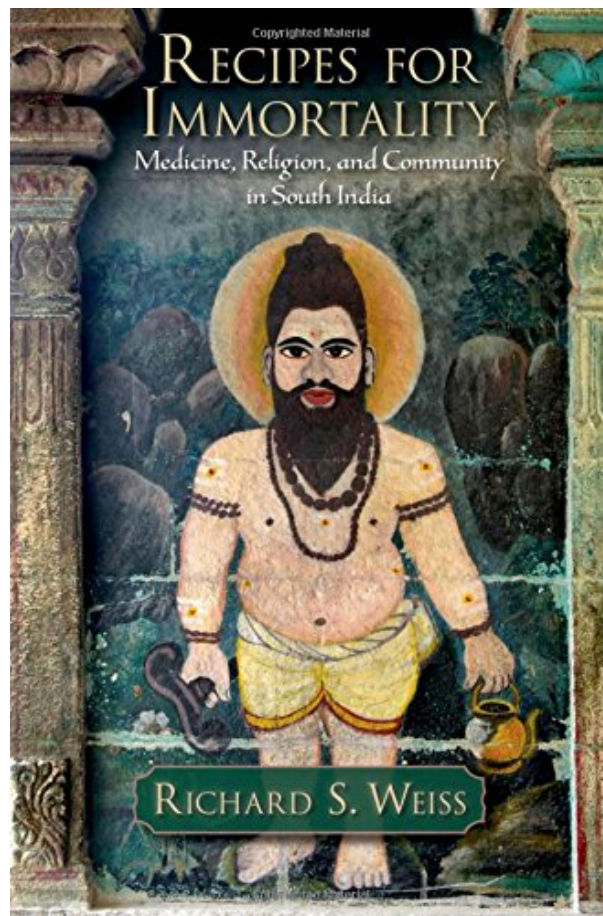
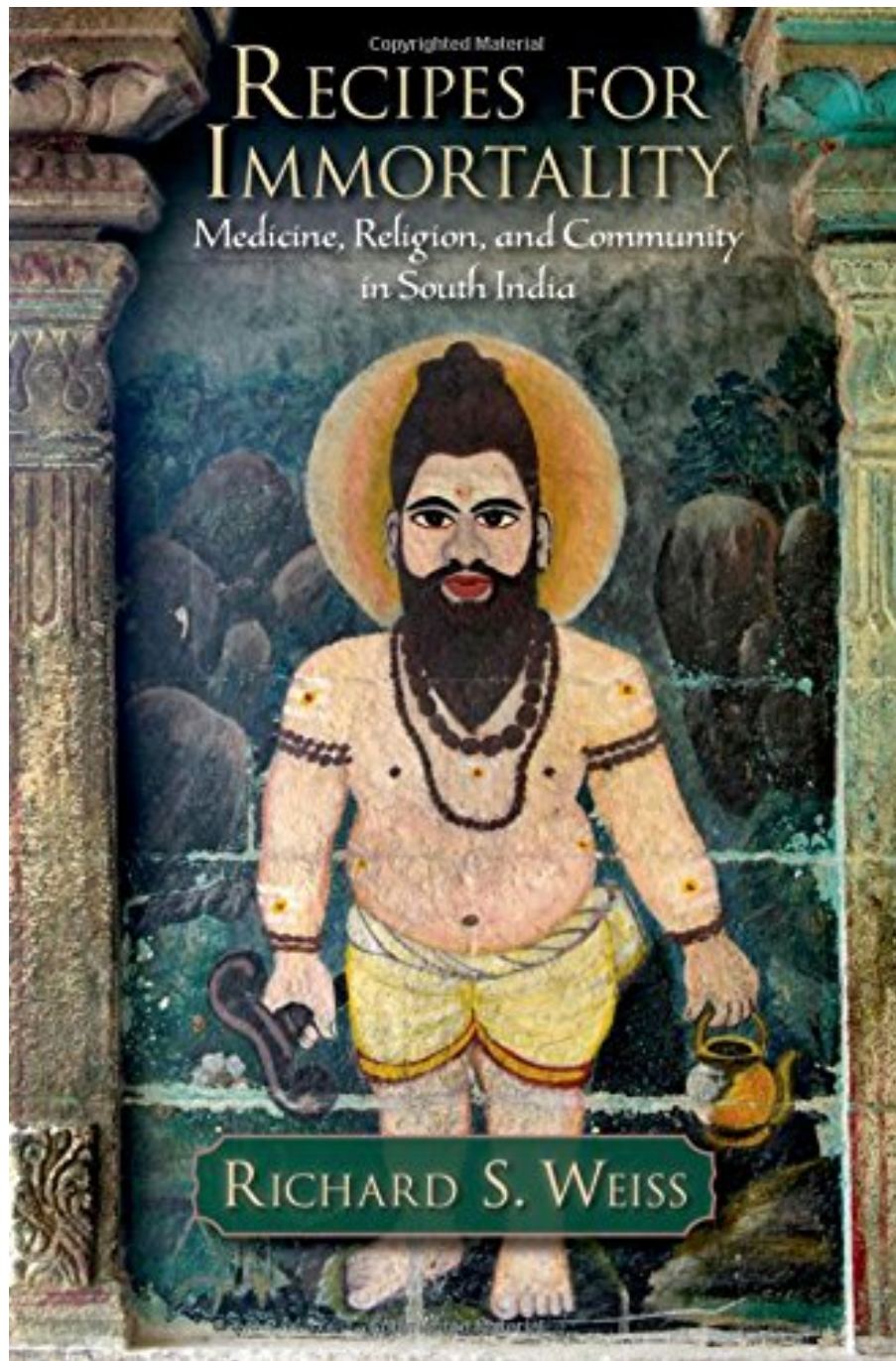


# RECIPES FOR IMMORTALITY: HEALING, RELIGION, AND COMMUNITY IN SOUTH INDIA BY RICHARD S WEISS



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## Review

"This book is a skillful study of Siddha medicine, the least understood of the medical 'systems' of India. Richard Weiss writes with great craft and strategy about traditions competing for medical authority in postmodernity, and very capably explores the tense dialectics between secrecy and revelation, magic and rationality, loss and revivalism, and the extraordinary and the banal. This is required reading for anyone interested in Tamil culture and its unique expressions of concern with the legitimacy of its traditions."-- Martha Ann Selby, Associate Professor of South Asian Studies, The University of Texas at Austin

"Richard Weiss's Recipes for Immortality is an original and timely contribution to contemporary debates on the discourses of tradition, science, and rationality in modern South Asia. Based on a pioneering study and interpretation of primary texts, and on fieldwork among practitioners, the book offers illuminating insights, not only into the 19th- and 20th-century reformulation of the influential knowledge system and healing practices of Tamil siddha medicine, but into the ways in which this reformulation has shaped and tapped into Tamil narratives of self and community in modernity."--Indira Peterson, Professor of Asian Studies, Mount Holyoke College

## About the Author

Richard S. Weiss is Senior Lecturer of South Asian Religions at Victoria University.

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Despite the global spread of Western medical practice, traditional doctors still thrive in the modern world. In *Recipes for Immortality*, Richard Weiss illuminates their continued success by examining the ways in which siddha medical practitioners in Tamil South India win the trust and patronage of patients. While biomedicine might alleviate a patient's physical distress, siddha doctors offer their clientele much more: affiliation to a timeless and pure community, the fantasy of a Tamil utopia, and even the prospect of immortality. They speak of a golden age of Tamil civilization and of traditional medicine, drawing on broader revivalist formulations of a pure and ancient Tamil community.

Weiss analyzes the success of siddha doctors, focusing on how they have successfully garnered authority and credibility. While shedding light on their lives, vocations, and aspirations, Weiss also documents the challenges that siddha doctors face in the modern world, both from a biomedical system that claims universal efficacy, and also from the rival traditional medicine, ayurveda, which is promoted as the national medicine of an autonomous Indian state. Drawing on ethnographic data; premodern Tamil texts on medicine, alchemy, and yoga; government archival resources; college textbooks; and popular literature on siddha medicine and on the siddhar yogis, he presents an in-depth study of this traditional system of knowledge, which serves the medical needs of millions of Indians.

Weiss concludes with a look at traditional medicine at large, and demonstrates that siddha doctors, despite resent trends toward globalization and biomedicine, reflect the wider political and religious dimensions of medical discourse in our modern world. *Recipes for Immortality* proves that medical authority is based not only on physical effectiveness, but also on imaginative processes that relate to personal and social identities, conceptions of history, secrecy, loss, and utopian promise.

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"Richard Weiss's *Recipes for Immortality* is an original and timely contribution to contemporary debates on the discourses of tradition, science, and rationality in modern South Asia. Based on a pioneering study and interpretation of primary texts, and on fieldwork among practitioners, the book offers illuminating insights, not only into the 19th- and 20th-century reformulation of the influential knowledge system and healing practices of Tamil siddha medicine, but into the ways in which this reformulation has shaped and tapped into Tamil narratives of self and community in modernity."--Indira Peterson, Professor of Asian Studies, Mount Holyoke College

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Healing, Culture & Nationhood in Tamil society: A Book About the Siddha Medicine of Tamil Nadu

By William Courson

Richard S. Weiss is a Senior Lecturer in South Asian religions at Victoria University (Wellington, New Zealand). In his "*Recipes for Immortality*," Weiss illuminates the continuing success of traditional healers in the face of Western medicine's global spread by examining the ways in which practitioners of traditional Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu enlist the confidence, support and patronage of their patients. This is a book about the interactivity and interdependency of tradition, faith, cultural identity and the sentiments of nationhood. The author presents a fascinating in-depth study of this traditional system of knowledge, which serves the medical needs of millions of Indians.

While biomedicine may (or may not) alleviate a patient's physical discomfort, Siddha physicians offer their charges a great deal beyond simple cure: these include affiliation to a timeless and ethnically pure community, culture and civilization, founded on the conception of a long-lost technologically advanced Tamil utopia, coupled with the notion of racial greatness stolen from a now marginalized people. They along with their ideological fellow-travelers - promoters of Tamil civilization, nationhood and culture - speak of an antediluvian golden age of Tamil civilization and of traditional medicine, a medicine so sophisticated even in ancient times as to offer its consumers the promise of resistance to all disease and - at least by implication - of immortality.

Weiss utilizes the tools of social analysis to qualify and detail the success of Siddha practitioners, documenting how they have successfully acquired authority and credibility in a context of medical choice while illuminating their lives, training, vocations, and aspirations for the future. Weiss also documents the challenges they face in the context of medical choice afforded by contemporary society, both from a "rational" Western biomedicine that claims universal legitimacy and efficacy, and also from rival traditional medical lineages, including Ayurveda and Unani medicine.

This book is a broad and deep study of Siddha medicine, the least understood of the medical 'systems' of India, written with great craft and clarity about immeasurably ancient traditions competing for social respectability as well as scientific credibility in emergent postmodern India, exploring the tense nexus between secrecy and revelation, magic and rationality, and loss and restoration. While biomedicine might alleviate a patient's physical distress, Siddha physicians provide their patients with much more: affiliation to a timeless and pure Tamil community. While shedding light on lives and vocations of Siddha doctors, the

author documents the challenges that they doctors face in the modern world as they are caught between two poles: a biomedical system that claims universal efficacy, and the rival traditional lineages of healing.

Weiss ends the volume with a look at traditional medicine in a larger context, and illustrates the ways that Siddha doctors, despite recent trends toward the globalization of Western biomedicine and the emergence of a global medical monoculture, reflect the wider political and religious dimensions of medical discourse in modern society. "Recipes for Immortality" proves that medical authority is based not only on physical effectiveness and the replicability of results, but also on imaginative processes that relate to conceptions of personal and group identity, history, utopian promise and the expectation of healing.

I strongly recommend this work for students, practitioners and teachers of traditional medicine with an interest in the social dimensions of their calling, as well as for those interested in the Tamil culture and society of southernmost India.

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