

India's forgotten African tribe seeks sporting glory



This picture shows youths of the Siddi community running while participating in an athletes program at Jambur village, in Junagadh district of Gujarat. — AFP photos

Rohit Majgul has weathered racism and rejection in India as part of a marginalized community tracing its roots back to Africa-but he still dreams of bringing sporting glory to his country. The 16-year-old is part of a group of teens practicing martial arts in an overgrown and sun-baked field near the remote hamlet where his family ekes out a precarious living on manual labor. Growing up around open drains and swarms of flies in Jambur village, he and other members of the local Siddi community were abused for their distinctive dark features and curly hair.

Majgul, a school dropout, sees his judo training as the only way to escape a life riddled with gruelling poverty and discrimination. "No-one believes me when I say I am Indian," he told AFP. "They think I am African, they call me by different abusive names, they tease me." "I have

descended from the Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. Some are believed to have been brought over during the Islamic conquest of the subcontinent as early as the eighth century. Many others were likely brought by the Portuguese to India between three and five centuries ago, researchers say.

'No-one cares about us'

When British colonial authorities abolished slavery in the 19th century, Siddis fled to the jungles in fear of their safety. Gradually they settled on the western coast, working as farmhands and laborers while adopting local culture and languages. India is now home to around 250,000 Siddis, according to researchers, with most living in Gujarat and Karnataka-two coastal states both facing the eastern tip of Africa from across the Arabian Sea. But they are still

came in the form of a scheme launched in 1987 by a government eager to boost the country's dismal Summer Olympics tally, with Indian athletes taking just nine gold medals in the last century. "We were exploring whether the Siddis had a genetic advantage," athletics coach R.

trained as forest guides for Gir National Park, a sanctuary for endangered lions. The state government revived the program in 2015, focusing mainly on judo and athletics. Promising Siddi youngsters now train at a sports academy in the state. A non-profit group in Karnataka is



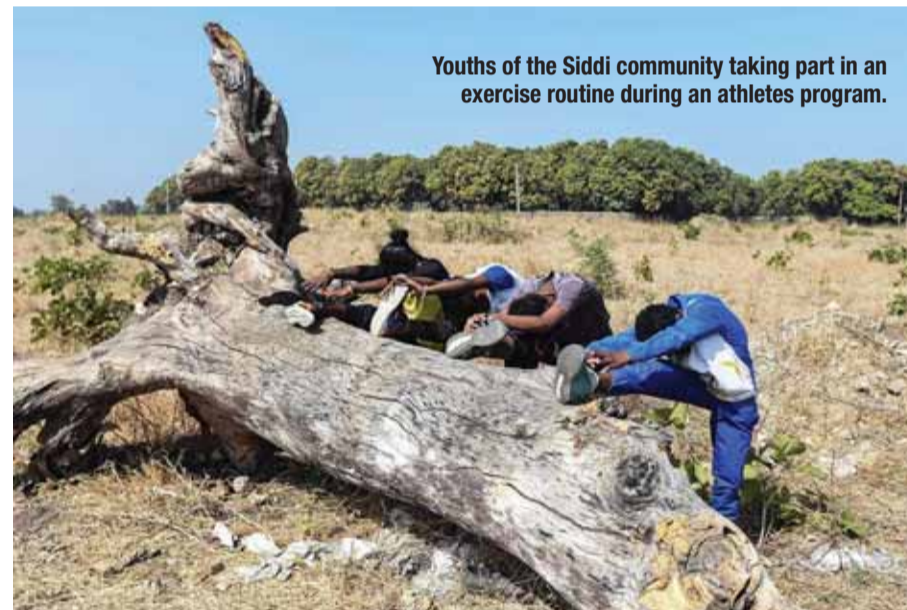
Youths of the Siddi community taking part in an exercise routine.

also been thrown off the bus because of my color, but I quietly endure everything because I want to do well in sports and carve my own identity." Two years ago, Majgul won silver in judo at the Asia-Pacific Youth Games.

His determination to represent India on the international stage was boosted by a government push to identify athletes in the Siddi community, which is believed to

viewed as outsiders. Those living in Gujarat are Muslim, making them targets for further discrimination in Hindu-majority India.

"No-one cares about us. There are no facilities in our village-no piped water, no proper toilets, nothing," said Majgul. Near his home, children with tangled, unwashed hair ran barefoot across narrow alleys lined with shanties. Hope



Youths of the Siddi community taking part in an exercise routine during an athletes program.

Sundar Raju, who was part of the project, told AFP. "Normally an Indian athlete takes some years before making it to the national level, but the Siddis were doing so in barely three years."

But authorities ditched the project seven years later, after realizing the impoverished Siddi were more interested in a linked program that encouraged Indians to pursue sporting careers by giving them highly sought-after government jobs. "They came from such poor families that the moment they secured jobs under a sports quota they grabbed the opportunity and left the training midway," Raju said.

'I used to curse my fate'

In the years since, some Siddis in Gujarat instead eked out a living by staging dance performances for tourists or

also mentoring 50 aspiring athletes from the community.

"We felt that this particular group has high potential but has been highly neglected," said Nitish Chiniwar, founder of the Bridges of Sports Foundation. Shahnaz Lobi, an aspiring shot-putter from Jambur, jumped at the chance to pursue a sporting career after watching her laborer father struggle to feed his family. "I used to curse my fate. But one day I got to know about the sports trials and I took part in them," she said. Lobi told AFP that she dreamt of competing in the 2024 Olympics. "I was selected and sent to the state sports academy. I have no friends there but it doesn't bother me. I just want to win an Olympic medal and let the world know I am Indian." — AFP



Youths of the Siddi community Rohit Majgul (right) and Firdos Majgul practising judo.



Izamam Majgul (left), member of the Siddi community, practicing with coach Hasan Majgul during an athletes program.



Shenaz Lobi (right), along with other members of the Siddi community, taking part in an exercise routine during an athletes program.

Tsarist-era Moscow grocery store set to close

A historic grocery store operating in central Moscow for more than a century selling exotic foods in an

ornate hall may soon close, Russian media reports said Tuesday. Eliseevsky's general manager Natalia Kharitonova told state news agency TASS that the chain which operated the store "will end cooperation with Eliseevsky in April". She said they were negotiating with several potential new partners but Russian state media cited a representative of the store saying it will close on April 11. When contacted by AFP, the store did not comment.

For several days, social media users have been complaining of empty shelves

and deserted aisles under the store's glittering chandeliers. "Empty shelves at the Eliseevsky: we've never seen that, not even during the war" or during economic struggles after the fall of the Soviet Union, a report on state channel Rossiya 1 said last week. The store is located in an 18th century building on the prestigious Tverskaya street, just hundreds of meters away from the Kremlin. Founded in 1901 by wealthy merchant Grigory Eliseev, the store was popular with the nobility for its European wines and cheeses, and exotic fruits.

After the Soviets came to power it was renamed "Gastronom no1" but remained abundant with rare foods, even during the times of shortages. In the early 1980s, its director was arrested as part of a corruption investigation, then sentenced to death and executed. True to its historic past, customers today are served in the extravagant hall by staff dressed in vintage white and burgundy uniforms. — AFP

ARCHBISHOP DENIES HARRY AND MEGHAN WERE MARRIED EARLY

The archbishop of Canterbury appeared to contradict a claim by Prince Harry's wife Meghan that he married them before their televised wedding, in an interview published in an Italian newspaper yesterday. Harry, a grandson of Queen Elizabeth II and the youngest son of her heir Prince Charles, married the US actress in a star-studded wedding on May 19, 2018. But in an interview with Oprah Winfrey broadcast earlier this month, Meghan revealed that they swapped vows in private before Archbishop Justin Welby three days before the public event.



In this file photo Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, speaks to members of the media at Windsor Castle in Windsor, west of London. — AFP

"I had a number of private and pastoral meetings with the duke and duchess before the wedding," Welby told La Repubblica daily. "The legal wedding was on the Saturday (May 19). I signed the wedding certificate, which is a legal document, and I would have committed a serious criminal offence if I signed it knowing it was false. "So you can make what you like about it. But the legal wedding was on the Saturday. But I won't say what happened at any other meetings." In the Oprah interview, Meghan said that "three days before our wedding, we got married". "No one knows that. But we called the archbishop, and we just said, 'Look, this thing, this spectacle is for the world, but we want our union between us,'" she said. — AFP



This file illustration picture shows Google map application displaying Covid-19 restrictions along your route on a smartphone in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

Google Maps to show more eco-friendly routes

Google on Tuesday said it will start showing users of its free Maps navigation service travel routes less damaging to the environment as just one of some 100 coming upgrades. Improvements to Google Maps tap into artificial intelligence for features including figuring out more fuel-efficient ways to get around. "Soon, Google Maps will default to the route with the lowest carbon footprint when it has approximately the same ETA (estimated arrival time) as the fastest route," vice president of product Dane Glasgow said in a blog post.

"In cases where the eco-friendly route could significantly increase your ETA, we'll let you compare the relative CO2 impact between routes so you can choose." Google worked with the US Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Lab to build a routing system that takes into account traffic congestion and steepness of roads to minimize fuel consumption, according to Glasgow. Google is also going to start alerting Maps users when a travel route is heading for a low-emission zone where higher-pollution vehicles such as diesel cars are not allowed.

Those alerts will launch in June on the Maps mobile app in Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain. Maps was also tweaked to provide users more comprehensive views of travel options that may be more eco-friendly than driving. And, air quality information along the way is being added to some routes displayed by Maps, launching first in Australia, India, and the United States. Google is also working to keep people on course once inside locations such as airports, shopping malls or train stations, according to Glasgow. — AFP