

Cultural Hybridity and Religious Practices among the Siddi Community in India

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ABSTRACT

The Siddi community in India represents one of the most distinct African diasporic populations in South Asia, with a historical presence shaped by migration, trade, slavery, and cultural interaction across centuries. Despite their long settlement in India, the Siddis have preserved elements of their African heritage simultaneously adapting to diverse Indian social and cultural environments. This process has produced a unique form of cultural hybridity reflected in their everyday social and religious practices. The present study analyzes cultural hybridity among the Siddis in India within the broader framework of the African Indian diaspora. The study examines hybrid cultural identity among the Siddis and how their cultural and religious practices have transformed through continuous interaction with Indian society. It analyzes how African and Indian cultural elements are negotiated and integrated in everyday social life. Using a qualitative approach based on existing literature on diaspora and identity, it focuses on rituals, music, language, festivals, and religious traditions. It argues that Siddi identity is dynamic and shaped by adaptation, continuity, and negotiation, contributing to broader discussions on diaspora, hybridity, identity formation, and multicultural coexistence in South Asia. The findings show that Siddi cultural hybridity is shaped by long term interaction between African heritage and Indian society. Cultural and religious practices have transformed through religious conversion, language shift, and institutional integration retaining African elements in music, dance, rituals, and oral traditions. Goma and Dhamal performances, along with Yellamma worship, reflect this synthesis. African and Indian elements are continuously negotiated in daily life, producing a dynamic Afro Indian identity that balances adaptation, preservation, and identity assertion.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian diaspora of Africans is considered as a relatively untapped field in South Asian social and cultural history. The Siddi community among others within the African-descended people in India is distinguished due to the historically long presence in several areas including Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana, as well as Hyderabad. Historical sources note that Africans appeared on the territory of the Indian subcontinent via several factors from the 7th to the 17th centuries such as Arab trade contacts, maritime contact, military recruitment, and Indian Ocean slave trade (Oka & Kusimba, 2008). As a result, the community members took different socio-political positions including those of soldiers, sailors, officials, bodyguards, and rulers under various Indian kingdoms and Deccan Sultanates (Khader, 2017). An example of a remarkable person of this community was the Ethiopian-born Malik Ambar who turned out to be an influential military general and a political figure in the state of Ahmadnagar in the beginning of the 17th century (Péquignot, 2023). However, despite their historical role, the members of the Siddi community encountered marginalization and social exclusion throughout the colonial and postcolonial times (Athyal, 2019).

The longstanding relationship between Africans and Indians has created a unique cultural identity amongst the Siddis. Despite generations of settling and becoming part of the surrounding society, a number of aspects from the cultural heritage of African descendants are still present in their culture through music, dances, storytelling, rituals, and social practices (Obeng, 2011). Many Siddis belong to Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity at once, remnants of African spiritual and cultural beliefs remain prevalent (Das, 2006). Thus, the cultural identity of the group represents a blend of influences from African and Indian cultures, which has emerged through migration, acculturation, and identity negotiation (Singh, 2015). Siddis' history and migration have received much scholarly attention; there remains an insufficient amount of studies dedicated to their cultural hybridity, cultural integration, regional differences, and youth identities (Hofbauer, 2025). Migration and marginalization have been the major focus areas in academic research, whereas the processes of changing cultural and religious beliefs have rarely been discussed (Singh, 2015). There is a definite need for a detailed discussion of the dynamics of cultural and religious integration amongst Siddis in India.

Problem statement

The Siddis of India are another group that constitutes an important diasporic population of Africa. This is because the Siddi population's culture has developed continuously due to their interaction with the Indian culture for many years now. Even though the population has rich history and culture, it remains underrepresented in the discourse on diaspora and culture in India. Most of the research on Siddis has focused on issues such as their migration story, racial identity, discrimination, and marginalization. Few researchers have studied how the Siddis adopted Indian culture still maintaining their African culture at the same time. Consequently, not enough is known about how Africans and Indians interact in the cultural and religious sphere of the Siddis. There seems to be a problem in the lack of knowledge about the ways in which the African traditions have changed, mixed, or even remained the same after interacting with the local traditions of Indians. There is a dearth of research on how the Siddis have negotiated issues related to identity and belonging in the larger context of the African Indian diaspora. The lack of such literature calls for a research on the topic of cultural hybridity of the Siddis in India. The current study is conducted with an intention to understand cultural hybridity of the Siddis through the analysis of their social life, involving the amalgamation of both African and Indian culture and religion.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative research approach within a historical and analytical framework to examine cultural hybridity among the Siddis in India as part of the broader African Indian diaspora. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data, including books, journal articles, historical records, government reports, ethnographic studies, and published academic literature related to diaspora, identity, culture, and the Siddi community in India. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of cultural practices, identity formation, religious traditions, and processes of social interaction and adaptation rather than quantitative measurement. The study further employs both historical and analytical methods to trace the historical emergence of the Siddi community in India and to interpret the evolving nature of their socio-cultural life over time. The historical method is used to contextualize their origins, migration patterns, and long-term settlement within different regions of India, the analytical method is applied to examine the interaction between

African and Indian cultural elements in shaping their lived experiences. Particular attention is given to oral traditions, rituals, music, festivals, and religious practices that demonstrate cultural continuity as well as transformation across generations. Through thematic analysis of existing literature, the study explores processes of cultural negotiation, preservation, and hybridity among the Siddis in India.

Objectives

1. To examine the nature of cultural hybridity among the Siddis in India within the context of the African Indian diaspora.
2. To explore the transformation of cultural and religious practices among the Siddis through interaction with Indian society.
3. To analyze how African and Indian cultural elements are negotiated and integrated within the social life of the Siddi community.

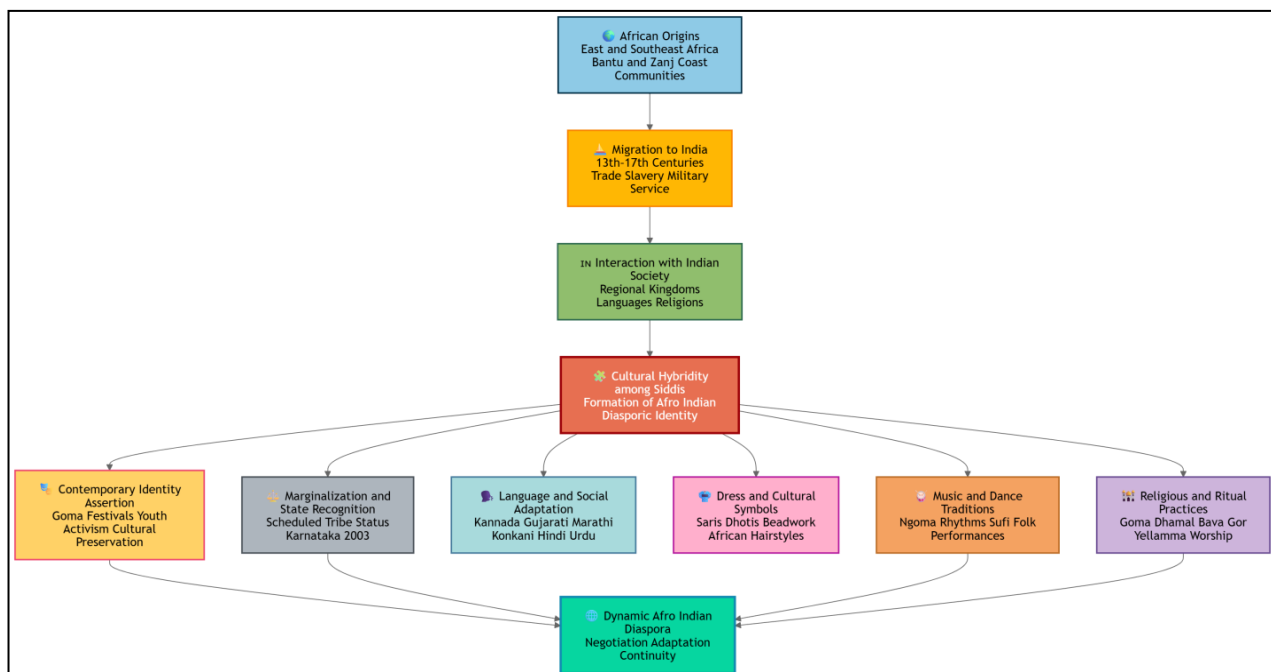
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Hybridity among the Siddis in India

The phenomenon of cultural hybridity involving the Siddis in India is characterized by the

integration of African heritage culture with other diverse Indian religions, languages, and customs, thus developing a unique Afro Indian diaspora identity (Singh, 2015). It should be mentioned that the approximate number of the Siddis in India is around 150,000 individuals who are predominantly located in the states like Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu (Karmwar, 2018). It is well known that the existence of the Siddis in India can be traced back to between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries based on maritime trade, slavery, military participation, and commerce by the Arabs, Portuguese, and Indians (Oka & Kusimba, 2008). The majority of Siddis claim that their origin is from Bantu speaking groups in east and Southeast Africa, especially those of Zanj coast (Yimene, 2004). After many years of interaction with the indigenous Indians, a new socio-cultural identity evolved among the Siddis, which maintained elements of African culture as part of their lifestyle (Péquignot, 2023). The Figure 1 below describes how the combination of all elements mentioned above resulted in the creation of an Afro Indian diasporic identity for the Siddis (Khader, 2017).

Figure 1. Process of Cultural Hybridity and Afro Indian Identity Formation among the Siddis in India



A prominent sign of cultural hybridity amongst the Siddis can be noticed in their religious and ritual practices (Basu, 1993). Siddis are now segregated into various religious groups such as Muslim, Hindu, and Christians, some of their common ritual practices still retain traces of their African heritage (Das, 2006). For instance, for Siddis who follow Islam in Gujarat, the Goma or Dhamal

practice, in honor of the saint Bava Gor, is a unique combination of spirit-possession practices, drumming, and dancing that merge with traditional Gujarati rituals and devotion to saints (Obeng, 2011). These practices are compared with the Ngoma tradition of Africa owing to their focus on music and community participation (Yimene, 2007). The Siddis residing in the regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra

engage in traditional religious rituals revolving around the worship of Yellamma or Renuka, who is one of the most widely venerated goddesses in the Deccan region (Hofbauer, 2025). These rituals have been undertaken through unique drumming techniques with an African touch to them (Obeng, 2009).

Music and dance illustrate another dimension of cultural hybridity exhibited by the Siddis in India (Drewal, 2013). In Goma musical performances in Gujarat, for example, there are complex percussion rhythms, dance sequences, and call-and-response vocals that seem similar to those of the East African style but combine influences of the Gujarati, Marathi, and Sufi musical traditions at the same time (Jackson, 2023). The term "Goma" itself is said to originate from the Swahili language where it means drum, music, and dance (Singh, 2015). In the states of Karnataka and Goa, traditional music practices of the Siddis still integrate local Konkani and Kannada folk traditions, maintaining the rhythms and rituals from their African culture (Karmwar, 2018). The performances of Siddi youths in government-sponsored cultural events and shows reveal how African culture can be redefined in an Indian national context (Reddy, 2024).

The language practices and customs in Siddi culture also involve cultural negotiations and adaptations (Shaikh & Kazi, 2014). The current Siddi populations speak regional Indian languages like Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani, Hindi, or Urdu as a result of their integration into the local social settings (Chakraborty, 2024). Nevertheless, vestiges of African language terms have survived in ritual performances, music, and naming conventions in particular groups (Yimene, 2007). The dress codes in Siddi culture are similar to the Indian region's dress codes, like saris, dhotis, lungis, and other local dresses, but certain forms of decoration, hairdo, and colors maintain their African descent (Almeida & Obeng, 2023). As a social group, the Siddis have traditionally been marginalized in Indian society and have found themselves in economically deprived and socially isolated situations (Athyal, 2019). Due to their vulnerable socio economic conditions and different cultural background, the Siddis were awarded the Scheduled Tribe status by the Government of Karnataka in 2003 (Kumar & Dubey, 2024).

Cultural hybridity in the Siddi community has become another form of political awareness and identity formation (Shroff, 2022). There have been attempts by cultural associations and other

organizations in Karnataka, Gujarat, and Maharashtra to safeguard oral traditions, organize Goma festivals, and create awareness regarding the rich African culture present in India (Shroff & Mehta, 2023). The educated generation within the Siddi community is trying to shape its identity through music, performance, and activism as more than just a marginalized tribe but a significant African diaspora in South Asia (Purohit, 2025). At the same time, urbanization, migration, intercommunity contact, and popular culture have brought about new forms of hybridization in the case of young Siddis (Binoy, 2025). Music styles and cultural practices in areas like Hyderabad, for instance, integrate elements of African rhythms along with Deccani music genres and Indian popular music. Hence, cultural hybridity in the case of Siddis is a continuous process, one that has been driven by their historical migratory pattern, as well as identity negotiation and cultural continuity. (Reddy, 2024).

Transformation of Siddi Cultural and Religious Practices

There have been notable changes to the culture and religion of the Siddis living in India due to their constant interactions with Indian society retaining aspects of their African cultural background (Singh, 2015). This process of change includes linguistic assimilation, religious conversion, and political participation in India (Shaikh & Kazi, 2014). As per current estimates, the number of Siddis living in India lies within the range of 270,000 and 350,000 and is concentrated in Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Telangana, and Hyderabad (Karmwar, 2018). Within Karnataka, the majority of the Siddis live in districts like Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, and Belagavi where they traditionally resided in forest areas and plantations (Reddy, 2021). The categorization of the Siddi Community as a Scheduled Tribe Community by the Government of Karnataka via amendments made in 2019 gave them reservation and various other benefits, including those in the educational and employment sectors (Kumar & Dubey, 2024). In the same vein, the recognition of the Siddis as a tribal community in Gujarat also has helped in giving them a strong institutional presence in India (Khader, 2023).

The religious transition is among the major aspects of culture change in the Siddi community (Das, 2006). Despite the fact that some religious practices that reflected African influence were present in the community, interactions with local Indian religions led to changes in their religious

identity in various areas (Obeng, 2009). In Gujarat, most members of the Siddi community are Muslims and follow religious practices involving the devotion to Bava Gor, the Sufi saint who was an African (Basu, 1993). However, the Siddis from Karnataka and Maharashtra exhibit a larger variety in their religious traditions as most of them are Hindus or Christians because of the local Indian religion temple

system and missions (Hofbauer, 2025). According to surveys carried out in Karnataka in 2017, about 43 to 45 percent of the Siddis were found to be Hindus, nearly 40 to 42 percent Muslims, and 12 to 15 percent Christians (Yimene, 2004). Such instances depict the manner in which local Indian religion affected the changes in beliefs held by the Siddis, but African rituals could still be retained.

Figure 2 Transformation of Siddi Cultural and Religious Practices in India

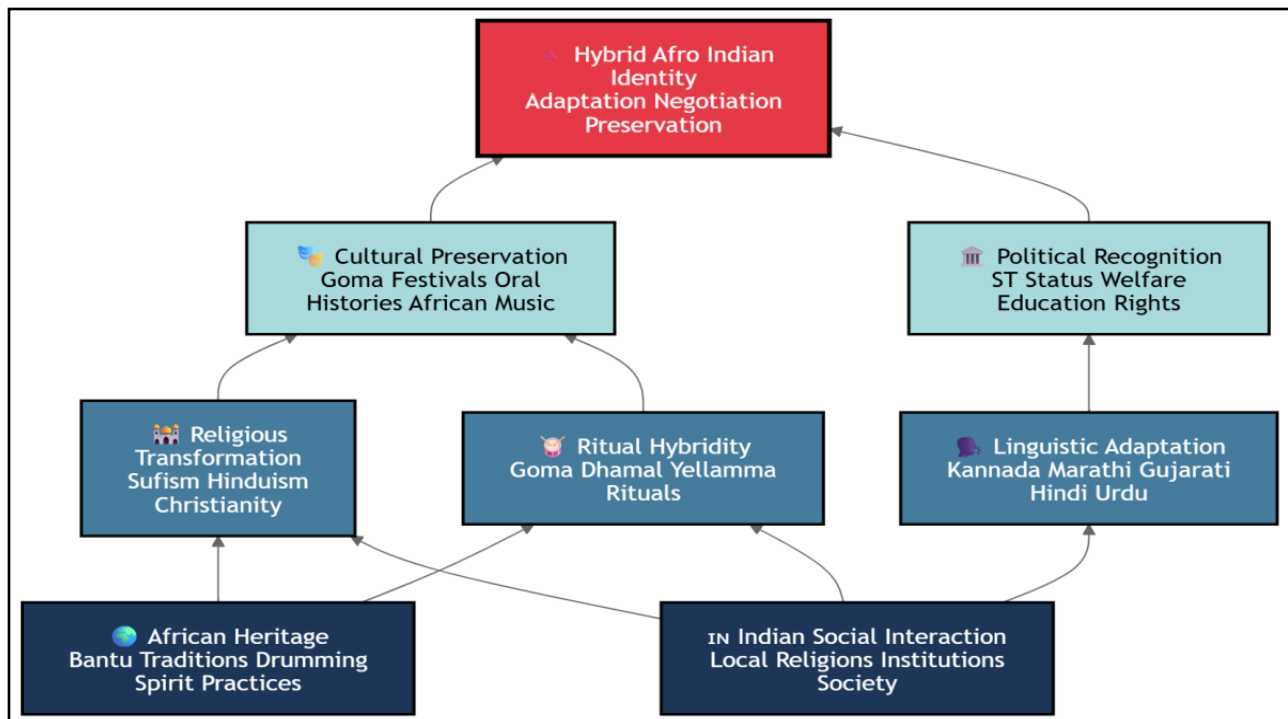


Figure 2 shows the pyramid model of the process of the transformation of Siddi cultural and religious identity in India. The illustration clearly shows that the base of Siddi cultural and religious identity rests on the foundation of an African background and constant engagement with Indian culture. Both of these factors led to the transformation in religion, rituals, and language of Siddis (Oka & Kusimba, 2008). The middle layers of the pyramid show the development of initiatives of cultural and political recognition, including the Scheduled Tribe status, welfare programs, and cultural movements (Pequignot, 2023). Finally, the top of the pyramid shows the development of a unique hybrid identity of Afro Indians through adaptation, negotiation, and selective cultural retention (Sharma, 2008). Thus, from the figure provided above, it can be stated that the process of transformation within the community of the Siddis does not represent complete assimilation but implies dynamic interaction between African tradition and Indian social influence. Religious hybridity occurs

during ritual performance, spirit possession, and ceremonies (Obeng, 2011).

In Karnataka, many members of the Siddi community belonging to Hinduism or Christianity take part in rituals associated with worshipping the local deity called Yellamma or Renuka (Chakraborty, 1994). During the ceremony, there takes place drumming, dancing in trance, and possession of the dancers by spirits combined with African traditions and Deccani regional folk tradition (Drewal, 2013). Recent ethnography states that young Siddis acquire their ritual knowledge through Hindu temples and other religious associations and not through elder Siddis (Shroff, 2022). In this regard, performances in honor of Bava Gor that incorporate drumming and dancing of an African type performed by Siddi Muslims in Gujarat continue to integrate elements of Sufism as well as culture from Gujarat (Jackson, 2023). As a result of this process, these rituals, which originally took place in rural shrines, were gradually adapted for performances during urban cultural festivals and

other state-sponsored occasions, where these performances became an integral part of Sufi culture in India (Yimene, 2007).

Transformation linguistically and socially is yet another example of how the impact of the Indian society has played its role in affecting Siddi culture (Chakraborty, 2024). Traditional methods of African inspired speech and language use have become rare in Siddi communities after decades of assimilation into local Indian societies (Yimene, 2015). Most Siddi people today either speak Kannada, Marathi, Konkani, Gujarati, Hindi, and/or Urdu depending on where they live (Karmwar, 2018). Siddi youth in the region of Karnataka, more than 70% speak the languages of India in their day to day lives, a minority knows some words used in their rituals from an African origin (Reddy, 2024). Siddis have gone from having large family systems to small nuclear families, mostly because of city living and wage work in plantations (Bharucha, 2007). The increased levels of literacy and education among the Siddis, especially in Gujarat and Karnataka, illustrate how the community is becoming part of mainstream Indian society (Rajguru & Ashmore, 2016).

On the other hand, there has been interaction between the Siddis and Indians; it has not led to full cultural assimilation (Athyal, 2019). The fact is that many members of the community continue to practice aspects of the African culture as part of their expression of identity and heritage (Purohit, 2025). Organizations in the community have begun organizing Goma festivals, conducting oral history projects, preserving traditional forms of music, and advocating for educational and land rights, taking advantage of the constitutional provisions of India (Shroff & Mehta, 2023). Many urban-based Siddi activists in places like Bengaluru and Hyderabad are utilizing their legal status, performing arts, and discourse in order to reshape their identity as an African Indian diasporic community (Mallik, 2023). Therefore, the transformation of Siddi cultural and religious practices reflects a dynamic process of adaptation, negotiation, and selective preservation in which African heritage and Indian socio cultural influences coexist within a continuously evolving hybrid identity (Binoy, 2025).

Negotiation of African and Indian Cultural Elements within Siddi Social Life

The incorporation of both African and Indian cultural elements into the lifestyle of the Siddis is accomplished through a process of ongoing adaptation, selective preservation, and reinterpretation of culture rather than through a mere

fusion of two different traditions (Singh, 2015). Throughout their residence in India for several generations, the Siddis learned to adapt the regional languages and social institutions preserving crucial elements of African culture through music, rituals, storytelling, and memories (Péquignot, 2023). As a result, a distinctive identity of Afro Indians was formed by the presence of their African roots combined with their social existence in an Indian environment (Khader, 2023). In regions like Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Hyderabad, the Siddis not only become part of the Indian social fabric but also manage to keep their African origin alive by participating in various celebrations, dances, music events, and maintaining family ties (Karmwar, 2018).

The interaction between culture from Africa and India can be clearly observed through the dynamics of social organization and kinship relations (Chakraborty, 1994). In rural Karnataka, most families from the Siddi community retain their close social relationships among themselves, which is reminiscent of the social solidarity and cooperation seen in African communities (Obeng, 2014). Cooperation in agricultural activities, plantation labor, and other collective social activities is consistent with previous practices of collective social organization (Reddy, 2021). But today, these identities operate within agrarian Indian societies characterized by patterns of land ownership, caste-based village economies, and government-controlled labor relations (Shaikh & Kazi, 2014). Urban areas, such as Hyderabad and Bengaluru, have seen increased contact between the Siddis and other communities through migration, schooling, and marriage (Almeida & Obeng, 2023). With increasing exposure to larger Indian society via schooling, work, and urban communities, young Siddis are adopting more flexible identity affiliations (Rajguru & Ashmore, 2016).

The rituals continue to be the most dominant places of cultural negotiation and integration for the Siddis (Das, 2006). Religious performances of Siddis in Karnataka and Gujarat include African-inspired music, spirit possessions, dancing, and chanting that also involve Indian religions like that of the Sufi saints, local gods, and folk religion practices (Basu, 1993). The Goma and Ngoma music played by the Siddis during their rituals clearly show an influence from Africa being practiced through Indian Sufi and Hindu religious traditions (Jackson, 2023). The ritual performances performed in honor of Bava Gor in Gujarat and those involving Yellamma in Karnataka show the way in which the rituals performed by

Africans have been incorporated into the Indian context without completely discarding the African symbolic meaning (Dey, 2022). The African cosmological principles continue to thrive within the Indian religious space by means of oral tradition, ancestral symbolism, trances, and communal participation (Obeng, 2009).

Similarly, language, dressing, and body language too are indicative of cultural integration and identity (Yimene, 2004). The Siddis living in contemporary India use regional Indian languages like Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani, Hindi, or Urdu due to their strong integration within the local linguistic environment (Yimene, 2015). However, even in these contexts, there is an underlying element of African influence found in chanting, family relationships, songs, and language. Likewise, clothing of the Siddis is very similar to other types of Indian dresses like sari, dhoti, and other traditional Indian clothes (Singh, 2015). However, certain aspects such as beadwork, hairstyle, body ornaments, and costumes for performing have been retained by the Siddis as symbols representing their African heritage (Drewal, 2013). With increasing cultural tourism projects and heritage preservation activities in the state of Karnataka, the music and dance of the Siddis are portrayed as Afro-Indian culture, showing that cultural signifiers now deliberately represent both African and Indian heritage.

Siddi hybrid identity is negotiated via interaction with state institutions, welfare schemes, cultural institutions, and community activism (Athyal, 2019). Leaders among Siddi communities make conscious efforts to invoke their identity as African diaspora as well as their Scheduled Tribe status to claim social justice, educational, land rights, and other benefits within the state apparatuses of Karnataka and Gujarat (Kumar & Dubey, 2024). Cultural organizations formed by young members of the community now actively blend traditional African-inspired drum beats with various types of Indian music such as Bollywood, Sufi, and Deccani music (Reddy, 2024). All this proves that hybrid culture of the Siddis community is not only a historical result but a continuous and dynamic process through which certain African and Indian culture is selected, modified, and reshaped in light of current socio-political and economic contexts

CONCLUSION

The Siddi community in India represents one of the most distinctive yet understudied African diasporic communities in South Asia whose cultural identity has evolved through centuries of migration,

interaction, and adaptation within Indian society. Not only were they geographically displaced from their homeland in the areas of East and Southeast Africa into the Indian subcontinent, but the process gave birth to a distinct form of Afro-Indian culture, which was continuously negotiated as a combination of their African background and the socio-cultural traditions of India. The issue of cultural hybridity among the Siddis is a result of the presence of both African and Indian cultural influences. Hybridity of the Siddi culture is a complex phenomenon characterized by a historical development of migration, adaptation, interaction, and identity politics in the context of the larger diasporic African Indian experience. The Siddis have managed to preserve crucial aspects of their culture simultaneously adapting to the changing socio-cultural and religious landscape of India over many centuries. It has been because of this fusion of African and Indian cultures that the identity of the Afro Indian diaspora emerged, which cannot be explained in isolation from cultural barriers and boundaries.

The religious and cultural aspects of Siddi culture have seen many changes over time as a consequence of its constant interaction with Indian society. Conversion to religion, linguistic adoption, involvement in local ritual traditions, and engagement with Indian socio-institutional systems helped in bringing about changes in the lives of Siddi culture. However, aspects of the African culture like drumming, spirit possession, and memory retention through storytelling, music and dance also survived after adopting new cultural forms. Ritual performances related to Goma, Dhamal, Bava Gor, and Yellamma all point towards this aspect of cultural interaction between African and Indian religions. Hybridity in the case of the Siddi community was never a mere result of acculturation but was always a selective and dynamic process of survival. Through cultural organizations, festivals, oral traditions, and identity based activism, the Siddis continue to preserve and redefine their African heritage within contemporary Indian society. This is because young generations are relying more on cultural performances, education, and political recognition in order to demonstrate that they represent a significant part of the African diasporic community in South Asia. The story of the Siddis demonstrates how such communities can negotiate belonging, tradition, and cultural transformation in a constantly changing world. It also provides insights into issues related to diaspora, hybridity, identity

formation, multiculturalism, and co-existence in India/South Asia.

Limitations of the Study

This study is grounded mostly on secondary information, historical documents, and academic research about the Siddis of India. Thus, it lacks a deeper examination of contemporary cultural practices and identity formations in various Siddi communities through an empirical study conducted in the field. Cultural differences and practices among Siddis in regions like Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Hyderabad could not be analyzed further due to time constraints. The study concentrates on the theme of cultural hybridity and identity formations; economic factors, migrations, and racial discrimination are not considered in the study.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can concentrate more on field-based ethnography and empirical studies among Siddis in India's diverse regions. Comparatively, a regional approach to studying Siddis, collecting oral histories, and using multi-methods can offer a much better insight into changes in cultural behavior and identity formation. Other topics for future study include gender roles, youth identity formation, urbanization, the use of digital media to construct culture, and the effects of globalization on Afro Indians.

Ethical Consideration

This research is non clinical and does not involve any direct human participation, personal data collection, medical intervention, or experimental procedure; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. All interpretations, arguments, and

analytical observations presented in the research are the original work of the author. ChatGPT was used only for grammatical correction, language refinement, and preparation of conceptual figures; intellectual ownership and analytical responsibility remain solely with the author. Proper academic integrity and citation practices have been maintained throughout the research.

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Nil

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

Data Availability

The data used in this research are derived from publicly accessible sources and materials available in the public domain. All relevant information supporting the findings of the research is included within the manuscript through proper citation and referencing.

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