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Dreamers and Doers

A multimedia collaboration between a photographer and a writer asks what it means to be young in India today

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LOVE DOESN'T DIE. It just changes form. "Mera ghar hai. Meri marzi hai (It is my house. I'll do what I please.)" "Nothing is really evil. Nothing is really good. These are just contexts we've created."

These are just a handful of voices that can be heard at 2024: *Notes from a Generation*, a multimedia collaboration between author Snigdha Poonam and photographer Prarthna Singh. Mounted at Mumbai's Tarq, and curated by Skye Arundhati Thomas, the show brings together portraits and a soundscape, which together create a montage of India's young adults.

To walk into Tarq is to leave the hurry-burry of Mumbai's Fort and to arrive at a cocoon of mellow light and muted sounds. Here portraits (of varying sizes, from 11 by 17 inches to 38 by 28 inches) stare down at the viewer from every wall. One is immediately struck by the absence of smiling faces. A hint of the slightest grin might be seen on the rare face, but no rows of teeth sneak out. Each of the nameless and untitled portraits make direct and unblinking eye contact with the viewer. The straightforward and serious gaze of the people in the pictures, foregrounded against pastel backgrounds, makes them prophets of the future and not passport photos of today. This encounter might unsettle a viewer, but the intent is precisely that. Are we leaving behind a better country and planet for our young people? Will they get what they deserve in the years to come? Will their potential be realised? Or are we passing on to them a heating and drying Earth, and a less kind and more cruel reality? The faces that look out from the frames are not meant to soothe the viewer, instead they are meant to rattle, forcing us to question our legacy, and their inheritance.

While looking at these faces, voices drift through the background on speakers. Depending on your position and attention, you might catch a word or phrase. A pair of




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headphones and seats provide the opportunity to listen with full absorption. Here a viewer hears snippets of conversations between these young people and Poonam. As an interviewer Poonam is a spectre. We are aware of her presence only through her 'ums' and 'ah' fillers, and the rare clarification. In this recording, the viewer/ listener overhears only a dozen-plus voices from the over 100-plus people the duo spoke to and photographed. Through the voices of India's youth, we get to hear of difficult childhoods and complicated relationships, digital dreams and gender battles. The blare of a horn, the sputtering of an autorickshaw and the occasional cry of a peacock punctuate these conversations, endowing the project with veracity.

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Singh and Poonam started working on this project exactly five years ago, and they knew from the start that they wanted to mount it in 2024 before the general elections. India is one of the 64 countries that goes to the polls this year. They had both just worked together on a story for *The Economist's 1843* on India's TikTok sensation Israil Ansari, who had more than two million followers and "is hellbent on world domination". "No one can stop me," he says in Poonam's September 2019 article, perhaps, echoing the sentiment of many of the young people in this show.

When I meet Mumbai-based Singh at Tarq, she explains *Notes from a Generation* is a way to "tell a larger story through tender, individual stories". Here the personal belongs to more than just the individual. We see 20-plus faces here, and hear a dozen-plus voices, but woven together we get a snapshot of India's youth. As Poonam says, "In each of these cases it's not one person's story. Along with the sound piece, you get a meta narrative: what it means to be a young person in India today."



By piecing both together we realise that the young of today are thinking beyond categories like 'male' and 'female', and some of them truly see gender as 'fluid'. They are not one-trick ponies; instead they've multiple interests from rapping to creating YouTube channels. They are also consciously constructing themselves both for social media and beyond. They are both this and that.



Speaking from Delhi, Poonam (a journalist, and author of *Dreamers: How Young Indians are Changing their World*, 2018) says, "In nearly every conversation that I had there was the aspect of the young person who was sitting across me talking about an obstacle, and these were a wide range of obstacles, even when the external circumstances were widely different. These young people are struggling with some of the common hurdles— finding opportunities, forming

Photographs by Prarthna Singh at 2024: *Notes from a Generation*
(Photos courtesy: Prarthna Singh and Tarq)

across the world, says the

identities, struggling for freedoms.”

Singh, a photographer, whose work has appeared in galleries and publications across the world, says the project started in 2019 as an “exercise in deep listening”.

Back then, both Singh and Poonam felt that as chroniclers of the present (as journalist and photographer) they did not quite have their ear to the ground. In her individual capacity she wanted to figure out a way to “see and listen better”.

AS THIS WAS A COMPLETELY self-funded project, they decided to shoot each ‘chapter’ in the four cities they were most familiar with. Poonam’s hometown is Ranchi and she had worked for many years in Delhi. Singh is from Jaipur, and had made Mumbai her home. They shot their first chapter in Jaipur in January 2020. The background colour of each portrait is a hat tip to their cities, reveals Singh. Green is for Ranchi, cream for the DDA houses of Delhi, blue for Mumbai and pink for the Pink City.

The set-up was easy enough; a simple makeshift tent in an open space. They chose consciously to eschew a formal studio, and opt for a more ‘jugaad’ setup to keep the conversations organic and not performative. Singh says, “The idea was to maintain informality in the structures we had.” To get the most diverse voices, they reached out to a host of sources—from local journalists to casting agents to researchers to someone who registers young voters—to identify several 18-25-year-olds (essentially first-time voters). The voices range from labourers to college students to Flipkart workers to chartered accountants. In the tent, Singh would shoot them, while in another corner at the same time, Poonam would speak to them, recorder by her side.

The atmosphere at the tent was often chaotic with people showing up with friends and family. At times, they arrived thinking they’d been called for a job interview, and Poonam would have to disabuse them of such mistaken notions. Having handed out chai or Fanta, Poonam would ask them the broadest question, “*Apne baare mein kuch bata sakte hai?* (Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?)” Used to the rigours of journalism, and the tyranny of the news peg, Poonam found it liberating to ask people questions devoid of any agenda. When she thought, a man was going to talk of the state of the nation, he told her about his child marriage, and how he was now in a dilemma as it was time for his bride to come home. By sharing snippets of her conversations with the audience, this is the first time Poonam exposes her “raw material” to the world. And this again allowed her to truly enjoy the act of listening, and to not be bogged down by sculpting the interviews into an article for publication.



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Parthna Singh
photographer

Just as Poonam shares her raw material with the world, Singh ensures that the project retains all its authenticity. She says, “The idea we often returned to in this work was truth telling, especially at a time when we are surrounded by the devil of misinformation, how do we represent our individual truths?” To adhere to the truth-telling aspect of the project, Singh shot all these young individuals on film and got the photographs developed in a dark room in London, minimising the possibilities of manipulation.

Over the five years that they’ve worked on this project, both have come to realise that many of their expectations have been upended and new paradigms needed to be set. This is not a generation

built on Facebook. To contact them, Singh and Poonam would often reach out on Instagram, or even leave comments on their posts. These young adults are learning about events like the liberalisation of the 1990s or the Godhra riots, for the first time, and often from YouTube. The young are also multi-hyphenate personalities, and are the first generation that is determined to build its own brand. Many might be jobless in the conventional sense, but they are using the gig economy (working as Swiggy delivery boys or Uber drivers) to make ends meet. While on one hand, they can be applauded for their entrepreneurial spirit, Poonam says if the coin is flipped, there is a darker side, which hints at building one’s own audience to fend off livelihood insecurity. She says, “I came to see that no matter what you were doing, you were at a fashion institute or becoming a doctor, you still had a sense that you need to have something more than that. That was

both interesting and exciting, but also worrying. This whole audience building has become a generational thing.”



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A viewer to the gallery will not pick up each of these aspects of today’s young people, which Poonam and Singh identify. The open-ended quality of *2024: Notes from a Generation* allows viewers to arrive at their own conclusions. I see a young man in a beige shirt and the first hints of facial hair staring at me. I conclude that he is the man in the sound piece who says, “*Humare paas kuch nahi tha, 10 rupey nahi tha.* (I had not even `10 on me). *Dilli etna vyasth shahar hai.* (Delhi is such a busy city).” Finding no refuge, he turned to begging, only to discover that people seldom give money to the young. I see the portrait of a young woman in a hijab with a ‘Hello Kitty’ on her jacket and imagine that maybe she is the one who grew up in a mixed neighbourhood and is familiar with the

customs of others, who says on the sound piece, “I feel people know too little about my religion. I feel am I too invisible that people are not acknowledging my existence?” These connections are mine alone. And every viewer will come to their own conclusions. We need to pay heed to each of these voices and faces as they represent not the one, but the many. As the curator Skye Arundhati Thomas writes of the exhibition, the only way to create a better understanding between people is “by listening to individual stories not simply as anecdotes but as historical and political records.”

2024: Notes from a Generation highlights the importance of breaking out of our own echo chambers and listening to others. By bringing together voices and portraits we can imagine that the young adults of today are doers and dreamers, followers and rebels. As Singh says, “I am selfish as an artist. I am always looking for moments where I am surrounded by hope. One thing I was left with was how these young people are always trying to bring about change.”

(*2024: Notes from a Generation* by Prarthna Singh and Snigdha Poonam runs at Tarq, Mumbai, till May 11)

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Photographs by Prarthna Singh at *2024: Notes from a Generation* | photography

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