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India gets the first-ever Siddi lawmaker.

India is home to about 60,000 people from the community which descended from Bantu people of Africa



Presence of Siddis in India can be traced back as far as the 7th century. It is believed that they were first brought in by Arabs as slaves followed by Portuguese and Britishers. They have been craftsmen, mercenaries, sailors and merchants. Most of the community members now depend upon agriculture or manual labour.

Shantaram Budna Siddi, who lives in Hitlalli village of Yallapur in Uttara Kannada district, became the first Siddi tribe member to be nominated for the Karnataka Legislative Council. The state government has nominated five persons to the Council on Wednesday including Shantaram. In his statement to The Hindu, he said that till now he could do whatever little help he can provide to the people.

On Wednesday, Karnataka governor Vajubhai Vala appointed 5 new MLC members from the BJP and Shantaram Budna Siddi, the state secretary of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was one of them.

“I did not understand it fully. I thought someone might be playing a prank. I went home for lunch. It was then that my wife and I started getting calls continuously, congratulating me for the

nomination,” he added while telling about the experience when he first learned about becoming an MLC.

The fascinating history of the Siddi community

Siddis is an isolated community that is spread along the coast of Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Their roots trace back to Africa. They have an estimated population of 50,000 to 60,000. Most of them are practising Muslims, but many of those who live in Karnataka are Catholics. Majority of their population is concentrated in Junagarh, Gujarat.

However, some reports mention that the Siddis living in Karnataka and other parts of India had not even found out about each other till recent years, because they have been living lives of seclusion in different states, their ancestors having come from different African ports centuries ago.

Their main occupation is agriculture, but it is hard to find landowners among the community. Most of them work as labourers in the field. Their community members often migrate to metro cities for better jobs and lifestyle.

Presence of Siddis in India can be traced back as far as the 7th century. It is believed that they were first brought in by Arabs as slaves followed by Portuguese and Britishers. Many Siddis came to India as merchants, sailors and mercenaries. In later years, the community migrated to forests to avoid conflicts and lead a quiet life.

Siddis of Gujarat

The Siddis of Gujarat had come to the erstwhile princely state of Junagarh. There are some reports which say the King of Junagarh had fallen in love and married a woman from East Africa and she had brought over a 100 slaves and servants with her, who settled down with their families around the Gir forests.

Over the years, the Gujarat government has started some development programs to help the marginalised community often struggling with poverty. In 2010, the then government had started an initiative that trained the Siddi community members as eco-guides in the Gir forest region.

Unique traditions and culture, a blend of Indian and African heritage

They have unique traditions and still follow some of the cultural practices blended with Indian culture and African heritage. Their folk dance, Dhamal, is known for its unique style in which the male dancers paint their bodies and move to the drum beats. Artists who perform Dhamal are often regarded as some of the best tribal dancers in India as well as abroad. Dance moves in Dhamal resemble the folk dances of Africa.

Siddis' history in India is hard to track mostly because of lack of interest shown by the government authorities and fellow citizens. However, some of the markers indicating their importance in history is still nurtured in the form of architecture. The beautifully carved tree-of-life latticework into the stone windows of Sidi Sayed Mosque, Ahmedabad, is one of the finest examples of their craftsmanship. The community is still struggling to get land rights and mark their presence at the higher positions in the hierarchy. The inclusion of a tribe member as MLC may bring some hope and change for the community.

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