

African Settlements in India*

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Asian/Indian settlements in East, Central and Southern Africa are a well-known fact. Many studies have been made to describe and analyse their presence and problems, their contribution to the social and economic development of their new homelands, and also their participation in the political life there. Similarly, there are several African settlements in India, the presence of which was reported long time ago but only as a novelty or in Census Reports. However, recently some serious studies about their social organisation, economic activity and political participation have been published in India and the United States.

There are about 250 000 Afro-Indians, i.e. Indians of African origin, in India, settled in the state of Gujarat bordering Pakistan and, in the states of Andhra Pradesh in south-central India (former Kingdom of Hyderabad), Maharashtra (formerly Bombay State), Kerala and Karnataka in the south, and the former Portuguese territories of Daman, Diu and Goa. In Gujarat they are found in the districts of Ahmedabad, Amerili, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Broach/Bharuch near Ratanpur, and the former Kingdom of Cutch/Katchch. They are normally settled in areas of their own, but in Ahmedabad, Broach and Cutch they live in mixed areas as they do in parts of Andhra Pradesh.

The Afro-Indians are generally known as Sidi/Siddi/Sidhi or Habshi/Habsi. These ethnonyms partly tell us that they were in the employ of Sayyads, the Muslim rulers of India, and partly that they came from Ethiopia. Almost all of them are Sunni Muslims, and the few Hindus and Christians are found in Karnataka and Goa respectively. They speak Gujarati in Gujarat, Hindi/Urdu in Andhra Pradesh, an admixture of Gujarati and Hindi in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. In Cutch they speak Cutchi (a dialect of Sindhi); in Sindh (south-eastern Pakistan) they speak Sindhi proper; and in Daman and Diu they speak Gujarati with many Swahili/Bantu words and phrases. Other groups of Sidis speak Marathi, Malayalam, Konkani etc. according to their region of settlement. In some cases they have special tribal names, e.g. the Tai of Saurashtra, the Shemali of Jambur Village near Madhapur (probably of Somali origin), the Kafara of Diu (probably from southern Mozambique and/or South Africa) and the Saheli of Daman (probably from the Kenya-Tanzania coast). These tribes do not intermarry with one another. Similarly, there are the Royal Sidis, survivors of the former Sidi State of Jafarabad established by the Sidi Naval Chief of Janjira during the time of the warrior King Shivaji of the Maratha in the mid-1800s. These Jafarabad Sidis together with those Royal Sidis in Hyderabad, Aurangabad and the former Sidi principalities in the native State of

* This is a summary of a talk given at the Institute of Kiswahili Research, University of Daressalaam, Tanzania, July 30th, 1991.

Radhanpur in the Kathiawar region of north Gujarat, and in Sachin near the port of Surat, marry among themselves or with upper class Muslim Indians, and consider other Indians and Sidis inferior.

The Kafara have maintained some of their African customs and a few linguistic items. The Shemali have kept alive some rites and rituals from their African past, but otherwise the Sidis are de facto Indians since they speak Indic languages as their mother-tongues and practice the Indian variant of Sunni Islam with the cult of *pir (saint) and *dargah (shrine). At these *dargah mausoleums they worship also ancestors and founders of settlements.

There are many legends about the origins of the Sidi settlements, but so far no contemporary written records have been found. However, there are a few early reports by European officials and travellers and one short language study by the explorer Richard F. Burton.

It appears that a large number of Sidis came, or were brought, to India from different parts of Africa as soldiers to serve in the Muslim armies of the Nawabs and Sultanates - hence their Muslim Faith and relative absence of the Hindu caste system among them. Many were officials in the Muslim, and later Hindu, armies and royal bodyguards and rose to power in more than one place, i.e. Jafarabad, Radhanpur, the great city of Ahmedabad and the imperial city of Aurangabad. Some were singers and drummers. In Gujarat the drummers are known as *nagarchi, and the Chief Drummer had the title of *nagarsha(h) (King of Drums). In Cutch, the Sidi singer-drummers are known as *langa (male *lango, female *langi) and they are prestigious and respectable professionals.

The Sidis of Jambur are supposed to have originally come from Kano in Nigeria via the Sudan and Mecca after their Hajj pilgrimage. Their leader was a wealthy merchant by the name of Baba Ghor who first settled in the Rajpipla Hills near Broach and Cambay (Khambat) where he developed mining and trade in agate, the precious stone known as Akik in India (and Akiki in Eastern Africa). A certain variety of agate beads are known as Baba Ghori; another maroon cornelian stone is named after his sister and successor Mai Mariyam. It is also claimed by the Shemali Sidis that one of Baba Ghor's younger brothers was a *nagarsha in the former Kingdom of Madhapur, and is worshipped as one of the several *pirs in Jambur.

Some Sidis came to India as special servants in the courts of Muslim Nawabs and Sultans, while some came as herbalists and midwives. A few were brought by Indian merchants returning home from Africa, and a few were brought as slaves especially in the Portuguese territories.

Noble Indian families had a convention of keeping Habshis (usually prisoners of war from Ethiopia and Sudan) as personal attendants since servants having no local social or blood connections or roots guaranteed political loyalty and security (as was the case with the Arab/Omani sultans of Zanzibar whose armed forces and administrative personnel consisted mainly of Baluchis and Makranis of Iran/Pakistan, and Patans and Cutchis of north-west India). Very few African slaves were brought to the Indian sub-continent to provide cheap labour. Ownership of

African slaves was an expensive affair since local Indian feudal systems related to slavery provided ample cheap or free labour to rulers, land-owners and the upper castes. The rulers of India could also obtain slaves of various categories from other parts of Asia, eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The descendants of these slaves in the Muslim societies generally cannot be distinguished as racial or ethnic groups or minorities, since most of them were employed in the higher administration and the armies, serving different governments and marrying the natives. They were a kind of life-long loyal servants of the ruler, rather than slaves in the Western sense.

Before the coming of the British rule in India, the Sidis were undergoing a process of assimilation, but the British divide-and-rule policy segregated the different Sidi groups from one another and also from the indigenous Indian peoples. As a result, the Sidis have been re-tribalised and have become impoverished in many areas. Those Sidi settlements which are organised as separate communities with a tribal system existing outside the main political stream and currents of socio-economic development, have been classified as Scheduled Tribes (as are dozens of other indigenous tribes of India) and get Central Government support. Jambur Village with its own *panchayat (Five Member Leadership Committee), a primary school and a shop is a good example, but progress is slow due to lack of structural changes in the system. Most Sidis in Gujarat and Maharashtra are farmers and unskilled workers, but in other regions one finds Sidi doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, businessmen and land-owners. And there is an inter-state movement to organise and unite all the Sidi groups and improve the economic condition and social status of the poor Sidis.

During the British rule in Zanzibar, several Sidi individuals and families from Cutch Mandvi and Surat immigrated to Zanzibar, and they are today completely assimilated into the Zanzibari society. Among them was a Cutchi-speaking drummer-singer lady called Langi Nur-bai who was a highly respected member of the Indian Sunni Muslim community of Zanzibar, and she was frequently invited to the weddings of the wealthy Indian Sunni Muslims in Kenya and on the Mainland of Tanzania.

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CONEXOES.

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