



Dasa Avathar

Lord Vishnu took ten incarnations to fulfill various purposes. The common underlying theme is of course “parithranaya sadhunam, vinasaya cha dush krutham” – i.e., punish the evil and protect the good. But there is more to these avatars and the sequence and purpose of these avatars that parallel the evolution of mankind in general and of an organization in particular. We will first look at how the sequence of Dasa Avatar bears a remarkable parallel to the evolution of life on earth and then look at the traits of each of these avatars that give us insights into the various activities an organization should undertake at the different stages of evolution.

Dasa Avatar and Evolution of Life

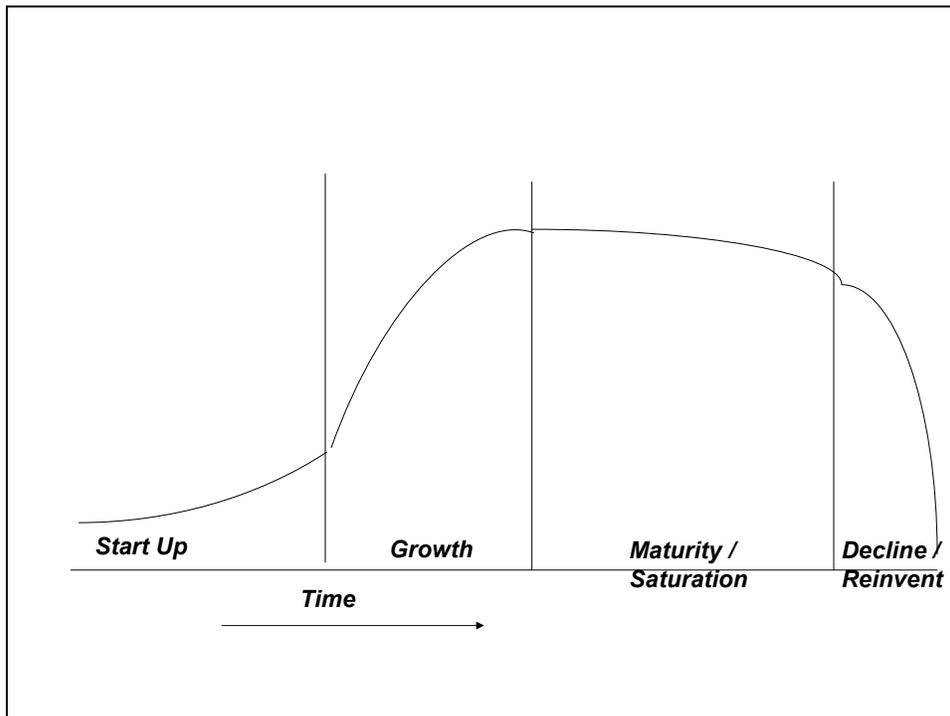
The first avatar is Matsya (Fish). This is an aquatic creature. Evolution of life shows that aquatic creatures were the first forms of life. It is indeed appropriate that the first avatar is aquatic. The next avatar is Koorma (Turtle). This is an amphibian. The transition to land has started to take place! The next avatar is Varaha or wild boar. This is a wild animal which can also go into water -- the next stage in the evolution of life. This is followed by Narasimha, half-lion, half-man. This is the first transition from animal form to human form. The evolution progresses from walking on all fours to walking just on two legs and the anatomy slowly starts to resemble a human as we see today. The next avatar is Vamana, a young boy. This is the first progression to a full-fledged human form, albeit small in size. The next two Avatars are Parasurama and Rama. These represent further growth in the human form, both in size and mindset. Both Parasurama and Rama are adult, full-grown human forms. Parasurama represents an angry human, while Rama evolves into a perfect human being, calm, composed, fair and just. This is followed by Krishna who enhances the perfection into well oiled strategy. The age of a thinking man, working in a society of cunning plotters, where dishonesty is selfishness are starting to rule the roost has started. Of course, as we progress through the 21st Century, we will see more deterioration of values, Kalki the final avatar envisions this total deterioration of values and epitomizes the present age of evolution.



Dasa Avatar and the Stages of Evolution of an Organization

The above parallel between evolution of human life and the Dasa Avatar has been explained in literature before. But, what is even more striking is how Dasa Avatar symbolizes how an organization evolves with time and in what sequence should an organization evolve.

Any organization goes through four phases of evolution: The first phase is the **Start-up phase**, in the early days. During this time, the organization sows the seeds of success by identifying its distinct product or service and set up the basic infrastructure for it to be a going concern, its launching pad for the years to come. The second phase is the **Growth phase**, during which the organization grows rapidly and becomes a force to reckon with in the space in which it plays. During the third phase, the **Maturity / Saturation phase**, the organization assumes a leadership position and starts to plateau out because of internal inefficiencies and emerging competition. The final phase is the **Decline / Reinvent phase** during which the organization or the product becomes meaningless in its current form and has to be discarded. At this stage, an unsuccessful organization dies a quiet death; a successful one reinvents itself and its product to satisfy the changed scenario are starts all over again at the start-up phase. The sequence of the Dasa Avatars and the specific tasks and achievements in each of the avatars bear a remarkable parallel to the above evolution of an organization. The various avatars fall into each of these phases in sequence, as we will see below.





A. Start-up Phase Avatars:

Matsya Avatar

Matsya Avatar is the first of the Dasa Avatars. During this Avatar, one of the main functions God achieves is to rescue the world from chaos (Pralaya) and restore Vedas. Vedas form the source of all knowledge. According to our epics, the Matsya Avatar was a small fish that was caught by a sage in his kamandala and in no time it filled up all the available water bodies on the planet. The giant Matsya then comes back to rescue the world from Pralaya, chases down a monster called Hayagreeva who has hidden the source of all knowledge – the Vedas – and brings the Vedas to the forefront so that the world can benefit from the use of this eternal knowledge.

This Avatar bears a remarkable parallel to the early days of a start-up organization. Mercurial founders of an organization go through a period of chaos (like the Pralaya), trying out various things, not being fully satisfied with what they have till they hit the bulls eye and identify their **core competencies**. They almost always start an organization in a chaotic way, with the aim of building upon their core competence or knowledge. Once the desire to identify and nurture this core competence is ignited, it grows like wild fire much like Matsya grew from a tiny fish to an all encompassing creature. This discovery of core competence lights the fire in the belly for the organization and eventually culminates in its flagship product or service.

By starting from chaos and first restoring Vedas, the source of all knowledge in his very first Avatar, God has shown that an organization should start with identifying, preserving and growing its knowledge, in its area of core competence. Those organizations which are successful are those that have put this initial focus on acquiring and building upon this knowledge and thereafter continuing to nurture and build upon this knowledge. In contrast, the scores of organizations that have failed ignore to identify their core competence and knowledge upfront and simply try to imitate the more successful organizations and as a result fail miserably.

This quest for knowledge as the first step is not only illustrated by the first Avatar. It is also not a coincidence that the very first couplet in Thirukural also says “*Agara Muthala Ezhuthellam Adhi Bhagavan Muthatre Ulagu*”. i.e., God is the source of all knowledge. Thus, the importance of knowledge or identification of core competence as the first step in any organization is amply brought out by not only the first Avatar, Matsya Avatar, but also by Thirukural!



Koorma Avatar

Once an organization or its founder identifies the core competencies on which to build the organization, the next step is to set up the **infrastructure** required to make the organization long lasting or immortal. This is precisely the purpose behind the Koorma Avatar. This Avatar is not so much talked about nor are there a large number of temples for this avatar, but this avatar brings about some of the best principles in organization building during the start-up days. First of all, we need to mobilize all the resources of the organization to start creating the Immortal Organization. And the major burden of this mobilizing has to be borne by the founder himself. That is why, God as the Koorma Avatar was the Rock of Gibraltar supporting the entire churning of the ocean. It was He who leveraged the Serpant Vasuki and made the various members of the organization – Devas and Asuras – to do the churning for Immortality. Even the roles played by Devas and Asuras shows a lot of parallel to an evolving organization. In any start-up venture, there will always be a lot of thankless, grunt (“s---”) jobs and some “cool” jobs. There will be lot of people who will clamor for doing all the cool jobs while there is likely to be absolutely no takers for the grunt jobs. Unfortunately, the organization will not be successful unless the grunt jobs are also complete! The Devas and Asuras represent two classes of typical stakeholders. Devas are the ones who will do what it takes without complaint or grumbling. Asuras are the ones who only want to do the “cool stuff”, reap all the benefits but will not do the grunt work. A question came up during the churning as to who should be on the head side of Vasuki and who should be on the tail side of Vasuki. The Asuras said “we don’t want to be on the tail side because it is where the snake does all the excretion!” So, they took the head side. Devas, on the other hand, did whatever was required and did not mind taking any side, did not mind doing anything it takes for the churning to be successful and took the tail side not minding the negatives. In fact, while opting to be on the head side thinking it was “cool” proved disastrous for the Asuras in that they had to bear the brunt of Vasuki’s poisonous emissions from the mouth! This is what happens to those who think they are playing it safe in an organization – they end up facing more problems later on.

While the objective of the churning was to find the key to immortality (Amrita), there were several useful by-products that came up. This again is typical of an organization’s early days: You will find a lot of new – and very useful – things that come up. It is important to use these by-products effectively but not get distracted by them. You should continue to carry out the search for the immortality (and your “biggie” product or “killer app”).

Even the sequence of the by-products that came about has a bearing on the type of resources that are needed for an organization in the early days: First came objects of pleasure like Ramba the beautiful damsel and Sura the Goddess of intoxicating wine. The stakeholders were not tempted by these pleasurable objects but kept churning. Next came Airavatha, the elephant and Unchairavas, the horse. These are two means of transport. You need to do a lot of “leg work” in the early days of an organization and hence it is indeed fitting that you get means of transportation. Also, fittingly, these were given to the Devas who were prepared to do any leg work! Then came Goddess Lakshmi – the symbolism of money and wealth. Obviously an organization needs capital and the world’s first ever Venture Capitalist came out in the form of Goddess Lakshmi! Obviously the founder (God himself) took Lakshmi! Then after all this came Amruta, the actual product they were looking for, the nectar of immortality. Now, the asuras wanted an unfair share of this nectar without doing all their duties correctly. Aptly enough, God punished the erring Rahu and Ketu.

Koorma Avatar brings home a lot of interesting lessons for an organization in its start-up phase:

- the need to engage everyone;
- the need for the CEO to lead from front;
- the realization that not everyone will do all the work;
- the focus needed on the final product and the effective use of by-products;



- and of course the undeniable importance of capital during an organization's life, especially its early days.

Varaha Avatar

In Varaha Avatar, God rescues the Earth from the clutches of an Asura who has hidden Earth under the ocean. This Avatar symbolizes acquiring real estate or an office space (symbolized by earth) for an organization. The organization is moving from the garage to a real office! The tough journey that even God had to undertake to get this prime real estate typifies the difficulties that a start-up would have at this stage. Furthermore, the Varaha Avatar is called Yagna Varaha. Yagna stands for serious work or sacrifice. God is telling a start-up organization that there would be a lot of sacrifice needed for the organization to prosper. In this Avatar, God also brings in environment-consciousness. The Yagna Varaha is worshipped as a conglomeration of herbs and plants. Perhaps God wants every organization, even in the early stages to be "green or environment" conscious!



B. Growth Phase Avatars

Narasimha and Vamana Avatars

Now we have an organization that is fledgling and ready to take on the giants! It has now entered the Growth phase. At this stage of evolution of the organization, other entrenched and established competitors tend to pooh-pooh (what they think is) a start-up. But the “start-up” generally changes the rules of the game and makes inroads into the pie of the more entrenched competitors. Two significant leverage points that a small and nimble start-up will have over its established competitors are **speed** and **size**. Because it is less bureaucratic and there are less “boundaries” or divisions of work within the organization, a start-up can make very quick decisions and pounce upon the enemy with unexpected alacrity and speed. This is exactly what Narasimha Avatar demonstrated. God appeared in a jiffy and before the enemy could react and got the enemy killed, catching the enemy unawares and surprising him with sheer speed. Other than the lesson that a small upstart start-up can beat an entrenched enemy by sheer speed, Narasimha Avatar also offers a few more valuable lessons in organization building:

- When the enemy Hiranyakasipu was searching all over for God, God hid Himself in Hiranyakasipu’s heart itself! Most often, the success of a start-up in upstaging an apparently stronger competitor is to strike at some weak point way inside the entrenched competitors’ organization.
- The success of God over Hiranyakasipu was achieved to save Prahlada, Hiranyakasipu’s son. More often than not, a start-up will benefit from the knowledge gained from (who is apparently) an insider in the competitor’s organization.
- God took the form of Narasimha and ensured that He did not break any of the boons given to Hiranyakasipu. Hence, the need to keep up any legal or contractual commitments is amply borne out. The means are as important as the end itself!

If Narasimha achieved victory over the powerful enemy by leveraging speed and alacrity, Vamana Avatar achieved victory by employing another big asset of a start-up –**size**. Mahabali was a powerful asura who thought that nothing was beyond his reach. Consequently, he was bulldozing everyone who was coming his way. His true power was not only his indomitable strength but also his total commitment. The only way he could be conquered was to turn his assets into liabilities by catching him unawares, turning his confidence to over-confidence and making him commit to the impossible. Hence God appeared as a small sized Vamana. When Vamana asked for three steps of land measured on His own foot, Mahabali under-estimated the quantum of what was required grossly, just by looking at Vamana’s size. That is what entrenched competitors do: they think that the small sized competitors can simply be blown away. Often they don’t realize that an insect can enter where a lion cannot or in Indian traffic lingo, an auto rickshaw can maneuver into spaces that a truck cannot. What the entrenched competitors think is a disadvantage is indeed an advantage for the start-up. Mahabali’s rejection of advice by his Guru Sukra also brings about another lesson: During a crisis, a CEO should not ignore the advice of his “management team”.



C. Maturity / Saturation Phase Avatars

Parasurama

With the early inroads achieved with the unique surprise elements of speed and size, the organization has become a force to reckon with it. It now starts using power to expand its market share and quash the enemies and competition. That is exactly what Parasurama Avatar does. With a vow to completely annihilate the enemies – Kshatriyas – Parasurama acquired powerful weapons and destroyed 21 generations of Kshatriyas. At this stage, there was no need for subtleties; brute force replaces stealth; enemies are vanquished instilling fear in their minds. From pooh-poohing you, your enemies begin to respect, nay fear, you. The organization is now reaching the peak of the growth phase and is on its way to becoming a market leader. Hence this is the boundary between Growth Phase and Maturity / Saturation Phase.

Rama

Rama Avatar depicts the perfectly mature organization: There is perfect internal and external harmony: Rama Rajya depicts satisfied stakeholders; Growth continues unabated for centuries in Rama Avatar. Integrity and Corporate Governance are at the peak. Ethics in doing business is emphasized in as much as the results themselves. The CEO (Lord Rama) is above all blemish. What is more, I think the English proverb “Ceaser’s wife should be above suspicion” is actually derived from the Agni Pravesam Sita did and proving “Rama’s wife is above suspicion”! What this means is that in this stage of evolution of the organization, there is no room for personal favors. What is also interesting is that there is no back-biting for the top post! There were no constant “re-org”s that characterize an unstable or immature organization! Rama was always the king, when He was not physically present, He was the ruler by proxy. With no internal squabbles, the full focus was on governance and growth, with no deviation from ethics and values.

Rama Avatar also stresses the importance of honoring contracts and keeping up promises. Be it in the way Rama fulfilled his side of the “deal” and waited for Surgriva to keep up his side or be it when Rama did the last rites to Jatayu, or be it Dasaratha keeping his word to Kaikeyi or Rama not taking up the throne when Bharatha requested him to do so, the necessity to fulfill promises is amply borne out.

Another interesting aspect of a successful and mature organization that Rama Avatar brings about is that in such organizations, recognition cuts across hierarchies and levels. Rama recognized the boat man Guha and the ever faithful Vanara Hanuman as his brothers. (Kamba Ramayana quote to this effect – “*naalvarodu ivaranen, ivarodu aruvar anen*”). Such honor is not given to influential princes and kings!

Hanuman, is almost the second hero in Ramayana. Even though we are talking of Dasa Avatar, no discussion of Rama is complete without discussing the lessons we can draw from the great Hanuman. Just like Bhagavd Gita is an epic within an epic, so also, Hanuman is a lesson by himself. His humility, foresight, proactiveness, going the extra mile (literally!) and total commitment are all values that every member of a successful organization should emulate. In order to continue the flow in Dasa Avatar, I have a separate article on Hanuman, in which I have listed some of the many lessons we can draw from this great Chiranjeevi.



Krishna

Well, Rama Rajya – the state of ultimate bliss and perfection – does not last forever in an organization. Slowly but steadily, the power mongers in an organization start rising their ugly heads. Ethics start taking a back seat. This is exactly what happens in the environment under which Krishna Avatar takes place. There is no sense of regret for Kamsa to dethrone his own father; the Kauravas use every immoral and illegal means to usurp Pandavas of their rightful throne; “success at any cost” replaces the dictum “end does not justify the means”; backbiting and power grabbing become order of the day. Don't these symptoms look very similar to what prevails in an organization that has tasted success and does not really know how to “cope with” success?

The approach of Krishna has also adapted itself to tackle such an environment. A pure Rama approach where everyone plays fair would have simply failed. Hence God shows the additional traits needed for a CEO in this incarnation. First, the approach is one of “all is fair in love, war and organization building!” At several times, Krishna has used tactics that a purist may question: For example, why did He have to “con” Kunti to get those boons from Karna so that Arjuna can be saved? Why did He create an artificial sunset to kill the evil forces? Why did He take a Brahmin's form and did Yuddha Yachaka from Jarasandha? All these may be viewed as “cheating” but since the ultimate aim was “parithranaya sadhunam vinasaya cha dushkrutham ...”, He had to do what it takes to accomplish that end, even if it means taking some “short cuts”. Thus the CEO has to transform to be a strategist; the methods of fair play that characterize Rama would not necessarily apply in this kind of environment. This also brings about the need for flexibility of approach of the CEO to adapt to the changing environment.

A major role that a CEO plays is that of a mentor. Krishna is probably one of the best mentors that one can see! How many people has He guided from ignorance to bliss, from darkness to light, from a perishable state to the divinely immortal state – “Asatoma Sat Gamaya, Thamasoma Jyothir Gamaya, Mruthyorma Amrutham Gamaya”... Arjuna, Uddhava, Nalakoopa, Manigreeva, Akroora, ... the list is endless.

Krishna's Bhagavad Gita is an endless treasure house in management lessons and we can spend one full book on it! The gist of this is also in Uddhava Gita, wherein He articulates succinctly the traits of the three Gunas – Satva, Rajas and Tamas that are so relevant when you try to move up the management ladder in an organization.

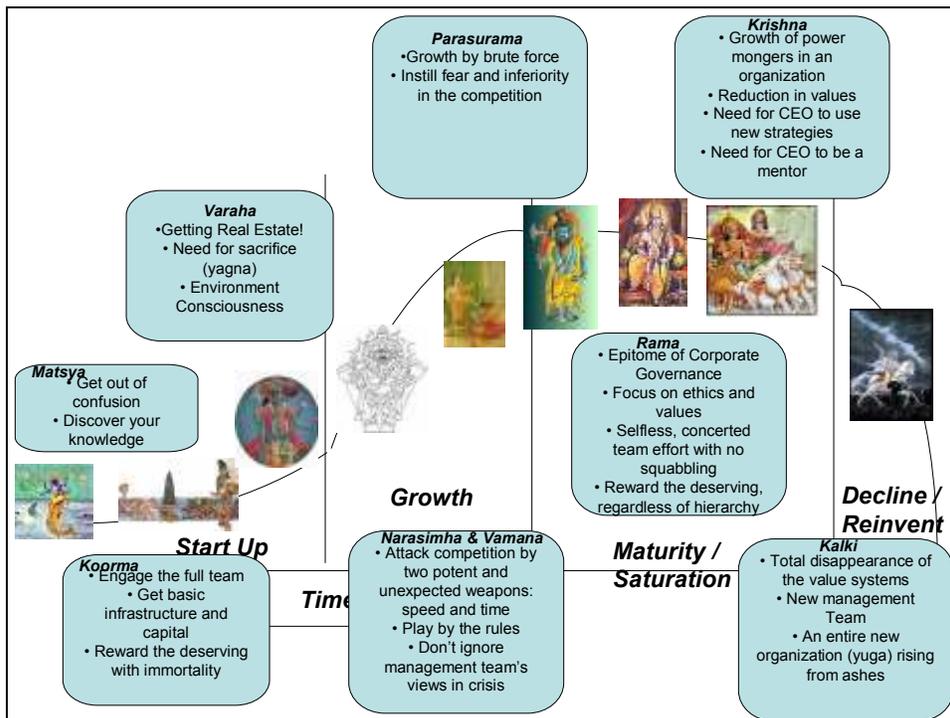
Perhaps one of the best lessons Krishna teaches through all his actions is that a CEO should be detached and should give a free hand to the team but stop them if and only if they are likely to fall off the cliff! Why else would He let Arjuna ask Him to take the chariot to “senaiyor upayor madhye...” (in between the armies) but when Arjuna is despondent, spur him back to action? No wonder Krishna is the true Aapath Bhandava – who rescues his devotees from danger! As Rajinikanth says in a movie “nallavargalai kadavul sodhippan, kai vida mattan”!

Finally, a strong CEO who is passionate about the long term success of the organization he has nurtured and built will not mind taking tough decisions. Krishna knew that his own Yadhu Dynasty was going to dogs and people were becoming dishonest and simply losing the value systems. He made sure that the Yadavas were completely destroyed before long, thereby ensuring a smooth transition to the Decline / Re-invent phase of Mankind.



D. Decline / Re-invent Phase Avatars

The erosion of values that a group starts snowballs into an organizational malaise – and perhaps an industry-wide malaise. Total annihilation of the organization is what is required. The organization needs to be re-born in a new age (yuga), severing all connections with the past. Perhaps a new COO is required – it is said the the “Manu” (presiding head) changes every Yuga. This phase characterizes the typical mass firings that happen in a dying organization! Make no mistake, a good CEO running a good organization will make sure that it will rise from the ashes just like a Phoenix! God is ready for the next set of creations!



A foot note: A purist may ask why I have left out Balarama Avatar and Dasa Avatar has become “Nava Avatar”! Frankly I could not fit Balarama into the curve! I honestly think that Krishna is such an overpowering avatar that Balarama’s deeds are not adequately narrated. Since there are not enough data points about Balarama, I chose not to include Him in this sequence. Let me be excused by purists in religion as well as purists in management!