

African Diasporan  
Communities across  
South Asia



# African Diasporan Communities across South Asia



AFRO-SOUTH ASIA IN THE  
GLOBAL AFRICAN DIASPORA

VOLUME 2

Edited by  
Omar H. Ali, Kenneth X. Robbins,  
Beheroze Shroff, and Jazmin Graves

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Ethiopian and East African Studies Project and  
Ahmedabad Sidi Heritage and Educational Center, India

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Cover Image: Detail of photograph of Siddi women performing  
*goma/dhamāl* in front of Bava Gor chilla (local representation of the  
original tomb of the Sufi saint) during Bava Gor Urs festival, Diu.  
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*This book is dedicated to*  
*Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh,*  
*heroine of the First Indian War for Independence,*  
*Malik Ambar of Ahmadnagar,*  
*defender of the Deccan,*  
*Dr. Yusuf Hamied,*  
*the Indian who has saved millions of African lives,*  
*and all the Afro-South Asian communities of today*

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1. INTRODUCTION ..... 9

INTRODUCTION

AFRO-SOUTH ASIA IN THE GLOBAL AFRICAN DIASPORA

Omar H. Ali, Kenneth X. Robbins, Beheroze Shroff, Jazmin Graves 11

2. CONNECTIONS WITH AFRICA: PAST ..... 23

SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE<sup>1</sup>

Purnima Mehta Bhatt.....25

THE KUTCHI MERCHANTS AND THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE IN  
THE PERSIAN GULF—AN APPRAISAL: 1807–1905

Yuvaraj D. Prasad and Miles L. Bradbury.....49

3. RELIGION IN AFRO-SOUTH ASIA ..... 65

BAVA GOR AND THE CREATION OF SIDI IDENTITY

THE CONTEXT

Lotika Varadarajan.....67

CHARISMATIC AFTERLIVES OF AFRICAN SAINTS AND MARTYRS:  
SIDI SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES IN GUJARAT

Neelima Jeychandran.....77

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE LYRE:

A TRANSOCEANIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE SIDI SUFI DEVOTIONAL  
TRADITION OF WESTERN INDIA

Jazmin Graves.....93

KAPPIRI:

A FAITH BUILT AROUND THE ‘FAITHLESS’

Bonny Thomas.....111

<b>AFRICAN INDIAN (SIDDI) PENTECOSTALS: IDENTITY FORMATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA</b>	
<i>Pashington Obeng</i> .....	123

<b>THE MANGHOPIR MELA OR SHEEDI MELA OF THE SHEEDIS OF KARACHI</b>	
<i>Rumana Husain</i> .....	143

<b>THE SHIDI COMMUNITY OF KARACHI: A BRIEF PICTORIAL INTRODUCTION</b>	
<i>Jürgen Wasim Frembgen</i> .....	153

#### **4. CULTURE AND SOCIAL ACTION IN AFRO-SOUTH ASIA ..... 169**

<b>WEDDING CUSTOMS OF THE SIDIS OF GUJARAT</b>	
<i>Abdulaziz Lodhi</i> .....	171

<b>SOULFUL STITCHING, SOCIAL ACTION: PATCHWORK QUILTS BY AFRICAN INDIANS (SIDDIS) OF NORTHERN KARNATAKA-INDIA</b>	
<i>Henry John Drewal</i> .....	181

<b>TO SOW AND TO SEW: SIDI WOMEN FARMERS AND QUILTERS IN UTTARA KANNADA, KARNATAKA, INDIA</b>	
<i>Sara Khurshid Khan</i> .....	199

<b>FAQIRS OR COSMOPOLITANS? SIDIS AT THE CROSSROADS DURING THE UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT</b>	
<i>Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy</i> .....	217

<b>THE ROLE OF THE EKLAVYA FOUNDATION: A REPORT ON THE SIDI LITERACY PROJECT IN RATANPUR, GUJARAT</b>	
<i>Sonal Mehta</i> .....	227

<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b> .....	243
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<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	249
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<b>INDEX</b> .....	251
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# To Sow and To Sew: SIDI WOMEN FARMERS AND QUILTERS IN UTTARA KANNADA, KARNATAKA, INDIA

Sara Khurshid Khan

I first met Siddi women with Henry J Drewal when he lived among them in 2004. Drewal, on an American Institute of Indian Studies fellowship, was advancing his research among the Siddi quilting community (Drewal 2004, 2008, 2013). Together and with our colleagues,<sup>1</sup> we helped facilitate a Siddi Quilting Cooperative (Faber-Cullen 2016). While researching the Ayurvedic traditional healing system from 2001–2005, I also began to learn of the Siddi women’s daily lives.

I returned to Uttara Kannada to formally learn from Siddi women about their farming and day labor lives as a Senior Research Fulbright Scholar in 2014–15. This research is part of a larger body of ongoing multimedia work I am creating on women farmers, including a series of photo exhibits in 2015 and 2016 along with animated short films narrated by a super shero.<sup>2</sup> I interviewed several local women about their farming and labor practices, present and past, with the long-term community-

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1 This included the following individuals over the course of thirteen years: Henry J Drewal, Sarah K Khan, Meeta Mastani, Pashington Obeng, and Bani Singh.

2 Photo Exhibitions: “Farmers: Past, Present, Future” Madison Children Museum, Madison WI 2018; “In/Visible Portraits of Indian Women Farmers and Spice Porters of Old Delhi,” Kimmel Gallery, New York University, 2018. Animated Short Films: “The Indian Women Farmers Series Introduction,” “Bowling to No One,” and more forthcoming.

1. (opposite) Clara at home.  
© sarahkkhan.

organizing and translation skills of the intrepid Sister Leena D’Costa from the Sisters of the Holy Cross.<sup>3</sup> For this article, I give brief overviews of the state of women and agriculture, the Indian agrarian crisis, Indian women farmers, and then focus on three Siddi women farmers: An elder woman, Clara, who no longer farms; a younger woman, Jennatbi, who engages in day labor and has a small garden; and a full-time farmer, Rameejabi, who has farmed her entire life on several acres.

## WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Agriculture would not exist without women, especially in the Global South. Women’s traditional ecological knowledge and their profound contributions to all aspects of food production are dismissed or devalued as menial.<sup>4</sup> Despite the necessity of their many roles, women farmers remain hidden and under-compensated.<sup>5</sup>

Editors Fletcher and Kubik<sup>6</sup> present broad and general challenges women face in agriculture. These obstacles are not new revelations to women farmers. For example, women lack access to resources and infrastructures. This results in a significant loss of productivity. Women farmers also lack household decision-making power. Gender biases persist in policy making and program development. Leadership building skills are discouraged. South Asian farmers confront a unique set of obstacles.

## AGRARIAN CRISIS IN INDIA

According to P. Sainath,<sup>7</sup> a “rural reporter” who has written widely on Indian rural farming and founded the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI 2017), the agrarian crisis must be addressed immediately. Sainath

.....  
3 Sister Leena D’Costa is a member of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. They are one of the only service organizations in the area, of any denomination. They provide education for girls and a nurse-run health clinic. The Sisters’ commitment to all Siddis has been invaluable for our work among Muslim and Catholic Siddi quilters and farmers.

4 Counihan 1998 pages 1-10.

5 Shiva and Zweifel.

6 Fletcher and Kubik.

7 Sainath 2017a.

reports that Indian farmer suicides crossed the three hundred thousand mark in 2014. Reports by Sainath and Weingarten indicate that the suicides are a media flashpoint.<sup>8</sup> Indian farmers are protesting in Delhi from across the country. Their immediate demands focus on government promises for a Minimal Support Price and loan debt relief.<sup>9</sup> But the roots of the farmers' suicides crisis began long ago. Kothari and Srivastava argue the primary reasons for the ongoing disaster is a cruel neglect of small farmers and agriculture by Indian governments since the mid-1980s, along with severe ecological degradation.<sup>10</sup> The authors, and others, maintain that the corporatization and industrialization of agriculture, and the dispossession of peasants, are at the core of the crisis.<sup>11</sup>

## INDIAN WOMEN FARMERS

In India, the portion of the female population in the agricultural labor force has remained steady at just over thirty percent. Among the female working population, almost seventy percent of employed South Asian women work in agricultural, as opposed to the industry or service sectors.<sup>12</sup> Indian women farmers number nearly ninety-eight million and they fare worse than their male counterparts.<sup>13</sup> Newer challenges have emerged due to the feminization of agriculture.<sup>14</sup> They survive despite the challenges of the absent male—due to male migration for work and/or farmer suicides, substantial debt, limited land ownership, and increasing food insecurity. Most of the labor is manual, occurs within the family context, and results in little remuneration. Women farmers are relegated to the role of unpaid family worker without access to independent income, or they are agricultural laborers receiving lower wages than male laborers.<sup>15</sup> To highlight the emergency, a delegation of women farmers protested, including many widows. The women traveled

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8 Sainath 2017a and Weingarten. Data compilation began in 1995. Since 2014, however, farmer suicide data has been reclassified to “Other” making it appear that there has been a dramatic decline. Recent reports reveal increased farmer suicides in the USA.

9 Pillai.

10 Kothari and Srivastava

11 Sainath 2017a and Shiva.

12 Fletcher and Kubik FAO 2010-11.

13 Munshi.

14 Slavchevska.

15 Fletcher and Kubik, Sainath 2013, Dashora.

to Delhi in November 2017 to advocate for their rights at the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, with baskets of produce to meet the Commissioner for Agricultural Costs and Prices.<sup>16</sup>

## SIDDI FARMERS IN UTTARA KANNADA, KARNATAKA, SOUTHERN INDIA

A long history of Siddi invisibility persists in remote Uttara Kannada, according to Prasad (2005, 2008). Most Siddi communities in this region live close to forests and far from bigger cities (approximately twenty to twenty-five thousand). The Siddis in this region are descendants of enslaved Africans brought to Goa by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Gradually, they escaped into the Western Ghats region and engaged in wage labor and forest produce. They also enriched lands through years of farming, only to be pushed off the parcels by land owners once the property improved. Siddi farmers, women and men, face additional challenges because of their scheduled status, tribe, caste, religion, and race. Siddis occupy a status somewhat comparable to untouchables (*Dalits*). Their position is not within the caste system, but is affected by skin color associations with lower castes. Also, they tend to be viewed as outsiders or “foreigners,” even though their ancestors were brought to Goa at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Not until 2003 did Siddis fight and receive Scheduled Tribal Status. This allowed them to access government support for health and education. Based on informal communication with Siddis and advocates since 2003, many report that government schemes for Scheduled Tribes, including the Siddis, have been rife with bribery and corruption. Confronting layers of discrimination, Siddi women farmers face all the challenges Indian women farmers encounter across India, and more. Silenced and ignored, it is time to hear their voices and share their thoughts and concerns.

Siddi families from Mainalli, Gunjavati, and Kendalgiri engage in seasonal farm, forest, and migrant labor. While interviewing Siddi women farmers and quilters (Jan–Feb 2015), I noted women remarking that some members were not present because families were engaged in seasonal sugar cane cutting. Other women stated that some male family members now undertook contract migrant labor (construction and masonry work) in the Middle East. This results in longer durations of family separation, and more responsibility for Siddi women.

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16 The Logical Indian Crew.



## CLARA

Clara is a fifty-seven year old woman from Jayanagar, Mainalli. Mainalli has approximately one hundred and fifty Siddi families of which about a third are Catholics. Clara leans on the wall in the front of her home, with her grandson hovering close by her side, and quietly recounts to us her background. She did not know her grandfather. Her father spoke mixed Konkani, Marathi and Kannada. Clara grew up near Haliyal and her first language was Konkani, spoken in Goa and south along the Western (Konkan) coast of India. Born in Kabacitkop, where her ancestral family home stands among eight Siddi houses, she reminded us that she has lived in forested areas of north Karnataka her entire life.

Growing up and after marriage, Clara engaged in all types of day labor jobs: cutting trees, collecting stones from dams and loading them for transport, or feeding them into machines to break them down. In the summer season, she would collect bamboo from the Baghoti forest (approx. 15-20 km away from her home today) for the paper mills. After her marriage in Sirsi, she engaged in seasonal labor like tree cutting, collecting cloves and teak flowers from the forest, and farm labor on cotton plantations.

2. Clara at Siddi Women Quilting Cooperative Meeting.  
© sarahkhan.

Today, Clara grows a few vegetables outside her home. She points out that there is garlic, which she received from her neighbor, Govinda. She has ginger that was gifted her. She planted tomatoes, eggplant, and radishes because the seeds were available. She used to grow much more (over fifteen types of produce) but hand watering regularly proved too much. “In the past, I used to sell potatoes, yams, another yam, bottle gourd, greens, and take to the Yellapur market ... [But] there is no strong fence. No bamboo to build the fences. That is why I do not feel like cultivating anything. I grow it, it gets eaten.” She added that access to water is a hindrance. Monkeys and untied village cows ravage her crops. Since the marriage of her son eight years ago, she farms less.

## JENNATBI



Jennatbi greets us as we walk up the open road to her home in Gunjavati village. She sits on the stoop outside and is framed by the faded blue paint behind her on the walls. With her booming, sharp voice, she calls out and gestures for us to enter. She pulls me in to see her latest quilt. She, like the other women, quilts in-between farming, day labor, and household work. Then we head to her kitchen. The dark room brightens with metal reflections. Perfectly ordered, metal dishes shine in their appropriate place. We walk out of the kitchen backdoor and up the hill. We trudge past a partially completed *pukka* building. We enter her semi-enclosed garden filled with bananas, coconut and lime trees, flowers, and some bamboo. We sit. Jennatbi talks.

Jennatbi is forty years old, married with one son and two daughters. Her grandfather was from Kavalwada, just north of Gunjavati. That was the first place he lived. Her mother was also from Kavalwada. Now her parents are settled in Kendalgiri. When asked about her connection to Siddi history, she remarked,

We have no knowledge! Siddi people, from where we have come, where we have lived, where we were born, they left us. We do not know. I knew my grandfather, not my great grandfather. I still have my father, mother, brothers, I have all my family. Half of my family, three sisters, are in Haliyal. We come and go.

### 3. Jennatbi in her garden.

© henryjdrewal.



With one daughter married to a construction worker, and another about to be married, Jennatbi laments that her husband and children did not want to educate her daughters.

If she studied more, she could have had her own profession. Her father stopped her studies. I said, 'let her study more.' Father was not interested in sending her. Even my children did not want her to go to school. If she had studied, it would have been better than sitting at home. Now we can't send her to school. A marriage proposal has already come. He is from Haliyal and is a construction worker.

Her husband gets occasional work. Her son is a migrant laborer and works for his brother-in-law. Along with thirty other men he travels to Maharashtra, earning 550 INR a day. If he makes his own food, he gets an additional 50 INR. He sends the money home. Jennatbi notes,

4. Jennatbi and her husband.  
© sarahkhan.

He does not keep one cent. He visits home every three months, more or less. He does not want to leave when he is here, and he does not come back quickly.

Based on several interviews, I learned that parents lamented they can no longer control their teenagers, especially about staying in school. One rice farmer said his son threatened to run away or hurt himself if the father insisted he stay in school. Out of fear, the father relented. Jennatbi echoed these same sentiments,

We cannot force the children to study, my son decided he will work. Can I force him to study? If he had harmed himself, I would have lost my only son. Don't you know?

Three years ago, her son helped her put her backyard garden together.

I created this because my son brought one [sweet] banana sapling. He dug and planted the sapling. I have since planted six coconut saplings that someone came to sell for 250 INR each. Three have gone and three are remaining. There is a lime plant, and we get plenty of limes. We make pickles and enjoy. Some locals come and buy for 1-2 rupees. Otherwise the garden is for home use ... It's good. Instead of buying them, better to have them from the garden to eat. Why should we purchase everything? No? When it is ours, anytime we can have it.

Jennatbi, like Clara, demonstrates knowledge about food and farming. In her garden, she improves the soil with “manure, and all the banana leaf waste, nothing more than that. Cow manure, not goat manure.” She adds, “For the paddy field, yes, we buy [government fertilizer]. If left over, I use it here [in the garden].” Sister Leena recounted that throughout the area, among farmers, the government has supplied chemical fertilizers for free, generously, to create a dependence.

Like Clara, she contends with poor fencing, the labor of hauling water, and animals getting in the garden.

Each plant requires one pot of water ... If I carry water for all these plants, I will die! Carrying from that far, don't you agree, sister? If my son is here, he waters, my husband also waters. Everybody eats, everybody waters.

Look, see all those plants and flowers, the goats eat them all up. We tie the old saris [as a fence], even those, the goats tear and get in ... They leave nothing ... I am disappointed, and I have stopped watering the plants.





I want to earn a living, that is what is on my mind. But I had no interest in studying, that is why I am in this situation now. The children taught me how to sign my signature. The only thing I think about is eating, working and looking after the children.

Over her lifetime until today, Jennatbi engages in day labor. She participates in farm work in the fields, plowing, sowing, weeding, and cutting paddy, and working in other gardens. “Any work that is offered, I do. If they call me to clean the garden to weed, I go there for the entire day.”

Brickmaking, according to Sister Leena, is a job that Muslims undertake in the region. Jennatbi and her family used to make bricks, even before her marriage.

Our customers were like us. Village locals, not people from outside. Those who needed, they came and bought. If someone needs 10,00 bricks, then we fire them and sell.

5. Jennatbi at SWQC.  
© sarahkhan.

Today, Jennatbi prefers brickmaking because the pay is better.

If anyone calls me to make brickmaking I go. The wage is 200 INR versus 150 INR for farm work. Yes, it is more money because you must pick the bricks up, carry, make the mud paste, and make brick molds.

But she says,

The Forest Department has put so many restrictions on collecting wood, requesting 10-20,000 INR for forest access. Don't we need wood to fire the bricks in the kiln? We used to make them, now we have stopped. The Forest Department does not allow us to get wood. Even for the fuel for the house, we must pay a yearly fee. That is why we have stopped making bricks. Otherwise we would have continued.... Now we eat and sit in the house quietly, we won't spend that much for forest access.

## RAMEEJABI

Rameejabi lives and works in Kendalgiri. She and her family own four acres of land. Seasonally, she farms an additional three acres that belong to her in-laws, depending on their needs and abilities. We met her on a clear, hot day. We walked through her fields, passed by large piles of yellowed brown hay, and stepped between ordered rows. First, she took us to see the small river from where, due to a broken water pump, she carries water to her ordered fields. Then we sat near a lone tree that broke the expanse of her fields, and talked about her lifetime of farming.

She swept her hand in the direction of drooping okra saplings. Water was the first thing she mentioned. "We planted this okra. There is no water, and they have died. How much water can I carry? I must water all these plants every evening from 4-6 pm." Her husband, a machine repairman and farmer, is occupied getting the pump fixed. The crops and saplings suffer despite three people working full-time.

Without water, the plants have faded away. They are dried, still I water a little so their life does not fade. A dying man, we save with water, no? That is our situation. One year we harvest, another year we do not. That is the reality of farming.



In the most ideal conditions farming is a gamble. Rameejabi states the recent challenges she faces such as too much rain, the present drought, and labor problems. There is an enormous time commitment and intense harvests. Gauging when and how to apply the fertilizer, and the time for weeding, cutting and removal, all affect productivity. The list of crops she grows includes various greens, cotton, paddy (rice), horse gram, green gram, chickpeas, tomatoes, okra, radishes, and fenugreek. She sells them at the weekly market in Mundgod. They save some for their own consumption. She reminds us, “In the village, plenty of people buy our produce like bunches of greens or radishes.” During our visits (Feb 2015) she was growing pulses, green gram, and horse gram. She was ready to harvest and thresh the pulses. In the coming month of June, monsoon, she would cultivate the cotton and rice (paddy).

Versed in all the nuances of farming vegetables, paddy, and cotton, she applies cow manure in the early stages of planting. Those who work the land gather and process the raw cow manure first, in a pit, where it dries. Later, once the plants mature, they apply government fertilizer.

6. Rameejabi at SWQC.  
© sarahkhan.

She communicates the vagaries of farming, due to weather and changes in the climate. Last season, she details,

For 500 INR, we had bought a packet of green gram seeds. We planted, and it rained so much. The field was flooded. It all died. We had to buy seeds again. And the packet price went up to 700 INR. We bought seven to eight seed packets equal about a half quintal. Whatever we planted, it grew. It did not die. We'll get only one quintal on green gram.

The cotton investment follows a similar trajectory. Rameejabi remarks,

Six years ago, farming was profitable for us. We grew a lot of cotton. From one acre, we used to get 50,000 INR income for twenty quintals, thirty quintals of cotton. This year, out of three seed packets, we got only three quintals. We did not even cover our weeding costs. Where is the money we spent on seeds? Nothing, no profit.

To further exacerbate the challenges when it is time to sell, local middlemen intervene and determine the cotton price. Here is how Rameejabi describes her situation that is representative of many,

First, we planted the seeds in the fields. It rained too much. All the cotton died. And we planted again. Normally we get 50,000 INR for the production. This year we will probably get 16-17,000 INR. In the past, outsiders from Bombay and Pune used to come and buy our cotton. We got a high rate from them, 5500, 6000, up to 7000 INR. Our local middlemen stopped them. They said, 'We do not have enough cotton, why are you coming here?' So, they stopped all the outsider buyers from coming. Outsiders do not come here anymore. And from the local middleman, now we get 4000 for a quintal in our village.

A similar challenge exists for the paddy harvest. Though the harvest is good, the market rate is not good.

Loans and debts dictate much of Rameejabi's decisions. And she manages multiple debts. She has loans from a self-help group, a farmers' society, and a money lender. The self-help groups tend to have low or no-interest loans. But the money lender has a fifty percent fee. Recounted Rameejabi,

7. Rameejabi and others walking on land she farms.  
© sarahkhan.

A money lender was pressuring us to pay back by selling land. I sold the land to another, and cleared that debt. I



got money from one to pay another. Now other people are farming that land. There are tamarind trees there, and we cultivated cotton. It was good land.

When queried about how she will pay back others, she says,

That is in God's hands. What to do? Every day the money lender comes. 'When will you return the loan?' He asks. This I'll harvest and make a payment. That I'll harvest and make another payment. That is what I say. Now I've cultivated green gram, now I'll harvest and pay him. I planted cotton, I say, when I harvest, I'll repay. Horse gram, I'll harvest and pay. If we do not repay within six to seven months, the interest increases. Some moneylenders take only the interest agreed upon, others charge more, when late. I cannot do anything, it is of no use. As each situation comes, we must deal with it. We can't leave the village and go. If we leave, who will take care of these fields? Our elders did this.



The cost of living increases. She remarks, “In the past, field and home the expenses were few. Children were small and they used to go to nursery, others went to village schools. Whatever clothes we provided they wore. Now the children go out, they want to be dressed like others.”

To offset the debt and vagaries of farming in an increasingly unpredictable climate, Rameejabi plans to make bricks. She had already collected the field mud. Sister Leena asked, “What about your local forester.” Rameejabi replied, “We take wood here and there but if we ask the forester, he will not allow. We get fined, even if we cut trees on our own land.”

## THE WAY FORWARD

8. Rameejabi and her niece  
surveying the land.  
© sarahkkhan.

Siddi women farmers face numerous challenges. Many challenges stem from the unpredictability of farming because of the climate and climate changes. This is the situation everywhere. Siddis farmers from Karnataka, however, work from a history of multiple dis-possession:

forced from the continent of Africa, to Goa, into the Western Ghats, to forest dwellings, then dispossessed again of their forest settlements and small farms, robbed of their displaced lands at the margins of the forest by rich and corrupt landowners, and now forced to occupy dry plains and less rich soil. The promised opportunities that arrive with Scheduled Tribe status since 2003 are slow, and laden with corruption every step of the way. And yet, they survive.

The three Siddi women farmers in these interviews display agro-ecological knowledge derived from family history and decades of labor. Siddis of Karnataka, despite arriving enslaved and empty-handed to the sub-continent, were not empty-headed. They came with a wealth of cultural knowledge. The women embody and utilize this knowledge of all aspects of food production, especially that derived from living close to the land and the forests. They are also acutely aware of the limitations and obstacles: economic, political and social. Obeng (2003) argues that empires cast ordinary subjects simplistically. Rarely is the agency of ordinary people and their cultural energy, especially African Indians, considered a valuable and important subject for systematic and ongoing research. On the contrary, I believe along with long-time scholar of Karnataka Siddis, Pashington Obeng that Siddi women farmers are important, resilient actors, and contribute to the complex agro-ecological Indian landscapes. This essay only begins to reveal the deep and rich wisdom Siddi women possess that has helped them and their families survive under the most oppressive circumstances for more than four hundred years. The strength and endurance of Siddi women have much to teach us. Let us take the stories and struggles of Clara, Jennatbi and Rameejabi as an opportunity to go deeper.<sup>17</sup>



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17 This research would not have been possible without the support of a Senior Research Fulbright-Nehru Fellowship 2014–15. Since 2001, my affiliation and collaborative research work with The Transdisciplinary Institute (and The Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions) in Bangalore, Karnataka has been a source of learning and collaboration. And, of course none of this work would exist without the dedication and resilience of the Sisters of the Holy Cross and every women in The Siddi Women Quilting Cooperative. They continue to sew and sow. All photos by Sarah K Khan except Fig. 3 (Henry J Drewal).

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