

Arts Education: Responding to Changing Landscapes
A Southern Indian Conference
February 21-23, 2025, at the State Art Gallery in Hyderabad

Conference Report by Sanjana Rangan

The Southern Indian Conference titled **Arts Education: Responding to Changing Landscapes**, was held from February 21-23, 2025, at the State Art Gallery in Hyderabad, Telangana. Bringing together diverse stakeholders including educators, artists, policymakers, and cultural institutions, the conference was a platform to deliberate on the evolving landscape of arts education across southern India. Built on past regional discussions under the Kali Kalisu program, the conference addressed the themes of *sustainability of arts education, policy impacts, and the role of integrated arts education in shaping social and cultural landscapes*.

The diverse participants at this conference — teachers, artists, researchers and scholars, students, and Community-based practitioners — helped surface both the challenges and the possibilities of arts-based education. Each voice added nuance to the discussions, making the conference a space of mutual learning and inspiration. It is this diversity that made the conversations vibrant, relevant, and full of promise for the future.

With panel discussions, workshops for participants, teachers and students, exhibitions of IFA projects, performances, and spotlights showcasing the transformative power of arts education, the conference highlighted the impact of arts education in contributing to a more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable learning environment.

One Day 1, setting the tone for the conference, Menaka Rodriguez, Executive Director, of India Foundation for the Arts and TN Krishnamurthy, Senior Programme Officer for Arts Education described this conference as a platform for arts education, to learn, grow and contribute to meaningful deliberations – becoming the voices for change.

The Keynote: Dr KN Ganeshaiah*

“It set the context for many panellists to connect nature and science to art”. Dr Ganeshaiah’s compelling call to rethink the rigid boundaries between arts and science in education emphasised the intrinsic connections between science and the arts and addressed how we could transcend disciplinary barriers to foster a mutualistic relationship between the two fields. To adapt to the ‘tremors’ in the changing education landscape, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between arts and science. He highlighted the interdisciplinary brilliance of Leonardo da Vinci and Dr BGL Swami, underscoring how scientific inquiry and artistic expression share the same fundamental goal—to understand and interpret the world. His address questioned whether we could transcend these linguistic and disciplinary barriers and instead foster a relationship between the two fields.

* INSA Scientist, Bangalore, Karnataka

He highlighted how art and science complement each other, fostering creativity, critical thinking, and deeper inquiry. As a way forward, he proposed the need for new models of teaching that integrate scientific enquiry and artistic expression, and advocated for a curricular shift towards mutualism, encouraging interdisciplinary exploration and creative problem-solving. His keynote laid a compelling foundation for the conference's broader discussions on integrating nature and science with arts education. Dr Ganeshaiah's perspective is not only timely but also crucial in reshaping contemporary education. In an era where problem-solving and creativity are equally valued, clinging to outdated arts versus science divide limits the potential of learners and educators alike.

The **panel discussions** focused on three key themes: sustainability of arts education, policies impacting arts education, and the role of integrated arts education in society. Each session featured a presentation followed by moderated discussions. With diverse projects, contributions and perspectives, these panels opened dialogues on the challenges, innovations, collaborative thinking, actionable strategies and future possibilities in arts education.

Panel 1: Arts Education and its Sustainability: Demands of the 21st Century

Panellists: Shivananda Hombal, Gayatri Nair, Lina Vincent, R Srinivasan

Moderator: Sameen Almas

The panel explored the relevance of arts education in a rapidly changing world shaped by technological, economic, and cultural shifts. It examined current challenges, emerging opportunities, and innovative approaches to ensure arts education remains impactful and adaptable.

Shivananda Homabal¹ emphasised that language education is not just about enabling communication. Advocating for an artistic approach to teaching, he stressed that education itself is an art, requiring creativity and emotional connection to be truly effective. He shared some best practices from his experiments in language education, notably integrating plays and songs to make Kannada learning engaging and relevant to students. A crucial aspect of his approach was the role of teachers in fostering deeper connections with the subject. Frequent changes in teachers disrupt learning and engagement, whereas consistent mentorship helps build trust and deeper connections with the subject. Addressing the dearth of available resources for learning, through Dhvani, he has developed teaching and learning materials in Kannada and social sciences and has trained educators. His presentation underscored the idea that teachers are not just instructors but facilitators of creative exploration, making language education a truly transformative experience.

Gayatri Nair² highlighted the importance of visual thinking in education, emphasising that students need to develop the skills to observe, analyse, and engage critically with their surroundings. She discussed how bringing rich visual resources into the classroom enables students to see beyond the obvious, understand multiple perspectives, and engage in meaningful discussions. Drawing from art mediation tools used in the Chennai Photo

¹ Dhvani Trust, Dharwad, Karnataka

² CPB Prism, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Biennale, she demonstrated how encouraging visual literacy through interactive and creative approaches can transform learning experiences. She stressed that teacher resources must also be engaging, attractive, and designed to stimulate curiosity. By integrating art-based pedagogical tools—such as those from the *What Makes Me Click* project—education can become a more immersive and thought-provoking experience. Her insights reinforced the idea that teaching students how to ‘see’ is just as important as teaching them what to see.

Drawing from a decade of experimentation in the arts, **Lina Vincent**³ emphasised the need for mentorship programs beyond institutional frameworks, advocating for consistent feedback and open platforms for interdisciplinary learning and reflective practice. She acknowledged that not all artists are inherently good teachers, underscoring the need for training, continuous reflection, and pedagogical refinement to enhance their impact. Addressing the financial and sustainability challenges in arts education, she asserted that funding is critical in determining what is taught and how it is implemented. Working both within and outside institutions, she champions sustainable learning models, Lina, in a powerful statement, captured the essence of sustainability in education: “If something that I am able to pass on is being used, that is sustainability.”

R. Srinivasan⁴ addressed the complexities of developing an arts education policy at the state level (Tamil Nadu), emphasising the challenges posed by the vast diversity of existing educational programs and the need to balance scale with the experiential nature of learning. He noted the tension between individual artistic expression and the necessity for standardisation in policy development. Highlighting the peripheral mention of arts education in NEP 2020, he pointed out that this reflects the ongoing lack of a structured, comprehensive policy for the subject. Srinivasan raised a critical question about whether art should be considered pedagogy to enhance learning across subjects or treated as an independent subject within the curriculum, a decision that would significantly shape its integration and assessment. He also stressed the need for teacher certification and professional development in integrating arts into education. Additionally, Srinivasan highlighted the high financial costs of arts education—materials, dedicated spaces, and maintenance—and the lack of large-scale research on its impact, which hinders its policy influence. While the government lacks a formal policy, it does support arts education programs, pointing to alternative models for state involvement.

The first panel explored the evolving relevance of arts education in a world shaped by rapid technological, cultural, and economic change. The moderator, **Sameen Almas**⁵, reflected on the challenges and opportunities facing the field, with a focus on how arts education can remain contextual, accessible, and impactful. Discussions brought out the need for resource development that resonates with diverse educational contexts—whether through localised language-learning materials, visual thinking frameworks, or open-ended mentorship models. Participants emphasised that scaling arts education should not come at the cost of regional and cultural specificity.

³ Art Writer, Goa

⁴ Member, Planning Commission, Tamil Nadu

⁵ Nalandaway Foundation, New Delhi

The panel acknowledged the growing significance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, advocating for innovative teaching roles that merge artistic skill with pedagogical intent. Presentations highlighted that arts education is not just about developing subject-specific skills, but about transforming the ways students learn across subjects—encouraging creativity, observation, and reflection.

There was also a focus on systemic gaps: the absence of strong policy direction, the need for teacher training and certification in the arts, and the financial challenges that schools and institutions face in sustaining arts-based programs. Yet, amidst these challenges, the panel affirmed that arts education continues to thrive through the efforts of educators, artists, and institutions that are reimagining its purpose and impact for this century.

Panel 2: Enhancing Arts Education beyond the Curriculum

Panellists: Revathi R, Vanavil, Blaise Joseph, Ananth Maringanti, Abhisheka Krishnagopal
Moderator: Padma Reddy

Recognising the vast potential of co-curricular activities, community engagement, and innovative teaching methods, the panel aimed to explore strategies that can expand the reach and impact of arts education. The panellists delved into how arts can be seamlessly incorporated into broader educational practices, enhancing student engagement, creativity, and critical thinking.

Blaise Joseph⁶ advocated for arts as an alternative curriculum, emphasising that creative expression is a fundamental right of every child. His statement, *“Children are by nature collaborative, not competitive”* was echoed verbatim by other participants and panellists. Art will help us navigate the insanity that is our reality. We need to nurture environments where children feel safe to explore, express, and create, emphasising art as a powerful tool for learning and self-discovery. The many experiences and projects in his presentation illustrated the transformative power of art in bringing the community together as an integral part of the learning ecosystem and creating a more holistic, sustainable, and empowering educational experience for children. He also briefly touched upon the impermanent nature of these arts education programs and their outcomes.

Ananth Maringanti⁷ critiqued the rigid epistemic boundaries imposed by disciplines, arguing that these structures establish core fundamental beliefs that restrict creative exploration. He emphasised the role of the arts as a vital force of disruption, enabling individuals to pause, challenge, and introspect. Rather than being confined to project-based or time-bound initiatives, which can limit the depth of artistic engagement and research, arts should be seen as an ongoing practice that fosters critical reflection and open-ended inquiry. He highlighted how artistic practices allow for the breaking away from traditional frameworks. By resisting disciplinary constraints, the arts create new possibilities for

⁶ Arts Educator, Kerala

⁷ Multidisciplinary Researcher, Hyderabad, Telangana

engagement and understanding, urging educators and practitioners to rethink how knowledge is constructed and shared.

Abhisheka Krishnagopal⁸ emphasised the need to rethink methodologies for nature education, ensuring that resources and approaches are both relevant and accessible. She shared her personal journey of using art as a means of expression and communication, both as a child and as an adult. She highlighted the lack of native educational materials, local ecological information, and resources in regional languages and resources for children, making it difficult to integrate nature education meaningfully. To address this gap, she has worked on transforming conventional educational tools, like converting generic posters of flora and fauna into illustrated, context-specific resources that depict local flora and fauna. Additionally, she has developed handbooks and activity guides for educators. She stressed the importance of training teachers, librarians, and naturalists to effectively use these materials. One key insight she shared was that when children sketch, they observe and absorb significantly more, reinforcing the idea that various art forms can be powerful tools for communicating scientific concepts.

Revathy R⁹, representing Vanavil Trust, spoke about the transformative role of art as a medium for identity, connection, and empowerment. She shared how art has been a thread that brings joy and unity, particularly in the Boom Boom Maattukkarar community, a historically nomadic group often marginalised by mainstream society. Through artistic expression, members of the community have been able to reclaim and articulate their identities. Revathy illustrated this with a poignant story about a young girl's illustration of a bull, which became a powerful moment of recognition and emotional connection between her and her father. She emphasised that art is not hierarchical—there is no high or low art—but rather, it is a shared experience that can create common ground. By rejecting rigid artistic classifications, she advocated for an inclusive approach to art, one that values diverse cultural expressions. She argued that art plays a vital role in recognising and celebrating diversity, allowing individuals and communities to tell their stories in meaningful and impactful ways.

The panel explored practices that extend art education beyond traditional curricula, emphasising how art creates spaces for expression, nurtures student sensitivity, preserves oral histories and so on. Anecdotes, experiences and learning from projects across the country demonstrated how community-driven collaborations can shape new practices in arts education. Speakers highlighted the potential of arts as a tool to navigate complex realities, the need for inclusive and context-sensitive educational materials, and the significance of oral histories and community-driven learning. While formal education provides foundational exposure, expanding arts education requires reimagining its role in learning environments, bridging urban and rural gaps, and ensuring its accessibility across diverse student demographics.

⁸ Arts Educator, Bangalore, Karnataka

⁹ Vanavil Trust, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu

Padma Reddy¹⁰, the moderator for this panel, noted that “in a Kafkaesque world, art is a tool we can use to navigate it.” Both Joseph and Maringanti reiterated the chaos of reality and positioned art as a vital tool for making sense of a complex world. The question of space—both physical and conceptual—emerged as a key challenge. How can classrooms, nature, and communities be integrated to create dynamic and interconnected learning environments? While advocating for context-sensitive approaches, **the determination of practitioners to see arts education as a dynamic and inclusive force was evident in their efforts to bridge disciplinary gaps, foster creative expression, and integrate diverse cultural narratives into learning environments.** Documenting oral histories and the role of art as a medium for preserving cultural narratives and lived experiences was a thread that ran through the discussions.

Panel 3: Arts Education and Society: Understanding Cultural Perspectives

Panellists: Muththamizh Kalai Vizhi, Radha Gomaty, Likla Lall, Swathi Vellal Raghunandan
Moderator: Menaka Rodriguez

This panel explored the intersection of arts education and society, examining the role of arts as a catalyst for social change, the therapeutic and expressive potential of the arts, deepening cultural understanding and reimagining educational spaces.

Swathi Vellal Raghunandan¹¹ emphasised the transformative role of art in fostering emotional expression, self-regulation, and connection, particularly for neurodivergent individuals. She highlighted how creative engagement can serve as both a sanctuary and a therapeutic tool, enabling individuals to navigate emotions and build coping mechanisms. As the world moves from a medical model to a social model of disability, Swati stressed the urgency of breaking down barriers to accessing art, which is often still viewed as a luxury. Through her work, she highlighted how creative practices were leveraged to enhance communication, build confidence, and develop essential life skills. By advocating for inclusive arts education, she underscored how artistic expression can be both empowering and therapeutic, fostering a sense of belonging and well-being in neurodiverse communities.

Described as a manifesto for arts education by an audience member, **Radha Gomaty's**¹² presentation highlighted that arts education is essential for a democratic society, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and inclusive dialogue and empowering educators as guardians of expression and inquiry. She noted that political narratives of nationality have not been strong enough to dissolve deeper religious and caste-based divisions. In this context, she positioned cultural practitioners as key agents in shaping a more cohesive and democratic society.

Her paper outlined five key areas of focus: (1) The collaborative nature of art, aligning with Blaise Joseph's view that children are naturally collaborative, possibilities for hands-on learning and integrating art with a democratic way of life, (2) The side-lining of art teachers

¹⁰ Painter and Printmaker, Hyderabad, Telangana

¹¹ Special Educator, Bangalore, Karnataka

¹² Illustrator, Kochi, Kerala

despite their critical role as guardians of creative voice and expression. (3) The need to distinguish craft as only one aspect of art, while recognising its role in fostering inquiry into other artistic forms. (4) A redefinition of art beyond skill acquisition, framing it as the capability to think creatively, with the need for structured exercises. (5) The power of films as an educational tool, advocating for open-ended discussions around film to encourage critical thought. Radha stressed the urgency of designing arts education programs that embed democratic values, equity, and compassion while also equipping educators with scientific methodologies and continuous training. She called for rigorous teacher preparation and refresher courses that not only develop pedagogical skills but also reinforce the core values of a democratic society.

Likla Lall¹³ explored the ethical dimensions of writing about the arts, emphasising three key areas: personal ethics, ethics of art, and the tensions between alignment, archetypes, and controversies. She raised critical questions about the overwhelming volume of artistic narratives and the subjectivity of truth, asking, "Which lies make sense to you?" In arts writing, personal ethics stem from self-awareness—acknowledging biases, limitations, and the responsibility of portraying artists as human, rather than just subjects of critique. The ethics of art extend beyond aesthetics to include economic realities, power structures, and the interplay between fundraising, popular culture, and the silencing or amplification of certain voices. Writing about art demands a willingness to envision alternative realities. She proposed that by assuming one's imagined utopia is real, educators and writers can work toward making it a reality, ensuring that art remains a space for reflection, inquiry, and transformation.

Muththamizh Kalai Vizhi¹⁴ discussed the role of arts in promoting gender-responsive education and shaping inclusive societies, stressing that schools are key spaces for introducing such programs. Drawing from her work with Tamil Nadu's Model Schools, she highlighted the importance of integrating gender and sexuality awareness early in education, ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge and tools to navigate complex social issues. She emphasised art as a powerful tool for communicating social issues and making abstract concepts more accessible to students, transforming traditional learning methods into a more engaging and inclusive experience. Her initiatives with Neelam Trust, including pride walks, social labs, and student-led ministries, encourage self-expression and empower students to engage with their identities and emotions, while providing them with leadership opportunities. One notable project, *Unseen Perspectives*, involved students documenting their parents' professions through photography, showcasing the personal and societal impact of their work. She emphasised the need for perseverance in creating lasting change and the importance of sustained efforts to build inclusive, socially-conscious schools

With the maximum engagement with participants, the panel invited questions about the personal journeys of speakers, the challenges of ownership and inclusion, and much more. Perspectives around the role and identity of the artist and the educator as “guardians of voice”, on overcoming stigma and sensitising the community, stressing that art has the

¹³ Writer and Storyteller, Mumbai, Maharashtra

¹⁴ Art and Holistic Development Educator, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

power to challenge deep-seated biases and foster acceptance were presented eloquently. The panel addressed educators and training, the role of parents in arts education, and the role of schools as key spaces for integrating arts into education, and culminated in an exploration of inclusive societies, touching on gender, neurodiversity, caste, and community representation in arts education.

The discussion raised key questions: *How can students connect with both their immediate cultural context and broader artistic movements? What does it mean to be an arts educator in a democratic society? How can arts education dismantle societal biases? How do we ensure that artistic platforms are accessible to those who have been historically excluded?* From gender and caste to neurodivergence and economic barriers, this panel reiterated that arts education is more than a subject—it is a catalyst for inclusion, a means of fostering empathy and reimagining a more inclusive and democratic society.

Creative Classrooms:

The Creative Classrooms across the three days were designed for students and teachers to explore a variety of arts-integrated teaching and learning methodologies. The workshops were facilitated by a diverse group of educators and artists; **Muralidhar, Madhukar, Syed Sadiq S (Riyaz), Gundappa Goudgol, Gururaj L, Syed Fakruddin Huseni, Siddappa Biradar, Shantamani, and Aruna BT**, grantees and project coordinators of the IFA Arts Education program. Drawing from their experiences and projects, these workshops left a lasting impression on the student participants from Vidhyanjali School, Shikara School, Rockspire Public School and their educators.

The objective was to create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that seamlessly weaves visual arts, theatre, puppetry, and hands-on crafts into everyday classroom practices. These sessions introduced teachers to creative methods, opening new possibilities for incorporating arts into their pedagogy. Some teachers expressed their interest in trying out these techniques in their classrooms, recognising their potential to make subjects more accessible and engaging for students.

Covering a range of artistic techniques, such as origami, theatre and puppet-making, and paper cutting, facilitators encouraged students to deepen conceptual understanding and reflect on the world around them. For instance, one session focused on creating mini-books representing science concepts through art, allowing students to visually document their learning, while the puppetry sessions saw students creating stories centred on nature and conservation. The sessions demonstrated that when students are given the freedom to explore subjects through artistic expression, they not only gain knowledge but also develop essential skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and self-expression.

The enthusiasm and energy of the students was palpable, with many participants so engaged that they continued their conversations with facilitators even after the workshops ended, seeking further insights and guidance. Some students followed up on conversations on consecutive days, eager to learn more, demonstrating a strong desire for continued engagement and growth. The teachers reflected on how the workshops challenged their perspectives, deepened their understanding of the subjects, and sparked new ideas they

had not considered before. For some, the arts-based approach helped them connect more deeply with the material, making it more relatable and memorable.

Workshops:

Three interactive workshops—*Journaling with Nature* by **Sangeetha Kadur**, *I Have My Thoughts*: Zine-Making Workshop by **Sreya Saraswatula**, and *Heritage Walk* at Charminar by **Ganesh Malthulkar**—offered participants creative tools to document and interpret their experiences.

Facilitated by **Sangeetha Kadur**¹⁵, the *Journaling with Nature* workshop explored the intersection of nature and art, inviting participants to step outside, observe their surroundings, and document their experiences through sketching, writing, and reflection. The session emphasised that spending time in nature allows for deeper learning and a more profound connection with the world around us. “Stay longer with your page, and the magic will happen,” Sangeetha reminded participants, encouraging them to slow down and immerse themselves in the process of journaling. Participants experimented with various journaling techniques including contour drawing and gesture drawing, learning to translate their observations into visual and written narratives.

Nature journaling, as she demonstrated, is not just about capturing an image—it is about curiosity, discovery, and engagement with all the senses. The workshop extended beyond the classroom, as participants ventured into the environs of the State Art Gallery, using the immediate landscape as inspiration. This outdoor engagement deepened their observations and encouraged them to translate their experiences into personal reflections. Many participants incorporated poetry and written texts into their journals, blending artistic expression with literary interpretation. The session not only highlighted the richness of the natural world but also demonstrated how journaling can be a tool for mindfulness, creativity, and exploration.

Sreya Saraswatula¹⁶ led a workshop on zine-making, a DIY form of publishing that allows for independent expression and storytelling. Participants were introduced to the history and culture of zines, understanding their role as vehicles for self-expression and dialogue. The workshop encouraged attendees to respond creatively to the themes emerging from the conference, using image-making and collaging techniques to craft their own zines. Presented in three acts, the zines would articulate an idea, discuss the conflicts that arise and contemplate the future of thoughts. Folding, designing, and assembling their booklets, participants engaged in a deeply personal and collaborative artistic process. These zines included many cut-outs from old magazines and comics, making every zine a unique reflection of the participants. Working in groups, the workshops also emphasised the communal nature of zine culture—highlighting the importance of sharing, exchanging, and discussing creative work.

¹⁵ Wildlife Artist, Bengaluru, Karnataka

¹⁶ Designer and Zine-maker, Hyderabad

Ganesh Malthukar¹⁷ facilitated a heritage walk with Telangana State Tourism to the iconic Charminar, blending history and lived experience, drawing attention to the layered narratives that surround this historic site. Participants were invited to reflect on the intersections of heritage, education, and identity. The session on Day 3 encouraged participants to take a step back and critically analyse the discussions and insights gathered throughout the conference. Through a structured group activity, attendees engaged in conversations that sought to define the most pressing obstacles in integrating arts into education. Several issues emerged, including the need for greater support for teachers in arts education, securing consistent funding for arts programs, ensuring access to quality resources for projects, and advocating for policy-level changes to integrate arts education more meaningfully into school curricula.

Spotlight:

These interactive sessions introduced teachers and artists who have been Grantees/Project Coordinators associated with IFA to showcase their arts-integrated projects, share their stories, and engage with the community.

B Kotresh, a dedicated government school teacher from Raichur district, Karnataka, showcased *Pencil*, a student-driven magazine that revitalised his school and community. This transformative initiative was a way to engage students creatively and foster a sense of ownership over their education. Through *Pencil*, students not only developed their writing and critical thinking skills but also gained the confidence to express their thoughts and experiences. Kotresh emphasised how the written word has the power to bring about change. Through their writing, students began articulating their perspectives, discussing issues that affected them, and participating more actively in their education. The impact of *Pencil* was profound—it rekindled interest in learning, reduced dropout rates, and strengthened the connection between the school and the community. This project stands as a testament to how creative educational tools can inspire students, amplify their voices, and address deep-rooted challenges in rural education.

On display at the exhibition hall were wood-cut prints by eight-grade students. Artist and educator **Chandrabhas Y Jalilhal** explored the history, geography, and legends of the Bahmani Sultanate through wood-cut prints. Chandrabhas designed the project to cultivate an appreciation for painting, architecture, and administration of the Bahmani era among eighth-grade students at the Government Higher Primary School in Kalaburagi. By incorporating woodcut printing and graphic arts, he encouraged students to engage with their social science curriculum in a hands-on, immersive manner. Chandrabhas emphasised that exposure to core visual arts disciplines had helped students sharpen their observational and imaginative skills while articulating ideas in innovative ways. Outdoor learning played a crucial role in the project which in turn, strengthened their historical understanding and creative expression. By the end of the project, many students had developed a newfound appreciation for art as a means of preserving history, and the initiative had sparked interest in sustaining arts education beyond the classroom.

¹⁷ Artist, Hyderabad

As part of the Spotlights sessions, **Baby Biradar**, an arts teacher at Government High School, Muchalamba, Bidar District, shared the impact of her project, which integrated visual arts with mathematics education. Inspired by her participation in the Kali Kalisu training program, she designed a unique approach using paper folding, origami, and craft techniques to help eighth-grade students engage with their geometry curriculum in an interactive way. Her project aimed to bridge the gap between mathematical reasoning and artistic exploration, offering students a hands-on, creative method to understand complex geometric concepts. Baby reflected on how the project had made mathematical learning more accessible and enjoyable. By constructing three-dimensional models, students were able to visualise and grasp intricate problems that might have seemed abstract in traditional classroom settings. Despite initial concerns from parents about balancing arts-based learning with exam preparation, Baby worked persistently to demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating creativity with academics. She faced challenges in shifting perceptions but successfully showed that the arts could deepen students' conceptual understanding rather than distract them from their studies. The project culminated in a publication of explorations in origami and geometry, a testament to how interdisciplinary approaches could transform education.

Theatre artist **Sahana Pinjara** shared the transformative impact of her street theatre project with students in Hosapete, Karnataka. Drawing from her extensive experience in theatre, including training at NINASAM and participation in international workshops, Sahana used street theatre as a tool to enhance students' critical thinking, self-expression, and social awareness. Sahana described how her project engaged students in immersive theatre exercises that went beyond performance, encouraging them to explore social and civic issues such as environmental pollution, communal harmony, and water conservation. The performances served as a bridge between the classroom and the community, allowing students to connect their curriculum with real-world concerns through interactive storytelling. Sahana reflected on the power of street theatre in breaking barriers between formal education and lived experiences. She emphasized that theatre was not just an act but a participatory process—one that helped students become active agents of change in their communities. The project culminated in 15 performances across villages and towns near Hosapete, where students performed for local audiences, sparking discussions on critical social issues.

Jahanara Kolur, an Assistant Teacher at the Government Higher Primary School in Koppala, shared the profound impact of her IFA project on the preservation and revitalisation of Koudi (quilt-making) traditions. Through this initiative, she engaged students, families, and communities, exploring quilt-making as a form of storytelling, collective labour, and cultural heritage. Jahanara recounted how the traditional process of sewing Koudis once brought families together, with each member contributing in some way—threading needles, arranging cloth, or singing songs that carried ancestral wisdom. She encouraged students to rediscover the art of quilt-making, not as a skill but as a way to understand their past and create something meaningful with their own hands. The act of stitching became an avenue for storytelling, where each patch of fabric held memories. The project brought the students back to school, incorporating folk songs, poetry, shapes, colours, geometry and writing exercises, with students reflecting on their experiences with quilt-making. The culmination of the project was a public exhibition and the publication of *Nannura Koudi* (Quilt of My

City), a collection of student writings that captured their evolving understanding of local folk culture.

Performances:

The **Tingala Sanje Yuva Vedike** from **Jakanapalli, Sedam**, presented an energetic Kolata performance, a fast-paced, rhythmic and geometric form that relies on mathematical precision, spatial awareness, and teamwork. The performance was a vibrant display of movement, coordination, and trust, in some ways, a reflection of society itself—one where every individual's action affects the whole, and trust is the foundation of harmony. The dance is built on spontaneity and joyful engagement, elements that need to be nurtured in arts and education today.

Ashok Totnalli's efforts to revive this form by engaging the community and students from Government High School, Jakanapalli, Sedam taluk, Karnataka, underscored the importance of arts in education, particularly in fostering a sense of community and collaboration among students. It is this kind of experiential learning—where art becomes a lived practice rather than just a subject to study—that creates lasting impact. The presentation of Kolata on Day 1 had a powerful takeaway: at the end of the day, the teacher who takes that extra step to engage students beyond conventional methods is the one who truly brings about change. The learnings from such initiatives extend far beyond the project period, leaving a lasting impression on students and communities alike.

Hazaaron Khwahishein is an interactive and deeply moving theatrical experience presented by Sifar Theatre, that follows the journey of a boy who, in an attempt to cheer up his suicidal mother, creates a handwritten list of a hundred (eventually more) things that make life wonderful—ranging from simple joys like jalebi to a morning chai to cherished memories like listening to a record with his mom. This poignant coming-of-age story had the audience play an active role; some became characters, while others helped move the narrative forward, engaging every viewer in the storytelling process. As the narrator masterfully guided the audience through the boy's struggles, the play encouraged reflections on mental health, gratitude, and the importance of noticing the small joys in life. *Hazaaron Khwahishein* urged audiences to reconsider their perspectives, think before they act, and appreciate the beauty in everyday moments. More than just a play, it was a theatrical journey that transforms storytelling into a shared, lived experience, blurring the lines between performer and viewer.

Exhibitions:

The exhibition showcased the outcomes of arts-integrated projects implemented by IFA under the Arts Education Programme across various government schools in Karnataka. Led by teachers and artists, these projects highlighted the power of the arts in enriching education. Through displays and conversations with project coordinators, visitors experienced first-hand how theatre, painting, puppetry, paper crafts, and storytelling have been integrated into classroom learning. The Project Coordinators shared how the dialogues that unfolded around puppets, woodcut prints, postcards, and videos helped reinforce the idea that art is a living, breathing part of education, not just a product. Featuring works by 20 educators and artists, the exhibition was a testament to how arts-based approaches can

transform not only students' academic journeys but also their ability to express, imagine, and innovate.

Concluding Thoughts:

This conference reaffirmed a fundamental truth: the basis of education is the arts. Whether as pedagogy, a subject, or a way of thinking, the arts shape how we perceive, express, and engage with the world. The sessions and projects showcased demonstrated that arts in education go far beyond skill-building; they enable interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning, foster emotional and social growth, and cultivate critical thinking and collaboration.

Yet, in a time when spontaneity and experiential engagement are fading from education, how do we reimagine arts education not as an addition but as the foundation of learning itself? This conference, an “unconference” (Blaise Joseph) in the spirit of open dialogue rather than one-way presentations, served as a space for deliberation, questioning, and rethinking. The exchanges among artists, educators, researchers, and community members reinforced that arts must be integrated into education at both the policy and grassroots levels to create lasting impact.

The projects and performances highlighted the seamless integration of arts into various subjects. The idea that disciplines should remain separate is obsolete. Arts are not just another subject; they are the foundation upon which learning can be built. We must push beyond conventional boundaries and establish arts as a pedagogical approach across disciplines.

Panellists noted that the conference's open and reflective format allowed for meaningful exchange of ideas rather than rigid presentations. They valued the diversity of perspectives in the room—from policy thinkers to grassroots educators—which led to robust conversations on pedagogy, sustainability, and the evolving role of the arts in education. Participants, ranging from teachers and students to activists and community educators, shared how the sessions resonated with their own experiences and challenges, and how valuable it was to see their everyday efforts reflected in broader discussions of arts and education. Several educators mentioned that the interactive workshops and panel conversations provided concrete strategies they could take back to their classrooms. The openness of the space, where questions and reflections were welcomed at every turn, was particularly appreciated, with many expressing a desire to stay connected with this growing community.

The IFA conferences have the potential to serve as incubators for joint projects, research, and cross-institutional partnerships that integrate arts into mainstream education. By fostering many more dialogues and collaboration among educators, artists, and policymakers, such gatherings will inspire long-term policy and pedagogical changes, strengthening the role of the arts in education across India.

The strength of the IFA network lies in its dedicated and creative teachers who actively engage with communities and students, fostering a sustainable approach to arts education. The camaraderie among project coordinators has been instrumental in building a

community of practitioners—educators who support each other and drive meaningful change at the grassroots level. This growing network is not just preserving the role of the arts in education but expanding its possibilities, ensuring that creativity, expression, and collaboration continue to enrich learning for generations.

This conference has been a space for rich discussions, collaboration, and shared learning, highlighting the role of the arts in shaping meaningful education. The insights and experiences exchanged here will continue to influence how we teach, learn, and engage with the world. By forging new paths and integrating the arts more deeply into education, we can build an educational landscape where the arts are not an afterthought but the foundation of how we teach, learn, and grow.

In the true *Kali-Kalisu* spirit, this three-day event culminated with reflections. With everyone in a circle sharing their learnings, experiences, and connections made, the speakers, participants and IFA team came together to celebrate the time together and go back energised and ready to make a difference.

Barakatenge! Tenge! Tenge!