

Notification No.580/2025
Date of Award : 22nd May, 2025

Name of Scholar : Zayana Nasir

Name of Supervisor : Prof. Farhat Nasreen

Name of Department : History and Culture

Topic of Research : Multi-dimensional Identity of African Indians in Medieval India
(Fifteenth to Early Eighteenth Century)

The thesis, “Multi-dimensional Identity of African Indians in Medieval India”, examines the nuanced processes of identity formation and community building among African Indians from the fifteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. The research illuminates how Africans, initially brought to India via the Indian Ocean slave trade, navigated diverse roles- as slaves, soldiers, administrators, and merchants- to integrate into, and influence, the socio-political fabric of medieval Indian society.

Studies of the African diaspora have traditionally focused on the transatlantic slave trade, overshadowing the experiences of Africans in Asia. This Eurocentric approach limits our understanding of the African diaspora’s complexity. Molefi Kete Asante’s concept of Afrocentricity serves as a critical lens for this thesis. Asante critiques the marginalisation of African histories in Western narratives and emphasises the importance of viewing Africans as active historical agents. This framework shifts the focus to the agency and resilience of African Indians, challenging the notion of their passive victimhood and highlighting their role in shaping medieval Indian society.

In January 2006, some 80 scholars from around the world and a few representatives from the Siddi (African-Indian) communities in India gathered in Goa for the first-ever conference on the African Diaspora in Asia. The acronym for this conference was TADIA (The African Diaspora In Asia). It evolved with the efforts of Belgian-Brazilian ethno-linguist Jean Pierre Angenot. He brought together the academics working on the African-descent Indian community.

The African diaspora in India was shaped by both forced and voluntary migrations. African slaves, primarily from the Swahili coast and Abyssinia, were initially transported through Arabian and Persian Gulf routes to ports in Gujarat, Sindh, and the Konkan coast. Integration and mobility were facilitated by Islam, wherein acculturation-adopting the religion, language, and culture of the host society- enabled many to transition from servitude to freedom. However, this process of integration did not dissolve their distinct identity; rather, it can be seen that African Indians consciously formed kinship networks and political factions, creating a pan-African elite group that wielded significant power in regions such as Gujarat, Bengal, and the Deccan. Prominent figures such as Malik Ambar exemplify this trajectory, demonstrating how Africans ascended through military and administrative ranks, establishing themselves as key players in medieval Indian politics. Malik Ambar’s rise, supported by a network of African elites like Chengiz Khan, his master, and Abhang Khan, underscores the importance of collective racial identity in advancing their socio-political interests. The formation of Habshi’s political identity might not have been something the early African slaves envisioned, however, it can be seen, at some point, they have become conscious of their distinct identity, which led them to create a Habshi elite kin. The existence of a “Habshi party” in Deccan politics during the sixteenth century which became a powerful faction in its own right, separate from the Dakhanis, attests to this conscious effort. This can be seen as a “survival tactic” that might have provided sanctuary to African elite soldiers, resulting in victory consciousness. Malik Ambar’s rise to power was the result of this political kinship among the Africans. Malik Ambar, after being purchased and trained by his Abyssinian master, joined the forces of Abhang Khan, another Abyssinian man of power. Later he married his son to the daughter of the powerful Habshi noble Yaqut Khan. Malik Ambar exploited the positions of existing Habshi nobles to rise to power. His rise

to power was not an extraordinary event, there have been other instances of Habshi regents and kingmakers for Ambar to draw upon.

Beyond the political realm, the thesis explores how African Indians contributed to the cultural and spiritual life of the subcontinent. Sacred spaces associated with African Sufi saints, such as Bava Ghor and Mai Misra, created a sense of belonging while preserving their Africanness within the broader Islamic Sufi traditions. Like any other community, the Siddis used cultural production as a tool for asserting their distinct identity. This assertion resulted in the creation of the Siddi Sufi order. Siddis employed Sufi Islam as a means of assimilation into the diverse fabric of Indian society. This chapter explores how Siddi communities, through Sufi practices, not only embraced the spiritual aspect of Islam but also integrated themselves into the social and cultural milieu, fostering a unique syncretic identity within the broader Islamic context of Sufism. Like the Sayyids, who traced blood kinship to the Prophet, Siddis trace a ritual kinship to their ancestor saints and eventually to Hazrat Bilal. The main saints of the Sidi Sufi order are Baba Ghor, Baba Habash and Mai Misra. Apart from them the African soldier martyrs' graves are also revered and are called Hazrat Siddi Shaheed Dargah. Because of their martyrdom, they have become a wali to the Sufi saints. African spirits also form a sacred space on the Malabar coast. They are known as Kappiri spirits, the spirits of African slaves who were either killed or buried alive with the Portuguese treasure during the Dutch siege of the Portuguese fort. For the contemporary Siddi community, the memoryscape and the landscape left by the Africans of the medieval period became the medium of identity formation.

The thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter reviews the existing literature on the African diaspora and its limitations in representing the African Indian experience. It emphasizes the need for an Afrocentric perspective to understand the distinct trajectories of African Indians. The second chapter examines the dual aspects of Habshi identity—how Africans were perceived by their host societies and how they perceived themselves. The chapter highlights writings that marked the alleged distinctiveness of Africans in the host society of medieval India. Despite the call for de-racialisation in Islam, some writings of the medieval period engage in the discourse around the natural division of human beings. This has led to the generalization of certain traits that came to be considered inherent among the Habshis. For instance, the Habshis were considered inherently malodorous. They were also valorised for their strength and loyalty. This suggests that their inherent traits were changed according to their position in the political conflict. The next section provides instances of collaboration among the African Indians arguing that they identified with each other due to their physical features. This covers the region of Bengal where the Habshis rebelled and took over the throne and laid the foundation of a Habshi dynasty; Gujarat, which witnessed many Habshis attaining considerable power; and lastly, Deccan, where the Habshis were nobles, kingmakers and regents.

The third chapter focuses on the Siddis of Janjira, their naval power, and their interactions with the Marathas and the English East India Company. It analyzes their political autonomy and military strategies, including significant victories like the 1689 siege of Bombay. The chapters deals with the naval influence of the Siddis on the Konkan coast and the establishment of an oligarchy exclusive to African Indians. The fourth chapter delves into the material culture, art, and architecture of African Indians, demonstrating how these elements provide legitimacy to contemporary Siddi communities.

The study challenges homogenized views of the African diaspora as passive victims by highlighting their agency and adaptability in medieval India. It reveals how racial identity played a central role in fostering unity among Africans.