

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN INDIA

**ASSIMILATION, CHANGE AND CULTURAL
SURVIVALS**

Purnima Mehta Bhatt



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This book explores the understudied and often overlooked subject of African presence in India. It focuses on the so-called Sidis, Siddis or Habshis who occupy a unique place in Indian history. The Sidis comprise scattered communities of people of African descent who travelled and settled along the western coast of India, mainly in Gujarat, but also in Goa, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Sri Lanka and in Sindh (Pakistan) as a result of the Indian Ocean trade from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries.

The work draws from extant scholarly research and documentary sources to provide a comprehensive study of people of African descent in India and sheds new light on their experiences. By employing an interdisciplinary approach across fields of history, art, anthropology, religion, literature and oral history, it provides an analysis of their negotiations with cultural resistance, survivals and collective memory. The author examines how the Sidi communities strived to construct a distinct identity in a new homeland in a polyglot Indian society, their present status, as well as their future prospects.

The book will interest those working in the fields of history, sociology and social anthropology, cultural studies, international relations, and migration and diaspora studies.

Purnima Mehta Bhatt is Professor (Emerita) of History, Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Studies at Hood College, USA, where she has taught since 1977. She completed her BA and MA in Indian History from the University of Delhi, did post-graduate work at Harvard University and was awarded her PhD in African history from Howard University. Her current research interests focus on the historical and contemporary roles of women in Asia and Africa; global perspectives on women, power and politics; women's leadership in peace movements; the impact of globalisation on women; and the African presence in India. Among her publications are *Scholars' Guide to Washington D.C. for African Studies*, *Reminiscences: The Memoirs of Shardaben Mehta*, *Shardaben Mehta: Una Mujer Exceptionale en al India de su Tiempo*, a chapter in 'Ethno-Ornithology: Birds, Indigenous Peoples, Cultures and Society' and *Her Space, Her Story: Exploring the Stepwells of Gujarat* (2014). Her most recent publication is a chapter in *Women's Leadership in Chaotic Environments* (2016). She has lectured extensively across the world, is recipient of many fellowships and honours, and has presented numerous papers at conferences.



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Cultural Survivals

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First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an
informa business*

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-28486-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-14838-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

For Kiran and Anuradha,

and

My mother, who passed away before the publication of this book.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my long journey to complete this book, I have incurred many debts and owe sincere gratitude to many individuals and institutions. Without their support and encouragement, this book would not have been possible.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Dr Ramji Savalia, the Director of the B.J. Institute of Indology and Research in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, who provided invaluable source materials and gave generously of his time and the resources of his Library.

Hood College, where I taught for thirty-nine years, also supported my work with grants and travel funds to complete my fieldwork in India. In Ahmedabad, I was welcomed into the Sidi community of Patthar Kuva, where they provided me with useful information about their lives and their experiences. Smt. Rumanaben, a leader and elder in the community, provided valuable insights into the Sidi community. I am deeply grateful for her friendship and help.

The following museums generously provided images: The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford; The Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the British Library; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The San Diego Museum of Art; The Cleveland Museum of Art; The Los Angeles County Museum; and The Freer and Arthur M. Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lastly, I wish to thank Dr Joseph E. Harris, who did the pioneering research on the African Diaspora in Asia and published his groundbreaking work on the subject in 1971. Dr Harris was my mentor and dissertation advisor and his research served as an incentive to undertake further research on the topic.

PROLOGUE

This book examines the African diasporic experience in India. It provides a historical analysis and documentation of the African presence in India. The contacts between Africa and India have deep historical roots, yet the subject remains largely unexplored. The descendants of the Africans continue to be marginalised and overlooked.

The descendants of the Africans who settled in India are referred to as Sidis, Siddis or Habshis. They settled mainly along the west coast of India in Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as in Sri Lanka and in Sindh (Pakistan).¹ Their ancestors came to India as slaves, soldiers, sailors, merchants, crewmen, mercenaries, pearl divers and even concubines. This migration of Africans to India, which may have had its beginnings as early as the first century CE, lasted for nearly 2,000 years. During the medieval period of Indian history, from eight to the eighteenth centuries, a number of Afro-Indians rose to high positions at the courts of the sultans and wielded considerable power. Some became trusted commanders of powerful armies, while others became founders of dynasties. Many of them amassed great wealth gaining prestige and influence in society. These descendants of Africans became both subjects and patrons of art and architecture – commissioning imposing mosques, tombs and other monuments.

My book focuses on the process of adaptation and gradual acculturation that took place over time. It examines the many challenges Sidis encountered, and their efforts to construct new identities while preserving the salient aspects of the cultures of their original homeland.

In many cases, African slaves were transported from the east coast of Africa to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea Ports and from there to India. Many of them converted to Islam, which facilitated their assimilation and absorption into the Indian society. I explore the elements of change, and continuity in African culture, as well as the retention

of collective memory and language in the diasporic community. The book also focuses on cultural survivals in the diasporic community, especially in the realm of religious beliefs and practices, namely in the attitude towards ancestors, belief in spirit possession, veneration of saints and the central role of music and dance in the religious rites and rituals of Africans in India. Accepting the premise that women play a critical role as the upholders of cultural tradition and the transmitters of values and sacred traditions, I examine the lives of the Sidi women to reveal the texture of their lives, the daily rhythms of their existence and their hopes and aspirations for their children. The book concludes with a discussion of the current status of the Sidis and the prospects for the future.

Significance and relevance of this book

Starting with the sixteenth century, the world witnessed the large-scale movement of people from the African continent, across the Atlantic to the New World. This forced migration, popularly known as the Atlantic slave trade has been the subject of numerous scholarly works and monographs. The nineteenth century also witnessed the migration of large numbers of indentured labour to various parts of the world. With the decline and abolition of the slave trade, indentured workers were recruited to work in the plantations of the Caribbean – Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Fiji and Mauritius. Indians also voluntarily migrated to East and Southern Africa (notably Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa) to work on the plantations, railways, mining and other industries. These diasporic communities have been studied and researched extensively. Despite this interest in migration and diaspora, very little is known about the movements of African people from the African continent to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea regions and across the Indian Ocean to India and China. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the necessity to examine and better comprehend the movements of Africans to Asia and the Middle East. Professor Joseph E. Harris undertook the pioneering work in this field in the 1970s.² Since then a number of scholars have begun to recognise the need to explore this fascinating field of study.

I hope this book will make a useful contribution to the field of diasporic studies and fill a significant void by providing a better understanding of the African presence in India.

My background and academic training has enabled me to work on this project. I completed my undergraduate and graduate degrees in

PROLOGUE

Indian History and have a doctorate in African history. My doctoral dissertation focused on the migration of Indians to East Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so this book completes the circle by examining the Africans in India. I have taught African and Asian History in the United States for nearly four decades. I am originally from Gujarat where most of the Sidis can be found today. Thus, I bring to this book language skills and a cultural understanding of the region.

Notes

- 1 While the book includes a discussion of the Sidis in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Sindh (Pakistan), Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands, much of the fieldwork for this book was undertaken in the state of Gujarat.
- 2 Joseph Harris is Professor (Emeritus) of African history at Howard University in Washington D.C. and the author of several books including *The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* and *Africans and Their History* (1994).



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SIDIS

A historical perspective

The Sidis comprise of small and scattered communities of people of African descent, along the western coast of India, in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as in Sindh (Pakistan), Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands. Their ancestors may have arrived in India as slaves, mercenaries or may have been sailors who opted to remain and settle in India voluntarily. These descendants of Africans provide interesting and valuable materials for scholarly investigation and study on the largely unexplored field of the African presence in India.¹ The culture of the Sidis in Western India also sheds light on the interplay between the forces of continuity and change in the cultures of immigrants and displaced people.

In Gujarat, the descendants of African slaves or sailors are referred to in popular usage as *Habshi* or *Sidis*. The term *Habshi* is used in Arabic and Persian dictionary for those belonging to Abyssinia or Ethiopia, while Sidi comes from the word *saidi* and refers to the learned.² In Pakistan, they are referred to as *shiddi*, while in Sri Lanka they are called *kafirs*. African slaves were referred to as habashi-kaffirs. It was a derogatory term, and over time was replaced by the term *Sidi*, a more dignified appellation, derived from the word *shyed*, *saidi* or *shyd*, which became a title. Over time, this too underwent change, and in Saurashtra, the term used was Sidi *badshah* which denotes their past association with the royal kingdoms and their rulers. The adoption of the term *badshah* by the Sidis may also represent an effort on their part to counter the negative connotations of the word *Habshi* used often to refer to the descendants of Africans. The Arab writings refer to the descendants of Africans as *Zanjis* meaning from Zanzibar, while the Chinese transcribed the word as *Xinji* or *Jinshi*. During the medieval period of Indian history some of them occupied high positions at courts and wielded considerable power. They also accumulated wealth, thereby, gaining prestige and influence in society.

It should be stressed that not all of the descendants of Africans can be traced back to slave origins. They came to India over many centuries and in different historical contexts. While many of them may have come as slaves, others came as sailors, soldiers, mercenaries, merchants, eunuchs, concubines and pearl divers and some served in the courts of the princely rulers. In Gujarat, the Sidis settled in Saurashtra, Kutch and south Gujarat in Diu, Jafrabad, Mangrol, Jamnagar, Veraval, Porbandar, Khambhat, Surat, Broach and in Janjira in Maharashtra. Sidi communities can be found in Jambur and Talala near Junagadh³ and Murud, the capital of Janjira (from the Arabic word *jazirah* meaning island).

Even as slaves, their dignity as human beings was often maintained by the princely states. This was particularly the case in Saurashtra and the Deccan. Some of the descendants of the so-called Habshis rose from slavery to positions of power and achieved considerable fame and wealth. Some commanded vast armies and amassed great wealth. The names of many of these are found in the annals of Indian history.

There is no clear consensus among scholars regarding the number of Sidis in India. These estimates vary from 250,000 according to Lodhi (1992:83) to as low as 5,000 (Patel 1986:238). Based on government statistics, Micklem estimated that in the year 2000, the Sidi population of Gujarat was 10,000 (Micklem 2001:25). Sidis comprise 0.01 per cent of the 60 million inhabitants of Gujarat (Shodhan 2015:3). These estimates, however, vary. Camara (1997) for example estimates the Sidi population at 35,000. In addition to Western India, Sidis are also settled in Karnataka, mostly in the districts of Yellapur, Mundgod and Hubli. Obeng estimates that there are about 14,000 African Indians in Karnataka, the majority of whom are agriculture labourers and gatherers of areca nuts (Obeng 2003:99). Sidi populations are also found in Sindh (Pakistan), Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and in Sri Lanka, where they are mainly concentrated in the coastal regions of Batticaloa, Negombo and Trincomalee.

Physical appearances

The physical appearance or the physiognomy of the Sidis resembles that of diverse African ethnic groups residing on the continent of Africa. They tend generally to have dark skin colour ranging from brown to black with woolly hair, thick full lips, broad flat noses and robust build. They have a reputation for being courageous, energetic, hard-working, strong and loyal. The Sidis in India are said to belong to a mixed racial stock comprising Negroid, Australoid and Caucasoid