India lays claim to a rich medical history and today has a diverse setting of healing traditions or, loosely defined, ‘medical systems’. To promote research and advance education on this history and to make known the contemporary state of affairs of India’s various medical systems, the Indian Government created the Department of Indian Systems of Medicine and Homeopathy (ISM&H) in 1995, renamed the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) in 2003. For a long time, the medical system most often studied by historians of Indian medicine has been Ayurveda. For the past 50 years, while the traditional Indological work of translating and critically editing ayurvedic texts has continued, scholars have taken a keen interest in the forms and functions of indigenous Indian sciences under European colonialism, during the march to independence and in postcolonial democratic India. This scholarship has brought to our attention the numerous ways in which the clinical medicine of the British played a role in colonising India. This work underscores the challenges colonial medicine foisted upon practitioners of India’s indigenous medicines, not only to avoid being subsumed by the flood of biomedicine on the subcontinent but also to compete with biomedical practitioners as purveyors of viable healing therapies for the Indian population. Here too Ayurveda has tended to be the focus of scholarly attention. Excellent studies of non-ayurvedic medicines have appeared over the past few decades, however, studies that shed light on the diversity of the Indian medical landscape and, importantly, also problematise the idea of indigeneity in India. First-rate studies of Unani medicine and Siddha medicine are available, as are a number of superb treatments of ‘religious healing’ in India.

*Recipes for Immortality* belongs to a growing body of scholarship on Indian medical traditions that seeks to demonstrate the significance of medical discourse and perceptions about medicine and clinical practice in Indian cultural history. This book adds considerably to our understanding of the history and textual traditions of Siddha medicine. Richard Weiss manages to tell an exciting story about Siddha medicine, the Tamil siddhars (medical yogis who mastered the medicinal preparations of muppu, a medicine that is said to heal all diseases and bestow immortality), Tamil nationalism, and the complexities of manuscriptology in south India.

As Weiss states at the beginning, his study is not a primer on Siddha medical practices and medicaments. Such books are readily available, and Weiss draws on them periodically, such as in the final chapter, ‘The Holy Science of Siddha
Medicine’, where he touches upon pharmacopeial aspects of Siddha and the production of muppu. Weiss’s project instead is primarily an examination of the discourses and rhetorical tactics of Siddha practitioners in Tamilnadu in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which boast the ancient origin and purity of Siddha medicine, the extraordinary powers of the siddhars, and therefore the authority of Siddha healing practices. The early chapters offer lively readings of the mythological origins of Siddha medicine and the siddhars. Weiss gives special coverage to the chronological progression of myths about and literature attributed to two siddhars: Tirumular, celebrated author of the *Tirumantiram*, and Agastya, to whom several texts are attributed, including the *100 Verses on the Regenerative Compound Muppu*. A third siddhar, Bhogar, receives occasional attention as well. Mixing text-historical analysis of primary and secondary Tamil sources with fieldwork observations and face-to-face interviews, Weiss presents many arguments and narrative tropes that proponents of the Siddha tradition have marshalled to demonstrate the centrality of Siddha medicine and siddhars to the construction of Tamil identity.

These discourses have served multiple purposes. They have articulated the history and characteristics of what it means to be Tamil, and they have helped to individuate Siddha vis-à-vis Ayurveda and vis-à-vis biomedicine in India. Weiss is attentive to the discursive tailoring of Siddha’s past in written and oral sources, drawing a clear picture of the imaginative cosmology developing in these discourses that interlinks the Tamil land, people, and medicine. Histories that emerge from this cosmology are highly political, and Weiss discusses at length how certain political groups in modern Tamilnadu have deployed stories about the siddhars and the rationalism of Siddha medicine to promote the idea of a pure Tamil identity that predates the so-called Aryan Invasions in South Asia. Siddha medicine in these histories is regarded as an original and perfect system of medicine that was contaminated by Aryan influence, whose prevailing Sanskritic and Brahmin-centred culture overshadowed and annexed Siddha medicine to the sphere of Ayurveda.

Weiss is hermeneutically at his best when he explores the ways in which Tamil historians and Siddha practitioners have used ancient mythology, secrecy, and unfalsifiable knowledge to recover the Tamil culture of pre-Aryan South Asia. Significant to this recovery is the mythological continent of Lemuria, which Tamil nationalists have identified with the ‘sunken land’ of Kumari Kandam in classical Tamil sangam literature. For some, Lemuria symbolises primeval Tamil society well before the arrival of the Aryans, when the Tamil people, language, and science were unspoiled. In particular, revisionist histories linking contemporary Tamilnadu with Lemuria look like descriptions of an Utopian cradle of all human civilisations.