

ESSAY

Meet India's Generation Z

The people who will shape the country's next decades came of age during the Modi era.

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By [Snigdha Poonam](#), an independent journalist in New Delhi and the author of *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World*.



Photos from "2024: Notes From a Generation" show young people in the cities of Jaipur, Mumbai, New Delhi, and Ranchi were taken between January 2020 and December 2023. PHOTOS BY PRARTHNA SINGH

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India changes more in five years than many countries would in a

quarter century. This is partly because it is still relatively young: The country gained independence just 76 years ago, and nearly half of its population is under the age of 25. As one would expect, then, much has happened in the five years since 2019, when Indian voters issued an overwhelming mandate to keep the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in power.

Shortly after reelection, the Modi government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir its special autonomous status, fulfilling a long-held promise to its Hindu base. The next year, COVID-19 arrived, and the country became one of the most tragic sites of the pandemic. In 2021, the government barely intervened as thousands of people died waiting for hospital beds and oxygen tanks.

Last year, India hosted the annual G-20 summit with the pomp of a country that had much to teach



the righteous leaders or the Western democratic world. With the next general election approaching, the BJP has doubled down on its key priorities. In January,

Modi appeared in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya to inaugurate a grand temple to the Hindu warrior-god Ram at the same site where Hindu nationalists demolished a 16th-century mosque in 1992. He called the current era a “[new dawn](#).”

Something else took place in the last five years: India overtook China to become the world’s most populous country, with 1.4 billion people. A key driver of this population boom is the country’s youth. They face the hopes as well as the harsh realities of India as it stands today—and they will determine which way it goes from here. How have they viewed the events shaping India and the world since 2019, and who will have their vote?

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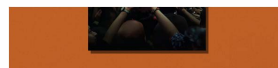
Between 2019 and today, I have interviewed more than 100 young

adults across India through my reporting and research. My first book, *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing the World*, was published in 2018, and I wondered how much had changed. I began reporting *Dreamers* one month after Modi first became prime minister in 2014—a time of hope for India’s youth, many of whom believed that the new leader would break down barriers between them and their dreams.

Just before COVID-19 hit in 2020, I embarked on a collaboration with the photographer Prarthna Singh to depict India’s young generation through portraits and conversations with people ages 18 to 25. In the years between the 2019 and 2024 national elections, the project, titled “2024: Notes From a Generation,” took us to the small towns where we grew up and the big cities we now call home. No two conversations were alike: The people we met represented diverse backgrounds, cultural values, and political leanings.

Themes began to emerge. Most of the individuals we interviewed were dealing with challenges rooted in the political, social, and economic contexts of today’s India. These conversations comprised a historical record of a particularly fraught moment in the country’s journey. How young Indians confront the hurdles they are up against—whether finding jobs, forming identities, or exercising freedoms—will shape their own lives and India’s trajectory.

The “2024: Notes from a Generation” project began in Jaipur, Singh’s hometown, in a tent we set up on the roof of her parents’ house. Two conversations there came to represent opposite viewpoints on today’s India and young people’s place in it. Saba Naz, who was 21 years old in 2020, arrived on a cold morning wearing a denim jacket and a hijab. She was enrolled in a medical college to pursue dentistry and focused keenly on her studies.



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However, things were heating up at Naz's college in Jaipur. One day, a teacher asked the students about their views on the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which grants a pathway to citizenship for religious minorities from neighboring countries but excludes Muslims. (The CAA was implemented this March.) When a classmate said the law was necessary, Naz, who is Muslim, couldn't keep quiet. "I got up and confronted him," she said. "I asked, 'What is the need for this when the Indian Constitution already has a dedicated law dealing with asylum-seekers?'" The teacher shut her down.

In 2019, India's Supreme Court also issued a judgment allowing for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya—a decision that was controversial because the temple was to be built on the site of a mosque torn down by a Hindu mob. Naz was increasingly disillusioned with the situation in India. She started to closely follow the women-led protests against the CAA in Shaheen Bagh, Delhi. When a demonstration was organized in Jaipur, Naz went along with her sister to see what it was about. She returned the next day and the day after.

When I met her in January 2020, Naz had just entered the world of political protest, but she knew she was in it for the long haul. I have since met many young Muslim women who were inspired by the Shaheen Bagh protests. In an increasingly polarized country, Naz felt that she couldn't afford to be indifferent. She now had responsibilities beyond her plan to graduate college and open her own clinic. "As young people, we have to ask questions and demand change," she said.

A few hours after meeting Naz, I interviewed Lokendra Singh Raythaliya, then 23, who was on a mission to mobilize local youth to back the government on the CAA. Raythaliya had just filed his nomination for student union president in an upcoming election at the University of Rajasthan. The students would vote for him, he said, because they knew he stood up for causes related to the BJP's nation-building.

Raythaliya joined the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, a student party affiliated with the BJP. He was inspired by Modi's own journey into politics—like himself, the prime minister came from nowhere, he said: "I grew up in a village near Jaipur. My father drives a truck, earning 10,000 rupees [around \$125] a month. I am the first person in my family to go to college." Raythaliya argued that Modi's success challenged the system in which only people with wealth or connections could advance in politics.

ABOUT THE PROJECT: "2024: Notes From a Generation," featuring portraits and a soundscape, will be on display at Mumbai's TARQ gallery from March 8 to May 11.

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Raythaliya also admired the prime minister for keeping his word, whether on removing Article 370 or building the Ram temple in Ayodhya: "Whatever he says he will do, he does." The student leader believed that India's biggest problems were poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality, but the fact that Modi hadn't tackled them yet didn't make him think any less of the prime minister's capability. He gave me several reasons why he continues to have faith. I would hear them again and again: "He is working day and night," "He is changing India's image in the world," "He is taking India into the 21st century."

Naz and Raythaliya were alike in many ways: ambitious and opinionated, each driven by their responsibility as young people to change things for the better. Naz would like to see her country adhere to the secular ideals enshrined in its constitution, while Raythaliya envisions an India where individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal opportunities as those born into privilege.

However, Raythaliya was working toward the BJP's vision of India, which seems to be no place for a young Muslim woman with big dreams. He was focused on his own prospects, blending business and politics. "We have to do something by ourselves," Raythaliya said. "I have to support my family. It can't run on my father's salary as a driver."

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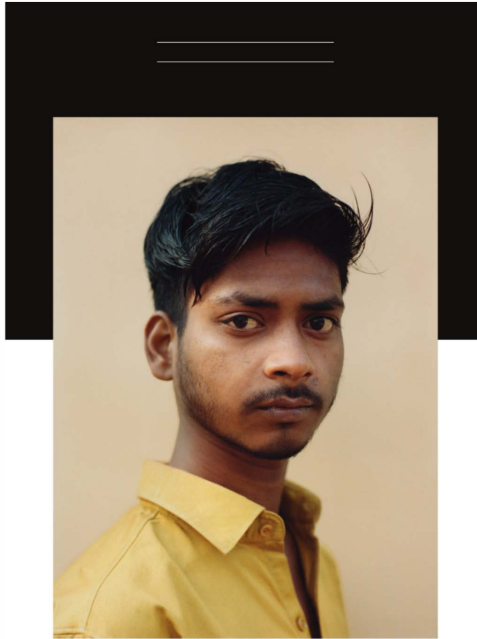
India's youth face significant obstacles to social and economic mobility.

The country's job market is shrinking, and education and skills hardly help people gain entry. As of 2021, 1 in 5 college graduates in India was unemployed, according to the Mumbai-based Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). In rural areas, working-age individuals are increasingly lining up for manual labor provided by the government's wage-guarantee scheme. Based on the latest government data, those with full-time employment are not seeing their salaries increase.

Despite India's economy growing by about 7 percent annually, many young people feel it has nothing to offer them. The CMIE notes a troubling trend of people withdrawing from the job market, with the labor participation rate falling from 46 percent in 2017 to 40 percent in 2022. The frustration among job seekers is palpable, and discontent has led to riots, such as those in 2022 in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Most job seekers resign themselves to low-paid casual work or self-employment. Across India, I have run into young people who keep two jobs at a time: a chef who sells insurance policies, a carpenter who makes deliveries for a food start-up, a call center employee who draws additional income as a web designer. Some were also preparing for examinations for government jobs, but few genuinely entertained the chance of landing one.

Last year in New Delhi, I met Mithun Kumar, a 19-year-old who had recently migrated from provincial Bihar, near the border with Nepal, to join a fast-growing workforce of underpaid gig workers. Between 10 million and 15 million people work as freelancers for Indian start-ups serving the needs of the country's urban elite: commuting, delivering food, and online shopping. Kumar delivered packages for an e-commerce company that assigned him work through a mobile app. Some months, he made as much as 15,000 rupees (around \$187) and could send some home to his family.



Mithun Kumar | New Delhi | 2023

Kumar liked the freedom to work when he wanted to, but three months into the gig, he was feeling restless about his work status. He could earn money, but he didn't have a job. His employers owed him nothing, and each day was unpredictable. He heard the He heard the company was going to change the app so that the delivery workers could no longer refuse a job during their designated hours.

company was going to change the app so that the delivery workers could no longer refuse a job during their designated hours. Kumar loved exploring the big city, but he wouldn't stay long. An uncle running a motor repair shop in Nepal had asked him to join him, working without pay for a few years but learning a real skill. He thought it was time to move on.

Few of the young men I interviewed connected their poor job prospects to the BJP's performance, instead viewing their bleak futures as a personal failure. Ramesh Kumar, who toiled in factories and construction sites, reasoned that a society can only function if the rich remained rich and the poor remained poor. The ire of those who did blame the country's leaders fizzled when confronted with their electoral choices. India, many of them told me, needed a strong leader, after all.



By comparison, the young women I spoke with were angrier: at their families, for not allowing them even small freedoms; at society, for judging them; and at the political system, for keeping India from becoming a place that values women's ambitions. In Jaipur, 23-year-old Chanchal Rajawat told me that her biggest wish was that the men in her family would respect the views of their female relatives. As a child, she believed that if women earned an independent income, men would listen to what they had to say.

Gradually, Rajawat realized that wouldn't be enough. Neither her sister-in-law, who has a postgraduate degree, nor her sister, who draws a higher salary than her husband, can make their own decisions or spend their own money, she said. "It was clear to me that I would have to become an IAS officer," she added, referring to the Indian Administrative Service, the government's premier civil service. Her father said only then would she be allowed to choose where she lives and works. Since then, Rajawat's single mission has been to ace the IAS entrance exam, a test so difficult that less than 1 percent of candidates succeed.

She is confident she will pass, and after she does, she intends to give herself the liberty to have fun for the first time in her life. "I will go out at night, go to a pub, have a few drinks, roam the streets," Rajawat said.

Across different cities, I met young women who were using education and employment to forge new paths for themselves. In New Delhi, I spoke to a woman who had run away from her home in Bihar to enroll at a university, demanding that her father pay her college fees or else she would file a domestic abuse complaint. Last year, in Mumbai's Bandra suburb, 18-year-old [Saniya MQ](#) told me that she taught herself to rap so she could "become someone" instead of dropping out of school to get married, like most other girls she knew. She already had a busy performance schedule and an album to her name.



Supriya Kumari | Ranchi | 2021



Having only one job is not enough to support one's family. In 2021 in Ranchi, Jharkhand, I met Supriya Kumari, who started her day at a soccer field coaching young players and finished in a car showroom handling phone calls from customers. In the same city, Arti Kumari worked full time as a gym trainer while also giving private karate classes. For the young women I met, a job was much more than a source of income. It gave them agency and confidence to engage with the outside world.

In 2019, 3 out of 5 respondents in a [survey](#) of first-time female voters said they would vote without the interference of their families. Traditionally, their votes favored the opposition Indian National Congress party, but that changed with Modi's rising popularity. By 2018, according to pre-election polls, the BJP seemed to have [plugged](#) the women's vote gap. From his early days as prime minister, Modi addressed women directly, envisioned welfare schemes targeted at their specific needs, and projected masculine authority. Many female voters I spoke to ahead of the 2019 election said they would opt for the BJP in gratitude. Post-2019 poll [surveys](#) showed the party's vote share was only marginally higher among men than women.

This year, women are expected to turn out in [equal numbers](#) to men. Yet Modi and his party might have to try harder in 2024. With every major political party seeking to court female voters, their electoral choices could carry more weight. In polling areas where welfare schemes are not the key factor influencing voters' behavior, a new generation of women may prioritize different issues.



No clear alternative has presented itself for young people who have

made up their minds against Modi. In some regions, voters make different party choices for state and national polls. In the eastern state of Jharkhand, those I interviewed from Indigenous backgrounds stressed the need to protect their ways of life and uphold their land and property rights. In the western state of Maharashtra, Yogesh Padmukh, a 19-year-old building supervisor, was leaning toward a political alliance centered on the interests of Muslims and Dalits.

But at the national level, few people expressed a strong preference when it came to non-BJP contenders. Even former Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi, who journeyed across the country on a march to "unite India" in 2022 and 2023, seemed to have limited appeal to those who oppose India's current trajectory. The only place I saw palpable support for Gandhi was Kerala, where he won a parliamentary seat in 2019. In Kozhikode, Kerala, last December, student protesters [blocked the entry](#) of the state governor, whose appointment they saw as the BJP's effort to gain a foothold in a state where calls for Hindu supremacy have little electoral currency.

That holds for a large part of southern India, a divergence that the BJP is trying to undo. It is succeeding in small pockets. In Tamil Nadu, Balaji Selavan, a 24-year-old who works in cybersecurity, admitted that many among his influential community of Tamil Brahmins were increasingly drawn to Modi's leadership style. They applauded the stock market's performance under what appears to be a stable government and celebrated India's successful mission to land a spacecraft on the moon. But Selavan said he still did not quite grasp what was so great about Modi. "He is all show and no substance," he said.

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