

MEET MUMBAI'S FIRST FEMALE AUTO DRIVERS

MUMBAI: Chaya Mohite slowly turns the accelerator as she carefully edges the salmon-colored rickshaw forward, one of Mumbai's first female auto drivers to make use of a government scheme aimed at empowering women. The 45-year-old was one of 19 women who recently started jobs ferrying passengers through the notoriously congested streets of India's financial capital in their new three-wheelers.

"This job is much better than doing household work. I can make more money and it helps us secure our futures," Mohite said as she got in some last minute practice. The mother of three has spent the past two months learning how to drive at a training centre in Mumbai's eastern suburbs and is thrilled with her new skills and financial prospects. "I couldn't even ride a bicycle but today I can drive an auto rickshaw. I'm independent and it makes me happy," says Mohite, who hopes to earn 1,000 rupees (\$15) a day.

She is benefitting from a scheme

introduced by the state government of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital that reserves five percent of rickshaw permits for women. It announced the plan in early 2016, saying that 465 licenses would be made available for women in Mumbai and the neighboring district of Thane. Unlike similar schemes in New Delhi and Ranchi, where some pink autos are driven by women for women as a safety initiative, the Maharashtra drivers take both male and female passengers.

Ready to drive anywhere

Services started in Thane last year but Mohite and her new colleagues, who will sport white lab-coat-like uniforms, are the first to ply the streets of India's most populated metropolis. "I've taught them the A to Z of auto-rickshaw driving. They are now experts and have passed an official RTO (Regional Transport Office) test," Sudhir Dhoipode, the women's instructor, said. Dhoipode says he is currently teaching more than



MUMBAI, India: This photo shows an Indian woman rickshaw driver taking part in a training session in Mumbai. — AFP

40 women how to drive while around 500 others have expressed an interest in learning despite some community opposition in the conservative country. "People mocked us for leaving our

homes and choosing to drive rickshaws but we hope we can inspire other women to come forward and take advantage of this great initiative," said driver Anita Kardak. —AFP



GOA, India: This file photo shows western tourists walking past a shopping stall at Anjuna Beach in the Indian state of Goa. — AFP

INDIA'S PARTY MECCA GOA BANS LATE NIGHT RAVES IN CRACKDOWN

LEGAL BAN ON HOLDING PARTIES AFTER 10 PM

NEW DELHI: India's tourist Mecca Goa is pulling the plug on its legendary all-night dance parties as the local government tries to clean up its image as a drug and rave hotspot. Goa chief minister Manohar Parrikar said the government would start enforcing a long-ignored ban on loud music after 10 pm-bad news for bars and clubs blasting out tunes into the early hours on the state's famous beaches. "There is a legal ban on holding parties after 10 pm. The ban will be upheld by the state government," he told reporters Wednesday.

The former Portuguese enclave lures millions of tourists every year with its night life, sandy beaches and laid-back coastal atmosphere. But its reputation as a tropical paradise has been marred by high-profile crimes involving foreigners. Last month the naked body of a 28-year-old Irish woman was found dumped

near a tourist hotspot. She had been spotted at a late night party with a local man who was later arrested for her rape and murder.

In 2008, 15-year-old British schoolgirl Scarlett Keeling was drugged, raped and murdered in a case that made global headlines. Her semi-naked body was found in shallow waters near a popular party beach. Other foreigners have also died in suspicious circumstances, while drug and alcohol-related mishaps are common. The Goa crackdown comes days after a top minister from Parrikar's administration called for the late-night party ban to be enforced. "These parties are against our culture. We need to stop them immediately," Goa's water resources minister Vinod Palyekar said last week. Parrikar said his government had also instructed police to commence a crackdown on drugs, prostitution and illegal gambling in the state. —AFP

NEW ZEALAND BATTENS DOWN AS BIG STORM APPROACHES

WELLINGTON: New Zealand was bracing yesterday for a storm that meteorologists warned could be the worst for almost 50 years, with extreme weather alerts across the entire North Island. The tropical depression, the tail-end of ex-Cyclone Cook which hit New Caledonia this week, has already generated offshore winds of more than 170 kmh. The official MetService said it was expected to make landfall overnight yesterday, generating five meter swells, torrential rain and gale force winds.

It warned the storm could be the most intense since ex-Cyclone Giselle in 1968, which swept a ferry onto rocks in Wellington Harbor, killing 53 people. Cyclone Cook on Monday dumped heavy rain on New Caledonia, where four people were hurt when a tree fell on their car and power supplies were disrupted. Damage, however, was limited. New Zealand emergency services pre-emptively evacuated some small coastal communities in the country's north, and the military was assisting relief efforts.

"This is a very significant event and is likely to produce widespread flooding, (land) slips and wind damage, including to power lines, and may even lift roofs and bring down large trees," MetService said. Many areas of the North Island are already sodden after the remnants of Australia's Cyclone Debbie swept over last week and caused extensive flooding. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the storm is bearing down as New Zealand prepares for the Easter long weekend, meaning roads are likely to be choked with holiday-makers.

The New Zealand Transport Agency urged motorists to stay off the roads if possible, saying conditions would be hazardous. Air New Zealand cancelled all flights from Rotorua, Napier, Hamilton and Tauranga in the North Island, and said it expected disruptions at Nelson and Blenheim in the South Island. The storm system is set to hit the Coromandel and Bay of Plenty regions of the North Island on yesterday night, before tracking south to Wellington early today. —AFP