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## ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-47



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## MAHE, NGO train Siddis for shot at Olympics



Bridges of Sports (BOS), a non-profit focusing on providing access to children to learn, play and excel in athletics, have worked with communities in Karnataka, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. It has trained over 1800 children in athletics.

Started with the support of few Indian Olympians, the organization is supported by Infosys Foundation, Micheal and Susan Dell Foundation, IIMB, Deshpande Foundation, and N/Core. It has recently signed an agreement with the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE).

As a part of an agreement between BOS Foundation and MAHE, 17 athletes (10 - 17 years age group) from BOS Foundation, will receive scientific, athletic training from sports scientists during the performance training camp to be held in Manipal from May 20th - 6th June.

The majority of the athletes come from an Indo-African tribal community called the Siddis and have struggled for basic amenities due to lack of resources and social exclusion. All of these athletes are being trained to compete for the 2024 Olympics.

The Siddis are settled primarily in Yellapura, Haliyal, Mundgod and Sirsi taluks of Karnataka. They have been in India for over 500 years. Studies have pointed that Siddis in Karnataka, much like in other parts of India, have remained isolated, and economically and socially neglected, predominantly settled in forest dwellings.

This limits access to resources and opportunities in more ways than mere logistics. In 1987, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) started a scheme to train members of the Indo – African Siddi community. Around 65 members of the community were initially chosen to be trained in athletic events as part of the ‘Special Area Games Scheme’. The scheme was discontinued six years later, and although further efforts were made to revive the scheme in the 2000s, it was criticized for its short-sightedness, lack of inclusiveness and proper coaches.

In an attempt to revive these efforts, BOS are building a sustainable sports ecosystem in North Karnataka which is home to one of the most naturally athletic Siddi Community. The organisation’s annual grassroots community league – PATANG (planning athletic training and nurturing grassroots) helps in talent identification, after which the athletes are enrolled in and supported at each level of their development.

Children within 20% of the national records are given specific training by youth coaches. Along with daily monitoring and development, they are also provided with basic nutrition support, training

shoes, and equipment. Only the best talent – who are within 15% of national records are then trained by senior coaches and are given complete nutrition support, sport science, and sports psychology support. Besides athletic training, BOS also conduct sessions for parents, team building activities, and personality development workshops for the athletes.

### **Who are Siddi tribe?**

Siddis are a unique tribe that has African ancestry and lives in South Asia. They are mainly found in three Indian states – Gujarat, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh – and according to the latest census, their total population size is about 0.25 million. The first documented record of Siddis in India dates to 1100 AD when the Siddis settled in Western India. By the thirteenth century, substantial numbers of Siddis were being imported by the Nawabs and the Sultans of India to serve as soldiers and slaves. The major influx of Siddis occurred during the 17th–19th centuries when the Portuguese brought them as slaves to India.

The Siddis (Afro-Indians) are a tribal population

whose members live in coastal Karnataka, Gujarat, and in some parts of Andhra Pradesh. Historical records indicate that the Portuguese brought the Siddis to India from Africa about 300–500 years ago; however, there is little information about their more precise ancestral origins. Here, we perform a genome-wide survey to understand the population history of the Siddis. Using hundreds of thousands of autosomal markers, we show that they have inherited ancestry from Africans, Indians, and possibly Europeans (Portuguese). Additionally, analyses of the uniparental (Y-chromosomal and mitochondrial DNA) markers indicate that the Siddis trace their ancestry to Bantu speakers from sub-Saharan Africa. We estimate that the admixture between the African ancestors of the Siddis and neighbouring South Asian groups probably occurred in the past eight generations (~200 years ago), consistent with historical records.



### **Bridge of Sports' role**

On August 15, 2016, the Bridges of Sports Foundation was founded. It was incubated at IIM Bangalore, as a non-profit start-up set up. This NGO

is trying to empower and integrate underprivileged communities using the sports ecosystem. Its Founder Nitish M. Chiniwar explained: “Quite simply we aim to provide children from backward communities the opportunity to learn, play and excel in sports.”

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