Indians of African Origin

The Saurastrian peninsula, being the westernmost end of India, has acted as the landing spot for various transcontinental migrations. The population of this region, like many other places, has retained the evidences of history in its ethnic forms. The Siddi of Gujarat are a similar group with undoubted African origin. Today they are listed in the Government schedule for tribes in India. Their total number as counted in the 1961 Census is 3,645 in Gujarat. Of this Junagarh district has the maximum concentration, accounting for nearly 66 percent of the total. The rest of the population are found scattered in various other districts of Rajkot. In Junagarh there are four villages within the famous Gir forest (known for its lions) in which the Siddi are found. These are Jambur, Sirwan, Moruka and Akolbadi. The former two are entirely inhabited by the Siddi while the latter two have both Siddi and non-Siddi groups.

Negroes variedly termed as Siddi, Hupsi, Kafri, etc., are known from many other parts of Western and Central India, but reliable census figure of these populations are not available. The Negroes of both Hyderabad and Kerala States are counted in earlier census and their total number roughly equals to the same of Gujarat. The Siddi of Gujarat, however, appears to have remained more in isolation and for a longer period of time as compared to the other two States of their occurrence.

History mentions two Siddi kingdoms established during 1100 A.D. on the western coast at Janjira and Jaffrabad (near present day Bombay and Diu respectively). It can be tentatively assumed, mainly because of the identical name of the present community, that the present day Siddi population of Gujarat is mainly a contribution of either the slaves or the descendants of the Siddi of Jaffrabad. In the early years of Moghul rule in India there was a brisk trade going on between Africa and the western coast of India. Slave trading was one of the prevalent customs among the traders. African and Abyssinian slaves were valued for their cheap upkeep (one plate of rice for a whole day of hard work—as the local literature cites). A large number of slaves were brought by the traders for their use and also for sale. Kaniz—a small town near Anand in North Gujarat—was once a flourishing storehouse of slaves (kaniz is a Persian word meaning slave girl).

Many of the slaves by the virtue of their loyalty and good work earned freedom and settled in various parts of the State. The community of Siddi, as described in the early records, identify them as having skill and utility of the highest order giving them influence and fostering a pride in their own which
made them among the most skillful and daring sailors and soldiers in Western India. They are described as hot tempered, dishonest and luxurious. Rich Siddi decorate their houses with sword, shield, lances, etc.

The Siddi of Gujarat as I saw them are poles apart from the rich, sophisticated group described in the historical records, though they may be a part of the same group, at least as far as the name goes. Today they are the most degraded groups of people with almost 90 percent of them working as sedentary workers. The rest 10 percent hold very small agricultural holding barely enough to meet their personal consumption. In spite of this poor economic status of the population, they are always found to be in very jovial mood with least care about food for tomorrow.

In religion, they belong to Hanafi school of the Sunni sect of Mohammedanism. There are, however, a small number of Christian Siddi also found especially in the south-eastern Saurashtra. It seems these represent the descendants of the slaves and sailors the Portuguese brought to Diu. Whether Christian or Muslim the Siddi are culturally speaking very much Hinduised. The usual clan ('Gotra or Attak) names of the Siddi are always identical with the local Hindu clan names like Mori, Makwani, Mazgum, Parmer, etc. They are usually not aware of their own religious norms. Jambur, a completely Siddi village with a population of 700 persons, has a mosque looked after by a mullah who is a non-Siddi and the attendance for prayers in this mosque is surprisingly low. In their day-to-day life religion has no meaning. They do not read the Koran, neither do they follow the usual pattern of prayer, Ramadan fasting, etc., the significance of Idulzuha, Bakra Idd and similar religious functions being largely unknown to them. The only Pir revered generally by all the Siddi is Baba Ghor who was supposed to be a trader from Abyssinia who established the agate industry in Cambay. The tomb of this saint is situated near Ahmedabad—the capital of Gujarat. The other saint mainly worshipped locally is known popularly as Baba Nagarchi Pir ('the drum-beater saint'). It is believed that Sayyed Ahmed Rahmatullah, a drum-beater in the troops of Muhammad Guznavi, had divine powers in him. He settled in Jambur sometimes in 1300 A.D. His tomb is situated in a corner of the village. Today the entire religious activities of the Siddi of Jambur are around the durga of Baba Nagarchi—the tomb of Rahmatullah.

In customs and practices there is not much difference found in them when compared with the local Hindu groups. For instance, on the seventh month of pregnancy they serve coconut, sweets and clothes among the villagers, the number of individuals entertained depending entirely on the economic ability of the household. Delivery as a rule is always found to take place in the expecting mother's parents' place, at least for the first issue. On the sixth day, they have both 'Sunnat' and naming ceremony. Though feast is prescribed for all such occasions, what actually is done most of the times is serving just a nominal quantity of rice and gur (jaggery) to only one or two persons. Marriage takes place within a couple of years after attainment of puberty. The boys as also the girls are not encouraged to have their own choice in marriage. Cross-cousin is preferential pattern, but non-availability of marriageable daughter of mother's brother may lead to negotiations with other families. They claim to practise clan exogamy in such cases. Settlement of the date of marriage is done by a knot-tying ceremony. The fathers for both the bride and the groom sit face to face in the presence of several members of the family and village. The girl's father starts making knots on a piece of thread, and the boy's father also makes the same number of knots on an identical thread. The girl's father can stop at any number he desires and the boy's father has to follow him. After the girl's father has stopped,
both of them go back to their respective homes. Afterwards, each day a knot is untied in both the families. The marriage is celebrated when they reach the last knot. A feast marks the ceremony with the usual certificate of marriage issued by the resident mullah.

To seek for a sociological reason, in order to explain the occurrence of Hindu clan names and the claim of clan exogamy among the Siddi, one has to understand the basic institutional pattern of the African communities from which the Siddi are drawn. Apparently, one may be tempted to explain this as the result of culture contact with the local Gujarati. But a careful investigation will reveal that the Siddi were always under the influence of the Arabs from which they were transferred to the Moghuls. The possibility of Hindu influence on such a group which was already converted in either Africa or Arabia and remained subsequently as slaves of the Muslim kings of Gujarat, is rather remote. On the contrary strict clan division and avoidance of mating within the clan might have been surviving in Africa even after their conversion to Mohammedanism. This practice, as can be clearly seen, is diametrically opposite cousin marriage, and lineage endogamy practised among the Muslims in general all over the world. I seek an explanation of the existence of this contradicting phenomena among the Siddi more as a survival of original tribal form than as recent Hindu influence.

In family structure, as also kinship terms, the Siddi are absolutely identical to the local Hindus. It may be of considerable interest to see that in many structural features they resemble more the Hindus than the Muslims of Gujarat. Polygamy, though allowed, has rarely been practised. This, of course, is more due to their extremely low economical position.

Factors which bring about the organic solidarity in a community like every individual acting as an instrument in the total structure of the social group are non-existent. The mechanical solidarity of being together with the common burden and benefits is the main binding force for the community. This is unlike what is expected of a tribal group. To my mind, this feature has slowly arisen in this community as they were suddenly uprooted from diverse tribal stocks and brought together in a group to be grafted in an alien group entirely without context. The first reaction of such a newborn group is to form a common bond and develop common interaction which in course of time can give rise to social norms and behaviour. Siddi could not develop any such phenomena because, as slaves their entire activities used to be governed by the non-Siddi rulers. Having got freedom from such rulers in the last century (?), all that they could afford is to come together in a physical sense. This is about the fifth or sixth generation of them living as a community. Today they do not know anything about where they came from, neither do they know that people similar to them in look are rulers in various countries of Africa. They speak Gujarati, though their voice is glotto-pharyngeal in sound. N is pronounced as L. Local Gujarati claim to find African words in their vocabulary, but no linguist has so far confirmed this.

A dance performed by Siddi called dhamal has, to my mind, retained undoubted African elements in it. They dance dhamal during a particular Urs festival in November, when they will wildly beat cylindrical drums and howl and jump. The main dancer smears white colour all over his body and face and wears cowree shells on his gown. On the head and around the waist peacock feathers are used to decorate. They sing about their forefathers who came from the high seas and propitiate them. This dance as contrast to the local garba appears as a conspicuous alien feature. Cowree shells are put in a coconut shell and wrapped in a red cloth and this is held in the hand to produce jingle music by shaking. The combination which forms a musical
instrument is known as *ulka*. The dance goes on for hours sometimes up to early morning and many a time the main dancer enters a trance by the time of finish. No particular explanation of spiritual transcendent or supernatural power arrival theory is given to such trance as the *dhamal* dancer may enter into, but he is taken near the *durga* or mosque and laid on the ground. After everybody is tired, the dance ends with a feast of buffalo meat.

Leadership is virtually absent in this community at present. Though there is a *patil*, 'headman', who is elected by the Siddi in their community gathering, his power and authority are mainly utilised in representation of grievances to the authorities. It is said that even a couple of decades ago the *patil* had the power of executing punishment in the manner of public flogging to the social offenders. The dying out of this centralised control of the community through a self-elected leader is mainly due to the coming of administrative decentralisation. Here in the Jambur village *panchayat* the Siddi are represented by only one member, the rest are taken from the non-Siddi village Madhopur which in conjunction with Jambur has one *panchayat*.

The present position of this community in Gujarat is that of a total marginal existence. They live unaware of the developments of the country and may soon get assimilated in the local Muslim population because of their close breeding groups and small number.