



WILDLIFE

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GIR

**Home of the Asiatic Lion
and African tribes**

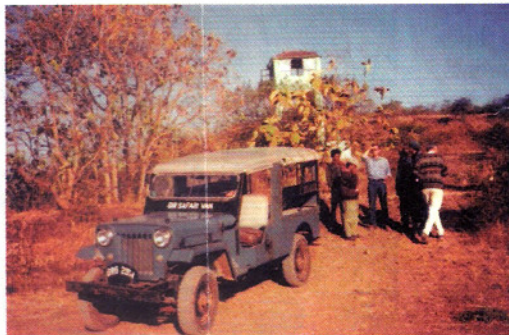
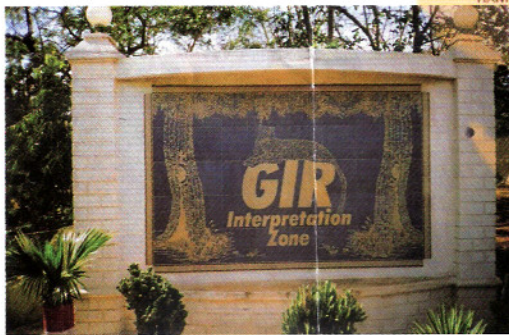
In 2005 December, I undertook a journey to the only home of the Asiatic Lion in the Gir National Park and Sanctuary, located in Junagadh District of Gujarat State. About 60 kilometres away from Junagadh town, the Gir National Park is a protected sanctuary, stretching across 2,400 sq kms. The terrain is hilly and covered with thick, deciduous forests.

The forest is home to several species of birds and animals. The most unbelievable fact about Gir is the existence of a village named Shirwan inside the sanctuary, which is populated by African tribals. They were brought to India by the Arabs, 400 years ago, during the era African tribals were traded as slaves. These tribes are known as 'Siddi Badshah' to the locals and trace their ancestry to Kenya, as they speak remnants of Swahili, to this date.

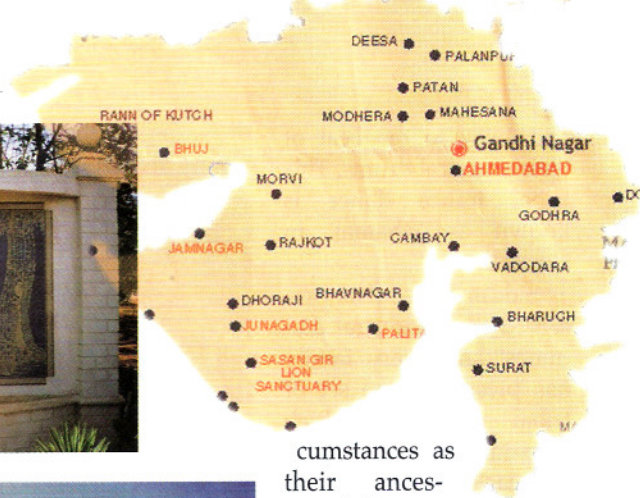
The base camp for entering these forests is Sasan Gir, which is located on the outskirts. The Siddi settlement of Shirwan is a 12-km-trek through a dirt road, which winds its way through thick forests from Sasan.

The trek to Shirwan from Sasan is fraught with risks. Panthers, leopards and cheetahs abound in the forests and could attack wayfarers. Wild monkeys, snakes and wild boar are also commonly seen and represent mild danger. More often than not, one could also come face-to-face with the lion, whose population in Gir is around 400.

The Siddis have lived in this village since 1600 A.D. They were brought to India as slaves by the Nawab of Junagadh, to convert the thick forests at that time into tillable land. 3,000 Siddis continue to live in the forest, existing in the same cir-



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cumstances as their ancestors, following the same traditions and existing in self-imposed isolation. Almost 100% of Siddis have married amongst themselves and maintained their ethnic purity over 400 years.

The Siddis respect the law of the forest and do not indulge in hunting though they live adjacent to several hundred spotted deer. Addiction to alcohol is rare as it is prohibited in Gujarat and brewing or sale of alcohol is illegal.

Only nature allowed

Siddis are forced to live off the land, in rather inhospitable conditions. Wild fruits and berries are available in plenty. Fresh water is also available as the Hiran river flows through Gir. In addition to this, there are several watering-holes across the forest.

The Government of Gujarat has offered the Siddis Indira Awas houses outside the park but, so far, none of the 100 Siddi families of Shirwan have accepted the generous offer of the Government. They continue to exist inside the forests, cheerful and facing the harsh realities of life.

Music and dance are a way of life for the Siddis. They continue to sing their ancient tribal songs in Swahili

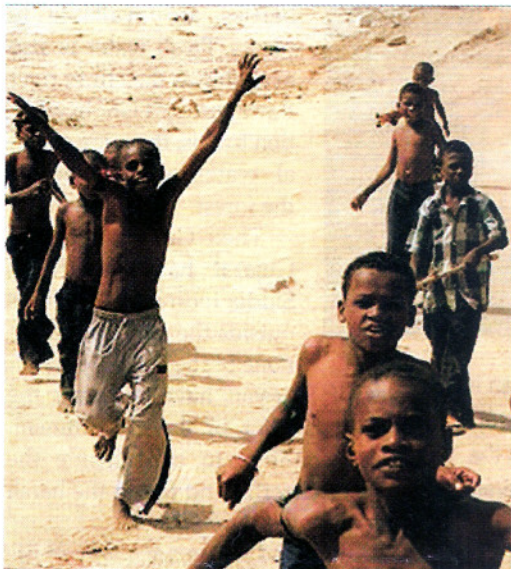
and sway to the beat of their ancestral drums. This tribal trance dance is known as 'dhamal' in Gujarati.

Siddis have also preserved their ancestral costumes, and every family has preserved one set of tribal costumes, which they don during ceremonial occasions, marriages or other festivities. The tribal drums, tribal flutes and other musical instruments, played during this trance dancing, have also been maintained in working condition.

Dancing Siddis

The beat of the drums and the swaying steps of the dance transport the viewer into a bygone era. The dancers move in synchronicity; men, women and children dance together in reverie and camaraderie in a community gathering.

One of the important aspects of Siddi culture is their existence in the present moment. They think



Vibrant Siddies: Laughter, music, dance are part of their life.

only about the here and now. They do not dwell on the past or contemplate the future. They are always aware of the present. If they get a meal, they are happy but they continue to remain cheerful, even if forced to go hungry to bed.

During the monsoons, most of the Siddi tribal houses are swept away by the rains. However, the Siddis remain extremely stress-free and rebuild their huts after every monsoon. They continue to live inside the forest during the rains and do not migrate to higher ground.

It would be an understatement to say that the Siddis are free from mental stress or worries. Smiling children, laughter, music, boisterous chatter, trance dancing and cheerful faces are the highlights of a visit to this inaccessible Siddi village in the heart of lion country.

One of the most important lessons one can learn from the Siddis is to shut out the past and forget about the future and continue to exist in the present. The learning experience from the Siddi tribe is aptly conveyed by this ancient Swahili Siddi proverb:

“Do not pursue the past,

Do not lose yourself in the future;

The past no longer is,

The future has not yet come;

Looking deeply at life,

As it is,

In the very here and now,

The Siddi lives in stability and freedom.”

How to get there?

The nearest international airport is at Ahmedabad. Junagadh is a 390-km-drive from Ahmedabad. Sasan is located 60 km away from Junagadh, on the Junagadh-Veraval Highway. Non-stop driving from Ahmedabad to Sasan should not exceed 8 hours.

Where to stay?

The Rainbow Hotel at Sasan is an affordable and comfortable place to stay. Sinh Sadan, the official guest house of the Forest Department, needs to be booked in advance for visitors and costs Rs 500 per night. The accommodation is comfortable and the food is basic.

Where to eat?

Lots of small restaurants serving North Indian and Gujarati cuisine dot Sasan. All restaurants offer simple but delicious vegetarian fare. ■