E-rickshaws in Jaipur: Freedom on three wheels

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Editorial comment: One could wish that the design of the driver's cabin was more suited to the build of the women drivers.

Komal Mahawar, one of the women drivers of Pink City Rickshaw Company, with tourists in Jaipur. Photo: Sandeep Saxena

Pink and yellow and chasing away the blues in Jaipur

We are in the 18th century City Palace in ‘Pink City’ Jaipur, about to be taken on a heritage ride by ‘tour hostess’ Komal Mahawar. Smartly turned out in a blue salwar-kurta with a pink bandi (waistcoat) and a light pink stole, the 20-something Mahawar is all smiles behind the wheel of her rickshaw. Every day, from 9.30 a.m. to 5 p.m., she takes tourists around the palace premises in her royal buggy-inspired e-rickshaw, taking home ₹5,000 at the end of the month. It may not seem like much but for Mahawar and other women like her, both young and old, this income means they don’t have to spend their lives hiding behind the ghunghat (veil). Thanks to an initiative called the Pink City Rickshaw Company (PCRC), many housewives and young girls from slums in Jaipur are finding their freedom on three wheels. After undergoing 10 days of training to obtain a driving licence, they are able to ply the e-rickshaws on Jaipur roads. What’s more: they are also equity holders in PCRC that they now proudly own and manage. PCRC will train 200 women drivers by the end of this year, and so far, there are 50 of them, between the ages of 18 and 45, already on the roads. Najma Bano will never forget the day she drove back home in her rickshaw for the first time.

Neighbours’ angry stares and verbal abuses greeted her. Her voice is soft and she sits hunched as she recalls that day. But the 45-year-old mother of four found a strong supporter in her husband Zafar, who owns a small cycle-repair shop. “What’s stopping you from driving a rickshaw when there are women flying planes, he asked me,” Bano says with a shy smile. No fears “I always dreamt of walking free, being on my own, but had no confidence or hope. Today, I can’t explain the joy I feel when I ferry tourists through the same bylanes I once feared to tread,” Bano says with child-like enthusiasm. “Initially, I would cover half my face while driving but not any more,” she says. Her elder daughter Rukhsar has now followed in her footsteps to become a qualified rickshaw driver. Siddharth Lunkad, Senior Project Coordinator, PCRC, calls these women ‘roadies’, like in the popular television reality show. “They face challenges head-on, and emerge stronger each day,” he says. The ride was far from smooth when Access Development Services (ADS), the non-profit behind PCRC, began their training programme in the latter part of 2016. The women were discouraged by their own family members. “Everybody mocked us saying: Will women ride rickshaws and take over the streets now?” the women say. But they kept at it, their ghunghats and burqas firmly in place. More than a year later, these women sit confidently behind the wheel in their smart uniforms. Festive look PCRC has 29 custom-designed e-rickshaws that cater to tourists, corporates, cultural events, literary festivals and even big-budget weddings. With a speed of 30-35 kmph, it can travel 60 km when charged for eight hours. The rickshaw itself looks festive with a pink body and cheery yellow collapsible canopy. The passenger seat is ergonomically designed with a mobile phone charging point, small dustbin, newspaper and bottle holders, and a locker. Lunkad says that the rickshaws will soon have IVRS (interactive voice response system), aimed at tourists.
The women take tourists around in their rickshaws on curated tours that last anywhere between two and four hours, and cost between ₹2,000 and ₹3,000. “We get ₹300 for a three-hour tour and additional income from the generous tips given by foreign tourists who are pleased to see us ride,” says Lalita Devi, a veteran who has conducted 12 heritage tours and ‘Wake-up With Jaipur’ rides. More than 90% of PCRC’s clients are foreign tourists. They have also partnered with leading hotels and tour operators. According to Surendra Verdia, Vice-President, ADS, they have already received 30 bookings for the coming tourist season in October-March. So what happens off-season? Says Renu Sharma, one of the first women drivers at PCRC, “I just rent an e-rickshaw and drive around ferrying daily passengers.” She manages to earn around ₹500 in the evening rush hour. Next up is Udaipur, as PCRC gets ready to expand its reach.

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