate identity and belonging in a geographically distant land from their ancestral roots. While their lifestyle mirrors traditional African villages, their adaptation to Indian social and economic frameworks is a testament to their resilience. The Siddi tribe, despite their rich cultural heritage and centuries-old presence in India, remains an unseen and overlooked community, their stories hidden in the margins of history and mainstream discourse. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has initiated various schemes for tribal welfare, economic development, and cultural preservation, yet the Siddis remain primarily marginalized. By documenting their cultural practices, traditions, and community structures, this study aims to shed light on their struggles, resilience, and evolving identity in modern India. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for policy interventions, educational opportunities, and cultural documentation to prevent the erosion of their unique heritage. This research contributes to the broader discourse on diaspora, cultural preservation, and tribal identity formation, offering insights into how indigenous communities sustain their traditions despite historical adversities. By exploring the Siddis' journey from slavery to citizenship, the study underscores the significance of cultural heritage as a means of resistance, survival, and self-definition in the face of globalization and socio-political challenges.

Keywords: Siddi Tribe, African-Indian Heritage, Tribal Culture, Goma Dance, Ngoma Drumming, Uttara Kannada, Nomadic Lifestyle, Cultural Preservation, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Diaspora Studies, Indigenous Identity, Oral Traditions, Social Integration

1. INTRODUCTION

The Siddi community, also known as Habshis or Sheedis, is an ethnic group of African descent who migrated to the Indian subcontinent over several centuries. Their presence in India dates back to the 7th century, when African traders and sailors from the Swahili coast of East Africa (present-day Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Somalia) arrived via

the Indian Ocean trade networks. However, a significant number of Siddis were brought to India between the 12th and 19th centuries, primarily through the Arab, Portuguese, and British transoceanic slave trade. During this period, the Siddis were transported as slaves, soldiers, sailors, merchants, and laborers to various regions of India, including Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Hyderabad. The migration of the Siddis occurred in three major waves. The first wave saw the arrival of free African traders, sailors, and merchants who settled in coastal regions and engaged in maritime trade. The second wave involved the forced migration of African slaves who were employed as warriors, palace guards, and concubines in Indian royal courts. The Portuguese and Arab traders brought many to work in ports, plantations, and forts. During the British colonial period, the third wave saw the decline of Siddi power as they were gradually pushed to the margins of society. Despite this, the Siddis managed to preserve their unique identity and cultural heritage, blending elements of their African roots with Indian traditions over the centuries. Historically, the Siddis occupied diverse roles in Indian society, ranging from slaves and servants to military leaders and administrators. Due to their physical strength and combat skills, many Siddis were recruited as warriors and bodyguards for Indian rulers. They served in the courts of the Deccan Sultanates, the Mughals, and various princely states, where they gained prestige and influence. Some Siddis even rose to positions of political power and became rulers of their territories.

One of the most prominent Siddi figures in Indian history is Malik Ambar (1548–1626), an Ethiopian-born slave who rose to become the Prime Minister of the Ahmednagar Sultanate in the Deccan region. He was a brilliant military strategist who resisted Mughal expansion under Emperor Jahangir. His leadership not only strengthened the Deccan Sultanate but also demonstrated the significant contributions of the Siddis in shaping Indian history. Besides military service, the Siddis were also naval commanders, merchants, and administrators in various Indian kingdoms. In Gujarat, they played an essential role in controlling the coastal trade routes. In Karnataka, particularly in the region of Uttara Kannada, the Siddis were employed by the local rulers as forest guards and protectors of fortresses. The Siddi Nawabs of Janjira and Jafraabad (on the Konkan coast) were among the few African rulers who established their autonomous states in India, resisting the Marathas and the Portuguese for several centuries. However, with the decline of the princely states and the arrival of British colonial rule, the Siddis lost their influence and were gradually pushed to the periphery of Indian society. Many were forced into subsistence labor, agriculture, and menial jobs, marginalizing them. Despite this, they retained aspects of their African heritage, particularly in their music, dance, and religious practices.

Today, the Siddi community is primarily found in Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Goa, with smaller populations in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. According to estimates, between 50,000 and 100,000 Siddis live in India, though their exact numbers remain uncertain due to a lack of comprehensive demographic studies. The largest concentration of Siddis is in Gujarat, particularly in the Gir Forest region (Junagadh district). Many Siddis here have been employed as forest workers and conservationists, often working in wildlife reserves and national parks. They have received attention for conserving Asiatic lions, as the government has provided employment opportunities through eco-tourism projects. The Siddis of Karnataka primarily reside in Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, and Belagavi districts. They have been granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, which provides them with certain legal and educational benefits. Many in this region are engaged in agriculture, labor, and traditional crafts. The Karnataka government has also initiated welfare programs to improve their socio-economic conditions. In Maharashtra, the Siddis are found in Mumbai, Raigad, and Kolhapur, while in Goa, they reside in coastal villages. Many of them work in fishing, tourism, and small-scale industries. Due to their historical connection with Portuguese rule, some Siddis in Goa identify as Roman Catholics, integrating with the local Goan-Konkani culture. A smaller Siddi community exists in Hyderabad and Nizamabad, descendants of African slaves brought by the Nizams of Hyderabad. These Siddis were once part of the royal bodyguards and cavalry units but later assimilated into the local Muslim population, as shown in Figure :1 Siddi Community Roles in India.

Siddi Community Distribution and Roles in India

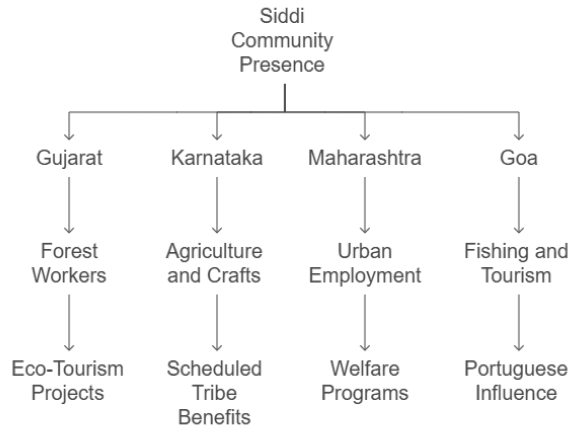


Figure 1 Siddi Community Roles in India

Despite their deep-rooted history in India, the Siddis continue to face social and economic marginalization. They are often stereotyped based on their African appearance, leading to racial discrimination. However, in recent years, efforts have been made to empower the community through education, affirmative action policies, and cultural preservation initiatives. Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and research institutions have taken an interest in documenting and promoting Siddi heritage, recognizing their contribution to India's multicultural identity. The Siddi tribe represents a unique blend of African and Indian heritage, reflecting centuries of migration, adaptation, and resilience. Their history is integral to India's global cultural connections, showcasing the long-standing ties between Africa and the Indian subcontinent. While they continue to struggle for recognition and inclusion, their vibrant traditions, music, and sense of community remain strong, serving as a testament to their enduring legacy, as shown in Figure 2: Marginalization of the Siddi Tribe.

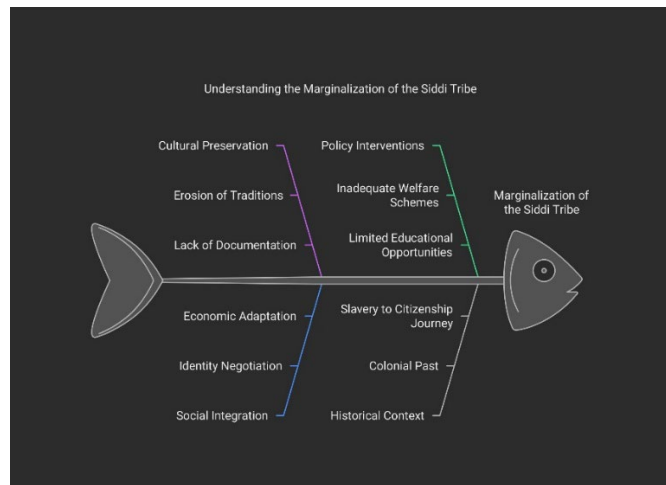


Figure 2 Marginalization of the Siddi Tribe

Despite its African ancestry, the Siddi community has primarily assimilated into Indian society regarding language, adopting the regional tongues of the areas where they have settled. Depending on their geographic location, Siddis mainly speak Kannada in Karnataka, Gujarati in Gujarat, Marathi in Maharashtra, and Konkani in Goa. Over centuries, they have integrated these languages into everyday communication, often speaking them as their first language while retaining some linguistic traces of their African heritage in specific words, phrases, and speech patterns. While most

Siddis do not have a distinct African language today, some linguistic studies suggest that their speech patterns carry phonetic and syntactical influences from Bantu and Swahili languages, which their ancestors historically spoke from East Africa. One of the most significant ways African linguistic elements have survived in the Siddi community is through oral traditions, particularly folk songs, storytelling, and ritualistic chants. Their traditional songs, often performed during community gatherings, festivals, and religious ceremonies, contain unique rhythmic patterns and repetitive structures that resemble African oral traditions. Scholars like John Picton have observed that the "Siddi Dhamal dance songs retain elements of African drumming and chanting styles, reinforcing their ancestral connections". These songs, passed down through generations, preserve linguistic influences and historical narratives of migration, survival, and adaptation. Storytelling is another vital aspect of Siddi oral traditions. Elders in the community narrate folk tales that blend Indian mythological influences with African storytelling techniques. According to Mahadev Desai, "some stories feature animal trickster figures, akin to Anansi in West African folklore, but adapted to an Indian setting". Such narratives demonstrate a unique fusion of African oral storytelling structures with Indian cultural contexts, showcasing the Siddis' ability to maintain a hybrid identity.

Despite these rich oral traditions, modernization and socio-economic challenges threaten to preserve these linguistic and cultural elements. Many younger Siddis, especially those migrating to urban centers for education and employment, are shifting toward mainstream languages like Hindi and English, gradually losing their unique oral traditions. As Lancy Lobo points out, "the cultural and linguistic assimilation of the Siddis into mainstream Indian society has led to a slow erosion of their distinct oral heritage, necessitating urgent preservation efforts." To counter this, cultural preservation initiatives led by NGOs and researchers are attempting to document and revive Siddi folk songs and storytelling traditions. Efforts such as recording oral histories and integrating Siddi folk traditions into school curricula are being made to ensure that future generations continue celebrating their African-Indian heritage.

The research objectives are, to examine the cultural practices and traditions of the Siddis, to analyze how their African and Indian heritage has shaped their identity and to explore challenges to the preservation of their cultural identity. This study is significant as it contributes to postcolonial and diaspora studies by examining the historical displacement and identity formation of the Siddi tribe, enhances our understanding of cultural hybridity and adaptation by exploring their African-Indian heritage, and engages with contemporary discussions on race, ethnicity, and marginalization by highlighting the socio-political challenges faced by the community in modern India.

The migration of Africans to India, spanning centuries, was driven by Arab, Portuguese, and British traders and rulers. The largest influx occurred between the 12th and 19th centuries, as the Portuguese and British trafficked African slaves to regions like Goa, Gujarat, and Maharashtra for labor and military service. Despite forced migration, many Africans integrated into Indian society while maintaining elements of their heritage. The Siddis played key roles in Indian sultanates and colonial administrations, excelling as warriors, naval commanders, and administrators. Figures like Malik Ambar (1548–1626), an Ethiopian-born Siddi, rose to prominence as Prime Minister of the Ahmednagar Sultanate, resisting Mughal expansion. The Siddi rulers of Janjira and Jafraabad established independent Afro-Indian dynasties, defending their territories for centuries. However, British rule led to their political marginalization, forcing many Siddis into rural settlements and labor-intensive jobs. Despite these challenges, they have preserved their African cultural identity through music, dance, and religious traditions. After India gained independence in 1947, the socio-economic status of the Siddi tribe declined significantly, as they were disconnected from the privileges and military roles they once held under various Indian sultanates and colonial rulers. Stripped of their historical positions in administration and the military, many Siddis were forced into agriculture, daily wage labor, and subsistence occupations in rural areas, particularly in Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Goa. The lack of access to education, land, and stable employment further marginalized them, pushing them into poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, their distinct African ancestry and physical appearance led to discrimination and racial stereotyping, often relegating them to the fringes of Indian society. Scholar Edward Alpers notes that the Siddi community, despite centuries of residence in India, continues to face 'double alienation', marginalized both socially and economically due to their African heritage and their historically subjugated status.

Recognizing their socio-economic struggles, the Government of India granted the Siddi tribe Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in Karnataka in 2003, a significant step toward social upliftment. The community was already included under the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes (OBC) categories in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Goa. Still, the ST status provided additional reservations in education, government jobs, and political representation. This recognition was crucial in addressing the historical injustices and economic deprivation faced by the Siddis. According to a government

report on tribal welfare, the ST classification aimed to promote the "holistic development and integration of indigenous and marginalized communities" into mainstream society. However, the benefits of this recognition have been unevenly distributed, with many Siddis still struggling to access quality education, healthcare, and sustainable employment opportunities. Affirmative action policies, including reservation quotas in education and government employment, have played a key role in providing better opportunities for the Siddi community. Initiatives such as the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), scholarships for tribal students, and self-employment schemes have been introduced to enhance their socio-economic mobility. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups have worked toward promoting cultural preservation, literacy programs, and skill development among the Siddis. Despite these efforts, scholars like Kiran Kamal Prasad argue that "affirmative action alone is not enough; deeper social inclusion and awareness programs are needed to combat racial prejudices and ensure sustainable development". While some Siddis have made progress through education and employment in urban areas, a large section of the community struggles with unemployment, landlessness, and social marginalization, highlighting the need for more effective policy implementation and community-driven development initiatives.

2. MUSIC AND DANCE

Music and dance are integral to the Siddi community's cultural identity, serving as both a celebration of their African heritage and a means of expressing their religious and social traditions. Among the various cultural performances associated with the Siddis, Dhamal dance stands out as their most prominent and recognizable art form. This energetic dance, performed during festivals, communal gatherings, and religious ceremonies, showcases distinct African rhythmic patterns and percussive beats, reflecting the community's ancestral roots in East Africa. "The gods will not descend without song" is a familiar aphorism in West African cultures observes Olly Wilson. Dhamal dance, as shown in Figure 3, performed by both men and women, is characterized by vigorous body movements, synchronized drumming, and call-and-response singing, elements commonly found in African folk dances. The Siddis use handmade drums (dhols), wooden sticks, and metal bells to create dynamic rhythms that resemble the polyrhythmic drumming traditions of the Bantu and Swahili-speaking peoples of East Africa. Scholars such as Helen Myers have noted that the dance "retains striking similarities to East African warrior dances, particularly in the way dancers stomp their feet, leap into the air, and maintain an intense, communal rhythm."



Figure 3 Siddi Dhamal Dance

Dhamal dance is also deeply spiritual and is often performed in honor of Hazrat Bava Gor, a Sufi saint revered by the Siddi community. The fusion of African dance traditions with Islamic devotional practices highlights the hybrid cultural identity of the Siddis, blending their African ancestry with Indian religious influences. As anthropologist Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy states, "Dhamal dance is more than just entertainment; it is a living testament to the survival of African traditions in Indian soil." Music plays a vital role in strengthening the social fabric of the Siddi community, fostering a

sense of unity and shared identity. Music tells stories of migration, struggle, and resilience during community gatherings, allowing the younger generation to connect with their cultural heritage. Traditional Siddi folk songs, often accompanied by drums and clapping, follow a call-and-response pattern where a lead singer narrates a verse and the audience responds in chorus, an element reminiscent of African musical traditions. Religiously, music is an essential part of Sufi rituals and spiritual healing ceremonies within the Siddi community. The Siddis, particularly in Gujarat and Karnataka, have historically followed Islam, integrating African musical elements into their devotional practices. In their shrines, rhythmic drumming and chanting are used during *zikr* (Sufi remembrance of God) sessions, where participants enter a trance-like state, reinforcing music's communal and spiritual significance. Richard Wolfe states, "Siddi devotional music is a unique blend of African percussive energy and Indian Sufi mysticism, embodying their historical journey of cultural synthesis." Despite modern influences and migration to urban areas, efforts are being made to preserve and promote Siddi music and dance as shown in through cultural festivals, performances, and collaborations with ethnomusicologists. Organizations and scholars are working to record and document Dhamal dance and Siddi folk music to ensure these traditions continue thriving, celebrating the community's rich African-Indian legacy.

3. RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The Siddi community's religious identity is shaped by centuries of syncretism, blending their ancestral African animistic traditions with Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Despite migrating to India over several centuries, the Siddis have retained elements of African spiritual practices, particularly in their rituals, music, and healing ceremonies, while also adopting the dominant religions of their regions. This cultural fusion has created a unique religious landscape where African spiritualism coexists with Indian spiritual traditions. Many of the Siddis, particularly those in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, follow Islam, primarily in its Sufi form. However, their Islamic beliefs are infused with African spiritual traditions, especially those related to ancestor worship, trance rituals, and drumming in religious ceremonies. One of the most important spiritual figures for the Siddis is Hazrat Bava Gor, as shown in Figure 4, a revered Sufi saint whose shrine (*dargah*) in Ratanpur, Gujarat, is a major pilgrimage site. Many Siddis believe that Bava Gor possesses divine powers and conduct special rituals involving drumming, singing, and ecstatic dancing in his honor, practices that closely resemble African religious ceremonies. Alongside Bava Gor, his sister, Mai Mishra, and brother, Bava Habash, are also venerated, and their shrines serve as centers of spiritual healing. While most Siddis are Muslim, a small section practices Hinduism, particularly in Maharashtra and Goa. Hindu Siddis worship deities like Hanuman, Shiva, and local village gods and goddesses, often integrating African animistic elements such as spirit possession and animal sacrifices into their rituals. Siddi Hindus celebrate Navaratri and Holi in some communities, incorporating traditional African drumming and dancing into the festivities. Their folk beliefs include appeasing ancestral spirits and seeking divine intervention through charms, amulets, and spiritual healers (*bhagats* or *fakirs*), a practice seen in African and Hindu traditions.



Figure 4 Hazrat Bava Gor

Additionally, a minority of Siddis, particularly in Goa, have converted to Christianity due to Portuguese colonial influence. Siddi Christians often follow Catholic traditions but have retained African elements in their religious ceremonies, such as spirit-invoking dances and rhythmic hymn-singing during Christmas and Easter celebrations. Some

communities also commemorate All Souls' Day with drumming and storytelling, honoring their deceased ancestors like traditional African funeral rites.

4. RITUALS, FESTIVALS, AND SACRED CEREMONIES

The Siddis observe various rituals and festivals that blend Islamic, Hindu, and African traditions. One of the most significant religious events among Siddi Muslims is the Urs festival of Bava Gor, held annually at his shrine in Gujarat. The festival involves sufi music, drumming, trance-dancing (dhamal), and prayers, where devotees seek blessings and spiritual healing. During the Urs, Siddi drummers and singers lead processions, performing intense rhythmic beats that induce spiritual ecstasy, similar to African healing rituals. Another unique ritual among the Siddis is the Goma (or Ngoma) dance ceremony, which traces its origins to East African healing traditions. The word "Ngoma" means "drum" in Swahili, and the ceremony involves rhythmic drumming, trance-like dancing, and invocation of spirits. It is performed during life events such as childbirth, marriage, and funerals, reflecting the community's belief in spiritual protection and ancestral guidance. In regions where Siddis follow Hindu practices, they celebrate festivals like Makar Sankranti and Diwali, but with a unique African twist, using drums, folk songs, and ritual dances not typically seen in mainstream Hindu celebrations. Animal sacrifices to local deities and fire-walking ceremonies are also observed in some Siddi villages, similar to West African Vodun and traditional healing practices. Among Siddi Christians, traditional Christmas and Easter processions are often accompanied by drumming and community feasts, resembling African communal celebrations. The Siddi community's religious and spiritual practices as shown in the Figure 5, illustrate a profound fusion of African traditions with Indian religious influences. Whether through Sufi mysticism, Hindu deity worship, or Christian ceremonies, the Siddis have preserved their African spiritual roots while adapting to the diverse religious landscape of India. Their festivals, rituals, and ceremonies continue to reflect this hybrid cultural identity, ensuring that their ancestral heritage remains alive despite centuries of displacement and marginalization.



Figure 5 Siddi community's religious and spiritual practices

5. FOOD AND CULINARY TRADITIONS

The culinary traditions of the Siddi community are a fascinating blend of African, Indian, and local regional influences as shown in the Figure 6, reflecting their historical journey from East Africa to various parts of India. Their cuisine retains traces of African culinary practices, particularly in the use of millets, tubers, coconut, and native African spices, while also incorporating Indian flavors and cooking techniques. Siddi food is not just a means of sustenance; it plays a vital role in community bonding, religious ceremonies, and cultural celebrations. Many dishes in Siddi cuisine bear similarities to East African staples, particularly those from Bantu and Swahili communities. Some of the most notable African influences in their food include, Ugali, a thick maize porridge commonly eaten in East Africa, finds its counterpart in Raagi Mudde (finger millet balls) and Jolada Roti (sorghum flatbread) among the Siddis in Karnataka. These starchy staples are eaten with spicy curries, coconut-based gravies, or lentil soups. Root vegetables such as cassava, yams, and sweet potatoes, which are dietary staples in Africa, are widely consumed by Siddis, especially in Goa and Karnataka. The Siddis make use of coconut milk, peanuts, and tamarind to prepare thick, aromatic stews that

resemble the West African groundnut soup. One popular dish is Shenga Saaru, a peanut-based curry often served with rice or flatbreads. Dry-roasting, grilling, and smoking meats, common in African cooking, are techniques still used by the Siddis, particularly in coastal regions. Spiced grilled fish, Masli Fry, and slow-cooked goat or chicken stews reflect African and Konkani influences. Like African fermented drinks like Palm Wine, Siddis prepare Tadi (toddy), a locally brewed palm sap beverage, and other fermented foods such as pickled vegetables and curd-based dishes.

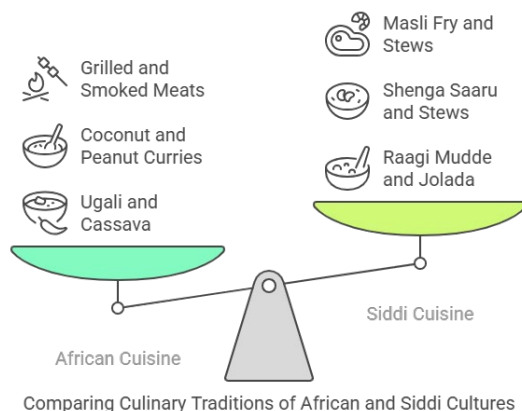


Figure 6 The Siddi community's Communal Feasts

Food plays a significant role in Siddi social and religious gatherings, where large communal feasts are organized for festivals, ceremonies, and spiritual rituals. Some of the major community feasts include, Bava Gor Urs Feast (Sufi Festival Meal), During the Urs (death anniversary) of Hazrat Bava Gor, a massive Langar (community meal) is prepared at his shrine in Gujarat. The meal includes rice dishes, lentil curries, and meat-based stews, distributed among devotees as blessed food (niyaz). Dhamal Festival Feast held in honor of Siddi ancestors and deities, this feast features spiced rice, grilled meats, coconut-based curries, and deep-fried snacks, accompanied by drumming, singing, and dance performances. Harvest Festival Meals, where Siddis engage in agriculture, seasonal feasts celebrate the harvest of crops like millet, sorghum, and rice. These meals include boiled cassava, pumpkin-based stews, and spicy chutneys made with tamarind and green chilies. During weddings and childbirth ceremonies, special dishes like Mutton Sukka (spicy dry mutton), Masala Fish Curry, and sweet coconut desserts like Kheer are prepared and shared among families and guests. Over centuries, the Siddis have adapted their African food heritage to Indian regional cuisines, incorporating local ingredients and cooking styles. For instance, in Maharashtra and Gujarat, Siddis have adopted Gujarati dal, rotis, and chaas (buttermilk), while in Karnataka, they consume rasam, sambhar, and rice-based dishes. Additionally, some vegetarian adaptations have emerged due to regional influences, though meat and seafood remain important components of traditional Siddi cuisine.

Siddi cuisine is a testament to their African-Indian cultural fusion, where ancestral African flavors blend seamlessly with Indian culinary traditions. Their community feasts and food practices reflect the importance of togetherness, religious devotion, and cultural preservation. Despite modern influences and migration to urban areas, the Siddis continue to celebrate their heritage through their food, ensuring that their rich culinary traditions remain a vital part of their identity.

6. ART AND CRAFT IN SIDI CULTURE

The Siddi community's artistic expressions reflect a rich blend of African heritage and Indian influences, showcasing their creativity in handicrafts, textiles, jewellery, and paintings. Their traditional craftsmanship and artistic sensibilities have been preserved over centuries, despite their displacement and marginalization in India. Many Siddi crafts and art forms feature bold patterns, bright colors, intricate beadwork, and symbolic motifs, resembling West and East African artistic traditions. The Siddis practice a variety of handicrafts and folk arts, which are integral to their cultural identity. These crafts are often passed down through generations, particularly among women artisans and tribal elders. The quilts of the Siddi tribe, as shown in Figure 7, hold deep cultural, historical, and artistic significance, reflecting their African

heritage, Indian influences, and unique storytelling traditions. The Siddi people, descendants of African migrants who settled in India centuries ago, have preserved their ancestral culture while integrating aspects of Indian traditions. Their quilts, often handmade from recycled fabrics, are integral to their artistic expression. Some notable traditional crafts include Handwoven Baskets and Mats (Muddhe Hasige), using natural materials like bamboo, reeds, and dried grass. Siddi artisans weave intricately patterned baskets, mats, and storage containers. This craft is similar to African basket weaving techniques, where geometric designs hold cultural significance. Wood Carving and Mask Making (Pratima Shilpa), inspired by African tribal masks, some Siddis craft wooden masks and figurines, often used in ritual performances and festive celebrations. These masks, featuring elongated features, bold carvings, and symbolic decorations, resemble those found in Central and West African traditions. Clay Pottery and Terracotta Sculptures (Mrittika Kala), the Siddis create handcrafted clay pots and figurines for cooking, water storage, and religious offerings. Many of these designs incorporate African patterns, particularly spiral motifs and sun symbols, which are believed to bring prosperity and protection. Beadwork and Embroidery (Moti Kaam and Kasuti), Siddi women specialize in beaded necklaces, embroidered fabrics, and mirror work, similar to Zulu and Maasai beadwork from Africa. These vibrant accessories, often adorned with geometric patterns and sacred symbols, are worn during festivals, marriages, and dance performances.

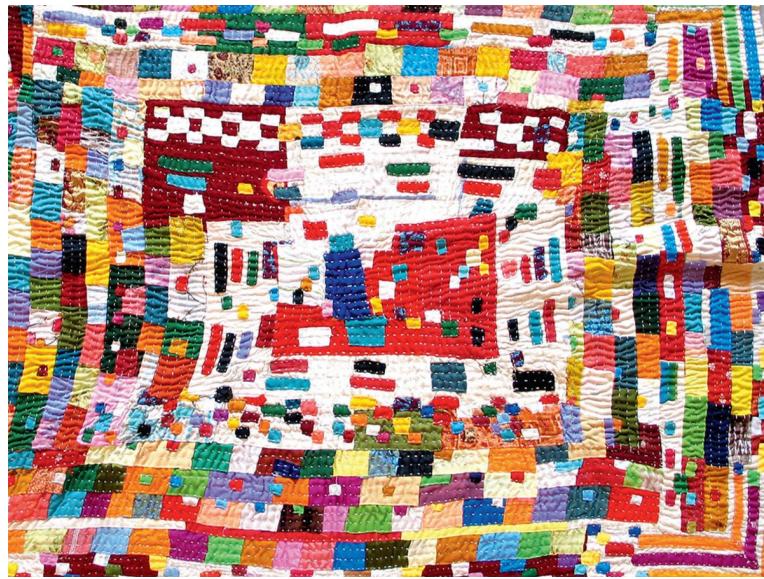


Figure 7 Soulful Stitching of Siddi Quilts

The Siddi aesthetic is a striking mix of African and Indian styles, evident in their traditional clothing, jewellery, and paintings. Many aspects of their attire and adornments still retain African cultural elements, distinguishing them from other Indian tribal groups. Clothing (Siddi Vastra Kala), While most Siddis wear regional Indian attire such as sarees, salwar kameez, dhotis, and lungis, their fabrics often feature African-style prints, including bold floral motifs, zigzag patterns, and earthy color tones. During festivals and cultural events, Siddi women sometimes wear wraparound skirts and headscarves reminiscent of African Kanga and Kitenge fabrics. Jewellery and Adornments (Siddi Abhushan Kala), Siddi women and men wear distinctive handmade jewellery, often crafted from seashells, cowrie shells, beads, and silver. Cowrie shells, which were historically used as currency in Africa, hold spiritual significance and are often worn as necklaces, bracelets, and anklets for protection against evil spirits. Large hoop earrings, nose rings, and stacked bangles are common among Siddi women, influenced by African and Indian tribal jewellery traditions. Painting and Tribal Murals (Chitra Kala), The Siddis have a folk painting tradition, including murals, fabric paintings, and decorative art on homes and temples. These paintings feature bright colors, stylized human figures, and natural elements like animals, trees, and the sun, similar to West African tribal art. Some murals depict stories of their ancestors, folklore, and religious symbols, creating a visual narrative of their history.

Siddi art and craft traditions serve as a living testament to their African ancestry, while also reflecting the cultural influences of their Indian surroundings. Whether through basket weaving, beadwork, pottery, or paintings, their artistic expressions preserve their identity, history, and spirituality. Despite historical challenges and social marginalization,

their crafts remain an essential part of their cultural heritage, celebrated in festivals, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings.

7. IDENTITY FORMATION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

The Siddi community in India navigates a complex identity formation and cultural adaptation process, balancing their African heritage with Indian societal influences. Over centuries, the Siddis have integrated into various regional cultures while striving to preserve elements of their ancestral traditions. However, challenges such as racial discrimination, socio-economic struggles, and cultural invisibility have shaped their identity in profound ways. The Siddis live in a constant negotiation between their African ancestry and Indian social realities. While they take pride in their African roots, they also face pressure to assimilate into the dominant Indian cultural framework. One of the biggest challenges is the gradual erosion of their African cultural practices due to social marginalization and a lack of formal recognition. Many Siddis strive to preserve their African traditions through music, dance, oral storytelling, and religious practices. However, younger generations, influenced by modern education, urbanization, and mainstream Indian culture, often drift away from these traditions. The absence of written historical records and the lack of institutional support for Siddi heritage further contribute to this cultural loss. The broader Indian society often perceives the Siddis through a racialized lens, viewing them as "different" due to their distinct physical features and African lineage. Many Siddis face social exclusion and stereotyping, often being mistaken for foreigners or African tourists. This othering creates barriers to full social integration, making it difficult for them to assert their dual identity as both African and Indian. Despite these challenges, the Siddis have adapted to Indian society by adopting regional languages, local customs, and religious syncretism, blending African traditions with Hindu, Muslim, and Christian influences. Their identity remains fluid, shaped by historical legacies, contemporary struggles, and ongoing cultural negotiations.

Education and media play a crucial role in preserving Siddi history and culture. However, the community has historically had limited access to quality education, which has impacted their ability to document and promote their heritage. The Siddis have high dropout rates due to economic hardships and a lack of educational resources in their communities. Efforts by NGOs and government initiatives have attempted to improve literacy and cultural education, but there is still a gap in including Siddi history in Indian academic curricula. Integrating African-Indian migration history and Siddi contributions into textbooks could enhance awareness and foster pride among younger Siddis. Mainstream Indian media rarely represent the Siddi experience, contributing to their invisibility. When Siddis do appear in media, they are often portrayed through a lens of exoticism or racial stereotypes rather than as an integral part of Indian society. However, some recent efforts, such as documentaries, news reports, and independent films, have started to bring Siddi voices into the public sphere, helping to challenge misconceptions and raise awareness. Although there has been some progress, more representation in literature, cinema, and academia is needed to counter stereotypes and ensure that Siddi cultural heritage is not lost.

The Siddi identity is shaped by their historical migration, cultural adaptation, and contemporary struggles. They continue to balance their African heritage with Indian influences, striving for social acceptance and artistic preservation. While education, media, and policy reforms can enhance their visibility and rights, addressing economic and racial inequalities remains a key challenge. By recognizing and valuing the Siddi contribution to India's multicultural identity, society can help ensure the survival of their unique cultural legacy. Despite its challenges, the Siddi community has witnessed renewed efforts in cultural preservation through government policies, NGO-led programs, grassroots initiatives, and global collaborations. These efforts aim to empower the community, preserve their unique heritage, and integrate their history into broader cultural discourses. The Indian government has taken several measures to uplift the Siddi community, particularly by recognizing them as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in states like Karnataka, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. This recognition grants them access to affirmative action policies, including reservations in education and employment under the Scheduled Tribes Act. One of the most significant government initiatives is the Special Central Assistance (SCA) to Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), which aims to improve educational, healthcare, and employment opportunities for marginalized tribal communities, including the Siddis. Additionally, the Karnataka State Tribal Research Institute (KSTRI) has conducted research and documentation projects focused on preserving Siddi traditions. Several NGOs and independent organizations have been crucial in preserving and promoting Siddi heritage. Some key initiatives include, as shown in the Figure 8.



Figure 8 Preserving Siddi Heritage

Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, an organization that focuses on tribal empowerment through education, skill development, and cultural awareness programs for the Siddis. Adivasi Academy (Bhasha Research Centre), founded by Dr. G.N. Devy, this organization documents tribal languages and artistic practices, including those of the Siddi community in Gujarat. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Programs, Various UNESCO-backed initiatives focus on preserving indigenous oral traditions, and some efforts have been directed towards documenting Siddi folk music and storytelling. These initiatives aim to strengthen the Siddis' socio-economic status while ensuring their cultural heritage is preserved and passed on to future generations.

Local Siddi communities have actively revitalized their traditions through community-run cultural festivals, performances, and educational programs. In Karnataka, the Siddi Jathre (Siddi Festival) is held annually to showcase their traditional music, dance, and craftsmanship. This festival has gained popularity recently and serves as a platform for raising awareness about Siddi culture. In Gujarat, the Siddi Goma Group, a renowned Afro-Indian dance and music ensemble, has gained international recognition for preserving Dhamal dance and traditional drumming. Their performances in India and abroad have helped generate global interest in Siddi heritage while providing economic opportunities for community members. The younger generation of Siddis has been increasingly involved in cultural preservation, using social media, digital platforms, and community workshops to document and share their heritage. Initiatives like "Siddi Youth Collective", an informal group of Siddi students and activists, work towards raising awareness about their community's history, challenges, and cultural expressions. Additionally, young Siddis are participating in academic research and cultural documentation projects, collaborating with universities and anthropologists to record oral histories, folk traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems. This growing youth-led movement is helping to bridge the gap between modern aspirations and cultural heritage preservation. In recent years, there has been an increase in transnational collaborations between the Siddis and African diaspora communities. These connections help strengthen their cultural identity and foster a sense of belonging to the more extensive Afro-descendant global network. The African Union's African Diaspora Division has recognized the Siddis as part of the African diaspora, leading to cultural exchange programs and academic collaborations. Kenyan and Tanzanian Cultural Organizations have worked with the Siddis to explore their Swahili and Bantu linguistic roots, organizing joint heritage projects. The People of African Descent Global Summit (UN Initiative) has highlighted the Siddi community's historical struggles and contributions, bringing them into international discussions on race, identity, and marginalization.

Globalization has had a dual impact on Siddi identity. While modern influences and migration have led to a loss of certain traditional practices, it has also opened new avenues for cultural expression and recognition. The rise of digital media, international collaborations, and academic research has allowed the Siddis to showcase their heritage to a global audience. Documentary films such as *Sidis of Gujarat: African Indians* (2021) by Beheroze Shroff, *Rhythm of Dhamma* (2024) by Jayan Cherian, and *From Africa to India* by Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. have brought international attention to their unique cultural history. Moreover, Siddi artists, musicians, and activists are gaining global platforms, helping to challenge stereotypes and promote Afro-Indian cultural dialogue. The increased presence of Siddis in global networks has strengthened their collective identity, fostering a sense of pride and resilience in their heritage. By integrating

education, media representation, and international networking, the Siddis are carving out a stronger cultural identity, ensuring that their rich history and traditions continue to thrive for future generations. The study of the Siddi tribe highlights their rich cultural heritage, shaped by centuries of African-Indian interactions, and their continuous efforts to maintain a distinct identity within India's socio-cultural framework. Key cultural practices such as Dhamal dance, Siddi Goma music, syncretic religious traditions, and unique culinary and artistic expressions are vital markers of their Afro-Indian heritage. However, despite these vibrant traditions, the Siddis face numerous challenges, including economic marginalization, racial discrimination, loss of traditional knowledge, and limited representation in mainstream Indian society. As Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, "Diasporic communities often struggle with identity, torn between assimilation and cultural preservation," a reality that profoundly resonates with the Siddis' experience in India.

To address these concerns, future research should focus on more profound anthropological and linguistic studies to document the linguistic remnants of African heritage in Siddi folk traditions and oral histories. Policy interventions must prioritize educational and economic empowerment, ensuring that the Siddis benefit from tribal welfare programs, land rights, and affirmative action policies. Furthermore, promoting Siddi culture in Indian mainstream society through media representation, academic inclusion, and cultural festivals is crucial in challenging stereotypes and fostering broader acceptance. As UNESCO emphasizes, "Cultural heritage is a bridge between the past and the future," and sustained efforts are necessary to preserve the Siddi legacy while integrating their identity into India's diverse cultural landscape (UNESCO).

8. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this research are included within the manuscript. The raw data was collected with the assistance of Mrs. Anusha Thangam Thevar, Medical Assistant from Mundgod, Karnataka, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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