

This paraplegic just hit the long road

Manish Raj | TNN

Manish Raj



NOW, THAT'S WHAT WE CALL DRIVE: Wheelchair-bound Deepa Malik will cover 2,000km across 6 states in 10 days in a car specially designed by a team of students from Sathyabama University, Chennai

Chennai: Gleaming bikes — from a vintage Yezdi to an imported Harley Davidson — waited at the Sathyabama University here alongside a customised white SUV. As Deepa Malik, 43, exchanged her wheelchair for the steering wheel, she was greeted with deafening applause.

Malik set off on the Will on Wheels (WOW) expedition from Sathyabama University on Sunday, to set a new record — the longest pan-India drive by a paraplegic woman. Wheelchair bound after three major surgeries and with 183 stitches on her upper spinal column, she will attempt to cover a distance of more than 2,000km across six states in 10 days. Accompanied by co-driver Prateek Gahlaut, she will end the journey at Gurgaon on September 29, driving through Bangalore, Pune, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Jaipur.

“Disability is never a bar-

rier and I want to spread this message across the nation,” Malik said. “It was in March that I was felicitated with ‘Inspiration Icon’ by Sathyabama University. When I interacted with the engineering students here, I requested them to create something that would bring a change, a design which would help people with disabilities. The students designed a car that could be used

by the disabled and came up with the idea of WOW,” she said. She also emphasised the importance of the youth in bringing about change.

Malik is an avid adventure sports enthusiast, international para-athlete and coach, swimmer and a motivational speaker. She has featured thrice in the Limca Book of Records — for being the first paraplegic woman to swim for an

hour against the current in the Yamuna, driving 58km on a bike and driving to one of the world’s highest mountain passes, Khardung La in Ladakh. “If I can do it, so can others with disabilities,” she said. In 2012, she was given the Arjuna Award for her records and haul of medals in various national and international para-athletic tournaments.

“It’s tough to match her energy and will power,” said Mariazeena Johnson, MD, Sathyabama University. “She was completely involved — from charting out the route to test driving the vehicle, but never said it was tough or challenging. Her enthusiasm is infectious,” she added. Pratik Somani, an engineering student who was part of the six-member team that designed the car said, “We conducted a survey among disabled people and tried to focus on their difficulties while driving a vehicle. It took about a month to conceptualise the changes.”