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Article

# Visual Art Beyond Individual Artists—Its Impact on Community Development, Collective Identity, and Social Engagement

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of visual art beyond the realm of individual artists, emphasizing its impact on community development, collective identity, and social engagement. As a universal language, art transcends personal expression, becoming a powerful tool for shaping perspectives, fostering connections, and addressing shared societal concerns. When integrated into public spaces, visual art transforms environments, giving communities a voice and a means to reflect their values, histories, and aspirations. Murals, sculptures, installations, and performance art serve as more than creative expressions—they act as catalysts for awareness, inclusion, and change. By engaging with local narratives and cultural identities, these artistic interventions empower people to participate in shaping their surroundings. This paper examines case studies in India where art has moved beyond the individual artist and become a collaborative force in social, economic, and cultural development. Furthermore, it highlights future possibilities for research into emerging trends, interdisciplinary approaches, and innovative applications of visual art as a dynamic and participatory practice.

**Keywords:** visual art; public spaces; community development; social engagement; cultural development

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## Introduction

Visual art has traditionally been viewed as a product of individual creativity like paintings, sculptures, and photographs often confined to galleries, studios, and private collections. Artists create their work within an intellectual or cultural context, and then share it in the art world. Critics, curators, and scholars help explain and promote the work, which adds to its value. While public and community-based art practices are gaining recognition, academic institutions continue to train artists for individual success in competitive markets. Evaluation systems and institutional structures foster a self-focused development of the individual artist, often disconnected from broader public engagement. However, in recent years, a paradigm shift has emerged—beyond individual identity visual art is increasingly becoming a public and participatory practice, integrated into the everyday environments of communities. Visual art helps people understand and appreciate different cultures. It shows us how others see the world, which builds empathy and respect. This evolution positions art as a tool for collective dialogue, civic expression, and cultural continuity.

Art introduces new ideas and can make us think differently, helping break down our own biases. Through visual art, we can connect with cultures beyond our own. When placed in public spaces, art becomes accessible, inclusive, and representative of diverse voices, serving as both mirror and catalyst for societal change. Some art institutions and non-profits offer valuable spaces for individuals to create, express themselves, and showcase their talents. These programs not only contribute to local economies but also provide stress-free, enjoyable experiences that support mental well-being, helping

to reduce stress and anxiety and promote healing. Interactive art, site specific installations, large scale public art, graffiti, other art forms in public space are a dynamic and evolving field that continues to challenge and engage audiences with its diverse expressions and critical perspectives. These art forms have the power to rejuvenate and motivate societies by infusing monotonous spaces with vibrancy and character.

Visual art plays a collaborative and transformative role in shaping communities, fostering social awareness and promoting ecological engagement. Through public art, street art, murals, performing art brought art into the lives of the local but also shines a spotlight on place making, an approach to urban design, city architecture, prioritise people on infrastructure, create public spaces for social interactions, cultural exchanges, gender equality, social—ecological awareness.

## The Power of Public Art

The traditional narrative of visual art has long been centered on individual genius, personal vision, and the aesthetic autonomy of the artist. However, contemporary global challenges—ranging from social fragmentation, economic disparity and rapidly fading cultural identities—demand more inclusive, participatory, and community-engaged forms of artistic practice. Visual art, as a powerful form of non-verbal communication, holds immense potential not just for personal expression, but for cultivating dialogue, solidarity, and transformation at the community level.

*Public art—through murals, sculptures, installations, and performative interventions—offers a medium through which communities can assert their presence and celebrate their heritage. Visual art has consistently demonstrated its ability to bridge divides and empower communities. As art moves from galleries to public spaces, its audience transforms from passive observers to active participants, leading to a democratization of cultural production and access.*

## Review of Literature

1. Art and culture play a significant role in binding India into a common thread, showcasing the rich and vibrant ethos of the country and connecting the past with the present, and paving way for the future. Visual Arts holds a prominent place in the cultural tourism of the country. It augments India's cultural representation and preserving its cultural identity as a whole. In achieving the above-mentioned objectives, a robust support system from the government is essential, providing platforms and the necessary support systems for artists and art communities, and all other stakeholders to prosper in their endeavours.

The Indian visual arts space has evolved a lot over the centuries, becoming more inclusive and enriched with various new forms of expressions. India has witnessed an increasing acceptance and appreciation for art amongst the public, driven by ever increasing cultural initiatives, which includes art festivals, biennales, exhibitions, auctions, and other participatory art events.

(KPMG in India & FICCI, 2018)

2. Public Art majorly comprises of large-scale sculptures, murals and installations. Public art are characterised by their enhanced accessibility to the larger public owing to the fact that they are situated in public spaces that have high visibility, often seen across busy intersections of roads, or near the end of the streets where people assemble, or across busy public spaces such as airports, railway stations, sub-ways, in front of large public buildings, and so on.

*'Public art is also defined through its relationship with the maker and its intent to present itself as a work of art as opposed to an architectural, religious or decorative element. Another defining feature of public art is its site-specificity, which may manifest in works that are either made using materials from the site, fused with the site or responding to it.'*

One of the most significant and revolutionary public art movement to take place in India is the wall-murals and free-standing sculptural works at Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan. These are some of the earliest examples of public art in India. The vibrant and lush green landscape of Shantiniketan provided the perfect space for public art practices. For the masters

of Kala Bhavan, it was an obvious and meaningful response to their natural surroundings. The masters and their apprentices at the school created works that became the identity of the space. The place became synonymous with the traditional Indian Fresco paintings and houses magnificent works of Fresco Style public art by Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij. One of the most significant contributions of the Master Nandalal Bose was the 'kalo-bari', or the black house. The idea was conceived by Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee in 1934, with noteworthy contributions from Ramkinkar Baij as well. The building was constructed as a part of the Kala Bhavan complex; it represents a very unique visual representation using mud and coal-tar, which gives it its characteristic black appearance. It embeds low-relief sculptural forms into the architecture, depicting mythological, tribal, and everyday rural life scenes of the place. The entire mural was made by the senior students, spanning over many years, adding to the collaborative spirit of the school, thus creating a public work which imbibes the local materials and the site of Santiniketan. Ramkinkar Baij is duly credited for creating several magnificent sculptures at the site, most significantly Mill Call (1956), a monumental sculpture that pays tribute to the indigenous Santhal community of the Birbhum district, where the campus is located. Benodebabu (Benode Bihari Mukherjee) was an ardent proponent of the 'mural style' of Shantiniketan. His murals were unique in the whole gamut of modern Indian painting scene. His first major mural on the ceiling of a dormitory in Kalabhavan (Santiniketan) pieces up various views of Birbhum village life into a related saga extended out in time; people work, relax; play or ply their trades through the day; the landscape undergoes transformations from season to season, with trees flowering, bearing fruit, or standing naked to the skies. Benodebabu did two other major murals. One in the attic of Cheenabhavana (Santiniketan), is an amazing visual chronicle of a day's activity on the campus, poetic, humorous, using devices of Japanese screen painting. The other mural is in Hindibhavana (Santiniketan) based on the lives of medieval Indian saints, is larger and more ambitious and can be said to be his best work, as it exceeds the others in size, conceptual delicacy, range and depth. It arranges the image of the growth of the Indian religious tradition through time by ranging the figurative life-dramas of the various saints. The descriptive incidents imply a portrait of a whole society in movement, an ageless and immemorial society, with a vast variety of culture and custom, which there were no dividing lines between religion and life. Post-independence, the Indian government began to commission artists to create artworks in public spaces, and private patrons and companies followed suit. In the late 1950s, the government instituted a policy that involved setting aside 2 percent of the budget to incorporate permanent murals on public buildings. KG Subramanyan -one of India's most influential modern artists and a former student and later teacher at Kala Bhavana, created splendid specimens of public art. He is well known for the relief mural titled 'The King of Dark Chamber' in 1963 on the walls of the Rabindralaya, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Devi Prasad Roy Choudhary created the iconic '11 Murti', or 'Eleven Sculptures' in 1966 at Sardar Patel Marg, New Delhi, depicting the historic Dandi March. MF Husain, the most celebrated artist of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, created one of his pioneering murals, Bharat Bhagya Vidhata, 1962-63, which was selected by The Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (under the directorship of Homi Bhabha), to adorn the inner corridor of the institution. Other noteworthy examples of public art projects include:

- A) The 1967 mural at St Xavier's School, Ahmedabad, conceptualized and executed by Himmat Shah, in contemporary materials such as brick, concrete and cement.
- B) Nagji Patel's 20 feet-long abstract sculpture titled 'Banyan Tree'. This sculpture was commissioned in 1991 by the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd., and stands at the Fatehgunj crossroads in Baroda.
- C) A tribute to the original masters of Shantiniketan, KG Subramanyan—one of India's most influential modern artists and a former student and later teacher at Kala Bhavana, created a monumental black-and-white mural on the outer walls of the Kala Bhavana building in honour of Nandalal Bose.
- D) Ravi Agarwal's famous work Extinction in 2009. This work examines and addresses the ecological concerns as a result of urbanization and industrialization. It specifically looks at how

a specific vulture population has been wiped out in New Delhi due to the use of toxic pesticides. Through his work, the artist aimed to engage the public through talks, lectures, and a documentary media project displayed in public places.

- E) Atul Bhalla's modernist work Chabeel in 2008 near Kashmere Gate in New Delhi, addresses the centrality of water to Delhi's community-based identity. Investigating the role that people play in enshrinement, the work gestures to the aquatic nature of many Hindu rituals. The holy river is the favoured site of religious ablutions (despite being abysmally polluted). Such contemporary works in public spaces have sought to explore the relationships between urban spaces, socio-political climate, and ecology.
- F) Navjot Altaf's work titled Delhi Loves Me? –KHOJ International Artists Residency, 2005. It is a collaborative project with communities dwelling in Khirki and Hauz Rani village, and autorickshaw drivers of New Delhi, India. The composition involving bumper stickers with poetry printed on them, which the artist pasted on rickshaws across the city.

Artist collectives, such as the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), organized art programmes that incorporated public transport, such as rickshaws, to display their artworks and posters, responding to the widespread communal violence in the 1990s.

In addition to the above-mentioned artist projects, several 'art collectives' have played a vital role in advancing and popularizing the public art movement in India. Few prominent mentions include:

- A) The Fearless Collective, initiated by artist Shilo Shiv Suleman, has undertaken several public mural work projects across India and abroad in collaboration with eminent artists.
- B) Artist Leena Kejriwal founded 'The Missing Link Trust', that sought to draw attention to gender-based violence and discrimination in the Indian subcontinent through collaborative public works of art. In 2014, Leena Kejriwal launched 'MISSING' Public Art Project to engage the public on the issue of sex trafficking. It was launched as a public art work, at the India Art Fair and immediately caught the eye of many international and national media through its installations. The project also went viral on social media, gathering us thousands of supporters empathising with the cause. This led to 'the stencil campaign' and a successful crowdfunding exercise. It urged people to reflect on human trafficking and its damaging impact on the social fabric of the nation.
- C) The St+art India foundation is a not-for-profit organization that works on art projects in public spaces. The aim of the foundation is to make art accessible to a wider audience by taking it out of the conventional gallery space and embedding it within the cities we live in—making art truly democratic and for everyone.
- D) The RPG Art Foundation, Mumbai provides a prominent platform for artists, and aims to make art accessible to the citizens of the country. The foundation has commissioned several noteworthy public works, such as 'The Wall of Gratitude', painted across a 10,000 sq-ft wall at RPG House in Mumbai. It is a tribute to the Covid Warriors (doctors, nurses, policemen, media persons, delivery personnel, and cleaners) who worked round-the-clock during the pandemic. Another key project of the foundation is 'Rhino' by Arzan Khambatta, located at Juhu, Mumbai.

Besides the above mentioned, organizations such as the KHOJ International Artists' Association and the 'Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art' regularly organize workshops and grants that support public art projects across the country. Public festivals, such as the 'Kala Ghoda Arts Festival', which has been held annually since 1999, create interventions in public spaces by transforming a section of Mumbai's Fort area into a festival with street art installations. Such institutions interventions, coupled with the public art festivals, have increased the visibility and commissioning of public artworks in the country.

(MAP Academy, 2023)

### 3. India's largest mural livens up the walls of Maharashtra's largest jail:

*“Modern life in a metropolitan with its constant rush and inevitable routine can have its moments of dullness and despair. The black, white and grey hues of the concrete that surround most city-dwellers, does little to uplift this mood. Perhaps that’s why the long but dying tradition of creating public art in the country through murals is turning more than just a few heads. A splash of colour to brighten up your Monday blues, a visual thought that takes you away from your own reality or perhaps binds you to the other strangers you share a space with, are just few of the magical effects that come with democratising art.”*

Pune witnessed the painting of the country’s largest mural, over the walls of Yerwada Jail, which is the biggest prison in the state. The mural titled ‘*Song Of The City*’, is the brainchild of young artists Harshvardhan Kadam, Rajvardhan Kadam, Kedar Namdas, and Monish Naik. The mural was materialized under the collaborative efforts of Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and the Pune Biennale Foundation (PBF). The mural measures 320 metres in dimension, and the wall is 7 feet high. The Yerwada Jail also has a significant place in history and is associated with India’s freedom struggle from the Colonial rule. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chand Bose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and many more of the freedom fighters were imprisoned here at some point of time of the other. *Song Of The City* is a visual story that can be ‘*experienced as a progressive narrative as well as a retrospective insight about the evolution of Pune*’. The mural takes ‘river’ as a central idea. River is depicted in myriad shades of blue and green, which is depicted as flowing from one end of the wall to the other, chronicling 2000 years of the city’s journey. In this larger than life wall mural, Pune has been depicted in the time stamp when it was the state’s colonial capital, and the depiction of British soldiers crossing the formidable Sahyadris is prominent. The wall mural depicts many such revolutions that took place during the British Raj. The visual narrative then continues to be progressive in time and towards then end of the wall, we see depiction of Pune as the technological hub that the city has become today. The mural culminates with Pune’s vision for the sustainable future; one where ecological balance goes alongside development. The overall aesthetics showcase the stylistic work of visual artist Harshvardhan Kadam, whose work is strongly influenced by comic book illustrations and the sensibilities of Indian mythology. For Kadam, who has beautified the walls of many cities across India, public art is a way of giving cities a new identity while connecting places and it’s people. The *Song Of The City* is the artist’s biggest and most socially impactful project till date. ‘*Usually my murals have a single idea or thought but Song Of The City was like painting a movie. When you go pass it, it’s sheer length and breadth makes you feel like you have entered an alternative reality. It also has great visibility with over 50,000 people viewing it everyday. The Song Of The City is an unmissable landmark in Pune, because the wall of the Yerwada Jail on which it exists is a gateway to the city; allowing the mural to both welcome and bid farewell to all those who and enter and leave it.*’— Kadam quotes.

Another of Kadam’s earlier significant work in Pune’s *Kasba Peth* is also worth noticing. (Mohta, 2021)

#### 4. **Project PARI: Public Art of India—Transforming Urban Landscapes Through Creativity:**

Public art has always played a major role and has acted as an effective instrument for community participation and engagement, social dialogue, and urban transformation in a culturally rich country like India. Project PARI (Public Art of India) was launched by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, in collaboration with other state governments and other government entities, with the aim to revitalize public spaces through art, drawing inspiration from India’s rich artistic heritage. This grand project was designed to make cities more inclusive, dynamic, and representative of India’s rich cultural heritage, highlighting the local arts and crafts of the region of implementation, also incorporating local material to the maximum extent. Project PARI has been envisioned as a movement that carries art beyond the conventional formats of dissemination such as galleries and museums; to connect art with a larger sphere of audiences, and to incorporate art as a part of daily lives. The project aims to turn public spaces of everyday use like streets, parks, metro stations, and underpasses, flyovers, etc into canvasses for artistic expression. The residents feel more connected with such spaces, also enhancing the visual appeal of the public spaces. The initiative also includes three-dimensional art such as installations, sculptures and other interactive formats in public spaces

with large footfalls such as parks, prominent intersection of roads such as squares, and roundabouts. These installations and sculptures are intended to be grand in scale and thought-provoking, allowing visitors to interact with and reflect on the artwork. As a part of other supporting activities of the Project PARI, it organizes art festivals and other interactive events such as seminars, workshops and symposiums to bring together artistic communities and promote the overall cause. These events result in further churning and brainstorming of artistic ideas, that result in meaningful collaborations, and interaction with the audience. Artist workshops also aim to provide a platform and nurture local talent and result in contributing to livelihood generation for the local artists. Another major thrust area of the project PARI is the promotion, preservation and restoration of heritage/traditional art forms and heritage places of India. Such activities also result in engaging local artisans, thus contributing to sustainable livelihood of such communities. Project PARI also embraces technology advancements and explores digital art and new media use in public settings. Kinetic installations, projection mappings, and augmented reality experiences provide creative methods for the public to engage with art and cultural heritage. Project PARI actively involves and collaborates with urban planners in all their initiatives. Project PARI have imbibed their footprints across various sites and locations of India and have begun the reshaping of Indian urban landscapes. The project has also contributed immensely to the cultural tourism industry of India. The installations and artworks have become very attractive tourist attractions. The project has succeeded in instilling a sense of community and cultural pride and spreading messages about socially relevant matters such as gender equality, environmental protection, and civic responsibility. The next phase of the project endeavours to expand its reach and span of work to smaller towns, semi-urban and rural areas.

(Pradhan, 2024)

## Research Framework

The research project explores a set of significant and exemplary public art initiatives that use visual art as a participatory, inclusive, and socially transformative medium. The research project analyses and validate visual art's capacity as a tool for civic empowerment and social change. Through these case studies, and based on dialogue with artists, scholars, and community leaders, this work is intended to throw light on how visual art projects serve as catalysts for fostering collaborative, interactive and sustainable development of the societies.

## Objectives

The core purpose of this research project is to investigate how visual art impacts the social fabric of communities. Specifically, the research will examine the ways in which art initiatives contribute to:

- Enhancing community cohesion and collective identity;
- Engaging and empowering local communities;
- Facilitating civic dialogue and social engagement;

The core objectives of the research project are:

- **To examine the role of visual art beyond individual practice**—specifically its impact on community development, cultural identity, and social cohesion.
- **To study participatory and public art projects** that have successfully engaged communities.

## Methodology

### **Approach:**

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, combining case study analysis, ethnographic observation, and interviews.

### **Data Collection:**

- **Case Study Analysis:** Identify and document exemplary participatory and public art projects, especially those involving community storytelling/participatory in nature.
- **Fieldwork and Ethnographic study:** Engage with local artists, curators and educators involved in public art initiatives. This includes site visits, observation, and participatory involvements.
- **Interviews:** Using unstructured questionnaires with open ended questions evoking candid and in-depth viewpoints on the subject matter.

This paper focuses on site specific case studies of Visual Art:

#### **Lodhi Art District in New Delhi, India:**

Lodhi Colony presents a unique case within the Indian context, where colonial architecture has become a canvas for contemporary street art. Developed during the 1940s by architect Edwin Lutyens, Lodhi Colony features characteristic wide roads, minimal vehicular traffic, and monumental façades—attributes that make it conducive to large-scale mural installations. It is a powerful example of how street art can reimagine public spaces and foster inclusive cultural development. Lodhi Art District began in 2015 as an invitation to imagine the city differently. By placing art on the walls of a lived neighbourhood, it suggested that creativity could be folded into the routines of walking to school, buying vegetables, or waiting for the bus. More than a decade later, what emerges is less a district of murals than a shared vocabulary, one that has allowed residents, artists, and visitors to speak about identity, memory, and belonging through the surfaces of their own city. The works that line Lodhi's streets form an archive of our times. Through an analysis of its murals, artists, themes, and community interaction, the study reflects on how public art has transformed not just the visual landscape but also the social and cultural dynamics of the area.

#### **SARA Centre:**

SARA Centre- (Sustainable Alternatives for Rural Accord) is a community-led initiative in Dombekoppa Village, Shimoga District, Karnataka, situated in the foothills of the Western Ghats. Managed by farmers and artists, the Centre serves as a platform for dialogue and knowledge exchange focused on ecological issues affecting this forest-dependent agricultural region. Its activities combine art, education, and practical learning to raise awareness about environment and to promote sustainable living practices. Educational programs at SARA aim to raise awareness of environmental challenges through the dialogues, discussions, stories, exhibitions, artistic projects, and interactive learning, targeting community members, educators, and youth. Stories play a vital role in community and public art by fostering empathy, connection, and collective responsibility.

#### **Anga Art Collective:**

Anga Art Collective, founded in 2010 in Assam, began as a group of friends who wanted to think critically about art in relation to the local geography, culture, and society. Evolving over fifteen years of collaboration, dialogue, and creative engagement, the fifteen-member group focuses on local issues and contexts in Assam. Through performance, interdisciplinary exchange, and community-based practices, they demonstrate how collective modes of learning, knowledge production, and creativity can actively foster and sustain meaningful social relationships.

#### **Sampling**

**Sampling Unit 1**—Organizers, Founders, Curators (Sample Size—10; Stratified sampling)

**Sampling Unit 2**—Artists (Sample Size—10; Stratified sampling)

**Sampling Unit 3**—Participating Audience (Sample Size—30; Convenience sampling)

### **Summary of primary data collection**

The various stakeholders were asked question on the below mentioned lines:

1. Opinion on 'Community-Centered Artistic Projects' and the resultant 'Social Empowerment'.
2. Experiences with completed the community-based art projects.
3. The key motivations for involvement with the community-based art projects.
4. The curatorial approach towards the initiatives.
5. Opinion on the below mentioned points:

- a. Public Art Practices as an Evolving Ecosystem
  - b. Public Art and Community Engagement
  - c. Future Possibilities and the power of Public Art
6. Reflections on the perceived impact (magnitude and directions) of the community art projects on the society, art communities, artists, and the entire art ecosystem.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed. This involved collecting data from multiple sources including interviews with the stakeholders; focus group discussions with the stakeholders and personal observations during the community art projects.

### Insights emerging from the research

#### **The curatorial approach towards these initiatives:**

These projects began with a curatorial premise or hypothesis—‘Can an Indian neighbourhood operate as an open-air museum co-authored with residents, without ticketed thresholds?’.

The “trigger” was a rights-based position: Cultural rights include the right to encounter high-quality art in the course of daily life—a school run, a market errand, an evening walk.

**Community Empowerment:** Lodhi Art District turning walls into murals helped people in the neighbourhood feel proud of their area. The project included locals in the process, making art something that belonged to everyone—not just artists. As quoted by the St+art India Foundation representatives—“*Community-centred public art is most effective when the artwork is treated as social infrastructure rather than a static image. In practice, this means moving from a “commission–install–exit” model to a cycle of inquiry (listening, asset-mapping, co-design), production (safe fabrication, permissions, documentation), and stewardship (maintenance, programming, feedback).*”

SARA Centre in a village in Karnataka, community members like farmers, educationists’, artists, students and children work together through workshops exhibitions to make art, discuss about the environment. This helps them share their traditional knowledge and speak up against harmful development. Anga Art Collective through projects like the Granary, ‘kNOw School’ works with communities to share stories and memories. It gives space for people who are often left out of the art world to create and be heard.

**Social Engagement and Activism:** Lodhi Art District while not overtly political, the murals often reflect themes such as climate change, gender, and urban belonging. This subtle activism invites public reflection and civic discourse in an accessible format. SARA Centre a deeply activist space, SARA positions art as a tool for ecological resistance. It fosters dialogue on deforestation, water rights, and indigenous knowledge through visual storytelling and site-specific interventions. Anga Art Collective projects like Granary push beyond visual art into pedagogy and protest—activating archives as tools for political memory, resistance, and self-determination—especially among Adivasi and rural communities

**Collective identity formation:** In all these initiatives, community members become active contributors rather than passive viewers. At the SARA Centre, local farmers, students, and women co-create artworks that reflect their ecological knowledge and lived experiences. through collaborative workshops and eco-art practices, community members articulate a collective identity as stewards of the Western Ghats. communal archives, ephemeral storytelling, and nomadic installations, Anga builds a fluid but strong sense of community among artists, thinkers, and local inhabitants, linked through shared aesthetics and pedagogic rituals. Lodhi Art District murals reflect motifs from both global street art culture and local heritage. These shared visual languages produce a hybrid civic identity, allowing diverse residents and visitors to identify with the space.

These case studies demonstrate that visual art beyond the individual offers powerful frameworks for participatory democracy, environmental stewardship, and cultural memory. However, this also demands critical reflection on power dynamics, authorship, and sustainability, ensuring that the community remains the central author, not just a subject.

As quoted by the representatives of the St+art India Foundation representatives:

*“Lodhi Art District is best read as an ongoing text, layered with memory, pride, and change. Its walls do not conclude a story; they keep it open, reminding us that art in the public realm is always unfinished, alive, and in conversation with the city around it.”*

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Summary of data triangulation**

1. Findings in a broader socio-cultural theory:
  - 1.1. Human development is fundamentally shaped by social interaction, cultural tools, and contextual environments. Public art in SARA Centre and Anga Art Collective functions not just creative art forms, but as a collaborative dialogue tool, where communities co-construct meanings about ecology, identity, and shared space.
  - 1.2. The Lodhi Art District and Anga Art Collective exemplify this by transforming walls and infrastructure into participatory sites for civic engagement, gender dialogue, and environmental awareness. Art practices are not merely aesthetic interventions but social practices that (re)produce urban space as lived and relational. Artistic initiatives like those observed in the SARA Centre where art is not object-based but relational, growing through sustained collaboration, conversation, and shared values.
  - 1.3. These initiatives act as communities of practice, where learning is embedded in social participation. Whether it's through mural-making workshops, environmental art labs, or community-based installations, these sites cultivate collective agency and ecological stewardship through art.
2. Community-based art redefines the role of the artist: In community-based art, the role of the artist changes from being a solo creator to someone who works with others—like a guide, partner, or communicator. Instead of making art alone, artists in places like the SARA Centre and Anga Art Collective work with local people to create art that reflects community issues such as the environment, gender, or traditions. The artist helps bring out stories from the community and turns them into visual art. In the Lodhi Art District, for example, artists work with both local people and organizations to make sure the art fits the community and speaks to their culture. The focus is not just on the artist's ideas but on creating something meaningful for everyone involved.
3. Potential of visual art to foster inclusivity, resilience and equity: Public art is for everyone—not just for people who visit galleries. Projects like the Lodhi Art District and Anga Art Collective let all kinds of people take part, including children, elders, and those who are often left out. This makes art open and welcoming to all. The SARA Centre-community art shows strength and care for nature where art helps people express feelings, heal, and stay hopeful—especially the places facing problems like environmental damage. These art projects highlight local voices, cultures, and issues like gender and the environment. They make sure different groups are seen and heard. Artists help give space to those who don't always get attention, making public art fairer and more representative.

## **Conclusion**

- Visual art moves beyond aesthetic function to become a social infrastructure—shaping narratives, reimagining space, and reinforcing values of participation, justice, and care. By rethinking the role of the artist and foregrounding collaboration, these initiatives exemplify how art can actively contribute to resilient, inclusive, and equitable communities.
- The case studies of Lodhi Art District, SARA Centre, and Anga Art Collective affirm that visual art, when practiced collaboratively and situated in public contexts, becomes a potent agent for community empowerment, civic engagement, and cultural memory.
- These initiatives reveal a shift from solitary artistic authorship to inclusive, participatory processes where art fosters dialogue, ecological awareness, and shared identity. Public art thus

transcends aesthetics, functioning as a dynamic and democratic tool that enables communities to reclaim space, voice, and agency.

- These initiatives also highlight the equity of cultural access; i.e., public space reaches audiences who rarely enter museums; district-scale work embeds culture into daily life.

## Statements and Declarations

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4. Data availability statement—The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on request.

## Areas for further research

### Long-Term Impact Studies of Community Art Projects

Despite the growing popularity of community and public art projects, longitudinal research is still limited. Areas for further inquiry include sustainability of community engagement after the project's completion, lasting effects on social cohesion, civic participation, and neighbourhood identity, long-term environmental awareness or behavioural change catalysed by eco-art or environmental murals, how public art influences urban regeneration or contributes to gentrification over time and the impact on local youth development, education, and intergenerational dialogue.

### Art in conflict zones

Community art in areas experiencing or recovering from violence, displacement, or environmental disasters requires special focus on how does public art help communities process trauma, memory, and displacement and the risks and ethical considerations of artistic engagement in politically sensitive or high-risk areas. How do artists and communities negotiate power, voice, and representation in such contexts.

### Institutional and Policy Frameworks for Supporting Public Art

Research is needed to understand how governments, cultural institutions, and urban planners can support community-led public art initiatives structurally and financially, create policies that recognize art as a form of public pedagogy, healing, and ecological activism, ensure equitable access to resources and visibility for grassroots artists and collectives.

### Interpretive layering

AR and lightweight web layerings can be explored, that may provide script transliterations, oral histories, and conservation notes, delivered in local languages; this will lead to deepened access without adding physical clutter.

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