



2024 (06), 2022. Courtesy of Prarthna Singh and TARQ

CULTURE & LIVING

What does it mean to be young in India today? A new art research project attempts to find out

In Prarthna Singh and Snigdha Poonam's new art research project, *2024: Notes from a Generation*, the youth of India speak through dynamic portraits and audio recordings

BY NIDHI GUPTA
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Mumbai's Tarq art gallery has been wearing the atmosphere of an after-hours college canteen lately. There are the faces, distantly familiar in the way people seem when they exist in the same orbit: young people in their hijabs, denim jackets, coloured hair, cool black shirts, silver chains, piercings, tattoos, sharp corporate vests and diamante-encrusted Chanel knockoffs. There are voices and murmurs in the distance that may or may not be meant for your ears: young people candidly discussing their life stories, dreams, devastating setbacks and everyday victories.

In Prarthna Singh and Snigdha Poonam's new art research project, *2024: Notes from a Generation*, the youth of India speak through dynamic portraits and audio recordings. Here, there's intimacy in anonymity—the kind you experience when you have a no-holds-barred conversation with a complete stranger on an airplane. There are no captions, name-tags or identifiers of any kind. But in just a look or a line in this show, you can glean more about the experience of being young in India right now than many consultancy-commissioned studies.



2024 (03), 2020. Courtesy of Prarthna Singh and IARQ

2024: *Notes from a Generation* began in 2019, right after the elections. Singh, the Mumbai-based photographer-artist had recently self-published a book documenting the events of Shaheen Bagh. After the elections, she suspected that it was important to move beyond “our echo chambers” and understand what the youth of India was really thinking. And so she put in a call to Poonam, who had, in 2018, published the groundbreaking book of narrative non-fiction *Dreamers*, and with whom she’d just worked on a story for *The Economist* about a TikTok star from Uttar Pradesh.

“The idea was to build an archive, a historical record of this time in India’s political and cultural history, through the perspective of young people—the absolute youngest generation that you can speak of,” says Poonam, the Ranchi-born, London-based journalist-author. “They are the people who will inherit the decades to come and shape the future.”



2024 (06), 2022. Courtesy of Prarthna Singh and IARQ

Singh and Poonam spoke with a cross-section of Indian youth across five years and four cities—their birthplaces Jajpur and Ranchi, and their adopted homes Mumbai and Delhi. They collaborated with fixers, casting directors and NGOs that register young people to vote and undertook a vast research project that involved “deep listening” to their stories.

Over the last five years, they set up “survey style tents” in each of these cities, inviting over 100 people between the ages of 18 and 25 to talk into a dictaphone and pose for a film camera. “We could have 100% done this in a studio, but we wanted to remove that element of formality and I wanted natural light,” says Singh. 26 of those people make it into *2024: Notes from a Generation*, which has been a completely self-funded project from the start.

In the course of the project, several overlapping themes emerged. “They’re all talking about different things, but a lot was common,” says Poonam. “Every single person talked about their fascinatingly complex relationships with their families; anxiety about work and career and education; identities, not just in terms of gender and sexuality, but even just who you want to be. Their views or take on the world that surrounds them – their political



2024 (19), 2023. Courtesy of Prarthna Singh and IARQ

What they also discovered was the youth’s dissatisfaction with holding just one job. “We met so many people who had a part-time gig, which is a global trend,” says Poonam. “You have a chef who’d also sell LIC policies and a carpenter who’s also a delivery partner for Swiggy. They might have 2-3 jobs but many of them were still preparing for and attempting any government exam they were eligible for.”

Above all, they were both stunned by the quantum of change that has been wrought by technology and social media. “When you hear a 19-year-old saying, ‘I have a YouTube channel with these many million followers and I’m actually making money off that’, that completely throws me off,” says Singh. “I didn’t have this kind of access at 19, of course, but I wonder, even if I did have the access, would I have had the capability to utilise it in this manner?” The photographer observes that “this generation is growing up not only with the people who are physically around them but with the millions they are connecting with online.”



2024 (22), 2023. Courtesy of Parthna Singh and TARQ

Singh and Poonam did not want to treat their stories as anecdotal, nor did they want them to come across as nostalgic or romantic. “They’re incredibly urgent,” says Singh. Poonam adds, “They are very individual stories but they exist on an interconnected web. This is a meta-narrative of what it means to be young in India today.”

And why is that important? To paraphrase curator Skye Arundhati Thomas’s show notes, each individual in *2024* is a sprightly protagonist of this chaotic and complicated moment in the history of India, and of the world. Beyond the chest-thumping that is encoded in the phrase “demographic dividend”, the artists hope to highlight the nuance, individuality and diversity of India’s youth. “We wanted to create greater understanding and more room for empathy, and encourage the audience to see these individual stories as a historical record.”

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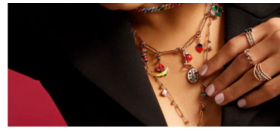
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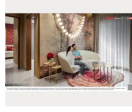
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