

Sidis of Gujarat – A Historical Reminiscence

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Abstract

The following study documents the socio-economic profile of “*Sidis*” an ancient tribe inhabiting the outskirts of the Gir forest in Gujarat. The study aimed at analyzing the impact of cage culture programme on the status of livelihood of the beneficiaries of the programme. Data was collected from a sample of 135 “*Sidis*” using structured interview schedule. The average monthly income and skill perception was higher for the “*Sidis*” practicing cage culture when compared to the other two categories.

Keywords: Cage Culture, Socio-Economic Profile, *Sidis*

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1. Introduction

“*Sidis*” are an ethnic diaspora whose origins are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. Historians have diverse opinion as to their origin and genesis. According to some, *Sidis* are a very ancient tribe whose genetic roots can be traced back to the African Subcontinent⁴. History records that, these tribes were brought to India way back in 997 A.D when they were brought as soldiers to

work in the army of “Mahmud of Ghazni” the most prominent ruler of the Ghaznavid Empire who conquered and plundered the northwestern Indian subcontinent. Thereafter, the major influx of *Sidis* to India occurred during the 17th-19th centuries, when the Portuguese brought them as slaves to India. Characterized by a strong physiognomy, unique to this race, these tribes were most sought after, to engage in hard and laborious tasks. It is interesting to note that the first Anglo –Indian war (also known as Child’s war), waged between the Mughal empire and the British in 1689, was led by a *Sidi* commandant named Sidi Yakub³. Considered as a lost African tribe² their descendants later dispersed to the States of Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. Rough estimates put their present population at around 20,000-30,000 spread over the states of Andhra Pradesh,

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Gujarat, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Most of *Sidis* reside in Gujarat, largely on the periphery of the Gir Forest¹. The present study deals with the socio-economic background of “*Sidi Badshahs*” of Saurashtra district of Gujarat. *Siddi* (or *Sidi*) is derived either from *sayyid*, an honorific title used in Arabic, originally to denote someone in the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad (possibly picked up in reference to the Arab captains referred to as such who initially brought Africans to the area of Iran/Pakistan), or from the Arabic *saydi*, meaning captive or prisoner of war. The “*Sidis*” are known as “*Sidis*” of Gujarat, “*Siddis*” of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Sidis today make a living through a wide array of occupations such as farming, laborers, rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, laborers in fishing vessels; and their women folk as farm laborers, firewood gatherers and sellers and also working as domestic help in the houses of well to do people from other communities. These occupations on the whole provide the *Sidis* a very meagre income source which is often erratic, seasonal and unsustainable in the long run. Known for their diving skills and sea endurance *Sidis* are not alien to fishing related enterprises. But they being traditionally forest dwellers endure a marginalised occupational niche in the coastal urban space where they have recently migrated seeking alternative jobs. Landlessness coupled with weak capital endowment has aggravated their survival options.

Comprehensive population estimates of contemporary *Sidis* in India has revealed that

the largest groups of *Sidis* have been identified to live in the States of Gujarat, Karnataka, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. In general, the *Sidis* do not have any specific occupations which provide them a sustainable source of income. Most of the *Sidi* men surveyed in Veraval and Talala Talukas of Junagadh district of Gujarat are laborers in various sectors. Most of them are employed as farm laborers, trawler laborers, as rickshaw pullers, auto-rickshaw drivers and laborers in processing companies. Some are also vegetable vendors and way side hawkers. The *Sidi* men prefer their women folk to stay in their houses, cook food and attend to all domestic work. Very few of the women folk go for work. Such women work as domestic help in the houses of the rich and well to do, or work as laborers in food processing companies. Some women gather firewood from the jungles such as the Gir forest and sell the firewood in the markets. While many members of the tribe work in the forest, there are some who are in government jobs. It could be observed that the general wage structure was Rs. 150 for men and Rs.100 for women laborers for 8-9 hours of work. The major crops grown in the study area were wheat, pearl millet (*Bajra*) and sugarcane. Among fruit crops mango dominated as the major crop grown.

The present day *Sidis* follow monogamy in marriages, though 4-5 generations back it was customary for the *Sidi* men to have 2-3 wives.

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Stricken by poverty and unstable incomes they are now encouraged to have only single spouse. Those *Sidi* men who opt for more than one wife are advised by their elderly muslim clergy men to refrain from doing so, and go back to their first wife. The *Sidi* custom does not permit the members to marry outside their caste. They marry among their close relatives often the girls marry their maternal uncle, their sons/daughters or the children of their aunts.

It is in this context that Open sea cage culture was identified as a potential alternative livelihood option for *Sidi* tribes to be promoted under the Tribal Sub Plan Project (TSP) of Government of India in December, 2011 by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). CMFRI has demonstrated the viability of open sea cage culture technology in various strategic locations in India⁵. Fish farming in cages is a lucrative business for otherwise poor coastal communities and it is an industry that is growing rapidly in many Asian countries. In some countries and locations, cage farming provides an important source of fish production and income for farmers, other industry stakeholders and investors. In modern times, cage culture of fish is also seen as an alternate livelihood, for example, for persons displaced by the construction of reservoirs or acquisition of land for other developmental activities.

The following study aims to trace the genesis of the *Sidis* and study the impact that cage farming has made on the participating beneficiaries in comparison to the other two categories namely non-practicing beneficiaries of the tribal society as well as non- practicing and non-beneficiaries of society.

2. Methodology

Multistage random sampling method was followed for the present study. The largest groups of *Sidis* have been identified to live in the States of Gujarat, Karnataka, Goa and Andhra Pradesh. For the present study, *Sidis* practicing cage culture of finfishes and lobsters in the State of Gujarat were selected. In Gujarat, Junagadh was selected the district having maximum number of *Sidi* population. From Junagadh district, Veraval and Talala taluka where maximum number of *Sidis* practicing cage culture of finfishes and lobster were selected. The *Sidis* practicing cage culture have been registered under the tribal society namely “Bharat Adim Juth Matsyadhyog Sahkari Mandali” A sample of 135 *Sidi* tribals consisting of 45 *Sidis* practicing cage culture (participating beneficiaries), 45 non-practicing beneficiaries of the tribal society, and 45 numbers of *Sidis* who were non- practicing and non-beneficiaries of society were selected using multistage random sampling method. A well-structured interview schedule was used to collect the necessary socio-personal, socio-psychological and socio-economic variables for the present study. The interview schedule was translated in to the local language, namely Gujarati and was administered to the respondents. The data collected was analysed using simple percentage analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

A cursory look at table 1 reveals that the monthly expenditure on food by the participant beneficiaries of cage culture were more when compared to non-participants and also non-participant non beneficiaries.

This finding clearly implies that the participant beneficiaries were getting a relatively

Table 1. Socioeconomic profile of *Sidis* in sample villages of Junagadh, Gujarat, India

Sl.No	Expenditure	PB	NPB	NPNB
1.	Food items (Rs.)	4308.33	3133.33	3500
	Non food items (Rs.)	900	1455.55	2250
2.	Average monthly consumption of food items (Kg)			
	Rice	12.41	16.72	17.25
	Wheat	14.58	22.22	17.50
	Pearl millet	6.5	10.33	11.25
	Onion	5.91	10.11	4.50
	Potato	4.08	10.11	7.50
	Vegetables	9.00	17.94	6.25
3.	Practice of home based enterprises (%)			
	Dairy	0	0	0
	Poultry	0	5.55	25
	Vegetables	0	0	0
	Farming	0	0	0
	Any others	0	0	0
4.	Social expenditure (yearly in Rs.)			
	Marriage	18083	133389	30,000
	Travel	2070	1280.55	475
	Religious	1783.33	1851.11	600
	Entertainment	558.33	376.47	300
5.	Major Occupations Practiced (%)			
	Other labour	41.66	55.56	0.00
	Farm labourer	25	27.77	75.00
	Fishing labourer	8.33	0.00	0.00
	Fishing	16.66	0.00	0.00
	Private job	8.33	16.67	25.00

higher income than the other two categories due to their involvement in cage culture. Besides it shows that *Sidis* practicing cage culture of finfishes and lobsters are having greater economic

gains than their non-practicing counterparts. This enterprise would continue to play an increasingly important role in the livelihood of the resource poor *Sidis* and has tremendous

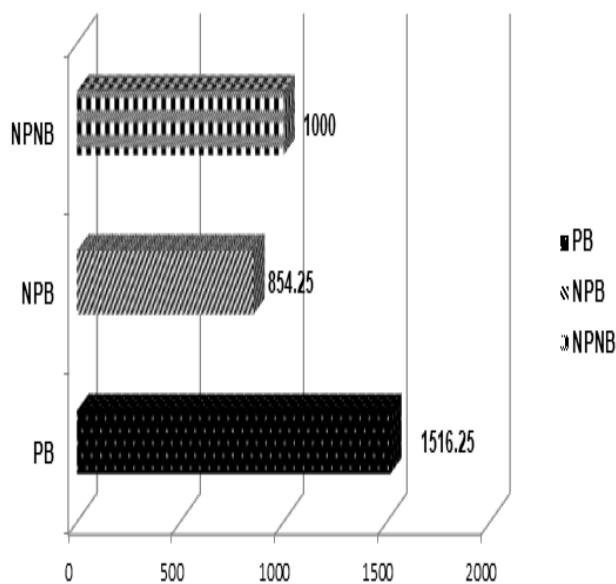


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents based on average monthly income (Rs.).

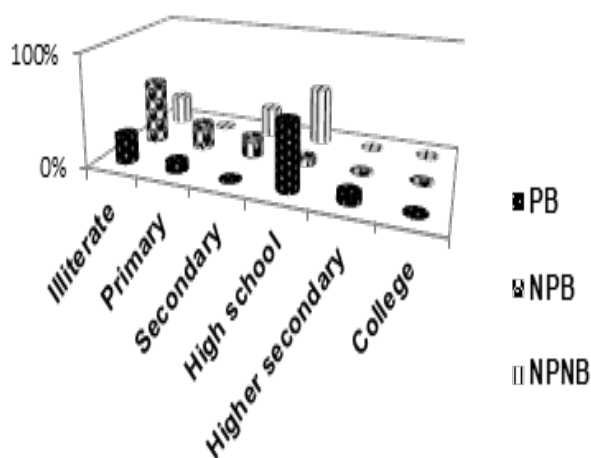


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents based on educational status.

potential to develop further in the area. It could be inferred from Table 1 that among the three categories of *Sidis*, the maximum expenditure for food items was made by the participant

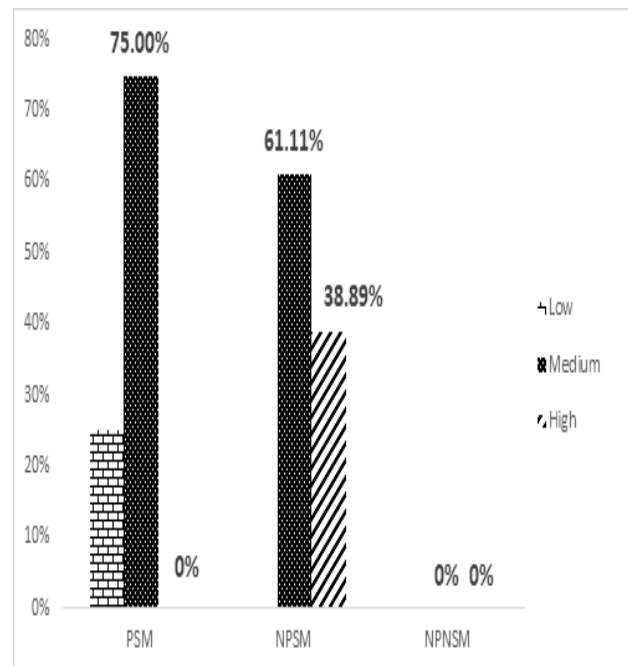


Figure 3. Skill perception of *Sidis* towards cage culture.

beneficiaries amounting to an average monthly expenditure of Rs.4308.33 and for non-food items the average monthly expenditure incurred by them amounted to Rs. 900.

The practice of home-based enterprises were meager. Only poultry rearing was practiced by non-participant beneficiaries (5.55%) and by non-participant and non-beneficiaries of cage culture, it was to a tune of 25%.

Among non-participant non-beneficiaries, majority (75%) were involved as farm laborers and 25% were involved in undertaking private jobs. Among the various items of social expenditure, it was observed that expenditure incurred on marriage ceremonies varied considerably. It was highest for non-participant beneficiaries (Rs. 1,33,389) followed by Rs. 30,000 for non-participant non beneficiaries and Rs. 18,083 for participant beneficiaries. During

the course of the study it was observed that the non-participant non beneficiaries were not frugal in their spending behavior. This category of participants preserved most of their social traits and attached much importance to social customs which they adhered to, since many generations. Much of the amount spent for marriages were borrowed as loans from money lenders or friends and their repayment behavior was observed to be poor. Hence mere spending on social functions is not an indication of a better livelihood status when compared to their counterparts.

As far as the occupational profile of the respondents were concerned (Table 1), majority of the participant beneficiaries (41.66%) were involved as different types of laborers in various fields followed by 25% working as farm laborers, 16.66% in fishing and 8.33% as fishing labourers and private jobs, respectively. Among the non participant beneficiaries majority (55.56%) were involved in different types of labour, followed by 27.77% in farm labour and 16.67% in private jobs, respectively. Among the respondents in this category none of them were found to be involved in fishing or working as fishing laborers. Only the participant beneficiaries were involved in cage culture of fishes.

Figure 3 showed the skill perception of the three categories of *Sidis* in cage culture. It could

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The successful venture undertaken by the Sidis of Veraval is an outstanding example of finfish culture in cages having emerged as a viable livelihood option for the rural poor in the country, besides meeting the protein needs of an ever increasing population.

be inferred from the figure that, majority of the participant beneficiaries (75%) had medium level of perceived skill towards cage culture followed by 25% in the low level of perceived skill. Among the non-participant beneficiaries, it could be observed that 61.11% were in the medium level and 38.89% in the high level of perceived skills respectively. Among the non-participant non -beneficiary category none of them exhibited any perceived skills towards cage culture. During the course of the study, it could be inferred that there exists tremendous potential for motivating the non-participant beneficiaries and non-participant non -beneficiaries to adopt cage culture. Perceptions of target households influence the success of efforts to introduce and diffuse innovation.

4. Conclusion

The study showed that *Sidis* practicing cage culture of fishes had clearly benefited from this avocation and were placed better socio-economically than their non-participant as well as non-participant, non beneficiary counterparts. The successful venture undertaken by the *Sidis* of Veraval taluka is an outstanding example of finfish culture in cages having emerged as a viable livelihood option for the rural poor in the country, besides meeting the protein needs of an ever increasing population.

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