

CONFLICT BETWEEN ASSIMILATION AND RETAINING IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORIC GROUP, THE SIDDIS OF KARNATAKA

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Abstract:

Tracing the origin of the Siddis merely provides us a little information of their nativity or their place of origin. However we can observe a long and protracted struggle and conflict of the Siddis at assimilating and, at the same time, retaining their identity through their native culture and traditions. History provides us information that the Siddis were brought by the Muslim rulers as slaves and the Portuguese officials through slave trade. Hence the Siddis were compelled to settle in India, which was a land of various cultures, traditions and customs. Like all the migrant diasporic groups, the Siddis had to come to terms with the reality that they were thrown or condemned to be in. They had no choice of returning to their homeland or the Native place. The only available option was to accept the geographically and culturally specific Indian tradition, and that probably was the beginning of this African diasporic group's long engagement in the process of cultural assimilation which at the same time reflects the struggle to assert and retain some of the dimensions that keep their original identity intact.

Siddis, initially, had to forsake the language, traditions, customs and practices. A Siddi had to assimilate the new language and local practices. Moreover a new and challenging beginning to their lives had to be started in the foreign land which basically was bereft with the dominant presence of the caste system and the allied problems of poverty and the colonial rule. It is learnt that one could quite easily give up, compromise or modify one's cultural characteristics but holding on to the very defining aspect of one's culture has been quite a challenging and disturbing task. Retaining the identity in the wake of other issues like displacement and alienation could have been excruciating. Obviously it required a strong grounding and a great sense of responsibility to retain the cultural identity and pass it on to the next generations in the face of the pressures of an alien culture imposing itself on them.

This paper attempts to investigate the various means by which the Siddis of Karnataka have struggled to preserve their cultural identity while assimilating consistently the local cultural practices. The story of the hard fought war for retaining of the Siddi culture will provide insights regarding the significant differences in the process of their assimilation in comparison to other similar diasporic groups. Needless to say, they have incorporated many cultural practices of their immediate Indian traditions. However it is interesting to note that they are very different when it comes to music and songs, folk and other dance forms, celebrations and practices, religious and family values. A close study of these elements of Siddi culture demonstrates a unique and specifically 'Siddi' characteristics.

This paper will also provide us an understanding of the African Diaspora in India. It will bring to light the struggles, the challenges, the acceptance and resistance to the local Indian traditions and their attempt to building a new culture in India which may be termed 'Siddi' Culture.

Key Words: Conflict, Assimilation, Identity, Siddi, Siddi Culture.

Assimilation into an alien culture, or the lack of, is essential in shaping ones identity in the context of the migrant diasporic groups. The phenomena of demonstrating various degrees of assimilation and efforts to retain a few of the major markers of native culture have been observed across such immigrant groups all over the world. It has been observed that these groups have a strong connection to their roots, yet are still immersed in the culture of the migrated region. While it is true that their background would influence their educational, occupational, political, social, and cultural beliefs, they feel more connected to one culture over another is a debatable issue. Assimilation of various

degrees plays a role in developing identity since it dictates how a person chooses to spend their time. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who choose to keep to themselves, always tentative about mixing with the local culture. As little as possible. At the other end, there are those who have apparently assimilated so fully that they compete for the same jobs, educational opportunities, and political positions as non-immigrants. This paper is an attempt to study the degree of assimilation and the efforts to preserve the native identity among the Siddis of North Karnataka.

The Siddis of Karnataka is an ethnic group living in the different talukas of North Karnataka. Research shows that Siddis are the descendents of 'Bantu' community from South East Africa and they are scattered in different parts of India as the dominant theory of their arrival indicates that they were brought as slaves by different rulers across centuries. Statistics shows that around fifty thousand Siddis live in different parts of India and a large number of Siddis live in North Karnataka. In Karnataka, their presence is concentrated around Yellapur, Haliyal, Ankola, Joida, Mundgod and Sirsi talukas of Uttara Kannada and in Khanapur of Belgaum and Kalghatgi of Dharwad districts.

When we trace their history, we find ample evidence to show that they were brought by the Muslim Rulers as slaves and by Portuguese officials through slave trade. Siddis had to settle in India, which was a land of various cultures, traditions and customs. It is also understood that the affluent and high caste Indians continued using the Siddis as Slaves since they were the poorest and, in addition, the colour of their skin obviously suited the perception perfectly. Hence Siddis remained victims of the society and took long years to find visibility and social and political recognition.

One of the elementary markers of identity is the names. There are different interpretations to the word 'Siddi' by different researchers. The word 'Siddi' today is used as the last name and this turns out to be the marker of their identity and not just a suffix. The long first names that the Siddis give themselves are typically Indian. Obviously, this has been a form of in-culturation and assimilation with the culture and tradition of region and milieu. For instances Krishna Mudinasaba Khadir Jimaadir Siddi, Madhuksha Belganvkar Siddi, Igenthi Naayka Siddi, Milagri Naayka Siddi, Francis Kambrekar Siddi, Francis Hardabodekar Siddi are some of the typically Siddi names. Being a non-native in terms of their language and physical appearances, which would lead to perceptions by the locals as foreign and alien, the Siddis must have been pragmatic enough to call themselves by the locally available names to avoid further alienation and marginalization instead of fighting for their identity in terms of their native traditions. But it is interesting to observe that they consider their last name "Siddi" as true marker of their identity.

Family plays a predominant role in all culture and it is the essential component of one's identity. The Siddis have shown a perceptible assimilation in terms of family. It is the larger family that promotes and fights for preserving the group identity. One can find small, extended as well as joint families among Siddis. During the earliest part of their migration they used to live in joint families but in the recent past most of Siddis live in either extended or micro families. It is predominantly Patriarchal in its basic canvas and the father becomes the decision maker among Siddi families. The woman plays a major role in sharing the responsibility in decision making process among Siddis. Managing the household and other necessities of the family is taken care of by the mother or the woman of the Siddi household. We find many similarities between the Hindu and the Siddi communities when it comes to the relationships within families. A Hindu Family in the regions where Siddis inhabit would divide affinities within the family into different segments like *Maneyavaru*, *Bandugalu*, *Balagadavaru* and *Nentaru*, each having a specific degree of affinity or bonding. This classification can be construed as a significant way of assimilation and evolution of relationships within the families and clans. They have been using the above mentioned local Kannada nomenclatures to these family divisions. The Siddis have been a male dominated community in general however these days women outperform men in many ways. Siddi women have shown great accomplishments and it is noteworthy to mention that they chose a woman as 'Budwonth' of one of the settlements in a village called Ugginakeri. 'Budwonth' means a wise person or a leader who would guide the community.

The strongest assimilation of the Siddis with the local community has been in the religious practices. All the three major religions of India have considerable affinity with the Siddi Community. The Siddis are converted to Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. We find that the leaders of these religions have reached their target group easily over the years and were able to bring them to their fold. It is heartening to experience the harmony and peace among the Siddi communities though they belong to different religious denominations. Over a period of time they must have slowly but steadily given up their native religious practices and customs in the flow of religious assimilation.

The Siddis must have had a language of their own when they arrived in India. There was a need to learn languages for day to day communication in the new land. The native language of the Siddis would have disappeared within a few generations of their migration. As they could not preserve their language, they had only the alternative of learning the local languages. It is also to be noted that the region of their migration had been a multilingual community speaking

various languages for different purposes. Kannada, Konkani, Navayati, Urdu, Marathi, Hindi and their dialects are the languages they had to contend with. But it is important to note that they have not imitated any of these languages as they are. They do speak different languages. There has been a hypothesis that the original language of the Siddis was Swahili, a language spoken today in the Eastern Coast of Africa. They are well versed in all the languages of their region. They speak Kannada, the state official language, Hindi, the national language, Konkani, the predominant language of coastal Karnataka and Goa, Marathi, the mother tongue of people from the neighboring state Maharashtra. Most of the Siddis also speak Urdu because of their religion and religious practices. The language which the Siddis speak is an interesting mixture of all these languages. From the morphological perspective, words like, Kaaibe, Kithbe, Bagaabe, Them (they), Kaundi (bedsheet), Jaabe, Yebe, Keshak Zaavli Thia, Laggon Aye (come soon) demonstrate the influence of all the languages of the region. It could be some sort of a pidgin, a link language evolved for communication with the different groups in the area. We find a large number of Siddis speaking the Konkani. Their original language was an alternative for the Konkani spoken by their former Christian Goan masters, a dialect that contains a lot of Portuguese elements. Moreover, the contact between Siddi Konkani and its original Goan Konkani font was episodic since centuries and as a result both the languages evolved independently.

In spite of all the challenges of approximating themselves to the compulsions of a new place, language, religion, traditions, customs and practices, the Siddis have maintained their cultural identity in terms of certain practices of their own. Siddis have assimilated a few common practices related to birth, marriage and death. However it is evident that the Siddis have really worked hard to retain their identity through culture. We find many unique practices in areas of performing arts. There are quite a few unique and markedly different features in such practices, customs that a Siddi performs. I have observed that the Siddis have really retained their identity through their folklore, dances, music, songs and other practices. Following are a few of the rare but preserved unique dimensions of the Siddis of Karnataka.

The live wire of any community and ethnic group are their modes of performing arts. It is these cultural practices and traditions of a community that will keep the community more alive, vibrant and progressive. Siddi music, dance and songs are unique enriching their community living and keeping them distinct from others. Music is integrally related to language because at the root, both are modes of communication that use sound and language. Siddis love and are passionate about music, which is noticed even in the way they speak their language with the musical flow. The incorporation of body motion as an integral part of the music-making process is essential to Siddis. Body movements and music are integral components of the same process as we witness singing and playing music is associated with elaborate body movements among Siddis. The pages of history reveal that Siddis were highly sought after for playing musical instruments in Goa, Bengal and other places in India. Their methods, pitch that they employ to sing, songs and the tune employed, their dancing, tapping of feet, clapping of hands, and the gross superstitions came straight from Africa. The best things enjoyed in the past are never forgotten. Siddis never forgot to leave behind them some impressions from the Goan musical tradition such as Gumhat used for popular dance called mando. Africans seem to have music in their blood as they love to sing, dance and make peculiar noises that keep them happy and others excited. Music, being natural to them, it enables their compositions to be original and creative which other tribes around them cannot copy especially their unique tone, rhythm and the movements of the body.

Siddi cultural and social history has been handed down in the form of folklore songs, legends, and dance with Dhamaam at various occasions. The songs that are composed and sung speak in volumes their struggle, their passion and their history in the form of songs. They are simple when it comes to their meanings but they have a lot depth and we find critical analysis in the words. Siddis have successfully retained their traditional devotional songs, cultural songs, songs of the marriage and the songs of the harvest. They sing according to the situation and it is the Grand Parents who take the initiative in teaching and keeping these songs to the next generations. The TV has influenced the younger generation however the Siddi Community is striving hard in keeping their songs familiar to the young ones.

Poogdi dance is merely a dance of attractive and collective moves. The songs sung for this dance are sometimes composed spontaneously according to the situation of the community. The Sigm and Dhamaam songs are simple comments on everyday life with some religious references. Sigm dance, which is unique to Christian Siddis, has its origin among Marathas, performed during holi festival. But now the Catholic Siddis perform them at the beginning of the Lenten season or on Ash Wednesday. Some of the male Siddis group themselves and go around the villages singing and collecting their contribution of the season which later is divided among them. The songs are composed in the language unique to Siddis. The drum beater stands in the middle of the group that surrounds him with an in-toner who is instrumental in changing the songs and the steps accordingly. The role of a comedian is essential in making the dance more entertaining and captivating. The steps are changed in accordance with the song and rhythm and are carefully led by the leader as pursued by the others which will entertain the onlookers.

Siddis have an almost instinctive flair for music, an emotional product, probably developed through suffering. They have their own traditional musical instrument, a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes, from two to eight feet in length, three or four of which make a beautiful Siddi band. The principal dancers and leaders are dressed in a variety of wild and savage fashions, always ornamented with a number of tails of the smaller local wild animals. In Africa, the drum is a language organized into a discourse: there are orchestral groups of drums where each instrument has its voice. Dances are performed on festive occasions such as marriage, birth of a child and feasts of saints. Dhamaam dance is a mark of Siddi identity in the Western Ghats. Dhamaam dance is performed on navarathri as well as on hiriyara puje and other entertaining occasions exhibiting their distinctiveness and uniqueness. While a man plays dhamaam at the background, two ladies or two men wearing sarees with peacock feathers and a coconut in another hand dance to the rhythm.

Assimilation and Preservation of one's identity is ongoing social process. This is particularly true of the migrant and Diasporic groups. The Siddis, an African Diasporic community living in northern part of Karnataka has demonstrated a vibrant and culturally potent process of assimilation and preservation of their identity in their long and protracted history in Karnataka. While the Siddis have continually approximated themselves to some of the major markers of identity like their names, religious practices, family and clan affinities, they have consistently maintained their unique and vibrant cultural markers of identities like their music, songs, folk traditions and dance forms in spite of the pervading influence of the dominant forms of performing arts of the local communities. Though assimilation of a group like the Siddis with their colour and physical appearances has been a painful experience which has robbed them of their history and self esteem, they have been assertive and have ingeniously negotiated to preserve their native identity over several generations.

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