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## Gender Empowerment in Transoceanic Feminine Folklore and Shrines: A Kin Study of Siddi Women's Participation in Mai Misra Worship in Gujarat, India

By Sayan Dey,<sup>1</sup> Tias Maity,<sup>2</sup> and Tanmay Srivastava<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

The term Siddi refers to the African diaspora communities in India, who initially arrived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the Islamic invaders in Gujarat (then Sindh) as slaves, palace guards, traders, and musicians from the eastern parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, Zanzibar, Sudan, and Tanzania. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, another group of Africans from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique were brought to India by the Portuguese colonizers as slaves. The majority of the histories of the Siddi community are androcentric in nature, focusing on the contributions of African men and male spiritual figures towards the development of the Siddi community in India. However, this paper offers a more diverse and deeper analysis that uncovers the role of women spiritual figures like Mai Misra, Makhaan Devi, and goddess Luxmi, and the role of Siddi women in the cultural and spiritual evolution of Siddi practices. This article analyzes how women spiritual figures and spiritual practices contribute to Siddi culture in Gujarat and offer Siddi women empowerment and agency. The thematic and theoretical arguments in this article are supported by a kin study on the patterns and intentions of Mai Misra worship in Gujarat.

*Keywords:* Mai Misra, Siddi women, Spiritual practices, Women's empowerment, Cultural evolution, Gujar, Zikrs, Dahmals

### Introduction: Oceans, Spirits, and Women

Generally, the different forms of existing narratives on transoceanic travels and diasporic culture have systemically and historically ignored the roles and contributions of women. Women have mostly been portrayed as accompanying entities to male counterparts as mothers, victims of fatal diseases, and destroyers of family relations, as seen in many documents from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

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centuries on the indentured Indian laborers of South Africa (Gregory, 1971; Haring, 2007; Lovejoy, 2012). Women's roles have also been ignored in the case of many Siddi histories and folklore (Khader, 2017; Dey, 2021; Dey, 2023a). However, this androcentric "history of human encounters at sea" is quite contradictory to the various indigenous narratives and folklore on "transoceanic exchanges, mobilities and folklores" (Gooptu, 2022, p. 45) which firmly acknowledge the existence of female spiritual figures and contributions of women, such as the spiritual cults of Mami Wata in West Africa (Drewal, 1988), the Yoruba practices of Yemanja and Osun in Nigeria (Babatunde, 2022), and the underworld aquatic cults of Lara in South America and the Caribbean (Hoefle, 2009) among others. Therefore, the ignorance of the contributions of female spirits and women towards the evolution of diverse transoceanic societies and cultures across the world is not accidental and momentary but is rooted in the historical systems of female oppressions and erasures (Wallerstein, 1979; 1991). The ignorance of the narratives of Siddi women within the daily ritual and folkloristic aspects of the Siddi community in Gujarat is no different. Except a few scattered references to the participation of Siddi women in different cultural and religious rituals (see Shroff, 2019; Graves, 2019), no scholarship on the voices and empowerment of Siddi women exists to date. This article attempts to recover the "submerged bodies" (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020) and voices of the Siddi women in Gujarat and unpack their diverse social, cultural, and spiritual contributions to the historical evolution and contemporary existence of the Siddi communities in a "tidalectical" manner (Mackey, 1991; Brathwaite, 1999). To explain further, like the "watery movements of backwards and forwards" (Gooptu, 2022, p. 55), or what Kamou Brathwaite philosophizes as "tidalectics" (1999, p. 27), the empowering initiatives of the Siddi women are porous, fluid, transoceanic, and trans-religious in nature (Kabir, 2020; 2022).

Prior to engaging further with the transoceanic feminine folklores and resistances of Siddi women, let us briefly look into the history of the evolution of the Siddi community in Gujarat. Initially, the Siddis were brought to Gujarat as slaves and palace guards from eastern Africa through Central Asia by the Islamic invaders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Selassie, 1972; Schoff, 1995). Robert Van Russell in his book *The Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces in India* (2015) claims that the term Siddi is commonly used to denote the Africans (either Abyssinians or Negroes) in India (p. 145). After their arrival, they were converted into Muslims and with the passage of time, because of their physical and intellectual prowess, many Siddis were relieved from enslavement and promoted as army officers, treasurers, singers, musicians, and architects. Apart from improving their existential conditions, the promotion also allowed the Siddis of Gujarat to revive their eastern African ancestral sociocultural practices and to learn about the local ritualistic practices of Gujarat in an unprejudiced manner. The revival gave birth to diverse transoceanic and creolized spiritual folklores and the singing (*zikrs*) and dancing (*dhamals*)<sup>4</sup> practices of the Siddis. The songs and dances engage with "oceanic interculture[s]" (Kabir, 2021, p. 1599) and "racial and cultural ambiguity and hybridity" (de Sousa Santos, 2002, p. 13). The songs and dances about the transoceanic, transcultural, trans-geographical, and trans-religious evolution of the Siddis also engage with different narratives of lands, oceans, and forests, around which their socio-historical existence in India have been shaped.

However, it is crucial to mention that a majority of the cultural and spiritual practices (*zikrs* and *dhamals*) of the Siddis are androcentric in nature. They tend to focus largely on the struggles, resistances, blessings, and worships of male Siddi spiritual figures like Bava Gor, Baba Habas, Sidi Badshah, and others. The *zikrs* and *dhamals* (especially the dancing *dhamals*) are largely

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<sup>4</sup> *Dhamals* are of two types: the sitting *dhamals* (also known as *Baithaaki dhamals*) and dancing *dhamals*.

performed by men, and the women are only allowed to sit in the audience and watch. For instance, during a dance *dhamal* in Vajiri Masjid in Ahmedabad, the Muslim women were asked to vacate the mosque so that the platform on which the *dhamal* would be performed could be cleaned and purified. When a Siddi man was asked about this practice, he shared that the cleaning ritual is necessary because there could be pregnant and menstruating women, which would cast an evil effect on the mosque and the community. After cleaning the mosque premises with water and incense, women are not allowed to enter until the performances begin, but they have access only to the exterior part of the mosque, because the interior premise is reserved for men. Similar forms of androcentric Siddi rituals are performed within the shrines of Bava Gor. According to the Siddi folklore, though both women and men can worship all their spiritual ancestors, during specific rituals like *Urs*, the men ancestors would be worshiped by the men and the women ancestors would be worshiped by the women. Also, the access to the shrines of men and women ancestors are structured in a gendered fashion; the internal shrines of Bava Gor, Bava Habash, and other male ancestors are only accessible to the men and the internal shrines of Mai Misra (the only female Siddi ancestor) are only accessible to the women. Despite having their own designated spaces of worship, the Siddi women have to consistently contest with androcentric practices to assert their voices and contributions within the Siddi community. This gendered aspect of the spiritual and cultural performances provoked the first author, Dey, to investigate the gender hierarchies that are inherent within the habitual social, cultural, and spiritual performances of the Siddis. This is how the project began, and the counter-resistant strategies of the Siddi women were audio-visually documented.<sup>5</sup> Prior to engaging further with their cultural and gendered practices, we turn to a literature review and discussion of the research methods that have been used to develop this article.

## Literature Review

It is crucial to outline the research that has been conducted around the Siddi cultures in general and the Siddi women in particular, so that the thematic and methodological positionality of this research can be clearly understood. In general, several monographs and edited volumes like *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World* (2003) by Richard Parkhurst and Shihan de S. Jayasurya, *Sidis and Scholars* (2004) by Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Edward A. Alpers, *African Elites in India: Habshi Imarat* (2006) by Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod, *The African Diaspora in India* (2018) by Purnima Mehta Bhatt, *African Rulers and Generals in India* by Kenneth Robbins et al., among other works, unfold the diverse historical, social, cultural, racial, and economic perspectives of the Siddi communities in India, but some of them do so in very overarching and generalized forms. To elaborate further, in these works the histories and cultures of the Siddis have either been presented in an elitist, over-celebratory, and over-romanticized manner by portraying the community as always indulged in celebrating, singing, and dancing, or they have been presented in culturally reductive ways by exclusively highlighting their experiences of poverty and socioeconomic crises. The books *African Elites in India* and *African Rulers and Generals* try to unfold the class and racial fractures within the Siddis in India by exclusively focusing on the narratives of the elite Siddis and negating the importance of other Siddi communities. The book by Parkhurst and de S. Jayasurya unfolds a wide compass of African diaspora communities and cultures across the Indian Ocean World and talks about the Siddi community in a very generic pattern without talking about their diverse social dynamics, power

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<sup>5</sup> To watch the documentary video that the researchers (Dey and Srivastava) created about the Siddi cultural practices of *zikrs* and *dhamals*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaEnwQoGFzE&t=29s>.

structures, or locational attributes. The book by Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers is a rare and phenomenal work that elaborately reflects on the social, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual scholarship of the Siddis in Gujarat, but the narratives are too androcentric in nature.

There are a few research articles that specifically focus on the existential state of the Siddi women in India. “Music and Identity Formation of Siddi Identity in Western India” (2008) and “Ritual Communication” (2017) by Helene Basu, “Mai Misra’s Khicari” (2018) and “Filling the Pot” (2019) by Jazmin Malani Graves, and “Sidi Voices and the Sidi Sayyid Mosque” (2020) by Beheroze Shroff and Sonal Mehta pertinently reflect on the various musical and spiritual roles of women within the Siddi community of Gujarat. In this article, we have referred to and paraphrased these works extensively because they serve as foundations for our arguments. The articles by Basu and Graves reflect on the various culinary practices of the Siddi community in Gujarat and how their culinary practices are interwoven with their musical and spiritual performances. The intersection of food, religion, and music is an essential thematic component of this article. The article by Shroff and Mehta centrally engages with the architectural grandeur of the Siddi Sayid Mosque in Gujarat, the diverse forms of culinary practices of the community as performed inside the mosque, and how the perspectives of architecture, spirituality, and food are related to each other.

However, these scholars’ arguments about food, spirituality, and cultural practices are centered more on the female spiritual leader Mai Misra and less on the sociocultural practices of Siddi women. Also, these works do not engage with the folkloristic narratives that trace the existential patterns of the Siddi women today. This article, as a continuation of the previous works, identifies and documents these gaps in an ethnographic manner and attempts to relate folkloristic narratives with present-day practices.

## **Research Methods**

The research was conducted from October 8-15, 2022, in the cities of Ahmedabad, Jamnagar, and Bhavnagar in Gujarat. The information has been collected through three semi-structured interviews with three women research participants, aged between 55 years and 90 years. Several female participants were approached and only three gave their consent to participate. The participants were approached on the basis of their personal availability and the physical accessibility of the geographical locations. Their responses were documented through audio recordings and notetaking. After the interviews, the recordings and notes were thematically segregated in terms of age, region, gender, and sociocultural perspectives about which the participants spoke. The names of the participants have been included in the article with their permission. We implemented the following research methods to thematically and theoretically develop this article.

### *Critical Diversity Studies*

This method ensures that research observations and arguments are not interpreted and reduced to a singular narrative framework. Melissa Steyn’s article “Critical Diversity Literacy” (2015) observes that within the methodological framework of critical diversity studies “differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist” (p. 379). The research literature consulted to develop this article explores the multiple narratives about the socio-historical origin and the practices of the Siddis in Gujarat, and the diverse perspectives of time and space from whence these narratives emerge. The article has not only taken into consideration the existing literature on the cultural practices of the Siddis, but also oral narratives in the forms of stories and song lines that were

documented during field research in the regions of Ahmedabad, Bhavnagar, and Jamnagar in Gujarat. The critical diversity literacy framework in turn has opened up spaces for methodological practices like guesthood and kin studies.

### *Guesthood*

While researching communities, the method of “guesthood” invites us to treat the community members not as passive data or objects of research, but as active co-researchers. In the article “Guesthood as Ethical Decolonising Research Method” (2003), Graham Harvey observes that the methodology of guesthood is generated by the concern that “our methods, approaches, and outcomes are not only appropriately academic but are also both ethical and decolonising in the experience of those among or with whom we research” (p. 126). During Dey’s fieldwork with the Siddis in Gujarat, he observed the ethical values of guesthood by asking community members open-ended questions like: “Can you please share stories about your spiritual practices?”; “Can you please reflect on your habitual lifestyles?”; “Can you please talk about your music and dance?” in order to analyze their socio-cultural practices in the ways they were described by the community members. The community members also invited first author Dey to actively participate in their songs and dances as a part of their guesthood practices. The practice of guesthood is further complemented by the practice of kin studies.

### *Kin Study*

The interviews that have been conducted with the Siddi community are based on the method of “kin studies” rather than case studies. To understand further, instead of treating the community members as mere information givers and data providers, kin studies invite us to “engage more thoughtfully and reciprocally with land [and water], non-human beings, and people” (Rubis, 2020, p. 816). In a similar way, the conversations with the participants and the theoretical arguments that have emerged out of them engage with the narratives of the human beings on the one side, and the narratives of more-than-human beings like the Indian Ocean, ships, spices, seeds, musical instruments, and culinary objects on the other. With respect to these research methods, the following sections discuss the diverse ways in which the musical and dance practices of the Siddis in Gujarat evolved through diverse transoceanic and trans-religious folklores.

## **Transoceanic and Transreligious Folklore**

The Siddi folklore about Makhaan Devi and the goddess Luxmi exhibit the role of women in shaping the social, cultural, and spiritual identities of the Siddi community.

### *Curse of Makhaan Devi*

As narrated by one of our interviewees, Hameeda Makwa Siddi, an 89-year-old Siddi woman from the Patthar Kuva locality of Ahmedabad, Mai Misra, along with her seven brothers, arrived at the coast of Kuda in Gujarat around the 14<sup>th</sup> century from Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) through the Nubian Valley. They arrived in the evening and so they decided to rest in Kuda. While Mai Misra was taking a rest, the seven brothers strolled along the seaside and one of the brothers was taken captive by Makhaan Devi.<sup>6</sup> When the brothers requested Makhaan Devi to release him, she denied their request and said that she would keep him as her playmate. Disappointed, the seven brothers returned and informed Mai Misra about the incident. Mai Misra walked to Makhan Devi and requested her to release her brother, but Makhan Devi remained adamant. Then, Mai Misra

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<sup>6</sup> A goddess located in the seaside of Kuda and associated with the oceanic Hindu spiritual myths of Gujarat.

came up with an alternate proposal—if Makhan Devi would release her brother, then she would give her company and they would bless and heal their devotees together (Hameeda Makwa Siddi, personal communication, 10 October 2022). This is why Mai Misra and Makhaan Devi's coastal shrines face each other in Kuda. Among all the siblings, it is only Mai Misra's shrines that are always located in the coastal regions of Gujarat. During *Urs* in Bhavnagar, the Siddis first perform Dhamaal at Makhaan Devi's temple and then go to Mai Misra and Bava Gor's shrines to perform. During the spirit possession and healing rituals, an experienced and elderly Siddi woman invites the spirit of Makhaan Devi from the coast of Kuda to the *dargah*<sup>7</sup> of Bava Gor and performs spirit possession rituals. In case the prayers are fulfilled, the Siddis offer cooked fish to Makhaan Devi and then it is brought to the shrine of Mai Misra and Bava Gor. Apart from the folklore of Makhaan Devi and Mai Misra, prominent women characters can also be located in the folklore that centers on the interaction between the goddess Luxmi and Sidi Suzaad.

### *The Goddess Luxmi Running away from the Kingdom of Ahmad Shah Badshah*

As narrated by our interviewee Farida al-Mubrik, a 55-year-old Siddi woman from Bhavnagar and the president of al-Mubrik Charitable Trust, once goddess Luxmi<sup>8</sup> got annoyed with the unnecessary financial extravagance and inequalities in the kingdom of Ahmad Shah Badshah, she decided to leave the kingdom. As she was about to leave, Siddi Suzaad, an African guard, spotted her near the *Teen Darwaza* (three gates)<sup>9</sup> and enquired about the reason for her departure. She said that she was highly disappointed with the state of economic discrepancies in the kingdom and wished to stay no more. Siddi Suzaad requested that she not leave, but she remained adamant. Then, Siddi Suzaad asked her if she could wait for some time and allow Siddi Suzaad to at least inform the king about her departure. Luxmi accepted the proposal and said that she would wait till Suzaad returned, and once he returned Luxmi would take Suzaad along with her. Suzaad accepted the proposal and went to the king. Listening to the entire story, Ahmad Shah Badshah was worried and Suzaad suggested that if Ahmad Shah killed him, then Luxmi would remain in the kingdom because she assured that she would not leave without Suzaad. Ahmad Shah rejected this proposal by arguing that he could not kill Suzaad without any reason. So, Suzaad killed himself by cutting his throat, and in this way, Luxmi remained in the kingdom, and she gave one blessing and one curse to the Siddis. The blessing was that the Siddis will never face any form of financial crisis, and the curse was that they will never be able to accumulate wealth (Farida al-Mubrik, personal communication, 11 October 2022). Today, many Siddis, especially those who are professionally associated with trade and commerce, regard Luxmi as their goddess of wealth and worship her.

The narratives of Makhaan Devi and goddess Luxmi reveal how female spiritual characters contributed towards building transcultural and trans-religious practices of the Siddis today. While narrating these folklores, Hameeda and Farida also shared that, in order to preserve the voices of the Siddi women, they introduce the young children to these stories, so that the identities, contributions, and roles of the Siddi women can be preserved across generations. For instance, before initiating a singing *dhamal* in the shrine of Mai Misra in Ahmedabad, Hameeda narrates these folklores to the young children in musical and rhythmic ways and makes the children repeat after her. While narrating the stories, she also shares how the contemporary values of coexistence

<sup>7</sup> The tomb or shrine of a Muslim saint.

<sup>8</sup> The Hindu goddess of wealth.

<sup>9</sup> *Teen Darwaza* or three gates were one of the many entrances to the kingdom of Ahmad Shah Badshah in Ahmedabad.

between the religiously, racially, and culturally diverse communities in Gujarat and in other parts of India have been shaped by such folklore. Yet, the participation of the Siddi women and the sociocultural contributions of the Siddis in general remain unacknowledged and marginalized in India.

### **Zikrs and Dhamals**

Besides women-centered folklore, the sociohistorical contributions of the Siddi women are also documented and archived in the forms of *zikrs* and *dhamals*. The Siddis in Gujarat are Muslims, and they follow the rituals of Afro-Sufism as can be seen in the case of the Muslims in Sudan, Tanzania, and in some parts of lower Egypt. The rituals of Afro-Sufism interweave indigenous African cultural rituals with traditional Sufi practices. In India, especially in Gujarat, the *zikrs* and *dhamals* of the Siddis amalgamate the eastern African ritualistic practices with local Gujarati ritualistic practices, widely drawn from Hinduism and Islam. For instance, before initiating the performances of *zikrs* and *dhamals*, the Siddis perform a fire ritual inside the mosque, during which they light a fire to seek blessings from Allah and their eastern African spiritual ancestors like Bava Gor, Bava Habas, and Mai Misra. A fire ritual is commonly performed by the Sufi Muslims and the Hindus as a precursor to the main religious rituals. After the fire ritual is performed, the Siddis come together to perform *zikrs* and *dhamals* either in sitting or in dancing positions.

**Figure 1: A Fire Ritual Being Performed in Vajiri Masjid in Jamnagar, Gujarat**



*Photo Courtesy: Sayan Dey*



Let us look into some of the *zikrs* and *dhamals* performed by the Siddis, especially the women Siddis:

## I

*Mai Misra Labey O*  
*Mai Misra Labey O*  
*Mai Misra Labey O*  
*Mai Misra Labey O*

**Meaning:** This *ziker* is sung in Urdu and Swahili Creole languages to remember and invoke the spirit of Mai Misra within the daily existence of the Siddi community. The Swahili Creole word *labey* means to invoke, embrace, and bless. The *ziker* says how the interreligious spiritual values of Mai Misra not only bless the Siddi community, but also the people of Gujarat in general. The *ziker* also shares the painstaking ways in which Mai Misra crossed oceans, forests, and rivers to come to Gujarat and spiritually uplift the Siddis.

## II

*Meri kasti hain, gamey unkey hawaley*  
*Jihne log kahetey hain baghdad waley*  
*Wo shayer Ilahey, wo shayer zamana*  
*Wo suney hardam sabka fasana*

**Meaning:** This *ziker* has been sung in Hindi and Urdu languages and is sung in the praise of the Siddi spiritual leader Mai Misra. The *ziker* means that whatever evil befalls the Siddis, no evil forces can harm the community because they are blessed by Mai Misra. She is always ready to listen to their concerns and offer solutions to them. It is crucial to note the universal spiritual values of Mai Misra and the other spiritual leaders like Bava Gor and Bava Habas. Historically, these spiritual leaders are traced from Ethiopia and the Nubian Valley of Africa; however, they are referred to here as *Baghdad waley*—someone who is from the western Asian city of Baghdad (currently the capital of Iraq). In this *ziker*, they are referred to as *Baghdad waley* because, before coming to Gujarat from Ethiopia, they traveled through the Nubian Valley, Syria, and Baghdad to learn and share their spiritual values.

The women-centric *zikrs* are mostly performed by the women in the sitting position (*Baithaaki Dhamal*) and inside the shrines of Mai Misra. The Siddi women trace and preserve their feminine spiritual ancestry from Mai Misra not just as a cultural performance, but also as a performance of what Sara Ahmed understands as the “feminist killjoy” (2023), which is consistently disrupting and dismantling the romanticized androcentric celebration of Siddi cultures and folklore. Though the *zikrs* thematically focus on Mai Misra, their performances are not just restricted within her shrines. They are performed, especially during festivals like *Urs*, in temples of Makhan Devi and goddess Luxmi across Ahmedabad, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar, and other parts of Gujarat. As shared by interviewee Farida, during *Urs*, in order to remember the trans-religious folklore, Makhan Devi and Luxmi are offered cooked fish and are spiritually invoked through singing and dancing. According to Farida, the Siddis also believe that while performing the songs and dance, the spirits of Mai Misra, Luxmi, and Makhan Devi interact with each other and bless the Siddis. The empowering aspect of this practice for the Siddi women not only lies in the narration, documentation, and performance of folklore, *zikrs*, and *dhamals*, but also the

psychosocial opportunities they can generate for themselves outside the realm of the patriarchy. During the performances, the body movements, voice modulations, and the spiritual connections with Mai Misra and other female spiritual characters empower the Siddi women and eventually function as agencies by enabling them to carve out cultural and economic spaces of their own (Sergeant & Himonides, 2014; Oliver & Risner, 2017; Dey, 2023b). Apart from performing during spiritual events, like their men counterparts, today the Siddi women are invited to perform in local cultural festivals, dance festivals, and marriage parties.

Rahmat Ben Kasam Bhai al-Mubrik (90 years old) from Bhavnagar remembered that during her younger days, the women were only allowed to perform during the rituals of Mai Misra. However, with the evolution of Siddi welfare organizations like Sidi Goma-Al Mubrik Charitable Trust, several possibilities for the Siddi women have been created to voice their opinions and concerns. Farida, the chairperson of the Sidi Goma trust, pointed out that the process of encouraging, sensitizing, and supporting the Siddi women to be socially, culturally, and economically self-dependent is complicated by challenges like resistance from parents, in-laws, and husbands, lack of access to education, early marriages and pregnancies, and others. Despite these challenges, the trust provides emotional and legal support to the Siddi women to defy patriarchal dictatorship and allows women to actively participate in cultural and economic activities. Besides dance and music shows, the Siddi women also work as bankers, office helpers, social workers, maids, and storekeepers. For socioeconomically underprivileged Siddi girls and women, the trust takes care of their financial needs to the maximum possible extent.

The following sections will highlight this project's various challenges and limitations and elaborate on the ways in which the performances of *zikrs* in the shrines of Mai Misra function as sites of female empowerment—physically, culturally, and psychosocially.

### **Research Limitations**

While conducting this research work, we encountered a number of challenges like restricted timelines for field works, limited literature on Siddi women, poor access to different geographical locations due to bad weather and poor road conditions, and lack of consent from many women to participate. Due to these challenges, the narratives that have been shared in this article were collected from only three participants, spread across three regions over a seven-day period. A longer timeline and a larger participant group would most likely have generated a more diverse array of perspectives regarding the transoceanic feminine folklore and gender empowerment of the Siddi women in Gujarat. Except for a few works by Helene Basu, Beheroze Shroff, and Jasmine Graves that have been published quite some time ago, there are hardly any recently documented or published works available on Siddi women. The limited literature on contemporary Siddi women and the Siddis in general has restricted this article's ability to refer to contemporary works. The limited participation from Siddi women may have been due to their discomfort to verbally communicate with a male researcher (Dey). In the future, women researchers may have better access to these spaces.

### **Shrines and Spirit Possession as Agencies of Female Empowerment: A Kin Study on Mai Misra Worship**

As a part of the research method of kin studies, we visited two shrines of Mai Misra in Ahmedabad and Bhavnagar. During the visit, we conducted interviews with three women: Farida al-Mubrik (Bhavnagar), Rahamat Ben Kasam Bhai al-Mubrik (Bhavnagar), and Hameeda Makwa Siddi (Ahmedabad). It is important to note that these conversations took place outside the interior

shrine complex<sup>10</sup> because, according to the spiritual principles of Mai Misra, men are not allowed to visit the interior shrine.<sup>11</sup> Rahamat Ben, a 90-year-old woman and mother of Farida, mentioned that during spiritual event performances like *Urs*,<sup>12</sup> including Mai Misra's *zikrs* and *dhamals*, the men are not allowed inside the shrine until the *khichdi*<sup>13</sup> is prepared (personal communication, 13 October 2022). While cooking, the Siddi women simultaneously sing *zikrs* and perform *dhamals* of Mai Misra.

A further detail of the ritual is that the Siddi women clean and decorate the shrines of Mai Misra before the festival. Unlike the men who clean the shrines and mosques to purify them from the presence of supposedly impure women (menstruating and pregnant women), the Siddi women clean the shrines to maintain spiritual integrity and hygiene. While cleaning and decorating, no adult men are allowed to enter the shrine. However, there may be male helpers who must remain outside the shrine and assist the women with their needs. After cleaning and decorating, the women start preparing *khichdi* for Mai Misra, and the process of cooking takes place behind closed doors of the inner sanctum. Only a group of elderly Siddi women, who are collectively identified by the community of Siddi women as spiritual healers, can be involved in the preparatory process. It is believed that the preparation of *khichdi* is not only a culinary process, but a spiritual and gendered process as well, during which the Siddi women communicate with Mai Misra and share their prayers, concerns, agonies, and crises, which they often fail to express within their patriarchal family and community spaces. The research participants shared that as some women cook the food, other women sing and dance to invite the spirit of Mai Misra, who is believed to arrive and sit with them, interact with them, consume the food, and bless them. This whole process often gets reflected through the ritual of spirit possession which serves as a crucial aspect of Mai Misra worship for the Siddi women. After the preparation of the *khichdi*, it is first consumed by the Siddi women who prepared it, and then it is distributed to other Siddi women. Once the Siddi women finish eating, only then are the Siddi men allowed to eat. Apparently, the approach of the women having the *khichdi* first may appear hierarchical and exclusionary in nature, but according to the spiritual folklore of Mai Misra, during her worship women should be given foremost value and importance, and all the spiritual procedures should be exclusively led by the women. This exclusive participation of women allows them to generate interactive spaces of their own that exist outside the surveillance and dictatorship of the patriarchy through music, food, and conversations. This space is not only physically and culturally empowering but is psychosocially therapeutic as well because the narratives and practices are not imprisoned within the androcentric knowledge enclaves of the Siddis and are "continually shifting" in nature (Basu, 2008, p. 164).

Like the closed-door preparation of *khichdi*, the spirit possession is another ritual that allows Siddi women to have physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual spaces of their own far away from the interventions and interruptions of the patriarchy. The possession of the spirit of Mai Misra may take place at any point in time during the *Urs*, either within closed-door private sanctums or in public spaces. However, apart from the possessed woman and her fellow healers, no one else has the right to know about the experience and the contents of the communication that takes place between the possessed and Mai Misra. Also, according to the Siddi cultural and

<sup>10</sup> Every Siddi shrine has a complex within which the shrine is located inside a chamber. The big complex is referred to as the exterior complex, and the chamber is referred to as the interior complex.

<sup>11</sup> To understand further how *zikrs* and *dhamals* are performed inside the shrines of Mai Misra, refer to the following link: <https://youtu.be/1tw2hokk7DM>.

<sup>12</sup> A festival to celebrate the death anniversary of Sufi saints.

<sup>13</sup> *Khichdi* is a culinary preparation where rice and lentils are cooked together with different spices.

spiritual practices, once a Siddi woman becomes a healer, she has every authority to stay on her own and live according to her own principles, without following the dictates and mandates of patriarchal family systems. Hameeda is a spiritual healer who has her own one-room house in Ahmedabad. Prior to being a spiritual healer, she stayed with her husband and in-laws and complied with the household chores that a married woman is expected to perform within patriarchal social systems. Once she was recognized by the Siddi women as a spiritual healer, her gender positionality within the community underwent a paradigmatic change. Unlike in her prior life, her voice and perspectives about the welfare of the Siddi community became highly valued and abided by all. She is also revered for her knowledge about the Siddi folklore and the way she teaches the children and fellow elders about these on a daily basis.

The empowering experiences of the women within the shrines and other spaces across the Siddi community and outside may not be sufficient to improve their social, economic, and gendered conditions, but the resistance needs to begin somewhere. Building physical, emotional, and intellectual spaces of their own through varied forms of spiritual, cultural, and economic practices is surely an efficient way to begin the process. These cultural practices by the Siddi women also remind us that the “archive[s] for remembering the past” (Basu, p. 168) do not belong to men alone. The Siddi women also have a lot to perform, practice, and share about the social, cultural, and spiritual evolution of the Siddis.

The reluctance of many Siddi women to participate in the research study can be understood as a systematic methodology of denying, interrogating, and bulldozing the patriarchally constructed research methods of allowing men to intervene in women-centered knowledge spaces and extract knowledge from women through fake promises of socioeconomic empowerment and gender equity. On multiple occasions, the Siddi men exploit the talent of the Siddi women by involving them in sewing dresses for cultural events and making musical instruments, but their contributions are hardly acknowledged. In such a circumstance, the acts of refusal (Dey, 2023c) by Siddi women are essential and powerful. However, these resistances often prove to be fragile due to a lack of collective realization, especially amongst the young Siddi women, who are more interested in the so-called modern technocentric systems of knowledges that will fetch them jobs and financial benefits, rather than on their ancestral sociocultural perspectives. Nonetheless, these “fragile threads” (Subramaniam, 1997, p. 762) of resisting Siddi androcentric narratives function as an “embodied sociocultural process” (Kabir, 2021, p. 1587) and serve as a form of symbolical and historical continuity (Graves, 2018, p. 1) of the resistances by indigenous women across the planet against the obliteration of their voices, values, and knowledge. The global relevance of the counter-resistance strategies of the Siddi women has been outlined in the concluding section of the article.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Siddi Identities through Women**

The social and cultural narratives about the challenges and resistances by the Siddi women in Gujarat that have been discussed in this article widely ties to the resistances by indigenous women in Africa and other parts of the world against the patriarchal patterns of indigenous societies (Kuumba, 2006; Bah & Barasa, 2021). The “legitimation of social relations of inequality and the struggle to transform them” (Alvarez et al., 1998, p. 12) as portrayed through the cultural and spiritual resistances of the Siddi women are also historically located within the struggles of aboriginal women for gaining social, economic, and property rights (Suzack, 2010). These women include the indigenous women of Turtle Island who wanted to protect their feminist “traditional teachings” (Baskin, 2020, p. 2083), the Guatemalan Maya K’iche women who wanted to protect

their lands against ecological abuse by men from their communities working closely with private organizations (Tun et al., 2017), and many others.

The contexts, intentions, and provocations of these struggles and resistances may be different, but they all point to the necessity of bringing the stories and folklore of indigenous women to the forefront, in order to demonopolize and decentralize the patriarchal and heteronormative “his-stories” (Dey, 2019). The stories about the Siddi women are no longer restricted within the geographical boundaries of India, but have traveled across the globe through their music, songs, handicrafts, and artworks.<sup>14</sup> Women scholars and activists like Beheroze Shroff, Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, and Jasmin Graves, with the assistance of their respective work institutions and community organizations in the United States, have sponsored the travel of several Siddi women to showcase their social, cultural, and aesthetic practices. However, these initiatives are not enough, and male domination of Siddi musical and dance performances can be observed across national and international platforms. Though women have started performing, their performances are locally confined to marriages and cultural programs that can be strictly supervised and censored by Siddi men. Additionally, many Siddi women are still expected by their husbands, partners, and in-laws to remain confined to homes and engage with family and domestic duties, rather than working and empowering themselves. Apart from the focused conversations with the research participants, we also informally conversed with other men and women from the Siddi community. While a lot of Siddi men defended their patriarchal mindset as an attitude of love, care, and protection for their women partners, a lot of Siddi women lamented about how they have to give up their passion in order to fit into the ideal women image of the Siddi patriarchal structure.

Despite these concerns, the cultural and spiritual performances of Siddi women function as a strong metaphor for systemic and epistemic resistance against the prevalent patriarchal systems of knowledge production in India and other parts of the world. The arguments in this article also open up avenues to rethink and reinterpret the histories, cultures, and societies of the Siddis in India through a feminist lens. Hopefully, this article will serve as the initiating point of redocumenting Siddi histories in a more diverse, critical, complex, entangled, interrogative, and interwoven manner, without further glorifying androcentric narratives.

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<sup>14</sup> The aspects of handicrafts and artworks as tools of creative resistance against the patriarchal forms of Siddi histories and cultures can be seen within the Siddi women of Karnataka and Maharashtra.

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