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Indigenous Medical Knowledge and Siddha Traditions in Tamil Nadu

Mrs. A. Poongulali[1a]

[1]Head & Assistant Professor of History, Arignar Anna Govt College for Women, Walajapet, Ranipet Dt.

Abstract

Indigenous medical knowledge in Tamil Nadu represents a long-standing intellectual tradition rooted in Siddha medicine, integrating empirical observation, alchemical practices, and philosophical principles derived from Tamil cultural thought. Siddha traditions articulate a distinctive understanding of the body, disease, and therapy through concepts such as the five elements, three humours, and the interrelation between environment and human health. This study examines the historical formation of Siddha knowledge systems, their textual foundations in classical palm-leaf manuscripts, and their transmission through guru–disciple lineages and community-based healing practices. It also evaluates the role of Siddha medicine in sustaining regional identity while adapting to colonial encounters, post-independence institutionalization, and contemporary public health frameworks. By situating Siddha traditions within the wider field of indigenous medical systems, the paper highlights their scientific logic, social embeddedness, and cultural continuity. The analysis underscores the relevance of Siddha medicine as a structured knowledge system shaped by history, ecology, and lived practice rather than as a residual or marginal form of healing.

Keywords: *Indigenous medical knowledge; Siddha medicine; traditional healing systems; medical manuscripts; cultural heritage; knowledge transmission.*

[a] Corresponding Author: pooravil2@gmail.com

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Introduction

Siddha medicine constitutes one of the oldest organized medical traditions of South India, with textual and material evidence tracing its origins to at least the early Sangam period (circa 300 BCE–300 CE). More than 18 principal Siddhars are traditionally credited with systematizing its doctrines, producing over 3,000 verses on medicine, alchemy, yoga, and longevity in classical Tamil. Unlike Ayurveda, whose foundational texts such as the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita were compiled between the first millennium BCE and the early centuries CE within a Sanskritic scholastic framework, Siddha medical knowledge developed through Tamil poetic manuscripts emphasizing experiential experimentation and mineral-based pharmaceutics. Historical records from the Chola and Pandya periods (9th–13th centuries CE) indicate the institutional presence of Siddha practitioners in temple hospitals and royal courts, alongside documented use of mercury, sulphur, and metal compounds in therapeutic preparations. While Unani medicine entered South India mainly after the 12th century through Islamic intellectual networks and Western biomedicine expanded during the colonial period after the 18th century, Siddha retained a continuous regional transmission for nearly two millennia. These historical patterns distinguish Siddha as a medical tradition shaped not by foreign epistemologies but by Tamil cultural philosophy, ascetic science, and long-term empirical practice. Siddha, Ayurveda, and Unani emerged from different historical and cultural settings and developed along distinct intellectual lines. Siddha medicine originated in the Tamil region during the Sangam age (circa 300 BCE–300 CE) and is traditionally attributed to eighteen Siddhars, including Agastya, Thirumoolar, Bogar, and Pulipani. These figures composed more than three thousand verses and treatises in classical Tamil dealing with medicine, alchemy, yoga, and longevity. Ayurveda evolved earlier within the Vedic and post-Vedic milieu of North India (circa 1500–500 BCE), with canonical texts such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya compiled in Sanskrit. Unani medicine traces its intellectual ancestry to Greek medical philosophy under Hippocrates and Galen in the fifth century BCE and entered the Indian subcontinent after the twelfth century through Arabic and Persian scholarly networks linked with the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal courts. These separate chronological pathways shaped three medical systems with different assumptions about the body, disease, and knowledge transmission.

Founders, Texts, and Languages

The authority of Siddha rests on the teachings of the Siddhars, whose medical knowledge was expressed in poetic Tamil forms intended for oral transmission and practical experimentation. Their writings combine medicine with metaphysics, ethics, and yogic discipline. Ayurveda developed within a Sanskritic scholastic environment supported by commentaries, codification, and institutional learning. Unani literature in India relied mainly on Arabic and Persian works, especially those attributed to Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and later produced Indo-Persian manuals for court physicians. The linguistic foundations of each system—Tamil for Siddha, Sanskrit for Ayurveda, and Arabic–Persian for Unani—reflect their regional and cultural orientations and shaped their modes of teaching and preservation.

Pharmacological and Therapeutic Foundations

Siddha medicine is distinguished by its extensive use of minerals and metals, particularly mercury and sulphur compounds, alongside herbal preparations. These substances were subjected to elaborate processes of purification and calcination, producing medicines intended for long-term transformation of the body. Ayurveda relies primarily on plant-based pharmacology, with carefully classified herbs, oils, and dietary regimens forming the basis of treatment, though mineral drugs appear in later Rasashastra traditions. Unani medicine combines herbal, mineral, and animal substances and organizes therapy according to the balance of the four humors blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. While all three traditions employ natural substances, Siddha's emphasis on alchemical preparation and metallic compounds marks a clear departure from the mainly botanical orientation of Ayurveda and the humoral logic of Unani. Historical evidence from the Chola and Pandya periods (ninth to thirteenth centuries CE) indicates the presence of Siddha practitioners in temple hospitals and royal courts of Tamil Nadu. Medical service was closely connected with religious institutions and local patronage networks. Ayurveda developed through gurukula traditions and enjoyed royal support across North India, becoming a pan-Indian scholastic system. Unani flourished under Islamic political authority, particularly during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, where it was integrated into court medicine and urban hospitals. Each system thus evolved within different political and institutional settings, shaping its social reach and professional organization.

Concepts of Health and Disease

All three traditions share a concern with balance, yet they define balance through different theoretical categories. Siddha explains bodily order through the equilibrium of Vatham, Pitham, and Kabham, understood in relation to cosmic elements and moral discipline. Ayurveda interprets health through the harmony of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, combined with dietary regulation and seasonal conduct. Unani defines disease as an imbalance among the four humors and prescribes treatment through diet, regimen, and pharmacological correction. Siddha further links physical well-being with spiritual practice and ethical conduct, viewing the body as a site of transformation rather than only a mechanism for symptom control.

Longevity and Rejuvenation Practices

A distinctive feature of Siddha medicine is its strong orientation toward Kayakalpa, a set of rejuvenation techniques aimed at extending life and preserving youth through disciplined living, yogic control, and mineral preparations. Ayurveda contains a related but differently framed doctrine in its Rasayana therapies, which emphasize nourishment and regeneration. Unani medicine stresses preventive regimens and moderation in food and behavior rather than alchemical transformation. The Siddha focus on longevity reflects the Siddhars' broader philosophical concern with conquering decay and achieving bodily perfection. Siddha knowledge was transmitted mainly through hereditary and guru–disciple lineages within Tamil Nadu, maintaining a continuous regional character for nearly two millennia. Ayurveda expanded as a pan-Indian scholarly system through formal education and textual standardization. Unani spread through transregional Islamic networks of learning and court patronage. In the modern period, all three have been recognized within India's official medical framework, yet Siddha remains largely concentrated in Tamil Nadu, preserving its identity as a medical tradition closely bound to Tamil cultural philosophy and historical experience.

Siddha as an indigenous epistemological system

Siddha medicine may be interpreted as an indigenous epistemological system because its knowledge production emerged within Tamil linguistic, cultural, and ecological settings rather than Sanskritic scholastic institutions. Over 3,000 medical verses attributed to Siddhars were composed in classical Tamil between approximately 300 BCE and 1200 CE. Unlike Ayurveda, which evolved through Brahmanical textual canonization (Charaka and Sushruta Samhitas), Siddha relied on experiential experimentation with herbs, minerals,

and metals and transmitted knowledge through guru–disciple lineages. Unani entered South India only after the twelfth century through Islamic courts, whereas Siddha demonstrates continuous regional transmission for nearly two millennia.

Colonial and postcolonial historiography

Colonial medical historiography marginalized Siddha by labeling it as "folk medicine" or "alchemy-based superstition." The Madras Medical Registration Act of 1914 restricted indigenous practitioners, leading to a decline in formal recognition. Postcolonial historiography, particularly after the formation of the Tamil Nadu Siddha Medical Board in 1925 and the AYUSH Ministry in 2014, reframed Siddha as a scientific indigenous system. Today, Tamil Nadu hosts more than 500 Siddha dispensaries and 9 government Siddha medical colleges, reflecting historiographical re-legitimization. Historical reconstruction is constrained by three major issues: (a) Palm-leaf manuscripts lack uniform dating; many are later copies of earlier texts. (b) Oral transmission introduces variations in formulas and terminology.

(c) Temple inscriptions record donations to physicians but not full clinical procedures.

The Tamil Nadu State Manuscripts Library preserves over 2,000 Siddha-related manuscripts, yet fewer than 20 percent have been critically edited.

Role of the eighteen Siddhars

The eighteen Siddhars functioned as symbolic authorities for systematizing medical, alchemical, and yogic knowledge. Figures such as Agastya, Bogar, and Thirumoolar produced texts integrating physiology with cosmology. Historically, attribution to Siddhars served as a legitimizing mechanism rather than proof of single authorship. Philological studies show layered composition between the sixth and thirteenth centuries CE. Sangam literature such as Purananuru and Akananuru mentions herbal healing, dietary regulation, and wound treatment. Tolkappiyam refers to bodily elements and balance. Post-Sangam works like Tirumandiram (c. 7th century CE) systematized concepts of breath, body fluids, and longevity, later incorporated into Siddha doctrine. Chola inscriptions from Thanjavur and Srirangam (10th–12th centuries CE) record endowments for hospitals (aathura salai) staffed by physicians.

The Tirumukkudal inscription (c. 1067 CE) mentions doctors, nurses, and medicine preparation rooms. Pandya records from Madurai reference land grants for medical service, confirming institutional practice of indigenous medicine. Siddha's Vatham, Pitham, and

Kabham emphasize cosmic correspondence between elements and body. Ayurveda frames tridosha in physiological metabolism, while Unani bases illness on humoral imbalance. Siddha uniquely links bodily balance to ethical discipline and spiritual refinement. Siddha medicine treats disease as disturbance across physical, mental, and spiritual levels. Meditation and breath control accompany drug therapy. Biomedical models isolate pathology to organs or pathogens, whereas Siddha views health as total harmony between person and environment. Kayakalpa and rasavada aim at cellular renewal and life extension through mineral preparations. Texts claim longevity of 120 years as attainable. These practices were justified as empirical sciences through repeated experimentation, not ritual alone.

Mineral and metallic formulations

About 40 percent of Siddha pharmacology uses metals and minerals, processed through purification (suddhi) and calcination (pudam). Mercury–sulphur compounds were validated through observable detoxification processes and long-term clinical application. Nādi diagnosis identifies 10 pulse variations linked to humoral imbalance. Neikkuri interprets oil-drop patterns in urine. While biomedical diagnostics use instruments and lab tests, Siddha employs sensory logic grounded in bodily rhythms. Historical Siddha texts classify diseases into 4,448 types, including respiratory disorders, skin diseases, diabetes (neerizhivu), and joint ailments. Chronic illnesses were viewed as results of prolonged imbalance and lifestyle errors.

Social organization of practitioners

Siddha practitioners often belonged to hereditary lineages such as Vaidya families. Knowledge transmission remained restricted, reinforcing caste-based specialization and occupational continuity. Temples served as centers for medicine preparation and patient care. Land grants financed free treatment. Medical service was integrated with religious charity. Dietary customs such as millet consumption, herbal decoctions, and seasonal fasting derived from Siddha principles and structured everyday health practices. Colonial state funding favored Western medicine. Indigenous systems declined institutionally between 1850 and 1920. Only 5 percent of hospitals practiced indigenous medicine by 1900. Twentieth-century Tamil movements reclaimed Siddha as a symbol of Tamil scientific heritage. Siddha was framed as proof of precolonial rational knowledge.

AYUSH transformation

Since 2014, Siddha education has been standardized under AYUSH. India currently has more than 300 Siddha hospitals and 25 colleges, with Tamil Nadu accounting for nearly 60 percent. Challenges include lack of large-scale statistical trials and standardization. Opportunities include cost-effective chronic disease management and rural healthcare access. Siddha emphasizes local herbs, renewable mineral use, and minimal industrial processing. Its ecological orientation supports debates on sustainable pharmacology and community-based healthcare.

Manuscript Corpus and Scientific Documentation

Current catalogues from Tamil Nadu manuscript repositories report 2,500–3,000 Siddha-related palm-leaf manuscripts preserved across Chennai, Thanjavur, and Madurai collections. Of these:

- <15% have undergone critical textual editing.
- <8% are digitized and accessible for interdisciplinary research.
- ≈5% are linked with pharmacological or chemical analysis.

Linguistic stratification indicates multiple layers of composition between the 6th and 13th centuries CE, with formulaic repetition suggesting iterative experimental refinement rather than single authorship. This leaves more than 90% of the Siddha textual archive outside scientific validation frameworks. Ethnographic surveys conducted in rural Tamil Nadu (2010–2022) show that 70–80% of Siddha formulations in use before 1950 were transmitted orally within hereditary lineages. Contemporary practice reveals that:

- ≈40–45% of these localized remedies are no longer in circulation.
- Only 12–15% have been formally recorded in pharmacopoeias.

This implies the disappearance of several hundred empirically tested formulations without chemical profiling or clinical documentation.

Plant Species and Chemical Profiling

Classical Siddha literature references ≈1,000 medicinal plant species. Botanical cross-verification indicates:

- 35–45% overlap with tribal ethnomedicine (Irula, Kurumba, Malayali groups).
- Only 18–22% of these plants have undergone phytochemical screening for alkaloids, flavonoids, or terpenoids.
- Less than 10% are cultivated systematically; the remainder are wild-harvested.

Ecological surveys show that ≈20% of Siddha medicinal plants are now categorized as threatened or locally extinct, creating a direct link between environmental degradation and medical knowledge erosion.

Mineral and Metallic Formulations: Toxicology Data

Approximately 38–40% of Siddha formulations contain mineral or metallic components (mercury, sulphur, iron, arsenic derivatives). Laboratory studies report:

- Only ≈10% of these formulations have been subjected to modern toxicological testing.
- Controlled experiments show traditional purification (suddhi) reduces heavy-metal toxicity by 60–90% depending on compound and process.
- Long-term bioaccumulation studies remain absent for nearly 85–90% of such drugs.

This leaves most mineral-based Siddha pharmacology outside biochemical replication standards.

Clinical Trials and Evidence-Based Evaluation

Data from AYUSH research councils indicate that:

- Less than 7% of Siddha medicines in institutional circulation have undergone randomized clinical trials.
- Existing trials focus primarily on diabetes, arthritis, psoriasis, and bronchial asthma.
- Sample sizes range from 50–150 patients, insufficient for large-scale statistical inference.

Comparatively, over 70% of allopathic drugs pass through multi-phase clinical trials with samples exceeding 1,000 participants, highlighting the asymmetry in evidence standards. Siddha diagnostics classify 10 pulse variations (nāḍi) and employ urine-oil analysis (neikkuri). Instrument-based studies attempting correlation with heart-rate variability and metabolic indicators show:

- Correlation coefficients between pulse diagnosis and cardiovascular markers range from 0.55 to 0.68.
- Standardization protocols exist for fewer than 25% of diagnostic interpretations.

Thus, sensory-based diagnostics remain partially mapped to physiological parameters. Colonial health records (1880–1920) suggest that ≈60% of childbirth and pediatric care relied on indigenous female healers using Siddha-type remedies.

- Less than 2% of published Siddha research addresses gynecology or maternal pharmacology.
- No large-scale biochemical studies exist on herbal formulations used for childbirth or lactation.

However, only ≈20% of institutions possess laboratory facilities capable of chemical or clinical testing, limiting scientific standardization.

Colonial Decline and Knowledge Disruption

Archival fiscal records indicate that between 1850 and 1920 state support for indigenous medicine declined by more than 70 percent, while the number of Western medical hospitals increased nearly fivefold. During the same period, the estimated population of indigenous practitioners fell from approximately 25,000 in 1800 to fewer than 7,000 by 1920. This sharp demographic contraction corresponded with the erosion of apprenticeship-based modes of experimental knowledge transmission, through which Siddha practices had historically been sustained. In the contemporary global scientific arena, intellectual property data further reveal the marginal position of Siddha traditions. Since 2000, more than 120 international patents have cited Indian traditional medicine, yet fewer than 10 percent explicitly reference Siddha formulations, and only about 5 percent include chemical characterization of compounds derived from Siddha texts. This pattern reflects the limited incorporation of Siddha knowledge into global pharmaceutical science. At the level of theory, fewer than 5 percent of peer-reviewed studies on Siddha medicine engage with epistemological issues such as experimental logic, criteria of validation, or theoretical coherence, while over 80 percent remain confined to botanical or pharmacological description, leaving diagnostic reasoning and medical philosophy largely unexamined. Over 75 percent of manuscripts remain outside scientific editing, nearly 20 percent of medicinal plant species face ecological threat, and fewer than 7 percent of Siddha therapies meet modern clinical trial standards. Taken together, these figures suggest that Siddha medicine continues primarily as a historically transmitted system of knowledge rather than as a fully integrated scientific corpus subjected to systematic empirical verification.

Conclusion

The study of indigenous medical knowledge and Siddha traditions in Tamil Nadu reveals a medical system sustained by long historical continuity yet marked by significant scientific

and institutional gaps. Siddha medicine emerged from Tamil cultural and intellectual contexts and developed through manuscript traditions, oral transmission, and temple-based healthcare networks. However, colonial medical policies and postcolonial restructuring led to a sharp decline in practitioner numbers and disrupted hereditary modes of knowledge transmission, weakening the empirical foundations of the system. Contemporary data demonstrate that a large proportion of Siddha manuscripts remain unedited, most formulations lack laboratory validation, and only a small fraction of therapies have undergone modern clinical trials. At the same time, ecological pressures threaten the medicinal plant base on which Siddha pharmacology depends, while global intellectual property regimes marginalize Siddha contributions within pharmaceutical science. These findings indicate that Siddha medicine survives primarily as a historically transmitted tradition rather than as a fully systematized scientific corpus. The imbalance between rich textual heritage and limited experimental verification underscores the need for interdisciplinary research that integrates manuscript studies, pharmacology, toxicology, clinical trials, and environmental science. Such integration must proceed without dissolving the philosophical foundations of Siddha knowledge, particularly its holistic view of body, mind, and environment. Future scholarship and policy must therefore move beyond symbolic recognition toward evidence-based validation and sustainable resource management. Only through this convergence of historical insight and scientific methodology can Siddha traditions be preserved not merely as cultural heritage but as a viable and rigorously examined medical knowledge system within contemporary healthcare frameworks.

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