

A monochromatic tryst with the Sidis

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Award-winning photographer Ketaki Sheth recently launched her new book *A Certain Grace: The Sidi, Indians of African Descent at Jnanapravaha Mumbai*. The book is a result of Sheth's explorations into the world of the Sidi, believed to be the descendants of slaves, sailors, servants and merchants from East Africa, who arrived in the subcontinent during the 1200-1900 CE. We speak to Sheth about the book and her experiences with the Sidi.

Q: What made you decide to do a book on the Sidis?

A: Around Diwali in 2004, my family and I were holidaying in the Gir forest and we drove through Sirwan, a Sidi village in the middle of the forest. When I realised

that this was a permanent dwelling given to the Sidi by an earlier Nawab of Junagarh, I was curious about exploring the Sidi, whom I knew very little of.

Q: How different is Sidi culture from Indian or Gujarati culture?

A: They speak Gujarati, dress just like any other Indian; they know how to cook Gujarati cuisine, so they're quite Gujarati in many ways. They do live entirely on their own, so in a typical Sidi village, you won't find outsiders. But because they've been in India for so long, and been in the same clusters, people around have accepted them and are more used to them than you or me.

There are two things I noticed that are signs of their African ancestry. First is their dance the Goma. The drumming and the music and the traditional instru-



(L-R) Sidi dancer shatters a coconut on his head while performing for the royal family, Sachin, 2009; Sukhi, Jambur, 2005

ments they use are definitely of African influence. The other is the ritual of exorcism and healing that is connected to Africa.

Q: Was it difficult to get the Sidi

to trust you and to be comfortable in front of the camera?

A: I think to photograph anyone one has to be sensitive and to photograph as an outsider perhaps one has to



be more sensitive. So the first time I went to Jambur village, I did not go with a camera. There was a group of young boys and I could sense their resentment because I was an

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obvious outsider. But then, when I met the community organiser Hirbaiben, it definitely helped in easing the situation. It took many trips before they, and I, were com-

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fortable with each other.

Q: Are you planning on exhibiting these photographs anywhere now that the book is out?

A: It's going to be shown at the NGMA in Delhi this September, and it will open at the time of the Delhi photography festival, so hopefully a lot of young photographers

will come. Then it will be exhibited in Bombay next year, because the NGMA show will be a fairly long one.

Q: You're one of the few contemporary photographers who still shoot on film and in black and white. Is there a particular reason for this choice of format?

A: I didn't look at it as a choice, this is the only thing I've ever done. It's been 20-25 years and I'm now ready for a change. It's just that I studied black and white photography and I studied shooting on film and I know dark room work. Many of the practitioners I admired as I was growing as a photographer were still using chemistry. I do love a silver gelatine print; it just seems to have a certain dimension which I feel that a digital print doesn't have. But everyone says that it's all catching up now and I have to be more open, so I'll try to be more open.