



Odhuvars in Tamil Nadu

For Prelims: Odhuvars, Saivite, Pathigams, Tirumurai, Thevaram, Avvaiyar, Bhakti Tradition

For Mains: Recognition of Odhuvars will legitimize the age-old tradition and benefit the community at large.

[Source: TH](#)

Why in News?

Recently, Tamil Nadu government handed over appointment orders to **15 Odhuvars** (among them five are women), who were assigned to **Shaivite temples** in the Chennai region as they **serve the deities by singing the hymns and praise**.

Who are Odhuvars in Tamil Nadu?

- **About:**
 - Odhuvars sing devotional hymns in Tamil Nadu's Hindu temples but are **not priests**. They are in the service of Lord Shiva by singing his **praise from Thirumurai in Saivite temples**. They sing devotional hymns **but do not enter the sanctum sanctorum**.
- **Origin of Odhuvars:**
 - The tradition of Odhuvars can be traced back to ancient times, **with its roots firmly embedded in the [Bhakti movement](#)**, which flourished **between the 6th and 9th centuries in Tamil Nadu**.
 - During this period, **several saint-poets known as Alvars and Nayanars** composed devotional hymns in **praise of Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva, respectively**. The Odhuvars emerged as **custodians of this rich musical and devotional heritage**.

Alvars and Nayanars: The Saints of Tamil Bhakti Tradition

- **Alvars:**
 - **Devotion to Lord Vishnu:** The Alvars were a group of **twelve Vaishnava (devotees of Lord Vishnu) saint-poets**. Their compositions primarily centered on their deep devotion to Lord Vishnu and emphasized the **concept of surrender (*prapatti*) to attain salvation**.
 - **Poetic Works:** The Alvars' devotional hymns and poems were collected in the **Naalayira Divya Prabandham**, a significant Vaishnavite scripture. These hymns were composed in the Tamil language and celebrated the divine qualities and forms of Lord Vishnu.
- **Nayanars:**
 - **Devotion to Lord Shiva:** The Nayanars were a group of **sixty-three Shaiva (devotees of Lord Shiva) saint-poets**. They were deeply devoted to Lord Shiva and composed hymns and poems in praise of him, emphasizing the path of **bhakti (devotion) and love for the divine**.
 - **Poetic Works:** The Nayanars' hymns and poems were collected in the **Thirumurai, a**

corpus of Shaivite scriptures. These compositions, written in Tamil, celebrated the various manifestations and attributes of Lord Shiva.

What is the Significance of Odhuvars in Present Context ?

- **Religious Significance:** Odhuvars continue to hold a crucial place in the daily and festive rituals of Tamil Nadu temples. **They are responsible for reciting Thevaram and Thiruvagasam**, two ancient Tamil texts filled with hymns and praises for Lord Shiva.
- **Community Engagement:** Odhuvars often come from **marginalized communities, and their role in temples offers economic opportunities.** Moreover, their performances bring the local community together, **fostering a sense of unity and belonging.**
- **Preservation of Tamil Language:** Odhuvars contribute to the preservation of the Tamil language. Through their recitations, they ensure that the ancient Tamil texts are **understood and appreciated by successive generations.**
- **Promotion of Devotion:** Odhuvars help create a devotional atmosphere within the temples. Their soul-stirring renditions instill a **sense of piety and spiritual connection among the worshippers.**

What are the Challenges and Issues of Odhuvars in Tamil Nadu?

- **Economic Vulnerability:**
 - Many Odhuvar families struggle to make ends meet, as their **income depends largely on temple donations and offerings.** This economic vulnerability can lead to the decline of the tradition.
- **Lack of Recognition:**
 - The Odhuvars' contribution to temple rituals and preservation of Tamil culture often goes unnoticed. **They receive limited recognition,** which can be demotivating.
- **Declining Interest:**
 - The younger generation may not be as interested in continuing the tradition, as it can be financially unstable and offers limited social prestige. **This raises concerns about the continuity of the tradition.**
- **Technology and Modernization:**
 - The advent of recorded music and modernization has altered the way people consume religious and devotional content. **Odhuvars may find it challenging to compete with digital media** and contemporary musical forms.
- **Lack of Institutional Support:**
 - Recognised government institutions like [Sangeet Natak Academy](#) etc have been **non-committal to Odhuvar's concerns** as their expertise and competence in the field can alleviate the suffering of the community.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question:(PYQ)

Prelims

Q 1. With reference to India's culture and tradition, what is 'Kalaripayattu'? (2014)

- (a) It is an ancient Bhakti cult of Shaivism still prevalent in some parts of South India
- (b) It is an ancient style bronze and brasswork still found in southern part of Coromandel area
- (c) It is an ancient form of dance-drama and a living tradition in the northern part of Malabar
- (d) It is an ancient martial art and a living tradition in some parts of South India

Answer: D

Q 2. With reference to the cultural history of medieval India, consider the following statements: (2016)

1. Siddhas (Sittars) of Tamil region were monotheistic and condemned idolatry.
2. Lingayats of Kannada region questioned the theory of rebirth and rejected the caste hierarchy.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
(b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: C

Mains:

Q 1. Evaluate the nature of Bhakti Literature and its contribution to Indian culture.(2021)

Q 2. The Bhakti movement received a remarkable re-orientation with the advent of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Discuss.(2018)

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