

23% metro users buy tokens despite Covid-19 spread risk

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Chennai: Around 23% of the city's metro rail commuters use tokens for their commute despite the risk of virus spread, as they do not want to pay more money than needed for the trip and buy a smartcard. The rechargeable smartcard costs ₹50. Staff at the metro stations are told to encourage commuters to purchase smartcards for a contactless travel but end up issuing tokens when people refuse to buy cards, as many of them are either one-time users or rarely commute in metro trains. Metros in Bengaluru and Delhi have stopped issuing tokens since operations started in September post-lockdown, due to fear that reuse of tokens could be a source of Covid-19 spread.

According to CMRL, of 6.8 lakh passengers who travelled in metro trains between September 7 and October 15, more than 1.5 lakh passengers purchased tokens for their commute, while 4.9 lakh used smartcards, about 10,461 bought group tickets and 21,933 purchased QR-code tickets.

Hundreds of passengers in long queues or interacting with metro rail staff to buy tickets, tokens also increases risk of getting infected

This means passengers buying tokens also end up spending more time at the ticketing levels of the stations, likely with other passengers, and also interact with the station staff.

"Passengers mostly do not want their money blocked in the smartcard. Some do not want to carry a smartcard at all and do not mind purchasing a token at the counter and some use metro trains rarely and do not want a card," a metro rail official said. "If they insist, we have to give them a token, which we sanitize after every use. We can't send them back. Our footfall is already low," the official added.

At present, the average daily footfall is at 25,000 compared to 1.16 lakh pre-covid

period, which was also less than the estimated daily average patronage of 7.76 lakh. CMRL says their regular commuters are IT employees and college students, who now work and attend virtual classes from home.

Further, one-time users also take the metro train only if their origin and destination are closer to the stations, as first mile and last mile connectivity is mostly not available. "I do not use metro service regularly because the station is at least a kilometre away. So even if I spend ₹50 to buy a card and travel two stations away, I may still have balance money in the card which I may not use any time soon," said

When services resumed on September 7 after a five month break, CMRL introduced readers to validate a recharged smartcards and QR-code ticketing facilities, where tickets can be purchased through CMRL app to encourage contactless travel. Commuters are also offered discounts on smartcard and QR-code tickets while the balance amount on smartcards are fully refunded.