

## Then destitute, now successful entrepreneurs

**T**HEY WERE no more than a group of destitute women till a few months ago. As victims of social exploitation, their future appeared bleak and gloomy until Odanadi Seva Samsthe, a non-governmental organisation engaged in the rehabilitation of destitute women and children, took them under its wings.

Today, they can take pride in calling themselves successful entrepreneurs in a vocation that has largely remained a man's domain. Geetha, Selvi, Kajol and Usha are not only running a taxi with a State permit profitably but also wish to reach out to the needy through a service-oriented programme.

The four women, under the guidance of Odanadi Seva Sangha and a soft loan of Rs. 1 lakh from the International Organisation for Migrants, set up Mannavi Taxi, which exclusively ferries children and women.

They bought a van for Rs. 75,000 and learnt driving and mechanism before starting the taxi service.

Ferrying children and women passengers to different locations in the State, they are raking in sufficient profits not only to maintain themselves but also to repay the loan at four per cent interest.

To mark International Women's Day, Mannavi Taxi announced free service to transport pregnant women in slums to hospitals. For the first three days, Mannavi Taxi's telephone num-



A taxi service for women by women. — Photo: M.A. Sriram

ber, 5559599, was virtually out of bounds. For the office received a flood of calls from women in advanced stages of pregnancy from different parts of the district.

"They even rushed to a village in H.D. Kote taluk where a mentally challenged woman, a victim of rape, had to be rushed to the hospital for delivery," Parashu, a coordinator of Odanadi Seva Samsthe said.

The unexpectedly large number of telephone calls kept Man-

navi Taxi fully occupied. "It will be difficult to repay the loan if the service is not made commercially viable. Hence, we are working out a scheme to keep the taxi at the disposal of pregnant women only one day a week," he added.

The remaining days of the week, the taxi service will be available for commercial use for children and women passengers. During the past six months of its existence, Mannavi Taxi has

made several trips to Bangalore. "With a State permit, the taxi has even gone up to Gulbarga," Mr. Parashu said.

The taxi service is by the women for the women. The women taxi drivers may not entertain men, except in rare cases. And, for the safety of the children and women passengers, the taxi drivers have also been trained in martial arts.

*By Lajih A. Khan  
in Mysore*