Mercury today is seen as a health and environmental hazard in most contexts. The Minamata convention has institutionalized this on a global scale and implements an international regulation of mining and use of mercury. Although India ratified this convention last year, the popularity of mercury and its utilization in India and especially in Siddha medicine, a medical system officially recognized by the Indian state, appears not to have waned. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev recently stated that “Siddha Vaidya cannot operate without mercury. Mercury is the most essential ingredient in Siddha Vaidya”, thereby expressing a notion that many experts of Siddha medicine share. This is confirmed by the data discussed in this presentation: this includes the production of mercury amulets, which are accredited with medicinal and spiritual powers; this also includes recent research studies on mercury-based drugs conducted at Siddha research institutes, modeled on randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies targeting, for instance, diseases such as dementia.

Contextualizing Siddha mercurial procedures and preparations by pulling together therapeutic, historical and global frames allows for the charting out of the role of mercury in Indian and Siddha traditions. It also explains how it is possible that mercury is both a neurotoxic heavy metal and a life-giving medicine. On this ground, the presentation highlights that what counts as dangerous or toxic, rather than being just “natural”, emerges and acts within historical, social, and scientific constellations.

Tuesday, November 12 17:15–18:45 CATS, Room 010.01.05

All are cordially invited