

The Siddhis of Gujarat

Africans lost in transition

Discover India Program
2015 - 2016



CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “*The Siddis of Gujarat- Africans lost in transition*” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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Why have you come here?

-To learn about the Siddis of Gujarat.

That's what they all say, but nobody helps us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As we began our journey of Discovering the Siddis of Gujarat, we did not know what we were going to find, but only knew that we wanted to do justice in understanding and representing the vibrant African diaspora in India. Six months later, we believe that we have done justice to that goal. It gives us great pleasure in acknowledging every individual who has been a part of our journey, without whom this endeavor would not have been a success.

Firstly, we would like to extend our gratitude to FLAME University for giving us the opportunity to be a part of a course as unique as the Discover India Program 2015-2016. We acknowledge with deep gratitude Prof. Neeti Bose chairperson of DIP for her continuous motivation and invaluable support through this course. Our extended thanks to Dean FSLE, Prof. Santosh Kudtarkar, Prof. Viraj Shah, Prof. Kunal Ray for their constant feedback.

This effort would not have been possible without our report mentor Prof. Poonam Gandhi. Thank you for your invaluable time and patience through every step in our process. This report would not have conceptualized without your inputs. Special thanks to Prof. Swati Nalawade our on-field mentor for accompanying us on this journey and for being the ever-energetic moral support we needed through our entire field research.

During our research, several experts helped us with insight and information. A special mention to Mr. Mohan Siddi, an advocate for the welfare and development of the Siddi community in Karnataka. We sincerely hope you achieve your goal of completing your PhD on the Siddis of Karnataka. We would also like to thank Ms. Avani Rushi sociologist, Forest Department, Gir National Park and Sanctuary for her input on the relationship between the Siddis and their ecological surroundings.

Above all our heartfelt thanks to the Siddi Community in Jambur for welcoming us into their homes and giving us a chance to interact with them. Their

genuine effort in helping us through our research will always remain with us. A Special mention to Ayudin Lobi, Nargis Lobi and Hiraben Lobi for their outstanding hospitality and connections with the Siddi community. We would also like to acknowledge the interview respondents and dhamal dancers for their valuable information and audio-visual data. This project would not have conceptualized if not for their information.

ABSTRACT

It could be a village anywhere in Africa, but Jambur is a million miles from the continent. African by origin, Indian by nationality speaking the local language of Gujarati, the Siddis have lived in Gujarat for about 400 years. This report specifically focuses on the Siddis of Jambur and revolves around understanding the social, economic and cultural aspects that make the Siddi community what it is today.

The study was conceptualized based on secondary data and explored further through primary research in Jambur, Gujarat. The primary information was essential in understanding the present scenario of the Siddis and to fill the lacuna, which was evident in the literature review. The main objective of primary research was to speculate on the various theories explaining the origin of the tribe and to understand the Siddis beliefs on the same. No study on any tribe is complete without understanding the relevant cultural aspects that encompass their life, and hence the dance, music, rituals and ceremonies have been studied and analyzed in this report. To understand the Siddis in their entirety, aspects related to their livelihood like education and employment have also been covered.

A recurring theme we came across in our primary research was discrimination the Siddis have faced over the years. Even though they have absorbed the local culture, the Siddis live in abject poverty and are often treated as untouchables. It has been seen that the government has given the Siddis in Gujarat special tribal status to guarantee their access to jobs and education. Yet, everyday is a struggle for them. More than preserving their African past, the Siddis here are worried about survival in the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 An Introduction to the Siddi Tribe:

India is one of the most culturally and religiously diverse countries of the world. As Indians, we pride ourselves with this diversity and identify with each other because of similar physical features, cultures, dialects and body language. Within this diversity, there resides a dispersed community called the Siddis. “African by origin, Indian by nationality”¹ with local languages as their lingua franca, the Siddi tribe has its settlements in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad in India”. The Siddi tribe also known as Habshi or Badsha is an African community that migrated to India several hundred years ago.² Several theories exist regarding their historical origin to this subcontinent but most are not backed by empirical data. While some Siddis believe that they came to India during the 16th century as traders and bodyguards, others believe that they came much earlier around the 14th century as slaves. The widespread belief today is that the Siddi tribe is a community of Africans who migrated to India at different periods of history for different reasons.³

Even though they came in smaller numbers, according to the Indian census of 1981, there are about 54,291 Siddis in India, however the 2001 census⁴ shows that about 8,000 of this number are scheduled tribes.⁵ A scheduled tribe is a category of people recognized by the constitution, which provides them with means of gaining political representation and, social and economic welfare. The word tribe can be etymologically traced to the Latin term “tribus” which has been used over the years to

¹ "African by Origin, Indian by Nationality and Gujarati by Speech." *The Hindu Business Line*. 2 Nov. 2011. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

²“Siddi”. Tribal Research and Training Institute. Tribal Development Department. Siddi. Gujarat Tribal Development Corporation, 4 Nov. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

³ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2015.

⁴ 2011 Siddi population data unavailable on the Census website

⁵ “Siddi”. Tribal Research and Training Institute. Tribal Development Department. Siddi. Gujarat Tribal Development Corporation, 4 Nov. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

understand divisions in society⁶. According to the sociologist G.S Ghurye, the essential aspect of the constitutional provision on scheduled tribes is to not treat them as a category by themselves but to integrate them with other social and cultural entities in India.⁷

Similarly, the Siddis have been declared a scheduled tribe because of the clear need for political representation and socio-economic empowerment. Having this status, as G.S. Ghurye points out, the Siddis of Gujarat have integrated with other social and cultural entities, which is clearly reflected in their blending of Hindu and Islamic culture. Although the Siddis are dispersed in many parts of the country, Gujarat has been known to have the largest concentration of Siddis⁸. Here, they live in regions of Ahmedabad, Jamnagar, Jambur, Junagad, Rajkot and Katchch and have adopted the local language of Gujarati.⁹ Gujarati Siddis are mainly Sufi Muslims and follow cultural and traditional practices of the same. They are strict non-vegetarians and work as agricultural labourers on lands owned by the Patel community or even as construction workers.¹⁰

Since the Siddis entered the Indian Subcontinent, they have been assimilating with local traditions to find means of livelihood. However, their rich history and African culture cannot be forgotten. The Siddis in Gujarat and other parts of India still perform their African music and dance, which has been explored in the empirical research.

⁶ Puja Mondal. "Essay on Tribes in India." *Your Article Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/tribes/essay-on-tribes-in-india-researched-essay/4416/>>.

⁷ Mondal, Puja. "Scheduled Tribes: Definition and Problems of Tribal People." *Your Article Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

⁸ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2015.

⁹ Lodhi, Abdulaziz Y. "African Settlements in India." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 1.1: 83-86. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

¹⁰ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2015.

1.2 Research Topic

Research Statement

To explore the socio-economic life and culture of the Siddi tribe in Gujarat, India

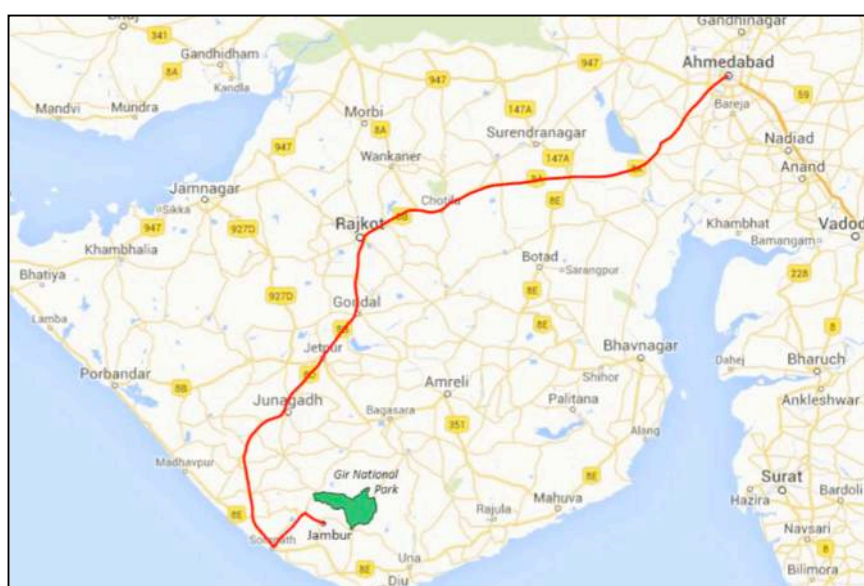
Aims and Objectives

- To study the origins of the Siddi tribe
- To discover the roots of the Siddi Tribe's dance and music
- To examine the current status of their dance and music
- To understand the importance of education to the Siddis
- To examine the employment scenario of the Siddi community
- To understand the attitudes and stereotypes faced by the Siddi community
- To understand their status in the Indian Society

1.3 Geographical Location

We conducted the primary research in Gujarat, the western most state of India. Known as “*The Land of the Legends*”, this state stands bordered by Pakistan and Rajasthan in the north east, Madhya Pradesh in the east, and Maharashtra and the Union territories of Diu, Daman, Dadra and Nagar Haveli in the south. The Arabian Sea borders the state both to the west and the south west”.¹¹

The name Gujarat was given to the state keeping in mind the rule of the Gujjars in the 700’s and 800’s. The state today has Gandhinagar as its capital city and encompasses a population of around 60,383,000 people. The principal language spoken here by all communities is Gujarati. Gujarat as a state mainly comprises of deserts, scrubland, grasslands, deciduous forests, wetlands and estuaries.



Map 1: Map of Gujarat

Our research was conducted in the regions of Sasan Gir, Jambur, Junagadh, Somnath and Sirvan. Out of these, Jambur comprised the largest population of the Siddis. Jambur is a village in the Talala taluka and Junagadh district of Gujarat. Housing approximately 4,000 Siddis, the village mainly consists of mud roads and

¹¹ "All about Gujarat." *Gujarat India*. Government of Gujarat, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

houses built in the traditional style with mud, stones and cow dung. It is located 66 KM towards South from District head quarters Junagadh and 374 KM from State capital Gandhi Nagar.¹²

The spatial and geographical location of the village of Jambur is barren, with a few scarce trees and shrubs here and there, that too, outside the main village. Jambur is small in area with not too many people or houses, most of which are made of mud. These huts have red tiled roofs and looked unstable due to the materials used. Every corner of the village is brown and muddy, including the roads, looking like it had been hit by years of draught and barrenness.

¹² "All about Gujarat." *Gujarat India*. Governmet of Gujarat, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

1.4. Research Methodology

Preliminary Research

The preliminary research was a stepping-stone towards understanding the Siddi tribe of Gujarat. It included secondary data from resources such as books, journals, interviews and other scholarly research papers.

- **Online resources:** This included using the Internet and the information it has to offer on databases like JSTOR and EBSCOT. We also looked into government websites mainly the Gujarati Tribal Research and Training institute, papers published by the Aga Khan Trust, Indian Tribal heritage center and online journals like the Nordic Journal of African Studies.
- **Print media:** This included research material from the FLAME library on historic relations between Africa and India. Print media research also included information found in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute Research and Training Institute (Pune), Asiatic Society Library (Mumbai) and Library of National Institute of Design (NID, Ahmedabad). It also included scholarly books and papers compiled by Amy Catlin Jairazbhoy that was acquired through Mr. Mohan Siddi.
- **Interviews:** We gathered in depth information from Mr. Mohan Siddi, a member and social advocate for the Siddi community who is also working on a PhD thesis on the Siddis in Karnataka. For this, a semi-structured interview was conducted keeping our research objectives in mind. We also interviewed Ms. Avani Rushi. She is a sociologist who works in the forest department of the Gir National Park in Gujarat. She has studied various socio-economic aspects of the Siddi tribe and has contributed to the economic upliftment of the Siddis. During the interview, we gathered information regarding the job opportunities and various training programs that she has created for the Siddis.

This interview also enlightened us on the various aspects of historical origin in relation to the kind of jobs the Siddis have been doing over the years.

- The secondary data that was compiled from all of the above means gave us a good base to understand the basic features of the Siddis and also provided insight on what to expect and who to get information from on field. The more intricate details about the community were left for on field research.

On Field Research

Our on field research mainly included gathering information about the Siddi tribe based on our research objectives. The research methods we used are as follows:

Data Collection Tools:

- **Observation:** This being a key component to our research, observation of the Siddi tribe in their natural setting told us a lot about the tribe's culture in terms of their food habits, gestures, dressing style etc. During this process, we kept an observation journal as a group, which helped us collect and co-relate the different observations made regarding different things and finally helped us draw conclusions on the different aspects of our study. The objective of having this method was to use a passive, non-interfering role, without disturbing the social dynamic of the community's daily activities.
- **Open-ended interviews:** Semi-structured and open-ended interviews provided us with free flowing yet detailed information. Interviews were conducted with members of different age groups, professions and statuses in the community. Interviews with not only the aged members, but also young members were conducted to understand the history as well as the current status of the tribe in terms of the objectives mentioned above. In addition to the Siddi community, interviews were also be conducted with members of other communities and workers at the Gir National Park to understand how the

Siddi community has affected and continues to affect other members of the larger society.

- Case studies: We addressed and gathered information on certain specific members of the Siddi Community for the purpose of a case study. This helped us get a more precise understanding on what it is to be a Siddi in today's world. Through this we explored cultural, economic, social and religious aspects in depth and drew conclusions of the similarities and differences if any, in the cases documented. Using Case studies, as a research tool helped us explore the entire life of a Siddi while covering our research objectives.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

This research study enabled vast data collection and our research tools gave us an in depth understanding of the Siddi tribe. A limitation we faced was paucity of time as we were on field for merely a week. Apart from this, an in depth ethnographic study would have given more insight into the tribe. For further research, a mixed method in finding qualitative and quantitative data would be useful.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1. Review of Literature

The literature on the Siddis is sparse. Due to a lack of research and a modicum of documentation during the immigration of Africans into India there are speculative theories about them and little information on the Siddis. According to an article written by Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi on African settlements in India, the origins of the Siddi people could be from various places. Some of the theories suggest the Siddis worked in Muslim armies and had roots in Ethiopia, Somalia, Southern Mozambique, South Africa and the Kenya-Tanzania coast. Given the limited documentation of the origins of the Siddi tribe, the article gives a wholesome explanation to the many possibilities of their origin. However, the origins of the tribe were always linked in relation to different factors as well, religion and music for example. Most of this research looks to be secondary information and maybe on-field research will help us understand their origins better. Through constant documentation of the tribe and face-to-face interaction, we hope to get a better idea of these theories and understand at least one subset of the tribe's origins.¹³

Another article by Mahmood Mamdani, called "The Sidi", suggests the immigration of Africans into India occurred in stages. The article mentions the import of Africans from Ethiopia to India to work in the army and also mentioned the Portuguese bringing in African slaves. This paper concentrates little on origin as it does on other aspects of the tribe. The author, being a Siddi himself, is a useful and valuable source for he understands the tribe from an insider's point of view. Through personal interaction we aim to possess a similar edge to understand the tribe.

¹³ Lodhi, Abdulaziz Y. 'African Settlements In India'. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 1 (1992): 83-86. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

Hopefully we could strengthen the relation between the Siddis culture and their origins.¹⁴

Shaunak S. Kulkarni also gave ideas of their origin, in an article aimed to study the dance forms of the Siddis. He put forward the mythological aspect of their existence and stated that the Siddis are those Indians who took Ravana's side in the war between Rama and Ravana. This is an interesting new take to the origin of the tribe. Through our field research, we aim to investigate and compare the opinions of Gujarati Muslim Siddis with regard to their mythological origins. It would be useful to study the genesis of the African tribe in India whilst taking religious perspectives into account.¹⁵

Apart from the origin of the tribe, authors have also spoken about the misconceptions and stereotypes faced by this community. James Micklem, in his research paper “Sidis in Gujarat”, has covered this issue. One of the segments of the paper Micklem uses examples from school textbooks, government documents, scholarly articles and publications to discuss common misconceptions, stereotypes and racism directed towards the Siddi community. It explains how the Siddis are given different names, which are often used to insult or mock their characteristics and culture. This paper provides an understanding of how Siddis are viewed by others, and sheds light on their image in the eyes of the public. In addition to this, the paper could have questioned whether or not the Siddi tribe faces racial discrimination in the region, taking into consideration the prejudices and names assigned to the community. Taking these prejudices and misconceptions into consideration, we aim to explore the true nature of these assumptions on our field visit to Gujarat by speaking to locals and understanding their perspectives of the Siddis.¹⁶

In addition to the above secondary data, information regarding the intricate culture of the Siddis is also available. In an article written by Seema Solanki, Sandeep

¹⁴ Mamdani, Mahmood. 'The Sidi'. *misr.mak.ac.ug*. N.p., 2008. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

¹⁵ Kulkarni, Shaunak S. *Tribal Dances Of India*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1999. Print.

¹⁶ Micklem, James. "Sidis in Gujarat." *Http://www.cas.ed.ac.uk/*. University of Edinburgh, n.d. Web. 13 Nov. 2015.

Kumar and C.N. Pandey, the relationship between the Siddis in Gujarat and the lions of the Gir forest is explored. The Gujarat Forest Department Wildlife Division published this article, in the year 2015. The article explores how the Siddis inhabited and populated the outskirts of the Gir forest; it draws connections between the tribe, the lions and the Gir ecosystem. The main focus is on the harmonious coexistence of the lions and the Siddis, made possible by emotional attachment and a sense of responsibility towards the environment and their roots. What the article lacks is an in-depth analysis of how this relationship is established and maintained. Through research we aim to establish a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Siddis, the lions and their shared ecosystem.¹⁷

D. Shaunak S. Kulkarni in the Encyclopedic Profile of Indian Tribes has explored aspects of their culture like dance and music. The author gives a basic background about the Siddis in various parts of the country and how they came to be. He gives brief information about their dance ‘*dhamal*’, the various occasions it is performed on, the instruments used, the body movements, costume and face paint, pairing of the dancers, and the duration of the performance are mentioned. The author also establishes a link between the Siddis dance, music and the agricultural occupations they are known to take part in. Titled “Dance Forms of the Siddis”, the chapter spoke mostly about the history of the Siddis rather than the dance form itself. As one of our main objectives, by studying the dance form on field as our primary research we aim to find further details on the intricacies of the art.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kumar, Sandeep, and C. N. Pandey. "Friends of the Lion- The Siddis." *Foresters Diary - Asiatic Lion Landscape*. By Seema Solanki. N.p.: Gujarat Forest Department, 2015. 77-81. Print.

¹⁸ Kulkarni, Shaunak S. "Dance Forms of the Siddis." *Google Books*. Discovery Publishing House, n.d. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

CHAPTER THREE: The Beginning

Many still find it surprising that India was once a slave-importing nation, even though history overflows with information on African slaves that served at the courts



Figure 1: An image showing the physical features of the Siddis

and armies of imperial rulers that once conquered the land. African presence in India draws attention to the feudal system of the subcontinent and its place in the Indian Ocean world, one that was lead by maritime and trading connections. Little do people know that African seamen, who were known for their maritime skills, served on the ships of traders from India, Portugal, England and other European colonial trading companies.¹⁹

In today's world, small communities of people of the African origin are encountered living along the western coast of India. Their ancestors could have been sailors who ended up settling in the country, or were brought to India as slaves. The Siddis, the Africans of India, no longer sail the ocean or serve as slaves as they did once. Their communities have merged with the lower classes of India and are found living in urban working class housing, and sometimes in villages.

Habshi (a popular term among the locals for the Siddis, in the Arabic-Persian dictionary indicates people belonging to Abyssinia or Ethiopia) were paid servants in medieval India and over time acquired their own wealth and achieved high posts in court; but this did not mean they were free.

¹⁹ Basu, Helene. "Africans in India- Anthropology." *Frontline*. 29 Aug. 2005. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

The Siddis in Gujarat now are seen as degraded descendants of these medieval *Habshis*, who once had wealth and power; this according to historians is incorrect. Africans in India came in different historical contexts and periods, and the ancestors of the Siddis in Gujarat today are said to have come in the 18th and 19th centuries, not all of them as slaves; many on ships. The reason some stayed behind is because vessels relied on the monsoons, and the rains happened to stay longer than expected that season, forcing the Siddis to leave the coast and into the mainland.

Somewhere in the 19th century, while the Siddis started living in India for good, Zanzibar grew as the hub for slave distribution to places, including western India. Even after the British abolished slave trade, a small number of African slaves continued to be sent to the western coast of India, especially Gujarat, where they were employed as servants and bodyguards for the most part by local rulers. This connection to Zanzibar is made due to a couple of reasons. One, because some of the tribe members remember the name of the island as a place where an ancestor came from, and two, due to the similarities in the cultural practices of the Siddis, like percussion music, with practices in Zanzibar as studied by anthropologists.

Though the Siddis came to the country as slaves, once a part of the court, they were treated like any other royal servant. They were given small pieces of land for housing and had the right to receive food and clothing from their owners. There were also a number of shrines built in dedication to saintly Siddi ancestors, some of which originated as a gift given by the royals. Plenty of Siddi women were personal attendants to noble women, and served in small princely states. Apart from the benefits, they were still counted as the king's personal property. For e.g. these maids could be given away as part of the dowry of a Rajput bride when she moved to her husband's house.

Another theory gives rise to the idea that the Siddis of Jambur originated from Nigeria after their Hajj pilgrimage. Their leader, Baba Ghor, was said to be a wealthy merchant who settled near Broach and built a mining and trade business. According to others, the Siddis were brought to India from different parts of Africa to serve in the

Muslim armies of the Nawabs as soldiers; explaining their Muslim faith compared to the lack of the Hindu caste system in the Siddi society²⁰.

As many know, in America, African religion was kept from dying by merging African gods with the Christian god; in India, African spirits were merged with Sufi saints. The acceptance of this idea of superhuman agents was not confined to the Siddis alone, as the worship of African saints became a popular practice, sometimes among the patrons of the Siddi servants as well. This way, forms of religious and musical practices derived from Africa helped displaced the Africans, adapt and assimilate into the social life in Gujarat²¹.

This development did not last long as when the British invaded, they imposed their divide-and-rule policy on the Siddis who were going through the process of assimilation, by isolating different Siddi groups from each other and also from the indigenous people of India. This resulted in impoverishment of the Siddis as well as re-tribalisation as seen in India today.

From the information gathered through secondary sources and as mentioned in the literature review, the common conception is that the Siddis initially came to India as slaves; but interviews on field say otherwise. Most of the Siddis we spoke to disagreed with this theory and instead believed that they most definitely came as bodyguards. Two important interviewees spoke of how the Siddis were perfect as bodyguards due to their might, strength and natural physique, and impressed the Nawabs and emperors enough to be brought across oceans. Another reason for their migration was to work as labor in the country. Because of their strength, the Siddis were apt for physically challenging jobs like laying train tracks, and thus were hired more than any other population. This gap in theories rounds up to the conclusion that the Siddis prefer their ancestors as bodyguards to slaves, as the latter doesn't earn them respect in the society they already struggle to strive in.

²⁰ "Historical Background of Siddhis." *Shidhganga*. Web. 8 Nov. 2015

²¹ Lodhi, Abdulaziz. "African Settlements in India." *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

CHAPTER FOUR: Customs and Traditions

Culture is one of the most important factors of this study as it describes the Siddi community in its entirety. It not only distinguishes the Siddi community from other human groups but also provides them with a unique identity, which shapes their interaction. This chapter focuses on aspects of Siddi cultural identity like dance, music, rituals and ceremonies in relation to their daily lives and environment.

4.1. The Beats of Dhamal



Figure 2: A picture of the dhamal performance we witnessed

Dance and music has often been an intrinsic part of tribal cultures in the world. We can trace this to periods in history where traders, slaves, travellers and colonists carried music beyond native shores. For centuries, African and Indian music has spread beyond its shores and left a great impression on the world that it touched. As the Siddis from Africa travelled to India, the cultural exchange that took place was quite different. India was a large civilization with its traditions and cultures long established, where as the migrant Siddi population was small and experienced social

isolation from the majority of Indian culture.²² However, this did not stop the African-Indian Siddi population from carrying with them unique elements of their musical heritage that are being explored and developed today.

Popularly known as *dhamal*, this Siddi dance has been retained for more than 300 years. The word *dhamal* has come to have several meanings over the years. Etymologically, *dhamal* originates from the Urdu words “*dhamm*” meaning loud sound and “*alo*”.²³ Through our experience in Jambur, we learnt that *dhamal* also mean “to have fun”. This arises from the Siddis idea that everyone has fun while dancing.

The Siddis also refer to *dhamal* as “*Siddi goma*”. Etymologically the word *goma* has its roots in Swahili or Bantu language, meaning drum or dance.²⁴ While in conversation with the respondents in Jambur, it became clear that even their dance and music has religious connotations as “*goma*” is the name of their music and also signifies their god. The verses of *goma* are recited from a holy book. Earlier *goma* included words from African languages but now, as this tribe has assimilated with the Gujarati traditions, the lyrics mainly consist of Gujarati words. However, with the tribes attempt to preserve their past, some Swahili words have been retained. The Siddis today don’t know the meaning of the songs they sing, yet continue to do so because their ancestors passed it onto them.

Siddi *dhamal* or *goma* is a vibrant, tribal dance that has been inherited by the Siddis in India as part of their African culture or heritage. The Siddis believe that dance and music is in their blood and the skills required for this dance is something they are born with. Most people here learn *dhamal* at a very young age.

²² Jairazbhoy, Amy Catlin, and Edward A. Alpers. *Sidis and Scholars- Essays on African Indians*. Rainbow Publishers, 2004. 178-79. Print.

²³ Jairazbhoy, Amy Catlin, and Edward A. Alpers. *Sidis and Scholars- Essays on African Indians*. Rainbow Publishers, 2004. 185. Print.

²⁴ Jairazbhoy, Amy Catlin, and Edward A. Alpers. *Sidis and Scholars- Essays on African Indians*. Rainbow Publishers, 2004. 186. Print.

As part of our field research in Jambur, we interviewed several *dhamal* dancers and also witnessed an exquisite *dhamal* performance. We saw that the costumes they wore during the performance were very colorful and vibrant. They danced in a circle with costumes that imitated patterns of tiger skin, which came up to, their ankles. Two crossed straps of cloth hold this up from the shoulders and their chest was left bare. The Siddi dancers wore extensive headgear, which in this case was made up of a shiny strap of cloth and straw like material.

After watching a *dhamal* performance in Jambur and comparing the costumes to performances we studied as part of the literature review, we noticed that the costumes vary based on the location of the performance and the amount of money the dancers earn from it. While performing for a smaller and less important tourist crowd or during a function in their village, they wear a simple costume, usually imitating patterns of tiger skin. When the same dance is performed in a bigger setting like competitions, state cultural programs, international platforms, where they have a chance to earn more money, their costumes are more detailed. The costumes in this case comprise of a blue green skirt, a little below knee length. Crossed straps again hold this up from the shoulders. The costumes in this case try to imitate the avatar of a Peacock, and this is made clear as the skirt is adorned with peacock feathers. The Siddi dancers also wear headgear and a belt made of cowrie shells and peacock feathers. They believe that cowrie shells are an important part of their costume as their ancestors always used it. They do not know much about its significance but just that these cowrie shells are found in the Indian Ocean and gained popularity in ancient Africa. Interestingly, certain researchers believe that according to certain African legends, there exists a spiritual connection between cowrie shells and man, as anyone who wears and possesses this could become family to an ocean spirit of wealth and earth. According to these legends, the cowrie shell also represents goddess protection and, strength of the ocean, destiny and prosperity. Certain aspects of African culture also talk about how cowrie shells and its legends have believed to teach people stories on humility and respect.²⁵

²⁵ "The Meaning and History of the Cowrie Shell." Africa Imports, n.d. Web.

Text Box 1: Ramzan, a *dhamal* dancer



Figure 3: Ramzan, dhamal dancer

Ramzan is a Siddi dancer who has been living in the village of Jambur since birth. He started practicing *dhamal* at a tender age of 7 and it has become his passion ever since. As a child he looked up to the other *dhamal* dancers of the village and hoped to become a professional dancer like them one day. Since Ramzan had an inclination towards *dhamal* from the very beginning, he used to go to the dargah very often to watch the senior dancers perform. These early years played a very important role in shaping his future as a dancer. Although *dhamal* is his main source of income, he also earns money through farming as he feels that income earned through *dhamal* is not enough for him and his family to live a comfortable life in today's world. One of his deepest regrets is quitting school in the 8th grade, as he had to join his father in farming after which he lost interest in studies. He now understands the importance of education and strongly believes that life without education is useless. Today, he is a successful Dhamal dancer and has performed at various occasions such as the *Kumbh Mela* in Allahabad. On a daily basis he performs for the guests staying in hotels around the Gir National Park.

Apart from the cowrie shells, the symbolism of peacocks in their costume can be linked to the ecosystem of the Siddi tribe in Jambur and the sheer abundance of peacocks in this area. The tribal here have daily encounters with this magnificent bird and some of their dance steps are also based on the sheer grace and neck movements of this bird.

The other costumes they wear while entertaining large crowds are costumes patterned like tiger skin with belts and headgear made out of cowrie shells and straw. Since the Siddis believe that they are mighty and strong like a tiger, they depict this through their costume patterns.

Figure 4: A dhamal dancer with face paint



The make-up they use in this dance is very geometric in nature. They use simple lines to bring out patterns like those of Aztec prints. The varying patterns of curves and lines drawn with white paint on their faces, in contrast to their

dark skin tone, brings out their facial expressions. The patterns they draw vary each time, and nobody paints identical patterns. Only the leader of the group uses yellow paint instead of white to denote his lead. The ingenious task of using only paint as make-up adds to the dramatic effect of the dance.

As part of *dhamal*, the Siddis have used several instruments through the years. The most common instrument that is still used today is "dhamaam". *Dhamaam* is a type of drum that is only beaten on one side; where as the other side is controlled by the other hand to produce various sounds.²⁶ Earlier, the tribe itself made this drum, but nowadays, since it is readily available at a cheaper cost in the market, the drum is

²⁶ Yimene, Ababu Minda. *An African Indian Community in Hyderabad: Siddi Identity, Its Maintenance and Change*. Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2004. 101. Web.

bought. The other instrument used is an “*ulka*”. This instrument is made out of coconut and cowrie shells. The coconut shell is filled with cowrie shells and wrapped in a red cloth to produce various jingling sounds. This instrument is kept in the hand and move during the dance.²⁷ Sometimes a wooden stick is also used during the dance. However, through our primary research we saw that the only instrument used by the Siddis in Jambur is the *dhamaam*.

Together, the beat of the drum, jingling of the *ulka*, the hooting of the dancers, vibrant costumes and makeup, add up to create a sheer energetic and joyful dance. The movements in the dance mainly consist of jumping, forming human pyramids, imitating animal movements and funny facial expressions. Towards the end of the dance, the dancers form a circle and dance in it; this in a way symbolizes the end of the dance. The tempo of the beats at this point rises and builds up to make a grand finale where a dancer throws a coconut into the sky and lets it break open with his head. This once again showcases the physical strength of the Siddi tribe. Before this, it is common practice to pass the coconut to the audience to make sure that it hasn't been tampered with.



Figure 5: A picture of the use of fire in the dhamal performance that we witnessed

²⁷ Bhattacharya, D.K. “Indiana of African Origin.” *Cahiers D’Etudes Africaines* 1970: 579-582. JSTOR. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

“Son of a Siddi, just like a lion” is a common phrase that the Siddis use during their dance. This once again conveys that lions are very intrinsic to the Siddis and their culture, as the Siddi tribe and lions of Gir forest, which is the last habitat of the Asiatic lion in India, share the same eco-system.²⁸ By comparing themselves to lions, they are repeatedly establishing that they are strong and fearless. This is also established through the use of fire in their dance. Through conversations with the dhamal dancers, we noticed that there is no cultural significance for the use of fire; however, they are open about the fact that this is only done for entertainment sake. The dancers not only use kerosene to create fireballs, but also perform tricks with fire like walking on it, making cartwheels around and over it and, tossing it around in their hands. All of this shows how energetic and big their dance movements are.

The movements in their dance are a reflection of their sense of proximity to animals and birds. As established above, the ecosystem in Gir is very important to the Siddis and hence this is evident in their dance. According to a respondent living in Jambur, the movements do not convey a specific story, but the Siddis dance to convey the joys and sorrows in their life. According to some others, dhamal conveys the Siddis passion for hunting and the happiness after a good hunt.²⁹

Apart from various movements, comedy is a very important part of *dhamal*. The dancers make funny expression by widening their eyes and sticking their tongues out throughout the dance. They also play tricks on the other dancers. Mohammed Bhai, a dancer from Jambur said, “ I am a dhamal dancer because I love comedy and enjoy making others laugh.”

With changing times, and social, economic developments, it is essential to note that the practice of *dhamal* has changed too. Earlier, dhamal was performed on several occasions throughout the year. Be it festivals, weddings, birthday parties or any special event, it calls for a dhamal performance. The “*Urus*” festival in November always showcased a great *dhamal* performance. However, according to Nargis, a

²⁸ Jairazbhoy, Amy Catlin, and Edward A. Alpers. *Siddis and Scholars- Essays on African Indians*. Rainbow Publishers, 2004. 181. Print.

²⁹ "Dhamal Dance of Gujarat." Craft and Artisans, n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

young Siddi woman, the trend of *dhamal* has changed nowadays. *Dhamal* is mainly done at hotels and grounds as entertainment for tourists. It is also done at various national and international competitions as a means to earn money. Our own observations and research in Gir confirm the same as a more Bollywood style of dance was performed in the engagement ceremony of a young Siddi couple we were fortunate to participate in.

The *dhamal* dance usually lasts about 45 minutes, but on special occasions it goes on for several hours, sometimes even till morning. At times it is believed that the main dancer spreads a sort of white powder all over his body and enters a trance by the time he finishes. No specific supernatural or transcendental explanation is given to this theory but the customary practice is to go and lay the dancer in the nearest mosque.³⁰ This secondary information was confirmed through our primary research in Jambur.

Dhamal does not have any specific rules. Anyone and everyone can learn this art form and join the dance. In fact, the dancers make it a point to interact with the crowd by usually picking people up from the audience and continuing the dance with them on their shoulders. The members of the troop who play the instruments however do not dance or interact with the audience. They only play the instruments as the dance revolves entirely on these beats. There is no concept of pre-recorded music, the dance troop itself sings and provides the beats.

Both men and women can do *dhamal* in Jambur, however it is seen that only men perform in hotels and competitions. While the men who perform Siddi *dhamal* were asked why women don't take part in these dance performances, it was said, "women are mostly shy, and they cannot perform the stunts we do". However, women take part in this dance during festivals where everyone dances as a joyous occasion but still do not dance in a wild manner like the men do.

³⁰ Bhattacharya, D.K. "Indiana of African Origin." *Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines* 1970: 579-582. JSTOR. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

Culturally, according to researchers, *dhamal* is also known as *Mashira* dance. This is known to be a form of prayer dance. The Siddi community is known to perform this dance on 28th October every year in honor of Baba Hazrat Bilal who is their spiritual leader. If the dance includes the beats of instrument *Mushira* it is called *Maimisra* or *Sailani*. This is an age-old name, which came from the palaces of kings who invited the Siddis to dance for entertainment purposes. The dancers then danced wearing forest costumes.³¹ Primary research in Jambur confirms the continued use of “forest costumes” which are mainly costumes that depict animals and birds. Today, the Siddis also confirm that their ancestors were called to dance in the palaces of kings, however in this age, the Siddis in Jambur have no recollection of *dhamal* being known as *Mashira*.

Interestingly, *dhamal* can be understood better by tracing its origin to that of the Siddis and their leader Hazrat Bilal. It is believed that due to the Siddis kinship to Bilal, they can extraordinarily recite the Azan, which is their call to prayer. They perform “*jikrs*” which are dances to devotional songs, all dedicated to Bilal. Speculators say that Bilal was also a musician who played the “lyre”. Hence, the Siddis dance and music is related to their religion and Islamic roots.³² Through primary research it is established that this belief is intrinsic to the culture of the Siddis and that they are aware of Hazrat Bilal’s connection to their dance and music. However, no connection has been made about *dhamal* being a dance that is done on devotional songs.

In the small village of Jambur, there exist about 5-6 *dhamal* troupes. Around 10-15 people are a part of each troupe. These troupes perform *dhamal* in various places as an occupation. In the village of Sirvan, which is just 30 minutes from Jambur, another Siddi population of about 400 people reside. Here, *dhamal* is not performed by anyone young or old. In fact people are discouraged in performing *dhamal*, as it does not provide them with enough money to have a stable lifestyle. A recurring statement that was heard in Sirvan was “how can one be at the farm all day

³¹ "Dhamal Dance of Gujarat." Craft and Artisans, n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

³² Jairazbhoy, Amy Catlin, and Edward A. Alpers. *Sidis and Scholars- Essays on African Indians*. Rainbow Publishers, 2004. 182. Print.

and still practice *dhamal*? Farming provides us with money to support our families, *dhamal* doesn't". Interestingly, *dhamal* is not even practiced as a cultural dance form during festivals in this village. The Siddis here think of *dhamal* as a waste of time.

Looking at the above facts, it has become clear that *dhamal* as a dance form is important to the Siddis of Gujarat but in a more economical sense. The fact that the Siddis here know nothing about the cultural significance of their costumes, music, instruments or the origin of the dance only leads us to infer that *dhamal* has been lost as a part of their cultural identity. Even though *dhamal* is known to be performed during festivals and weddings, our own encounters with Siddis at a wedding proves otherwise. Bollywood music and dance is what the Siddis listen to and dance on today. *Dhamal* in one sense connects the Siddis to their African roots however our on field research brought to light their lackadaisical attitude towards preservation of their dance as a cultural heritage and the fact that *dhamal* has merely become a source of livelihood.

4.2. Daily Attire



Figure 6: An example of their daily attire

On the streets of Jambur were seen young boys cycling and walking around, but not too many women. The women we saw, walking around the village were mostly seen at the entrances of their homes, or sitting on their patios.

The Siddis wore extremely colorful clothing that contrasted their monochromatic surroundings. Everywhere the eye looked, your gaze would fall upon a brightly, and daringly dressed person. The men wore trousers, jeans, t-shirts, shirts, and sometimes, kurtas, all in colours that would contrast their skin strikingly. These outfits were usually mismatched, showing how they wore whatever they could get their hands on, or afford, due to the poor economical status. Despite this, the Siddi men tried to be as fashionable as they could with vivid t-shirts, low waist jeans, sneakers and caps worn backwards; just the same as any other boys their age. Kurtas were seen either on older men, or worn by the people visiting the *dargah*. Almost all of them had earphones dangling from their necks, which also seemed like a style statement in this village.

The women dressed equally as colorful, if not more. All adorning variations of a *salvaar kameez* (common north Indian outfit) in bold and bright colors that would make them stand out even more. The women did not wear much jewelry, but a necklace with the holy number “786”, a small pair of earrings, a nose ring/pin and a couple of bangles, all of which are allowed and encouraged to be worn by the Islamic faith³³. One would expect Muslim women to be dressed extremely conservatively, especially when they live in a tight religious community, but to our surprise, the Siddi women wore these outfits in various different styles that contradicted the stereotypical Muslim clothing norms. The necks were low, and so were the backs, and the silhouette hugged their bodies, accentuating their full African figures. The only thing that seemed conservative, or a norm was that all teenage and adult women had their heads covered with a scarf, even if just lightly.

³³"As per the Islamic Law" *IslamQ&A*. 2012. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

4.3. Band Baaja Baaraat

This segment focuses on the marriage system of the Siddis, their rituals, and traditions and how they have managed to remain an endogamous community. A study done by Jyotirmoy Chakraborty called “Marriage and Kinship Among the Siddis of Saurashtra” focuses on two villages, Jambur and Sirvan; both that we visited. Information here was gathered using observation and anthropological techniques by the author. Like most communities, marriage for the Siddis is essential and parents like to see their sons and daughters get married at a suitable age. From the interviews conducted, we found that the average age for women was between 18-20, and 20-22 for men. Earlier men and women got married at younger ages like the Hindu communities nearby, but today, no one below the age of sixteen gets married. This could be attributed to the fact that a many Siddi children are perusing higher education and enrolling into colleges and universities, therefore not being obligated to marry at a young age³⁴.

Being Muslims, the Siddis are permitted to enter a polygamous marriage, but they prefer monogamy. Polygamy is rare within the community and limited to situations where the wife is incapable of bearing a child, is non-cooperative, or when a love affair spurs. Only then does the husband bring a second wife to the family, but without breaking the first marriage³⁵.

The common type of residence after marriage is either neolocal or patrilocal. The only time a man lives in his wife’s paternal home is when the woman is the only child and her parents either need to be taken care of in old age, or have huge amounts of land³⁶.

³⁴ Chakraborty, Jyotirmoy, Georg Pfeffer, and Deepak Kumar. Behera. *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies: Professor Satya Narayana Ratha Felicitation Volumes*. New Delhi: Concept Pub., 1997. *Google Books*. Google. Web.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ ibid

Widow remarriage is a common concept in the community and is mostly considered if she has no children. There must be a mutual agreement between the two parties, and the marriage takes place according to Islamic rites without any elaborate ceremonies. The widow is usually remarried to a divorced man or a widower.

The Siddis prefer building ties with known families and due to that cross cousin marriages are very popular. The first choice for a Siddhi man when he starts looking for a partner is either his father's sister's daughter, or his mother's brother's daughter; basically his first cousins. If a suitable partner is not found within the circle of first cousins, they then start looking among the set of second cousins. If one is still not found, the man will look for a partner beyond his kin circles, within or outside the village³⁷.

There are two main reasons for choosing relatives as marriage partners: economic and social. In a Siddi marriage, the expenses including the bride price are quite high, taking under consideration their poor economic conditions. To manage that, the Siddis believe it is economical and smart to spend such a big amount of money on a near relative, rather than an outsider, so the money remains in the family. Socially speaking, the Siddis believe that relationships that are not with immediate family fade away eventually, and to prevent that from happening, they must renew these ties by marriage amongst cousins. 56 cases of marriage alliances were studied in the village of Sirwan and it was found that 30 marriages were between cousins and the rest 26 were outside their kin.³⁸

³⁷ Chakraborty, Jyotirmoy, Georg Pfeffer, and Deepak Kumar. Behera. *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies: Professor Satya Narayana Ratha Felicitation Volumes*. New Delhi: Concept Pub., 1997. Google Books. Google. Web.

³⁸ Singh, K. S. *People of India*. 3rd ed. Vol. XXII. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992. Print.



Figure 7: An image of the baraat moving towards the venue of the wedding.



Figure 8: A picture of the ceremonies that follow the nikah.

The Siddi community approves the tradition of levirate. This is when the widow marries her deceased husband's younger brother. Likewise, sororal marriages are not objected either. In both cases, consent of the parties is required³⁹.

Due to modernization and development in the Siddi society, the consent of both the boy and the girl is taken into consideration, after which a date for the engagement is fixed, called the *mangani* locally. Our group witnessed one such event while on field. The girl and boy were made to sit on a stage while people came up individually and blessed them by handing the couple money as a gift. The bride and the groom kissed the visitor's hands as a thankful gesture in return. This event was a long process that started from Jambur, and ended at the girl's village. The procession was a big one where all the village dressed up in their best attires, gathered in a large group and danced on the streets while a mobile DJ system lead them around the village and then onto the next one. They played remixed Bollywood music and danced nonstop for a couple of hours. The to-be-groom, dressed in a *sherwani* and a *pagdi* (headgear), followed behind in a car, with a smug look on his face, as it was his big day and he was the center of attention. Our group members joined in with the procession and learnt the traditional dances, as the crowd continued to block the main road. Something we noticed was that a lot of the people seemed to be in "higher spirits" than usual and upon asking our guide Ayyuddin, we found out that alcohol was a norm here, especially at weddings, which is why these affairs tend to get violent; another thing experienced first hand by us.

During the ceremony the girl is seated on a wooden stool called a *patla* and her future sister in law puts a saree on the girl's head. She is also given silver jewelry like a *kadla* (anklet), *sunk* (gold nose ring), *sankra* (bangles) and *kario* (earrings). A fixed pride price of Rs. 125 is given to the girl's father at the time of marriage⁴⁰.

After the engagement comes the wedding, which is known as the *nikah*, the most essential element of the ceremony. This takes place at the bride's house where

³⁹ Singh, K. S. *People of India*. 3rd ed. Vol. XXII. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992. Print.

⁴⁰ *ibid*

guests and relatives are invited. A Muslim priest, known as a *kazi*, performs the nikah as per the Muslim religion. This marriage is recorded in a register where the bride and groom sign, after which they are declared married. A special ceremony is held by the Siddis after three days of marriage where the couple goes to their respective clan's Pir, to untie something called a midhole. A lot of Hindu influence is noticed in Siddi weddings in ceremonies and customs such as the untying of the midhole by the newly weds in front of their gods, use of turmeric paste, coconuts and betel-nuts, and a purification bath before the ceremony. This could be attributed to the fact that the Siddis are otherwise isolated from the wider Muslim communities and are in closer contact with the Hindu groups around the villages of Jambur and Sirvan.

The male members accept no dowry, which minimizes the debt one would otherwise feel in an Indian wedding. Both the families share the expenses for the wedding and they also receive financial help from the villagers. Disputes after the marriage are solved between the two families with mutual understanding. All this shows us how tight the Siddi community is, and how something like a wedding isn't seen as a burden, but is a celebration worked on, and funded by the entire community⁴¹.

⁴¹ Singh, K. S. *People of India*. 3rd ed. Vol. XXII. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992. Print.

4.4. Religion

Islam is the dominating religion amongst the tribe, with a very small minority of Hindu Siddis that reside in the village of Sirwan only. Islam is followed by all the villagers in Jambur, though in an influenced manner sometimes, as noticed on field. A minority in Gujarat, the Siddis and their understanding of Islam has been impacted by the large Hindu influence of the state. This was seen at various instances, one being the Siddi wedding that the group experienced. We were informed about the wedding by Ayudin, our guide, and decided it was a good opportunity to experience the traditions of the village, first hand. The first thing we noticed was a mobile DJ on a small tempo, leading a *baraat* that just seemed to grow in number at every corner as people joined in. The Siddis were dressed in what seemed like festive clothing, and dancing with immense energy to famous Bollywood tunes. A car with the groom and a group of children followed the whole procession at snails pace. As the *baraat* moved through the village, and then to the next one, where the wedding was going to be held, people kept joining in, enlarging the group. A *Baarat* is a Hindu concept where friends and family accompany the groom, and arrive at the wedding venue on a horse (usually a car now days). This symbolizes the happiness that the groom's family feels in accepting the bride as part of the family, and also to make a statement about them arriving at the venue⁴². The concept of a *baraat* has been borrowed from Hinduism by the Siddis, in their interpretation of Islam. Hiraben, one of the most influential women in the Siddi community said "We follow the Muslim religion, we do *namaaz* on every Friday because we believe in Allah. Just as it is important for the Hindus to learn and understand the Ramayana, it is important for us to follow the Muslim religion", contributing to the Hindu-Siddi Islam relationship.

Another observation made at the wedding was that a majority of the crowd was drunk. By sundown, everyone seemed to be swaying and a few fights broke out, which Ayudin shrugged off by saying "they're just drunk". This was confusing because as far as our knowledge extended, Alcohol was forbidden in Islam. Upon questioning this, Ayudin said, "Yes, it is forbidden in our religion, but these people

⁴² "Insight: Enchanting Rituals of a Traditional Indian Wedding Ceremony." *The Cultureist An Online Travel Culture Magazine for the Socially Conscious Citizen*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

don't know any better. They are uneducated and don't know what the Quran says. They follow blindly". This condensed down to the conclusion that Siddi Muslims were a lot more lenient and less orthodox in their ways.

Textbox 2: Mohan Siddi, an advocate for the Siddis

Mohan Siddi has done his Masters in Social Work and is presently doing a PhD. He is working on the development of the Siddi community and has helped develop education and employment particularly. Mohan Siddi explains how the three main religions followed by the tribe are Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. He states how the Siddis identify with particular religions on a basis of the benefits they gain. Religion gives the Siddis an edge in terms of academics, employment and health as well. Mohan Siddi adds that as a result of these benefits the Siddis believe it appropriate to follow the religion and adopt its practices.

This disassociation to a particular religion has Mohan Siddi working on a newer religion, or philosophy rather that entails the original beliefs of the Siddis. This newer religion, termed Siddism, stems from the teachings of Siddi Naas. He explains how before Siddi Naas was a ceremony, they would worship the Siddi Naas in hope for a bountiful hunt. Furthermore, he speaks about the importance of ancestors to the Siddi community. "They thought us what morals are, what culture is and what everything else is", he says. For this reason he believes they are worth being worshipped. In addition to ancestor worship, he states that nature worship is essential. Being a tribe that is familiar with wildlife, he suggests nature worship is inevitable.

The village of Jambur, along with its multiple mosques, has a famous *dargah* that sees Muslim visitors from all around Gujarat. It is believed that any wish comes true, if prayed for at this shrine. The *dargah* is built over a large area, and has green walls with pink borders. The main structure is surrounded by an open compound, and houses a cemetery in the backyard. Moreover we were told that there was a peculiar tree in the backyard. The people of Jambur use this tree for the purpose of trial and ordeal. This is any ordeal that is meant to test a person's strength and endurance, essentially to resolve an accusation. This method was a common occurrence in the judicial system of Europe, Africa and also Asia. The thought process behind this ritual was such that they believed that the gods would interfere and show them signs that indicated the guilt or innocence of the accused. There were variations of the process like trial by fire, trial by hot iron, trial by water, trial by hot water, trial by snake and a few more, but the method used in the village of Jambur was not cruel or physically strenuous such as these⁴³. The tree in the backyard had a large trunk that signified its old age, and had thick roots that helped it hold its ground. One such root was thicker than all the others. It grew out of the ground, creating a bridge over a hollow patch of land under. This was the trial tool for the Siddis. Whenever something goes wrong in the village, namely theft, violence, or any act that causes the community discomfort, trial by ordeal, using this tree is conducted. The accused is asked to slide through the space between the root and the ground, which is covered by a mat. To come to a verdict, the suspect must slide through the congested space and if they come out to the other side, they can leave scot free, if not, they are deemed guilty. "We believe any body size and shape, no matter how fat or thin, can slide through if they are pure and have not committed the crime. The whole village comes together here when the trial is happening," said Ayudin.

⁴³ "A History of "Trial By Ordeal"" *Mental Floss*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

4.5. A Meaty Diet

The Siddis are a non-vegetarian island in an ocean of vegetarian Hindu Gujaratis. They eat meats like chicken, buffalo, goat, fowls and fish. Eggs are also a part of their diet. Their staple food is spiked millet, which they called *bajri*, and rice, as these are the crops they grow themselves. Pulses like gram, pigeon pea, lentils etc. are also a part of their everyday diet. The main cooking medium is groundnut oil. The Siddis also eat roots and tubers, which they find in the forest. They eat any vegetables and fruits that are locally available to them⁴⁴. In an interview with Mohan Siddi, we found that there was no food particularly Siddi. He said, “There is no food that is specially called Siddi food, or is exclusively known as our type of food, we eat normal Gujarati food”. The only exception to this case is a dish called *Shoba*, which is peculiar to the Siddis. In this, goat meat is cut into pieces, cooked and mixed with cooked rice, over which ghee and sugar are added. The village head, Abdulbhai, told us that the Siddis eat *maida* (flour) *rotis* in the mornings, Gujarati snacks and chai in the afternoon, and fish and rice for dinner. Gujarati sweets like *mohanthaal*, *mehsur*, and *laddu* are eaten on special occasions, along with special food like biryani and *shir khorma*. The Siddis also chew on pan and *supari*, which looked like a tradition⁴⁵. Something we noticed was that the Siddis made their chai with just milk, tealeaves and sugar, with no water in the concoction, making it a very heavy drink; another Gujarati influence. There are no traces of African cuisine in their food as far as noticed.

⁴⁴ Singh, K. S. *People of India*. 3rd ed. Vol. XXII. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992. Print.

⁴⁵ "SIDDI DHAMAL." *Siddi Dhamal Gujrat, Dhamal Dance of Siddi, Western India Tours, Tribal Tours of Gujarat, Traditional Guj Tours, Tribal Tourism Siddi, Mashira Nritya*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

4.6. Birth Ceremonies

When a woman is announced pregnant, a pre- delivery ritual of lap filling, called *Kholobharo*, is conducted during the seventh month of her pregnancy. This ceremony is held at her husband's house and the to-be mother received new clothes, coconuts and other such customary items. The ceremony commences with a dinner for family and close kin members. A *Chatti* ceremony is conducted on the sixth day after the birth of the child, and the father's sister names the baby. A *Mundan* ceremony is performed on a boy child, where his head is shaved clean and a goat is sacrificed and feasted on, on that day. The only post birth restriction is that the mother does not visit the mosque for a certain number of days after delivery. Nothing about gender preference came up in the conversations we had with the Siddis. Everyone spoke to us about how both genders are equally loved, and none is given preference over the other⁴⁶.

4.7. Death Ceremonies

The Siddis bury their dead and no food is prepared when someone in the household passes away, till the third day. The prayers recited after the death of a member of the community is known as the *Ziarat*. Relatives and friends are treated to a feast upon attending this ceremony. There are other days that are observed like the *Dasma*, *Bisma*, *Trisma* and *Chelem*, on the 10th, 20th, 30th and 40th days⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "SIDDI DHAMAL." *Siddi Dhamal Gujrat, Dhamal Dance of Siddi, Western India Tours, Tribal Tours of Gujarat, Traditional Guj Tours, Tribal Tourism Siddi, Mashira Nritya*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

⁴⁷ Singh, K. S. *People of India*. 3rd ed. Vol. XXII. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1992. Print.

4.8. Kings of the Jungle

The Siddis have established their settlements in and around the Gir forest, in places like Sasan Gir, Jambur and Sirvan, due to their close connection with the lions. There is a very significant relationship between the Siddis and the lions of Gir, which is supported by how the community considers itself appropriate for the forest and the happenings of its ecosystem⁴⁸

The Siddhi's had a close relationship with the African lions before they migrated to India, and those habits conditioned them to live with the Asiatic lions in Gir as well. It is said that the Nawab of Junagarh located the Siddis around Gir, as they were the only ones who had the strength and experience of living with the lions peacefully. They claim the lions and Siddis cannot survive without each other and take great pride in the harmonious association they have built. Abdul bhai, the village head of Jambur confirmed this, "Lions and Siddis go together. Where the lions stay, the Siddis stay. The bond is so strong that neither can stay without the other"⁴⁹.

Lions have been incorporated in the Siddi religion, obligating them to protect these beasts. Their bond is emphasized on through the explanation of a Siddi woman; She states that the same Pir blessed the lions and Siddis. There are stories about a lioness visiting multiple *dargahs*, possibly seeking blessings of the Pir. A study by Seema Solanki and Sandeep Kuman called "Friends of Lion the Siddis" observes that the Siddis understand the lion's behavior well and know how to conduct themselves around the animals. They often encounter lions while working in their farms, in the forest collecting wood, and in the villages when the lions come in strolling. Even after such close contact, there have been no complaints about attacks or killings of the Siddis. The Siddis claim they know lion behavior like when it's hungry, if human presence is disturbing it or even when the animal is unwell. These skills help the

⁴⁸ Kumar, Sandeep, and C. N. Pandey. "Friends of the Lion- The Siddis." *Foresters Diary - Asiatic Lion Landscape*. By Seema Solanki. N.p.: Gujarat Forest Department, 2015. 77-81. Print.

⁴⁹ *ibid*

Siddis analyze the situation and tackle them nonviolently. With such close association, the Siddis also consider themselves strong and sturdy like the lions⁵⁰.

Not only do the Siddis believe in co-existing with the wildlife, but also in it's conservation. They fear globalization and its effects, which are deteriorating their natural habitat and also the lion's. This is a major concern as the forest has always been their home. They consider themselves as a part of the lion's territory and not as the lions intruding into theirs⁵¹.

A common profession for the Siddis now is to work as forest guards and trackers for the sanctuary, since they have lived in the area for centuries and have extensive knowledge of the surroundings and the lions.

⁵⁰ Kumar, Sandeep, and C. N. Pandey. "Friends of the Lion- The Siddis." *Foresters Diary - Asiatic Lion Landscape*. By Seema Solanki. N.p.: Gujarat Forest Department, 2015. 77-81. Print.

⁵¹ *ibid*

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1. The Growing Importance of Slate and Chalk



Figure 9: A picture of the primary school in Jambur

Education is a privilege often exhorted by the learned, and desired by the deprived. The term education can be defined very broadly but it entails the exchange or inheritance of knowledge, usually in a school, college or university⁵². The benefits of education are long lasting and the exchange of ideas and information is the framework to such advanced human development. Getting educated means having many doors opened to you and allows you, if not at least gives you the chance, to pursue a field where you find yourself most interested. Today, the uneducated often work only to sustain their existence and rarely to fulfill a dream.

The Siddi tribe lacks a means of getting a hold on education and is deprived from this human necessity. Their options and opportunities are stunted, as education

⁵² "Education". *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2016. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

is a commodity taken up temporarily and seldom pursued. The little education that is taken up is restricted mostly to the males due to societal and economic factors. A majority of the males ends up dropping education further, but not too far, down the line⁵³. Without education, the future development of the tribe is dubious. Some faction of the Siddi Tribe receives benefits from their schedule tribe status. In addition to financial support, they get plots reserved for education institutions⁵⁴. The government provides some students benefits like cycles to reach schools that are relatively far away⁵⁵. The members of the tribe are often accused of not being interested in education and arguments sometimes disregard the remoteness and difficulty of access in the area they reside⁵⁶. Even though number of children sent to school is on the rise, however, the rate at which these children drop out of school is also on the rise. Girls are not encouraged to continue with education after they hit puberty and the Siddi students are often ragged, one of the reasons for such widespread dropouts, for their distinct features⁵⁷.

The Siddi people do not give primacy to education and the government does very little to help their situation. There are instances of girls dropping out to get married and that, to them, seems like a better alternative to studying. Parents send their daughters to school but don't urge them to continue with it. Higher education for young women in the Siddi tribe is often left in the hands of their in-laws. Furthermore, if these girls wish to pursue secondary and higher education, they must travel around 8 kilometers to reach an educational institute that offers this for in the village of Jambur there is only one school, that doesn't offer secondary and higher education, and two schools in the neighboring village called Madhupur⁵⁸. Girls as young as 16 get engaged and give up education out of will or force. A lot of the female school dropouts choose to discontinue their education after the 10th standard

⁵³"Siddi". Trti.gujarat.gov.in. N.p., 2015. Web. 18 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁴ Micklem, James. "Sidis in Gujarat." University of Edinburgh, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁵ Shanavaz, Personal interview, 2015.

⁵⁶ Trivedi RK (ed) 1967 *Census of India 1961: Village Survey Monograph 10, Jambur*. Vol.V, Part V-A. Government Printing Press, Delhi. 19 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁷ Siddi, Mohan. "Critical Life Of Siddis (Indian Africans) In Karnataka, India." *Siddijanavikas.blogspot.in*. N.p., 2011. Web. 20 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁸ "The Woman who Makes Borders", Personal interview, 2015.

due to a lack of interest. Even insistent parents can do little to keep them from leaving schools.

Textbox 3 : Meena, a Siddi adolescent girl

Meena is a shy 16-year-old girl from the village of Jambur who lives with her parents and brother. Her father works as a rickshaw driver and her brother at a hotel in Sasan Gir. Due to financial issues that restricted their basic needs, Meena always helped her family to earn any form of income she could. Having completed her 10th standard from Diamond High School in Chitraval, she was forced to quit schooling hence after.

The reason for her to quit school could be because of several issues but Meena was clear about the fact that it had nothing to do with parental pressure or financial issues. She said, “my friends are also planning on dropping their education and it is not unusual in our community”. However, Meena is a bright student who enjoys studying. After a period of long hesitation she mentioned that due to her recent engagement, she was forced to drop out of school by her mother-in-law who wanted her to provide labour for the family.

Economic factors play an essential role in this aspect of the Siddi community however on further research we discovered that the government offers to pay a certain amount of the education fee and reimburses the money at the end of the year. Education is free till the 8th standard, after which the government offers to subsidize it for the Siddi students only⁵⁹. Although economic factors create impediment to the education of these girls, a lot of them choose instead to get married at a young age and, drop out of school.

⁵⁹ Meena, Personal interview, 2015.

The trends related to education are changing today, as the Siddis understand the importance and value of education. By visiting the primary school in Jambur and interacting with the principal and children we learnt that the Siddis believe that education should be pursued even if they choose not to. The village of Jambur is home to only one primary school, therefore accessibility to secondary and higher education is difficult. The primary school is a government school. Private schools in surrounding villages are frequented by the Siddi children in an attempt to finish secondary and higher education. Graduation is becoming common amongst the Siddi tribe than before and some Siddi people have found jobs in bigger cities, like Rajkot and Ahmedabad. BA degrees are now not unknown to this tribe anymore and a few Siddis have gone on to become even professors. The fate of the uneducated is that of a farmer, rickshaw driver or labourer⁶⁰. Students who drop education sometimes end up regretting their decision. Life can be tough without obtaining educational certificates and getting to do things they might have wished for becomes almost impossible. Menial labour, like farming, lures in many of the young adults and results in a lack of educational interest. After education is ruled off, some males, in contrast to farming or rickshaw driving for example, choose to get into *dhamal*. *Dhamal* is not taught in school but rather picked up by a male child through observation of an earlier

⁶⁰ Abdulbhai, Personal interview, 2015.

Textbox 4: Nargis Lobi, a young educated Siddi woman



Figure 10: Nargis Lobi

Nargish Adreman Bhai Lobi, a 20 year old Siddi girl from the village of Jambur, is setting educational milestones for women in her community. She is a second year student, pursuing her BA degree in a college nearby. She specifically mentioned that the college was co-ed and there is no hesitation in going to college with boys. In fact, her family encourages it and sends her to the same educational institutes as her older brother, not letting gender be a gap. She mentioned that the Siddi girls lend a big hand in household work, but are also given enough freedom to do as they please in terms of pursuing their education and careers.

The college she attends has students from all communities and religions around the area, without any discrimination towards the Siddis. She also told us the government gives the Siddis a free bus pass to and fro the college, making it easier for students to attend classes without worrying about the travel costs. Nargis is on a scholarship at her college, awarded to her for scoring 93% in her 12th grade exams. Her favourite subjects were languages like Sanskrit and English, and she wants to be fluent in the latter to converse in public. She knows how to operate a computer and the Internet and uses those tools on an everyday basis as she has a device at home as well. After her under graduation, she wants to continue studying a course in either nursing or agriculture.

generation performing the dance⁶¹. A little more educated Siddis choose to join the army or police after schooling⁶². Staff size is small in colleges around the village and students don't know many of their teachers' names. Poverty is widespread in the village. People are forced into labour just to sustain their lives and education is their only way out. Unfortunately, due to the high rate of dropouts, a lot of the young adults find themselves under pressure to get employed⁶³.

Advocating education to the Siddi community is absolutely essential and is now being taken up mildly by NGOs but especially by Mohan Siddi, a determined member of the Siddi community. He says the people of his tribe are not very educated. Like in the case of Madrassas, members of the tribe have now taken up informal education. He showed how the role of education is now increasing in their society when he said that some boys look into the education level of the girl before marrying them. On the other hand, he stated how most women are interested in the income of the man. Mohan Siddi said that the Siddi tribe would learn better if the education system leaned towards a more practical oriented one. The Indian education system of having to sit in one place and score great marks whilst ignoring physical fitness and outdoor skills doesn't work for them, he stated. He says they are falsely accused of being lesser intelligent by the Indian society because the Indian society neglects the things they are good at and the skills they have acquired. He believes an education system that fosters learning through practical work instead of reading and memorizing material out of a textbook would work a lot better for the tribe. He then goes on to add that because of young adults joining construction sites far from the city, they don't know where to get their children educated. He also mentioned briefly that he did a documentary with the NID students⁶⁴.

Mohan Siddi is the first member of the Siddi community to travel the world and work on getting a PhD. He educates himself, not to earn money but to be a role

⁶¹ Ramzan, Personal interview, 2015.

⁶² Sirvan, Personal interview, 2015.

⁶³ Dadu, Personal interview, 2015.

⁶⁴ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview, 2015.

model to the younger Siddis. He wants to prove that even a common man's son can earn a PhD and therefore motivate more children from the Siddi community to pursue education. He says his incentive is not to work in a big company but to work for the development of the Siddi tribe. He has presented papers in other countries and to the Pan-African Congress in South Africa. The paper was on India's African diaspora. He attempted to get scholarships for Siddi students in urban areas away from their home and says he has arranged something where a mixture of 10 to 15 Siddi tribe members will get these scholarships. He says it might take a little persuading to get the Siddi youth to overcome their fear of leaving home but it can be achieved without a problem. He claims the Siddis are good with language and will be able to survive easily away from their home. He believes it would be counterproductive to sponsor all expenses of these students for that would make them lackadaisical and instead just sponsor their tuition and housing fees and then allow the Siddi students to take up certain responsibilities⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview, 2015.

5.2. Employment, a lack of opportunity



Figure 11: Farming is their main occupation

In a community hardened by poverty, finding employment becomes a dream. Rarely does it matter how one makes money as long as money is being made. The link between education, employment and income is a clear one. Trends usually show that lower the educational qualifications, lower would be their incomes. Furthermore, education and unemployment are inversely proportional: More education leads to lower rates of unemployment⁶⁶. The people of the Siddi tribe must sustain themselves and their families, hence leading to one person being enrolled in multiple occupations. The income from one job is not enough to keep a family, consisting usually of more than four people afloat and requires a little extra income from other occupations⁶⁷. The government has attempted to aid employment in this tribe but hasn't managed a

⁶⁶ Strauss, Steven. "The Connection Between Education, Income Inequality, and Unemployment". *The Huffington Post*. N.p., 2012. Web. 29 Jan. 2016.

⁶⁷ Sheth, Priya. "African By Origin, Indian By Nationality And Gujarati By Speech". *The Hindu Business Line*. N.p., 2011. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

way to sustain their efforts, resulting in largely ineffective programs⁶⁸. They were forced into labour in their origins and now financial pressure often forces them into certain fields of employment.



Figure 12: A Siddi auto rickshaw driver

The most common occupation being agriculture, the Siddis work on farmlands owned by the Patel community in Gujarat. Since they do not have the money to own land, they are often wage labourers who spend their days tilling, sowing and reaping crops. The exception here is Hiraben and her family from Jambur who are one of the most influential Siddi families owning 0.5 hectare of land. She has employed other Siddi workers on her land and promoted high yield farming techniques.

Apart from farming, dance and music is the next most common occupation chosen by them. Known for their unique dance ‘*dhamal*’ this dance form has been inherited from their ancestors and is now being commercialized. Many men have found occupation in *dhamal*, but it is limited to only the men. As recalled by Mohammed a *dhamal* dancer in Jambur, “women don’t usually perform *dhamal* as they are shy and do not have the physical capabilities to perform the stunts that men do.” he also says that *dhamal* is taken up as an occupation by those who have not

⁶⁸ "From Exclusion To Empowerment – Women Of Siddi Community". *AgriculturesNetwork.org*. N.p., 2008. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

pursued education and cannot get any other job.⁶⁹ Through interviews on field it was also noted that *dhamal* is only performed by men below the age of 30. After 30, most men resort to other occupations like rickshaw pulling and farming and they do not have the physique and strength to perform *dhamal* anymore. Other interviewees responded that men also prefer to participate in other occupations after a certain age as *dhamal* alone does not provide them with enough money to support a family. However, this has not stopped the Siddis in performing *dhamal* as an occupation. During an interview with Ramzan, a *dhamal* dancer he said “I know it does not provide me with enough money, but I perform *dhamal* as I love dancing and dancing is in my blood.”⁷⁰ Contrary to this, in the Siddi Village of Sirvan, not one single individual performs *dhamal* as they believe that anything that does not give them enough money is a waste of time. Such is the condition with *dhamal* as an occupation taken up by the Siddis

It is often that one occupation does not yield enough income to satisfy the wants and demands of the people. Some *dhamal* dancers also grow crop and some farmers join the army. It takes the extra income to sustain comfortable living in the tribe. Jobs range from rickshaw drivers to workers of the government. Farming and shop keeping is extensively taken up and is an important source of income to the village of Jambur. Many families own rickshaws as an extra source of money. It is evident from our primary research that division of labour exists in the society as men and women take up different occupations. Men perform jobs like agriculture and rickshaw pulling that requires intensive physical strength and staying away from home for long hours. Women take up jobs like border making for dresses and handicrafts to earn even 14 rupees a day, a miniscule amount of money⁷¹.

Apart from this sort of division, families need to provide in more than one way to sustain their development and it is therefore common for more than one member of the house to take occupation. For example, the father might drive a rickshaw while

⁶⁹ Mohammad, Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁰ Ramzan, Personal Interview, 2015.

⁷¹ "Sahilya", Personal interview, 2015.

the son works at a nearby hotel⁷². Most employment only ensures the bare minimum and the employee is satisfied with enough money to stay sheltered and relatively comfortable. Shopkeepers yield around 300 rupees a day and are usually satisfied with this much. Sometimes shopkeepers also have to resort to other occupations like Dhamal, rickshaw driving or both⁷³.

Finding employment seems to be a problem for the Siddi people. Any job is better than no job and because of this the young adults look for employment in a familiar field. For example, many Siddi children take up farming because their parents were farmers. Furthermore, many children who get into *dhamal* usually do so because their parents or grandparents had taken it up in preceding generations. Similarly, children who grow up to be shopkeepers usually inherit the family store. The Siddi people are given government jobs as well. For example, some Siddi people earn their wages by laying roads in the Gir forest. Children between the ages of 15 and 18 have to study and work side-by-side and there are government-training programs for Siddis who intend to find employment there. Education helps getting government jobs in the army and police.⁷⁴

Lack of education had emerged as the most pressing issue for the Siddis. Perhaps it would be a lot easier to find a job had they been more educated. Siddis pursuing education have achieved jobs they once couldn't have imagined. To persuade Siddi students to enroll in educational institutes, they are often told about the jobs a good education can bring⁷⁵. The role of education is now given more importance and the benefits of education are now widely recognized in the tribe. There are students from the tribe that now have BA degrees, diplomas in computer engineering and even nursing degrees. However this is only the case for a very small number the current youth. The Siddi youth today has also taken to joining the army. The high employment rate of the Siddis in the army is often credited to their strength. The

⁷² Meena, Personal interview, 2015.

⁷³ Yousuf, Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁴ "Sirvan Older Man", Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁵ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview, 2015.

Siddis are very fit and strength runs in their genes. This also makes them adapt to physical labour easily.

Our on field research and interviews with the Siddi villagers led us to conclude that even though the Siddis take up different types of professions, there is no particular jobs in the community that bring with it a great sense of honour and respect like urban centers today⁷⁶. Sometimes, though, not all parents want to send their children to school so they can get into labour work. Labour work could be looked upon as a form of employment that gives little gain or outcome⁷⁷. The Siddis, due to their physique, are very good at sports. A couple of Siddis were given the chance to take part in competitions by the sport authority of India. These Siddis won medals but are now working jobs in the railways and police department⁷⁸.

It is unfortunate how the Siddi people are not given access to the many opportunities in a world developing so rapidly due to globalisation. This is a tribe that has been promised help and support by the NGOs and other organisations but are always let down in some way. There has been an increased interest in the Siddi tribe over the past couple of years but the Siddis feel like they are still stuck in a situation of oppression. Mohan Siddi believes that the Siddis won't have access to better opportunity until they are supported financially and given the chance to showcase their talents. The caste system adds to their troubles to find an equal opportunity. The people that gave them hope in the past seem to have manipulated the Siddis for just the title of the tribe. Mohan Siddi states how the Siddi community acquired their religion as a means of employment. He says that people in the past would offer them jobs if they were willing to change their religious beliefs⁷⁹.

The Siddis have worked hard to get where they are in society today. They have started small businesses and have found ways to earn a living. A wider access to loans

⁷⁶ Abdulbhai, Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁷ Akrambhao, Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁸ Siddi, Mohan. Personal interview, 2015.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

has given the community a chance to financially support themselves and their families. Owning cattle makes it easier for them to take loans, and also helps them to start dairies. A few of them also use the loans they get to rent cars and rickshaws, and employ themselves as taxi drivers. Overall this has helped them increase employment opportunities in the community.

Women on the other hand, take loans from the *mandals* that they are a part of. Societal pressures in the village often lead to a lot of work for the women. They are expected to know how to bring up their children while making sure the house functions properly as well. If a woman chooses to be a part of other occupations she is still expected to complete her household chores. Through our on field research we identified Hiraben, a woman who managed to accomplish the task of setting up businesses, helping the community and taking care of her house. Having done a lot for the women of the Siddi community, she believes that women are just as able as men are. She faced pressures from her family when she founded the women's organization and was often told that a woman does not have the same amount of time a man has to invest in activities that does not concern the household. She used her land for the benefit of women in the society and gave them chances of employment⁸⁰.

A lack of access to opportunity has left the Siddis mainly self-employed. Making sure there is just enough money to keep the house functioning is sufficient for the tribe. A higher awareness of education leading to employment in places away from their village has got the Siddis aspiring for greatness. Siddis work predominantly in the labour industry but have proved to be great entertainers as well as promising students and employees. With the rise in awareness of the Siddis, the opportunities the Siddis found in a world away from their village increased. Employment seems to be at its all time peak in the agriculture and transport industry. The Siddi people have even found jobs as professors, policemen and policewomen, entertainers and entrepreneurs. Although there is trouble finding aid and support, the Siddi community appears to be developing slowly and steadily.

⁸⁰ Hiraben, Personal interview, 2015.

CHAPTER SIX: The Real Struggle

To study any tribe, one must pay attention to their socio-economic standing in society, which would be incomplete without focusing on the attitudes and stereotypes the tribe faces, leading to possible discrimination. Hence, our study also focused on the attitudes towards the Siddis and the stereotypes faced by them.

Over the course of a few hundred years, the Siddis have faced immense discrimination in India as a result of social and economic inequality. Through our research on field, we learnt that a majority of the Indian population has never heard of the Siddis, and those who have, consider them as mediocre, untrustworthy and sometimes even compare them to the *Dalits* or untouchables. This sort of discrimination exists within the network of various Siddi communities in India itself.

While trying to gather information on the Siddis before our field research began, we were stunned at the fact that every guide, hotel owner and resident that we spoke to, did not know these African origin, Indian national community as the “Siddis”. In fact, they referred to them as “Negros”, generally used as a very derogatory term. Our journey of understanding the discrimination against the Siddis began here. As we continued to explore this aspect on field, our bus driver, one of our first interactions in Gujarat, constantly referred to the Siddis as “West-Indies”. In conversation with him, “they have African ancestors but are Indian citizens”, the only reply we got was “yes, same thing, blacks, West-Indies”. This made us realize that there is a serious lack of knowledge about the Siddi community, which only makes them greater victims of discrimination.

Textbox 5: Hiraben Lobi, an influential Siddi woman



Figure 13: Hiraben Lobi

Orphaned at a very young age, Hiraben Lobi is one of the most influential women in Jambur today. Her leadership skills were seen at a young age when her dad left his 0.5-hectare land to her as he thought of her as his son. She was determined to put this land to good use. She recalls a conversation years ago and said, “I would always see this one lady crying, and one day I asked her why she was crying. She told me that her children were really small and she was a widow. She used to earn 80 rupees a day. I gave her my word that I will support her and employ her. This happened years ago, from that day onwards from supporting one woman, I went on to support several more”.

Today Hiraben employs and gives loans to several hundreds urging them to start micro-enterprises. With this she has not only improved the status of the Siddi community by employing them and giving them a means of livelihood, but also more specifically improved the status of the women. For the same she has won several international and national awards like “Women of the World” in Switzerland, “Jankidevi Bajaj Award – Ladies wing of IMC Bombay”, Aga Khan Foundation Award and several more. She has also been felicitated by Aamir Khan, Jaya Bachchan, Mukesh Ambani and Narendra Modi for her role in the development of the Siddi community. She has and is working effortlessly to reduce discrimination and increase the quality of life the Siddi Community leads.

Part of our pre field research was talking to Mr. Mohan Siddi, a social activist for the Siddi community of Karnataka. He believes that the discrimination meted to the Siddis is never ending. "I will never forget those days in my primary school where the teacher made us 'Siddis' sit on the last benches of the classroom. If we raised our hands to answer a question, it was like we were invisible. She just thought of us as stupid because we were Siddis and didn't let us participate in classroom discussions." The mistreatment did not stop there; Mr. Mohan Siddi goes on about how he doesn't like going to a barber shop even today as the first question he is asked is "why is your hair so curly? Are you a foreigner?"

According to Mr. Siddi, discrimination against the Siddis is not just in terms of the attitudes of people, but also in cases of employment. It has been seen that in a state government job, they recognize who a Siddi is and which tribal area they come from. They then infer that the Siddis belong to the so-called 'lower caste' and treat them in an undignified manner. However, this is not seen in the case of a central government job as in that scenario, people from different backgrounds are working and diversity is accepted. Mr. Mohan Siddi gave an example from his own life where he talked about working in Mumbai and how he experienced no discrimination, as nobody identified him as a Siddi. Being a Siddi from Karnataka, Mohan had heard that the Siddis in Gujarat were too aggressive, violent and untrustworthy. He conveyed this information to us even though he had never met the Siddi from Gujarat himself.⁸¹

There have been numerous cases of discrimination towards the Siddis, some reported, and some gone by unnoticed. Incidents have been covered by the east African magazine with one such instance being when a young Siddi woman from Gujarat, Farida al-Mubrik, reported for her first day of work at a bank in Bhavnagar, was mistaken for a tourist due to her African looks and asked to wait at the foreign exchange counter⁸². Other such cases have been seen in tourist spots like the Taj Mahal where the Siddis were mistakenly asked to pay the entry fee for foreigners. In

⁸¹ Curtis, Edward E. "Shrines of the African Saints and LifeCycle Rituals in the Village." *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora*. N.p.: UNC, 2014. 92-94. Print.

⁸² "India's Sidis, a Forgotten Diaspora of Africans." *The East African Magazine*. National Media Group, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

one such situation, when a Siddi man demanded to pay the normal fee for Indian citizens, the ticket clerk laughed and asked how a “black” visitor with dreadlocks could possibly be an Indian⁸³. Returning from an overseas tour, members of the Siddi Goma musical group met with suspicious looks at the immigration control desk of Delhi airport. The officers wondered how they get hold of Indian passports, “Nigerian forgery, no doubt!”⁸⁴.

The Siddis have often complained that bus drivers ask them to stand while commuting to places, shopkeepers cheat them with the weight of pulses, landlords treat them in a brutal manner and even cheat them of their produce and money. A Siddi woman told us about the happenings in Madhupur, in regard to employment opportunities and festive occasions. The Patel community in the area eats with the Siddis, but from different plates, which they must wash and clean themselves after the meal, and nobody else can touch or use these plates. This sort of information has been supported by scholars like Charles Camara, who we studied as one of our secondary sources. He narrates an incident where a Siddi woman at a restaurant was made to wash her own plates and cups in cow dung; a purifying agent in India. This clearly shows that discrimination against the Siddis by equating them to untouchables still exists. Camara, who has done extensive research on the Siddis, emphasizes on how these complaints are not registered by the police. Hence, discrimination against the Siddi community is not only done by the common people they interact with but also by those who are a part of the legal system, supposedly their own protectors.⁸⁵

Misrepresentation by mass media has further added to the stereotypical attitudes towards Siddis. A Kannada newspaper article described the Siddis as “dark” and “ugly” hoping to be raised from their darkness but only through time.

Despite instances such as above, we came across inconsistencies in the information scholars have written about discrimination against the Siddi community.

⁸³ "India's Sidis, a Forgotten Diaspora of Africans." *The East African Magazine*. National Media Group, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ ibid

While Charles Camara states that Siddis have generally not been allowed to enter homes of other caste people, eat with them or marry them, we saw that contrary to that, the Siddi community in Jambur felt like nobody discriminated against them. Hiraben, a very powerful woman in the village, agreed that times are changing and nobody treats them badly anymore. However through our interview with the village head, we learnt that discrimination does exist to a large extent. Upon asking for more clarification on the same, the head was hesitant and said “I don’t think it is right for me to be talking about the cruel discrimination we face”. This by itself shows that the community only wants to make it seem like they are equals in the state of Gujarat and do not face day to day discrimination even though they still do.⁸⁶

Apart from being discriminated by other communities and cultures, it is interesting to note that the Siddis discriminate amongst themselves as well. To our surprise, the Siddis living in the district of Madhupur and Jambur have one key element of difference; religion. Madhupur, consisting of mainly Hindu Siddis, and Jambur, a complete Muslim population, refuse to eat or drink water in each other’s houses. The Village head of Jambur also told us that the Siddis here rarely visit their relatives in Madhupur. However, efforts are made to maintain cordial relations with the other. This shows how religion itself can be a barrier within the same community and cause discrimination.

Every aspect of research that has been done on the Siddis in India includes a mention of the Siddis fight against stereotypes and discrimination, and their struggle for empowerment. Our interaction with the Siddis brought us to a conclusion that this struggle for empowerment exists in all three aspects; social, economic and political. From what we saw on field, a reason for this objectionable attitude towards the Siddis could be the lack of awareness about this tribe. We witnessed first hand discrimination against the Siddis, while on field. During a Siddi wedding, a Gujarati passerby came and questioned why we were present in the festivities. He went on to tell us that the Siddis were not nice people and that it wasn’t safe for us to be here. The Siddis around us who heard this weren’t bothered by the remark, as if they used to this daily generalization and discrimination. Our experience as a group made us

⁸⁶ "India's Sidis, a Forgotten Diaspora of Africans." *The East African Magazine*. National Media Group, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

realize that the Siddis are quite violent and aggressive, but this aspect does not make them bad people, as labeled by other communities⁸⁷.

It is this discrimination and social, economic inequality that lead the Siddis to fight for the status of a scheduled tribe. Schedule tribes are communities that show “indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness”⁸⁸. Kiran Prasad, like many other scholars, fought for the Siddi’s right to be recognized as a schedule tribe under the Indian law. This helps distinguish the tribe as a formal community, deserving government benefits. The struggle went on for several years, and the Siddis of Gujarat finally received their Scheduled Tribe status in 2003, entitling financial aid and incentives to the ones who attend and complete any form of formal education. One problem that arises from the Siddis being deemed as Scheduled Tribe is being confused as being Scheduled Caste. Schedule Caste is a group of people that were essentially known as untouchables, according to the Hindu mythology. They were identified as being dirty and were booked for jobs that were not attractive, such as cleaning sewage spaces.⁸⁹

After having been through this ordeal for years, the Siddis have not just stayed strong, but also found certain means to overcome this injustice. To overcome economic discrimination the Siddis have used self-employment strategies by practicing subsistence farming, keeping their own shops, driving rickshaws etc. Apart from this, scholars believe that certain religious and cultural practices of the Siddis play an important role in “physical and psychological healing” which brings the community together and lightens the stereotypical and discriminatory tone they face by others.⁹⁰ The community stays strong by uplifting each other in the eyes of the world.

⁸⁷ "India's Sidis, a Forgotten Diaspora of Africans." *The East African Magazine*. National Media Group, n.d. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.

⁸⁸ "Ministry of Tribal Affairs." *Definition*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

⁸⁹ "Scheduled Caste Welfare - List of Scheduled Castes." *List of Scheduled Castes*. Web. 07 Feb. 2016.

⁹⁰ Curtis, Edward E. "Shrines of the African Saints and LifeCycle Rituals in the Village." *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora*. N.p.: UNC, 2014. 92-94. Print.

CONCLUSION

The origin and settlement theories on the Siddis in India are multiple and a dearth of documentation on the African people who migrated to India has rendered a single theory implausible. The Siddis today are ambiguous about their diaspora into the Indian sub-continent. Some theories suggest they were brought into India as slaves whereas as other theories suggest they came to India for other reasons, like trade, and chose to stay in the country. Where in Africa they exactly came from remains unclear but their culture suggests roots in Zanzibar and Nigeria. The reason the distribution of the Siddis seems so sporadic is because when the British came into India, the British hindered the Siddis amalgamation as a part of their divide-and-rule policy.

It is surprising that in an age interlinked by media only a miniscule percentage of the Indian population are aware of the Siddi tribe. The Siddis have adopted the Indian culture and managed to only retain some of their African traditions, like dance and music. Whether they were brought into the country by the Portuguese or whether they came here as merchants who took up permanent residence matters little to the people of the tribe. Integrating into the Indian community and an opportunity to develop, rather than regress, is what matters more to the tribe. Given the rigid Indian structures, it is difficult for the Siddis to pull themselves out of their current position and therefore require help from the rest of the nation. This can only be brought about by an increased awareness of their existence and situation.

Through our empirical research on field we found that although the Siddis felt so strongly about dance and music, they knew little about its origins. Children, usually males who get into Dhamal, learn it in their youth and are not formally taught the dance. The name of the dance has found different meanings through the years. The Siddis believe it means to have fun. An alias of *dhamal* is "Siddi Goma". "Goma" means drum in Swahili and suggests the dances origins are from Southeast Africa. The dance requires costumes that vary according to the occasion. The Siddis wear more or less intricate costumes depending on the importance of the event. The instruments used were once made by the tribe itself but are now bought in local markets. *Dhamal* has become more of an occupation than a hobby today. A large sect

of the Siddi men relies primarily on *dhamal* to earn a living. Although the dance and music of *dhamal* has come to define the Siddi people, we observed, at a wedding, that they dance to and listen to Bollywood music. *Dhamal* appears to now be an economic endeavor rather than a recreational one.

Their birth and death rituals were those of the Islam religion. The Siddis, we found, mainly concern themselves with physical labour, like laying roads in the Gir forest or farming. Through research it was found, marriage and remarriage, even if after divorce, is acceptable in the tribe. Furthermore, many young women choose to discontinue education after an early marriage. Education in the Siddi tribe is now gaining more importance and families are learning the benefits of education. Life can get hard for the Siddi and the Siddi youth must often travel far distances to pursue further education. Jobs often have to be taken up by more than one member in the family to sustain the family. Some people work two jobs a day to earn a little extra money. The most common jobs taken up appear to be farming, rickshaw driving and shop keeping. Many men who do the Dhamal dance often have to take up a more steady and reliable source of income as well. The Siddi people are very well built and have a comparative edge with their physique. They are adept with labour that requires physical fitness and are therefore extremely good with sport. The Siddi children are extremely agile and slightly aggressive. The Siddi people were very welcoming and enjoyed having their fair share of fun. Some of the young adults, on being interviewed, gave humorous answers allowing them and their friends to enjoy a laugh.

On field research showed the dark side of stereotyping that prevails today. The tribe is referred to as "Negros" by neighboring communities and many of the villagers that know of the tribe do not know they are called "Siddis". They are often compared to Dalits and are deemed untrustworthy by many of the locals. The locals know very little about the tribe and sometimes even refer to them as "West-Indies". The Siddis face discrimination even in formal settings, like in employment and education. Because of the colour of their skin, many times the Siddis are asked if they are foreigners and are given treatment foreigners would receive. The Siddis face discrimination even in everyday transactions. Though the discrimination was evident the Siddis were not forthcoming in sharing it with the research team. They apparently

desired acceptability as Indian citizens. Thus it is indeed true that with this, the Siddis of Gujarat are an African community, lost in transition.

APPENDIX ONE: Detailed Case studies

Mohan Siddi, An advocate for the Siddis:

Mohan Siddi is a member of the Siddi tribe from Karnataka. Having completed a Masters in Social Work from Bangalore University, Mr. Mohan is currently pursuing a PhD (studying the socio-economic status of the Karnataka Siddi community) while simultaneously working on the development of the Siddi community around India. Four years of this work has led him to focus his energy on the Siddi community in Karnataka, wherein he has facilitated social justice, employment, and education for the local Siddi communities. Even though his endeavors are making progress at a slow pace, Mr. Mohan is committed to connecting with Siddis spread across the Indian sub-continent. He speaks of how there is a diaspora of Siddis in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that Indians and Pakistanis speak the same language and communication is easy, Mr. Mohan finds establishing physical contact a difficulty, as a result of poor relations between the two countries, with visas almost impossible to acquire. At the same time, he believes that the Siddi tribes are neither well represented, nor identified in India.

For Mr. Mohan, the first step towards development is identification – it does not make sense to talk of development of a tribe without first identifying them, and the areas that they inhabit. For instance, only Siddi communities in Gujarat and Karnataka have Scheduled Tribe statuses, and even in these states, not all communities are accounted for. Mr. Mohan is also unsettled about how Siddis do not get many opportunities to study in institutes of higher education around India, and how they're a dying breed. He expresses resentment towards the fact that the few people that study the Siddi tribes, come to India, travel, enjoy, conduct their research, and receive credit for their work back at home while the Siddis gain nothing.

However, Mr. Mohan also comments on the secluded nature of the Siddi lifestyles, where marriage is generally arranged within the community, and Siddis tend not to marry other Indians. At the same time, he maintains that due to Christian

and western influence, love marriages within the community have become increasingly popular. Some have even seen youths eloping with other non-Siddis to escape communal pressures. The caste system in India also poses as a nuisance for Siddis trying to assimilate, and Mr. Mohan admits that education is not the strong point of Siddis, which also makes their people less desirable. One of the main barriers to their assimilation is religion, where two individuals cannot get married due to their faiths – a Hindu cannot marry a Muslim and vice-versa.

From what was gathered from the interview, Mr. Mohan believes that Siddis are more in need of practical, vocational training and education, rather than the conventional systems, which don't do the tribe much good. As a result, along with his colleagues, he is working hard to establish an education system for the Siddis. To give an example, if one were to give a Siddi a book on birds and ask him to identify birds in the forest, he'd be extremely good at it. The main reason a Siddi would deviate from conventional education in school, is due to sheer lack of interest in what is being taught. Apart from disinterest, the costs of traveling to school, uniforms, books, and other expenses act as incentives for Siddis not to send their children to schools. Their main sources of pride and identity, however, are their music, as well as the fact that they've retained the physical characteristics of their ancestors. Siddi music is very lively, and Mr. Mohan passionately discusses how, for a Siddi, the musical traits are inherent in the child when it is born. Their music revolves around life and the daily troubles of Siddis, and is accompanied by energetic dances.

Unfortunately, partially due to lack of education, employed Siddis resort to doing menial labour far from home, which breaks families apart. There are also very few land-owning Siddis, as most are poor and work as labourers and farmers, that take loans from local lenders with high interest rates. Finding themselves in debt, a large proportion of Siddis succumb to the continuous cycle of poverty. One aspect of Siddi life, however, which particularly unnerves Mr. Mohan is the fact that the Siddis face their fair share of discrimination, exploitation, and insult. They are bullied in school, and are even insulted by teachers. Upper caste communities look down on them, and consider them Dalits. Apparently, in larger cities like Mumbai, Siddis are less likely to be discriminated against since very few people even know who the Siddis are, contrary to the situation in and around Siddi tribal villages.

Hiraben Lobi, An influential Siddi woman

Orphaned at a very young age, Hiraben Lobi is one of the most influential women in Jambur today. Even though she lost her parents at a very young age, she was brought up to believe that hard work and determination could take her places. Her leadership skills were seen at a young age when her dad left his 0.5-hectare land to her as he thought of her as his son. She was determined to put this land to good use. She recalls a conversation years ago and said, “I would always see this one lady crying, and one day I asked her why she was crying. She told me that her children were really small and she was a widow. She used to earn 80 rupees a day. I gave her my word that I will support her and employ her. This happened years ago, from that day onwards from supporting one woman, I went on to support several more”.

Today Hiraben employs and gives loans to several hundreds urging them to start micro-enterprises. With this she has not only improved the status of the Siddi community by employing them and giving them a means of livelihood, but also more specifically improved the status of the women. For the same she has won several international and national awards like “Women of the World” in Switzerland, “Jankidevi Bajaj Award –Ladies wing of IMC Bombay”, Agakhan Foundation Award and several more. Aamir Khan, Jaya Bachchan, Mukesh Ambani and Narendra Modi have also felicitated her for her role in the development of the Siddi community. She has and is working effortlessly to reduce discrimination and increase the quality of life the Siddi Community leads.

Detailed conversations with Hiraben lead to the revelation of a lot of the Siddi culture and beliefs. She started off with telling us about the Siddi religion, which is Islam, how they read the *namaaz* every Friday and believe in Allah as their god. “Just as it is important for the Hindus to understand and learn about the Ramayana, it is important for us to follow the Muslim religion,” she said. She informed us of Siddis in other parts of India, such as Karnataka and how religion varies there, as some are Hindus, some Christians and some Muslims.

Hiraben had quite a lot to say about the involvement of the government, or the lack of. The government does not have any special provisions for employment for the

Siddis, pushing them to be self-employed in meager professions like small-scale farming. They receive a few grants when it's time for elections and ministers need votes from the poor and vulnerable. She seemed most irritated by the fake promises made right before the elections about the upliftment of the tribe. "After getting elected, these ministers don't do anything for us, the poor always remain poor" she said. She believes a lot of change is needed to eradicate the problem of poverty in this country, and the government should come up with better schemes.

All her arguments and discussions kept falling back to one topic; education. She thinks because the poor are not given enough opportunities, they are not aware of the important issues, such as lack of education. "These people are not aware about the importance of providing proper education to their children, nor do they understand the need of living in a better environment" she said. Jambur only has schools up till the 10th grade and students who wish to study further have to travel to a district 11km away, called Talala. Most don't get to college as they stop their education for monetary purposes. According to her, the Siddis in the village of Jambur have started valuing education and the standard is increasing. The primary school provides proper study material including textbooks, and has a good turn up of students, but the problems are faced at the higher level of education. Funds are low and parents are hesitant to let their children go to the city for further education. The only ones who lack initial education as well are Dhamal dancers who give up their schooling to practice and perform the dance form, again for an income. She tells children "education is never complete because one can never learn enough".

Dhamal, she says "is a part of the Siddi blood. Even a small child, who is in the cradle will dance if the *dhol* starts playing". The Siddi kids are not scared of noise as that is their culture and embed into them. Children who want to get trained start as early as the age of 5. Women have to ask for permission to join a *dhamal* group, and can only do so when the men permit them. She told us of the *dhamal* festival called *Urash* that takes place every 5th month of the year. All the Siddis, from all over the area gather and dance endlessly, "this is our tradition". They buy the instruments from the market now, but initially these were handmade by the Siddis. "We used to make the *dhol* on our own before, but now neither does the forest have good wood and nor does the government allow us to wood". She proudly told us of the tradition of

breaking a coconut on one's head while performing the Dhamal, "no one else can do it".

As an activist, with the 500 USD she received from America for her contribution in the upliftment of women, she invested it in the education of children. She continues to use all her award money for educational purposes like the development of the first primary school of Jambur. Her journey as a social worker started with one widow who needed help, and then went on to hundreds. She never stopped farming, taking care of her household, her children, or her life, once she started helping other women. "I did everything at once, and gave my best to everything, all aspects of my life". The organization she started 20 years ago is particularly to help women in the village. They meet once a month and discuss any issues the women might have. "I have just one dream, which is to see children playing and getting trained in various sports and physical activities on the land that I own". She says she will need financial help from either the government or NGO's to build up on this empty land as she lacks the funds for it. "I am not going to get anything out of this, but my village is. To help the needy, is my duty".

APPENDIX TWO: Glossary

Bajri: A spiked millet

Baraat: A Hindu concept where friends and family accompany the groom to the venue of the wedding

Chatti: A naming ceremony that is conducted on the sixth day after the birth of the child.

Dargah: An Islamic shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure.

Dhamaam: A type of a drum used in *dhamal*

Dhamal: The Siddi dance

Dhol: Drum

Habshi: Another name for the Siddis.

Jikrs: Devotional songs

Kadla: Anklet

Kario: Earrings

Kazi: A Muslim priest

Kholobharo: A Lap filling ceremony

Laddu: An Indian sweetdish

Maimsara: A dance that includes the beats of a mushira

Mandal: An administrative division of some countries of South Asia.

Mangani: The engagement ceremony

Mashira: Another name for *dhamal*

Mashira: a prayer dance

Mehsur: A Gujarati sweetdish

Mohanthaal: A Gujarati sweetdish

Mundan: A ceremony that is performed on a boy child, where his head is shaved clean and a goat is sacrificed and feasted on, on that day.

Mushira: Instrument used in Mashira

Namaaz: Islamic prayer

Pagdi: Headgear (Usually worn at weddings)

Sankra: Bangles

salvaar kameez: A common North Indian outfit

Siddi goma: Another name for *dhamal*

Sherwani: A common traditional North Indian outfit

Shir khorma: An Indian sweetdish

Shoba: A dish peculiar to the Siddis

Sunk: Gold nose ring

Supari: Bettle nut

Ulka: An instrument made of coconut and cowrie shells

Urash: A *dhamal* festival

Urus: An Islamic festival

Ziarat: A prayer recited after a person's death

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