

## THE SIDIS OF JAMBUR

An Indian community with roots in Africa became a five-year-long documentary project for **Ketaki Sheth**, one of India's leading female photographers, finds **Aarti Virani**



**R**arely does medieval Indian history zoom in on the odds-defying tale of Malik Ambar, a trailblazing Abyssinian warrior. Born in Ethiopia, he arrived in India as a slave and miraculously ascended the ranks, becoming emperor Jehangir's arch-nemesis in the early 17th century. Though Ambar's story is one of the era's more epic accounts, he was part of a wave of thousands of East Africans who migrated to the Indian subcontinent—as merchants, soldiers, even pirates—between the 7th and 19th centuries.

It's their present-day descendants, the Sidis, with whom the award-winning photographer Ketaki Sheth first crossed paths in 2005. "My entry was not at all welcome," discloses Sheth, who stumbled on a Sidi village in the dust-encased forests of Gujarat. "They were playing carom, and I think I interrupted," she says. "Eventually, the Sidis didn't care that I was wearing jeans or that my hair was in a ponytail. They treated me like an equal and I respected that."

That initial scepticism wasn't entirely unfounded. Currently, the Sidis—whose population is estimated to hover around 70,000—are one of India's poorest ethnic groups, incessantly discriminated against for their looks. Many opt to marry outside their communities as a gut-wrenching effort to "dilute" their physical appearances, according to Bangkok-based

photographer Luke Duggleby, founder of The Sidi Project, a digital platform that has thoughtfully and inclusively documented the group since 2015.

For Sheth, that first inadvertent trip to Jambur, a remote village in Junagadh, spurred a five-year adventure consisting of frequent visits to local madrasas (most Sidis are Sufi Muslim), fisheries and homes. "During my first trips, I didn't use my camera at all," she says. Her trust-building took shape over a series of intimate interactions, spanning both Gujarat and Karnataka (as well as Mumbai and Hyderabad), where the Sidis reside. The result is a tome of 88 soul-stirring photographs titled *A Certain Grace: The Sidi—Indians Of African Descent* (2013).

Sheth brought her compassionate lens to portray a misunderstood and underrepresented community. To wit, she nurtures connections with several women she befriended while researching, including Hirbai Lobi, a dynamic 70-year-old who steered an all-female jute bag business until the pandemic hit. "Hirbai has managed to do more than most of the men in her village," says Sheth, underscoring the pivotal role women play in uplifting communities. "[In Gujarat], the Sidi community is wedged between villages that are not Muslim," she says, "Nobody writes about them as history becomes even more revisionist. But they're incredible, and they're Indian."



**DEEP FOCUS**  
Ketaki Sheth's book on the Indians of African descent is published on PhotoInk