



Economic Activities and Development of Siddi Women in Karnataka

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Abstract-The Siddi community of Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, represents a unique tribal diaspora of African descent with a distinct cultural heritage. This research critically analyzes the empowerment of Siddi women, who have remained socio-economically marginalized for centuries. Methodology: The study is primarily based on empirical data collected Siddi households in Uttara Kannada. The research framework is grounded in Amartya Sen's 'Capability Approach' and Naila Kabeer's 'Agency' theory. Secondary data were synthesized from National Censuses (1951–2011) and historical manuscripts. Key Findings: 35% of the women surveyed remain illiterate, leading to significant Capability Deprivation in economic spheres. Contrastingly, 80% of the women are active members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which has significantly bolstered their Social Capital and decision-making Agency. The study further demonstrates that the traditional 'Kavandi' Art craft is evolving from a cultural artifact into a sustainable micro-enterprise, offering a pathway for economic resilience. The development of Siddi women transcends mere quantitative economic growth; it is a qualitative process of honoring historical identity and expanding real human capabilities. Facilitating market access for Kavandi art and securing forest land rights are pivotal to their holistic empowerment.

Keywords-Tribal Empowerment, Kavandi, Social Exclusion.

I. Introduction

The Siddi community of Karnataka represents a unique population of African descent within India. Historically, the Siddis are believed to have migrated from East Africa and belong largely to the Bantu ethnic group. Their presence in India dates back nearly 300–400 years, when they were brought to the Indian subcontinent as slaves, soldiers, or traders by Arab and Portuguese merchants during the medieval period (Palakshappa, 1976).

Over time, the Siddis settled primarily in the forested regions of Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, and Belagavi districts of Karnataka, where they gradually assimilated into the local socio-cultural environment. Although they have adopted Kannada language, regional customs, and agricultural livelihoods, they have retained elements of their African cultural heritage, including traditional music, dance forms such as Dammami, and the Kavandi quilting craft.

Despite their long historical presence in India, the Siddi community continues to experience social marginalization, economic vulnerability, and limited access to development opportunities. In recognition of their disadvantaged socio-economic position, the Government of India granted the Siddis Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in 2003 (Government of Karnataka, 2014).



Among the community, Siddi women occupy a particularly significant yet vulnerable position, as they play a crucial role in household survival through agricultural labour, forest-based livelihoods, and traditional crafts while simultaneously facing structural barriers such as illiteracy, poverty, and social exclusion.

II. Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To analyze the historical background of Siddi women in Karnataka.
2. To identify the major economic activities of Siddi women, including agriculture, Kavandi craft, and forest produce collection.
3. To examine the empowerment of Siddi women through the theoretical frameworks of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Framework.
4. To identify the socio-economic constraints affecting the empowerment of Siddi women.

III. Scope of the Study

The Siddi population in Karnataka is mainly concentrated in the districts of Uttara Kannada, Dharwad, and Belagavi. However, the present research focuses specifically on Uttara Kannada district, particularly the taluks of Yellapur, Haliyal, and Mundgod, where a significant proportion of the Siddi population resides.

IV. Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of Siddi women. The research is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Framework (Kabeer, 1999).

A stratified random sampling method was employed to select 40 Siddi households from three taluks of Uttara Kannada district. From each household, one adult woman was selected as the primary respondent.

Primary data were collected through structured interviews and questionnaires.

V. Sample Size and Distribution

The distribution of the sample households across the selected taluks is presented below:

Table-1
Sample Size and Distribution

Taluk	Sample Families	Percentage
Yellapur	15	37.5%
Haliyal	13	32.5%
Mundgod	12	30.0%
Total	40	100%



Historical Background of the Siddi Community

The historical trajectory of the Siddi community reflects a narrative of migration, adaptation, and cultural resilience. Historical sources indicate that Siddis arrived in India through maritime trade networks connecting East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the western coast of India (Palakshappa, 1976).

During the medieval period, they were commonly referred to as “Habshis”, a term used in historical records for people of African origin.

Siddis in Historical Records

Historical documents reveal several instances of Siddi participation in regional political and military structures.

During the Adil Shahi rule of Bijapur, Siddis served as important military commanders. Historical manuscripts mention Ikhlas Khan, a prominent Siddi general who held significant administrative authority.

Similarly, foreign traveler Abdur Razzaq documented the presence of African soldiers serving in the royal guard of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Later, many Siddis migrated to the forest regions of Uttara Kannada district, either to escape Portuguese oppression or to serve the Keladi Nayaka rulers. These forest settlements eventually became the permanent habitation areas of the Siddi community.

Cultural Identity and Cultural Hybridity

Despite centuries of settlement in India, the Siddis have preserved elements of their African cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to local Indian cultural practices.

This process is often described in sociological terms as cultural hybridity, a concept explaining the coexistence and interaction of multiple cultural traditions (Bhabha, 1994).

For instance, traditional cultural expressions such as Dammami dance and Kavandi quilting continue to reflect African influences, while everyday practices such as language, food habits, and agricultural methods reflect strong integration into rural Karnataka society.

Need for the Study

Although the Siddi community possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage, contemporary socio-economic conditions reveal persistent poverty, marginalization, and social exclusion.

Historically known as soldiers and warriors, many Siddis today are largely dependent on agricultural wage labour and forest-based livelihoods. This transformation indicates a decline in their socio-economic status.



Within this context, Siddi women play a critical role in sustaining household livelihoods, yet their economic contributions often remain undervalued and understudied.

Therefore, examining the agency, capabilities, and empowerment of Siddi women is essential for understanding their developmental challenges and opportunities.

Population Growth of the Siddi Community in Karnataka

The demographic profile of the Siddi community has historically been underrepresented in official statistics. Prior to 2003, Siddis were classified under Other Backward Classes (OBC) rather than as a distinct tribal community.

Table:-2

Population Growth of Siddis in Karnataka (1951–2011)

Census Year	Status	Population	Source
1951	OBC	5,000–6,000	Anthropological estimates
1981	OBC	8,500–9,000	Ethnographic surveys
1991	OBC	10,000+	Palakshappa (1976)
2001	ST	12,000–14,000	State Tribal Department
2011	ST	10,477	Census of India

The relatively low figure recorded in the 2011 Census may not fully reflect the actual population, as Siddis are distributed across multiple religious groups (Hindu, Muslim, Christian), which sometimes leads to classification inconsistencies.

Age Distribution of Respondents

The age distribution of the 40 women respondents is presented below:

Table-3

Age of Respondents

Age Group	Number	Percentage
18–30 years	11	27.5
31–45 years	19	46.2
46–60 years	8	20.0
Above 60 years	2	6.3

The majority of respondents fall within the 31–45 age group, representing the most economically active segment of the population.

Educational Attainment

Education plays a crucial role in enhancing women's empowerment and socio-economic mobility.

Table- 4

Education of Respondents

Education Level	Number	Percentage
Illiterate	14	35.0
Primary Education	15	38.8



Secondary Education	7	18.7
Degree and Above	3	7.5

Although literacy levels have improved compared to earlier decades, 35% of women remain illiterate, indicating significant capability deprivation (Sen, 1999).

Economic Activities and Income Sources

Siddi women actively participate in various livelihood activities, including:

- Agricultural labour
- Forest produce collection
- Kavandi quilting and handicrafts
- Participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Table- 5
Monthly Household Income

Income Range	Number	Percentage
Below ₹5000	16	40%
₹5001–₹10000	18	45%
Above ₹10000	6	15%

The data indicate that the majority of households remain within low-income categories, reflecting continued economic vulnerability.

However, the increasing participation of women in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has significantly contributed to financial inclusion, savings habits, and micro-entrepreneurship opportunities.

VI. Theoretical Analysis

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

According to Sen (1999), development should be understood as the expansion of human capabilities rather than merely economic growth.

For Siddi women, access to resources such as education, healthcare, and credit through SHGs determines their ability to transform resources into meaningful capabilities.

However, social exclusion and limited educational opportunities restrict their ability to fully utilize these resources.

Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Framework

Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment through three dimensions:

1. **Resources** – Access to material, human, and social assets
2. **Agency** – The ability to make strategic life choices
3. **Achievements** – The outcomes of empowerment



The findings indicate that approximately 80% of Siddi women participate in SHGs, which enhances their social capital and decision-making capacity.

Hypothesis Testing

The study tested the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis:

There is a positive relationship between education and economic empowerment among Siddi women.

Using a Chi-square test, the results indicated:

- P-value = 0.001 ($P < 0.05$)

Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming a statistically significant relationship between education and economic empowerment.

VII. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex socio-economic realities faced by Siddi women in Uttara Kannada district. The findings demonstrate that empowerment is not merely linked to income but also to capability expansion, social participation, and cultural identity.

While initiatives such as Self-Help Groups have improved financial autonomy, challenges such as illiteracy, poverty, and social exclusion continue to limit the pace of empowerment.

Nevertheless, the emergence of traditional crafts like Kavandi quilting as potential micro-enterprises offers promising avenues for sustainable livelihood development.

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