Arts Research and its Changing Understanding in India
A Report for the India Foundation for the Arts

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Introduction

The landscape of arts research in India has undergone significant transformations over the last decade, marked by a shift in methodological concerns and institutional structures which have become more dynamic, interdisciplinary, and accommodative of independent research approaches. This report seeks to explore the current state of arts research and funding in India through a series of interviews conducted with 37 practitioners and researchers from various fields, including visual arts, performing arts, cinema, technology, and allied fields. The insights gathered from these conversations aim to reveal a landscape shaped by the intersections of institutional frameworks, funding challenges, and regional disparities—all of which play a crucial role in shaping the ecology of arts research in the country today.

Methodology

For data collection, the methodology for this report is rooted in utilising interviews as the primary source. The India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) provided a list of 129 names, from which I approached 84 by email and phone. Finally, from the 51 individuals that responded, I interviewed 37 over phone, video calling and in-person. These 37 respondents, representing a broad spectrum of arts disciplines, were engaged in conversations structured around a questionnaire provided by the IFA. While conducting the interview, I divided this questionnaire into three broad topics, each addressing critical aspects of the arts research landscape in India.

1. Existing Landscape of Arts Research: This section explored the respondents' observations on the current state of arts research in India, with a focus on new methodological approaches, the role of institutions, and the positioning of independent research. The aim was to contrast these observations with traditional ideas of research, considering whether such practices existed historically and how they have evolved over time.

2. Funding for Arts Research: The second section discussed the landscape of funding for arts research in India. While the questions were focused on arts research, they also allowed for a broader discussion on funding for the arts as a whole, including practice-based aspects. This section sought to uncover the challenges and opportunities within the current funding ecosystem.

3. Research from Smaller Towns and Indian Language Contexts: This section addressed the positioning of research from smaller towns, cities, and Indian language contexts. Respondents were encouraged to reflect on the influence of metropolitan areas on arts research in India and to consider the possibilities presented by the so-called peripheries.

Given the rapidly advancing technological age in which art and research are situated today, interviewees were also asked to reflect on the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in arts research.

I, then, synthesised the responses to draw out common themes and concerns, which became my framework for organising the report through various sections and sub-sections. It is written in a manner highlighting shared concerns, emerging trends, and potential directions for arts research in India today, as gleaned through the course of the interviews. Thus, while the questionnaire was prepared by the IFA, this mode of reporting the findings by recognising themes was a shape that began to take form through my notes as I advanced through the interviews. Here, the methodology has been to weave together the diverse perspectives of the interviewees by positioning their voices in conversation with one another. This approach serves two purposes: one, it retains the individual perspectives of the respondents but also highlights the interconnectedness of the issues they raise; and two, the aim then becomes not to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field but to underscore the importance of collaborative discourse in addressing the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the field of arts research in India.

I hope that the reader is able to interpret the themes I have identified not as hermetically sealed categories but also as avenues for cross-conversations to emerge throughout the document; for instance, even though the section on funding identifies the issue through categories such as public or private funding, the document is replete with discussions across several other pages that invoke questions of funding. This is true of many of the other themes identified. Finally, I believe that the perceptive reader, to whom I submit a very abbreviated account of the interviews, will use their discretion to recognise my individual shaping of the discourse at play; especially that the original interviews may have expanded on contexts larger than that could be reproduced here given the limitation imposed by decisive factors—of readability, time, and available funding.

List of Interviewees

Visual Arts

S.No.	Respondent	Details	Mode of Interview	Language of Interview
1	Afrah Shafiq	Multi/New Media Artist, Goa	Phone	English
2	Anupam Roy	Visual Artist, West Bengal	Video Calling	English
3	Deeptha Achar	Professor, Department of English, M.S.U. Baroda	Video Calling	English
4	Indrapramit Roy	Professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S.U. Baroda	Video Calling	English
5	Kavitha Balakrishnan	Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts, Calicut University, Kozhikode	Video Calling	English
6	Latika Gupta	Director, Projects, Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
7	Pankti Desai	Assistant Professor, English, Government College of Engineering, Valsad	Video Calling	English

8	Ravikumar Kashi	Artist, Writer and Educator, Bengaluru	Video Calling	English
9	Dr. Sandip K. Luis	Assistant Professor, Department of Art History and Art Appreciation, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
10	Suchitra Balasubrahmanyan	Professor, School of Design, Ambedkar University, New Delhi	Video Calling	English

Performing Arts & Music

S.No.	Respondent	Details	Mode of Interview	Language of Interview
1	Abhishek Majumdar	Artistic Director, Nalanda Arts Studio, Bengaluru	Phone	English (primary), Bengali
2	Aishika Chakraborty	Professor and Director, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata	Phone	English (primary), Bengali
3	Aparna Dharwadker	Professor, English and Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison	Video Calling	English
4	Dr. Arun Jolad Kudligi with Srimatha Ramanand (Interpreter)	Folklore Scholar and Researcher, Assistant Professor, Department of Kannada Studies, Dr. Ambedkar College of Arts & Commerce, PG Centre, Kalaburagi	Video Calling	Kannada (primary) with English interpretation
5	Madan Gopal Singh	Musician and Educator, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
6	Sharmistha Saha	Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay	Video Calling	English
7	Srijan Deshpande	Hindustani Classical Vocalist and Researcher, California and Pune	Video Calling	English
8	Yousuf Saeed	Filmmaker, New Delhi	Video Calling	English

Cinema & Technology

S.No.	Respondent	Details	Mode of Interview	Language of Interview
1	Abhishek Kukreja	Critical Thinking Educator, Conflictorium, Ahmedabad	Video Calling	English
2	Jyoti Nisha	Documentary Filmmaker, Mumbai	Video Calling	English
3	Kaushik Bhaumik	Professor, Cinema Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
4	Maheen Mirza	Independent Filmmaker; Co-founder, Ektara Collective	Video Calling	English
5	Padmini Ray Murray	Founder, Design Beku, Bengaluru	Phone	English
6	Pallavi Paul	Video Artist, Filmmaker and Researcher, New Delhi and Berlin	Phone	English
7	Ratheesh Radhakrishnan	Associate Professor, Cinema Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi	In-Person	English
8	Saba Dewan	Filmmaker and Writer, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
9	Shweta Ghosh	Lecturer, Screen Practices and Industries, University of Reading, U.K.	Video Calling	English

Allied Fields

S.No.	Respondent	Details	Mode of Interview	Language of Interview
1	Avner Pariat	Writer, Shillong	Video Calling	English
2	Karen L. Donoghue & D. Junisha Khongwir	Assistant Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong | The Northeast India AV Archive, Shillong	Video Calling	English
3	Mridu Thulung Rai & Dipti Tamang	The Confluence Collective, Kalimpong	Video Calling	English
4	Sanjoy Hazarika	Journalist, Human Rights Activist, Shillong	Video Calling	English

5	Sita Reddy	Writer, Scholar, and Curator, Hyderabad	Textual (document)	English
6	Sneha Ragavan	Senior Researcher & Head, Asia Art Archive in India, New Delhi	Video Calling	English
7	Sundar Sarukkai	Philosopher, Writer, and Educator	Video Calling	English
8	Tashi Morup	Projects Director, Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation, Leh	Phone	English

Institutional Landscape of Arts Research

Many of the respondents note how the categorisation of 'arts research' as such in India is very institutional, albeit a recent development only a couple of decades old. Particular to the context of PhD studies, observes artist Anupam Roy, universities have standardised arts research while heavily adopting theoretical frameworks typical of the social sciences—namely the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. But while this may be the case in elite universities, of which there are only a few in India, artist and educator Ravikumar Kashi also points to how the seriousness towards arts research in India has been compromised in recent years. This is due to the increasing emphasis on PhDs from the University Grants Commission as a requirement for academic promotions. It has led to a surge in PhD degrees, often without genuine research intent, resulting in low-quality research output. Sita Reddy furthers this critical stance, suggesting that when departments of history, culture, and heritage are stacked with partisans who decry historical research in favour of rightwing ideological advocacy, and when the government influences the state akademis in terms of appointments and content, it is clear that institutional understandings of arts research have become more bureaucratic, conventional, and less independent.

Offsetting the scene of research at the PhD level, Latika Gupta reminds of the absence of substantial funding outside academic institutions posing a critical challenge for independent arts research.

● **Defining "Arts Research" in India**

Relatively new compared to disciplines such as history or economics, Aishika Chakraborty characterises arts research by its critical approach to existing art practices. Yet, even as arts research gets its critical thrust from its intersection with social sciences, Sundar Sarukkai complicates the landscape of disciplinary practices such as history of art, sociology of art, and philosophy of art—all poorly represented within the Indian academic arts research community. The onus of producing a new generation of arts researchers is then loosely defined, but the well-established interdisciplinary programs of concentrating on arts and aesthetics.

● **The Interdisciplinary Turn**

Shifting the attention to the discipline of art history, Kavitha Balakrishnan recounts how "art" research had at one time focused predominantly on established artworks, emphasising traditional art history methods like dating, provenance, and stylistic studies—an approach shaped by colonial perspectives, often mirroring Western frameworks. Latika Gupta and Sanjoy Hazarika observe how research in the arts, in fact, have gone beyond traditional historical study to incorporate diverse methods and approaches such as field documentation, photography, architectural studies, anthropology, ethnography, design, filmmaking and community engagement, to name a few.

Noting the interdisciplinary turn as a positive development, educator Karen Donoghue highlights the continued efforts to situate inclusive approaches in arts research; this includes generous borrowing from social and behavioral sciences to address lived experiences, incorporating diverse lenses such as disability and queerness. On the other hand, Indrapramit Roy takes cognisance of this broad scope of research in the arts today. They have been able to

accommodate explorations of personal language and documentation of vanishing traditions, which rigid academic structures continue to struggle with. Within academia, when such rigid structures fail to accommodate this diversity, it leads to a situation where practitioners with practical experience are sidelined in favour of those with academic credentials that may not reflect their teaching capabilities.

Yet, we are reminded of the continued possibilities of arts research as it leaves its academic confines. Sneha Ragavan finds promise in "artistic research," while contending that not many models exist to define what constitutes artistic research.

- **The Need to Narrativise the Scene**

Despite the strengths of a flexible, interdisciplinary approach towards arts research, across the board respondents have commented on the urgency to narrativise this scene in India, together with a need for better models. Sundar Sarukkai highlights how borrowing from the sciences and traditional disciplines may not always be suitable for arts research, as arts research should have its own vision, methodology, and validation process to accommodate the unique aspects of arts practice. Kaushik Bhaumik asserts that while well-run institutions like the IFA do not struggle with identifying themes for research, there persists a larger systemic problem: the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the cultural matrix of Indian society. In his critique, several junctures converge: modern historians and their abstract treatment of Indian culture, neglecting complicated histories of places, religions, castes, and communities; the absence of a foundational framework to guide researchers through the cultural and historical contexts of various artistic and folk practices; and the interplay of the two allowing right-wing ideologies to fill the void, given the little effort made to educate the public on the complexities of Indian religion and culture.

On the other hand, Maheeen Mirza acknowledges the growing prevalence of qualitative methods in arts research, but she also emphasises the need for broad-based quantitative studies to understand the research landscape itself, such as what is being researched and by whom. For Shweta Ghosh, the lack of an overarching understanding of what is happening in arts research hampers not only research progress but also the overall state of arts funding. Adding another layer of criticality is Sandip K. Luis's observation on the lack of sociologically oriented research on art's institutionalisation in India and how institutions have evolved before and after liberalisation. With a missing theoretical framework for institutional critique to understand the dynamics of power structures, including caste, gender, and regional identities in shaping the flows of capital and cultural production, the gap extends to broader issues. Most recently, this is felt in recent debates around the effectiveness of art institutions in protecting themselves against shifts in political or economic power, or how they interact with state and philanthropic funding.

⬜ Methods and New Directions in Arts Research

While interdisciplinarity might characterise the general makeup of the diverse methodological approaches in Arts Research, a number of tools have shown wide applicability. Also adding heterogeneity to this mix is the integration of arts research with the Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs) established by United Nations in 2015, as observed by Aishika Chakraborty, specifically mentioning SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities).

- **Ethnography and Fieldwork**

  Sharmistha Saha elaborates on how during the colonial period theatre research often linked the modern era to ancient Indian performing arts culture, highlighting a lack during the medieval period under Islamic rule. In post-independent India this narrative continued. Despite government funding for various academies post-independence, there was still a notable lack of focus on caste-based art forms and related research that have existed for centuries. Saha notes the recent surge of interest in caste-based politics and ethnography as tools for arts research; this shift is partly due to the gap left by inadequate state documentation pre and post-independence. She mentions how the British government in colonial India had an imperialist agenda behind the colonial state archives. She refers to Nicholas Dirks' work in this context highlighting the relationship and changing power dynamics of ethnography and archiving.

  Aishika Chakraborty concedes how caste dynamics have become a strong focal point to study the history of classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, or Manipuri, especially as caste issues were previously sidelined or ignored in such studies. At the same time, she emphasises the importance of feminist ethnography and the serious approach to fieldwork, which now involves more immersive and thorough documentation using audiovisual tools. Yousuf Saeed adds how this approach goes beyond visiting a site or videographing performances to truly engaging with the community and integrating into the performance environment. Sanjoy Hazarika also stresses the importance of listening, as he shares how the most valuable lessons he gathered from his lifetime of writing, reporting, documenting, and filming have come from travel, conversation, and meeting a diverse range of people. To him, the definition of arts research does not lie in its aesthetics but in the hands-on, immersive experience of fieldwork. This involves getting deeply involved, being patient, and having the stamina to listen attentively to others, rather than focusing on speaking.

  At the same time, certain conundrums emerge when tools such as ethnography are adapted to research more classical forms of art. Srijan Deshpande criticises a classical tendency of Indian music research that studies music in isolation from day-to-day life, focusing solely on technical aspects like *ragas* and *talas* without considering broader sociopolitical implications or historical contexts. He notes that when researchers do engage with these broader contexts, they are often labeled as adopting Western academic methods.

- **The Archival Turn**

  Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, alongside a vast majority of the respondents, identifies the turn towards archives as a dominant methodology in not just arts research but also arts practice today. He notices how the creation of new archives often brings about a crisis by challenging established narratives and canons; to him, this also prompts the need for new reading

mechanisms, integrating personal narratives, memories, and even gossip into the historical narrative.

Abhishek Kukreja highlights online archives like Cine.com, Google Arts and Culture, and Rekhta, among others, whose efforts made in annotation and detailed documentation of art forms, including Indian cinema, are becoming more common. Aishika Chakraborty, on the other hand, also highlights the significance of archival research in referencing sources such as newspaper reports, government documents, and historical texts to supplement oral narratives and interviews. Visual materials, including photographs, cinema booklets, posters, and tickets, have become crucial sources for research in cinema and performance history today.

o **Curation and Dissemination**
Srijan Deshpande underscores the importance of archives not just as repositories of information but as active participants in the curation and contextualisation of cultural heritage. When in the pre-internet age music archives were valued for their exclusive holdings of rare recordings, platforms like YouTube have made music widely accessible online, diminishing the need to visit physical archives. This shift necessitates a more curatorial approach to maintain relevance; Deshpande's archive, for one, responded by creating guided listening experiences and well-researched music commentary.

D Junisha Khongwir emphasises the importance of constantly seeking new ways to archive and interact with the community. Taking the example of the Northeast India Audio Visual (NEIAV), she maintains how the archive's role is not only to catalog and preserve material but to also disseminate them. The NEIAV supports researchers across seven states by providing small grants to collect oral histories, allowing local nodal offices to determine the most urgent topics and projects. This approach also involves working with photographers, filmmakers, and other researchers to gather and preserve diverse materials.

o **Creative Practices and Transformations**
Ravikumar Kashi notes that many contemporary artists, including him, are engaging in archiving as a practice. While Kashi acknowledges that archiving can serve as a valuable repository for others to draw from, he personally feels uncertain about categorising the work itself as "creative practice" unless it includes a transformative element into something new. He underlines the importance of categorising different types of work, much like how we differentiate poetry from a novel or a research-based long essay; for instance, Amitav Ghosh's historical fiction trilogy is rooted in significant research yet remains within the creative space, whereas his *Smoke and Ashes* is understood as non-fiction. He cautions that the art field should carefully consider how it categorises different types of work, ensuring that the transformative aspects of creative projects are recognised and valued separately from research and archiving efforts. However, he also acknowledges that certain works defy easy categorisation and can occupy liminal spaces between these domains.

Towards another register, Abhishek Majumdar points out how traditionally archives were viewed primarily as repositories for documentation, meant for researchers rather than artists. But today, influenced partly by the direction taken by visual art in its treatment of

archives as subjects of study and sources of inspiration for new works, theater practitioners too have begun to recognise the value of archives in developing research questions and methodologies for their creative work. He gives the example of Koodiyattam, an ancient form of theater, which almost disappeared until support from organisations like the Ford Foundation, Sangeet Natak Akademi, and IFA led to its gradual revival. This later saw a surge in research and documentation interests, also in the form of documentary filmmaking that heightened the visibility of Koodiyattam.

o **Search vs. Research**
Sandip Luis reflects on the generational shift in how researchers have interacted with data. The first generation of internet users in India is now entering research roles, bringing a new consciousness influenced by digital experiences. He highlights Clare Bishop's essay, 'Information Overload' (*Artforum*, April 2023), which critiques the disconnect between information aggregation and genuine knowledge production. This critique emphasises that merely collecting data is not sufficient; there needs to be a robust framework for turning data into valuable knowledge. It requires posing novel questions and developing new methodologies and frameworks, rather than just navigating existing information.

Sneha Ragavan reflects on the distinction between simply collecting data and conducting meaningful research. She argues that true research involves accessing, identifying, and contextualising material, especially when dealing with sources that are not readily available in public libraries or the public domain. Here, she identifies the importance of narrative in research, noting that set methodologies are often inadequate for research in less accessible areas. Oftentimes documenting the research process itself can inspire others and provide insights into the material's context, circulation, and potential new research avenues. She also highlights the complexity of motivations behind research proposals, particularly in cases where personal identity and community are closely linked to the subject matter. She references a proposal focused on researching women's magazines in Kerala, which stood out to the jury because of how the researcher, belonging to the same community as the women featured in the magazines, articulated their relationship to the material; it was neither sentimental nor nostalgic but rather cautious and curious, reflecting a more critical engagement with the subject. Ragavan underscores that such personal stakes can shape both the direction and methodology of the research in ways that differ from purely scholastic endeavors.

● **Integrating Lived Experience**

Although institutional training exists to equip researchers with the necessary skills and awareness, oftentimes new methodologies are born from integrating lived experience—of both the researcher and the subject of their research. All respondents agree that the subject-object divide in research, even in the hard sciences, is a false problem; all research begins from a subjective standpoint and is influenced by political and institutional contexts around them. Madan Gopal Singh explains that researchers often come with preliminary work, driven by initial fascination or seduction. He cites the works of two researchers that he evaluated recently. One research on marginal folk music from Punjab was driven by the researcher's desire to reconnect with a culturally alienated space—being Punjabi he never did grow up

there—and to understand the lives of musicians also alienated within their caste-inflected space. Following the musicians to places like the borders of Punjab and Rajasthan, Singh describes this approach as exploring multiple structures: personal dislocation, broader political-cultural dislocation, and caste dynamics.

Avner Pariat identifies a trend of localisation among many artists and researchers, who often explore their own cultural contexts; Pariat reflects on his work on the influence of the tiger on Khasi lore and life, highlighting a focus on local culture and its potential heuristic value even for those outside the immediate local context. Yet at the same time he notes the increasing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the arts, recognising this as a significant trend beyond the local context.

- o **Community-centric focus**
  Dipti Tamang and Mridu Rai note the extractive nature of traditional research practices, advocating for engaging ethically with communities. They cite the example of their project Confluence Collective, aimed at creating a collaborative dialogue rooted in their community's oral traditions and practices; the approach of learning from shared experiences and lived realities, especially in groups with histories of exclusion and marginalisation, helps shape their collective's work, making it a constant process of learning and unlearning.

  Kavitha Balakrishnan speaks of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences' project in collaboration with Kudumbashree, a women's collective in Kerala, focusing on community mapping and theater to aid in flood recovery. In this form of community mapping local women create detailed maps that track flood levels, damage, and timing, thereby emphasising grassroots mobilisation and local knowledge.

- o **Person-centric focus**

  Jyoti Nisha and Anupam Roy observe a trend in recent artistic research and documentary filmmaking in India, where the focus has shifted toward singular, often marginalised, individuals. These individuals, like the poet Ramashankar Yadav (known as Vidrohi), become central figures in films and documentaries that often gain recognition and awards, despite the fact that these subjects themselves may have lived lives of poverty and invisibility, argues Roy. Jyoti Nisha, however, considers these as stories of assertion as opposed to the conventional depiction of marginalised characters as victims without agency. She foregrounds theories like "Bahujan spectatorship" which she uses in her own filmmaking practice to address marginalised perspectives, often helping to subvert the mainstream "gaze" of cinema.

- o **New Platforms of Engagement**

  Within the shifting focus in arts research from close reading of artworks to considering contextual locales, Deeptha Achar discusses the emergence of Dalit art as a critical and impactful area. She notes how the modes of display and audience engagement for Dalit art have evolved. Unlike traditional galleries, these artists are using websites and digital formats to showcase their work. This shift not only broadens their reach but also challenges conventional perceptions of art and how it is viewed.

☐ Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Arts Research

With Artificial Intelligence becoming a significant part of the creative industry today, given the tools available for writing and generating images, respondents have shared their concern on the challenge of distinguishing between content created by AI and that produced by humans. Despite these concerns, many are not entirely dismissive of AI. Maheen Mirza notes that it provides valuable resources, especially for under-resourced individuals, such as those needing help with writing applications. She argues that AI has emerged due to gaps in accessibility and exclusivity which traditional systems have failed to address. However, there remain ethical concerns related to data usage when companies are given access to creative data for training AI.

Padmini Ray Murray reminds how AI has limited access to knowledge about arts research, particularly in India, due to insufficient data. To be contextually accurate, more robust and original arts research is needed. AI can hallucinate knowledge but lacks intrinsic understanding. Technology can showcase arts research in interesting ways and inspire creative directions, but it won't necessarily improve the quality of the research itself due to its lack of accurate information. Afrah Shafiq, on the other hand, believes that AI can be a subject of research in itself. Instead of fearing AI as a replacement for human work, she suggests that the ways in which AI is modeled and interpreted offer rich areas for artistic and academic inquiry.

⬜ **Practice-Based Research**

Shweta Ghosh notes that practice-based research in India is less defined than in the West, with fluid methodologies that aren't strictly aligned with Western academia. She locates this flexibility as a strength, seeing how it avoids gatekeeping and allows for a more inclusive approach to research.

- **Defining Practice-Based Research**

Particular to the context of envisioning the goals of practice-based research, some have also distinguished practice-based research as one that directly contributes to individual artistic practice. But if such were to be its definition, Saba Dewan reflects on the term "practice-based research" with some skepticism, questioning its implications. As a filmmaker, she shares an example where her research for a film about female courtesans and their lifestyles was practice-based, but she wonders if all her research, including unrelated yet enriching material, fits this definition. Dewan then argues that the term "practice-based research" can sometimes feel overly utilitarian, focused solely on being directly useful. Especially given that research often leads to unexpected, valuable insights that may not be immediately relevant but are crucial for the overall understanding of one's own artistic practice.

Madan Gopal Singh, on the other hand, chooses to situate practice-based research through its process-oriented approach. He references philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the artist as a paradoxical figure, both a nomad (open and exploratory) and a monad (isolated and introspective), to describe his own artistic journey and the blend of personal and collective experiences that have shaped his work, mostly through journeys with local musicians from various cultures. Instead of defining practice-based research through its commitment to the growth of particular artistic projects, he identifies it as a process of creating connections and dialogues between diverse cultural practices and perspectives.

- **Practice-Based Research and Collaboration**

Respondents also concur that practice-based research thrives best when there is equal and flexible collaboration between practitioners and scholars. Srijan Deshpande advocates for a balanced approach where practitioners with deep understanding of their art work alongside scholars with humanities training to ensure that research is both contextually rich and methodologically sound. While Indian scholars drawing from their own experiences as performers produce genuinely insightful work, a significant issue arises from the lack of standardisation in citations, methodologies, and drawing coherent arguments, making it difficult for others to build upon their work, and also hindering the progression of discourse in such areas. Arun Jolad Kudligi complements this by discussing the insider-outsider dynamic in research, particularly in folk art. He acknowledges that there needs to be a balance between the insider's knowledge and the researcher's broader perspective to produce well-rounded and insightful research. Thus, rather than involving practitioners from the community as just resource persons he suggests their involvement as active collaborators, which allays the limitations of an outsider's perspective. At the same time, he also stresses the need for flexibility in project structures, where the level of involvement of practitioners and researchers can vary depending on the project's requirements.

Suchitra Balasubhrahmanyan mentions her teaching experience at Ambedkar University Delhi, where a master's program in design focused on social design had linked design to questions of democracy and capitalism, showcasing an institutional effort to integrate practice-based research with broader social issues. She also discusses how practice-based research can intersect with markets and policy-making. For example, designed objects can gain value in the art market through research projects, highlighting the broader societal and economic implications of practice-based research.

☐ State of Funding for Arts Research

Across disciplines, many identify visual arts as receiving prominent funding, primarily because wealthy individuals enjoy collecting and displaying art. Films also are noted to receive significant funding due to their cultural and patriotic appeal. However, as Avner Pariat points out, areas such as literature suffers from a severe lack of funding, with very few resources available to support writers.

- **State Bodies**

The majority of respondents maintain that Government support for arts research, primarily channeled through the three akademis (Lalit Kala, Sangeet Natak, and Sahitya) since the 1960s, has not been effective in fostering creative, scholarly, and imaginative arts research. Over the last few years, observes Sita Reddy, there were not only monolithic understandings of arts research, but also monolithic understandings of what art itself is—as instrumental instead of expressive. Under the previous government and through the pandemic we saw fewer arts research opportunities at a structural level (though there were of course more individual-led and privately initiated opportunities via webinars and such), more politicised understandings of the arts, and divided understandings of what constitutes research. At the same time, some respondents believe as to how the volume of individual public funds is usually more generous compared to private funds, with support for arts research in India coming from institutions like the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), and the Institute of Advanced Study in Simla, to name a few. Many of these sources of funding, however, often reflect certain conceptions of arts and culture, with substantial funds allocated to projects that demonstrate a nationalistic outcome or align with specific ideological stances.

> o **State Funding Challenges**
> Respondents have described how the process of obtaining government funding is influenced by factors such as political affiliations, religious beliefs, caste, and creed. These biases lead to unfair judgment and hinder access to government resources for many individuals and projects. Avner Pariat also notes how the Ministry of Culture's budget is frequently cut, which diminishes the perceived importance of the arts compared to other priorities in a developing country, such as infrastructure.
>
> Ratheesh Radhakrishnan further complicates the scene, shedding light on how historically patronage has been a fundamental condition for art, often driven by a nationalistic logic that the state should support the arts. This idea made sense when the state was more actively involved in welfare activities, but with a noticeable withdrawal of the state from

such roles in recent years, including the production and support of the arts, there is an ongoing debate about whether there is still a valid argument for state support of the arts.

Lastly, respondents are not remiss in bringing up how grants from both public and private sources typically do not cover living expenses, requiring researchers to take time away from their practice or other forms of livelihood to conduct their research. Suchitra Balasubhrahmanyan emphasises that this issue is particularly acute for those without secure academic positions.

o **Areas Supported by the State**
Some highlight the increased interest from state governments in promoting regional arts. Sanjoy Hazarika mentions how researchers in Meghalaya and Assam have focused on traditional arts at risk of extinction, such as drum-making and the dotara; the Northeastern Council (a Government of India entity) too has been supporting research and documentation related to preserving cultural heritage; in Nagaland, a government initiative called the Musical Task Force goes to villages to find and support musicians, helping them through their education and training them. Pariat points towards a research grant made available recently from the autonomous district council in Meghalaya, focused on cultural aspects of the region's inhabitants. The traditions of mask-making and other skills of Majuli, an island in the Brahmaputra river, for instance, says Hazarika, have gained attention with earlier efforts by the Assam government to make a UNESCO heritage site. While this did not succeed, the historical relics and royal burial sites or Moidams of mediaeval Assam at Charaideo were recognized as a UNESCO heritage site in 2024.

Yet, despite the state support, Hazarika stresses on the critical importance of ensuring that research and documentation in the arts translate into effective policymaking; without this translation into policy, research remains on paper and fails to make a tangible impact.

● **Private Funding**

Private funding, some speculate, though significant, is often whimsical and lacks the accountability and transparency of public funding. Many large philanthropic organisations in India, like Tata Trusts and Azim Premji Foundation, do not support the arts. Despite noting this, respondents lauded the efforts made by the likes of IFA, Foundation for Indian Contemporary Arts (FICA), and Inlaks Foundation. IFA's approach to funding arts research has been especially made note of for it being more attuned to supporting committed practitioners and serious researchers rather than adhering strictly to academic demands.

Mridu Rai and Dipti Tamang also highlight the historical and ongoing exclusion of marginalised voices from mainstream narratives and funding opportunities. This exclusion is compounded by regional challenges, such as conflict and state surveillance in the Northeast of India. While there have been some positive developments, such as FICA's Himalayan Fellowship, the financial infrastructure remains inadequate, prompting the formation of collectives to fill this void in Rai and Tamang's region of the Sikkim-Darjeeling hills.

- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**

Sita Reddy notes a trend towards PPPs in arts research, particularly in museums, heritage, arts education, and interdisciplinary projects, such as the Aga Khan Foundation's restoration of Qutb Shahi Tombs and the World Monument Fund's restoration of the Residency in Hyderabad or the development of the various Partition museums. Not explicitly advocating for PPPs, she notes these efforts as merely indicating a trend towards interdisciplinary work in arts research.

- **Towards Building Equitable Terms in Funding**

Sita Reddy warns that while there has been a rise in privately funded agencies that support arts research, including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), emphasising outcomes over process could be detrimental, compromising independence and creativity. Sneha Ragavan notes the preference for practice-based or production-led works because of their immediate public impact. Research, she argues, may not always have a glamorous outcome but is still crucial for the development of new ideas and materials.

Further, as has been observed by some, the jury process for selecting projects has become more discerning in private organisations, with an emphasis on quality over quantity and an acknowledgment of the challenges faced by both seasoned practitioners and newcomers. However, Indrapramit Roy urges towards the need for clearer categories and differentiated funding for various levels of experience and types of research, as well as the importance of considering proposals in different languages to avoid disadvantaging non-English speakers.

Shweta Ghosh brings up international collaborations, pointing out that many current collaborations, such as those between the UK and India, tend to be one-sided. She critiques the colonial mindset that still pervades, where Western institutions are seen as the primary innovators, and the role of Indian institutions is limited to implementation or secondary support. She advocates for a shift where instead of Western institutions merely sharing their methodologies and practices with Indian counterparts, there should be a mutual exchange where both sides learn from and contribute to each other's knowledge and practices.

☐ Addressing Gaps and Challenges

- **Issues of Accessibility**

  - **Archives**
    Many lament the absence of well-developed archives in India, noting that existing archives are mostly limited to museums and a few specialised entities like the Asia Art Archive and Sahapedia. Particularly to theatre, Aparna Dharwadker mentions how although theatre scholarship exists across the country, it often fails to meet international standards due to insufficient resources like libraries, archives, and qualified supervisors. Major institutions like the National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Natarang Pratishthan, Natya Shodh Sansthan, and the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai offer some archival resources, but many theatre organisations lack comprehensive records.

Kaushik Bhaumik, on the other hand, emphasises how the production of archives is expensive and resource-intensive. Additionally, once the data is collected, there are significant costs associated with organising, annotating, and preserving the information. Annotation is crucial because without it the collected data may not be useful or accessible for future research. Bhowmik points out that due to these high costs the production of archives often necessitates separate, dedicated funding, which the country severely lacks.

o **Museums**
Avner Pariat laments the state of many Indian museums, where exhibits are often poorly curated, have overcrowding displays and lack informative narratives. He shares an experience at the Indian Museum in Kolkata, where despite the presence of intriguing items like ivory cutlery from Shillong, staff were unable to provide information or had not digitised records. Better-curated museums could help enhance public understanding and appreciation of cultural artifacts.

● **Discourse and Dominant Narratives**

Public discourse on arts, many point out, once prominent in newspapers and public talks, has diminished. Reviews and extensive articles on arts have largely disappeared from mainstream media, reducing the visibility and impact of arts discourse. Adding to this, Avner Pariat and Sandip K. Luis argue for the separation between art practice and discourse being a necessary one, acknowledging the distinct nature of art practice and artistic discourse and the importance of having critics and reviewers in offering independent and partisan perspectives on art.

Within the landscape of shrinking coverage of mainstream discourse, Sundar Sarukkai adds how a more private, localised discourse has emerged particularly in non-metro areas and among language-specific communities. Significant arts research and discourse happen in non-metro areas, often in local languages, without formal institutional support, with Ninasam Theatre Institute in Karnataka being a prime example.

o **Navigating the Urban-Rural Divide**
Kaushik Bhaumik suggests that marginalisation is not just about geographical or socio-economic status but also about ideological and cultural positioning. For instance, those who try to modernise or enter urban spaces from rural or traditional backgrounds are doubly marginalised—both within their own communities and in the broader urban context. Urban intellectuals and modernist practices, on the other hand, could be marginal compared to the dominant rural and religious narratives. Bhowmik calls for a reassessment of what constitutes "marginal" and "urban" going beyond simplistic binaries to reflect the complex realities of contemporary Indian society more accurately. Sarukkai also argues how the distinction between metro and non-metro is less relevant than the distinction between institutional and non-institutional research.

Arun Jolad Kudligi, then, explains how technology has played a significant role in bridging the urban-rural divide. Artists from rural areas use platforms like YouTube to share their work, thus bypassing traditional gatekeepers and directly reaching a broader

audience. But while this might have made it easier for researchers to access and study these art forms, the harsh reality of rural areas remaining disconnected from funding opportunities remains, despite the presence of communication networks. Tashi Morup cites the challenging conditions in Ladakh, a high-altitude, cold desert region with scarce resources, climate issues, and limited livelihood opportunities; the youth in these rural areas often face significant struggles for expression and existence, with a strong inclination towards urban migration in search of better opportunities.

Further, Mridu Rai and Dipti Tamang point out how the divide between mainstream and peripheral regions is still a reality, particularly in the Northeast and the northernmost regions in India, which face multiple layers of exclusion. The shift in gaze towards these areas often remains neo-colonial, with access to institutional spaces and funding still favouring a select few, despite efforts made in recent years to decolonise practices; resources are often diverted to address ongoing state conflicts. To make the landscape more equitable, such that narratives from non-urban or marginal backgrounds can emerge, Sharmistha Saha advocates for reservation. She argues that reservation is crucial for bringing in perspectives that would otherwise be excluded due to systemic biases favoring urban and elite backgrounds. Similarly, Saba Dewan suggests that art funding should focus on giving more weight to where an applicant comes from, rather than just the perceived merit of their proposal. It's crucial to engage in dialogue with artists, helping to develop their ideas and project proposals, especially for those who may not be as skilled in writing or presenting their concepts.

o **Language and Translation**
Pankti Desai suggests that translating literary works in Indian vernacular languages has improved over the last decade, but translating visual art and related literature remains a significant challenge. Understanding the regional context is crucial for a comprehensive Indian art history, as many canonical Indian artists have layers of regional life that are best understood through their native languages. Suchitra Balasubhrahmanyan also touches upon how activist research, often conducted in local languages and contexts, doesn't always qualify as formal arts or anthropological research. This points to a gap in how research methodologies and outcomes are defined and recognised in the academic and funding landscapes.

● **Writing, Research, Practice**

There is a wide acknowledgement of how many artists might find the process of writing discouraging, especially those who excel in visual forms but struggle with writing detailed applications, even deterring talented artists from applying.

o **Imposition of external frameworks**
Oftentimes, the theoretical temperament central to academic arts research poses limitations on artistic research methodologies, tending to impose external frameworks on artists and communities. To Anupam Roy, a deeper understanding of labour and its representation within the arts could counter the theoretical blindspots. To Indrapramit

Roy, the challenge lies in recognising that not all artists work with a conceptual view, and that the richness of art lies in its diversity, including purely visual approaches.

o **Curatorial Studies**
Over the past two decades, curators have become increasingly influential, driven by the structures of museums and the broader art industry. There is a shift in the art world dynamics where curators often overshadow the artists themselves. Indrapramit Roy observes how a vast majority of curatorial training programs tend to emphasise the application of critical theories borrowed from other disciplines, like literary theory, rather than allowing theories to evolve naturally from within the realm of art. Conversely, Avner Pariat separates the act of reading from this, stressing how it is also important for artists to engage in reading aside from purely visual pursuits.

Within these changing dynamics, artist Anupam Roy notes how research was historically associated with art historians, while art practitioners rarely saw the need to write or read extensively to communicate their work. Having a specific "area of research" is a relatively new concept for artists; in the past, artists did not typically identify their work in terms of research interests like "land and labour" or "ecology," which are now more common. A strictly theoretical approach can be problematic, as it often leads to a marginalisation of artists who do not fit into these pre-determined conceptual frameworks. Indrapramit Roy further cautions against how it creates a disconnect between what is art and its interpretation or curation; while this trend has led to the emergence of some highly skilled curators, it has also resulted in a surge of mediocrity, where individuals without a deep understanding of art can pass off as curators simply by organising shows. It points to a lack of effective mechanisms to differentiate between truly knowledgeable curators and those who lack substantial expertise.

☐ Key Areas for Research and Funding

At the outset, nearly all respondents expressed hesitation in pinpointing specific themes or areas within the arts that require more immediate research attention. Given the limited funding landscape, it is important that research across all domains receives equitable visibility and support. Here, Saba Dewan issues a further caveat on the practice of thematically listing areas deemed important for funding; she argues that it can be limiting for artists who feel they must fit into these predefined categories to receive support. This approach potentially creates a hierarchy of research priorities, which may discourage artists from pursuing topics that genuinely interest them but fall outside of these recognised themes. Thus, while most advocate for a more open approach to funding, without being constrained by predetermined priorities set by funding bodies, there is also the acknowledgment of certain areas that have either been understudied, underfunded, or simply overlooked.

● **Documentation, Archiving, and Museums**

In discussing potential research areas within arts research and practice, Pankti Desai identifies digital magazines and newspaper archives as particularly fertile grounds. She notes the troubling

trend of archival destruction, using the example of the lost Babri Masjid archive from Times of India to illustrate the vulnerability of such records. She also underscores the importance of preserving oral literature and histories which are at risk of being forgotten, or are often neglected by mainstream archives.

Aparna Dharwadker highlights the historical and continuous nature of theatre theory in India, which is robust, but notes deficiencies in theatre history and criticism. Essential to this is the documentation of theatre activities, institutions, and biographies, as theatre performances are ephemeral. Dharwadker suggests that arts-support organisations can play a critical role in developing archives and preserving documentation of major theatre activities; for instance, this could take the form of identifying specific organisations across the country and inviting researchers to explore what materials are available and what is lacking, with the goal of creating comprehensive archives.

Avner Pariat advocates for a sustained interest in museological research and exhibitions, appreciating the dual aspect of such work that involves both research and artistic presentation. Presenting everyday objects, for instance a 17th century spoon, with historical narratives can make them fascinating and educational, allowing communities to engage with their own or other cultures through storytelling.

- **Translation**

Sneha Ragavan highlights translation as a key area needing attention. It can bridge gaps between languages and regions, making important materials accessible to a wider audience. She cites the Sharjah Art Foundation's publishing grant as a model that supports translation and publication, facilitating the circulation of ideas and historical materials. This approach could also ensure that research in vernacular languages, for instance, can reach new audiences and contribute to a broader understanding of diverse cultural contexts.

- **Marginalised and Gendered Art Forms**

Aishika Chakraborty underlines that while classical forms of art still hold immense value and should continue to be explored, it is also crucial to focus on other less examined areas. These include the popular, erotic, vulgar, and marginalised art forms, as well as the experiences of various bodies – from trans, queer, disabled, feminist, and refugee bodies, to include the experiences of performers in nightclubs, cabarets, and other spaces considered outside the realm of classical or high art. She advocates for breaking the silences around taboo or uncomfortable topics in art research.

Abhishek Majumdar highlights gender disparities in Indian theatre, noting that renowned playwrights like Karnad and Tendulkar are predominantly men. On the other hand, while influential directors, such as Neelam Mansingh and Kirti Jain have been documented, much less has been archived about women theatre makers from rural or home learnt and practiced socio-economic centres of theatre making. Majumdar calls for deeper research into gender dynamics, focusing on areas where women have been excluded from or played crucial yet unacknowledged roles. This includes examining art forms with cross-gender roles and oral traditions where stories by women are attributed to male authors, like the Mahabharata.

- **Folk and Performative Practices**

Many respondents stress on the continuous folk nature of Indian art across subcultures and the importance of examining contemporary elements in these traditions. Abhishek Kukreja highlights the need for deeper analysis of performative practices, including theological and regional expressions like Gurdwaras, Kali Pujan, and Ganesh Visarjan, due to their rich artistic, literary, social, and humanistic aspects. He warns that without philosophical and intellectual decoding, these traditions may be appropriated for sinister purposes.

Arun Jolad Kudligi advocates for an open-minded approach to changes in folk art due to modern influences. While some see modernity as a threat to traditional art forms, he views it as an opportunity for evolution and adaptation, which can help preserve these art forms in a contemporary context. Inherent hierarchies existing in Indian society, such as caste and gender, are often perpetuated through folk art forms; it is important for the researcher to be cognisant of these hierarchies and social structures in influencing the creation and perception of art in rural areas. Yousuf Saeed brings to the fore how traditional artists often focus on preserving their art forms in their original states, sometimes neglecting the broader discourse or impact. A keen knowledge of discourse may show how their practices inherently reflect syncretism, blending various cultural influences. Saeed cites his documentary "Khayal Darpan," which explores how classical music in Pakistan was redefined post-partition to align with Islamic values, paralleling similar efforts in India to revive pre-Islamic cultural elements. He stresses that researchers should consider historical and socio-economic contexts and not rely solely on practitioners' accounts, as artists often adapt their art to fit their audience and secure patronage.

Within this, Maheen Mirza and Tashi Morup emphasise the need for more attentive and context-sensitive research methodologies in community-based practices. Mirza criticises the confinement of research to safer spaces and stresses investigating social structures, using tribal folk art as an example. She warns against exoticising folk art while neglecting the harsh realities of its creators' lives, advocating for a balance between the art, the context, and the recognition of knowledge ownership. Mirza calls for participatory mechanisms where researchers act as scribes informed by the studied communities' viewpoints. Similarly, Morup underscores the importance of listening and learning in rural contexts, particularly when language barriers exist, advocating for methodologies that appreciate local realities rather than imposing external perspectives.

- **Reassessing Arts Research Focus**

For Indrapramit Roy, while contemporary art and the documentation of dying traditions or intangible heritage have been common focuses, there are notable gaps, particularly in critical writing on recent art history. This includes an under-explored area like the history of visual arts post-independence, where there are numerous "gaping holes." For instance, there is limited research on gender-based perspectives in art practice or a comprehensive study of mainstream arts as opposed to those at the margins.

Kaushik Bhaumik calls for a radical overhaul of art funding frameworks to integrate all aspects of Indian culture, including popular cinema and urban practices, emphasising the interconnectedness of rural and urban expressions. He critiques the conservative, anti-modern tendencies across Indian society, which influence funding policies and neglect urban and popular cultural forms.

Bhowmik advocates for a major conceptual revision of Indian history and culture in funding agendas, suggesting that integrating ethnographic work on Indian religion and rituals into public education will foster a deeper understanding of cultural practices. This foundational change, he argues, is essential to realising the true potential of arts research.

Sharmistha Saha highlights the absence of experimental work, which historically evolved from performance labs that involved philosophical and academic engagement. While dramaturgy—a field that bridges practice and research by incorporating contextual elements into performances—could help close this gap, it has not been widely recognised or utilised in India. She emphasises that modernising and incorporating new roles like the dramaturg can positively impact the arts. Modernisation should be seen as a thoughtful evolution rather than a negative change.

Additionally, Aparna Dharwadker warns against focusing solely on the regional origins of art forms, as the arts in India have broader trans-regional and national dimensions that are often neglected. Arguing that regions are not isolated, that they are part of larger movements that can be studied on a broader scale, she advocates for a shift towards cross-regional research that identifies commonalities across different regions and art forms rather than focusing on distinctions. For instance, themes like realism, modernism, and political coercion are prevalent across the country, and similarities can be found in street theater practices from different regions, often influenced by leftist ideology. Here, a shift away from viewing the nation as an external imposition, and instead recognising it as a geocultural space that offers valuable perspectives for research could be productive. Sandip K. Luis, too, finds the notion of regionalism as inherently subversive oftentimes problematic. Taking the instance of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors' Association, sometimes referred to as the "Kerala Radicals"—a misnomer, according to Luis, he advances how regional identity should not overshadow or diminish the broader context of national or global claims made by artists.

Srijan Deshpande emphasises the need for arts research to balance the study of the craft with its broader social and political context. He notes that research on classical arts like Hindustani and Carnatic music often fixates on technical aspects, such as musical grammar, while neglecting the historical and sociopolitical influences, including colonialism. Conversely, studies on folk and minority music tend to focus on social contexts but lack depth in understanding the craft. Deshpande advocates for a more comprehensive research approach that integrates technical analysis with sociopolitical and historical perspectives to better understand and appreciate the art forms.

Lastly, on the very aspect of defining what is art, some have brought up the need to challenge rigid definitions shaped by dominant narratives. Junisha Khongwir and Karen Donoghue highlight the underrepresentation of traditional art forms, particularly those from marginalized communities, which are often overshadowed by mainstream classical arts. Written work in India is often dominated by certain well-known names, making visible their framework that routinely intersect with class, caste, and privilege. Khongwir and Donoghue push for the need to explore and value overlooked arts, starting with one's own backyard to challenge the traditional notions of what is considered art. Greater openness is needed in recognising diverse artistic practices beyond those canonised and defined by dominant frameworks rooted in historical power structures and cultural hierarchies.

⬜ How can funders be more engaged with arts research and practice?

- **Workshops**

Many respondents comment on the role of workshops in decentralising artistic practices and promoting a more diverse representation of voices and experiences. Afrah Shafiq emphasises the power of workshops as a means to foster artistic engagement and development, particularly outside of major urban centers. Workshops do not necessarily need to be product-oriented but can serve to bring people together, spark engagement, and create a domino effect of further initiatives. By holding workshops in locations such as smaller towns and cities, she argues that it can facilitate exposure and collaboration among artists who might not otherwise have access to such opportunities. On the other hand, Sanjoy Hazarika also reminds how several interesting projects and initiatives already exist in rural areas, but the challenge lies in making these accessible to a broader audience. Videos and short films promoting these works, disseminated through well conducted workshops, could then broaden the understanding of different themes and mediums of art that have long existed, but lacked visibility. Adding to this is Padmini Ray Murray's sentiment on the need for greater transparency and educational efforts around the process of arts research in the country, particularly the importance of proper terminology in navigating resources in a world that is increasingly becoming technology-driven. She argues that many people may already be doing arts research without realising it due to a lack of awareness about the discipline. By offering workshops and educational resources on what arts research entails, especially in non-urban areas, more people could identify their work within this category, thereby accessing more resources and support.

- **Training and Mentorship**

Suchitra Balasubhrahmanyan stresses on the need for ongoing support and mentorship beyond just the financial aspect. She believes that workshops and continued mentorship, even after the initial proposal stage, could be valuable for those who need it. This would help grantees and project coordinators navigate challenges and develop their projects more effectively. Several other respondents, who have been past grantees of the IFA, have acknowledged that while funding is crucial, the visibility and recognition provided by IFA are equally important. Pankti Desai brings up the opportunity to present her work online at the end of her project, which helped enhance her visibility and recognition in the public domain. Further, IFA's level of commitment to provide constructive feedback and guidance, she notes, is extremely significant for the development of researchers operating outside academic settings. Karen Donoghue, among many others, also advocates for the need for expertise support. This includes connecting researchers with experts and providing methodological guidance; it is crucial due to the limitations individual researchers face compared to institutions. At the same time, a few others have critiqued the practice of many arts organisations in the country that fix a mentor from the very beginning before the grantees are finalised; instead, care should be taken to bring in experts matching the profile and research interests of the grantees. Further, Latika Gupta brings up the merits of holding online sessions focused on writing applications, even if they aren't directly related to the organisations' own projects. She also takes the example of IFA's practice of providing budget templates to assist in the

process of writing applications, strongly advocating for the continuation of this practice and for it to be considered by other funding bodies as well.

On the aspect of linguistic barriers, Sandip K. Luis contends that while regional language research is vital, English also empowers non-English speaking researchers. Rather than using external translators, he suggests mentoring researchers to translate their own work into English, as this enhances their language skills and ensures accurate communication of their research. Most researchers already have basic English skills, and with guidance, they can be the best translators of their work.

- **Dissemination and Platforms for Publication and Discussion**

Pallavi Paul argues how it is essential to create a discursive environment where participants engage in meaningful interaction and idea exchange rather than just working on their individual projects. While highlighting IFA's existing practice of organising events that bring people together to discuss and share their work, she suggests the emphasis could be on exploring innovative ways to showcase the progress of grantees and project coordinators, instead of individuals merely bringing their projects to the table. Adding more interactive methods to present ongoing research or creative projects, such as exhibitions, websites, or pop-up events, would allow funders to better understand the progress and impact of the work they support. However, the responsibility of creatively presenting these projects should lie with the funding organisations and not the artists alone. Programme officers should reimagine the required submissions to effectively communicate the value of the work to funders, relieving artists from the pressure of making their projects more marketable. Further, Sneha Ragavan also mentions how the profile of programme officers adds to the self-definition of bodies like the IFA, influencing how the organisation presents itself and what it prioritises. A major commitment must then be on having cutting-edge researchers and practitioners within such organisations manage and administer grants. This approach contrasts with a more bureaucratic model, such as that of a government, where administration might become rigid or detached from the creative and research processes.

On the other hand, many speak of the dire need for building a supportive infrastructure for publications and training in research methodologies; it is crucial for developing a robust arts research environment in India. Sundar Sarukkai, for instance, argues that training and publication should go hand in hand. Without publication opportunities, training researchers is futile as their work remains unpublished and unrecognised; organisations like the IFA must focus on creating publication avenues and training researchers on how to write and publish their work. Many have also brought up how the main reason for research coming from smaller towns not managing to make a difference in the existing ecology of arts research is due to the very lack of their visibility; having a dedicated and discerning publication infrastructure could not only give such research their due exposure but also bridge gaps between dominant and marginal discourses.

For Aparna Dharwadker, fostering cross-disciplinary and trans-regional discussions could go a long way in enriching the arts community. She suggests the initiation of an annual forum where people from various regions and disciplines in the arts come together to discuss key issues. This gathering could focus on specific areas; for instance, if the focus is on theater, this could be done by bringing together major directors, playwrights, practitioners, scholars, and critics. Also

important is recording and publishing these discussions and making them accessible to the public; the use of digital platforms could make wider dissemination possible.

- **Developing Networks and Databases**

The facilitation of networking among art researchers has been widely considered to hold promise. Yousuf Saeed, for one, proposes creating a database that connects art researchers with similar or complementary interests. This would be particularly useful for researchers working in different cities; for example, someone in Delhi could connect with someone in Chennai to collaborate on documentation or share resources. This could also channel into infrastructure support when traveling; having access to local contacts or resources could greatly enhance the research process. For Shweta Ghosh, fluid partnerships between institutions, fostering collaboration instead of competition, is just as important for grantees/researchers to gain easier access to resources. For instance, grantees/researchers should be able to access resources from a range of different institutions depending on their project requirements, without necessarily having to bear their respective accession costs.

- **Supporting Artistic Evolution and Emotional Well-Being**

Noting the diverse and ever-evolving nature of artistic practices, Indrapramit Roy cautions against creating too many fixed guidelines, as this can restrict the flexibility needed to support the wide array of art practices seen today. Pointing to the potential danger of over-regulation and rigid policy-making within funding organisations, he advocates for an open-ended, flexible approach that allows funding bodies to make exceptions and adapt to unforeseen circumstances, ensuring that they can channel support to all art practices.

It is usually the case that when artists are confident in what they deserve, they are more likely to receive the support they need; both self-belief and clear communication with funders thereby become essential in securing the necessary resources to bring a project to life. Yet, beyond financial support, respondents also express the need for mental support and empathy from funders. While some may scoff at this idea, suggests Karen Donoghue, institutions should play a role in supporting the emotional well-being of researchers, as integrating emotional support into funding strategies can enhance the overall support provided to researchers, tailored to fit different contexts and individual needs. Jyoti Nisha adds that instead of making the process of procuring funds more stressful for the artist, the application process should be supportive and understanding, especially when it comes to the logistical and production costs necessary to realise an artist's vision. Creativity, she holds, flourishes in a stress-free environment and excessive stress can hinder artistic expression. Shweta Ghosh also stresses the importance of accessibility, particularly for disabled people, suggesting that more should be done to ensure that research and resources are accessible to all, including providing alt texts and other means to decenter dominant nondisabled experiences in research. This would enhance the inclusivity and reach of the respective organisation's work.

☐ Conclusion

While this report reveals the complexities of both infrastructural challenges and individual preferences as shaping the landscape of arts research India, the interviews routinely emphasise the

need for a more inclusive and flexible structure for arts support that can better house the growing interdisciplinary aims of arts research in the country. The current institutional frameworks, while crucial, often struggle to accommodate the diverse methodologies and perspectives that contemporary arts research demands. As the field continues to navigate the slippery terrains of tradition, innovation, and global influences, collaborative practice emerges as a dominant strategy of pushing forward the momentum towards both the development of discourse and the ongoing reevaluation of research practices.

While introducing the report I had emphasised on the process of identifying trends that may help the reader navigate the content with better ease. But this report on the state of arts research in India today, according to the responses of thirty-seven practitioners from the field, has aimed to go beyond merely identifying the 'big trends.' Though larger directions have emerged, like the archival turn for instance, of equal importance are the more located observations such as how the lack of funding landscape has pushed the need for collective practices in certain regions, responding to questions of (in)visibility. There have even been personal observations like highlighting a specific cause that made a certain proposal more interesting to a jury. To me, all of these equally contribute to portraying the pulse of the current time. By taking stock of these issues, I hope stakeholders in the arts research and arts funding community can work towards a more inclusive future for the arts in India.

As I now conclude this project spread over three months, I also find it germane to add a final reflection to the report. This is to address a two-pronged problem with my manner of reporting, as some have astutely observed during the review process of the report. One, there is a critique to be made that my approach subtly influences the discourse, and this is something I cannot entirely refute; and two, some might take issue with this approach, particularly in terms of accuracy, as it does not aim for a faithful reproduction of the interviews. To this end, I will add that I have consciously constructed the narrative so that the opening paragraph of each section establishes a premise for the discussions that follow. These premises have taken the form of historical overviews of the topic in question, delineations of current practices, or even broader conceptual reflections. Thus, while some of the quotes may appear to be extracted from their immediate conversational context, their inclusion serves a larger purpose. They are meant not just to continue the dialogue but to offer moments of departure from the premises laid out earlier—expanding the conversation into a more flexible understanding of the time we inhabit and its many implications. My goal here, therefore, has been to come close to capturing the intricacies that have been layering the discourse. While this became obvious to me as I went from one interview to another, while writing I found it best to transcend the immediacy of the conversation to make space for the conversations that follow; to me this reveals a richer, more complex picture shaped by privileging the very noise of the conversations, or their frenetic branching off into themes beyond that prompted by the questionnaire.

Draft Questionnaire for Shramona

1. How has the understanding of Arts Research changed over the last few years in India?
2. What are the different modes / methodologies of arts research that are being employed today? What are some new directions in the field of Arts Research?
3. How can we encourage practice-based/ practice-led research under arts research? What criteria can we adopt to encourage this?
4. Between public and private support for Arts Practice, what are the various areas that are currently funded? Are there visible trends in the proportional availability of funding for certain areas in arts research?
5. Are there areas/ thematics/ domains/ practices in the arts that have more potential for research or that need more attention? If yes, what would those be?
6. In the face of rapid technological advancements, the emergence of the digital, AI and the "non-human," what could be some of the challenges that arts research might have to grapple with? On the other hand, do these developments provide new opportunities for arts research?
7. What, according to you, could be the reason for the existing gap between art practice and artistic discourse in the country?

8. Are there major differences in how funding bodies operate, in terms of setting eligibility criteria, evaluation processes or modes of soliciting applications for arts research? What are some significant gaps in Arts funding in the country?
9. Are there factors such as an artist's age and/or politics, the medium adopted, or nature of their practice that negatively impact the likelihood of attracting funding? Conversely, are there certain privileges of language, city living, or educational background that help in accessing funding?
10. How do you think that the Arts Research in the smaller cities and towns in the local context inform/question the dominant narratives and the existing research from the metros?
11. Apart from financial aid, what other ways can a funder help your project? What are your expectations from a funder like IFA?
12. Often, in scholarly research, objectivity is taken to be sacrosanct, which leads to a certain kind of attitude towards the field. What role, then, can Arts Research play in blurring the subject-object divide that is often taken as a starting point of "good" research? In other words, is there a way that Arts Research could facilitate a foregrounding of/ challenging the researcher, their emotional registers and values?
13. What are the challenges faced/methodologies developed by researchers working in Indian language contexts? What could be the kinds of research that can emerge from unique language sensibilities? What do you think is the relationship between the act of translation and research?
14. How can researchers become part of the art economy and infrastructure rather than only being on the receiving end of it? Conversely, how can funders be more engaged with research and discourse around the arts in the country?