

TEMPLE RITUAL DANCE THIDAMBU NRITHAM: IMPACT OF ELEMENTARY FAMILY CULTURE, MINDSETS AND THOUGHT PATTERN

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ABSTRACT

Thidambu nritham is a ritualistic dance performed in temples as a part of annual worship and festivals of Kasaragod, Kannur and Kozhikode districts of Kerala state in India. The idol representing the image of the deity decorated in the temple is known as thidambu and divine dance is performed by holding the thidambu on the head of the dancer. Thidambu nritham have been a part of social worship and group of families connected to temples have passed on the knowledge about celebration of this temple ritual through generations over 700 years. With the evolution of the nuclear family culture, the coordinated joint living has deteriorated. The shared cultural knowledge on thidambu nritham transmitted down from ancestors remains with the elderly members of family and is gradually vanishing from cultural domain of the region. The exploration studies and investigations were based on experience of the first author as a practitioner of thidambu nritham at temples for nearly 50 years. The emphasis of the research involved discussion with members of the old generation, collection of materials, documentation and literature. It is evident that communication of customary understanding on organization of thidambu nritham ritual, culture and tradition to the current generation will remain as a challenge; unless a new environment is created to transfer knowledge in a periodic manner to the new generation.

Keywords: Thidambu nritham, Temple ritual, Annual festival, Social worship, Joint living, Cultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Thidambu nritham is a type of temple ritual dance in north Malabar region of Kerala in India. The north Malabar region in which thidambu nritham is presented include Kasaragod, Kannur and Kozhikode districts. The dance involves manifestation of deities inside the temple involving rhythmic foot movements based on specified rhythms interlinked with the rituals. Thidambu nritham is believed to symbolize cultural values in north Malabar since the custom is followed to bloom and multiply the prosperity, security and happiness of the each village (Namboothiri & Govindan, 2016; Gurukkal & Varier, 1999; Panikkar, 1983; Menon, 2012; Reddy, 2001).

Thidambu nritham is an ancient ritual seven hundred years old. The religious dance is performed as a part of the ceremonies during the annual festival. Thidambu nritham is

governed by mythology, however, the sacred steps represent the link between devotees and temple, and represents the social and cultural portrait of the village (Gurukkal & Varier, 1999; Panikkar, 1983; Menon, 2012; Vatsyayana, 1976; Rao & Devi, 1993; Mathew, 1983). In the dance, the drums go together with the dancer who makes cadenced footwork. The legends and myths of thidambu nritham are a continuance of the temple architecture and nature of temple deity. The origin and emergence of thidambu nritham can be clearly understood from the visual presentation (decorated turban known as ushnipeedam, a strip of holy cloth put across the body called uttareeyam, gold ornaments such as bangles and necklaces) and auditory representation (four rhythms thakilati, atantha, chempata and panchari). The footwork-based performance of thidambu nritham plays a main

role in the lives of village people.

The region in which thidambu nritham is observed is from Nethravathi river in the north to Korappuzha river in the south, was known Kolathunadu. The Chera kingdom headquartered at Kodungallur had partial control over the area till 12th century AD. In 13th century AD, Kolathiri dynasty, the rulers of Kolathunadu became the political power in the province. However, the administration as well as governance was decentralized. Namboothiri sanketham in the region had exerted the political influence in the region, because of which, it is believed that the Kolathiri king had introduced thidambu nritham in the temples (Menon, 2012; Vatsyayana, 1976; Rao & Devi, 1993). Besides, the migration of Namboothiri Brahmins to this region in the 8th century AD established the ritual power over the temples. The immigrants also included craftspersons, workers, peasants and traders, who were directly or indirectly connected to temple rituals. The groups of landlords who ruled the regions for the past 12 centuries had followed a joint family structure, however, currently in the state of disintegration into several nuclear families. The rituals coupled with thidambu nritham were also set up to carry on the joint family traditions in the society.

Since 1960s, there has been a rapid shift from joint family to elementary family, in the regions of earlier Kolathunadu which includes the important towns such as Vatakara, Thalassery, Kannur, Payyanur, Cheruvathur, Kanhangad and Kasaragod. There had been changes in family practices, hereditaments and division of duties related to ritual worships in the family. The relationship with the society and ritualistic observance to a large extent is affected by the change in family structure (Menon, 2012; Vatsyayana, 1976; Rao & Devi, 1993; Mathew, 1983; Kurup, 1985). Thus, it appears that the reflections of nuclear families on the society and a consequent alteration in the views could make changes in the mindset and thought pattern regarding thidambu nritham. The other declining art forms include gandharvan pattu, marakkalappattu, kumbhapattu, paniyarkali, paliyanrutham, eruthukali, mangalamkali and vannankoothu. Considering in general, from a state of devotional worship at temples, thidambu nritham has

presently transformed to the level of a performing art. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to make out and categorize the plausible causes for this shift through investigation involving observation, documentation and comparative analysis. Short sections highlighting few recommendations to revive thidambu nritham and representation of verbal commands of thidambu nritham are also included. It is envisaged that the research would throw light on the causes for the gradual transposition of the temple ritual from the nuclear family perspective in the past fifty years.

1. Literature Review

The rituals, traditions and customs of thidambu nritham highlighting the legends based on a practitioner's perspective was first reported by Namboothiri and Govindan (2016). In their work, a correlation between Indian folk culture, thidambu nritham and temple devotees in the state of Kerala in seven centuries was depicted. In another attempt on cultural history of Kerala, as reported by Gurukkal and Varier (1999), the active involvement of folk in conduct of ritual dances as a result of the influence of family culture was briefly reported. The connection between temple culture, temple traditions and family culture is envisaged throughout the reported article. Panikkar (1983) projected the folk of the Malabar region of Kerala as a unique culture apart from the rest of Kerala and presented the specific findings of cultural studies. The rich historical backgrounds, cultural practices and art form evolutions are elucidated. Menon (2012) used the modes of organization of family as a tool to estimate the degree of energy and liveliness of the members in the modern society to participate in the temple ritual activities. Since the family chain following customary worship remained unaffected, the question of formation of a newer constitution did not exist. Vatsyayana (1976) investigated the artistic characteristics of Indian dance forms as a whole with a particular focus on ritual dances in Malabar. The research had mentioned development of temple arts such as theyyam in those times mentioning the relationship with family rights on it. Some researchers discussed the features of Dravidian folk such as faith systems, practices, methods, relationships, creativity and the impact of all

these factors on the tribelore. The influence of mindset and thought pattern variations over years was evident in the sections and articles. Rao and Devi (1993) studied the inventive behavior of audience around the Indian dance stage and found that the mindsets and thought patterns in the observer can cause a decrease in participation over years, whether it is theatre or temple ritual dance. The sixteenth century witnessed a quick development and growth of temple dances, particularly thidambu nritham which was accomplished through the support, participation and involvement of all sections of the society, 100% of the forward sections (castes) being following the joint family tradition and culture, as reported in archives documenting Portuguese empire in India presented by Mathew (1983). Kurup (1985) has summarized the legends, ritual dances and literature in and around the Thalassery region of Malabar. The connection of traditional arts with old Dravidian culture and Sangham period of history (importance of family groups and thoughts of togetherness) was established in the remarks. Furthermore, the act of abolishing Hindu family joint system in the Kerala state is referred in this paper (of year 1975 and Act no. 30 of 1976) to mark the decline of art forms as a consequence. The cultural traditions in India, way of life, domains, diversity and prosperity of the long-established folk dances in the 19th century are wholly covered in the work by Khokar (2003). The fundamental features of tribal folklore, martial art practices, martial art masters, martial art schools and supplementary rituals are touched upon in the sections. Similarly, Narayanan (2004) has provided a broad overview about the Indian cultural heritage, regional dances, tribal music and dance patterns with the singular focal point of family mindset in Malabar. The research on dance practices in the state of Karnataka, the neighboring region of Malabar was presented in the book by Nandagopal (2011). The summary of research articles make available enough evidence that there is a need for higher research on influence of family culture, trends, thought pattern and mindset change in the current circumstances.

2. Thidambu nritham: effect of elementary family culture

In the area selected for the research, there were different joint families as separate units in a village to provide

support to its members. The joint families were though independent, were in good cooperation and mutuality with each other. Each individual belonging to a joint family was measured as only a member of the collective group. The prime consideration was for the joint family as a sacred place from where each individual was systematically trained.

The responsibility of an individual in a joint family, and indirect legacy on the possessions is highlighted in Figure 1. The responsibility of temple had an important place among the assigned duties. Because the temple culture had influence on society, conduct of the entire rituals of thidambu nritham, and authority to ensure conduct of thidambu nritham in a ritualistic as well as customary approach was essential for welfare of the joint family. The immigration and settlement of Namboothiri communities near the temple with the support of Kolathiri dynasty helped influence society through temple culture with a focus on thidambu nritham. The thidambu nritham worship was developed with Brahmin system, because of which cultural power was established. The land was offered to the temple by the Kolathiri king in the presence of local chiefs called naduvazhis and ooralan. Brahmins were the authorities of temple rituals and the temple land as well. The size of a joint family depends on the wealth, land and property collectively owned. After the independence of India in 1947, the acts of Indian parliament confirmed the rights of Individual members of the joint family on the share of family property. The change in the concept of family had led to the division of family property. The Kerala joint Hindu family system abolition act was established on the first day of December, 1976 (Act 30 of 1976, listed 10 under reference). The nuclear family became the elementary family and joint family was totally disintegrated.

In the modern-day stage, most of the old familial homes are disconnected from the nuclear families and the responsibility of festivals and rituals of thidambu nritham are burdened with senior members. See Figure 2 a-b indicating typical thidambu nritham rituals in Kannur (a) and Kasaragod (b) districts. Thidambu nritham ritual is connected with farming and crops. There is a speedy decrease in the number of agricultural workers in Kerala

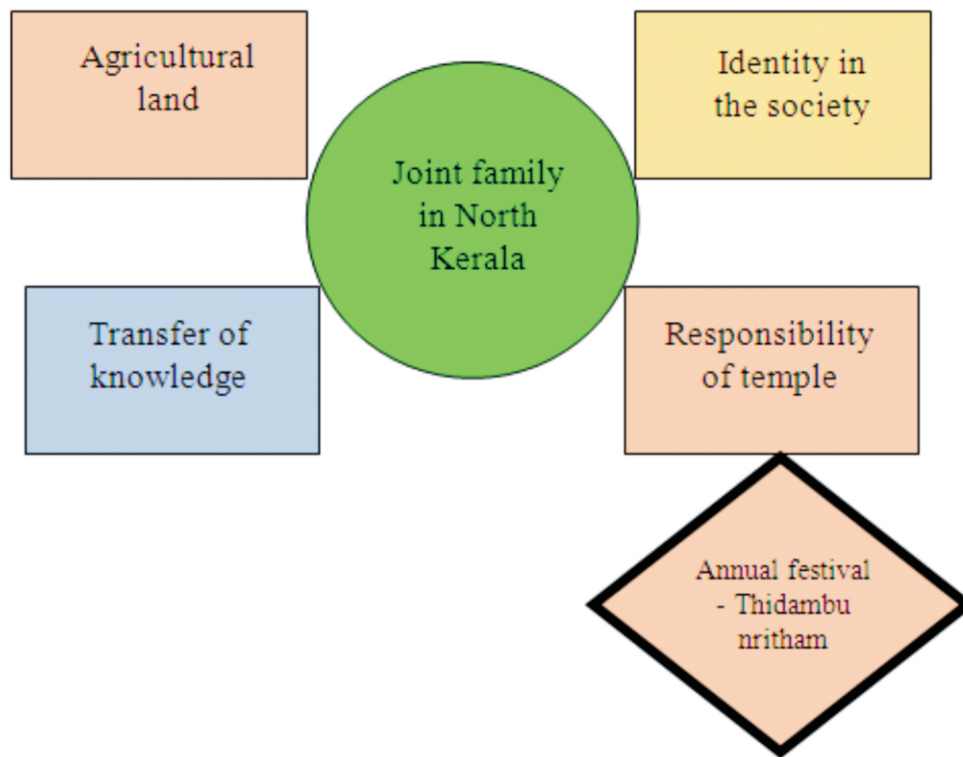


Figure 1. Role of an Individual in a Joint Family and Placement of the Commitment to Organize Thidambu Nritham at Temples



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. Thidambu Nritham with the Active Spectatorship of Devotees, a. at Chalad Sree Dharma Sastha Temple, Kannur, b. At Echikulangara Sree Narayanapuram Temple, Pilicode

over years. Most of the nuclear houses are in the city, away from the village. The elementary family usually has two working parents and their two children as members and follows a consumerist lifestyle. The family members visit their ancestral home and connected temple, once in a year

during annual temple festival and thidambu nritham ritual. The observance of the ritual has lost the strength like in earlier days and these ritualistic places have become centers for friendly gathering of family members after a long period, see Figure 3. Neither the parents of the

elementary family nor the children are trained in taking part in the rituals and worship during thidambu nritham at temples.

3. Thidambu nritham and society: effect of mindset and thought pattern

The joint families have currently changed to a society or trust which is intended for conducting the annual festival and thidambu nritham. Over the last 60 years, rapports between members of the family have collapsed due to the frequent lawful arguments and disputes over the ownership of the temple, see Figure 4. There were issues interrelated to land partitions too. The self-indulgence for grabbing joint family possessions in place of the bond of trust between members to actively take part in rituals has changed the joint family conditions. The ritual privileges are not observed with the former concentration and all representatives are members of an independent elementary family. As a

result, the mindset and thought pattern have changed significantly. The joint family members do not live together. There is no compulsion from the parents' end on the children to uphold and maintain the ritualistic practices particularly, the thidambu nritham at temples.

The cultural significance of thidambu nritham performed at temples is in a declining state. Thidambu nritham was earlier performed in spaces in temple courtyard prepared according to religious practices using cow dung and mud. Presently, the floor space has been replaced with marbles or tiles. The presence of sacred trees near the temple premises had earlier been compulsory to perform rituals. Presently, the trees are cut down and replaced by small concrete sheds for the convenience of carrying out rituals. The current circumstances and troubles of devotees shifting away in terms of mindset and thought pattern (though physically present during annual festivals) remains

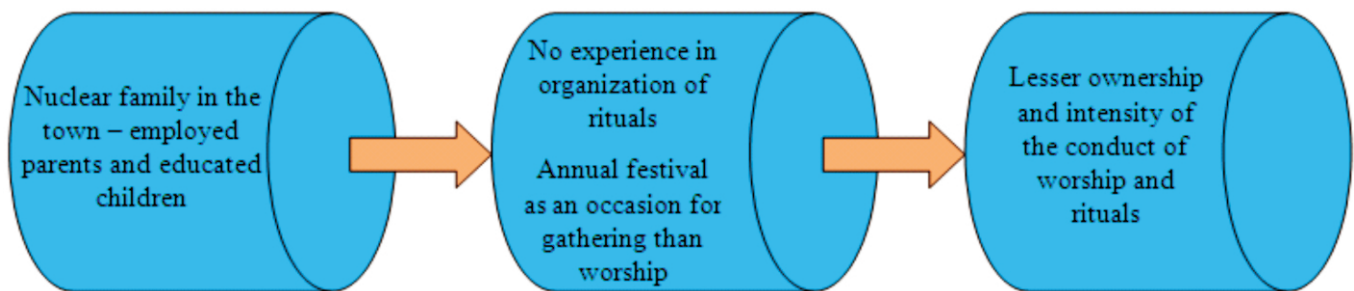


Figure 3. Impact of Elementary Family Culture on the Conduct of Thidambu Nritham Ritual

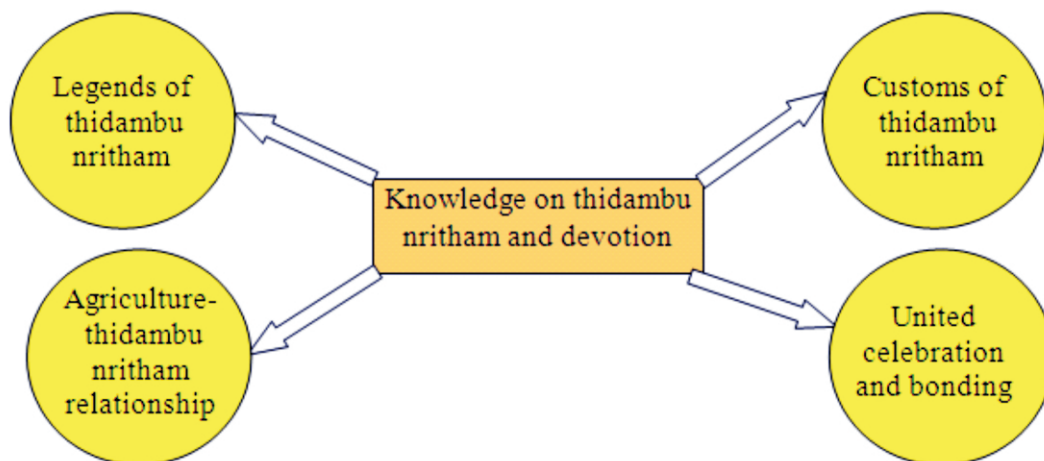


Figure 4. The Joint Family-Thidambu Nritham Ritual Relationship Model in 1950s Indicating The Chain of Transmission of Knowledge

unaddressed.

4. Contemporary status of thidambu nritham

With the disintegration of the joint family, the agricultural practices and rituals such as thidambu nritham in its original form is gradually disappearing from the temple site. Thidambu nritham has become an event that will occur at the temple once in a year. The ritualistic folk dances are defined as 'dances performed spontaneously, naturally and original in its essence representing the old cultural tradition, customs and religious beliefs' (Khokar, 2003). Thidambu nritham is 700 years old folk dance which follows simple movements with minimum variety in steps and putting in the maximum physical efforts. Currently, due to limited number of conversant persons to organize the rituals at temples, the quantity and complexity of rituals done earlier in a comprehensive manner are cut down. The joint families connected to the temple have disappeared and has become a sacred place to light an oil lamp during the last auspicious day of every Malayalam month (sankranti). The residual old generations still continue the old rituals and worships associated with thidambu nritham and have deep respect and admiration, whereas most of the members born after 1970, and brought up in elementary nuclear family perceive it as a divine art.

4.1 Recommendations to Revive the Art Form

The seven century old dance form thidambu nritham is currently in a declining stage. The following are the recommendations to revive the dance form:

- The presentation of thidambu nritham at temples involved original and traditional steps, which needs to

be trained and preserved for the current as well as future generations. The influence of other classical dance forms as well as attempts for duplication of steps might have attenuated the importance of thidambu nritham.

- Awareness needs to be created among the public regarding thidambu nritham dance form, decorations and steps. Programmes and talks on classical aspects of the art could help share the existing knowledge.
- The available resources on historical aspects of temple art and sculptures highlighting various dance forms should be preserved for the future generations.

4.2 Representation of Rhythm

The four rhythms used in thidambu nritham are thakilati, atantha, chempata and panchari.

The verbal commands according to which the dancer performs his regular practice as well as the dance during the annual temple festival is presented in Figure 5.

5. Discussion

The elementary family culture plays a major role in the current status of thidambu nritham. The family culture determines the bondage of the family members which was influential during the evolution as well as growth of the temple dance form thidambu nritham. The temple art is survived by property, transferred knowledge and identity in society principally directing to individualism and independence within the community. The annual festivals primarily involving thidambu nritham and responsibility of regular activities at the temple were a part of the anti-indolence as well as the individual responsibility. The

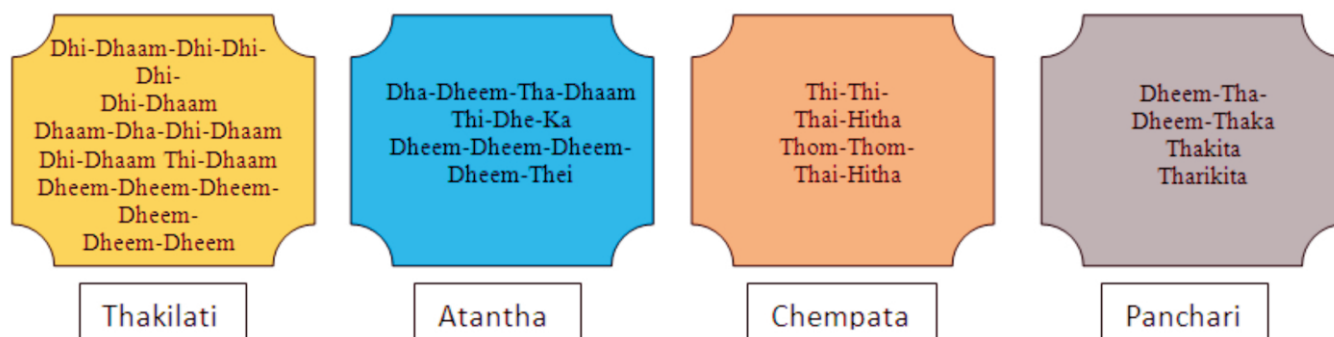


Figure 1. Seven Hundred Year Old Verbal/Oral Commands of Thidambu Nritham

disintegration of joint family culture has not only diminished the culture and heritage of temples in Malabar including thidambu nritham, but also caused change in the attitude toward temple culture in the society. The joint family acted as a gathering machinery between member groups and temple towards active spectatorship during the festivals.

When the knowledge level, seriousness level as well as energy level for active participation in the temple ritual are high, the enhancement of synergy and feeling of togetherness during temple festivals is significantly large, which requires a constant monitoring and self-correcting means within the family system. A change in the mindset, thought pattern and individualistic approach among the elements of society amplified the effects of drifting away from the conduct of tasks majorly organization of ritualistic dances such as thidambu nritham. Firstly it creates a divergent force as a result of change in mindset pulling out individuals away from the regular and principal crowd which had a nature secondary to that of the family. Secondly, it creates an 'anxiety effect' as well as augmentation of 'anticipation in the degree of reciprocity' which allows the folk to dwell at the spiritual interfaces, rather to capture the key roles. As the outcome, it appears that the current generation holding lead positions at temples, comparatively has a reduced amount of earnestness in assessment of thidambu nritham whether spontaneity, uniqueness and naturalness exists, and seven hundred years old conventions, traditions and values are retained. Therefore, it is felt that a revival of the art form could only be realized by intensification of the interrelation between current family culture, mind set and thought pattern with the thidambu nritham, which is an intrinsic element of the temple culture and heritage.

Conclusion

Thidambu nritham has been an ancient temple ritual, annually prearranged in connection with several devoted joint families over centuries. Due to the elementary nuclear family culture, drift in the thought pattern and change in the mindset, the flow of knowledge to the new generation from the old is obstructed. The transformation from an agrarian

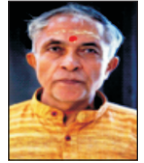
to consumerist society has unconstructively influenced the rituals of thidambu nritham. The breakdown of joint family has lead to the change in perceptions on thidambu nritham. The contemporary education structure and perceptions on own possession of properties from joint family to nuclear family has weakened the association of members and networking with the joint family. With a change in the views on thidambu nritham by the current generation of devotees from a form of worship to temple dance has affected the uniqueness as well as the originality of the temple ritual.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Puthumana Govindan Namboothiri is the living exponent of thidambu nritham who played a central role in standardizing thidambu nritham as a temple dance form and energized it, from a state of fading away after 700 years. Puthumana redefined, rejuvenated and innovated on thidambu nritham and was responsible for evolving the classic styles of thidambu nritham, while preserving the seven century old conventional steps. Puthumana has been a lover of this dance form for past 60 years and a regular practitioner for nearly 50 years. He has used thidambu nritham as an artistic creation to purify the society and has been active in enriching and educating others through plenty of performances, demonstrations and workshops which could ignite a thought in the audience. Puthumana took the initiative to introduce thidambu nritham to all sections of India, and played role of an ambassador for international integration by protecting, preserving and propagating India's rich culture and heritage with beneficiaries over 10 crore devotees, art lovers and tourists from other states of India and abroad. Puthumana introduced few steps partially illustrating yogasanas/yoga postures into thidambu nritham and renamed this version of the dance form as 'yogathmak deva nruthya'. The awards won by Puthumana Govindan Namboothiri are numerous including those at national and International level, Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi Kalashri Award 2014 and First Kerala Kshetra Kala Akademi Award 2017, and is the only thidambu nritham artist to receive all these prestigious recognitions. He is currently very active in regular practice of thidambu nritham and dissemination of rich knowledge and experience in thidambu nritham to target audiences in the society.



Dr. Govindan P is a distinguished Indian scientist who is a Marie Curie Postdoc from European Union. He did his M Tech from IIT Madras, Chennai, India (2003) and PhD from IIT Bombay, Mumbai, India (2012). He has 17 years of research and academic experience. His key area of interest has been development of eco-friendly, energy-efficient and cost-effective engineering technologies. Dr. Govindan has published more than 150 research articles in journals and conferences of International repute. He is a practitioner of thidambu nritham and a disciple of Shri. Puthumana Govindan Namboothiri, and is actively involved in assisting Shri. Puthumana, the legendary temple dance icon in promoting rich Indian temple culture and heritage.

