

# The African diaspora in India: assimilation, change and cultural survivals

Santosh Kumar Singh

To cite this article: Santosh Kumar Singh (2019): The African diaspora in India: assimilation, change and cultural survivals, *Diaspora Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/09739572.2020.1690208](https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2020.1690208)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2020.1690208>



Published online: 20 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The African diaspora in India: assimilation, change and cultural survivals**, by Purnima Mehta Bhatt, New York, Routledge, 2018, 152 pp., Rs. 7511 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138284869

India and Africa is having close relations since antiquity. Consequently, most of the Indian scholars have studied ties between India and Africa from Indian viewpoints. The author of the book under review has addressed the unexplored and understudied subject of the African Diaspora in India. The author has focused on the African diaspora, especially Sidis, Siddis or Habshis. This book is divided into 12 chapters. Purnima Mehta Bhatt, the author of this book has identified and tracked the trends and patterns of African diaspora in India. The author in its interdisciplinary approach has used anthropology, cultural studies, history, literature, and oral tradition to describe the tale of the African Diaspora in India. This work has diligently provides an investigation of the cultural struggle and survivals of Africans in India. In this process, the book has systematically explored and examined – how the Sidis strived to construct a distinct identity in a multilingual Indian society.

The Africans migrated to India around 2000 years ago, the evidence of which has been found at the various sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation especially at the dockyards of Lothal in Gujarat. During this period, there was an active maritime trade between India and the African continent (8). The Sidis came from their homelands such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Zanzibar, Egypt, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, and Mozambique. Most of the Sidhi community who settled in India came through the Gulf States. During this process, they have lost their original homelands and cultural memory, but they constructed their new identities, preserved their basic culture and survived here in India.

Purnima found that the African Diaspora who settled in Gujarat as slaves or sailors has been referred Habshi or Sidis. In Pakistan, they referred as Shiddi while in Sri Lanka as kafirs. The author underlined that there is no clear consensus among the scholars about the number of Sidis in India. The Sidis who came here prior to the expansion of Islam were assimilated and soaked into the local population particularly with the sailing and seafaring communities. The physical features of Africans especially among certain members of the Kolis, Kanbis and other seafaring communities' are still visible. On the other hand, their different identity is also noticeable in their shady form of speaking Hindi and Bantu languages (53).

The author found that during the seventeenth century, the domestic slavery was widely 'accepted' and existed everywhere – most of the slaves were referred as 'agricultural' slaves. Interestingly, Ethiopian slaves were in great demand by Indo-Muslim rulers 'for their courage, fidelity, and shrewdness; in which they so far excel, as often to rise to posts of great trust and honour, and are made governors of places'. Despite the proclamations and laws passed in the years 1843 and 1860, which imposed severe punishments on those involved in the trade of humans, but Kutchi traders continued with the slave trade because of its profitability. The African slaves in India constituted numerically a small numbers and were sought primarily for their prestige value and loyalty (14). Due to which the author has underlined that there were considerable demand for African slaves in India. The traders from Muscat and Zanzibar brought African slaves and sold them in Bombay. The Portuguese imported slaves into India from Mozambique and Zanzibar. Most of these slaves were found in the Portuguese territories of Goa, Diu and Daman on the west coast of India (18). Gujarat continued to dominate

the trade with East Africa throughout the seventeenth century and in the return of its cloth, they imported numerous East African products such as slaves, ivory and gold (20).

Africans have also played an important role in the armies of Gujarat. In 1572, when the Mughals conquered Gujarat, there were around 700 Habshis in the cavalry comprising of 12,000 horsemen in Gujarat. Many Habshis had risen to the position of commanders in the armies and some became wealthy merchants (27). The Sidis provided economic prosperity to the city of Ahmadabad. It was the Sidis who guarded the entrances of the city along with protecting the wealth of the city. Russian traveller, Athanasius Nikitin (1468–1474), travelled India and provided noteworthy information that Dabhol in Ratnagiri district (in present-day Maharashtra) was the meeting place for cultures and people from the west coast of India and Ethiopia (28). The European travellers also noted the African presence in India in their travelogues. Ibn Battuta who extensively travelled all around India in the mid-fourteenth century has also noted their presence. He mentioned that ‘the Habshis are the guarantors of safety, especially in the Indian Ocean; let there be but one of them on a ship and it will be avoided by the Indian pirates’. The nawabs of Junagadh and Radhanpur had a history of recruiting Africans. Because of its geographical location, Gujarat served as the gateway to India for Africans especially East Africa, Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf regions.


Until the independence of India, the Sidis were a mostly forgotten and marginalized community in India. Their participation in the economy and political life has been limited and peripheral. There are some scholars who claim that the Sidis have achieved full socio-cultural integration in India. As a community, Sidis suffer from poverty, lack of education, unemployment and racial discrimination resulting they lacks a unified identity despite sharing cultural practices, namely African spirit cosmologies, reverence for ancestors, distinct musical traditions and dance.

Africans were also associated with the construction of mosques not only in Ahmadabad but also in the other cities Adoni, Aurangabad, Bijapur, Janjira and other cities (74). Malik Ambar (Sidi) also contributed in terms of construction of canals, irrigation networks, schools, and architecture. Malik Ambar played a major role in the construction of the fort at Antur in Aurangabad, with the necessary provision of water supply (76). Along with this, many ‘Sidis’ were hired by the various rulers to serve them as bodyguards and they also protected these rulers from political rivalries and murders. The author has also established the fact that how in this process some Sidis snubbed the opportunity and took the control of political power (89), namely Sidi Ismail (who was appointed prime minister of Radhanpur in 1820), Saifuddin Firuz Shah (1487–1490), Ghiyath-al-Din Barbak Shah and Qutb-al-Din Mahmud Shah, etc.

In the end, I would like to emphasize that the author has eloquently attempted to fill the gap in the Diaspora studies in India especially on African Diaspora. While describing the pitiable conditions of the old African Diaspora in India, the author has highlighted the social, economic, political, cultural, gender, discrimination, etc. aspects of African Diaspora in India makes this book a must-read for Diaspora scholars.

Santosh Kumar Singh

*Department of Political Science, Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, India*

 santoshjnu@hotmail.com

© 2019 Santosh Kumar Singh

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2020.1690208>

