Alvars and Nayanmars – the Bhakti Movement in Tamil Nadu, 12 Alvars, 63 Nayanmars, Nalayira Divya Prabandham, Thevaram and the Twelve Thirumurais | TNPSC Notes

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The **Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu** was a religious and literary movement of about the **6th–9th centuries CE**, under the Pallavas and Pandyas. The **12 Alvars** who sang of Vishnu (Thirumal) built the Vaishnava tradition, and the **63 Nayanmars** who sang of Shiva built the Saiva tradition. **Nathamuni** compiled about 4,000 hymns of the Alvars as the **Nalayira Divya Prabandham**; the Saiva hymns were arranged as Thirumurais by **Nambiyandar Nambi**, and with Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam they became the **Twelve Thirumurais**. The **Thevaram** of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar forms the first seven Thirumurais.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. They serve the topics "Tamil literature" and "History of Tamil society" in the unit on **History, Culture, Heritage and Socio-Political Movements of Tamil Nadu**, the "Bhakti movement" in Indian history, and the saint–work matching questions of General Tamil. For the political background see the Pallava art and Chola administration notes.

The Bhakti Movement at a Glance

Feature	Details
Period	About 6th–9th century CE (Pallavas and early Pandyas)
Vaishnava saints	12 Alvars – Nalayira Divya Prabandham (about 4,000 hymns); compiled by Nathamuni (c. 9th–10th century)
Saiva saints	63 Nayanmars – Twelve Thirumurais; 1–11 compiled by Nambiyandar Nambi; the 12th is the Periya Puranam (Sekkizhar)
Sacred places	Vaishnava – 108 Divya Desams; Saiva – shrines praised in the Thevaram (Padal Petra Thalangal)
Language and music	Hymns in Tamil, the people's language, set to panns (melodies) – still sung in temples by Odhuvars and Araiyars
Background	Saiva–Vaishnava revival against Jainism and Buddhism; rise of a temple-centred society

The 12 Alvars

"Alvar" means one immersed in devotion. Poigai, Bhoothathu and Pey Alvars are called the "**Mudhal Alvars**" (first Alvars).

Alvar	Main works	Note
Poigai Alvar	Mudhal Thiruvanthathi (100 verses)	One of the three Mudhal (first) Alvars
Bhoothathu Alvar	Irandam Thiruvanthathi	Mudhal Alvar
Pey Alvar	Moondram Thiruvanthathi	Mudhal Alvar
Thirumazhisai Alvar	Nanmugan Thiruvanthathi, Thiruchanda Viruttam	–
Nammalvar	Thiruvaimozhi (1,102 verses), Thiruviruttam, Thiruvasiriyam, Periya Thiruvanthathi	Thirukurugur (Alwarthirunagari); called "Sadagopan", "Maran"
Madhurakavi Alvar	Kanninun Siruthambu	Disciple of Nammalvar; sang of his guru, not of Vishnu
Kulasekhara Alvar	Perumal Thirumozhi	A Chera king
Periyalvar	Thiruppallandu, Periyalvar Thirumozhi	Srivilliputhur; foster-father of Andal
Andal	Thiruppavai (30), Nachiyar Thirumozhi	The only woman Alvar; Srivilliputhur
Thondaradippodi Alvar	Thirumalai, Thiruppalliyezhuchi	Associated with Srirangam
Thiruppan Alvar	Amalanadhipiran (10 verses)	From the Panar (bard) community; Srirangam
Thirumangai Alvar	Periya Thirumozhi, Thirunedunthandakam, etc.	Chieftain of Thirumangai; the largest number of verses in the Prabandham

- **Nalayira Divya Prabandham:** about 4,000 hymns compiled by **Nathamuni**. Nammalvar's Thiruvaimozhi is revered as the "**Dravida Veda**" (Tamil Veda).
- **Andal:** the Thiruppavai is sung across Tamil Nadu in the month of Margazhi. The **gopuram of the Andal temple at Srivilliputhur appears on the emblem of the Government of Tamil Nadu**.
- **Later development:** Nathamuni, Yamunacharya (Alavandar) and **Ramanuja** (Vishishtadvaita; c. 11th–12th century) made the Alvar hymns the foundation of Vaishnava philosophy.

The 63 Nayanmars

- **Source of the list: Sundarar's Thiruthondathogai**, sung at Thiruvarur, names the devotees; Nambiyandar Nambi expanded it in the **Thiruthondar Thiruvanthathi**; **Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam** narrates the lives of all 63 Nayanmars.

- **Thevaram trio (Moovar):** Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar (Appar) and Sundarar. Their hymns form the **Thevaram** – the first seven Thirumurais.
- **Women Nayanmars (3):** Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mangaiyarkkarasiyar and Isaignaniyar (Sundarar's mother).
- **Karaikkal Ammaiyar:** one of the earliest Nayanmars; her Arputha Thiruvanthathi, Thiruvirattai Manimalai and Thiruvalangattu Mootha Thiruppathigam are in the 11th Thirumurai.
- **Varied social backgrounds:** kings (Kootruvar, Nedumaran), a hunter (Kannappar), a member of the Adi Dravidar community (Thirunalaippovar – Nandanar), a potter (Thiruneelakandar) and merchants are revered as Nayanmars – the idea that the path of devotion is open to all.
- **Manikkavasagar** is not among the 63 Nayanmars, but his **Thiruvasagam** is the 8th Thirumurai. A Tamil saying runs: "one not moved by the Thiruvasagam will be moved by no words". **G.U. Pope** translated the Thiruvasagam into English (1900).

The Thevaram Trio and the Kings

Saint	Birthplace / background	Historical significance
Thirunavukkarasar (Appar)	Thiruvamur; earlier a Jain (Dharmasena)	By tradition converted the Pallava king **Mahendravarman I** from Jainism to Saivism; his line "we are subjects of none" shows fearlessness before royal power
Thirugnanasambandar	Sirkazhi	By tradition converted the Pandya king **Nindraseer Nedumaran** (Koon Pandiyan) to Saivism, helped by Queen Mangaiyarkkarasiyar and minister Kulachirai
Sundarar	Thirunavalur	"Thambiran Thozhar" (friend of the Lord); composed the Thiruthondathogai; friend of Cheraman Perumal Nayanar

The Twelve Thirumurais

By tradition, in the reign of **Rajaraja Chola I**, **Nambiyandar Nambi** recovered the Thevaram manuscripts kept in the Chidambaram temple and arranged them as Thirumurais; hence Rajaraja is called "**Thirumurai Kanda Cholan**". Later, in the reign of **Kulothunga II**, Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam was added as the 12th Thirumurai.

Thirumurai	Author	Work
1, 2, 3	Thirugnanasambandar	Thevaram
4, 5, 6	Thirunavukkarasar (Appar)	Thevaram
7	Sundarar	Thevaram (Thiruppattu)
8	Manikkavasagar	Thiruvasagam, Thirukkovaiyar
9	Nine poets including Thirumaligai Thevar	Thiruvisaippa, Thiruppallandu
10	Thirumoolar	Thirumanthiram

11	Several, including Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Nakkeerar and Nambiyandar Nambi	Various prabandhams
12	Sekkizhar	Periya Puranam (Thiruthondar Puranam)

Impact of the Bhakti Movement

- **Religion:** Jain and Buddhist influence declined and Saivism and Vaishnavism became popular faiths; the path of love (bhakti) was placed above sacrifice-centred ritual.
- **Language and literature:** Tamil became a language of worship alongside Sanskrit; literary forms such as the pathigam, anthathi, thiruppalliyezhuchi and pavai grew.
- **Music:** the Thevaram was sung in panns, preserving Tamil musical tradition; the Odhuvar and Araiyar traditions continue today.
- **Temples and art:** the shrines praised in the hymns became pilgrimage centres and drove the growth of Pallava and Chola temple architecture.
- **Society:** women (Andal, Karaikkal Ammaiyar) and members of oppressed communities (Thiruppan Alvar, Nandanar) were accepted as saints – though an answer may also note that the caste order did not fundamentally change.
- **All-India:** historians hold that this South Indian bhakti tradition, partly through Ramanuja's line, later inspired the bhakti movement of North India.

Tamil Nadu Angle – the Tradition Today

- **State emblem:** the gopuram of the Srivilliputhur Andal temple.
- **Odhuvars:** the tradition of Thevaram singers continues in temples under the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department; these hymns are the basis of Tamil in worship.
- **Margazhi tradition:** singing the Thiruppavai and Manikkavasagar's Thiruvempavai in Margazhi is common across Tamil Nadu.
- The **Tamil Virtual Academy** (tamilvu.org) offers the texts of the Thirumurais and the Divya Prabandham online.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

The Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu – nature and impact (about 200–250 words)

- **Introduction:** 6th–9th century CE; 12 Alvars and 63 Nayanmars.
- **Background:** Jain–Buddhist influence; Pallava–Pandya politics; Appar–Mahendravarman, Sambandar–Nedumaran.
- **Literature:** Divya Prabandham (Nathamuni), Twelve Thirumurais (Nambiyandar Nambi, Sekkizhar).
- **Impact:** Tamil as a language of worship; music; temple art; participation of women and the oppressed.
- **Limits:** no basic change in caste; harshness in religious disputes.
- **Conclusion:** foundation for the continuity of Tamil language, music and temple culture; the starting point of the Indian bhakti movement.

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The Periya Puranam as a source of social history (about 150 words)

- Sekkizhar, reign of Kulothunga II; 12th Thirumurai.
- The varied social backgrounds of the 63 Nayanmars.
- Information on village and town life, occupations and temple administration.
- Conclusion: a work that joins literature and social history.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Thiruvaimozhi	Nammalvar – Dravida Veda
Thiruppavai	Andal – 30 verses
Amalanadhipiran	Thiruppan Alvar
Thiruthondathogai	Sundarar
Thiruvasagam	Manikkavasagar – 8th Thirumurai
Periya Puranam	Sekkizhar – 12th Thirumurai

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Nathamuni, not Ramanuja, compiled the Divya Prabandham.
- Nambiyandar Nambi compiled the Thirumurais; Sekkizhar only composed the 12th.
- Manikkavasagar is not among the 63 Nayanmars; Thirumoolar is one of the 63.
- Thevaram = only the first seven Thirumurais; the Thiruvasagam is not Thevaram.
- Madhurakavi Alvar sang not of Vishnu but of his guru Nammalvar.
- Appar – Mahendravarman (Pallava); Sambandar – Nindraseer Nedumaran (Pandya) – do not swap the pairs.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

தமிழ்	English
பக்தி இயக்கம்	Bhakti movement
ஆழ்வார்கள்	Vaishnava saint-poets (Alvars)
நாயன்மார்கள்	Saiva saint-poets (Nayanmars)
பதிகம்	Hymn of (usually) ten verses
திருமுறை	Saiva canonical collection
திவ்விய தேசம்	Vaishnava sacred shrine
ஓதுவார்	Temple singer of Thevaram
பாடல் பெற்ற தலம்	Shrine praised in the Thevaram

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
c. 6th–9th century CE	Age of the Alvars and Nayanmars (general view)
7th century CE	Appar and Sambandar – conversion of Mahendravarman and Nindraseer Nedumaran (tradition)
c. 9th–10th century CE	Nathamuni compiles the Nalayira Divya Prabandham
Reign of Rajaraja I (985–1014)	Nambiyandar Nambi arranges the Thirumurais (tradition)
Reign of Kulothunga II (12th century)	Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam
1900	G.U. Pope's English translation of the Thiruvasagam

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Alvars 12; Nayanmars 63.
- Mudhal Alvars – Poigai, Bhoothathu, Pey.
- Only woman Alvar – Andal; women Nayanmars – Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, Isaignaniyar.
- Nalayira Divya Prabandham – Nathamuni; Thiruvaimozhi (1,102) – Dravida Veda.
- Kulasekhara Alvar – a Chera king – Perumal Thirumozhi.
- 12 Thirumurais: 1–3 Sambandar, 4–6 Appar, 7 Sundarar, 8 Manikkavasagar, 10 Thirumoolar, 12 Sekkizhar.
- Thirumurai Kanda Cholan – Rajaraja I; compiler Nambiyandar Nambi.
- Periya Puranam = Thiruthondar Puranam – reign of Kulothunga II.
- Appar → Mahendravarman I; Sambandar → Nindraseer Nedumaran (tradition).
- Tamil Nadu state emblem – Srivilliputhur gopuram.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who were the Alvars and Nayanmars?

They were saint-poets who sang of God in Tamil in about the 6th–9th centuries CE. The 12 who sang of Vishnu are the Alvars (Vaishnava); the 63 who sang of Shiva are the Nayanmars (Saiva). Their hymns were compiled as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham and the Thirumurais respectively.

Who compiled the Nalayira Divya Prabandham?

Nathamuni (c. 9th–10th century) compiled about 4,000 hymns of the Alvars. Among them, Nammalvar's Thiruvaimozhi (1,102 verses) is revered as the "Dravida Veda".

What is the Thevaram?

The Thevaram is the collection of hymns on Shiva by Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar (Appar) and Sundarar. It forms the first seven of the Twelve Thirumurais and is sung in temples by

Odhuvars in the pann system.

Who compiled the Twelve Thirumurais?

By tradition, Nambiyandar Nambi compiled the first eleven Thirumurais in the reign of Rajaraja Chola I, who is therefore called "Thirumurai Kanda Cholan". Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam was added as the 12th in the reign of Kulothunga II.

What changes did the Bhakti movement bring to Tamil society?

Tamil became a language of worship; pann-based Tamil music was preserved; temple-centred society and temple art grew; women and people of many communities were accepted as saints. However, there was no basic change in the caste order.

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Practice questions

1. How many Alvars are there?

A. 9
B. 12
C. 18
D. 63

2. Who compiled the Nalayira Divya Prabandham?

A. Ramanuja
B. Nathamuni
C. Nambiyandar Nambi
D. Sekkizhar

3. Which work is revered as the "Dravida Veda"?

A. Thiruppavai
B. Thiruvasagam
C. Thiruvaimozhi
D. Periya Puranam

4. Who is the only woman among the Alvars?

A. Karaikkal Ammaiyar
B. Mangaiyarkkarasiyar
C. Isaignaniyar
D. Andal

5. Who are called the "Mudhal Alvars"?

A. Poigai, Bhoothathu and Pey Alvars
B. Nammalvar, Madhurakavi, Andal
C. Periyalvar, Andal, Kulasekhara
D. Thirumangai, Thiruppan, Thondaradippodi

6. Which Alvar was a Chera king?

A. Thirumangai Alvar
B. Kulasekhara Alvar
C. Periyalvar
D. Thirumazhisai Alvar

7. Which Alvar sang of his guru rather than of Vishnu?

A. Bhoothathu Alvar
B. Thiruppan Alvar
C. Madhurakavi Alvar
D. Thondaradippodi Alvar

8. Which of the Twelve Thirumurais form the Thevaram?

A. 10 to 12
B. 1 to 8
C. 8 to 10
D. 1 to 7

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9. Who compiled the Thirumurais?

A. Nambiyandar Nambi

B. Nathamuni

C. Sekkizhar

D. Manikkavasagar

10. Who is called "Thirumurai Kanda Cholan"?

A. Karikal Chola

B. Rajaraja I

C. Rajendra I

D. Kulothunga II

11. Which Thirumurai is the Periya Puranam?

A. 7

B. 8

C. 10

D. 12

12. Which Thirumurai is the Thiruvasagam?

A. 7

B. 8

C. 9

D. 11

13. Who, by tradition, converted the Pallava king Mahendravarman I to Saivism?

A. Thirunavukkarasar

B. Sundarar

C. Thirugnanasambandar

D. Manikkavasagar

14. Which work narrates the lives of the 63 Nayanmars?

A. Thiruvilaiyadal Puranam

B. Thiruthondar Puranam

C. Kantha Puranam

D. Thala Puranam

15. Who sang the Thiruthondathogai?

A. Appar

B. Sambandar

C. Sundarar

D. Sekkizhar

16. Which Thirumurai is the Thirumanthiram?

A. 8

B. 9

C. 10

D. 11

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17. Which of these is NOT a woman Nayanmar?

A. Andal
B. Mangaiyarkkarasiyar
C. Karaikkal Ammaiyar
D. Isaignaniyar

18. The gopuram on the Tamil Nadu Government emblem belongs to which town?

A. Madurai
B. Srivilliputhur
C. Srirangam
D. Thanjavur

19. Who translated the Thiruvasagam into English?

A. Veeramamunivar
B. Caldwell
C. G.U. Pope
D. Ellis

20. In whose reign was the Periya Puranam composed?

A. Rajaraja I
B. Rajendra I
C. Mahendravarman
D. Kulothunga II

Answers with explanations

1. B) 12 – Alvars 12; Nayanmars 63.

2. B) Nathamuni – Nathamuni compiled the Alvar hymns.

3. C) Thiruvaimozhi – Nammalvar's Thiruvaimozhi.

4. D) Andal – Andal; the other three are women Nayanmars.

5. A) Poigai, Bhoothathu and Pey Alvars – Poigai, Bhoothathu and Pey – the first three Thiruvanthathis.

6. B) Kulasekhara Alvar – Kulasekhara Alvar – Perumal Thirumozhi.

7. C) Madhurakavi Alvar – Madhurakavi – Kanninun Siruthambu on Nammalvar.

8. D) 1 to 7 – Sambandar 1–3, Appar 4–6, Sundarar 7.

9. A) Nambiyandar Nambi – Nambiyandar Nambi, in Rajaraja I's reign (tradition).

10. B) Rajaraja I – Rajaraja I.

11. D) 12 – Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam is the 12th.

12. B) 8 – Manikkavasagar's works – the 8th Thirumurai.

13. A) Thirunavukkarasar – Appar; Sambandar is linked with the Pandya Nedumaran.

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14. B) Thiruthondar Puranam – Thiruthondar Puranam = Periya Puranam (Sekkizhar).

15. C) Sundarar – Sundarar, at Thiruvarur – the source of the Nayanmar list.

16. C) 10 – Thirumoolar's Thirumanthiram is the 10th.

17. A) Andal – Andal is an Alvar (Vaishnava).

18. B) Srivilliputhur – The Andal temple gopuram, Srivilliputhur.

19. C) G.U. Pope – G.U. Pope, 1900.

20. D) Kulothunga II – Sekkizhar – reign of Kulothunga II.

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