REPORT

SMART Practice

Reimagining Strategic Thinking for the Theatre Arts (2014-2024)

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Sharmistha Saha and Kanika Khurana

Executive Summary

About SMART

Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre (SMART) was a pioneering capacity-building initiative in India that effectively began in 2013. It responded to the chronic lack of relevant management training for theatre practitioners. Unlike conventional arts management programmes that rely on corporate models or Western templates, SMART emerged as a practitioner-led, collaborative, and India-specific response to sustaining and strengthening theatre practice.

Over the decade, from 2013 to 2023, SMART evolved from being not just a programme to a collective experiment in reimagining management in the arts—emphasising values, vision, community, and care.

Purpose of the Study

This impact study was commissioned as SMART concluded its journey, aiming to reflect on its evolution, impact, and learnings. It seeks to understand SMART's influence at three levels:

- Individual practitioners—their thinking, decision-making, and leadership approaches.
- Theatre groups—changes in structure, sustainability, and collaborative practices.
- The wider theatre ecosystem in India—evolving discourses and practices in arts management.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on:

- 39 in-depth interviews with participants, core team members, and facilitators
- Archival analysis of programme documents, reports, and strategic plans
- Two digital surveys
- Case studies of theatre groups that underwent notable transformation

The analysis was guided by a social constructivist lens, emphasising reflective practice, context, and community-driven change.

Key Findings

1. Management as a Reflective, Artistic Practice

SMART successfully reframed management not as a top-down administrative function, but as a creative, value-driven process rooted in each group's vision and ethics. Participants were encouraged to ask "Why do we do what we do?", leading to internal transformation and greater alignment between artistic intent and organisational decisions.

2. Collective and Contextual Pedagogy

SMART's peer-led, non-prescriptive pedagogy was built from within the theatre community. Facilitators were themselves practitioners from theatre or allied areas, and the curriculum evolved through feedback and real-world application. This grounded approach enabled long-term shifts in how groups thought about sustainability, leadership, and collaboration.

3. Shift From Survival to Strategy

For many participants, the programme marked a turning point in moving from ad hoc functioning to long-term strategic thinking. It fostered planning, reflection, and the ability to articulate vision—practices otherwise often missing in the daily rush of theatre-making.

4. Institutional and Ecosystem-Level Change

By involving institutions like India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) and Junoon, SMART demonstrated new forms of partnership between funders, practitioners, and collectives. It shifted IFA's role from distant evaluator to active ally. It also introduced the term "management" into the artistic lexicon as empowering rather than bureaucratic or corporate.

5. Limitations and Challenges

SMART's scale remained modest, limited by funding, team capacity, and the voluntary nature of its structure. Gathering mentors and sustaining long-term facilitation was difficult, and outreach in regional contexts faced logistical barriers. The decision not to scale or institutionalise the programme further stemmed from a conscious effort to preserve its core values and collective spirit.

Legacy and Looking Forward

SMART leaves behind a living pedagogy, a peer-led curriculum, and a community of reflective practitioners who continue to carry forward its spirit. It challenged dominant models of training

and instead validated contextual knowledge, grassroots insight, and collective intelligence. Its closure was a deliberate, values-based decision, rooted in care and integrity.

As this report shows, SMART's greatest contribution lies in how it redefined arts management for India—as a practice of intention, reflection, community, and vision.

Key Themes and Keywords that Emerge in the Study

Collective spirit, Collaboration, Shared purpose, Community-driven, Participatory approach, Peer-led, Friendships, Theatre management, Arts management, Capacity-building, Sustainability, Effectiveness (vs Efficiency), Thriving (vs. surviving), Organisational development, Strategic planning, India-specific needs, Local realities, Non-Western frameworks, Contextual training, Informal structures, Grassroots insights, Vision and values, Management as care, Reflective practice, Collective thinking, Safe space for dialogue, Reframing management, Strategic decision-making

Chapter 1 – Introduction

What is SMART?

Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre, or SMART, was a pioneering initiative launched in India in 2013 to address a longstanding gap in the performing arts sector: the lack of structured, contextually appropriate management training for theatre practitioners. Unlike conventional arts management programmes, which often draw from corporate or pre-existing models outside of India and have a toolkit approach, SMART was deeply rooted in the lived realities of theatre in India. It emerged not as an academic course, but as a collective, practitioner-led response to the challenges of sustaining meaningful, often experimental, and community-focused theatre practice.

Organisational Structure

SMART operated via a collaborative structure, rooted in collective leadership, shared values, and a context-sensitive pedagogy. Over its 10-year run (2014–2024), SMART's organisational model evolved organically, guided by a group of committed individuals with strong ties to theatre and arts leadership in India. In its early iteration, SMART's resource people included course consultant Milena Dragićević Šešić, course director Sameera Iyengar, and course coordinators Arundhati Ghosh, along with facilitators and a project development team.[1] At the heart of SMART was its core team—a diverse group of theatre practitioners, producers, managers, and arts leaders who conceptualised, designed, facilitated, mentored participants, and implemented the programme. This team collectively made decisions on every aspect of SMART, from curriculum design to outreach, evaluation, and strategy. The Core Team members over time included:

- Founding Members: Sameera Iyengar, Arundhati Ghosh, Sanjna Kapoor, Sudhanva Deshpande
- Core Team members over time: Sameera Iyengar, Arundhati Ghosh, Sanjna Kapoor, Sudhanva Deshpande, Sunil Shanbag, Swati Apte, Ashish Mehta, Menaka Rodriguez, Neel Chaudhuri
- Course Consultant: Milena Dragićević Šešić

[1]" SMART - Theatre Management Capacity Building proposal with BUDGET," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

Each core team member brought different artistic and administrative experiences to SMART, allowing it to remain adaptable and relevant. While several early core members came from the India Theatre Forum (ITF), SMART was not formally governed by ITF. India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) and Junoon Arts & Education Foundation (Junoon) played active supporting roles.

Institutional Support & Partner Organisations

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on November 28, 2013, between Junoon and IFA,[2] outlining their collaboration on the SMART India programme—Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre: a capacity-building initiative for theatre practitioners. IFA and Junoon lent their administrative, logistical, and fundraising capacities, allowing the programme to scale and adapt over time. Junoon was required to raise funds, provide programme support and run publicity and outreach. Starting in the early years, IFA managed donor-specific proposals and application forms and oversaw all MoUs and agreements with donors, partners, and facilitators. They received and acknowledged funds (including nominal fees from participants), handled expenses, maintained accounts, conducted audits, and prepared utilisation certificates and financial reports.

Arundhati tells us that she had proposed bringing IFA on board to provide institutional support and a credible structure for handling funds. She approached the IFA board with the idea, and while they agreed, there was a clear mandate that IFA would not contribute its own funds to this initiative. As a grant-making organisation, the board was cautious about moving into a different operational model, especially at the time under its new Executive Director, Arundhati. Arundhati framed the initiative as an opportunity to expand IFA's engagement with the field without incurring additional costs. She tells us that over the years, this perspective proved accurate—the board came to see the immense value of IFA's involvement in SMART. It helped transform IFA's image from that of a distant evaluator to a trusted ally in the field. Arundhati noted that as a grant-maker, one is often seen primarily as someone who judges and rejects applications. SMART allowed IFA to participate more collaboratively, shifting its role from gatekeeper to enabler in the eyes of the arts community[3]. Yet IFA maintained its distance when it came to fundraising. Arundhati clarified that she chose not to raise funds for SMART because as Executive Director, her primary responsibility was to raise funds for IFA, which already had significant targets. Even before IFA officially joined SMART, she was clear that her time and efforts would be dedicated to IFA's fundraising needs. Additionally, she believed SMART should retain its own identity, separate from IFA, to avoid conflicts or divided loyalties around fundraising. If interest in SMART arose at the time of fundraising for IFA, she would redirect it

[2]" FINAL SMART MOU - Junoon IFA on letterhead 2015," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[3] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.

to those managing SMART's fundraising efforts. Arundhati emphasised that SMART was designed as an independent, collective programme, not belonging to any single institution.

According to Sameera, SMART organically transitioned to being overseen by Junoon. In the early years when the conversations on management in the theatre began (which would later evolve into SMART), they were under the ITF banner, and meetings would often happen at the Prithvi Theatre, the umbrella organisation holding ITF. When Sameera and Sanjna left Prithvi to form Junoon in 2012, ITF too transitioned to receiving institutional support from Junoon. Over the years ITF's activities gradually declined. During this period, some members of ITF including Sameera and Sanjna, the co-founders of Junoon, continued to develop and drive SMART forward along with other core members. Junoon thus became a key institutional base for SMART, playing a vital role in anchoring and nurturing the programme. However, when Junoon ceased operations in 2020,[4] Arundhati expressed discomfort that IFA became the sole institutional anchor.[5] While IFA willingly provided logistical and administrative support, she was concerned that SMART would increasingly be perceived—and function—as an IFA programme, which went against SMART's collective DNA. Without Junoon or another co-hosting institution, the balance shifted, making it harder to sustain SMART's independent identity. Similar conversations emerged in the core team meetings of SMART. Arundhati repeatedly raised the need to bring in another organisation to restore that collaborative framework, emphasising that SMART was never meant to be held by a single institution.

Menaka reflected on the transitions that SMART underwent—from being managed by IFA and Junoon, and eventually by IFA when Junoon was dissolved in March 2020, highlighting how the shift impacted the programme. She tells us that when IFA joined, its initial role was administrative and financial (including donor reporting) as well as holding together the evaluation process, with Junoon handling fundraising, communications and media relations. Arundhati, along with Sameera and Sanjna, was instrumental in formalising SMART and integrating it into IFA. Though IFA held the funds, it did not raise them. The founding core team, shaped by their early training with Milena, shared strong values and a collaborative commitment. She noted that SMART's collective approach remained respected by IFA. However, gathering the busy team members became increasingly difficult in later years. Menaka acknowledged that after a decade, if SMART was to continue, it may naturally evolve into new forms or "avatars."[6]

[4] " Sanjna Kapoor and Sameera Iyengar's 'Junoon 'Announces Closure," The Quint, 2020, https://www.thequint.com/sanjna-kapoor-junoon-closure-sameera-iyengar-prithvi-theatre

[5] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.

[6] Menaka Rodriguez, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 18-07-2024.

Different Formats of the Project[7]

- Residential Course (2015 & 2016):
    - Residential Foundation Course: A 12-day immersive training experience
    - Mentorship Phase: 4 to 6 months of one-on-one and group mentoring by core team members and external experts
    - Final Workshop: A Two-day event for project presentations and public interaction
- CCRT-NSD Workshop (2015): A workshop customised for 2nd year NSD students
- SMART on Wheels (2017–2018): 1-day interactions in 7 cities to broaden reach
- SMART Workshops (2018–2020): 3-day regional workshops with condensed curriculum
- SMART Online (2020–2022): SMART Online Workshop and conversation series titled SMART In The Round
- Case Study Project (2020–2021): A research initiative exploring the realities of theatre groups

The Makers of SMART

The core team of SMART strongly believes in its collective spirit, which enables it to work cohesively towards its common goals. When interviewed separately and asked about the early period of SMART, when they joined this collective, they tell us about the first conversations or encounters with each other in the context of a management course for theatre.

Arundhati Ghosh, currently a core team member of SMART, reminisces[8] about a conversation with Sameera around 2012 that revolved around aspirations in the arts, particularly the need to build capacity for arts organisations. Unlike nonprofits, which had established training systems for fundraising and administration, the arts sector, especially theatre, lacked such structured support. Arundhati had tried encouraging arts groups to join nonprofit training programmes, but with little success, as artists often felt out of place in such programmes. Around the time of this conversation with Sameera, Arundhati was preparing to take on her role as Executive Director of IFA.[9]

Sameera Iyengar, also a current core team member of SMART, mentions that she invited Arundhati to conduct a workshop in Delhi for India Theatre Forum (ITF) members after a conversation with her, which became an opportunity to discuss the gaps in theatre management training. ITF was, at the time, a collective of theatre artists. However, ITF questioned whether this was truly what theatre needed at the time. As Arundhati recalled, "So then I said, Okay…

[7] " SMART TIMELINE," shared with Research Team by IFA on 21-03-2025.
[8] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.
[9] Ibid.

Why don't we do a baseline study? Why don't we actually go and ask theatre groups? Do you want this? That is what the study came out of. The study was overwhelmingly like, yeah, yeah, we should do this."[10] The study that Arundhati mentions, which was based on a survey that she had designed and was shaped by collective discussions, sought direct input from theatre practitioners. Its findings were overwhelmingly positive—there was a clear need for structured capacity-building in the performing arts. As a result, this initiative gained momentum, providing a crucial foundation for addressing management challenges in the theatre sector.

Sameera, who was the Director, Junoon at the time of her conversation with Arundhati, tells us that the development of an arts management initiative in Indian theatre was not a straightforward process.[11] ITF had been holding national theatre seminars to discuss challenges in the field. During the second seminar, renowned playwright G.P. Deshpande emphasised the need for action rather than just discussion. This prompted ITF members to consider concrete steps, one of which was addressing the long-standing struggle with theatre management. Since most theatre practitioners entered the field as creative artists without dedicated managers, this was a recurring issue. According to Sameera, it was at a follow-up meeting at Ninasam that ITF members divided responsibilities, with Sanjna, who was managing Prithvi Theatre as Director during the time, committing to lead the arts management initiative.[12] However, despite enthusiasm, progress stalled between 2009 and 2011, as ITF struggled to find a practical way to implement the ideas. A renewed effort was made in 2012 to formalise an approach to theatre management, building on earlier discussions and Sameera's conversation with Arundhati. The journey from conceptualisation to action took years, reflecting the complexity of institutionalising such support structures for theatre practitioners in India. By now, Sameera and Sanjna had co-founded Junoon in 2012, an organisation that believed that living with the arts is a fundamental right, and worked to make this a possibility for people across India.

Sanjna Kapoor takes us[13] back to these early conversations about the programme and her encounter with Milena who was member of the Arts & Culture Sub Board, Open Society Institute (OSI) and a Professor of University of Arts, Belgrade, at the *CultureAsia: Connecting Asian Cultural Actors* meet that took place in Bangalore from 14th-16th December, 2008 at the Infosys Campus.[14] The organisers were HIVOS, The Hague, Open Society Institute (OSI), Budapest and Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS), Bangalore. Sanjna was asked to give a presentation in a workshop on 'Cultural Management Training' along with Rajendran Nathan (HIVOS Regional Office, India). The presentation was a reflection of a HIVOS-Prithvi

[10] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.
[11] Sameera Iyengar, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 01-07- 2024.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Sanjna Kapoor, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 24-07-2024.
[14] P.Radhika, *CultureAsia: Connecting Asian Cultural Actors: Report on the Conference* (CSCS, Bangalore, 2008) https://www.cscsarchive.org/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2009-08-26.7098835221/file.

initiative to formulate a curriculum for cultural management and a methodology for arts management that could then be passed on to performing arts organisations.[15] Sanjna remembers that she found the notion of a collective "Asian identity"[16] contrived and struggled with the conference's academic tone, which didn't resonate with her. She wasn't keen on being there and was even more dismayed when told that she had to be part of a conversation on arts management. Feeling completely unprepared, she hastily jotted down thoughts on a napkin before being ushered into the session. The session, however, proved to be a turning point. It was chaired by Milena, the organiser of the entire programme, and during the discussion Sanjna instantly felt a deep connection, what she describes as love and awe at first sight. She decided then and there that Milena would be her mentor. Sanjna shares that even before meeting Milena, she had already been deeply engaged with questions around sustainability in theatre. At a prior gathering at Prithvi Theatre—which included people like Sudhanva, Kirti Jain, and Akshara K.V.—she had helped organise discussions on how theatre artists could move from mere survival to what she called "thrival."[17] In preparation, she had sent out a candid and detailed survey to about 28 theatre groups, expecting little response due to the typically secretive culture around money and decision-making in the arts. To her surprise, 26 of them responded. This overwhelming engagement revealed a shared, if often unspoken desire to talk about management and sustainability. This survey is different from the one mentioned by Arundhati. The survey mentioned by Arundhati was distributed across the ITF database and received responses from 68 theatre groups, majority of whom expressed support for both the identified needs and the proposed course design of the management programme for theatre. This survey was called 'What does Theatre in India need?'. The 68 respondents belonged to different art organisations, groups or were individuals related to the arts. The one mentioned by Sanjna was created with the help of Milena in 2009. This first survey became possible after Sanjna invited Milena to tour India and experience first-hand the realities of theatre-making in the country. Milena generously agreed, undertaking the tour with little compensation, simply out of commitment and interest.

Milena would become a key person in providing training to the trainers of SMART and was primarily associated with it during the long format SMART courses. She remembers these early conversations as an extension of her work during the late 1990s and early 2000s, in developing the cultural sector in Central Asia through her work with the Soros Foundation, alongside her academic commitments. Around 2005-06, she began collaborating with Dutch and Swiss foundations, which eventually led to the creation of a Central and South Asian Cultural Forum, which met in Bangalore in 2008.[18]. This large gathering, hosted at Infosys, included participants from South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia) and Central Asia

[15] Ibid.
[16] Sanjna Kapoor, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 24-07-2024.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Milena Dragićević Šešić, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 30-06-2024.

(Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan).[19] Although Milena and Arundhati both attended this event, they did not meet each other at the time, only discovering years later that they had appeared in a photo together from the conference.[20] Arundhati, the Deputy Director of IFA at the time, in a session on 'Sustainability of Arts and Culture in a Civil Society 'had highlighted sustainability, new revenue strategies, impact measurement, capacity-building, media support and policy, and identifying core values or practices that must remain non-negotiable.[21] During the event, Milena led a small session on arts management training, which had very few attendees. In that session, she shared her experience of developing arts management programmes in the Arab-Mediterranean region, with an emphasis on empowering local producers with the knowledge to codify, and apply that knowledge confidently, rather than relying on Western frameworks. According to Milena, it is not unusual that conversations on arts management have fewer takers. Sanjna attended this session and was struck by the relevance of Milena's approach. She shared concerns about the dominance of Anglo-American models in arts management and fundraising, echoing Milena's own critiques of how Western literature often fails in non-Western contexts. Sanjna then invited Milena to conduct a closed seminar for the ITF. Although the seminar was planned for December 2008, the financial crisis disrupted the timeline. Sanjna however insisted that before the seminar, Milena should travel across India and meet practitioners firsthand—a principle Milena deeply respected. To prepare for her research, Milena created a detailed questionnaire on organisational culture and development, which she sent to theatre groups.[22] While responses varied in depth, they provided valuable insights that helped guide her interviews during site visits. Initially, she encountered scepticism—viewed as another Western expert discussing efficiency and money—but this shifted once participants saw her genuine interest in their values and motivations for doing theatre. As trust grew, deep connections formed. For example, although only two people per group were expected at the final seminar, Milena in the interview remembers that five members from Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), a political cultural group that was initially the most resistant, chose to attend.

Sudhanva Deshpande, a member of JANAM since 1987, and founding member of SMART, reminisces that the SMART programme emerged organically. It was not a sudden or externally imposed idea, but rather the culmination of years of collective thinking about theatre and arts management in the Indian context. The aim was to conceptualise a management course that reflected the specific needs and realities of Indian theatre, rather than replicating global models. The idea for SMART was first articulated by Sameera and Arundhati, he remembers, which sparked interest and eventually led to the IFA formally joining the initiative. However, IFA's

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Tejaswini Niranjana, "Questions of Culture," *Centre for the Study of Culture and Society*, accessed 23-07-2024.https://www.cscsarchive.org/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2009-08-26.7098835221/file.
[22] Sanjna Kapoor, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 24-07-2024.

involvement came later, after the groundwork had already been laid by the ITF team, according to him. Sudhanva, being part of ITF's core group, was involved in the evolution of the programme from the start, making the involvement in SMART a natural continuation of that earlier work, he tells us.

While Arundhati, Sameera, Milena, Sanjna and Sudhanva trace the early years back to encounters and conversations on management for theatre, theatre practitioner Sunil Shanbag, who continues to remain associated with SMART, and Swati Apte, joined SMART as facilitators and core team members, on invitation.[23]

Sunil Shanbag joined the SMART core team at a later stage. He became involved during an intensive, focused workshop at Sameera's place in 2013, where participants, including Milena, collaboratively shaped the structure and content of the SMART programme. Each person contributed ideas based on their areas of expertise and practice. While Sunil wasn't part of the earlier processes, he was invited, by Sameera and Sanjna[24], to join at this critical planning stage, becoming part of a collective effort. Sunil came with his extensive knowledge of directing and producing theatre works. He had co-founded Arpana Theatre Company in 1985 and was its artistic director at the time he joined the conversations on SMART. Around the same time in 2014, he co-founded Tamaasha Theatre.

On the other hand, Swati Apte's journey into arts management began during her time in the U.S. in the early 2000s, where she ran a dance troupe and was struck by how easily artists could access funding through city, state, and other grants—something she had never encountered in India. Simultaneously, Swati had started her career at McKinsey & Co. in New. Curious and inspired, though unfamiliar with the term "arts management," she began researching the field and even wrote a paper on it. Collaborating with NYU, which had an existing arts management curriculum, Swati and others explored whether any of it could be adapted for India. After returning to India and meeting various individuals involved in arts funding and administration, she realised that not only was this ecosystem underdeveloped, but also that traditional two-year programmes, like those in the U.S., wouldn't suit the Indian context. Such roles in India were often filled informally, by friends, family members, or performers themselves. Swati thus conceptualised a modular course structure: short, week-long sessions on topics like finance or audience development, held in different cities, enabling participants to build skills over time. Although the financial crisis in 2007-2008 put this idea on hold, Swati resumed her engagement with arts infrastructure after her association with Junoon. Swati joined the core team as the initiative took shape. She remembers that she was one of the founding members of Junoon along

[23] Sameera Iyengar, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 01-07- 2024.
[24] Sunil Shanbag, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 22-07-2024.

with Sanjna and Sameera. According to her, the SMART programme was intentionally designed to be participatory, without institutional ownership, which aligned with her beliefs.

Therefore, we see that the SMART programme emerged through extensive dialogue, mutual recognition, and a shared sense of purpose among artists, administrators, and thinkers invested in theatre and, more specifically, Indian theatre. Key moments—such as the ITF's seminars, Milena's India tour, early surveys and various individual efforts—demonstrated a growing consensus: Indian theatre needed management frameworks rooted in local realities. This collective affirmed that managing art was not separate from making art. SMART thus became a collaborative experiment in redefining theatre management for India—contextual, responsive, and driven by practitioners. .

After the first residential course, a growing need for expansion was felt by the core team with the idea to include younger members who could join the core team as well as serve as mentors or facilitators for the project from the early days of SMART.[25] In an interview,[26] Neel, a playwright and theatre director based in New Delhi as well as founding member and former Artistic Director of The Tadpole Repertory, who had attended the first iteration of SMART in 2015, as a participant in the course, reflects on his early transition from being a participant in the SMART programme to joining its team within a year of graduating. Initially flattered and excited by the invitation, he accepted eagerly. However, when attending the next cohort's final session at IIT Bombay, wherein he gave feedback to the participants, he began to feel conflicted as he felt a lack of application of the teachings to his own group, Tadpole Repertory. This internal conflict stayed with Neel throughout his involvement in the SMART team, even after he became a core team member. Although he shared his concerns once or twice with Sameera and Ashish, it remained a source of discomfort. He does not blame SMART for this, but rather recognises it as a shortcoming in his own journey, wishing he had taken more time to reflect and mature as a practitioner before stepping into a teaching role. In hindsight, Neel feels he should have remained a student of SMART's pedagogy for longer, allowing his practice to align more fully with the values he was helping to promote. Needless to say, his reflections underscore the importance of lived experience, humility, and readiness in stepping into positions of guidance and leadership.

Ashish Mehta describes his involvement in the ITF and later in SMART as primarily administrative and coordination-based. Initially, he and Choiti Ghosh, a theatre practitioner who later became a participant in the course, managed the ITF office in a part-time capacity. They handled tasks like record keeping, organising meetings, and maintaining office operations. When SMART emerged, Ashish transitioned to managing the SMART office as a project coordinator.

[25]" Minutes from Meetings in April and August 2015," SMART Archives, accessed on 12-10-2024.
[26] Neel Chaudhuri, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 05-08-2024.

Ashish's responsibilities included following up with a remotely working core team, maintaining timelines, coordinating meetings, managing schedules and budgets, and keeping the programme infrastructure functional. According to him, ITF, which was never a formal body but a loose collective, gradually took a backseat, especially as members grew occupied with their own commitments. Eventually, Junoon came on board to manage SMART's operations more formally. Ashish later joined the core team and also became a facilitator and mentor, continuing his involvement in a strategic capacity. Apart from his experience with SMART, Ashish has had a long experience as an actor & technical director with the Pune-based contemporary theatre organisation, Aasakta Kalamanch.

Menaka describes her involvement with SMART as beginning peripherally during the first foundation course around 2014–15, when she was invited to present a case study on individual donor fundraising through the 'Friends of IFA 'initiative. Though initially not part of the core team, she participated as a facilitator and mentor, guiding one or two theatre groups during the first two editions of SMART. In 2017, her role deepened as she formally joined the core team during the SMART on Wheels phase, contributing more actively to the programme's pedagogy and design. She also helped prepare sessions with Arundhati and later facilitated sessions herself, focusing on communication, fundraising, and strategic planning. When SMART began, Menaka was Head- Resource Moblisation and Outreach at IFA. She became IFA's Executive Director in 2023.

As we see, the second line of leadership entered through diverse backgrounds associated with theatre. SMART as a platform allowed them to explore and redefine their relationship with theatre in some sense.

Funding SMART

SMART drew support from a range of national and international sources over its ten-year journey. In its formative years, especially during early conversations of a management programme/course for theatre at ITF, the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS), a Dutch development organisation, funded early gatherings and the exploratory India tour by Milena Dragićević Šešić that helped her research on theatre in India and shape SMART's early pedagogy. In the early years, the National Culture Fund (NCF) was approached, but no funding was secured. However, with the help of Naveen Kishore, Director Seagull Foundation, the Norwegian Embassy was successfully introduced, leading to fruitful conversations. Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi also showed interest in SMART, along with Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) and the Bajaj Group, who committed support in the programme's first and second years. For the two residential courses, SMART received funding and in-kind support from diverse donors: the programme had secured funding commitments and support from the Norwegian Royal Embassy, Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller

Bhavan New Delhi, IL&FS, and Bajaj Group. Additionally, the programme got venue support for the Final Workshop of the residential courses (and Graduation) from Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai, G5A Foundation and Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT Mumbai. Additionally, Indigo Airlines offered a discount on flight bookings, Fireflies provided a venue discount for the Foundation Course, and the Italian Embassy and British Council, Wales, UK, each supported the travel of a key speaker of evening addas, over the two years.[27]

In its subsequent years, SMART continued to receive support from the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi, through all its avatars, particularly for SMART on Wheels and SMART Workshops. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SMART was able to adapt its programming online, and secured a grant from the International Relief Fund of the German Federal Foreign Office, coordinated in India by the Goethe-Institut. Despite this funding diversity, SMART remained modest in scale. Much of its success was made possible through the voluntary contributions of its core team, facilitators, and mentors, who consistently offered their time and labour with very little financial compensation.

Outreach

From the outset, the team discussed and implemented a variety of outreach measures. The press release for the 2015 course was discussed at length in a meeting in 2014 with Sanjna and Sameera as persons-in-charge for publicity and outreach.[28] A film was created with support from Sunil to expand reach in 2015.[29] Subsequent strategies for outreach, such as collaboration with National School of Drama[30] or regional partners for SMART on Wheels or SMART Workshops, were discussed collectively and implemented. Regional outreach often meant translating publicity material or rephrasing versions to suit the flavour of the place. For example, Neel drafted a concise version, and Rupali created a Marathi catchline for the Pune SMART workshop in 2018.[31]

The SMART outreach strategy leveraged public dialogue with corporate and civic leaders to advocate for the arts as essential to urban development and community well-being. Curated by Sanjna Kapoor, a series of six high-profile conversations between business leaders and each of the core team members were published in Business Standard. These interviews included voices like S. Ramadorai (former CEO and MD of Tata Consultancy Services), Hari Sankaran (former IL&FS vice-chairman), Rajeev Dubey (former Chairman of Mahindra Insurance Brokers Ltd,

[27]"Interim Report of Strategic Management of the Art of Theatre (SMART) 2015 Programme," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[28]" SMART meeting MINUTES 15 January 2014," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[29]" Minutes of SMART final meeting August 2015," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[30]" 20180826 MoM Sudhanva Neel Rupali," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[31]" 20181022 MOM Sanjna Neel Sudhu," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

Mahindra Steel Service Centre Ltd and Mahindra First Choice Wheels Ltd), Nachiket Mor (former National Director at Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and former board member at Reserve Bank of India), Priya Paul (chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels) and Hari Bhartia (Co-chairman and founder of the Jubilant Bhartia Group). These conversations explored the intersections between theatre and leadership, infrastructure, urban planning, and corporate responsibility.

Although SMART had online presence since the beginning, newer digital outreach strategies were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Menaka took on public relations and outreach responsibilities with support from Sudhanva.[32] For SMART In The Round, Neel took on communication and outreach, designing promotional materials with input from Rupali, Darshana, and Ashish.[33] A need for strong publicity, planning a series of announcements with clear themes, media outreach, and connections with theatre departments across India was felt.[34]

The Two Surveys

Between 31st December 2009 and 16th January 2010, an initiative was launched by the ITF to deepen the sector's engagement with theatre management. This two-part effort involved a national tour by Milena and a three-day roundtable conference in Mumbai. Milena's travels took her across Delhi, Chennai, Pondicherry, Bangalore, Kanchipura, Heggodu and Mumbai, where she met with some of the country's most influential theatre organisations and individuals, including Adishakti, JANAM, Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, Prithvi Theatre, Kattaikkuttu Sangam, Ninasam, and Ranga Shankara. These field visits were guided by a comprehensive and in-depth questionnaire created by Milena, designed to probe not only the operational structures but also the philosophical underpinnings of Indian theatre. The questionnaire was an open-ended, reflective tool divided into seven sections, inviting responses on mission and aims, artistic and socio-political values, programming choices, and decision-making frameworks.[35] The questionnaire also probed responses on the strategies that participants employed for securing sponsorships and ensuring financial stability. Audience development questions sought to uncover target demographics, loyalty, engagement strategies, educational outreach, and attendance trends. Marketing and PR inquiries assessed promotional strategies, budget allocation, pricing policies, branding efforts, and media communication. Finally, the questionnaire addressed collaboration—

[32]" 20200512 Re-defined roles and responsibilities of the SMART team," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[33]" 20200915 SIR 1 meeting," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[34]" 20210621 Minutes of Meeting to discuss Next Steps and SIR," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[35]" Theatre Survey 2009," SMART Archives, accessed on 12-10-2024.

both local and international—by asking about networks, partnerships, and sectoral cooperation. Overall, the questionnaire provided a structured framework to understand how Indian theatre organisations function, adapt, and sustain themselves.

The responses revealed diverse models of practice and sustainability. Most theatre organisations defined their mission in terms of building professional artistic practices, fostering community engagement, or promoting socio-political awareness through performance. Some prioritised creating sustained access to high-quality theatre or developing contemporary, research-driven performance languages, while others emphasised on democratic values, public education, and cultural dialogue. Programming structures also varied, from multilingual seasonal and annual festivals to street plays and issue-based productions. Content decisions were often made collectively, though typically guided by artistic directors or core teams. Organisations functioned under different legal identities, such as private companies, charitable trusts, or registered societies, with many relying on a combination of part-time staff, freelancers, and volunteers. Financial models were similarly diverse, ranging from corporate sponsorships and performance income, to public grants and donations from audiences and well-wishers. Despite some stability in seed funding or ticket revenues, most faced precarious and unpredictable financial conditions, leading to efforts in fundraising, selling merchandise, commercial services, and initiating educational initiatives. Audience development remained a core concern, approached through workshops, outreach programmes, and affordable pricing, though loyalty schemes were rare. Marketing strategies ranged from informal word-of-mouth, to structured multi-channel campaigns involving print, digital, and broadcast media. This typically used around 10–15% of the overall budget. Collaborative work, both local and international, was widely acknowledged as crucial for sharing resources, expanding networks, and innovating artistic practices. Many groups were members of informal or formal cultural forums, and several had developed educational wings or outreach components that contribute to sustaining both creative practice and community relevance. Overall, the responses revealed a sector that is vibrant and imaginative, yet navigating significant structural and economic challenges.

This survey was followed by a meeting to discuss management in the performing arts between 14th and 16th January 2010. Held in Mumbai and hosted by Prithvi Theatre, this meeting brought together 26 participants[36] to explore the need for an India-specific Theatre Arts

[36] Participants as given in the "Report Arts Management 2009" in SMART Archives include Akshara K V (Ninasam, Heggodu), Anurupa Roy & Pawan Waghmare (Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, Delhi), Arundhati Nag & Gayathri Krishna (Ranga Shankara, Bangalore) (were only able to be present on opening day), Ashish Rajadhyaksha (SRTT), Ashok Tiwari, Komita Dhanda, Moloyashree Hashmi & Sudhanva Deshpande (Jana Natya Manch, Delhi), Choiti Ghosh & Saurabh Nayyar (ITF), Hanne M. de Bruin & P Rajagopal (Kattaikkuttu Sangam, Kanchipuram), Jehan Maneckshaw & Sharvari Sastry (Theatre Professionals, Mumbai), Padmini Chettur (Padmini Chettur Dance Academy, Chennai), Rajendran Nathan (HIVOS) & Felencia Oktaria Hutabarat (HIVOS Indonesia), Ruchira Das & Vikram Iyengar (Ranan, Kolkata), Lalit Sathe, Sameera Iyengar & Sanjna Kapoor (Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai), Shaili Sathyu (Gillo, Mumbai), Surendra Rao (Samudaya, Bangalore), Toral Shah (Q Theatre Productions & Thespo, Mumbai).

Management programme. Key goals of the meeting were tentatively drawn by Milena and included designing short- and long-term training programmes, setting up systems for continuous professional development, and addressing ethical questions around management in the arts. Participants envisioned creating a series of books on Indian arts management practices, a knowledge and skills database, and accredited platforms for internships and consultancy. About eight months later, in Belgrade, Sanjna and Milena developed follow-up plans: a leadership workshop for theatre managers, scholarships to Belgrade University's Arts Management course for the workshop participants, and internship exchanges amongst Indian organisations. A parallel policy research programme was also proposed to better understand the impact of government policies on the arts.

It was in late 2012 when Sameera and Arundhati discovered their shared passion for addressing this need that the conversation was revived. In January 2013, Sameera invited Arundhati to an ITF core team meeting where Arundhati conducted a workshop for ITF members. Based on the discussions, a detailed survey was designed to validate the workshop findings and mobilise support for developing a theatre management course. The survey, distributed across the ITF database, received responses from 68 theatre groups, the majority of whom expressed support for both the identified needs and the proposed course design.[37] The survey was called 'What Does Theatre in India Need?'. The 68 respondents belonged to different art organisations, groups, or were individuals related to the arts. The survey began by acknowledging that theatre-makers often struggle with aspects outside their core creative practice, like in administration, fundraising, communication, and audience engagement, and that while experts exist in these domains, their methods often don't align with the realities of theatre groups in India. The survey was structured into seven core areas: Group Sustainability, Audience Building, Communications, Fundraising, Financial Management, Administration, and Building Shared Spaces. Each category offered specific subtopics, ranging from accessing legal, technical, and creative expertise, building long-term financial security, creating performance opportunities and engaging media, to documentation, outreach strategies, fundraising techniques/methods, financial planning, people management, and developing shared physical and intellectual spaces. The survey also included open sections for participants to suggest other focus areas and reflect on how such a programme could address their specific needs. This survey laid the foundation for the SMART programme by gathering ground-level insight into the structural challenges faced by theatre in India.

The responses revealed artistic and ideological commitments across a wide spectrum of Indian performance groups and individuals. Each participant expressed a vision rooted in distinct traditions, diverse methodologies, and various modes of social engagement. This diversity also extended to their administrative models, ranging from informal collectives driven by ideological commitment to formal institutions with structured planning and salaried staff. Some operated

[37]" Theatre Survey SMART ITF 2013," SMART Archives, accessed on 12-10-2024.

through tight-knit core teams that expanded as per project needs, while others relied on individual initiative and occasional collaborations. Funding the performing arts emerged as a persistent challenge, with most respondents navigating a precarious terrain of project-based models. While a few relied on grants, ticket revenue, or donor networks, others sometimes rejected certain funding streams on the basis of ideological grounds, opting instead for community support or international partnerships. Even those with relative financial stability reported constant negotiation between creative ambition and economic feasibility. Audience development strategies were just as varied. Some organisations prioritised education and long-term engagement, often positioning their performances as cultural tools. Others used festivals or mailing lists to attract diverse city audiences. Independent practitioners acknowledged limited visibility among audiences, and some politically aligned groups engaged directly with the working-class or activist communities. Marketing efforts were similarly diverse. While some groups had access to professional media and PR networks, others relied on visual documentation, word-of-mouth, or event-focused outreach. Trust, peer networks, and visibility within cultural circuits proved more influential than mass media in many cases. Collaboration—both national and international—was a significant area of strength. Even solo practitioners sought deeper collaborations within India to complement their global engagements. Despite these variations, the responses shared a common desire: to move beyond just survival and towards sustainability through community-developed, contextually-sensitive models of arts management.

The two surveys offer complementary insights into the landscape of arts practice in India. Given the constraints within which almost all theatre organisations and individuals function, the responses to the two questionnaires highlight the urgency for systemic frameworks that nurture reflective practitioners across career stages. While they map diverse administrative models, funding strategies, and audience engagement methods, they also underscore the shared precarity and the collective desire for sustainable, self-determined arts ecosystems. Together, the two surveys revealed a sector requiring capacity-building that can support both individual and collective artistic futures, which became a guideline for designing SMART.

Designing SMART

SMART's pedagogy was created collectively by the initial core team—Sameera, Arundhati, Sanjna, Sudhanva, Sunil and Swati—with significant input from Milena. She not only helped shape the course curriculum, but also mentored the team during its early years and in fact, coined the name 'SMART 'with the team's approval. According to Milena, the ones who were going to become the facilitators of the theatre management programme came up with their own tools since there were no universal models in this field. She also brought in case studies that she shared with the team of facilitators, which included the International Council of Museums (ICOM), Vishtynetsky Ecological and Historical Museum (Kaliningrad region, Russia), ODA Theatre (Pristina, Kosovo), Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (Belgrade, Serbia), and Exodos

Festiva (Ljubljana, Slovenia). A workshop was organised on April 5 and 6, 2013, in Delhi, aiming to finalise the framework for the SMART programme[38]. The agenda revolved around conceptualising the programme's core values and aims, drafting a pedagogic methodology, and creating a comprehensive schedule. Discussions also covered identifying potential facilitators, outlining the application and selection process, defining roles and responsibilities for the core team and the course director, and addressing critical aspects like facilitator training, budgets, timelines, and venue logistics. The participants, including Arundhati, Sameera, Sudhanva, and Sanjna, were led by Milena. It was in this meeting that the team unanimously voted for Sameera to serve as the course director for SMART.

According to Sameera,[39] one of the central objectives of the SMART programme was helping theatre practitioners become more *effective*, not just *efficient*. The course emphasised the "why"—encouraging groups to identify and stay rooted in their vision of doing theatre, especially when faced with the pressures of survival. Rather than offering a standard toolkit or set of instructions, SMART was designed as a thinking course. As Sameera puts it, "We are not interested in telling them how to function. We are interested in giving them some tools with which they can ask questions of themselves."[40] Every managerial choice—from funding to partnerships—was to be guided by this core purpose. The course deliberately avoided one-size-fits-all solutions, recognising the diversity of regional contexts and audience in India. Instead, SMART provided frameworks to help practitioners think critically and build their own context-specific practices. Sameera highlights that the participants often returned to their groups with radically new perspectives which would even cause internal conflict, but ultimately lead to meaningful transformations: new formations, sharper articulations of intent, and in some cases, disbanding and re-forming based on a deeper clarity of purpose. Arundhati explains that a core part of SMART's design involved *unpacking* the term 'management 'to make it resonate with the realities of theatre arts practice.[41] She explains, "The word management has that burden, because we have taken it from business… But if we try and remove the corporate baggage from it… We all manage our lives, manage our work, manage our homes."[42] SMART thus redefined management not as a business import but as an organic, embedded practice already present in theatre-making, rooted in lived experience and collective resourcefulness. This shift helped shape a vision of arts management that was ideologically aligned with the theatre groups it served, drawing lessons from within the arts and nonprofit sectors rather than imposing external frameworks. Arundhati tells us that the SMART team came together with diverse backgrounds,

[38]" Interim Report of Strategic Management of the Art of Theatre (SMART) 2015 Programme," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.
[39] Sameera Iyengar, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 01-07- 2024.
[40] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.
[41] Arundhati Ghosh, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 26-07-2024.
[42] Ibid.

ideologies, and experiences in the arts. Each member—Sunil, Swati, Sudhanva, Sanjna, Sameera, and Arundhati herself—had different visions and contributions, leading to rich internal debates, especially around terms like ʻprofessional ʼand ʻamateur ʼtheatre. These conversations shaped the evolving identity of the programme.

SMART's focus on a certain kind of theatre group—those in need of support, but not necessarily part of the mainstream professional circuit—was not fixed from the outset. As Arundhati reflects, "a lot of what I'm saying today is my learning of being in the group [SMART]."[43] The target audience was clarified over time after much internal debating, partly through experience and partly by observing who actually responded to the programme's call. She notes how while some groups which expected to benefit did not apply, others from outside the theatre, especially from the dance community, expressed strong interest, indicating a wider relevance. The programme's audience, then, was not just defined top-down, but shaped organically. Sunil[44] tells us that his experience of launching Tamasha Theatre, moving away from large-scale productions with Arpana[45] to explore a more agile, intimate, and audience-connected practice, informed his thinking around SMART. He felt that the SMART initiative resonated deeply with this shift. He appreciated that SMART emphasised responsibility and self-reflection over just offering solutions. Sunil also valued SMART's focus on detailing and aligning artistic vision with theatre management. For him, theatre that claims to be democratic must also be managed democratically. He took on the ʻVision, Mission, Core Values ʼsessions because these were questions that his own practice regularly grappled with. His goal was to push theatre-makers, especially younger ones, to move beyond instinctive choices (such as "I liked it") and instead reflect on ʻwhy ʼthey do what they do. He emphasised that a clear vision not only shapes a body of work but also establishes a relationship with the audience that goes beyond individual plays. In his sessions, he used practical tools, like synopses of plays, to initiate discussion and help participants understand each other's perspectives. These discussions set the tone for the entire SMART programme, grounding later questions of fundraising, audience relationships, and ethics (e.g., who one accepts money from). Overall, Sunil saw the process as both an adventure and a responsibility, one that allowed for growth, self-questioning, and community building. At the same time, Sudhanva highlights[46] that a large part of the pedagogy evolved from their practice-based experiences and discussions as a collective working towards the SMART programme.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Sunil Shanbag, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 22-07-2024.

[45] Arpana was founded in 1985 by a group of theatre professionals committed to presenting contemporary theatre to discerning audiences. Over the last twenty-five years, Arpana has staged 30 productions, many of which have had more than fifty performances each in Mumbai and other parts of the country. Arpana has been a regular participant at the prestigious Prithvi International and National Festivals. The company's international profile includes two seasons at the Shakespeare Globe in London and a collaboration with Theatre Freiburg in Germany.

[46] Sudhanva Deshpande, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 08-07-2024.

Talking about management in theatre, he explains that while many people in Indian theatre, for instance, Ashish from Aasakta, perform tasks that require excellent management skills, their roles are more aligned with that of a 'producer 'rather than a dedicated 'manager'. A producer is someone deeply embedded in the creative and logistical processes, often making artistic choices, handling fundraising, coordinating with artists, and ensuring the project gets made. In contrast, a manager is someone who operates from a more structured, institutional position—building administrative frameworks, long-term planning, handling systems, human resources, and operational sustainability. Sunil says, "Where are the professional arts managers in theatre? They just don't exist. You can count them on the fingertips of half a hand."[47] Sudhanva argues that theatre in India has not historically supported or even conceptualised the role of a full-time, professional arts manager. The sector largely relies on individuals taking on multiple overlapping roles out of necessity. As a result, the kind of management training provided by arts management programmes such as the ARThink South Asia (ATSA) often doesn't directly translate to the grassroots, informal, or collective nature of theatre-making in India. Initiated in 2010 by Khoj Studios and supported by the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, ATSA was conceived to build a cadre of arts managers dedicated to capacity-building across South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.[48] While Sudhanva found the programme rigorous and valuable in certain contexts, he pointed out that its top-down approach and focus in arts management courses didn't align with the resource-scarce and project-based nature of most Indian theatre groups. This critique informed SMART's approach: "We had to build a pedagogy that spoke from within theatre, not outside it,"[49] he added. He tells us that SMART's pedagogy therefore emerged from the field itself—peer-led, experience-driven, and reflective of theatre's collaborative ethos. Sudhanva explains, "What I had was experience. What I didn't have was the articulation of that experience as knowledge."[50] SMART sought to offer precisely that: a space to share and build on the tacit knowledge embedded in theatre-making. He gives another example of Neel and the performance space S47 that he managed in New Delhi. Located in a residential basement, S47 posed logistical challenges—parking, visibility, access—which they addressed through consistent email communication with audience. In a session, Sudhanva invited Neel to share how the team refined their messaging over time, developing a signature text to clearly explain the location and facilities. This practical example of theatre-based management stood out for Sudhanva, especially as someone uncomfortable with abstract tools like vision or mission statements. SMART validated the hybrid roles many already occupied—artist, producer, fundraiser, administrator—grounding management training in

[47] Sunil Shanbag, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 22-07-2024.
[48] "ARThinkSouthAsia," Khoj International Artists 'Association, accessed May 23, 2025, https://khojstudios.org/arthink-south-asia/.
[49] Sudhanva Deshpande, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 08-07-2024.
[50] Ibid.

theatre's lived realities. Ashish and Neel both became facilitators and later, core team members of SMART.

As mentioned earlier, Swati had already considered a management programme adapted to India in collaboration with NYU. Her academic training at Harvard Business School and later, consulting experience at McKinsey brought a structured, research-driven approach to the development of SMART. Her early research revealed that a theatre's needs were most of the times, localised. Her exposure to case-based learning at Harvard resonated with SMART's approach of interviewing theatre practitioners and drawing insights from real-world examples. "When they said, let's go and interview people… that made complete sense to me,"[51] she recalls. As a dancer herself, she felt like an outsider to theatre, but this allowed her to ask foundational questions like "what does money mean to you?" and gather stories that bridged personal journeys and organisational realities. Leveraging her prior work in nonprofit capacity-building, she studied best practices—attending Dasra's[52] workshops, reviewing NYU course materials, and benchmarking sector norms. Her goal was to demystify money for theatre practitioners and help them build sustainable practices around it, without losing sight of the lived experiences that shape theatre-making in India.

Sanjna reflected candidly on her experience with SMART, expressing regret over not using more examples from her work at Prithvi Theatre. "That was who I was,"[53] she says, noting that including Prithvi's many failures—and not just its successes—could have offered valuable lessons and prevented others from repeating similar mistakes. She admits that the first year of teaching SMART left her feeling unsure, leading her to opt out of the second year, though she later returned for smaller sessions. She also critiques the internal dynamics of the SMART team, saying, "Our structure was not very cohesive."[54] While she enjoyed the learning process and the research, she believes that more India-specific stories and field surveys would have strengthened SMART: "We didn't have the funding or freedom to travel and gather those stories,"[55] she says, adding that perhaps she wasn't equipped to do that herself. For Menaka Rodriguez, her prior experiences included training with ATSA's 'Train the Trainer 'programme and facilitating the IDEX Fellowship's resource mobilisation lab, which gave her a strong foundation in running workshops for arts and social impact sectors. This prepared her to lead SMART sessions on resource mobilisation, communication, and strategy, especially in the smaller, segmented

[51] Swati Apte, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 24-07-2024.
[52] A strategic philanthropy foundation that nurtures powerful partnerships to help the social sector in India.
[53] Sanjna Kapoor, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 24-07-2024.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

workshops and during the pandemic-era online version, which she co-designed with Sameera and Sunil.

The Legacy

The current SMART core team shares that SMART was effectively born in 2012 from a phone call between Arundhati and Sameera, co-founder of Junoon and part of the ITF. At the time, both had been reflecting on the lack of managerial infrastructure in the arts, particularly for groups that were doing critical work but struggled with survival due to a lack of resources and management strategies. While nonprofits in India had access to fundraising and administrative training, such capacity-building mechanisms were rarely accessible—or even designed—for theatre artists and other arts groups.

This initial idea quickly gained momentum. The founding core team of Arundhati, Sameera, Sanjna, and Sudhanva then invited Milena to guide them. They were joined later by Sunil and Swati. They were followed by a second line of leadership that the earlier team had tried to build—SMART alumni Neel Chaudhuri, Ashish Mehta, who had worked in the SMART office for a while, and Menaka Rodriguez who was a part of SMART from its early conversations and had a background in arts management. Each of these individuals brought a distinct perspective based on their experiences, ranging from street theatre to urban theatre production, from academic frameworks to grassroots organising. This diversity of backgrounds became a strength, enabling SMART to design programmes that were flexible, responsive, and non-prescriptive.

From the outset, SMART refused to define itself as a conventional training course and instead positioned itself as a *thinking course*—a structured process of self-inquiry, reflection, and peer learning. Central to its pedagogy was the idea of *vision*: participants were consistently encouraged to ask themselves, "Why do you do what you do?" This framing helped theatre-makers align their managerial decisions with their core purpose.

The launch of the SMART programme was planned keeping in mind the schedules of festivals and competitions. The application process began on August 4, 2014, with a deadline of September 30, 2014. After publicising the course through direct mailers, press releases, and social media, 46 articles were published across various media outlets to further spread the word. The application process had two stages: an online questionnaire and interviews for shortlisted groups. The questionnaire, created with Prof. Ashwini Deshpande from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, had three purposes in mind, "i) To get the groups to think about and articulate as clearly as possible the current state of their organisation; ii) To set in motion thinking about issues around capacity-building, management, audience development, etc; and iii) To gather information from the field to help us tweak our programme and to overtime develop a

bank of basic data around theatre practice."[56]. A jury, consisting of experienced theatre professionals, including some of the SMART core team members, reviewed applications and conducted online interviews to assess the potential of the groups. Ultimately, 17 groups from 11 cities participated in the course.

The first phase of the course commenced on January 16, 2015. Sunil began with an exploration of vision and core values, encouraging participants to reflect on their group's purpose within theatre and society. Sameera and Sudhanva facilitated a session on group sustainability, emphasising shared leadership and long-term cohesion. Sanjna led a session on audience building, highlighting strategic outreach, though later she noted a need for more varied case studies. Sudhanva's session on communication broadened the participants' perspectives, stressing on all forms of communication as expressions of core values. Swati elucidated financial planning, stressing on realistic budgeting, while Arundhati focused on contextual, system-based fundraising. Sameera's session on administration helped participants evaluate their organisational structures. Milena's strategic planning session offered a global framework for aligning objectives with strategy. The course concluded with participants reflecting on how they would apply their learnings to their own groups. In addition to the core sessions, the Foundation Course featured evening talks, or 'Addas', that brought international perspectives to the table. Australian arts manager and cultural policy practitioner Ruth Bereson's talk on arts management underscored the importance of personal passion in arts administration. Shubham Roychoudhury and Sumana Chandrashekar from IFA shared insights into funding in the arts, revealing how clarity in planning can lead to successful funding applications. Faisal Abu-Alheija and colleagues from the Freedom Theatre Group in Palestine spoke about the role of theatre in war zones, highlighting the life-threatening struggles they face to keep theatre alive. Researcher at the Fitzcarraldo Foundation in Turin, Alessandra Gariboldi's talk on audience engagement offered fresh perspectives on reaching audiences in unexpected places, while Sameera and Sanjna shared their personal experiences in audience building and their journey with Junoon. Finally, Milena's talk on capacity-building in Cambodia illustrated the challenges of developing cultural policy and supporting arts professionals in a complex socio-political environment. The daily review meetings between Milena and the facilitator team allowed for constant adjustments to the course throughout its duration. The course took place at Fireflies, a secluded, green campus near Bangalore.

Phase II of the SMART programme focused on mentorship, where mentors acted as facilitators, provocateurs, anchors, and bridges for the groups as they developed their strategic plans. Mentors were assigned to groups based on factors such as personal interests, language compatibility, and other specific needs. Monthly meetings were scheduled for the groups to

[56]" Interim Report of Strategic Management of the Art of Theatre (SMART) 2015 Programme," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

present updates on their strategic analyses, challenges, and needs, with clear communication expected from them beforehand. The mentorship phase also included periodic check-ins to ensure the groups were making timely progress. The groups were expected to submit a 10-page strategic plan, along with an executive summary, and prepare a presentation for a final workshop in August 2015. This workshop involved a presentation of the strategic plans, peer reviews, and discussions.

The second iteration of SMART followed a similar format. The application process for SMART 2016 began on March 3, 2016, with a deadline of April 10, later extended to April 15, 2016, to accommodate more applicants. The application period was shorter as compared to SMART 2015, which led to 31 additional applications within the final days. Publicity efforts included direct mailers, social media campaigns, and requests for individuals to share in their networks. SMART 2016 also had media coverage, especially in English, although it was felt that further attention to regional language press was needed. The application process followed a two-step approach: an online written application, and interviews for shortlisted groups. In this iteration, applicants were asked to reflect on the commitment required and to have another key member of the group present at interviews. The jury for SMART 2016 used a set of criteria to evaluate applicants, such as the group's professional approach, leadership support, and openness to learning.

The sessions were also named differently this time. For example, the session called 'Why We Do What We Do' by Sunil focused on providing theatre practitioners with essential insights and tools to help them understand and navigate the complexities of managing their theatre groups while staying true to their artistic vision. Participant feedback indicated that they appreciated the clarity it brought to decision-making and the importance of aligning vision with action. However, some felt that more concrete examples, such as vision statements from other groups, would have enhanced the learning experience. Sudhanva's session on communication emphasised the importance of understanding and managing how a theatre group expresses its core values, not just through social media or posters, but through every aspect of the group's operations, including its space and interactions. Avijit Michael contributed to the conversation by focusing on social media's role in modern communication, pointing out the importance of understanding audience demographics and staying updated on platforms that best serve the group's needs. The feedback suggested that while informative, the sessions would have benefited from more real-world examples and practical exercises. The session on financial management, led by Swati, dealt, like the previous time, with managing finances within a theatre group. Once again, many participants felt that more case studies and practical budgeting tools would have been helpful in translating theory into practice. Similarly, in the resource mobilisation session led by Arundhati and Menaka, participants learned to identify and leverage resources beyond money, emphasising the importance of partnerships, relationship-building, and strategic 'asking'. While the session provided valuable insights, many sought more diverse case studies and hands-on

exercises to refine their understanding of resource mobilisation in the context of theatre. The nuts and bolts of administration were tackled in Sameera's session, which aimed to equip participants with the tools necessary to organise and sustain a theatre group. The session focused on group structures, relationships, and administrative planning. It encouraged everyone to evaluate their group's current structure and explore how to align it with their goals, discussing the possibilities and limitations of various organisational forms like trusts and private limited companies. A key takeaway for many was the importance of human values in administration and its potential in creative problem-solving. The ‘Road Ahead ’session, led by Sameera and Milena, provided participants with a strategic planning framework for their groups, from vision and mission development to goal-setting and evaluation.[57] This session was meant to guide the next phase of mentorship, with a focus on long-term strategies. While the participants acknowledged its importance, quite a few of them found the session overwhelming due to its complexity. The facilitators reflected on the need for simpler models and better clarity in terminology to avoid confusion, particularly around terms like ‘criteria ’and ‘indicators’. Sudhanva's session on sustaining a group explored how to create a core group of committed individuals who are deeply invested in the theatre group's long-term success. Daily review meetings allowed the facilitators and mentors to concurrently adjust the course based on participant feedback, ensuring that each session built on the previous ones. Evening ‘Addas ’once again provided a space for guests to share real-world experiences. Sadanand Menon discussed the role of theatre in times of societal violence, emphasising the courage and passion required to create art amid such adversity. He noted how theatre remains a form of rebellion and expression despite multiple challenges. Jonatan Stanczak shared his deep connection to Freedom Theatre in Jenin, Palestine, discussing how theatre serves as a tool for protest and hope in an occupied land. Kully Thiarai, then Artistic Director of National Theatre, Wales, UK, explored the significance of engaging communities and building audiences, highlighting her experience with UK theatres and advocating for the inclusion of communities as essential stakeholders in the artistic process. A panel on funding, moderated by Sanjna, delved into the challenges and realities of fundraising in India, offering perspectives from both grant-makers and artists. To finish, Milena spoke about the transformative power of theatre, focusing on how art can move from individual memories to collective societal narratives and encouraging audiences to reflect politically and ethically. Once again, the secluded Fireflies venue, surrounded by nature, contributed to participants bonding through informal activities like singing and dancing in the evenings.

Mentorship followed the 10-day residential programme. The mentor assignments were done to match mentors to groups based on shared understanding of the group's context, philosophy, and needs. During the Foundation Course, mentors met their groups twice, including a session on Day 9 to discuss future plans. Regular communication was encouraged, with groups required to send detailed updates to their mentors before each meeting, including updates on their strategic

[57]“ SMART 2016 Final Narrative Report March 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 12-10-2024.

analysis, challenges faced, ongoing activities, and areas where they needed guidance. The two-day Final Workshop, set for December 8-9, 2016, at IIT Bombay, featured the participating groups presenting their three-year strategic plans. A graduation ceremony followed, with a party inviting present and potential funders, cultural personalities, and media.

The SMART programme never came back to its longer course iterations (as in 2015 & 2016), primarily because of budget constraints. Between 2017-18, the SMART programme was reconsidered in its approach, logistics, and impact, starting with a meeting at Max Mueller Bhavan in New Delhi. SMART sought to increase accessibility and reach more practitioners, especially in non-urban areas leading to the creation of SMART on Wheels, an ambitious outreach exercise that travelled to 7 cities across India including Bikaner, Agartala, Patna, Bareilly, Pune, Mumbai, and Delhi, with significant participation and a focus on ensuring the presence of decision-makers from each group. The aim was to take SMART to places where theatre practitioners might not have the resources to travel to or commit to longer residencies. This phase of SMART was designed to spark conversation, build networks, and begin long-term relationships with regional theatre groups.

Building on this momentum, SMART launched a series of SMART Workshops (2018–2020) in five towns/cities—Bangalore (Karnataka), Bikaner (Rajasthan), Madhyamgram (West Bengal), Mulanthuruthy (near Kochi, Kerala), and Pune (Maharashtra). These were compact, three-day versions of the original course, tailored to meet the needs of local groups. SMART partnered with local arts organisations to host these workshops, which allowed them to engage smaller, rural, or regionally rooted theatre practitioners. By this point, SMART had developed a reputation for being accessible and respectful of the diversity of Indian theatre practices.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, SMART, like most arts initiatives worldwide, was forced to adapt rapidly. Recognising that artists were struggling to make sense of this unprecedented global shift, the team launched SMART In The Round, an online series of six reflective conversations on theatre practice ranging from talking about freedom of expression, to navigating the pandemic, and its impact on theatre practice. These conversations were not positioned as webinars or lectures. but as intimate, peer-led dialogues that kept the SMART spirit of community alive, even during lockdown.

In addition, a SMART Online Workshop was developed to help theatre practitioners respond to the changed world, bringing back the course's key themes—vision, sustainability, and ethics—in a virtual format. Around this time, SMART also commissioned 20 case studies of theatre groups from across the country in order to create a corpus of material for pedagogy. These in-depth studies offered valuable insights into how different organisations had evolved their practices over time, and how management decisions were deeply tied to artistic identity, social contexts, and political values.

Ashoke Chatterjee was brought on board to be the external evaluator for the two SMART Courses 2015 and 2016. He is a distinguished design and development professional with a diverse background spanning engineering, civil service, tourism, and over 25 years at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, where he served in multiple leadership roles.[58] He became involved in SMART through his association with IFA, motivated by his belief in integrating management thinking into the performing arts. In general, he observed a resistance among young artists towards accountability, with some feeling that financial discipline and structured management were contrary to creative freedom. His goal was to dismantle this divide and demonstrate that being "SMART" about one's practice doesn't mean selling out but instead ensuring sustainability. He emphasised the importance of accountability—not just to funders, but to the artistic community itself. As an external evaluator to SMART, he advocated for both quantitative and qualitative indicators to help theatre groups measure their progress meaningfully. He encouraged artists to reflect on and articulate the changes their work creates—on audiences, communities, or the cultural ecosystem—and to communicate those impacts clearly. According to him, management in the arts should be context-specific and artist-led, with each group developing its own benchmarks. Ashoke also highlighted the value of 'caselets'—short experiential narratives that allowed groups to reflect, analyse, and learn from others' decision-making processes. In this regard, he speaks highly of the practitioners 'role in SMART, for instance Sunil's interventions in developing context-specific management tools for the performing arts. Ashoke believed that people like Sunil were essential for creating meaningful and relevant teaching tools, noting that "they should be the ones who actually decide what is a case, how to put it down, and how to use it" given the extensive experience that someone like Sunil had in running a show and a theatre group.[59] On mentorship, he viewed the six-month handholding as critical, noting that real transformation requires sustained guidance. However, building a diverse and committed mentor pool remained a challenge in SMART, according to him. SMART, he noted, also addressed tensions between personal careers and collective aspirations in theatre. Discussions often circled around sustainability, team cohesion, and survival. Ultimately, he believed that SMART helped develop a reflective, arts-specific management culture, but its future required continuity, investment in mentorship, and adaptive outreach.

A significant number of participant groups across the programme remain active and continue to contribute to their respective local theatre scenes. Groups like Gillo Theatre Repertory, Third Space Collective, Tram Theatre, The Patchworks Ensemble, and Kattaikkuttu Sangam are steadily producing performances, workshops, and international collaborations. Some groups such as Expression Lab and Khula Aasman (now Kalavkaash) have expanded their operations, while

[58] Ashoke Chatterjee, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 11-08-2024.
[59] Ashoke Chatterjee, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 11-08-2024.

others like Jana Natya Manch and Kusumagraj Pratishthan continue with long-standing reputations. Atelier has maintained a consistent presence, even evolving into a new residency format. However, certain groups appear inactive or possibly closed. A few collectives have restructured or undergone leadership changes, such as Indianostrum, Ranan, and Untitled Arts, while others like Natak Company have seen key members depart but continue functioning. In the following sections, we will examine the impact of the SMART programme on the overall growth and transformation of several of these groups based on in-depth interviews conducted with them.

After more than a decade of programming, reflection, and impact, the SMART core team made the decision to bring the initiative to a close in 2023. The reasons were both practical and philosophical. The pandemic had changed the landscape of theatre and altered how groups functioned. At the same time, sustaining SMART as a voluntary, collective effort had become increasingly difficult. Rather than institutionalising the initiative—which would have gone against its spirit—the team chose to conclude it with care and intention.

Before closing, SMART commissioned this impact study to reflect on its legacy, identify takeaways, and explore how the conversations it initiated might continue in other forms. In this impact study, the aim is to understand SMART's effect at three key levels: individual practitioners, theatre groups, and the broader ecosystem of theatre in India. At the individual level, SMART trained participants to think strategically, rooted in both practical realities and larger political and ethical contexts of working in theatre. The study explores what these learnings were and whether these have stayed with participants, even as they moved beyond their original groups. At the group level, SMART encouraged internal conversations that often remained unspoken—around leadership, finances, vision, and sustainability—by offering frameworks and a safe space for self-examination and planning. At the ecosystem level, SMART introduced the idea of management—a term often met with resistance in artistic spaces—into the wider discourse in a grounded and non-corporate way, helping theatre practitioners see it as a form of intention and not control.

The impact study also focuses inward, examining how the process shaped the facilitators and core team members. Each brought their own perspective to the pedagogy, and in designing sessions and mentoring groups, they grew alongside the programme. The study will explore how this collective model of working influenced their personal practices and how SMART's learnings carried into their other roles in the arts. Finally, while SMART had notable success, the team acknowledges its limitations in reach and scale. The study will try to assess where the programme fell short and how those reflections might guide future initiatives.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

This impact study of the SMART programme was conducted through a mixed-methods approach. Primary data was gathered mainly through 39 in-depth interviews with participants, facilitators, collaborators, and mentors who had engaged with the programme across its iterations. These interviews explored personal experiences, challenges, and the perceived effectiveness of the programme. Two sets of core interview questionnaires were developed – one for the core team and other members in SMART, and the other for the participants in the SMART long-format programmes and workshops. For each interview, additional questions were added to the core questionnaire to capture the specific context of each participant and group. For instance, questions were added based on a reading of the strategic plans submitted by the group, an understanding of the group's SMART experience from the reports of mentors, the external evaluator and other core team members, and the current status of the group's work. Similarly, for interviews with the SMART team members, questions were added based on the nature of their participation in SMART gathered from the SMART archives in the form of reports and minutes, as well as from an understanding of the duration of their association and current engagement with SMART. The core questionnaires for the interview with SMART team members and participants, as well as the details of all interview respondents, are given in the appendix.

All the interviews were recorded with the verbal consent of interviewees, except for one where consent was not given. Extensive notes were taken during the interviews by all members of the research team, and these were exchanged and discussed thoroughly. A significant number of interviews with core team members and participants were also transcribed verbatim. We undertook qualitative coding of the notes and transcripts using a social constructivist approach[60] to derive relevant interpretive themes from the data.[61] The themes that emerged from our analysis form the crux of the findings presented in this study. We sought consent from interview respondents for using personally identifiable information, including their names, group names, and locations of work. In some cases, interviewees did not grant such consent. Accordingly, we have anonymised these participants in this report.

Apart from the above, Google Forms surveys were distributed to gather insights into the changes observed in the participants 'practices and their group dynamics post-SMART. Two surveys were created, one for the participants of the long-format SMART courses and one for the attendees of the SMART workshops. The questionnaires for the long-format course participants

[60] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2014).

[61] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

and the workshop participants, as well as the details of all survey respondents are given in the appendix. However, we were unable to get a good response from the surveys. Case studies of selected theatre groups who attended the programme in its first two long-format iterations provide detailed narratives of transformation in the individual participants and their groups, illustrating how different contexts influenced the programme's outcomes, while also showing how many of these changes were implicit. These are also included in the appendix.

Archival material encompasses programme documentation, strategic plans, session feedback forms, and minutes of meetings of the SMART team as well as the ITF team that were shared with us through a Google Drive link called SMART Archives. These helped ensure a comprehensive understanding of the programme's nature and impact. Documentation of the SMART process has not been smooth, and various gaps are evident when one goes through the many files in the archive. We have been in touch with the documentation and archive team of SMART in order to navigate these gaps. Online recordings of the ITF programmes available on Pad.ma, as well as material on Junoon and SMART on YouTube have also been beneficial.

This methodological framework, based on primary, secondary, and archival data, allowed us to identify recurring themes, evaluate the programme's successes and limitations, and draw insights that might be useful for future iterations, if at all. By collecting rigorous data in the form of interviews, the research aims to provide a nuanced evaluation of the programme's influence on its various participants as well as India's larger theatre ecosystem. However, one limitation of our methodology has been our inability to engage in any form of ethnographic technique, as a result of which we were unable to observe the participants and their groups in action today. We were, however, partly able to resolve that through navigating their social media presence and engagements.

Chapter 3 – Evaluating the Impact

This section of the report presents a comprehensive analysis of the SMART programme's impact across its various formats. The initiative, which evolved from an intensive 10-day residential course into a broader, multi-format programme, was designed to strengthen the strategic, managerial, and reflective capacities of theatre practitioners across India. The analysis is organised according to the programme's four major formats:

1. **SMART Courses (2015 & 2016):** These intensive courses emphasised immersive learning, sustained mentorship, and strategic planning.
2. **SMART on Wheels (2017–2018)**: A mobile, one-day outreach initiative designed to extend SMART's reach to smaller towns and underrepresented theatre communities.
3. **SMART Workshops (2018–2020):** A condensed three-day format focused on providing foundational management insights and tools to a broader participant base.
4. **SMART Online (2021–2022)**: Introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this digital adaptation included two components:
    - **Online Workshop**: A three-day structured course delivered virtually, continuing SMART's core focus on theatre management.
    - **SMART In The Round**: An online conversation series offering space for reflection, dialogue, and discussing contemporary challenges and evolving theatre practices.

This analysis draws on in-depth interviews, programme archives, and participant feedback to understand how different elements of SMART were received and interpreted across contexts.

SMART Courses (2015 and 2016)

The first two editions of SMART—held in 2015 and 2016—played an important role in introducing structured approaches to strategic thinking in theatre. Designed as intensive capacity-building programmes, both iterations were structured around a three-phase format: a ten-day residential Foundation Course in Bangalore, a sustained Mentorship Phase, and a Final Workshop for peer review and reflection. Across both years, 34 theatre groups—carefully selected to reflect diversity in language, form, region, and ideology—participated with a total of 57 individuals.[62]

SMART 2015 established the core structure and pedagogy of the programme. The Foundation Course introduced participants to strategic thinking through sessions on vision and core values, group sustainability, audience building, communications, financial management, resource mobilisation, administration, and strategic planning. Evenings were devoted to 'addas' that expanded perspectives through national and international voices. The mentorship phase enabled participants to contextualise these learnings within their specific group realities. The final workshop was a space of honest exchange and feedback, and visible transformation: nearly all groups presented strategic plans, and a strong network of mutual support and collaboration emerged.

SMART 2016 built on this structure and sharpened its processes. Participants arrived with clearer expectations, mentors reported a more focused and effective engagement. While the Foundation Course followed a similar design, new emphasis was placed on using each module as a building block towards a comprehensive strategic plan. The mentorship phase was essential to the programme's impact. The final workshop again featured presentations from the participating groups, each sharing the plans they had developed over the course of the programme. These presentations reflected the varied approaches and journeys of the groups, and opened up space for rich discussions on theatre practice, planning, and long-term vision.

Across both years, SMART supported internal reflection within individual groups and encouraged conversations around sustainability, leadership, and the long-term theatre practice. The impact of the first two editions is explored in greater detail below. It is organised into three sections: the first focuses on the impact on individual participants; the second examines the evolving relationship between participants and the management of their groups; and the third considers the broader impact on the groups themselves. This analysis draws on in-depth interviews with participants from several groups, discussions with the SMART core team and

[62] " SMART 2015 Final Report Nov 2015" and "SMART 2016 Final Narrative Report March 2017", SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

mentors, reviews of programme archives—including strategic plans and feedback from mentors and evaluators—and information shared by interviewees on recent developments in their work.

Impact on individual participants

A safe space fostering deep connections

Before attending the SMART 10-day residential course, several participants admitted feeling a sense of apprehension. The core team's strong reputation in the theatre world led some applicants to feel they had to prove their worth during the selection process. Neel, for instance, recalled his SMART Course 2015 interview, saying, "I wanted to impress this person—not just to get into SMART, but because they're such an influential figure in the theatre space."[63] However, the interviewers approached the process with an open and empathetic mindset, aiming to understand the applicants and their work rather than asserting authority. Most participants described the experience not as a high-pressure interview, but as an informal and welcoming conversation where they felt at ease talking about their work.

Many participants did not even recall the selection process as a formal interview at all. Instead, they remembered short yet meaningful conversations that helped them reflect on where they stood in their theatre practice. In contrast to more hierarchical spaces in the theatre world, where newcomers often feel like outsiders, SMART's informal approach offered an early glimpse into the programme's core values—openness, trust, and accessibility.

Still, for participants from smaller towns or less-connected backgrounds, there was initial intimidation, especially upon arrival at Fireflies, the programme venue. While some already knew members of the core team, others felt like they were stepping into a space where they didn't belong. One participant expressed a worry that the programme might turn out to be prescriptive—a one-way flow of information from experts to learners. But once it began, many of these concerns faded. The atmosphere at Fireflies, built on mutual respect and informal interaction, helped bridge perceived hierarchies.

Over time, participants described the programme as a space where they could express themselves without fear of judgment. The immersive and residential format nurtured bonds that extended beyond the programme itself. as can be seen in this report. A participant shared that simply sharing space with theatre groups from across the country—and being in conversation with seasoned facilitators—was one of the most valuable aspects of the entire experience.

Connecting People and Building Collaborations

[63] Neel Chaudhuri, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 05-08-2024.

The diversity of participants at SMART allowed practitioners to get a view of theatre practice beyond just their own. For many participants, it was the first time they encountered such different theatre practices. While they may have seen other performances at festivals or events, SMART offered a unique opportunity to understand the inner workings of various groups—from newly formed collectives to decades-old institutions; from rural-based troupes to urban travelling companies; from groups focused on children to organisations that served as hosting platforms.

One urban-based participant was surprised to learn how thriving and commercially viable theatre could be in rural regions. Another found themselves rethinking the idea that theatre must always be presentational, opening up to the idea of theatre as deeply interactional. These revelations were often eye-opening for the participants. Several participants shared how this exposure widened their thinking and offered them practical alternatives they hadn't previously considered.

The ability to connect with other professionals is especially valuable for theatre artists. As core team member Sunil observed, theatre practitioners often work in isolation, deeply engaged in their own creative process. One participant, who had been developing his practice independently for over a decade, expressed a keen interest in learning about alternative 'business models 'and functional approaches used by fellow artists. Others, like Savitri, reflected on the lack of access to formal training or established networks—resources often available to students from institutions like NSD. She said, "See, I don't come from a formal theatre training [background]. Right. So then how do you connect into the larger theatre community?"[64] For her, SMART represented a meaningful opportunity to engage with the broader theatre ecosystem.

Some participants admitted to initially feeling like 'outsiders', but by the end of the programme felt integrated into the artistic community. One participant shared that SMART made her feel like part of something far bigger than her own small theatre practice. Another described how, through SMART, they developed a sense of solidarity with the wider theatre world—understanding that their struggles were shared by many.

The bonds created at SMART were often described as deeper than typical networking interactions. One participant fondly recalled the 'hostel-like 'camaraderie and emphasised that the connections weren't transactional—they were meaningful and long-lasting. Many continue to meet and interact with their SMART peers during visits to other cities. For some, these connections became trusted support systems for artistic and personal challenges. One participant even said that the sheer quality of conversations at SMART made the experience worthwhile, even without the formal learning sessions.

[64] Savitri Medhatul, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 08-08-2024.

SMART's collaborative spirit extended beyond the programme. Several participants went on to initiate projects with each other. Savitri collaborated with a co-participant for performances at the Ranga Shankara Festival and also staged shows at venues like Studio Safdar, managed by fellow SMART alumni. Another participant, while not directly collaborating with his SMART peers, used lessons from the programme to manage a local theatre project with younger artists in his city. He ensured it was inclusive, transparent, and financially sustainable—a mindset he attributed to SMART's teachings.

Others highlighted ongoing collaborations with facilitators as well. One participant hosted a seminar featuring Sunil, who addressed artists in the city and shared his SMART journey and insights. Whether through joint productions, guest performances, or simply showing up to support each other's plays, the ripple effects of the programme were felt clearly.

The long-format version of SMART, though deeply impactful, reached only a small segment of the country's theatre community. The meaningful connections and sense of solidarity it fostered were available only to the select few who had the chance to participate.

Pausing, thinking, articulating the why and dealing with the how

Before attending SMART, many participants found themselves occupied by the daily demands of theatre-making, rarely finding time to reflect on what motivated their work. The inability to clearly articulate the 'why 'behind their practice was a common challenge—one that SMART meaningfully addressed. Neel noted that his group had often overlooked fundamental questions such as "Who are we?" and "What do we do?"[65] While individual members might have had their personal reasons for doing theatre, these were rarely expressed—either at an individual level or collectively within the group. This lack of clarity often led to disagreements about the group's direction and made it difficult for audiences and external stakeholders to grasp the values and identity of the group, as their body of work often appeared incoherent.

SMART created a space where participants could pause and reflect on their practice. Many participants, who earlier juggled theatre alongside other pursuits, began to take their theatrical work more seriously. Savitri shared that the clarity she gained at SMART helped her define her future path more decisively. Prior to SMART, she had been involved in both documentary filmmaking and theatre, but the experience at the programme prompted a stronger commitment to theatre. Komita, a member of a group with a rich and long-standing history, was drawn to SMART because her group wanted to critically revisit its own practices and explore its relevance in contemporary times. SMART pushed her to reconsider their core values and engage in discussions with facilitators and fellow participants. She took these conversations back to her

[65] Neel Chaudhuri, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 05-08-2024.

group, resulting in deep, and at times contentious, internal dialogues that ultimately enriched their collective understanding. A year after completing SMART, Bikram reflected that the programme had enabled his group to put together a much clearer aesthetic identity and make deliberate changes to align with it.

One participant revealed that her group continues to use the vision and mission statements crafted during SMART even eight years later. She mentioned that the foundational philosophy from SMART continues to be passed on to new members. Another participant admitted that his group had previously never engaged with the idea of an explicit vision or mission, but post-SMART, they realised that every performance needed to align with their overarching goals. Prajakta mentioned that SMART instilled in her a habit of asking 'why 'in every aspect of her life—not just as an artist, but also personally. This kind of reflection, and the ability to communicate it effectively, was also emphasised by Ashoke Chatterjee, who believes that SMART played a significant role in fostering a sense of external accountability within the artist community.

While the entire SMART programme encouraged reflection, the session on vision, mission, and core values—facilitated by Sunil—stood out in participants 'memories. Titled 'Why We Do What We Do 'in SMART 2016 and 'Vision and Essential Core Values 'in SMART 2015, this session emerged as the most impactful one across editions, as reflected in detailed participant feedback.. Rupali shared that although she had spent significant time thinking about her group's work, the session revealed how unfocused her ideas had been. She said, "I had a whole lot of thoughts in my mind about what this group should be and should do and all of that. But all my thoughts were scattered…And core value sessions asked very pinpointed questions that prompted me to sieve my thoughts."[66] Sunil's method of structured questioning played a key role in helping her clarify her thinking.

Our study reveals that some groups routinely revisit their vision and mission statements, while others do so much less frequently. Regardless, most participants vividly recall the session and the exercises that forced them to think deeply about who they were and what their group stood for. Beyond defining vision and mission, these sessions—and the broader SMART experience—helped bring implicit values to the surface, encouraging participants to examine and express them more consciously.

One participant shared how, after SMART, her group began embedding their values into everyday decisions and systems. For example, if their plays addressed environmental concerns, they committed to environmentally conscious practices—such as avoiding plastic and minimising waste—especially while traveling for performances, as this participant informed us.

[66] Rupali Bhave, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 21-08-2024.

For many groups, SMART also brought questions of power and hierarchy into sharper focus. Savitri, for instance, was able to clearly articulate the non-negotiables in her theatre practice, especially the importance of artist welfare. Today, she continues to prioritise the financial and emotional well-being of her collaborators when making key decisions.

For another participant, the SMART environment stood in stark contrast to the hierarchical dynamics of her own group, where issues of gender and caste were often ignored. Inspired by her SMART experience, she began to engage more directly with these concerns—especially in how she collaborated with fellow folk artists and represented their work. One participant continues to strive to build an inclusive space within her group, while another, who came to value empathy as a guiding principle after SMART, has made it a point to foster a greater sense of ownership among the younger members of his team.

Neel observed that as theatre groups evolve, they often fall into traditional patterns of power consolidation, with decision-making becoming increasingly centralised. While SMART did not offer prescriptive solutions, it helped him recognise these subtle dynamics within his own group and empowered him to address them head-on.

In many ways, SMART became a catalyst for participants to reflect on the ‘why ’behind their involvement in theatre—helping them define the purpose and direction of their work. Just as significantly, it compelled them to examine the ‘how’—the values and ethics that shaped their processes. Through this dual inquiry, participants began to reimagine their practice in ways that were more intentional, grounded, and true to their evolving vision.

Money Matters

Dealing with money has always been a complex challenge for theatre practitioners. This is not only due to the chronic underfunding of the performing arts in India, but also because of deeply rooted beliefs that artists often hold about money—particularly about their intent, capacity, and willingness to ‘sell ’their work. The SMART core team was acutely aware of this complicated relationship with money from the outset. They knew that the issue needed to be addressed head-on, but with sensitivity appropriate to the typically limited financial resources at artists' disposal.

These concerns were thoughtfully addressed in the Financial Management sessions titled ‘What’s My Bottom Line? ’in SMART 2016 and ‘Financial Management ’in SMART 2015—facilitated by Swati. For many participants, the clarity with which Swati tackled the topic of money and artistic value made it one of the most eye-opening and engaging sessions. Most participants had never previously thought about money in such clear and structured terms.

One of the primary takeaways was the importance of being proactive rather than reactive about financial needs. This meant that artists needed to understand from the very beginning of a project

how much money they would require and how they planned to raise it. Writing down numbers and creating a budget became a critical practice to ensure that financial concerns were not left to chance. Neel reflected that prior to SMART, his group hadn't approached money in a planned way—often adjusting their artistic vision to fit the available funds, rather than defining their budget based on what the work truly needed. Another participant admitted he had never planned financially at all. Dana shared that she had never considered money as particularly significant in her work.

Swati challenged the widespread romanticisation of 'garibi', i.e., poverty in theatre. Sanjna also pointed out that even in urban theatre communities, discussing money is often accompanied by shame or discomfort. Through exercises in Swati's session, participants learned how to create detailed budgets, and many continue to use those templates to this day. These budgeting exercises weren't just about planning—they also helped participants understand and articulate the value of their work, which emerged as another crucial insight from the session.

Often, theatre practitioners avoid making ambitious budgets because they assume the money won't come. While this may be true to some extent, it also reflects a lack of recognition of the value of their artistic labour. One of the central concepts Swati introduced was 'true value'—the idea that the value of a production, and therefore what it can justifiably cost, is not necessarily tied to how much has been spent on it. Unlike traditional businesses, where inputs are purchased at market rates, theatre relies on mobilising resources through relationships, shared spaces, and collaborative efforts. Artists frequently rehearse in their homes, bring their own costumes, and contribute time and labour across multiple functions—set design, publicity, logistics, lighting, and more. Often, putting in work on production is what earns artists the opportunity to later act or direct.

Swati helped participants understand that the actual monetary expenditure on a play is only a fraction of its real value, and that they should factor in opportunity costs—the value of what was foregone in order to do the work, whether material or human effort. For many participants, this was a transformative shift. It gave them the courage to think about money rationally and to ask for it unapologetically—whether from donors, audiences, or commissioning agencies. One participant said the session gave him the confidence to approach fundraising in a new way, and since SMART, he has been able to raise funds for multiple projects. Rupali acknowledged how, in experimental theatre, it's common to undervalue one's own work. Komita said that learning to account for implicit and explicit costs gave her group a more holistic understanding of their real financial needs. For Bikram, it brought clarity on how to provide for artists in times of illness or emergency, highlighting the importance of valuing the artist as a person—not just a performer.

Dana, for her part, began to see her work as cultural capital and became more adept at negotiating funding from external stakeholders. Another participant shared how, after SMART,

she evaluates her work more critically and negotiates fees assertively. Her group has also hosted financial literacy sessions for fellow theatre artists in her city, covering topics such as fundraising, negotiation, and financial planning. Tanya, post-SMART, has begun incorporating indirect costs—like equipment purchases or infrastructure development—into her project budgets, thereby building fixed assets rather than covering only immediate expenses.

However, the session wasn't easy for everyone. Vaibhav, with less experience and high expectations, was disappointed to learn how scarce theatre funding is universally. Bikram was daunted by the number of things he didn't know and the extent of effort required to make theatre financially viable. And Dana, while more confident in the value of her work, still admits that financial sustainability remains elusive.

Building One's Audience

Low audience turnout is a persistent challenge for theatre artists. After months of rehearsals, creativity, and emotional investment, empty seats can feel deeply disheartening. The experience of SMART helped several participants reframe this issue—not just as a logistical problem but as a core part of artistic sustainability. Understanding who the audience is and how to engage them became a key insight.

Many theatre-makers assumed that if they produced compelling work, the audience would naturally follow. SMART helped dismantle this belief, particularly through the Audience Development sessions—'Audience Building 'by Sanjna in SMART 2015 and 'Where's My Audience? 'by Sunil in SMART 2016. These sessions emphasised that audience development is not accidental; it's a deliberate and continuous process. The approach in these sessions begins with identifying the right audience for your work. It continues with consistent communication through various platforms and culminates in building long-term relationships—turning audience members into committed supporters. For many participants, this systematic approach to audience-building was new, as their training and interests had largely focused on the creative aspects of theatre rather than management.

One participant reflected that he used to feel personally hurt by empty auditoriums. SMART helped him realise that different types of plays attract different audiences, and that each require a tailored strategy. For example, a Hindi comedy might appeal to an entirely different demographic than a Punjabi drama. Understanding this diversity allowed him to segment his outreach accordingly.

Another participant, who previously expected her work to generate its own audience, began considering whether her efforts should focus on building an audience specifically for her group or for theatre in general. She pointed out that Indian theatre audiences are often fragmented—divided by language, genre, and artist loyalties. This fragmentation, she felt, limits the scope of

broader audience-building efforts unless theatre becomes more mainstream as a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, she described the session as a turning point.

Another participant admitted that although building an audience remains difficult, SMART helped her group move away from complaints and towards action. They have since experimented with various audience engagement strategies. Her colleague, who also attended SMART, said they now pay closer attention to audience demographics. For instance, realising that their core audience was ageing, they began efforts to attract younger viewers.

Some participants even launched new initiatives. One introduced a subscription model, where audience members pay an annual fee in exchange for access to all performances at the venue, along with a membership card offering priority seating. Prajakta recommended reaching out to student leaders and general secretaries in colleges, recognising their ability to mobilise youth audiences and amplify visibility.

Ultimately, SMART's insights into audience development have had a lasting impact. Participants now understand that knowing, engaging, and nurturing one's audience is as crucial to a theatre group's sustainability as the performance itself.

Impact on the Relationship between Participants and the Management of their Groups

Delegation and Role Specialisation

Specialisation of labour is one of the most important foundational concepts in management. Frederick W. Taylor (1909) proposed how tasks could be standardised and work assigned based on the skill and motivation of workers.[67] Taylor's work, which continues to inform the discipline of management, made significant strides in increasing productivity and efficiency. However, productivity and efficiency are not typically priorities for theatre artists. In non-profit, experimental theatre groups, it is common for everyone to take on multiple responsibilities. Struggling with limited resources, such groups often survive due to the efforts of a single founder or a small core team that simultaneously engages in all the creative and managerial tasks essential for survival.[68] The group becomes so dependent on these key individuals that its survival becomes synonymous with their continued involvement. As a result, the burden of managerial responsibilities often overshadows creative work, eroding the artist's satisfaction in writing, acting, or directing.

[67] Frederick W. Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management (Harper & Brothers, 1909).

[68] Kanika Khurana and Atanu Ghosh, "Management in the Performing Arts: An Empirical Exploration of Organizational Structures in Indian Theatre," IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review 12, no.1, (2023).

SMART proposed that specialisation and theatre work need not be mutually exclusive. While an experimental theatre artist may never prioritise productivity, it remains essential to ensure that managerial tasks are clearly divided among members. One of the significant and immediate changes observed post-SMART was a clearer division of roles. Several participants shared that after attending SMART, they decided to relinquish some of the many responsibilities they had been carrying within their groups. This was especially true for founders who had grown accustomed to managing everything themselves. Neel, for instance, shared that by dividing responsibilities, he could devote more time to creative work. This redistribution of tasks also fostered dialogue within the group, promoting a sense of ownership amongst various members. When suitable people weren't available, Neel's group hired production managers externally—a decision that positively impacted their work. Another participant, who previously felt the entire burden of the group rested on his shoulders, saw a change post-SMART—responsibilities were better distributed, enabling him to focus on writing and directing. He now has a team handling production management and another small team managing social media.

One participant highlighted that the post-SMART division of roles was crucial for their group, which regularly engaged very young artists. With many of their actors balancing full-time education alongside acting, establishing clear commitments and expectations at the outset proved beneficial. Regular meetings to discuss role division and task allocation with all artists have been fruitful. This clarity has also reduced potential conflicts. In groups like Vaibhav's, where there are two or more primary decision-makers, it is helpful to determine in advance whose decision prevails in case of disagreements. For example, they established that Vaibhav takes the lead in collaborations, while his co-member's word is final on financial matters, helping them prevent internal conflicts.

SMART's discussions on strategic planning and sustainability inspired the delegation of tasks and the basic specialisation of roles. The idea of shared responsibility, discussed at SMART, encouraged artists to distribute tasks and involve more members in the group's functioning. As a result, many artists found themselves able to dedicate more time to their strengths and focus on creative pursuits.

From Informality to Intentional Management

To some extent, SMART served as a response for groups aspiring to elevate their work or resolve persistent challenges in implementation. Many theatre groups begin as collectives of like-minded artists driven by a shared passion for creating unique art. As the group matures, managerial responsibilities become more pressing. One participant noted that theatre management is often guided by emotion—he frequently felt agitated when plans didn't materialise. Young artists who had worked in established groups led by senior artists often grew disillusioned with how these groups were run. They sought to explore new ways of working and to find their own voice.

One such artist formed his own group with like-minded youth a few years before attending SMART, after having worked with multiple groups in the city. He felt his group often functioned haphazardly and wanted to run it more professionally. Another participant, aiming to empower the next generation of artists, wished to depart from traditional approaches in her city and introduce younger voices to Gujarati theatre. Rupali, despite having learned from multiple organisations, often felt disconnected from existing models and sought sustainable frameworks for her group's work. A different participant, deeply passionate about dance and theatre, needed structure for her young group. For Dana, SMART arrived at a pivotal moment, aligning perfectly with the challenges her group was contemplating. Similarly, Prajakta, who had been experimenting with new initiatives but saw limited success, hoped SMART could offer some solutions.

What challenges did these young groups face? Were they similar to those encountered by older groups attempting new approaches with limited success? The answer for many lay in structured thinking about management. In most theatre contexts, training—both creative and administrative—is informal and observational. New artists typically learn by watching experienced counterparts and gradually develop rudimentary practices. However, even senior artists often lack formal training in managing a group.

Management training at SMART influenced participants and their groups in two primary ways. First, it fostered structured thinking and action, both in conceptualising group management and executing various activities. Komita observed that much of her and her group's learning had been informal. SMART helped structure discussions around ownership, plays, audiences, and new members—issues they had previously discussed but now approached with greater clarity. Interestingly, Komita believed that others in her group might not acknowledge SMART's influence in bringing about these changes, but as a participant, she personally recognised its value.

Another participant from a group that already had established systems saw SMART as an opportunity for deeper reflection. Their post-programme meetings became more agenda-driven, and they began streamlining their operations. SMART also encouraged them to treat budgets as sacrosanct and to closely track income and expenses. Vaibhav, whose group was previously disorganised, shared that they adopted detailed planning practices post-SMART. Now, when approaching potential donors, they are equipped with flyers, brochures, and strategic pitches. Dana, who became a founding member of a new organisation after SMART, reported that her new group adopted much stronger systems than her previous one—a shift she attributes partly to the programme. Even her former group implemented detailed processes and timelines to allocate resources more effectively post-SMART, enabling members to pursue their dream projects.

Formal training in management implies not only structure but also a level of maturity, as one participant pointed out. Even when things go awry—be it financial losses or unresponsive

collaborators—he manages challenges with calmness. Notably, younger groups especially benefited from SMART's structured management approaches, while some older groups didn't always find solutions to their unique challenges.

Structured thinking also translated into planned action. Improvisation, a hallmark of artistic creation, often extended to group management. Decisions were made reactively, based on available resources and people. Many organisations, including some that attended SMART, were stuck in perpetual crisis management. While improvisation adds vitality to art, it is less effective for managing organisations, which require planning and consistency. The *jugaad* mindset—a make-do approach—was prevalent among many theatre groups. One participant candidly shared that before SMART, he only considered money as a resource; everything else was jugaad. SMART taught him to 'dream on paper'. By creating concrete plans rather than relying solely on instinct, he was able to execute and realise ambitious projects—some of which have reshaped the artistic landscape of his city.

Another group engaged in deep reflection after SMART. By focusing on the broader role of theatre, they shifted towards a consistent practice that went beyond spontaneous actions. Putting their ideas on paper became a catalyst for implementation. Sameera emphasised that strategy and spontaneity are not mutually exclusive in the context of Indian theatre. She noted that while improvisation is necessary, excessive reliance on it can lead to mediocrity. According to her, it's about balancing systems and strategy with the realities of spontaneous adaptation. SMART enabled strategy and systems where few previously existed, making it especially effective for newer or younger groups.

Beyond structured thought and action, SMART also contributed significantly to knowledge. Many participants stated that the programme helped them build a vocabulary of management. As discussed earlier, this was facilitated through pedagogic sessions led by Milena. This vocabulary was instrumental not only in articulating and distributing internal tasks but also in engaging external stakeholders. Vaibhav, whose group had just begun at the time of SMART, shared that concepts like resource mobilisation and audience building were new to them. One participant called the SMART fee their group's 'seed capital'. Dana, aware of her group's multiple potential directions, admitted that she lacked the vocabulary to articulate those possibilities prior to SMART. Another participant expressed pride in becoming fluent in management jargon, which she now confidently uses in funding applications and professional conversations. She believes her understanding of management and access to theatre networks—facilitated by SMART—has helped level the playing field in a space where access is often restricted.

However, the spread of management vocabulary in theatre did not resonate with everyone. Komita felt her group sometimes struggled to align with the terminology and concepts of strategic management. Terms like vision, mission, target audience, and resource mobilisation sparked internal debate. For example, the group had long relied on friends 'support but didn't

equate this with ‘resource mobilisation’. Using such terminology made their work feel transactional, contrary to the communal ethos that had guided them. SMART made considerable effort to contextualise management ideas within theatre practice, using case studies and relevant examples. Still, the programme was fundamentally rooted in management principles developed for the business world, and it’s unrealistic to expect these concepts to be entirely separable from that origin.

My Art or My Group?

Some theatre artists operate independently, collaborating and freelancing with various groups or individuals. Others prefer the consistency of working within a group, gradually building a collective practice over time. While SMART was primarily designed for individuals embedded in regular group practices, drawing this distinction is not always straightforward in theatre.

In its selection process, SMART explicitly prioritised artists with strong ties to theatre groups. This was evident from the structure of the application form, which began with questions such as group name, year of establishment, legal status, and the nature and duration of each member’s association with the group. The interview process reinforced this preference. Yet, despite this intention, SMART attracted participants with varied levels of group affiliation. Some had no established group but were keen to start one; some were part of very new collectives (one participant even coined a group name for the first time in the application form); while others had only a loose connection with the groups they cited.

During SMART, and often long after it, participants were compelled to reflect deeply on where their focus lay—on personal artistic expression or on managing and growing a group. Although this wasn't an explicit theme in the curriculum, the programme's emphasis on strategic planning and management inevitably prompted this internal debate. For some, it led to a renewed commitment to group building. One participant decided to resign from a stable job soon after SMART, recognising that his group needed full-time attention. Another participant, Rupali, shifted her focus to ensuring continuity within her group, whose members were mostly young. She was determined to pass on SMART's learnings to them, aiming to ensure that the group's work was not dependent on her alone.

For others, this line of thinking resulted in the opposite outcome. Rosemary, for example, joined SMART intending to form her own group post-programme. However, she later chose to remain independent, assembling teams project by project. This allowed her to step away from the long-term obligations of group management and focus on artistic creation. Similarly, Savitri initially envisioned a permanent collective, influenced by other groups she encountered during SMART. This vision shaped her strategic plan, but she later realised that she lacked the temperament for such a structure. Eventually, she adopted a more flexible, project-based approach—prioritising art over the formalities of collective organisation.

These experiences revealed how SMART's inclination toward group-based structures sometimes conflicted with participants' evolving needs. Neel reflected that SMART's pedagogy was based on idealised notions of Indian theatre practice, often mirrored in the case studies used to illustrate key concepts. This, he believed, highlighted the underlying complexities and politics of theatre management in India.

Importantly, the choice between personal artistic focus and group development did not always rest with individual participants alone. In one group formed by young college students, a divergence in vision emerged over time. Although the group had successfully achieved many of its strategic goals, internal disagreements about whether to prioritise the group or the art eventually led to its dissolution. One of its founding members, much like Savitri, opted for a fluid model—where teams formed and disbanded around specific productions. The original group, however, continued with some of the founding members and new additions.

SMART's initial design focused on informal theatre groups rather than individuals or larger, more formal institutions. This was in line with the landscape of experimental theatre in India, where loosely structured collectives—often led by one or two core members—are the norm. These groups typically exist in symbiosis with a broader ecosystem of theatre workers, including actors, directors, designers, and technicians, many of whom move fluidly between groups. Long-term affiliations are not the norm, and this fluidity was reflected in the diversity of participants SMART attracted.

By centring groups, SMART inadvertently nudged participants toward more structure and formalisation—an approach that did not suit everyone. Over time, some participants deviated from SMART's frameworks, carving out hybrid or more individualised models that aligned better with their realities.

Mentorship as Dialogue, not Direction

There was near-unanimous agreement among SMART's core team and participants that the mentorship phase following the 10-day course was crucial. The 2015 cohort underwent a six-month mentorship period, while the 2016 batch had four months. Both culminated in a two-day workshop where groups presented their strategic plans and received comprehensive feedback.

The purpose of mentorship was to ensure that insights from the intensive course could be translated into long-term, actionable strategies. The SMART team recognised that implementing change would not be simple and thus built mentorship into the programme as a bridge between learning and practice.

The impact of mentorship varied considerably across groups. For some, it was transformative—not only in refining strategic plans but also in fostering ongoing relationships. Neel and Bikram,

for example, found the mentorship phase deeply reflective. Their mentor posed incisive questions that helped them focus on the foundational changes they sought, rather than merely polishing their strategic plan. Their mentor's process-oriented and non-directive approach stood out. Neel appreciated that their mentor allowed space for their own reflections, a trait echoed by another participant, who described her mentor as someone who kept asking the right questions without pushing a particular agenda.

Several participants formed long-lasting personal bonds with their mentors. One shared that her mentor and other SMART core team members became trusted guides—her first call during a personal tragedy was to her mentor. Dana described her mentor as a father figure.[69] For another participant, whose ability to act on SMART's teachings was limited due to his organisational constraints, regular dialogue with his mentor was invaluable.

Mentorship was also about learning to adapt goals to realistic conditions. One participant recalled how her mentor encouraged her to let go of certain plans due to a lack of support—an insight that helped her focus her energy on what was feasible. Another continues to consult his mentor, who also emphasised having an exit strategy—an unexpectedly empowering piece of advice.

Mentorship was not just about one-on-one conversations. Some SMART participants involved their groups in the mentorship process. Komita, for instance, regularly discussed strategic planning in team meetings and relayed challenges to her mentor. Dana and Indu conducted group meetings alongside mentorship sessions to facilitate a two-way flow of ideas. In these cases, the mentor functioned as a bridge between the SMART curriculum and the group's ongoing development.

However, mentorship did not always deliver. A few participants said that their mentors lacked genuine interest in their group's ethos. In other instances, mentors were unavailable or did not provide meaningful guidance. In such cases, even warm mentor-mentee relationships failed to support strategic clarity or change. The silence of certain participants when asked about mentorship also indicated an underwhelming experience.

What made mentorship effective? The clearest pattern was that dialogic mentorship—where mentors listened, questioned, and reflected with participants—was far more impactful than prescriptive advice. Whether gently nudging or simply holding space, the most effective mentors understood that change is complex, slow, and often messy. One participant noted that if the SMART course was about listening to facilitators, mentorship was about facilitators listening to participants. His mentor, he said, never imposed ideas, and that respectful distance made all the difference.

[69] Dana Roy, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 05-09-2024.

Swati, a SMART mentor, described the mentor's role as being a 'thought partner 'to artists who often navigate decisions alone. Where mentors embraced this role, the results were profound. Where they didn't—or couldn't—the process faltered. Ashoke Chatterjee noted that mentorship varied in style: some mentors offered solutions, others provided perspectives, and some instilled confidence to diverge from plans altogether. Arundhati echoed this, stating that she adapted her mentoring style based on each group's needs.

While mentorship was essential to SMART's design, building a cadre of mentors who could consistently offer time, insight, and empathy remained a challenge. The process revealed that mentorship is not a fixed formula—it's a relationship that must be responsive, patient, and deeply human.

Impact on Groups

The Power of Validation

Most theatre groups in India, including those participating in SMART, often operate without trained managers. Artists, juggling creative responsibilities with group operations—whether formal or informal—frequently find themselves uncertain about the paths they are forging. These are rarely well-trodden routes, and a lack of institutionalised knowledge around managing arts organisations leaves much to intuition. Many participants expressed that their choices often stemmed from gut instinct or chance encounters. In this context, attending SMART proved to be a validating experience. The programme assured them that their approaches, however unconventional, were legitimate and effective. When artists dared to make ambitious plans, SMART gave them the confidence to believe those plans could be successfully executed.

One participant shared that his group did over 50 performances across 20 cities in 2017—a bold endeavour supported by the encouragement SMART provided. Tanya expressed how her group had grown more committed to its plans, regardless of execution challenges. For Savitri, the programme boosted not only her personal confidence but also that of her co-participants. Terms like 'reassuring', 'empowering', and 'feeling confident 'recurred across many participant interviews. While artistic creativity did not seem to require external endorsement, participants often sought—and received—affirmation around their management and organisational decisions. SMART served as an external validation for artists who were often confident in their craft, yet uncertain or inexperienced in managerial roles. The programme reinforced the legitimacy of their journeys and encouraged them to forge ahead with greater assurance.

Much of this newfound confidence stemmed from contextualising their group's place in the broader theatre ecosystem in India. Listening to facilitators 'case studies and sharing experiences with peers helped participants appreciate the diversity within Indian theatre. One urban-based

participant expressed surprise upon learning how rural and traditional formats had not only survived but also flourished commercially. This urban participant came to recognise that many of his struggles were less about internal group dysfunction and more about systemic issues within urban theatre—particularly the prohibitive costs of space and travel in metropolitan cities. Understanding this distinction allowed him to frame his problems more accurately and seek targeted solutions.

Savitri, whose theatre practice includes both commercial and experimental productions, observed that SMART was less applicable to her commercial ventures. India's commercial theatre landscape, while influenced by colonial modernity, heavily borrows from traditional, caste-based performance forms—resulting in community-centric entertainment genres like Gujarati, Marathi, and Bengali commercial theatre. The programme helped Savitri delineate how her experimental work differed in goals and impact. With SMART, she came to value the meaningfulness of her experimental pieces, even if they lagged in frequency or commercial success.

Vaibhav, based in Belgaum, a relatively smaller city, used SMART to navigate both the limitations and potential of his locale. He explored collaborative models with nearby towns and examined the city's multilingual culture to build an inclusive arts space. Understanding their own work within this wider milieu helped groups contextualise their challenges. This not only offered comfort but also reaffirmed the efforts they were making to sustain their artistic endeavours. Although SMART wasn't explicitly designed to validate participants 'management choices, it inadvertently became a powerful source of reassurance and motivation for many.

Radical Shifts and New Directions

The confidence instilled by SMART led many groups to undertake transformative changes—some planned and others unexpected. These shifts emerged from the belief that with a clear vision and structured planning, ambitious goals were achievable. One group created a wish list of dream projects, setting aside constraints for the first time. This participant credited SMART with giving him the courage to adopt this fearless mindset.

Another participant made the life-changing decision to leave his full-time job and commit entirely to his theatre group. He also attributed the success of a recently curated large theatre festival—and his group's participation in a major international event—to the planning and goal-setting skills learned at SMART. Rupali, for instance, guided her group to become more deliberate in selecting plays that aligned with the organisation's core vision. Post-SMART, the group became increasingly conscious of how each production contributed to their identity.

One group adopted a long-term perspective after SMART, not only in terms of productions but also in relationships with their audiences. Inspired by SMART's strategic frameworks, they created plays for children across different age groups and even initiated birthday performances to

deepen their connection with young viewers. Another group successfully hosted a major festival after SMART, attributing their success not to the programme's direct solutions but to the incisive questions it raised.

Further examples of creative and administrative innovation include launching new production series, securing grants, installing three-phase electricity in the theatre, and initiating a monthly youth engagement programme. Several initiatives were directly inspired by SMART. One group organised a local gathering of artists to discuss pressing theatre-related issues, while another replicated the idea of SMART addas by hosting similar community forums.

Although not all changes could be clearly traced back to SMART, participants widely acknowledged its influence on their thinking. Many emphasised that SMART had reshaped their mindset more than it had prompted specific actions. One participant spoke of an increased focus on outcomes, leading him to more effectively evaluate and communicate the impact of his creative work.

Failures and Fissures

Despite many successful initiatives post-SMART, not all endeavours met with the same results. Prajakta recounted how her group's monthly programme to promote awareness fell short of expectations. While disheartened, the group valued the courage SMART had given them to try something bold without fear of failure.

Many groups aspired to build a financial corpus to support ambitious work—a vision planted during SMART—but few achieved this goal. Even those who closely followed their strategic plans found the corpus fund particularly challenging. Some strategic plans were simply too ambitious. Neel admitted that while their plan brimmed with creative ideas, it wasn't always grounded in reality. He reflected that the plan felt more like an assignment than an organic outcome. His group member and SMART co-participant, Bikram, had a contrasting perspective. Proud of the plan and the effort that went into it, he believed the group lacked the readiness to implement it. These differing views sometimes caused internal friction. Though Bikram appreciated aspects of SMART, he ultimately became disillusioned, criticising what he perceived as hierarchical structures in India's cultural landscape. He eventually relocated and reduced his involvement in the group.

Another group experienced a major rift in 2021 when several members parted ways. One participant from this group felt that the reflective thinking encouraged by SMART brought individual clarity but failed to create a shared vision. Differences arose over the value of spontaneity versus structure in running the group. While SMART may have catalysed some of these tensions, other factors—such as the pandemic and the natural evolution of long-term

collaborations—also played a role. Despite the split, members of this group remained on good terms.

A recurring challenge was that not all group members attended SMART. With only two participants per group, the ideas and enthusiasm generated at SMART were difficult to disseminate. Komita faced resistance when trying to implement new tools and terminology. Dana had a similar experience. In some groups, management concepts were too unfamiliar; in others, there was inertia against changing long-standing methods. Dana eventually co-founded a new group where implementing SMART's learnings proved easier.

One participant, the sole SMART attendee from his organisation, stressed the importance of involving decision-makers. While he was with the group, many strategic goals were achieved. After his departure, however, many initiatives were dropped. Another participant, burdened with most of the group's responsibilities, failed to implement their plan due to a lack of a support team and inadequate funding. Despite both co-participants attending SMART, differences of opinion led to a fallout, and one refused to share their side of the story with the research team.

The Test of the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic abruptly halted the work of performing artists, whose practice relies on interaction with live audiences. It proved to be a test not only for artists striving to continue their creative work but also for the relevance of SMART in addressing such an unprecedented disruption. The long-format SMART programme, conducted in 2015 and 2016, had already led many groups to redefine their working models. The strategic plans formulated during the programme required groups to set out three-year goals. The realisation of these goals had been gradually taking shape between 2015 and 2019. However, many groups encountered internal resistance or external factors that delayed the implementation of their plans and programmes. By 2019, several groups participating in SMART had put in place systems and structures aimed at more effective functioning. But when the pandemic struck in early 2020, leading to the closure of theatre spaces and making physical interaction infeasible, these plans were thrown into disarray.

One participant shared that just before the pandemic, her group had managed to build significant momentum. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns broke this momentum, and by the time of our interview on 27th August 2024, the group's core committee had still not resumed collective theatre work. This participant also revealed that some of her group members faced severe livelihood challenges, and she herself had to rely solely on her freelance training work in the corporate sector during and immediately after the lockdowns. Vaibhav shared that his group had planned to launch a course to impart technical knowledge of theatre in collaboration with a reputed cultural institution around the time the pandemic began. However, the group has still not recovered from the disruption. As of our interview with Vaibhav on 4th September 2024, the

collaborative programme had yet to be initiated—more than five years after its initial conception. Plans and programmes of several other groups suffered similarly significant setbacks due to the pandemic.

Even amid the gloom caused by the pandemic, artists found time for introspection and gained clarity about the motives and purpose behind their creative and administrative work in theatre. One participant observed that artists had ample time during the pandemic to reflect on the next steps in their work and lives. When his group reconvened in 2021, after lockdown restrictions were eased, each member had a clear sense of direction and articulated where they wanted their work to go. This clarity was not only a result of the enforced pause but was also facilitated by the intense reflection encouraged by the group's participation in SMART. However, this individual clarity did not translate into a shared vision for the group's collective future, ultimately becoming a key reason why several members left. In many cases, the clarity around vision, mission, and core values helped groups determine the extent of compromise they were willing to make to keep their creative work alive during the pandemic. Several participants shared that they chose not to pursue online performances, as it did not align with the nature of their work. Vaibhav explained that SMART had helped his group realise their focus was on creating an experience rooted in physical presence—something the online medium couldn't offer. He said, "The reason we decided we are not doing anything online—theatre is all about senses. It's a sensory experience. It's a live experience."[70] Another participant similarly chose to avoid online work, preferring that her group remain dormant during the lockdowns.

On the other hand, Dana shared that the concretisation of vision and mission at SMART led her group to host 'Contagion: Performance, Space, Community' — an online series of "8 curated conversations and presentations addressing the live performance experience as an art and part of the human act of assembly."[71] Dana explained that some of the ideas behind this curation were implicitly shaped by their experiences at SMART. One participant offered an interesting perspective on the pandemic, viewing it as a great leveller—particularly for the performing arts. She felt that the usual advantages of reputation and connections were rendered less relevant, creating a more level playing field. Another participant expressed a similar view, suggesting that the removal of physical performance venues from the performance equation during the pandemic equalised opportunities for artists. While the pandemic was undeniably detrimental to the field, it also fostered a heightened awareness of both the privileges and limitations faced by performing artists.

SMART played a crucial role in helping individuals and groups define and clarify their values during the pandemic. However, the magnitude and suddenness of the disruption were such that

[70] Vaibhav Lokur, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 04-09-2024

[71]" Contagion." (Pickle Factory Dance Foundation, 2020) https://picklefactory.in/contagion/.

there was little SMART—or indeed any other intervention—could do to alleviate the dire circumstances in which the participants and their groups found themselves.

A Larger Role for SMART?

SMART's impact on many participants in the longer courses, while transformative, also led to heightened expectations about what it could offer. Several participants pointed out aspects they felt could have been included to enhance the course's value.

One major expectation was access to information about opportunities, particularly related to grants and funding. One participant suggested that the role of government agencies in supporting theatre could have been concretely addressed during the 10-day course. Another similarly felt that the perspective on public funding opportunities was lacking. A third participant believed it would have been the icing on the cake if SMART could have tapped into CSR funds or grant-making organisations and if representatives from such bodies had been present during the final strategic plan presentations by participant groups, potentially exploring avenues for funding. Emphasising how extremely challenging it is for theatre organisations to function without funding or sponsorship.

According to one participant, SMART—with the help of IFA—could have become a continuous source of information about funding and performance opportunities for theatre and performing artists. In fact, some participants hoped SMART could play a role in building a national body of support for the performing arts sector. One participant was hopeful that senior artists could unite to push for the creation of an arts council in India, similar to councils in the West. He believed such councils could at least partially address the lack of rehearsal and performance spaces. Satish, a mentor in SMART, also referenced the Arts Council in the UK and hoped SMART, leveraging its network, could facilitate a larger national programme to support the arts. He additionally remarked that funding was the biggest challenge for theatre and that SMART could have been more effective by enabling access to funding opportunities.

In response to these expectations, Sameera, who was the programme director at its inception, explained that SMART was conceived as a theatre management programme—not as a fund facilitator. Its primary objective was to impart knowledge of management in theatre. She emphasised that every group must navigate its own process of raising and sustaining funds—some succeed, others do not.

A second commonly expressed desire among participants was for a longer association with SMART. Some requested the formation of a SMART alumni network, while others hoped for an extended mentorship period. Neel emphasised that the process of change takes time and that a longer mentorship—even if informal—would have been beneficial. He shared that some of the ideas his group hoped to implement in 2015 were only coming to fruition in 2024, nearly a decade after attending SMART. In several instances, mentorship continued informally well

beyond the official period. Savitri shared that her mentor, Swati, continued to guide her long after the formal mentorship ended.

Komita noted that SMART was not a long-term course and felt there was limited time to absorb and execute various concepts. Another participant expressed a desire for follow-up sessions after his highly positive experience at SMART. Many participants voiced a wish to reconnect with their mentors, facilitators, and co-participants. One suggestion was to create an annual review system for participants. Sushma expressed that it would be wonderful to reconnect and reflect on how each participant's journey had evolved. The idea of a SMART reunion—and even a structured alumni network—was considered not just by participants, but also by the SMART core team.

Reflecting on the Early Editions of SMART

The 2015 and 2016 editions of SMART offered an important starting point for introducing structured approaches to theatre management. Through a carefully designed combination of immersive learning, mentorship, and peer exchange, the programme created space for participants to reflect on their artistic and organisational practices and to begin articulating questions of sustainability, leadership, and long-term vision.

While the programme's frameworks and tools were useful to many, they also highlighted the diversity of contexts in which theatre is practised. Not all ideas resonated equally with all participants, and translating individual learning into group-wide change was not always straightforward. However, the efforts of the facilitators and mentors, along with the participants' willingness to engage deeply with the process and adapt it to their realities, were significant strengths in both editions.

Overall, the first two editions of SMART opened valuable conversations that had rarely been formalised in theatre groups, especially in urban or relatively urban areas. They provided participants with a space to pause, reflect, and reimagine their work with greater intention.

SMART on Wheels (2017-2018)

From Residential Immersion to Mobile Outreach

SMART began as a 10-day intensive residential course followed by several months of mentorship focused on developing long-term strategic plans and applying the principles and concepts learnt during the course. The course was designed to bridge the gap between artistic vision and the practical challenges of running a theatre group. Rooted in applied learning, the immersive format offered participants an opportunity to examine their theatre practices from an organisational perspective. The residential format encouraged sustained interactions, reflection, hands-on exercises, and collective problem-solving under the guidance of experienced facilitators and mentors. The aim was to initiate long-term change by helping groups define their vision, articulate values, and think strategically about sustainability.

However, due to escalating costs, limited staff capacity, and shifting availability of core team members, it became clear that sustaining the long-format programme in its original form was no longer feasible. In response, the SMART team piloted SMART on Wheels—a one-day outreach initiative designed to introduce the SMART approach to theatre-makers in smaller towns. These one-day engagements were intentionally positioned not as replacements but as stepping stones in the evolution of SMART.

Conceived as a travelling orientation series, SMART on Wheels was designed to reach theatre groups across India's diverse geographies, especially in smaller towns and underrepresented regions, offering an introductory understanding of theatre management and the SMART course structure. Conducted across seven cities in 2017 and 2018—Bikaner, Agartala, Patna, Bareilly, Mumbai, Delhi, and Pune—SMART on Wheels aimed to open conversations around theatre management, provide a structured preview of the SMART course, and gather insights into local theatre ecosystems. Each workshop was facilitated by SMART core team members, often joined by alumni from the SMART long-format programmes, in collaboration with local hosts or partners.

Participants across all seven cities included a mix of theatre group leaders, independent theatre-makers, educators, and performers. Many were deeply embedded in their regional contexts, and while some had institutional affiliations (such as NSD), others worked in highly informal or self-organised settings. Women participants were notably fewer in number in several locations. Some groups were legally registered, often as societies, while others functioned without formal structures. Participants' experience ranged from newcomers to senior practitioners with decades in the field. Several groups expressed interest in formalising their work processes, and many indicated strong interest in applying for the SMART course.

Since SMART on Wheels aimed to engage theatre groups and introduce the concept of SMART, its impact was in gathering rich perspectives and informing the future SMART versions, more than in offering in-depth theatre management training to participants. The following section outlines the structure and nature of the SMART on Wheels sessions, highlighting key learnings and regional insights from each location. It draws primarily from reports of SMART on Wheels events held in Bikaner[72], Agartala[73], Patna[74], Bareilly[75], Mumbai[76], Delhi[77], and Pune[78], as well as interviews with core team members and several collaborators and participants regarding the value added from these sessions and the rich dialogue facilitated through them.

Structure and Pedagogical Approach

The SMART on Wheels workshops were designed as intensive one-day orientation sessions, typically lasting 3 to 6 hours, incorporating participatory discussions, conceptual presentations, film screenings, and interactive Q&A segments. The pedagogy was dialogic and rooted in mutual respect and listening. The sessions were designed to be conversational, especially during the first part, where participants shared their key challenges in doing theatre and the SMART team gathered insights on local conditions for theatre-making. In the second part, facilitators framed key concepts from SMART, relating them to the challenges mentioned by participants and eliciting further reflections during and outside the formal session.

The typical flow of the day included:

- Participant registration and introductions
- An overview of SMART and its guiding philosophy
- A discussion on local theatre practices, guided by questions posed by the SMART facilitators
- Presentation of the eight core modules of the SMART course
- Screening of the SMART film and photo loop
- Open discussion and participant queries

While the content was consistent across sessions, the delivery was responsive to local contexts, languages, and participant energy. Hindi, English, Bengali, and other regional languages were incorporated as appropriate, depending on the location of the SMART on Wheels session.

[72]“ Report on SOW 1 in Bikaner – Mar 4 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[73]“ Report on SOW 2 in Agartala – Mar 26 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[74]“ Report on SOW 3 in Patna – Aug 20 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[75]“ Report on SOW 4 in Bareilly – Oct 5 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[76]“ Report on SOW 5 in Mumbai – Dec 22 2017,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[77]“ Report on SOW 6 in Delhi – Feb 6 2018,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.
[78]“ Report on SOW 7 in Pune – Feb 10 2018,” SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.

The eight modules from the SMART course presented were:

1. Values, Vision, and Mission
2. Group Sustainability
3. Audience Development
4. Communication
5. Financial Management
6. Resource Mobilisation
7. Administration
8. Strategic Planning

Regional Insights from SMART on Wheels Sessions

1. Bikaner (4th March 2017)

Facilitated by: Sudhanva Deshpande and Sanjna Kapoor

Local Partner: Anurag Kala Kendra, through Sudhesh Vyas, as part of the Bikaner Theatre Festival
Participants: 23 participants from 5 theatre groups, including some freelance actors from 3 cities—Bikaner, Jodhpur, and Chandigarh

Theatre in Bikaner was sustained by a committed community operating largely through registered groups with small executive structures, though leadership tended to be centralised. Performances were mainly held in urban venues, with limited rural outreach, and there was a collaborative spirit among practitioners, with little rivalry. Groups typically produced one new play a year with a few performances, often free of charge due to challenges in ticketing, despite a shared desire to establish paid models. Marketing remained a major expense, relying on traditional methods, and rehearsal space was limited, though sometimes underutilised. While most focused solely on productions, some had begun to expand into workshops, festivals, and other activities to build sustainability.

2. Agartala (26th March 2017)

Facilitated by: Neel Chaudhuri and Sameera Iyengar

Local Partner: NSD (TIE[79]Wing), Tripura, through Vijai Kumar Singh, as part of a two-day Theatre Groups Meet

Participants: Over 50 participants representing 34 groups, including some freelance artists, from Tripura, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland

Theatre in Tripura, particularly in Agartala, had a dynamic presence supported by both established groups and emerging practitioners, including NSD TIE Centre graduates. While senior groups commanded respect, younger artists were increasingly active, particularly in children's theatre. Agartala hosted both ticketed and free shows, though technical infrastructure like lighting remained limited, and production costs often restricted smaller groups. Beyond Agartala, performance and rehearsal spaces were fewer and often poorly equipped. Despite this, theatre often thrived through local festivals and street performances. In Assam and Nagaland, groups faced similar challenges and frequently used makeshift venues. Financial struggles were common, with reliance on grants, community support, or member contributions. Theatre was mainly in Bengali, with limited tribal-language work and little crossover in audiences. Actors often worked across groups, and competitions in schools, colleges, and offices helped sustain interest.

3. Patna (20th August 2017)

Facilitated by: Swati Apte and Pradeep Vaiddya

Local Partner: Sanjiv Kumar and Takshila, hosted at Delhi Public School, Patna

Participants: 56 participants representing 36 groups, including one freelance artist, from Patna, other parts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh

Theatre in Patna was marked by both commitment and fragmentation. Most groups were centred around individual directors and operated without long-term planning, often assembling teams for specific productions. While established groups like IPTA had some structure and consistent activity, others depended on temporary collaborations and external funding—mainly through government grants, donations, and informal borrowing. Ticket sales were rare, infrastructure was limited, and rehearsal spaces were hard to find. The community showed signs of internal division, with a lack of open dialogue and a general wariness towards newer practitioners. The term ‘management ’was often interpreted colloquially, associated more with improvisation or *jugaad* solutions than formal planning. Despite these challenges, there was interest in learning. The gathering revealed that many were unaware of the innovations or difficulties faced by others

[79] The Theatre-in-Education (TIE) Company of the National School of Drama, also known as Sanskar Rang Toli, is the institution’s children’s theatre wing, comprising actors and educators committed to working with and performing for children.

in the same city. This suggested that regular, structured interactions could help foster mutual understanding and strengthen collective thinking around theatre practice in Patna.

4. Bareilly (5th October 2017)

Facilitated by: Ashish Mehta, Menaka Rodriguez, and Arundhati Ghosh

Local Partner: Windermere Theatre and Ranga Vinayak Rang Mandali

Participants: 21 participants representing 7 groups, including some freelance artists, from Bareilly, Saharanpur, and Badaun

Theatre in Bareilly and nearby areas faced significant challenges, primarily due to a lack of infrastructure and funding. Most groups performed in makeshift spaces like streets or temporary stages, relying on personal contributions and community donations to sustain their work. Ticket sales were rare, as local audiences were reluctant to pay for theatre, often viewing the practice as a means of delivering social messages rather than a commercial activity. Key issues included the absence of rehearsal spaces, a shortage of female actors, and the growing influence of television and digital entertainment, which drew actors and audiences away from live performances. Despite these struggles, some practitioners pursued to operate professionally, seeking sponsorship, charging modest fees, and attempting to create dedicated performance spaces. However, securing sustainable funding remained difficult, and the lack of maintenance for existing spaces posed a challenge.

5. Mumbai (22nd December 2017)

Facilitated by: Swati Apte and Sunil Shanbag

Local Partner: Tamaasha Theatre, hosted at Studio Tamaasha

Participants: Members from 5 groups, some freelance artists, and 1 SMART alumna

Theatre in Mumbai faced several challenges that hindered the growth and sustainability of groups, despite the city's vibrant cultural scene. A key issue was the scarcity of suitable spaces for rehearsals and performances, making it difficult for groups to operate consistently. Additionally, the lack of dedicated actors, often juggling multiple commitments, impacted the continuity and quality of productions. Financial constraints were a significant concern, with many groups relying on personal funds or alternative income sources while still struggling with audience engagement. Limited resources not only restricted production quality but also affected the creativity of theatre artists. Maintaining long-term commitment from team members and conveying a clear artistic vision beyond the core group were ongoing challenges. Despite these difficulties, there was a strong spirit of collaboration and a desire to foster creative expression,

with some groups focusing on original work and others seeking new ways to expand their impact in Mumbai's competitive theatre landscape.

6. Delhi (6th February 2018)

Facilitated by: Sanjna Kapoor, Sudhanva Deshpande, and Neel Chaudhuri

Local Partner: Barefoot, hosted at their space in Shahpur Jat

Participants: 17 participants from several groups, including some freelance artists and a few SMART alumni

Theatre in Delhi reflected a variety of practices, with a strong emphasis on community engagement and alternative spaces. Many practitioners focused on working with diverse audiences, such as children, young adults, and marginalised communities. There was a noticeable trend towards shifting performances to more intimate, non-traditional venues, away from larger, commercial spaces. This shift was also accompanied by efforts to explore different media, including video, to support theatre and expand its reach. Decision-making within theatre groups often remained concentrated in the hands of a few, which sometimes led to challenges in management and commitment. Space limitations and access to broader networks were ongoing concerns, particularly for smaller or emerging groups. Despite these obstacles, the focus on inclusive, accessible theatre remained strong, with many practitioners offering workshops and performances aimed at schools, corporate environments, and local communities.

7. Pune (10th February 2018)

Facilitated by: Pradeep Vaiddya, Ashish Mehta, and Rupali Bhave

Local Partner: Maharashtra Cultural Centre, Expression Lab, and Aasakta Kalamanch, hosted at Rangdarshan Sabhagruh

Participants: 40 participants representing 27 groups, including some freelance artists, from Pune, Kolhapur, Nashik, Sangli, and Mumbai

The theatre scene in Pune was characterised by a diverse mix of established and emerging groups, with many involved in various activities such as theatre training, event organisation, and productions. A significant issue faced by these groups was the absence of a centralised platform for the local theatre community. This lack of a unified space made it difficult for different groups to collaborate effectively and contributed to audience fragmentation, as each group tended to cultivate its own dedicated audience, making it hard to reach a broader public. Additionally, access to rehearsal and performance spaces was a persistent challenge, particularly for experimental and newer groups. Collaboration with larger, established groups was also difficult, and many practitioners faced the issue of artists and technicians leaving the theatre scene for

opportunities in television and film. Younger groups struggled with a lack of resources, including access to archives and contemporary scripts, while others found that the competitive nature of intercollegiate theatre often left them unprepared for the realities of non-commercial theatre. There was also a widespread need for a platform for constructive criticism, and concerns were raised about the diminishing public perception of theatre in comparison to films and television.

Laying the Groundwork for Strategic Theatre Practice

Participants across all cities acknowledged the value of the workshop in clarifying the role of management in artistic practice. For many, it was their first structured exposure to the principles of strategic thinking in theatre. The participatory format allowed for deep personal and group reflections. A participant in Agartala illustrated this shift, noting that despite 15 years in theatre, he had never previously set personal goals.

Facilitators observed a strong appetite for continued learning and mentorship, especially when content was rooted in participants' lived realities. The use of real-world examples, accessible language, and a respectful tone helped establish credibility and trust. Some reflections gathered by the SMART team to guide future SMART on Wheels sessions included:

1. Language and Cultural Sensitivity: Multilingual facilitation deepened engagement and should remain central to future sessions.
2. Materials and PR: Participants requested printed handouts. Also, clearer SMART branding was needed.
3. Institutional Collaborations: Ties with local festivals, cultural bodies, and educational spaces proved effective and should be expanded.
4. Follow-Up Engagement: Regional mentorships, short courses, or alumni-led sessions could extend the programme’s reach and deepen its impact.

SMART on Wheels successfully introduced theatre practitioners across diverse regions to the vocabulary and vision of structured theatre management. By combining dialogue, reflection, and information-sharing, the sessions encouraged a cultural shift—from project-based survival to long-term sustainability thinking. These shared yet locally grounded experiences across seven cities demonstrated the transformative potential of such initiatives. SMART on Wheels not only helped participants envision more strategic futures for their groups but also offered SMART an invaluable window into the layered and lived realities of theatre-making across India, widening the programme’s scope. These insights provided a strong foundation for refining SMART and deepening its outreach through the SMART workshop—the impact of which is examined in the next section.

SMART Workshops (2018-2020)

From Long-Format Immersion to Localised Access

Building on the SMART on Wheels experience and recognising the need for a scalable and logistically practical version of the SMART programme, the team developed the concept of a three-day SMART workshop. Although significantly shorter than the original 10-day course followed by months of mentorship, this new format retained the core principles of SMART's curriculum. It aimed to equip participants with the tools to understand organisational dynamics, reflect on group practices, and develop a basic roadmap for future growth. Each session—whether on core values, group sustainability, audience development, communication, or money and resource mobilisation—was designed to offer foundational inputs, followed by facilitated exercises or discussions tailored to the participants ’local realities.

The introduction of the shorter three-day SMART workshops significantly expanded access, enabling participation from artists and groups across a broader range of regions and linguistic contexts. By bringing the programme to locations such as Bikaner, Madhyamgram, and Mulanthuruthy alongside larger cities like Pune and Bengaluru, SMART created valuable opportunities for learning and exchange among artists in these and surrounding areas. These regional workshops helped foster stronger local networks and relationships among theatre practitioners, addressing some of the divides that persist in the wider theatre ecosystem. The condensed format of the workshop proved advantageous, allowing it to travel more easily. It enabled SMART to reach cities and communities that the original 10-day residential format could not. With the support of local collaborators and host venues, the workshops remained financially viable and responsive to the contexts in which they were held. Artists who previously lacked the time or resources to attend the longer programme were now able to engage with structured training.

The Three-Day Dilemma: Reflections on Format and Effectiveness

Despite the evident gains in reach, there were concerns within the SMART team about the trade-offs involved. Could deep learning and strategic transformation be effectively compressed into a three-day format? Many team members openly acknowledged that while the workshops met immediate goals, they could not replicate the reflective depth of the long-format SMART courses. Within the core team, perspectives varied. Sudhanva and Sunil emphasised the irreplaceable value of sustained peer-to-peer learning inherent in the residential format. They felt that the workshops lacked the experiential layer that made SMART truly transformative. Menaka and Ashish maintained that while the workshop offered relevant knowledge, it lacked a mechanism for long-term application.

On the other hand, Arundhati acknowledged the limitations but emphasised that the workshop had to be viewed in the context of what was possible at the time. She believed that the workshop still posed essential questions and nudged participants toward strategic clarity. Rupali, who later joined as Programme Manager at the SMART office, as well as Sameera, underlined that many artists who participated in the workshops would never have been able to travel for a residential programme due to time or financial constraints. Sameera added that the local collaborators helped connect SMART to theatre-makers who had previously been beyond its network.

Some participants also noticed the difference. A participant familiar with earlier editions observed that the shorter workshop felt like a crash course—intensive and useful, but often overwhelming. They shared that it was difficult to internalise all the information, and there was limited time to discuss ideas in depth with fellow participants. Furthermore, several exercises had to be abbreviated, and there was not enough time for teams to collectively draft strategic plans or set long-term goals. That said, workshop participants did mention clear takeaways. The following sections present workshop details and participant feedback drawn from SMART archives and interviews conducted by the research team. All quotations from workshop participants in this section are taken from anonymous feedback forms collected by the SMART team after the workshops held in Pune,[80] Bangalore,[81] Bikaner,[82] Madhyamgram,[83] and Mulanthuruthy.[84]

Details of SMART Workshops

1. Pune (21st–23rd November 2018)

Facilitated by: Arundhati Ghosh, Sameera Iyengar, Sanjna Kapoor, Sudhanva Deshpande, and Sunil Shanbag

Local Partner: Maharashtra Cultural Centre

Participants: 27 participants from 17 groups from Pune and other locations, including Mumbai, Nagpur, Chalisgaon, Kolkata, and Bangalore

[80]" Summary of Feedback Forms - SMART Workshop at Pune," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
[81]" Summary of Feedback Forms - SMART Workshop at Bangalore April 2019," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
[82]" Summary of Feedback Forms - SMART Workshop at Bikaner June 2019," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
[83]" Summary of Feedback Forms - SMART Workshop at Madhyamgram near Kolkata February 2020," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
[84]" Summary of Feedback Forms - SMART Workshop at Mulanthuruthy near Kochi March 2020," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.

2. Bangalore (12th–14th April 2019)

Facilitated by: Menaka Rodriguez, Neel Chaudhuri, Sameera Iyengar, and Sunil Shanbag

Local Partner: The Courtyard, Bengaluru

Participants: 12 participants from 9 groups from Bengaluru and other locations, including Hyderabad, Jalgaon, Lucknow, and Pondicherry

3. Bikaner (28th–30th June 2019)

Facilitated by: Ashish Mehta, Menaka Rodriguez, and Sudhanva Deshpande

Local Partner: Anurag Kala Kendra, Bikaner

Participants: 16 participants from 11 theatre groups from Bikaner and other locations, including New Delhi, Bhilwara, Jaipur, Kota, Pune, and Mumbai

4. Madhyamgram (14th–16th February 2020)

Facilitated by: Sameera Iyengar, Sanjna Kapoor, and Sudhanva Deshpande

Local Partner: Jana Sanskriti

Participants: 19 participants from 17 theatre groups from Kolkata, Howrah, Kalyani, Berhampore, Barasat, Konnagar, Bongaon, Liluah (West Bengal), and other locations, including Mumbai

5. Mulanthuruthy (7th–9th March 2020)

Facilitated by: Neel Chaudhuri, Arundhati Ghosh, Sudhanva Deshpande, and Sunil Shanbag

Local Partner: Ala Centre for Culture and Alternative Education

Participants: 27 participants from 19 theatre groups from Kerala (Thrissur, Kodungallur, Chengannur, Ernakulam, Palakkad, Kochi, Koottanad, Kasargod, Kalady), and other locations, including Tamil Nadu and Karnataka

A Shared Language for Theatre Management

Participants across locations repeatedly expressed that the workshop gave them a vocabulary to articulate what they had long intuited about their practice. While many groups had been functioning for years, they often did so on instinct, without clearly defined principles or future roadmaps. As one participant from Kochi put it, “I asked myself for the first time, ‘Why do I do

what I do?'" For another participant, the biggest takeaway was the realisation that "vision and mission reflect all aspects of a theatre organisation."

This act of articulating—of giving words to the unsaid—had a structuring effect. A participant from Pune reflected, "We now know how to share our vision and values with our team." Others described the process as a "push" or a "reaffirmation," suggesting that the act of clarification helped bring dormant thoughts and feelings to the surface. "What we got in three days with limitations of time, space, and finances was a lot," wrote one attendee, adding that the effort to make "business concepts relevant to art in the Indian context" was handled with care.

Thinking Like an Organisation

A notable shift in mindset came from the realisation that running a theatre group also means building and sustaining an organisation. Participants often acknowledged that their groups lacked formal structures, long-term planning, or mechanisms for continuity. One individual, who had been contemplating winding up their group, wrote, "This workshop has given [me] ways to manage my group better. I will wait for three years before handing it over to the next generation." This theme of sustainability—both personal and organisational—emerged as a key concern for participants.

Roles and responsibilities, once informal or assumed, were now seen as needing clear definitions. "Deputation of work [should be done] to specialised persons and [one should] pay them for it," said a participant from Pune, emphasising the need to professionalise. Others began thinking in terms of group succession, legal frameworks, and even generational transitions. In Bikaner, a participant noted that they now intended to start children's theatre work after identifying a local gap.

The sense of renewal was palpable in several accounts. One participant shared that before SMART, the management side of theatre had seemed "large and insurmountable" but that the workshop had helped them "chart out a plan on how to proceed." Another participant reflected that they had thought their problems were unique, but after the first day of the workshop realised, "that after writing them down and analysing them, I may find ways to overcome them."

Reimagining Relationships Inside and Out

For many, the workshop prompted reflection on how they relate to others—both within their groups and beyond. A participant in Kochi described a newfound appreciation for how "usage of words might mean different things to different people," and how internal communication could make or break the cohesion of a group. Another from Pune observed, "We hadn't actively

connected with our audience, not communicating inside and outside the group. This needs to change now."

Externally, many groups discovered that audience engagement was not an incidental outcome but a deliberate practice. The insight that audiences have to be built was repeated across locations. A participant from Kochi admitted, "I always felt it is for them. So, they should come," realising that the need to develop one's audience had never been recognised. Others began to see audiences not as passive consumers but as partners in a shared journey.

Communication also extended to funders and collaborators. "Be a good communicator with clarity," said one participant. Another highlighted the importance of internal processes: "Have regular meetings and define roles." In many cases, the emphasis on articulation—of values, goals, and expectations—was experienced as a tool for building trust and sustaining relationships.

New Attitudes Toward Money and Resources

The subject of money was approached with a mix of discomfort and relief. Several participants confessed to long-standing aversions to discussing finances, only to find their views challenged and reshaped. "Money isn't a monster," wrote one participant, "It is an enabling resource." This shift in mindset was echoed in multiple locations, where participants admitted to previously avoiding budgeting or fundraising out of fear or uncertainty.

The concept of resource mobilisation, in particular, was appreciated for being revelatory, with one participant describing it as an "eye-opener." Another noted, "Whatever you don't like to do or can't do, build a resource from outside." Such comments suggest that the workshop encouraged participants to broaden their understanding of what constitutes support—whether financial, social, or skill-based. That said, there were requests for deeper, more actionable information. Participants asked for specific donor proposal formats, grant application processes, and case studies of successful models in theatre.

From Instinct to Strategy

The workshops offered participants tools to move from reactive to proactive planning. For many, it was the first time they considered aligning artistic decisions with timelines, budgets, and measurable outcomes. One participant summarised their key learning as "figuring out goals and priorities" and utilising research in this work. Another said, "We were doing things in a certain way and wanted to formalise certain things. This workshop has opened up our veins on reorganising," highlighting the deep, transformative impact the workshop had on the group's strategic organisation.

Strategic thinking also meant learning how to distinguish between vision and strategy, or between tactics and long-term planning. "Making short and long-term goals is essential to have a desired outcome," said one respondent. Others spoke of drafting annual schedules, setting three-year goals, and assigning responsibilities based on skills and availability.

However, time remained a limiting factor. Many participants felt that three days were not enough to absorb and implement everything. "It should be a residential 5/7-day workshop," wrote one. Another suggested a follow-up round "a year from now" to assess progress. These suggestions highlight the need for more layered, longitudinal engagement to add further depth to the relatively compact intervention of the three-day workshop.

Personal Discovery and Redefinition of Roles

Finally, the workshops acted as a space for personal introspection. Participants described moments of realisation about the roles they played within their groups—and the roles they could step into. "I found the Administrator in me, which I hadn't expected," said one. Another wrote, "I am an Integrator." These discoveries, based on the PAEI (Producer, Administrator, Entrepreneur, Integrator) model[85] adapted for use in SMART, were often surprising and empowering.

Some participants began to see themselves not just as artists, but also as organisers, producers, or cultural entrepreneurs. The idea that theatre-making could and should be approached with the same seriousness and rigour as any other profession was repeatedly affirmed. "I shouldn't ignore mission, vision, budget in the name of 'it's just a passion'," said one participant.

Others described the workshop as a moment of alignment. "Now I know more about the role I can play in my group," said a participant from Kochi, "and I am excited to do it more efficiently." These comments suggest that, beyond group outcomes, SMART had a lasting impact on individual confidence and clarity of purpose.

Reflections on Format and Delivery

While the overall feedback was strongly positive, participants shared constructive suggestions for improvement. The most frequent recommendation was to increase the duration of the workshop. "Three days aren't sufficient to take in this much information," was a sentiment echoed in every location. Others requested more physical activities, interactive sessions, and time for group reflection.

[85] Ichak Adizes, "Organizational Passages—Diagnosing and Treating Lifecycle Problems of Organizations," *Organizational Dynamics* 8, no. 1 (1979).

Language accessibility was also raised, especially in Kochi, where participants requested sessions in Malayalam or facilitators who spoke the local language. "Although translation was available later, I couldn't get involved in the discussions," said one participant.

Several participants requested post-workshop mentoring, peer networks, and intermediate-level workshops. One respondent expressed the desire to do the workshop again, "after giving all the points some more thought," while another suggested "a second round, a year from now, and some sustained mentoring."

Snapshot: Reflections from Kerala—A Participant-Organiser's Perspective

Manu Jose, founder Director of Meandyou Performing Company and Creative Director of the Ala Centre for Culture and Alternative Education (Ala, hereafter), is a veteran theatre practitioner in Kerala with over three decades of experience. Known for his deep engagement with self-awareness and storytelling-based workshops, Manu has long worked to democratise theatre knowledge by making it accessible beyond performance spaces, particularly through educational and therapeutic contexts. In March 2020, he partnered with SMART to host the SMART workshop at Ala in Mulanthuruthy, while also participating himself. Manu shared his insights and reflections on the need for SMART during an interview with the research team.[86]

For Manu, the SMART workshop was timely and necessary. He observed that while there is a significant interest in theatre in Kerala, there is little culture of sharing experiences or learnings. His frustration with the fragmented, insular nature of the theatre community made the opportunity to host SMART deeply meaningful. He saw it as a space to spark conversations, bring the local theatre community together, and encourage greater transparency around management thinking in theatre.

One of the most impactful takeaways from SMART for Manu was the concept of cross-funding—something he was practising but hadn't explicitly named. He shared that Ala, the organisation he runs, is partially supported by his earnings from his parallel profession in hospital administration. SMART provided him with the language and structure to articulate this model more clearly and reinforced the legitimacy of such practices in arts organisations.

SMART also helped sharpen Manu's approach to audience development. Drawing inspiration from the workshop—and guided by his natural inclination towards launching and experimenting with new initiatives—he started *Amuse*, a monthly music festival at *Ala* that served as a soft entry point for new audiences. As he explained, people may not always be attracted to theatre, but they will come for music. Over time, this recurring event began converting some music

[86] Manu Jose, Interview with Research Team, Zoom, 09-04-2025.

lovers into theatregoers and contributed to building a strong community database. He also initiated Kadhayanam, a school outreach programme involving giant puppets, storytelling, and workshops. While the initiative emerged after the SMART workshop, the concept was partly shaped by his earlier exposure to children's theatre work by other groups and theatre-makers—many of whom later became part of the SMART network.

Manu has consistently shared his SMART learnings with the broader theatre ecosystem in Kerala. Through NATAK (Network of Artistic Theatre Activists Kerala), he facilitated a follow-up theatre management session that drew heavily from his SMART experience. This session enabled participants who had not attended the original SMART workshop at Mulanthuruthy to gain insights into funding models, organisational strategy, and sustainability. Manu believes that SMART sparked a shift in thinking—one that inspired the enthusiasm within NATAK to organise this follow-up initiative on theatre management.

A particularly striking moment for Manu during the SMART workshop was a conversation about the fear of funding—especially the scepticism surrounding institutional support for theatre. While some participants felt that such funding could compromise artistic integrity, Manu valued how Arundhati guided the discussion during the SMART workshop to challenge this assumption. He felt that the workshop encouraged participants to rethink their hesitations, opening up new perspectives on sustainability and the role of funding in supporting meaningful artistic work.

For Manu, SMART was not just a workshop—it was a space of recognition, reflection, and re-energising. It affirmed practices he had long carried out instinctively and provided tools to deepen and share them more deliberately with others in the region.

SMART Workshop—From Uncertainty to Direction

The SMART workshop appears to have achieved its goal of helping theatre groups sharpen their internal processes and external impact. While some participants sought more time, depth, or local relevance, the consensus was that the programme succeeded in reshaping how participants approach both artistic and administrative challenges, instilling a sense of direction and possibility. One participant captured this transformation best: "I entered the session thinking that theatre building is an unachievable challenge, but now I think I can track a path to it."

SMART Online (2020-2022)

SMART Online Workshop (2020) - From In-Person to Online

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns in 2020 made physical gatherings impossible. This sudden halt to in-person engagements disrupted plans for upcoming SMART workshops, forcing the team to reimagine how such intensive training could be offered in the new normal. Building on the experiences from earlier SMART formats, including the shorter, regionally adapted SMART on Wheels, the team developed an online version of the workshop.

This digital format, spread over three days, aimed to retain the participatory and reflective nature of SMART while adapting to the realities of online interaction. The goal remained the same: to support theatre groups in understanding their internal dynamics, revisiting their vision, and planning strategically for the future, even amidst deep uncertainty. The following section presents the workshop details[87] and participant feedback[88] drawn primarily from the SMART archives and interviews conducted by the research team.

Workshop Structure and Format

Dates: December 2–4, 2020

Facilitators: Arundhati Ghosh, Ashish Mehta, Menaka Rodriguez, Neel Chaudhuri, Sameera Iyengar, Sudhanva Deshpande, Sunil Shanbag

Participants: 18 theatre practitioners from 10 groups representing Bengaluru, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, New Delhi, and Palakkad

Each day consisted of two sessions, combining full-group activities with focused small-group discussions held in three breakout rooms.

Day 1: Context and Vision

- Session 1: *Today's Context* (Led by Neel)

An exploratory session where participants reflected on the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic. It provided a safe space for individuals to share personal and professional anxieties and discuss how their roles and organisations were evolving.

[87]" SMART Online Course Flow Dec 2020," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
[88]" Feedback – SMART Online Course (Responses)," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.

- Session 2: *Vision—Why We Do Theatre* (Led by Sunil)

This session helped participants articulate or revisit their theatre group's core purpose. Writing exercises and guided feedback helped clarify their vision in practical terms.

Day 2: Ideation and Reality Check

- Session 3: *Crazy Wild Brainstorming* (Led by Arundhati & Ashish)

A free-form session where participants imagined new possibilities for their work, inspired by their current realities and long-term dreams.

- Session 4: *SWOT Analysis* (Led by Sudhanva)

This session grounded the imaginative energy from earlier discussions in a structured analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each participant/group. Each participant developed a personalised SWOT chart and discussed it with their peers.

Day 3: From Vision to Action

- Sessions 5 & 6: *Goals and Outcomes* (Led by Sameera & Menaka)

Drawing from the previous sessions, participants identified actionable goals and mapped out desired outcomes. They created one-page documents reflecting short-to-mid-term plans and refined these through peer and facilitator feedback.

The workshop concluded on day three with a one-hour final session led by Neel, featuring an open discussion and closing reflections. The structure of the SMART online workshop emphasised participation, reflection, and contextual responsiveness, supported by thoughtful facilitation and intentional pacing.

Participant Feedback

Participant responses on the SMART Online Workshop revealed a strong appreciation for its structure, depth, and the sense of connection it fostered—even within the confines of a digital format. The key themes that emerged from the participant feedback are outlined below.

Online Format: Effective and Engaging

Participants heard about the workshop through various channels—email, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and word of mouth. For most, the registration and onboarding experience was smooth. One participant wrote, "Very structured and well organised," while another said, "We had superb support from the organisers 'side." A few participants noted issues or confusion—particularly with payment or the length of the registration form—but acknowledged the assistance they received. As one noted, "I had hiccups in sending my payment. Rupali was a great help."

Despite initial doubts, the online format proved to be a surprising success for most participants. Many appreciated the thoughtful structuring, the balance between large group and small group sessions, and the use of breakout rooms. One participant expressed that the workshop felt as if one was "meeting everybody physically," while another remarked, "The online experience worked very well for me, especially as we shared in the breakout rooms and the larger group." Several participants reflected on the value of being able to attend from their own homes. One wrote, "Physically we wouldn't be able to connect with people from different parts of the country."

A recurring appreciation was the breakout room model, which allowed for familiarity and focus. One participant stated that he appreciated the idea of breakout rooms since it allowed "participants to get concentrated attention on their problems." Another added that it was valuable to be "able to talk to people other than the facilitators, (and that) it felt like an actual workshop rather than a series of lectures."

Key Learnings and Shifts in Perspective

Participants reported several takeaways that deepened their understanding of group processes, management, and planning. Vision-building was a major theme. One participant cited learning the "importance and the true meaning of vision," while others focused on how to "brainstorm on the vision" and "write your goals and strategies."

Some discovered new tools for organisational planning: "Articulating problem areas in the shape of opportunities" and "clarity on objectives." The SWOT analysis and goal-setting sessions were highlighted by many. As one respondent put it, "We need to reimagine our objectives" and "have an evaluation method to see where we are going."

Others spoke about the impact on their group culture and dynamics. "We revisited our group vision," one said, while another shared that the workshop "helped us open our minds that a lot of things/ lack of resources that we complain about, aren't really needed." One striking piece of

feedback described the workshop as a space where everything discussed "was implemented in our group's working under guidance from the teachers."

Participants from newer or smaller groups appreciated the opportunity to learn from others. One participant remarked that the workshop "gave me the opportunity to meet people doing theatre in various parts of the country and also have a sense of their work." Another highlighted the benefit of having conversations between the group members and the larger group in the workshop, "that were necessary to move forward."

Suggestions for Improvement

Though the overall feedback was very positive, there were also constructive suggestions for the future. Several expressed interest in ongoing dialogue and support post-workshop. One suggested a "mailing list/a contact sheet/a place where conversations can be continued even after the workshop." Another proposed a "mentor-mentee relationship."

Participants also identified areas for potential expansion, such as sessions on "how to archive and document work," "how to use technology to create processes," and "how to start a conversation around safety in your organisation." One suggested that the workshop could benefit from a "more independent practitioner and a management-driven approach to strategic management of the arts."

A small number of participants mentioned that the workshop was different from what they had expected. One person said, "My expectation from the workshop was a primarily management-oriented approach to the offerings. To assume and treat every participant as a cultural manager first. I found that approach severely lacking." However, even those with mismatched expectations appreciated the workshop's overall content and approach and were open to recommending it to others.

Overall Reception

The majority of participants strongly recommended the workshop to others in the theatre community. The structured yet open-ended format, the experienced facilitation team, and the opportunity to reflect deeply on one's work were valued across the board. As one participant succinctly put it, "It was an enriching experience because the result of it can be seen in our organisation's work." Another offered a broader reflection: "We are a theatre organisation that already has tools, so we did not require them. What it allowed us to do was solidify our identity for the three attending members as ONE TEAM."

Across different geographies, group sizes, and stages of development, the SMART Online Workshop offered a much-needed pause and a structured space to think, connect, and reimagine.

SMART In The Round (2020-2022)

The SMART online workshop created a structured digital space for theatre practitioners to examine their context, revisit their group vision, and map out actionable goals, while navigating the unfamiliar terrain of online engagement. While the workshop proved effective in offering focused and rigorous learning, the SMART team also recognised the need for a more open-ended platform—one that could address practical questions and expand the conversation beyond the core group of workshop participants. The team began to think of new formats to engage with the wider theatre community during this period of isolation and transition. In internal planning meetings, a parallel idea began to take shape—a lecture series on ancillary subjects—that could bring in expert perspectives on areas often adjacent to artistic practice but crucial to sustaining it, such as legal frameworks, leadership, and archiving.

From these conversations and early planning sessions emerged SMART In The Round—a curated series of online public talks designed to complement the more intensive SMART workshops. SMART In The Round aimed to widen the circle of engagement, offering accessible, focused sessions on essential themes in arts practice and management. SMART In The Round retained the SMART ethos of contextual responsiveness but with a format suited to broader participation. The goal was not only to offer knowledge but to create space for timely, necessary conversations—while experimenting with what online engagement could look like for theatre artists.

SMART In The Round materialised as a series of six curated online conversations on creativity, culture, and context. Held on Zoom and streamed live on SMART's Facebook page, the series brought together practitioners and thinkers from across the country to reflect on pressing questions emerging from the pandemic and the shifting cultural landscape. The details of each session—including the panellists, moderators, and number of attendees—are provided below. Attendance figures are based on Zoom reports[89] of unique viewers of each session.

SMART In The Round #1: On Fear, Funding, and Freedom of Expression

Date: 29 September 2020 (Attendees: 122)

[89]" SIR 1 – Zoom Attendee Report," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
"SIR 2 – Attendee Report," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
"SIR – Community – Attendee Report," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
"SIR 4 Space – Attendee Report," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.
"SIR 5 Experiment – Attendee Report," SMART Archives, accessed on 11-04-2025.

This inaugural session examined the changing landscape of artistic freedom during the pandemic, exploring how fear, funding issues, and self-expression were being negotiated by artists and cultural practitioners.

Panellists: Aditi Mangaldas, Bose Krishnamachari, Purva Naresh, and Sambhaji Bhagat

Moderator: Vinutha Mallya

SMART In The Round #2: On Why We Do What We Do

Date: 20 December 2020 (Attendees: 55)

This reflective session brought together two theatre-makers to explore the motivations and impulses that sustain creative work, particularly during times of isolation and uncertainty.

In Conversation: Deepika Arwind and Maya Krishna Rao

SMART In The Round #3: On Community

Date: 25 August 2021 (Attendees: 56)

This discussion focused on how ideas of community shifted during the pandemic—how artists reimagined connections, care, and collective practice while physically distanced.

Panellists: Anurupa Roy, Nisha Abdulla, Sanjoy Ganguly, and Sapan Saran

Moderator: Sameera Iyengar

SMART In The Round #4: On Space

Date: 29 September 2021 (Attendees: 100)

Exploring the various meanings of ‘space’—from the physical to the symbolic—this conversation reflected on what it meant to create, hold, and lose space during lockdowns, and the new imaginations that emerged

Panellists: Kallol Bhattacharya, Manu Jose, Michaela Talwar, and Rupali Bhave

Moderator: Sunil Shanbag

SMART In The Round #5: On Experiment

Date: 26 October 2021 (Attendees: 54)

Centred on experimentation as a response to disruption, this session brought together artists who embraced risk, play, and the unknown in their creative processes.

Panellists: Lapdiang Syiem, Mallika Taneja, Mohit Takalkar, and Vivek Madan

Moderator: Neel Chaudhuri

SMART In The Round #6: On the Ideas of Consent in Intimate Practices

Date: 26 May 2022 (Attendee data unavailable)

The final session of the series addressed the complexities of consent in creative and intimate collaborations. The conversation opened up crucial reflections on boundaries, trust, and ethics in artistic processes.

Panellists: Mandeep Raikhy, Neha Vyaso, and Sharanya Ramprakash

Moderator: Arundhati Ghosh

Chapter 4 – Reading Between the Formats: SMARTʼs Broader Impact

Negotiating the Idea of Management in Theatre

There was a strong desire to root the SMART programme in the context of theatre practice in India. Many from the core team believed that applying principles from the business world or performance practices from the Western world would render SMART irrelevant to the unique context it sought to influence. A programme based on extraneous frameworks would only function at a superficial level—failing to challenge deep-seated beliefs held by artists or resonate with their ethos and identities. As a result, the idea of creating a theatre management programme was incubated for a long time before it eventually took concrete form.

The core team invested enormous time and effort in developing the content and design of the SMART programme. Its members brought together diverse experiences and relationships with theatre and the performing arts. Some were artists creating work; others were managers or administrators. While some came directly from theatre, others hailed from the broader arts sector or were associated with funding bodies and non-profit organisations. This diversity led to very different perspectives on how SMART should be shaped. The teamʼs collaborative approach encouraged peer learning—facilitators became familiar with each other's modules. This interactive, research-driven process allowed individual perspectives to converge into a shared vision for SMART.

Yet, this consensus did not come easily. Sunil notes that the longstanding tension between theory and practice in the arts surfaced in the functioning of the SMART team. He observed palpable tension between practitioners and non-practitioners regarding how theatre management should be approached. Interestingly, those with professional management backgrounds made conscious efforts to moderate their language and practices to suit SMARTʼs context. Arundhati, for instance, was concerned about how groups engaged in ideologically driven work would respond to managerial concepts. To build trust, she deliberately distanced the idea of management from business, presenting it instead as universally applicable, from managing households to managing theatre groups.

Swati shares that her interest in enabling arts management in India predated SMART. Although she had wanted to initiate a two-year arts management course at New York University, her involvement with SMART led her to co-create something from scratch, rather than replicate existing models. Meanwhile, theatre practitioners in the core team were embracing management ideas. Sunil observes that artists were more comfortable using the term ʻproduction ʼrather than ʻmanagementʼ, and felt this resistance was something SMART needed to address. Sanjna, too, wanted to challenge this mindset—she deliberately used terms like ʻstrategy ʼto push theatre

groups to reflect on their societal roles, articulate their values, and move from passionate survival to purposeful engagement.

The internal struggle—between distancing from and embracing management—was context-driven and ongoing. It ultimately helped the team build a foundational common ground. However, this foundation was not always stable. Tensions around SMART's identity and purpose persisted. The careful, and often fragile, balancing of these tensions is what transformed SMART from an idea into reality.

Divergent viewpoints within the core team were often rooted in the shared belief that managers should not dictate the functioning of theatre. To address this, SMART consistently prioritised management's role in serving the arts. Sameera emphasises that practitioners, often without formal training or adequate funding, sacrifice creative time just to keep their groups afloat. She viewed management training as a way to help artists reclaim time for their art, which deepened her investment in SMART.

Given the diversity of the team, motivations for engaging with SMART varied, but they converged just enough to sustain collaboration. While no team member explicitly articulated a formal vision statement for SMART, one donor report captured a key goal: "To impact attitudes and approaches of theatre groups towards their own functioning, effectiveness of their own work and thereby impact on their audiences, communities and overall impact."[90] Notably, this goal does not use the word management—a subtle reflection of the negotiations between individual beliefs and the evolving core ideas behind SMART.

Understanding SMART Through Its Multiple Identities

Though commonly referred to as a programme, SMART has taken on various identities over time—course, experiment, knowledge base, enterprise, brand, institution, idea, and concept. These multiple identities, voiced by core team members and participants alike, complicate and deepen our understanding of SMART's impact.

We explore SMART through four distinct lenses: as a collective, an entrepreneurial venture, a knowledge base, and a potential institution.

A Collective

A collective is a group of individuals sharing a common interest and choosing to work together towards shared goals. In our interactions, especially with core team members, SMART was often

[90]" IFA SMART - S61 Progress Report Project and Programme Support," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-04-2025.

referred to as a collective—likely a remnant of their early association with the ITF collective. It brought together a diverse group of people interested in developing arts management thinking and practices rooted in the context of Indian theatre. The implication of the term 'collective 'was that the group was loosely formed, with minimal structure and non-binding commitments.

The disparate individuals that formed the SMART collective were held together by their shared interest in facilitating theatre and the performing arts. Their diverse capabilities and experiences created synergies for the SMART programme. Aided by an underlying spirit of cooperation, the collective effectively designed and implemented the long-format SMART programme during its first two editions. Despite the presence of institutions like IFA and Junoon in the scheme of SMART, Sameera stresses that each core team member was present in an individual capacity and that the institutions were there purely to support the collective and handle financial transactions if needed. There was a strong desire within the collective to remain independent of institutional influence. For instance, Sameera points out that had IFA been seen as the institution backing SMART, the relationship with the field would have been very different, given that IFA is a donor organisation.

The individual members of the SMART team greatly benefitted from the collective spirit. The idea of achieving consensus through discussion and balancing resistance with collaboration has already been established. These complex negotiations led to the development of a novel and more perceptive approach to communication and working within the core team. Swati shares that after her experience with SMART, she developed a more nuanced understanding of the concerns of different stakeholders and felt better equipped to deal with organisational fragility. Her collaborative efforts deepened after SMART. For Arundhati, working with SMART taught her to collaborate with brilliant but often opinionated individuals. She discovered that being direct, rather than diplomatic, was the most effective way to engage. While Arundhati undertook the challenging task of convincing the IFA board to get involved with SMART, the association also benefited IFA members who participated in the collective, as well as the institution itself.

Menaka conveys that her experience with SMART enabled her to adopt more collaborative models of work at IFA, distinct from the traditional donor-donee relationships typical at the institution. Darshana adds that IFA expanded its circle of artists through SMART and contributed to the larger discourse in the field. The IFA members who were part of the SMART team significantly deepened their knowledge through direct engagement with practitioners. The SMART collective created the possibility for conversations between diverse actors in theatre. The shared understanding of management developed through SMART emerged from this collective spirit—not from formal hierarchies or structures that a more professionalised entity might have imposed.

Sameera recounts that SMART team members developed a level of trust that made collaboration easier. Her interactions with a wide range of theatre practitioners through SMART helped her

reflect more deeply on her own work, and that influence continues to this day. Sunil reveals that SMART pushed him to examine aspects of his own practice that he had previously taken for granted. He feels better equipped to articulate his ideas, and the validation he received from SMART boosted his confidence.

However, alongside the benefits of flexibility and openness, the informal nature of the collective also created challenges. Core team members prioritised collective goals, but their individual pursuits inevitably took precedence at different points in time. The level of commitment varied among members, both in timing and intensity. This variability, coupled with the lack of formal structure, occasionally created friction.

Milena, who played a critical role in the design phase and the first two editions of SMART, shares that she gradually withdrew from the programme to allow it to continue without her support. Similarly, Swati states that she made it clear from the outset that her involvement would last for two years. Yet, her departure was perceived by some team members as a betrayal. With the shift to shorter formats and the eventual departure of Sudhanva and Sanjna, Sunil notes that the collective began to question itself. Swati believes that the energy and commitment the team brought in the early years could not have been sustained long-term.

The open, informal nature of the SMART collective enabled its intense initial efforts but also contributed to its gradual disintegration. As individuals and institutions disengaged, apprehensions emerged. Arundhati, for example, became concerned when Junoon was dismantled, and IFA remained the sole institutional supporter. She felt that the collective spirit was put at risk with IFA becoming the exclusive host. Arundhati had hoped that SMART would be co-hosted by IFA and another theatre group or organisation.

Even as the early energy of SMART dissipated, the need to induct new members and build a team for the future was clearly acknowledged. Some of the new members who joined, particularly in the shorter formats like SMART on Wheels and the SMART Workshops, included Neel and Ashish. Both shifted into roles as core team members. Neel shares that he joined the team within a year of completing the long-format SMART programme. At the time, he had applied only a small fraction of his learnings in his own work, and he felt uneasy about preaching principles he had not yet implemented himself. In hindsight, he feels he should have waited a few more years before joining the core team.

Ashish, who facilitated several sessions in the shorter formats, similarly expressed some reluctance to lead sessions but took on the responsibility as part of the core team. Some newer members felt the SMART alumni base did not have sufficient experience to take on leadership roles. While some lacked experience, others were not ready to assume such responsibility. Even the new members who joined felt ill-equipped to lead SMART. There was a shared sense that SMART had not built enough momentum in its first two editions to warrant a leadership transition. Some were surprised to be suggested as future course leaders. The urgency for newer

members to take over may have stemmed from older members ’desire to reinvest in their personal creative work, particularly as some had already moved on from SMART. Although sincere efforts were made to induct new members, the readiness and experience of the incoming members were often lacking. Some members felt SMART was still too young to be handed over.

SMART’s sustainability was also impacted by a lack of funding and the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Menaka notes that it was primarily the SMART collective that applied for funding, rather than IFA taking on this responsibility. She felt that this was consistent with the collaborative ethos that IFA respected, even as the institution played a major role in holding SMART together in its later years.

Arundhati explains that the pandemic severely affected artists' incomes, including those of the SMART core team. As members took on other work to supplement their earnings, SMART lost priority. Its loose structure meant that the intense commitment it required was not adequately compensated. Challenges were addressed—or left unaddressed—based on the prevailing collective spirit.

Sameera reflects that she had hoped the new core team would take on more responsibility. She wonders whether the continued presence of the founding members discouraged newer members from stepping up. Interestingly, one alumnus who joined after the early editions felt that some in the founding team were holding on too tightly, creating too many non-negotiables for the programme to be effectively handed over.

Arundhati feels there was insufficient reflection within SMART about the collective’s own formation and sustainability. She notes that while much thought was given to the course and its content, less was devoted to the internal dynamics of the team—how much control members retained and how much they were willing to relinquish. The identity of the SMART programme became closely tied to that of the collective. As the collective dispersed, so did the programme. Efforts to rebuild the collective, while sincere, were ultimately unsuccessful, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

An Entrepreneurial Venture

An entrepreneurial venture seeks to develop an idea into a project to create financial and/or social value. The idea is innovative and, therefore, carries a risk of failure. The introduction of arts management for theatre practitioners in India was an innovative concept at the time of SMART’s inception. There was both an absence of and resistance to formal management practices in theatre and the performing arts. Furthermore, there was a risk that the idea might not be accepted by practitioners, and that the economic structure of theatre might not support its financial viability. Like entrepreneurs convinced of the timeliness of their idea, the early core team behind SMART persisted in transforming their concept into a functioning initiative. These

early team members were deeply committed to the idea of developing arts management thinking and practices tailored specifically to the Indian theatre context. Through deep thought, discussion, and deliberation, they worked to materialise the idea.

The SMART 2015 Interim Report[91] defines SMART as "a capacity building programme for theatre groups in India that addresses their need to understand the role of strategic thinking and management in their work." Resources were gathered to convert this idea into a tangible initiative. In addition to early members from ITF, a larger team was brought on board. Collaborations were formed with institutions that could provide administrative support. Funds were raised for the design and development of the programme content.

Despite its entrepreneurial characteristics, SMART's primary focus remained on transforming the idea into a high-quality programme, not on building a self-sustaining venture. Much like the creation of a theatre production, the emphasis was on the artistic and pedagogical value of the programme. The commitment of the core team was to the idea of SMART—not to its establishment as a separate, self-sustaining entity. Yet, subtle references in interviews with core team members hint at an emerging perception of SMART as an independent entity. Sudhanva referred to SMART as an 'enterprise', while Sanjna initially described it as an 'institution 'before revising this to 'idea'.

Due to the team's deep focus on developing programme content, the question of sustainability was not sufficiently addressed in the early stages. Research efforts were aimed at shaping the content rather than building a sustainable operational model. Decisions about resources, duration, and costs were made with the primary goal of delivering a high-quality experience—not creating a long-term venture. Sudhanva admits that the team had no clear answer when questions about SMART's sustainability arose within a few years. He acknowledges the difficulty of running a programme without secured resources, given the high effort demanded from facilitators and participants alike.

Sunil notes that concerns about the cost and sustainability of the programme emerged only during the second edition, despite Sanjna's repeated insistence that SMART was a long-term initiative. While she emphasised this point to potential funders, it was not embedded in the team's early strategy or fundraising efforts. The programme was created using whatever resources could be mobilised at the time, without a concrete long-term operational plan. Issues of sustainability only gained urgency once SMART's future came into question. Immediate design and delivery concerns took precedence over planning for the programme's longevity.

[91]" Interim Report of Strategic Management of the Art of Theatre (SMART) 2015 Programme," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

Unlike many entrepreneurial ventures, SMART was not structured around an operational framework that could ensure continuity. The lack of long-term planning meant that the implications of a single edition costing over Rs. 40 lakhs were not fully considered in advance. With greater strategic foresight, the programme might have taken a different shape. In hindsight, SMART's development implicitly—and perhaps inadvertently—favoured depth of impact over breadth.

Several participants and core team members describe SMART as a bold and ambitious initiative. Arundhati notes that the IFA board even referred to SMART as a 'brand'. Ashish believes that SMART created a unique space for conversations around theatre practice, even if the number of beneficiaries was limited. Many expressed regret that SMART did not continue. Rupali sees a widespread need for the long-format programme. Savitri describes SMART as an ambitious effort that did not last long enough to mature. Ashish echoes this sentiment.

One participant felt that the core team failed to implement some of the same long-term strategies they taught and deeply regretted the programme's closure. Ashoke reflects that while the passion of the core team was evident, it needed to be matched by a layer of leadership to carry the work forward. Sanjna admits that, while the programme was well-designed, more could have been done to ensure its sustainability, especially in fundraising. She believes the idea behind SMART was beautiful but could not transcend its moment or make a substantial impact on the larger field.

Milena expresses regret that the team did not stick with the long-format version of SMART and questions whether it might have been better to end the programme after the first two editions. Arundhati, on the other hand, felt that the three-day workshop format was more efficient and achieved wider reach. Sunil acknowledges that, even without the disruption caused by the pandemic, SMART was becoming 'heavy', and people were losing interest in keeping up with its demands. The shorter formats required the involvement of fewer members, and the depth of team interaction was diluted. As team members prioritised other personal or professional commitments, either by leaving SMART or reducing their involvement, the energy that had sustained the early years began to dissipate.

A Knowledge Base

SMART combined available knowledge with the rich experiences of those who made it possible. The team also undertook empirical research to develop the programme's content. The result was material that was deeply relevant to practitioners. Since the programme design involved adapting existing knowledge and reshaping it to suit the Indian context, it is essential to recognise SMART as a valuable and unique knowledge base. SMART's design, which recognised this

context, added to its value as a knowledge base. The case studies presented in SMART offered strategies and solutions to challenges in a passion-driven, resource-constrained theatre sector.

However, the content and its presentation did not resonate fully with all participants. One participant from the long-format programme felt that some cases reflected the personal beliefs of facilitators rather than presenting diverse perspectives. Another noted that some pedagogical approaches and ideas in SMART were rooted in idealised views of Indian theatre. Another raised concerns about how certain cases led him to reflect on the complicated politics of theatre management in India.

Ashoke appreciated the learning potential of SMART's case-based approach but felt that the cases were not sufficiently detailed. He described them as snapshots rather than comprehensive studies. He emphasised that case studies should facilitate decision-making within the unique contexts of individual practitioners. Sudhanva agreed that the use of context-specific examples helped SMART avoid a one-size-fits-all toolkit approach. However, he also suggested that each case could have focused more sharply on specific aspects of theatre management to function as effective teaching tools.

While SMART made a strong contribution as a knowledge base, its long-term impact depended on the accessibility of that knowledge. The content was shared with participants of the various SMART programmes—significant in number, yet a small fraction of India's experimental and non-profit theatre community. Sanjna admitted that SMART was unable to create a document that captured its core insights and made them widely accessible.

Nonetheless, SMART's knowledge has continued to be shared by its facilitators in various other contexts. Sameera and Swati have taught aspects of SMART to students at the Drama School Mumbai (DSM). Sameera mentions her six-module course, Ethics of Practice at DSM, which distils ideas from SMART and encourages students to ask critical questions. Sudhanva and Sunil have conducted voluntary sessions for theatre practitioners outside the SMART ecosystem. Milena continues to use SMART case studies in her teaching and training work. She also highlights how SMART opened up professional development pathways. For example, Sushma, a participant in the long-format course, later pursued a Master's degree in Cultural Policy and Management at the University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. She credits SMART with sparking her deeper interest in arts management and her decision to pursue it full-time.

Through facilitators now engaged in teaching, mentoring, and research, SMART's knowledge continues to circulate. Yet this raises important questions: Does dissemination through a handful of individuals do justice to the knowledge SMART created? Can its accessibility and impact be expanded?

To answer these questions, it's important to examine SMART's target audience. There was broad agreement that SMART was designed for theatre practitioners with some years of experience. Sunil says the team sought people who were searching for something and had sufficient practice behind them. He felt that younger practitioners often hadn't yet reflected on their reasons for being in theatre. Sameera echoed this, noting that participants with limited involvement often struggled to engage in meaningful conversations. Sudhanva added that SMART had a positive bias toward voluntary theatre practitioners—those driven by passion rather than profit.

A participant's ability to implement change also depended on their role within a theatre group. Sunil pointed out that participants needed to be in positions where their voices could be heard. Some team members, however, envisioned a broader reach. Sanjna wanted the programme to include as many people as possible, excluding only traditional, commercial theatre. Arundhati, too, was curious about which kinds of practitioners within the amateur and experimental theatre spaces would be interested. Sudhanva highlighted SMART's focus on groups rather than individuals. Still, many participants who were new to theatre or were only considering forming groups found SMART immensely useful. These younger practitioners often sought guidance on how to manage their creative practice from the ground up.

On the other hand, some established groups with long-standing practices struggled to implement change. The CCRT-NSD workshop illustrates this tension. Intended for NSD students with limited experience running theatre groups, its effectiveness was debated. Sunil questioned its relevance, while Swati said it was eye-opening for some students but less impactful for others.

Despite this, core team members have continued to engage with newer and less experienced practitioners through DSM and other platforms. One collaborator, involved in a SMART-on-Wheels session, strongly advocated for introducing arts management to students. His reasoning was simple: students need this training early if they are to apply it later. He noted that India lacks Arts Councils similar to those in the West and that bureaucrats in the Ministry of Culture often lack artistic backgrounds. In his view, the responsibility for theatre development rests with theatre people themselves.

He emphasised that everyone in the arts manages their work, albeit often informally. For this reason, he believed that arts management training should be widely available to students, including those in folk arts, who could benefit from learning how to expand their reach and manage their practice effectively. Swati noted that the CCRT-NSD workshop was particularly meaningful for students who had assumed government support would fund their artistic careers. The session helped debunk this myth and introduced them to the realities of theatre practice in India.

If a smaller proportion of young and relatively inexperienced students find SMART relevant, does that mean the knowledge should not be made available to them? SMART's relevance was

something the team actively explored—both in terms of who it was reaching and who it ought to reach. The SMART on Wheels initiative, and later the SMART three-day workshops, sought to address this by expanding access.

Ashish mentions that the first two long-format editions of SMART mostly reached people with internet access and prior connections to the team. With SMART on Wheels, the aim was to test whether SMART was relevant to a broader range of practitioners. Arundhati says SMART on Wheels was about going to people instead of waiting for them to come to SMART. Each city shaped its own version of the conversation, based on the ground realities of its theatre community.

While SMART on Wheels was partly a response to fundraising constraints, Sunil emphasises its role in reaching non-metropolitan areas and better understanding their challenges. SMART on Wheels reflected SMART's openness to evaluating and extending its own relevance. It also generated interest among those who had previously been unable to participate. One participant, who was rejected from the long-format course due to a technical error, felt excluded but later attended SMART on Wheels in Delhi. When SMART went online, many younger members of his group expressed a desire to join and learn.

In reality, SMART's narrow early definitions of the 'ideal participant 'did not always align with the programme's actual impact. Young practitioners and newly formed groups often found the programme transformative. In contrast, some long-standing groups were less responsive to change.

SMART began as an experiment and evolved into a knowledge base that remains relevant to theatre and performing arts practitioners. Sameera believes that even after the programme's closure, SMART can live on. She supports digitising SMART's knowledge through an online version, even if it cannot replicate the intensity and interactivity of the offline experience. Still, a question remains: Will SMART's knowledge continue to circulate widely, made available to all who seek it—or will it rest, preserved in an archive? This is a decision its custodians must make.

(Within) An Institution

An institution is an establishment that works towards a specific purpose. It typically has rules and structures that shape behaviour. SMART as an institution—or as part of one—never fully materialised. Although it received backing from institutions like IFA and Junoon, SMART consciously resisted becoming embedded within them. Its identity as a collective often contrasted with the notion of being institutionalised. Nonetheless, the idea was considered and debated.

Sunil reveals that Sameera repeatedly raised the possibility of SMART being housed within an institution or university, with the support of institutional resources. This idea aligned with the understanding of SMART as a knowledge base that needed to be preserved and made accessible. However, most of the team resisted the proposition of institutional affiliation. Arundhati shares that the SMART core team included both those who believed in institutions and those who were sceptical. In a meeting held on 1st October 2019, SMART decided that independence and non-affiliation with educational institutions were non-negotiables. Questions were raised about whether an institution was even necessary to sustain SMART.

By 2020, the idea of SMART as an institution was actively discussed. In the minutes of an online meeting held on 29th April 2020 with Arundhati, Sameera, Sunil, Sudhanva, Ashish, Neel, and Rupali present, one agenda item was 'SMART as an institution. 'The notes reflected mixed views: "While SMART isn't a legal entity, people look at it like an entity/organisation. We come together as individuals, but we run it like an organisation. We could project SMART as 'the ' institution." However, the group also acknowledged that "Seeing it as a programme keeps it lighter… A programme could run for a while and it may shut. If one needs to close an institution, it's quite unwieldy. To institutionalise SMART should be the last case scenario. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't imagine it as an institution."[92]

As the collective energy began to wane in SMART's later years, Arundhati acknowledged that while collectives allow people to join and leave freely, institutions have a greater chance of surviving over time. Swati echoed this sentiment, explaining that her original vision had been to embed arts management education within a university. However, other team members did not share this vision. She remarked that SMART was executed in a 'purist 'sense—rooted, minimal, and intentionally bite-sized. In retrospect, Swati appreciated the purity of its design while understanding the resistance to institutional structures.

Sameera agreed, stating she would not trust an institution to preserve SMART's spirit. She believed institutions tend to curtail egalitarian processes and that the SMART team would not have accepted such interference. Despite this resistance, IFA played a significant role in implementing SMART, especially in its later years. Darshana mentions that while IFA was not expected to raise funds for SMART in its early phase, it became involved in fundraising over time. Arundhati adds that the decision to keep fundraising separate from SMART was also meant to preserve its distinct identity. SMART was always seen as a co-administered project, not a programme housed at IFA.

[92]"20200429 SMART Meeting on Zoom - Base Conversation for the MoM," SMART Archives, accessed on 24-10-2024.

At times, IFA's strict administrative procedures led to friction, as Arundhati recalls. Nonetheless, IFA's continued support indicated that some form of institutional backing was crucial to SMART's survival. Just as SMART benefited from IFA, the organisation also gained from its association with SMART. Arundhati notes that this relationship strengthened IFA's connection to the theatre community. It enhanced IFA's reputation—not just as a funder, but also as a facilitator of capacity-building efforts. Collaborating with theatre veterans through SMART also helped IFA deepen its engagement with practitioners. In later years, some SMART alumni received funding through other IFA projects, even if no formal effort was made to do so.

Even as the relationship proved mutually beneficial, there remained discomfort about the possibility of IFA 'owning 'SMART. This unease stemmed from both ideological resistance to institutions and fears that SMART's spirit could be lost if absorbed by one. Ashoke, on the other hand, felt IFA could have made a stronger commitment to sustaining SMART. He was uneasy with SMART's reliance on a handful of individuals and doubted its ability to survive without them. In his view, while collectives are ideal for experimentation, long-term continuity requires institutional frameworks.

This insight echoes earlier observations: SMART prioritised programme content (its knowledge base) and collaborative spirit (its collective identity) over long-term operational strategy. This meant the possibility of SMART as a mission-driven venture or institutional component was never fully realised.

Still, traces of the institutional idea remain. Swati suggests that SMART's extensive documentation and process mapping provided the beginnings of an organisational structure. Ashish believes the programme was not mature enough to be handed over to an institution, but several others continue to envision institutional possibilities.

Ashoke Chatterjee suggests reviving SMART within a training unit at IFA. Menaka acknowledges that IFA sees value in continuing SMART, though it is wary of compromising its collaborative spirit. Arundhati shares this concern, noting that if IFA were to revive SMART independently, it could be seen as appropriating the programme. She is open to sharing SMART's material with another organisation but feels there is a sense of collective ownership over the knowledge.

Ashoke believes SMART's experience must be documented and that a national seminar could be held, potentially hosted by a university. Arundhati recalls discussions about placing SMART within institutions like NSD, Drama School Mumbai, and Ninasam, though each came with its own complications. Swati wonders if liberal arts institutions like Ashoka or Shiv Nadar might be a better fit, aligning more closely with SMART's ethos than traditional academic spaces.

The fact that institutional involvement in SMART never progressed beyond a limited association with IFA highlights the team's commitment to preserving its original spirit. Reservations persist, even regarding IFA continuing the programme without the core team. These tensions reinforce SMART's prioritisation of depth over scale.

While SMART's journey as a venture has ended, and the collective is no longer active, its role as a knowledge base remains vital. Whether it can be revived and expanded within an institution—or by a new collective—remains an open question.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion: Reflecting on a Decade of SMART

As the curtain falls on a decade of the SMART programme, we are reminded that some of the most powerful legacies are not found in institutions or infrastructure, but in ways of thinking. SMART, with all its complexities, contradictions, and commitments, was never merely a capacity-building initiative. It was a pedagogical experiment—an invitation to rethink the purpose, practice, and philosophy of management within Indian theatre.

At its core, SMART questioned the assumptions behind 'management 'itself—especially in contexts where resources are informal, hierarchies fluid, and creativity intrinsically collective. Rather than importing management as a set of best practices from the corporate world, or even from the international context of performing arts, SMART reframed it as a means of taking responsibility for one's artistic ecosystem. It treated management not as a tool of control or efficiency, but as an act of care, contextual judgement, and long-term thinking. In doing so, it offered theatre practitioners a way to align their operational decisions with their artistic values.

The programme did not aspire to produce 'professional managers 'in the conventional sense. Instead, it sought to strengthen reflective practitioners—artists who could ask difficult questions about vision, sustainability, collaboration, and ethics. From the earliest foundation courses to the regional workshops and pandemic-era online versions, SMART remained committed to helping theatre-makers think deeply about what they were doing, why they were doing it, and how they could do it better.

This very commitment also meant that SMART was not always easy. Its refusal to offer one-size-fits-all solutions sometimes left participants navigating ambiguity and complexity on their own. It chose to decentralise leadership, which fostered creativity and collective ownership but also placed greater demands on leaders to coordinate with the team, sustain momentum, and hold space for diverse viewpoints. It insisted on remaining context-specific and resisted scaling up, a decision that safeguarded its integrity but inevitably limited its reach. These were not failures—they were trade-offs. And they offer important lessons for anyone looking to build similar programmes in the future.

SMART: A Different Kind of Arts Management Programme

In assessing SMART's contribution, it is useful to consider how it differs from other arts management initiatives. Many formal training programmes in arts management, including those catering to South Asia, are geared towards developing a cadre of professional arts managers, ready to be deployed into large-scale festivals, museums, or well-funded arts organisations. These programmes often follow a structured curriculum, drawing on global models of institutional management, project planning, marketing, and evaluation.

Such models serve a crucial purpose in building arts infrastructure. However, they are often most applicable in contexts where jobs for arts managers exist—in well-resourced festivals or private museums, where clear hierarchies and roles allow for specialisation. The Indian theatre sector, in contrast, functions through informality, collaboration, and multiplicity of roles. Most theatre groups do not have the luxury of hiring a manager; instead, directors, performers, and technicians double up as fundraisers, administrators, and communicators.

SMART responded directly to this reality. Rather than training 'arts managers', it spoke to practitioners already embedded in the field—many of whom were producing, directing, or acting in the same work they were also trying to organise. Where conventional programmes may offer a top-down delivery of management knowledge, SMART built its curriculum from the ground up—rooted in the lived experiences, dilemmas, and innovations of the theatre-makers themselves. It prioritised relational learning over formal accreditation, reflection over instruction, and community over competition.

Even those with experience in other structured programmes noted this distinction. They valued the exposure, tools, and networks gained elsewhere—but also recognised that those programmes were designed for a different kind of arts ecosystem. In contrast, SMART offered a horizontal space, where peer-to-peer learning, mutual vulnerability, and context-specific strategies could emerge. It was not a course one completed; it was a conversation one continued, often long after the interactions ended. In fact, the impact study of the programme that predates SMART, ATSA, meant for art managers in general, commends, "SMART differs from ATSA in being focused on theatre and on India, and on organisational sustainability rather than on developing individuals. One of the interesting aspects of SMART is its focus on peer learning."[93] Like other arts management initiatives in India,[94] SMART had its limitations. While it catalysed deep and lasting shifts within many theatre groups, it did not—or perhaps intentionally chose not to—scale up or institutionalise its impact. Its reach remained modest, shaped in part by funding constraints and its reliance on a small, dedicated group of individuals who often held the programme together while balancing, and sometimes setting aside, their own artistic and creative pursuits. There has been, and continues to be, a strong demand for more structured mentorship, deeper

[93] Sue Hoyle, Petia Tzanova and Tanya Dutt. "Development Needs of Arts Managers in South Asia." *Cultural Accelerator: Legacy Effects of ARThinkSouthAsia* (Khoj India, 2020): 29.

[94] Art X Company's report titled *Arts-Management Landscape in India* (2019) suggests that arts management is an emerging field in India. According to the report, the sector is vast, spanning museums, galleries, festivals, performing arts, and more. Managers in the arts play crucial roles in administration, strategic planning, financial management, marketing, and audience engagement. Despite its growing importance, arts management lacks formal recognition and structured training programmes in India, making it challenging for professionals to scale and sustain their careers. The report's discussion on arts management training in India includes the ARThink South Asia (ATSA) fellowship, the SMART programme, and a Diploma in Arts Management by Chennai-based Museum Dakshina Chitra.

case-based learning, and greater accessibility—particularly through regional languages—needs that remain pressing in the field to this day.

Internally, SMART's collective model—while rich in diversity and dialogue—faced its own strains. As members moved on or shifted focus, continuity became difficult. The emotional labour of sustaining a consensus-based structure began to weigh on the team, particularly without institutional backing. In its final years, SMART faced the challenge of renewing its leadership while staying true to its non-hierarchical values. This tension remained unresolved—a reminder that collectives, too, need infrastructure, care, and succession planning.

Despite these limitations, SMART succeeded where many others have failed: in making management feel meaningful to artists. It bridged the often-divided worlds of administration and artistry. It validated the invisible labour of coordination, communication, and care. It gave theatre practitioners a language for sustainability that didn't feel like a compromise. Most importantly, it did all this without claiming ownership—SMART was always an invitation, not a directive.

Continuing the Work, Beyond the Programme

As the SMART team decided to conclude the programme in 2023, they did so with intention rather than out of failure, recognising a completed cycle. The choice not to formalise or institutionalise SMART may have limited its longevity, but it also preserved its ethos. SMART ended as it began: by centring practice, community, and self-determined growth.

The conversations it started, however, need not end. The principles of SMART—collaborative pedagogy, reflective practice, context-first learning—are not owned by any one initiative. They can and must inform how we imagine future frameworks of capacity-building in the arts. There is a need for more hybrid models—programmes that can blend the rigour of structured training with the flexibility of grassroots insight. There is a need to support peer-mentorship networks, document case-based practices, and build platforms for regionally grounded knowledge sharing. Above all, there is a need to centre care—not just in how art is made, but in how it is managed, sustained, and held.

SMART's greatest gift is this reminder: that managing art is not separate from making art. That the choices we make around money, people, time, and vision are not administrative afterthoughts but part of the creative act. That to manage with intention is to honour the work, the team, and the community. And that to do so collectively, messily, but meaningfully—is perhaps the most radical thing of all.

Annexure 1: SMART TIMELINE

Date	Detail
Late 2012	Conversation between Arundhati and Sameera marks a starting point for what became SMART *(Pg 12)*
January 2013	Arundhati holds a workshop with the India Theatre Forum (ITF) core team at Studio Safdar to explore a theatre management course. A small team to take this forward is formed - Sameera, Arundhati, Sanjna and Sudhanva. They become the founding members of SMART *(Pg 12)*
March 2013	Survey 'What Does Theatre in India Need?' assessing field need for management distributed across the ITF database. 68 people from across arts organisations, groups and individuals respond, confirming need *(Pg 14)*
April 2013	The first workshop is held in Delhi at Studio Safdar, with Milena and the founding members - Sameera, Arundhati, Sanjna, and Sudhanva - towards creating the course. *(Pg 23)*
2013-2014	Sunil & Swati are invited to join the core team. This core team - Sameera, Arundhati, Sanjna, Sudhanva, Sunil and Swati become the team that create the SMART residential course, under Milena's guidance, through multiple workshops. *(Pg 16)* Milena comes up with the name SMART - Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre - at a meeting / workshop in Mumbai, in Sameera's house. *(Pg 23)*
January to August 2015	1st SMART Residential Course *(Pg 12)* • January 2015: 12-day Residential Foundation Course at Fireflies, Bangalore • February to July 2015: 6-month Mentorship • August 2015: 2-day Final Workshop, Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai
October 12-16, 2015	5-day CCRT-NSD Workshop, NSD, New Delhi (customised for 2nd year NSD students) *(Pg 90)*

Date	Detail
July to December 2016	2nd SMART Residential Course *(Pg 12)* • July 2016: 12-day Residential Foundation Course at Fireflies, Bangalore • August to November 2016: 4-month Mentorship • December 2016: 2-day Final Workshop, School of Design, IIT Mumbai, Mumbai
March 4, 2017	SMART On Wheels #1: Bikaner, Rajasthan At Bikaner Theatre Festival, Bikaner, Rajasthan *(Pg 62)*
March 26, 2017	SMART On Wheels #2 - Agartala, Tripura At National School of Drama, Agartala, Tripura *(Pg 62)*
August 20, 2017	SMART On Wheels #3 – Patna, Bihar At Delhi Public School, Patna, Bihar *(Pg 63)*
October 05, 2017	SMART On Wheels #4 – Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh At Windermere Theatre Black Box, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh *(Pg 64)*
December 22, 2017	SMART On Wheels #5 – Mumbai, Maharashtra At Studio Tamaasha, Mumbai, Maharashtra *(Pg 64)*
February 06, 2018	SMART On Wheels #6 – New Delhi At Barefoot! Theatre space in Shahpurjat, New Delhi *(Pg 65)*
February 10, 2018	SMART On Wheels #7 – Pune, Maharashtra At Rangadarshan Sabhagruh, Maharashtra Cultural Center, Pune Maharashtra *(Pg 65)*
November 21-23, 2018	SMART Workshop #1 – Pune, Maharashtra At Rangadarshan Sabhagruh, Maharashtra Cultural Center, Pune Maharashtra *(Pg 68)*
April 14-16, 2019	SMART Workshop #2 – Bangalore, Karnataka At The Courtyard, Bangalore, Karnataka *(Pg 69)*
June 28-30, 2019	SMART Workshop #3 – Bikaner, Rajasthan At The Millennium Hotel, Bikaner, Rajasthan *(Pg 69)*
February 14-16, 2020	SMART Workshop #4 – Kolkata/Madhyamgram, West Bengal At Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, Madhyamgram, West Bengal *(Pg 69)*

Date	Detail
March 07-09, 2020	SMART Workshop #5 – Kochi/Mulanthuruthy, Kerala At Ala Centre for Culture & Alternative Education (Ala), Mulanthuruthy, Kerala *(Pg 69)*
September 2020 to June 2021	Development of 20 Case Studies by 5 commissioned researchers *(Pg 32)*
September 29, 2020	SMART In the Round #1: *Fear, Funding and Freedom of Expression: Artistic Freedom in 2020 (Pg 79)*
December 02-04, 2020	3-day SMART Online Workshop Online, Zoom - 11:00 AM to 04:00 PM, Daily *(Pg 75)*
December 20, 2020	SMART In the Round #2: *Why We Do What We Do - A conversation between Deepika Arwind and Maya Krishna Rao (Pg 80)*
August 25, 2021	SMART In the Round #3: *Community (Pg 80)*
September 29, 2021	SMART In the Round #4 *Space (Pg 80)*
October 26, 2021	SMART In the Round #5*: Experiment (Pg 80)*
May 26, 2022	SMART In the Round #6: *The Ideas of Consent in Intimate Practices (Pg 81)*
June 2022	SMART team takes a hiatus
October 2023	Decision to close SMART taken, along with decision to commission an Impact Study *(Pg 33)*
January 2024	Final SMART meeting held in Mumbai
May 2025	SMART Impact Study completed

Annexure 2: The SMART People

The people who made SMART happen, which includes their professional / theatre roles during their SMART years, and the roles they played in SMART

Arundhati Ghosh, Executive Director | India Foundation for the Arts-IFA (till 2023) (Bangalore)
Founding member, Core Team member (2013-2023), Course Co-Director (2016), Facilitator (SMART courses, workshops, online), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Ashish Mehta | Actor, Producer, Aasakta Kala Manch (Pune)
Project Coordinator / Production Manager (2013-2016), Core Team member (2017-2023), Facilitator (SMART workshops, online). *(Pg 9)*

Avijit Michael | Social Media Professional, (Delhi)
Facilitator (2016) *(Pg 30)*

C Suresh Kumar | Senior Manager-Management Services, IFA (Bangalore)
SMART office team (2014-2025)

Darshana Dave | Manager-Institutional Projects, IFA (Bangalore)
Assistant Project Coordinator (2015, 2016), SMART office team (2014-2025) *(Pg 84)*

KP Pravin | Theatre Director, Co-founder, Magic Lantern (Chennai)
Mentor (2015)

Menaka Rodriguez | Head-Research Mobilisation and Outreach, IFA (till 2023), Executive Director, IFA (2023-) (Bangalore)
Core Team member (2017-2023), Facilitator (SMART courses, workshops, online), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Milena Dragićević Šešić | Professor, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia and Founder, UNESCO Chair, Interculturalism, Arts Mediation and Management (Belgrade, Serbia)
Course Consultant (2013-2016), Facilitator (SMART courses) *(Pg 9)*

Neel Chaudhuri | Playwright, Theatre Director, Founder, Tadpole Repertory Theatre (Delhi)
Core Team member (2017-2023), Facilitator (SMART Course 2016, workshops, online), Mentor (2016), SMART Course 2015 Alumnus *(Pg 9)*

Pradeep Vaiddya | Creative Director, Expression Lab (Pune)
Mentor (2016), SMART Course 2015 Alumnus *(Pg 63)*

Rajiv Krishnan | Theatre Director, Perch Collective (Chennai)
Mentor (2015)

Ramya Nurani | Project Manager, Junoon, (Mumbai)
Project Coordinator (2015-2016)

Rupali Bhave | Actor, Founder, Jacaranda (Pune), Co-Creator The Box (Pune)
Programme Manager (2018-2024), SMART Course 2016 Alumna *(Pg 19)*

Sameera Iyengar | Co-founder and Director, Junoon (Mumbai)
Founding member, Core Team member (2013-2023), Course Director (2015, 2016), Facilitator (SMART courses, workshops, online), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Sanjna Kapoor | Co-founder and Director, Junoon (Mumbai)
Founding member, Core Team member (2013-2020), Facilitator (SMART course 2016, workshops), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Satish Alekar | Playwright and Actor (Pune)
Mentor (2016) *(Pg 58)*

Sharmistha Saha | Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Bombay (Mumbai)
Project Coordinator (2016-2017)

Sravasti Banerjee | Theatre performer / Performance maker, (Mumbai)
Programme Manager (2017-2018)

Sudhanva Deshpande | Actor, Jana Natya March (JANAM) member (Mumbai)
Founding member, Core Team member (2013-2021), Facilitator (SMART courses, workshops, online), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Sunil Shanbag | Theatre Director, Co-Founder, Arpana Theatre, Tamaasha Theatre and Studio Tamaasha (Mumbai)
Core Team member (2013-2023), Facilitator (SMART courses, workshops, online), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Swati Apte | Founding member, Junoon (Mumbai)
Core Team member (2013-2017), Facilitator (SMART courses), Mentor (2015, 2016) *(Pg 9)*

Support Teams - SMART Courses

Mridula Rao (2015, 2016)

Priyanka Ghosh (2016)

Sharvari Sastry (2016)

Vilas Kundkar (2015, 2016)

SMART Course Evaluator

Ashoke Chatterjee (2015, 2016) *(Pg 32)*

Annexure 3*:* SMART Support

Partner Organisations

India Theatre Forum (2013-2015) *(Pg 10)*
Junoon (2013-2020) *(Pg 10)*
India Foundation for the Arts - IFA (2014-2025) *(Pg 10)*

Funders

Bajaj Group (SMART Courses) *(Pg 18)*
Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi (SMART Courses, SMART on Wheels, SMART Workshops, SMART Online) *(Pg 18)*
Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) (SMART Courses) *(Pg 18)*
International Relief Fund of the German Federal Foreign Office (SMART Online and Case Studies) *(Pg 19)*
Norwegian Royal Embassy (SMART Courses) *(Pg 18)*

Additional Support

British Council, Wales, UK (Speaker support, SMART Course 2016) *(Pg 19)*
G5A Foundation (Venue Support - SMART Course 2016 Graduation) *(Pg 18)*
Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai (Venue Support - SMART Course 2015 Final Workshop and Graduation) *(Pg 18)*
Indigo Airlines (Airline subsidy) *(Pg 18)*
Industrial Design Centre (IDC), at IIT Mumbai (Venue Support - SMART Course 2016 Final Workshop) *(Pg 18)*
Italian Embassy (Speaker support, SMART Course 2015) *(Pg 19)*

Local Partners - SMART on Wheels

Aasakta Kalamanch, Expression Lab, and Maharashtra Cultural Centre (Pune) *(Pg 18. Pg 33, Pg 65)*
Anurag Kala Kendra and Bikaner Theatre Festival (Bikaner) *(Pg 62)*
Jana Natya Manch, Tadpole Repertory, and Barefoot! Theatre (Delhi) *(Pg 15, Pg 17, Pg 65)*
Ranga Vinayak Ranga Mandali and Windermere Theatre (Bareilly) *(Pg 64)*
Sanjiv Kumar - The Takshila Education Society (Patna) *(Pg 63)*
Tamaasha Theatre and Studio Tamaasha (Mumbai) *(Pg 16)*
Theatre in Education (TIE) Wing, National School of Drama, Agartala (Agartala) *(Pg 63)*

Local Partners - SMART Workshops

Ala Centre for Culture & Alternative Education (Ala) (Mulanthuruthy) *(Pg 69)*
Anurag Kala Kendra (Bikaner) *(Pg 62)*
Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed (Madhyamgram) *(Pg 69)*Maharashtra Cultural Centre (Pune) (*Pg 65)*The Courtyard (Bengaluru) *(Pg 69)*

Annexure 4: Overview of SMART Programme Formats

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART Course 2015 Residential Course: Bengaluru (Jan 2015) Mentorship: Remote / Online (Feb to Jul 2015) Final Workshop: Mumbai (Aug 2015)	**Funders:** Norwegian Royal Embassy Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) Bajaj Group **Additional support:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai Indigo Airlines Italian Embassy	**Facilitators** Arundhati Ghosh Milena Dragićević Šešić Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag Swati Apte **Mentors:** Arundhati Ghosh KP Pravin Menaka Rodriguez Rajiv Krishnan Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag Swati Apte	29 *from 17 theatre groups*	Ahmedabad Allahabad Bengaluru Chennai Kolkata Mumbai Nashik New Delhi Puducherry Pune Thiruvananthapuram.

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART Course 2016 Residential Course: Bengaluru (Jul 2016) Mentorship: Remote / Online (Aug to Nov 2016) Final Workshop: Mumbai (Dec 2016)	**Funders:** Norwegian Royal Embassy Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) Bajaj Group **Additional support:** Industrial Design Centre (IDC), at IIT Mumbai British Council, Wales, UK	**Facilitators:** Arundhati Ghosh Avijit Michael Menaka Rodriguez Milena Dragićević Šešić Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag Swati Apte **Mentors** Arundhati Ghosh Menaka Rodriguez Pradeep Vaiddya Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Satish Alekar Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag Swati Apte	28 *from 17 theatre groups*	Bareilly Belgaum, Bengaluru Kanchipuram Kolkata Mumbai New Delhi Ponda Pune Shillong Vadodara

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART On Wheels Bikaner (March 4, 2017)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Anurag Kala Kendra Bikaner Theatre Festival	Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande	23 *from 5 theatre groups & some independent practitioners*	Bikaner Chandigarh. Jodhpur
SMART On Wheels Agartala (March 26, 2017)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Theatre in Education (TIE) Wing, National School of Drama, Agartala	Sameera Iyengar Neel Chaudhuri	50 (approx) *from 34 theatre groups & independent practitioners*	Assam Manipur Nagaland Tripura
SMART On Wheels Patna (August 20, 2017)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Sanjiv Kumar - The Takshila Education Society	Swati Apte Pradeep Vaiddya	50 (approx) *from 35 theatre groups & independent practitioners*	Bihar Madhya Pradesh Uttar Pradesh.

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART On Wheels Bareilly (October 5, 2017)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Ranga Vinayak Ranga Mandali Windermere Theatre	Arundhati Ghosh Ashish Mehta Menaka Rodriguez	21 *from* *6 theatre groups & independent practitioners*	Badaun Bareilly Saharanpur
SMART On Wheels Mumbai (December 22, 2017)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Tamaasha Theatre Studio Tamaasha	Sunil Shanbag Swati Apte *Attending Alumni* Savitri Medhatul	6 *from* *5 theatre groups*	Mumbai
SMART On Wheels New Delhi (February 6, 2018)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Barefoot! Theatre Jana Natya Manch Tadpole Repertory	Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande *Attending Alumni* Neel Chaudhuri Ashish Paliwal	17 *from* *8 theatre groups & independent practitioners*	New Delhi

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART On Wheels Pune (February 10, 2018)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partners:** Aasakta Kalamanch Expression Lab Maharashtra Cultural Center	Ashish Mehta Pradeep Vaiddya *Attending Alumni* Ravi Choudhary Rupali Bhave	40 *from* *27 theatre groups & independent practitioners*	Kolhapur Nashik Pune
SMART Workshop Pune (November 21-23, 2018)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partner:** Maharashtra Cultural Center	Arundhati Ghosh Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag	27 *from* *17 theatre groups*	Chalisgaon Bengaluru Kolkata Mumbai Nagpur Pune
SMART Workshop Bengaluru (April 14-16, 2019)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partner:** The Courtyard, Bengaluru	Menaka Rodriguez Neel Chaudhuri Sameera Iyengar Sunil Shanbag	12 *from* *9 theatre groups*	Bengaluru Hyderabad Jalgaon Lucknow Pondicherry

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART Workshop Bikaner (June 28-30, 2019)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partner:** Anurag Kala Kendra	Ashish Mehta Menaka Rodriguez Sudhanva Deshpande	16 *from* *11 theatre groups*	Bikaner Bhilwara Jaipur Kota Mumbai New Delhi Pune
SMART Workshop Madhyamgram (February 14-16, 2020)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partner:** Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed	Sameera Iyengar Sanjna Kapoor Sudhanva Deshpande	19 *from* *17 theatre groups*	Balurghat Barasat Behrampura Bongaon Howrah Kalyani Kolkata Konnager Liluah Mumbai

SMART Formats	Funders / Partners	Facilitators & Mentors	# Participants	Participant Locations
SMART Workshop Mulanthuruthy (March 7-9, 2020)	**Funder:** Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi **Local Partner:** Ala Centre for Culture & Alternative Education (Ala)	Arundhati Ghosh Neel Chaudhuri Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag	27 *from* *17 theatre groups*	Bengaluru Coimbatore Ernakulam Guwahati Kalady Kalyan Kasargod Kolkata Kochi Kodungallur Koottanad Palakkad Thrissur
SMART Online Workshop ***'Practicing Theatre in Changing Contexts'*** Online – Zoom (December 2-4, 2020)	**Funder:** International Relief Fund of the German Federal Foreign Office	Arundhati Ghosh Ashish Mehta Menaka Rodriguez Neel Chaudhuri Sameera Iyengar Sudhanva Deshpande Sunil Shanbag	18 *from* *10 theatre groups*	Bengaluru Coimbatore Hyderabad New Delhi Palakkad

SMART IN THE ROUND
a series of curated conversations on creativity, culture and context

Conversation	**Speakers**	**Topic**
Fear, Funding and Freedom of Expression: Artistic Freedom in 2020 Zoom and Facebook September 29, 2020	Aditi Mangaldas (dancer, choreographer) Bose Krishnamachari (artist, curator) Purva Naresh (playwright, director) Sambhaji Bhagat (activist, playwright, balladeer) *in conversation with* Vinutha Mallya	The term ‘artistic freedom ’is often treated like an abstract concept. What does artistic freedom mean now, when many freedoms are under threat?
Why We Do What We Do - A conversation between Deepika Arwind and Maya Krishna Rao Zoom and Facebook December 20, 2020	Deepika Arwind (poet, playwright, theatre practitioner, and Artistic Director, The Lost Post Initiative) Maya Krishna Rao (theatre artist, teacher)	A freewheeling conversation between artists on what inspires them, the questions, values and desires that drive they work, and how they imagine moving into the future as we approach the final bend of a difficult year.

Conversation	**Speakers**	**Topic**
Community: A Conversation with Theatre Makers Zoom and Facebook August 25, 2021	Anurupa Roy (Katkatha, Delhi) Nisha Abdulla (Deep Listening Circle, Qabila, Bengaluru) Sanjoy Ganguly (Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed, Madhyamgram) Sapan Saran (TheatreDost Initiative, Studio Tamaasha, Mumbai) *in conversation with* Sameera Iyengar	During both waves of COVID-19, theatre people, under pressure themselves, stepped up to give much-needed relief to their communities. This conversation explores the connection between specific relief efforts and the performing arts practice of those undertaking the effort - how one leads to the other and back.
Space Zoom and Facebook September 29, 2021	Kallol Bhattacharya (Tepantar, Satkahunia) Manu Jose (Ala, Mulanthuruthy) Michaela Talwar (Harkat Studios, Mumbai) Rupali Bhave (The Box, Pune) *in conversation with* Sunil Shanbag	Small, independent alternative performance spaces across the country have been profoundly changing the way in which theatre is created, curated and received in these places. In this conversation people who run spaces talk about surviving the precarious pandemic times by adapting, improvising and even radically re-inventing themselves.

Conversation	**Speakers**	**Topic**
Experiment Zoom and Facebook October 26, 2021	Lapdiang Syiem Mallika Taneja Mohit Takalkar Vivek Madan *in conversation with* Neel Chaudhuri	How have theatre-makers responded to the challenges of COVID-19, which shut down performance spaces and challenged the relationship between performer and audience?This conversation explores digital experiments undertaken, the new equation with remote audiences, and the challenges and possibilities that arise.
The Ideas of Consent in Intimate Practices Zoom and Facebook May 26, 2022	Mandeep Raikhy (dancer, choreographer) Neha Vyaso (intimacy director) Sharanya Ramprakash (actor, director) *in conversation with* Arundhati Ghosh	Theatre and movement arts constantly, by their very nature, involve physical intimacies. This conversation imagines further spaces for the performing arts by asking: how do we explore the idea of consent in such intimate practices? How do we analyse, reflect and take action to create spaces that are brave, safe, nurturing? How do we engage with what is permissible, what is not; what needs a change of thinking, what a change of behaviour?

SMART - CASE STUDIES

In September 2020, during the pandemic, SMART commission 5 young theatre makers to undertake case studies of 20 theatre groups across India, towards building a case study bank for the SMART initiative. Members of the SMART Core Team mentored the researchers through this process. The final case studies were received in June 2021.

Researchers	**Mentors**
Aopala Banerjee	Sudhanva Deshpande
Komita Dhanda	Neel Chaudhari
Ponni Arasu	Sameera Iyengar
Tanvi Shah	Sunil Shanbag
Tanya Mahajan	Ashish Mehta

Groups Researched

1. Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research (Auroville)
2. Atelier Centre for Arts (Delhi)
3. Ebong Amra / Tepantar (Satkahunia)
4. Expression Lab (Pune)
5. Gillo Repertory Theatre (Mumbai)
6. Ideas Unlimited (Mumbai)
7. Indian Ensemble (Bengaluru)
8. Jaswant Thaker Memorial Foundation (Ahmedabad)
9. Jhalapala (Kolkata)
10. Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust (Delhi)
11. Manalmagudi (Kovilpatti)
12. Marapachi (Chennai)
13. Natakghar (Pune)
14. Patchworks Ensemble (Mumbai)
15. Perch (Chennai)
16. Q Theatre Productions (Mumbai)
17. Rangakarmee (Kolkata)
18. Sri Venkateswara Surabhi Theatre (Hyderabad)
19. Tadpole Repertory Theatre (Delhi)
20. Tamaasha Theatre (Mumbai)

Annexure 5: SMART Core Team

Arundhati Ghosh is a writer, cultural practitioner, social activist and traveller. With three decades of experience in the arts and culture, she served as the Executive Director of India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) between 2013 and 2023. Her awards include the Chevening Gurukul Scholarship at the London School of Economics (2005-2006), Global Fundraiser Award from Resource Alliance (2010), Chevening Clore Leadership Award (2015-2016), and Salzburg Global Seminar Fellowship. As part of her fellowship under the Clore Awards she has worked with the National Theatre, UK to recommend a strategy for their national reach. She contributed on advisory panels and boards of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, Blind with Camera, Sangama and Toto funds the Arts, and continues to do so for The Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), *Shomokaleen Protibidhan* (a feminist magazine in Bangla), the Solidarity Foundation, and Maraa. She has co-curated the International Theatre Festival of Kerala 2020 organized by Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi. She was also selected as one of the top three leaders in the city of Bangalore under the 'Lead India' campaign of The Times of India in 2008

As a Fellow of the Salzburg Global Seminar, Arundhati was a core facilitator for the Young Cultural Innovators programme for five years. She has also been a key facilitator for the Arts and Culture Entrepreneurship programme of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) based in Beirut for five years. As a key consultant she had set up the Indiaplaza India Book awards and led it through 2008 to 2010 in Bangalore. When the pandemic hit in March 2020 she raised resources for sex workers in Karnataka, weavers of Karnataka and performing artists across the country through online fundraisers. She was a Core Team member that had put together a capacity building programme for theatre practitioners across the country titled SMART (Strategic Management for the Art of Theatre) as a joint project of IFA, Junoon, and the India Theatre Forum, and ran it for ten years.

Arundhati actively volunteers with many citizen initiatives that work towards a just and equitable society. She speaks on arts and philanthropy for leading Indian and international organisations including International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), Kelola Foundation, On the Move, Festival Academy Europe, UNESCO Berlin, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), Kultura Nova Foundation, University of Leeds, Theatre Cooperative Turkey, among others. She writes for publications such as Scroll, The Wire, The Hindu, The Deccan Herald, News 9, Business Standard, etc. A poet in Bangla her first collection of poetry *Oshomoye phire esho nodi hoye* was published in January 2023 by Lastrada Prakashan. Her book *All Our Loves: Journeys with Polyamory in India* has been published by Aleph Book Company in April 2025 and won the Non Fiction Book of the Year Award 2025 at the Rainbow Literature Festival 2025. She writes a monthly column on relationships titled *Ties and Knots* for the Deccan Herald. She consults and offers training programmes for the cultural and not-for-profit sector. Raised in the small industrial township of Asansol, Arundhati now lives mostly in Bangalore.

Ashish Mehta is a producer at Aasakta Kalamanch, Pune. He has produced and managed more than 25 theatrical productions for the company. Ashish has been an ARThinkSouthAsia fellow (2012) and was also part of the core team of Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre (SMART) which developed an indigenous capacity-building program for theatre groups in India. He was the festival manager of the annual Vinod Doshi Theatre Festival, Pune for all its 10 editions. Besides this, Ashish has also been a production designer for feature films like 'The Bright Day', 'Medium Spicy', 'Occasional Reflection On The Contingencies Of Life' and 'Toh, Ti Ani Fuji' - directed by Mohit Takalkar. His acting encounters in theatre include plays like 'Tu', 'Charshe Kotee Visarbhole', 'Necropolis', 'Mein Huun Yusuf Aur Yeh Hai Mera Bhai', 'Chaheta' and 'Love & Information'.

Ashish has been awarded Adhisthaata Puraskar 2026 by Maharashtra Cultural Centre towards his work with Aasakta in the field of Theatre.

Menaka Rodriguez has Master's degrees in Archaeology and Indian History from the Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute, Pune, India and Arts Administration from the University of New Orleans, United States.

Menaka has over two decades of experience in institutional management, programming and fundraising for a range of arts organisations including museums, arts festivals, art councils and a theatre company in the United States and India. She joined IFA in 2007 as a fundraiser and has been instrumental in building and developing the Individual Donors initiative at IFA. Then, she led the Resource Mobilisation and Outreach team for eight years, served as a co-facilitator for SMART (Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre) and managed a part of the Project 560 programme. She assumed office as the Executive Director on June 01, 2023, after completing 16 years with the Foundation.

With expertise in archaeology, research and strategic planning, Menaka has worked on projects for several cultural institutions including INTACH; Vasant Sheth Memorial Foundation; Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Poland; Society for South Asian Studies, United Kingdom; and Afghan Family Guidance Association (AFGA). Menaka has also served on the Faculty of Archaeology and Museum Studies at Madras Christian College, Chennai.

Menaka was an ARThinkSouthAsia (ATSA) Fellow in 2012-13 and was awarded 'Fundraiser of the Year' at the India NGO Awards 2016 instituted by the Resource Alliance, India and Rockefeller Foundation. Menaka had also been a part of ARThinkSouthAsia (ATSA) Train the Trainer programme aimed at creating a cohort of art management trainers in the South Asian region. She was one of the international participants selected for the Arts Leaders Programme supported by the Australia Council for the Arts for 2017-18. She was also a resident mentor on Resource Mobilisation for IDEX Fellowships.

Menaka has represented the foundation at diverse forums and panels on the arts, grantmaking, fundraising, and philanthropy. Her interests include reading, travelling, jazz, sculpture and the performing arts.

Neel Chaudhuri is a playwright and director based in New Delhi. He is a co-founder and the former Artistic Director of The Tadpole Repertory, one of Delhi's most prominent theatre groups. Over the past fifteen years, this collective of actors, writers and designers have endeavored to present original writing and devised performances on subjects that are relevant and compelling to audiences today. Neel's plays seek to turn a mirror towards our contemporary experience, and tell stories that seem to be about people we know or have known in our lifetime.

Neel studied History at Delhi University and completed a Masters degree in Film Studies from the University of Warwick, UK. He worked with the Berlinale International Film Festival in 2004-05 and then returned to work in Delhi as a film programmer before beginning to work in the theatre. He was the Artistic Director of The First City Theatre Foundation (2006 to 2009), where he wrote and directed the following plays: Positions (2006), Mouse (2007), A Brief History of the Pantomimes (2008) and Good Hands/Godspeed (2008).

In 2009, Neel was awarded the Toto Funds the Arts Award for Creative Writing for Godspeed, and the following year, his play Taramandal won the Metro Plus Playwright Award. In 2010, he received a 50th Anniversary Grant from the Goethe Institut for his play, Ich bin Fassbinder. His plays as a writer-director include the META Award-winning Still and Still Moving (2014), which was developed in collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre, London; This Will Only Take Several Minutes (2017), a collaboration with the Japanese theatre collective HANCHU-YUEI; and Quicksand (2017). Neel's work with Tadpole has travelled to venues and festivals across the country, as well as to The Dublin Theatre Festival, Yokohama and Tokyo, Japan, and the India Scene project in France.

His most recent plays with Tadpole are Aakhirkaar, which opened in December 2024. He is currently writing and an interactive game theatre piece titled A Seed Story, in collaboration with machina eX in Berlin.

Neel works as a repertory mentor with Aagaaz Theatre Trust, a community-based arts organization based in Nizamuddin in New Delhi. He has directed the play Rihla with the Aagaaz Repertory, adapted from Andreas Flourakis's I Want A Country. Neel is Visiting Faculty at Ashoka University's Performance Arts Department, the National School of Drama, Bargad Theatre and The Drama School Mumbai. He teaches courses on playwriting, devised theatre, character and scene study, contemporary theatre practice, theatre direction and multi-disciplinary approaches to performance-making. From 2016-2024, Neel was a core member of SMART ((Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre), India's first programme for theatre practitioners that aims to build knowledge, skills and expertise about arts management from within the Indian theatre community.

For his work in the theatre, Neel has received the 2014 Vinod Doshi Fellowship from the Sahitya Rangabhoomi Pratishthan, the 2020 Aditya Vikram Birla Kala Kiran Puraskar by the Sangit Kala Kendra and the Shankar Nag Award (2020).

Sameera Iyengar is an arts freestyler, driven by the belief that the arts play a central role in imagining and building a thoughtful, empathetic, critically aware, and playfully connected world. She adapts her role to the need—serving as a curator, ecosystem builder, creative producer, facilitator, writer, or dramaturg.
Through her venture Freestyle: arts in action (launched in 2024), she creates and enables rich platforms for cultural engagement. To date, this has included enabling the play *Be-loved*; curating a multi-arts response to the 'Ancient Sculptures' exhibition at the CSMVS museum; and consulting with the arts space Shoonya to help realise their future vision. Her work is in essence ground-up, listening to the field's needs and desires and building collaborative frameworks that allow co-creation and multi-stakeholder contribution. In a connected life, she also works as Creative Producer for the feminist media production company Parodevi Pictures.

Previously, as Director-Projects at Prithvi Theatre and as co-founder of the arts outreach organisation Junoon, she expressed this arts-embedded vision through festivals, curatorial collaborations, workshops, and public conversations.

Committed to strengthening the theatre ecosystem, she co-founded the India Theatre Forum and the strategic management course SMART. She teaches 'Ethics of Practice' at The Drama School, Mumbai, and contributes to the field's discourse as co-editor of *Our Stage: Pleasures and Perils of Theatre Practice in India Today* and contributor to publications like *Habib Tanvir and His Legacy in Theatre*, alongside numerous articles.

Her love for theatre began at MIT, where she earned an SB in Mathematics and a Minor in Theatre. She also has a PhD from the University of Chicago, based on extensive field research in India and titled *Performing Presence: Feminism and Theatre in India*.

Sanjna Kapoor is well known for her passionate work with theatre over two decades, and for having built Prithvi Theatre into one of India's premier cultural hubs (1990 to 2011). She is responsible for having brought to Indian audiences some of the finest of world and Indian theatre, being the first to introduce a touring theatre festival into the Indian scene.

Sanjna has also played a key role as catalyst for theatre for children. Her vision, commitment and enthusiasm ensure that she keeps bringing the richness of theatre into people's lives in multiple ways. She co-founded Junoon (2012 to 2020), and spearheaded Junoon's school programme, and continued

the legacy of both the Kapoors and the Kendals to take theatre to people across the country. The role of theatre in schools holds a special place in her heart, and always said that if she was not working in the field of theatre she would work in the field of education.

Sanjna has also been responsible for initiating the India Theatre Forum network for theatre practitioners. She was involved in building an all-India theatre alliance, based on a practical sharing of resources and ideas, as well as consolidating and strengthening theatre practice in India, that developed the first theatre management training programme, and was one of the core team member and facilitator of SMART India, Strategic Management in the Art of Theatre.

In 2020 Sanjna was awarded the *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, a knighthood conferred by the Ministry of Culture, Government of France in recognition of significant contributions to the arts, literature and the propagation of these fields. She founded and has developed The Artful Teacher Workshop Programme and conducts these workshops in schools across the country with a remarkable team. Scuba diving and safaris into the magnificent wilderness of India and Africa are what recharge her soul!

Sudhanva Deshpande is a publisher, author, teacher, theatre director, film and theatre actor, podcaster, and filmmaker.

Sudhanva was Coordinator, SLA Programme, at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, from 1992 to 1994, and taught at the AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, from 1994 to 2004. He has lectured and led workshops in several institutions in India, Germany, The Netherlands, USA, UK, Poland, South Africa, and Palestine.
He has been a publisher for over three decades. Since 1998, he has been Managing Editor at LeftWord Books, and since 2017 at Vaam Prakashan, both imprints of New Delhi-based Naya Rasta Publishers. At LeftWord/Vaam, he has published over 200 titles. Prior to that, he worked as Editor at Tulika Books (1995-98) and Orient Longman (1994-95).

Sudhanva is the author of *Halla Bol: The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi* (LeftWord 2020), which has been translated and published in 7 languages besides being converted into a podcast. His second book, *Imposter: The Delightful Subversions of* Orijit Sen, is forthcoming from LeftWord in Winter 2025–26. His lockdown podcast, A Poem a Day by Sudhanva Deshpande, has had over 25,000 downloads.

Sudhanva is the editor of *Theatre of the Streets: The Jana Natya Manch Experience* (Janam 2007), and co-editor of *Our Stage: Pleasures and Perils of Theatre Practice in India* (Tulika 2008). His articles and essays have appeared in *The Drama Review*, *The Hindu*, *Frontline*, *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, *Seminar*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Udbhavana*, *Samaj Prabodhan Patrika*, *Scroll.in*, *thewire.in*, among others.

Sudhanva joined the New Delhi-based theatre group Jana Natya Manch in 1987, and has acted in, directed, or been involved in the creation of over 4,000 performances of over 80 plays. His play *Bahut Raat Ho Chali Hai* premiered at the Prithvi Festival in 2003. He has co-directed two films on the theatre legend Habib Tanvir and his company Naya Theatre. He has acted in films and web series such as *Pink*, *Grahan*, *Rangbaaz 3*, *Vikram Vedha* and *Jawan*. He was a co-founder and core team member of the India Theatre Forum in 2006, as well as SMART, an arts management training programme.

Sunil Shanbag is a Mumbai based theatre director and producer. He is the co-founder and artistic director of Theatre Arpana, and Tamaasha Theatre.

Over the past 50 years, Sunil's work spans across themes and issues that concern modern Indian society, across class, caste, gender and other inequalities. Key productions include Cotton 56, Polyester 84, Sex, Morality and Censorship, Walking to the Sun, Club Desire (with the NCPA Mumbai), Stories in a Song, Words Have Been Uttered, Blank Page, Loretta (For Aadyam Theatre Festival) , and a re-making of Prithviraj Kapoor's iconic play, Deewar with the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai. More recently he has recreated Utpal Dutt's classic play Barricade in Hindustani, and Hungarian playwright Julius Hay's The Horse for the Aadyam Theatre Festival 2025. Internationally his adaptation of Shakespeare, Maro Piyu Gayo Rangoon, featured at the Shakespeare Globe in London over two seasons, and He has also worked with Theatre Freiburg, Germany as senor artistic consultant.

Sunil is involved in training and mentoring young theatre practitioners, and has been visiting director at Lalit Kala Kendra, University of Pune, Drama School Mumbai, the Jyoti Dalal Liberal Arts College, Mumbai, and the Thrissur School of Drama in Kerala. He has been visiting Professor of Practice at Ahmedabad University, Gujarat.

Tamaasha Theatre and Tamaasha Studio Foundation are deeply engaged with the theatre community in Mumbai through training, mentoring, and providing access to support facilities like the UsPaar Residency space for the Performing Arts run in partnership with the Kalpalata Trust.

Sunil is a national award winning documentary film-maker, and is involved in several theatre and arts documentation projects. Sunil was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for Direction (2017) by the President of India.

Swati Apte is founder director of The Arts Quotient, a leadership development firm working with leaders across business and the social sector.

She has served as advisor/ on the boards of Aspire Institute, Educate Girls and World Monuments Fund. She has also taught leadership courses at Barnard College, SP Jain and other colleges in India and abroad.

A business strategy specialist with a passion for the arts, her background includes a Masters in Economics from Oxford University, an MBA from Harvard Business School.