CHAPTER 8

INDIANS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE

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ALTHOUGH PRIMARY FOCUS ON THE AFRICAN DIASPORA HAS BEEN PLACED ON the slave trade, one should remember that Africans traded voluntarily throughout much of the world long before the slave trade existed. In ancient times they traveled as merchants and sailors, many of whom settled in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Some came as soldiers and remained permanently.[1]

A long history of trade, commerce, and travel connects the African continent and India. Even though Africans have been traveling to India as traders, merchants, soldiers, domestic servants, and slaves from various parts of Africa via different routes, their migrations have not been chronologically systematic, linear, or continuous. Africans in India have been called Habshis, Abyssinians, Sidis, or Kaffirs,[2] but their descendants mostly refer to themselves as Sidi (sometimes spelled Siddi). Communities of Sidis can be found in Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa. My own research is focused on the Sidis of Gujarat, a state on the west coast of India and on Sidis who migrated from Gujarat to Bombay.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Contacts among peoples and migration occurred in two ways in ancient times—trading in goods and migrating voluntarily and trading in peoples and migrating involuntarily. Joseph Harris, a pioneering scholar of the Indian Ocean slave trade, states that

there were Africans who migrated voluntarily before the Omani Arabs and before the Europeans began the slave trade in East Africa. Among these Africans were merchants, traders, and sailors, some of whom intermarried with non-Africans and settled down.

Another historian, Richard Pankhurst, states that with extensive trade between Ethiopia (called Aksum in ancient times) and India, exports from the former "consisted mainly of ivory and rhinoceros horn, but, the Roman writer Pliny says, also included slaves." Consequently, the first Ethiopian slaves could have been brought to India early in the Christian era; however, there is not much documentation available until the early thirteenth century. Pankhurst adds that Ethiopian slaves brought to India were converted to Islam and given Islamic names, which enabled them to assimilate into the Muslim-ruled states of India.

With Islam as a common bond of identity, slaves in those states held trusted positions, serving as palace guards, royal bodyguards, administrative officers, domestic servants, and, most importantly, as soldiers. As a result of their incorporation into royal households, Africans, often called Habshis, exercised power and often became rulers themselves. In this context, some historians note that slavery within the Indian Ocean world could be seen as different from the Atlantic Ocean slave trade, where human beings regarded as property were denied basic rights to freedom and mobility.

Offering a similar argument, historian Richard Eaton points out that Indian rulers used slaves of diverse ethnicities, such as Turks, along with African slaves in the military. For Eaton, the experience of slavery in India "was understood not as a fixed status, but as a particular origin, a particular career, and . . . one's career could evolve as one moved from cadet to commander, or even become an employer of other military slaves; and . . . over time, mutate from a master-slave connection to a patron-client one."

Emphasizing some of the significant features of the slave trade in Asia, Harris states that the East African slave trade undertaken by Arabs, which predated the Atlantic slave trade, was conducted on a smaller scale and was not the lucrative business that it became in West Africa. Dhows that relied on monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean were the main mode of transport, and the number of slaves transported was small—rarely more than two hundred—and "well below the many hundreds transported in European vessels."

Contesting the perspectives on Islam and slavery held by Harris, Eaton, and Pankhurst, however, is the extensive research of scholars such as Michael Gomez and Eve Troutt Powell, who offer a more layered and nuanced representation of the structured social hierarchy within the Islamic societies of the Mediterranean. Gomez quotes several case studies in which the African slave, whether absorbed within the family or defined as a domestic, was often racially and economically constructed as subordinate. Most importantly, Gomez states that although the Qur'an accepted slavery under certain specified circumstances—particularly for those captured in war—and manumission were desired goals, "reality diverged from theory" after the first century of Islam, and slaves were randomly captured "through raids and kidnapping and sold to merchants." Gomez goes on to emphasize some of the brutal conditions under which slavery was practiced in the Islamic world.

SIDIS IN INDIAN HISTORY

It is productive to examine differences in the experience of slavery in the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean by looking at some historical examples of Africans

who ascended to positions of power in India. Several scholars have devoted attention to the career of a famous statesman, Ethiopian-born Malik Ambar (1548–1626), who was sold into slavery in Ethiopia and taken to Baghdad where, recognized as an intelligent youth, he was educated, converted to Islam, and given an Islamic name. Ambar changed hands again and was taken to the Deccan area of India, where he was purchased by the chief minister of the Nizam Shahi sultanate of Ahmadnagar (1496–1636). Ambar entered the minister's service in the 1570s. Eaton states that as "one of a thousand Habshi slaves purchased by the *peshwa* (Chief Minister), himself a Habshi and a former slave . . . Ambar would hardly have stood out in the mosaic of ethnic groups then inhabiting the western Deccan." Ambar assimilated into the culture of the region and, through his keen sense of statecraft, eventually became an important power broker and regent under the Nizam Shahi rulers. Harris and Eaton map the trajectory of Ambar, who as a military commander kept the great Mughal Empire to the north from taking over Nizam Shahi territory. Additionally, Ambar's military forces included other ethnicities such as the sturdy and light-footed Maratha warriors, whose expertise of the regional terrain enabled Ambar to challenge the Mughals in a guerrilla war.

Harris argues that the charismatic Ambar was able to maintain power in the southern region by his astute, multiethnic governing policies. Ambar "granted land to Hindu residents and appointed Brahmins as his principal financial officials and tax collectors. Marathas were also prominent as clerks in the military and civil service. Arabs and Habshis were appointed to key military posts; they also, along with the Persians, were the core of small business."

Among Sidis who attained position and power in Indian history are those who ruled the island of Janjira, off the coast of Bombay (now also known as Mumbai), for more than three centuries. The Sidis of Janjira became an important naval power, since Janjira was a vital entry point in international trade. Sidis controlled this area from 1616 to about 1760, and at different times they kept the British, the Portuguese, the Marathas, and the Mughals wringing their hands in despair at their naval might.

In the seventeenth century, the great Maratha leader Shivaji failed to conquer Janjira despite several attempts, while the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb aligned with the Sidis, enlisting their assistance to protect Muslim pilgrims who were crossing the ocean to go to Mecca. The Mughals also needed naval protection to continue trading operations at their ports such as Surat in Gujarat. The British, Portuguese, and Dutch, too, had to negotiate with the force of the Janjira rulers. Finally in 1733, the British negotiated a treaty of alliance and friendship with the Sidis. However, with the British gaining full control over India after 1857, princely states such as Janjira were allowed to exist but only under British administrative policies and jurisdiction. After Indian independence in 1947, the princely states were dissolved and merged into the unified nation of India. Yet, to this day, in Murud, the mainland across from the island of Janjira, residents still refer to the descendants of the royal Sidis of Janjira as Nawabs, a title held by Muslim rulers.

Contemporary communities of Sidis are not descendants of the royal Sidis. They are thought to be descended from a later period of the slave trade carried on by colonial powers, Arabs, and Gujarati merchants, when slaves were brought to work mostly within princely families and for wealthy merchants. They worked in different capacities as bodyguards, domestic servants, or stable-keepers, and among them were those

who escaped from their masters or who were freed by British interdiction after the abolition of slavery in Britain in the 1830s. The royal Sidis intermarried and merged with the other Muslim elite in India and more or less disappeared, eschewing their identities as Sidis.[16] An exception is the Janjira family that claims Sidi as a royal title. Contemporary communities of Sidis in Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh do not see themselves as linked to the power and prestige of Sidi royalty, caught up as they are today with different economic and social dilemmas and struggles in postindependent India.

Relatively little focused scholarship exists on contemporary Sidi communities of India, although there are many studies that deal with their historical presence.[17] Detailed historical studies of Africans in India begin with Joseph Harris's 1971 book *The African Presence in Asia*; a landmark volume from 1932, *Bombay and the Sidis* by D. R. Banaji is a scholarly forerunner, and Harris quotes Banaji extensively.[18] T. C. Palakshappa's study *Sidis of Karnataka* was published in 1976 soon after Harris's work.[19] Almost two decades after Harris, Indian historian R. R. S. Chauhan documented the rise of the powerful Sidis of Janjira.[20] A year later, scholar Shanti Sadiq Ali (who acknowledges the foundational work of Joseph Harris) published her study on the historical presence of Africans in the southern Deccan region of India.[21] Short studies of Sidis include work by T. B. Naik and G. P. Pandya, Jayanti Patel, and Cyprian Lobo (who later published his work as Kiran Kamal Prasad).[22]

German scholar Helene Basu's pioneering anthropological studies, focusing on contemporary Sidi communities of Gujarat, provide a welcome emphasis on memory and reinvented identities. She undertakes a detailed analysis of Sidi identity and cultural practices in postcolonial India that include rituals, ceremonies, and the creative reenactments of their African past through spirit possession and the sacred *goma* dance.[23] The field of scholarship on Sidis is gaining momentum as more attention is focused on the millennia-old trade and commercial exchange patterns and contemporary hybrid cultures and communities of the Indian Ocean world.[24]

REINVENTED IDENTITIES: BAVA GOR AND THE SIDIS OF GUJARAT

Despite the abolition of slavery by the British, the selling of slaves continued until 1936.[25] As the British continued to patrol the oceans to catch slave ships, the freed Africans were brought to cities such as Surat or Bombay and often left to fend for themselves. Some were employed as police or in the military and some worked as domestic servants in the homes of Hindus, Muslims, and Parsis. Some of the freed Africans and runaways were able to find their way to the shrine of Sidi saint Bava Gor in search of community. The space of Bava Gor's shrine and the land surrounding it belonged to the Rajput Gohil Rajahs, who gave the land to the Sidis as an *inam*, or reward, for their loyalty and services to the royal family. This became a space for reconstructing community. Basu considers the shrine as a site of resistance where runaway slaves bonded as a community by creating "fictive kinship ties" and constructed a Sidi brotherhood of *fakirs* (or spiritual specialists or healers) devoted to their patron saint Bava Gor. By tracing their genealogy to Bava Gor, Sidis positively reinterpreted their racial difference within a caste-defined society, in which "black skin and curly hair [became] sacred signs of . . . their special powers" inherited from the saint.[26]

Similarly, after 1947 and the dissolution of princely states in India, many Sidis lost their positions in royal households but were able to reinvent themselves as *fakirs* by forging connections through Bava Gor and his sister Mai Mishra. Bava Gor thus became a significant catalyst in the creative adaptation by Sidis faced with changing economic circumstances. Additionally, the legend of Bava Gor empowered Sidis by giving them "their rightful place in the history of this region of Gujarat, where the official discourse has no place for them except as a marginalized people."[27]

As a key resource, the space of the shrine is most importantly a place of healing through which the spiritual legacies of Bava Gor and Mai Mishra continue to offer solace and comfort to Sidis and to thousands of pilgrims and devotees even today. Traditionally, the shrine to them was a place for the poor, which included the indigenous people, or *adivasis*, of the area. The latter continue to come to the shrine to seek help with a variety of problems from mental health to fertility and economic concerns. However, today, the original shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat is considered a place of pilgrimage not only for Sidis and poor *adivasis* but also for other Muslim sects, such as Khojas, Memons, and Bohras as well as different religious communities, including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Parsi Zoroastrians.

ECONOMIC STRUGGLES

"This place is emptying out," says a Sidi man in Gujarat. "Many have left. What jobs are available here? . . . Forest work is not suitable anymore. In the past when we didn't know better, we used to sell wood and make a living. Even selling stones [agate] we could make a living. But now none of these things benefit us."[28] As this quote suggests, contemporary Sidis confront significant economic challenges: the decline of traditional ritual roles along with limited opportunities for other work, the necessity to leave their village or community to find work, and a lack of educational and social services in rural areas. All combine to position the Sidis within an economic quandary, particularly so when the liberalized Indian economy has created an ever-expanding middle class and growing consumerism. By some estimates, there are between fifty thousand and sixty thousand Sidis in India today.[29] Contemporary Sidi communities are located in different areas of Gujarat and Karnataka, while in Andhra Pradesh they are concentrated in Hyderabad and in Maharashtra in Mumbai. Sidis who have migrated from Gujarat live in Mumbai city. They have adapted to the regional cultures and speak the regional language or are multilingual. In Gujarat, Sidis speak Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu. In Karnataka, they speak Kannada and Konkani. In Hyderabad, they speak Urdu and Telegu. In Mumbai, they speak Gujarati, Hindi, and some Marathi.

In Gujarat, Sidis live in both urban and rural areas. There and in the metropolis of Bombay, some Sidi families are attached to shrines and work as *mujavars*, or caretakers, an extension of the role of *fakir*; many more work as daily wage laborers, drivers, painters, mechanics, and vendors, and women work as domestic workers. Most Sidis of Karnataka live in forest areas and make a living by collecting and selling forest products. Their constant struggle with forest authorities puts severe constraints on their means of livelihood. In Hyderabad, the Sidis—who are mostly the descendants of the African Cavalry Guards, a regiment that was maintained by the previous ruler

of Hyderabad—were given free housing by the Nizam, but after the regiment was disbanded they had to find work at diverse, low-paying jobs. Only a few have been absorbed into the police force or the military.[30]

While the shrines of Sidi saints enable Sidis to earn a living as spiritual specialists, many *mujavars* face economic struggles, since they have to manage the daily running of the shrine and its maintenance from donations given by patrons. There are some shrines where wealthy patrons take responsibility for upkeep, but mostly members of the caretaker's family struggle with maintenance costs. As illustrated in my film *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links*, even the caretaker of the shrine, Babubhai Sidi, had to take on several other jobs in addition to his duties as shrine caretaker. He worked in the docks as a day laborer or as a stuntman in the ubiquitous Hindi cinema industry called Bollywood.[31]

At the original shrine of Bava Gor, the Sidi community organized a democratic system of rotation by which all Sidi families could work at the shrine and reap the benefits of the patrons' donations. However, in the 1980s the state intervened and appointed a board of trustees to manage the shrine. The appointed trustees were non-Sidi Muslims from another sect. Only one Sidi was allowed to be a trustee, giving his family the authority to run the shrine. This intervention drew the Sidi community into legal battles, but the state prevailed. Thus, although today the shrine of Bava Gor draws thousands of devotees from all areas of Gujarat and from as far away as Bombay, only one Sidi family benefits from donations, while the others work as vendors of flowers and tea and earn a subsistence livelihood.[32]

The system of rotation and job distribution organized by the older generation of Sidis worked to the benefit of the next generation, which was apprenticed to continue the same work. For example, at Bava Gor's shrine the musician/poet (*nangasi*) Kammar Badshah played the specific role of leading shrine rituals, with singing and drumming during the sacred *goma* dance. Kammar Badshah's sons learned the same profession. However, after attaining a high-school education, one of the sons later tried to augment the family income with a salaried job. As he explained, his attempt to get a job with the police was met with a major obstacle—he was asked to give an unofficial bribe of ten thousand rupees (approximately $250). Consequently, the young man continued to work at the shrine, helping his brothers in the flower-vending business.[33]

The Sidis of Karnataka face a very different economic situation, as documented by Pashington Obeng. Most live in rural and forest areas and work in agriculture. There are no schools, and children have to travel a considerable distance for elementary and secondary education. Parents find it difficult to pay for tuition and books. Added to these drawbacks, teacher absenteeism is common, and since parents need the children to work in the fields, the youngsters' education suffers.

Several schools run by the Catholic Church and nongovernmental organizations assist Sidi children in Karnataka, but the situation of child labor persists from a combination of material realities and ideologies of social hierarchy and power that continue among the Sidis and other poor communities in India. As Obeng writes, "About 60% of African Indian (Sidi) children from the ages of six to fifteen, along with over 80 million Indian children have either dropped out of school or work in child labor." Obeng adds that Sidi children are found working in construction and tobacco industries and other jobs.[34]

ATTEMPTS AT ORGANIZATION

In addition to limited economic resources, language barriers and geographical distance are significant obstacles for Sidis to organize socially and politically at the national level. However, incipient organizing efforts are occurring on several levels: cultural initiatives, individual interventions, and collective organizing. In terms of cultural initiatives, at the regional level, in Gujarat, for example, the state has organized Sidis as groups of "tribal" dancers to perform in folk festivals and parades on Independence Day, dance at "folk festivals" for middle-class Indians, or entertain visiting dignitaries such as Nelson Mandela. Most of these activities function under the West Zone Culture Center in Gujarat, part of the government's plan to promote and revitalize traditional culture and "folk" culture in India mostly for the purposes of tourism.[35] This cultural initiative at first seemed to promise a regular source of income for Sidis, but all that they earned for their dance was a mere 150 rupees per person per day (less than US$4).

With the growing academic interest in the African diaspora in Asia, one Sidi dance group from Gujarat was independently funded to perform their *goma* dance for audiences in Europe, America, and even Africa. While these foreign trips offer an opportunity to earn good pay, only a small, privileged group has benefited so far, which has created tension within the community in Gujarat.

In terms of cultural initiatives from within the community, in the 1980s, Sidi Sikandar Badshah, who works for government-run Indian Railways, organized a *goma* dance competition with the support of a wealthy, Bombay-based Sidi businessman, Rafiq Makhwa. The original shrine of Bava Gor, which brings Sidis from all over Gujarat for the annual *urs* festivities in honor of the saint, was the location. Sikandar, along with other Sidis, formed the Bava Gor Relief Committee and sent out a printed newsletter to promote the dance competition. It proclaimed that some of the objectives of the competition were to preserve the centuries-old Sidi culture that had roots in Africa and to celebrate the culture and the long lineage of Bava Gor, who brought this culture with him. The newsletter urged members to uphold communal consciousness and solidarity.

An eagerly awaited event, the dance competition was held for three years, from 1983 to 1985. Invitations printed in Gujarati and English were circulated in Gujarat and Bombay. *Goma* dance groups from Jamnagar, Surat, Bombay, and Ratanpur competed, with the Bombay group winning every year. The following year, fueled by the energy and enthusiasm of the dance competitions, members of Bava Gor Relief Committee expanded their organization into the All India Sidi Community Federation in 1986. As general secretary, in 1986, Sikandar Badshah wrote a letter to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi requesting that the government allot some land to the Sidi community in order to build a training facility that would help young Sidi men become professional athletes. The government response was favorable but, as always, tied up with lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Sikandar found himself managing lengthy administrative details on his own, and the federation folded when his railway job and family demands needed his attention.[36]

Two social schemes initiated by Sidi women to benefit the Sidi community deserve mention. Farida Al Mumbrik, a young Sidi woman from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, is

following her grandfather's vision in seeking strategies to build relationships between different Sidi communities across the state of Gujarat. She has reestablished the charitable trust that her grandfather, Sidi Abdula bin Mubarak, founded in the 1970s. For his part, Abdula bin Mubarak seems to have had an awareness of a diasporic identity as an Indian of African origin. From the early 1940s, after his own father's death, he continued in the prestigious position of private secretary to the Hindu maharajah of Bhavnagar. A man of some means, Abdula bin Mubarak founded the Indian Negro Welfare Board, whose name suggests that Abdula bin Mubarak was attempting to broaden the connections of Sidis in India to other African-descended peoples by constructing a Pan-African Sidi identity. The use of the term "Negro" clearly demonstrated his awareness of the struggles of the African American community in the United States. The board published a newsletter, attempting to construct a sense of community among dispersed Sidis in Gujarat by reporting births, deaths, marriages, and other news and community events.

Through the trust, Ms. Al Mumbrik initiated activities and projects to bring the community together. Most important, with the assistance of a Muslim doctor in Bhavnagar, she has introduced a scheme to bring medical attention to Sidis in Gujarat at a reasonable cost. In 2006, devastating floods from the monsoon rains destroyed many Sidi homes. She was quick to take action and mobilized private funding sources in order to assist the victims. She has also created educational incentives for local Sidi schoolchildren by organizing various cultural competitions and issuing certificates and awards. At present, in order to encourage Sidis to pursue college-level education, Ms. Al Mumbrik is developing a plan to build dormitory-style housing for students. She has set aside a plot of the family's land for this purpose and is in the process of raising money for the construction of the facility.[37]

In Jambur, a village in Gujarat, another Sidi woman, Hirbai Ibrahimbhai Lobi, has initiated women's groups, or mandals, in order to encourage Sidi women to take advantage of microcredit schemes offered by NGOs. Herself a farmer, Hirbai has made giant strides at the grassroots level by undertaking different creative projects for women such as making organic fertilizer, founding a daycare facility and a flour mill, offering tailoring classes, and raising dairy cattle—all of which have transformed poor, nonliterate women from seasonal laborers into small-business entrepreneurs. Hirbai has gone on to organize about fifteen women's cooperatives in her area, and in the last five years, collectively the women have saved the equivalent of US$50,000. As a Sidi woman, Hirbai was the first woman to break the barriers of caste, class, and gender when she was appointed to the position of district chair on the Social Justice Committee. Attending adult literacy classes, Hirbai has managed to acquire basic reading and writing skills in the Gujarati language. While she continues to work with the Sidi women's cooperatives, as a government officer she now attends to administrative work and assists all people living below the poverty line who approach her. To add to her projects, Hirbai and another member of her family, Osmanbhai Baghia, have worked tirelessly and have successfully brought educational facilities up to the high-school level to their rural area.[38]

In the state of Karnataka, organizational efforts have come from Catholic agencies and organizations. Prasad and Obeng discuss how collective organizing has worked for the Sidis of this southern region, most of whom sell forest products like honey and bamboo or work on agricultural land. However, the Forest Department regards Sidis as encroachers and harasses them. As a poor and vulnerable community, the Sidis could not organize and stand up for their rights. As a group fleeing colonial oppression, historically, the Sidis sought refuge deep within forest areas, cleared these areas, and made them habitable, but most of their land was either sold off to retire debt or confiscated by wealthy landlords who took advantage of their desperation. In order to address urgent economic and social issues of land ownership and survival, in 1984, with the assistance of some NGOs and Catholic groups, the Sidi community formed the All Karnataka Siddi Development Association (AKSDA). In 1995 AKSDA was replaced by the Siddi Development Society (SDS), which, headed by twelve members, represents twenty thousand Sidis.[39] With the assistance of Catholic groups, Sidis have also initiated self-help groups in Karnataka called sanghas through which communities discuss social, economic, and cultural issues and sometimes help to settle family disputes.[40]

Most significantly, the Sidis of Karnataka struggled and successfully gained official status as a so-called scheduled tribe, which the state government granted them in 1986. The central government dragged its heels on this issue, but after almost seventeen years they officially gave the Sidis of Karnataka this designation.[41]

SCHEDULED TRIBE STATUS

According to the constitution of India, the term "scheduled tribe" (ST) is used to classify indigenous peoples, or adivasis (original inhabitants), as those who have historically been socially and economically marginalized. Under different affirmative-action schemes initiated by the state, the indigenous people qualify for various assistance programs that include reservation of seats in educational institutions as well as a certain number of jobs reserved in government-run services such as railways, the post office, and the police force. The Indian state's putative reason for the special advantages to the indigenous people is to facilitate their entry into the mainstream. Additionally, in order to rectify the rigidities of the Hindu caste system's stratification, by which certain castes were economically and socially marginalized as "lower caste" or "untouchable," the government also extended their affirmative-action schemes to these groups as "scheduled castes" (SC). In the Indian constitution, articles 341 and 342 lump both SC and ST categories together. It is important to note, however, that not all groups under the ST category, such as the Sidis, are indigenous or original inhabitants. Furthermore, the classification of ST has been given to groups of Sidis arbitrarily. In the Saurashtra region of northern Gujarat, for example, Sidis fall into the ST category while leaving out many Sidi communities in the southern Gujarat region. The Sidis of Karnataka, too, were left out of the ST classification and had to undertake a protracted struggle to obtain this status.

The classification of communities as "tribal groups" began under the British colonial government in India in 1936, "founded on a mixture of paternalism, fear and indifference" and as "a policy of isolationism."[42] Later, during the freedom-movement years in colonial India, the nationalist Congress Party's policy toward tribal communities was more inclusive, influenced as it was by Mahatma Gandhi's work, which challenged the social stigmas surrounding the lowest Hindu caste, the untouchables.

Gandhi renamed them *harijans*, or "children of God," but this politically organized group began to represent itself as *dalit*, a word that historicizes their social and economic exploitation and oppression.

In 1950, under the constitution of independent India, the British government's list of scheduled castes and tribes was updated under article 341 and 342, as the new government sought to bring the forces of modernization to "primitive" and "backward" people who had been discriminated against. As part of the government benefits to disadvantaged people, scheduled-tribe communities would qualify for a reserved number of seats in institutions of higher education, a determined percentage of government jobs, and some assistance with housing. For the latter, government funding and subsidies would be offered for affordable housing plans and schemes. A special Ministry of Tribal Affairs was formed in October 1999 to formulate policies and implement government programs for tribal welfare.[33]

However, neither the British nor the postcolonial Indian state has been able to successfully define who qualifies as tribal or by what criteria a community is designated as a tribal group. According to anthropologist Jaganath Pathy, even though India has the largest number of tribes in the world, there is only an arbitrary designation of communities as tribals as "only article 342(i) provides that the President of India with due consultation with the governors of the states may designate the 'tribe and tribal communities' to be the scheduled tribes for each state. Obviously then, there is no clear sociological basis of identifying a community as tribe."[34] The vague criteria for communities to qualify as tribal are "indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. This criterion is not spelt out in the Constitution but has become well established."[35]

The Sidis of Saurashtra have constructed their own narrative about their inclusion in the ST category. As Farida Al Mumbrik recounts, the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was traveling through the Saurashtra-Kutch area of Gujarat and met some Sidis. Seeing their living conditions, he decided to include them in the ST category.[36]

In the whole debate on scheduled tribes and castes, some among the *dalit* community—but not the Sidis—identified their social and economic struggles with those of African Americans. In 1972, in an attempt to create meaningful ties and connections with African American people, a militant group of *dalits*, inspired by the struggles of the Black Panther Party, formed the Dalit Panthers. The Panthers earned much public attention, especially throughout their "emerging *Dalit Sahitya*, the literature of the oppressed." This movement among those officially categorized as "scheduled castes" signaled a "new level of pride, militancy and sophisticated creativity."[37] A long history of politicization and organization behind the *dalit* movement has given them visibility and credibility on the Indian political scene, so much so that they constitute a voting bloc with whom political parties seek alliances. Small in number, Sidi communities do not attract the same attention.

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN ASIA

The question of Sidis from all over India organizing collaboratively in order to attain ST status came up as an urgent issue at an international conference, The African Diaspora in Asia (TADIA), held in Goa, India, in January 2006.Initially launched in 2003 as an online community of scholars and interested individuals, the TADIA network burgeoned, bringing together diverse scholars of the African diaspora in the Indian Ocean world and the Sidis. Packed into the ten-day conference was a three-day workshop on political and economic self-development in which approximately 130 Sidis participated.

While academics debated issues such as what constitutes "diaspora," some of the Sidi delegates who were present at academic panels brought up diverse perspectives and steered discussions toward their contemporary socioeconomic situation in India. For example, one of the Sidi delegates from Mumbai, Juje Sidi, argued his point, "What is Africa to me? What is Africa to them [other Sidis present]? Right now, money does matter, and so does education. Education is a tool that will free us from poverty." Another Sidi delegate made a poignant appeal: "I have a request. Don't leave us as research subjects. Within three years after doing so much research, what has happened? I want to follow up and do something." The comments of the Sidis brought home the point that their current economic realities need urgent attention.

The workshops, coordinated by Rustom Bharucha, an independent scholar and writer from Kolkata, India, were an extremely important part of the conference. Bharucha's previous success and skill with theater workshops with Sidis from Karnataka enabled energetic and enthusiastic responses from Sidi delegates from different parts of the country, some of whom met one another for the first time and lived together for three to four days, communicating through gestures and some Hindi, the national language of India.

Distinctly foregrounded throughout the workshops was the fact that there are differences and divisions among the Sidis at regional, economic, religious, and cultural levels, and for the first time these differences were given the space and time to be articulated within structured discussions. The main issue under consideration in the workshops was that the ST designation should be extended to Sidis all over India. At present, with only some Sidis gaining benefits from the ST status in Karnataka and Gujarat, there are divisions within the community. However, based on the general discussions in the workshops, it became apparent that there was a substantial gap in the information around benefits that accrue from the ST category. Three days of intensive hammering out of details led to the determination that an All India Sidi Federation was a necessity. Tentative plans were made to follow up with regional meetings in different parts of India.

One of the Sidis, a social worker and activist from Yellapur village in Karnataka, pointed out that despite the ST status in Karnataka, Sidis continued to encounter problems. Krishna Sidi pointed out that several Karnataka Sidis who lived deep in the interior of forests depended on forest products to make a living. They made cane baskets and collected honey, pepper, bananas, and other foods. When sold on the regular market, the Sidi products faced market competition by which they were forced to lower prices drastically, thus killing their profits. Moreover, Krishna Sidi also added

that at one time Sidis were allowed to collect forest products but are now considered "encroachers" upon the land. They have to bribe forest officers and work stealthily at night. On the latter issue, the workshop coordinator Bharucha told the entire gathering of Sidis that the government was debating the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005. Not a single Sidi was aware of this bill—a comment on how Sidis and tribal communities are not equipped to navigate the state system and bureaucracy, which requires filling out application forms and obtaining documentation in order to gain basic benefits for which they would qualify under ST status.[48]

The bill of rights debated in parliament itself had a catch. As sociologist Madhuri Krishnaswamy points out, it would favor only those persons "who can prove that they were in occupation of forest lands before October 25, 1980," the date that marked the passing of the Forest Conservation Act. Therefore, the bill in effect pits the conservationists against the tribal communities, who are seen as destroyers of the forests when in fact they have cared for them over the centuries. Krishnaswamy adds that it is quite likely that the government will engage in some form of a token settlement with tribal people under the new bill and then start the process of mass evictions. So once again, forest communities will become scapegoats while the real destructive forces that degrade and destroy forests, namely commercial and industrial development projects, will get free rein in the name of modernization and development.[49] The bill was passed by the government and became an act in 2006. It has yet to be implemented in Karnataka.[50]

After the international conference in Goa, many Sidis were energized and started making plans to hold another workshop at a regional level. For example, Farida Al Mumbrik, who served as the vice president of TADIA, planned to hold a conference and workshop of Sidis, in Gujarat, in order to address urgent economic and social issues. In Bombay, Juje Sidi, a young Sidi from Bombay, and Sikandar Badshah circulated a statement of objectives for an All-India Sidi Federation. Lacking the institutional funds available to the TADIA organizers, they used their own time and money in their efforts, which continue today.

NOTES

1. Joseph Harris, "The Dynamics of the Global African Diaspora," in *The African Diaspora*, eds. Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1996), 9.

2. Shihan de Silva Jayasuria and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003). 7; Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Diaspora to India: The Role of Habshis and Sidis from Medieval Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuria and Richard Pankhurst (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 190.

3. Joseph Harris, "The Dynamics of the Global African Diaspora," in *The African Diaspora*, eds. Alusine Jalloh and Stephen E. Maizlish (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1996), 7–21.

4. Richard Pankhurst, "The Ethiopian Diaspora to India: The Role of Habshis and Sidis from Medieval Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *African Diaspora*, eds. Jayasuria and Pankhurst, 189.

5. Ibid., 190.

6. Ibid., 191.

7. Richard M. Eaton, "Introduction," in *Slavery and South Asian History*, eds. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 6.

8. Joseph Harris, *The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), xiii.

9. Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–40; Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 51–120; John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2002).

10. Richard Eaton, "The Rise and Fall of Military Slavery in the Deccan, 1450–1650," in *Slavery and South Asian History*, eds. Chatterjee and Eaton, 116.

11. Ibid., 128

12. Harris, *African Presence in Asia*, 95.

13. R. R. S. Chauhan, *Africans in India: From Slavery to Royalty* (New Delhi: Asian Publication Services, 1995.).

14. Harris, *African Presence in Asia*, 83.

15. Babubhai Sidi and his wife Fatimaben, in my film *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links*-26 mins. DVD (2005), talk about these positions, held by their grandparents.

16. Eaton, "Rise and Fall," 128–29; see also Helene Basu, "Africans in India— Past and Present," *Internationales Asienforum* 32, nos. 3–4 (2001): 254.

17. For a survey of studies on the history of Sidis in India, see Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward Alpers, eds., *Sidis and Scholars: Essays on Africans in India* (New Delhi: Rainbow, 2004), 1–25.

18. Dadi Rustomji Banaji, *Bombay and the Sidis* (Bombay: Macmillan, 1938). In the 1960s, Richard Pankhurst, a scholar of Ethiopian history, gave some attention to Sidis, and his work needs mention. Richard Pankhurst, "The Habshis of India," in *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia* (London: Lalibela House, 1961), 409–22.

19. T. C. Palakshappa, *The Siddhis of North Kanara* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1976).

20. Chauhan, *Africans in India*.

21. Shanti Sadiq Ali, *The African Dispersal in the Deccan: From Medieval to Modern Times* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1996).

22. T. B. Naik and G. P. Pandya, *The Sidis of Gujarat: A Socio-Economic Study and a Development Plan* (Ahmedabad: Tribal Research and Training Institute Gujarat Vidyapith, 1993); Jayanti K. Patel, "African Settlements in Gujarat," in *Minorities on India's West Coast: History and Society*, ed. Anirudha Gupta (New Delhi: Kalinga, 1991), 17–24; Cyprian Lobo, *Siddis in Karnataka* (Bangalore: Centre for Non-Formal and Continuing Education, 1984).

23. Helene Basu, "The Sidi and the Cult of Bava Gor in Gujarat," *Journal of Indian Anthropology* 28 (1993): 289–300; "Hierarchy and Emotion: Love, Joy and Sorrow in a Cult of Black Saints in Gujarat, India" in *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (London: Routledge, 1998), 117–39; "Theatre of Memory: Performances of Ritual Kinship of the African Diaspora in Sind/Pakistan," in *Culture, Creation, and Procreation in South Asia*, ed. Aparna Rao and Minika Böeck (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 243–70; "Africans in India: Past and Present," *Internationales Asienforum* 32, nos. 3–4 (2001): 253–74.

24. See, for instance, Jayasuria and Pankhurst, *African Diaspora*; Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers, *Sidis and Scholars*; Ababu Minda Yimene, *African Indian Community in Hyderabad: Siddi Identity, Its Maintenance and Change* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2004); Kiran Kamal Prasad, *In Search of an Identity: An Ethnographic Study of the Siddis in Karnataka* (Bangalore: Jana Jagrati Prakashana, 2005); Pashington Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining*

Nation: The Cultural Politics of African Indians in South Asia (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2007); the special issue on "Invisible Africans," *African and Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2007), edited by Shihan de Silva Jayasuria; and Helene Basu, ed., *Journeys and Dwellings: Indian Ocean Themes in South Asia* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008).

25. Basu, "Africans in India," 261.
26. Ibid., 266.
27. Beheroze Shroff, "Sidis and Parsis: A Filmmaker's Notes," in *Sidis and Scholars*, ed. Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers, 171.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Personal communication with Helene Basu and Pashington Obeng, July 22, 2007.
30. Ababu Minda Yimene, "Dynamics of Ethnic Identity Among the Siddis of Hyderabad," *African and Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 321–45.
31. Beheroze Shroff, *Voices of the Sidis: Ancestral Links* (DVD, 2005). See also Shroff, "Sidis in Mumbai: Negotiating Identities between Mumbai and Gujarat," *African and Asian Studies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 305–19.
32. Helene Basu, "Redefining Boundaries: Twenty Years at the shrine of Gori Pir," in *Sidis and Scholars*, ed. Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers, 61–85.
33. Shroff, "Sidis and Parsis," 174.
34. Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation*, 56.
35. Shroff, "Sidis and Parsis," 173.
36. Interview with Sikandar Badshah, December 2007.
37. Interviews with Farida Al Mumbrik in Bhavnagar, March 2004, September 2006, and September 2007.
38. Interviews with Hirbaiben Lobi in Jambur Village, March 2006, September 2006, and September 2007.
39. Prasad, *In Search of an Identity*, 105–10.
40. Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation*, 198–203.
41. Prasad, *In Search of an Identity*, 29–31, 101–16; Obeng, *Shaping Membership, Defining Nation*, 30–31, 189–203.
42. Alistair McMillan, *Standing at the Margins: Representation and Electoral Reservation in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 112.
43. Jhon K. Thomas, *Human Rights of Tribals* (New Delhi: Isha Books, 2005), 1:2–3.
44. Jaganath Pathy, "Tribe, Region and Nation in the Context of the Indian State," in *Nation and National Identity in South Asia*, ed. S. L. Sharma and T. K. Oomen (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 97–111.
45. Thomas, *Human Rights*, 4.
46. Interviews with Al Mumbrik, 2004, 2006, and 2007.
47. Zelliot Eleanor, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 267.
48. As a translator from Gujarati to English, I made some notes and kept track of most of the discussions at the three-day workshop organized by TADIA in Goa, January 2006.
49. Madhuri Krishnaswamy, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 47 (November 19, 2005): 4899–4901.
50. Personal communication with Pashington Obeng, July 22, 2007.

CHAPTER 9

TAKING ON EMPIRES

REPARATIONS, THE RIGHT OF RETURN, AND THE PEOPLE OF DIEGO GARCIA

DAVID VINE

We are the descendants of slaves. Our skin is black. We don't have blue eyes. . . . Whether we are black, whether we are white, whether we are yellow, we all must have the same treatment. That, that is the treatment that the Chagossian community is asking for. . . . Stop all the injustices that have been committed against us.

> —Louis Olivier Bancoult, elected leader of the Chagossian people

THE CHAGOSSIANS ARE A LITTLE-KNOWN PART OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, ORIGINALLY living halfway between continental Africa and Indonesia as the indigenous people of the Indian Ocean's Chagos Archipelago. Members of the community are the descendants of enslaved Africans, mostly from Madagascar and the southwestern Mozambique coast, and, to a lesser extent, indentured Indians, brought to the previously uninhabited islands beginning in the late eighteenth century. By the mid-twentieth century, this diverse group had become a distinct people of around two thousand with a vibrant society and generations of ancestors buried on islands described by many as idyllic.

Between 1968 and 1973, however, the Chagossians were forcibly removed from their homeland by the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom as part of the creation of the U.S. military base on the archipelago's largest island, Diego Garcia. They were deported and left twelve hundred miles away on the western Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles. Receiving no resettlement assistance, the islanders quickly became impoverished. The base, meanwhile, has become one of the most important overseas U.S. military installations in the world, playing major roles in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and serving as a focal point for U.S. military plans to extend its power to every corner of the globe in the twenty-first century.