

AFRICANS TO AFRO-INDIANS: THEIR JOURNEY, ASSIMILATION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract: Today, Africans and their descendants are found on every inhabited continent. African traditions have influenced socio-economic culture. African derived forms of religious and musical practices helped displaced Africans to become assimilated into the social set-up in costal India. Numerous Africans rose to positions of authority as generals and governors, even as eunuchs at princely courts in India. The Siddis of India have found their niche in India's complex hierarchy of Castes and tribes, but their position in this ranking is near the bottom. The African presence in Indian history and culture provides the primary framework for the present work. This research covers various aspects related to Africans who are now profoundly assimilated into social fabric of India. Their role in the History of India is significant. The study tries to convince the fact and therefore, concludes that Indian culture has been enriched, influenced by the African culture and African Diaspora played a significant role in India.

Key words: African, Assimilation, Diaspora, India, Siddi & Bava Gor

The African Diaspora concept includes a triadic relationship; Africa as homeland, Africans and their descendants, and the adopted residence/home abroad. This connection is built on many years of voluntary and involuntary dispersals with primary and secondary migrations as well. In addition, this Diaspora has the following characteristics: Collective memories and myths about Africa as the homeland or place of origin, a common socio-economic condition, a transnational network, a sustained resistance to the African presence abroad and an affirmation of their human rights. All of these factors characterise the dispersed communities of African descent out side Africa.

JOURNEY OF AFRICANS: ROSE TO POWER

African and Asians have been migrating to each other's continents for thousands of years. While overland routes have likely been used the longest, by the third century B.C.E. the trade winds across the Indian Ocean made it possible for dhows to sail from the east coast of Africa to India from

April to September and then to go from India to Africa between November and February. Trade across the Indian Ocean, including trade in human beings, shaped the economies and societies of both Africa and Asia. Asian slaves in Africa and African slaves in Asia performed important economic, political, and cultural functions, and their legacies are part of both continents today. From 800 C.E. to 1900, millions of Africans may have been transported to sites in the Indian Ocean world, including East Africa, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. A relatively small number of enslaved Africans settled in what today are Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, three contemporary nation-states that were once occupied by Great Britain. Historian Ralph Austen estimates that during the nineteenth century perhaps three hundred thousand Africans from the Swahili coast were transported to destinations in the Middle East and South Asia, but most of those slaves went to the Persian Gulf, Yemen, and the Hijaz and eventually to Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, perhaps fewer than one thousand African slaves per annum arrived on the Indian subcontinent (Curtis, 2014, p. 89).

By the second millennium C.E., African slave elites and free Africans had become powerful political and military actors in South Asia. As with the Mamluks, the warrior slaves of Egypt, African slaves in South Asia rose to the highest rungs of power in Indian society. In the 1200s, Queen Raziya of the Delhi sultanate named Jalal ad-Din Yaqut, a Habshi slave, as master of the royal stables. In 1490 Sidi Badr, a royal guard, staged a coup and ruled the region of Bengal for three years; he became known as Shams ad-Din Abu Nasr Muzaffar Shah. During this same period, two of four governors of the Bahmani kingdom, located in the south of India, were African. Then, from 1600 to 1626, Malik Ambar, an African-born slave, emerged as the real power behind the throne in the Ahmednagar sultanate. In the next century more Africans migrated or arrived against their will as military slaves; their expertise in naval warfare allowed them to extend control over much of the Gujarati and Maharashtra coasts. In 1618 Malik Ambar appointed Sidi Surur to command the island fort of Janjira, located off the coast of Maharashtra. Janjira's link with Malik Ambar and the Ahmednagar sultanate was severed by Janjira leader Sidi Ambar the Little, who became the first effective monarch of Janjira state. The African Cavalry Guards in Hyderabad were, along with the nobles of Janjira, one of the last vestiges of African military power in South Asia. In 1948, when Hyderabad's leaders agreed to join the newly independent state of India, this unit was dissolved (Curtis, 2014, pp.90-92).

Several Africans played an important role in different Indian dynasties Battuta recalls that at

Alapur, the Governor was the Abyssinian Badr. A man whose bravery passed into a proverb. Some of the Africans who rose to positions of considerable importance were: Malik Kafur, Malik Ambar, Malik Sarwar, Mubarak Shah, Ibrahim Shah, Malik Andil, Malik Sandal, Yaqut Dabuli Habshi, Ikhlas Khan, Dilawar Khan, Khavass Khan, Ulugh Khan. Their role in the History of India is Significant. The Africans, who arrived in Hyderabad, Deccan, apart from playing their traditional role as bonded guards and servants, were recruited as the Nizam's private bodyguard. Other Siddis were elevated to the status of Khanazahs (protégés) and became trusted advisers of the Nizams (Karmwar,2010,72).

There are evidences of African's role in socio-political and military life during the period of Delhi sultanate, Nizamshahi, Adilshahi, Qutbshahi, Imadshahi, Mughal India and Hyderabad till India's independence. African dispersal in India covers several states/provinces namely, Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Daman and Diu, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. In Gujarat, they are found in the districts of Surat, Ahmedabad, Amerili, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Rajkot, and Bhavnagar, Broach/Bharuch near Ratanpur and the former kingdom of Kutch/Katchch. They are normally settled in areas of their own but in Ahmedabad, Broach and Kutch they live in mixed areas as they do in parts of Andhra Pradesh. In Karnataka, they are concentrated around Yellapur, Haliyal, Ankola, Joida, Mundagod and Sirs Talukas of Uttara Kannada and in Khanapur of Belgaum and Kalagatgi of Dharwad district. Their language is a mixture of Sidi-Konkani and Siddi-Marathi. They also speak Kannada. In Maharashtra they are settled in Raigad district. In Uttar Pradesh they are situated in Jaunpur. Their involvement in the court-politics increased so much sometimes that they emerged as king-makers also. In the Janjira and Sachin kingdoms they rose from king-makers to Emperors (Karmwar, 2010,71).

Though most Africans remained in lowly positions, other Africans, surprisingly, were able to rise to positions of prominence and power in India. Africans held, at one time, high-ranking positions in government and in the military in Khandesh and in Bhavnagar in western India, and in Hyderabad in southern India. Africans, who had once been slaves, even married into several Indian royal families. For example, Mehr Lekha Begum Sahiba became a queen when she married the nawab, or prince, of Bengal. The former slave, Yasmin Mahal, became the queen of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh when she married the king there. Bamba Muller, the daughter of an Ethiopian woman and a German man, married into the Indian family that had once owned the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, which is today part of the British royal family's prized "Crown Jewels". Bamba Muller married the last ruler of the great Sikh empire, Maharaja Duleep Singh, in 1864 and became a maharani or princess. Some

Africans even created their own kingdoms. The best known are the dynasties established in Sachin in western India, and in Janjira in northwestern India. Both Sachin and Janjira had their own currencies, coats of arms, and armies--and were much feared and respected by neighbouring states (Goffe, 2013).

IBN BATUTA'S ACCOUNT

The itinerant Moroccan savant Ibn Batuta, who travelled through India in the 1330s and 1340s, writes about a Habshi eunuch called Sunbul who attended on him while he was in Delhi. The Sultan of Delhi also gifted Batuta African slave girls. About the Habshis of Gujarat, Batuta writes that they “are the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean; let there be but one of them on a ship and it will be avoided by Indian pirates and idolaters”. In 1572, when the Mughals conquered Gujarat, there were 700 Habshis among the 12,000 horsemen in the service of Gujarat. Many Africans also came to India as traders. With the establishment of the Portuguese Asian empire in the 16th century, slaves began to be shipped regularly to India from the region of modern Mozambique as well. Goa, Daman and Diu served as the chief ports for this international trade in people. The slave trade was a crucial component of the political economy of the Indian Ocean trade. One estimate says that some 4.7 million Africans were traded as slaves and shipped to Arab lands, Persia and India from 800 A.D. to 1896 (Sayeed, 2016).

BOTANICAL EXCHANGES

The history of botanical exchanges between Africa and the Indian subcontinent reaches back in time over 5,000 years. Recent advances in archaeobotanical have revealed these connections through evidence of food crops of African origin found at various archaeological sites in the subcontinent. However, little is known about the people that brought the crops to these places and other parts of the Indian Ocean world. This is also the case with other plants from Africa such as the charismatic baobab tree that appears to have had a longstanding presence in South Asia. Most scholarly accounts assume that 'Arab traders' were responsible for introducing baobabs to this region but do not offer any reasons for their doing so. Few scholars, if any, have sought to relate the dispersal of baobabs with the history of African migrations to the region. Recent advances in archaeobotanical have revealed that human movements and biotic exchanges between Africa and the Indian subcontinent extend far back into prehistory. Evidence for these movements has been found at sites in the Indus valley, western and peninsular India, where food crops originating from Africa such as sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*), finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*),

hyacinth bean (*Lablab purpureus*) and cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) appear in the archaeological records between 3,500 and 4,500 years ago. The tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica*), which is said to originate from the Sudan, is estimated to have been introduced even earlier and dispersed across the subcontinent into South-east Asia. In addition to these widely cultivated food plants, there are other plants of African origin such as the doum palm (*Hyphaene thebaica*) and the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) which have limited or disjunct geographical distribution in this region and do not appear to be cultivated in any significant way. Although there are no archaeological records or archival accounts that establish when and from which regions of Africa these plants were brought to various places in the Indian Ocean world, it is possible to trace the historical connections and role of African migrants by combining genetic and cultural evidence associated with the plants between places of origin and introduction (Rangan & Bell, 2015).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Archaeological sites trace the earliest relation between India and East African countries and provide evidences to support their trade related bond. Archaeological excavations at the site of Rojdi in Gujarat have revealed the presence of domesticated grains that had their origin in Africa. These include finger millet dating around 2500-2300 BC (Weber, 1998). There are ancient sites in South Asia which have yielded evidence for the prehistoric production of Jowar of African origin. Jowar was grown at Pirack in the earliest period dating back to circa 2000 B.C. There are sufficient grounds to prove the African origin of the millet also, though non-biological evidence is lacking for contact between India and Africa during or prior to the Second millennium. The only possibility that emerges is the direct connection across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Since the overland route to India could not be of any practical use, there is a reason to suppose that proto-historic maritime activity connecting the Indian sub-continent to Mesopotamia was fairly wider in scope than the available historical records reveal. In 2000 B.C., Indian cotton was widely in use in Mesopotamia where Indian traders had their settlement. Sesamum, wheat, rice was exported to East Africa from India. In Gujarat, at Lothal harbour structures have been found of that era confirming the existence of port and dockyard facilities on the Indian side of the trade route where ships could load and unload their goods. Therefore, it can be conclusively averred that the earliest trade in the Indian Ocean existed between the Gulf and Western India, especially Gujarat, Cutch and Sind in and around 2000 B.C. (Chauhan, 1995).

According to *Cyril A. Hromnik*, India had seaworthy ships and it must have left a deep mark on all the coasts of the ocean that bears its name *i.e.* the Indian Ocean. The works of early writers make it amply clear that Indian ships sailed regularly to the coast of East Africa at the time. The range of items such as Indian '*Bhang*', Coconut scrapers, beads, cotton, metalwork, architecture, different currencies in the east and even South Africa covered the period between 3000 to 200 B.C. Indian gold mining on and around the south Zambezi plateau might have started as early as the end of the Second millennium B.C. in the opinion of Hromnik, the arrow heads, the first tools made in Africa, had Indian origin and the linguistic evidence, as the best recorder of history, further make us believe that the area which is called in modern times as 'Sub-Saharan Africa' was in fact Indo-Africa (Hromnik,1981). *S.A.I. Tirmizi's*(1968) Scholarly work on Indian sources for African history clearly reveals that ebony, ivory and cotton goods including silk meant for wrapping the well-known Egyptian mummies were supplied to Egypt in the Second millennium B.C. by the Abyssinian and Somali traders who used to transport them from India. He avers that the trade between India and East African coast has been going on at least since Roman time.

CULTURAL ASSILIMIATION

Today the Sidis of Bombay, Hyderabad, Kamataka, and Gujarat are mostly poor and marginalized, but their African roots are still evident in musical instruments, names of instruments, and certain stylistic features of performance. Beginning in Uttara Kannada, in Karnataka state, we visit Hindu, Christian, and Muslim Sidis, observe coconut shell rattles, vertical drums, women engaged in polyrhythmic handclapping, and singing in thirds. In Hyderabad, we see musicians at a wedding with frame drums and a large brass pot played with sticks. The instruments are not uniquely African, but notable since they are relatively unusual except among the Sidis. In Bombay the Africanisms are more obvious: in a small shrine are four large lyres called nangaa, the Bantu inanga. Lacking strings and unplayed today, their importance to the community is obvious: leaders of ritual music in Sidi communities are still called nangasi, or inanga players. Another instrument, in this case actively in use, is a tall cylindrical footed drum, common in Africa, but otherwise unknown in India. In the community of Rajpipla, another quintessential Central African instrument is revealed-the malunga, a gourd-resonated musical bow, a virtual twin of the familiar Brazilian berimbau from Angola, except that the malunga is a "braced bow" with a small loop dividing the string into two segments, while the berimbau has an undivided string (Knight, 2007).

SHRINES AND SIDDI

In India, there are numerous shrines dedicated to saintly Siddi ancestors, many of which originated as a gift given by a royal patron. Today, these shrines form important Religious Centres where Siddis venerate an assembly of black Sufi saints by playing what is known as *Goma or Damal*. The first word has its root in Bantu language the second derives from Indian Sufi traditions. The interchangeable use of both words for Siddi performances of sacred permission, music and dance nicely illustrate the fusion of African derived practises with Indian forms of Sufism. African spirits emerged with Sufi saints, but their acceptance as superhuman agents was not confined to Siddis. In this way, African derived forms of religious and musical practices helped displaced Africans to become assimilated into the social set-up in Gujarat. Ethiopian and other African slaves taken to India were for the most part converted to Islam. This change of religion sometimes occurred even on the boats transporting the captives across the sea. After conversion they almost invariably abandoned their pre-Muslim names, in favour of the Islamic ones. Slaves in medieval India, benefited from their conversion, in that it facilitated their integration into Indian Muslim society. Unlike Negro slaves in the New World, slaves in Muslim India were largely free from racial discrimination. They differed from slaves in America and the West Indies, moreover, in that they were not subjected to plantation labour. Many slaves in India entered the personal service of rulers and other politically important personalities (Alpers,2004).

KAPPIRI MUTHAPPAN: SHRINE IN KOCHI

The small shrine at Mangattumukku in Mattancherry bears no religious markings, idols, or symbols. It consists of a simple platform built onto an adjacent compound wall and a tiled roof covering it. Yet, people visit this shrine every day to light candles, offer flowers, cigars, tender coconuts, and even toddy to the ‘deity’ unique to Kochi – ‘Kappiri Muthappan.’ ‘Kappiri’ is the local slang for African slaves shipped to Kerala in the 16 century by the Portuguese. Brought to Kerala as slaves, kappiris were kept in inhuman conditions in dungeons or small cellars. Kochi was a centre for slave trade in the 16 century. The legend goes that when the Dutch pushed the Portuguese out of parts of Kerala in the 17 century, Portuguese traders buried their riches under large trees and sacrificed their African slaves so their ghosts would be around to guard the treasure. Kochiites believe that these ghosts still linger to protect the lost treasures of the Portuguese. Today, the ‘kappiri’ is a benign spirit or deity who smokes cigars, drinks toddy, and helps lost travellers. Many people here are firm

believers in the powers of the Kappiri. They also claim to have seen a ghost-like figure of the kappiri at night and the light from the cigar he smokes. Some have seen him sitting on walls drinking toddy and humming a tune. Religion and modernity have not dulled the local people's faith in Kappiri Muthappan. Those who believe in his powers still make offerings so that he may cure a loved one of some illness, or bring better fortune. Not much remains in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry to remind people of the African slaves who once lived here, though there are plenty of structures in memory of the Portuguese and Dutch slave owners. Dungeons used to hold slaves have now been broken down or converted into new housing. They left no buildings or plaques to indicate their presence in Kochi. What the slaves did leave behind are stories of their powers that give them a special place in Kochi, long after their masters left the land (Surenranath,2013).

The Siddis of India have found their niche in India's complex hierarchy of Castes and tribes, but their position in this ranking is near the bottom, slightly above the dalits. Because of low educational standards and religious divisions, they have not been able to form viable organizations to advocate Siddi interests. Some Siddi communities are Muslim, some others are even Hindu or Christian. More recently their common identity as Siddis seems to override their religious differences. They speak different languages Urdu, Kannada, Gujarati, Hindi, Konkani, with only a handful of educated Siddis able to communicate in English. They are regarded as a tribe rather than a caste. More elements of African identity are found among the Siddis of Gujarat, who make a living as a guardian of temples and mosques, selling flowers, incense and performing prayer rites. Central to the Siddis Sufi Cult is Gori Pir, a black saint, whose wise judgment and blessings are sought by Siddis and non-Siddis alike. The Siddi communities of Gujarat and adjacent regions have made significant contributions to the larger sphere of south Asian Culture. These contributions include agate-mining and bead-manufacture, as well as local trade, long distance trade networks that connect the Indian subcontinent to the furthest reaches of the Islamic world in Africa, Southeast Asia and West Asia (Alpers,2004).

In Karnataka among the Siddi families there are Catholics, Hindus and Muslims. In Haliyal there are only Muslims and Christians, and in the Ghat areas of Yellapur and Ankola only Hindus. The Siddi people are divided into three religious groups, for which a distinct siddi self-identity has not yet been developed. Some of the Christians changed their religion after settling in the forests of Kanara. After living for generations among Hindus they considered themselves to be Hindus. The Muslims have a strong identity. They are very particular that they are called Muslim Siddis and not

just Siddis or in some rare cases they would not like to be called Siddis at all. They are Sunni Muslim as they say they are direct descendants of Mohammad and their guru is Bava Gor, a disciple of Mohammad. One common feature of all the Siddis found in Karnataka, as also those in Maharashtra and Goa, is that they have retained some of their original culture. The Siddis do not suffer from any sort of prejudice, either racial or cultural. Moreover, there are no pressure to change; whatever changes have taken place is voluntary.

Similarity and the extent of assimilation of Africans with Indians can be seen from different cultural rituals and their day-to-day life-style. Siddis trace their descent along the male line. The dress of the Siddis is very much similar to that of the Muslim communities of India. The males generally wear a shirt or an ordinary pajama and a turban. Women generally put on a choli and Odhani. The cultural similarity is clear from the fact that the Swastika also occurs in Zanzibar, though no meaning is attached to it, being used more for decorations. Thus, there can be no question that Siddis are assimilated, both in terms of social integration and in terms of cultural norms.

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