



Do Local Ecologies Shape Artists' Aesthetic and Professional Decisions? A Qualitative Exploration in the Indian Context

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Abstract

The Indian art ecosystem is rich and diverse, where Indian artists are strongly shaped by institutions, markets, historical background, and local cultures. In this context, this exploratory qualitative study proposes that local ecologies – institutional culture, market conditions, historical-artistic inheritance, and material environment – influence artists' aesthetic preferences and professional orientations in distinct ways in Baroda and Kolkata. To do so, it draws on thematic analysis of transcripts from semi-structured interviews conducted with art students, emerging artists, and professionals from both hubs and field observations. Key findings suggest distinctive differences in the approaches of artists between these two places. Baroda is marked by a stronger market and financial confidence, which supports art practice as a professional career, and institutional encouragement for greater freedom in terms of concept, medium, and techniques. Kolkata, on the other hand, indicated financial uncertainty and career diversion for artists. At Kolkata, more homogeneous and restrained artistic trend is identified, with artists appearing less experimental. The influence of Bengal's historical background, such as the traditional preference for mediums or techniques, continues. However, artists from both hubs express strong sense of autonomy in their approach to subject matter and view art-making as a journey of research and self-growth. Findings indicate that local ecologies strongly influence artists' aesthetic and professional choices. This has implications for better policies and revitalized institutional approaches to support regional art ecosystems.

Keywords: Aesthetic preferences; Professional choice; Indian art ecosystem; Local ecology; Regional variation

1. Introduction

Creativity or artistic production does not emerge in isolation. Art practice is context-dependent, and it is significantly influenced by various local factors, such as environments, cultural or historical backgrounds, institutional practices, and the market dynamics of a particular region. To understand their influence on practising artists, this paper uses the term “local ecologies” as an operational concept. This usage does not draw on a single established term from any specific art theory; rather, it is influenced by broader sociological approaches that understand art as emerging through networks of cooperation and through the wider social

conditions of cultural production (Becker, 2008; Bourdieu, 1993). Hence, artists' aesthetic and professional decisions are considered here as practices shaped by the local conditions that enable, constrain, and sustain artistic work rather than as arbitrary individual choices.

Given the diverse cultures of India, which include distinct environments; cultural or historical backgrounds; institutions; climates; and economic factors that directly influence material selection, techniques, subject matter, professional sustainability, or career trajectory, this study aims to explore how local ecological conditions influence artists' aesthetic and professional decisions, with a special focus on two art hubs – Kolkata and Baroda. Drawing on qualitative insights and understandings through interviews with three types of artists (students, emerging artists, and professional artists), this study investigates how local ecological factors influence the possibilities and limitations of art practices that may shape artists' aesthetic and professional choices.

By foregrounding local ecology as a critical factor in artistic production, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of context-driven aesthetics and expands the discourse on the intersections of environment and art practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Shift of Indian Art Market

The contemporary art field in India is shaped not only by individual creativity but also by the factors of institutions, markets, historical background, and social context. While art collection has played a significant role in promoting art in India and has evolved through the ages from royal and religious patronage to a globalised market system, there was almost no market for contemporary art in India before the early 1990s, at least not in the Western sense. However, from the beginning, Indian art was deeply shaped by cultural identity and social context (Sooudi, 2012; Mehta, 2024). The scenario shifted after the political and economic reforms, when India became a prominent participant in the global art market. The economic liberalisation of the 1990s and the emergence of middle- and elite-class buyers facilitated the substantial rise of the contemporary art market, reflected in both sales volume and pricing for Indian artists, where Delhi and Mumbai emerged as important hubs of artistic endeavour (Robertson, 2011; Kraeussl & Logher, 2010; Vermeyleylen, 2015). In recent years, Indian art has also gained recognition internationally through museum shows, biennials, and art fairs. International auction houses, such as Sotheby's and Christie's, played a crucial role in legitimising and globalising Indian modernist art, while domestic auction houses, such as SaffronArt and Osian, have driven the secondary market. The Indian art scene has thus expanded through globalisation and digitisation in both physical and digital contexts. Although the market has gone through many ups and downs because of the lack of government support, regulation, and institutional funding, private initiatives such as new museums, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, and the India Art Fair have helped improve its infrastructure and strengthen its place in the global art ecosystem (Vermeyleylen, 2015; Kanzaki Sooudi, 2022). The art field in India is therefore shaped by multiple social, institutional, and market forces that often influence the aesthetic choices and professional decisions of artists.

2.2 The Influence of Ecosystem on Creative Artists

Artistic production is often shaped by local ecosystems that include clusters, institutions, networks, etc. Studies showed that creativity is not purely individual; rather, it is organised, structured, and managed within a framework of cultural industries, such as institutions, networks, and market systems. A dual framework of economic and cultural value is needed for the artworks to operate (Markusen, 2006; Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2002; Throsby, 2001). Artistic production is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural contexts of a certain place and is produced

through cooperation. Artworks may be understood as products within a particular field of social relations. A network of suppliers of materials, distributors of artworks, fellow artists, critics, theorists, and audiences all play significant roles together in the realm of creating artists; it is not simply a matter of isolated individual creativity (Bourdieu, 1983; Becker, 1984). Apart from this, studies have shown that art practices of a particular place are deeply shaped by local ecology. Like artists in other countries, artists in India are inspired by ecological, cultural, and historical factors and create artworks by engaging with their particular environments. Traditional art forms can include diverse community groups and reflect regional, social, and cultural identities (Pandey, 2020; Ekanayaka, 2025). Folk art does not merely serve as an aesthetic expression but also acts as a vital cultural document that records myths, rituals, festivals, agricultural cycles, and social hierarchies of a particular space. Each region develops distinct styles, reflecting its unique ecology, language, and belief systems. The subject matter as well as the medium get influenced by this regional essence. Thus, folk art has considerable influence on contemporary art practices by bridging community tradition and cultural heritage with contemporary art through motifs, themes, and aesthetic parameters (Pandey, 2020; Egide, 2024; Ekanayaka, 2025). Besides this, institutional practice builds the framework of artistic style by providing resources, support, and guidelines that shape the creative process and influence the direction of artistic expression (Kumar, 1997; Sheikh, 1997; Guha-Thakurta, 1992). Thus, the environment, including its social, religious, cultural, institutional, and material dimensions, affects the practice of an artist.

While the concept of ecologies of practice in the art field may be well-established outside of India, it remains under-explored within the country. The notion of ecologies of practice has been used to show how artistic practice is embedded in a complex system of institutional and professional environments and even of socio-cultural, historical, or regional backgrounds—these all help in shaping the professional identity and decision-making of an artist.

2.3 Creative Clusters and Local Ecologies in India

Research has demonstrated a complex relationship between artists and urban growth. Generally, artists cluster in cities through artist-built infrastructures such as affordable studios, peer networks, art schools, and cultural institutions, which play a significant role in constituting a functioning art world (Markusen, 2006). Cultural and creative productions are concentrated in a particular geographic location and these become clusters which shape creativity, production and economic development gradually (Jordan et al., 2023; Chapain & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2020; Saha & Sen, 2016). In the Indian context, these creative industries are shaped by highly diverse cultural and informal economics which are influenced by regional histories, institutional frameworks, and socio-cultural networks. In India, cultural production cannot be shaped by a singular institutional model since artistic and cultural activities are dispersed across multiple regional and socio-economic contexts, and it is different from the Western industrial models because of its historical background, cultural diversity, informal economy, and uneven economic development. Still, a large population of Indian youth are connected to this cultural production. But, these creative clusters are not static because of technological changes, evolving consumer preferences, new artistic practices, and mobility of creative workers (Banks, 2007; Saha & Sen, 2016). Studies suggest that there are numerous creative practitioners who work within precarious and informal labour conditions that lack stable incomes, strong collaborations and equal access to resources that shape cultural production. (Jordan et al., 2023). Such perspectives play significant roles while it comes to understand the differences between these two regional artistic centres such as Baroda and Kolkata, where art practice does not solely depend on one's creativity but on a network or cluster that connects institutional cultures, artistic communities, art spaces and broader socio-cultural environments.

Creative industries tend to make clusters like Kolkata which help in fostering innovation, knowledge exchange, and artistic development while shaping the cultural identity of this particular place (Saha & Sen, 2016). Unlike Kolkata, Baroda's cluster is mainly centred around the Faculty of Fine Arts, shared studios, artists-led spaces, cross-disciplinary discussions, and informal "*addas*" where ideas circulate freely. This cluster has been rooted in over a century of state-sponsored cultural and educational investment by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwas III, whose efforts had a significant role in reforming Baroda as a cultural capital (MoMA, 2025; Vaidya, 2013).

2.4 Creative Labour and Artistic Practice

Artistic practice is shaped by the material and social conditions in which artists live and work – conditions that are at once economic, institutional, and relational. Studies on creative labour have shown that artistic work is characterised by layered forms of precarity, such as income instability, project-based time, spatial displacement, and the difficulty of separating self from work when work is figured as self-expression (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Menger, 2015). The concept of the 'social factory' claims that creative workers produce not only objects but also affects, relationships, and ways of life – forms of value that are socially generated yet often privately extracted (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Yet these accounts gesture towards something broader than precarity alone. Gill and Pratt's framework implies that artistic work is sustained through relational infrastructures of collaboration and circulation, while Menger shows that artists navigate labour markets through institutional positioning—access to training, reputation networks, and market intermediaries, such as galleries and curators (Menger, 2015). This helps clarify why precarity alone cannot explain the reasons behind artists' perseverance.

Artistic work in media and cultural industries of India is often performed by precarious labour that can be described as highly flexible but actually insecure, informal and marked by instability, low bargaining power, and weak legal protection. Precarity has long been inextricably connected to the artistic labour and recent studies claimed that it is becoming increasingly widespread and deeply embedded within the creative profession. It is explicitly said that visual artists often experience precarity through fragmented career paths and uneven access to opportunities (Vasanthi, 2023; Serafini & Banks, 2020). Studies suggest that cultural labour in India is not merely about creative expression; rather it extends beyond that and involves a complex system of social and economic realities. Although artists, cultural performers or creative workers play a significant role in cultural production, their labour and effort often remain under-recognised within the dominant economic and institutional framework (Singh, 2013). In Indian art scenario, where artistic creativity often goes through informal economies and regional art ecosystems, such concerns become significant for a better understanding the realities of artists and creative practitioners.

However, Banks (2006) explains the concept of the moral economy of cultural work, arguing that artists sustain commitment to uncertain labour through shared ethical norms, reciprocity, and informal solidarity – points that market rationality cannot fully account for. Banks (2007) extends this further, showing that cultural workers are sustained by the moral fabric of their communities, where mentorship, peer support, and collective values constitute an informal institutional life that sits alongside – and often compensates for – the failures of formal markets and state support. Informal networks of mentorship, studio visits, peer critique, and collective exhibition thus function not as incidental background but as structuring conditions of artistic life.

Together, these accounts suggest that precarity is not simply an economic condition but one that is actively negotiated through institutional access, market positioning, and the strength or fragility of relational ties within specific creative communities. This theoretical framework

underscores that artistic labour is shaped not only by individual creativity but also by social relations and institutional situations within local contexts. However, the ways in which the precarity of an artist and moral economies are experienced may vary across different artistic environments or art ecologies. To get a better understanding of how these dynamics operate in specific contexts, this study focuses on two major art hubs in India, such as Kolkata and Baroda.

2.5 Kolkata and Baroda: Major Art Hubs of India

This study has considered two major art hubs: Kolkata and Baroda. Kolkata, situated in the eastern part of India, is famous for its art and culture. The Bengal School, which emerged there, made an immense contribution to shaping modern Indian artistic identity through nationalism. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in colonial Bengal, a distinct form of Indian art was consciously formed through the rejection of Western academic realism (Mitter, 1994; Guha-Thakurta, 1992). Institutions such as Santiniketan, located near Kolkata, and other art institutes significantly shaped modern Indian art and continue to reflect the influence of local culture, environment, and education (Kumar, 1997). On the other hand, Baroda lies in the western region of India. Its emergence and development, particularly through the Faculty of Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University, drastically changed the scenario of contemporary art in India. The critical and experimental art culture of this institution brought Baroda forward as one of the major art hubs of India. Baroda has established itself as one of the important post-independence centers of modern Indian art, where artists have engaged with modernity, identity, and everyday life through a new artistic language (Sheikh, 1997; Brown, 2009). Thus, these two locations represent geographically and historically contrasting contexts, while both sustain rich artistic cultures.

While existing studies have explored Indian art within broader historical, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts, a significant gap remains in understanding how local ecological conditions shape artists' aesthetic choices and professional trajectories in the contemporary Indian art context. This study addresses that gap by examining how local ecologies influence artists' aesthetic and professional decisions, with a comparative focus on Baroda and Kolkata.

3. Gap

While existing studies have explored Indian art within broader historical, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts, less attention has been paid to how local ecological conditions shape artists' aesthetic choices and professional trajectories in contemporary Indian art.

4. Research Objective

This study aims to examine how local ecological factors shape artists' aesthetic and professional decisions in the contemporary art field of India, with a focus on Baroda and Kolkata.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to examine the relationship between local ecologies and artists' aesthetic and professional decisions in the Indian context. The primary methods used for this study are semi-structured interviews with artists and observation.

5.2 Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a sample of artists from both locations. The participants included 16 artists from Baroda, including 5 males and 11 females, aged between 23 and 52 years (mean age = 32.18), where 19% are students (three females), 50% are emerging

artists (five females, three males) and the remaining 31% (three females, two males) are professional artists. On the other hand, 15 participants were taken from Kolkata, including 11 males and 4 females, aged between 23 and 65 years (mean age = 39.06), with 20% students (one male, two females), 40% emerging artists (six males), and 40% professional artists (four males, two females). This study follows a few inclusion criteria, such that only those individuals with at least four years of experience in the art field will be chosen for it. Mostly they have academic backgrounds in art. However, self-taught artists can be taken seriously if they continue their practice and professionally choose the art fields. Regardless of whether they are students or self-taught, they should all be continuing their practices and participating in various exhibitions on a daily basis. They were later categorised into three groups based on their designations and expertise: art students, emerging artists/practitioners, and professional practitioners. To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned alpha numerals such as A1, A2, A3, and so on.

5.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Various art spaces, including art colleges, art institutes, exhibition halls, galleries, and open art spaces, were visited in both locations, Baroda and Kolkata. After visiting those places, catalogues of these exhibitions were also collected, and informal interactions with the artists occurred purposefully. It is important to be mentioned that these artists were chosen from the art spaces without consideration of their age and gender. Although efforts were made to include the participants of different gender, the final sample showed a higher proportion of female artists in Baroda and a higher proportion of male artists in Kolkata. However, this distribution was not intentional and the final sample emerged from the availability and accessibility of the participants during the fieldwork. Afterwards, an email or text message was sent to a few artists explaining the nature and purpose of the study. In Baroda, sites such as the final display of students at the *Maharaja Sayajirao University*, *Vis-a-Vis Studio*, and *Space Studio* were visited, and interactions with the artists were conducted. Similarly, in Kolkata, visits were made to different exhibition spaces such as the *Academy of Fine Arts*, *Gaganendra Shilpa Pradarashashala*, and *Birla Academy of Art and Culture*. Art institutes such as *Rabindra Bharati University*, *Government College of Art & Craft*, and the *Indian College of Arts & Draftsmanship* were also covered. Of more than 40 artists who were contacted, 37 responded to the mail and the text messages, expressing their consent. The study followed institutional ethical norms for interview-based research; participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, identities were anonymised, and participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Ethics approval was later taken from the Institute for the study.

A total number of 31 interviews, which consisted of 16 from Baroda and 15 from Kolkata, were conducted. Interviews were conducted until recurring patterns and themes began to emerge repeatedly across the participants; there were no significantly new insights, indicating saturation of themes. During the coding process, saturation was identified, and the additional interviews only reinforced existing themes. At this point, it was considered that the data were sufficiently rich and diverse to address the research objective. Therefore, further data collection was considered unnecessary.

5.4 Interview

The semi-structured interview schedule was primarily developed based on existing literature and further fine-tuned through consultations with practicing artists and preliminary interactions with respondents to ensure sensitivity toward participants. All interviews were conducted in person to ensure the comfort level of the participants and to allow for a more effective probing and deeper engagement during the interaction. The interviews focused on a set of interrelated

themes related to both aesthetic practice and professional choices. These included the inspiration behind subject matter ("Could you please tell me about the conceptual framework of your practice?", "What inspires you to paint them?" and "What is the philosophy which drives your work?") and choice of medium, perceptions of artistic freedom ("Does your work give you a sense of satisfaction?"; "Do market needs affect your creative process?"); market trends and market influence ("What kinds of paintings get sold today or have most demand?"); the role of a supportive environment; the relationship between the artist and the artwork; the creative process; satisfaction derived from practice; the relationship between artwork and society; hindrances affecting artistic work; and the role of art in self-growth. The interview consisted of 17 semi-structured questions and typically lasted between 35 and 50 minutes.

5.5 Thematic Analysis

Data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to uncover relevant themes from the obtained data. The steps of thematic analysis mentioned by Braun and Clarke were applied to the transcribed data. First, to get familiarised with the data, the transcripts were read and the audio records were reviewed multiple times, while keeping the research objective in mind. Following these steps, the first-level coding was performed while ensuring that the codes are closely grounded in the observed data. Following the second step of generating initial codes, all these codes were refined by a higher level of coding where the deeper meaning underlying the initial codes was explored. In the next step, themes were identified. These themes were developed around various ecological factors, aesthetics, subject matter, medium, and decision-making. To review the themes, the codes were compared both within and across participants to identify themes and sub-themes to encapsulate the broad meanings conveyed by the data. Afterwards, these themes were named according to the essence they carried. Finally, the themes were arranged and the report of results was prepared as the final step (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To strengthen analytic credibility, the first author conducted initial coding and theme development, while the second author independently reviewed selected transcripts, codes, and emergent themes. Differences were resolved through discussion until interpretive agreement was reached. This procedure was used as researcher triangulation rather than as a statistical inter-coder reliability measure.

5.6 Reflexivity

The researchers, visual art researchers and artists, have been deeply involved with art practice academically and professionally. This long-term engagement in the art field has developed and shaped the understanding of the researchers in terms of aesthetics, artistic processes, and socio-cultural dimensions of art practice. Familiarity with artistic environments, institutional spaces, and relationships between artists and buyers facilitated access for the participants and enabled more nuanced and context-sensitive interactions with them during interviews. This positionality may have affected how these questions were framed, how the responses were interpreted, and how the participants and data were engaged with. To address these issues, conscious efforts were made to remain reflexive throughout the process by maintaining a critical awareness of assumptions and allowing the participants' perspectives to emerge independently in a non-judgemental environment. Attention was carefully given rather than imposing preconceived notions throughout the research process. Thus, having a background as an artist contributed a more profound understanding of the art field; reflexivity was continuously practised to reduce the bias and enhance the credibility and transparency of the study.

6. Findings

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes with Illustrative Interview Excerpts and Participant Frequency (number of participants endorsing the sub-theme) across Study Locations

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative excerpt	Kolkata frequency	Baroda frequency
Sources of subject matter	Daily life, surroundings, and nature	"The surroundings of my village where I spent my childhood keep changing, and now I cannot recognise them." — A3; "Daily life where both human and nature reside together." — A1.	8	13
	Religion, iconography, and rituals	"I have been inspired by Shakta and Vaishnava culture..." — A5; "Bengali life, household things, religion, prayer... culture provoke me." — A1.	3	0
	Emotions and mental conflict	"The feelings of conflict are different; it cannot be expressed completely." — A2; "I try to portray human emotions." — A4.	2	3
	Society and socio-political concerns	"Everywhere, every time what we perceive... in society, in politics... social changes... I document." — A7; "From a humanitarian ground I start working... for existential crisis, gender discrimination..." — A18	2	0
Medium	Oil colour	"Initially I worked with oil colours." — A1; "I can handle oil better." — A17.	1	6
	Acrylic colour	"Sometimes with acrylic." — A11; "Acrylic is very forgiving." — A7.	5	5
	Watercolour and ink	"To bring the flavour, watercolour is needed." — A5; "Sometimes with ink, but mostly with watercolour." — A12	7	3
	Mixed media	"I don't have any restriction when it comes to choosing medium; if it demands, I add soil, sand, and charcoal together..." — A3.	2	1
Market influence	Attention to market demands	"We avoid painting anything related to socio-political issue, so that people can hang those in their house." — A17; "We keep an eye on which kind of paintings of seniors are getting sold." — A28, A29.	2	11
	Artistic vision beyond market demand	"I never follow what market needs." — A7; "My commercial paintings are different... these are not my work of art." — A1.	13	5
Career and financial sustainability	Confidence in art practice due to financial sustainability	"Students rent apartment and continue their practices after passing out from the college." — A16; "Now I consider myself as an emerging artist... I will continue." — A19.	6	13
	Uncertainty about art practice as career	"After college, I will look for a teaching job." — A10; "Sometimes I have to lend money from others." — A6.	9	3
Constraints on practice	Lack of market and financial support	"For financial constraints, I am not able to work at the scale I want." — A4; "Not enough money I have." — A6.	7	0
	Time constraints due to institutional pressure	"It is not like that I do not want to work, I want but I cannot... due to shortage of time." — A1; "For display I worked so hard... I really don't like the pressure I got from my institution." — A16.	3	11
	Medium shaped by durability and climate	"In Kolkata, it gets attacked by fungus, if you will not take care of this." — A8; "My first priority is oil. However, I work with acrylic since it is durable." — A4.	8	0

Note. Frequencies indicate the number of participants who endorsed or reflected each sub-theme in their interviews. Since this is a qualitative thematic table, the frequencies should be read as descriptive indicators rather than statistically generalisable measures.

6.1 Surroundings as a Source of Subject Matter

When it comes to subject matter, artists from both locations seem to be strongly inclined towards their surroundings. These may include childhood memories, religious practices, literature, folk art, and everyday life. Artist A5 from Kolkata mentioned in his interview that initially he started with "folklore, popular stories which give various birth to visual

representations" and began his research by finding folk elements such as "doll" and "ornaments", which led him to mythological figures such as "Goddess Kali" and ancient Hindu texts such as the "*Puranas*," "*Adi Purana*," and "*Markandeya Purana*". Finally, he arrived at his present subject, which takes the form of simplified iconography, symbols, and their analysis through visuals. Another artist, A1, said that he depicts his simple life through "Bengali lifestyle, urban life, daily rituals, small family life and religion", through which he portrays the struggles of daily life in a positive way.

Artist A2 said that he constantly tries to express the conflict of his mind but feels that he fails since "the feelings of conflict are different; it cannot be expressed completely." Artists such as A3, A4, A7, A11, A16, A21, A22, A25, A30, and A31 mainly spoke about urbanisation, which affected them deeply, and some of them had personally witnessed its cruelty towards nature. Artist A3 mentioned that "the surroundings of my village where I spent my childhood keep changing, and now I cannot recognise them." Female artists such as A20 and A18 spoke about existential crisis and the challenges faced in society. Artist A18 said, "meat or flesh presented in a female dress in my paintings means there is no difference between a female body and meat... in my childhood I faced issues, but after coming to the cities for higher education, the abusive encounters became frequent."

Thus, almost all the artists spoke about their experiences, mental states, environments, and surroundings when discussing the selection of subject matter for their paintings.

6.2 Material Choice and Environmental Conditions

The environment of a particular place can significantly mould an artist's choice of material or medium. When certain media or materials are not supported by the climate, artists are often compelled to choose alternatives to sustain their art practice. For instance, working with oil colours is very challenging in Kolkata due to its humid climate. Poor preservation of oil paintings can lead to damage from fungal growth. As a result, most artists prefer alternative media such as acrylic, which offers a visual finish similar to oil painting while being more resistant to fungal attack due to its synthetic composition. A1 mentioned, "...Earlier in my college days, I made a few oil paintings, but these are all damaged now. After joining this institution, I learned how to protect my paintings from damage. Some paintings I have donated are in the Belur Math, where these are kept in a room featured with an air conditioner that maintains a controlled environment." Other than this, artists in Kolkata choose to practise mostly with watercolour, ink, or mixed media. However, in Baroda, the relatively dry weather supports the medium, and artists allow themselves to work with oil colours. A8 from Baroda mentioned that she loves the medium so much that "...I would love to continue my practice with oil colour, even if I had to explore various mediums."

6.3 Impact of Market Dynamics on Artistic Practice

Findings suggest that artists from Baroda, including final-year BFA and MFA students, have greater opportunity to sell their works. In an interview, A16 estimated that around 60% of works could be sold during final displays. It has been observed that buyers from nearby metropolitan centres such as Mumbai and Delhi, as well as from other parts of Gujarat, play a significant role in facilitating the buying and selling process in a very dynamic manner. In contrast, students in Kolkata face job insecurity, except for a very few, after passing out from institutions because of a less commercialised art market. A4 from Kolkata said, "Rich people are taking decorative paintings for their living room for maintaining their status. But there are no human emotions found. If a certain kind of painting gets sold, artists repeat this style, but I don't. I want to express my own emotions as well as those of others."

In Baroda, where the market was perceived to be stronger, this confidence enables artists to continue their passion, leading to sustainability in their art practice. In contrast, the less commercialised art market in Kolkata drives artists to choose another way to earn or to leave the city and move to more market-enriched locations.

6.4 Professional Sustainability

Findings from this study showed that students from Baroda gained the confidence to continue pursuing their passions after selling their work. A16 said that most of the students are able to take a rented apartment or a studio and continue their practice afterwards. It has also been observed that a few artists from Kolkata have shifted to Baroda as practitioners, although Baroda is a comparatively smaller place with only a few significant art spaces. A22, A17, and A18 shifted from Kolkata to Baroda because they believed that they would have better opportunity and exposure there. A16 from Baroda mentioned that “there is absolutely no market in Kolkata”. This observation is supported by most of the artists in Kolkata, while a few believe that a market does exist, although it is not highly commercialised.

Artists in Kolkata, especially students, appear to demonstrate comparatively lower professional confidence and frequently seek alternative income sources. A8 is a hobby artist who makes artwork very well but left the art world as a profession at an early stage. He chose another field of work for survival purposes. Even when artists in Kolkata remain within the broader art domain, they often reflect a shift away from sustained, passion-driven artistic practice. In Baroda, art practice is nurtured through a few key spaces that offer emerging artists opportunities for experimentation and residencies, while Kolkata has a strong foundation of art institutions but provides relatively weaker market support, which seems to limit professional sustainability. As a result, artists often find more favourable conditions for sustained practice in Baroda.

6.5 Impact of Institutional Practice on Artistic Choice

It was noticed that market trends have a significant influence at Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, apart from the other art spaces. Interviews with artists such as A28 and A29 revealed that junior students draw inspiration from the types of paintings that seniors sell in the final display. Thus, individually, some of them become influenced by their style, which reflects the market trends and the successful techniques used by seniors in their final display. Artists in Kolkata primarily draw inspiration from the Bengal School, folk art, and their chosen medium. At the same time, they remain truthful to their artworks, reflecting their personal experiences and cultural heritage in their creative expressions. Several factors influence the medium and subject matter. In Kolkata, it has been observed that art practices are shaped to some extent by specific institutions.

In Baroda, however, there is a wide range of variation in medium, subject matter, and colour application, which suggests that institutions promote conceptual independence instead of directing students towards a specific style. In Kolkata, by contrast, distinct stylistic tendencies associated with individual art colleges are visibly noticeable. This indicates that the institutional environment has a major impact on determining artistic choices. Additionally, artists in Baroda prefer representational painting, with oil being a very popular medium, while artists in Kolkata tend to use acrylic, ink, or watercolour, often focusing on deeper conceptual subject matter. This indicates that the environment in Baroda is conducive to oil painting, whereas the humid weather in Kolkata hinders its use as a medium. Representational painting in Baroda may also reflect the influence of royal patronage practices, which historically supported traditional art forms and encouraged artists to focus on representational techniques that align with cultural heritage. Only a very few artists are inclined towards pure abstraction.

Artists in Baroda appear to experience greater freedom of expression, with noticeable variation in subject matter and medium and no dominant stylistic trend. Many experiments are bold, producing colourful, largely figurative paintings.

6.6 Influence of Buyers and Buyers' Preferences

According to students and emerging artists in Baroda, buyers often prefer visually appealing works that are “eye-catching” and “easily understandable.” Such paintings tend to lead to quick purchase decisions, sometimes without closely engaging with the artist’s statement, though brief conversations with the artist may occur. In Kolkata, however, selling artwork appears to be more challenging. Even when works are sold through established galleries, they typically pass through a more detailed curatorial process. Consequently, artists perceive the selling process to be comparatively easier in Baroda than in Kolkata.

Additionally, artists in Baroda reported that they tend to avoid overtly political themes in order to enhance marketability, instead focusing on distinctive approaches to medium and technique that may attract buyers. In contrast, artists in Kolkata are more frequently observed engaging with socio-political issues, often addressing them in implicit or nuanced ways within their work. A28 from Baroda expressed her concerns regarding the future direction of art in India by saying, “...in India, I think they might believe that figurative paintings have less value than abstract paintings, but it is wrong.” She further added, “Another direction consists of socio-political works, but it feels superficial; there is a division between reality and gallery culture.”

6.7 Effect of Curatorial Practice on Productivity

Artists from both cities report experiencing significant pressure to produce a large volume of work for exhibitions. While this demand can increase productivity, it may also reduce opportunities for introspection and deeper reflection on their practice. In some cases, artists feel compelled to adapt their work to curatorial expectations and continue producing in a particular style, even when it does not align with their personal artistic direction, which can lead to a conflict between their creative vision and the demands of the art market. A7 mentioned that “curation is good for the art field... they do research on artists for a long time and approach the artists according to their needs for exhibitions.” However, Baroda-based artist A16 expressed an opposing view by saying, “...There are very different kinds of galleries—some of the galleries never interfere with what artists are doing, like there are residencies and alternative art spaces, like KEMOLD, that give us space in Mumbai... But when you are simply working with galleries, selling your works, and you signed a contract with them for a longer period... 90% of artists (mid-career artists) have to produce a certain kind of work. It is not something that the gallery would say specifically, but they would choose something from your work only... colours from the colour palette, visual representation, or a kind of style.” She also mentioned that she knows many artists who work with complete freedom under very specific galleries.

7. Discussion

From the findings we understand that artistic practice emerges not only from individual creativity but also from the interactions of various factors. It is evident that the historical-artistic background shapes the present art practice, and it also gets reflected in the artworks of both places, such as Baroda and Kolkata. In Baroda, the prevalence of representational art, including portraits and depictions of flora and fauna, appears to reflect the legacy of court tradition associated with the royal family. The continued use of oil colour may also be linked to this historical influence. On the contrary, artistic practice in Kolkata is largely characterised by the use of watercolour, ink, and linear forms. This reflects the influence of the Bengal School,

which was significantly shaped by Bengal folk art and Japanese painting through cultural exchanges associated with the Tagore family.

At the same time, it is evident that institutions have a significant influence in structuring the artistic language of artists. When certain art colleges emphasise skill and medium, and others prioritise conceptual development, students tend to carry these distinct orientations into their long-term artistic practice. Becker (1984) contended that shared conventions, developed and maintained through training, materials, and institutional practice, govern the functioning of the art world. In Kolkata, distinct stylistic tendencies associated with particular institutions are more visibly noticeable, whereas in Baroda there appears to be greater variation in medium, subject matter, and colour application. While institutional actors like curators help artists structure their practice, stylistic approach, and career trajectory with visibility and productivity, a few factors may also constrain artistic work. Artists working under curator-run galleries may lose a degree of freedom, since curators often act as major actors of the art market, functioning as gatekeepers, interpreters, and selectors. Only a few galleries allow artists to work independently. Artists sometimes feel pressured in terms of colour palette, visual representation, and stylistic approach, especially when particular kinds of works are seen as more saleable. Bourdieu (1993) viewed the cultural field as a conflict in which artists, curators, galleries and collectors compete to decide what is accepted as valid art. Artists' need to alter their palette, subject matter or style to fulfil curatorial or market demands substantiates Bourdieu's point about the tension between the logic of art for art's sake and the logic of economic demand. This raises an important question regarding the balance between authenticity and adaptability. Very few curators offer artists complete freedom to work independently; most artists experience pressure to follow specific curatorial directions, which may result in greater productivity but less authenticity. This sometimes creates a conflict between personal choice and adaptability.

It is noteworthy that the selling rate in Baroda was perceived to be comparatively higher than in Kolkata, and buyers' preferences appear to play an important role in shaping what becomes marketable. Due to the presence of influential buyers in Baroda, the market appears stronger. These differences in market dynamics echo Bourdieu's (1993) idea of symbolic and economic value. In Baroda, they often choose paintings that are visually appealing and pleasant. Artists, especially students, shared that they sometimes refrain from political issues in order to enhance the possibility of sale. They make paintings that are visually appealing so that they can easily catch the attention of buyers. This helps in achieving immediate commercial success. While in Kolkata, artists appear to operate in the autonomous pole of the field by prioritising artistic integrity over commercial return since artists in Kolkata are comparatively more inclined to express their views on socio-political issues, and paintings are mostly sold through exhibitions, often in much smaller numbers. This may be one of the reasons why the selling rate appears lower in Kolkata since buyers often want to hang these paintings on office walls or in their personal spaces as décor.

Apart from this, natural environments or conditions such as climate also play a significant role in shaping the art practices. Ecological conditions create both opportunities and constraints. It may also influence medium choice. In more humid places, artists often leave oil colours despite their preference for the medium, since it does not support durability in the same way. Thus, local ecologies shape not only opportunities but also limitations in artistic practice.

8. Limitation & Future Direction

This study acknowledges a few limitations. First, these claims about the sales rate and market strength of both locations in this research are primarily based on the artists' self-reported interviews. These accounts might provide valuable insights and understanding of the markets,

but these are inherently subjective. To strengthen the vitality of such claims, future study will be focused on the triangulation of self-reported data with secondary data that might be obtained from gallery sales records, auction house data, institutional archives, and other records. Such an approach would provide a more robust and stronger understanding of market dynamics, which will be empirically grounded. Second, the study is geographically limited to Baroda and Kolkata. Although Baroda and Kolkata are significant art hubs in India and the study provides useful information about the Indian art field, it is important to note that India has many more art hubs. Therefore, the findings cannot be completely generalized to other regional artistic ecologies in India. Third, the sampling strategy was purposive and based on the availability and accessibility of the artists in the selected art spaces that include art colleges, art institutes, exhibition halls, galleries, and open art spaces. Participants were chosen without initial consideration of age or gender. Efforts were made to include participants of different genders. But the final sample emerged with more females in Baroda and more males in Kolkata. This may be vaguely explained against the perception that Baroda is a safer and more secure for art practice, compared to Kolkata. This possibility remains speculative and requires a detailed study. By addressing these limitations and proceeding with this direction in future studies, a more nuanced, empirically grounded, and deeper understanding of how local ecologies shape artistic practice and their professional trajectories in the contemporary Indian art field can be provided.

9. Conclusion

This comparative study between Baroda and Kolkata suggests that art practice in India is deeply influenced by local ecological factors, including market dynamics, historical and cultural backgrounds, institutional environments, and climate, which collectively shape artists' aesthetic and professional choices. Consequently, India's rich art ecosystem continues to develop with a wide range of diversity. The analysis reveals that local ecological factors do not simply influence artistic production on a surface level; rather, they shape the possibilities, limitations, and directions of artistic practice in a particular area. This study supports the view that artworks and artistic choices do not form in isolation. Rather, we can understand them as products of cooperation and social relations, influenced by various local ecological factors. External influences shape how artists develop their aesthetic preferences and career trajectories. Although many ecological factors are conducive to the art field, a few raise concerns that require attention in order to ensure the long-term sustainability and well-being of the art ecosystem.

Artworks are primarily sold through curated exhibitions, while in others, affluent buyers, often businesspeople. It is important to note that such buyers may not always possess a deep knowledge or understanding of art or aesthetics. This may raise concerns for the art field if such trends continue over a long period. In regions with a less commercialised market and a relatively smaller base of connoisseurs, artworks often remain unsold even when their quality is comparable. Such market dynamics may marginalise critical and conceptually driven practices and may affect artistic authenticity and depth. If buyers engage with art through a deeper conceptual understanding, this influence may become less problematic. Not only buyers, but artists themselves may also need greater clarity regarding their future direction before entering this field professionally. Additionally, the tension between curators and artists needs to be addressed through more constructive and transparent engagements, since both play significant roles within the art ecosystem, particularly in fostering collaboration and mutual understanding that can enhance the overall artistic landscape.

As the findings are based on two art hubs, they are not intended to be generalised across India, but they offer important insight into how local ecologies shape artistic practice in distinct

regional contexts. However, these findings have important policy implications for regional art ecosystems in India. Instead of a uniform policy framework, support should be geared to the specific institutional, market, and material contexts of different art hubs. Stronger market linkage, career mentoring, residencies, grants, and support may help artists sustain their practice more effectively. Greater coordination among institutions, curators, buyers, and artists may also contribute to a more balanced and supportive art ecosystem by facilitating collaboration, sharing resources, and creating opportunities for artists to showcase their work.

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