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Reminiscence of Africans on the Western Coast of India: Siddis in Composite Memory

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Abstract: An Afro-Indian community that settled on the western coastline of India, known as Siddis, left behind a great and exceptional legacy as naval and military leaders as well as independent rulers during the 17th-18th centuries. The study presents the case of Siddis from being a slave in East Africa to their ascent as Janjira kings. It aims to discuss their military skills, connections with the contemporary powers and the ways through which their story has been kept alive in people's memory. Digging deeper into the oral traditions and the material culture, finally, it repositions the Siddis in the contexts of African diaspora and Indian Ocean histories by challenging the Eurocentric view and revealing their long-lasting effects on the identity, legacy, and memory in South Asia.

Keywords: Siddis, African diaspora, Indian Ocean, South Asia, Marathas

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Introduction

An African-Indian community, known as the Siddis settled along the western coast of India played a significant yet understudied role in the region's political and maritime history. The main objective of the research is to examine the composite memory of the Siddis, particularly focusing on their contributions as formidable military leaders, naval commanders and as autonomous rulers in the Indian Ocean world. The study also tries to explore how the Siddis carved out a distinct identity in Indian society while preserving ties to their African heritage. It traces their origins from East Africa to their arrival through the complex networks of the Indian Ocean slave trade. The main objective of the paper is to examine their role and naval proficiency in maritime warfare, largely in defending their main fortress of Janjira from both European and Indian rulers. They played a substantial role in the history of Deccan Sultanates and later under the Marathas which shows their importance in regional power dynamics. The article tries to look into their political and maritime achievements and how they have been reminisced and represented historical narratives. This paper tries to place the Siddis within larger debates on African diaspora as well as maritime history. The core purpose of the paper is to challenge the Eurocentric historiography, which can be

done only by recognising the value of Indian Oceans as a strategic hub for African movement and influence. Therefore, by studying deeper into the connections between race, power and memory in the post-colonial Indian context, it tries to shed some light on the Siddis political and maritime legacy. Finally, by presenting their significance in contemporary discussions on identity, cultural preservation this study tries to relocate them in the Indian Ocean world.

Origin and Arrival: Tracing Siddi's journey from Africa to India

The Indian Ocean slave trade which spanned from the early medieval period to the 19th century is considered to be a huge and complex network of human trafficking. By transporting several enslaved individuals across continents, it shaped the social and economic landscapes of the Indian Ocean rim. Distinct from the transatlantic slave trade, the Indian Ocean trade was known for its diversity in routes and the participation of multiple powers, including Arab, Persian, European traders. The Siddis were also known as *Habshis* are intricately tied to the Indian Ocean slave trade as part of this transoceanic network of human trafficking which facilitated the migration of enslaved Africans from the eastern Africa to various regions across the Indian Ocean. The Siddis or *Habshis* were said to have migrated from regions including present-day Ethiopia, Somalia and Mozambique, where they were often taken as captives during conflicts, raids or may be sold to traders involved in the vast maritime economies of the Indian Ocean through local slave markets. They were then forcibly transported from East Africa to Indian ports via trading routes largely by Arab, Persian, and later Portuguese traders. According to Obeng,

"From as early as the seventh century to the early twentieth century, Africans, called variously "Abyssinians," "Ethiopians," "Habshis," and "Siddis," had been transported to South Asia as part of the early Muslim Omani Arab and the later Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and American trading companies". (Obeng 2007:1)

The routes of their journey stretched from the Swahili Coast of Africa to main trading hubs in India like Surat, Goa and Diu. These Africans were demanded particularly for military and naval service which grew more with the expansion of these maritime networks. Talking about the Siddis, their transportation to India happened mainly through maritime routes on dhows. Dhows is the traditional Arab sailing vessels that facilitated trade and movement across the Indian Ocean. These African born slaves were often traded through ports such as Zanzibar, Kilwa and Mombasa which were important centres back then in the Indian Ocean slave trade. From there these African slaves were shipped to chief Indian ports such as Diu, Gujarat and Bombay. (Obeng 2007: ix) Initially these Africans who arrived in India as enslaved entities served as labourers, soldiers or naval warriors under native rulers and European forces. Here, the Portuguese who established trading posts along the Indian coast did play a substantial role in bringing African slaves to India. Later, these individuals were employed in numerous capacities like defending forts to even actively participating in naval expeditions. Hence with time many Siddis gained their freedom and rose to positions of fame and power mainly in the Deccan Sultanates and later under the Mughal Empire.

Settlement in Western Coast of India

Though the Siddis were initially brought to India as slaves or mercenary warriors, later they rose to prominence and became part of the nobility and even held significant positions of power throughout

the Deccani Sultanate and its successor states. They were highly renowned for their resilience, talent and bravery. They even earned a formidable status as naval warriors for the leading rulers particularly along the north western coast of India. (Orme 1805 :56-57) It was their proficiency in maritime warfare which made them indispensable and identifiable as the most proficient and courageous sailors in Western India. They not only proclaimed their strength through their martial skill but also restructured political alliances among themselves. For instance, when one of them gained power, they often appointed fellow Africans to administrative and military roles.

The Siddis were highly acknowledged for their naval expertise and their unmatched strong fleet that included various warships, *ghurabs* (light warships) and *gallivats* (swift coastal vessels). It was their expertise over these vessels and in guerrilla warfare which allowed them to govern the Western Konkan coast. The grasp of both land and sea ultimately made them a powerful force not only capable of defending their territories but also influencing the regional politics of the time. Their reputation as skilled naval warriors were even noticed by the ruling powers of that time. For instance, the Adilshahi rulers of Bijapur and the Mughal Empire, recognized their importance as naval soldiers by hiring their services to protect their coastal domains and strengthen their naval capabilities. (Bhattacharya 2017:151) Even Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat, saw the extraordinary combat skills of the Siddis and recruited thousands of them into his service. One of the most important examples of this is of Malik Ambar, considered to be an influential African leader who was born in Ethiopia in 1550 and was enslaved by Arabs and sold in Baghdad. (Eaton 2005:105) From there he was taken as captive to Deccan and was purchased by Chengiz Khan, a chief minister of Ahmadnagar sultanate. Once in cage, this slave then rose to a position of great power and later became the *wazir* (regent-minister) of the Nizam Shahi Kingdom of Ahmednagar. In 1601 he demonstrated his military acumen by leading the kingdom's forces to victory against the formidable Mughal army at Berar. (Ali 2016:98) Under his military leadership, the Nizam Shahi Kingdom was revitalized with an aim of expelling the Mughals from the Deccan region. Ambar's is known for his military revolutions such as he employed both Marathas and Africans in his service and even trained them in guerrilla tactics. This Guerilla warfare was successfully used to resist their enemies, including the Mughals.

These African Indians were not only known just for their strength but also their ability to restructure the political alliances of that times. (Harris 1971:123) Taking advantage of the fellow African, the Siddis solidified their reputation as formidable naval warriors by becoming a crucial ally to Malik Ambar who was the powerful regent of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate at that time. Ambar recognised their unwavering service, particularly in safeguarding maritime commerce along the Western Coast and also ensuring the safe passage of pilgrims to Mecca. It was Malik Ambar who bestowed the Siddis with strategically important island known as Janjira, which eventually grew into their main stronghold. The fort had a strategic location as it was situated between the Western Ghats and the Indian Ocean. Mainly its location was right in between Kolaba and Ratnagiri in Western Maharashtra. The name "*Janjira*" is derived from the corrupted Marathi version of the Arabic word "*Jazirah*," which means "an island." The fortress was also known to as "*Habsan*," a term engrained in the Persian and Urdu word "*Habshi*," denoting Abyssinians. (Hawley 2008:257) The Siddis used this fort as their political center and from there they were able to dominate and pull their influence over the whole Indian Ocean. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Janjira

was always an annoyance for the Marathas since it stayed intact and was a symbol of the Siddis' endurance and mastery of the sea. (Saswadkar 1976:223-229)

This prestigious appointment as the naval commander of Ahmadnagar sultanate, the Siddis were also granted a *jagir* consisting Danda-Rajapuri and neighbouring regions. By this jagir, the Siddis made for themselves a small but extremely authoritative Abyssinian presence and influence in the region. Along with Janjira, the region consisting Danda-Rajapuri became the chief centre for the Siddi naval contingent with a fleet of forty to fifty ships. (Sarkar 1961:244-45) This fleet helped them not only in protecting their territories but also assisted them to conduct raids on enemy lands which further secured their resources and preserved their autonomy. Their control over Janjira allowed them to exercise considerable influence in the region. Their fleet can be seen beyond as a tool for defence but as an instrument of power and resilience. All these factors enabled them to navigate the complex yet highly competitive political landscape of the time. The Siddis were able to safeguard their influence and prosperity by frequently plundering territories of their enemies, declaring their dominance over the seas. Their strong presence mainly in regions like Janjira and Danda-Rajapuri cannot be seen merely symbolic but it signifies as a powerful maritime force that shaped the defence and politics of the region. The skill and power by which they preserve such a formidable stronghold in such political disorder and competition is a testimony to their naval expertise and skilful adaptation to the challenges of that time. (Sen 1920:89)

Apart from Janjira and Danda-Rajapuri, Daman in Gujarat became another focal centre of their piratical and commercial doings. The latter part of the seventeenth century was a period of ambiguity and political turmoil for both Siddis and Janjira, as the Marathas and Europeans were at the height of their power. (Bhatt 2017:92) The Siddis, their fort and their courage remained untouched despite all these challenges and turmoil. It was their valour and skills that played a crucial role in shaping the maritime history of Western coast of India. This resulted in their influence and dominance to the region which extended far beyond their ancestries as slaves or soldiers. They became key players in the shifting dynamics of Western India, as they acted not merely as guardians of the Konkan coast but also actively participated in the political and military struggles of the region. Siddis were capable of adapting in the harsh maritime environment along with their strategic ability. These characteristics safeguarded their position in Indian history. Their legacy as fierce and skilled sailors will always remain will persist through time and in the naval history of Western India.

Factors Behind the Siddis Upward Mobility

The rise of the Siddis in Western India can be seen as impressive naval power. After their influx into Indian society, they were mostly hired as naval soldiers. Later they were integrated into native services because of their services in battle and naval strategies. In a time of political instability, Siddis were valued for their military service and as many regional powers such as the Deccanis and Mughals needed qualified fighters to strengthen their positions. But Siddis were quite clever who recognised the profound strategic advantage of aligning with the Mughals. Thus, they very incisively shifted their faithfulness towards one of the most powerful dynasties of that time. As a reward for their devotion and naval knowledge, they were showered with extensive rewards and recognitions. The Mughals granted them with a *mansab* of 900, together with a *jagir* that yield an

annual income of 3 lakh rupees. Not only this, Emperor Aurangzeb who is known for his tactical acumen installed one of the Siddis Yakut Khan as the admiral of the Mughal navy. This position was of immense strategic importance for the Siddis. It not only raised their rank but it increased their status in terms of wealth and influence. (Sarkar 1973:170-74)

This was a calculated move by the Mughals, where they placed a loyal yet highly capable ally in the region where they themselves wanted to consolidate their control over. By doing so, the Mughals were ensuring their own maritime interests along the western coast. They gave the Siddis the control over the fortress of Janjira, which acted as stronghold of naval power, stood against the Marathas, a rising naval contemporary and threat to Mughal sovereignty. Through this tactic the Siddis worked as an important ally for the Mughals who not only safeguarded their dominance in the region but kept an eye on their adversaries as well. As far as Siddis are concerned, this alliance with the Mughal Empire strengthened their hold and validity as the Mughals provided them with resources and political backing. This further enhanced their influence in the region as now they have both material resources and an official title of Wazir of the Mughals. The period from seventeenth to eighteenth centuries served as a turning point in the political and maritime history of the Indian Ocean as it demonstrates complex networks of alliances, where loyalties were shifting and each power wanting to become the master of their region. The Siddis too wanted to establish their reputation and secure their position in this volatile political environment by associating themselves with the Mughals. This strategic association with the Mughals displays not only their resilience but also their political move in securing a for themselves. Through this alliance with influential regional powers, they achieved remarkable social ascent, rising from slavery to positions close to the ruling dynasty. As a result, they gained significant advantages, effectively becoming the rulers of Janjira from where they could guard against their enemies. (Harris 1971) This status allowed them to assert dominance where now they were in a position to make diplomatic negotiations with the contemporary powers. This further enhanced their position in the social and political environment both as naval commanders and diplomatic leaders. (Czekalska 2016:194)

In addition to their political influence, they controlled the maritime routes which led to their influence in economic and commercial aspects. As discussed earlier, the western coast due to its proximity to vital Indian Ocean trade routes, was the focus of intense competition and rivalry among various powers. The Siddis of Janjira used their naval skill to dominate these trade routes which provided them with upper hand over both local trade and military engagements. (Chauhan 1995: 240) They managed trade and economic activities from their stronghold at Janjira. The fort was not only central to their defensive operations but also served as a hub of economic power. By controlling vital naval routes, they protected their lands from adversaries and participated in profitable trade, boosting their economic control. Consequently, they enjoyed another advantage, recognized both for their protective role and their commercial activities. (Sadiq Ali 2018:168) The wealth generated from these maritime activities gave them the wealth and resources from which they maintained and even expanded their military engagements and also forged political and strategic alliances with rulers and merchants who wanted them to secure their maritime activities and commerce. For instance, one of the reasons Mughals hired them was to look after their hajj trade against the Portuguese in Gujarat.

Diplomatic Alliances and Conflicts with the Europeans and the Marathas

The 17th century was marked by the complex and often duplicitous nature of diplomacy and power dynamics where regional and international powers were involved in shifting alliances and political diplomacies. These European powers in order to hold their control in the region often sided with their enemy's enemy. For instance, in the skirmish between the Siddis and Shivaji, both Portuguese and English took equal interest and participation. They all secretly supported the Siddis, in order to limit the growth of the Marathas and sometimes for their own selfish purpose.

Despite appearing amicable toward Shivaji, they simultaneously backed his enemies in secret. Such duality in behaviour showcases their diplomatic acumen, driven not only by economic considerations but also by political aspirations. For instance, the Portuguese were by the fact that a native ruler was evolving as a naval power in turn posing a direct threat to their political interests. Consequently, it was important for these European powers to maintain their influence in a region which was seeing the rise of the Marathas and the Mughals. As a result, to maintain their hold in the region, the Portuguese allied with the Siddis capable to restraint the Maratha expansion without directly engaging in conflict themselves. This dual strategy of covert assistance and public neutrality is evident in the Portuguese response to Shivaji's siege of Janjira in 1667. (Pissurlencar 1983:42) For instance, when Shivaji threatened to disrupt Siddis supply line, Portuguese came and supported them by the providing military support and provisions. But this help was done in secrecy without being upsetting Shivaji. It should be noted that this support was nether an act of friendship nor of goodwill but a calculative attempt to secure their own advantages. For the Portuguese, Siddis or any other native power was merely a buffer against the Maratha expansion in the region. The English were no different to the Portuguese, as they too wanted to make their hold in the region. The reason for their concern was that Shivaji wanted to conquer the island of Khanderi which was both strategic and near to their Bombay factory. (B.G. Paranjape 1931:198) Hence, we see a new collaboration emerging between the English and the Siddis against the Marathas. The question is why the Siddis were interested in this alliance. There were two main reasons for that. First, their hostility towards the Marathas and second was the strategic location of Khanderi which allowed them to monitor trade movements efficiently. Hence, this united alliance proved futile against Shivaji's persistence and shrewdness. Maratha's victory shows that they were not only strong enough to confront the Siddis but could also easily overcome any combined threat against them.

The arrival of Kanhoji Angre as Maratha's admiral intensified the situation for everyone involved as his control over major maritime routes and naval skills posed a direct threat to the Europeans and the Siddis. (D. G. Dhabu 1939:16). Hence, it was natural for them to align with each other against Angre to curb his growing power. The situation became more complex when Kanhoji shifted his headquarters to Kulaba which was close to Janjira. Dute to the proximity between both the places, there was a constant struggle between the both the powers. Once the Siddis took advantage of their friendship with the Portuguese launched a naval blockade against Angre's headquarters. But, Kanhoji was not at all worried, instead managed the situation with great smartness and diplomatic skill by extending peace offerings to the Portuguese Viceroy. However, the Viceroy rejected his offer as he wanted Siddis to remain aligned with them. This episode shows that even the Portuguese were apprehensive of the Marathas growing naval

army, hence these alliances were often shaped by one's own benefit rather than any loyalties to each other (B.S.Shastry 1974-75:110) This alliance between the two demonstrated a common apprehension regarding the growing power of the Marathas. The situation shifted even more dramatically after 1720s, as other companies also began to assert their dominance. The Siddis once again asked for Portuguese support but interestingly the Viceroy was not very much keen on helping them this time. He not only rejected their proposal but also took two Siddi ships that were returning from Mecca. This highlights these European powers pledged no loyalty to anyone. Though initially they refused to help them but later they even agreed to return the seized ships. Again, this move was nothing but a strategic move as they wanted Siddis to be on their side. All these instances shows that politics and diplomacy was a complicated phenomenon which require both shrewdness and self-interest. It also highlights the influence of the Siddis, as even strong naval powers like the Portuguese and English wanted their support in preserving their hold on the western coast.

The coalition between the Siddis and the Portuguese proved to be advantageous for both. Siddis were dependent on European military technology and supplies to strengthen their defences against the Maratha attacks while the Portuguese never wanted a regional power to have their own strong navy. They both formed a formidable force, combining Siddis naval expertise with Portuguese artillery and navy. Due to their political knowledge and influence, the Siddis were quite fortunate to powerful forge both local and foreign alliances. This coalition discloses that such alliances were frequently short-lived and were motivated by mutual self-interest. I would again like to stress that the Siddis were not simply the Europeans pawns, on the contrary, they artfully utilized these powers to their own advantage. By siding with the Portuguese, the Siddis did not just gain their freedom but also got the resources to resist the Marathas and the Mughals. This is a vivid demonstration of how the Siddis managed to assert their own will and develop a strategy in a world where the regional and global powers had the upper hand.

All the European powers were not just conquerors who impose their will on local population, instead they acutely were interested in the region's political and economic matters. As a part of their colonial policy their relations with native powers like the Marathas or the Siddis was mainly a blend of struggle, collaboration and filled with strategies. The prime example of their duplicity can be seen by an example of how Portuguese dealt with their enemies. For instance, they sometimes secretly aided with the Siddis and sometimes showed neutrality toward the Marathas. By this tactic of avoiding direct confrontation with their competitors, they protected their trade routes and also maintained their control over coastal territories. One of the reasons for this could also be their limitations of influence in the region, hence they were often forced to depend on allies, such as the Siddis in order to achieve their goals. The Portuguese role in the constant struggle between the Siddis and Marathas in this struggle shows the complex nature of power politics in the Indian Ocean. Despite the growing influence of the Marathas the Siddis were able to win the support of the Europeans and the Mughals. This shows that they were highly demandable in the politics and maritime matters. For the Europeans the Siddis were just protecting their commercial interests without directly involving with the Marathas. Thus, this period was characterised by secret alliances and diplomacy where every power wanted to prioritise their own welfare.

Cultural Integration and Distinctiveness

With time, the Siddis became an integral part of Indian society by merging their heritage with local population and culture. However, this does not mean they abandoned their African roots which can still be seen in their religious practices, social and oral traditions. Despite their assimilation to Indian culture and society they still preserve features of their ancestors which in turn make an interesting subject of research for understanding cultural and social resilience. This assimilation into local culture was a multifaceted phenomenon where they adopted local languages, customs, way of living and everyday household practices. At the same time, they appear to take pride in their African heritage, music, dance and even religious practices. (Alpers 2003:20-22)

Though their music is influenced by African heritage yet with time it got influenced from Indian musical traditions. One of the key features of their music tradition is Drumming which can be seen as a testimony to their African community and cultural memory. (Jairazbhoy 2003:53) The importance of music and dance lies not only in artistic expressions but as a means of storytelling, social bonding and festivity within the Siddi community in India. The main feature of their music is that their songs follow call and response pattern which reflects African heritage, unity and collective expressions. Siddis music is more than mere entertainment but as a form of cultural preservation. (Venkatesh 2013:52) Their unique style of drumming along with attractive rhythms and distinct dance form make them culturally unique and distinct from rest of India. For them music holds a great importance to them as it has been preserved and transmitted through oral traditions across generations. Many local Indian instruments such as brass pot etc ere incorporated to their musical traditions reflecting Siddi's adaptation to local culture. Now talking about their dance form, they followed a very interesting ritual where dancers are purified by taking bath prior to the commencement of their performances.

The performances are often started with light rhythmic drumbeat which slowly rise in energy and volume. One of the most popular Siddi dances from this era is *Dhamal*, which is a war dance with elements like martial movements, swaying of swords and spears in turn symbolising their valour and courageous history. Another famous dance form is “*Zubu*” dance where an animal is roasted over an open flame and is prepared while male dancers sings and dances to the beat of the drums. This dance forms symbolizes an act of thanksgiving. The term “*Zubu*,” rightly can be translated as “cutting an animal.”

“The malunga name, structure, playing technique, and musical patterns closely resemble many African forms. The structure of the Sidi musical bow, with fixed gourd resonator and turning noose, is most similar to “... a large number of African instruments, covering a very wide area, chiefly south of the equator and principally associated with people within the limit of range of the great Bantu stock” (Jairazbhoy 2003:55)

This dance form which was once seen as a form of thanksgiving has changed in contemporary times now being more symbolic in expression. Mostly because now, many can't afford the luxury of roasting animals as part of the performance, so they no longer roast the animal but gather in a large circle moving to the beats of drums known as “Africa Duff.” Today's performances now are quite different from their traditional forms. Now in most places the martial elements like swaying swords and spears, firing of guns are missing. Instead, now at the culmination of the dance, the performers extend salutation known as “*salaam*,” which signifies peace. Therefore, both music

and dance still form a vital part in the lives of Siddis. It is a way for them to proudly preserve their African tradition

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Siddis history reflects their strength, compliance and influence in the ever-changing political and maritime dimensions of the 17th and 18th centuries. Their rise from slavery to being the powerful naval commander of the Mughals show how marginalised can become influential and powerful. The Siddis not only protected their lands but also by their valour and tenacity, took a part in shaping the political scene in the region. The ascendance of a Sidi as a capable commander of the navy showcases the volatility of the power dynamics in the 17th and 18th centuries. The period which was marked by shifting loyalties, diplomatic alliances and political ambitions. Both regional and as well as international players wanted to preserve their hold over key maritime routes and trade. It is commendable that how these marginalised community carved out a distinctive identity of being one of the most powerful sailors in South Asian history. The way by which they navigated the waters of Indian Ocean is a reminder of the fact that how significant were these African communities in the history of the Indian Ocean world. By highlighting their role as a military leader and placing them at the centre this paper tries to deconstruct the narrow lens of Eurocentric historiography. It also tries to make discussions on African diaspora and maritime influence by highlighting their heritage and enriching our understanding of dispersion, power and memory in post-colonial South Asia.

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