

MUMBAI

## Winner all the way: autorickshaw driver's daughter fights all odds to pursue dreams



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**Pune girl Rutuja Bhoite, who overcame financial difficulties and poor self-esteem due to leukoderma, heads to Thailand to study with a full-time scholarship**

When you hear 17-year-old Rutuja Bhoite speak, it is hard to imagine she was once afraid to face people. "I was always worried about being accepted," she says. But the daughter of an autorickshaw driver in Kondhwa, Pune, who has lived with leukoderma all her life, comes across as articulate and self-assured.

Rutuja has been accepted in United World's College (UWC) in Thailand on a full-time scholarship, the first in her family of parents and three siblings to travel and study abroad. She begins her sessions this month. "I'm going with a feeling of pride," she says. "I've worked hard, done the best I could with the tasks given to me. So this is a token of gratitude I'm giving myself."

All her academic life, Rutuja was a shy, but focused student. She studied in Pune Municipal Corporation's Sant Gadge Maharaj English Medium School till Class IX, following which she joined Avasara Academy near Pune. The school selects meritorious girl students for its secondary school programme, offering them financial assistance if needed.

In May 2013, she was selected as the protagonist of Teach For India's (TFI) Broadway-style musical *Maya*, which had 30 other children from various Pune schools participating. "Everything changed after *Maya* came into my life. My journey to being an extrovert started there," she says. "I learnt the values of courage, compassion and wisdom. I learnt to open up, mingle with new people."

More than anything else, her understanding of education changed. She saw how students from other schools were given an opportunity to integrate values and extra-curricular activities with academics. "The pressure to score high marks stopped making sense."

Rutuja subsequently participated in TFI's Design for Change project, where students from the *Maya* team shortlisted an area in Pune to give hugs to random people – "an experiment in how we could change the world to become a beautiful place," she says. She also took part in street plays on sexual harassment and traffic rules.

All through, she found support from TFI fellows. During the *Maya* training, she came across a student who had completed her UWC course in Italy. Rutuja knew she had to take that path. It wasn't easy; some of her teachers at Avasara wanted her to continue to Class XI and XII. She also sensed jealousy from her classmates.

One of the TFI fellows, Karthik R.G, pushed her to go for it. "'Believe in yourself', he told me. There would always be people opposing me."

After a rigorous two-stage selection process that involved a test, a personal interview, a faculty interview, a team-building activity and a group discussion, she got the news of her selection on March 29. At UWC, students come together from all over the world, from various backgrounds. Rutuja will study biology, maths and French for two years. Perhaps inspired by TFI, she wants to work in the educational sector in future, "experiment with curriculum and teaching styles, in different schools."

## A committed student

Her parents, Nanda and Arun, are thrilled. With a monthly family income of barely ₹10,000, they had never dreamt of higher education for their children, let alone sending them abroad. Her mother ran a beauty parlour from home, but backache has prevented her from continuing it. The couple sells vegetables to supplement Mr. Bhoite's earnings.

"She's going so far away," says her mother, with a catch in her voice. "I've seen her struggle with leukoderma; the treatment was painful. But she never stopped studying, come what may."

So committed was Rutuja to academics, says her mother, that she would teach children in the neighbourhood for free on weekends. "I have always wanted for her to not feel less than anyone else. There was a time when people saw her differently, but not any more."

Mr. Bhoite is floored by her fluency in English. "You heard her. I have no idea how she got so good at it!" he says, sounding every bit the proud father. He says his daughter has won scholarships at every stage of her schooling. And what does he want for her? "She should study as much as she wants. There's always time for marriage!"

## Holistic learning

Karthik R.G, former TFI fellow, says when he met Rutuja in 2015, what surprised him was that she was good at academics as well as co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. While she has dreams and ambitions, she is also humble, and has leadership potential, he says.

Her leukoderma made her shy, unsure of her acceptance in the world and prone to self-pity. TFI fellows often pushed her to a point where she would occasionally cry and walk out, but she took it all in her stride.

Mr. Karthik says he taught many students, but “not everyone shone”. Students as bright as Rutuja are often denied opportunities in the regular school system. “These children are at the highest spectrum of vulnerability. They need a teacher, mentor, philosopher, guide and everything.” For a long time, in the PMC school, there were no classrooms and four fellows took turns to teach the students in a big hall. The greatest educational crisis, says Mr. Karthik, is that our schools are producing people who are “unskilled, unemployable and angry”. There is also a lack of support and respect for teachers – “they do everything except teaching, and there is no system of continuously evaluating them.”

Shaheen Mistri, CEO, Teach for India, says many of the children they have trained are in top schools like the UWCs and Avasara. “They are giving back to the community, running projects.”

Mr. Karthik does not take all the credit for shaping Rutuja's growth, though. “We are just catalysts. People like Rutuja will go places. She is a role model for others.”

And Rutuja intends to do just that. She says, “During *Maya*, we always said, ‘Find your light’. It means, find your potential. It means taking what you have learnt, outside.”

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