

# Role of Indigenous Knowledge in the Siddi Health System: An Interaction of Tradition, Spirituality, and Medicine

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## ABSTRACT

India's population is diverse and multifaceted, encompassing various cultures and communities. Among them, the Afro-Indian Siddis stand out as one of the country's unique and distinct tribes, currently present in various states including Gujarat, Goa, Daman & Diu, Maharashtra, Bengal, Telangana, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. The health of individuals and communities is profoundly shaped by social and cultural factors intricately woven into the fabric of daily life. To understand the ethno-medical practices of any group or community, it is essential to consider healthcare's social and environmental dimensions, including ecology, culture, economic conditions, and the history of diaspora. By integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific approaches, India aims to create a more holistic health system that addresses the needs of the present, preserves ecological balance, and promotes long-term sustainability. This study explores the health beliefs, traditional healthcare practices, medicinal knowledge, and cultural shades of the Siddi community in India as well as the challenges faced by the community in their well-being.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Afro-Indian community, known as the Siddis, constitutes a distinct diasporic group in India, with ancestral roots tracing back to East Africa. The population of Afro-Indians in India constitutes about 54,291. Historical records indicate the presence of two Siddi kingdoms, established around A.D. 1100 on the Western coast of India at Janjira and Jaffrabad.<sup>1</sup> Descendants of African origin who settled in various states of India are referred to by names such as Siddi, Sidi, Siddi Badshah, and Habshis. Many individuals in modern-day India, whose ancestors arrived from Africa, are now essentially indistinguishable from the other communities in which they reside in terms of appearance, culture, or language. Few studies in this field of medicine demonstrate how Siddi ethno medicine has been influenced by India's medical pluralism, particularly Ayurveda and biomedicine. Under an international convention to support research on traditional knowledge, India in 2021 gave a researcher, Ms. Seema Solanki of the University of

Kent in the United Kingdom, access to the ethno-medicinal knowledge of Gujarat's Siddi people. The Gujarati Siddi community is well known for its vast knowledge of plants and herbs, which have been utilized for many years to treat a variety of illnesses. The Nagoya Protocol, an extension of the Convention on Biological Diversity, aims to ensure the "fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources" by promoting legal transparency and preventing the exploitation of traditional knowledge for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) without due recognition or benefit to the originating communities.<sup>2</sup> This significant achievement demonstrates the international dedication to protecting indigenous populations' rights and promoting cooperative research. Since the protocol's main goal is to encourage the use of genetic resources and related traditional knowledge while guaranteeing a just and equal distribution of the benefits resulting from their usage, it also engages the Siddi community in showcasing their traditional knowledge.

For a clear understanding of Siddi's concept of health, it is important to look at certain aspects of health, medicine, and healing that exist in the community.

For a better One Health strategy, India aims to integrate indigenous knowledge with the scientific framework that guides national health policies. The majority of people in India and globally continue to rely, at least in part, on traditional medicine.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the social and environmental dimensions of health care—such as ecology, culture, economic circumstances, and diaspora history is crucial to comprehend any group's or community's ethno-medical practices. Health is understood in contrast to disease. The World Health Organization (1946) has defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'<sup>4</sup> By integrating indigenous knowledge with scientific approaches, India can create a more holistic health system that addresses the needs of the present, preserves ecological balance, and promotes long-term sustainability.

### Healing Practices of the Siddis of Gujarat

Located at the intersection of medicine and religion, Siddi healing is a medical depiction of cultural syncretism. In Gujarat, the Siddis have a strong belief in the importance of Siddi ancestral saints and their diasporic history, which helps to contextualize the spiritual parts of Siddi healing. "Culturally derived etiologies for health problems and healing play an important role in many African communities."<sup>5</sup> The development of a new healing system depends greatly on the biogeographic similarities and contrasts between the place of origin and the area of migration. An interesting revelation is that the healing system of Siddis brings together their ethnobotanical medicine (*dava*), which is similar to that of the Maldhari tribe of Kutch and spiritual medicine (*dua*), which resonates with their African heritage.<sup>6</sup> One strategy to examine how the Siddis make medical decisions and deal with India's medically pluralistic environment is to examine the role and effects of the Siddi medical system and health practices on their present state of health.

In Gujarat's Jambur and adjacent villages, Siddi people typically have greater faith in the traditional medical system than in other medical systems. Because it aligns with their culture and traditional health beliefs, they rely more on folk medicine. Therefore, they dislike the modern and advanced medical facilities that the government offers. They have their own specialist and healer called *Munjawar*, who provides them with exceptional care and in whom they have total faith and trust. One of the few traits shared by the Siddi in this area is how health care is provided, where illnesses are thought to be mostly caused by evil spirits, which also serves as the foundation for folk medicine. Using water and

other things, they have their own ways of diagnosing. The goal of treatment is to eliminate the underlying causes by using charms, herbal remedies, and calming spirits. The healing system of Siddis also incorporates music, including drumming and their traditional dance called *Dhamaal*. With a main focus on Nagarchi pir's dargah 'mausoleum' at Jambur village, where drumming is performed daily, there comes a role of *dua* in ritual healing of ailments, which Siddis consider as the "domain of the transcendental."<sup>7</sup>

The Siddi healthcare system exemplifies the vibrancy of medical pluralism, with *dava* (medicine) and *dua* (spiritual medicine) serving as its core pillars, particularly in reproductive, maternal, and child healthcare. Previous research highlights the importance of diet and the idea of "Fo-Med", which means using food as medicine. It shows how there has been a shift towards using pharmaceuticals and Ayurvedic medicine, but also continues to focus on older practices like the theory of "hot and cold". This theory relates to balancing different types of foods and treatments based on their perceived qualities. There is also an emphasis on the special role that women and children play in the healthcare traditions of the Siddi community in India, with a strong focus on their well-being in traditional healing practices. The Siddis use herbal remedies for certain illnesses, which are mostly made by the *Munjawar* using their understanding of the different flora that can be found in the forest and nearby places. They pass down this knowledge through generations. It has been noted that the forest ecology has a significant impact on health and therapy. The foundation of the traditional health care system and treatment is their in-depth knowledge of the environment and natural world. The Siddis have a sophisticated system of medical beliefs and ethno-medical practices, a variety of medical facilities, a powerful system of ceremonial healing that includes drumming and dancing, and extensive knowledge of the medicinal plants found in the Gir forest of Gujarat. A few indigenous plants used for medicinal purposes are Tulsi, Ashoka, Til, Sonamuki, Dathuro, Sonth, Khas Khas, Harda, Jamula, etc. This traditional knowledge system not only serves as a practical healthcare framework for the community but also reinforces their cultural identity and unity.

### Siddi Community's Health Management

Human society is better equipped than ever to ensure that every community is healthy. Disease burden is frequently caused by a variety of behavioral, social, and environmental risk factors. Environmental factors and diseases are related. The unhealthy environmental conditions may facilitate disease prevalence and transmission in the area. In the medical sense, the environment includes the surroundings, conditions, or influences that affect an organism.<sup>8</sup>

The interaction of existing societal, economic, and environmental elements has a major impact on the health issues of the Siddi people. The management of illness is closely linked to common superstitious beliefs, customs, and behaviors. The community's high infant mortality rates are a result of the neglect of maternal and child healthcare. The Siddi community's perception about the cause of illness affects treatment. The Siddis have acquired some logical understanding through customary experience. Their socio-cultural religious system includes this information. In general, there are two main categories of therapeutic procedures: curative and preventive. The employment of charms, amulets, animal sacrifice, appeasing disease-seeking spirits, and worshipping God—believing that rituals serve a protective purpose—are some of the preventive measures. Worshipping gods and spirits is the first of the healing rituals. For the Siddi, medicine and religion are the same.

They mainly prefer *Munjawar* for the treatment of illnesses.<sup>9</sup> Yet there is some overlap between the chosen health provider category and the disease category in villages of Gujarat as reflected in research on this field. For instance, more people visit a PHC or sub-center for cough than for other illnesses, especially women. In her research on *Health and gender in siddi, a primitive tribe of Gujarat*, researcher Ankita Arya found out that the Siddi women's most prevalent answer was that they came to the PHC since the staff did not ask them to spend the night there because they had a cough. Additionally, it has been found that they use both their traditional and modern medical systems. The majority of women are required to care for the ill person in addition to observing symptoms in any family members. They combine both, modern and traditional medical systems. When it comes to treating diseases that they feel are mostly caused by ghosts or spirits, 97% of households believe in *Munjawar*. However, they also see private physicians (21.4%) and PHC (30.2%).<sup>10</sup>

### Shifting Health Beliefs and Practices among the Siddi Community: From Traditional Remedies to Private Healthcare

While the Siddis of Gujarat highly believe in traditional treatments of a *Munjawar*, it is not similar for Karnataka and Hyderabad. The Siddi community determines a person's health based on his or her capacity to carry out everyday tasks without experiencing any physical issues, regardless of interior body disorders. People don't care much about their general health. In Hyderabad, people classify diseases like cold and heat, cough, sneezing, and other respiratory infections as illnesses of cold and boils, ulcers, piles, and genitourinary disorders are believed to be problems caused by heat.<sup>11</sup> People prefer to use home remedies or readily

available substitutes from local petty shops for mild illnesses like cough, fever, throat aches, headaches, or stomach issues. They generally see a private or public allopathic practitioner if the ailment lasts even a few days. The majority of people in the community firmly think that herbal or traditional treatments are ineffective, despite there being a medicine man in every village. According to the Siddi community in Karnataka, if their illness lasts longer, they go to the hospital, which has a direct impact on their ability to work and earn a living. People favor private health care over public health care for various reasons, including the difficulty in reaching doctors, the expense of treatment, the length of recovery, etc. The majority of the community members agree that traditional medicine no longer has the same effectiveness in terms of its effects or healing qualities. Additionally, they believe that an individual's body becomes insensitive to herbal or traditional treatments the moment they receive an injection, which occurs from birth. The custom is falling apart, even though individuals still make home cures for some mild illnesses using readily available herbs known to them for generations.

### Health Practices and Challenges

When it comes to the Siddi community's overall health or personal cleanliness, the social network of friends, family, and caregivers is usually involved in restoring health, as the illness is not viewed as an individual matter among Siddis. It may be said that the Siddi practice gender-based health management and that the majority of disease occurrences are caused by inadequate environmental management, which in turn contributes to the Siddi community's low health condition. A program educating women on the use of dietary supplements and breastfeeding habits must be developed. When treatment is anticipated to be costly, government hospitals are the go-to option. Additionally, people frequently pick government hospital facilities when medical emergencies arise and there are few options for making the necessary financial arrangements. The people show signs of relying on the public sector for both inpatient and outpatient care. Lately, people are becoming more aware of health facilities and public health initiatives.

Siddi lifestyles, which involve social and economic factors, living and environmental conditions, food habits, housing, education, child-rearing techniques, socio-religious beliefs, taboos and superstitions, etc., have an impact on their health. The Siddi's general state of health is influenced by their living conditions, cultural customs, the availability of healthcare in Siddi communities, and their aloofness when it comes to receiving modern medical assistance when the illness is still in its early stages. The majority of common diseases have been discovered to be related to the environment. It is shown by

studies that Siddi people have relatively little awareness of the biological reasons for illness and disability. Common traits of the Siddis include their belief in supernatural forces and traditional health care methods for delivery. According to the community, disease, and epidemics are not related to their unhygienic living conditions, but rather to the anger of the gods, goddesses, and spirits. This indicates the need for culturally sensitive health education and improved access to healthcare services to address their unique health concerns.

### Health and Welfare Initiatives

Even though the development of Siddis and other communities was given a lot of attention in the past, including leveling their agricultural land, providing agricultural kits, free seed, milch cattle, fishing boats & nets, etc., these families were connected to housing, health, and other social welfare programs, the gap between these programs and Siddi families could not be significantly reduced, primarily because the interventions were dispersed and there was no follow-up. The recent years have seen initiatives that have been in place for the community. An Ashram Shala program was designed and put into place for Siddis to raise their educational status and encourage high-quality education. The government's Shakti Samanway Yojna program aims to improve the lives of Siddi women. Recently, Shantaram Buban Siddi was nominated as the MLC in Karnataka, and Hirabaiben Ibrahim Lobi (the president of Mahila Vikas Foundation) has been awarded the fourth highest civilian award Padma Shri for her work towards women empowerment.<sup>12</sup> The Mahila Vikas Foundation or the Mahila Mandal for the welfare of Siddi women was founded in 1995 by Hirabai Ben of the Siddi community of Junagadh, Gujarat. Raising awareness and supporting the Siddi community's women was the primary goal. She promotes health and sanitation education for Siddi women and education for Siddi children. To raise the overall standard of living for ST families to that of other groups in the Gujarat state, the Chief Minister's Ten Point Program seeks to double the income of every ST family and provide high-quality infrastructure, healthcare, and education in areas where STs predominate. Mainstreaming the PVTG population with the rest of the ST community is one of the strategies discussed. As part of this Programme, a mobile medical van has been sanctioned for PVTG families in Surat district and a few major projects are being developed to bring major improvements in their lives.

### CONCLUSION

India is very rich in traditional knowledge, especially in traditional medicinal knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Prioritizing the promotion and preservation of traditional Indian medical

knowledge is essential for the benefit of the Indian populace, promoting sustainable economic growth. So the active involvement of tribes such as the Siddis in policy-making becomes crucial for ensuring the cultural relevance and efficacy of health interventions, while also leveraging their extensive knowledge of local biodiversity, which is important for effective disease management. The traditional medical and healing practices of the Siddi tribes, deeply embedded in their cultural and spiritual backgrounds, embody a holistic approach to health and well-being. These practices, rooted in ancestral wisdom and centuries-old customs, encompass both, preventive and curative dimensions, highlighting their comprehensive understanding of healthcare. Bridging research gaps in this domain will empower the Siddi community and significantly enhance the overall impact of India's public health strategies, enhancing inclusivity and sustainability. In an era defined by the pursuit of self-reliance and sustainable development, "Viksit Bharat 2047" and "Agenda 2063" form a visionary framework guiding India and Africa towards a prosperous future. In this spirit, enhancing trade between India and Africa in the domain of traditional medical knowledge, particularly that of the Siddi community, presents a unique opportunity to encourage cultural exchange, economic growth, and the preservation of the indigenous knowledge system.

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