

[Music Festival Honors Saivite Hymn Singers](#)

Category : [July 1984](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1984

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Normally, before a crowd, Srimati Salem S. Jayalakshmi would be sweetly singing Saivite religious hymns in Carnatic style. She still sings beautifully, transpiring audiences into uplifted reveries. But lately she has become very active-consumed really-in organizing, as an accomplished virtuoso, various functions which promote her art and other aspects of Hindu culture. Coupled with the recent flood of hands-on participation by ministers of government in Hindu religious and cultural activities, her zeal is giving a measure of renewed hope to scores of highly skilled professional temple singers known as "Oduvars." For a long time Oduvars have been underpaid both in salary and recognition.

Since 1972, Srimati Salem S. Jayalakshmi, with the help of religious institutions and other leaders, has been conducting the annual three-day Tamil music festival that celebrates the rich musical traditions of the Thirumurai hymns. Every year Oduvars of various temples from all over the State participate in concerts presenting the Thevaram songs. Eminent musicians also participate. A resolution of this year's festival, held at Tirukalikundram, Tamil Nadu, on June 15, 16 and 17, requested that the government arrange for the instruction of Thevarams and other hymns in public schools and open teaching centers where Oduvars can offer training in their art. The gathering also urged the government to improve the living conditions of the Oduvars and other singers "who are custodians of this system and of these hymns." With five eminent ministers on hand to hear the resolution, the chances for implementation seem good. The Honorable Minister M. Veerappan said in the inaugurating speech. "It is time we revive these greatest works with fresh faith and feeling." And the Honorable Education Minister, C. Aranganayagam hailed the importance of teaching them in the school.

Oduvars from all over the state assembled at this small town 40 miles south of Madras where, centuries ago, all four the Samayachariyas sang the praises of the Supreme Lord Siva at the Vedagiriswarar Temple. Under the S. Sivakumar Trust, founded in the name of Jayalakshmi's late uncle, honors will now be awarded to Oduvars each year. This year, Dharmapuram Velayuda Oduvar was honored as the oldest and most senior Oduvar.

About Carnatic Music

From the days of Saint Tiru Gnanasambandar onward, the practice of singing the divine hymns of Thevaram was established in every Siva temple during puja time. Oduvars were appointed in each temple and the Chola kings made endowments to provide for their sustenance. After the 15th century, the Tamil music tradition spread its roots in other Dravidian languages, and hence became broadly known as Carnatic music of the South.

Carnatic songs are called "Punn Sumantha Padal," meaning "song saturated with raga or melody." They are meant for elaborate musical exposition and composed to suit a variety of thalas or rhythms. The tradition has deteriorated a bit, losing the practice of singing in multifarious rags, now being confined to only 24. The effort to revive Tamil music started in the early part of this century. The Thevaram hymns hold a special sway over the people by virtue of their ideals, devotion to God and the high discipline they prescribe.

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