

## [In Praise of Siva's Singers](#)

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### MUSIC

## In Praise of Siva's Singers

A talented oduvar devotes his life to preserving a two-thousand-year-old temple tradition

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As a fast-setting sun throws shadows upon the eighth-century Kapaleeshwarar Siva temple of Mylapore, local vendors hustle to finish business before another day draws to a close in the bustling South Indian seaport city of Chennai. Providing counterpoint to the clamor and confusion, the sweet tones of a soft but perfectly articulated Tamil hymn come floating through the crevices of the temple wall, entrancing those who manage to distinguish the magical lyrics over the hubbub of the city. Captivated, I step inside the temple to track the source of this heart-melting music. The all-pervasive fragrances of flowers and incense and the overlapping sounds of bells, drums, cymbals and Sanskrit chanting have no power to distract me as I wade through the milling devotees crowded around the main temple sanctum. In the divine confusion of it all, one man stands out from all of the rest. He is young--about thirty--bare-chested and clad in white. Sacred ash is smeared on all visible parts of his thin body. He is sitting before the main sanctum, singing to Lord Siva. His name is Satgurunathan Oduvar, and he is a professional temple singer.

After the puja I introduce myself to Satgurunathan and ask if we might talk. He graciously complies, and we find a quiet spot. I am eager to discover the world of oduvars through his eyes and to understand why some say his quintessentially devotional music is fading into obscurity.

The literal translation of the Tamil word oduvar is simply "a person who sings with

great devotional reverence." In the tradition of South India, however, this name is conferred as a title upon certain well-trained musicians, like Satgurunathan, who sing only from the Panniru-Tirumurai, a 12-volume collection of hymns authored by 64 famous South Indian saints who lived more than 1,000 years ago.

## Rigorous training

Satgurunathan speaks to me of the rigorous training required of an oduvar. Each aspirant studies from a young age with a personal teacher or at a school dedicated only to this instruction. Tamil language skills and a thorough knowledge of the Tirumurai are essential. Most oduvars are Tamil Saivite males, but there are no restrictions against women learning and performing this sacred music.

"Being born into an oduvar lineage, " says Satgurunathan, "I was trained in music from my youth. School lessons did not interest me much. At my father's suggestion I entered the Thevaram school, VS Trust, in Chidambaram, run by my uncle, Thiruvavadudurai Somasundara Desikar, who was frequently featured on radio programs. As a young boy I was greatly influenced by this popular man. I was deeply impressed by the respect he commanded wherever he went."

Even 15 years ago, when Satgurunathan attended Thevaram school, the popularity of this profession was waning. There were only seven students in his class, even though the tuition, lodging, medical assistance and food were provided for free by generous benefactors. The training was strict. During the five-year program, Satgurunathan and his fellow students received a complete training, including instruction in Pann, an ancient Tamil music system (see sidebar).

"We would begin the day by picking flowers for Lord Nataraja in the five-acre garden that grew a variety of blooms in all hues, " Satgurunathan recalls. "This would be followed by classes in music and literature that lasted all day, ending with practice sessions in the temple. These sessions helped us get over the fear of singing in public. Also, being at Chidambaram Temple and often listening to the priests chanting Vedas gravitated me more towards a spiritual life."

## The life of an oduvar

For the next stage of his professional development, Satgurunathan sought the promising atmosphere of a big, bright city, hoping to shape his ethereal aspirations and years of study and practice into an actual vocation. "I came to Chennai after graduating from Thevaram school in 1991, " he explained. "Although it was overwhelming at first, I quite naturally started to settle into a life of singing and listening to various musicians at the numerous festivals here and there. On one such occasion, the popular singer Dharmapuram Swaminathan heard my performance and strongly recommended that I take up private music lessons. That led me to B. Achutharaman, an All India Radio musician, who taught me South Indian classical music for three years and helped make me the performer I am today."

Singing well as an oduvar requires a level of talent and dedication that very few have. The life demands strict discipline in character, personal hygiene, purity, devotion and humility. "Unless we follow a strict regimen, we cannot help others in worshipping God, " says Satgurunathan. "It is such a privilege to stand in front of the Lord and sing for Him every single day. I attribute all to Him." A strong sense of humility is essential in order to embody and project the devotional fervor of the Tirumurai hymns. The remarkable eloquence of this singing style, when properly performed, inspires devotion in both listener and performer.

Satgurunathan Oduvar has a no-nonsense approach to performing. He dresses simply and always wears sacred ash and the red kumkum dot on his forehead. He sits erect, and he begins and ends his performances promptly.

After I first heard him by chance at the Kapaleeshwarar Siva temple, I made a point of attending his performance at the Tamil Nadu Music College during the Tirumurai festival. Although he only sang three songs, the magnificence of his performance completely won me over. Since then I have listened to him at every opportunity, and over the past few years I have watched him grow dramatically as a singing artist. He has the power to enchant an audience anywhere, in India or overseas.

Satgurunathan has performed widely at festivals, temples and concert halls, including the prestigious Music Academy in Chennai. He has also performed on

radio and television and has been invited to Sri Lanka three times, where his singing during a temple consecration ceremony was telecast live on Rupavahini, the national television station of Sri Lanka. He also sang in the theater production of "Sundarar, " which featured the legendary dancer, Dr. Padma Subramanyam.

## The Past and Future of Thevaram

In the seventh century ce the Vedic ways of living were being lost as Buddhism and Jainism dominated South India. The lives and songs of four renowned saints Sambandar, Appar, Sundarar and Manikkavasagar helped to revive Saivism in Tamil Nadu during the sixth to ninth centuries. Known as the four samayacharyas, "teachers of the faith, " these saints pilgrimaged through South India from temple to temple, 274 in all, beseeching the grace of Siva through their soul-stirring songs. The hymns of Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar are collectively referred to as the Thevaram; Manikkavasagar wrote and sang the Tiruvasagam. Both works, scribed on ola leaves, form part of the Tirumurai.

Several centuries later, during the reign of the great emperor Rajaraja Cholan (985-1014 ce), these irreplaceable ola leaves were thought to be lost. Rajaraja Cholan best known for constructing the magnificent Brihadisvara Temple in Thanjavur made a crucial contribution to the preservation of the samayacharyas' hymns: he instigated a great search which finally located the precious leaf bundles, badly damaged by leaf-eating bugs, in the Nataraja temple of Chidambaram. Rajaraja Cholan had the leaves collected, cleaned and preserved, then engaged a scholarly devotee named Nambiandar Nambi to compile them for posterity.

Now these songs are again facing the threat of extinction. There are only two Thevaram schools in Tamil Nadu, both patronized by the Chettiar community. Only a few students are enrolled in these schools.

"There are about 50 oduvars at temples in Tamil Nadu, " Satgurunathan says, "but the well-trained ones are few. It makes me sad that so few youth are coming forward to follow this tradition of serving God. Finance is one reason for this decline. This profession just does not pay enough for singers to be able to meet today's living demands. I teach about 20 students who come from different occupations: a policeman, a student, a man who works in the film industry. They are all learning

purely out of their interest. No one plans to take it up as a profession. Unless the government or temples intervene, the future looks bleak. I plan to continue teaching just to keep the songs alive. Unfortunately, I don't think that we are not going to have another Rajarajan. I hope to build my own school and offer this honey I have tasted to others until my end."

Satgurunathan has been serving at the Kapaleeshwarar temple at Mylapore for over eight years now. Very few people come up to express appreciation for his extraordinary talent just a handful of other similarly trained musicians who occasionally visit the temple to worship, pray and perform.

Satgurunathan Oduvar has a rare gift for this unique music. I could see him becoming popular like a Bollywood star, if only his genius could be exposed to a larger audience. If anyone has the ability to revive and re-inspire this fading tradition, it is he. But until that happens, the community of oduvars need encouragement and support, financial and otherwise. How can they inspire others to a higher life if they themselves are in need of inspiration? Their gift to us is their song. Our gift to them should at least be our thanks.

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## What Is Pann?

Pann is a South Indian system of music that dates back to 400 bce. It utilizes a melodic structure that was developed by the Tamil people exclusively for performing devotional songs and preceded the development of the raga system of Carnatic music now famous in Tamil Nadu. The tones of Pann consist of what has come to be known in modern times as the pentatonic scale, which consists of five rather than seven notes per octave. This scale corresponds to the modern-day, Western major scale of seven notes, with the fourth and seventh omitted. Today, the pentatonic scale is commonly used in the Indonesian gamelan, the melodies of African-American spirituals and Celtic folk music. It has also been used by French composer Claude Debussy, as well as other Western classical composers, like Maurice Ravel and Frederic Chopin. Because of their simplicity, pentatonic scales are often used to introduce music to children.