

**OCCASIONAL PAPERS**

No 88

SIDIS IN GUJARAT

JAMES MICKLEM

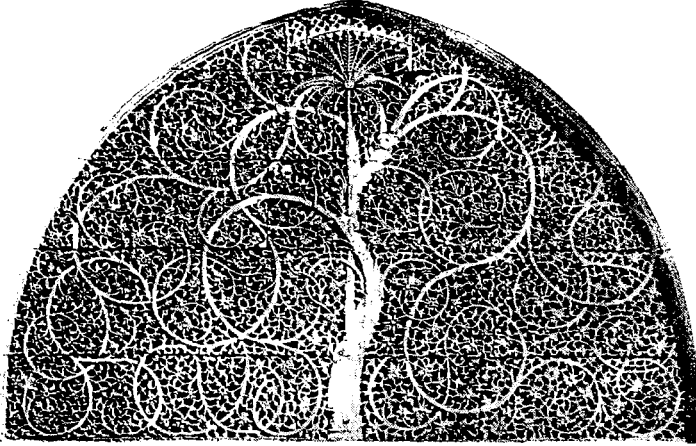
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# इंवीइ in गुजरात



**James Micklem**

**Centre of African Studies  
University of Edinburgh**

**A recurrent exchange:**

What is your purpose here?

- I am interested in the Sidis of Gujarat...

Ah, yes, the cities of Gujarat... so you are a student of architecture?

Front and back cover images:  
outside view and silhouette of the famous *jali*  
of the Sidi Saiyad mosque in Old Ahmedabad, built in 1571-72.

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## Abstract

The Sidis, Indians of African descent, are a tiny minority in Gujarat: better estimates of their population in the state are expected from a currently on-going census, but the total is probably around ten to twelve thousand.

It is likely that Sidis have been in the region for many hundreds of years, with new immigrants arriving from different African origins over the passage of time. In the past, some Sidis rose to important positions, yet the Sidis are now considered by the Gujarat administration as among the most backward minorities. Few Gujaratis are even aware of the presence of Sidis, let alone their important contributions to the history of the region. One of several prominent Sidis in the history of Gujarat is Sidi Saiyad, who built a mosque in Ahmedabad that is famous for the unique artwork of its perforated windows (*jaliyo*) carved in stone. One of these, known as the *Sidi Saiyad jali*, is almost a symbol of the city of Ahmedabad, if not the state of Gujarat itself. Yet there is widespread ignorance, even among the well-educated, that this monument was built by an African. Surprisingly, even those who know about the Sidi community often fail to make the obvious connection to the name Sidi Saiyad. Perhaps Sidis can reclaim this symbol of their heritage, as one way to raise their status in Gujarat and elsewhere in India.

The Sidis of six districts in Rajkot Division of Saurashtra have been designated as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) since 1956, which brings various benefits in forms of financial assistance, and especially reserved places for educational institutions and government jobs. Along with four other tribal groups, these Sidis have since 1982 been further accorded the status of 'Primitive' group, which entitles them to additional financial assistance from the government. For the Sidis living elsewhere in Gujarat, an important issue has been their wish to be recognised as ST like the Sidis of Saurashtra, if not as 'Primitive' group too, and their as yet unsuccessful struggles to obtain this status.

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## Introduction

“So many people have come to visit us, but none of them has done anything for us!”  
(elderly Sidi lady, Ahmedabad)

This short report mainly derives from meetings with Sidis<sup>1</sup> and others in the city of Ahmedabad and the associated capital Gandhinagar, during August – September 2000.

Previous field research by Indians on Sidis has tended to be dominated by census-oriented, survey-based and traditional anthropological approaches, such as carefully counting numbers of pots and pans in households, or describing the details of marriage rituals (eg Malkan 1957; Kawa 1967; Trivedi 1967, 1969; Palakshappa 1976; Rao 1980; Naik & Pandya 1981); there have also been a few historical accounts (eg Banaji 1932; Pinto 1992; Chauhan 1995; Ali 1996). The handful of international researchers on the other hand have mostly been interested in history (eg Harris 1971; Baptiste 1998; Alpers 2000), religion (eg Basu 1998) and music. Most have nevertheless also been motivated by a concern to improve life for Sidi communities, although direct tangible benefits have as yet been rather limited. The designation since 1982 of Sidis in parts of Saurashtra as a ‘Primitive’ group, giving entitlement to various financial assistance from government, may represent an indirect benefit, following from Naik & Pandya’s study.

This study was approached without committing to any particular line of enquiry beforehand. It was also recognised that some of the most interesting questions are correspondingly difficult to approach if meaningful results are to be obtained. These would include various economic and demographic questions, which are complicated by their sensitive and multidimensional nature, such as measurement of indebtedness, ownership of assets, land tenure and land alienation, income and (un)employment

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<sup>1</sup> The word Sidi as spelt in Gujarati script appears most often with a single unaspirated dental ‘d’, hence the spelling ‘Sidi’ (eg Naik & Pandya 1981) seems preferable to alternatives such as ‘Siddi’ (eg Trivedi 1969) and ‘Siddhi’ (eg Palakshappa 1976). This is still a compromise, since both ‘i’ vowels are long in the Gujarati script, so a case could be made for the spelling ‘Siidii’.



(Bardhan 1989: ch.1). For example, there may have been increasing land alienation from Sidis in recent decades: Trivedi (1967: 25-27) reported high levels of debt in Jambur village, but that 'there has not been much significant change in the extent of ownership of land... during the last one generation' (Trivedi 1969: 13-14). But subsequently Naik & Pandya (1981: 65-70,176-178) have reported high levels of land alienation through inability to repay debts: while legislation exists that is intended to prevent transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals, it has not proved an effective safeguard.

Likewise, it would have been interesting to understand better the socially constructed positions of Sidis in Indian society, what it means to be African black in India, and what (if any) adverse discrimination they suffer in the present day. These considerations are complicated by the fact that most Sidis in Gujarat are Muslim; and that significant numbers of Sidis are barely distinguishable in appearance from other Indians. To attempt to address such questions satisfactorily would require a more extended period in Gujarat than was possible on this occasion.

## Sidi Identities

Gupta (2000: 87,19) compares and contrasts similarities and differences between race and caste, observing that racial identification depends primarily on surface phenotype, whereas caste status can rarely be distinguished reliably through natural differences of appearance or skin colour. Sidis would therefore seem to present an interesting exception: they do seem to recognise their identity 'Sidi' as a *jati* [caste]. Yet at the same time, anyone of Negro appearance is for them also 'Sidi' or 'of our caste'. Thus peoples of several different African countries were on various occasions all described to me as being 'Sidis' too, seemingly oblivious to the many mortal divisions between countries and tribes on the continent. Black Americans and Caribbeans, for example the West Indies cricket team<sup>2</sup>, were also referred to as 'Sidis'. This would suggest that the term 'Sidi' could be translated as 'Negro', rather than as a caste identity. Yet perhaps this does not quite work either, because there are plenty of present-day Sidis who are basically indistinguishable in appearance from Indians.

It is interesting that Harris (1969: 5), considered to be a great pioneer in the study of Africans in Asia, supposed that 'the stigma of racial (Negro) inferiority is less pronounced [in Asian countries] than in western societies'. Palakshappa (1976:104) went as far as to conclude that in Karnataka 'the Siddhis do not suffer from any sort of prejudice, either racial or cultural'. As unsupported statements, it is curious to wonder how they could reach such conclusions, since the understanding of social discrimination and prejudice are complex sociological questions that would require careful exploration beneath the surface appearances. For a country like India, one might instead hypothesise that the stigma could be just as great, but be less apparent due to the contrasts between black and Indian being submerged by the many competing hierarchies of social division, such as those embodied in the caste system. Nevertheless, Sidis in Ahmedabad said they did not think that they experienced discrimination on account of being Sidi, expressing the view that the important differences nowadays are defined by differences in economic well-being.

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<sup>2</sup> The West Indies cricket player Brian Lara seemed to be something of an idol for Sidi children in Ahmedabad. Likewise the successful tennis-playing Williams sisters were also considered to represent Sidis, as also the pop-star Michael Jackson!

Gupta (2000: 42,87) points to the fact that it was possible to have a Negro cook in a racist Southern state of America, but not a Harijan in a Brahmin's kitchen. However, he does not comment on the likelihood of a Negro in a caste Hindu's kitchen. The question arises as to whether Sidis have ever been treated as untouchables. In villages of Saurashtra, it was observed that the Sidis' homesteads are often located on the edge of villages next to those of the former untouchables.<sup>3</sup> However, this may be more an indicator of landless poverty, rather than of untouchability. Sidis in the city of Ahmedabad admit that others take them as a 'lower community', but not like untouchables: they can remember witnessing open discrimination against untouchables, (the example of separate cups, chipped and broken, for untouchables at tea stalls was mentioned), but say that Sidis never experienced such treatment.

In other contexts, it may be difficult unambiguously to identify such stigma: if Sidis do experience adverse discrimination, there is a problem to discern the degree to which this is due to their being Sidi or Negro *per se*, or rather because of other forms of prejudice and inequity.

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<sup>3</sup> According to students working for a census being undertaken by the Tribal Research and Training Centre.

## The Muslim context

In this respect, religion may be an important factor. The Sidis in Gujarat are nearly all Sunni Muslim in faith: to understand their position, it is therefore also necessary to understand the Muslim context, while also recognising that their experiences may be different in important ways from other Muslims. There is no doubt that the position of Muslims is subordinate in India as a whole, and particularly in Gujarat. Many of those who could afford to migrate to Pakistan at the time of partition, so that the communities left behind were depleted of much of their wealth and talent: in particular, government officials felt encouraged to migrate because they were promised equivalent jobs in Pakistan. In political terms, the state of Gujarat has in recent years been overwhelmingly dominated by the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), a party with close associations with the Hindu fundamentalist *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP). The VHP represents the 'saffron' movement that is trying to turn India into a Hindu state.<sup>4</sup> Many such Hindus still perceive Muslims to be foreigners who invaded India. The dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, with deaths frequently reported in the newspapers, constantly threatens to ignite smouldering Hindu-Muslim relations within India, because indigenous Indian Muslims are automatically perceived to be allied with Pakistan: there is constant propaganda projecting Muslims as bad elements in society.<sup>5</sup> No doubt this is exacerbated by the fact that Gujarat shares a border with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> There have been many occurrences of communal rioting in cities of Gujarat since Independence: it is usually the minority Muslims who fare worst. With the BJP in power, it would seem that Hindu fundamentalists are able to attack Muslims with increasing impunity. As it was put to me: 'Each and every Muslim is feeling insecure in this secular country'.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the VHP are ardent supporters of building a *Ram mandir* on the site of the *Babri masjid* of Ayodhya that was destroyed by Hindu mobs in 1992. In the colour symbols which prevail, the colour saffron represents Hindu, while green represents Muslim, hence an alternative explanation for the significance of these colours in the Indian flag, the white band between the saffron and green representing unity and peace. (According to more official secular interpretation of the colours of the flag, saffron signifies patriotism or piety, white signifies simplicity and purity, and green signifies agriculture, farming or greenery.)

<sup>5</sup> A waiter in a restaurant reading the newspaper over my shoulder pointed to a heading about a bomb explosion somewhere in Pakistan which had blown a dozen random civilian bystanders to pieces in a marketplace, and commented with evident pleasure: 'Good...!', with the explanation 'Muslim people is bad'. This kind of attitude is very widespread.

Political elections also serve to ignite communal tensions. In terms of political power, since the decline of the Congress party<sup>7</sup>, the Muslims have been increasingly marginalised. Muslims now comprise about 12-15% of the population of Gujarat: the official version is 12%, but it seems that many Muslims are convinced that the BJP government is deliberately undercounting them. In support of this, they cite the fact that the census only distinguishes by language: those whose language is recorded as Urdu are counted as Muslim, while Gujarati speakers are counted as Hindu; but there are many Muslims whose main language is Gujarati who are in this way counted among the Hindus. At the time of Congress rule in 1984, there were 18 Muslim members of the legislative assembly that governs the state of Gujarat; and at national level, 3 Muslim MPs from Gujarat in the *Lok Sabha*<sup>8</sup>. In the 1993 state elections, there was only a single Muslim MLA<sup>9</sup> out of a total of 182 for the entire state of Gujarat! The situation in 1998 was slightly improved, but only to a total of five Moslem MLAs: two for Ahmedabad<sup>10</sup>, and one each from Saurashtra, Kutch and Bharuch. Even at the national level, out of a total of 26 MPs from Gujarat in the *Lok Sabha*, there is at present not a single Moslem. For the whole country, there are only about 25 Muslim MPs out of the total of 543 seats, and these are mostly from south Indian states. Part of the problem is that the Muslims themselves are divided (for example between Sunni and Shi'a, who represent about 80% and 20% of the Moslem population respectively), so that the Muslim vote becomes split between more than one candidate.

The marginalisation of Muslims is also apparent in education: for example, the Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad has only two Muslim teaching staff out of a total of more than a hundred.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, I was told Gujarat University employs only a couple of Muslims out of hundreds of teaching and non-teaching staff. It is doubtful

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, for example, there has been a spate of accusations that *madrasas* [Muslim schools] are being infiltrated by the Pakistani secret services.

<sup>7</sup> Congress is traditionally the main party supported by Muslim voters.

<sup>8</sup> The Lower Parliament or 'House of the People', the main legislative body for all India.

<sup>9</sup> Member of the Legislative Assembly.

<sup>10</sup> Even the common alternative spelling of Ahmedabad, Amdavad, is perceived by some Muslims as intended to erase the Muslim origin of the name, literally 'city of Ahmed', the Muslim Sultan Ahmed Shah who founded the city in 1411.

<sup>11</sup> These figures refer to the higher education campus of the Gujarat Vidyapith: the Vidyapith also has primary, secondary school, and other college campuses.

that this can really be blamed on a shortage of qualified candidates, nor on a 'backward' attitude to education sometimes ascribed to Muslims. While teaching jobs depend on qualifications, it was pointed out that even for Class IV posts (ie peons) Muslims are hardly ever selected. The numbers of Muslim students in educational institutions are similarly very low.

This raises the question of whether there should be some form of reservation specifically targeted for Muslims, like there is for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Such reservation was apparently offered at the time of Independence, but refused by the Muslim leader Molana Abul Kalam Azad. Some politicians have tried to raise the issue over the last ten to fifteen years, notably in 1994 when Sitaram Kesri (Congress), then federal welfare minister, proposed that there should be reservation for Muslims. While the BJP remains powerful, and Muslim representation such a minority, there is little hope of such legislation ever materialising.

While the issue of reservation is discussed in more detail in a later chapter, it is worth noting at this point that there are *no* Muslim castes designated as SC: the argument is that Muslim religion does not have any concept of untouchability, so they are not subject to the kind of social exploitation that was used in defining SC. So for example, Hindu *wankar* [weaver caste] are SC while their Muslim *julaha* counterparts are not; likewise Hindu *bhangi* are SC, while Moslem *lalbegi* are not given such benefits of reservation. Many Muslim castes have subsequently been listed under Other Backward Classes (OBC) and are thereby entitled to some reservation, but the benefits are much less compared to those of ST/SC.

In all of India, there are only very few Muslim tribes listed as Scheduled Tribe: the Sidis are the only case for Gujarat.

## Stereotypes and misconceptions

It is likely that Sidis have been in the region of Gujarat for many hundreds of years, with new immigrants arriving from different African origins over the passage of time. Their contribution to the history of the region is not in doubt, at least as far as the academics are concerned (eg Commissariat 1938, 1957, 1980; Harris 1971; Ali 1996; Alpers 2000). On the ground, it may be a rather different story, illustrating that refined arguments based on carefully researched details in books and journals may be going largely unheeded.

It is quite possible that the majority of Gujaratis are unaware of the Sidis in their midst. My expression of interest in Sidis was not infrequently misunderstood as an interest in 'cities'. The term *habshi* seems to be more easily recognised by non-Sidhis, or sometimes the conjoined *Sidi-badshah*. The word *badshah* literally means 'emperor', but seems open to dual interpretation: on the one hand, it harks back to a time when the Sidis were employed as soldiers and guards by Sultans and Nawabs, and is therefore said to imply a carefree disposition on the part of the Sidis. On the other, it may be used with ironic intention, making fun of their condition of poverty. There was some recognition by non-Sidhis that the term *habshi* may be used pejoratively<sup>12</sup>, showing contempt towards black people: the Sidis I asked did not recognise any bad sense in the use of the word. Sidis themselves recognised that Gujaratis use the word *KaaDiyo* as an insulting term for black people behind their backs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The use of names is a very sensitive issue in India, with some terms that were previously widely used now banned completely by the National Atrocities Act (first passed in 1955 and updated in 1989). For example, it is now an offence to call someone *DheDha* or *BhangaDa*, names derived from former untouchable communities (*Dhed* and *Bhangi*). Of course, this Act is ineffective against many terms. Virtually for every caste, there is a term of respect and a term of abuse: the simplest way is to render the name of the caste in neutral gender. Thus Vaniya is a name of a caste (male gender), but Vaniyu is derogatory. An insult used as a term of address for Muslims is *miya*, derived from the Muslims' use of this as a suffix denoting respect (eg *Allah-miya*). Even more insulting is *miyu*, the neutral gender form of *miya*. Another term used to insult Muslims is *banDa*, which denotes someone who has been circumcised.

<sup>13</sup> An Ahmedabad Sidi who has travelled to the USA said that this word *KaaDiyo* is used by the large community of Gujaratis there, and that it is now even recognised by American blacks to be insulting.

A number of misconceptions and prejudices about Sidis seem to be quite prevalent, some encountered among even well-educated Gujaratis whom one would expect to know better. A short 'tentative' film script proposed by a student of the prestigious National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad illustrates some of the most common stereotypes attributed to Sidis<sup>14</sup>:

Once there lived a happy group of black pigeons. Their community lived a primitive but free life in the deep forest of the African Continent...

But suddenly one day...

They saw a white pigeon... They all got together to look at this strange pigeon who had flown all the way from the west.

As time passed, they saw more and more white pigeons... Very soon the white pigeons recognized the ignorance which prevailed amongst the Black pigeons. They also recognized their power and faithfulness...

White pigeons with help of strong powerful weapons, took over the Black pigeons... Black pigeon became slaves of the whites. They were treated brutally... A big group of such Black pigeons was also taken as far as India... The land of gray pigeons.

First there seems to be an absurd ignorant notion in some quarters that Africans are all primitive creatures of the deep forest, as if this were their 'natural habitat' and Africa were entirely forested with no towns and cities. This finds expression in, for example Chauhan (1995: 234) on runaway slaves from Goa: 'Being attracted by the forest regions, they formed their first destination there.' (A more straightforward explanation would be that the forest was remotely located and offered cover from pursuit). Likewise: 'These people are originally from jungles so the jungles of Gir may have attracted them...' (Malkan 1957). Some Gujaratis would seem to think that Sidis gravitated to the environs of Gir forest, because, well, there are lions there, the only lions outside Africa, so it must be the natural habitat for Africans!

The above pigeon scenario also would propagate another series of misconceptions, based on the notion that the Sidis were all brought to India by the 'Europeans' as slaves. While many slaves were indeed brought latterly by the Portuguese (and a

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<sup>14</sup> (Pandya 1984: 145-174). The narration uses the imagery of pigeons to represent different peoples: black pigeons as Africans, white pigeons as Europeans and grey pigeons standing for Indians. Keeping pigeons is a popular hobby, especially among Muslims, and perhaps people appreciate the beauty of all the varied colours of different varieties of pigeons more easily than they do for their human counterparts.



relatively small number by the British and Dutch too), it is known that Arabs were engaged in the slave trade for centuries before these European powers even knew to navigate the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> Thus the duration of the history of African presence in India is very much greater than this 'European' assumption would imply. In practice, 'Europeans' is often understood to mean that the Sidis were all brought by 'the British', which is somewhat misleading. This tendency to blame all the slavery on the Europeans also overlooks the complicity in slaving of many Gujarati (including Kutchi) traders, who were active in East Africa centuries before the Europeans (eg Harris 1971: 62; Mehta 2000). The sole emphasis on slavery overlooks the possibility that many Africans came freely, as seafarers, merchants and traders in their own right.

Another example, from a book extolling 'The Glory of Gujarat' (Vyas 1998: 301):

The Sidis were originally the habitants of the forests of Africa. The whites caught them and sold them to European countries as slaves. They are dark black in complexion, their lips are very thick, nose flat and their hair are curly.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the aforementioned errors, this example illustrates the classic stereotyping of Sidis that prevails: whereas in reality, there are many Sidis who are quite fair, and plenty of Indians with fat lips and flat noses. This illustrates a kind of mentality that one would hope should belong firmly in the past, along with anthropometry studies (cf. Choudhury 1958: Plate caption 'Negroid Sidhi with very thick lips'). It is also related to the prevalent myth that there has been virtually no intermarriage between Sidis and Indians: eg 'Ethnically they have maintained their negroid features as they marry within the group' (Patel 1986: 241).<sup>17</sup>

Such language even finds its way into the official Government literature. The first thing the Tribal Sub-Plan Annual Development Programme (1998: 39) has to say about Sidis is:

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<sup>15</sup> Ghosh (1992: 375) comments on an interesting reference to slave-traders in Mangalore relating to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> (Grammatical and spelling 'errors' in all quotes are reproduced as in the originals.)

<sup>17</sup> This would contrast with what Harris (1969: 4) also thought was a prevalent myth: 'that all Africans... were absorbed into the local societies.' See also Baptiste (1998b: 113-114) for discussion of miscegenation; and also Mehta (2000) for evidence of Gujarati traders in East Africa having children by local women, and in some cases bringing them back to Gujarat.

Siddis is the only scheduled tribe possessing completely Negroid racial traits. They are strongly built, tall, black and curly hair protruding jaw, and thick black lips.

Unfortunately, such simplistic understanding and misinformation about Sidis is being purveyed and perpetuated even by the authorised Gujarat state school textbooks:

And more, there are the black Siddis found mainly in the Gir forest area in Saurashtra. Jambur near Jafarabad is their main centre. They are followers of Islam. It is believed that people of this race were originally from Africa brought over to this region as slaves by the Europeans in the past. They are black in appearance and have thick lips, with flat, broad nose, and kinky hair. They have a traditional folk dance called Dhamal which is a delight to watch.

(Dixit, Modi & Pandya 1997: 112).

Apart from the points already covered, it is perhaps slightly misleading to refer to Jambur as 'their main centre': in terms of Sidi population, Jambur has the largest of any village in Saurashtra or indeed in Gujarat, and there is an important shrine of Nagarchi *pir* located there. However the Sidis' main spiritual centre is the *Dargah* [tomb] of Bava Gor in Ratanpur village, Rajpipla.

Sidis are also portrayed as ignorant and having no interest in education: eg 'The Siddi have a real aversion for formal education. They prefer to lead a carefree life' (Chakraborty & Nandi 1984: 132). 'It is evident that the backwardness [in literacy] of Jambur is not due to isolation of the habitat nor to any geographic reason but must be ascribed to the apathy of Siddis themselves' (Trivedi 1967: 35). Such accounts are quite unfair, being typical of prejudice against poor people who, however much they might value education, may have little choice but to engage their children in work; there is also the possibility that the quality of formal education actually available was very low.

It should also be mentioned that some of the recurring stereotypes about Sidis are complimentary, though sometimes a little patronising in their ritual expression, or mixed in their message: 'Though their outside appearance and physical features may initially give us a scare, they are, however, by nature very polite, humble, well-

behaved and soft-spoken' (N.Basu<sup>18</sup> c.1982: 11). Positive images include the beliefs that Sidis are strong, honest, loyal and faithful (eg Pandya 1984: 92; Chauhan 1995: 238).

The belief in the strength of the Sidis finds expression in a couple of phrases mentioned by Mastar (1969:63): '*Habshi-ki muuth*' and '*Habshi-ka baal bāāka*'.<sup>19</sup> The first of these translates literally as 'Habshi's grip', implying a strong hold on something. The second proved more difficult to translate unambiguously, but may mean something like 'you can't hurt a Habshi'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It might be noted in passing that N. Basu's study, although entitled 'A Linguistic Study of Siddi Dialect of Bedi Village' does not concern any African-origin language, but just the Bedi Sidis' use of Kutchi dialect of Gujarati.

<sup>19</sup> The tilde *ā* denotes nasalisation of the vowel

<sup>20</sup> There was confusion in translating this second phrase, because of the many meanings of *baaka*, partly depending on whether the initial vowel is nasalised or not. Without nasalisation, the word may have the sense of curly, so *baal baaka* would refer to curly hair. However, there is also an idiomatic expression *baal bāāka karne* meaning to hurt someone, but used with the implication that you can't hurt them.

## Black is beautiful!

There is another saying or proverb in Gujarati referring to Sidis, originating in the Saurashtra dialect: '*Sidibhai ne Sidkā wahlā*' (also mentioned by Malkan 1957: 238).<sup>21</sup> The direct translation is roughly: 'To a Sidi, his children are dear'. What does such a proverb signify about Gujarati attitudes towards Sidis, if anything?

The saying is sometimes elaborated as a story:

A King asked a Sidi to select several of the best children in the kingdom and bring them to him. So the Sidi went off to search for them. The Sidi went on and on and round and round and round, and couldn't make up his mind. Ultimately he landed upon his own children, and realising they were the best, brought his own children to the King.

In some ways, this 'proverb' is like a Gujarati version of the Shakespearian: 'Love is blind'. The problem with the expression is that it seems to be founded on a racist supposition, that Sidi children are self-evidently inferior.<sup>22</sup> It is sad to note that the distinguished professor who first retailed this story to me prefaced it with the explanation, to which he apparently subscribed: 'because they are not handsome, darkish and all that'.

There is a further problem of interpretation here: if an Indian says that an African is not beautiful, is that simply because they are dark-skinned, or is there more to the 'all that'? In India, as indeed in Africa too, there is a lamentably widespread belief that fair skin is more beautiful than dark: so much so that precious income is spent on cosmetic creams that promise to lighten the skin.<sup>23</sup> However, this widespread belief

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<sup>21</sup> There was also a proverb about Sidis listed in the 'Gujarat Kahevat Sangraha' [Collection of Gujarati Proverbs] (1929): *Sidi bhai chand dekho tho kahe apsehi nazar ayaga*. Literally it was explained to me as: 'Sidi brother look at the moon then he says I will see it in you'. I was unable to find anyone who could confidently explain the usage of this saying; the only suggestion was that the Sidi is dark like the night sky, so you can see the moon in him...

<sup>22</sup> An alternative version, perhaps more current, was given as: '*Sidi na chokra Sidi ne wahlā*'. This was translated for me as: 'Only the Sidis love a Sidi child...', with, it was explained, the insinuation '...but not others'.

<sup>23</sup> Some of these creams are manufactured not for cosmetic purposes, but to treat genuine skin problems: it is just a side-effect of the steroids they contain that they cause a (temporary) lightening in the pigmentation of the skin. I have seen such steroid creams available even in the markets of a small

that lighter-coloured skin is more beautiful is no more sinister than notions among fair-skinned Westerners that a tan is more beautiful.

It was pointed out to me that there are many such sayings in Gujarati, which make their point at the expense of some or other group within Gujarat: so in that sense the Sidis are not necessarily being singled out for negative treatment. Curiously, the Sidis I asked did not immediately find fault with the saying: for them it expressed above all the commendable fact that parents will love their children no matter what. But among non-Sidhis, opinions vary as to whether the expression has offensive overtones. Among those who find no problem with it are included well-educated people who nevertheless are able to pronounce – as if an inherent truth, as if expecting me to agree with them as a matter of course – that ‘the negro race is ugly’, explaining that it is not just a matter of colour, but also features. It was surprising and uncomfortable that such disagreeable views could be expressed so unselfconsciously.

The saying seems to be more familiar to the older generation, but perhaps rather less well known among younger people: the explanation given by some is that the use of proverbs in everyday speech is going out of fashion. So there is some possibility that the expression may be lapsing from use. Only two out of a couple of dozen in class of MA students at the English medium St. Xavier’s school professed to have heard it. In their attempt to interpret the expression for me, the class was inclined to change the wording to Sidibhai ne sikka wahlā’: ‘To a Sidi, a coin [money] is dear’. This was ironic considering the opposite (and equally dubious) view that crops up about Sidis caring little for money, being happy if they have sufficient just for the day.<sup>24</sup>

In south India, there are similar proverbs, that were translated for me as: ‘For the crow, its own child is the most precious thing’ [Malayalam], or ‘The crow’s baby

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African village. The people who buy them are almost certainly unaware of the health risks of using steroid creams in this way, and would be unlikely to be able to read, let alone understand any warning message. It is possible that such cosmetic use far exceeds the intended use. (Personal correspondence with Glaxo, 1992). Cosmetic creams which promise to lighten the skin are very widely available in India: their ingredients are not identified on the packaging. It is ironic that so many might be risking their health by using steroid creams to lighten the skin, while so many others similarly risk their health by exposing themselves to ultraviolet radiation to achieve the opposite effect.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Chauhan’s comment (1995: 235): ‘Today, the Siddhis are least concerned with their future and feel happy once they have a few rupees in hand.’ Or Palakshappa (1976:58): ‘This lack of thought and foresight regarding their future needs is one of their characteristics’.

crow is the beautifullest in the world' [Tamil]. However, unlike in the west, where crows are usually considered as ugly birds and agricultural pests, and traditionally as harbingers of ill fortune, in India the meaning attached to crows is not necessarily bad. For example, it is believed that if a crow starts shouting, then someone is going to visit who you haven't seen in a long time, (or a letter will come from them). A different god is believed to visit on each day of the week: on Saturday, one god visits through the crow. People who believe this keep some food and put it out for the crow, and if a crow comes and takes it, they think the day will be a good one. Some say that if crow shit should land on your head, it is a good omen. In Gujarat, it is considered auspicious to feed crows during the time of *shradh*: this gives rise to a further saying: 'for the crow, there are sixteen days of *shradh*', which might be used of someone unemployed, who on getting some money spends it all at once. On the other hand, there are also negative interpretations of the crow: 'If the she-crow shouts then a death will occur in the family'. It is clear that this little excursion into the realm of proverbs is unable to shed much light on the interpretation of the first saying. But observing some birdshit landing on my shoulder from a tree, a Sidi joked: 'the crow is also Sidi!'

## Population estimates

The Sidis are a tiny minority in Gujarat: it probably does not matter that much *exactly* how many of them there are, but they probably number in the region of ten to twelve thousand. Although it is potentially rather a dull subject, it is perhaps worth dwelling briefly on the question of population numbers, since they seem to be carelessly mentioned in the literature. So for example, Patel declares in 1986 that 'The total population of these Africans in Gujarat is nearly five thousand; 3000 of them stay in Saurashtra', when the population in Saurashtra alone had already been identified as 4482 way back in the 1971 census! Basu (1998: 119) states that Sidis number 6000-7000, but with no indication of how this figure is reached. Pandya (1984) quotes figures from the 1971 census as if they pertain to 1982, then estimates a total of 12000 for 1983 without explanation. Rao (1973: 35) seems to be quite mistaken when he refers to there being 'about a couple of thousand... in and around the capital of Gujarat'.

One of the problems is that detailed census figures have only been available for Sidis in Saurashtra (see Table 1), where they are designated as a Scheduled Tribe (ST): these figures have at times been quoted as if they represent the entire population of Sidis, overlooking the presence of Sidis elsewhere in Gujarat, for example the urban Sidi populations of Ahmedabad and Surat, the Sidis of Ratanpur village in Bharuch, and those of Bhuj and other villages of Kutch, and probably small numbers of Sidis in many other places. Because these other Sidis were not recognised as ST, there were never any figures for them in census reports. Likewise, although Diu is geographically located within Gujarat, owing to its previous history under the Portuguese, it is administered separately as a Union Territory: so the Sidis of Diu, although relatively few (96 according to a 1981 census<sup>25</sup>), might be overlooked when enumerating Sidis of the region.

Census Year	Population	% Increase
1961	3645	
1971	4482	23%
1981	5429	21%
1991	(Not available)	

**Table 1: Census figures for Sidi population in Saurashtra, Gujarat**

Since 1981, the decennial census has not enumerated individual Scheduled Castes and Tribes, so it no longer provides data on the ST Sidi population. Subsequent data from the Tribal Development Department have not covered all districts of Saurashtra, so if a figure for the present Sidi population in Saurashtra is to be extrapolated, it is therefore necessary to look at a breakdown of the figures:

	1961	1971	1981	1991	2000
Amreli	187	307	284	352	295
Bhavnagar	75	125	181		
Jamnagar	570	623	780		
Junagadh	2406	2954	3695	6107	6243
Rajkot	380	452	464		
Surendranagar	27	21	26		
Saurashtra total	3645	4482	5430		

**Table 2: Census figures by District for Sidi population in Saurashtra**<sup>26</sup>

These 1991 figures are unpublished data provided by the Tribal Development Group, Old Sechiwala, Gandhinagar. The year 2000 figures for Junagadh and Amreli derive from a currently on-going census of all five 'Primitive' tribes, being conducted as part of an evaluation study by the Tribal Research & Training Institute<sup>27</sup>: these

<sup>25</sup> KS Singh 1998: 3255

<sup>26</sup> 1961 and 1971 figures derive from Census reports, as quoted in Naik & Pandya 1981; 1981 figures from Census reports; 1991 figures are unpublished, provided by the Tribal Development Group in Gandhinagar; 2000 figures are unpublished, provided by the Tribal Research & Training Institute, Gujarat Vidyapith. Since 1991, Porbandar has been separated from Junagadh to form a new district, but the numbers for Porbandar have been included in the year 2000 total figure for Junagadh in this table for convenience. Unfortunately this total omits the numbers for Maliya taluka since these were unavailable at the time, but these are unlikely to exceed 60 at the most.

<sup>27</sup> This study is therefore quite distinct from the decennial census conducted nationally by the Directorate of Census Operations: it has been separately commissioned by the Tribal Development Department, funded by 6.5 lakh rupees over 6 months. The census results are expected to be available towards the end of year 2000.



recent figures are considered more reliable. The details for all the villages with Sidi populations in the various *talukas* of Junagadh district are given for reference in Appendix 1. If the 1991 data were to be taken seriously for Junagadh, then a remarkable upturn in population would be indicated (a decennial increase of 65%), or otherwise a new diligence in locating previously uncounted households (if not some creative accounting). If all the data were to be believed, then there have been some steep decreases in population in several villages which would deserve investigation (e.g. in Una, Khilavad and Bharana villages). Ignoring these doubtful 1991 values however, the figure of 6243 for year 2000 still corresponds to a decennial increase of about 30% over the previous two decades, which would hardly lend support to Singh's throwaway comment (1998: 3255) that the 'response of these people to family planning programmes is favourable'. In any case, in villages where the population growth has decreased, it would seem more likely to reflect migration.

The decennial increase overall for Saurashtra corresponds to about 23% for 1961-71 and 21% for 1971-81. If the population has continued to increase at a similar rate for the subsequent two decades, then for the year 2000, the total figure can be estimated as around 8000. If the population outside Junagadh has remained as stagnant as would appear to be so in Amreli, this would also give a total estimate of around 8000. If instead the population in the rest of Saurashtra has increased as fast as appears to be the case for Junagadh, this would give rise to an estimate of around 9200. Taking the lower of these estimates and combining with estimated numbers for Kutch, Ahmedabad, Surat and Ratanpur<sup>28</sup> gives a total figure at least in excess of ten thousand:

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<sup>28</sup> There are estimated to be about 105 Sidi families in Bhuj, or more than 400 individuals, and a further 60 families scattered in various villages, especially in Bhachao, Anjar, Mandvi and Rapar: this makes a total of about 165 families, though Sidi elders in Kutch themselves estimated about 200 families. Altogether there are estimated to be about 1200-1300 individuals (estimates provided by the Tribal Research & Training Institute, Gujarat Vidyapith); the Ahmedabad estimate is from Sidi community leaders; Ratanpur estimate from 'Sidis at the Millenium Conference Paper Abstracts, Rajpipla 16-18 February 2000':

Saurashtra	8000
Kutch	1300
Ahmedabad	350
Ratanpur	300
Surat	150
Total	10100

**Table 3: Conservative estimate of Sidi population in Gujarat for year 2000.**

The total population of Gujarat was about 41.3 million in 1991<sup>29</sup>: if the population has continued to increase in line with that of the previous decade (c. +21%), then the present population can be estimated at around 50 million. The Sidis would therefore represent not much more than 0.02% of the population of Gujarat.

The problem with such a simplistic numerical approach is that it might be taken to belittle the historical significance of Africans in Gujarat. It is worth mentioning here the (totally unsupported) statement by Lodhi (1992: 83) that ‘There are about 250 000 Afro-Indians, i.e. Indians of African origin, in India.’ If palaeoanthropologists are correct in believing that all present-day humans have their origins in Africa, then in that sense *all* Indians (and everyone else besides), are of African descent. However, there is a sense in which Lodhi has a point: such a simple count of present-day people who identify themselves as Sidi probably overlooks a *very* much larger portion of the Indian population who have some African ancestors in the not-so-distant past. Much is made of the idea that endogamy maintains castes in India (Gupta 2000: 89): the present-day existence of seemingly self-contained groups practicing endogamy is taken to reinforce the belief that any mixing is insignificant. However, a low level of exogamy occurring over a long period will result in significant mixing of the populations. There is plenty of evidence that this has been going on: many of the Sidis I met could recall one or more of their forebears being from outside the Sidi community, even several generations ago; and for a minor but significant proportion of Sidis, it would be difficult to distinguish them in appearance from other Indians. Rao (1973: 35) quotes a Sidi: ‘When the Siddis came to India their women did not come with them, they married the Hindu and Muslim women living in the nearby

<sup>29</sup> Source: Statistical Abstract of Gujarat State 1998: 2-3. (Part I, Social Statistics, Table 1.1)

area'. If we take an individual, that person has 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great-grandparents and so on. If we just consider the last 350 years, and assume there is a new generation every 25 years, then there are 14 generations, and about sixteen thousand ( $2^{14}$ ) ancestors. This simple calculation will of course count many ancestors twice because of marriages between relatives, but the basic point remains: some of them were probably African! It has to be said that the Gujaratis to whom I painted this little scenario noticeably tended towards a foolish reluctance to acknowledge the possibility of some African blood.

## The ST question: background

The Sidis of six Saurashtran districts of Rajkot division, namely Junagadh, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Surendranagar and Jamnagar, have been designated as a Scheduled Tribe since 1956.<sup>30</sup> The majority of Gujarat Sidis live in these six districts: they are concentrated especially in villages of Talala *taluka*<sup>31</sup> of Junagadh district. Since 1981, the decennial census has not included a breakdown of population numbers by named Scheduled Castes (SC) or Scheduled Tribes (ST), perhaps because of fears that such figures might in some cases be politically sensitive: those sympathetic to the government would say it is to avoid disputes, others would say it represents a move by the government to help it avoid its responsibilities. Either way, it is considered to make tribal progress harder to assess. The 1991 census does still break down the figures to give total numbers of SC and ST: according to the 1991 census, the population of Gujarat includes 7.4% SC and 14.9% ST, roughly reversing the proportions for India as a whole (16.5% SC vs. 8% ST).<sup>32</sup> Even on this reckoning, the Scheduled Tribe Sidis comprised less than a fifth of a percent of the total 1991 ST population in Gujarat of 61.6 *lakhs* (6.16 million).

For the Sidis living elsewhere in Gujarat, an important issue has been, and continues to be, their wish to be recognised as ST like the Sidis of Saurashtra, and their as yet unsuccessful struggle to obtain this status. It is useful therefore, as a brief digression, to recollect the history of the ST designation. The process began under British rule, particularly after the 1931 census, with the colonial government compiling a list of Backward Tribes in 1936, which formed the basis for the subsequent list of Scheduled Tribes (Beteille 1991: 77). The inception of Scheduled Castes and Tribes was defined by Articles 341 and 342 respectively of the Indian Constitution<sup>33</sup>:

'Certain communities in the country were suffering from extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness arising out of age-old practice of untouchability and certain others on account of this primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructural facilities and geographical

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<sup>30</sup> Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Modification Order 1956 (Trivedi 1969: 3). The Sidis are one out of the total 29 Scheduled Tribe groups listed for Gujarat.

<sup>31</sup> An administrative division of a district

<sup>32</sup> Source: Statistical Abstract of Gujarat State 1998: 2-3 (Part I, Social Statistics, Table 1.1)

<sup>33</sup> This official version would appear to gloss over the British colonial government precedent.

isolation, and who need special consideration for safeguarding their interests and for their accelerated socio-economic development. These communities were notified as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe as per provisions contained in Clause 1 of Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution.'

(The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Handbook 2000: 1)

The main criteria for defining Scheduled Castes were thus deemed to be social, educational and economic backwardness due to the practice of untouchability; while the corresponding criteria for Scheduled Tribes were social, educational (and sometimes economic) backwardness due to geographical isolation from the rest of the world. Whether castes or tribes meet these criteria has been decided using data from the decennial census and from studies commissioned by the national Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (previously the Ministry of Welfare), and by the Ministry of Home Affairs Registrar General of India and Census Commissioner, who oversees the state-level Directorates of Census Operations. There is a national multi-member commission, known since 1992 as the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, (under the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment), which was set up as a National Level Advisory Body to advise the Indian Government on broad policy issues and levels of development of SCs and STs. This National Commission has regional offices in all the Indian states. Ultimately, decisions on including or removing a caste or tribal group must be taken at national level, dependent on the National Commission placing a bill before the *Lok Sabha* [parliament] in Delhi.

Articles 341 and 342 allow for sub-groups to be delineated geographically, which is why it was originally possible for only the Sidis of Rajkot division to be accorded ST status, while other Sidis in Gujarat were overlooked. The designation is geographically untypical for Gujarat: the main tribal areas lie along the borders of Eastern Gujarat, in the districts of Dangs, Valsad, Surat, Bharuch, Baroda, Godhra, Panchmahals, Sabarkantha and Banaskantha. The recognition of the Saurashtra Sidis as a Scheduled Tribe might perhaps be imagined to stretch the definition of a 'tribe', in that the Sidis' have enormously diverse geographical and historical origins: however, for the purposes of drawing up the list of Scheduled Tribes, the concept of tribe was neither systematically formulated nor systematically applied, and the present

list includes a very wide variety of social formations, from small food-gathering bands to substantial populations of settled agriculturalists (Beteille 1991: 59).

The SC or ST status of course defines eligibility to privileges, most notably to reserved places in educational institutions and government employment, and these 'reservations' have since become a contentious political issue in India. The levels of reserved positions for members of SCs and STs vary for each state according to proportions of SCs and STs in that state. For Gujarat therefore, 14.9% of positions are reserved for STs and 7.4% for SCs; whereas, for example, government posts at the national level in Delhi are reserved at the all-India average 8% for STs and 16.5% for SCs. Every government office has to maintain its own roster, which provides a system for making new appointments to vacant posts such that these target percentages are achieved. These appointments are made through Employment Exchanges. To become eligible for such employment, an individual tribal has first to obtain a certificate that attests to their ST status from the District Collector, and then submit this along with other documentation such as school-leaving certificate and ration card<sup>34</sup> to the Employment Exchange. For most situations, the individual's ST status is valid for application to posts throughout the state, though certain posts (usually Class III, and Class IV) are given on a local basis only, for example where the job requires fluency in the local language. The usual age limit for eligibility for government jobs is 28 years, but in the case of SC/ST, this limit may be extended by up to five years.

Of course, reservations only apply to the government-controlled sector: the private sector is not affected. Since the early 1990s, India has been undergoing a paradigm shift with the dismantling of Central planning, and the adoption of market-oriented growth strategies. Gujarat is considered to be one of the leading states in this liberalisation process. As the private sector gains ascendancy, the policy of reservations may become correspondingly less effective as a means to redress social imbalances.

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<sup>34</sup> Ration cards are not only important for obtaining rations, but also for proof of identity, showing residence address.

Apart from reservations, a number of other plans and schemes are available to those with ST status. In Gujarat, these schemes include various scholarships, stipends, grants, loans and subsidies for education, apprenticeships, professional and vocational training, house construction, helping the landless buy land and entrepreneurs to buy shop space, medical care to sufferers of serious disease, and compensation to victims of violence.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Source: 'Summary of many plans and schemes for all Scheduled Tribes of Gujarat' 1999. Leaflet published by *Adimti vikas* [Primitive Development], A-Block, 10<sup>th</sup> floor, Multistorage House, Apnabazar, Lal Darwaj, Amdavad. [language = Gujarati]

## Efforts to gain recognition as ST

Considering the potential benefits of reservation and various forms of financial assistance, it is perhaps not surprising that many Sidis outside Saurashtra perceive it as a great injustice that they are not also recognised as ST: they see their relatives in Saurashtra benefiting while they do not. It is clear that there has long been migration and intermarriage among Sidis in different parts of Gujarat: by way of example, I encountered one family in Ahmedabad, with three sisters scattered by marriage to Rajkot, Surat and Bhuj. Many of the Ahmedabad Sidis trace some of their ancestors to Saurashtra, but are frustrated by the fact that they can not obtain proof of this.

Sidís outside Saurashtra are classified as one of the Other Backward Classes<sup>36</sup> (OBCs), which comprise about 27% of the population and therefore have 27% reservation. However the level of competition for these OBC reserved places is apparently much higher than for ST reserved places.

It is apparent that Sidís have expended considerable time and expense in their efforts to get the Government to accede to their demand to be recognised as ST too. I was shown a file by a Sidi community leader containing perhaps 40 letters relating to this subject, stretching over a timespan of 20 years. She recounted their most recent campaign, when just over a year ago, they organised for about 150 Sidís to travel to the Government offices in Gandhinagar to deliver a petition to the Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel. The issue is also mentioned in a newsletter produced by the Adivasi Sidi Progress Association in Rakot<sup>37</sup>, and I was also shown a recent letter written by the 'All India Sidi Community Fadraton', based in Ratanpur, Broach [Bharuch] District.<sup>38</sup> It has been difficult for Sidís based in different parts of the country to

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<sup>36</sup> Every state government appointed a commission to identify who should be included under OBC: in Gujarat this commission was chaired by Justice Baxi, and has come to be known as the Baxi Panch, which reported to the state government in 1978. In Gujarat, OBCs have been renamed SEBC: Socially and Economically Backward Classes. Sidís are one among 128 listed OBC castes.

<sup>37</sup> Adivasi Sidi Progress Association, Sidi News Pamphlet, Saurashtra University Road, Bhavani Nagar, near Aalap Society, Rajkot 360005. [undated, c. mid-1999; language = Gujarati]. I was told this newsletter has been produced monthly since about a year ago. The Bhavnagar Negro Welfare Board, which published the *Sidi Samachar Patrika* mentioned by Naik & Pandya (1981: 95), as well as an account by a Sidi who visited East Africa (Mubarak c.1974) has been inactive for many years (cf Alpers 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Bharuch has recently been split, so that Ratanpur may now be in Narmada District.



coordinate their efforts. Another problem is the limited tenure of politicians and government officials: even if they cared to take any action, they are perhaps not around for long enough.<sup>39</sup>

There may be some differences of opinion about the appropriate course of action for initiating the necessary change. It was suggested to me that, since it would only involve adding districts, it *may* be possible to achieve at the State level. In this case, the District Collector must first make a formal proposal on behalf of the Sidis of that District.<sup>40</sup> Such a proposal could then be forwarded to the Secretary of the Tribal Development Division, who might then commission a more detailed study. If the Collector takes no action, it would be necessary to approach the Secretary directly. If the Secretary is persuaded to put the proposal to the Chief Minister of Gujarat, then his approval might be sufficient to enable Sidis of that District to be included as ST. However, others were of the opinion that it would be necessary for the Secretary to forward the proposal to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Delhi, where, if persuaded, they would submit it before the *Lok Sabha*.

Opinions are clearly divided on whether these Sidis should be granted ST status. Some are simply against the principle of reservations for the standard reasons: they see any such adjustment as pointless because in their view the whole system should be done away with altogether. According to this point of view, reservation is divisive, emphasising and perpetuating SC and ST identities. Certainly this fear was appreciated at the outset: reservation was never intended to be continued forever, and when moving the draft Constitution in 1948, Ambedkar observed that it would be 'wrong for minorities to perpetuate themselves'.<sup>41</sup> Reservation is also perceived as divisive because it has generated conflict between groups over their eligibility for special dispensations. It further incites resentment because the system is not based on

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<sup>39</sup> For example, I noticed on my visit to the office of the Commissioner of the Tribal Development Department in Gandhinagar a painted noticeboard on the wall detailing how long previous Commissioners had held their post. The present incumbent had been in office for some weeks: few of his predecessors had lasted more than a few months, or at most a year or two.

<sup>40</sup> The Research Officer of the Primitive Development Group said he wrote to the District Collector for Ahmedabad over a year ago, requesting such a proposal to be made, but there has yet to be any response.

<sup>41</sup> Gupta 2000: 106,111

merit: people with lesser qualifications are able to get employment or educational opportunities, while others with better qualifications who are unsuccessful feel cheated of their deserved place. According to this viewpoint, the injustice of dividing the Sidi community by ST status is of less significance than the wider injustices arising from the reservation system in the first place.

Others oppose the inclusion of the other Sidis as ST because they consider that they do not fulfil the necessary criteria: certainly, it is difficult to argue that urban-based Sidis suffer from primitive agricultural practices, lack of infrastructural facilities or geographical isolation. On the other hand, there are many Sidis, such as those of Rajpipla, for whom the criteria apply at least as well as for those of rural Saurashtra. This line of argument also overlooks the fact that a high proportion of the ST-listed Saurashtra Sidis live in towns.<sup>42</sup> It might also be relevant to consider levels of continuing poverty, and whether there is a special case to be argued for Sidis suffering from adverse discrimination.

The Sidis are such a tiny minority that the costs of including them all as ST would be relatively insignificant. The problem is that the Sidis are not the only group in Gujarat where, according to geography, some members have ST status while others do not. For example, the Vagris of Kutch are ST, whereas elsewhere they are not; the Rabaris, Charans and Barwars are similarly affected. According to this objection, allowing all the Sidis to have ST status would 'open the floodgates', with a great number of communities wanting to be included. It is further argued that if all such communities were included, then it would be at the cost of the 'real' tribals. It may be that by now, the political sensitivity of adjusting the list of Scheduled Tribes, last modified in 1976, presents the most formidable obstacle to inclusion of all Sidis as ST.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> 37% of Saurashtra Sidis were considered urban according to the 1961 and 1971 census (Naik & Pandya 1981: 18)

<sup>43</sup> It would seem that such matters are nevertheless under consideration: a study of Sidis of Kutch district is mentioned as completed by the Tribal Research and Training Institute in the Annual Report of the Administration of Scheduled Areas 1997-98 pp13-14. According to this, the study was undertaken in order to assess whether these Sidis should be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Gujarat.

## Sidis as 'Primitive Tribe'

Among the Scheduled Tribes, a small number have been singled out for further special assistance, earning these benefits at the cost of the rather dubious and patronising label of 'Primitive'.<sup>44</sup> The status as 'Primitive Tribe' confers benefits beyond the level provided to ordinary Scheduled Tribes. These benefits are administered by a special unit entitled the Primitive Development Group, created within the Social Welfare and Tribal Development Department, located in the Gujarat state government in Gandhinagar. Schemes approved under the 'primitive' programme are 90% subsidised, whereas financial assistance to ordinary ST groups provides only 50% subsidy. The funding for the 'primitive' schemes comes from the central government, whereas ST schemes are funded by the state government, so there may be some hidden incentive for the state government to increase the numbers of 'primitive' tribes!

The criteria defined by the Government of India for identifying these so-called primitive groups are reported as<sup>45</sup>:

1. pre-agriculture level of technology
2. extremely low level of literacy
3. more or less stagnant population

So far, between 1978 and 1984, altogether five tribes have been recognised by the GOI Ministry of Home Affairs as being a 'Primitive Tribe': the Kathodis, Kotwalias, Padhars, Sidis and Kolghas. The Sidis were declared this status in 1982: like the ST designation, it seems the 'primitive' label has been interpreted as applying only to Sidis of Saurashtra, although for a brief period, Sidis of Rajpipla were 'mistakenly' included and received some funding under the programme. The Tribal Development Division estimated the relevant Sidi population for 1991 to be 6896 (by extrapolation from 1981 data), so on that reckoning they comprise about 9% of the total of about 75000 identified as 'primitives'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The Gujarati term is *adim*, which is rendered in official parlance as 'primitive' in English.

<sup>45</sup> Tribal Sub-Plan Annual Development Programme 1998-99; Annual Report of the Administration of Scheduled Areas 1997-98

<sup>46</sup> Tribal Sub-Plan Annual Development Programme 1998-99(p38). In conversation, slightly different figures were given: 6460 Sidis out of 78319 total for all five primitive groups.

It would seem that this third criterion could not have been critical in the decision to include the Saurashtra Sidis as 'primitive', since the Sidi population in Saurashtra was already estimated in 1971 to have increased by 23% over the previous decade (Naik & Pandya 1981: 12)<sup>47</sup>, which does not seem especially stagnant when compared with the all-Gujarat average increase of about 29% over the same period.<sup>48</sup> It is curious, if not somewhat bizarre, that stagnant population is given as an indicator of 'primitive'. Population control through family planning is seen as a sign of civilisation: if the (hypothetical) lack of population increase were due to exceptionally high mortality, then the latter would surely be a better indicator.

Going by the available statistics, it would seem that literacy could not have been critical either. The Tribal Development Department Annual Development Programme (1998-99: 39) notes that the Sidis literacy rate was estimated in the 1981 census as 23% (with a large but not untypical disparity between males at 35% and females at 11%). Likewise this does not compare that unfavourably with literacy rates estimated in 1981 as 21% (30% male, 12% female) for all Scheduled Tribes taken together.<sup>49</sup> At the time, the literacy rate was about 44% for Gujarat as whole.<sup>50</sup> According to the statistics, literacy rates for tribals overall increased dramatically over the next decade to 1991, jumping to 36% (cf 51% for all-Gujarat). It has not yet been confirmed whether the Sidis have shared in this improvement: new data on literacy is expected from a study currently being undertaken by the Tribal Research and Training Institute (based in the Gujarat Vidyapith of Ahmedabad).

The Primitive Development Group is meant to have a staff of thirteen based in Gandhinagar, but is apparently facing something of a staffing crisis: while the Director is a relative newcomer of 6 months standing, the post of Project Officer (the only Class I post) has been vacant for a year; meanwhile the Research Officer (the only Class II post) is retiring at the end of September 2000, and is unlikely to be replaced in the near future.

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<sup>47</sup> 1981 census figures would not have been available at the time of the decision in 1982.

<sup>48</sup> Statistical Abstract of Gujarat State 1998: 13 (Part I, Social Statistics, Table 1.7). These decennial percentages correspond to yearly rates of about 2.1% and 2.6% respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Source: Statistical Abstract of Gujarat State 1998: 41 Part I Social Statistics (Table 1.21)

<sup>50</sup> Source: Statistical Abstract of Gujarat State 1998: 38-39 Part I Social Statistics (Table 1.19)

According to the Research Officer, for the current financial year of the programme, a total expenditure of 421.50 *lakh* rupees (Rs. 42.15 million) has been budgeted to be spent on all five 'primitive' groups. The following table gives expenditure on Sidis during the last 3 years:

Year (April – March)	Total Expenditure (rupees)	Administrative component	Individual beneficiaries
1997-98	2 099 321	227 000	1012
1998-99	2 689 683	361 000	1062
1999-2000	2 636 980	231 997	800

**Table 4: Expenditure on 'primitive' Sidis: 1997 - 2000**

While Sidis from any of the villages in Junagadh District may apply, efforts have been concentrated mostly in 8 villages of Talala *taluka* in Saurashtra because these villages have the highest concentration of Sidis. These villages are located in the vicinity of Gir forest. This year a small allocation (about Rs. 0.5 *lakhs*) has also been provided to Sidis in Bhavnagar town. Money has been spent on various projects related to agriculture, animal husbandry, education, self-employment, fishery, social welfare, housing and water supply. The programme only provides assets, such as a buffalo, or an oil engine for example, never cash. The maximum any individual can receive under the programme is Rs. 20000 but it would appear from the above figures that most receive much less than this; if they receive less in one year, they can apply again for the remainder the next year. Aspiring beneficiaries have first to contact the District Collector in order to make out an application: the application requires the preparation of an annual plan, and they may be assisted in formulating this by the local 'project officer' (Class II) of the Taluka Development Office (TDO). Beneficiaries of approved schemes must also provide 10% of the total costs<sup>51</sup>, a fact which might suggest that relatively better-off individuals would be more likely to appropriate most of the benefits. It is the responsibility of the local TDO and staff to ensure that benefits are really going to the poor. The Research Officer estimated that about a quarter of applications are from women. Every scheme has to be approved by a local Committee presided over by the District Collector. This Committee can

<sup>51</sup> i.e. Schemes approved under the 'primitive' programme are 90% subsidised, whereas financial assistance to ordinary ST groups provides only 50% subsidy.

approve schemes with a maximum budget of 5 lakh rupees (Rs. 0.5 million), whereas the Commissioner of the Tribal Development Department has powers to approve up to 10 lakh rupees for a single scheme. Public works schemes (for example road works, irrigation, check dams) can be 100% funded, subject to approval by the Commissioner. The Research Officer estimated that in the villages where they have concentrated their work, around 90% of Sidi households have received an asset of some kind through the programme.

One approved scheme has funded Sidi student athletes with a stipend to support their training at the Sports Authority of India campus in Gandhinagar, as discussed further below.

While individual District Collectors do discuss the merits of different proposals at local level, it seems that, in the entire lifetime of the Primitive Development Group, no overall analysis has been done to examine the success of the various schemes which have been funded: the fact that the money gets spent according to targets was apparently deemed to give sufficient measure of the programme's success. An evaluation is only now being undertaken by the Tribal Research & Training Institute. A PhD study on the impact of the Tribal Sub-plan on Sidis of Gir forest is also reported to have been underway since 1997.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> pers.comm.: Nilesb Barot, Bhavnagar (email: nilbhav@yahoo.com)

## **The Sports Authority of India's 'Sidi Project'**

An opportunity for raising the status of Sidis in India is provided by a programme of the Sports Authority of India to train Sidis as athletes. However, this programme was not originally conceived as a way of helping Sidis: rather it represents a strategy on the part of the Indian Sports Authority, disappointed by India's consistently poor position near the very bottom of the league in the world Olympics.<sup>53</sup> The plan was conceived when it was realised that so many of the successful medallists in the Olympics are black. It was first implemented in Karnataka, where Sidis were recruited from 1987, with Gujarat starting the following year.

The Sports Authority of India (SAI) campus for all of Western India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Goa) is in Gandhinagar, just outside Ahmedabad. Sidis have mainly been recruited from talent-spotting competitions organised in Junagadh district in Saurashtra. Currently, there are four Sidis training at the SAI Western campus, including one girl recently arrived, out of a total of 134: all are being trained in athletics. Trainers are optimistic, taking the view that it takes only three years to train a Sidi to a standard which takes most other Indians five. They estimate that in its lifetime the programme has taken on about sixty Sidis, of which about a third were women. But of this number, a very high proportion (nearly two-thirds) abandoned their training and went back to Saurashtra within about a month; with one exception, no female trainee has lasted more than a year. There was some suggestion that Sidis do not always feel entirely accepted by the other trainees, perhaps exacerbated by their poverty relative to them. If so, their isolation is increased by being far from family and friends, with little money to spare on bus fares or even phone calls.

So far, although showing promise, the scheme has proved something of a disappointment to its proponents: while several outstanding Sidi athletes have emerged at state and national level, none has yet reached the standard required to represent the country internationally. In India, a curious feature of large state

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<sup>53</sup> Only three Indians have ever won individual medals at the Olympics, and all were bronze: wrestler Kashaba Jadhav in 1952, tennis player Leander Paes in 1996, and weightlifter Karnam Malleswari in 2000. (Times of India 20<sup>th</sup> September 2000).

enterprises like the railways, police or ONGC (oil & natural gas corporation) is that they hold sports competitions between their staff. These institutions therefore tend to recruit a certain number of staff with a view to improving their performance at such competitions. This presents a very tempting employment opportunity to medallists among the SAI trainees. A number of Sidis have in this way secured coveted 'service' jobs very much better than they could hope to obtain with their educational qualifications alone. There is an overwhelming pressure to accept such opportunities when they are offered, because if they do not succeed to win a medal in the next season, such offers may not come again. Having achieved such employment, their interest in the gruelling training regime has tended to wane, since they do not need to maintain such high standards for the purposes of the institutional sports competitions. The SAI trainers perceive that they have lost some of their most promising trainees to this route, lamenting that they have no ambition once they get a job.

The chances of attaining international status in athletics is likely to seem remote to most Sidi trainees. While training involves submitting to a tough regime in a disciplined environment, it offers the benefits of a good diet compared to what they might afford at home, plus the chance to travel widely in India to take part in competitions, with some further incentives in the form of prize money. But the major incentive is surely the possibility that modest success on the track will lead to an otherwise relatively unattainable position in government employment: they can hardly be blamed for taking such jobs when they are offered.



## Sidis of Ahmedabad

At one time there were said to be 'as many as five thousand *Habshis*' in Ahmedabad (Commissariat 1938: 469-471), when the city would have been much smaller than it is now. Today, by their own estimate, there are perhaps about 360 Sidis altogether in Ahmedabad. This is a tiny minority in a city with well in excess of 4 million inhabitants. Perhaps it is not so surprising then that many residents of Ahmedabad are not aware of the Sidis' presence in the city, nor of their important contribution to its heritage. Most of those who are aware of the Sidis identify them only as inhabitants of Saurashtra. Among those few who do know about their being in Ahmedabad, the Sidis are held to have a reputation for the occupation of 'painters', for which they are most in demand before Diwali, when Hindus like to repaint their houses. While there are indeed some painters, Sidis are also involved in a variety of other trades, occupations and income-generating activities, such as driver, mechanic, security guard/watchman, computer trainer, computer engineer, musician, dancer<sup>54</sup>, boxer, meat shop owner, shoe shop sales assistant, street hawker, *pheriyo*.<sup>55</sup>

Like other Muslims, if they can afford it, many Sidi men would prefer that women in their household do not do paid work, or if finances dictate otherwise, they would prefer them to work from home. At least some of the younger women have different ideas, looking favourably on the idea of having outside employment. Sidi women who need to work sometimes do household work for others outside the community. There is some indication that some young women Sidis are nowadays able to pursue their studies further than their male counterparts, perhaps helped by this family protection from the need to earn. Boys may be expected to get a job as soon as possible, and may see no point in further education, because in practice it often makes no difference to their employment prospects. Meanwhile girls who are at home anyway are free to continue with their studies. Another factor for poor families is that ST girls get slightly higher scholarship grants than boys. Such education opens up

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<sup>54</sup> Several Sidi men in Ahmedabad belong to a dance group coordinated from Surat that has travelled widely in India performing *dhamal*. (Siddi Goma Party, Munna S Badshah, Akbar Shahid Tekra, Pathanwada, nr. Sher Ali Baba Dargah, Navsari Bazaar, Surat 395002. tel 0261 544514, 440741; fax. 0261 406190, 413706).

<sup>55</sup> Trading from a mobile wheeled trolley, for example, selling soft drinks.

new avenues for home employment too: it is possible to earn quite well doing tuition classes for neighbourhood children.

The Sidis are also known to others, especially in Moslem localities, as visiting *fakir*: they sing *zikr* [Sufi devotional songs] accompanied by *mai mishra* rattles and sometimes also *dhamama* drum, accepting alms in return for blessing the house. This activity, called *basti*, is most often practiced on Thursdays: it is also seasonal, receiving the best returns during the month of Ramzan, when Moslems have a special religious obligation to give *zakaat* [alms]. Formerly men used to take part, but now it is only women (cf David 1997: 43).

Sidi women in Ahmedabad have got together to organise a group, registered with the Charity Commissioner, now running since about a year: *Maha Gujarat Sidi Samaaj Mahila Vikas Samiti* [Gujarat Women's Development Committee].<sup>56</sup> One of the major problems they identify is the ST question discussed earlier. They see money to be the major constraint on what the committee can achieve: each member is asked to pay a monthly subscription of Rs.5, but many cannot afford that. The question arises whether Sidis have had any help from the world-famous NGO, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) which is based in Ahmedabad. A group of Sidi women did take part in a sewing training scheme run by SEWA about 15 or more years ago, but it seems there were some problems, and since then, Sidis have not had any interaction with SEWA.

The Sidis' largest single community in Ahmedabad is a collection of some twenty households in the locality of Patthar Kuwa<sup>57</sup> [Stone Well], behind the General Post Office near to SV College. Within the city centre itself, there are also a few Sidi households in Kahunpur, and about a dozen more households scattered in the slums next to the Sabarmati river by Nehru Bridge. Further Sidi households are scattered in Sarkhej, and a few more in Gomtipur, Sardarnagar and Vatva.<sup>58</sup> Sidis in Ahmedabad

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<sup>56</sup> Another organisation of Sidis in Ahmedabad was also mentioned: *Babagor Sidi Samaaj Mandal*. It is also registered as a 'Public Trust' with the Charity Commissioner, and has been involved with campaigning on the ST issue.

<sup>57</sup> (The English spelling 'Kuwa' is slightly misleading because really a nasalised vowel: *Kuā*)

<sup>58</sup> For some reason, Rao (1973: 35) states that 'About a couple of thousand live in and around the capital of Gujarat, where there is a black-inhabited area called *Siddi ganj*'. The official administrative capital of Gujarat is now outside Ahmedabad, in Gandhinagar, and the only Sidis there are four athletes

are aware that Sidis have been in the city for a very long time: they say six or seven hundred years. However, it seems that there are no families who claim to have ancestors who were there that long ago. They say that all the Sidis now in Patthar Kuwa have come from various other parts of Gujarat: 'everyone staying here has come from outside'. Unlike Sidis of Saurashtra, who speak Gujarati as their mother tongue, Sidis in Patthar Kuwa say they speak Hindi in their homes.

The Sidi houses at Patthar Kuwa enclose a peaceful courtyard shaded by a couple of *neem* trees, a large *imli* [tamarind] and a *gorakh imli* tree. In one corner, there is a single-room building housing the *chhilla*<sup>59</sup> of the Sidis' most important saint or *pir* Bava Gor, together with *chhilla* of Hubas Khan and Mai Misra.<sup>60</sup> It is not known to them how old the *chhilla* is: it has been there for longer than anyone can remember. The Sidis have long performed their *dhamal* music and dance in this courtyard.<sup>61</sup> In another corner of the courtyard, there is the *dargah* of Malang Baba, alongside several other small graves, with a *kanjhi* tree growing in the middle; one of the graves belongs to Jichamma, but the others' names are not known. At the base of one of the *neem* trees, there is another *chhilla*, that of Sidi Muktah.

The door of the Bava Gor *chhilla* opens onto the street, so that anybody who wishes may visit the *pir*. There are apparently many outside the Sidi community who also believe in his powers: visitors to the *chhilla* may make a kind of promise with God, *mannat*, in the hope that some wish may be fulfilled. If their wish comes to pass, then they will celebrate according to the promise by summoning a large group of Sidis to perform *dhamal* for them in their home, and providing them with a feast. During the performance of *dhamal*, money is ceremonially showered (*nazrana*) on the musicians and dancers.<sup>62</sup> Bava Gor is believed to protect the Sidi community from any danger:

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currently training at the Sports Authority of India campus. If Rao was instead referring to Ahmedabad, The Sidis I met did not know of any area in the city ever called *Siddi ganj*. It seems likely that Rao was meaning to refer to Hyderabad?

<sup>59</sup> A *chhilla* is a shrine: the actual tomb is called the *dargah*.

<sup>60</sup> The *dargah* of Bava Gor is in the village of Ratanpur in Bharuch, as are those of various others including Hubas Khan, Mai Misra and Sidi Muktah.

<sup>61</sup> Sidis recognised photographs of *dhamal* dating from several decades ago in Trivedi (1969: between pages 28-29) as having been taken in this courtyard. The building housing the Bava Gor *chhilla* is not the unmodified original: it was pointed out that since these photographs were taken, the building has been repaired and the walls raised in height.

<sup>62</sup> It seems that in recent years, the Sidis' drum music has also been used for political purposes: some Sidis have become involved with the Congress party, and I witnessed a group of them playing for an

during the periods of communal rioting that have convulsed parts of the city of Ahmedabad over the years, Sidis have not been involved. The Relief Road, very near to Patthar Kuwa, has been a dangerous place in these times, but no Sidi has come to harm.

In fact the Bava Gor *chhilla* at Patthar Kuwa is not the only one in Ahmedabad: others are located in Khamasa, near Khas Bazaar; and in Topiwali Pol in Kalupur. There is also a Bava Gor *chhilla* located very close to the famous Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* [mosque], in Kothi Mohalla, raising the intriguing possibility that perhaps Sidi Saiyad himself might once have lived there: Nadvi (1955: 71) remarks that the *masjid* was built near to Sidi Saiyad's house.

Apart from the Bava Gor *chhilla*, there are several other places in the city which Sidis identify as important to them, and which they visit at least once a year. One is the *dargah* of Sidi Sultan, who was an army chief, located near the police stadium in Shahibagh. There are many graves in the vicinity, not all belonging to Sidis: that of Sidi Sultan lies within a low-walled enclosure along with thirteen others, while two further graves just outside the enclosure are believed to be those of female relatives. The enclosure is marked with a sign: 'Pir Hazrat Sidi Badsh Sultan's Sherin'.<sup>63</sup> A green pennant flag stands above the graves, which are draped with coloured silk, and a *chirag* [ceremonial flame] is kept burning there. It is believed that Sidis have lived near this site since generations back, but there is only one household nearby now.

There is also the *dargah* of Sidi Bashir, nearby the remains of the mosque that he built, in Sarangpur near the railway station. This is now located within the precincts of an engineering works that builds auto-rickshaws. Sidi Sarang is remembered as the architect or engineer who designed the *julta minara*, the shaking minarets for which the Sidi Bashir mosque is famous: his *dargah* is located next to the Sidi Bashir mosque. A few minutes walk east of the Sidi Bashir mosque, still in Sarangpur, is the *dargah* of Sidi Bashir's *ustad* [teacher], Sidi Afzal. Another *dargah* is that of Pir

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election procession through the streets in support of the Congress candidate in the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation elections.

<sup>63</sup> Although it seems to be accepted that Sidi Saiyad's tomb is next to the mosque itself, Nadvi (1955: 68) notes that Sidi Saiyad was also called 'Sidi Said Sultani' because of his close association with

Hazrat Sidi Ballol Badshah, located a moment's walk eastwards from the Dilli Darwaza: the grave is within a small roofed enclosure, without any identifying sign, inside a walled courtyard that can only be reached by going through the entrance of a block of flats that was constructed about ten years back. The *dargah* of Sidi Sujaat is also located beside Dilli Darwaza. A further *dargah* is that of Sidi Shah Alam, located in a lean-to shed immediately outside the Lal Darwaza. Around the corner, opposite the Government book shop in the Bhadra, is the *dargah* of Sidi Sadiq. Nearby the Bava Gor *chhilla* in Kothi Mohalla, in an alcove in the city wall, there is the *dargah* of Sidi Saheb<sup>64</sup>: this presumably pre-dates the city wall, as the wall has been built on top, covering half of the grave. There is also a place called 'Sidi *pol*' or 'Sidi *gali*' in Raipur, near Sarangpur, with at least five Sidi graves. Apparently the Sidis do not visit there anymore: the area is now entirely inhabited by Hindus. On the other hand, there is a *chhilla* of Sidi Sultan in Kalupur that was said to be maintained by Hindus. There is an old building known as *Sidi ki haveli* in Kalupur, containing the *dargah* of another Sidi Saheb. It seems that in recent decades, the Sidi community has been cheated of various pieces of land associated with these places, including an estimated 5 acres by the Sidi Bashir *Masjid*, several acres by the *dargah* of Sidi Ballol, and some more near Teen Darwaza.

There is a story told by the Sidis about Sidi Shah Alam<sup>65</sup>: he is said to have been a watchman at the Lal Darwaza (one of the twelve gates of the citadel of Old Ahmedabad). One night, Laxmi (the Hindu goddess of wealth) appeared, asking to leave the city. But Sidi Shah Alam told her to wait while he took permission from the Sultan Ahmed Badshah, making her promise not to leave before he returned. The Sultan, realising that if Sidi Shah Alam returned then Laxmi would be free to leave the city, cut off the head of his watchman. The story is said to account for the wealth of Ahmedabad, because Laxmi was unable to leave. In another telling of the story, Sidi Shah Alam cuts his own head off, not wishing for Laxmi to desert his master's city. This version conforms both to the prevalent idea of the faithful Sidi, and further conveys that it is the Sidis who are in some way responsible for the wealth of Ahmedabad. It also accounts for the poverty of the Sidis themselves, since Laxmi is

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Sultan Mehmud, so perhaps there could be some connection between this Pir Hazrat Sidi Badsh Sultan *dargah* and Sidi Saiyad?

<sup>64</sup> The name 'Sidi Saheb' is used because his actual name is not remembered.

said to have cursed the Sidis for not letting her go. But on the other hand, Ahmed Shah blessed the Sidis because he saw his faithful servant had sacrificed his life. For the Sidis in Ahmedabad, this explains why 'money doesn't accumulate in our house', but nevertheless that 'we may not be wealthy but we never go hungry'.<sup>66</sup>

Once a year, Bava Gor's *Urs*<sup>67</sup> is celebrated: this is the Sidis' most important festival, with celebrations spread over several days. The first day is *Sandal*, followed by *Urs*; the following three days are dedicated to Sidi Bashir, Sidi Muktah and Sidi Malang. On the day of *Sandal*, a preparation is made with sandalwood powder and rose water; women make a sweet called *malidi*, with flour and sugar, and another called *boja*<sup>68</sup> made with *khajoor* [dates] and water. In the afternoon, the Sidis go in procession from Patthar Kuwa to visit the nearby *chhilla* of Bava Gor in Kothi Mohalla, and the *dargah* of Sidi Shah Alam and Sidi Sadiq. On their return, the Sidis stay up all night playing *dhamal* music and dancing, with the climax at the end of the night, when one or more male goats are sacrificed, before the sun rises on the day of *Urs*. The sandalwood preparation is used to make handprints, while holding a *paan* leaf, on the walls of all the Sidi homes, and *malidi* sweets are distributed. During the day, the goat is cooked and shared with visitors from the neighbourhood. *Dhamal* music and dancing recommences in the evening, and lasts long into the night. On the afternoon of the third day, the Sidis go in procession to visit the *dargah* of Sidi Bashir, carrying two pots containing *boja*: after singing *zikh* in the *dargah*, *malidi* is distributed, and then the nearby *dargah* of Sidi Afzal is visited before returning to Patthar Kuwa. In the evening, a *qawali* performance takes place on a stage erected in the road outside

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<sup>65</sup> This story also appeared, with slightly different details, in Ratnamanirao (1929: 572-573).

<sup>66</sup> A similar story is known among some non-Sidis, but perhaps with a different slant: according to one such version, Laxmi asked to meet the king [Sultan], and instead of taking her directly, Sidi Shah Alam told her to wait while he informed the king. By the time he came back, Laxmi had disappeared into the city: the king blamed the Sidi for losing Laxmi, asking why he done such a stupid thing as to come and inform him, and cut off his head. In this rendering, Sidi Shah Alam is therefore portrayed in a rather negative light compared to the Sidis' version.

<sup>67</sup> *Urs* is the name given to the festival commemorating the death of any *pir*. Thus each *pir* has his own date for celebrating *Urs*. The day preceding *Urs* is called *Sandal*. The date varies each year because it is set according to the Muslim calendar. Bava Gor's *Urs* is celebrated in Ahmedabad just after it takes place in Ratanpur: in the year 2000, the Ratanpur *Urs* was on the 8-9 October, and in Ahmedabad on 10-11 October. Sidi Ballol's *Urs* is celebrated separately towards the end of the Muslim month of Rajab.

<sup>68</sup> *Boja* was described as Bava Gor's *niyaaz* (an offering consecrated by the *Pir* before distribution, to be likened with the Hindu *prasaad*).

the Bava Gor *chhilla* in Patthar Kuwa.<sup>69</sup> The next day celebrates Sidi Muktah: food is prepared, and Sidis from all other parts of Ahmedabad come to Patthar Kuwa to eat together, followed by consumption of a drink prepared with *bhāng*, with *dhamal* music and dancing into the night. The following day, in honour of Sidi Malang, is celebrated by Sidi children, who collect money and sweets from their elders; there is again *dhamal* music and dance at night. The end of the festival is marked on the morning of the sixth day, with singing of *zīkr*, mainly by the elder women.

It might be assumed that the Sidis have the habit of visiting the various places noted above because they are commemorating some of their forebears. The Sidis did not seem to know about the graves of at least three prominent 16<sup>th</sup> century Sidi army commanders mentioned in the history books, who are buried in Sarkhej: Bilal Jhujar Khan, his son Marjan Sultani Habshi (who also was known by the title Jhujar Khan), and Yaqut Sabit Khan Habshi<sup>70</sup>, who was one of several Sidis to bear the title Ulugh Khan (Commissariat Vol. I: 469-471). Marjan Sultani Habshi is known to have been trampled to death by an elephant under the Mughal Emperor Akbar's orders in 1573. So perhaps none of their descendants survive in Ahmedabad to this day.

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<sup>69</sup> This is a relatively recent arrangement, since about the last ten years: previously, the Sidis would celebrate with more *dhamal*. It is clearly an important public occasion for the Sidis, filmed by local television, with many local dignitaries and politicians invited, who are presented with gifts of garlands and shawls.

<sup>70</sup> Yaqut's son was the patron of Hajji-ad-Dabir, who wrote an Arabic History of Gujarat. It may therefore be thanks to another Sidi that much can be told of the history of the time, including the correct dating of the Sidi Saiyad mosque, over which there was previously much confusion (Commissariat Vol. I 1938: 471).

## Sidi Saiyad

In this respect, it is particularly curious that Sidis in Ahmedabad are not in the habit of visiting the Sidi Saiyad<sup>71</sup> *Masjid*, nor Sidi Saiyad's *dargah* which is located there.<sup>72</sup> Sidi Saiyad, a Habshi nobleman in the reign of Sultan Muzaffar III, is arguably the most prominent Sidi in the history of Ahmedabad, if not of all Gujarat. He was responsible for building this mosque in Ahmedabad, which is world-famous for the unique artwork of its perforated window screens or *jali* of carved sandstone.<sup>73</sup> One of these *jali* screens is almost like a symbol of the city of Ahmedabad, if not the state of Gujarat itself.<sup>74</sup> Yet most Gujaratis are simply unaware that this monument, of which many are so proud, was built by an African.

Sadly, there does not seem to be any information about the actual craftsman who designed the *jali* (Ratmananirao 1929: 363). However, one might speculate about his origins, given the comments by various writers about the unique and unprecedented

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<sup>71</sup> There are various English transcriptions of the name, including Saiyad, Sayyad, Saeed, Syeed, Sayid, Sayyid, Sahid, Said etc.

<sup>72</sup> (but see also footnote 63).

<sup>73</sup> There has been a long-standing mystery about the central window arch of the mosque, which is walled with stone. The *jali* on either side are of such artistic quality that it is only natural to wonder what masterpiece might have been intended for the central position. Commissariat (Vol I, 1938: 502) noted that a Henry George Briggs had visited in 1847 and commented on this arch being already plastered up, and considered that Briggs' reference '...serves at least to dispose of the tradition which has persisted for many years that the screen was removed from the mosque and transported to England some time about the end of the last century'. He would be disappointed to learn that nowadays this belief seems still to be very widespread. Commissariat observed that a more likely explanation for the absence of the central window screen, and also of three further window arches on the northern side, is that the mosque was still under construction when the Mughals invaded Gujarat, and was therefore never completed. On the available evidence, it seems unlikely that the British removed any screen, but there were once wooden copies of the *jali* in museums in South Kensington, London and in New York (Nadvi 1955: 72, Burgess 1900: 43). Records at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (which absorbed the Indian museum in South Kensington), show that they acquired a life-size wooden copy in 1883 at the cost of £70 (IS 80 acquisition # 1897) of one of the two important *jali*, the one with 3 trees and 4 palms. It was described as a balsa teak copy of an arched window, from the Sidi Sayid mosque. Unfortunately, the documentation also records that it was 'de-accessioned' in 1949, probably destroyed following war damage. The museum also used to have plaster copies of several *jali*, that were made in the nineteenth century, but these were similarly disposed of in 1939 and 1949. It seems reasonable to suppose that the second wooden copy said to be in New York was a life-size copy of the other screen, with a single tree and palm, but the Metropolitan Museum in New York does not have it, and was unable to locate any record of its present-day whereabouts.

<sup>74</sup> (See cover photographs). It was mentioned that, in the time of Congress power, silver reproductions of the *jali* used to be given by the Gujarat government to important visitors: the Hindu-oriented BJP is said to shun this symbol because of its association with a mosque. Silver reproductions of the *jali* mounted in painted wood, of rather doubtful quality compared to their pricetags, are quite widely available in jewellery shops in Ahmedabad. It is reported that, on request at the GPO, letters can be stamped with a special *jali* cancellation mark.



originality of the designs when compared to the contemporary styles that prevailed in the region.<sup>75</sup>

There is a small inscribed stone plaque set in a wall of the Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* that gives a brief historical description, in both English and Hindi:

Sidi Saeed Mosque. C.A.D. 1572

This mosque was built by one Sidi Saeed, an Abyssinian in the service of Rumi Khan the second son of Khudavand Khan Khwaja Safar Salmani, the Governor of Surat during the tenth Gujarat Sultan Mahmud Shah (1537 – 1553). Later Sidi Saeed joined the personal retinue of Bilal Jha Jhar Khan the famous Abyssinian General in the army of the last Sultan of Gujarat. He was a learned man with a valuable library.<sup>76</sup> He died in 1576 and his tomb lies near the north wall of the compound.

The same text is repeated on a painted sign that hangs by Sidi Saiyad's *dargah*. At least there is a mention of 'Abyssinian', though the significance of this will almost certainly be lost on visitors, most of whom are unaware that this old name refers to a region in present-day Ethiopia. There is only a small painted sign at the mosque of Sidi Bashir which makes no indication of the Sidi's heritage:

Sidi Bashir Minars

These two lofty minars with principal archway formed part of the original mosque which was completely damaged during the upheaval of (1755 AD). These exquisitely carved minarets are said to have been built by Sidi Bashir who is said to be a famous architect<sup>77</sup> in the reign of Sultan Mahmud Shah I (1458 – 1511 AD). These minars are world famous for their shaking property which is entirely due to impulsive vibrations conducted through the perfect plan of the plinth.

Surprisingly, even those who know about the Sidi community often fail to make the obvious connection with the names of Sidi Saiyad and Sidi Bashir.

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<sup>75</sup> There may be some clues in the plants depicted in the *jali* screens: unfortunately, the stone carving does not provide sufficient detail for botanical identification. According to botanists, the only feature that can be confidently identified are the palms: these are definitely a *Phoenix* species, but could equally be the native Indian wild date palm (*P. sylvestris*), or the actual date palm (*P. dactylifera*) which is mainly African, but planted sporadically in Gujarat. It may be noted however that dates are remembered by Muslims as a favourite of the Prophet Mohammed (the food with which he broke his fast), and are often the first food eaten when breaking the fast of Ramadan.

<sup>76</sup> One wonders what became of his library.

The Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* has been maintained since 1910 by the Sunni Muslim Waqf Committee, which is also responsible for the upkeep of some twenty-seven *masjid* and several *dargah* in the city, including the *Jumma Masjid*. The Committee uses an image of the famous *jali* on its letterhead, as does the prestigious Indian Institute of Management (know as 'IIM') located in Ahmedabad. It is perhaps an irony that the Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* is now in regular use by the *tabliq jamaat*: these are Muslims who believe only in Allah, and not even in the Prophets, and are therefore set against the celebration of *pir* like the Sidis' Bava Gor.

Perhaps Sidis can set about reclaiming these symbols of their heritage, as one way to raise their status in Gujarat and elsewhere in India. For a start, these famous monuments, which are such important tourist attractions, could be signposted with a proper indication of their African heritage. The site of the Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* must once have been very peaceful, but in present-day Ahmedabad this celebrated mosque is sadly stranded in a square that is surrounded on all sides by the continuous roar of traffic that also produces an abominable level of noxious fumes. Would-be visitors have to risk their lives just to cross the road. If the area was turned into a pedestrian precinct, it is hard to imagine where such a volume of traffic could be displaced, but perhaps that is something the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation could be persuaded to start planning now.

Sidi Saiyad is a historical hero of whom the Sidis can be proud, and not only for bequeathing such a valuable asset to the Gujarat tourist industry: according to Nadvi (1955: 69), he was generous with his wealth, building homes for poor people, and also maintaining a *langur*<sup>78</sup> serving food to large numbers of the poor.

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<sup>77</sup> According to Z.A. Desai, this sign is wrong in asserting that Sidi Bashir was the architect; as noted earlier, the Sidis themselves remember Sidi Sarang as the architect.

<sup>78</sup> A community dining hall, which might be translated as 'soup kitchen'.

## Conclusion

It is known that Sidis have been in the region of Gujarat for many hundreds of years, with new immigrants arriving from diverse African locations over the passage of time. The majority are thought to have been transported to India as slaves in an easterly slave trade, controlled mainly by Arabs, that long predated the better known Atlantic slave trade - existing for centuries before European powers even knew to navigate the Indian Ocean - and continued even into the early twentieth century. It is remarkable that such a coherent Sidi cultural identity seems to have emerged out of such geographically and temporally diverse origins.

The Sidis in Gujarat are nearly all Sunni Muslim in faith: Muslims in general undoubtedly suffer considerable discrimination in Gujarat. It is difficult to assess whether Sidis encounter a different degree or kind of discrimination from that experienced by other Muslims. The possibility of some kind of affirmative action to give Muslims a share of benefits in line with their proportion of the population seems a remote possibility in the current political climate. In this respect, it is interesting that the listing of some Sidis (only those in parts of Saurashtra) as Scheduled Tribe represents the only case in Gujarat of a Muslim group with Scheduled Tribe status. Some of these Sidis have further been designated as a 'Primitive' group, but curiously, at least according to the available government statistical evidence, their situation did not really match the stated criteria by which this decision was said to have been made.

The increasing divisions in Indian society between rich and poor are probably being reproduced in microcosm among the Sidis, with a few making significant progress, while the majority remain very poor. Scheduled Tribe designation clearly brings tangible benefits to Sidis in Saurashtra, if the desire of other Sidis to be included is any indication. On the balance of arguments, it seems entirely reasonable for the Sidis to be considered as a single group for the purposes of recognition as a Scheduled Tribe. However, the political sensitivity of adjusting the list of Scheduled Tribes, last modified in 1976, could be the most formidable obstacle to achieving this. In the meantime, 'liberalisation' of the Indian economy could lead to extensive privatisation

of government enterprises, with the result that, short of reservation being imposed on the private sector, ST status will make less difference to employment prospects.

There seems to be something of a myth that Sidis have not intermarried with (other) Indians. Instead, one might reasonably speculate that there is a considerable portion of the Gujarat population with some African ancestry in the not-so-distant past. For a minor but significant proportion of Sidis, it would be difficult to distinguish them in appearance from other Indians. Understanding the socially-constructed positions of Sidis in Indian society -- what it means to be African black in India, and what (if any) adverse discrimination they suffer in the present -- is complicated by this diversity.

Public misconceptions about the Sidis could begin to be addressed if some attempt were made to provide sensible information about them: a starting point would be for government authorised school textbooks to be updated so that the minimal information they contain on Sidis is at least more accurate and informative. Another simple measure would be to put better signs on outstanding historical monuments like the Sidi Saiyad *Masjid* and Sidi Bashir *Masjid*, clearly identifying the African heritage of their builders.

The Sports Authority of India programme to train Sidi athletes offers a small but tangible hope of eventually producing a Sidi who could become an Indian international sports champion. Meanwhile, Sidi Saiyad could be promoted as an already existing historical hero, for his good works, and for providing Gujarat with an important tourist attraction. As a symbol, the Sidi Saiyad *jali* surely belongs to the Sidis.

**Appendix 1(a): Census of Sidi Tribe, 1991 \***  
**Breakdown by taluka villages for Junagadh District**

	village	households	male	female	total
Talala taluka	Talala	181	543	533	1076
	Jambur	204	538	520	1058
	Madhpur	65	167	152	319
	Javantri	69	159	143	302
	Sirvan	57	124	125	249
	Chitravad	30	76	74	150
	Gundaram	17	57	56	113
	Surva	28	78	66	144
	Moruka	30	81	78	159
	Rashulpura	18	37	32	69
	Galiavad	24	62	59	121
	Sangodra	7	18	17	35
	Barvav	10	25	20	45
	Sasan	21	52	43	95
	Vadana	18	51	47	98
	Vithalpur	16	45	39	84
Bhalchhel	1	3	2	5	
Hadamtiya	27	94	75	169	
Vadva	29	72	66	138	
	total	852	2282	2147	4429
Veraval taluka	Veraval	40	105	115	220
	Bharana	25	84	73	157
	Madar	14	71	54	125
	total	79	260	242	502
Mangrol taluka	Mangrol	6	19	16	35
Una taluka	Una	45	129	119	248
	Khilavad	12	69	65	132
	Thordi	28	72	86	158
	Bhakha	5	19	19	38
	total	90	289	289	576
Junagadh taluka	Junagadh	40	155	123	278
	Bilkha	4	9	8	17
	total	44	164	131	295
Mendarda taluka	Mendarda	8	30	29	59
Maliya taluka	Achrapur	6	22	20	42
Porbandar taluka	Porbandar	30	89	80	169
<b>Junagadh District Total</b>		<b>1115</b>	<b>3155</b>	<b>2954</b>	<b>6107</b>

\* Figures provided by the Tribal Development Group, Old Sechiwala, Gandhinagar

**Appendix 1(b): Census of Sidi Tribe, 2000 \***  
**Breakdown by taluka villages for Junagadh District**

	village	male	female	total
Talala taluka	Talala	484	478	962
	Jambur	633	605	1238
	Madhpur	205	211	416
	Javantri	185	153	338
	Sirvan	139	128	267
	Chitavad	81	73	154
	Gundaram	73	68	141
	Surva	85	78	163
	Moruka	94	78	172
	Rashulpura	39	41	80
	Galiavad	83	64	147
	Sangodra	30	26	56
	Barvav	28	35	63
	Sasan	54	71	125
	Vadana	37	39	76
	Vithalpur	34	39	73
	Bhalchhel	4	3	7
	Hadamtiya	88	91	179
	Vadva	80	116	196
		total	2456	2397
Veraval taluka	Veraval	90	114	204
	Bharana	47	51	98
	Madar	59	42	101
	total	196	207	403
Mangrol taluka	Mangrol	25	22	47
Una taluka	Una	72	77	149
	Khilavad	37	33	70
	Thordi	72	74	146
	Bhakha	8	8	16
	total	189	192	381
Junagadh taluka	Junagadh	141	142	283
	Bilkha	4	5	9
	total	145	147	292
Mendarda taluka	Mendarda	44	42	86
Maliya taluka	Achrapur			
Porbandar taluka	Porbandar	97	84	181
<b>Junagadh District Total</b>		<b>3152</b>	<b>3091</b>	<b>6243</b>

\* Data provided by the Tribal Research & Training Institute, Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad. Information on numbers of households, and for Maliya taluka, was unavailable at time of visit (cf. data for 1991). Since 1998, Porbandar has been separated to form a new district of its own, but the numbers are included here for convenience.

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