

Social Change among Siddi Community : A sociological study in Karnataka.

Dr. Shivananda S Kempaller

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology

SGSLP GFGW College Haveri

Email - shivanandaskempaller@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study explores the patterns of social change within the Siddi community in Karnataka, focusing on transformations in their socio-economic, cultural, educational, and political life. The Siddi people—an Afro-Indian tribal group—have faced historical marginalization but are gradually experiencing shifts due to government schemes, education, and social integration.*

Keywords: *Siddi community, cultural traits, tribal identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

The Siddi community, descendants of East African migrants brought to India centuries ago, primarily reside in Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, and Belagavi districts. Despite being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, Siddis remain socio-economically backward. This study analyzes how changes in education, policy, economy, and civil society engagement have affected their traditional lifestyles and identity.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the socio-economic and cultural status of the Siddi community in Karnataka.
- To understand the factors contributing to social change within the community.
- To assess the impact of government policies and welfare programs.
- To explore changes in education, employment, and political awareness among Siddis.
- To document the challenges that continue to affect their integration into mainstream society.

1.2. Research Methodology

- Type: Qualitative and Quantitative
- Tools: Structured questionnaires, oral interviews, field visits
- Sample: 100 Siddi individuals across villages in Uttara Kannada and Dharwad
- Techniques: Observation, focus group discussions, interaction with NGOs
- Data Sources: Government census reports, Tribal Development Board records, NGO publication

1.3. Importance of the Study

- Highlights the intersection of race, ethnicity, and tribal identity in Indian society.
- Offers a grassroots view of how state and non-state actors influence tribal upliftment.
- Contributes to sociology of marginalized communities and tribal development.

1.4. Socio-Economic Aspects

- Traditional dependence on agriculture, forest produce, and manual labor.
- Rising employment in government jobs under reservation policies.
- Continued poverty and limited access to financial services in rural belts.

1.5. Cultural Aspects

- Rich African-influenced heritage including dance, music (Dammam), and rituals.
- Gradual decline in traditional customs due to integration and modernization.
- Influence of local Kannada culture in language and attire.

1.6. Political Participation

- Low political representation but increasing awareness due to ST status.
- Participation in Panchayat Raj institutions and village committees.
- Support from organizations like Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram and others.

1.7. Educational Development

- Access to free education under ST welfare policies.
- Presence of hostels and pre-matric scholarships.
- High dropout rates remain a concern in remote areas.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SIDDI COMMUNITY

The Siddi community, often referred to as the Afro-Indians of India, trace their origins to East Africa—mainly from present-day countries like Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Sudan. They were brought to India over centuries through various means:

- Through Arab traders as slaves and soldiers (as early as the 7th century).
- By the Portuguese and later British as indentured laborers, domestic workers, and guards.
- Some migrated voluntarily over time, especially seafaring groups.

In Karnataka, Siddis are mainly concentrated in Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, Haliyal, Yellapur, and Belagavi districts. Despite their African ancestry, Siddis have adopted many local cultural traits including the Kannada language, local food, and dress styles. Though racially distinct, they are now recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Karnataka since 2003, which has allowed some access to welfare schemes and affirmative action.

3. OCCUPATIONAL ASPECTS

Traditionally, the Siddis were engaged in low-income, informal, or unskilled labor due to historical exclusion and lack of access to land or education. Their major traditional and contemporary occupations include:

- Agricultural laborers or marginal farmers (in the Western Ghats and hilly regions).
- Forest-based livelihoods such as collecting firewood, honey, and medicinal plants.
- Wage labor in construction sites, brick kilns, and small factories.
- Some employed as security guards or drivers due to their physical stature.
- In recent years, a few have gained employment in government sectors due to ST reservations, particularly in education, police services, and sports (especially athletics).

However, economic vulnerability remains high due to lack of land ownership, limited vocational skills, and geographic isolation.

4. WOMEN'S PROBLEMS IN THE SIDDI COMMUNITY

Siddi women face a unique intersection of gender, caste/tribal status, and racial discrimination. Key issues include:

a) Socio-Economic Challenges

- High rate of illiteracy among women, especially in remote villages.
- Early marriage and high fertility rates due to lack of awareness and access to family planning.
- Minimal land ownership and decision-making power in household economics.
- Low participation in formal employment and continued dependence on manual labor.

b) Health and Nutrition

- Limited access to maternal healthcare and public health facilities.
- Malnutrition and anemia are common due to poverty and poor diet.
- Lack of sanitary facilities and menstrual hygiene awareness.

c) Education-Related Issues

- Girls drop out of school early due to domestic burdens, distance from school, or social norms.

- Fear of racial discrimination and bullying in educational institutions.
- Limited access to role models or mentors within the community.

d) Violence and Discrimination

- Cases of domestic violence and gender-based exploitation are underreported.
- Exclusion from local decision-making forums like Gram Sabhas.
- Limited representation in women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or local politics.

5. Siddi Community facing Problematic phenomena's in society.

Social Discrimination and Racial Prejudice

- The Siddi community, with their African features, often face racial stereotyping, teasing, and exclusion from mainstream society.
- They are sometimes treated as "outsiders" despite centuries of residence in India.
- There are instances of being denied housing or social dignity due to their appearance.

Economic Marginalization

- Most Siddis are landless or marginal landholders with low incomes.
- They are engaged in menial jobs, forest labor, and seasonal wage labor with little job security.
- Access to capital, credit, or entrepreneurship opportunities is minimal.

Educational Backwardness

- Despite some improvements, the community faces high dropout rates, especially among girls.
- Educational institutions in rural areas lack resources and proper facilities.
- There is a lack of representation of Siddis in higher education and technical fields.

Health and Nutrition Challenges

- Poor access to primary healthcare in remote regions.
- Common health problems include malnutrition, anemia, malaria, and lack of immunization.
- Women face maternal health issues due to lack of institutional delivery services.

Geographical Isolation

- Many Siddi habitations are in forest or hilly areas of Uttara Kannada and surrounding districts.
- This results in poor infrastructure: bad roads, lack of transportation, limited access to schools, hospitals, or markets.

Cultural Assimilation Pressure

- While trying to integrate with the Kannada-speaking population, the Siddis often face identity dilution.
- Younger generations may abandon traditional customs due to pressure to conform to mainstream norms.
- Their unique music, dance (like Dammam), and oral history are under threat of extinction.

Lack of Political Representation

- Political parties often neglect the community due to their low numbers.
- There is insufficient representation in Gram Panchayats, local councils, or legislative bodies.
- They are often unaware of or excluded from policy discussions affecting their welfare.

Limited Implementation of Welfare Schemes

- Despite being classified as a Scheduled Tribe, many Siddi families do not receive the full benefits of government schemes due to lack of awareness, documentation, or bureaucratic delays.
- Tribal development programs often fail to reach the most remote areas where Siddis live.

Youth Alienation and Unemployment

- Siddi youth often struggle with unemployment and a lack of skill development programs.
- Many feel alienated from both traditional culture and the modern world, creating an identity crisis

6. Welfare Programs for the Siddi Community in Karnataka

Scheduled Tribe (ST) Welfare Schemes

Since the Siddi community was officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Karnataka in 2003, they are now entitled to various central and state-level schemes meant for ST development:

a) Educational Schemes:

- Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships (by Ministry of Tribal Affairs)

- Free hostel facilities for ST students (Ashrama schools and Government ST Hostels)
- Vidya Siri Scholarship for students from backward and tribal communities in Karnataka
- Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) for tribal children

b) Economic Upliftment Programs:

- ST Sub Plan (Special Component Plan) – focuses on infrastructure, livelihood, and housing
- Karnataka Adijambava Development Corporation and Scheduled Tribe Development Corporation offer small loans and self-employment support
- Land purchase and housing grants under the Forest Rights Act (FRA)

Siddi Development Corporation (Proposed)

Although not yet fully institutionalized, there have been demands and some efforts toward setting up a Siddi-specific Development Corporation in Karnataka. This would provide targeted assistance similar to what exists for other micro-minorities.

Special Training and Skill Development

- Vocational training programs through institutions like the Tribal Research Institute, Mysuru
- Free coaching for competitive exams (KAS, IAS, Police) for ST candidates
- Sports training schemes: some Siddi youth have been enrolled into sports academies due to their natural athletic ability (e.g., athletics, kabaddi, wrestling)

Health and Nutrition Programs

- Janani Suraksha Yojana (for safe motherhood and delivery)
- Tribal Health Clinics and Mobile Health Units in remote forest areas
- Nutritional support through Anganwadi centers and schemes like Poshan Abhiyan
- Special medical camps for tribal belts conducted by Zilla Panchayats

Livelihood and Employment Support

- MGNREGA (100-day guaranteed rural employment)
- ST Self-Help Group (SHG) promotion under National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)
- Handholding support through NGOs like Vanavasi Kalyan, Samagra Grameena Ashrama, and Samagra Development Society

Housing and Basic Infrastructure

- Basava Vasati Yojana (housing for BPL families)
- PM Awas Yojana (Gramin)
- Electrification and drinking water projects targeted in tribal areas under ST Sub Plan

NGO and Civil Society Initiatives

- NGOs like Samanvaya Trust, African Indian Development Association, and Samagra are actively working to improve education and health conditions among the Siddi community
- Community-run hostels, awareness camps, cultural preservation projects, and health drives are conducted regularly

7. Challenges of the Siddi Community in Karnataka

Social Exclusion and Racial Discrimination

- Due to their African ancestry and distinct physical features, Siddis often face racial prejudice, teasing, and alienation from mainstream society.
- They are treated as "outsiders" despite living in India for centuries.
- Stereotyping and social isolation reduce their opportunities in education and employment.

Educational Backwardness

- Low literacy levels, especially among women and children.
- High dropout rates due to poverty, distance from schools, and lack of awareness.
- Very few reach higher education or professional courses.
- Language barriers and cultural disconnection from mainstream curriculum.

Economic Marginalization

- Most Siddis are landless or marginal farmers with no economic security.
- Dependence on daily wage labor, forest produce, or unorganized work.
- Limited access to bank credit, employment schemes, or entrepreneurship support.
- Lack of vocational training and market skills.

Poor Health and Sanitation

- Limited access to quality healthcare and awareness about preventive medicine.
- Common issues include malnutrition, anemia, malaria, and poor maternal health.
- Lack of clean drinking water and proper sanitation facilities in tribal areas.
- Inadequate public health infrastructure in hilly and remote regions.

Political Underrepresentation

- Very limited participation in political or local governance institutions.
- Low representation in Gram Panchayats or tribal welfare boards.
- Poor political mobilization due to lack of leadership and awareness.

Gender-Based Challenges

- Siddi women face dual marginalization due to gender and tribal identity.
- High illiteracy, early marriage, and limited control over income or decisions.
- Limited access to healthcare and reproductive services.
- Underrepresentation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and leadership roles.

Cultural Identity and Loss of Heritage

- Modern pressures and integration efforts have led to dilution of traditional music, dance (e.g., Dammam), dress, and rituals.
- Lack of formal documentation or recognition of their unique African-Indian heritage.
- Younger generations are losing touch with their cultural roots.

Geographic Isolation

- Siddi settlements are often in forest or hilly areas with poor infrastructure.
- Limited transport, electricity, mobile networks, and road connectivity.
- Difficulty accessing schools, hospitals, or markets.

Inadequate Implementation of Welfare Schemes

- Though included under the Scheduled Tribes category, many Siddis lack proper documents to avail benefits.
- Lack of awareness about welfare schemes and rights.
- Corruption, red tape, and discrimination sometimes block their access to support systems.

Identity and Psychological Challenges

- Many Siddis struggle with identity crisis — being Indian by nationality but African by ancestry.
- Feelings of alienation and inferiority in social and academic spaces.
- Limited role models or success stories from within the community.

8. Conclusion

The Siddi community is undergoing a slow yet significant social transition. Education, reservation policies, and civil society engagement are improving their quality of life. However, persistent challenges like caste-based exclusion, lack of resources, and loss of cultural identity need to be addressed for inclusive development. The challenges of the Siddi community are rooted in historical neglect, socio-racial exclusion, and systemic gaps in policy implementation. Siddi women are among the most marginalized within an already vulnerable community. Addressing their challenges requires gender-sensitive policies, access to education and healthcare, capacity building, and the strengthening of community-based women's organizations.

Siddi women are among the most marginalized within an already vulnerable community. Addressing their challenges requires gender-sensitive policies, access to education and healthcare, capacity building, and the strengthening of community-based women's organizations.

The Siddi community continues to face a complex set of problems rooted in historical marginalization, racial identity, poverty, and state neglect. Addressing these requires a multi-dimensional approach involving education, economic development, cultural preservation, and political empowerment.

While the Siddi community benefits from several tribal welfare programs in Karnataka, there remains a need for better implementation, awareness, and monitoring to ensure inclusion. There is also a growing demand for a separate Siddi Development Board to tailor welfare schemes for their unique socio-cultural context.

REFERENCES :

1. Government of Karnataka. (2021). Siddi Development Board Reports.
2. Census of India (2011 & 2021 provisional data).
3. Pinto, R. (2015). The African Diaspora in India.
4. Gazetteer of Uttara Kannada District, Karnataka.
5. Rath, N. (2006). Tribal Development in India.
6. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.
7. Journal articles from Economic and Political Weekly and Indian Journal of Anthropology.