

Survey of Tamil Siddha manuscripts in possession of Traditional Healers in Northern Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Background: Traditional Medicine throughout the world has been passed on to the next generation mostly by oral tradition. The two codified medical traditions of India, Ayurveda and Siddha have also been similarly promoted and the medical literature is in the poetic form for continuity and easy memorization. Subsequently they were written down in palm leaves. Not all palm manuscripts, treasure of knowledge have been converted into books.

Objective: To collect and digitize the traditional Siddha medical knowledge documented in the Siddha palm manuscripts in the possession of Traditional healers.

Materials and Methods: The Centre for Traditional Medicine, Tamil Nadu, India, carried out survey among different practitioners of Traditional Medicine in northern Tamil Nadu, to locate and collect palm manuscripts and followed it with preservation, cataloging and digitization using digital scanners and photographic equipment.

Results: Two hundred and fifty six works were analyzed and this paper presents the age, authorship, subject content and status of the palm manuscripts.

Conclusion: The traditional knowledge present in the palm manuscripts are undergoing decay and the persons with knowledge to decipher are less. Hence there is an urgent need to decipher and publish the contents as books.

Key words: Siddha, palm manuscripts, Traditional knowledge, survey, India, Tamil Nadu, Ayurveda

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge traditionally has been passed on to the next generation by oral tradition before being documented. Ayurveda and Siddha have also been similarly promoted and the medical literature is in the poetic form for continuity and easy memorization when passed on to the next generation by rote learning. The earliest documentation has been as writing in copper foils, stone and clay plates/tablets and subsequently in palm leaves (*Borassus flabellifer*) in South Asian countries. The earliest literature on Indian medical practice appeared during the Vedic period in India, i.e., in the mid-second millennium BCE. The *Susruta Samhitā* and the *Charaka Samhitā*, encyclopedias of medicine compiled from various sources from the mid-first millennium BCE to about 500 CE, are

among the foundational works of Ayurveda.^[1]

These works are available in the book form with commentaries by different authors. The other tradition Siddha in spite of having multiple contributors of primary knowledge, the eighteen Siddhars, has not been very fortunate to have that many original texts published in book form. However the largest share of the palm manuscript collection of South India, particularly Tamil Nadu is on Traditional Siddha medical

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practice next only to personal astrology and *mantras*. The palm leaves being locally available, cheap and easy to write was used more widely than other forms of traditional documents.

India possesses an estimate of five million manuscripts, probably the largest collection in the world. These cover a variety of themes, textures and aesthetics, scripts, languages, calligraphies, illuminations and illustrations. Together, they constitute the 'memory' of India's history, heritage and thought.^[2] The Saraswathi Mahal Library and Manuscriptology dept of Tamil University at Thanjavur and the following institutes in Chennai, The Govt. Oriental Manuscript Library, U.Ve.Swaminathaiyer Library, Institute of Asian Studies, International Institute of Tamil Studies, Siddha Central Research Institute, Literary division of the Directorate on Indian Medicine and Homeopathy, Govt. of Tamil Nadu, posses a large number of Siddha manuscripts apart from religious mutts and private individuals. With copies of the same work being available in different libraries and individual possession it is considered about 800 original works of texts of Siddha Medicine are available and of which about 160 have been published as of now.^[3] The Govt. Oriental Manuscript Library has digitized and created catalogue for 1085 Tamil Siddha manuscripts in the year 2005.^[4]

However, a large number of manuscripts lie scattered across the country and beyond, in numerous institutions as well as private collections, often unattended and undocumented. The current work of collection, cataloguing and digitization was carried out by Centre for Traditional Medicine and Research (CTMR), in Northern Tamil Nadu during the period 2011-2012 and an analysis of the status, content is presented in this paper.

The primary objective was to prepare a digitized inventory of Siddha Medical palm

manuscripts along with catalogue of author and subject content. The other objective was to explore the possibility of using this traditional knowledge for future drug development based on leads with proper equity for the holders of traditional knowledge.

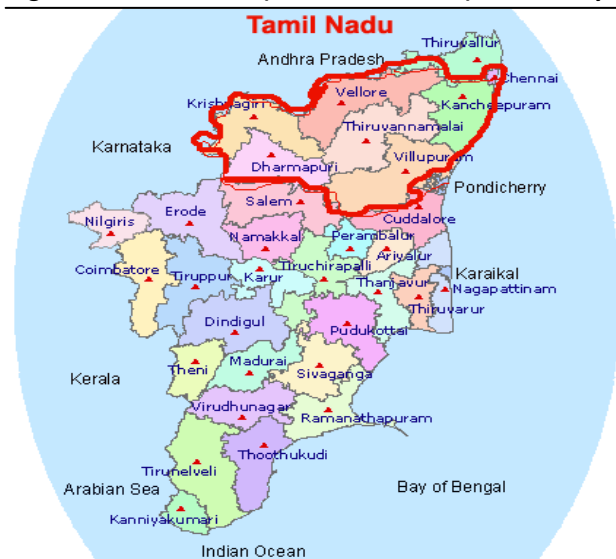
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The area covered under this survey included Chennai, Vellore, Kanchipuram, Thiruvanamalai, Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri, Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu (Figure 1). Tamil Nadu lies between 8°5' and 13°35' north latitude and 76°15' and 80°20' east longitude. This area lies south of Andhra Pradesh and bounded in the east by Bay of Bengal and west by Salem district in some parts and Bangalore rural district of Karnataka and south by Cuddalore district. The Study area accounts for 35% of Tamil Nadu and each district has about 150 Traditional healers.^[5]

Most of the healers store manuscripts in their homes mostly due to the sentiments they attach to the traditional heritage and have a reluctance to share their possession. They also believe that the knowledge or the unique formulation present in the manuscripts could bring them a huge royalty.

Figure 1: Areas covered (marked with red line) under study



Locating palm manuscripts

The primary activity was identifying the location of the palm manuscripts. Awareness meetings were held for Traditional healers and institutionally trained Siddha physicians in Dharmapuri, Vellore, Coimbatore, Chennai, Thiruvannamalai and Tirunelveli about the need for collections, preservations and conservation, digitization of the Tamil Siddha palm manuscripts. This helped in identifying manuscripts lying with healers and physicians. The various religious Mutts and libraries were visited to explore the possibility of digitizing hitherto undigitized Manuscripts.

Collection of palm manuscripts

About 400 healers were briefed personally in the awareness meetings and 15 healers provided the palm manuscripts for screening and digitization. Manuscripts thus collected were cleaned and handled as per the guidelines of the National Manuscript Mission of India.^[6]

Cleaning process

Palm leaf being in nature is susceptible to deterioration due to physical damage and decay. The most common deteriorating agents are climatic factors like temperature and humidity variations, insects, constant handling and improper storage. We cleaned every leaf with soft tissue paper and lemon grass oil was applied to each leaf to preserve palm leaves. Fading was restored by applying carbon black mixed with oil on the leaf. Then leaves were dried and kept in wooden shelves to avoid direct sunlight. Each state and region has its own indigenous method of preparing, writing and preserving the palm leaves.” Few methods to conserve manuscripts are^[7]:

1. The use of natural herbs like Vasambu (*Acorus calamus*) or Neem leaves (*Azadirachta indica*)

with the manuscripts to keep insects away.

2. Application of citronella oil, camphor oil, or lemon grass oil on the surface of the leaves to keep it flexible. This prevents physical damage due to brittleness.

3. Fumigation with thymol vapors helps to prevent fungus.

Digitization process

Epson GT 20000 Scan with 300 dpi resolution was used for digitization, wherever required higher resolution up to 600 dpi was used. The digitized manuscripts were returned to the persons who originally possessed the manuscripts along with digital version. The rest 56 bundles were kept in wooden shelves at the library of CTMR as the healers felt it may not be possible to conserve them in their location without decay or of no use to them due to their failing vision and not in a position to read them any further and lack of interest among the next generation.

Assessment of condition of palm manuscripts

The conditions of the palm manuscripts were classified as damaged, minimal damaged and good based on the following criteria;

Damaged - the manuscripts which were damaged beyond the margins and multiple holes in the palm manuscripts making it difficult to read. Minimally damaged - these were the ones where the margins or the first and last folios were damaged or moth eaten or with fungus or letters invisible but could be retrieved. Good condition - palm manuscripts where the margins were complete, the letters were readable with the folios arranged in proper order.

The individual texts were assessed as complete and incomplete by matching the poetic text number with the number mentioned in the title of each texts.

Assessment of age of palm manuscripts

The age of the text were determined by the year, month, day, star, ayanam (solar movement) based on Tamil calendar mentioned in the script. Colophon given by the authors, language used, units mentioned and the writing style of letters were also considered to assess the age and the place of origin of the manuscripts.

Authors of manuscripts

The palm manuscripts were broadly be classified as primary and secondary source. Primary source (original work) in which the name of Siddhar is mentioned and is usually in the poetic form. Secondary source is the one where individual physicians have recorded their clinical experiences including drug formulations, process methods and treatment procedures.

RESULTS

Language of manuscripts

The palm manuscripts though were collected from the northern part of Tamil Nadu, the vast majority of them were written in Tamil in the dialect and vocabulary used in southern districts such as Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari of Tamil Nadu as Siddha tradition flourished in these region and palm trees were also aplenty.

Number and condition of manuscript

About 210 bundles of palm manuscripts were collected, of which, 160 bundles containing 258 texts belong to Siddha Medical literature. The rest were of astrology consisting of individual's birth chart and shamanism. Majority bundles contained only one Siddha text, few bundles contained 3 - 12 Siddha texts. Out of 258 Siddha manuscripts, 197 were in good condition, 26 were in minimally damaged condition and 35 were damaged. Of the 258 texts so far digitized, 122 texts were available in complete form while 136 were incomplete (Figures 2 - 3).

Age of manuscripts

The oldest palm manuscripts of this collection was about 400 years old (16th Century) and the latest was about 150 years old.

Authors of manuscripts

Though texts contributed by fifteen Siddhars were collected in the process, the largest number of seventy is attributed to Saint Agstyar. In our observation, many authors of Siddha texts attributed their knowledge to Agastyar and hence those texts go in the name of Agastyar (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of texts attributed to different authors

Author	No of Siddha texts
Agastyar	70
Bogar	7
Bhramamuni	3
Dakshinamoorthy	4
Dhanvantri	7
Korakkar	3
Karuvoorar	7
Machamuni	3
Nandheesar	5
Pulipani	5
Ramadevar	5
Romarishi	3
Sattamuni	7
Sundaranandar	3
Therayar	2
Thirumoolar	2
Yacobu	1
Healers notes	120

Contents of manuscripts

Though most of the scripts contain more than one area of knowledge, like formulation, treatment, diagnosis, specialty, the primary content was taken for content classification. The subject elaborated in the palm manuscripts had a large number of formulations, disease

classification, and specialty areas of treatment (Table 2).

Unique manuscripts

The availability of palm manuscripts of specialty areas like *Varmam*, Ophthalmology, Toxicology, Inorganic formulation and pulse diagnosis reveal the strength of the Traditional

Siddha system of medicine. The treatise on Materia medica '*Agastyar Gunapadam*' which was collected during this process was over 300 years and probably the first Siddha treatise which elaborates the properties of different herbal raw materials and food substances. The latter texts like '*Pathartha Guna chintamani*' '*Pathartha Guna Vilakkam*' are based on this text as we found out in slightly altered forms (in terms of words).

Table 2: Content of the Manuscripts

Subject	No of texts
Formulations of Healers	60
Processing of inorganic	4
Materia Medica	2
Diagnostic methods	2
Pulse diagnosis	8
Disease description –Vaatham	7
Disease description - fever	3
Ophthalmology – Nayana Vidhi	3
Pediatrics – Kulandhai Maruthuvam	5
Women health including ante-natal care	3
Ear disease- Karneegam	1
Surgery – Saliyam	1
Drug Synthesis – Sarakku Vaippu	1
Varma	3
Unani Medicine	1
Treatment Procedures	12
Mystic treatment- Faith healing	12
Toxicology – Vishavaidyam	2
Assorted including medicines, prayers, treatment	128

The presence of Unani medicine in Tamil was also not known before and is worth further studies. The presence of eight texts on pulse diagnosis which elaborates the most important diagnostic tool which is unique to this traditional medical system provides lot of research opportunity. The Siddha texts on disease of the children (*Kulandhai Maruthuvam*) not only elaborate the different disease conditions but also preventive care. The treatise on *Karneegam* - ear diseases is also less known and requires further detailed study.

Figure 2: Palm manuscript bundles



Figure 3: Siddha palm manuscripts (a) before cleaning process and (b) after cleaning process



DISCUSSION

The damage of the palm manuscripts have occurred due to improper maintenance as many owned it by default as a family property with little interest in the traditional medicine and also due to inadequate knowledge either in conserving or digitization. During our field studies it was observed that the rare palm manuscripts leaves were destroyed by rodents, moth or due to vagaries of climate and some got trampled in rain as they are mostly kept in the roof of huts. It was also observed, where ever they were held by practicing healers, they were in a reasonably good state, this is evident from the fact as many as 120 original texts which are over 300 years were found in good shape. An organized search for old manuscripts in the possession of individuals, libraries of religious institutions, monasteries may yield rich results. The critical examination of these manuscripts, cataloging, their publication and translation, are among the many things that needs to be done to fully explore the potential of the South Indian Traditional medicine - Siddha. Still many thousand palm manuscripts lie with individual healers and institutes, which needs to be digitized and creation of proper catalogue of all such works needs to be carried out in the

future, particularly from Southern part of Tamil Nadu. The recent palm manuscripts are mostly clinical experiences of individual healers and formulations used by them in practice. The clinical experience with these formulations vouchsafe for the efficacy.

The current work is only a tip of the iceberg and efforts needs to be taken to digitize the palm manuscripts collected so far by various organization and a complete catalogus catalogorum of Siddha manuscripts needs to be created and made available online so that, comparative analysis is taken up and critical editions of Siddha texts published. The treasure of formulations will open up new opportunities in the area of drug development.

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