

# AN ASSESMENT ON ACCESS FOR DISABLED TO PUJA PANDALS , KOLKATA, INDIA

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Durga Puja is a celebration way beyond the boundaries of any caste , religion or gender. It has evolved in the last 10 years as the most happening thing in Kolkata. No wonder, Vir Sanghvi wrote, "You can take the craze of Diwali in Delhi, Christmas in London, Summer Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Valentine's day in Paris and then add it to the month long madness of Olympic Games or the World Cup and cram all that into a span of 5 days and you still wouldn't know what you are missing if you haven't been in Kolkata during Durga Puja" .....

Though the celebration is way beyond the boundaries of any caste, religion or gender, Durga Puja is yet to cater Differently abled/Specially abled People...their accessibility is restricted to their shelter homes or houses or neighbourhood. With the third highest disabled populace in the country, West Bengal (according to 2001 census) still couldn't evolve much in giving access to physically challenged /mentally challenged to the Pandals , the main attraction during the Puja. They are yet to enjoy the grandeur, fun, the artistic pleasures and much more from Durga Puja.

Civilian Welfare Foundation conducted a pivotal survey on the Puja Pandals throughout Kolkata with respect to the facilities provided for the accessibility of the Disabled People. Though this is generally termed as an Access Audit but as access audit has a much broader spectrum considering many things such as distance form the parking zones, distance for the main entrance, hindrances in the path etc we would like to call it as just an Accessibility Survey for the Differently abled/Specially abled Populace. The survey revealed many shocking facts about the inaccessibility of disabled people. The big Puja Committees hardly bother for them though the small puja committees (not included in the survey) have started catering for the disabled. For an example Podder Park Sarbojonin Durgatsav Committee, a small puja at Podder Park Government Quarters (a Housing estate) with meagre budget had kept Wheel chairs but Mohammad Ali Park , a big budget puja had nothing for them and thoroughly unfriendly to the disbled.

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**Methodology:** The survey was conducted mainly for the Pujas having footfall of an average of 4 lakh people /day. Only three variables namely wheelchairs present, volunteers present at the extreme entrance of a Puja and presence of ramps were judged during the survey. The other variables such as distance from the parking zones, distance for the main entrance, hindrances in the path etc were not taken into consideration because the picture would have been gloomier. We consider this survey as an initial one and would evolve this catering all the aspects of an access audit in the later days. The organizers/volunteers were contacted and questioned during the survey. The survey was conducted for all five days of the Puja (Panchami to Navami) at different intervals throughout day and night.

**Results and Observations:** The results, observations (remarks) are enlisted in the following table

PUJA NAME	WHEELCHAIRS	RAMP	VOLUNTEERS	REMARKS
<b>AJAY SANGHATI</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	The wheel chair was almost broken and was there like a non-existing instrument. No extra volunteers were there for disable people and handling of the wheel chairs and to push the wheel chairs. Still it was quite disable friendly with respect to the presence of the ramp .
<b>VIVEKANANDA ATHLETICS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	The single Wheel Chair was literally lying at a corner like an ignorant and extra baggage. The crowd was passing by the wheel chair and some of them were falling on the wheel chair because of the extremely huge crowd. No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people was there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. If a disable person has contact any volunteer at the entrance, he/she will not be able to do it as the crowd was huge and the entire situation was confusing.
<b>41 PALLY</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>yes</b>	There were Stairs inside and outside the Pandal area. There was no arrangement ramp at 41 Pally Puja Pandal. There were no extra volunteers to push the wheel chairs through the stairs.
<b>NAKTALA UDAYAN SANGHA</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	The wheel chair was in a good condition rather than other Puja Pandals. There were Stairs inside and outside the Pandal area. No ramp for the smooth running of the wheel chairs was there but when asked outside the pandal one of the organizer said that there was a ramp and later couldn't locate it ! No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people was there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. No volunteer was there at the main entrance of Naktala Udayan Sngha. So if they are not been able to contact any volunteer for assistance which the foremost step, how they are going to get

				the wheel chair and see the Puja Pandal in the crowd?
<b>MOHAMMAD ALI PARK</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>no</b>	Not a single wheel chair was there at Mahammad Ali Park. There was quite a long stair case at the main entrance of the park. There was no volunteer at the Puja Pandal area forget about presence of exclusive volunteer for handling disable people. Regarding disability access, Mahammad Ali Park was a disaster. There was no chance that a disable person can visit the Pandal of Mahammad Ali Park.
<b>COLLEGE SQUARE</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	There was no Medical Aid Stall at the Puja Pandal area. Not a single wheel chair was there at College Square Puja Pandal. No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people were there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. The distance of the main Pandal from the main entrance was quite long and very crowded.
<b>SANTOSH MITRA SQUARE</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>yes</b>	The organizers said, there are many wheel chairs kept for the disable people who will be visiting their Pandal. The place where the wheel chairs were kept according to the organizers was quite far from the main Pandal area. No volunteer was there at the entrance of the Puja Pandal area. If a disable person has contact any volunteer at the entrance, he/she will not be able to do it as the crowd was huge and the entire situation was confusing. So if they are not been able to contact any volunteer for assistance which the foremost step, how they are going to get the wheel chair and see the Puja Pandal in the crowd. Even if they would have contacted any volunteer, it would have taken a long time for the volunteers to bring the wheel chairs to them. Over all the arrangements for disable people was not disable friendly .

<b>EKDALIA EVERGREEN</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	There was no Medical Aid Stall at the Puja Pandal area. Not a single wheel chair was there at Ekdalia Evergreen. No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people was there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. The organizers were least bothered about any disable people coming to see the Puja.
<b>SINGHI PARK</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	Not a single wheel chair was there at Singhi Park. There was no separate gateway or way to the main Pandal
<b>BALLYGUNGE CULTURAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	The pandal was already at an elevated height and there were only stairs making it completely chaotic and problematic for physically handicapped people to get near the idol.
<b>SALLAKE FD BLOCK</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	AS the puja was in the ground it was extremely difficult for any wheel chair bound person to visit the pandal due to the absence of any ramp.
<b>BADAMTALA ASHAR SANGHA</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>yes</b>	Though there was a separate gateway for disable people to enter the Puja Pandal but there was not a single wheel chair. No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people was there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. The organizers were least bothered about any disable people coming to see the Puja.
<b>66 PALLY</b>	<b>The organizers said 2 wheel chairs are there though they couldn't show us</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>yes</b>	Though the organizers claimed they have wheel chairs but they could show that to us.
<b>JODHPUR PARK</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>	There was no Medical Aid Stall at the Puja Pandal area. Not a single wheel chair was there at Jodhpur Park Puja Pandal. There was no separate gateway or way to the main Pandal for the disable people. The way from main

				entrance to the main Pandal entrance was extremely uneven and thus no disable person can walk through that. No exclusive volunteer for handling disable people was there at the entrance and even inside the Pandal Area. If a disable person has contact any volunteer at the entrance, he/she will not be able to do it as the crowd was huge and the entire situation was confusing. So if they are not been able to contact any volunteer for assistance which the foremost step, how they are going to see the Puja Pandal in the crowd.
SHIV MANDIR	0	Yes	yes	When the volunteers were asked they couldn't say us about the arrangement and told to go to the police guard. Police guard said that they would help us but they didn't know how.
MUDIALI	0	yes	yes	There was ramp made and the volunteers were present but there was no wheel chairs present and the volunteers had no clue how to get the specially abled to the puja.
CHETLA AGRANI	1	Yes	yes	They had a proper arrangement of ramp and volunteers but their wheelchair was not proper.
BOSPUKUR(SHITLA MANDIR)	0	no	no	
DUMDUM PARK	2	Yes	no	
BHARAT CHAKRA	0	no	no	There was utter confusion about "disability" and how to deal with it.
TARUN SANGHA	0	no	no	
TARUN DAL	0	no	yes	
BHAWANIPORE SADHIN SANGHA	1	no	yes	No special entrance but allocation of a wheelchair was there.
75 PALLY	1	no	no	No special arrangement for disabled people.
DESHOPRIYO PARK	0	no	no	The puja had a natural ramp but still there was no preparation for disabled.
MADDOX SQUARE	0	yes	no	In this puja ramps are made every year but not Keeping in mind the differently abled person, this time they did the same without any wheelchair

				and volunteers.
<b>SURUCHI SANGA</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	
<b>BORISHA CLUB</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>yes</b>	There were enough space to make stalls and there was a huge dais for the committee members to sit but no arrangement of a single wheelchair. It was a huge convoluted line and there was no special arrangement for the disabled people. The organisers were not bothered that they had not arranged one and said that there is no special allocation for any disabled people that included not allowing them through the VIP entrance as well.
<b>PURBO BORISHA SHITALATOLA KISHORE SANGHA</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>yes</b>	They had kept a complete first aid area where there was a wheelchair and even a resting place for any disabled person if he/she feels uncomfortable. There are volunteers at the VIP entrance who would escort any disabled person to the pandal as the VIP entrance served as a special entrance for disabled people.

### Conclusion and way forward:

The conclusion which might be drawn from the survey.

1. Most of the Puja Committees are yet to give basic facilities for a Disabled person
2. The situation is better than the last year (we conducted a similar survey, though random and not on the basis of footfall) but still not enough
3. There is a restricted awareness on this accessibility issue among the Puja Committees
4. Among the most inaccessible pujas there are many award holders (e.g. Naktala Udayan Sangha got Asian Paints Sarod somman)

The way forward is quite tough but achievable. Firstly the understanding and awareness among the Puja Committees need to be increased. Secondly Government should put up few basic mandatory rules (just as they have done it for Fire prevention) for all the Puja Committees. Thirdly instead of having awards for most Disable Friendly Puja (this year it was organized by National Institute of Professionals) all the Awards for Best Puja (e.g. Asian Paints Sarod Somman, State Bank of India etc) should cater this clause for accessibility of Disabled people. Is there any prize for the mobility of normal people so why should it be so different for the Differently abled or specially abled people? There fundamental right of enjoying the grandeur and fun shouldn't be nipped in the bud.