



MERCTimes

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MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
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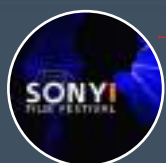
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Gold, edible oil prices soaring as Russia - Ukraine crises escalates

Sabreen Ashraf

Consumers are facing the heat as gold and edible oil prices have skyrocketed, much to their dismay, amid the escalating war between Russia and Ukraine.

President of All Kashmir Valley Gold Dealers cum Workers Union, Bashir Ahmad Rather said customers are waiting for the gold rates to go down which does not seem to be happening right now.

"Our business works mostly for six months during the wedding season in the valley. The rest of the time we don't have much work. Now, if such problems continue to occur in this time period, it will become very difficult for us to make our ends meet," the president said.

Gold is a highly sought-after metal in Kashmir, where it is utilised as a hedge by the individuals to protect themselves against financial insecurity and is frequently given as a gift at wedding rituals.

Zafar, a jeweller from Sarafa Bazar, Hari Singh High street said, "Before the war our work was going well but due to this drastic hike in gold consumers run away as soon as they hear the rates."

"People are facing hardships as the wedding season in the valley has almost arrived and we don't want our customers to suffer," he further added.

Gold futures on MCX (Multi Commodity Exchange) were trading higher by 1.62 per cent or Rs 871 at Rs 55,095 per 10 grams. Silver futures were trading up by 2.13 per cent or Rs 1,520 at Rs 72,905 per kg.

Not only gold, edible oil prices are on rise as well.

Nearly 80% of the world's sunflower oil is shipped from Ukraine and Russia.

The price of edible oil has risen a few notches, and it is expected to continue rising in the coming days, adding further to the plight of customers.

Mohammad Shafi, resident of Aali Kadal said "People can live without gold but how can we live without food and oil. They must- have thing in every household."

"The price of gold will not bother people as much as oil can as we can wait for decrease in gold rate but can't wait for the oil price to fall," Shafi further added.

The on-going tension and the price hike has raised many concerns and both sellers and buyers are worried equally.

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Sony World Film Competition

MERC students bag first prize

Seerat Nissar

Students from the University of Kashmir's Media Education Research Centre (MERC) have achieved first place in the Sony World Film Competition 2022.

Muzammil Bhat, Suhaib Rafiq, Suheel Nissar Paul, and Aadil Shafi, students of the third semester (class 2020) of the MERC, University of Kashmir, produced the film. "An Unknown Environmentalist, a documentary about the day-to-day life of a rag picker; a gatherer, an unsung hero.

The team talked about their experience and said, "We faced a lot of hardships while shooting for the film, from getting permission to different locations especially Achan (where the wastage of whole srinagar is dumped), to convincing the rag picker, Iman Ali to speak in front of the camera and shooting in dump sites bearing the foul smell emanating from the garbage and the waste disposal felt nearly impossible."

While asked about the title and the subject, they answered, "The aim behind making this film was to show that the rag pickers are unwittingly contributing in saving the earth from plastic pollution. In spite of the silent service, they are forced to live on the margins of the society. But they are actually the real heroes who work in the most unhygienic conditions to help us maintain our hygiene and instead of getting acknowledgment they are put down to the extent of being rendered untouchables."

"We are highly thankful to Sameer Ashraf for organizing an online workshop on filmmaking and boosting us for making the film which made us the National Film winners. We thank the department of MERC for giving us the opportunity to participate in the SONY World Film Festival. We thank Heeba Din (Assistant professor, MERC) who teaches us the television production and gave us the unending support and assisted the whole team throughout the work," they said.

In 2021, the Sony World of Film competition began, honouring the best short-form filmmaking shot on Sony cameras in Asia Pacific, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Australia, and New Zealand.

The film's national winners will get a SONY Cinema Line FX3+ SEL 1635 GM SONY World of Films, SONY wireless headphones WH-1000XM4, and an invitation to an exclusive session on SONY Digital Imaging.

According to a MERC handout, the films in the final round were judged by a jury with extensive experience in the art of filmmaking.

The handout also stated that 'An Unknown Environmentalist' has also entered to compete at the international level (ASIA Pacific), with the winners to be notified in March - April 2022.

The winners were announced on the 16th of February, 2022. Various media groups, including notable filmmakers and journalists, praised the winning team's efforts.

Meanwhile, Prof Talat Ahmad, Vice Chancellor of the University of Kashmir, Dr. Nisar A Mir, Registrar, and Dr. Aliya Ahmad, Head of the department of MERC congratulated the students on their national victory.



Picture Courtesy: Google

Roads leading to Parimpora mandi in shambles, traders irked

Nasir Ahmad

Parimpora Mandi is located in the north-west of Srinagar city, six kilometres away from Lal Chowk Srinagar. Connected with National Highway 1A, the market is at about ten kilometres distance from Srinagar Airport. Parimpora mandi was built in 1981 to provide a location for Kashmiris to bring and sell their fruits and vegetables.

The Parimpora Fruit Marketing Complex: which spans over 320 kanals and was inaugurated by then-Chief Minister Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah in 1982 with the goal of making it into a model mandi. It is Srinagar's most important business centre.

"It has been 10 years and the road is still not repaired which is creating problems for the buses and customers to reach mandi. Even after a slight rainfall water logs in the whole mandi creating lots of problems for us," said vice president of mandi Hani Bashir

Due to poor connectivity and lack of government attention, this economic hub is on the verge of dying. The path between the main bus stand to the inside mandi, which is a priority road, is in shambles. "The road is dotted with potholes which speaks volumes about the high claims of the government

about improving road connectivity," said one there.

The route is filled with potholes and deep ditches, creating a lot of problems for both commuters and fruit-laden trucks. Furthermore, the large craters on the road endanger the lives of two-wheelers. Due to the poor road conditions, no customers visit the shops, resulting in a financial loss for the retailers. Once hailed as Kashmir's economic capital, the place today struggles to provide even basic essentials to local businesses.

The local transporters said that, "Due to poor road conditions, it is nearly impossible for the travellers to come inside the bus stand, while the potholes create problems for their cars as well which get damaged due to that."

The road in Parimpora is in disarray, making it difficult for vehicles to enter the mandi, which in turn makes it tough for consumers and retailers.

"Here we have thousands of business establishments, we are the backbone of economy for the state but, unfortunately, we are the ones who are suffering due to these problems," says Hilal Ahmed, president Trader's Federation. "We have requested authorities many times to repair the road but since 10 years nothing has happened, sometimes we feel helpless," he explained.

Shopkeepers and Mandi Association said that, "Though this Fruit Mandi ranks high at national level, unfortunately, the concerned departments are not paying attention in revamping its structure."

They request that the authorities take the necessary steps as soon as possible.

The authorities from the SDA stated that the work file had been delivered to the appropriate department, which is awaiting final signatures. They, however, refused to comment any further.



Due to poor road conditions, it is nearly impossible for the travellers to come inside the bus stand, while the potholes create problems for their cars as well which get damaged due to that





Teaching or Trolling?

Babra Wani

Last month when Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education (JKBOSE) declared results for higher secondary part two, Arusa Parvaiz emerged as the topper. Media houses soon thronged to her place to interview her. Soon her videos and pictures went viral. While some people congratulated her others took to their keyboards to "teach" her. In no time the comment section of her interviews were filled with comments like, "dupatta kahan hai?", "wear hijab" and some even wrote long paragraphs, drawing parallels between her and the Karnataka girl Muskan. There was also a section of people who questioned her and her upbringing.

For Arusa, a resident of Ellahibagh the comment section and social media was full of negativity. Most of the people forgot that she secured 499 marks, what they remembered was that she was not

wearing hijab. Even the media outlets who did her interviews decided to switch off their comment section.

Users did not stop here and trolled her brutally, some of the users even went to an extent of abusing her parents.

One such user wrote, "Sab theek hai par pehlae koi issae duppatta do yaar... Kaise maa baap ho... Aaj nahi pehna hai iska matlab kabhi nahi pehenti hogi... This is totally disappointing... Upar wala bhi ulta dekh kae hi khushiyan baant raha hai."

Another one wrote, "Sir pae duppatta hota muslim lagti. Lagta hai ye...ki beti hae."

This online abuse and trolling came after the Karnataka hijab row and people started comparing her to the girls from there.

Arusa broke her silence on the continuous trolling and told some media outlets that the trolls and the negative comments did not bother

her however her parents were deeply disturbed by the comments. She also lamented that not wearing hijab did not prove her disloyalty towards her religion and that she is a practising muslim and planned to wear hijab whenever she feels she should. Stressing that her faith could be much stronger than those trolling her, that she should not be judged on any basis and her space should be respected.

It is pertinent to mention that there were also people who poured their support to the young girl and defended her against the trolls. One such user wrote,

"What is wrong with everyone? Why are you being so rude?"

This however is not just about Arusa, online harassment and trolling has become a trend over the years. Though people do not talk about it much while leaving the victims of trolling helpless, battling mental scars and traumas.



Most of the people forgot that she secured 499 marks what they remembered was that she was not wearing hijab. Even the media outlets that carried her interviews decided to switch off their comment section.

Students excited to be back to schools

Mehak Yaseen

After more than two years of lockdown, students are returning to school across Kashmir. On February 13, the Jammu and Kashmir administration decided to reopen schools in the union territory for all levels after a long period of closure.

"We want schools to start academic and other activities in the proper time," said the officials of education department. They further added, "We advise schools not to pressurise the students in any way." The school education department also stated that wearing uniform is not compulsory for the first few weeks.

For students, reopening of schools has come with a lot of excitement and

they are emotionally overwhelmed with the decision.

"We were feeling depressed because of the online mode," said Rida Shakeel, a student. "It took us maximum one year to understand completely the online mode," Rida further added. "I am so happy finally after two and a half years our schools are reopening and we can meet our friends, teachers and can enjoy our study in offline mode," expressed a visibly excited Rida.

"The closure of 1.5 million schools due to the pandemic and back to back lockdowns in 2020 effected 247 million children enrolled in schools," said a report published by UNICEF.

Not only students but even parents are happy and all praises for this move.

"I did the admission of my son in 2020 and now he is UKG but he

dosen't know what exactly the school is. He has just gone to school for one week and after that COVID arise and schools were closed. And education department decided to start education in online mode which was very much difficult for the kids," said one such parent, Mohammad Yaqoob whose son is five years old.

"I play in the school, I like to study with all the kids and enjoy my study, our teachers love us and teach us friendly," said five year old Abu Bakar who is happy to attend the school.

Falisha 10, who could not contain her happiness exclaimed, "When Jammu and Kashmir government announced that schools are reopening from second March, I couldn't believe that finally after two years I am going to school, that is the best."



Picture Courtesy: Google

Schools reopen after two years

Mahwish Mushtaq Khan

All government and private schools in union territory of Jammu and Kashmir were thrown open on Wednesday after a gap of three years, on the directions of concerned authorities.

Schools in valley remained closed for over a year after jammu and Kashmir was stripped off its special status in August 2019 and later deadly Covid-19 made things even worse which lead to closure of schools for two more years.

However on Wednesday people witnessed an Eid like hustle bustle across length and breadth of valley as students donned their uniforms and rushed towards their respective schools wearing a jubilant look.

Teachers were seen welcoming the students with flags, placards, smiles and chocolates. Almost all the schools were decorated for this special reunion.

"It was a reunion long overdue. Although students attended their classes in online mode but it could never maintain the charm and environment of physical classes. To make this day memorable we decorated the entire building with flags and balloons to welcome our blooming buds back where they

actually belong," said Shahnawaz Shaheen, a teacher at government school in Ganderbal.

Virtual classes had become a new norm for last three years which according to most teachers was burdensome not only for them but for their students as well. They believe it created a great hurdle in effective teaching and learning process apart from creating distress among students.

"Teaching online was really tough initially but with time you get used to it. However I always felt a bit frustrated while teaching online since you can never replace the aura of physical classes. Now that schools have reopened, I am glad finally I can see my students, teach them and feel like humans again," a teacher at Oasis school said.

To help students re-adjust to their previous norm Directorate of School Education officials have asked the teachers to make sure they break the ice with the students in the first week by indulging them in playful and fun activities.

"We have been asked to pay a special care and attention in evaluating and addressing psychological, behavioural and attitudinal issues of the students in the first phase," said a teacher.

"The students were asked to narrate their COVID-related experiences. Narrating personal stories helped them to unburden emotionally," the teacher further added.

It is important to state that the decision of reopening of schools has been widely appreciated by people from all the spheres of the valley. Everyone is full of hopes for the future.



To help students to return to their routine school life, Directorate of School Education officials have asked the teachers to make sure they break the ice with the students in the first week by engaging them in playful and fun activities.





Picture Courtesy: Google

Parents happy but apprehensive

Saqibah Gul

With last year turning out to be the year of apprehensions over the reopening of schools, this year it is all about 'hopes' and 'positivity' for the parents. For them the academic stagnation due to pandemic will soon be over besides they pray for a no-more-hiatus in future.

"Online classes were a big time 'darbadari' (a futile exercise) with kids messing up their health. Now that schools have reopened I welcome this decision by the authorities," says Arshad Hussain from Srinagar.

Online education or home schooling can never replace a physical school which happens to be the fundamental institution of learning. "My daughter turned four this year and was mesmerised to see what a school looks like. Any further delay in the reopening would've meant no less than a disaster for kids of her age. The social health a casualty in covid times can be addressed in a school only!" says Fiza Malik from South Kashmir.

Mohammad Ayoub from Bandipora says "They know it better than us" on

the question of the Covid Appropriate Behaviour (CAB). The kids have become accustomed to wearing masks and other COVID SOP's. They have adapted to this new world by adopting these measures. Among all this education must not suffer."

Anjum, a mother and a doctor by profession is hopeful that schools continue to function without halt from now on.

"the amount of stress Pandemic added over parents was very challenging, as kids stayed at home all day which made them cranky," she said, "With three kids around it was one big challenge to look after all their needs. This reopening of schools has come like a big relief for me for sure. This should have happened earlier, anyways "der ayad durust ayae (Better late than never)."

"We were apprehensive about a lot of things, our boy is only six and we were worried about what if he exchanges his mask with his friends, we mean physical distance is difficult to maintain for a six year old ...we talked to the staff and management... we had a meeting where we were assured of special caretakers to help

achieve better results," said a couple from Sanathnagar.

Government has issued guidelines for all schools over CAB. School management is adopting the special COVID measures as sanitisation, screening body temperatures through thermal scanners, maintaining social distance and instructing students to follow the SOPs.

Kids have become accustomed to wearing masks and other COVID SOP's. They have adapted to this new world by adopting these measures. Among all this education must not suffer.



Obesity increases risk of heart diseases

Andleeb

Fayaz Ahmad (name changed), 35, diabetic and obese, on treatment with oral drugs, was diagnosed to have gall bladder stones following pain in upper abdomen. He was advised to undergo a surgery and was sent for a pre-surgical routine. The evaluation consisting of Echo Cardio Graphic Examination revealed that he had suffered a heart attack in past. Which made his surgical procedure very risky. Fayaz and his family members were shocked with the news since the heart attack was a silent one which was caused due to fat accumulation and obesity of which they never knew about.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined obesity as the disease where there is excessive fat accumulation which may have adverse effects and impairs the health. A person is classified as obese on the basis of his/her BMI (Body Mass Index). The increasing number of heart attack among people is worrying cardiologists who strongly seek attention to contributing factors like smoking, stress and sedentary lifestyle. A life-altering disease, obesity is a chronic condition in which a person accumulates abnormal or

excessive fat which causes adverse health conditions.

Dr. Hamid Bashir, consultant cardiologist said that "Heart disease is the country's leading killer. Paying attention to risk factors and living a healthy life style can keep heart disease at bay."

The fifth NFHS (National Family Health Survey) has flagged a worrying increase in the percentage of obesity and overweight across group gender groups, particularly among men in the erstwhile Union Territory of Kashmir. The number of overweight children usually increased from 2.1% in NFHS-4 to 3.4% in NFHS-5. Not just children, obesity among women and men has also increased. The percentage of overweight women rose from 20.6% to 24% while in men the number increased from 18.9% to 22.9% as per NFHS-5. Experts attributed the increase in obesity due to the lack of physical activity and unhealthy food habits.

The noted endocrinologist Dr. Abdul Hamid Zargar said that "The rising prevalence of obesity is the root cause of diabetes, cardiac ailments and Poly Cystic Ovarian Disease (PCOD) epidemic in Kashmir." He asserts that "First step towards addressing the issue about

obesity in Kashmir, it is necessary to accept that the weight we have is not healthy. Exercise, exercise and exercise is the best way to deal with obesity."

According to a 2022 study, "Prevalence and factors associated with overweight and obesity among school children in Kashmir valley: a community based cross-sectional study" conducted by Government Medical College) GMC Srinagar, (Sher-I-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences)SKIMS, Soura, the high prevalence of obesity in school going children with no significant difference in the obesity prevalence between boys and girls demands urgent measures.

"If left untreated, it has the potential to flare pandemics of non-communicable diseases among Kashmiri population in future", the study read.

Community medicine specialist Dr. Sheikh Mohammad Saleem said that "The Obesity in children is a major problem that can lead to long term issues such as low self esteem and depression."

"The risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, asthma, and sleep apnea can considerably rise due to obesity," he added.

'Scraping scrap'

Creating art from bones

Aziz ul Rehman carves objects from bones using process that is both unique, prehistoric

Tabinda Maqsood

Jammu and Kashmir is a place where many people have a variety of diverse skills and crafts that are quickly becoming extinct because their descendants do not see it as a viable employment in today's world. But, Aziz ul Rehman, a twenty-year-old young man, is of a differing opinion.

Aziz ul rehman has taken a different path and approach to art of making jewellery items out of discarded animal bones, while talking to MERC times he said, " I make various things from animal bones such as jewellery, key chain , knives etc." Not only bone carving, but he also produces

jewellery out of wood scraps, such as beautiful wooden things and calligraphy frames.

Aziz ul rehman, a resident of Srinagar's Gulab Bagh area, is currently pursuing his bachelor's degree in fisheries at Kashmir's Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agriculture Science and Technology (SKUAST Srinagar).

Bones have been used for utility and decorative purposes since ancient times, according to him. He has been interested in crafting art since he was a child. "I did not want to be idle," he said. To pursue his passion, he did not even need a lot of resources. Purchasing tools and equipment for this craft is a one-time investment

that does not need to be updated on a regular basis. In Kashmir, the raw material bone is also free of charge; he frequently collects bones from butchers that offer them to him for free.

Social media has helped him a lot to groom his skills and business. He uses social media platforms for selling his artwork. He has garnered a good response from social platforms. His parents after witnessing his growth and progress have also supported him. "But they also want me to focus on my studies," Aziz said.

He also recently attended an event in SKUAST Kashmir, Kisan Mela to promote his items, and he received a positive response.



She-Veterinarian

Tuba Ashraf

Veterinary medicine, previously a male-dominated profession, has experienced a significant increase in the number of women studying at veterinary colleges and practising in all fields of the profession.

Dr Rafia Maqbool hailing from Ellahi Bagh Srinagar, whose father is also a veterinarian always knew she wanted to be in this field. However having passion for research she never expected that she will work in the field.

"My job is to walk the pens every morning. If I see a problem, I catch the sheep and fix the problem as best as I can. Here the patient doesn't reach you for treatment but you have to reach them whether they are in their sheds, in grazing lands, forests plains or in the marshy lands. Knowing all the ways an animal can suffer and perceiving that through symptoms and providing healthcare is overwhelming," she explains.

"For anyone who is in vet school, wake up every day, do your best, and when it gets too hard, find that thing that saves you. It'll be somewhere in your community," she added further.

How did you begin your journey with vet school?

It started way back in 2009 when Rafia joined BVSC and AH in Faculty Of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry SKUAST-K Shuhama after that topped university entrance test in 2014 and joined Masters in Veterinary Microbiology and Immunology.

"In Masters I worked on Ranikhet disease which fetched many publications and awards at national and international conferences," she said.

After that she joined doctoral programme but in the meantime also got selected through JKPS as Veterinary Surgeon in Department of Sheep Husbandry Kashmir in 2019 presently posted in Ganderbal.

Describe your average day?

Walking miles to visit flocks is a daily exercise.

"My work is mainly rendering my extension service to the breeders," she adds.



Dr Rafia said her aim is to improve the quality of small ruminants and their population for upliftment of the economy of the breeders. Giving best healthcare facility at their doorstep.

"Awaring breeders regarding role of timely vaccination, deworming and following proper prophylactic measures is a priority," she adds.

Challenges you face

initial ignorance of the people with regard to the deliverance of vety. healthcare by females is slowly giving hope to the breeders that female vets are more cooperative, enthusiastic and empathetic with regard to providing health care to the sick animal.

"Our patient doesn't express the symptoms and pain but we ourselves have to perceive infection and non infection nature of the disease. Doing surgeries in the fields c-section, managing dystokia and treating metabolic disorders in the field is challenging," Rafia said.

"In the field we meet breeders with different mindsets and nature and how you cope up with them is a challenge," adds Rafia.

Work highlights?

Health cover to private and government livestock including deworming treatment and vaccination.

B)Supervision and close monitoring of Sheep Extension Centres in the Block.

C)Extension activities in the form of awareness programmes highlighting the schemes of department and benefits of the same to breeders.

Adding further she said that she was

always inspired by her father who is a Veterinary Pathologist. He used to put efforts to render service for improving healthcare of livestock in Kashmir. Also treating speechless creatures generated a keen interest in her for the field.

Rafia also explained that her extended family has been a biggest support to her especially her mother, sister and grandparents.

"My father has guided me all throughout my journey and is still guiding me. Also my husband and my in laws are very supportive last but not the least my associated staff who always work with coordination for smooth conduct," she says.

"As I grew up, I learnt that there is so much more to veterinary science than I had initially realised. Getting well dressed and matching shoes is no longer a priority. Being a female veterinarian, priority is healthcare of flocks and upliftment of economy of breeders. As we have to make regular visit to the flocks we have to gear according to our ease for accessibility," she explained.

Her message to the young generation is, "Veterinary science has got a tremendous scope in our state, country and abroad for improving livestock healthcare and economic state of people. It improves population by augmenting both qualitatively and quantitatively and ensuring safe food for human consumption."

Treating speechless creatures gives her satisfaction. "It's not only we save animals we save the economy of farmers," concludes a visibly happy Rafia.



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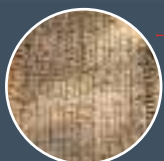
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Social Media pushing popularity charts of local cricket tournaments in Kashmir



Picture Courtesy: Google

Nasir Ahmad

Cricket also known as gentlemen's game originated in south-east England around 18th century and grew in popularity in the beginning of the 19th century. In India this game was introduced by British merchants in the 18th century, which later became the most followed sport in the country especially after independence.

Just like other parts of India, game of cricket is followed very religiously in Kashmir as well. There is no dearth of local talent in Kashmir. Manzoor Pandav, Parveez Rasool, Umran Malik are some prime examples who have not only proved their mettle at local but national level also.

The craze of watching, playing and discussing cricket is not new to Kashmir however it has grown considerably with the advent of technological changes. The latest trend of livestreaming cricket matches with a smartphone device on social media sites like Facebook has helped in exponential growth of the game in the valley. This in turn has led to the employment and earning opportunities for many people.

Shakeel Ahmad, a resident of Kulgam in south Kashmir, was unemployed and forced to make ends meet by doing odd jobs until last year,

when he was offered the chance to commentate in a local league of his hometown.

"I received many calls to do the live broadcasting and commentary for local leagues and tournaments and since then there is no looking back. People apparently love the way I speak and I am happy to entertain them" Shakeel Ahmad said.

Offering commentary services was only a hobby in the recent past for many but now it has become a source of income apart from fun.

"I was not sure if I could feed myself or my family, now with the commentary, I earn enough to live comfortably," a local commentator Rayees Ahmad said.

With this new found popularity due to social media, more and more local level tournaments are being organized in every district of Kashmir valley. All the organizers live-broadcast their matches in order to reach wider audience which in turn generate some income and also helps new players make their name as well. Broadcasters of cricket matches of Kashmir have popularized this game among people of all ages.

"I am amused and happy that our game is not dying, people are watching it and appreciating the local talent. Some years back people only knew the names of international players

but now local players are becoming a source of inspiration for youth. No doubt live broadcasting has helped in making of our own stars like Aadil Kachroo, Dar Nadeem and Ishtiyaq Rasool" Adil Rather a local cricketer said.

Matches that are live-streamed on Facebook pages usually attract an audience of around 50 thousand to 1 lakh which is a huge number considering there are no high-tech equipments involved but just a microphone and a smartphone. Many popular sports pages of Kashmir even boast of nearly a million followers which again shows the growing popularity of cricket with each passing day due to social media and live broadcasting.

I was not sure if I could feed myself or my family, now with the commentary, I earn enough to live comfortably



Picture Courtesy: Google

Pets in Pandemic

Haiba Iftikhar

With the pandemic bringing the most unexpected stress into lives of people, many turned to their pets for some comfort and many brought home new furry friends. The pandemic changed lives of people all around the world causing them an unending misery. This in turn led, people finding peace and solace in pets. However, pandemic has been equally cruel to pet animals who have suffered abandonment, pain and loss. During the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a big spike in pet adoption and sale in Kashmir.

“We have definitely seen a surge in the buying of pets over the last two years here with cats being higher in demand,” said a local unauthorized pet seller wishing anonymity.

Gradually pet owners realize that the animals they have brought home need extreme attention, love, care along with medical assistance and timely regular trips to the vet.

“We got a cat and didn’t realize she was pregnant, unfortunately she lost her babies and would not eat for days. It was an extremely difficult time for us,” a pet owner Nusrat said.

While the world was going through

Pets became companions of people when pandemic confined them to their homes. However, the owners of the 'pandemic' pets faced a new challenge of reverting to pre-pandemic conditions.

a financial whirlwind, people did also not see the hefty bills coming their way related to the food and maintenance of their pets.

Samira 24 said, “I was doing an internship and that’s how I managed the expenses of my puppy, however, during the pandemic I lost my job and had to give him away.”

In addition there are various unregulated animal sellers whose major motive is to gain money out of these animals rather than

being concerned about where these vulnerable pets end up. The forced breeding puts immense stress on the cats and to add to that, the kittens are taken away from their mother’s untimely causing trauma both to the cat and kittens.

“Most people ask for younger pets. I have sold kittens as young as few weeks old, many a times they have died,” another unauthorized pet seller in Srinagar said.

Pets became companions of people when pandemic confined them to their homes. However the owners of the pandemic pets faced a new challenge of reverting to pre-pandemic conditions. People returning to their offices had a major impact on these animals.

”My husband and I bought two cats during the pandemic. However, when the situation improved and offices were open, we had no one to look after them, and one day they wandered off somewhere,” said Madiha Shafi.

According to Mars Petcare, India’s first-ever survey of pet homelessness in nine nations, 50% of pet owners abandoned their pets from the beginning of the pandemic till the day survey was completed.



Breaking stereotypes of disability

Saleet Rashid

Stephen Hawking rightly said, "Disability need not to be an obstacle to success". Physically challenged people are often referred as disabled people. According to WHO(World Health Organisation), approximately 1 billion population in the world are disabled. In India 5% of the population is disabled.

Javaid Ahmad Tak from South Kashmir's Anantnag district runs his own school namely "Zaiba Appa Institute" for students who are differently abled. Despite being bound to a wheel chair he started the initiative of providing education to disabled students.

In 1997 he was hit by a bullet on his back which caused massive damage to his spinal cord. Javaid didn't lose hope, he continued his studies and completed his Masters in Social Work from University of Kashmir. He has worked in numerous NGO'S, later he started his own school for differently abled students where 120 differently abled students are currently enrolled with 25 staff

members ,including 10 trained teachers.

Javid has also taken a project of "Child Helpline" under which 10 employees are working for him in Anantnag district.

He has been awarded with many state awards. In 2020 he was conferred with Padma Shree.

Jan Mohammad Bhat, another person who hails from the same district of Anantnag was 18 years old when he met with an accident which left him paralyzed.

Jan Mohammad was a teenager at the time of the accident. In 2000 he was on his way to distribute the wedding cards of his cousin to the nearing village when his bike skid from the road and fell on his back, he was rushed to "Bone and Joint Hospital Barzulla".

Jan Mohammad didn't continue his studies as he was bedridden for five long years but he was persistent and keen to do something in his life .Unsure of how to live his life he either had a choice to let his disability define him for the rest of the life or to continue fighting.

In 2010 he tried his luck in poultry business, established a big firm of poultry farm but that didn't meet his expectations and he moved to construction business. Initially he was given small projects of building walking bridges in small town's by R&B(Roads and Buildings) but with his consistency and experience he has an 'A' Class contractor card and has done exceptional work in South Kashmir's Anantnag district as a contractor.

Despite their disability both Javid Ahmad and Jan Mohammed are living productive and meaningful lives.

Jan Mohammad said that, "I always wake up early in the morning for work and my brother assists me along the way. I also drive my own automatic vehicle with hand controlled instruments installed in it. I also contribute to the daily Urdu newspaper Shaharbeen times and manage all their social media handles as well".

Despite their disability they are living productive and meaningful life, without becoming burden on anyone.

Trypophobia: Fear of holes

Andleeb

The term trypophobia was first coined in 2005, when participants in an online forum claimed to have an unreasonable fear or disgust toward objects with closely packed holes. Since then, thousands of people have come forward claiming to be affected. This has led some experts to question whether trypophobia is a legitimate condition, or simply a socially influenced disorder, similar to Morgellons disease. However there are some people who believe it is not a good sign for their mental health.

"Trypophobia is very triggering. Whenever I see pores or small holes I get very anxious. I mean my teeth start shaking and it renders me restless. I remember I was once in an online webinar and someone presented a picture of some holes and I was so done that I left the meet and I couldn't look at my phone for hours

altogether" a 23 year old student Babra said.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially recognized Trypophobia not a disorder but as state of disgust. The journal Psychological Science found 16% of participants experienced feelings of disgust or discomfort when looking at an image of a lotus seed pod.

Trypophobia was first described by British researchers Arnold Wilkins and Geoff Cole who claimed to be the first one's to investigate this phobia. In the peer reviewed journal Psychological Science, the researchers wrote that the reaction is triggered by the brain associating the shapes and danger. They described individuals who reported feeling itchy, shuddering and experiencing a skin crawling sensation when they saw a cluster of holes.

According to the website Trypophobia.com, "Trypophobia is a weird kind of phobia





Traditional 'Waguvv' vanishing fast

Aadil Shafi

Traditional Kashmir Valley's grass mats have almost completely lost market share to more contemporary floorings, leaving a significant portion of the people jobless. Waguvv, a traditional Kashmiri mat that was formerly popular as a home mat, has fallen out of favour. It vanished first in urban areas and is now rapidly vanishing in rural Kashmir.

Kashmir's used it to cover their mud floors a few decades ago. Waguvv has vanished from the picture, as mud floors have become a thing of the past as concrete constructions spring up everywhere.

"I still remember how I used to place orders for Waguvv (grass mat) from Ali Mohammad who was from the Downtown area of Srinagar City, he often used to visit my house for new orders, but now Waguvv has become history," says Abdul Gani Dar. Dar is a retired school teacher from Chadoora District in Central Kashmir's Budgam District.

"Waguvv was not only used in

homes but also in Mosques and Shrines as people would think of Waguvv as a clean matting for such sacred places of worship" Dar adds

Grass mat locally known as Waguvv



was a traditional matting for most of the houses in the valley. Waguvv was weaved from peichz or pech, a kind of grass that is cultivated from the waters of Dal Lake. Weavers used to cultivate pech from Dal waters and clean it and spread it out in sun for drying before knotting it into a Waguvv.

Waguvv was woven by families

on the outskirts of Srinagar and in surrounding regions. Waguvv is a soft and spongy mat produced from common grass found in wetlands such as Dal Lake and Anchar Lake in Srinagar, also known as Peich.

Both men and women used to weave the Waguvv. The Waguvv was usually of two types one soft and another hard. Soft Waguvv was cheaper than a hard one. It had the difference of twists of ropes while weaving the Waguvv.

Kashmiris used Waguvv to cover their mud floors a few decades ago. Waguvv has vanished from the picture, as mud floors have become a thing of the past as concrete constructions spring up everywhere.

According to Zareef Ahmad Zareef, the famous Kashmiri historian and a poet, "the Waguvv in the summer's acts as cold breeze while in winter's it provides full insulation from the chilly cold".

"Waguvv is health beneficial and is eco-friendly as its components are obtained from nature. It is harmless to both environment and humans" said Gh Mohammad Teli (70) a local faith healer.



Picture Courtesy: Google

and it can generally be considered as the fear of shapes especially the shapes created by nature". The fear covers "clustered holes in skin, meat, wood, plants, corals, sponges, mould, dried seed pods and honeycombs". These can make them feel that their skin is crawling, feel itchy and physically sick when seeing these images because they really find it disgusting. Some of these people think that something might be living inside these holes and some of them are afraid that they might fall in these holes, the website explains.

12 year old Ifra experienced feelings of discomfort when she encountered surfaces and objects covered with holes or dots. When asked to draw a picture of her fear, she filled the whole paper with a repetitive pattern of clustered round dots.

According to Scientific theories, it is an evolutionary response to things that are associated with disease or danger. Psychologists are still divided over the fact whether it represents a genuine phobia. People with Trypophobia may feel afraid when they

look at a seed head of lotus flower. An open pomegranate or soap buds.

Trypophobia is poorly understood and not recognized by Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders(DSM). Trypophobia is not currently listed in American Psychiatric Association. Majority of the people who have trypophobic reactions have other mental health disorders such as generalized anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or Major Depressive Disorder.

There are several internet based support groups for trypophobia including a social media profile [HYPERLINK "https://www.facebook.com/groups/33183222991"](https://www.facebook.com/groups/33183222991) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/33183222991> in which more than 12,000 people have provided testimonials and shared their experiences of living with fear to clusters of concave objects. Individuals describe these images as haunting and as evoking fear, panic attacks, revulsion, and distress as well as a wide variety of somatic symptoms such as nausea, goosebumps and itchiness.



MERC TIMES

‘Sakhi Bandipora’ awarded best performing OSC in J&K

Saba Ansari

Bandipora’s One Stop Centre Sakhi was established in 2020 to provide an array of services from skill development to psychological assistance to violence affected women under one roof. The centre is intended to support women affected by violence, in private or at public places, within the family, community or at workplace. The centre is entirely for the women and is operated by the female staff.

The centre is having representatives from health, education, administration, police, as well as resources from many departments .The centre also raises awareness about the various women-specific schemes.

During the celebration of International Women’s Day at Tagore Hall in Srinagar, One Stop Centre Sakhi Bandipora was awarded as UT’s “Best Performing OSC”.

In the presence of Divisional



Picture Courtesy: Google

Commissioner Kashmir PK Pole, Mission Director, Women Empowerment, Social Welfare Department, JK, Shabnam Shah Kamili, the award was presented to OSC Bandipora by Advisor to Lieutenant Governor J&K Farooq Ahmed Khan.

Meanwhile, in collaboration with district administration Bandipora, Sakhi One Stop Centre also participated on the International Women’s Day at Mini Secretariat Bandipora.

Other administrative class that took part in the event included education, information, and MSK(Mahila Shakti Kendra), ICDS(Integrated Child Development Services), ICPS(Integrated Child Protection Scheme), health and other sectorial line departments.

One Stop Centre was formulated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, popularly known as Sakhi Centre. The scheme was launched in India on April 1, 2015 with the objective to help out women who have been victims of violence in private or public spaces. The Sakhi scheme is funded by Nirbhaya Fund. The central government provides 100% financial assistance to the state government/UT Administration.

Dog menace on rise in Srinagar

Saba latief

The menace of stray dogs has become a matter of serious concern for the locals of Srinagar. Despite gaint claims of Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC) to control the canine population in Srinagar. People in various areas of Srinagar are facing difficulty in venturing out of their homes.

Bilal Ahmad sheikh , a resident of Bemina Srinagar said that,“The people are facing the problem of dogs and their stray on the main road .They run towards motor bikes, cars and other transport which leads to many accidents on the road”.

As reported by Shri Maharaja Hari Singh (SMHS) Hospital Srinagar, around 30,000 persons were bitten by the dogs in the last few years in Kashmir .Street dogs in kashmir are large numbers and people face many problems , increasing number of Dog bites, contineous barking at night are



some of the many problems faced by people .

Mohammad Amin, another local of Bemina said that “ The people including elder as well as children are not able to go out of their homes as they run behind us when we pass through them”.

Niyaz Ahmad Farash, a resident of Lalmandi Srinagar said that “The street dogs have many negative impacts on the environment of a city and to the health of the people living in them . They are also responsible for the main

road accidents”.

I request the Srinagar Municipal Corporation(SMC) and the government authorities to come with comprehensive plans to reduce the number of street dogs”, he added.

As Srinagar Municipal Corporation(SMC) said that there are around 2500 dog bite cases reported from Srinagar every year . Veterinary health officer, Tawheed Ahmad Najar said that “They are working on dog sterilization,we cannot kill or poison the animals as it is punishable act under Sec.428 to Sec.429 of Indian Penal Code(IPC).

“Our main focus is on sterilization of dogs ,we have one sterilization centre at Shuhama .where they are able to carry out 300 sterilization per day .Another dog sterilization centre at Tengpora Srinagar. Now ,the Animal Birth Control (ABC) has managed to open another centre where we will be able to sterilize more than 100 dogs per day”, he added.



Cultural significance of Nowruz

Ashiq Hussain

Nowruz is an ancient culture celebrated on 21st of March annually in many parts of the world. It marks the Persian and Iranian new year and is a symbol of renewal of nature.

Nowruz Signifies the new beginning and officially marks the arrival of the spring season after a harsh winter. Spring symbolizes new age, youth, new commitments, new resolutions and so on. The term Nowruz is a Persian compound word, consisting of the words now and ruz. Now means new and Ruz means the day, so it is a new day, often called locally as Nowroz and Nowroz-e-Aalam.

The famous almond blossom festival at Badamwari on the foothills of Hari Parbat in Srinagar City has become the symbol of the onset of spring as well as jashn-e-bahar.

The build-up to Nowruz begins a month before the festival. Each of the four Tuesdays falling before Nowruz is dedicated to a different element. First is Water Tuesday, where water renews nature. Next is Fire Tuesday which honors fire as a method rebirth. Then it is Earth Tuesday marking the revival of the earth. The last one is the Wind Tuesday when the wind opens the buds and marks the arrival of Spring.

“It has a cultural essence in it and is celebrated with great fervour. Many good delicacies are prepared on this day. Kashmiri fish and Nadru (lotus stem) are prepared across cultures. It brings with it a newness in all aspects, bringing land into life again which indicates the beginning of the spring,” said Dr. Saba, Faculty MERC, University of Kashmir.

In Iran the first day of the new year is called Nowroz, this is when the sun enters the new orbit, and this day is thus a big event and big celebration for Iranians. It has been celebrated for over 3,000 years. It plays a significant role in strengthening the ties among people based on mutual respect and the ideals of peace and good neighborliness.

It was inscribed in 2009 on the UNESCO’s representatives list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity as cultural tradition



observed by numerous people. The United Nations officially recognized the “international day of Nowroz” in Feb 2010.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres’s message for International Nowruz Day 2022

“Nowruz is a celebration of new beginnings. The beginning of a new year. The arrival of spring. The renewal of nature. Nowruz is also a celebration of our diversity. It unites over 300 million people, between generations and beyond borders. It is a time to learn about each other, our cultures and our world. And Nowruz is a reminder of everything we have in common. It promotes reconciliation and good neighborliness. It echoes the values of the United Nations of peace, human rights and dignity. As humanity faces unprecedented challenges, let us be guided by the Nowruz spirit of solidarity and renew our pledge to live in harmony, protect our planet and leave no one behind. I wish everyone a happy, healthy and peaceful Nowruz.”

The international forest day is also observed the same day. Many officials like forest department, tourism department are seen engaged in mass plantation drives. Seeds and saplings are sown. Many schools, colleges and universities organize events to plant trees and spread awareness about the plantation. The agrarian activities on this day are seen in full fold. As it is believed that the seeds and the saplings

sown or planted on this day, bloom at a very fast pace and into a healthy one.

The celebration varies from India to Gulf, from Kashmir to Tehran. The way of celebrating the nowroz is quite similar in wishes and quite different in dishes. Special dishes are prepared on this day. Some prefer the famous Kashmiri wazwaan, the Kashmir based fish is also a food of great importance. Nadru (lotus stem) is a compulsory dish on this occasion. People share sweets and dry fruits with their relatives and their loved ones including walnuts.

People consider a shower of rain on this occasion as a good omen for future endeavors. This short spell of rain is commonly known as “Nowrooz-Khund” which blesses the earth with bountiful harnessing qualities.

Leech therapy is conducted on this day in many parts as it is believed that it has more strength on this day. It purifies the body. It is said that the leech sucks the impure blood from the body. This improves blood circulation and prevents clotting. Helps in relieving the joint pains treats hypertension. Removes sinusitis, nausea and many other chronic pains.

“Nowroz has nothing to do with any religion, creed or sect. It is a secular festival and celebrated with great enthusiasm. As it refreshes everything and flourishes the greenery all around. It brings a state of happiness in the human beings and a hope for the new beginnings,” said Altaf Hussain, a religious scholar.

Glimpses of 'Aes Chi' Online, a street play by MERC Students

Students of Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir Hazratbal campus performed a street play at three different locations. The first play took place outside the IT department, the second near the MBA department and the third outside the Humanities block, at 11 AM, 1:30 PM and 2:15 PM respectively. The play attracted a large audience and was attended by both the students and the faculties of various departments. The play had various performances. Audience enjoyed the performances and cheered up the participants. **Syeda Sakeena** captured the precious moments. Here are some glimpses

