

**An International Conference**  
**Medicine, Religion and Alchemy in South India**  
**Resources and Permutations of Siddha Traditions and Siddha Medicine**  
**25 – 27 July 2019 | Hohentübingen Castle | Tübingen University**

**Virgin Creatrix / Bountiful Womb: Siddha Equivalence towards Women**

*Kanchana Natarajan*

Abstract

My paper foregrounds the curiously ambivalent view of women that is frequently found in Siddha thought and poetry – a genre which, as noted by K. Kailaspathy, is often seen as a very important subaltern philosophy characterized by “anti-Brahminical and anti-hierarchical” features.

The first section of the paper, which includes a brief study of kundalini, describes the Siddhas’ attitude towards their goddess Valai, portrayed as a ten-year-old kanni (‘virgin’) and venerated as a tantric goddess/embodiment of kundalini; she has the power to assume several forms and also to create the universe. Interestingly, some Siddha cosmology proclaims that the virgin Valai has sexual union with a pen – an entity not clearly identified – and this cryptic consummation results in the birth of the peyan (‘ghost’) Shiva. The goddess Valai is thus seen as the first principle and generative force. However, she transcends her power of prolific female fecundity to also be the goddess of learning and knowledge. In Siddha alchemy, the word valai translates as ‘mercury’, and the virgin goddess instructs practitioners in the esoteric science of rasa sastra (‘alchemy’) wherein mercury is ‘tamed’ and gold is produced through the transmutation of base metal.

The second section of the paper is a feminist engagement with the female body, problematizing the views held by some Siddhas about women as living physical and social beings. The anti-caste, anti-brahminical perspective prominent in Siddha writings does not necessarily indicate an egalitarian view of gender. Women are presented as limited and primarily reproductive beings, and inscribed in reductive terms that are a glaring contrast to the exalted rhetoric used to honour and celebrate the omnipotent Valai.

The third section of the paper focuses on women’s diseases, chiefly concerned with pregnancy, childbirth and post-partum ailments, and the related medicines and treatments prescribed by Siddha physicians.