

Swadharma

The Soul of Action



Key to Integral Social Transformation

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Abstract:

Swadharma is a radical five-weeks educational intervention based out of Auroville - an international community situated in Tamil Nadu, India, a social prototype-in-making as an alternative to the capitalistic economy. Swadharma is a call for adventure for the youth of the world to take a leap into the future. The aim of Swadharma is to create a social field which shifts students from ego identity to their truer self, while being inspired by radical experimentation and creative alternatives in sustainability and social change to embody change themselves. It aligns students personal quest with working for a more awakened, just and compassionate world in a way that brings out their unique inborn gift. This is relevant today since today's education system neither looks into the innate gifts of the learner nor creating social transformation. Based on Auroville's 50 years of practical experience in building a new society, it seeks to answer in a living way a quest that many people in the development world grapple with i.e. how to seamlessly integrate the domains of self, society and environment in a practical way. Swadharma is an answer to how individual transformation is the key to profound social transformation.

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Context of Our Pedagogical Innovation

In this section, we will step by step look at the different contexts in which Swadharma intervention is happening. Each context illustrates the challenges of the contemporary world and the relevance of Swadharma in it. First, let us look at the economic context.

The Assumptions of the Modern Economy

1. Humans are self-centered.
2. Human needs are unlimited.
3. Resources are limited.

- *Economics 101*

These are the three assumptions underlying all economics. One reads them when one begins the study of Economics. They do not change even as one moves to a more advanced study of economics, or even when one begins to study economics from the perspective of social development. The leading world experts in economics mostly do not question these assumptions. Even the people working consciously for social good hardly question these assumptions, but are they true?

Are humans self-centered? If yes, does it always have to be? Are nature's resources too little for human needs? Or is it that because we are psychologically and spiritually unfulfilled that we are seeking to fulfil our needs for respect, love, community through material goods? What if nature actually has abundance, humans true needs are indeed limited and humans actually care and love to contribute? Is it possible?

Through restoring our relationship with self, society and environment, Swadharma seeks to change the very fundamentals about human nature that mainstream economics assume. Before we look at how Swadharma works, let us look at the status-quo of how these

assumptions are causing fundamental divides in the society - in ourselves, amongst ourselves and in our relationship with the Nature.

The Three Divides of the Economy

The mainstream economy in the contemporary world is one of the most significant spaces that manifests and creates fundamental divides in human society (Scharmer, 2019). The assumption 'resources are limited' brings a scarcity mentality, and pushes humans to exploit nature, creating an **ecological divide**. Climate change, species extinction, depletion and destruction of natural resources, pollution of rivers, seas and air, poisoning of the food and the food chain, increasing natural calamities - all represent the growing ecological divide.

The ecological divide i.e. the divide between human beings and Mother Earth is most succinctly represented by the number "1.5". Although we have only one planet earth, we leave an ecological footprint of 1.5 planets; that is, we are currently using 50% more resources than our planet can regenerate to meet our current consumption needs. The economy treats the sacred Earth as unconnected from human beings; resources as materials meant for the satisfaction of human material desires and pleasures.

The assumption that human needs are unlimited, pushes humans to acquire and accumulate, at the cost of others, creating gross social inequalities and a social divide. The social divide is best represented by the number "2.5". Two and a half billion people on our planet subsist on less than \$2 per day. The present economic system has in-built assumptions and levers that accelerate the existence of inequalities and by itself do little for poverty alleviation. Although there have been many successful attempts to lift people out of poverty, this number, 2.5 billion, has not changed much over the past several decades (Scharmer, 2019).

We are also more divided than ever. There is rising inequality. The richest one percent of the world's population owns half its wealth. The top 1% richest individuals in the world have captured twice as much growth in financial wealth as the bottom 50% of individuals since 1980 (Alvaredo et al, 2018). The division in income is only one facet; there is divisiveness over caste, gender, religion, race and nation. Its violent form today is more visible than ever, as people are beginning to question political boundaries and media is becoming more decentralised and accessible.

The social crisis mirrors the psychological crisis. The UK has a Minister of Loneliness (Pimlott, 2018). In the US, depression is on an unprecedented rise, with the diagnosis of depression rising by 33% from 2013 to 2016 (Fox, 2018). In India, as much as 36% of the population has suffered from major depression at some point in their lives (WHO, 2017). Globally today, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds (WHO, 2018). The list of shocking numbers goes on. The social crisis feeds into the psychological crisis; the psychological crisis into the social. But is there a deeper crisis behind the apparent social and psychological crises of our times?

Perhaps there is. Behind the psychological and social crisis is the underlying **spiritual divide**. Spiritual divide is the disconnect with our true selves, our true nature that is mirrored in our systems, structures and institutions. The spiritual divide is based on one of the central assumptions of mainstream economics that is humans are self-centred. However, humans are capable of surpassing the ego, discovering who they really are and operating from a space of wholeness rather than the narrowness of the ego. In the development sector, we are beginning to question this assumption of self-centredness, practicing more humane and egalitarian values; yet the present approach remains fragmentary where self-development

and social change are practised as separate domains of intervention, rather than being two sides of the same coin.

It is the marriage of these two aspects - self and social development - that is at the basis of Swadharma, where we see that when we bring out the dormant universal values in human beings, give them the confidence to live from their inner wisdom, they begin to walk on a path which is naturally bridging the social and the ecological divide. Self-development is not seen as something personal. The focus on enlarging the self, shift from ego-centric to eco-centric naturally results in an integral social change. A solid inner grounding through Swadharma gives the students the confidence to trust their inner being, to take radical life decisions, and not succumb to the pressures of money and authoritarian structures, but follow their own path and walk new territories.

This illustrates the importance of Swadharma's intervention from the perspective of the global economic, ecological, social and spiritual crisis. Next, we must appraise the present educational context in which the Swadharma intervention is happening.

Degenerating Educational System

Swadharma is a needed response to the broken links in today's education system which (1) ignores the inner potential of each individual, (2) not even creates employability that it promises to do (3) is detrimental to the mental health of students. Below we look at each of these three aspects.

The disappearance of the individual from education

The present mainstream education is largely a by-product of the Industrial Revolution and its penchant for mass production. We have inherited its mindset and think in terms of the batch: production of

'educated' masses who are meant to fit into the socio-economic system. The uniqueness of each individual arising from the truth and rhythm of their inmost being has no place in such an education system.

The disappearance of practical knowledge from education

Not just are we not able to strive for an education that values the true individual and his/her unique gifts, but also we are unable to even create an education system which is making our youth employable. A simple google search on Indian engineers employability yields a ton of disappointing statistics and literature posing what we're producing is not good enough for practice.

The disappearance of well-being from education

The number of suicide rates in the age group 15 - 29 is a living testimony that something is not right. Our social context has become diseased in a self-destructive manner and we need to restore it back to health once again.

As a result of the dysfunctional educational system, the learners suffer the most. They get disconnected from their true being. This makes their self-expression only a reaction to the external forces without any ability to respond from their own truth within. In the long term, this leads to increasing inner emptiness, confusion, depression and degeneration of life at an individual and collective level. Such a disintegration may be a good business opportunity to sell more consumer products to fill in the inner vacuum but it destroys in the long-term, not only the individual and the society but also the ecosystem as well. Soulless education creates a soulless society and soulless social machinery.

We have a serious disintegration happening at all the levels of our society and perhaps helping people to find their Swadharma is where a fundamental systemic change in the educational system can begin.

Why Swadharma?

The most common ways, we find in the world, of solving social problems is through outer, mechanical and socio-economic means. This misses the root cause of the subtler, psychological, human crisis behind it. Unless the state of consciousness that creates social problems changes, the change is not sustainable. Swadharma recognises that behind it all is a disconnection with oneself and aims to bring this connection back and re-establishes the connection with others and nature as well - creating a natural precondition for social change and sustainability.

Other reasons why Swadharma is the need of the hour are:

1. Swadharma empowers the youth to avoid burning out while 'doing good' by giving them the necessary inner foundation.
2. Swadharma recognises the true unique individuality of each student and in doing so, proposes an alternative to the present cookie-cutter education system.
3. With 'self, society and environment' as three key components of Swadharma's curriculum, it is a solution to the three divides caused by the economic crisis i.e. the spiritual, social and ecological divide.
4. In the context of Artificial Intelligence replacing human thinking skills, Swadharma opens the doors of intuition in heart to create global citizens who are capable of evolving with changing times and

make use of the unprecedented possibilities of technologies for creating a value-based world.

5. Swadharma provides an alternative to the overly theoretical educational system through the context of Auroville, the land of practitioners with a focus on learning-by-doing in the context of real life projects.

With these reasons impelling the need for Swadharma, let us look at what Swadharma is and how it is practiced in detail.

What is Swadharma?

Swadharma is a Sanskrit word meaning one's own law of being. This innate law of one's own being is central in the process of individualisation. So before we dive deeper into the concept of Swadharma, we need to first put into context the process of individualisation.

Individualisation Process

Individualisation is a psychological process of transformation in which a person transitions from being identified with the collective ego to developing one's individual ego, to finally discovering one's true identity. For example, by virtue of being born in a certain caste, religion, nation, one may identify with it. This is the collective ego. However, slowly, one begins to question one's unconscious belief systems and come out of it with an individual ego identity. One begins to chart one's own course of development using personalised ideas and will. However, this ego individuality is still not the true individual, it is only a surface person, largely a mental construct. At some point, this ego hardens. One begins to feel lonely and isolated from the larger social life and seek to go beyond. This 'going beyond' is where

one goes beyond the ego to the true self within, that reveals one's unique purpose in life.

With this background in individualisation, let us look at the core characteristics of Swadharma.

Key to true individualisation in harmony with the whole

Swadharma is not an external duty one must perform in a society based on any economically or culturally formed social roles.

Swadharma is one's own law of being, an inside-out movement arising from one's own innermost potential. As from a mango seed unfolds a mango tree and from a jackfruit seed a jackfruit tree, there is a unique potential, however modest it is, in each individual that seeks to unfold in the world. This law of being is simultaneously acting through all individuals and collectives and in fact the whole of Nature according to each one's position in the larger whole. Its movements are in natural harmony with the good of all. It is in living one's *swadharma* that one fulfills one's natural function in the evolution of the whole ecosystem.

Accelerating conscious evolution

Discovering and living one's *swadharma* demands one to go beyond the outer personality and the inner being. Pursued unaided and unconsciously it can be chaotic, time consuming and a dangerous process. Facilitating this journey can make it simpler, safer and faster. Swadharma programme makes this otherwise unconscious process conscious and accelerated.

From suffering to light

Not to be able to express one's *swadharma* in life leads to disintegration of the life; not to do it sufficiently means languor, weakness, inefficiency, the danger of being oppressed by the environment forces and overborne; not to be able to do it wisely, intuitively, with a strong use of one's inner material and inner powers, means confusion, disorder and finally decline and loss of vitality. It is this disconnect that leads to a growing sense of inner conflict and suffocation in young people.

A journey of self-discovery

The inner exploration reveals one's purpose in life and with it the awakening of one's creative force and its effective expression in life. In short the *swadharma* leads to the discovery of:

- Purpose
- Path and
- Practice

This helps the learner to orient themselves properly in their life's journey to make effective social transformation in harmony with their inner nature.

Self, society and environment

Self, society and environment are the three domains of Swadharma. All these three components are present in the development sector, however in a more-or-less fragmented way. Either an organisation focuses on social development, or it focuses on sustainability, or then there are organisations working on personal development and values. These aspects hardly seem to come together in an integral way. Further, often there is also a perceived tension between self and social development. Even more difficult is to find practitioners who

are rooted in all three aspects of self, society and environment. Swadharma seeks to seamlessly integrate these aspects and base itself out of practice, not just theory, in the context of Auroville's 50 years of experience in these three fields.

Self-discovery and social development

The focus on the 'self' often raises the question or concern that isn't it going to make an individual selfish, concerned only about their own inner journey, inner discovery? Here lies the paradox. It is the outer ego personality with its deep sense of separation and scarcity has the need to compete and control. When compounded by the presence of fear or greed or urge for domination we get the problems we already have in the world. A world of strife and competition with inequitable distribution of wealth, an economic system that destroys the ecosystem itself. All the powers of technology goes to serve the self-embellishment of the ego.

On the other hand, when an individual is able to go beyond the selfish ego into their true being, what awakens is a radiant force bringing a greater sense of empathy and oneness. It is the source of our compassion, universal love, gratitude and generosity. So what appears as an inward turn paradoxically results in an outward radiance, a profound involvement and self-expression in the world and involvement in the welfare of the whole.

From individual perfection arises social perfection

Following one's *swadharma* unfolds a process of psychological integration of various parts of one's being that otherwise are in conflict. It is this internal integration and harmonisation that bring out the best in each individual and only such individually harmonised and integrated people who can compose a society that can live in harmony with its members as well as its natural ecosystem. Thus the

key to larger social harmony and perfection is the perfection of the constituent individual.

A fundamental responsibility of education

Following one's *swadharma* enables an individual to become self-aware, self-directed and self-driven setting in motion the inspired action radiating from their inmost source. It is such individuals who pioneer new uncharted pathways and become path breaking leaders. It is such individuals who work for the welfare of the whole because their inmost source is naturally in harmony with the universal movement of society and Nature. Making this happen is a fundamental responsibility education.

Thus the Swadharma programme intervenes at a fundamental systemic level.

The Programme in Detail

Swadharma offers young seekers — aged 18 to 30 — an opportunity to embark on a transformative learning journey with the goal of self-discovery in the context of Auroville. We are very well aware that the process of self-discovery is a lifelong process and we are only setting in motion the beginning of the journey. The programme has been designed as a five-week-long multi-disciplinary foundation programme with an option for a self-directed internship in Auroville after five weeks. The duration of stay after the five-week programme is left to the learners to decide depending on their convenience.

Learning Objectives

The learning objective is intended to be two-fold:

- 1. Inner development and**

2. Outer manifestation.

Inner development

1. Self-awareness

Learning to distinguish the various psychological part of being and discern the presence of a deeper self and its intuitive guidance revealing one's potential and purpose.

2. Self-mastery

Developing mastery over the movements of various parts of the being brings gradual unification of otherwise scattered movements of Will and aligns it with the inner guide and its inspired action.

Outer manifestation

These are skills and knowledge required to engage with the world effectively.

1. Design thinking

Train the thinking process to be systematic and be creative by opening to intuition and inspiration so that it can be applied in solving problems that are challenging and engaging.

2. Communication

Learn how to articulate and express oneself precisely and efficiently so that one can inspire, invite and engage with the world.

3. Collaboration

Learn to work together as teams by deep listening, empathy and enjoying diversity; an essential skill to solve complex problems and to engage with the world joyfully.

4. Leadership

Learn to take responsibility and initiative and make things happen by perseverance.

5. Global citizenship

Learn to develop a global perspective while solving local problems, assimilate the best from all cultures.

6. Sustainable living

Understand and redesign everyday life choices to be in harmony with earth and Nature.

Pedagogy

To facilitate the emergence of *swadharma*, the learning process follows the following:

1. Self-referential - following the inner guide
2. Experiential - learning by doing
3. Immersive - residential, full-time
4. Integral - touching all parts, wholesome
5. Individualised

Below we share in detail about each of the five pedagogical principles and how they are applied in the Swadharma programme.

Self-referential

The fundamental premise of Swadharma programme is that there is a truer self hidden behind our outer personality of the ego. Piercing the veil of the ego and coming in touch with this inner self is thus a central movement in discovering one's *swadharma*. It is this discovery, or at

least the ability to sense its presence, that brings out the sense of one's purpose and gifts.

This is done through, first and foremost, helping the student get in touch with the inner self.

Discovery of the inner self

The inner self is that within us which thirsts for truth, goodness, and beauty. We symbolically represent the inner self as a flame. On the very first day itself, we acknowledge the inner flame in each one. All participants & facilitators surrender through a symbolic ceremony to the divinity within each and every one. We accept this inner flame to be the true teacher, the true leader of our learning journey. This symbolic practice is then made into multiple ways of approaching the same flame in the coming weeks through many specific practices.



In the process of discovering this fire and being led by it, the students get a sense of what it means to be their authentic self by shedding all

the masks. However, it is not enough for the learners to orient themselves towards their own inner fire. They need to learn how to discern the inner self from the noise within through self-observation.

Observing within

There is a lot that goes on within us - there are sensations, impulses, desires, drives, emotions, thoughts, ideas, values, imagination and so much more. But how do we accurately discern what movement in our consciousness is coming from where? Often we tend to deceive ourselves, unaware that many of our movements are mixtures of human ignorance and the goodness within.

A deeper understanding of human psychology and the practice of self-observation helps one cultivate an inner attitude of being the witness. Slowly one begins to understand the various parts of our being, their psychological nature and how to manage one's self and its instruments.

Accessing knowledge from within

One of the first principles of integral education is - "Nothing can be taught to the mind which is not already concealed as potential knowledge". Following this principle, the programme is designed to create a space that facilitates the emergence of knowledge which already lies within the individual. The teacher is not a 'teacher'; s/he is only a guide, a helper in the process. For instance, in the design of the sessions, instead of spoon-feeding students about the contemporary ecological and economic crisis, a context is created where they sift through and reflect on the contents of their luggage and discover for themselves their relationship with the crisis at large.



Further, the programme facilitates accessing the voice of the inner guide, through several activities such as initiating a writing exercise which enables one to have a conversation with the wiser part of oneself. The programme facilitators do not say what the inner guide has to say. There is no one narrative that is given; it is trusted that the inmost being of each one knows and that all one has to do is to allow it to guide.

Integral - Touching different parts of being

The programme touches upon different parts of being: the self and its instruments of the mind, emotions and body. We will deeply look into the self in the section on 'The Soul of Swadharma', here let us look at how the programme develops the mind, emotions and the body.

Using mind as an instrument for higher life

Of all lines of education, mental education is the most widely known and practised. Generally speaking, school and college is considered to be all the mental education that is necessary. In Swadharma, we build on the mental education given in the society by including facets that guide them towards a higher life. This includes concentration, design thinking, weekly presentations and journal writing.

Concentration

We are living through an era of social media and constant media distractions making attention spans shrink. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has become widespread and it is critically important to counter this degeneration. It is in this context concentration practice become a powerful tool. Concentration is a fundamental skill required to succeed in anything a student undertakes and therefore we have given it a great importance in our programme.

We begin each day with a 10 minutes of flame gazing exercise. In this simple traditional Indian practice called *tratak* lies inherent wisdom - through the gazing we are learning to focus our dispersed attention. Once our gaze becomes stable, it becomes powerful. The ability to concentrate is a great capital, it can be used as a force to focus on a specific area and make it grow or solving a problem. Participants report a significant improvement to the quality of their concentration over a period of five weeks and many of them decided to continue the practice after Swadharma.

The flame in our context also serves a deeper symbolic meaning as the programme is centred around getting in touch with one's inner flame and bringing it to the forefront as the guide of our existence in the world. Building this connection with tangible flame is also a symbolic activity to invoke the inner flame.

Journaling

We have half-an-hour kept for journaling practice every day. Because there is a lot of stimulation during the day, which has a corresponding effect on the inside, journaling serves as a means to process, reflect, and grow in self-observation. Sharper mind's capacity at observation, we become better at

- Self-awareness,
- Identifying the signals coming from the inner guide,
- Understanding the parts of the being, their strengths and weaknesses,
- Understanding emerging patterns unfolding in one's life,
- Documenting the process of self-discovery.

Design thinking

We are all designers! Each student takes up a project that is meant to be a seed of what it would mean when their full potential comes alive. The five iterative stages of design thinking - empathise, define, ideate, prototype, test - are used so they can design a project around their true calling and slowly begin to design their life around their passion.

Presentations

At the end of every week, the participants distill their learning and share about their week's journey in a crisp five minutes using minimum words and images to heighten precision and creativity. The presentations are followed by peer-to-peer feedback. This serves multiple purposes - creative communication, documentation, self-observation and peer-to-peer learning, making it an insights-packed inspirational exchange.



A student making a presentation

Refining emotions and building connections



Of all education, emotional education is perhaps the most important, the most indispensable. Yet it is rarely taken up and pursued with discernment and method. Swadharma programme uses the following practices to refine emotions.

Life Mapping and Clearing the Past



Clearing the past, after a day-long sharing of each one's river of life

Each student maps their journey thus far. They review and map their own life as a river: "What different streams and other rivers helped them get here? They map, with colours, drawings and/or words, the challenges or rocks that they moved

through, and the times they moved through smoothly. Using the metaphor of a river to its fullest— they depict offshoots, rapids, waterfalls, dams or still times in ponds, etc. Thereafter they share. This sharing creates a deep sense of community, release, a sense of beginning something new, and letting go of the past.

At the end of the life mapping session, each student clears the past. There are things that one is unable to share, that one feels too guilty, embarrassed or simply too private to share. Each student writes them on paper and offers it to the sacred fire in the center. This part the students do not share. This helps the students clear what they have been holding onto, and open to receiving new knowledge, and inspired energy.

Sharing Circle

Every alternate day, we create a space of deep listening and sharing, where each individual is offered a space to share what's going on for them, particularly in the inner landscape as there is a lot of stimulation happening at mental emotional and physical level. This safe space offers the participants a chance to let their guard down, be honest and vulnerable, thus creating deeper bonds, building perspective, and learning to listen deeply. This is in addition to many other deep sharing we have during the programme. Students have found this as one of the most valuable components of their time at Swadharma and have tried to continue sharing circles remotely even after the programme.



Gratitude and Appreciation Practice

Usually we often find ourselves complaining, missing out on what we have, the true wealth that is around us. In this context, gratitude helps one realising and appreciating what we have. It brings humility, warmth and joy. And when it naturally extends to an authentic appreciation, it nourishes relationships. It is a cure for egoism.

Every batch, the students personalise Swadharma's gratitude jar. The jar becomes a sacred collectively owned entity where students write on paper whenever they feel gratitude for something and drop it in the jar. By the end of the programme, they open it, share and enjoy.

Exploring emotions through theater

Theater helps the students realise all that goes on behind the verbal mental layer, come in touch with their energies and emotions, and safely express them through expressive theater games.

Connecting to the inner child

Through visualisation and writing, the students connect to their inner child. Particularly, whenever there is some form of discomfort within, however minor or intense, connecting to the inner child helps dive into it and open up a deeper conversation with one's own depths.

These open up emotional ranges and help them to encounter their own veiled parts and the related issues.

Next, we explore the third element of integral education - the body.

Preparing the body

Preparing the physical foundation, the body, for its optimum performance and capacity for learning is an essential part of bringing integrality into education. The body has its own consciousness and corresponding intelligence that is quite different from intellectual and emotional parts of being. Understanding and developing body's own innate capacities is accomplished through various practices like Hathayoga and Awareness Through the Body (ATB), Barefoot Nature Walk, Cycling, healthy food and habit building exercises. Usually mornings, between 6.30 to 8 am are dedicated to one or other form of physical education that prepares the body for the day.

Hatha yoga

Hatha yoga or yoga in short, a product of ancient Indian tradition, is well known all over the world for its great efficiency in making body

supple and energised. It is also a great practice to establish hormonal balance resulting in better physical, emotional and mental health.

Awareness through the body (ATB)



During an ATB session

ATB is a unique practice developed in Auroville is still not much known outside Auroville network. It is a practice that develops subtle awareness enabling students to

experientially explore multiple layers of their body from gross to finer depths. This expands their range of sensory perception and awareness and enable them to use this sensitivity to understand themselves and their environment better.

Barefoot walk in nature

Students are taken out for silent barefoot walk through the forests of Auroville to establish connection between body, earth and the surrounding Nature. These are meditative walks that uses Nature as a context to connect with oneself and it has intrinsic healing effect at various levels. This practice also helps them to widen and deepen the awareness of Nature. It also helps in expanding the range of the senses. It is one of our attempts at integrating mindfulness while actively using the body.

Cycling, sports and healthy food



Food at the community kitchen

Throughout their stay in the campus students move around on bicycles and this is another practice that is used to exercise the body. Further, many evenings are given to sports such as frisbee. Eating healthy organic food in Auroville's community dining hall adds to

the overall physical well being.

Habit Building

The body is the seat of all our habits and to change life one has to change habits. So during the programme students are also guided on how to design and develop new habits, how to create practices suitable for one's own unique requirements etc.

In summary, the Swadharma programme develops the mind, emotions and the body integrally to prepare for a higher life.

Now, let us look at the next pedagogical principle.

Experiential

Experiential learning takes place through activities, site visits and in the project they do.

Experiential activities

In the indoor sessions, instead of a lecture, we make students engaged in living activities. For example, in order to expose students to issues touching upon three domains of self, society and environment, they are asked to make an inventory of things from their luggage. Each participant makes an inventory of all the things they have bought in their luggage. In the process of making the list, they begin to question - is it eco-friendly? Is it needed? How was it

made? Were the people creating it given fair pay? What was the journey of the product? What need in me does it fulfill? Such an exploration helps the learner to get a direct sense of how social and environmental issues are intimately woven into one's own life.

Site visits

Secondly, site visits, community living and encounters with passionate people who are path breakers set in motion a whole lot of inner responses that forms the fertile ground for inner investigation. A cooking workshop in a permaculture farm, for example, becomes a starting point for investigating one's own food habits and connection with nature. Visit to solid waste collection service in Auroville becomes a context for learning about plastic pollution and issues related to the enormous amount of waste generated everyday.

Micro project



Poster of a student's micro-project

As students, we have done so many projects; so what distinguishes this project from the rest. It is a seed of their dream project. Through this project, they learn what it feels like to bring to life what one is passionate about, overcome inner and outer challenges on the path, and feel the sheer joy of inspired energy flowing through oneself.

Immersive

Immersing in everyday life experiences

Learning process is not confined to classrooms, it is the very process of life itself providing experiential learning from waking up in the morning till one goes to sleep. It is by deeply observing everything that is happening, by immersing consciously in the experience of life itself one learns about oneself and how one is relating to the wider society, and environment and the related issues involved in it. So the toothpaste one uses, the clothes one wears, the food one eats, the conversations one is having, one's internal reactions, physical and psychological habits, perceptions, shifts in moods in relation to changing contexts and everyday encounters that provide the living experience directly from life. Our role as educators is to provide the right perspectives to make sense out of these contexts and use them as a means of learning.

Immersing in Auroville context

The programme takes place in the context of Auroville, an Integral Living Campus, where

1. There is no private property and yet there is individual freedom,
2. Education is not synonymous with degrees but all aspects of life, from birth to death,
3. Individuals are not following social norms, but courageously following their swadharma,
4. There is care for social welfare and environment more than fulfilment of one's desires,
5. And lastly, all aspects of human beings are given importance - not just the mind.

The context of Auroville pushes the boundaries of the conventional mindset, challenges it, and helps establish a new perspective. It naturally begins to reorganize the perceptions and values of the students. Life itself is the curriculum. And the beautiful part is that it touches different students in completely different ways, depending upon their inner call and that's one of the key threads we work with.

Individualised

With the programme much in demand, often we are asked why take only 15-20 students? Is that not being exclusive?

There is a reason behind the number 15, it is not arbitrary. One of the central components of the programme is the individual attention given to each student: whether through regular individual interactions with the facilitators, through individual feedback sessions or through individual interviews with Aurovilians where students explore potential lines of external work in alignment with their inmost truth and its guidance. The most important of these components is the individual interactions between the facilitators. They become spaces for deep conversations to happen in a safe space and leads to insights and a mental or emotional release.

The Soul of the Programme

Soul values, soul forces and ikigai form the soul of Swadharma.

Soul Values

Values can be defined as broad references guiding appropriate courses of our action. Values are:

1. Culturally inherited (external source, **social values**) or
2. Developed from within (internal source, **soul values**)

The process of becoming a true individual involves consciously shifting from social values to soul values. Soul values are universal. Peace, Beauty, Truth, Goodness and Freedom are some examples of soul values.

How do we identify our soul values?

We find soul values by identifying the trails of inspiration. Each student distills out the values by studying the people and organisations who s/he is inspired by. Following the principle of mirroring, what each student sees in inspiring others is a part of themselves. What one deeply resonates with is one's own in-most qualities. Through this process, each student's own unique values mandala emerges and this value mandala becomes an important reference point for one's choices in life.

Soul forces

When we stand up for our values, our inner strength awakens and radiates as soul-force.

Soul forces are universal powers and different cultures have expressed them differently as archetypes. However, across all cultures, there are four fundamental soul-forces which have been identified. As we call them, these are Wisdom, Strength, Harmony and Perfection.

Depending upon the primary faculty of consciousness through which this force naturally acts, our way of engaging with the world varies. When the soul force flows through the mind, it expresses as wisdom. When it is through the faculty of will, it expresses as power and strength. When it is through vitality, it expresses as harmony and mutuality. And lastly, when it is through the body, it expresses as perfection and service.

The soul force is independent of the field of work, yet it is the key to finding out how you engage in your field of work. Thus, it is the bridge between the soul values and the ikigai. It is through theater, reflective dialogue, questionnaire and mapping that each student finds out their primary soul force.

Ikigai

Ikigai is the Japanese word for 'the reason for getting up in the morning'. Ikigai is a simple and well-known framework which helps identify where one's true calling lies. It is at the intersection of what one loves, what one's skills are, what the world needs and what one can get paid for. The sweet spot between these four is Ikigai. After identifying one's soul values and soul forces, the students identify ikigai through a rigorous inventory of the aforementioned four aspects & through identifying convergence.

Flow of the Programme

While self, society and environment are the three broad domains of study, they are not separated into subjects in isolation. Learning activities are designed in such a way that they are meant to bring out the interconnection between the three domains. Besides the domains, the learning process actively engages all parts of the being. Structured part of the programme starts at 6.30 in the morning and ends at 6.30 in the evening. Yoga, ATB and Silent Barefoot Walk happens first in the morning as a preparation for the day. More intellectually stimulating and demanding sessions takes place between 9 to 12 in the morning and afternoons are generally for site visits or more active forms of learning. After five we have sharing circles or sports such as frisbee. Evening timings are also used for one to one personal guidance.

Overall in general there are broadly 5 stages to the learning journey.

- Stage One: Inward gaze to discover oneself
- Stage Two: Exploring social and environmental innovations
- Stage Three: Encounters with elders on the path
- Stage Four: Prototyping with one's dream project
- Stage Five: Self-directed life-long journey

The Impact of Swadharma

To more than 100+ youth, Swadharma has given a life-changing turn to their careers and lives, in a way that they begin serving the society and the environment, living consciously and charting previously unthought-of careers, all the while being rooted in deeper values. In this report, we present four case studies.

Case Studies

The case of Sushmitha: Pursuing a career that is yet to emerge



Sushmitha took a gap year from her engineering studies because she felt the conventional system of education was not doing a great job of nurturing her creative intelligence. That's

when she found out about Swadharma. The programme provided her

with both structured mentorship & tools to craft her own self-directed learning journey.

For the first time in years, she re-discovered her sense of 'flow' through yoga, which gave her inner peace and meaning to life. "It just felt so familiar to lose myself within the practice; almost like a reflection of a self from a past life, expressing itself faithfully through spontaneous movement," she says.

Through Swadharma, she realised (in her own words) - "**I don't want to be the jack of all trades or the master of one, I'd like to be at the intersection of multiple realms and discover my own path. I want to harness the mind, body and spirit in equal measure and pursue a career that is perhaps yet to emerge.**"

After Swadharma, Sushmitha **began to make the most out of her daily life schedule.** She began leveraging technology to redesign her life in such a manner that her daily routine contained only those habits, interests and ways of living that were in line with her inherent strengths. In terms of studies, she began **concurrently studies of two seemingly incongruous subjects:** Philosophy & Cognitive Computing, which, she feels, work synergistically to prepare her for the future. In parallel, her philosophical training in Vedanta gives her a deep insight into human nature and complements her critical thinking skills honed through a degree in western philosophy.



Further, she founded **Ashtanga Cycles**. Her foray into community service began when she volunteered at Payir Trust (an NGO), where she piloted her innovation 'Ashtanga cycles' (AsCy) and created unique work cycles for the children to achieve self-discipline. Initially born out of a need to train her own brain to focus, AsCy breaks away from the notion of having to work only at a desk and instead interleaves yoga techniques and music into study sessions. Over the coming years, she hopes to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into AsCy for different learning styles, age groups, and demographics. In 2019, she offered women's wellness workshops that combine a mix of self-defense, strength-training and digital-literacy to teachers of Assefa schools at Cuddalore.

Post Swadharma, she also **crafted the Introspective Movement**.

The 'Introspective Movement' workshops introduce the latest tools in emotional intelligence, across major cities in India and Tanzania.

These hybrid sessions increase the flexibility of both physical muscles and mental mindsets, and aim to transform the whole personality.

Lately, she created the first-ever mindfulness and yoga intervention for pre-schools kids in East Africa. She volunteered at Yoga For Wellness Africa, where she executed 'train the trainer' programs at Malaika Kids Orphanage and Women's Hope Rehabilitation Center. For Mindfulness week, she introduced 600+ students in multiple groups to yoga & mindfulness.



These are only a few of Sushmitha's extraordinary pursuits post-Swadharna. The contribution of Swadharna to Sushmitha Shrikanth's journey has been to help her harness mind, body, and intellect to creatively design solutions for the future. Her larger vision is to spark a revolution in education by tailoring Ashtanga Cycles suited to the individual to foster holistic learning.

The Case of Mohit: From following social norms to working for social cause



"I think the fundamental shift in my life was that I freed myself from the boundaries of 'how life should be lived. I had been trying to fit myself into a box whose shape I didn't relate to but all I knew about that was that everyone was trying to fit into it so it must be the right thing to do. However, Swadharna gave me an opportunity to not try and fit myself into that same old box and work on building a container that's customised for me by me. Now I find strength in living

life in ways I've always wanted to rather than following an aimless crowd.", says Mohit

After doing Swadharma in Aug 2017, Mohit has been creating video content for social organisations. In this process, he has had the opportunity to work with around 10-15 grassroots NGOs across rural India. His aim has been to utilise the social media as a platform to enable these organisations to amplify their reach and impact, especially through the medium of videos. These videos have helped the NGOs to raise funds, showcase their work at international conferences, attract volunteers and ultimately, create a larger impact in their area of work which has ranged from sustainable menstrual health to tribal nutrition in the Nilgiris.

Some of his projects include:

1. [The Real Elephant Collective](#): Aane Kaapi which translates into 'coffee from where elephants roam', seeks to promote coexistence between humans and elephants by informing viewers about the shared spaces that exist on plantations.
2. [Keystone](#): This long-format video supplements the rural health work module to encourage tribals in the Nilgiris to switch to a traditional diet.
3. Mohit's documentary on the life of [an international female football player who lives on the streets of Chennai](#) has been selected for the MyHero Film Festival in the US for the people's choice award.

The Case of Utsav: From Business-as-usual to sustainable business

"The biggest shift was the understanding that technology is merely a tool. It's not an end goal." - Utsav



Much of the food in the cities is harmful to the body and the planet. Yet there are only a few hobbyists who grow food by themselves in the cities but most of the urban population is away from farming and food. Realising this, Utsav founded U-Farm, an organisation that

enables city dwellers to do urban farming and eat fresh vegetables. The larger goal of U-Farm is to have distributed farms throughout the city be it indoor, on rooftops or inside homes and grow food with the aid of technology and people.

If you had met Utsav a day before he began his Swadharna journey, you would have never predicted that one year down the line, he would birth U-Farm. He came from a Gujarati family and an engineering background, and he loved to talk about money and using technology. However, coming to Swadharna he realised that both money and technology are only tools. Cycling through the pathways of Auroville forest, he began to connect with nature and realised that he wants to give his life to serve nature.

“My relationship with nature and food changed in the few months I was in Auroville. Although, it was not apparent at the time. It became clearer when I moved back to the city and saw a stark difference. This led me to start growing food on window and rooftop and I have not looked back since.”



Today U-Farm grows microgreens for hotels, cutting down on the carbon footprint of getting these exotic vegetables from longer distances, manages a small farm of 600 sq. ft. for an NGO which provides the harvest to an orphanage, and is beginning to sell small kits for indoors which makes it ultra simple to grow greens for households.

You can read more about U-Farm's work [here](#).

Ishan: From a Financial Trader to an Ecologist



Before coming to Swadharma, Ishan was working at a proprietary trading firm named Futures First where he traded financial instruments like fixed income interest rates on international exchanges in Brazil and Canada. His work at Futures First allowed him to learn a lot about himself, develop his soft skills to complement his working skills, and understand how professional environments work. He truly hadn't ever felt inclined to a role in the finance industry but landed in one as his education and skills suited the role, but after

having lived the corporate life for a little over 2 years, he decided to venture out to spaces that connected with his heart.

When he left the comfort and safety of a settled job in late 2016, the idea was to explore and dive into his passions while also making oneself uncomfortable if need be. This led him to join the Swadharma programme. This was his gateway into understanding, reflecting and realising a lot of unlocked potential within him. The inner journey through the 5 weeks of the programme helped him to see different perspectives about himself and the environment around, while also giving him the courage to stay with these thoughts and intentions with purpose. Ishan also chose to live in Auroville after the programme.

“Personally, I felt like a continued immersion into such a conducive environment for growth while honing my skills would be the way to go, and so I lived in Auroville for 11 months. **At the core, it helped me realise the connectedness between the inner-outer worlds, and how harmony within allows for greater work to flourish out/externally. I see my current work as an ecologist as an extension of the same.** We need to restore love and respect for the gift of life and this planet that we have. It is my commitment to work towards solving this using the space of environment conservation as my canvas.”, says Ishan.

After living in Auroville for 11 months, he has been part of a holistic waste management company based in Bangalore (saahaszerowaste.com), where he has had a chance to develop end-to-end value chains (segregation at source to managing onsite to transporting to recycling/biogas with partners) for Bulk waste Generators (BGs) to ensure maximum resource recovery from waste. There has been a huge underlying element of social and environmental impact; he managed about 45 ground staff who were given dignified livelihoods while working with them, and at the same time managed through his portfolio about 10 Tonnes of waste per day

diverting it away from landfills or unauthorized dumping sites. Outside of his regular work, he has been nurturing a climate movement (extinctionrebellion.in) in India that aims at bringing the existential threat of the climate crisis into mainstream conversation and then necessitating action through systemic interventions, thus has great societal impact on the horizon.

Another way of capturing the changes post Swadharma is capture them as shifts at an individual, scale and systemic level. Below we articulate them.

Shifts at an Individual Level

The five key shifts are:

Ego to soul

The journey of Swadharma is a journey from caterpillar to the butterfly. The students come closer to their essence and begin to blossom.

Limited to unlimited possibilities

Swadharma opens up whole new possibilities in terms of career for the highly skilled youth it attracts, for they encounter individuals living unimaginable careers in Auroville. Auroville has an archeologist architect, a farmer musician running a cafe with locally grown vegetables, a dancer author activist, an entrepreneur yogi, what not! Many youth who come learn to combine their passions in new ways and discover new ways of contributing towards social development.

Knowledge to action

Another key shift that Swadharma facilitates involves the shift from being in one's mind, in the world of ideas, to coming in action. They

begin to realise simple theory is not enough, one has to walk the path to embody change.

Changing life's trajectory

One of the most significant changes that happen post Swadharma is a radical change in the trajectory of one's life's work in a way that is socially just, environmentally sustainable, and rebuilding spiritual connections, as we saw with the aforementioned case studies.

Individual to community

The student comes alone but leaves with a tribe. Students find a home to come back to.

Shifts at Scale

It is not through a large-scale social intervention that Swadharma impacts the community. Instead, it creates the shift by creating leaders who are empowered to create an integral shift deeply as well as in the community-at-large. It does not work for the under-privileged directly, but transforms the students to live truly meaningful lives, which for many of them is to give themselves to serve the under-privileged. For instance, Sarvath Khan, one of our students post-Swadharma started [Maatiyose](#) which conducts practical workshops with innovative exhibits to bring out creativity and innovation for 5000+ children.

Even those who come to volunteer for Swadharma are deeply transformed by the field it creates; one of our volunteers, Vipul, was inspired by the "values, soul forces and ikigai" sessions and took these to his native village, helping the youth discover (as he puts it) "the unique role each one may be called to play in making this world a more beautiful, joyful, kinder and a greener place for all to live in."



Vipul, a Swadharma volunteer, bringing change in his village

Systemic Shift

When the nature of individual and social fields begin to shift, it causes a systemic change. When individuals are no longer working for degrees, titles and positions, but for service and love for humanity, when education is given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts, when money is no longer the sovereign lord, work is not a way to earn one's living but live one's true calling, when relationships are based on collaboration and real brotherhood...something begins to shift.

This something is the systemic shift that happens when the deep culture, even if of a small group of people, begins to qualitatively shift. It is like the 100 monkey effect, wherein when 100 monkeys learn a new phenomena and begin to embody it fully, they do not need to teach it to the rest of the monkeys in the world for it naturally begins to spread (Frazier, 1991). Similarly, once a critical number of humans begin to passionately live their Swadharmas from their truest core, something usually unknown to mankind, then this new behaviour or idea begins to spread to all.

Challenges

Lack of Understanding

We had to deal with many popular stereotypical notions that stood on the way of making people understand what we are upto.

First, the mainstream notions of finding one's true self imagines the quest by withdrawing from life, by retreating into some mountains or retreat centres where you meditate for hours in search of enlightenment. Second, it is seen as entirely a personal and individual journey which has nothing to do with social welfare. One is seeking one's individual salvation or liberation.

An active process of inner development and self-discovery, that too a process that propels you to engage with social issues from much deeper and harmonious space is still a new concept that is slowly making inroads.

Building a Team of Facilitators With a Coherent Approach

Since the educational programme demanded a deep insight into human psyche and there are many models and theories of psychological development it was difficult to build team with a coherent approach. Especially in the context of Auroville where people with all perspectives and cultural backgrounds come together in a non hierarchical work culture, it took two years of work to get the programme launched. It took a couple of years to chisel out our approach and processes with greater clarity and cohesion.

Finding the Right Students

This programme clearly is not for any young person, it is only for those who are psychologically ready for an accelerated process of

individualisation. This demands us to very carefully filter the applicants to find those who have that inner spark and can be kindled for a new adventure through our process. The inner changes are so transformational, we have to ensure that students whom we select are of good psychological health and has capacity to go through very demanding processes. Besides, the students who come are at different stages of their inner development. Some are just ready to move from collective ego to become an individual ego but others are ready to go beyond the individual ego to a truer and deeper self. Since the age group we work with is between 18 to 30, we get a wide range of youth and creating a common learning experience for them is often very challenging.

Affordability

We do not have any financial support from any government grants or other forms of financial support. We only have provision for two scholarships, which makes it not easily affordable to all youth, especially those who are not from financially privileged background. This is even more challenging especially after the programme when the students wants to intern in Auroville or chart their own path of self-directed learning journey that involves a great deal of trial and error.

Energetically and Emotionally Very Demanding

Since we are taking a group through an intense process of inner transformation in a very short time with highly individualised learning journey it is very demanding on the faculty members both energetically and emotionally. This also makes it difficult for us to conduct the programme too frequently. We do this only twice a year.

Scale of Operation and Impact

Since we take only 15 students per batch and only two batches per year, our scale of operation is small. Besides, it takes one to two year for the learner to get a deeper footing and establish on a path of active service to the society. Results or social impact of our programme is a secondary byproduct and hence not directly measurable. So far we have completed 7 batches and students are still establishing themselves, it is hard to track the social impact in an objective manner.

Lack of Parental and Social Support

A major challenge for the students who go through the programme is re-engage with their parents, family and friends from a new perspective. They are no more seeking a career in conventional way but instead something that is deeply meaningful and fulfilling to their life's journey. It is often challenging for them to convince their parents and friends that they are doing something meaningful, especially when they are still in the process of getting established in their new depth of being and still in the process of sourcing their authentic power.

Learnings

Overall sense towards the Swadharma programme is that of profound gratitude for both the facilitators and the participants. Vast opportunities have opened up as we have a successful programme running. It has put us on the map of global alternate education leading to various meaningful exchanges and sharing with other members of the organizations active in reimagining education. It is clear that we are on the right path.

At the end of every week, we collect feedback from the students about the week gone by. Even though the programme has become fairly stable now after 7 occurrences, we believe it's never a finished product. We acted on a lot of the feedback we received from our previous participants to improve the programme, together we are co-creating a better programme. Our approach is both inside-out and outside-in, we bring in what inspires us and we believe can work, test it out, and act on the feedback it generates.

Strengthening the alumni network thereby creating a powerful unique support system of self-aware individuals is clearly a need to provide more active post programme support.

There is enormous potential in Auroville for transformational learning and over the last 51 years, Auroville has established an incredibly wide range of activities that can provide a rich diversity of learning opportunities for people. Swadharma programme has given us a taste of what is possible and the field is potent and ready setting in motion a new type of higher education.

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