

ABSTRACT

Traditional South Indian medicine surrounding Tranquebar

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Before the coming of the Muslims in the tenth century A.D., two predominant forms of medicine existed in India: Ayurveda in the north and parts of Kerala in the south, and Siddha principally in Tamil Nadu. Both of these traditions of indigenous medicine have long histories and are still practised in their respective areas in India. Much has been written about the history, development and practice of Ayurveda, which has a literary tradition in Sanskrit and Hindi extending over two millennia. However, very little is known about Siddha medicine because its literary history is meagre in comparison to that of Ayurveda, and most of its knowledge has been passed down via oral tradition from teacher to student. This project, therefore, will focus on the Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu, with particular reference to that area surrounding Tranquebar.

Ayurveda uses an aetiology based on the unbalance of three basic bodily humours: wind, bile, and phlegm to diagnose disease. Health is then restored and maintained by means of a combination of herbs, minerals, life-style, and sometimes surgery. Siddha medicine, on the other hand, uses other forms of aetiology, which includes, among others, pulse-diagnosis, to diagnose illness. Cure is effected primarily by a system of medical alchemy that is rarely seen in the modern world. Both systems share a common underlying fundamental understanding of the relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm, or between human-beings and their environment.

Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu is ideally situated to undertake the research into the South Indian traditions of Siddha medicine because records already exist, detailing the encounters between Siddha medicine and medical practitioners and Danish doctors attached to Tranquebar. Using this information as the point of departure, a comprehensive study of the history and practice of Siddha medicine and its influence on and by both western medicine and Ayurveda will be undertaken. This project will focus on the history and development of Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu and its relationship to Ayurveda.