



METRO RAIL WORK FROM PORUR TO POONAMALLEE SLOWS DOWN DUE TO DELAY IN LAYING TRACKS | 8

NOT FAIR TO ABUSE A FOR PARTING WAYS, SAYS PALA

Swimming Dreams For Those With Disability Take A Dive As City Pools Remain Non-Inclusive

NO SPLASH FOR ALL

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The feeling of being 'abled' comes only while swimming for many disabled people. Those confined to wheelchairs experience the freedom of moving their limbs inside water, something that they would never be able to do on land. Many take up hydrotherapy (water exercises) and some of them become paralympic champions. But that's a tall order for most.

Chennai, with 1.5 lakh disabled people, lacks accessible public swimming pools. Only two out of seven pools maintained by GCC and Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT) are supposed to be disabled-friendly but they too aren't good enough.

In SDAT's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, a ramp leads into the pool. There is a seating lift that should lower a wheelchair person into the pool, but is defunct. At the SDAT pool in Velachery, there is a seating lift but no ramp. "This pool is not completely accessible to the disabled. Toilets do not have ramps," says Madhavi Latha, 53, a paralympic swimmer. "Sometimes, they put up wooden ramps."

Other pools are inaccessible, with no ramps or seating lifts, said Sathish Kumar, a Disability Rights Alliance member.



People come from faraway places to swim in these accessible pools. "I have to spend ₹1,000 on a cab from Tambaram if I have to come to the pool at Nehru Stadium. My family members drop me," said Geetha Kannan, 42, a wheelchair person and paralympic swimmer with a gold medal.

According to an official, children with autism and other disabilities use SDAT pools on the ground floor which have ramps at the entrance of the pool complex. But none of these pools are heated for hydrotherapy. A trainer at one of the accessible public pools said, "Around 20 people come to the pool every day for practice. Earlier, 30-40 people used to come. During monsoon, many do not come because the water is cold."

None of the GCC pools were accessible. When TOI asked if the GCC pools would be made accessible, the contractor maintaining the pool near Marina said, "We cannot make changes now."

Madras high court had insisted all buildings should follow harmonized guidelines and standards for universal accessibility in India, 2021. An official said, "We will include accessible infrastructure when we tender out the maintenance of the other two swimming pools."



Number of people with disabilities in Chennai
1.5 lakh

Number of trained swimmers with disabilities
150

YES YOU CAN: Geetha Kannan, a 42 year old paralympic swimmer, at Nehru stadium pool

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES IN A SWIMMING POOL

Swimming pool	Maintaining body	Ramp leading into swimming pool	Seat lift	Accessible toilet	Warm pools for hydrotherapy (around 36°C to 40°C)
Jawaharlal Nehru stadium	SDAT (Sport Development Authority of Tamil Nadu)	Yes	Not working	Yes	No
Velachery aquatic complex	SDAT	No	Yes	No	No
Shenoy Nagar	SDAT	No	No	Yes	No
Mogappair	SDAT	No	No	Yes	No
Marina Beach	GCC (Greater Chennai Corporation)	No	No	No	No
Periyamet My Lady's Park Pool	GCC	Not functioning			
Thiruvottiyur	GCC	Not functioning			

“ We will make the seating lift in Jawaharlal Nehru stadium fully functional in a week's time – SDAT official

Woman defies disability, bags para gold

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"I feel like flying while swimming after being wheelchair-bound on land," says Geetha Kannan, 42, from Tambaram. She bagged the gold medal in freestyle, front stroke, and

BRAVEHEART: Geetha was struck with polio during childhood, but that didn't dent her spirits

backstroke in a state-level paralympic swimming competition held in Theni earlier this month.

When Geetha was six months old, she had a polio attack. In 2016, she injured her hands in a car accident. "She could not lift even a spatula. We visited many doctors who recommended surgery," says Kannan R, her husband. "Then, six months ago, we were introduced to swimming. Her health improved; she mas-

tered the sport and bagged three gold medals."

Geetha visits the SDAT pool every day for a two-hour swim. Every day, her husband drops her in the car. "An abled person can dance, walk, or jump on land. But a disabled person can do all of that only in water. I wanted to give that to my wife," says Kannan.

Geetha said: "I used to depend on another person to move from place to place. Swimming is the only activity

where I am not dependent on machines or humans," Geetha tells TOI, after a back lap.

Like Geetha, many people can be trained if there are more accessible pools in the city, experts say.

"All apartment complexes that have swimming pools need to be made accessible for those with a disability," says Madhavi Latha, a paralympic swimmer, who practices yoga and a host of other exercises in the swimming pool.