



Arts Research and Documentation Programme:

Voices from the Field

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Introduction

Through this study we sought to collect, analyse and report on the current scenario of arts research in the country. The areas we tried covering include the kind of research that is happening in the field, the key stake-holders of the domain, the changes that have taken place in the recent past, funding strategies, new funders if any, needs of current arts researchers in the country, and the context in which they are situated. What we wish to present in this report is a picture of what's happening in the field, partial at best.

The reasons for the study

The driving forces behind this study are both internal and external. Firstly, from our experience of implementing the Arts Research and Documentation programme after it was last reviewed in 2006, we had felt that there may be many situations in the field that may be changing and we have not accounted for these changes. Secondly, it was felt that the space that IFA attempts to support lying outside of the hegemony of the market and the state may have become more and more ambiguous and complex in the last few years. While production and consumption of research in the arts has significantly increased over the last decade in India, it was important to understand from the field what meanings that might hold for the field at large. While the market, providing newer opportunities for the arts, has given rise to an aspirational creative industry and a certain kind of discourse building within that space, it has simultaneously marginalised many other voices. The state, on the other hand, mostly remains manifested in the expansion of higher education. In such times, we felt a study of this nature might give us more insight into the field before we go into reviewing the programme.

Methodology of Study

A set of questions was prepared by IFA staff and sent to key experts – researchers, scholars and practitioners, who are intensively immersed in research across India. Most of the conversations with programme staff happened over telephone and email. The questionnaire addressed a wide range of issues and concerns, including: a) the diversity of views of what constitutes arts research in India; b) the trans-regional hurdles occurring from linguistic differences; c) traditional and non-traditional types of research, their outcomes and audiences; and d) practice as research.

The following experts gave us their detailed responses on which this report is based:

Alok Rai (Professor, Department of English, Delhi University)

Parul Dave Mukherjee (Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU)

Moushumi Bhowmik (Singer, songwriter, researcher of music)

Prem Chandavarkar (CnT Architects, Bangalore)

Janaki Nair (Professor, Centre for Historical Studies School of Social Sciences, JNU)

Narendra Pani (Professor, School of Social Sciences, IAS, Bangalore)

Indrapramit Roy (Associate Professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda)

R Siva Kumar (Principal, Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan)

Moinak Biswas (Professor, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University)

(We approached 53 experts but only 9 reverted to us with their responses as others were unable to commit time for the interviews).

The report below has been divided into two parts: a) common concerns that arise from the responses of the experts; and b) key challenges that we feel IFA must deal with, given the responses from the field.

Common Concerns

Lack of priority for arts research

Art Historian Siva Kumar while responding to this question says, “In India the research in arts is not comparable to research in humanities and social sciences. Theoretical study of arts in India is comparatively young and there are fewer scholars involved in it. And even the few who are there, are having to seek a living either in teaching or art writing for the galleries.” Research in the arts in India forms part of the higher education system of the country, monitored by UGC and the Councils established to improve specific disciplinary domains. While many of the experts corroborated Siva Kumar’s view, the report which maps the landscape of funding in India, prepared for Research Councils UK (Arts and Humanities Research Mapping India, Prepared by IFA, 2010), gives a more worrisome picture of how not just the arts, but also the humanities in general, is not prioritized by the government. It reports, “Research as an area under Higher Education, has low priority for the Government in comparison to what it perceives as the more pressing needs of a developing nation. Within the broad area of research, national education policies from the 1980s accorded greater primacy to science and technology as indispensable aids to the progress of a developing nation, and arts and humanities research had to face a serious reduction in budgets.”

Academicisation of the arts

Another issue with arts research in the country is that it is primarily seen as an academic endeavour. The inclusion of arts schools into universities and the progressive adoption over decades of various fields of study including the arts by the academia have led to a certain reorientation of the concerns that were of the practicing field, to those of the academics. Therefore, when one is to approach a subject of research in the arts, there are often fewer choices other than when approaching it from an academic perspective. Thus the academicisation of the arts has not just been a passive process that simply added to knowledge and discourse, it has been an active process that transformed the object of study.

The dearth of funding

There are plentiful accounts voicing the dearth of funding for arts research in India that mainly comes from the Government which remains the single largest source, and philanthropic organisations. “There are a handful of institutes such as yourself, Inlaks Foundation, FICA or Majlis in Mumbai that provide an enabling role. The universities are mostly dormant or defunct or mired in red tapism,” remarks academician and visual artist, Indrapramit Roy. One of the pressing truths is that the exchange of ideas between the government and private funders has not fostered yet. The absence of dialogue between these agencies as well as those between the universities and independent research centres is largely due to the fundamental differences in institutional culture, relative need for autonomy in relation to the State, openness to change, processes of programmatic review, and responsiveness to new themes and compulsions in the arts.

Several of the respondents are of the opinion that research is given less priority than practice by public and private institutions in India. Narendar Pani, says that “The akademis tend to be better in providing recognition to successful works of art, rather than to generate high quality research into the arts. But this can be related to the general challenges facing research in other fields as well.” A general viewpoint is that practitioners have more opportunities than researchers, both in India and abroad. Practitioners across all artistic discipline are invited for residencies, workshops etc. within the country and internationally also, while such opportunities for researchers are very limited.

Problems of government funding

One of the dangers of state funding is that researchers serve the bureaucracy that allocates their funding. This involves the risk of corruption since bureaucracy may accidentally or intentionally be subject to the conflicts of interest in achieving vested political interest which influence the allocation of funding. The researcher is expected to avoid the controversial, challenging, or un-conventional projects to please his/her political backers. The politicisation of arts research thus is not only worrying for its detrimental effects on excellence, innovation, and diversity, but also the potential loss of liberty and freedom of expression central to critical enquiry.

The three akademis (Lalit Kala Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi and Sahitya Akademi), all of our respondents unanimously voice, have not been able to fulfill the needs of the researchers. The impact of government setup akademis on arts research and practice has been “very inadequate” says Parul Dave Mukherjee. “The quality of research and publication produced by these institutions is very uneven,” she adds. While government institutions including the university departments mostly only rely on government funding for the all their research projects, autonomous institutions have been able to create innovative combinations of the state and private funders with varying degrees of success, and have come up with some suitable institutional provisions. While reflecting on the pitfalls of government funding, Moushumi Bhowmick also points towards the akademis, “Every year these places give out many dozens of grants. Some must be for good quality work. But I have seen some films of Sangeet Natak Akademi, and they are appalling. Also politically problematic, in my view. I fear what lies ahead when it comes to government-run akademis.” For Siva Kumar, “during its early years it (Lalit Kala Akademi) did make a yeoman’s service to Indian art through its two journals (Lalit Kala Contemporary and Lalit Kala Ancient), small monographs, albums, and posters. But like many other activities of the Akademi, without a permanent editor, it has become less definitive and erratic. While private galleries and publishers have stepped in and helped in improving the quality of production, they are largely guided by promotional interests and therefore do not fulfill the need for an independent critical space. Thus by leaving it to the galleries the Akademi has more or less abdicated the responsibility of producing high quality research work.”

Another problem of state research funding is that it is not distributed fairly amongst institutions. Higher Education Institutions which score best on the UGC’s Research Assessment Exercise receive more funding than those who do not. Many people are critical of this approach,

arguing that this creates a structural elitism that puts the new universities with less research record or infrastructure to support it, at a disadvantage. While the good news is that funding is perhaps increasing, the bad news for many is that it is not being distributed evenly or according to critical merit.

Problems of private funding

Private funding does not stand devoid of problems either. Its major pitfall is that it is project-centric, and is often seen as a revenue generator for the institution that dispenses the funds. Often it remains oblivious of academic scrutiny or rigorous standards of quality. Funding from larger donors from foreign countries is accompanied by the peril of certain agenda driven research programming lacking any disciplinary basis, relevance to the actual needs of the field or reference to the specific institutional identity, history and context within which it is situated.

In India, private funding is in its nascent stage. Although a few new players (FICA, New India Foundation, Inlaks Foundation, PUKAR Mumbai, etc.) have entered the field of arts, it still does not fulfill the needs of researchers in a vast country like India. Their reach beyond metropolitans is extremely poor and they do not serve trans-regional network building. Their support of a few individuals and organisations based in the metro becomes the breeding ground for biases they themselves create. The situation is so unfortunate that researchers outside these cities are not even familiar with the names of such funders, and similarly funders are not acquainted with the scene of arts research outside these cities. So what happens is that the researchers outside of the cities rely on the schemes of ministry of culture, state akademis, and to some extent, on universities which essentially support projects on traditional arts, heritage and folk arts; meanwhile the private funders in big cities support newer and contemporary subjects in the arts – thereby creating a deep chasm between the scholarships in these two places, keeping the non-metropolitan researcher isolated from the developments gaining currency in mainstream arts.

What is funded and what is not?

In academic institutions, UGC has been generally supporting arts research. “The UGC funding has been useful for young researchers, especially those pursuing PhD programmes. However, beyond this, the UGC has not been very effective although they have a number of research support programmes and department assistance programmes. So far the impact of such funding has been more quantitative rather than qualitative”, says Siva Kumar. Government funding agencies like akademis generally support practitioners and not scholars. Ministry of culture too has more number of schemes for practitioners interested in specific outcomes of their work like exhibitions and productions, than for researchers. Many of the ministry’s schemes are thematic and ‘topical’ given to celebrating centenaries of prominent personalities in arts but these again do not support any research programmes and are only interested in projects that will have a tangible outcome at the end. So largely, the researcher’s share in the government sector is very limited.

Some respondents spoke about the kind of projects that usually get supported by government and private funding agencies. It seems there are catch-words that an applicant has to fill his/her

proposal with to acquire the funding. For Indrapramit Roy, “There is generally a bias for things that are considered ‘in’. For instance at many occasions it is easier to get a grant for something that involves new media rather than old media or somehow includes the word ‘post-colonial’ at the moment. It varies from agency to agency.”

According to Moshumi Bhowmick, two kinds of projects are mostly supported by government and autonomous funding agencies in the arts, “First, things to do with ‘heritage’- showcasing a place and its people as repositories of traditional knowledge. Thus, archiving, exhibiting, showcasing tradition gets support. But what this tradition is, is often the question. I think at the end of your research you are expected to come up with the results which have already been decided. For example, when it comes to tradition, you are expected to show India as unchanged and unchangeable, almost ageless. It is a thing which works both for India and the outside world. Say, if at the end of your research you can show Baul and Fakir philosophy as syncretic and practitioners as mystical groups of people living on the edge of society, then you stand a chance of being supported. Wishy-washy, lifestyle centered research which serves a certain social group will also find support. Or, if you can work on trendy things such as popular culture and Bollywood, then you will get support. Secondly, if you are working with some disadvantaged group; say, if you are a dance company and you are working in prison with inmates, then you are very likely to get support. I think the main thing is that the project should be ‘safe’ and it should not ask disturbing questions about the social and economic system. Moreover, numbers are very important. If your research is considered to benefit X number of people, communities and so on, or if it generates so much revenue, then too you will find support.”

According to Parul Dave Mukherjee, “The UGC supports research grants but their mechanism of keeping control on quality is not up to the mark. Many private art galleries that have begun to mushroom around in Delhi, for example, also conduct research and bring out publications. But, given the fact that many of these publications are in the form of monographs of artists that these galleries themselves showcase, the self-interest of these institutions colour the research.” Keeping to the same tone, Prem Chandavarkar says, “My concern is that many funding agencies tend to view proposals from the viewpoint of how attractive the list of titles and subjects will appear in the profile of the funding agency – and are not oriented to broader strategic goals of knowledge and practice development in the field.”

Private funding too has narrow areas of concern and very set boundaries within which they function. While their review process and quality of work may be more critical than some of the state funded work they confine themselves to very specific areas like, FICA supports research only for the visual arts, New India Foundation supports research that contributes to the understanding of Independent India and PUKAR focuses on the Urban sphere. Many focus and support projects on areas that are aligned with social agendas or theoretical viewpoints that are currently in vogue. In a nutshell, both government and private funding agencies have their boundaries set and a researcher has no option but to abide by the terms and conditions of these two sets of funders.

The question of languages

Repeated attention has been drawn towards the unbridgeable linguistic divide in India between English and the regional languages. The problem primarily stems from the education policy adopted at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The mediums of instruction at the undergraduate level are the various regional languages whilst postgraduate education and almost all advanced research other than language studies use English as the language of communication.

This gap is identified by Janaki Nair as, “Language is a great barrier in higher education generally, in research and in giving students access to the material from other regions of India. It is the single biggest challenge to higher education today.” Parul Dave Mukherjee adds, that “Efforts are needed to make possible “high quality” translations across regional languages.” A number of respondents held this divide responsible for the lack of critically engaged research across disciplines. The relationship between English and other regional languages, instead of being supplemental, has unfortunately remained asymmetrical. Most of the interviewees are of the opinion that due to linguistic issues the research in arts domain is less than adequate. And insufficient attention is paid in art historical research to acquire language skills to deal with the literature on modern and postmodern arts. Moinak Biswas, responding to the question of language says, “It has indeed played a role. A large pool of researchers never comes forward to undertake research.” Going further on the issue, he says, “the gap between practitioners and researchers increases because of the English-vernacular borders.” However, according to Biswas, the situation in Bengal is pretty different from other states, “the tradition of independent and amateur research is strong here (in Bengal). High quality research comes out in little magazines. In fact, most serious researchers in the language are not even aware of funding opportunities.”

Many of our respondents observe that one of the tasks for arts research in India towards developing original theoretical frameworks, must stress over language contexts and practice in which they are situated. Narendar Pani believes that “a more serious limitation is that the researcher does not spend enough time to develop fresh theoretical perspectives on the Indian reality. Even when there is an effort to use theory, it is typically borrowed from the West.”

Bhowmick, on the other hand, identifies the problem on a very different scale, where she speaks about the newly formed translation industry that runs a nexus of translating vernaculars into English, thus reducing the value of the regional language, “There is another side of the story. The regional languages now have a new market. In many cases, they have been appropriated by the English-speaking-writing Indian world. So regional language becomes raw material for products made in English – from T-shirt to serious academic paper-writing to fiction...”

Perhaps the most articulated response to this problem is voiced by Alok Rai, “However, there is the profoundly important insight about the linguistic divide between metropolitan English and the regional vernaculars which your questionnaire takes up. This has very far-reaching consequences - and the consequent impoverishment is two-fold, and mutual, and reciprocal -

and everything else you can suggest along those lines. In the vernaculars, so-called, the analytic habit has small purchase - so one is more likely to get hagiography, or anecdotes, or in the case of classical music, Sanskritic noises. However, the impoverishment of the metropolitan discourse of art is no less serious. And apart from commercial log-rolling, one often gets prose that seems, almost congenitally, to be destined for "Pseuds Corner" - simultaneously vapid, obscure and pretentious. Thus, some of the best writing that I have seen recently about our own artistic traditions has come from scholars who are NOT based in India. This is, I need hardly say, deeply depressing - and anything that the IFA can do to remedy this situation would be very welcome indeed."

The classical versus contemporary

The categorizing of arts research into two rigid groups like classical and contemporary has been a major problem with many funders. This problem stems from the binaries that art history has created by labeling its sub-categories as prehistoric, medieval, modern, and contemporary, and is embedded in the institutional domains. The government too has based their schemes of scholarships and fellowships alongside the departments for ancient and contemporary arts; for example, all three akademis follow this format. Funding agencies formulating such labels may result in researchers attempting to formulate their projects as per the needs of the funder and sacrificing the methodology at the outset. IFA's Arts Research and Documentation programme also has two focus areas, although these two areas were set to sharpen the focus of the programme after the programme was reviewed in 2006. It is time for IFA, as a funder, to rethink and revisit these categories and the criteria that define them.

The role of arts funding institutions

Most interviewees found it difficult to respond to the questions about the role of the institutions facilitating arts research in the country. Prem Chandavarkar approached this question from a different angle, placing his argument on the prevalent misconception that 'art is a luxury.' For him, "There is a lack of clarity on the purpose of the arts. We live under a popular perception that art is a luxury that can be indulged in after one has sorted out the basic necessities of roti, kapda and makaan. Arts research, and its funding, has done little to dispel this perception, and given that we are still a developing economy with high levels of poverty, until this perception changes, arts research will never be taken seriously by anyone other than a small minority who are already converts to the cause. The reality of the Indian situation is that art is not a luxury, and the communities, whose struggle for survival is most precarious (tribals, rural societies, etc.), are most embedded in art. Arts research has to develop clarity on the cultural role of art if it is to make a difference."

For Moushumi Bhowmick, funding has played a role, but deficiency of funding has not constrained her work. She places herself among those people who despite all odds continue to pursue their work, whether or not they receive financial support. "I can say this from personal experience. Our work of the past ten years has had some support, but not a lot, and certainly not enough. But we have continued to work despite our circumstances, and our work has grown. We have tried to stretch our limit all along. Not just us, but there are many people who

are known to work in this way. I think end of the day it is not a question of funding but one of passion.”

Key Challenges for IFA arising out of the responses from the field

Responding to the dearth of funding

Given that the field is unanimous about how little priority and funding is allocated for arts research, and the fact that IFA essentially is a small funder, it becomes all the more critical for IFA to decide what in research it would need to provide grants for. The challenge would be to be accessible and at the same time, maintain its commitment to discipline and rigour, to provide support for as many projects as possible, and at the same time, remain focused on areas that need more facilitation. Also, it perhaps would be a good idea to stay away from the kind of projects the government and other private funding agencies are already supporting.

Question of reach

IFA will need to decide how it needs to address the question of reach. It is impossible for a small organization like IFA to reach the vast geographical area that it is set up to serve. So often we find ourselves constantly dealing with the question of reach, frustrated by the fact that no matter what we do, we never seem to reach as many as we would want to. Given that IFA's resources will not change significantly over the next few years, the challenge would be for us to contemplate on what should our optimal reach be and how do we achieve that; on if we want to look outside the metros, where and how we should look.

Dealing with linguistic divides

Researchers who work in language contexts other than English feel completely sidelined by IFA. IFA to some extent has been trying to overcome this hurdle by accepting proposals in all regional Indian languages. Roy remarks, “English remains a pre-requisite in most cases and articulation in that language often proves crucial. I am happy to note that IFA is trying to break out this syndrome.” However, no matter how hard IFA has attempted to be accessible to language proposals, because of the very mechanism of its working and realities on the ground, like capacities of staff, irregular and uneven translation services, costs of travel - it always falls short. IFA had also tried to set up a separate Bengali Language Initiative a few years ago (details are in the main brief and annexures), which ran for some time and then was called off for various reasons. The challenge for IFA would be how to ensure that within whatever scope it defines for this programme post its review, it remains as open, approachable and conducive to supporting work that is happening in languages other than English.

The role of the funder

Since IFA has always had to raise funds year on year for its various projects, IFA has to continuously engage with the donor community on the need, role and value of the arts for individuals, communities and society. To that extent, IFA is already engaged in advocacy for the arts. The challenge would be to strengthen this and reach out to larger numbers of major funders, who currently do not support the arts, to convince them.

Conclusion

This report is based on our in-depth conversations with nine experts, which is hardly in any way a complete study of the field. However, what we have attempted to do here is to develop a very broad sense of what is going on in the field so that this, together with our research brief and the engagements that the panel of reviewers will have with the grantees, can enable them to help us re-envision the programme.