Chapter 6
The Artistic Choice: Making the decision to lead an artistic life

6.1. Context for this discussion

One of the important questions guiding this research was about what makes an individual decide that he or she wants to be an artist? How does it come about that an individual embarks upon an artistic life? We have this far evolved a several hypotheses about how the Artistic Mind functions. As per the theory emerging from this study, the Artistic Mind can be identified by the presence of three important intelligences – Musical, Kinesthetic and in specialized cases Spatial intelligence. Of these, Musical intelligence appears rather core to the concept of an Artistic Mind. A good amount of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal intelligence is also required to reach a level of success in the artistic domain as in any other domain. Among the conceptual properties identified for each intelligence, the one common factor was that there is an interaction between intelligence and the social environment and one may influence the other. While it is acknowledged that social environment may impact the development of an intelligence, there is also the possibility that possessing a certain intelligence causes an individual to seek out a particular milieu or shape their existing environment to complement their gifts. Codes for interaction with the environment were found in the data for all the intelligences except Kinesthetic and Spatial.

The Artistic Mind, therefore, is not a water-tight concept. There are many non-cognitive factors that influence the functioning of the artistic mind. Although not a part of the research questions, the Artistic Personality emerged as an important theme and includes the Artistic Identity and the personality traits of Independence, Dealing with Uncertainty, Tenacity, and Flexibility among others. All these together were found to be a subset of the larger construct of the Creative Personality. Perhaps it is the Artistic Mind that differentiates artistic people from other creative people? Or perhaps it is the choice to be an artist. This choice and the conditions governing the choice came up as an important theme in the interviews and biographies.

According to Torrance (1966), students in their secondary school years do not grow much creatively. For example, mean scores of seventh graders are roughly the same as those of twelfth graders as reported in the norm samples of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. An interesting point that has become apparent in this research is that these years may be very critical formatively. Irrespective of whether they grow creatively or not, individuals at the high school level seem to be shopping around, looking out for what to do in life, and the years between eight and eighteen seems to be the time that they make a commitment to some artistic domain. Decision-making, as Sternberg (2006) says is important to the process of creativity. There are of
course many decisions that each person makes on an ongoing basis about their investment in a
domain, but from a developmental perspective, these years appear critical, in that the major
decision about a life course is made during this time. Many of the research participants spoke of
having important moments of choice in their late school years that determined, or at least
propelled them towards an artistic life. These were sometimes preceded by crystallizing
experiences. Both the choice moments and the crystallizing experiences have been dealt with in
the following segment. First the choice moments in the lives of the research participants is dealt
with, followed by choice moments in the lives of the biographed artists. Later, the artistic choice
is discussed in the context of overall human development and hypotheses are proposed describing
how the choice process works.

6.2. Choice moments: Interviewees

The choice to be an artist was an active one in most cases. Among artists, there was only one
(Geeta) who mentioned that she never planned to be an artist, but even that was not to say that she
never intended to practice her art. She never planned to perform professionally, and when the
programs started coming in, it was a new adventure for her. All the other artists made clear
choices, leaving behind other options and embarking on an artistic life. I use the term artistic life
instead of career as several participants themselves did not prefer the use of the term career with
its connotations of material advancement and worldly success. A few of the moments of choice in
the participants’ lives are described below in their own voice.

Anjan: I was eight years old and staying at Jhansi with an uncle and was very much
missing my mother who had gone on a business trip. I was sleeping when she
got back and when I woke up I saw her and she looked like a fairy who had
brought me a gift – my first camera. From then on photography became my
passion…Every month I would be given a roll of film containing 12 exposures
and this was my quota for the month; so I had to be careful in what I shot. I used
to roam the streets of Delhi looking for suitable subjects for my pictures and that
is when I wanted to use photography to tell a story. At a very young age 12/13
years I decided I wanted to be a photojournalist.

Venkat: In the colony, Yesudas used to perform every year for this Ayappa program and
that is what really inspired me – that is when I felt that if you want recognition,
you should sing (around 4th or 5th standard)…

Gayatri: When I gave up dance during 10th standard, I felt it was a vacuum – I could not
remain without dance, so got back to it as soon as possible

Geeta: I and one sister of mine used to learn violin. But there was only one violin at
home and we would fight. Once when she was away at some camp, to prove a
point I learnt to play the flute as well as she could play the violin – this was
when I was 14-15 years old – flute was entirely self-taught and I only learnt
formally after I started performing
Neela: In 11th and 12th std, I lost interest in academics and was looking out for something different to do when I heard about NID. I heard that NID does not have exams and it was not a regular college experience – when I went for the interview I saw that the environment was perfect and that is when I knew that it was right for me…even admission criteria were not based on academics.

Rajeev: The day before I sat for Joint entrance test (for engineering in 1996), there was a major explosion in the home because I told my parents that I did not want to do it – my dreams will die

Shiva: Initially I had to be dragged from the cricket field for music class… I lost my mother when I was sixteen and it was her dream to see me play at Music Academy. I lost her in March and in December (of that year) I performed at Music Academy.

Soumya: I worked as child artist in regular theatre – when I was about ten years old I decided I did not want to do anything in front of the camera or on stage.

Divya: When I went to sing for one of my mother’s students at Narada Gana Sabha in Chennai, that’s when I woke up and decided that I wanted to dance. I was in 11th standard at that time. In the following year, I performed at Music Academy in Chennai. Around then is also when I started to get involved in Kalanidhi mami’s workshops...In 1998 went to Goa and saw a program by Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra and decided I wanted to learn Odissi. In May of the following year, I went to his workshop in Orissa, but the experience was too stressful since the style was new, people were new etc., so came back to Mumbai and started Odissi with Didi…Narayan uncle saw me playing with the keyboard and I was able to play simple tunes, and he suggested that I should try music (she subsequently learnt violin for six years from the same Narayan uncle and attributes her understanding of and interest in music to him)

Avik: I have always been interested in doing something creative. For project week in 9th standard, I chose chemistry, but we had the art room next door where there were film appreciation classes. I used to peek into the class and was visually blown away. I felt this was where everything came together – one needs a good fast understanding of everything…In college, I really enjoyed popular culture and film – realized when literature applies to things I like.

Soumita: I have learnt (dance) from good Gurus, but I had to take complete charge of myself by the time I was 18-19 years old…I started teaching dance when I was 18. I did not pursue a career in Kathak as it needed me to be very Guru dependent – I could only “get ahead” if I had a Guru with me always and I did not want that. In dance, there is no guarantee that finances will be ok, and I need to support myself always, so I’d rather do dance because I enjoy it even if it means my investing money in it. (She has therefore pursued a dual career all her adult life)

Anurag: Everybody assumed I would join engineering. There was lot of pressure, especially being the only boy child in the family, but I knew I was not interested. My brother-in-law saw the ad for NID and he suggested that it is an architecture institute so would be a good mix of science and art. I applied and got a seat in
NID before the CET and other tests, so I did not take the other exams seriously. When I went to NID for the interview, I felt a sense of freedom and that is when I decided to join there.

Cyrus: I am a self taught sculptor, started in 1982, I was only 16 then. I would sit amidst the scrap and let it poke me. The design concepts would emerge from the shapes of the scrap. (His journey with sculpture started around 1982 when he attended a vacation art class at Adi Davierwala’s workshop. Fascinated by the possibilities that scrap presented artistically, Cyrus learnt welding and started his initial experiments. His first work a horse head was bought by architect Dara Mistry and was a great encouragement to continue sculpting, which he did as a hobby for several years).

Invariably, there were clear moments of choice at which point they decided on their artistic course. Often these were preceded by or coincided with some crystallizing experience. It is not that they did not have options. In some of the interviews, they also reported paralyzing experiences where they were turned “off” from an alternate area of interest. Possibly this turning “off” also contributed to shaping the direction that their energies would take. Some examples of this turning off due to some negative experience are described below in the participants’ voice.

Soumita: Around age 8 I was at a birthday party where a Mickey and Donald show was going on, I was pulled out in the middle of the show to come back home and do music class because my teacher had come. I was very upset and quit music after that. (She went back to music a couple of times in life later, but has not attempted to perform as a musician or gain expertise in the domain. This is despite a high score on musical intelligence).

Anjan: At school I was a very good athlete. I even won the best athlete championship at the Padma Sheshadri School where I studied in Chennai. I love competitive sport. But on that occasion, after all the celebration, they had carried me around and everything, I was waiting alone for my mother to pick me up. Everybody had gone home and I was alone and I realized that the moment was very short-lived and that I don’t want to work for awards and since then, although I continued to play sports, I did not pursue at a competitive or professional level.

Siddhart: When I was in 5th standard, my parents engaged a guitar tutor for me, but I could not stand the lessons because they were more in the nature of exercises than playing music, so I am self-taught, I learnt from older kids in the locality who used to play.

Divya: Dad used to give me books to read always – like classics which I did not enjoy, but unconsciously writing and literature became something important. (Her score on linguistic intelligence is one of the lowest, despite having learnt to fluency a language not taught at home, despite having won prizes for poetry and elocution as a child and despite having a BA in English and an MA in Sanskrit. This reflects some kind of ambivalence towards the linguistic medium).

Anil: I used to play cricket, but after I started training at Nalanda, I stopped because I was different from the other boys. I did not know other artist boys and therefore felt lonely. Although my friends have been supportive, my dance did keep me away from general social groups – the image bothers me – there is this usual look on people’s faces when I say I am a dancer and this typical “attami” (neck movement) that they do – it bothers me. Most of my friends at Nalanda were girls and their lives went a different way…
Perhaps this suffering and ambivalence that the individual goes through is inevitable, maybe even essential to helping the artist decide the focus of his/her life’s energy. An important fact is that in addition to the choice moments or crystallizing experiences in many cases that the artists experienced in the later school years, some of the life stories reflect choice moments later on in life too. These are either brought on by the environment or could be a call from within.

Anagha: I thought poetry was my self-definition, but that fell through...my near death experience of 1997 changed things, the way I see things.

Venkat: Going to the US was life changing in that it really made me want to educate myself; when I gave my project, I saw the disappointment in my guide’s eyes and that made me want to commit to a year of sincere work (this was during a Master’s program at Clemson University).

Dinesh: I took it (photography) up because my first choice of career that is television engineering did not work out since technology changed and I needed to make a living...I did not pursue fine arts professionally because my hand was not good, but visual medium was deep rooted in my heart.

Soumya: That is when I felt I want to write for children or do some work for children (when she took a sabbatical from her architecture course and went to a village as part of a school construction project). My evenings were free and I used to read to the children at the school. At that time, the goal was not clear, only I decided I do not want to go back to college, so I dropped out. My parents were disappointed at first because they were keen that I study, but then were quite supportive. I took two years to decide what I want to do.

Siddarth: When I was on a visit to Bombay (from Muscat), I was talking to my friend about future plans, etc when he almost abused me saying I should do music and not pursue a job – that made me think and led to my quitting and returning to Mumbai for good (he dabbled in several jobs after a Masters in Earth Sciences before finally turning to music full time).

In the case of Anagha and Venkat, there was no change of domain even after these important experiences in their lives. Their commitment to their area of work took place a long time ago. What changed was their perspective. In the other cases of Dinesh, Soumya and Siddharth, they changed course and began investing in a new work area. But even here the domain they chose was not altogether new. Soumya’s exposure to theatre happened when she was a child as did Dinesh’s to the visual medium and Siddharth’s to music. It was instead a moment where they decided to stop doing other things and focus on the one thing that would keep them buoyed at a time of personal crisis. The fastening on the artistic domain that attracted them the most happened much earlier in life and they relied on that to forge a new path forward for themselves.

It is possible that this decision to commit to an artistic life is part of a larger issue of identity. Stories of creative geniuses such as Einstein, Picasso or Mozart indicate a fast forward of sorts of this process, with the crystallization taking place a lot earlier, at the age of four or five. But those are exceptional cases, where prodigious talent, special circumstances and the uniqueness of the domain combine to create a potent recipe for genius. But this need not be true for all artists. The search for identity is well documented, but before linking the interview data back to literature or
commenting any further on the patterns that have emerged, I would like to widen the field of inquiry by examining the bio-profiles of leading Indian artists. At what point and how did they choose to pursue an artistic life?

6.3. Choice moments: Biographed artists

The evidence in these biographic profiles is not always clear cut. There are choice points, but many of them are inferred since it was not possible to hear from the artist himself/herself on how they chose, decision-making necessarily being an internal process. Hence this data is being used only to supplement the observations from the interviews.

Bhimsen Joshi from a very early age displayed a love for music. He would be fascinated by local bhajan troupes, marriage processions, singing pedlars and vendors, so that he would follow them without any idea where he was going. He would stand riveted listening to the music playing at a gramophone shop, and it is one such experience that was to prove crystallizing for him. He once heard a recording of Abdul Karim Khan and was so moved by the music that he resolved then and there to make it his life’s work. This was probably when he was eight or nine years old. Around the same time, he attended a concert by Pt. Sawai Gandharva, Abdul Karim Khansahib’s disciple and he also discovered his Kirtankar (musician) grandfather’s tanpura at home which was a stark reminder of the exciting visions that music promised. Soon after, at the age of eleven, following a disagreement at home, he ran away without any money and literally only the shirt on his back. He first went to Bijapur, then Pune and finally to Gwalior searching for taleem (training) and so began his musical sojourn.

During his stay in Calcutta at the Bhowanipur house, Guru Dutt would regularly attend the Jatras that happened nearby and on coming home would don makeshift costumes and imitate all the actors. In 1935, when he was ten years old, he saw his first Uday Shankar performance in Calcutta and told his mother that he too would one day dance on stage. She did not take him seriously at this point, but his mind was set upon learning to dance. When he was sixteen, Guru Dutt took up a job as a telephone operator in a mill, but in a month and a half, he abandoned his job (without even collecting his last pay) to join Uday Shankar’s dance troupe at Almora as soon as he got the chance. He performed with Uday Shaker in several productions and returned to Mumbai in 1944 when the Almora center closed down.

As a young boy Kelucharan Mohapatra grew up in an environment of music, theatre and dance. His village was a hub for a wide variety of performing traditions such as Sankirtana, Naga dance, Stick Play, Krishna leela and Jatra which would be performed for temple festivals. All this fascinated him and left a great impression on his young mind. But the most important experiences that shaped his direction in life took place when he was five or six years old. Young Kelu did
attend school, but fascinated by the classes taking place at the local *akhada* (gymnasium) where young boys (*Gotipuas*) were trained in a form of graceful and acrobatic dance, he used to watch the sessions for hours standing outside. Seeing that this boy was so interested, Balabhadra Sahu, who taught the *Gotipuas* took him under his tutelage. This was the beginning of his training in dance.

In the case of MF Hussain, it is difficult to sieve through the impact of his dominant personality and focus on the facts of his early life. But we do know that he spent his early teen years in Indore which left a deep impression in his mind. The feudal system, the opulent traditions and rich imagery were to resurface in his work all his life. For example, the tazis (decorated structures used during the Muharram processions) were fascinating for MF even though it was not how his community celebrated the festival. Images of lions, the Duldul horse and tigers’ paws were drawn directly from here. Formal education did not really hold MF’s interest - he only studied up to ninth standard. MF used to cut afternoon classes and go to the cinema – V Shantaram’s *Ayodhecha Raja* and Baburao Painter’s *Sawakai Pash* left a deep impression on his mind and his enchantment with cinema began during these early days. At age 17, MF won the gold medal at an art competition at Indore and studied for one year at the Indore School of Art under NS Bendre which was a great encouragement for him to pursue art as a career.

MS Subbulakshmi had music in her blood, both her mother and grandmother being musicians of renown. From a very young age, MS would play the tambura lying about in the house and try to match her pitch to that of the instrument. This is interesting as she was later known for her perfect pitch while singing. A moment of choice came for her when her mother anxious to secure her future, tried to arrange an alliance for MS (aged 13) with a scion of the Ramanathapuram Raja’s family. There was no money in music, especially for women and the only way for women of the Devadasi community was to attach themselves to a powerful (upper class/ caste) protector. But MS refused the alliance, saying she wanted to develop more as a musician before she could think of marriage. This refusal and voicing of one’s own opinion was unusual in the traditional environment in which MS grew up and signifies the point at which she made up her mind to a lifetime in music.

In Raj Kapoor’s life too the decision to make film and acting his life becomes evident through a confrontational scene with a parent. Prithviraj could have made him into a child star; with his talent and looks he had every opportunity (Raj Kapoor’s first appearance on screen was in the film *Inquilab* in 1935 when he was eleven). But the father was worried about early glory and the possible frustrations that would set in later in life and he put him through regular school. However, Raj Kapoor’s heart was not in his studies and he failed Latin at the Matriculation exam. Dejected and rebellious at the prospect of having to repeat the year, he confronted his father and said that he only wanted to learn about films, as that was his chosen line of work.
This failure in academics seems to have been a propelling factor for more than one artist. R.K. Narayan did not get through the University entrance examination in the first attempt due to failing in English, which was ironically his favorite subject. His family was one where everybody conversed in English at home and his father, who ordinarily was not too severe about his children failing a subject, was almost incredulous. The year he lost in education, though seems to have been significant otherwise, because that is when he started writing and thinking about being a writer. He says he used to leave home everyday for a walk around Kukanahalli tank with a book in his pocket. He could read what he pleased – which included Palgrave’s Golden Treasury or Tagore’s Gitanjali, or Keats, Shelley, Byron or Browning and many more authors. He himself describes how all his early writing was very similar to whatever author he was reading at the moment.

R.K. Laxman says that he cannot remember a time when he did not draw. As a child he was always drawing things on the floor, on the walls and any surface he could find. He reportedly started schooling late and as a young boy would spend his days observing things outside, running around the house, looking at things in his father’s room – and that is how he became attracted by some magazines that were lying there and much later by a cartoon of David Low whose work influenced his young mind. He reports an incident in school (the years are not specified), where his teacher asked each student to draw a leaf, any leaf. On seeing Laxman’s drawing, he asked him whether he had drawn it himself. Frightened at the possibility of a beating, Laxman had withdrawn. But the teacher instead held up the drawing for the class to see and congratulated the boy on his perfect leaf, giving him ten on ten and telling him that he would be an artist one day. This unexpected encouragement inspired Laxman and he says that is when he began thinking of himself as an artist. Another incident he reports of his later school times is when he was doodling during the mathematics class because he could not make head nor tail of the work they were set. Suddenly, he was pulled up by the ear and the slapped by the teacher who was angry that Laxman was making fun of him. Arguments arose on both ends and finally the dispute subsided. The point of dispute was a doodle of a tiger cub that Laxman had drawn in his exercise book. The teacher insisted that it was a distorted image of his, while Laxman pleaded that it was only a tiger cub. Of this incident, Laxman says in his autobiography, ‘…the vertical white red white caste mark on his forehead gave him a permanent frown. I could not help thinking that he resembled a tiger cub that I had seen in the zoo…many years later I realized, as I matured in my profession, that the confrontation with the teacher was indeed beneficial. It was a moment of discovery vital to my understanding of the art of caricature. Behind the mask of the teacher’s public face, a person like a tiger cub could be discerned…’

For Uday Shankar, the decision point came a little later in life when he was around twenty three or twenty four years of age. As a boy, he used to secretly go to see the nautch girls dance and draw crude figures of birds and animals with charcoal on the walls of his house. Ambika
Charan Mukherji, Uday’s drawing master was impressed with his work and would encourage him, introducing him to painting, photography, music and magic. Uday’s first inspiration to dance probably came from watching the performance of a Chamar (low caste) Mata Din on the outskirts of the village. Uday would try to copy his steps and perform for his mother. He developed an interest in sports, especially cricket, swimming and shooting, but never took to studies. The highest he reached in school was class VII. The moment of choice came for him after he had completed his studies at the Royal College of Art. His mentor William Rothenstein, Principal of the Royal College was fretting and fuming because he had heard that the prima donna Anna Pavlova was encouraging Uday to quit painting and come with her on a dance tour. Rothenstein was extremely reluctant to let his prize pupil go. In a crucial meeting in London between Rothenstein, Pavlova, Maharaja Rana Bhawani Singh (through whose good offices Uday had got admission into the Royal College) and Shyam Shankar (Uday’s father), Uday made his choice to dance.

Zohra Segal recounts an incident in school which she says for her was important. When she was ten years old, she played Jack in a school production of Jack and the Beanstalk. Later, she overheard her English teacher Miss Harvey telling someone, ‘This girl could earn ten pounds a week on the London stage.’ Zohra says in her memoirs, ‘I had absolutely no idea how much that was, but it sounded grand, and I felt as if I was already halfway to the moon! The sentence stuck in my mind and may even have spurred me on to choose acting as a career.’ Her moment of choice became evident when she wrote to her maternal uncle after her matriculation saying she did not want to get married, but wanted to go in for a career. On her way to London, at a hotel in Lebanon, Zohra started dancing in the corridor to the music floating up from the ballroom. Noting her cousin Mahmud’s appreciative glances, she became bold and began dancing the Ludi, a Punjabi folk dance. Mahmud apparently exclaimed, ‘Oh Zohra, how wonderfully you move. You should be a dancer!’ At that time she was also reading Isadora Duncan’s biography and all in all, she announced at breakfast the next day that she wanted to be a dancer. Soon after, she enrolled in a dance school in Germany and so began her career in the performing arts.

In the case of Mrinalini Sarabhai and Kamala Das, it has been a little difficult to identify specific incidents that clearly displayed their choice in life. Events of a personal nature dominated their teens – for Mrinalini it was the loss of her father when she was twelve and for Kamala it was marriage at the age of fifteen. Perhaps that made career choices fade into the background of their lives. But the other ten artists’ choice moments are similar in many ways to the ones that were described by the interviewees. The pattern of the choices occurring at a particular time in life led me to explore the underlying cause in theories of human development. Is it that all career choices get made the same way? What is different then about the Artistic Choice? Hence, in the following section, I briefly review important concepts of development as proposed by Erik Erikson, the leading psychologist in the area.
6.4. The Artistic Choice in the context of human development

The most famous theory of human development proposed by Erik Erikson talks about psychosocial development and arranges individual growth into a series of stages. According to his theory, middle childhood is the time when the conflict between Industry and Inferiority has to be sorted out. This conflict has to do with the child’s capacity for productive work. The nature of this work naturally varies from culture to culture. It is usually such a work as is valued in the environment within which the child lives. So while a child in the urban context would learn skills such as reading, counting, working the computer and other such scholastic tasks, a village child may learn to herd cattle, hunt, gather forest produce and so forth. When this conflict is successfully resolved, he says it leads to the virtue of Competence. The next stage that the child moves to is adolescence, where there is a conflict between Identity and Identity confusion. The central question in the drama of adolescence is ‘Who am I?’ The search for identity according to this theory is a lifelong process, but it comes into force during this time between the ages of 12 or 13 and up to 20 sometimes even the mid-twenties. A significant aspect of identity is the search for a meaningful career. When this conflict is successfully resolved, it leads to the virtue of Fidelity – a commitment to a set of values, people, ideology, religion, movement or even ethnic group.

Sudhir Kakar (1979) draws a parallel between these two stages and the *Brahmacharya ashrama* of the Hindu concept of human development that divides lifespan into four stages or *ashramas*. The equivalent of Competence and Fidelity in Hindu terms, he says, is Knowledge of *Dharma*. It is clear that Erikson’s stages can be discerned in the data generated from the interviews as well as the biographies. In every case there was a lot of exposure to the particular domain well in advance of the moment of choice. In most cases, there was even some skill-building that happened before the moment of choice. That exposure and skill-building I believe could be interpreted as working towards Competence in what each one saw as a socially valued skill. And the moment of choice reflects the point at which Identity gets resolved. That also explains why in some cases, the question of Identity resurfaces later in life, but the question of Competence rarely becomes an issue. Combining the two stages to say that this is when an individual becomes aware of his/ her *Dharma* is appealing. *Dharma* literally translated means Duty. But it stands for considerably more. It represents finding your personal mission in life relative to *Desha* (place), *Kala* (time), *Shrama* (work/ effort) and *Guna* (qualities that you have including caste). It is that against which everything in future will be evaluated and every decision will be guided by Dharma. This metaphysical interpretation of *Dharma* more accurately describes the mission that each artist focuses his/ her life on. It captures the element of Higher Purpose often attributed to artistic choices.
Established theory about human development therefore explains why these moments occurred in the lives of the artists at the time when they did. But the decisions are qualitatively different (and perhaps unique to artists) from those made by most other people at the same stage in several ways:

i. The decision is not based on material/monetary considerations—the viability of a course of action is secondary. If money is an issue they take up other jobs to support themselves. But each and every one of them is very clear that their calling lies in the arts. Shiva, Geeta, and Soumita have pursued dual careers either due to financial need or to maintain their independence. Cyrus worked for a while in architecture until his work in sculpture picked up. Pavan, Avik, Anjan, Rajeev, Dinesh, and a few others all do a considerable amount of commercial work in their own and related domains. Siddharth lived off his savings from earlier jobs while he was establishing himself as a singer. Among many of the biographed artists there are instances of financial constraints even dire poverty that had to be lived through to fulfill their dream—such as Kelucharan Mohapatra, Bhimsen Joshi, Guru Dutt, Uday Shankar and many others. The monetary consideration clearly did not operate in their choice of an artistic life.

ii. In most cases, the choice of an artistic life is not spoken of as a ‘career’ with its connotations of considered choice, competition, external reward, and worldly success. The decision is often made with very little information about prospects in a field.

iii. That is not to say that they did not think about the choice they were making. Data suggests that they mostly thought of nothing else during that time. The moments are charged with passion. The decisions are a curious mix of confidence and submission; confidence in their ability, fire to excel on one hand and an awareness that there is much more than their own ability at work.

iv. While many of the artists did get a supportive environment (family support primarily) during the Competence stage of skill building, they were not expected to make their mainstay out of art. MS’s mother would have had her married and settled, Bhimsen Joshi’s father known for his erudite scholarship would have preferred his son to study, R.K. Narayan faced a lot of skepticism even from his family at the time when he was struggling, Rajeev’s and Anurag’s parents would have preferred them to qualify as engineers, Venkat and Soumya still teach in addition to their artistic work, and so on. In the very least, each of them has gone through some tense moments, despite having the most supportive families, when they were on the brink of making a definite commitment.

v. The paths chosen are considerably more difficult than they would be had they been mainstream. The artist needs to endure much more than exam anxiety, more stress than having to find friends in a new college or work environment, more complexity in task
than just finishing some work to a deadline, more ambiguity than wondering about what
questions will appear in an exam or what performance rating will be given at the end of
the year, and more hostile interfaces than just peers and benevolent seniors. A small
number such as Soumita chose to pursue a dual career so as to balance the problems in
one off with the upside of the other. But for the large part, artists seem to take the bull by
the horns when it comes to these type of challenges.

What I mean to say by highlighting these five points is that the ingredients of the decision are
different from that of an average would-be MBA, engineer, lawyer, graduate in mass
communications, accountant, or army/ navy recruit. A look at the three non-artists interviewed
might clarify the point. All the three had deep amounts of exposure to artistic options. Rajesh, a
chartered accountant in employment with a corporate is very sure that he is in the career of
choice. He learnt violin briefly, but gave up music as his focus was more on achievement in
academics. In his words, ‘…they tried to teach me violin because my mother’s sister plays, but I
did not pursue. I tried tennis too, but studies used to dominate. My focus was on my career. My
father wanted me to be an engineer…I liked Physics a lot, but in 11th and 12th, I found I enjoyed
accounts…I used to like things with problems to solve. So I studied BCom and then CA and got
straight into working life…it’s a very job-oriented life. I was never attracted to arts much. I listen
to really good music of any genre but am not so passionate.’

Sameer who is a qualified engineer said about his tryst with music, ‘When I was maybe five
or six years old, I started playing the flute, learning from mom. I used to practice quite a lot until
12 years or so there was an upward learning curve in music. Afterwards I lost interest in Carnatic
music. I had talent, I won competitions did small stage performances, etc…But I wanted to try
Hindustani music which I learnt during 10th, 11th and 12th. I even did a couple of small
concerts…later became part of a college band where I used to play a mix of pop, soft music and
Hindustani. But I was never so keen to develop…no inner force to become excellent by practicing
everyday…I did not have the drive to create in music so I did not become an artist. I was not
really interested. This (my engineering business) is what I have been doing for the last six years.
The market is good, it’s a niche market. Once that started picking up, I did not pursue
music…Music not being a part of my life is not a planned thing. I discovered my career along the
way. I did not know whether what I was doing was right or wrong until last year. Now I know
where I am headed.’

Rajesh, of course is older than Sameer and the firmness with which his life choices have set in
confirms that maturity. However, in Sameer’s case, the life choice has only just settled into a
trajectory of movement. Both men display a greater identification with their non-artist fathers than
with their artist mothers. For example, Sameer shared, ‘My father was instrumental in deciding
about my career. He knew the business, so I had that comfort.’ Gender may have had something
to do with it (a popular Freudian interpretation comes to mind), but the instances of artists coming from completely non-artistic backgrounds or arts sensitive backgrounds (where neither parent can be a role model to identify with) indicates that this might not be true for all people.

Sandhya comes from a family where both parents are artists and she writes as Dance Editor for a lifestyle and events publication. She was the youngest person that I interviewed and she clearly said that her choices were as yet fluid. She said, ‘I grew up learning dancing. I learnt until I was fifteen years old. I took a hiatus for by board exams and since then have not gone back to dance. I realized my priorities lay elsewhere. Writing about dance just happened. I love sports too and reading the news, but I don’t think I can escape this (art). I would love to do more dance reviews, not just of classical dance. I love watching movies, maybe even more than watching dance (her father is an award-winning film-maker), and perhaps one day I would like to write a script. I am an artistic person, maybe as I write I am a journalist. But I am not an Artist…but this might change…am only twenty seven now…’ It is possible that Sandhya will decide to live a completely artistic life in the future.

What is interesting is that in all three interviews, despite asking the question in many different ways, I was unable to ferret out any major crystallizing experiences. They had all had exposure to the arts and to other streams of study, but there was no “a-ha” moment pursuant to which they committed to their careers. There was also no major change of direction or inflection in their history at the point when they made their choice. Three is a very small number, and perhaps if more individuals in different streams of work were interviewed, there will be more clarity on this point. The reason these three were sought out for the interview is that they had the exposure and background and they chose not to pursue the arts. The choice moment, however, has been difficult to pin-point. It’s more a case of art fading out in the face of other priorities. This, in a reverse sort of way, highlights how different it is to actively choose the arts, and how different are the individuals who are the focus of this study. There were no particular patterns that emerged in the way these experiences organized themselves. There were no gender differences and there was no point of difference between those coming from Artistic Heritage, Arts Sensitive and Non-Artistic backgrounds. What inspires an individual to chose an artistic life and the process by which the choice to live an artistic life is made is quite independent of the background that they come from. This possibly explains how so many people from a non-artistic background also take the plunge into the arts. Building on this data, I propose the following hypotheses:

*In general the choice to lead an artistic life happens at a turning point in an individual’s life which coincides with an at least partial resolution of the search for identity. The moment of choice (to lead an artistic life) is usually preceded by some powerful crystallizing experience. This moment of choice is a charged one, much more so for artists than other mainstream fields of work.*
6.5. Chapter Summary

Paplia and Olds (1992) in their text book on human development make an interesting statement. They say that the sense of self might seem the most personal thing in the world, but most researchers see it as the meeting point of the individual and society. Middle childhood seems to be the appointed time for that meeting. The choice to be an artist appears to take place anywhere between middle childhood to the mid-twenties. Even if the individual has entered a domain earlier by starting training in early childhood, the choice to commit a lifetime of work to the domain only happens when the question of identity is resolved. This choice for artists is often preceded by powerful crystallizing experiences, “a-ha” moments that brought their attention to bear on the thing that would be their passion for life. There are in some instances corresponding paralyzing experiences that serve to turn off the individual away from other (competing) avenues of work and life. The question of identity may resurface later in life, but the choice moment always coincides with at least partial resolution of identity. For artists, this moment of choice is full of emotional charge, colored often by disagreements in the family, difficulties entering the field and lack of knowledge of what lies ahead. Nevertheless, the moment is an important melting point that channelizes the artists energy into their chosen field for the rest of their lives. The Artistic Mind and Artistic Personality may play a role in propelling the person to decide to lead an artistic life, but there are environmental factors that may equally contribute to this decision and these are examined in the next chapter – The Artistic Environment.