

## [Singing the Songs of Saints](#)

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### MUSIC

## Singing the Songs of Saints

Once there were 3,000 temple singers in Tamil Nadu. Now there might be 100.

Kesava Mallia, Chennai

I will be a temple oduvar until my death," declares Sivagangai boldly. "I have dedicated my life to this work, and I am happy with whatever payment I get. I will not take up any other job, even if I am offered a lot of money."

Brave words. In the twilight of a tradition long overdue, great praise for simply surviving, even the most optimistic would have to concede that the singing of Tamil Nadu's temple bards will never quite reclaim the light of its greatest glory. Yet there is Sivagangai and a few more like him. And after them, there will be a few more. And so it will be for a very long time, for the music of the oduvar is truly divine. As told from the annals of South Indian history, "A heart that does not melt from the songs of the oduvar does not melt at all."

In the Tamil language, the word oduvar comes from the verb odhu, which means to sing respectfully. One who performs odhu is an oduvar. More specifically, according to the ancient tradition of South Indian temple worship, an oduvar is a singer who has been rigorously trained—usually from a very young age in a most difficult form of South Indian classical temple music. He is male—usually Saivite Tamil and sings only for God—usually in temples and ashrams—and only from the Tirumurai, a twelve-book collection of hymns and writings of South Indian Saivite saints.

Not only is the oduvar taught to sing with great devotion, the songs he sings are devotional by nature. The following famous verse from the Tiruvasagam of Saint Manikkavasagar, often sung by oduvars, provides a good example of the devotional yet deeply philosophical quality of the Tirumurai:

"To the one who embodies within Himself the Vedic hymns and Vedic sacrifice, truth and untruth, light and darkness, joy and sorrow, the divided and undivided, the attachment and release, the beginning and ultimate end to Him our songs of praise we sing."

Like a first-rate concert violinist, the oduvar must

possess more than a sense of discipline. He must be blessed with extraordinary talent and exemplary dedication. Yet, unlike perhaps even the finest violinist, he must also be pure, humble, religious, austere and devotional. This is as it was 100 years ago. But modern times militate against the success of the oduvar. Today, when rock and stones mean "Mick Jagger" rather than "granite deity," the very fact that Sivagangai would want to do what he is doing at all is just short of a miracle.

The golden age of the oduvars reached its height when India's kings held sway. South India's documented history dates back to the fourth century bce when the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas ruled what is now Tamil Nadu. The domains of these three dynasties changed many times over the centuries, and other dynasties periodically came into power. Through it all, there was a steady patronage of the arts, and this served the expansion of Tamil culture well.

The Tirumurai were written and compiled from approximately 200 bce through the eleventh

century. During this time, the saints that composed these poems and songs were becoming legends, and oduvars like the minstrels of Europe, were singing their praises. In the eleventh century, during the reign of two important South Indian kings, Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola Sumatra, the religious life of the Tamil people was at its zenith, and times were never better for the oduvar.

Rajaraja Chola once supported more than 3,000 oduvars. During his reign, these sacred singers were given great respect. After the ceremonial flame of high puja was shown to the temple Deity, it was passed next to the oduvar— even before the king, if he were present.

During the 14th century, Muslim invasion weakened the Chola dynasty, then in power. Even after the great Vijayanagar Empire fell in 1564, Tamil culture continued to flourish under Nayak rule. History shows, in fact, that the Tamil way of life enjoyed uninterrupted development from prehistory until the British came, almost 500 years ago.

The East India Company of Great Britain was established in Tamil Nadu in 1640 when it negotiated the use of Madraspatnam, later to become Chennai, as a trading post. Petty quarrels among provincial rulers catalyzed the British to gain administrative control over the area. Under their colonial rule, most of South India was integrated into the region called Madras Presidency. When India became independent in 1947, Madras Presidency became Madras State. In 1956 the Madras State was reorganized to form present-day Tamil Nadu along linguistic lines.

The religious Hindus of India generally suffered from British occupation and Indian Independence. The British left them humiliated subordinated to Western values and nonreligious principles. Indian Independence spawned a faltering democratic government laced with corruption. This new democracy harvested profits from temples and left priests nearly penniless. As bad as this was, the priests at least had jobs, for the temples could not function without them. The oduvars, however, were expendable. Only the most dedicated remained at their posts. This is still true today. Sivagangai is now working in the Kundrakudi

Murugan Temple, which is government controlled. Although his food and lodging are free, he makes only about \$15 a month.

At the Tirumurai Pathasala run by Koviloor Aadheenam, Ratnasabhpathi Desikar, 72, teaches a five-year intensive course to qualify oduvars, but he currently has only seven students. There are four other schools like this in Tamil Nadu. The most successful of them is at Dharmapuram Aadheenam, where teachers have sustained their program for the last 25 years. Today, in all of Tamil Nadu, it is estimated that less than 30 students are studying to become full-time oduvars.

This bleak horizon reveals a glimmer of light. Recently, a Tamil movie entitled Raja Raja Cholan featured a number of oduvars performing on film. Never in recent history have these elite but obscure musicians enjoyed such mainstream promotion. Sri La Sri Nachiappa Gnana Desika Swamigal, the pontiff of Koviloor Aadheenam, is enthusiastic. "We will be releasing an audio cassette/CD on Tirumurai," he says with a gleam

in his eye. "Things are slowly getting better. There is more respect for the oduvar." For years, Swami has been spearheading a campaign to revive the tradition.

At the school run by Koviloor Aadheenam, Muthukumar and Ananda Kaleeswaran, both 21, are the only two students who have graduated from the course since its inception in 1995. Muthukumar is a first-generation oduvar, while Kaleeswaran is fifth generation.

"Many have discouraged me, saying that I may be losing out monetarily," says Muthukumar. "But I was firm and determined. Oduvars are respected everywhere."

The students still studying in the program all share a similar enthusiasm. Dingidul, 18, seeks to emulate his grandfather, who is still a highly revered oduvar. Sivanmalai, 16, wants to sing in a temple in his hometown. So do 23-year-old T. Rathinavel Subramaniam and 18-year-old Ganesan. "Even in villages, people are now more

God-loving," says Ganesan, who will be a 15th-generation oduvar. "So I am very sure this tradition will stay for a very long time." Soma Sivaprakasam, 20, is the son of an accountant who became an oduvar. He dreams of going abroad to serve as a teacher and a singer.

At the Koviloor Aadheenam, Tirumurai school education is free, just as it is in all the pathasalas (schools) of Tamil Nadu. Food, accommodation, clothes and books are provided at no cost. The Chettiars, a community of wealthy South Indian businessmen, have long been associated with the oduvars and figure in their future as dependable patrons. Organizations like the Music Academy, Seethai Hall, Narada Gana Sabha and Ramalingar Pani Mandram all based in Chennai, Tamil Nadu's classical music vortex—constantly promote the Tirumurai and the oduvars.

Then there is Sivagangai, who daily strives to melt even the hearts that do not melt at all. The saints who wrote the songs he sings have long ago passed away. Yet, they live on in their Tirumurai and in the sacred singing of Sivagangai.