Since its very beginnings, Auroville has been a magnet for the youth of the villages around. Many have been particularly receptive - they have committed themselves to the project and have become talented actors in Auroville life. Poovizhi is 24 - she was born in Edayanchavadi on Auroville’s birthday, the 28th of February, in 1996. She has recently decided to join Auroville. In this exchange between Poovizhi and Rakhal of the YUCCA Newcomer Program, we see the long-time links of the past 50 years, and the inspiring role that Auroville has played for so many village youth.

Acres for Auroville sincerely thanks Poovizhi for this sharing, and Rakhal for conducting the interview for us.

A4A: Can you tell us about your childhood and youth in the village and how your relation with Auroville developed?

Poovizhi: My parents were not in relation with Auroville but they chose Udavi School for my elder sister Bhuvana’s education. Udavi was the first outreach school of Auroville - a school inspired by integral education where different volunteers coming from the world would contribute. We had a government school in our village at that time but I didn’t want to go there. For Udavi, there was a lot of competition, my parents took me very late and for me the admissions were closed. I was 3 years-old but I was stubborn and very determined to study in the same school as my sister. So I took my sister’s uniform, wore it and went to the school. I don’t remember what I said but my parents told me that I was crying... and Sanjeev, the director, agreed for me to join Udavi School when I was just 3 years old.

At Udavi, slowly, slowly, we developed our English and that has made drastic changes in my life. I can’t imagine what would have been if I would have studied in a government school - I wouldn’t be able to talk in English, to be in such contact with Auroville and I wouldn’t be talking to you now here. I also learnt different things from the school like how to express myself and how to connect within myself, how to be creative and how to concentrate, how to connect with strangers and to come out of my fear.
When I was in 8th grade, I was 12 or 13 years old, I had an English teacher called Payal who gave us different ideas to write about ourselves, for example, what we wanted to become and how to find who we are, what is our purpose in life. I was young but I was curious about it: “What is the purpose of me being here?” It made me think a lot about myself but I didn’t find any answer at that time. I just wrote something and I went to her to check if it was the right answer ... and she said “You need to find what is right by yourself”. Then I asked her “Did you find yours?” She replied: “Yes, I have almost found what my purpose is and you need to find it for yourself. You have time for that, search within yourself”. So these questions made me ask within myself and connect within. Sometimes it would be through very simple things. For example, we would put a flower in a jug and then concentrate on it and see what came in our mind, and then make a drawing of what we saw. Or write poems and share them with everyone in the assembly. All these things made us connect within.
We had other good teachers and were only 16 children in a class. Instead of academic books, we learned through projects on whatever we wanted to study - when we studied Biology we created our own skeleton. And we watched a lot of different movies. Udavi School allowed us to explore and get acquainted with different things in Auroville and this is how I got connected with Auroville.

After my school days in Udavi, I went to Kuilapalayam Higher Secondary School for my 11th and 12th standards, which is also an Auroville outreach school, but with a much bigger number of students. It was a drastic change between the two schools! It was fully focused on academics and gaining marks. But I was prepared - I had all the benefit of Udavi. After I wanted to study outside, in Pondicherry, but my parents were not able to gather the money to cover the cost.

But at that time, my mother had started to work at Thamarai. While cleaning the space there, she used to see students coming and meeting in order to get support for their higher studies - that is how I came to know about the program “Reach for the Stars”. So I went to the person in charge of the program in our village, and he guided me.

I needed to write an essay and I remember I wrote about my future and what I wanted to be and where I will be after five years. Computer Engineering is what I chose for my higher education. I wrote that I wanted to complete my Engineering studies and be happy and support people who were struggling like me. There was a final test, a personal interview where they put a question that struck me: “How do you think you are different from others?” I don’t remember properly how I said it but I uttered: “I drive trucks and motorbikes”

Poovizhi: Yes I did and I do – big ones and tractors also and I drive gear bikes. My father is a driver and he taught me when I was 13 or 14 years-old. They were surprised but the person in charge in the village confirmed and said: “She does all these things!”

Poovizhi: I would say that it is a courageous thing because you must create something that is beyond your fear. I also have this thing burning inside me: “I am not something smaller when compared to men because of my gender?”. In the case of a boy of the same age studying with me, people would say that it is fine if he drives a lorry, and in my case people would look at me with surprise if I drive. It means that there is a difference. I want to show that women can also do the same things.
So then I went to the college I had chosen in Mailam where I did my Computer Science Engineering during a four-year course. I was a day student, so every day I was taking the bus at 8:30 a.m. from my village and we would reach Mailam 45 minutes later. I had chosen Computer Sciences, and I learned programming; at that time we learned C language. But now we are not working in C. In my workplace I am doing Python programming.

Meanwhile I used to go to Thamarai’s evening center. After I reached home at 5:30, I went to Thamarai where I volunteered to support kids with doing their homework. If they didn’t have homework, there was dance, drama, and creative activities.

As for all the other “Reach for the Stars” students I was also asked to attend English classes every Sunday for one and a half hours. We were split into 2 groups, and the more fluent would go to Jill’s drama class. Others who were not able to follow what Jill said, and who needed more support, would then come into my group where I was teaching them basic grammar and spoken English. Stephanie (the coordinator of “Reach for the Stars”) gave me a grammar book to help me. I asked my students to make written exercises, gave them some topics to write about, took them home and corrected them. Through all this I also learned a lot about my own grammar mistakes.

I passed my exams in 2017. After my college I joined STEM, which stands for Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics, a center promoting sciences through education. STEM is financed by donations and it functions under SAIIER. It started initially in Udavi School and it is now scaling up to different schools around and in Auroville like Aikiyam School, Thamarai, The Living Community and the International Technological Institute in the AVAG compound.

Today, to support my family and myself financially, I work full time from 8 am to 5:30 pm for STEM Land Aura *Auto* Design. There we work remotely for a company called Aura Semiconductor in Bangalore but I have been there one time. It is linked to Auroville through Sanjeev (Ranganathan) who is the project holder of STEM and who used to work for this company before.

This job allows me to do volunteer teaching for 3 hours a day in schools. At Udavi, as a volunteer, I teach Mathematics for 6th and 3rd grade children and Environmental Science at Isai Ambalam. For the smaller children it is a basic approach to their social and natural environment - their family is their first school, in addition to the school itself, and all they can see around themselves - trees and plants, how different life forms look, what color they are. And I teach them how to behave with children who are different, how to treat children who are physically disabled and not make fun of them.
A4A: Do you remember how the connection to Auroville increased - a landmark, something that struck you in particular?

Poovizhi: While being in Udavi, we were taken to Matrimandir, once in a while and for bonfires and we would meditate there. These moments were all very special for me when I was there at that time.

A4A: Now you have gone through the YUCCA Program, have decided to become a newcomer and join Auroville, can you explain why?

Poovizhi: I have been asking this question to myself for a long time. I am connected to and around Auroville for so long and I found that this is the place where I can answer the question that my teacher asked me when I was a child: “What is my purpose of being here?” I am still searching an answer to this question and I find that Auroville is the place for me to search within myself. This is the hope that brings me here.

A4A: Yes, and probably also as you said earlier “to be happy and support people who were struggling like me”

Poovizhi: Definitely yes for others! And I need to know who I am to do things for others.

A4A: Is there anything that strikes you, which you would like to share about your experience of Auroville?

Poovizhi: What is remarkable is that everyone refers to unity in diversity: how we interact with different people yet being a human being and holding a sense of humanity, so that we know what we really care about. And whatever action I take will be based on that, showing the direction where I need to go. I feel that this unity in diversity is the direction, the center point that drives everything here in Auroville and this is the thing I find remarkable.

A4A: A last question, what does Poovizhi mean in Tamil?

Poovizhi: Poo is flower, vizhi is eyes or the gaze, so Poovizhi means, “Flower Eyes” or “Flower Gaze”.

A4A: Thank you very much Poovizhi!!

Poovizhi: Thank you so much.

The Thamarai Community Centre was created by Aurovilians to build closer connections between Edayanchavadi Village and Auroville. The “Reach for the Stars” program is an Auroville initiative that finances higher education for young people from poor backgrounds of the villages surrounding Auroville. You can view the inspiring clip on “Reach for the Stars”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAtrM0KRXml