

In the Making of a “Tanpura” Organization

*reflections of a year-long journey in enabling a community-anchored business to create harmony,
purpose & scale*

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Acknowledgements

We thank the *Svaram* team for allowing us to share this work with the outside world. Our AshAn (<https://www.raghuananthanarayanan.com/about.html>), Raghu Ananthanarayanan, is a true inspiration with his non-didactic, non-guru centered approach to teaching Indic wisdom. The prior work done with traditional guilds by Raghu and other consultants from Indian Process work, theater and music backgrounds have provided inspiration and a broad set of anchor points. Sashikala Ananth’s (<https://ritambhara.org.in/community/space-anchors/>) work with living institutions of the Vishwakarma traditions in Tamil Nadu has provided important clues on what is relevant in today’s context. Much of our own reflections through this journey have been held with *sakhi* and *sAkshi bhAva* (friend and meditative observer locations) by our co-journeyers at Ritambhara (group called RASA - Ritambhara Acharya Sangha) and has helped us with our own practice.

Abstract

The paper shares our experiences of applying fundamental praxes and perspectives from the Indic wisdom traditions in working with a community-based enterprise, *Svaram*, Auroville.

We believe that the Indian traditional systems of organizing practised in craft communities have a strong sense of equity, commitment, and dignity; and reviving some of the institutional processes from such communities can help these guilds to scale and meet the demands of the modern economy in a humanistic, purposive, and ecologically sensitive manner. In times of inequities and ecological crises, these ways of organizing can show a way out!

However, the guild-like way of working has its own challenges. The destruction of ‘institutional’ spaces that allowed these systems to be regenerative has resulted in mutual jealousy, fights for ownership and various forms of dependency and counter-dependency.

Their revival requires interventionists to respect traditional systems and their innate intelligence and adopt these in the contemporary context.

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Introduction

From a small workshop in 2003, *Svaram*, one of the foremost community enterprises in Auroville, has grown to a 50-member organization catering to a global market. *Svaram* manufactures and sells a diverse set of Indian and World Music Instruments, sets up various indoor and outdoor sound experience spaces, offers sound-healing sessions and sound healing training program. *Svaram* plans to build an exclusive campus dedicated to sound and music research, arts, craft and new product development.

Aurelio (one of the co-founders and executives, *Svaram*), invited Rajeev Natarajan from *Ritambhara* to help build leadership capabilities for driving growth within the organization. He believes that the organization and its leaders need to be rooted in leadership processes from Indic wisdom for long-term sustainability. Further, the leadership processes need to be connected to the lives and context of the core team members who were primarily the locals.

How it All Began

My desire to explore application of Indic Wisdom in organizational settings, drew me towards *Svaram*, which I believed would be a place that will help me with this exploration. Being very clear about his dream, Aurelio wanted the production at *Svaram* to work independently and he had picked 5 core team members, who are deeply service minded and

truly Aurovillian in spirit. They have worked with him for 15 years and hail from villages around. Aurelio desires to make *Svaram* financially more viable for the employees, while making it a model in Auroville.

Feeling very fortunate that our core work matched with *Svaram*'s vision, I invited Raghu Ananthanarayan to help us through the journey given his rich experience in working with many craft communities in south India. I also invited Ganesh Chidambarakrishnan, a fellow member of the *Ritambhara Sangha*, and a consultant at TAO to co-anchor this journey.

Steps Taken

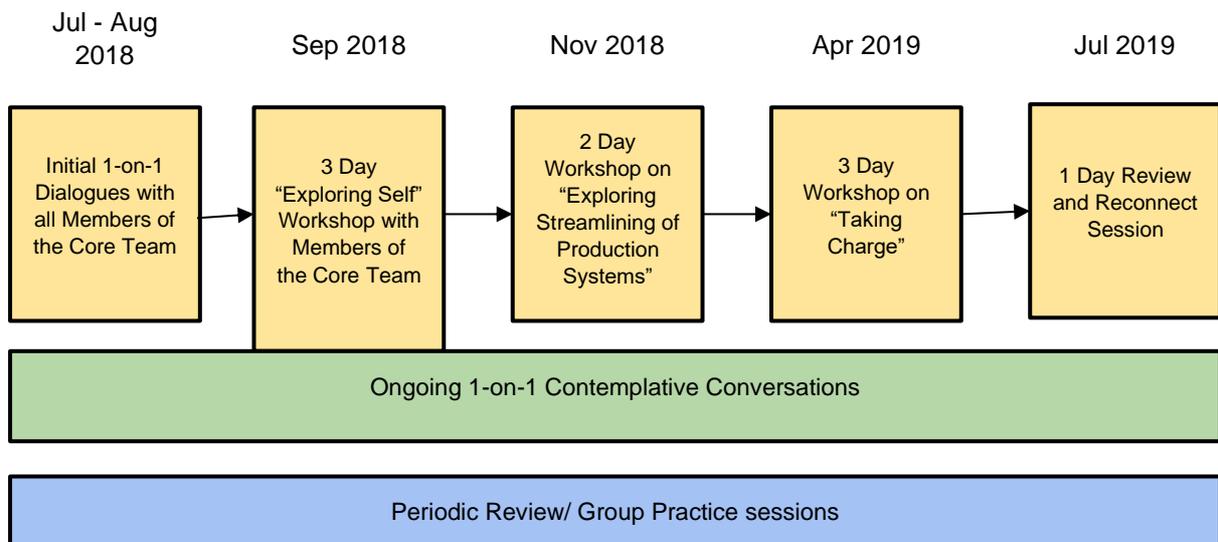


Fig 1: *Svaram* Activity Timeline

The intervention involved three key workshops with periodic group review/practice sessions and 1-on-1 conversations with the core team. Over 12 months, around 25 1-on-1 coaching

conversations amongst the core team members and executives, 16 group practice sessions and reviews were conducted.

Rajeev's location of an insider-outsider aided the latter two and made the conversations in both sessions effective. Ganesh, besides co-anchoring the workshops, played the role of a mirror (anchor *sakhi* and *sAkshi bhAva*) for Rajeev to reflect on the ways of his engagement with the client system.

Our Praxis and Perspective

Organizations are living entities. While each organizational context is unique, the underlying substratum is similar and any transformation calls for a certain exploration of the configuration of various universal archetypal energies for oneself, the collective and the context. These practices are enunciated in various Indic texts and traditions¹. The essence of the praxis can be articulated as:

1. Life as a Process: If one of the needs is a certain dynamicity and response-ability, we ought to look at plans and strategies not as outputs of a one-time exercise to be 'executed', but as a *continual* dialogue that is designed to have traceability and response to change. Thus, strategizing as a practice that bridges 'plan' and 'execution' is more important than the strategy.
2. Bringing together *dharmam*, *dandam*, and *mukti* in response to a context:
 - *dharmam* – how can we simultaneously enliven the self, the other and the context? *This is institutional space.*

- *dandam* – how can we create equitable boundaries and encourage psychological ownership and ‘right’ associated with this ownership and not be entirely dependent on structural power? *This is primarily a task space with commitments to other role holders.*
 - *mukti* – how can we create a space for the individual to grow and create a structure that provides this space? *This is typically explored in an intra-personal and inter-personal immersive space, and personal and group coaching conversations.*
3. Practice of *Koodam*: An organization is a set of human energies that come together to co-create a context. What impacts the self, impacts the system and vice versa! Our different propensities make us sensitive to different things in a group context. Thus, if one desires to co-create spaces that are meaningful and enlivening, how does one create a practice of dialogue that brings in these different perspectives? The anchorage of such a conversation in a *koodam* is:
- to practice having this conversation from a space of *shAntam* (equanimity) - having *sakala sahrudaya samvAdam* (*sakala* - with all one’s faculties, *sahrudaya* - with a resonance of hearts, *samvAdam* - contemplative conversations)
 - understanding differential capabilities in the system and having a sense of equity (not equality)

- *aprAptasya prApti* (*aprAptasya* - that which is considered unachievable, *prApti* - to attain) - collective understanding of the current state of the system and exploring possibilities from that location
- This automatically means that we trust the inherent resourcefulness of the system and not see the organization as something to be ‘acted upon’ with our pet framework

Koodam is an old Indian practice of self-managed institutional dialogue, no more in use.

Facilitating a koodam is a modern innovation where such a space is created consciously to revive this practice. Thus, the practice of the facilitators is to see how they can anchor a space of quietude, sans their own pushes and pulls and allow for co-creating an emergent space pregnant with possibilitiesⁱⁱ. The objective of each intervention is to collectively identify the current state, desired state, impetus for change, and what is an ‘intelligent’ first step (and not make a static ‘plan’).

Thus, our praxis is to help the client system tune into the underlying *shruti* of the collective space, and being present to the play of the others and allow for individuals to express their creativity in sync with others.

Intervention and Reflections

Understanding the Client System

The 1-on-1 discussions with all the core members of *Svaram*, including the two Executives,ⁱⁱⁱ showcased the overall health of the system while allowing for us to connect with everyone and understand their place in the system. The process of emotive sensing and ‘alter-egoing’,

helped us draw a set of key inferences, that was shared with the team. The key inferences that resonated with the team and helped us design our next step were:

- Their lives being deeply interconnected with *Svaram*, most of the core team had undergone various challenges in their pursuit of a career. Though ridiculed and discouraged for an unusual career choice, they persisted and were duly rewarded. They had achieved what everyone aspires for; quality of life and work-life balance.
- Each brought in a specific kind of strength in their understanding of specific range of instruments, having worked hands-on over time.
- *Svaram* held the space for their personal aspirations and dreams. But the question was “I have invested in the system; but I am ambivalent. Is the system investing in me as much as I would like for it to?”
- They felt that, “I have to obey the management, my decisions don’t matter.”
- Despite the deep social interconnectedness, the feeling to compete and win over others was palpable.
- Viewing themselves as crafts persons in specific instrument types, they were focused around developing, improving and building that line of instrument Mindspace for establishing processes for scaling up production was low. There seemed to be a concern that this could dampen their freedom and creativity.
- While the members had their own financial aspirations, the primary inner drive for them was the joy of the craft - working with sound and sound instruments. They seemed to expect the organization to provide for their financial aspirations.

- Aurelio's shift in focus towards new initiatives had an ambivalent response - an experience of a potential void, while wanting to rise to the occasion.
- The voice of the customer was very feeble as was the voice of wealth - there was a lot more inward looking and it was felt that this could have an impact on long-term business viability.

Imitations, mass manufacture and other forms of competition have reduced *Svaram's* dominance in the field.

The team's response to various skill and leadership development workshops they had attended earlier were:

- The workshops were too generic and abstract, and hence impractical.
- Much of this was in English and this made it difficult to learn and incorporate.
- Some of the attempts to implement frameworks helped in solving specific issues for a short while, with no long-lasting impact.
- It seemed like that the core team was asking, "Is this more advice from yet another volunteer?" Use of Tamil, however, provided some comfort.

Workshop 1: Exploring Self (September 2018)

Creating a *koodam* being one of the central themes, the workshop involved bringing together key stake holders in a manner that helps connect at a human level devoid of divisions and exploring the configuration of human energies in the system, the dreams that the individuals hold, and the blocks that they experience.

A discourse free 3-day experiential workshop^{iv} (*intra and inter-personal immersive space*) allowed one to explore:

1. The *navarasA* (*nava* - nine; *rasA* - essence of feelings) currently accessible to us – which amongst the nine do we flow with, which of them are blocked, and which are we completely unaware of?
2. One's inner dialogue among the various Archetypal Inner Figures. The workshop is designed around various non-conversational ways of working – primarily through movement, play, art, and theatre,^v to help one discover the ability to look at these inner processes with curiosity, compassion and attentiveness. Our research shows that most individuals are trapped amongst four internal voices - that of the Victim (holding on to the hurt), the Guardian (being vigilant and reactive), the Judge (being suspicious, critical and rule-bound, and the Beckoner (flitting and distracting from true exploration). The consequence – sense of self-worth, belief in our own potential and talent and the dream to be 'the best I can be' get masked or lost. Once a participant is free from these shackles, self-worth and the ability to listen to the dreamer within can be recovered.
3. Relatedness to one another – especially in an organizational context. What are the conversations we have stayed away from? What images do I hold of the other and of myself in this context? Can I discover new ways of coming together?

The primary values in this workshop were *maitri* (friendship), *karmA* (action) and *dharmA* from the *Saptaswara* (*sapta* - seven; *swara* - notes) framework [1] and further building on to include the other four values as well.

The Components

1. Various *AsanAs* / *prAnayamA* and theatre exercises to get in touch with the body, under the axiom that various concretizations of what is over-engaged or under-engaged or disengaged with, over time, are all ‘stored’ in our bodies as locked up energies.
2. Practising looking at these patterns from a space of *shAntam*: *shAntam* is a space of tranquillity that is pregnant with all emotional response-capabilities. As we learn to anchor ourselves in this space, we can draw back from our patterned responses and observe the patterns themselves.
3. Reflective Discussions: there are three players in ‘action’ for a truly reflective process. The actor sharing his or her story, the listener (*sakhi* – friend) who listens with compassion and without judgement, shares what is evoked and asks questions to explore, and the observer (*sAkshi*) who holds the space within and looks at the drama that is playing, outwardly and inwardly. We first practice this by creating triads and slowly move to finding all the three locations within.
4. Given the team’s background, elements from music were used extensively in the workshop.

The workshop was followed up with group and individual coaching sessions. The group sessions provided a space to practice these reflexive processes. Going forward, many of these sessions were co-anchored by one of the core team members and became less dependent on the facilitators.

Reflections from the Participants and Reported Changes

- At the end of the workshop, the team reported a certain feeling of connectedness that helped them go beyond their differences that had built up over time. Spaces created during the workshop enabled conversation to manage their differences, which gave them practises to continue such conversations.
- Over the next few months, some of the practices developed helped deepen relationships amongst the team. The coaching sessions worked on personal and specific issues. The renewed trust and connectedness also helped individual team members take 'risk' within the organization.
- They also started looking at how they were part of the problem, allowing for dialogue rather than judging/blaming others in the system.

Our Reflections after the Workshop

We felt that this group really understood the essence of the work, and got in touch with spaces much more intuitively and quickly than most corporate leadership teams. Some of the key ideas around *nyAyA* (contextual fairness and not letter of the law), *dharma sankatA* (ethical dilemmas and not polarities), and a sense of community were ingrained deeply and were a lived experience for them.

However, they felt that the fast-changing contexts didn't value communities and contextual intelligence, leading to less such spaces in their lives and rupturing this fabric. Also, the lack of energizing spaces alongside outcome-focused interventions, meant few opportunities to learn to stay in this anchorage, repair the fabric, and move forward.

Transition Discoveries

A need for greater predictability in the production process was discovered in the group coaching. The teams were largely trained as crafts people, so they were able to work with greater freedom and creativity compared to an average ‘manufacturing company’; but the over-engagement with tacit knowledge and related ways of working impeded manufacturing top-selling instruments at scale. We suggested the team explore lean manufacturing.

Workshop 2: Exploring Streamlining of Production Systems (November 2018)

This workshop was planned as a set of working sessions, interspersed with games and other activities, to explore link responsibilities and systems thinking. We picked one instrument and walked through its entire time, material, and people flow – from raw material till the finished good ready for shipping. We looked at the idea of waste in lean manufacturing and talked about reducing waste. We also looked at

- processes that could potentially be outsourced
- processes common to more than one division and therefore introduce a horizontal
- broadly mapping the different kinds of skill levels required to understand cross-training needs and cross-working possibilities to help with seasonality of products

Each member picked one instrument from their divisions to test this before introduction into the organization.

We initially approached this workshop as a space to introduce the concepts and tools of Lean Manufacturing Systems to the team, with a plan that each member in the team would apply these to their respective product lines. But the workshop came at a time when *Svaram* had

their peak customer demands - so their mind space was not available to explore this way of working. This required a certain ability to document processes in detail (mapping on paper, for instance); and the team found it difficult to follow. So, we focused instead on helping the team get a grasp on the concept of *waste* in production system, and looking at the production system as a whole.

While no direct shifts were experienced in the periodic reviews, improvement in shared deployment of people across lines through improved cross-training of people, better raw material and inventory management and increase in efficiency by subcontracting was observed.

Transition Discoveries

A month after the second workshop, an unusual stock-out situation for different products, exposed the gaps in the link responsibilities in *Svaram*'s production system. The crisis led the core team to take up key roles depending on their skill sets and they asked themselves why they hadn't done this before. They observed that things slipped by due to a systemic lack of attention as the co-founders' working style was very different leading to a disconnect.

The crisis led them to think, "What does it take for me/us to take charge of the operations?" , after their first workshop.

Workshop 3: Taking Charge (April 2019)

As the team had started reflecting within, it was possible to dive into the topic of 'taking charge at this workshop'.

1. The group would repeatedly get to the threshold of a big shift but stop themselves.

“What does this threshold mean: Is it just a better version of today? Are there guarantees? Can we just trust and jump?”
2. While the group expressed gratitude for the support from Executives, they also observed a sense of helplessness and anger that stemmed from such a dependency and their part in the drama.
3. What do we mean by leadership? What is the role I see for myself?
4. The team sensed difficulty with a new role of production manager (one among the 6 had been nominated). While sharing their perception on roles and challenges, it was clear that the production manager felt ‘powerless’. He felt he wasn’t able to contribute when things were lagging as they ran these units independently. The question was, "How did this role even come about"? Is there a role at all for a 'conductor' in an Indian classical concert? It was surprising that they worked well as a team during crisis but unable to have standard operating procedures in place when needed. Were external triggers the only opportunities to come together? Therefore: *How do you value who you are as you are and find answers from that space? How do we work from a space of inner conviction and not external challenge? How do we create a business entity from the traditional and artisanal way and not as a child of modernity?*

Our Reflections

A critical point of inflection came when we examined the tendency to *invite* crises. A participant said, “It is like we sub-consciously mess up so that we can fix it.” From here, ‘working’ with individual and collective dreams (drawn and shared) became easier.

Body practices and *bhAvanA* helped bring these pictures back to a space where one could meditate on them, draw meaning and inspiration and make commitments to the journey.

Where Have We Reached - Reflections from Review in July 2019

Three months after the last intervention, we saw a big shift in the organization with an old-timer wanting to quit. Despite their personal opinions and relationships with the employee, the team had come together to handle the issue and prevented escalation.

Reflections of Team Members:

“The coaching has helped me plan my finances better. I earn more now and plan savings and feel I can save up to build a house.”

- “The group processes and coaching helped me negotiate and work with other innovators. After our meeting in April I have been able to complete a n old project that will go live in August.”
- “My interactions with retailers have clear boundaries regarding stock possession and have significantly improved the cash flows.”
- “I stopped focussing on trivial issues and now trust my teams to deliver. I am able to focus on sales and marketing and have set aggressive targets for myself.”
- “My team has taken over the daily activities while I focus on new product development with small lab set up at home.”
- “Realising that a team was understaffed, we quickly move a few from our team to meet their demand.”

Author's Personal Reflections:

Rajeev: I am humbled by the quality, intensity and commitment the team brought to the process. The process has empowered them to adopt and run it themselves. They now see it as integral to their organizational identity. The work has begun in their communications to potential clients and stake holders.

The transformation is largely because of their connectedness to their body and spirit coming together and their rootedness in Indic Wisdom. Our work was to reconnect them to the wisdom. The stories about organizing large festivals, the entire village coming together to organize a wedding and their finding ways of justice beyond the rule-bound right and wrong, demonstrate their anchorage in the spirit of such processes.

The degradation of processes like *koodam* meant that these guild-like organizations became more closed and congealed. Revival of such processes allowed for the key role holders to start listening deeper - to discontent, needs and desires. Reflecting which of these are systemic and which are personal allowed them to make choices that are enlivening as opposed to obligatory.

Conversations anchored in *sakhi* and *sAkshi bhAvA* allowed for exploration without blame or guilt and gave space for new possibilities and empathy for role-holders in the organization.

Revival of ideas such as *catushkoti* have also contributed to a certain consensus building.

Given the context and literacy, it was important to find spaces to build skills useful in modern business contexts, like English language and computers.

Ganesh: Rajeev's location of the simultaneous Insider- is a critical factor that shaped the intervention. The multiple critical conversations around his role-taking and choice-making, helped us stay on the edge between our commitment to system, and the potential biases of an insider and the confidence on the privacy of conversations while at the same time not becoming a messenger of difficult topics to authorities. Being just a facilitator and not a solution provider and hold space for the individual and group to discover inner resources, required anchoring at the location. Much credit to the *Svaram* team and their social fabric for their ability to connect with us in an equitable manner. Our practices to internalize our praxis and perspectives and the team's openness to include us in their journey helped us in facilitating the intervention in a well-anchored manner.

Way Forward

We plan to continue the 1-on-1 and group contemplative conversations while *Svaram* plans to continue the path leading towards specific skill-building, long-term strategizing and culture building.

The immediate priorities in skill building include:

1. Working with volunteers in Auroville to familiarise English Language.
2. Using a local entrepreneurship lab for transitioning to a robust accounting system.
3. A survey to understand the breadth and depth of various skills in the organization.

The immediate priorities in strategizing and culture building include:

1. Work on an in-depth business aligner - to help identify a "North Star" for the next 2-3 years and short-term actions and a way to re-orient as the context changes. The

business aligner is a framework of strategizing that involves the art and science of listening and working with the 5 voices of business - that of customer, wealth, technology, associates, and *dharmA*. A key challenge that one might face is to see how a predominantly cognitive process can be made accessible and workable to a group that works more from an intuitive and tacit space.

2. Building a stronger culture of production management and innovation - explore further refinements to production processes, and also start looking at processes to help build on their knowledge base and co-create a culture of innovation and new product development.
3. Involving the next set of people from the community to this process and expanding the *koodam* process.
4. Building capacities in the core team members to take up the role of Executives in the Auroville system.

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End Notes

ⁱ The Ritambhara and TAO flavor of process work has underpinnings in the Yoga Sutra. The Yoga Sutra is seen as a *darshanA*. It is important to understand the word *darshanA* as an invitation to an exciting and continuous experiment with one self. If we treat our experiences and interactions from the perspective of a mirror, we can avoid prescriptive and dogmatic ways of reflecting and the need for a central authoritative ‘explanation’. This enables us to enter an adventure of rigorous learning and continuous insight.

The traditions that inspire this body of work are found in various craft communities (guilds) that emphasize on a sustainable, enlivening, and contextual way of working. The practices of traditional art forms (such as *koothu* in Tamil Nadu) truly bring alive the metaphors in the epics (beyond seeing them as just stories) to the present.

ⁱⁱ Yoga Sutra 1.37 – *vItarAgavishayam vA cittam*. Transference-countertransference happens in most normal interactions. If one can be mindful of one’s own pushes and pulls in this work, there is a possibility that he / she can offer a space that allows the other to truly explore

ⁱⁱⁱ The Auroville governance holds Executives accountable for the Units that they steward. They are equivalent to Directors in a Private Limited Company

^{iv} The experiential workshop was derived from design principles of *Saptaswara* and Mahabharatha Immersion (Raghu Ananthanarayanan et al)

^v The theatre components of the workshop are inspired and developed over 2 decades based on interactions with various theatre groups, the most notable among them being a Tamil Theatre Group called ‘Koothu-p-pattarai’. Shanthakumar, a theatre artist, who was associated with this group co-anchored these elements of the workshop

The transliteration key for words in Indian languages (largely Sanskrit; but also a few words in Tamil and Malayalam) follows the Harvard-Kyoto Protocol [Available <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard-Kyoto>] barring the following exceptions made for intuitive reading:

Devanagari	HK Protocol	Our key
ङ	Ga	Nga
ञ	Ja	nja
श	za	sha
ष	Sa	Sha
क्ष	kSa	kSha
श्र	zra	Shra

