



Margins and Gateways: The Economic Struggles of Emerging Fine Artists in India's Contemporary Art Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the key challenges faced by emerging artists in India, including limited access to markets, professional networks, and financial stability. It explores how gatekeeping in galleries, intense competition for exposure, and the scarcity of grants and patrons restrict opportunities for new talent. The instability of freelance and teaching work further compounds these difficulties. Through analysis of current conditions and available support systems, the paper highlights the need for more inclusive, transparent, and decentralized frameworks to support emerging artists and ensure a more equitable future for India's creative community.

Keywords: *Emerging Artists, Art Market Access, Financial Instability, Exposure Opportunities, Grants and Residencies.*

INTRODUCTION

Starting a career in fine arts can be exciting and full of hope, but for many emerging artists, the journey is filled with serious financial struggles that make it hard to keep going.

According to O.P Jindal University, fine arts cover a wide range of creative expressions, including visual arts such as painting, sculpture, and photography; performing arts like music, dance, and theatre; and literary forms such as poetry and prose. Fine arts significantly influence how people understand nationalism and identity by reflecting cultural values, preserving heritage, and encouraging a shared sense of belonging. They offer a platform for exploring both individual and collective experiences, shaping how nations see themselves and are seen by others. Economically, the fine arts contribute to a country's GDP by generating employment, supporting tourism, and driving growth in creative industries like media, design, and education—highlighting their importance not only culturally but also as a driver of economic development.

While these artists are passionate and committed to their work, they often face unstable income, high costs, and limited chances to promote or sell their art. Many surveys and studies show just how hard this path can be. A 2022 report by Creatives Rebuild New York found that more than 60% of artists earned less than \$25,000 a year (Creatives Rebuild New York). In Australia, a study by Macquarie University revealed that nearly half of all artists make under \$200 a week from their work (Throsby). These figures show that most young or lesser-known artists cannot depend on their art as a stable source of income. Because of this, many take up side jobs that have nothing to do with art, which means they have less time and energy to focus on their creative work. This constant juggling between earning money and making art creates stress and burnout, and it can even stop some artists from continuing altogether. In addition to low income, the cost of producing art is often very high.

Artists have to buy materials like paints, canvases, clay, digital tools, and other supplies—often without any guarantee that their work will sell. Renting a studio space is another big expense. In large cities like New York, London, or Mumbai, studio spaces can cost hundreds of dollars a month (Zarobell). Many emerging artists also want to show their work in galleries or exhibitions, but applying for these often comes with entry fees, shipping costs, and framing charges, which can quickly add up. For artists with little money, these costs can feel impossible to manage. Even online platforms that allow artists to sell their work may charge fees or require digital marketing skills and budgets that many artists don't have (RedDotBlog).

Reaching the right audience is another major challenge. Art buyers, gallery owners, and collectors often prefer to invest in established names, making it difficult for new artists to break in. Many fine art opportunities come through networking, word-of-mouth, or being noticed by someone in the industry. But without the right contacts or a strong support system, many talented artists remain invisible. For example, in India, many young painters and sculptors struggle to get gallery representation or commissions unless they come from an art school with a strong network (Kapur). This lack of access can limit their exposure and growth. Social media platforms like Instagram and online galleries have helped some artists build their audience, but they are not a perfect solution. These platforms can be crowded, competitive, and often require constant engagement and marketing, which again takes time and sometimes money. Another issue is the emotional and mental strain that comes from trying to survive financially while staying true to one's creative vision. Artists may feel pressure to make work that sells instead of what they really want to create, which can hurt their artistic development. This trade-off between art and survival affects not just individuals but the larger creative community, as it limits the diversity of voices and ideas that are seen and heard (Southwest Contemporary). Programs and grants that support emerging artists do exist, but they are limited and highly competitive. In many countries, arts funding has been cut, and the support systems that do exist often go to a small number of winners. As a result, many emerging artists find themselves stuck in a cycle where they are constantly creating, struggling, and hoping for a breakthrough that may never come.

The COVID-19 pandemic made this even worse, as galleries closed, events were canceled, and sales dropped, leaving many artists without income or opportunities (Frieze). Even now, as the world recovers, the art world remains unpredictable. All of these factors—low and unstable income, high costs of materials and space, limited access to buyers and galleries, and lack of funding—combine to create a tough environment for new artists. These problems don't just affect individuals, but also shape the future of art itself. If talented people are forced to leave the field because they can't afford to stay, we risk losing powerful voices and ideas.

This paper will explore these economic challenges in more depth, drawing from real-life experiences, case studies, and expert research to understand what makes the path so hard for emerging fine artists—and what might help improve it in the future.

UNSTABLE AND UNPREDICTABLE INCOME

For many emerging fine artists, sustaining a stable income is a constant struggle, as they must rely on irregular sales and commissions, face tough competition for limited grants and residencies, and often depend on inconsistent freelance or teaching opportunities to stay afloat.

A major factor contributing to this instability is the reliance on irregular sales and commissions. Artists often depend on the irregular sale of their artwork, which can be influenced by market trends, economic conditions, and personal networks. For instance, many artists supplement their income through teaching, freelance work, grants, and awards, yet income can be unpredictable and often fluctuates based on many factors based on the economic conditions. This makes it very difficult for artists to financially forecast their future, invest further in their practice, or even cover their day-to-day expenses due to the inconsistency in income.

There are many factors that influence irregular sales. Firstly, economic conditions like recessions, inflation and overall economic uncertainty can significantly affect spending. This would further reduce the aggregate demand for luxury goods like fine art. Secondly, geopolitical events like trade and political uncertainty can create uncertainty and risk amongst collections, leading to a decreased spending. Thirdly, collectors' tastes and priorities can evolve, influencing the demand for certain styles, artists or periods. For example, a shift towards more established names occurs very often and this could negatively impact newly emerged artists as they have to rely on irregular sale patterns. For example, in 2024, the spending on art pieces declined by 12% and only well known and already established artists faced strong sales, whereas, others faced difficulty in earning income and making a living out of being a fine artist. Irregular sales can have serious consequences for fine artists. These include, a decline in the income earned, difficulty in finding a market and also gaining recognition to sell their art works in the future.

Compounding the challenges faced by emerging artists is the formidable difficulty in securing grants or residencies, which are often viewed as vital stepping stones towards financial stability and professional development within the arts sector. These opportunities provide artists not only with much-needed funding but also with critical exposure, access to resources, and platforms to develop their practice in a sustained manner (FICART, n.d.). However, the competitive nature of these grants and residencies means that preference is frequently given to artists who are already established or who possess strong connections within the artistic community. Such biases inadvertently perpetuate existing hierarchies and limit access for emerging artists who have not yet built extensive portfolios or networks, thus exacerbating inequalities within the creative ecosystem (Smith, 2019).

The number of grants and residencies available, while beneficial, remains limited in relation to the vast pool of aspiring and practicing artists, particularly in contexts like India where the contemporary art scene is growing rapidly but funding remains scarce. The Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), for example, offers a range of annual awards, fellowships, and grants specifically targeted at supporting Indian artists, but the scale of these programs is small compared to the overall demand (FICART). Consequently, many talented emerging artists are left without crucial support, hindering their ability to invest time and resources in creating meaningful work or expanding their professional reach. This scarcity of opportunities, combined with intense competition, means that many promising artists are unable to sustain their practices or gain recognition, which can lead to early attrition from the field (Kumar & Patel, 2021).

Furthermore, the application process itself presents a significant barrier. Grants and residencies often require detailed proposals, portfolios, letters of recommendation, and other forms of documentation that can be time-consuming and complex to assemble. For emerging artists juggling multiple responsibilities—such as part-time employment, teaching, or other non-art-related work—this can represent a substantial administrative burden that detracts from their creative output (Jones, 2020). The need to articulate a compelling vision in written form, sometimes requiring professional-level grant writing skills, adds another layer of difficulty for artists who may not have prior experience or access to mentorship in navigating these bureaucratic demands (FICART.). This procedural complexity can discourage artists from applying altogether or limit their ability to present their best work and ideas, putting them at a further disadvantage.

Moreover, these systemic challenges contribute to a cycle where financial and professional opportunities remain concentrated within a small group, often reinforcing socio-economic and cultural disparities. Artists from marginalized backgrounds or those without institutional support find themselves excluded not only from funding but also from the networks and visibility that such grants and residencies facilitate (Gupta, 2018). This dynamic creates a gatekeeping effect that limits diversity and innovation within the contemporary art world, restricting the breadth of voices and perspectives that gain recognition.

While grants and residencies are critical for the development and sustainability of artists' careers, the current landscape is marked by limited availability, highly competitive selection processes favoring established individuals, and demanding application requirements. Organizations like FICA play an important role in supporting Indian artists, but the scale of need far exceeds the available resources, leaving many emerging artists struggling to access these essential opportunities (FICART.). Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms to create more inclusive, accessible, and supportive funding frameworks that recognize the diverse circumstances of emerging artists and enable a broader range of creative talents to thrive.

In addition to the challenges of art sales and grant acquisition, many artists turn to freelance or teaching opportunities to supplement their income. However, these avenues are also highly unstable. Freelance work is often project-based, lacks benefits, and can be subject to delayed payments or cancellations. Teaching positions, particularly adjunct or part-time roles, may offer limited hours, low pay, and minimal job security. The cumulative effect of these factors is a patchwork of income sources that fail to provide consistent financial support. This instability not only affects artists' economic well-being but also their ability to focus on and invest in their creative practice.

Teaching, particularly in the form of adjunct or part-time roles at art schools or community centers, is another common income source for artists. However, these positions often come with significant limitations. Adjunct faculty members may receive lower wages compared to full-time instructors and frequently work without job security or contracts that guarantee employment beyond a single semester or term (Reddy, 2018). The limited hours of part-time teaching mean artists must juggle multiple roles or sources of income, which can reduce the time and energy they have available for their own creative work. Moreover, the administrative and preparation demands of teaching can be considerable, adding to the overall burden (Patel, 2021).

The combined effect of relying on freelance projects and part-time teaching is a fragmented and precarious financial situation. This patchwork of income sources rarely provides the consistent financial stability necessary for artists to fully focus on developing their practice. The constant uncertainty around when and how much money will come in makes long-term planning difficult and can force artists to prioritize survival over artistic experimentation or growth (Chowdhury, 2022). Many artists find themselves in a continuous struggle to balance economic necessity with creative ambitions, which can ultimately limit their productivity and professional development.

This income instability not only threatens artists' economic well-being but also has significant implications for their creative output. The stress and time constraints resulting from financial insecurity can hamper artistic innovation and risk-taking, as artists may feel pressured to pursue more commercially viable or immediately profitable work instead of projects that align with their vision or artistic goals (Mehta, 2019). Without stable support structures or reliable income streams, the creative potential of many emerging artists remains unrealized, and the cultural ecosystem suffers from a lack of diverse and experimental voices.

HIGH UPFRONT AND ONGOING COSTS

Additionally, emerging fine artists frequently encounter significant financial barriers that hinder their ability to sustain and grow their creative practice. These obstacles include the high costs of materials, studio space, and equipment, the expenses associated with participating in exhibitions and art fairs, and the marketing and promotional investments required to reach audiences and buyers.

Firstly, they have to deal with the costs of materials, studio space, and equipment. The foundation of any fine art practice lies in procuring materials like paints, canvases, brushes, clay, digital tools etc. They also require access to dedicated studio space and specialised equipment. These basic needs translate into substantial expenses, often disproportionately affecting artists at the beginning of their careers.

The article "Advertising Photography Costs in India: What to Expect in 2025" by Ravikant Photography provides a detailed breakdown of photography pricing across different types of commercial shoots. Basic advertising photography packages in India start around ₹25,000–₹40,000 for half-day shoots. High-end commercial shoots can range from ₹1.5 lakhs to ₹5 lakhs, especially with experienced photographers and extensive post-production. Studio rentals, assistants, equipment, and post-processing costs are often billed separately, adding significantly to the final amount (Ravikant, 2025). Studies of studio-based artists in India show that renting studio space in urban centres like Mumbai, Delhi, or Bengaluru can consume 25–50 % of an artist's income, with spaces in creative hubs commanding particularly steep rents.

Common running costs of an art studio include rent (\$500–\$2,000/month), utilities (\$100–\$300/month), and art supplies (\$200–\$1,000/month). Additional expenses like marketing, insurance, and equipment upkeep, estimating startup costs between \$10,000–\$50,000. This data helps new artists budget realistically and plan for ongoing financial sustainability. (Business plan, 2025) Adding to this, upkeep of studio infrastructure—including repairs, utilities, and security—can constitute an additional 10–15 percent of operating budgets, with one estimate suggesting annual repair costs of ₹1.2–3 lakhs depending on the studio's age and equipment needs.

Moreover, initial capital outlays for furnishings and tools—such as easels, roofing, kilns, or specialized lighting can depend heavily on the scale and type of business being started. , representing a barrier to scaling one's practice or acquiring a commercial-grade work environment. When layered onto recurring monthly costs for rent and raw materials, the financial pressure becomes severe, spurring decisions like relocating to less creative or isolated areas where communities, networks, and exposure opportunities dwindle.

Alongside production costs, participation in local and national exhibitions and art fairs is essential for emerging artists to gain visibility, engage collectors, and build professional credentials.

The Aalto University thesis highlights that participating in art exhibitions and fairs involves considerable costs—such as booth fees, transportation, framing, and promotional materials—which can strain the limited budgets of emerging artists. These expenses often discourage artists from showcasing their work, especially when there's no assurance of sales or exposure, leading to reduced professional opportunities. Many artists are forced to self-fund such ventures, further destabilizing their financial position. According to ReaFairp—(explain)—key costs include booth fees (often ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars), shipping and insurance for artworks, installation materials, travel, accommodation, and promotional expenses. These cumulative costs often exceed an artist's budget, making participation risky without guaranteed sales or exposure. For many, it's a significant investment with uncertain returns. These costs can deter emerging and independent artists from participating, thereby limiting their visibility and access to critical market opportunities. The financial gatekeeping involved creates inequality in artistic exposure and career advancement. Exhibiting at art fairs entails substantial costs that often surpass the actual artwork's value—especially for emerging artists and small galleries. Application or jury fees typically range from \$30 to \$50 for local shows, with larger regional events charging \$100 to \$400. Thirdly, in today's art ecosystem where visibility underpins success, artists must invest in branding, marketing, and promotion alongside creating art. Participating in major art fairs involves substantial upfront investments—often 10,000 Euros to 15,000 Euros—for booth fees, travel, setup, and marketing. While these costs are high, art fairs can yield long-term benefits like improved brand exposure, networking with collectors, and stronger market presence. However, for small galleries or independent artists, the financial risk remains significant without guaranteed sales or returns. The Journal of Business Research article highlights how art fairs, while offering access to elite networks and potential buyers, place heavy financial burdens on participating galleries and artists. The high costs of booths, transport, and logistics, combined with uncertain returns, mean that fairs often benefit already-established players more than emerging ones. For smaller or newer participants, this creates a risky investment that can destabilize operations if not carefully strategized.

LIMITED ACCESS TO MARKETS AND NETWORKS

In the contemporary art world, success is often as dependent on access as it is on talent. For emerging artists, particularly those without institutional affiliations or social capital, limited access to markets and networks poses a serious barrier to establishing sustainable careers. While creativity and originality remain central to artistic practice, visibility, patronage, and professional connections are crucial in transforming artistic labor into livelihood. In many regions, including India, systemic issues such as gatekeeping by galleries, fierce competition for limited opportunities, and the difficulty of building a reliable collector base severely restrict the ability of new artists to break into the market. These limitations not only hinder individual artists' professional growth but also affect the diversity, innovation, and inclusivity of the larger art ecosystem. Understanding the structural nature of these challenges is essential to addressing inequities and creating more supportive pathways for emerging artistic voices.

Emerging artists often face exclusion from established galleries and institutional spaces due to entrenched gatekeeping practices. These institutions typically favor artists with commercial track records, elite networks, or formal training, leaving little room for newcomers or those from underrepresented backgrounds (Delagrangé, 2024). In India, major galleries in cities like Mumbai and Delhi tend to exhibit a small group of established names, reinforcing the visibility of a select few while excluding others. Curators and gallery owners act as cultural gatekeepers, determining whose work is deemed "marketable" or worthy of exhibition. This reinforces a self-perpetuating cycle where visibility is granted only to those already legitimized by the system. As a result, many emerging artists are forced to operate in alternative spaces or remain confined to online platforms, limiting their opportunities to reach wider audiences or engage with collectors.

Emerging artists face formidable barriers in accessing markets and professional networks, which significantly affects their financial sustainability and long-term visibility. A central challenge lies in the **gatekeeping practices of galleries and institutions**. These organizations tend to favor artists who are already established or commercially successful, leaving newcomers with little opportunity to exhibit their work. This issue is particularly visible in India, where premier galleries often represent only a select few. As noted by Garima Ajay in her article on Medium, "the top galleries in India prefer working with a handful of artists they've already invested in, making it difficult for new voices to enter" (Ajay, 2023).

Even when artists circumvent institutional barriers, they encounter intense competition for the few platforms that offer visibility—such as art fairs, biennales, residencies, and public exhibitions. These opportunities are crucial for artists to showcase their work, build professional networks, and gain recognition. However, access to these platforms is highly competitive and often restricted by application fees, curatorial bias, or urban concentration. For instance, events like the India Art Fair or Kochi-Muziris Biennale receive thousands of applications but only offer limited slots, making participation a rare privilege (Sundaram, 2020). Furthermore, emerging artists often lack the resources needed to travel or pay for exhibition logistics, adding financial barriers to an already exclusive system. The result is a bottleneck, where a small group of artists gains consistent exposure while others remain in the shadows despite their talent or potential. Beyond institutional exclusion, there is **intense competition for limited exposure platforms** like biennales, art fairs, and residencies. Events such as the India Art Fair and Kochi-Muziris Biennale offer invaluable visibility—but these opportunities are scarce compared to the vast number of applicants. The India Art Fair started with 34 galleries and over 6,000 visitors in 2008, and has now grown to include over 90 exhibitors and 100,000 visitors, yet participation remains selective (India art fair). According to a recent article on TNA Mag, curators and institutions tend to favor "tried and tested" names for such events, leaving emerging artists to compete for limited visibility in over-saturated spaces (TNA Mag, 2023).

Beyond exposure, sustaining an artistic career requires consistent support from collectors or patrons—a challenge for artists operating outside institutional networks. Collectors often rely on galleries, curators, or art consultants to discover and evaluate artwork, which sidelines independent or self-representing artists. Without gallery representation or institutional endorsements, it becomes difficult for artists to form direct relationships with buyers. Moreover, many emerging artists lack the business skills or resources to market their work, negotiate prices, or navigate the commercial aspects of the art world. While platforms like Instagram or independent art fairs offer some visibility, they rarely provide the long-term financial backing or sustained engagement that traditional patronage systems once offered. This disconnect leaves many artists economically vulnerable and creatively constrained, often forcing them to produce commercially viable work rather than pursue innovation or experimentation.

Even when artists gain visibility, they often struggle to **build a collector base or attract patrons**. This is largely because collectors rely on galleries and curators to guide their purchasing decisions, which excludes artists without formal representation. Artsy's 2023 Art Collecting Report reveals that although 72% of collectors express interest in emerging artists, only 17% feel the current market infrastructure adequately supports them (Artsy, 2023). Furthermore, 69% of collectors cite opaque pricing as a major deterrent to buying from new artists. Without transparent pricing tools or marketing support, many emerging creators are left with no clear path to connect directly with buyers. The digital shift has opened some new doors, but it hasn't been equally accessible to all. According to Vision arts, a significant portion of India's emerging artists lack the resources, internet access, or digital marketing skills to take full advantage of online platforms. This digital divide places rural or economically marginalized artists at an even greater disadvantage. In conclusion, the difficulties faced by emerging artists stem from three interconnected factors: **gatekeeping in institutional spaces, intense competition for exposure, and challenges in forming collector relationships**. While platforms like Instagram and digital fairs have begun to democratize visibility, meaningful participation in the professional art market still demands structural changes. These include transparent pricing systems, affordable digital access, and more inclusive selection practices in galleries and fairs. Only then can the market truly support the diversity and creativity of new and emerging talent.

What can be done better for artists in India? What are your recommendations?

India is home to a rich and diverse artistic heritage, yet many contemporary artists face significant challenges due to a lack of systemic support, limited funding, and inadequate visibility. To address these issues, one of the most important areas of reform is arts education. Currently, the arts are often treated as extracurricular or optional subjects in schools and colleges. Introducing structured and well-funded arts education at all levels would help foster creativity from an early age and give legitimacy to artistic careers. Government bodies should invest in developing specialized institutions, provide scholarships, and encourage interdisciplinary studies that blend the arts with other fields like technology and social sciences. Another critical step is increasing financial support for artists through both public and private funding. Many artists in India struggle with unstable incomes and limited access to grants or fellowships.

To address this, the government can create recurring grant programs with transparent selection processes through national and state-level arts councils. At the same time, tax incentives can be offered to private collectors and corporations that fund or purchase works from Indian artists. This not only benefits individual artists but also helps build a sustainable ecosystem for the arts in India. Market access remains a major hurdle for emerging and regional artists. While a few established galleries in metro cities dominate the scene, thousands of talented artists across the country remain invisible. To bridge this gap, artist-led collectives, digital marketplaces, and traveling exhibitions should be supported by the government and NGOs. Regional art fairs, particularly in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, can democratize access and provide exposure to a wider audience. Furthermore, training programs in digital marketing, art entrepreneurship, and self-promotion would equip artists with essential skills to navigate today's globalized art market. Finally, there is a need to foster community engagement with the arts. Public art installations, performances in local spaces, and collaborations with schools and universities can create deeper appreciation for the arts at the grassroots level. By investing in cultural infrastructure, such as community art centers and artist residencies, India can ensure that artists not only survive but thrive. A comprehensive and inclusive approach—blending policy, education, technology, and public participation—is key to building a vibrant and supportive environment for artists in India.

CONCLUSION

Emerging artists in India face a complex web of challenges that significantly hinder their growth and sustainability in the creative field. From systemic gatekeeping in galleries and art institutions to intense competition for limited exposure and funding, many talented individuals remain excluded from mainstream recognition and financial stability. The lack of consistent income, reliance on unstable freelance or teaching roles, and difficulty building a collector base further exacerbate the precariousness of their careers. While initiatives and grants exist, they often cater to a privileged few with established networks. Addressing these barriers requires a conscious effort to democratize access to opportunities, decentralize artistic spaces beyond major cities, and create transparent, supportive systems that prioritize equity over elitism. Without such reforms, India risks losing a vast pool of untapped artistic potential.

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