

Big pujas lack facilities for disabled visitors

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

TOI

Kolkata: Millions hopped merrily from one pandal to another across the city this puja, but a few spared a thought for people with disabilities. Less than 5% of the big pujas had the basic arrangements for such visitors.

Majority of the big draws didn't care to arrange anything more than just a wheelchair, which, at many places, was not even functional. A few had ramps or volunteers to assist the disabled, according to a survey by Civilian Welfare Foundation (CWF), an NGO.

Conducted at pandals that had an average footfall of 4 lakhs or more per day, the survey observed that several pujas, which won awards, were guilty of ignoring people with disabilities. Star attractions such as Ekdalia Evergreen, Mohammed Ali Park, College Square and Santosh Mitra Square had no wheelchair. Vivekananda Athletic and Ajeya Sanghati, on the other hand, had broken wheelchairs. None of the top bracket pujas had ramps for wheelchairs. Instead, they had stairs that were extremely risky for disabled visitors, the survey observed.

"Kolkata pujas are unfriendly towards disabled persons. Even if they are accompanied by their family members, it would be virtually impossible for them to get inside a pandal. Without a wheelchair and help from volunteers, it could be risky. Even pandals which had wheelchairs, didn't have them near the entrance. None had a ramp to roll the chairs. Thousands of disabled visitors returned from pandals as a result," said Shuvojit Moulik, president of CWF.

The only wheelchair at Vivekananda Athletic lied at a corner away from the main entrance and there was no volunteer to fetch it. The pandal at Mohammed Ali Park, which had no wheelchair, had a long staircase without any volunteer to help disabled people climb the stairs. Ekda-



Dum Dum Park Puja Committee provided ramps for the disabled which most other pandals did not have



lia Evergreen didn't even have a first-aid box. Singhi Park, too, went without a wheelchair or a separate gateway for disabled persons.

Yet others had arrangements which were inadequate, the survey observed. Badamtala Ashar Sangha, for instance, had a separate entrance for disabled people but didn't have a wheelchair. Muddiali Club had a ramp but no wheelchair. Chetla Agrani Sangha had a ramp and volunteers to operate them, but their wheelchair was not in good shape. Maddox Square had ramps but no wheelchair or volunteers.

"It is difficult to change things unless the government lays down a few basic mandatory rules for puja organizers. There should be incentives for organizers, like awards, for the best arrangements for the disabled. Unless these are done, they will continue to be deprived of the right to en-

joy the pujas," said Moulik.

But, despite the overall gloomy picture, things have improved marginally, observed Moulik. "There were a few exceptions such as Suruchi Sangha in New Alipore that had ramps, wheelchairs and a separate entrance for disabled persons. Some small, obscure pujas, too, had proper arrangements," he said.

National Institute of Professionals, another NGO that has been campaigning for 'friendlier' arrangements at pandals, agreed. Secretary Debajyoti Ray pointed out that several pujas on the northern fringes of the city had better arrangements for the disabled.

"Not only did they have ramps and wheelchairs, the pathways had been smoothed out to make it convenient for disabled persons. But sadly, the famous pujas continue to ignore the challenged," said Ray.

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