The Siddhis of India - The Chronicle of an African Diaspora - Two Part Paper

PART II

SIDDHIS - SLAVES OR SOLDIERS or BOTH

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SYNOPSIS

India and Africa shared a multidimensional relationship since ancient times. The geographical proximity and an easily navigable Indian Ocean brought the people of the two regions nearer to each other. During colonial times, soon after the conquest of Africa and for restructuring African economy, the free and voluntary relations of the past gave way to colonial needs and preferences. The relations between India and sovereign states of Africa were formally established when both sides gained independence. No other country in the world has had African rulers even though they were traded as slaves throughout the continents. Africans came to India as traders, rulers, and artists in the earlier times and through slave trades later. The provinces of Sachin and Janjira in western India were African ruled kingdoms that survived the war of independence. Deccan, as well as Bengal have been influenced by Africans who shaped their economy, political and social life for quite some time.

Many African Kings who ruled India descending from Abyssinian, Habasi, Ethiopian and Dravidian races have been forgotten even though they influenced trade, commerce and socio-cultural lifestyle in India.

In the book East Africa, the Western Indian Ocean Basin, and the World Economy, 1760 to 1880 (Active Page: Part 5: The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean) under a subtitle it is suggested that Africans were brought as slaves to India. My assertion is that this statement is not completely true. Great African fighters came as mercenaries to India. If at all as slaves, then these were brought from African countries by the Abyssinian rulers of the princely states in India rather than by Indian Kings. By Indian I mean the term metaphorically as there were several states in the subcontinent- not ONE India as today. Other non-serious publications also casually talk of Siddi slaves etc but the point is- if Siddhis were slaves how did they become kings?

“What Happened to Africans Slaves in India

Much less is known about African slaves and the African diaspora in India. The Portuguese imported slaves to Diu and to Goa, mostly from Mozambique. Often their slaves were domestic servants, but there are sources suggesting that Africans also served as soldiers and sailors (Alpers 1997). Elsewhere in India it is still possible to trace communities of African descent, whose members are called Sidis (sometimes Habshis), for example the Sidis of Hyderabad. Sidi (pronounced see-dee) comes from seyyid, the same Arabic word that the Busaidi rulers of Oman used as a royal title! This term acknowledges role of Arab Muslim traders in conveying Africans (converts to Islam) to India. The ancestors of Sidis include men who had crewed or commanded dhows; they were usually slaves, but some might have been freedmen. In nineteenth-century sources, Sidi is a more general label for any person entering
the Indian Ocean world from Zanzibar or other East Coast ports (Ewald 2000: 83). There are identifiable Sidi communities in Gujarat, Maharashtra (around Bombay), and Hyderabad.

When European commerce and warfare in the eighteenth century tightened the maritime labor market, Europeans (the British in particular) stepped up their efforts to recruit African and Asian sailors. These "lascars" (Indian Ocean sailors) crewed ships sailing in Atlantic as well as Indian Ocean waters. Among the lascars were individuals that sources identify as Sidis. By the early nineteenth century, the British were employing so many "lascars" that Parliament enacted legislation requiring them to return to their home ports. These "Asian Articles" reflected growing fears over the consequences of racial mixing in among port populations (Ewald 2000: 75).

In general, slaves exported to Indian Ocean ports provided labor in the harbor, construction, and food-processing sectors—and these sectors were growing in the nineteenth century (Ewald 2000). After the Suez Canal opened, for example, the number of Muslim pilgrims traveling to Mecca rose rapidly, and more labor was required to house and feed them. At Jidda, slaves worked alongside free Arabs in these sectors. In Aden, where the British had abolished slavery, many Yemeni workers were recruited, but freeborn Somalis and Sidis also loaded coal onto ships and operated small boats in the harbor. British territories (especially Aden), Consulates, and ships were havens for slaves seeking freedom. Those who were successful usually joined the local labor force or became sailors because it was too difficult for them to return to Africa (where slave raiding had disrupted their home communities). At least two thousand Africans were working in Bombay in the 1860s (more than half were sailors). Some of these workers were freemen who had migrated from Aden, but others had been rescued by British anti-slavery patrols and sent to Bombay. These "Bombay Africans" learned skilled trades in mission schools; eventually a few of the better-educated returned to East Africa as missionaries.”


**Océan Indien** :  Africa and India are separated by the Indian Ocean. The geographical proximity between the Horn of Africa and the Indian subcontinent has played an important role in the development of the relationship since ancient times.

**Ancient trade relations**

![Coins of king Endybis, 227–235 AD. +. The left one reads in Greek "AXWMITW BACIAEYC", "King of Axum". The right one reads in Greek: ENAYBIC BACIAEYC, "King Endybis".](image)

India and Africa shared a multidimensional relationship since ancient times. The geographical proximity and an easily navigable Indian Ocean brought the people of the two regions nearer to each other. During colonial times, soon after the conquest of Africa and for restructuring African economy, the free and voluntary relations of the past gave way to colonial needs and preferences. The relations between India and sovereign states of Africa were formally established when both sides gained independence. While the earlier pattern of their relationship was moulded in the colonial frame, it was considered by the leadership of newly independent states as highly inadequate to meet their developmental aspirations as reflected in their quest for
South–South Cooperation. The new relationship is being developed on partnership model. As Indian connection is old, multidimensional and with strong historic ties, India enjoys tremendous goodwill in the continent. (Chapter 2 India–Africa Relations: Historical Goodwill and a Vision for the Future Ajay Kumar Dubey).

Due to the proximity of Africa to India and the thriving trade between port cities on either side of the Arabian Sea, Africans have often played an important role in Indian history. Called ‘Siddis’ in the Deccan and ‘Habshis’ in the North, they rose to positions of great strength.

**Multiple Versions:** There are multiple versions of how the Africans in India reached here but what we do know is that they arrived in waves over a period of time. The earliest reference to Africans in India is from the 7th century, when they were brought here as slaves by the Arabs. Later, when the Europeans arrived in the Indian Ocean, they reached India as a part of the slave trade. The last major migration took place in the 19th century, when the Nizam of Hyderabad hired soldiers from Africa as bodyguards.

Razia Sultan was one of India’s most valiant queens and history tells the tale of her suspected liaison with her confidant and ally, Jamal-ud-Din Yakut, with great relish. Whether or not they were lovers we will never know but the outrage that this alleged dalliance sparked in the 13th century Mamluk Dynasty is well recorded. Much of the resentment against Yakut arose from the fact that he was a slave-turned-nobleman of African origin, and not from the Turkish clique that dominated the nobility in the Delhi-based Sultanate. Conferred the title of Amir al-Umara (Amir of Amirs), Jamal-ud-Din Yakut was therefore the first African to occupy a prominent position in India. But Yakut is only one of many Africans to have left their mark on Indian history. Apart from political patronage, they also enjoyed a great degree of social mobility, some of them going on to become military commanders, aristocrats, statesmen and even founders of their own kingdoms.
Indo-African relations date back to the Bronze age period of the Indus Valley civilization. Pearl millet first domesticated in Africa have been discovered from the site of Chanhu Daro and there is at least one burial of African women from the same site as well, it is thus postulated that Indus valley maritime activities included journey to the horn of africa and bringing back african crops along with african diaspora to the Indus valley since Pearl millet was cultivated in South Asia since 2nd millennium BC but there is no such evidence from the Near East. Black peppercorns were found stuffed in the nostrils of Ramesses II, placed there as part of the mumification rituals shortly after his death in 1213 BCE. In the 2nd century BC the Greek's accounts of Ptolemaic Egypt and its trade relations mention Indian ships making the trip and Greeks began to utilize this knowledge from Indian sailors to conduct maritime activities in the Indian ocean and conduct business with the Indians directly instead of relying on the middle men, when Romans replaced the Greek administration in Egypt, this began a 400-year period of trade relations between the Roman Empire and India. *Periplus Maris Erythraei (Periplus of the Erythraean Sea),*—which dates to mid-first century—refers to trade relations between the Kingdom of Aksum and Ancient India around the first millennium. Helped by the monsoon winds, merchants traded cotton, glass beads and other goods in exchange for gold and soft-carved ivory. The influence of the Indian architecture on the African kingdom shows the level of trade development between the two civilizations.

Under Ptolemaic rule, Ancient Egypt dispatched two trade delegations to India. The Greek Ptolemaic dynasty and India had developed bilateral trade using the Red Sea and Indian ports. Controlling the western and northern end of other trade routes to Southern Arabia and India, the Ptolemies had begun to exploit trading opportunities with India prior to the Roman involvement but according to the historian Strabo the volume of commerce between India and Greece was not comparable to that of later Indian-Roman trade. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* mentions a time when sea trade between India and Egypt did not involve direct sailings. The cargo under these situations was shipped to Aden:

Eudaimon Arabia was called fortunate, being once a city, when, because ships neither came from India to Egypt nor did those from Egypt dare to go further but only came as far as this place, it received the cargoes from both, just as Alexandria receives goods brought from outside and from Egypt.

The trade started by Eudoxus of Cyzicus in 130 BCE kept increasing, and according to Strabo (II.5.12.):

"At any rate, when Gallus was prefect of Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Kingdom of Aksum, and I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise."

Barbaricum Port (Karachi), Barygaza, Muziris, Korkai, Kaveripattinam and Arikamedu on the southern tip of India were the main centers of this trade. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* describes Greco-Roman merchants selling in Barbaricum "thin clothing, linens, topaz, coral, storax, frankincense, vessels of glass, and silver and gold plate" in exchange for "costus, bdellium, lycium, nard, turquoise, lapis lazuli, Seric skins, cotton cloth, silk yarn, and indigo". In Barygaza, they would buy wheat, rice, sesame oil, cotton and cloth.

With the establishment of Roman Egypt, the Romans took over and further developed the already existing trade. Roman trade with India played an important role in further developing the
Red Sea route. Starting around 100 BCE a route from Roman Egypt to India was established, making use of the Red Sea to cross the Arabian Sea directly to southern India. Traces of Indian influences are visible in Roman works of silver and ivory, or in Egyptian cotton and silk fabrics. The Indian presence in Alexandria may have influenced the culture but little is known about the manner of this influence. Clement of Alexandria mentions the Buddha in his writings and other Indian religions find mentions in other texts of the period.

Blanche D'Souza states that Hindus had, by 1st millennium AD, begun using monsoon-led trade winds to establish trading activities between western parts of India and Mozambique, linking these to other eastern coastal regions of Africa and Arabian peninsula.

Medieval period relations
Relations attained stronger levels during medieval times due to the development of trade routes between the Mediterranean and Asia, through Arabia. Zheng He, a Chinese admiral met with the Malindi envoy present in Bengal. The Malindi traders had brought tribute of Giraffe for the Bengal sultan, so they gave one to the Chinese as well. Indian Hindu traders were reportedly present according to the records of Vasco de Gama in the south eastern African coast of Mosambique. While around the world and in India, Africans were mainly ‘bought as slaves’ and used by their ‘owners’ in menial jobs, but in India they came as traders or soldiers and were also employed in the security and military apparatus. They were recognised for their bravery and military prowess and were a significant part of the armies in the different Sultanates, of the Mughals and even the Nizams till the 20th century. During the 15th and 16th centuries were the most significant periods for the Africans in India as this is when they held high positions or ruled in the Sultanates of Bengal, Gujarat and the Deccan.

African soldiers also played an important role in the army of the Sultans of Gujarat. One of Ahmedabad city’s most famous icons, the Siddi Sayyid ni Masjid, which boasts the famous Siddi Sayyid ni Jaali, was commissioned by a Siddi soldier, Shaykh sa’id al-Habshi Sultani, in the 16th century.
African heritage in India

Aside from the aforementioned Aksumite trade with India, the documented presence of Africans in India dates back to the eighth century CE. Several Africans played an important role in different Indian dynasties. The first Habshi, of whom there is a historical record, was probably Jamal al-Din Yaqut, royal courtier in the kingdom of Delhi, in the north of the sub-continent. Habshis were also reported in the interior of northern India. Ibn Battuta recalls that at Alapur, the Governor was the Abyssinian Badr. A man whose bravery passed into a proverb. Some of the Africans who rose to positions of considerable importance were: Malik Kafur, Malik Ambar, Malik Sarwar, Mubarak Shah, Ibrahim Shah, Malik Andil, Malik Sandal, Yaqut Dabuli Habshi, Ikhlas Khan, Dilawar Khan, Khavass Khan, Ulugh Khan. Their role in the History of India is Significant. The Africans, who arrived in Hyderabad, Deccan, apart from playing their traditional role as bonded guards and servants, were recruited as the Nizam’s private bodyguard. The Siddi Risala (African Regiment) was retained until 1948. Other Siddis were elevated to the status of Khanazahs (proteges) and became trusted advisers of the Nizams.

Under the rule of the British Empire

During the British colonial rule in the Indian Subcontinent and large parts of Africa, the Indian city of Mumbai was already a center of ivory trade between East Africa and Britain.

The stay of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa between 1893 and 1915 remains one of the main events which paved the road to the modern-day political relations.

Trade between Africa and Gujrath: During the Muslim period, in which the Muslims had dominated the trade across the Indian Ocean, the Gujaratis were bringing spices from the Moluccas as well as silk from China, in exchange for manufactured items such as textiles,
and then selling them to the Egyptians and Arabs. Calicut was the center of Indian pepper exports to the Red Sea and Europe at this time with Egyptian and Arab traders being particularly active.

Arabic missionaries and merchants began to spread Islam along the western shores of the Indian Ocean from the 8th century, if not earlier. A Swahili stone mosque dating to the 8th–15th centuries have been found in Shanga, Kenya. Trade across the Indian Ocean gradually introduced Arabic script and rice as a staple in Eastern Africa. Muslim merchants traded an estimated 1000 African slaves annually between 800 and 1700, a number that grew to c. 4000 during the 18th century, and 3700 during the period 1800–1870. Slave trade also occurred in the eastern Indian Ocean before the Dutch settled there around 1600 but the volume of this trade is unknown.

In Madagascar, merchants and slave traders from the Middle East (Shirazi Persians, Omani Arabs, Arabized Jews, accompanied by Bantus from southeast Africa) and from Asia (Gujaratis, Malays, Javanese, Bugis) were sometimes integrated within the indigenous Malagasy clans. New waves of Austronesian migrants arrived in Madagascar at this time leaving behind a lasting cultural and genetic legacy.

Indian sea merchants from the Gulf of Kutch in the Western coast of India sailed for East Africa in their very seaworthy dhows, using the alternating sea winds for navigation. The North-East monsoon winds brought these merchant sailors across the Indian Ocean from December to March. After trading and bartering, they returned to East Africa during June and September, using the reverse South-East winds. They sailed regularly to the Zenj coast (Zanj Coast: Zanzibar), as it was called in those times, to obtain incense, palm oil, myrrh, gold, copper, spices, ivory, rhino horn and wild animal skins. They sold cloth, metal implements, foodstuff like wheat, rice and jaggery, besides porcelain and glassware. Trade was assisted by favourable sea winds and the development of a suitable marine technology. India’s skills in harnessing winds and currents of Indian Ocean are traced by scholars in several historical sources. It includes
references in Vedas where mention is made of growth of trade and shipping during the Maurayan period, in the dialogue of Buddha during the fifth century BC and in ancient Tamil writings in the context of West Asia and Africa.  

India’s pre-colonial ties with Africa have received little attention. It links with Pharaonic, Greek-ruled, Roman-ruled and Islamic Egypt, from the tenth to fourteenth century, extended to neighbouring African lands along the Red Sea. Modern history lays testimony to the fact that enterprising Indian merchants were looking for trade routes across the ocean and they set sail across the Arabian sea to the West in the quest to find lucrative markets and to explore new frontiers. In the process they played an influential role in the history of the African countries with whom they came in touch. People from both sides became part of the Indian Ocean ‘circuit.'

2.Chapter 2 India–Africa Relations: Historical Goodwill and a Vision for the Future Ajay Kumar Dubey
https://www.loyolacollege.edu/e-document/history/Nancy/India%20Africa%20Relations%20Dubey.pdf
From Slavery To Kingship; How An African Man Fought The Mughals In 16th Century India. Rhea Almeida

At a time when India’s racism towards the African community is becoming more and more abhorrent, or at least, apparent, it’s interesting to note how deeply our countries’ histories are entwined—filled with figures from the African subcontinent who entered our country as part of the slave trade but went on to become reformers and rulers. One such man was Malik Ambar, as he came to be known later, whose destiny demanded he become a ruler in 16th century India. Born as Chapu in 1548 southern Ethiopia, his journey to our part of the world tells the story of slave trade, the rise and fall of dynasties, and military excellence in India’s Deccan sultanate.

Tracing Ambar’s travels, leads us through caravans, dhows and more, as the young African was taken across the Red Sea to the port of Mocha in southern Arabia (Yemen), after which a slave trader sold his fate in Baghdad’s slave markets—a moment in time that defined the beginning of a chain of events that would upturn the Mughal empire. In Mocha, his Arab owner Kazi Hussein noticed his intellectual capabilities, and trained him in finance and administration as well as christened him Ambar while converting him to Islam. And by 1575, Ambar found himself sold in India to Chengiz Khan, the Peshwa of Ahmadnagar at the time.

Africa’s role in Indian history
“Early evidence suggests that Africans came to India as early as the 4th Century. But they really flourished as traders, artists, rulers, architects and reformers between the 14th Century and 17th Century,” said Kenneth Robbins, co-curator of an exhibition on ‘forgotten’ stories of Africa’s role in Indian history at the New York Public Library. As many African slaves were sold and resold into India, Ambar was a member of this mass movement eastward. While locally in India African slave migrants were termed as Sidis (now a tribe with scheduled caste and tribe status) connoting a higher status, they were more commonly referred to as Habshis—people from Abyssinia.

Chengiz Khan, who was a Habshi himself, instilled Ambar with knowledge regarding Indian political, military and administrative affairs. After Khan’s death, different accounts relate contrasting stories regarding Ambar’s future, but the most accepted version believes Ambar was eventually sold to the King of Bijapur, who, impressed by his skill and intellect, bestowed upon him the title of ‘Malik’, meaning ‘like a king’. Still, Malik Ambar was born to lead, not follow.

A leader is born
In the book Man, Know Thyself: Volume 1 Corrective Knowledge of Our Notable Ancestors, Rick Duncan states, “Malik Ambar was made military commander of the King’s army and after some time, when the King refused to finance trainee soldiers, the frustrated Ambar took his soldiers with him and became an independent mercenary army who hired their services to various Kings and Sultans in Deccan culture.” And this began Malik Ambar’s military prowess in India’s Deccan.

While various sources retelling this historic tale might argue over how exactly Malik Ambar gained control of Ahmadnagar with himself as the Regent Minister, the popular story is that he imprisoned the King of Ahmadnagar and took the title. Further, he cemented his rulership by marrying off his daughter Murtaza to Ibrahim Adil Shah II, son of former Deccan ruler Shah Ali.

As Regent, he founded a new city and capital called Khadki, later Aurangabad, and launched several long term architectural projects. His innovative and wildly sophisticated water supply system, later known as Aqueduct, was one amongst his many planning trump cards. Introducing a new systematic revenue system based on land measurements, he created a farmers tax system that several Deccan settlements continued to follow. Still, the legacy he left behind was the unified force he harnessed to keep the Deccan Sultanate out of Mughal hands.

The Deccan Sultanate and Ambar’s rise to military power
As a military expert, he employed guerilla tactics and trained his army to become a strong force against Emperor Akbar as well as Jahangir, and he didn’t do it alone. As The Muslim Diaspora, 1500-1799 by
Everett Jenkins, Jr. states, “Upon consolidation of his power, Malik Ambar organized an estimated 60,000 horse army. His light cavalry was very effective as a mobile unit. Malik Ambar also enlisted the naval support of the Siddis (fellow Africans) of Janjira island in 1616 in order to cut the Mughal supply lines and to conduct harassing missions.” Riksum Kazi, author of a TCJN Journal paper on Malik Ambar’s life and legacy, recounts how Ambar recruited anti-Mughal soldiers and led an army of highly skilled Abyssinians, Marathas, and Muslims from the Deccan.

When Janagir ascended the Mughal throne, he inherited his father’s loathe for ‘Ambar of dark fate, that disastrous man’. His memoirs refer to the African sultan as a rebel, a usurper, a plotter. Embodying this sentiment is a famous painting with Malik Ambar’s head on a stick, being shot at with an arrow by none other than Jahangir in royal robes. The emperor commissioned the creation of this work of art in 1615, representing the Mughal hunt for Ambar’s head. Ironically, Jahangir never actually got to defeat Ambar, despite the will of his painter’s brush.

**The legacy he left behind**

Accounts of Malik Ambar’s heroic rise in India’s military ranks feature in several historical records of the African diaspora in Asia. As the *Encyclopaedia of Antislavery and Abolition* remembers him, “Ambar, who died in the 1620s, is remembered as having been not only a good commander and administrator, but also a great builder. He established Ghurkeh, later named Aurangabad, and decorated it with a magnificent palace and gardens. He was by far the most famous of the Muslim Siddis of India who survived either as part of the Deccan nobility or more commonly as farmers and poor unskilled workers. Ambar’s remarkable career represents how some slave-soldiers used the military as a path out of slavery.”

Still, apart from being a savvy opportunist and strong military leader, Malik Ambar’s legacy in India is one of great historical relevance. As *The New Cambridge History of India: A social history of the Deccan, 1300-1761* rightly puts it, “Yet Malik Ambar’s career can also provide a window onto a range of other issues pertaining to the social history of the Deccan—issues of race, class, or gender, and especially issues related to the institution of slavery.”

**African Mercenaries in India:** The Siddi (pronounced [siːd̪diː]), also known as Sidi, Siddhi, Sheedi, or Habshi, are an ethnic group inhabiting India and Pakistan. Some were merchants, sailors, indentured servants, slaves and mercenaries. The Habshi or Siddis are thought to have arrived in India in 628 AD at the Bharuch port. Several others followed with the first Arab Islamic conquest of the subcontinent in 712 AD. The latter group are believed to have been soldiers with Muhammad bin Qasim’s Arab army, and were called Zanjis.

Some Siddis escaped slavery to establish communities in forested areas, and some also established the small Siddi principalities of Janjira State on Janjira Island and Jafarabad State in Kathiawar as early as the twelfth century. A former alternative name of Janjira was Habshan (i.e., land of the Habshis). In the Delhi Sultanate period prior to the rise of the Mughals in India, Jamal-ud-Din Yaqut was a prominent Siddi slave-turned-nobleman who was a close confidant of Razia Sultana (1205–1240 CE). Although this is disputed, he may also have been her lover, but contemporary sources do not indicate that this was necessarily the case.

Siddis were also brought as slaves by the Deccan Sultanates. Several former slaves rose to high ranks in the military and administration, the most prominent of which was Malik Ambar.

Researchers Yatin Pandya, Trupti Rawal (2002), in the paper *The Ahmedabad Chronicle: Imprints of a Millennium*, Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design, state that the first Muslims in Gujarat to have arrived are the Siddis via the Bharuch port in 628 AD ... The major group, though, arrived in 712 AD via Sindh and the north. With the founding of Ahmedabad in 1411 AD it became the concentrated base of the community..Josef W. Meri, Jere L. Bacharach (2006), Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia, Taylor &
Francis, ISBN 978-0-415-96692-4. Claim that Jala ad-Din Yaqut, an Abyssinian slave, was appointed to the post of master of the stables, a position traditionally reserved for a distinguished Turk.

**The Sultanate of Bengal** was established in the 14th century and a large number of African-origin soldiers were recruited in the army here. Many rose to perform administrative duties and some became magistrates, were involved in law-enforcement and even collected tolls and taxes. But there was one Abyssinian who went even further. The commander of the palace guards of the then ruler, Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, he seized the throne in a palace coup. The Sultanate of Bengal thus got an African king, Barbak Shahzada, who established the Habshi Dynasty in 1487. However, this was a short-lived endeavour and the rule of the dynasty he founded ended in 1493. Despite their brief reign, the Habshis of Bengal were brave and just kings. They were also
patrons of art and architecture, and built many secular and religious structures like the Firoze Minar in Gaur, Malda in West Bengal.

The valour and loyalty of the Siddis is the subject of legend. According to one story, Goddess Lakshmi was wandering the walled city of Ahmedabad one night and was trying to leave through one of its gates, when she was stopped by a Siddi soldier who recognised her and asked her to wait while he took the king’s permission to let her leave at that hour. The Siddi soldier rushed to the king and asked him to behead him so that Goddess Lakshmi would stay and keep the city prosperous. According to the legend, Lakshmi is still waiting for the soldier to return and let her out, to which the prosperity of the city of Ahmedabad is attributed.

Arguably the most famous African in India is Malik Ambar. Born in the mid-16th century in Ethiopia, he was enslaved as a young man. After an arduous journey to the Middle East, to Baghdad and then to India, he finally reached the Deccan and rose through the ranks to become Prime Minister in the Ahmadnagar Sultanate.

Known as one of the greatest leaders of the Deccan, Malik Ambar was a master of guerrilla warfare and more than once subdued the armies of the Mughals in their quest to conquer the Deccan. Before he died, Malik Ambar got his daughters married into the Sultan’s family, a mark of just how respected he was.

Such was the military prowess of the Africans that the kingdom of Janjira was the one holdout to both the Mughals and the Marathas. The island of Janjira, on the west coast of Maharashtra, had been captured by Malik Ambar who built a fort on the island. The Siddis of Janjira continued to rule the kingdom till Independence and even went on to establish a minor kingdom in Sachin, in Gujarat.

The last major movement of Africans to India took place in the 19th century. It is believed that the Nizam of Hyderabad saw some African soldiers in the army of another princely state and, impressed by them, asked for a troop for the state of Hyderabad as well. Thus soldiers were hired in Africa for the Nizam’s army and continued to serve the Nizam till the erstwhile princely state was integrated into the Republic of India.

It is ironic that unlike the liberal and meritocratic West, the rigid and class-based structure of Indian society gave Africans the opportunity for social mobility. Today, the African community
in India is well assimilated into the local population and small communities of Siddis live in parts of Gujarat, Karnataka, Hyderabad, Maharashtra and Goa.

The descendants of these African rulers inter-married with other Indian communities and thus slowly lost their African identity. Today, there are around 50,000 people of African descent in India, most of them descendants of the Africans who came here centuries ago. They speak the local languages, wear traditional Indian clothes and follow local dietary practices. The only way to recognise them is through their physical appearance. One of the few remnants of their African past is their music and dance. Much about the history of Africans in India is still unknown and there is a need for further research on this lesser known aspect of Indian history.

https://www.livehistoryindia.com/history-daily/2019/01/01/indias-african-kings
The journey of Africans to India was itself fascinating: captured by Arab slave traders, they were packed into hell ships that came to India via the Indian Ocean and its surrounding seas. They were bought by kings, princes, rich merchants and aristocrats and were referred to as habshis or sides. But not all remained slaves. Some like Yakut did make their own destiny. But while Yakut’s was perhaps a story that didn’t end too well, others set examples worth emulating. Take Malik Kafur for instance. This transgender slave was bought by Sultan Alauddin Khilji’s general Nusrat Khan for a thousand dinars. Kafur caught the fancy of the sultan and rose through the ranks, becoming his deputy and entering the history books as Nawab Hazar Dinari. In his last days, an enfeebled Khilji was at the mercy of Kafur who effectively ruled Delhi and also played kingmaker after the sultan’s death.

Elsewhere in the Deccan, Africans were making an impact on the political landscape. The splinter states of the Bahmani kingdom resisted the expansion of the Mughal Empire to the south. One of the architects of this resistance was Malik Ambar, the prime minister and general of Ahmadnagar state who was an African. Ambar is believed to be the father of guerrilla warfare in India since he used his Maratha cavalry to harass the Mughals with great effect. This had enraged Emperor Jahangir so much that he never missed an opportunity to heap his vitriol on Ambar. The exhibition has a painting showing Jahangir firing arrows at the severed head of Ambar—an unfulfilled dream of the emperor realized only on canvas. The Bijapur state had a clique of habshi nobles led by Ikhlas Khan, a powerful general. The fact that he got the title ‘Khan ’ (reserved only for people of high birth at that time) itself speaks volumes for the glass ceiling he and others of his ilk broke. Some Africans also managed to set up independent kingdoms, like the Siddis of Janjira. The
Siddis commanded Mughal navies and were respected by both Marathas and the European powers. The Janjira state and its successor state of Sachin survived until Independence.

An African begum of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Avadh seen with other begums.

India has been a long time meritocracy. Whatever your background, one could move up the ranks. Nowhere else in the world have Africans been able to rule outside Africa except India.
India and Africa have a shared history in trade, music, religion, arts and architecture, but the historical link between these two diverse regions is rarely discussed. Many Africans travelled to India as slaves and traders, but eventually settled down here to play an important role in India’s history of kingdoms, conquests and wars. Some of them, like Malik Ambar in Ahmadnagar (in western India), went on to become important rulers and military strategists. Ambar was known for taking on the powerful Mughal rulers of northern India.

Exhibition ‘Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals and Rulers’ Opens at United Nations Headquarters on 17 February

A formal opening ceremony for the exhibition “Africans in India: From Slaves to Generals and Rulers” will be held at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, 17 February, in the Visitors’ Lobby at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

The event is organized by the Department of Public Information’s Remember Slavery Programme and presented in partnership with the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations. The exhibition, which will be on display at the United Nations until 30 March, is created by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library.

Curated by Sylviane A. Diouf, Director of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at the Schomburg Center, and Kenneth X. Robbins, collector and expert in Indian art, the exhibition tells the history of enslaved East Africans in India, known as Sidis and Habshis, who rose to positions of military and political authority.

Through colourful photographs and texts, the show conveys that their success was also a testimony to the open-mindedness of Indian society, in which they were a small religious and ethnic minority, originally of low status. The exhibition also sheds light on the slave trade in the Indian Ocean and the history of Africa and its diaspora in India.

The exhibition was mounted at the Paris headquarters of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in September 2014 and travelled to several cities in India. It was also displayed at the third Africa-India Forum Summit in New Delhi in October 2015.

Cristina Gallach, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, will welcome guests to the opening ceremony, which will include remarks by Syed Akbaruddin, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations and Ms. Diouf.
The exhibition is part of the observance of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which is commemorated every year on 25 March. The theme for this year’s observance is “Remember Slavery: Celebrating the Heritage and Culture of the African Diaspora and its Roots.”

The United Nations Remember Slavery Programme was established by the General Assembly in 2007 to honour the memory of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. It aims to provide an understanding of the causes, consequences and lessons of the slave trade, as well as raise awareness of the dangers of racism and prejudice today.

Abyssinians, also known as Habshis in India, mostly came from the Horn of Africa to the subcontinent. Dr Sylviane A Diouf of the Schomburg Center says Africans were successful in India because of their military prowess and administrative skills. African men were employed in very specialised jobs, as soldiers, palace guards, or bodyguards; they were able to rise through the ranks becoming generals, admirals, and administrators.

This 17th-Century cloth painting depicts a procession of Deccani sultan Abdullah Qutb Shah. African guards are seen here as part of the sultan’s army.

It is very important for Indians to know that Africans were an integral part of several Indian sultanates and some of them even started their own dynasties. Early evidence suggests that Africans came to India as early as the 4th Century. But they really flourished as traders, artists, rulers, architects and reformers between the 14th Century and 17th Century.
Apart from the Deccan sultanates in southern India, Africans also rose to prominence on the western coast of India. Some of them brought their traditional music and Sufi Islam with them. Mr Robbins says Deccan sultans relied on African soldiers because Mughal rulers of northern India did not allow them to recruit men from Afghanistan and other central Asian countries. This 1887 painting from Kutch portrays the Sidi Damal, a religious, ecstatic dance form of the Muslim Sidis who were brought to India from East Africa.

The funerary complex shown in the photograph above was also designed by eunuch Malik Sandal after 1597 in Bijapur (in present-day southern Karnataka state).
Dr Diouf says Indian rulers trusted Africans and their skills. "It was true, especially in areas where hereditary authority was weak and there was ongoing instability due to struggles between factions like in the Deccan," she says.

"Africans sometimes did seize power for their group like they did in Bengal - where they were known as the Abyssinian Party - in the 1480s; or in Janjira and Sachin (on the western coast of India) where they established African dynasties. They also took power on an individual basis, as Sidi Masud did in Adoni (in southern India) or Malik Ambar in Ahmadnagar (in western India)," she adds.

This painting from 1590 shows an Indian prince eating in the land of Ethiopians (Habshi) or East Africans (Zangis).

Today under Prime Minister Modi there is both continuity and change in the India-Africa relationship. Why the India-Africa bond matters is India’s priority being not just Africa; India’s priority is Africans — every man, woman and child in Africa and also in India.