

A Critical Analysis Of Siddha Tradition In The Context Of Malaysian Hindu Culture

M. Rajantheran¹, Sarjit S. Gill², Balakrishnan Muniapan³, K.Sillalee⁴ and S. Manimaran⁵

^{1,5}Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Malaya, Malaysia.

²Department of Social and Developmental Sciences, Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra, Malaysia

³School of Business Administration, Wawasan Open University, Penang, Malaysia

⁴School of Business & Design, Swinburne University of Technology (Sarawak Campus), Kuching, Malaysia.

¹E-mail rajamun@um.edu.my

Abstract: This paper explores the origin and development of *Siddha* philosophy in the context of Malaysian Indian culture. Although the development of *Siddha* philosophy has been written by several scholars in the context of South India, hardly any studies are found outside India. Scant literature is available on *Siddha* philosophy from Malaysia; and any related literatures found are generic in nature and not in-depth. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to expand the literatures on the Malaysian *Siddha* philosophy which is becoming relevant in the Malaysian Indian culture focussing on Tamil *Siddhas*. The methodology employed for this paper is qualitative in nature and it includes inputs gathered on *Siddha* philosophy and *Siddhars* from various discussions held with many scholars at conferences, *Siddha* practitioners in Malaysia and a review of the existing literatures on *Siddha* philosophical traditions. This paper is to be considered as the first to explore the current development of *Siddha* philosophy among the Indians in Malaysia.

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1. Introduction

Siddhars are known as saints, mainly in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. The *Siddhars* are also classified as *Yogis* as *Siddhars* acquire *Yogic* powers called *Siddhis* through their austerities or penance. In Sanskrit "*Siddha*" means "one who is accomplished" and refers to perfected masters of their self. This is usually accomplished only by persistent meditation and an inquiry into self (*athato brahma jigyaasa*). A *Siddhar* refers to one who has attained a *Siddhi* (Murali, 2010). A *siddhi* is a power, a power that can be focused on, acquired through deep practice and austerity, or can be given by grace to someone who has been so purified as to be enlightened. *Siddhars* are considered to be people who are believed to control and transcend the barriers of time and space by their *Yogic* powers.

The origin of the word "*Siddha*" was explained by Ramakrishna Rao (2010), a well known *Siddha* scholar. He traced and found the existence of the word *Siddha* as follows:

1. The word, *Siddham* denoting to knowledge is used only once in *Paripadal* (20:47), therefore, its occurrence in other sources are considered.

2. According H. P. Blavatsky, *Siddhas* belong to fourth root-race datable to 4000 BCE.

3. According to *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (Chapter I, Verses, 3, 5, 7), the *Siddhas* are those who possessed from birth of "superhuman" powers, as also of "knowledge and indifference to the world".

4. According to occult teachings, however, the *Siddhas* are *Nirmanakayas* or the "spirits" – in the sense of an individual or conscious spirit – of great sages from spheres on a higher plane than our own, who voluntarily incarnate in mortal bodies in order to help the human race in its upward progress.

5. *Siddhas* are holy saints on the Earth as the celestial yogis in the Heaven, because, their commander is Kartikeya, who supposed to control them.

6. Puranas also describe *Siddhas* grouping them with Divine Sages or *Devarishis* (*Vayu Purana*, Chapter 41: 66-73). In other places, they are mentioned with *Caranas*. They are also grouped with *Devas*, *Demons*, *Pannagas*, *Yakshas*, powerful *Gandharvas*, *Kinnaras* etc. They are located in Jambu Dwipa on the *Jarudhi*, *Kumudhaprabha*, *Sitanta* mountain peaks and caves.

According to Ramakrishna Rao (2010), *Siddhas*, *Siddhar*, *Sittar* and *Cittar*, are the words variously used in English by the Western and as well as Indian scholars but each as specific connotation in Tamil. *Siddhas* means the refined monotheistic creed existed. *Siddhar* means perfected or realized saints. *Sittar* implies an expert in occultism, alchemy and so on with magic or superstitious power. *Cittar* also connotes the same however exhibiting such powers with mind. It may be noted that the differentiation arises due to the understanding and interpretation of the Tamil words *siddhu* (miracle, supernatural

performance, etc) and *cittu* (connected with mind and mental powers).

In terms of defining the word “*Siddha*”, it can be done on two perspectives. The first definition is based on the root word evidence while the other is the internal evidences found in *Siddha* literatures. Kandaswamy (2004) made an analysis of the root word of *Siddha* and revealed the followings:-

1. *Citti* - The one who acquired the above eight types of super powers as a result of penance and austerity.
2. *Citta* - The one who can control his mind and actions.
3. *Cit* - The one who had attained the ultimate level of knowledge and wisdom.

However, unlike the *Vedanta* traditions, not much is known of the *Siddha* traditions of South India as it was guarded in secrecy. The *Siddha* philosophies are usually taught in the traditional manner by a *Siddhar* to a spiritually mature disciple. Typically *Siddhars* were saints, doctors, alchemists and mystics all in one. They wrote their findings, in the form of poems in Tamil language, on palm leaf which are collected and stored in what are known today as palm leaf manuscript, and handed down through the generations. The *Siddhars* have over the centuries developed, a vast knowledge-system, what is now known as *siddha* medicine, practiced mainly in Tamil Nadu and also in Malaysia as traditional medicines (Unknown, 2010).

2.0 Tamil Siddhas and The Philosophy

Siddhas are not bound by any religion, race or faith. They have projected themselves in various parts of the world (Marshall Govindan, 2007). According to some scholars such as Kandasamy (2003) and Marshall Govindan (2007), Lord Buddha and Lord Jesus are also bound by the characteristics of *Siddhas*.

The Tamil *siddhas*, are a unique group of thinkers, were great *Yogins* and *Jnanis*. They lived in the company of nature and evolved the native system of traditional known as "*naattu maruthuvam*". They attached much importance to the physical as well as the psychical perfection. They adopted the method of *Kundalini Yoga* to realise the oneness of the individual Self with the Universal Self, leading to eternal bliss (Ganapathy, 2004). Ganapathy (2009) asserted that it is very difficult to give a trustworthy biographical account of the Tamil *Siddhas* as very little about their lives is known or recorded in history. A verse from the sage Agastya says that most of the *Siddha* works were lost in the floods (*pralaya*) and what we have now as *Siddha* poetry is only a small collection of verses which have been washed ashore and preserved.

In terms of Tamil *Siddha* literatures, Ganapathy (2009) is also in opinion that the literature of the Tamil *Siddhas* spans many centuries and it is probable that certain details of the life-history of them are changed, modified, and many times distorted, to suit the ethos, the occasion, the period and the time when they were narrated and recorded. Hence it is not possible to say anything definite about the life, date, i.e., the biography of the *Siddhas*. To trace the life history of the Tamil *Siddhas* is as difficult as tracing the path of birds in the sky. Just as boats do not leave any mark on the seas or rivers where they sail, the *Siddhas* have not left any autobiographical details in their poems. In a number of cases factual information such as dates of birth, or at least the periods in which they lived, the real (original) names of the *Siddhas*, the villages where they were born, and the castes and religions in which they were born and the places where they lived and attained liberation (*samadhi*) cannot be obtained.

In the culture of Tamil *Siddhas*, there's a practice of dividing the *Siddhas* based on Thirumoolar and Agasthiyar tradition (Kandasamy, 2004). There are 18 prominent Tamil *siddhas* and scholars find it difficult to categorize the 18 *Siddhas* accordingly as a conclusion could not be reached (Sivapalan, 2006). The 18 *Siddhars* are Agastyar, Bogar, Korakkar, Kalanginathar, SattaiMuni, Tirumoolar, Nandhi, Therayar, Konganar, MachaMuni, Karuvoorar, Patanjaliyar, Edaikaadar, KamalaMuni, Punnakeesar, Sundarandandar, Romarishi and Pulipani.

The Tamil *Siddhas* were against the text religion and whenever possible criticized the rituals and religious practices. They uphold the principle of being united with nature (Marshall Govindan, 2007).

They discovered the secret of life and delivered the message in the simplest way possible to people (Shanmugavadivu, 2007). The *siddhas* denounced the caste system. Though the caste system was created by the society, during that time, caste system was embedded into the religious practice of the society. As *siddhas* were against such practices, they were portrayed as rebels and outcast of the society. Society also looks at the *siddhas* as people who go against the *Vedas*. Therefore, the temples gave priority to the *Nayanmaar* (the top of all the Lord Siva devotees) and the *Aalvaar* (the top of all the lord Vishnu devotees) and denied any recognition to the *siddhas*. Only Thirumoolar who practiced Saivite was given recognition and accepted among the Saivites and uplifted as one of the *Nayanmaar* but not as a *siddha* (Marshall Govindan, 2007). Some of the *Siddhas* great *Samadhi* has currently become well known temples.

In South India, among the well known temples, Konkana Siddha's Samadhi in Thirupathi, Idaikaattu Siddha's Samadhi in Thiruvannamalai, Boogar and Pulippaani Siddhas Samadhi in Palani, Paambatti Siddha's Samadhi in Marudhamalai, Sundarananthar Siddha's Samadhi in Madhurai and Karuvloor Siddha's Samadhi in Karuvloor (Kamalakkannan, 2006).

The Tamil society appreciates and welcomes the knowledge of *Siddha* practice and *Siddhas* medicine introduced by these *Siddhas*. *Siddhas* who lived centuries ago left valuable knowledge on papyrus/palm leaves for the current community. The *Siddhas* effort had attained extreme devotion for the *Siddhas* among the Malaysian Hindu community and is spreading widely as the practice is also being updated regularly by *Siddha* philosophy practitioners from India.

3. The Development of Hinduism and Siddha Philosophy in Malaysia

In describing the origin and the development of *Siddha* philosophy in the Malaysian Indian culture, it is essential to explore the development of Hinduism as the *Siddha* philosophy is embedded in Hinduism.

Hinduism is a minority religion in Malaysia. An estimated 9% of the total population of Malaysia is ethnic Indians, of whom almost 89% are practicing Hinduism. Most of the ethnic Indians are Tamils from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Hinduism was prevalent in Malaysia (Nusantara) prior to the arrival of Islam in the 15th century. Traces of Hindu influence remain in the Malay language, literature and arts. Although this not recorded in the present version of Malaysian history, it is a known fact the Indians and the Hindus have made great contribution Malaysia especially in terms of culture.

Early Indians came to Malaysia, a country consist of majority Malays, Chinese and minority indigenous communities (Kunasekaran et al, 2013) as invaders and for trading. The majority of Indians who came to Malaysia in the end of 19th century and beginnings of 20th century were non-professional villagers (Sandhu, 1969). Talib et al, (2013) stressed that religious tolerance is the key achieve development in a country like Malaysia consist of diversified ethnicity. Apart from this group, there was a minority group migrant from India who settled for civil service and trade industry. This group found their settlement in the urban areas. Generally the urban people followed the text religion or 'The Great Tradition'. On the other hand, the group that settled in plantation estates performed their religious practice based on popular religion as well as "Little Tradition" that they inherited. They build temples for Goddess Amman, mother Goddess i.e Mariamman, Muthu Mariamman and Karumariamman. Malaya

attained its independence in 1957. As the British were returning home, they sold off the estates on lots as there were not any financially strong people to buy off the estates from the British. As such, many estate workers lost their jobs and were displaced. In search of jobs, many were forced to look for jobs in the cities (Janaki Raman, 2009). These people started their own temples in the cities as well and most of the temples built by them were devoted to Goddess Amman.

Although the *Siddha* philosophy has been in existence for long time, the development of *Siddha* philosophy emerged in the beginning of 20th century in Malaysia. This is due to four major aspects:

1. *Siddha* medication.
2. Religious movements or societies.
3. Movies.
4. Individual effort and practices.

Siddha medication

Malaysians were firstly introduced to *siddhas* through *siddhas* medication and treatments. Some researchers suggest that *siddha* medications were firstly introduced in Malaysia in the 7th century. This is due to the archaeological findings in the form of artefacts at Bukit Batu Pahat in Lembah Bujang, Kedah. The authors themselves had visited the site. Even then, there is not much evidence to proof that these artefacts were indeed used for *siddha* medications. In the process of research, it had been discovered an unproved assumption that when the King Rajendra Chola 1 attacked Kedah in the 11th century (1012-1044) (Subramaniam, 1989), *siddhas* medication practitioners had followed him.

This current study discovered that a man called Periya Thambi provided *siddha* medication service in the 1870's in Malaysia. This piece of information was gained from the descendent of that family, Seenivasan, a *siddhas* medical practitioner. He is the grandson of Annasamy, who served as a *siddha* medical practitioner to the royals at Tanjai palace in Kumbakonam, South India. Periya Thambi came to Malaya at the age of five who belongs to the Sivaraja Yogi tradition from Tamil Nadu, India. Later, it is said that he had approximately 50 students learning the trait from him. Even at that time, apparently he used a van to provide medical services to the people. He passed away in 1943 at the age of 95.

The most important student of Periya Thambi was his son, Ganapathy who served as a Headmaster of a Tamil school in Rawang in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. According to one of his disciple and son-in-law, Mr. Seenivasan, Ganapathy attained Samadhi in 1986 and his followers are performing 'Guru' pooja and prayers for him, till now. He operates a clinic in Old Town, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia and provides medical services to the needy people. On

13th February, 2009, Mr. Seenivasan gave a valuable talk to the student of University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur on *Siddhas* medication. According to him, there were other siddha medical practitioners during Periya Thambi's period but he could hardly recall them. Through this piece of information, it is found that there are many more siddha medical practitioners in Malaysia besides Periya Thambi, during that time.

Subsequently, based on Tamil newspapers in the 1960's, it is found that siddha clinics of R.M.K. Velusamy from Palani, India had been running their medical practices through their branches in Penang and Kuala Lumpur (Tamil Nesan, 18/06/1960 and Tamil Murasu, 21/07/1960). Apart from this, some individuals in estates had also used herbs and provided *Siddha* treatment based on their personal knowledge. At that point of time, awareness on *Siddha* medication was higher compared to *Siddha* philosophy among Malaysian Indians.

Early societies and movements related to *Siddhas* philosophies

After some form awareness on *siddha* principles, people were slowly introduced to *siddhas/cittars* philosophy through the emergence of some movements and societies that operated on small scale. As such, Ramakrishna Mission was initially established in Singapore in 1896. Later in 1904 they expanded their operations in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur by initiating Vivekananda Ashram. 1949 marks the beginning of Sutta Samajam by Swami Sathyanandha in Puchong. Theiveeka Vazhkai Sanggam (Divine Life society) initiated in the year 1936 by Swami Sivanandha in Rishikesh took a strong root in Malaysia in 1953 (Ramasamy, 1988). This centre teaches yoga exercise and meditation based on siddha principles. Apart from this, in the same year, the editor of *Tamil Murasu* press Muthu Valliappa invited Paranjothi Mahaan to Malaysia. His presence was used to form Paripoorana Nyana Sabai. Later, this movement grew and took form of World Peace Temple (*Ulaga Samadhana Alayam*) in 1969. Even at time, exercise of raising *Kundalini* was taught to the followers (www.gpmahan.com). Besides this, in 1955, K. Ramanatha Cettiyar and Swami Sathyanandha jointly started a spiritual society named Arul Neri Thirukoottam (Ramasamy, 1988).

Above mentioned movements and associations preached the *Siddha* principles as one of their component of teachings. Despite that, the fact remains that majority of Malaysian Indians were residing in estates at that time. As such, according to various researches, they were more keen and comfortable in worshipping Mariamman, sub-deities such as Madurai Veeran, etc. These people were not exposed to *Siddha* teachings which were mostly

confined to the town folks (Rajantharan, 1997; Subramaniam, 1995).

***Siddha* philosophers and followers**

Despite the fact that people were not fully aware of *Siddhas*, there was some information on *Siddha* realised by the Malaysian Indians. The information reached the people through yogis and sages who lived at that period. A yogi by the name of Jeganatha Swami who lived and attained Samadhi in Tapah, Perak is a prominent example of *Siddha* awareness in Malaysia. Many yogis had appeared in various places and preached *Siddha* principles to the people at that period. These yogis took upon yogis, holy men (*sadhus*), and sages' teachings, lived by the principles of the teachings and preached the same to the society.

Some individuals who were well versed on *Siddhas* philosophy and principle performed ceremonies such as guru pooja, pournami pooja and amavasai pooja. They also guided people who came to them for advice on *Siddha* principles. These people were not associated with any *Siddha* society or body but they had been dwelling with *Siddha* philosophy for many years and became spiritual masters. This was also one of the ways as to how people were made aware towards *Siddha* philosophy.

***Siddha* philosophy and movies**

Apart from these great people, it is undeniable that in 1950's Tamil movies played a crucial role in creating awareness on *Siddha* philosophy and principles. Movies as a media are considered to be a powerful tool as far as Tamil community is concerned (Muniapan and Dass, 2009). Characters such as Vasistar (Vasistha), Agasthiyar (Agastya), Visvamarar (Visvamitra), Viyasar (Vyasa), and Kalaikottu Munivar known as Rishyasirunggar in movies based on stories from great epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabaratha* gave some form of *Siddha* knowledge to people. Following this was the production of movies entirely devoted to Siddhas such as *Agasthiyar*, *Pattinattar*, *Arutperumjothi*, *Arunagirinathar* and *Sri Ragavendra*. Through these movies, society gets more information and awareness on siddhas life. Despite that, research found that, though people became aware of *Siddha*, they merely looked at them as sadhus, sages and people who had attained God's blessings and were not looking at the *Siddhas* as someone they could be devoted to.

The post 2000 years can be considered as the Golden Era for the development of *Siddha* philosophy in Malaysia. This is the time when the prime media, Astro Vanavil station started broadcasting Mega serials based on *Siddhas*. Among them were *Rutraveenai*, *Annamalai*, *Sivamayam* and *Adhu Mattum Ragasiyam*. Of these serials, *Sivamayam* is a serial totally dedicated to *Siddhas*. Scenes from this particular serial depict on

appearance of *Siddhas* to commoners in times of need and help them to overcome obstacles. This creates an awareness and realisation on *Siddhas* among the people. Besides, this effort also increases *bakthi* (devotion) on *Siddhas* among the viewers. In the same serial, a character known as *Kurangucittar* had attracted many viewers in Malaysia. The particular character's physical appearance had brought about different perception held on *Siddhas* physical appearance among Malaysians. Finally, a field research carried out during 1st World Conference on *Siddha* Philosophy reveals that a sizeable number of the participants were drawn to the interest of *Siddha* principles because of the *Sivamayam* serial.

The introduction of New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s, development in education system, economy, politic, jobs, business opportunities and so forth further contributed for rural migration to urban and cities (Arasaratnam, 1994 & Ravindran, 1970). Further development in the 1980s and 1990s demanded for labourers in the areas such as construction, maids and building roads. As the locals were not keen in these areas, employers gave priority to the immigrant workers as they neither demanded high wages nor facilities. The current situation sees foreign workers in estates especially from Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Nepal as well as Burma.

As such, presently, majority of Indian Malaysians have settled in urban and cities. Though Indians have gained from the government's economic policies, these gains are quite insufficient as it is not reaching the majority of Indians. Despite the fact, development in the lives of Indians in Malaysia did contribute towards the progress in the religious aspect as many are showing keen interest in knowing the substance and essence of their religious practice. Due to this, many religious movements started booming in Malaysia (Rajantharan & Manimaran, 1994).

Conclusion

As far as Malaysian *Siddha* philosophy tradition is concerned, it is a heritage from Tamil Nadu, India. The *Siddhas* eulogized by the Malaysian society are Tamil *Siddhas* and the *Siddha* literature is written in Tamil language. Moreover, *Siddha* societies and movements in Malaysia are mostly comprised of Tamilians and focuses on Indian culture.

Apart from that, after the year 2000, *Siddha* serials screened on Astro channel were all in Tamil language. As such, though *Siddha* philosophy is general and applicable to all races and religion, due to the above mentioned factors, *Siddha* philosophy is still or even widely considered as a philosophy for Tamilians.

Historically, *Siddha* philosophy, which was once introduced through *Siddha* medicinal practice which only covered a limited group of people, is now spreading vastly through a powerful medium, which is movie. Movies are undeniably the best way to inform the society on *Siddha* philosophy immaterial to their age. The effect of the *Siddha* philosophy awareness is currently reflected through prayers, talks and announcements made through various media.

Almost every day, materials on *Siddhas* and the philosophies are highlighted in the three main Tamil daily in Malaysia. Subsequently, plenty of books devoted to *Siddhas* and *Siddha* philosophies are being published, imported and sold in Malaysia. As a result, more people are becoming aware of the *Siddha* and *Siddha* philosophies through their readings. Besides that, many individuals, private organisations and associations organise pilgrimage to holy places related to *Siddhas* in Tamil Nadu, India.

Finally, this research concludes that currently, the year 2010 marks an evidently high level of involvement and awareness of *Siddhas* and *Siddha* philosophy among Malaysian Indians and it is expecting a further growth and development.

Corresponding Author:

Professor Dr. M. Rajantharan

Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: 603-79675510

E-mail: rajamun@um.edu.my

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