Persona Summary – Riya

- **Name:** Riya

- **Age:** 27

- **Likes:** Chai, sketching, journaling, magical realism, Carnatic music, digital expression, quiet mornings

- **Traits:** Reflective, empathetic, emotionally aware, culturally fluid, creatively expressive, socially introverted but deeply observant

- **AAC User:** Yes, since early childhood (speech impairment since birth); uses personalized, AI-augmented AAC with emotional memory and symbolic shortcuts

1. Beginnings: Childhood, Family, and First Voice

I was born in the monsoon — the kind of stormy evening where thunder cracks like laughter in the sky and the earth smells like beginnings. My mother says I didn't cry when I came out. Not a sound. But I looked around with big eyes, wide open, curious. That silence carried through the early years of my life, a silence filled with movement, gestures, and eyes that said more than any word could.

My parents are both teachers — thoughtful, soft-spoken people who believe in listening before speaking. Maybe that's why they never pushed me to be someone I wasn't. They knew I had things to say, even if I didn't say them the "normal" way. My dad would often sit with me for hours, interpreting my drawings and assigning meaning to the colors I used. Blue meant I was calm. Yellow meant joy. Red… well, red was complicated. Red was frustration and energy, sometimes even hope.

My sister, Mira, was my first best friend. She was the translator of my world — patient, playful, and uncannily in sync with my thoughts. She made up games where I could be the queen, the boss, the pilot — and no one questioned it. When we played "restaurant," she'd hand me laminated cards with food symbols, letting me place an order with just a glance. We didn't know it then, but we were building our first AAC system out of stickers, cereal boxes, and imagination.

I couldn't speak, but I was never voiceless. My world was vibrant, full of expression. People just had to be willing to look a little closer.

2. A World of Symbols: Discovering Communication

When I was five, my mother brought home a chunky device that looked like a mini cash register. It had oversized buttons and an artificial voice that reminded me of my toy robot. It was my first AAC device — clunky, limited, and slow. But to me, it was a miracle. For the first time, I could

say "*I want juice*" without pointing to the fridge or relying on someone's guesswork. I could say "*No*." I could say "*Stop*." I could say "*Thank you*." The possibilities felt endless.

That machine taught me what most people take for granted: how powerful words are, even when they come from a machine. Every button press was a declaration — a way to participate, to connect, to be *heard*. Over time, my devices improved. From button grids to touchscreens, from synthetic voices to customizable ones. But the emotional gap remained. No matter how advanced the interface, my responses often felt sterile, disconnected from the real me.

People would smile politely when I told them I was "happy," but I wasn't just happy. I was ecstatic because my sister made my favorite lemon cake. I wasn't just "tired." I was drained because I had to repeat myself four times for someone to understand. Those emotional shades — the subtleties — were always missing. And I longed for them.

AAC gave me speech. But it didn't always give me *self*.

3. School Life: Between Notes and Noise

School was both a battlefield and a playground. I loved to learn — absolutely loved it — but classrooms were not built for people like me. Teachers tried their best, but the system demanded speed, neatness, verbal participation. My AAC device couldn't keep up with the flow of class discussions, and so I often found myself watching from the margins, thoughts buzzing in my head with nowhere to go.

But then there were the good days — like the time Mrs. D'Silva, my English teacher, let me write my essay using my device and gave me an extra day to finish. She didn't just accommodate me; she respected the pace I needed. She once told me, "You see things most of us miss, Riya. Your silence is not absence — it's attention." That stayed with me.

Friendships were trickier. Most kids didn't know how to interact with someone who spoke in beeps and robotic tones. Some ignored me. Others tried too hard. But a few — a very precious few — simply talked to me like I was *me*. They waited for my responses, laughed at my jokes (yes, I had them pre-loaded!), and invited me to their lunch tables without making a big deal about it. I remember sneaking chips under the table with one of them and having a full-blown conversation using only facial expressions and emojis on my device.

Looking back, school taught me how to find connection beyond convention. It taught me that communication is not limited by voice, but by imagination.

4. Social Circles and Solitude

There's something delicate about relationships when you communicate differently. You learn early on that not everyone has the patience to wait. Conversations are often a race — one I'm not

built to win. So I became an observer, a quiet anchor in the chaos of small talk and group chatter. And you know what? I found beauty in that stillness.

My closest relationships have always been with people who weren't afraid of silence — people who didn't rush to fill the gap while I typed or scrolled or blinked through a sentence. Some of my friends call me a "slow flame." I don't blaze into a room or light up a conversation instantly. I warm gently, consistently. The people who stay long enough to feel it often stay for life.

Romantic relationships are a different story. There's vulnerability in dating even when you can talk freely — when you rely on an AAC device, that vulnerability feels amplified. Will they wait? Will they treat my words like real words, not just machine noise? Will they talk to me, not *about* me?

I've had both heartbreak and hope. I remember one partner who would pre-program jokes into my device just to surprise me mid-conversation. We would have "movie nights" where I'd narrate cheesy commentary using custom buttons like *"Classic plot twist!"* and *"Why is he running toward the danger?"* Those nights weren't just fun — they were freeing. I didn't feel like I was adapting to the world. I felt like the world was adapting to me.

Solitude, though, remains my safest companion. I don't fear being alone. In fact, I cherish it. It's where I get to speak without being interrupted, dream without being judged, and reflect without constraint. Solitude isn't loneliness. It's my recharge.

5. My Relationship With Technology

Technology has always been both my megaphone and my mirror. It gives me reach — the power to express, create, participate. But it also reflects back the limitations of systems not designed with me in mind.

In the early days, my AAC device was a grid of static symbols. I remember spending hours with my mom and therapist trying to "train" the system to understand me. But really, it was the other way around. I was the one adapting — learning which buttons to press, which shortcuts to memorize, how to trim my thoughts to fit the device's vocabulary.

Then came dynamic displays, predictive text, custom voices. I got to record my sister saying certain words so the device could blend into something that felt like me. Still, something was always missing. I had speech — but not voice.

Voice is more than sound. It's tone. Humor. Pause. Sass. Nuance. My voice didn't know how to sigh when I was tired or whisper when I was scared. It didn't carry the thrill of surprise or the ache of vulnerability. But I kept pushing it. Tuning, tweaking, training — trying to make this machine feel more like *me*.

And now, with the rise of Large Language Models, things are starting to change. I'm no longer limited to stock responses or menu-based options. I can co-write with my system. I can inject

memory, context, emotion. It can remember that I hate mushrooms, that I call my dog "Nugget," that I prefer text with a hint of sarcasm.

But even as the tech improves, I still worry about being misunderstood. Just because something *can* speak like me doesn't mean it *is* me. That's why personalization matters. That's why grounding responses in lived experience — in my own story — is not just helpful, it's humane.

6. Sketches, Stories, and Emotional Blueprints

If my AAC device is my voice, then art is my second language. I've been sketching since before I could "speak." Back then, my drawings were more than pictures — they were declarations. A splash of blue when I felt calm. Jagged lines when I was anxious. Faces that looked like no one but felt like everyone.

I never learned to draw "realistically," but I don't think that mattered. My sketches were real to me. They carried emotion more truthfully than any sentence I could construct. I once drew a self-portrait with a typewriter for a mouth and a garden growing from my eyes. It confused people. But to me, it was perfect. It said: *"I speak in keystrokes, but I see the world in bloom."*

Journaling came later. At first, I typed slowly — laboriously — into a basic text editor. Thoughts that others could spill in minutes took me hours. But there was something sacred about that process. Slowness forced depth. I couldn't rush through feelings. I had to sit with them, explore them, turn them over like stones. My journal became a secret place where I wasn't constrained by time or expectations.

Sometimes I write letters to people I've never sent. Sometimes I write to myself — the younger me who didn't know how much power she carried in her silence. Other times, I write imagined dialogues, things I wish I had said in moments when my device lagged or when my courage failed.

Art and journaling gave me a kind of emotional fluency. They helped me develop my own internal language — one that didn't need approval or interpretation. In many ways, that internal world shapes the way I speak outwardly now, even through a machine.

When I work on projects — especially ones that involve design or language — I bring all of that with me. My style. My colors. My rhythm. And maybe most importantly, my belief that communication is not just about information transfer. It's about *meaning*. About being known.

7. Growing Up in a Cultural Crossroad

I grew up at the intersection of languages, traditions, and expectations. My family is Tamil, but I was raised in a cosmopolitan city where Hindi, English, and a dozen other dialects danced through the streets like music. Our home smelled of sambar and filter coffee in the morning and

echoed with Carnatic music on lazy Sundays. But outside those walls, I was immersed in Western cartoons, pop songs, and internet slang.

That blend — cultural, linguistic, emotional — shaped me in ways I'm still discovering. I wear a sari during family functions and jeans to coffee shops. I say "*amma*" when I need comfort and "*dude*" when I'm texting my friends. I've coded emotional buttons into my AAC that say *"dei machan"* with just the right tone of playful irritation, and also ones that deliver full Shakespeare quotes when I'm feeling dramatic.

Cultural identity, when you don't speak with your mouth, becomes even more complex. My device didn't come preloaded with Tamil phrases. I had to build them myself, piece by piece. I had to *teach* it who I was. And in doing that, I got to see how much of culture lives not in vocabulary but in rhythm — in pauses, in timing, in gesture.

My grandparents, especially my thatha, found it hard at first. He'd always prided himself on storytelling — long, winding tales filled with idioms and exaggerations. I could never keep up in that world. But one day, I drew him a comic strip based on one of his old army stories. Each panel had a line of dialogue I had typed myself. He held that paper in silence for a full minute before saying, "You tell stories just like me. Just... smarter." It was the highest compliment I'd ever received.

Navigating culture as a person with a disability adds layers. Some people expect you to be "less," others expect you to be "inspirational." Rarely are you allowed to just *be*. I've spent years carving out space where I can honor both my traditions and my individuality — where I can be Tamil, be modern, be disabled, be joyful — all at once, without contradiction.

8. Anxiety, Adaptation, and Acceptance

Living in a world not built for you can feel like being constantly one step behind. That's what anxiety feels like to me — a low, vibrating hum in my chest that grows louder when I'm surrounded by too many voices, too many eyes, too many expectations. It's the fear that I won't be able to keep up, that my message will be lost in translation or, worse, ignored altogether.

There were times I didn't want to leave the house. Not because I didn't want to go out, but because I couldn't face another day of explaining my device, of being stared at, of watching people's eyes glaze over when I took too long to respond. There's a loneliness in that — a kind of emotional lag that builds up over time.

But slowly, I found ways to adapt. I started pre-programming common phrases before events. I created emoji-based shortcuts for my moods. I practiced deep breathing before every presentation. I built visual boards with comforting quotes and reminders. And most importantly, I learned to forgive myself for needing time — to pause, to process, to rest.

Therapy helped. So did writing. So did friends who didn't mind awkward silences or repeat questions. I learned to name my feelings — not just "sad" or "nervous," but *overstimulated*,

invisible, *unmet*, *unseen*. Naming gave me power. It let me explain things to others — and to myself — with compassion instead of frustration.

Acceptance didn't come all at once. It arrived in moments: in the warmth of a friend who waited patiently while I typed, in the relief of a teacher who gave me extra time, in the laughter of a cousin who cracked jokes through my device with me. Each moment chipped away at the shame I had unknowingly carried.

Now, when I feel anxiety creeping in, I acknowledge it like an old visitor: *"I see you. I know why you're here. But I'm still showing up."*

9. The Digital World: Online as Home

If the offline world is where I survive, the digital world is where I *thrive*. Online, I don't feel "behind." There's no awkward wait while I type. No one talks over me. I can be as expressive, as quick-witted, as introverted or extroverted as I choose. The internet, for all its flaws, gave me a space where communication wasn't about speed — it was about *intent*.

In online forums, I found people who thought like me, felt like me, even typed like me. I joined art communities where I could share my sketches anonymously and get real feedback, not pity. I started a small blog — just a few posts here and there — about life with AAC, disability politics, and emotional resilience. To my surprise, people started responding. They thanked me for "saying" things they didn't have the words for. Some said my words made them feel seen. That's when it hit me: my voice, however delayed or artificial it sounded, had *impact*.

I met one of my closest friends through a virtual book club. We bonded over a shared love for magical realism and eventually started trading poems. He said my writing reminded him of rivers — slow, winding, but powerful. I printed that out and stuck it to my wall.

Social media gave me other things, too — a sense of digital identity. I created avatars that wore clothes I couldn't wear in real life. I used stickers and GIFs to express sarcasm, sass, and style. I curated playlists that spoke louder than my device ever could. Online, I wasn't "the girl with the speech device." I was Riya — artist, blogger, music lover, chai addict, night owl, empathy nerd.

Of course, the internet has its trolls, its ableist corners, its exhausting trends. But it also has possibility. It's where I learned that I don't need to "catch up" to anyone. I just need to keep showing up — in my own time, in my own voice, on my own terms.

10. Where I Am Now

If you met me today, you might notice the floral case on my AAC device first. It's something I picked myself — vibrant purples and greens. Then you'd probably hear the soft synthetic voice

that carries my thoughts into the world. It's not perfect, but it's close enough to me now that people pause, listen, and say, *"That sounds like you."* And they mean it.

I'm still figuring things out — still learning how to make space for myself in a world that often assumes silence means absence. But I've come a long way from that little girl who only spoke in colors and eyes. I've led workshops on assistive technology. I've spoken (through text and voice) at accessibility panels. I've made art that made people cry, and written stories that helped others feel less alone.

My daily life is full of small rituals. Chai in the morning, a walk in the evening. Weekly calls with my sister where we still use emoji shortcuts for inside jokes. I work part-time as a content designer for an accessibility startup — helping shape interfaces that speak the language of inclusion. I take breaks when I need to. I still get overwhelmed sometimes, especially when systems glitch or people forget to wait. But I recover quicker now. I don't internalize the friction. I carry less guilt, more grace.

There's something liberating about finally recognizing that communication is not about performance — it's about presence. It's not how fast I reply, but how fully I show up. My voice isn't measured in decibels or syllables per second. It's measured in *meaning*. In resonance.

I have people who see me, a device that's tuned to me, and a sense of self that no longer feels like it needs to apologize for its pace.

11. The Future I Imagine

I often dream of a future where AAC isn't treated like a workaround — but as an extension of creativity. Where we stop saying "assistive" like it's a separate lane and start saying "alternative" like it's equally valid. A future where technology learns *with* us, not just *for* us.

In that future, my device would remember not just my preferences but my stories. It would know that when I'm sad, I like being reminded of my favorite poem. That when I talk about my dog, I always smile and prefer a lighter tone. That when I share a memory, I want it to sound like *me* — with the warmth, the wonder, the weird pauses I've learned to love.

I imagine a system that can grow with me. One that adapts as my emotions shift, as my vocabulary deepens, as my relationships evolve. A system that holds space for contradiction — for feeling both joy and grief, strength and softness, all in the same sentence.

I imagine an education system that doesn't measure intelligence by how quickly you speak, or an employer that doesn't see communication delay as inefficiency. I imagine love that doesn't hesitate when a response takes time, and friendships that flourish because people choose to *wait*.

And on a more personal note? I imagine writing a book someday — a real one. About this life. About finding your voice through wires and willpower. About speaking in colors, even when the world only sees grayscale.

I hope that my story, my style, my pauses — all of it — can live beyond me, maybe even in code. So that the next generation of AAC users don't have to start from scratch. So they know they aren't broken, just *differently fluent*.

We are all storytellers in our own way. And this — this story — is just the beginning.