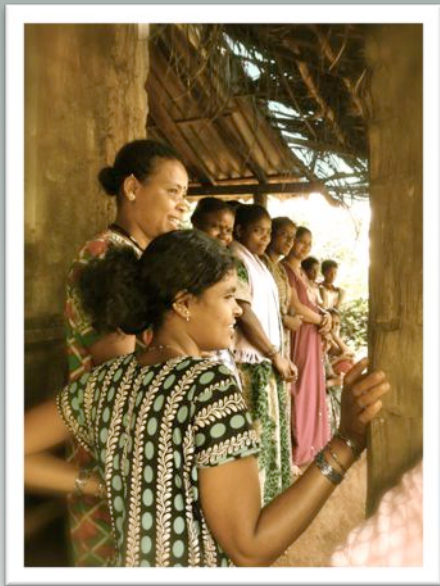


N O V E M B E R 2 0 1 5

Forest Journey

AMKing IE3 Global Intern



A visit with the
Siddis of Uttara
Kannada,
Karnataka,
India

Laughter, Charisma, Devotion, Family, Adventure...these are just a few of the words to describe the community I visited for a few days in the belly of the Western Ghats.

I had been in India for just over 2 weeks when I was swept away with my fellow IE3 Global Intern on an 8 day journey with Students from the Indian Branch of the United World Colleges into the rolling Western Ghats. We were traveling through the watersheds of the area, truly it was an adventure in the EcoSociology of the region, with homestays, plantation visits, and delicious fresh veg meals from the local landscapes. We really were following both the ecological, economical and sociological norms of the area. On the 4th day we hiked down into the jungle and stopped for 2 nights in the Siddi Village . The Siddi People are a recent Scheduled Tribe in India (meaning they were recently given constitutional rights), whose members are spread throughout the western part of India and Pakistan. The essence of the Siddi Village people are pleasantly lingering in my conscious; their laughter ringing in my ears; their grins, strong hands, leather-like feet and brightly colored clothing are clearly visible on my mind... and these are just a few of the beauties this small community possess.



Eleven families make up this Afro-Indian community 40 km outside of Sirsi Town, Uttara Kannada, Karnataka, India. They each have homes built of local products, and some of them had help post 2003 through governmental aid to update their homes, create bathrooms, plant new orchard plants, and access subsidized food. The Siddis are a resilient group of people, they found their home in the forest nearly 400 years prior, and are now an integrated part of the landscape. While in this hillside village I helped tend the areca nut orchard, drank young coconut straight off the tree, ate raw sugar cane cut down moments before, hiked to waterfalls, across wobbly bridges made of bamboo, and spent the down time in the home of one of the families. I was blessed to be in a home with two amazing early teen boys; honestly they were not much different than teens from the USA: they played video games on their parents phones, were competitive at with each other, loved to explore.

I learned some Kaanada words with them (the local lannguage: one of the 4 languages they know); the three of us glanced around the room at any and everything we could see. They would say it in English, then teach me it in Kannada...well, they would tell me it in Kannada, and then we all would laugh at how I attempted to say it back. They took me to a local stream where they hunted for crabs, and collected plants for me to smell or taste. Later, after a long hike with other village members, I tried to get them to swim. They slowly made their way into the water, we splashed and laughed some more. I



found out later that most of the Siddis do not know how to swim. I was so surprised by this-- and then realized, this was my own worldview coming through--I love to swim and have swam in rivers, streams, lakes, oceans... this was the norm for me, this was my form of relaxation and play.

So many questions arose from this experience, is water as recreation outside of the typical routine for folks in this part of the globe? Is swimming a sign of privilege? Is the fact I had the opportunity to learn to swim putting me in a different sphere of influence? These questions still linger.





Later, when I was learning to play cricket, this came up again: here I was, a *grownup*, playing in the middle of the day, laughing and carrying on while other adults worked. Yet, I did not feel that out of place because there was a sense of adventure here, and although I was different, and I watched them as they watched me--I seemed to be the mystery, not the other way around. They were interested in me and who I was in their world, how I responded as a member of their community. Their playful sense of self made me feel at home as a grown kid spending time as a guest in their forest home.

Some could say that the Siddi People are displaced; they are, like many others throughout the globe, in India due to African Diaspora. They, like so many others, have, and continue to experience, marginalization, and impoverishment

from the dominant culture that surrounds them. They are Indian people whose ancestors are from West Africa, but they are distinctly Indian with an identity in the vast forests of the Western Ghats. They have found their own voices in the forest that their Indian ancestors brought them to 400 years ago. They were, for me a sign of resilience, the past did not seem to define these devoutly Hindu, free spirited, and amazingly brave folks.

My time with the Siddis-- eating snacks and playing games by kerosene lamps, hiking up boulders, watching them dance by the river... revealed a strong sense of Home, more joyful than I have seen in a community in a very long time. And as they sang us a Welcome song, and waved us goodbye I left changed: they inspired me and are continuing to teach me what it means to celebrate, to rise above, and to live in each moment to the absolute fullness... in laughter, barefoot, and singing.



To hear more of Aliesje's journeys in India visit <http://kithandkinfarms>.