



MERC Times

Vol 15 | Issue 11 | Pages 08 | AUGUST 15, 2022

MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR

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From Shiraz to Srinagar in 50 days

Zainab Shafiq

Twenty-year-old Abdul Rehman Khan was appearing in his semestral exams when the first cases of the novel coronavirus were reported in Iran on Feb. 19.

“I had taken my exam and was leaving the examination hall when my phone started ringing. It was my mom,” said Khan.

A second year MBBS student from Srinagar, Kashmir, Khan had left his hometown to pursue a medical degree in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Iran in 2018.

Classes were being conducted smoothly until the moment he received that call. Two people had tested positive for COVID-19 in the city of Qom in Iran and died on the same day.

“My mom was worried and I was trying to reassure her while listening to my friends talk about how the cases were already

mounting and people were dying,” recalled Khan.

He didn't want his mother to panic, so he told her that everything was normal and that they were going back to their dormitory.

When the cases started increasing, educational institutions were closed in some provinces, but they still remained open in Shiraz.

“We were so scared that we didn't dare step out of our dorms. All of us had decided not to attend classes unless we were sure that it was safe to go outside,” said Khan.

In Kashmir, the families of these students couldn't do anything but wait for normalcy to return or for the government to bring them back.

In a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, dated March 15, Tehran-based Mahan Air airline's Managing Director Hamid Arabnejad had written that around 7,000 Indian nationals were stranded across various locations in Iran and offered to

repatriate them without any commercial interest, on humanitarian grounds.

After completing a month-long quarantine period at Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, the students were flown to Kashmir on April 21.

“When I went to sleep on that night, I kept opening my eyes again and again, just to make sure that I was actually lying in my own bed, at my home and not in the quarantine center in Jaisalmer or the university's dorm in Iran,” said Khan.

When the cases started increasing, educational institutions were closed in some provinces, but they still remained open in Shiraz

Health risk on platter

Masrat Nabi

In the summer capital and other parts of the valley, unhygienic street foods are primarily offered in front of educational institutions, creating a severe health risk.

The street food industry, which is run by vendors, plays a significant role in urban areas and is rapidly expanding in Valley. It provides a wide variety of reasonably priced and easily accessible food to thousands of people every day.

The authorities have utterly failed to keep an eye on the filthy food products being sold by hawkers and vendors along the roadside in Srinagar, where there are several roadside vendors who continue to offer unhygienic eatables during the evening and night hours. The majority of street food sellers do not prepare their goods with sufficient cleanliness, which raises the possibility of bacterial infection.

In front of educational institutions, a variety of street food like pickles, fries, belpuri, momos, and chicken fries are selling like hotcakes.

Due to their low cost and delectable taste, students in universities, schools, and colleges are the main consumers of the mouth-watering street food.

Many vendors do not use hand gloves while preparing and serving food, exposing customers to dirt and other dangerous germs.



The foods are also often served in open areas.

A study conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organisation in 2010 shows that 100 per cent of street food vendors have no training on food safety and food serving or handling. About 58 per cent of the vendors do not cover their food while selling.

Despite this, sentiments towards hawkers selling food, particularly in the evening, vary greatly among residents of Srinagar. Others said they have a right to a living while others claim they shouldn't be permitted to sell food on the streets because there are no laws protecting consumers.

Speaking of the native stance taken by the authorities, these hawkers, some of whom are operating illegally from the evening till late at night, seek to earn a quick buck

without giving any thought to the welfare of the populace.

“They prepare it without using gloves, clean the dishes, handle the money with the same hands, and leave it out in the open. That is utterly unclean” said Zainab Bint Tariq, a student at the University of Kashmir

While talking to Dr Aftab who is physician at GMC Baramulla said that most vendors prepare and serve food improperly, which results in the transmission of bacteria like coliform, E coli, salmonella, shigella, staphylococcus aureus, and pseudomonas, which are major causes of infections like diarrhoea, typhoid, food poisoning, urinary tract infections, and pneumonia.

He continued by saying that the bacteria can enter human bodies if vegetables or meat are not properly washed or if there is faecal contamination during food production or handling. The bacteria also grow quickly if the food is kept in moist, warm conditions. Additionally, bacteria can get into your food through flies, money exchanged with diseased hands, or contaminated water.

The truth is that these roadside vendors will continue to jeopardise the health of thousands of people every day unless and until the authorities keep an eye on the quality of food items being sold.



Garbage burning cause of concern for Hawal residents

Shaila Khan

Residents in Mughal masjid area of Hawal are concerned about the indiscriminate burning of garbage left at a vacant park area and they are pleading the Municipal Corporation Srinagar to act quickly so that the garbage is disposed off properly.

There are hundreds of houses in the vicinity, and every day the trash collected is set on fire in the park, causing pollution, the residents alleged.

As per locals, majority of waste is plastic and causes respiratory problems to them.

"They do it on the daily basis here," said Aijaz khan a resident.

In December 2016, The National Green Tribunal (NGT) ordered a nationwide ban on burning of garbage in open air with a penalty of up to Rs 25,000, citing it as a major source of air pollution.

According to locals, the waste should be transported and disposed-off properly.

"The regulations call for punitive action, and we often do it, we will take



There are hundreds of houses in the vicinity, and every day the trash collected is set on fire in the park, causing pollution, the residents alleged



Residents should complain to their local ward officer or dial the SMC helpline toll-free number 18001807038 if they witness burning of waste again, said an official at the Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC).

action regarding this matter soon" said Mudasir Javed Head Engineer at SMC's solid waste management division.

PCOS prevalence has reached unsettling levels

Masrat Nabi

Mehak, a teenager from north Kashmir's Baramulla, observed that she was gaining weight and that, despite her best attempts to stop it, it kept increasing.

Her health issues began to interfere with her daily life when they were coupled with an irregular menstrual cycle and the first indications of excessive facial hair growth.

"Over the course of a year, my mother took me to several hospitals. The doctors told me to wait, saying I was too young to have any problems. Some of the doctors thought that I was overreacting and merely "faking it," and that I needed to get out of this state," said Mehak,

She said her mother took her to a gynaecologist and pleaded with him for a thorough check. He performed an ultrasound to diagnose a disorder that he called Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), Mehak continued.

One of the main endocrine conditions,

polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), is linked to reproduction and affects 6 to 12% of women in the reproductive age groups. The risk factors for PCOS are present in almost all young girls. The doctor informed Mehak that these factors include a lack of vitamins B and D.

Up to six out of ten women in Kashmir may have PCOS, an endocrine condition that affects an estimated 116 million women worldwide. In Kashmir, it has grown to be rather prevalent. Women with PCOS are now far more affected than before.

PCOS has emerged as the most prevalent endocrine illness in women of reproductive age, according to Dr. Humaira Noor, a consultant gynaecologist at the district hospital in Baramulla. "Irregular periods, hirsutism (facial hair growth), weight gain, hair loss, and oily skin or acne are some of its symptoms. However, each woman experiences these symptoms differently, according to Dr. Humira.

She continued by saying that more PCOS instances are being recorded every

day, which indicates an increase in the condition's prevalence in Kashmir.

According to Dr. Humaira, there has been a 40% increase in PCOS patients. "The age range of 15 to 40 years sees the majority of PCOS cases. Currently, we receive five to seven cases each day of women with PCOS.

According to her, teenagers are the age group with the highest prevalence of PCOS cases, and 90% of them are obese women. "Genetic factors are frequently to blame in lean women. It might result in infertility in some situations.

The majority of women in the valley are unaware of this underlying issue and blame stress for irregular periods, according to Dr. Rukiya, a gynaecologist at district hospital Baramulla.

80% of PCOS-afflicted women struggle to conceive, she continued. There are a variety of therapy options, such as consuming a diet high in antioxidants and unprocessed carbs in moderation. Increasing exercise can also be helpful, she advised

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Madeen Sahab Shrine: A unique architectural marvel of Kashmir



Sadaf Shabir

Rift over the custodian rights between two groups forced the government lock the gates of a 600 year old monument for public since 2002 in Madeen Sahab, Zadibal, in downtown Srinagar.

Madeen Sahib Shrine is among the most revered historic monuments of Kashmir. As the inscription of the entrance of the mosque alongside shrine reads the mosque and the shrine was built by Sultan Sikander, father of Zain-ul-Abideen (Budshah) in 1448.

It is the shrine of a Muslim saint and missionary Syed Mohammad Madani popularly known as (Madin Saeb).

For centuries the monument remained place of attraction for not only locals but people across Kashmir.

Its unique architecture was praised by foreign writers in their books and travelogues.

Sajad Ahmad Naqash, a member of the Mohalla Committee of Madeen Sahab blamed certain miscreants for the unfortunate locking down of the shrine. Sajad said, "I myself have witnessed miracles of the shrine, in today's era people have little or no faith on such things."

He said that in the Muharram of

2002, some people claimed that they saw a dazzling light shining from a flag that was put on the pagoda shaped top of the shrine. As the news spread, crowds started simmering at the shrine compound. Meanwhile, an old dispute about the custody of the shrine resurfaced between some members of two particular communities living in the immediate surroundings of the shrine.

Later, the flag was removed but the dispute started turning ugly. To maintain the law and order police force was deployed and eventually the administration decided to lock the shrine and disallow public presence at the religious place. The shrine comes under the Archaeological Department of the Government of Jammu and Kashmir. It is put under strict security since the dispute.

Sajad said, "We wrote many letters to the then Divisional Commissioner to reopen the shrine for public but because the permission was not granted."

Many youth who are interested in architecture and stories related to the shrine have tried to visit the shrine to know the reality but the security guards and employees of the Archaeology department deny permission to enter which is subject to the written permission of the Director Archives.

Fayaz Ahmad Bhat (59), another local said, "When I was young people from all the communities used to take care of the shrine together, without any conflict. We used to celebrate Urs on 11 Rajab every year, Ghulam Hassan Khan from one community and Ghulam Mohammad Khan from other community were unanimously chosen as the caretakers of the shrine."

Zareef Ahmad Zareef, a public figure and poet said it was in 1905, when archaeological surveyor W.H Nicholls, during his pioneering study of Muslim architecture in Kashmir, noticed the uniqueness of the art of this building among all Muslim monuments of India.

He described the glazed tiles of the monument and the painted mystical beast not seen anywhere in India.

Zareef said, "It was Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah during 1985, who ordered for the renovation of the shrine. The members of the two communities were clamming the custody of the shrine, however, later it was handed over to the Archaeology Department to avoid any clash."

He further said, "It's a tragedy with our Kashmir that nothing is valued here, whenever I see that shrine my heart aches. It is hard to describe how even shrines are politicised and locked down for small disputes."

Notably, the 2002 clashes were third of its kind in more than 100 years. In an article titled 'Why is Madin Sahib locked?', Vinayak Razdan, a Kashmiri Pandit writer, says that on 19 September 1872, on the Urs (death anniversary) of Madin Sahib, a wave of violence was unleashed over the claims of ownership of the place that lasted about three days.

"In the madness, the ancient monument was damaged in a fire that raged all over Zadibal," says Razdan.

He says that the violence of 1872 is recorded in a report published in a Munich-based paper, where it is titled 'The Grauel in Kashmir' (The horror in Kashmir).

Speaking about the 2002 incident, Bilal Ahmad Bhat, a local resident said, "Everything was planned by some people to get the ownership of shrine so we went to Divisional Commissioner and told him to give its custody to the Archeology Department and now it's locked down from many years."



When 'golden hands' decide to give up

Zainab Shafiq

Fifty-year-old Ghulam Qadir has been working with Pashmina (a fine type of wool) since the age of 10. Despite weaving it for more than forty years, Qadir failed in weaving his dreams through this costly thread.

Working in a remote area Ari Pathan of Beerwah, of Central Kashmir's Budgam district, he earns very little in spite of working for long hours.

"We live in a hand-to-mouth condition," he rues, adding that the craftsmen actually receive a meagre 20% of the profit that too in not less than three months after the sale of the product.

This dreadful account is not the complete story of his misery. Advent of machines which have made the life of humans easy and comfortable - have added more miseries to the life of craftsmen like Qadir.

"The poor is always helpless. Unfortunately, machines are cheaper and quicker than our hands," laments Qadir.

The products being made from copying the designs of the originals, are very much similar to the latter and a common man can't tell the difference between the two.

Since the inflation has severely hit Europe and Middle East - where Kashmiri handicrafts are mostly exported, the exporters here have been unable to obtain new orders for their products.

This has affected the working of the

entire chain - from exporters, down to craftsmen.

The inability of manufacturers to finance new production cycles through craftsmen associated with them, has rendered most of them jobless. Consequently, most of them have shifted to other activities.

Ali Mohammed Dar had started making shawls at the age of 15. Hailing from Rathsun, a far-flung village of Beerwah, he learned this skill from the elder of his village and later taught almost 100 more.

He has a family of six, his wife, three sons and a daughter. The whole family has put their blood and sweat in this craft, but all in vain.

Due to the problems being faced by artisans from all sides, they have lost all their zeal and are no longer interested in this work and instead prefer farming.

"Despite working day and night and giving our hundred per-cent, we didn't get the deserving results, only false promises from the government. It has no respect for our work and now we have given up on it," mourns Ali.

Over the past two decades, a good number of stories were published in newspapers that talked about how a substantial number of skilled craftsmen and artisans has shifted to other jobs and the rest are ready to follow their path.

Although tourism is considered as the backbone of Kashmir's economy and key zone of employment, the handicrafts sector is the spinal cord of this backbone.

The significance of this sector can also be proven by the fact that the

Directorate of Handicrafts is creating more and more work power through its training centers. These centers are present almost in each block of Kashmir and have thus opened a window of hope for universal entrepreneurship.

Abdul Rashid Tantray, an artisan, says that he oversees the work in two such centers in Arizal and Khan Sahib areas of Beerwah.

Since 1985, he has been teaching the craftsman skill to others as well and today, almost 50-100 people work for him, most of them being post graduates.

In a way, he's providing employment to them, "but the government doesn't acknowledge that."

"This work is headed to a dead end," asserts Tantray.



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Encroachment, pollution wreak havoc in Nigeen lake



Zainab Shafiq

The encroachment of Nigeen Lake along with the dumping of garbage continues unabated near Saida Kadal.

Many illegal constructions have come up at almost a dozen places along Saida Kadal road and heaps of garbage can be seen piled up along the banks of the lake.

The locals accused the government of indifference and amid complaints of official neglect, Bashir Ahmad, a local from the area said this matter was brought to the notice of Lake Conservation and Management Authority (LCMA), but nothing has been done so far.

He also said that trucks continuously dump garbage full of polythene bags in the lake which is choking it and reducing its area.

Seconding Ahmad, Fazul-ud-Din, a boatman said the garbage, as well as weeds make it difficult to row the boat and what once took him half an hour to reach a certain place, takes almost two hours now.

Refuting the allegations of the locals, Tariq Malik, the Public Awareness Officer of LCMA said Nigeen Lake is not shrinking.

“We cannot remove all the weeds, it’s must for the lake. And as far as the disposal of garbage is concerned, a team from Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC) regularly collects the waste from the lake.”

“We also conduct awareness programs in which we appeal people not to throw waste in the lake. We have even provided them 1400 dustbins.”

A monitoring committee was formed by the High Court in 2002, whose present chairman is the Chief Secretary of the state.

“The committee holds a meeting with the scientific committee every month where suggestions are given and implemented,” he added.

Talking to the reporter, Vice-Chairman of LCMA, Dr Bashir Ahmad Bhat, said all the drainage pipes from surrounding areas empty into the two lakes (Dal and Nigeen).

“Around five Sewage Treatment Plants have been set up to treat the water bodies,” said Bhat.

On the suggestion of the High Court a third party was formed under the supervision of Dr Tapas Nandy, a known scientist from Nagpur.

“According to his report, the water body is 57 percent clear in summer and 84 per cent clear in winter,” he added.

Shah said he visits the lakes every other day, talks to the houseboat owners and asks them for their ideas and suggestions “since they know the lake well.”

“We even made pamphlets to involve people in the cleaning of the lake. We will get them registered and also offer employment to those interested. They will be paid every week,” he said.

When asked about the illegal constructions, LCMA’s VC said the enforcement wing keeps a close watch on the possible violation of building norms and encroachments in the area allotted to it.

“Special care is taken in the green belt (restricted area) and demolition drives are carried out at periodic intervals, in co-ordination with police and district magistrate to discourage people from resorting to illegal constructions,” he added.

'Illiterate' poet of village Churmujroo

Uzair Khursheed Kotay

Haleema Quadri, a Sufi poet was born in Sugan, Khag. During childhood she didn’t received any kind schooling, the condition was not such in her home to send her school.

She has even not went to Darasgah. But it was the will of God that she was bestowed with such beautiful and soothing poetry.

While talking to her she said, “Once she was washing utensils on the edge of stream first couplets of a poetry came



into her mind.”

She has written many books, among them ‘Aashq-e-Nabi’ is popular.

Haleema was using a writer who would pen down her poetry.

Haleema said, “She collected all her poetry in a book, during this journey.”

Recently Lt Governor Manoj Sinha talked about Haleema Qadri in a programme “Awaam Ki Aazaz Mai.”

He said, “Haleema Qadri is an illiterate sufi poet, but this illiteracy doesn’t became hindrance in her poetry.



Kashmir's first female rapper 'Menime'

Taha Wani

21-year-old Mehak Ashraf is the first female rapper from Kashmir who dons multiple hats as a rapper, a teenager from the old city of Hazratbal area of Srinagar, better known by her stage name 'Menim'. She is pursuing her graduation from Women's College Srinagar. Her forays into rap began in 2016.

"I was 12 when I first heard Eminem's songs. And I started to learn from his vocabulary, his assent and

raping style that's when I found a way towards rapping," she said.

Mehak's parents were not in favour of her choice to become a professional rapper and she faced resistance at home and outside but she didn't give up on her passion. She had faith in what she was pursuing. And wanted her parents to trust her. "When I first shared this with my parents, they said that there are many male artists here before you. What will you get as a girl here when they don't get any platform here? You will get only bad comments and backlashes here," she said.

Apart from rap, Mehak is also an avid nature and animal lover. She intends on composing some raps on climate change and animal abuse in the future.

"If we talk about rapping, it is a difficult for a girl to do this thing here in Kashmir. Especially pressure from the society because when you come on social media, some people also make wrong comments.

One thing is important that you should have the support of your family, no matter what, then you can handle easily anything," Mehak said.



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She further said that she started taking interest in rapping in a very young. After that she explained it to my father that I have to do this. "By the grace of Almighty he supported me. From then till now wherever I go, my father is with me. Whether I have a performance or an outside meeting," she said.

For a few years Mehak only practiced rapping and then recently she opened her own YouTube channel 'Rapper Annie'. Mehak is satisfied with the people's response to her channel. "Got a very good response from the people. Yes, some people also give backlash and make wrong comments but some people also supported a lot," said Mehak.

Encouraging young aspirants of the field, Mehak said that if you have any desire to follow through with something, be prepared to get analysis, be prepared to confront dismissal, gain from it; really at that time could you at any point try to arrive at the top. Indeed, it is vital to get the help of your family; you want to persuade them that. "This is the very thing that I need to do; this is the very thing I'm keen on doing." Assuming they see that you are getting along nicely and that you actually want to seek after it, then, at that point, clearly, they will uphold you. In the event that you don't have a stage, begin from some place, the base in the event that need be, begin with YouTube, utilize your telephone to record and send it out to a more extensive crowd, see their responses and reactions, try to improve as you come. Use stages like Instagram, Facebook also, it will get gotten, get sees, and so forth. In the first place, there were issues, for instance, I didn't begin from a studio, I utilized a telephone to record my rap tunes, Inshallah, you will be on top one day, you know, in the event that you begin, buckle down.

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Import of Iranian apples abates demand for Kashmiri apples

Faizan Khurshid

Apple growers in Kashmir valley are agitated with the import of low cost apples from Iran. It has allegedly resulted in the decline of demand for Kashmiri apples.

Kashmir produces 80% of India's total apple production, nearly 1 million families are associated with Kashmir's \$1.25-million apple industry.

"Iran's apples are imported at very cheap rates which reduces demand of our harvest," says Abdul Ahad Malik, fruit distributor at Sopore Fruit Mandi.

"I want to ask the government, when Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir has abundant production of apples then why do you need to import apples from other countries," Malik added.

"Apple boxes that we sold at rupees 1000 last year are being bought at rupees 500 this year, we growers are so annoyed that we consider cutting down the apple trees," Mushtak Ahmad Dar said, a fruit grower from Sopore, Baramulla.

Due to huge production of apples in the region, Kashmir possesses Asia's second largest fruit-mandi known as Sopore Fruit Mandi, that is spread over 370 kanals of land.

"Apple industry is our backbone, it's our only source of income. Allah forbid, if this industry faces more issues, we will be forced to beg and starve," says Abdul Majeed Lone,

a fruit distributor at Sopore Fruit Mandi.

Fruit growers also accuse traffic department of stopping their fruit-laden trucks on National Highway resulting in damage to the fruits and delay in induction of apples in outside markets that increases demand of foreign apples.

"The boxes that we purchase at Rs 800 here in the mandi get rotten on way because of frequent closure of National Highway," said Abdul Ahad Malik.

"Despite paying taxes, our convoys are stranded on way. We don't earn much, feel worried and are at the verge of suicide," he added.

Meanwhile, Chief Secretary, Dr Arun Kumar Mehta has impressed upon concerned officers to ensure smooth movement of the fruit laden trucks and their passage on the National Highway is given due priority over other vehicles for their smooth travel to their destinations.

Taking note of the issue, Inspector General of Police (IGP), Traffic, Vikramjit Singh has directed all the SSPs of traffic to take immediate necessary measures to ensure smooth passage to the fruit laden trucks.

To ensure full transparency, IGP Traffic asked the Horticulture Department and Horticulture associations to depute their representative with Traffic officials at Banihal and Qazigund for ensuring smooth movement of fruit trucks.



When Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir has abundant production of apples then why do you need to import apples from other countries



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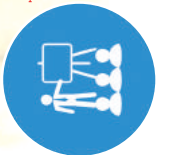
Vol 15 | Issue 12 | Pages 08 | AUGUST 30, 2022

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Lake of Life

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Watching too many cartoons have negative impact on child behaviour
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INSIDE **STORIES**



First proposed multiplex in valley generates hope, joy

Aadil Shafi

As Kashmir is set to get its first Multiplex Cinema owned by the Dhar's of DPS School fame, almost all the cinema halls located in Kashmir are in shambles. Regal, Naaz, Shiraz, Broadway, Khayam, Neelum, Shah, Palladium and Firdous were famous operational cinemas in Srinagar. In other districts of Kashmir Valley, there was Samad Talkies in north Kashmir's Sopore town and Heaven Cinema in south Kashmir's Anantnag.

In early 1990's all the theaters were closed down in the valley after militant groups imposed ban on cinemas. Most of the abandoned theaters were then turned into security camps. Alost nine years later, the Jammu & Kashmir Government, rportedly gave huge monetary incentives to owners for reopening of the cinema halls. Three cinema halls—the Broadway, the Neelum and the Regal—reopened for a brief time. The

reopening of the cinema halls did not evoke much response. People were reluctant of visiting movie theatres despite tight security arrangements. Among these three only Neelum remained functional for some time but ultimately it also closed down during the civil unrest in 2008.

After more than a decade now cinemas are reopening, and the valley will get first-ever multiplex, which is being designed by the INOX, one of the top companies in the business. It is owned by Vijay Dhar, the chairman of the DPS school.

Located in Sonwar area of Srinagar city, this multiplex has capacity of seating of 520 people and has three cinema halls designed beautifully. Dhar said that they are going to intriduce the Kashmiri elements in the interiors. The lobby shall have a 'Khatamandh' ceiling. The multiplex shall have many food courts and other entertainment facilitie. "We will try to introduce local foods at the food courts,"

Dhar said.

"The multiplex is tribute to renowned Bollywood actors who shot many Bollywood films here like Raj Kapoor, who came to Kashmir to shoot the film Barsaat," he added.

Gulzar Ganie, a local filmmaker and director, believes that the inauguration of a multiplex shall provide a glimmer of hope for valley filmmakers. "There is a lot of potential in Kashmir; all we need is a platform and to polish the talent of aspiring filmmakers because there are a lot of scripts that need to be framed," Ganie added.

The multiplex is tribute to renowned Bollywood actors who shot many Bollywood films here like Raj Kapoor, who came to Kashmir to shoot the film Barsaat

Watching too many cartoons have negative impact on child behaviour

Saba Latief

The advent of internet enabled mobile phones have benefitted society in innumerable ways, however, it has caused many worries too. Children are usually seen fiddling with the mobile phones. They are either into online gaming or spend lot of time on social media. Earlier, children would spent a lot of time outdoors playing with friends, however, most of their leisure time is consumed by smartphones now.

Shakeela, mother of a 10 year girl said, "I did my best to keep my daughter occupied in activities. However, she consistently complaints of fatigue, and is only interested in cartoons. She also loses her cool frequently." Such complaints are becoming normal now.

Naseema, mother of an 11 year boy said, "My son does not pay any attention to studies or other activities, he rather prefers to watch cartoons only." She said that she often gets complaints about her son from school that he is very weak in studies.

Khurshid Ahmad, a father of nine years old girl said, "My daughter was very good in studies earlier, but since she got a mobile phone in her hand and started watching cartoon movies, animated series, she does not pay attention to her studies or other things."

"There has been a lot of changes in the



behaviour of my daughter, she gets angry on small things and does not eat food on time, she only engages with the phone and keeps watching cartoons," he added.

According to Fahmeeda, a teacher of D.A.P.girlsHighschool,Srinagar, "Children are watching cartoons for a long span of time, and as a result, they are becoming violent and angry, which has become a worry for parents now."

She further added that more than 90% children watch cartoons and that is why they get influenced by the characters. Which indeed becomes the reason they loose their

language and religious values and choose different words while speaking.

According to Wasim Kakroo, a clinical psychologist, "Cartoon viewing should only be allowed for one hour each day as watching more than that may have a negative impact on a child's development and cause them to reject certain moral behaviors in the future."

He added, "More children, especially those between the ages of six and nine years watch cartoons than children from any other age groups. Additionally, they frequently mimic cartoon characters to the piont where they even speak in their voices," he concluded.



Wular Lake: Source of life and livelihood

Muzamil Bhat

Around 64 kilometers away from Srinagar, Wular Lake (colloquially Wolur) surrounded by the Himalayan mountain range, located in the Bandipora area of North Kashmir is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Asia and is fed by River Jehlum and Madhumati Stream. The size of the lake is 16 kilometers long and 10 kilometers wide which keeps changing due to varying water levels as per seasons.

Wular plays a significant role in the hydrographic system of the valley as it acts as a flood basin for Kashmir. Wular has saved Kashmir from many disastrous floods by absorbing the annual flood water, but the lake is on the verge of being extinct, as the rivers Bohnar, Madumati, and Erin from the mountain ranges and Jehlum and Ningal from Southern Kashmir bring hundreds of tons of silt, plastic, other solid wastes every year. This unrestrained siltation and human encroachments have shrunk the lake by 54% in the last three decades. The area of the lake has reduced from 157 sq. km to 86 sq km.

The lake is an important habitat for migratory water birds and supports rich biodiversity. Wular is a source of life for a huge chunk of the lakeshore community as the livelihood of a large number of people depends on the lake resources, including Fish, Water-Chestnut, and other aquatic vegetation.

Wular produces around 60% of the total fish production of Jammu and Kashmir which provides livelihood to at least 30000 families from across 30 villages settled on the lakefront. Apart from fish,



I have been fishing in the wular waters from last 20 years and this has been the worst time as I haven't earned a single rupee from last 20 days, there will be a time when wular will be without fish and we will be jobless

The lake is also known for its water-chestnut production as 90% of Jammu and Kashmir's water chestnut is sourced from Wular Lake.

But, as the lake has shrunk almost half of its size, it has crumbled the livelihood of the lakeshore community. "I have been fishing in this lake for the last 8 years and I can say that my catch decreases every day," says Mohammad Rafiq (24) a fisherman from Paribal, Aloosa area of Bandipora.

Rafiq recalled, that 8 years ago when he would come along with his father to catch the fish, they used to catch 20-30 kg of fish every day, and now it has reduced to 4-7 Kg's a day. "It's hard for us to survive, the lake which once used to provide us a good amount of fish has now plunged us into poverty and despair," but we can't blame the lake for it, we have polluted this lake

and left it to die.

Another fisherman Nazir Ahmad Dar (37) of Zerimanz village of Bandipora has not caught a single fish in last 20 days, "I have been fishing in the wular waters from last 20 years and this has been the worst time as I haven't earned a single rupee from last 20 days, there will be a time when wular will be without fish and we will be jobless".

During these tough times, the women folk of the fisherman community come to the rescue of their livelihood by extracting water chestnut from the waters of Wular. These women from all age groups leave with their wooden boats at the dawn into the water of Wular lake to extract water chestnut.

But the season lasts for two months only (July-September), and after that period fishermen are left jobless " I go to District Kupwara which is Approximately 71 Kilometers from my home during the winter, and sell vegetables there as Wular almost dries during the winter season but there are other people in our community who don't know anything other than fishing and they end up in debts," Nazir Ahmad says.

Fisherman blame that all the waste from South Kashmir to North Kashmir flows into the Wular Lake resulting in destroying the biodiversity of the lake, they also call dredging of River Jehlum against them " Due to dredging of River Jehlum the water from Wular flows back into the river as its depth increases as compared to the depth of Wular" says Abdul Aziz Malla (60). Malla has been fishing in Wular for the last 40 years and also resides in Zerimanz village of Bandipora.

MERC TIMES



Children in Muharram- Faith and Future

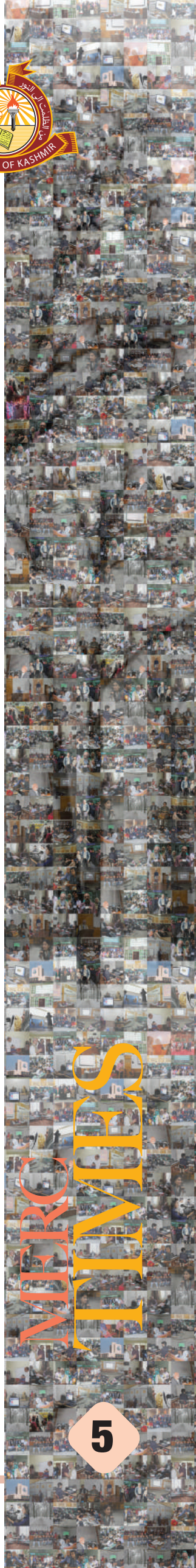
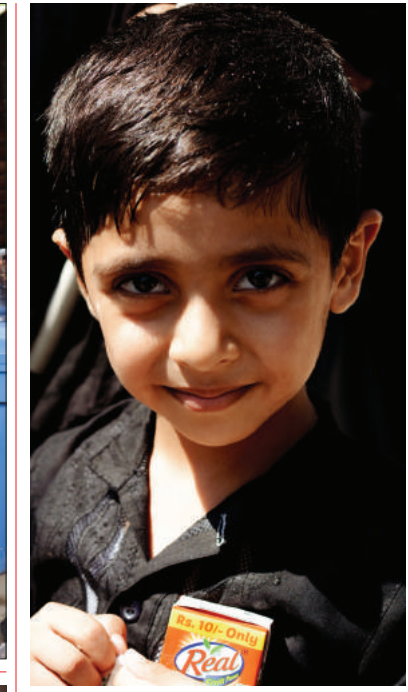
Syeda Sakeena | Suhaib Bhat

Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (AS), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by abstaining from joyous events for the entire Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar.

During this holy month Shia Muslims take part in the mourning ceremonies and processions. Khaak-e-Shifa (soil of Karbala) is applied on the faces and forehead of the followers of the sect, which includes men, women, children because of their affection towards the land of Karbala where the grandsons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) along with other members were martyred. During Muharram children were also seen wearing headbands on which names of Ahulbait are mentioned. Besides adults, even children can be seen carrying the Alam (a flagpole topped by an ornate metal finial) during the march.

“Watching the children dedicating themselves to the services to be provided during the event depicts the healthy future of azadari(lamentation),” Sandeep Koul, a Kashmiri Pandit said.







E-Rickshaws are big relief to Srinagar people



Iqra Khan

Intra-district public transport, especially in Srinagar city is pathetic. Private buses that are plying in the city are either over-crowded or too slow. In order to escape the plight, people take auto-rickshaw rides. It was not a bad option as it was an easier and faster mean of transportation and would also generate employment, however, the fare is so exorbitant that people feel "fleeced." An auto will normally charge Rs 250 to Rs 300 for nine to ten kilometers. The meter

system would have regulated the fares but rickshaw drivers do not go by the meter ratings. In fact there are either no meters installed and even if there are meters they are mostly dyfunt.

In this scenario electronic rickshaw or E-Rickshaw has come as big relief. As these rickshaws are battery driven so the fuel cost is saved and hence they are cheaper. A local resident of downtown, Srinagar who often travels in an e-rickshaw said, "E-rickshaws made our travelling very easy and cheaper," adding more she said, "e-rickshaw should ply on each and every

road of the Srinagar."

Bilal Ahmad, an E-rickshaw driver said, "I am driving this rickshaw since three months. There were barely three e-rickshaws in the city initially but now the number has raised upto more than 25."

"The petrol-auto used to charge 120 to 150 rupees from Akhada building (Lal Chowk) to Bohri Kadal but e-rickshaw price is only 10 to 20 rupees, therefore, making it affordable for people especially for low income group of the society," he said.

Aadil Farooq, a dealer of e-rickshaw told MERC Times, "This e-rickshaw is eco-friendly. It creates less pollution." Putting the doubts of people, regarding their efficiency in winter, at rest Farooq said that these rickshaws have lithium batteries which are least affected by cold."



The petrol-auto used to charge 120 to 150 rupees from Akhada building (Lal Chowk) to Bohri Kadal but e-rickshaw price is only 10 to 20 rupees, therefore, making it affordable for people especially for low income group of the society

Independence day celebrated under 'Har Ghar Tiranga' banner

Inshallah Azhar

'Har Ghar Taranag' a campaign call by Prime Minister Modi was given ahead of August 15th, mark the states 75th Independence Day. The call was to hoist the national flag in homes, Government as well as Private offices to celebrate the Independence Day.

As per the Chief Secretary of Jammu and Kashmir, the aim of the campaign was to bring the oneness and feeling of loyalty towards the nation. It was for the first time that rallies with tricolor flags were seen on the roads across the valley.

"For the first time in my life I have seen such rallies with national flag of the country on roads which is totally a new



thing here," said Abdul Ahad Mir (65), a local resident of Sopore. He further added, "It was for the first time that I have seen that in schools this day was

celebrated along with tricolor flag of the country."

The campaign call not only remained confined to houses but was followed by schools, members of civil society, police and other government departments. To make this call successful there were rehearsals in schools for drills and hosting of flag by the students and teachers ahead of August 15th.

Most of the schools across Kashmir valley participated in the hoisting of national flag; apart from hoisting of

tri-color, students were also seen taking part in tiranga rallies and other folk programmes to mark the India's 75th Independence day.



Rise in health consciousness among women in Kashmir encourages 'gym-going-culture'

Insha Rashid

As people are becoming conscious of the importance of health, the 'health market' is booming. Kashmir valley has been under political turmoil for decades which imposes an enduring psychological and physical impact on people. As social media is buzzing with words like "balance", "mental wellness", "health consciousness", people especially women in Kashmir have started taking their health seriously. Women from every age group are now aware of the importance of exercise and keeping fit.

Muzzafar Bazaz, owner of the Nexgen gym credits COVID-19 for the mindset shift in Kashmiri people. "COVID brought a sense of awareness towards ones health. With people shackled inside the four walls of their houses, pandemic highlighted need for health-conscious living," he said, "We can see a number of gyms have opened since COVID breakout to attract people towards better living. Women initially were shying away because they thought gym is only meant for men but now they



While I tried to workout at home, do cardio and aerobics by learning from YouTube, I could not continue with that. Gym has made me disciplined and seeing woman my age workout here gives me encouragement and motivation

have understood the importance of health that aids them to take better care of their families and makes them focused to carve a successful career."

As per the Indian council of Medical Research (ICMR), the prevalence of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) among Kashmiri women is above 30 percent by Rotterdam Criteria, which probably is the highest percentage globally. Likewise Diabetes, High blood pressure, Thyroid are the prime diseases prevalent in Kashmir that can be managed by lifestyle changes.

Saika Yatoo, a gym instructor at three prominent gyms of the valley said that workouts have become stress busters for many working women. "Mainly women with hormonal imbalances, back pain, fertility disorders are joining gym to change their sedentary lifestyle. The ratio of women joining gym has increased by 60 percent," she said.

For 47 year old Principal, Shaheen Mir, back ache and pre-diabetes was a major provoking factor to join gym and now she has been enjoying the process. "I was so occupied with my school and kids that I never got time to think about health, but lately I have been having mobility issues and that forced me to give exercising a try and ever since I have been spending one hour on my body and mind it has helped me to move freely and with my age I feel lighter and active," she said.

She further added, "While I tried to workout at home, do cardio and aerobics by learning from YouTube, I could not continue with that. Gym has made me disciplined and seeing woman my age workout here gives me encouragement and motivation."

Owner of Beast Factory gym said, "We have a number of women wanting to join the gym, from house wives to working women, old and teenagers, obese or not, women have understood the importance of exercise and healthy nutrition. Many women join us some months before their wedding in order to look healthy and loose or gain weight. There was a misconception before that only obese women should join gym but now the ideology has changed, even petite women join the gym to make muscles and get healthy. Exercising lowers stress levels and women enjoy exercising with good music. I feel happy to see physical as well as mental health becoming the prime focus for not just men but also women."



MERC TIMES



Drought-like situation hits farmers in Anantnag, leaves over 1000 kanals uncultivated

Babra Wani

This year Kashmir witnessed agricultural losses triggered by drought and then by a sudden rainfall. In the Anantnag district of South Kashmir the scarcity of water caused a situation of panic among the farmers. Farmers from South Kashmir told MERC Times, that the major loss was caused by drought like situation.

Mudasir Ahmed, a farmer said that half of his earnings depend on what he gets from his agriculture field but this year, he is unable to get any produce. Mudasir is one of the thousands of farmers from different districts of South Kashmir who faced a similar situation.

Barely five kilometres away from Mudasir's field is Mushtaq Ahmed's eight kanals of agriculture land that lies uncultivated with the similar deficit. "We were 70% dependent on agriculture but this year's failure has pushed me and my three brothers to look for other jobs for their income," Mushtaq said.

Out of the Kashmir's annual crop, paddy forms the majority of the produce. Officials of the agriculture department of District Anantnag told the MERC Times, that due to lack of irrigation water, farmers were forced

March 2022 received the minimum rainfall and temperature during these months was above normal which resulted in early melting of the snow from the mountains

to produce maize and pulses instead of paddy.

"Some 2677 hectares of paddy land are estimated to be uncultivated this year," they said. They also said that it has been observed that the crop failure occurs due to sudden climate change since ages because of drought, floods, snowfall etc.

"For instance during the winter months December 2021 to January 2022 optimum precipitation in the form of snowfall occurred in Kashmir valley which happens to be the major source of irrigation water for agriculture crops. Further, February 2022 and

March 2022 received the minimum rainfall and temperature during these months was above normal which resulted in early melting of the snow from the mountains. The effect of this phenomenon was more visibly observed in peak irrigation time of paddy cultivation which is the month of May leading to drought in some areas of district Anantnag. Therefore, such change in weather conditions can be termed as local climate change, scientifically," they explained.

Director Agriculture Kashmir, Chowdhary Muhammad Iqbal, told MERC Times, "As a result of last year's lower snowfall, there was no snow in many areas this year, which created a drought-like condition where farmers were unable to irrigate their fields." The director acknowledged that paddy cultivation was postponed.

After the rainfall in June the paddy was re-cultivated and the maize was removed but due to the absence of irrigation water the paddy crop also failed, which resulted in the crop failure.

Director Meteorological Department, Sonam Lotus told MERC Times, "This year's rain deficit has proven detrimental for agricultural sector in the valley and a similar situation was faced by Horticulture sector."

Project EduAccess in collaboration with CCPC conducts three day workshop at KU



The Centre for Career Planning and Counselling (CCPC) University of Kashmir is organising a three-day mentoring and capacity-building workshop on 'Career Opportunities Abroad' in collaboration with Project Eduaccess from August 29 to 31.

During the three-day workshop, sessions will be conducted by the pass-outs of some reputed international universities like Oxford University, Cambridge University, London University, UNSW Australia, Milano and Durham University.

Some eminent speakers of 'Project EduAccess' team scheduled to speak during the workshop, include Misbah Reshi, Sameer Rashid, Muda Tariq, Imad-ul-Riyaz, Samia Mehraj, Sadaf Mir, Suhail Rashid Bhat, Gayathree Devi KT, Ifsha Zehra, Ubaid Shah, Muzaffar Shah, Arooj Khalil and Maria Shawl.

The Inaugural session will be held at University of Kashmir's Gandhi Bhawan at 10 am on Monday, where the Vice-Chancellor Professor Nilofer Khan will be the Chief Guest, while Professor Farooq A. Masoodi, Dean Academic Affairs and Dr Nisar A. Mir, Registrar will be the Guests of Honour.

KU organizes annual IIPA debate



The annual debate of the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), held at the University of Kashmir saw an overwhelming participation of students.

More than 60 students from University's various departments and degree colleges of Kashmir spoke for and against the motion on the topic, "Keyboard learning is not an alternative to formal education".

The debate was organised jointly by university's Department of Students' Welfare and Jammu and Kashmir Regional Branch of the IIPA.

Mehak Fayaz from KU's English Department bagged the first prize while Saira Jabeen and Numaira (both from SKUAST-K) bagged the second and third prizes respectively. Fahad Fayaz from Amar Singh College and Mehvish Manzoor from School of Law KU bagged the first and second consolation prize respectively. SKUAST-K emerged overall winners of the IIPA Cup.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Nilofer Khan presided over the valedictory-cum-prize distribution ceremony of the event as chief guest.

Dr G N Qasba, Vice Chairman IIPA J&K Regional Branch and Mr A M Watali, former Vice Chairman IIPA J&K Regional Branch also spoke on the occasion and thanked the University authorities for their support to the IIPA debates.

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