

## Kerala's auto-rickshaws vroom up for golden jubilee

It is party time for auto-rickshaw drivers here as the three-wheeler vehicle Tuesday celebrates the completion of 50 years on Kerala streets.

Zakir Hussain, president of the Kalamaserry Auto Rickshaw Workers Cooperative Society, said the day is being celebrated with cultural programmes and a feast with family members.

'There are 1,000 auto-rickshaw drivers in this cooperative society, which is believed to be the largest of its kind in the state. In the afternoon we will have a full-course meal,' he said.

'Cooperation Minister G. Sudhakaran will take part in the evening programme - 'Hey Auto 50 years', said Hussain, who is also the state joint secretary of the Democratic Youth Federation of India - the youth wing of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

The three-wheeler made its entry into the roads of Kochi - then known as Ernakulam - in 1957. From Kochi it travelled to other cities, coming to the capital city - Thiruvananthapuram - in the early 70s.

According to the State Planning Board, the number of auto-rickshaws in the state grew from 58,165 in 1990 to 342,466 in 2006.

'This profession got a real boost with the blockbuster Malayalam film 'Hey Auto' in the 80s in which superstar Mohanlal played the lead role. It was a film that showed the auto driver in a positive role,' said Kuttapan, an auto driver here.

Seeing the popularity of the three-wheelers, the state government started the Kerala Automobiles Limited (KAL) on the outskirts of the capital city to manufacture auto-rickshaws in 1984.

But despite the huge demand for three-wheelers in the state, KAL could not compete with other companies and is now targeting the north Indian market with a monthly production of 600 three-wheelers.

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