

The Siddis of Gujarat: Cultural resilience and social integration

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Abstract

Indian subcontinent is a resident of diverse communities and cultures. Siddi community, as one among them, scattered and settled across geographical and political terrain in India. Siddi community represents a unique case of the African descendants from Bantu peoples whose ancestors were brought to India through trade, soldier and trans-oceanic slave trading between the 7th and 19th centuries by various Arab, Portuguese and other traders. The community lived in areas such as mainly in Gir Somnath, Junagadh, Jamnagar, Bhuj; and scattered across the other parts of Gujarat state. The Siddis has maintained the unique features of their traditional culture, especially one of their most vibrant and unique art forms as Dhamal dance, the traditional drums, music and oral folklore. These cultural practices through which they have successfully adapted to the Gujarati linguistic, religious and social context. Through a review of historical documentation, ethnographic research and field-research (funded by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi), the present research paper explores dynamics of the Siddi tribe of Gujarat, an enchanting fusion of their African roots with Indian traditions and integration. The concept of dynamics operationalises as patterns of continuity, transformation and integration observed in the Siddi community in Gujarat. It also considers challenges such as negligence, economic marginalization and debates around official recognition. The study foregrounds how the Siddi identity has been shaped by creolization, by syncretic religious practices and by external representations. Further, it investigates how the community's struggle for recognition and resources reflects broader issues faced by Siddi community in Gujarat. The article concludes that while assimilation has enabled certain socio-economic gains, it also threatens the erasure of distinct Siddi cultural forms – calling for culturally sensitive policy interventions to support identity preservation and community empowerment.

Keywords: Siddi Community, African descendants, Bantu, Gujarat, Culture, Creolization, Syncretism, Dhamal dance, Assimilation, Community empowerment

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Introduction

Culture is the way of life of a group of people. Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 defined that culture "consists of everything that a man is able to attain, be it knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom, or any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society." Modern interpretation extends this to include culture as a living system of acquisitive, accepted and contested meaning, symbolism, practices and institutions which influence worldviews and human actions.

Over the centuries, numerous communities have migrated to India during the different course of historical periods and settled in various parts of the society. Among those people, Siddi stands out as a living reminder of transcontinental movements, colonial histories and legacies of slavery. Siddis, tracking their origins to Bantu speaking populations of Africa continent, are concentrated in Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana. Afro-Indians or Habshis, the Siddis are descendants of the Bantu-speaking people of the Africa who embarked across the Indian Ocean in various roles, ranging from traders to mercenaries, sailors to pilgrims and shamefully, slaves, over several centuries. Siddis arrived in waves beginning as early as the 7th century AD, notably in times of Arab trade, the Delhi Sultanate, Mughals, and the Portuguese colonial rule and primarily consist of people from the Zanj coast. A notable influx of the Siddis into India occurred with the Portuguese colonies in India between the 16th and 19th century. With the passage of time, they adjusted and adapted to the prevailing social, cultural and economic systems, gradually integrating into Indian society and becomes an integral part of its rich cultural heritage and civilization.

A substantial proportion of the Siddis has been living in the Gujarat for centuries, having arrived in different phases of history and settled in different parts of Gujarat. Siddis of Gujarat are predominantly Muslims, however alongside with their Islamic beliefs, they incorporate elements of animism, reverence for ancestral spirit, certain Hindu practices and Sufi devotional rituals. Their identity reflects a rich syncretism, shaped by the integration of diverse cultural and religious influences. They have a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, with distinctive music and dance. This paper explores the dynamics underlying the Siddi culture in Gujarat, the ways the community practices, preserves and adapts its distinct culture amid historical and contemporary challenges.

Theoretical background of the study

This study on the cultural dynamics of the Siddi tribe is grounded in the multiple interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that capture culture as fluid and evolving. Paul Gilroy (1993) focus on hybridity, creolization, and transnational relationships as manifestations of creative cultural production and resistance. The study also draws upon Stuart Hall school of thought on culture, which strives to go beyond the idea of cultural identity as a fixed position to fixed origins that can be marked in a ritualistic manner; that is, border crossing theory

suggests that ‘cultural identity’ is not fixed, but fluid and positional, and operates through ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots.’

Literature Review

Although many research studies has been conducted on Siddis in India, there are scanty research on the Siddis of Gujarat. Nevertheless, these studies provide an important insight about the history, culture, identity, genetics and migration across different regions of India. Accordingly, the present literature synthesises the` available literature into three themes as historical, genetics and cultural & identity dimensions to identify the existing knowledge and establish the rational for conducting the present research on the Siddis in Gujarat.

In the historical dimensions, Bhattacharya (1970), Mengesha (2003), Kessel (2006), Pancholi (2018), Zeleza (2010), Amarendra Kumar (2014), Czekalska & Kuczkiewicz-Fras (2016), Sovane (2023) and Kumar & Dubey (2024) documented on the Siddi’s historical evolution, slavery, migration, settlements and contemporary challenges.

Studies by Vijaykumar and Malhotra (1983), Vijaykumar et. al. (1987) and Gauniyal et. al. (2008), Shah et. al (2011) pointed out the genetics of Siddis’ ancestry to Bantu and population structures in India. These studies provide significant biological insights about the genetics of the Siddis.

In the cultural and identity dimensions, research by Bharucha (2003), Obeng (2020), Basu (2008). Drewal (2013), Jayawardene (2013), Shroff (2013), Singh (2015), Khader, (2020), Swathi & Dhayalakrishnan (2023), Dey (2025) and Reddy (2023) explores Siddi identity, religion, music, quilts, beliefs and cultural heritage.

Altogether, these books and articles paint a picture of Siddi culture as vibrant, intermingled, resilient, and adaptive, while also highlighting some areas for future research. The historical and genetic accounts of the Siddi community have founded well substantiated by credible evidence and with less scholarly dispute. Regarding the cultural and identity of the Siddi, existing scholarship paid little attention to the contemporary cultural dynamics and identity negotiations among Siddis, especially in Gujarat.

Population Profile

As the Census does not have specific & separate Siddi population, based on the Census 2001, the Gujarat Research & Training Society estimated the Siddi population as 8662 and out of which 4417 males and 4245 are female as reported by (<https://trti.gujarat.gov.in/siddi>).

Distribution of the Siddi Population by Gender in Gujarat

Zone	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total	Percentage
West	9444	49.40	9670	50.60	19114	100.00
South	376	52.37	342	47.63	718	100.00
Central/East	322	49.23	332	50.77	654	100.00
North	130	56.52	100	43.48	230	100.00
Total	10272	49.58	10444	50.42	20716	100.00

Sources: Household Listing from the survey conducted from December, 2025 to March, 2026 in Gujarat State (Funded by the ICSSR, New Delhi)

The total population of the Gujarat state is approximately 74.3 to 74.5 million, 9th most populous state in India in 2026 according to the Technical Group on Population Projections (<https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/india/gujarat-population.php>). There are 34 administrative districts. The Siddi population is geographically dispersed across several districts of Gujarat, although its distribution is highly concentrated in specific regions. In Gujarat, in comparison to other areas, the western zone of the state constitutes the principal settlement area, accounting for approximately 92 per cent total Siddi population in the state. Within this zone, 87 per cent proportion of the Siddis are resided in Gir Somnath, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Rajkot, Kutch districts, making these areas the primary centres of Siddi habitation. The conglomerate settlement of the Siddis in these areas reflects long-standing historical settlement patterns, social networks and livelihood opportunities that have contributed to the community's continued presence in the region. Minimal number of Siddis are also resided in Amreli, Devbhumi Dwarka, Bhavnagar, Porbandar, Surendranagar, Morbi districts of the western zone.

Apart from the western zone, the Siddi population is more sparsely distribute in other areas of Gujarat. In the Southern zone, Siddis are settle in Surat, Bharuch, Narmada districts consisting approximately 4 per cent of the total Siddi population in the Gujarat. In the Central/Eastern zone, Siddis are settle in Ahmedabad, Botad, Vadodara, Anand, Kheda consisting 3 per cent of the total Siddi population in the Gujarat. The Northern zone has the smallest concentration of Siddis consisting one per cent only of the total Siddi Population in the State. They are settled in Mahesana, Palanpur, Sabarkantha, Patan, Vav-Tharad, Gandhinagar. In overall, the spatial distribution of the Siddi population demonstrates a pronounced dominant concentration of settlement in western Gujarat; while remaining minimum population is dispersed across other parts of the State.

Based on the recommendation of the Dhebar Commission (1960-61), and further studies conducted during the fourth five-year plan, the central government initially identified 55 tribal communities as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) subsequently raised to 75 communities in 2006, which were renamed Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). In 2003, the Union government declared Siddi as Scheduled Tribe. PVTGs are identify based on extreme socio-economic disadvantages, isolation and fragile livelihoods.

Family & Marriage: The Siddis in Gujarat predominantly have nuclear families, although to some extend there are extended families also. Immediately after the marriage, usually the new couple establish a separate

neo-local household thereby forming a nuclear family. In terms of matrimonial rules, Siddis in Gujarat practice community endogamy with clan exogamy. Siddis prefer marriage within their own community, while some Siddis practice clan exogamy is strictly prohibited in many settlements such as Jambur and Talala (West Zone). However, considerable regional variations are there as among the Siddis in areas like Jamnagar marriage within the clan is reported. They also practice cross-cousin marriage, whereas parallel-cousin marriage is strictly prohibited. Monogamy is the predominant marriage practice among the Siddis, although some of them practice polygyny as per their economic strength to support multiple wives.

Nevertheless, community endogamy is the preferable form of alliance; inter-community matrimonial alliances are also accepted in certain circumstances. Siddis may accept bride from outside their community but have reservations about marriage of girls outside their community. In some areas of Bhuj and Kachch (West Zone), there are instances of individuals entering into matrimonial alliances with Muslims from foreign countries like United Arab Emirates, Iran etc.

The age at marriage has also undergone change overtime; the community observed age at marriage for boys and girls as per the legal norms 18 years for the girls and 21 years for the boys respectively. The emerging kind of marriage in the community is Samuha Vivah (collective marriage), where several couples solemnised together in a single ceremony or at the same event. Samuha Vivah are organised by the community members in support with the Jamat. Each couple solemnised in this function has a separate and exclusive marital relation. In overall, the family and matrimonial patterns of the Siddis in Gujarat depict the cultural continuity and social transformation.

Belief and Practices: The Siddis observe and celebrate many rituals and festivals respectively, reflects the convergence of their African ancestry with the socio-religious tradition with the Indian sub-continent. All Siddis in Gujarat are Muslims and practice Islam, but have developed distinctive religious practices over time. Generally, Siddis of Gujarat revere Bava Gor, who, travelled from Abyssinia to Mecca, then to Basra in Iraq, where he was initiated into Rifa'i Sufi order. He converted many followers in Sindh and Gujarat in the 14th century and after his death in 1383, was entombed in Ratanpur, Gujarat. Another version identified him as a merchant of agate (akik) stones, traditionally treasured for its protective and spiritual values. The Malunga African-Indian musical bow is his sacred symbol & emblem. Oral tradition also portrays Bava Gor as soldier, trader, mystic, saint and remover of evil spirits.

Siddis usually worship the shrines dedicated to Bava Gor, Bava Habash and Mai Misra (Bava Habash and Mai Misra are brother and sister of Bava Gor); and other shrines, usually maintained along with Sunni Vohra Muslims. However, the Siddis are Sunnis, they honor Sufi saints like Bava Gor, whose practices combine animist traditions (such as spirit possession and the sanctification of the dead man's ancestors) with Islamic rites and certain Hindu customs reflecting religious syncretism. The tradition of offering coconuts at revered

Shrines represents religious syncretism incorporation of Hindu ritual traditions into the devotional practices of the Siddi community. The syncretic element is also reflected in their traditional healing practices, which African ethno-medical knowledge with the indigenous medical practices such as Ayurveda. In the same way, oral histories, songs and quilting traditions have also evolved through incorporating Gujarati cultures while retaining elements of their African ancestry.

Zikr or Dhikr (remembrance of God) songs are sacred devotional chant performed as part of the Siddi's sufi tradition. Sung during Baithaaki dhamal (sitting session) to invoke Allah, Prophet Muhammad and also revered Sufi saints such as Bava Gor, Bava Habash, Mai Mishra and Nabi Sultan. One distinctive feature of Siddi Zikr is the use of a Swahili Creole language, blending Kiswahili, Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu. With other instruments, dholak (two-headed hand drum) and harmonium (pump organ) accompany devotional singings, rhythmic drumming and performance of dhamal dance, particularly during the Urs (death anniversary) of Bava Gor and other religious occasions. In addition to this distinctive practice, the Siddis observe major Islamic festivals including Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, Muharram and Milad-un-Nabi.

Faith in saints, sacred vows (mannat), blessings and the healing efficacy of shrines remains deeply embedded in community life. Visit to the dargahs, offerings and collective prayers are common expressions of devotion. Religious leaders and community elders continue to play a significant role in preserving these traditions and transmitting religious knowledge to younger generations, while reverence for ancestors and spiritual guardians continues to influence community customs and ritual practices amid contemporary changes.

Language: Sir Richard Francis Burton was one of the earliest European scholars to document the language spoken by the Siddi communities of Western India in his book "Sindh and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus" (1851). He identified the substantial presence of many African lexical elements in the Siddi vocabulary, which showed a close affinity to Swahili (Bantu people). His documentation of the Siddi language spoken in the coastal Sindh and Cutch (now Kutch District) at that time and contains altogether 122 words and phrases, numerals and 22 place names including ancestral homelands. Many of them are derive from languages spoken in eastern Africa providing African linguistic heritage. At the same time, it also reflects the process of integration. Most of the Siddis in Gujarat speak Gujarati, but traces of their ancestral linguistic heritage may persist in their residual vocabulary or accent depending on their geographical and historical origins.

Dress: Siddi women used to wear a sarī (for women) or a traditional ghaghro (a broad petticoat) matching choli (blouse), which is also a common wear for women in Gujarat. They also wear accessories of silver and glass bangles. Siddi men usually wear dhoti (trousers), khamij (shirt) and safo (turban). The Dhamal performers wear vibrant and colourful attire that reflects their cultural identity. They usually wear brightly

colored tunics and skirts, beaded jewellery and accessories, headgear adorned with feathers and mirrors, ankle bells to accentuate rhythmic movements. Siddi also practices two textile traditions i.e. Bandhani and Kawandi.

Bandhani is a traditional tie-dye textile craft deeply rooted in the Saurashtra regions of Gujarat where many Siddi communities live. It is the transformation of fabrics into a masterpiece of dots, patterns and colours. The desired pattern is carefully marked onto the fabric using stencils and a fugitive dye, which serves as base for the entire craft. Using an artificial nail or similar tool to lift the fabric, artisans tie thousands of tiny knots with a thin thread, often using a glass tube to have a precise shaping the final design. While dyeing, it ensures that the tied sections are protected from penetration of undesired colours securing the areas by using plastic and rubber. Then, the fabric is dried in the sun, after which the knots are carefully opened. The opening of the knots gradually reveals the characteristic dotted patterns and vibrant designs, resulted in getting a fine Bandhani. Another less known textile craft among the Siddis in Gujarat is Kavandi. Kavands (quilting tradition) is a patchwork and quilt made using pieces of old clothes and other fabric scraps. The pieces are applied onto a backing and secured with hand-running stitches.

Occupation and livelihood: Historically, Siddis are connected to forest ecosystem, especially Gir Forest (where Asiatic lions live). Their livelihood has been extensively supported through indigenous knowledge about biodiversity, sustainable collection of products and traditional practices of coexisting with the wildlife as being in close proximity to the forest. However, the seasonality of the forest is often driven by strict regulations of the forest laws, conservation prioritisation and inadequate ownership of productive resources often constrain their livelihood opportunities resulting to food insecurity and compelled them to survive on low paying manual work. Vulnerabilities are worsened by illiteracy, poverty, and absence of market linkages with many families selling the Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs) for an exorbitant price to intermediaries.

However, in the recent years, the influence of modernization, urbanization and environment has driven people towards new avenues and some of them have move to cities like Gandhinagar, Surat, Ahmedabad or even outside Gujarat for a better life. Due to their physique, the government also introduced a specialised sports training initiative to cater the talents among Siddi youths in sports. In 2026, Gujarat government launch Shaktidoot 2.0 scheme to provide annual financial assistance in sports including talented athletes from tribal and marginalised communities. However, lack with proper educational degree and skills compatible to the jobs resulting in high unemployment rates among Siddis, especially affected those residing in remote places such as Jambur, Javantri, Shirvan etc. At present, the occupational structure and livelihood of the Siddi community have undergoing with drastic changes. They are engaging as agricultural labour, casual wage earner, construction work, petty trade, domestic workers and menial jobs.

Some upward mobility has been achieved through programmes, including Awas Yojana housing, scholarships, skill development and special quotas in employment, from the government. There are new ways to earn

livelihood in the ecotourism initiative of community like forest homestays and line dancing skills of Dhamal for tourists to promote heritage. In overall, the livelihood structure of the Siddis of Gujarat reflects a deterioration towards subsistence-oriented and diversified low paid, informal and precarious occupations.

Dance & Music: Music and dance occupy a pivotal place in the day-to-day and spiritual life of the Siddi people. Their music and dance reflect a unique blend of African heritage and Indian influences, sustain through generations despite social and cultural transformations. Traditional peripatetic sufi faqirs and mendicants used to perform devotional recitation in sufi shrines, homes, palaces and public venues. These practices evolved into ecstatic Goma or Dhamal dance fostering spiritual devotion and community solidarity among the Siddis. The Dhamal dance is characterised by high-energy acrobatic jumps, rapid spins, rhythmic clapping, powerful vocal chants, synchronise footwork with the music. Dhamal is traditionally performed exclusively by the male members of the Siddi community. And, *Resda* is performed by both men and women together of the community. It includes folk song and dance expression rather than an intense, martial or ritualistic nature serving a social and collective form of community bonding and celebration during gatherings and festivals. Another form of Dhamal, known as Baithaaki, usually performed in sitting position focussing more on the devotional lyrics and spirituality than the music. These performances are accompanied with the indigenous musical instruments that have been preserved over centuries. The main musical instruments are Mugarman, Musindo, Malunga,

Mugarman which are large double sided cylindrical drums producing rhythmic beats, and Musindo, a small, single-sided cylindrical hand-drum (Strapped to dancer's body) used to maintain rhythmic patterns. Another significant instrument is the Misr kanga, a small funnel-shape shaker filled with tiny stones producing a rattling sound that complement the drum ensemble.

Among the most distinctive musical instrument among the Siddi community is the Malunga, a single-stringed musical bow amplified by a hollowed-out calabash (gourd) resonator. The Pitch is altered by pressing the string with the knuckle of the supporting hand while striking it with a slender stick. Traditionally, the string of the Malunga was made by twisting two strips of leather together to provide its strength and flexibility. A loop attached to the string divides the string into two segments, and its position can be adjusted to regulate the tension of each segment. This enables the instrument to produce different pitches during performance. In modern times, leather strings have been largely replaced by stainless steel or other metal wires because of their durability and ease of maintenance.

The Malunga belongs to the family of musical bows found across several continents, reflecting the transcontinental cultural heritage of the Siddis. Such kinds of instruments are similar with *Berimbau* of Brazil, *Tawitol* of Mexico, *Uta Wa Mundu Mue* in Kenya, *Uhadi*, *Ugubhu*, *Makhoyana* in Southern Africa, *Kse Diev* in Cambodia, *Pitjantjatjara* mouth bow in Australia etc. In India, musical instruments such as *Ravanahatha*

in Gujarat & Rajasthan, *Villupattu* in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, *Pena* in Manipur have the similar features like Malunga. This demonstrates the widespread evolution and cultural significance of musical bow traditions across diverse regions around the globe.

Dhamal dance is increasingly being showcased at cultural events, government sponsored programs and international events. Traditionally, Siddi dance and music accompanied storytelling, devotional singing and community celebration, functioning an important medium for preserving and transmitting oral traditions, cultural values and collective memory of the community. At present, these have transcended to serve a powerful symbol of cultural identity and resilience and enduring preservation of the community's distinctive historical and artistic heritage.

Political status: The recognition of Siddi as Scheduled Tribe by the Union Government in 2003 has enabled access to affirmative action, educational and welfare programmes which promotes socio-economic advancement, however, poverty, lack of access to Welfare funds and resources, and discrimination still exists. But all Siddis in Gujarat have not been notified as Scheduled Tribes. Siddis in the Bhavnagar, Gir Somnath, Jamnagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Junagadh, Porbandar, Dev Bhumi Dwarka, Surendranagar districts are included in the ST status. Many people who are migrated from Saurashtra to other district of the Gujarat, they avail benefits of the ST status. However, Siddis in other remaining areas/districts are not Scheduled Tribes but are classified as Other Backwards Classes.

Siddis remain politically underrepresented at the district, state and national political levels. Sirvan village (a village under the jurisdiction of Forest Department), is exclusively inhabited by the Siddis, was transferred to Mendarda Taluka in 2008 following the delimitation of Junagadh district by the Government. The village doesnot have its own gram panchayat through which they can mitigate their issues to the government. People has to travel around 35 kms to Mendarda to access government offices and essential administrative service.

Conclusion

The Siddis represent a distinct African-Indian cultural identity, reflects a historical process of migration, settlement, adaptation and cultural integration. Their demographic concentration is evident in the western Gujarat. The community possesses cultural continuity and transformation in family, marriage, religious beliefs and practices, language, dress, livelihood, music and dance. The contemporary Siddi life exhibits neither complete cultural assimilation nor static cultural preservation, rather it represents an ongoing process of adaptation in which inherited traditions are selectively retained, modified and reinterpreted within dynamic social, economic and cultural contexts.

The process of transformation is the intergenerational construction of ethnic identity. While older generations are elated that people identify them, as same as Africans whereas the younger generations perceived such

identification negatively, regarded such comparison as stigmatizing or pejorative, thereby reflecting a generational shift in ethnic self-identification and aspirations towards social belonging and integration. At the same time, younger generations are not necessarily distancing themselves from their traditions, rather they are also engaging with it through renewed heritage consciousness, cultural pride and identity revitalization. Therefore, cultural transformation can be conceptualised as a dynamic process of creolization, resilience and identity construction. Thus, the Siddis continue to sustain and refine their distinctive identity while contribution to the pluralistic and multicultural social fabric of Gujarat.

There is a need for the proper documentation by the government on the distinctive cultural heritage of the Siddis. The government shall identify exclusive and separate population of the Siddis henceforth monitor the changes in demographic conditions, family structures, livelihoods, cultural practices and political participation. Such an approach can enable the government to streamline and channelize the integration of the Siddis without weakening their distinct cultural identity and heritage. The most significant focus for the amelioration of the Siddi community is the educational interventions, school and higher education retention, vocational skills and employability among the youth. There is also a need to strengthen targeted livelihood interventions through imparting relevant skills according to the market. Not undermining the forest conservation program, sustainable livelihood programs, community-based forest activities and ecotourism shall be imparted with the support of relevant forest department.

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