



MEDIA TIMES

MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR
HAZRATBAL, SRINAGAR-190006

Fading Fragrance

The art of rose water making in Srinagar is more than just a profession;
it is a legacy passed down through generations.



MEDIA TIMES

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The Media Times is a lab journal of Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir. Its main purpose is to provide a platform to the students and scholars to hone their writing abilities and to chisel their journalistic skills. The journal builds necessary confidence in them to take on the future responsibilities as conscious media practitioners in the society.

All the contributions are the students/scholars of Mass Communication and Journalism at MERC KU. Opinions, views, reports & essays in this issue do not necessarily represent the views of the faculty of MERC. The author are solely responsible for the facts stated including the source of the information and references. The Editor or the centre is not responsible for any kind of plagiarism.

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MESSAGE

It brings me great pleasure to know that Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir is publishing another edition of its in-house media journal, “Media Times”.

In today’s ever-evolving media terrain, staying at the forefront of innovation and excellence is imperative. Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir has been consistently upholding its commitment to excellence in both academic pursuits and creative endeavors. I am sure, the magazine is a perfect amalgamation of captivating stories, insightful analyses and visually mesmerizing content, gracing its pages. Such publications are a celebration of the creativity, learning and innovation that define the vibrancy of our students and showcase their remarkable achievements and contributions.

I congratulate and extend my warm greetings to all the contributors and wish a great success to the magazine.

Prof. Nilofer Khan
Vice-chancellor

MESSAGE

I am very pleased to present yet another edition of our Center's lab-journal, which is the reflection of the diligence and hard work of our students and dedication of our faculty /editorial team.

Our students have won laurels with their creditable performance in academics as they continue to shine both on and off campus. To mention a few, our students produced several award winning documentaries won coveted scholarships and fellowships for impactful journalism and outstanding photography, thereby showcasing the incredible talent of our students.

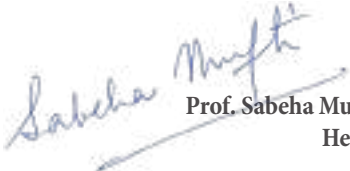
With a warm sense of contentment, we can put forth that our publications serve as a platform and serve a purpose by providing opportunities to our students to polish their writing acumen and photography skills.

MERC is striving hard to create human resource for the ever expanding, multi-dimensional and dynamic media and communications industry. We believe that besides rigorous academic training students also need to be exposed to a real life environment by experiential training so that they get a chance to learn by doing. We conduct field visits and research trips.

In the spirit of fostering collaboration, we are actively seeking partnerships with other departments and institutions.

We are planning a series of exciting events in the coming year. From guest lectures by industry experts to hands-on workshops, we aim to provide valuable experiences that complement the academic journey of our students.

I wish my students, scholars and the faculty all the best and look forward to a bright future ahead.


Prof. Sabeha Mufti
Head



SEARING AGRI SECTOR

From the ancient times, the dependence of Indian agriculture is primary in functioning of the country's economy. The nature of India's economy is such that is impacted by agricultural patterns and productions and any change crop up in the primary sector will have an influence.

Agriculture sector is being affected by the global warming and climate change in general and heat waves in particular. Analyzing the rising temperatures from past few years are changing the agrarian sector. Dynamic change in temperatures has resulted in water scarcity, soil infertility and so on which is disrupting the crop quantity, livelihood and supply chain. All this is creating an economic burden in the country and creating challenges for economic growth.

Agriculture serves as the central system for livelihood and GDP, representing a systematic dependence on fulfilling the food needs of the country. While discerning the reliance of our economy on agriculture, it is essential to consider the overwhelming dependence of Agronomy in India on climate, rainfall and other unpredictable factors.

Heat waves have sprung up as strong challenge for harvesters. The dilemma that farmers face impinges on the production patterns. The impact is seen in health,

water availability and consequently, crop failure. Being a tropical country, India is already vulnerable to high temperatures and heat waves. However, climate change has made the situation even more challenging. Heat waves, as defined by the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), are considered when the maximum temperature of a station reaches at least 40°C or more for plains and at least 30°C or more for hilly regions. Following this criterion, India is experiencing heat and severe heat waves that are adversely affecting seeds and production of crops that are not heat tolerant. This has resulted in either a drastic reduction in crop yields or complete crop failure.

Issues

The circuitous Impact is evident in the overburden of resources, which has consequential fallout on the social and developmental targets of the country. There is a direct impact on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets for India, particularly economic growth. Considering the agrarian essence of Indian economy and with rising challenge of global warming, such issues are not surprising anymore. It has therefore become critical need to challenge the conventional patterns of agriculture and bringing the agrarian science and technology with innovations like heat resistant crops and integrate

Dynamic change in temperatures has resulted in water scarcity, soil infertility and so on which is disrupting the crop quantity, livelihood and supply chain.

Mir Mehwish Farooq



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

climate smart agriculture

India has recorded its warmest month this season in the past 122 years. This challenge has unfavorable consequences on the poor and demands greater efforts to reduce poverty and manage inflation. The detrimental outcomes and strain on resources will impact the flow of resources for developmental needs and exert economic pressure. Droughts, water shortage and dependence on more chemicals to cope up with this challenge will affect the arability and deteriorate the soil quality and reduce the production capability further. According to the Climate Transparency Report published by environmental groups, India may already be experiencing a loss of 5.4% of its GDP due to declining productivity caused by extreme high temperatures.

The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned of the implications of a possible rise in global temperature on Indian agriculture. According to the G20 Climate Risk Atlas, released in 2021, India could face heat waves that last 25 times longer by 2036-2065 if carbon emissions continue to rise at high levels, mirroring the worst-case emission scenario outlined by the IPCC. The report further highlighted that increasing heat in India poses a significant threat to economic productivity.

Kashmir's Agriculture Struggles with Heat waves

Kashmir finds itself facing a formidable challenge, one that not only alters the very essence of its seasons but also reverberates through its agricultural and economic tapestry. As the Indian subcontinent grapples with the unsettling rise in heat waves, Kashmir stands at the forefront of this narrative, experiencing a prolonged summer season of unprecedented warmth and aridity.

This shift in climate dynamics has cast its shadow over the once-thriving apple orchards and agricultural fields that have long been the lifeblood of the region's economy. Additionally, the impact extends beyond the realms of agriculture, as the iconic Jhelum river finds itself progressively drying up, leaving behind a trail of ecological and

economic consequences.

Professor Mohammad Muslim, from the Department of Environment and Science at the University of Kashmir, shared insights on the current climate scenario in the region. He emphasized, "This year seems to be influenced by El Niño, highlighting the dynamic nature of our climate. It's evident that human activities have modified the natural order of things." Speaking about the specific challenges in Kashmir, he pointed out, "In our region, we've observed an increase in carbon levels. To understand the nuances, we must meticulously analyze various factors, including shifts in moisture content. However, it's crucial to recognize that climate changes vary regionally, and we must consider these regional differences in our assessments."

Professor Muslim explained, "The impact of these changes isn't uniform across Kashmir. While some areas may experience distinct alterations in weather patterns, others may see different effects due to regional disparities. We need to examine these parallel developments." Regarding agriculture, he noted, "Kashmir's agriculture relies heavily on irrigation, which may mitigate the immediate impact on crops like rice. However, there are concerns related to soil moisture levels and alterations in vegetation patterns. Paddy cultivation, for instance, may not be significantly affected, but horticulture faces substantial challenges." Describing the visible consequences on the ground, Professor Muslim stated, "We've observed soil cracks and moisture depletion beyond critical limits in certain areas. Nevertheless, there's still some resilience in the soil, providing hope for mitigation efforts."

Professor Mohammad Muslim further elucidated the intricate dynamics of climate change in Kashmir. He elaborated, "In the context of agriculture, it's crucial to understand that the impact isn't solely limited to crops; it extends to the entire ecosystem. Changes in soil quality and moisture content can disrupt the delicate balance of the region's flora and fauna, potentially leading to long-term ecological consequences."

He emphasized the significance of adaptation strategies, saying, "In light

of these challenges, it becomes imperative for the agricultural sector to adapt. This may involve shifting cultivation practices, introducing drought-resistant crop varieties, and implementing more efficient irrigation methods to sustain agricultural productivity.”

Discussing the drying of the Jhelum River, he commented, “The dwindling water levels in the Jhelum River, which is a lifeline for the region, are a worrisome sign. It affects not only agriculture but also the availability of freshwater for various uses. We need a comprehensive approach to address water resource management and ensure sustainable usage.”

Professor Muslim concluded with a note of caution and hope, stating, “While the climate shifts pose significant challenges, it's essential to remember that Kashmir has a long history of resilience. By combining scientific insights with local knowledge, we can work towards mitigating the impacts and securing a sustainable future for this unique and cherished region.”

Case Analysis (Wheat Production)

It is important to note that North India has faced more challenges due to heat waves, highlighting the region's fragility in terms of the country's dependence on it for agricultural needs. It is important to consider a holistic approach to dealing with this issue to prevent future adversities.

Regarding crops, Kharif crops (June to September) are particularly impacted due to their sensitivity and reliance on monsoon rainfall.

Amongst Rabi crops which are associated with winter crops, wheat production has faced severe challenge.

Wheat crop is not habitable to rising temperatures and can result in moisture stress and crop failure as they are adaptable to cooler temperatures.

High temperatures in the months of March over India's Northwest, Central, and Western parts can affect the growth as crop is approaching reproductive stage.

Significant yield decline is evident by rising temperatures by 3 – 4 degrees during flowering and maturing period

Extreme weather events such as heat waves pave way for unpredictable rainfall patterns which destroyed wheat crops in 2022 during the crucial grain-filling stage to the extent government had to stop the exports.

According to data from the India

Meteorological Department, Punjab and Haryana experienced unusually high rainfall during the period from March 1 to April 3. Punjab received rainfall that exceeded the normal levels by 205%, while Haryana witnessed an excess of 220%. These two states together contributed nearly 74% of the total wheat procured by India for its public distribution system in 2022.

The Ministry of Commerce, in its media statement in March 2022, mentioned that the country had been making progress in increasing wheat exports during the previous fiscal year. However, the export plans faced a setback due to adverse weather conditions. A projected decline of 3-7% in the yields of wheat, soybean, mustard, groundnut, and potato is anticipated for every 1-degree increase in temperature. The data puts forth the concern that is inevitable due to vulnerability of the country to extreme weather events. Such setbacks further intensify the growth of country and put unnecessary financial stress if mitigation is not timely and prompt.

Possible Solutions

Farmers and agricultural workers form the backbone of the agrarian economy in the country. Their health, well-being, and job security will determine the future of the agriculture sector. It has become a critical need to challenge the conventional patterns of agriculture and incorporate agrarian science and technology with innovations like heat-resistant crops and integrated climate-smart agriculture.

It is consequently important to divert resources to improve the condition of resources and agricultural technology and promptly pave the way for innovations in this direction. It is also important to develop a forecasting system to predict crop production in the country and improve accessibility to technology so that its impact can be achieved. Developing effective infrastructure, along with implementing smart agriculture practices, and fostering collaborations with countries known for booming agriculture like Israel, the Netherlands, and Japan, can significantly boost production and improve ties with these nations, benefiting the economic growth of the country. It is crucial to understand how to make the best use of limited resources, educate farmers accordingly, and prepare for global warming and climate change, as they are inevitable. Prevention whenever possible and being prepared are essential for survival.

PAPER-MACHIE REINCARNATED



Generating enthusiasm among art lovers and homeowners alike, the transformation of paper-Machie from a static display to an essential interior design element is drawing significant attention and admiration.

Tufail Ganie

In Kashmir, the age-old art of paper-Machie is experiencing a remarkable resurgence. No longer confined to display shelves, it is seamlessly integrating into the very fabric of local living, transforming from a mere artifact into an essential element of interior design, gracing the beauty of houses in the region.

Generating enthusiasm among art lovers and homeowners alike, this transformation, from a static display to an essential interior design element, is drawing significant attention and admiration.

The renaissance of the revered art of paper-Machie is not just a revival but integration into daily life. No longer confined to mere display, it has found its way into the soul of local homes, transforming spaces with a touch of artistic tradition and creativity.

The legacy of paper-Machie in the region traces back to the 14th century when the revered Muslim saint Mir Syed

Ali Hamdani, known as Shah-e-Hamdan, graced the region. His profound influence was instrumental in not just spreading the beauty of Islam but also in enriching the local culture. Among his many gifts to the people, the introduction of several crafts stands tall, notably the esteemed art of paper-Machie, which continues to be a cherished part of the region's rich artistic heritage.

Once a thriving business, paper-Machie faced a gradual decline over recent years due to various adversities, including the internet blockade, the abrogation of Article 370, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. But a dedicated group of artisans refused to let this ancient craft fade into obscurity. They innovated, incorporating paper-Machie into interior designs, breathing new life into a fading tradition.

Artisans faced the unfortunate necessity of shutting down their workshops due to circumstances beyond their control,



pushing them to seek alternative sources of income. However, a determined collective of Kashmiri artisans refused to let the traditional art of paper-Machie fade into oblivion. Their ingenious strategy involved infusing paper-Machie into interior design concepts, igniting a revival for this ancient craft.

Their goal extended beyond preserving the legacy of paper-Machie; it aimed to infuse fresh relevance and aesthetic appeal, transforming it into a captivating element within modern Kashmiri homes.

Among these artisans, Hakeem Manzoor emerges as a luminary in the fusion of paper-Machie with interior design. His trailblazing venture commenced in 2007 when a client expressed a desire to embellish ceilings using paper-Machie, marking a pivotal moment in the evolution of interior aesthetics. Manzoor's visionary approach not only earned him accolades from his peers but also garnered admiration and reverence from the local community and beyond.

Manzoor embarked on his journey of integrating paper-Machie into interior designs in 2007 when a customer requested paper-Machie art for their ceilings.

"I've been practicing paper-Machie art for 40 years. I'm the pioneer who introduced paper-Machie into interior art," expressed Manzoor. Manzoor explains, "The cost fluctuates based on the customer's design preferences and the square footage required. More intricate designs will naturally incur higher costs for the customer."

Regarding the completion timeline, it

entirely hinges on the specifics of the order. The duration can range anywhere between 15 days to a month, sometimes even longer, depending on the project's complexity and scale.

Recognizing Manzoor's exceptional skill, the Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH) entrusted him with government projects. Consequently, Manzoor has undertaken various endeavors, contributing his expertise to renowned shrines across Kashmir.

Talking to Nasir Hussain Khan, aged 55, boasting 42 years of experience in this profession, sheds light on the necessity of shifting towards incorporating paper-Machie into interiors to align with modern trends, emphasizing its significance in preserving traditional art.

"The shift was necessary to keep our traditional art alive by embracing paper-Machie in interior designs," Nasir expressed. Numerous artisans transitioned from traditional to interior paper-Machie design, noting a revival in the craft ('ATH AAW YAWUN': its youthfulness is back), leading to substantial increases in their income compared to previous earnings.

The shift from traditional to interior paper-Machie has been a financial boon for artisans. With up to a 50% increase in sales, these creators have found social media to be a game-changer, broadening their reach and boosting sales through creative displays of their work.

In the traditional practice of paper-Machie, artisans primarily utilized materials like newspaper, tissue paper, cardboard, and at times, recycled or old magazine sheets. Contrastingly, the contemporary approach relies on structural bases of wood or Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF) panels, alongside high-quality, vibrant, and long-lasting acrylic waterproof paints.

The modern methodology in paper-Machie design, especially within interior applications, demands intricate detailing, precise scaling, and accuracy to achieve flawless strokes and panel work, making it more challenging compared to the traditional approach. Interior paper-Machie panels cost around 700 rupees per square foot, contrasting with the traditional pricing, which averages between 2500 and 3000 rupees per box.

In the realm of traditional paper-Machie, the focus predominantly rested

on crafting decorative pieces destined for foreign markets, failing to resonate within the local Kashmiri community. However, the introduction of interior paper-Machie designs into Khatamband, a traditional ceiling art of Kashmir, sparked a remarkable shift. This fusion of tradition and modernity not only captured the curiosity of the Kashmiri people but also invigorated a newfound fascination with interior paper-Machie.

This innovative approach, embraced by local interior designers, swiftly gained traction among homeowners. Unlike its decorative-centric predecessor, the new model didn't just enhance the aesthetics of homes; it also served a practical purpose, solidifying its acceptance within Kashmiri households.

The younger generation, drawn by the allure of modern paper-Machie, actively engages in learning sessions, embracing the fusion of contemporary and traditional art forms. Students have found mentors like Manzoor and Nasir, envisioning their futures in mastering and potentially commercializing this unique artistry.

Eager students actively engage in immersive learning sessions led by various paper-Machie interior artists and participate in workshops conducted by skilled artisans. Nowsheeba, a 12th-grade student mentored by Manzoor, envisions a fusion of paper-Machie and calligraphy, highlighting Manzoor's support that provides her with a platform to experiment and earn, free of cost. Expressing gratitude, Falak acknowledges Manzoor's illuminating guidance, emphasizing his unique ability to blend traditional and modern art forms.

Wasifa, a student of Nasir, shares her childhood admiration for paper-Machie and expresses her newfound eagerness to master interior paper-Machie design, aspiring to establish her workshop.

Irfan, another protégé of Manzoor, underscores how establishing his workshop has not only rewarded his efforts but also provided a substantial source of income. He notes how the new paper-Machie model has not only benefited artisans but also positively impacted other sectors like carpentry, contracting, and interior design, contributing significantly to promoting the rich cultural heritage of paper-Machie.

Idrees, trained by Nasir, recounts his journey from learning paper-Machie to

venturing into interior paper-Machie and establishing his business. His success has transcended borders, with exhibitions in Mumbai, Delhi, and Surat, significantly boosting his business and expanding the reach of interior paper-Machie panels across India.

While many students have successfully learned the art of paper-Machie interior design, financial constraints hinder some from establishing their businesses or workshops independently. Zahoor Ahmed, a former student of Manzoor, emphasizes the need for government support to preserve this fusion of art for future generations.

The Impact of this transformation reaches beyond artistry, influencing sectors like carpentry, contracting, and interior design, while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage.

In customer reviews, there's a resonating sense of pride in preserving tradition while adding a personal touch to living spaces. Clients vouch for the charm and quality that paper-Machie interiors bring, emphasizing their contribution to cultural preservation.

Fayaz Ahmed, aged 45, expressed, "Paper-Machie is deeply rooted in our heritage. After witnessing the charm of paper-Machie interior design, I was compelled to incorporate it into my home. It truly added to the overall appeal, and the investment felt worthwhile due to its quality and craftsmanship."

In a similar vein, Zubair Bastal highlighted, "Opting for paper-Machie on interior walls brings a unique and personal touch to your space. It fosters a sense of individuality in décor while supporting local artisans. This choice cultivates a sense of community and appreciation for skilled craftsmanship."

Sharing his perspective, Tariq Ahmed, aged 48, stated, "Previously, Khatamband was commonly used for ceilings in Kashmir. However, with the introduction of the new model, intricate paper-Machie designs on Khatamband ceilings gained preference over false ceilings. I embraced this approach in my home, resulting in rooms that feel refreshing and appealing."

As interior paper-Machie emerges, artists are optimistic about the future. They foresee great promise in this innovative approach, expecting not only increased

income opportunities for artists but also a significant contribution to preserving this art form for future generations.

Despite governmental efforts, artists feel a sense of dissatisfaction regarding the support they receive. They emphasize the need for nurturing future artisans and building stronger relationships with customers to safeguard the legacy of interior

paper-Machie.

The horizon looks promising for this craft. The artists anticipate not only financial prosperity but also a safeguarding of their heritage for generations to come. The call for government backing remains strong, underscoring the importance of collective efforts in preserving the rich tapestry of Kashmir's paper-Machie tradition.



IN PURSUIT OF DISTINCT IDENTITY

Pashtun community faces a predicament stemming from historical reclassifications and survey categorizations, resulting in a lack of a distinct identity. The situation was exacerbated by their exclusion from the ST categories by the Mandal Commission, despite their tribal origins and rich cultural heritage.

Nahida Mushtaq

The Pashtun community, often referred to as Pashtuns, Pashtoons, or Pathaans, has a deep-rooted connection with the Kashmir region. Their native language is Pashto, and they exhibit linguistic versatility, being proficient in languages like Kashmiri, English, Gojri, Pahadi, and more. Pashtuns initially arrived during Afghan rule, with many brought by Maharaja Gulab Singh during the Dogra rule to serve on the border. Presently, they are predominantly concentrated in the southwest region of Jammu. Additionally,

there are significant populations of nomadic Pashtun clans in both northern and southern parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In Jammu, they can be found mainly in Poonch District and Jammu District, and they are known to speak Dogri, a Punjabi dialect, alongside Pashto. In the northern part of the state, particularly in districts like Bandipora and Baramulla, Pashto is also spoken. In the southern Kashmir region, Pashto is prevalent, especially in Ganderbal District, with two villages being particularly known

for this.

The Pashtuns' presence in Kashmir is deeply intertwined with its history, closely linked to India's struggle for independence. In 1931, elders of the Pashtun community began migrating to the Kashmir valley from places like Afghanistan and which is now Pakistan, seeking better opportunities and a new life in the region. This migration coincided with the fervor of the Indian independence movement, and the Pashtun community played a vital role in this fight for freedom. Prominent figures like Gaffar Khan, affectionately known as "Pathaan," emerged as influential leaders, dedicating themselves to the cause of independence.

After India gained independence, many Pashtun elders who were previously engaged in businesses such as selling dry fruits chose to stay in Kashmir. The warmth and acceptance they received from the local people encouraged them to make this region their home. Leaders like Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad and Jawaharlal Nehru recognized the value of this diverse community and encouraged their settlement in the region, despite the differences in language.

Presently, the Pashtun community faces a predicament stemming from historical reclassifications and survey categorizations, resulting in a lack of a distinct identity. This situation was exacerbated by their exclusion from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) or backward categories within the Mandal Commission, despite their tribal origins and rich cultural heritage. In an attempt to rectify this, some individuals within the community adopted surnames like "Pathaan" or "Gujar" to access associated category benefits. However, these efforts failed to secure a separate identity or rightful recognition.

Nazeer Ahmad Masoodi, a leader from Ganderbal, played a pivotal role in uniting various tribal communities, including the Pashtun community, under the banner of a "Pahadi community" due to their shared use of the Pahadi language. This collaborative effort led to the formation of the "Pahadi Athenic Group," with active participation from the Pashtun community in cultural activities and scholarships. Despite this progress, Pashtun community members

faced significant challenges in preserving their Pashto language and obtaining ST certificates.

Concerns persist regarding the sustainability of this recognition, given the Pashtun community's unique cultural heritage, tribal origins, and inherent backwardness. The community is puzzled by the difficulty its representatives face in securing employment, especially when they once had a presence and broadcasts in Pashto on Radio Kashmir. Radio Kashmir Srinagar commenced broadcasting news in the Pashto language, a practice that endured until around 1965 or 1966. This acknowledgment of their language on a prominent platform underscored its significance. In 1976, another significant development occurred when the community was reclassified into a different backward class. Regrettably, the common Pashtuns remained unaware of this alteration, which would have enduring consequences.

In 1986, central authorities conducted a survey to classify communities into "Ethnic groups." This survey led to the misclassification of people other than Kashmiris as "Gujar," erroneously encompassing the Pashtun community. This misclassification erased their distinct identity and rich cultural heritage, posing a challenge to their recognition and representation. Notwithstanding these challenges, historical records trace the presence of Pashtuns in the region as far back as 1921.

The community now seeks recognition within cultural academies and universities, with the establishment of a dedicated department for their language. Additionally, they aim to regain their place on Radio Kashmir to preserve and promote their rich language and culture. The Pashtun community continues to grapple with multiple challenges, particularly in education, where students typically receive only limited schooling, forcing many into daily wage labor due to limited job opportunities. The struggle for ST certification remains unresolved, as their cultural heritage and backward status are not adequately acknowledged.

Despite these hardships, the Pashtun community remains committed to their country, seeking recognition, representation, and opportunities to uplift their community and preserve their





language and culture.

In recent times, Zaffar Iqbal from the Pashtun community took the initiative to address their challenges by proposing a program in Pashto language, similar to that of the Gujars, to the Chief Minister of the region. However, the government's response was disappointing as they could not allocate the requested posts, despite Zaffar Iqbal's dedicated efforts. This highlights a stark contrast with other tribal communities like the Gujars and Pahadies, who have achieved separate category recognition and representation in the Raj Sabha.

The Pashtun community believes that with genuine government interest and support, there is hope for improving their condition. They aspire to enhance their language's historical significance and have dedicated representatives to advocate for their interests, similar to Haji Meer Ahmad Naqshbandi's role in the past. In their pursuit of recognition and advancement, the Pashtun community reaches out to those willing to listen and support their cause. Despite being a small community in Kashmir, they have displayed remarkable resilience and produced exceptional individuals who have made significant contributions in various fields despite the daily challenges they face.

In 1957, a pivotal development unfolded with the establishment of the social welfare department, conferring special category status upon the Pashtun community as a backward tribe. This recognition was

rooted in their historical reliance on animal husbandry for sustenance, opening doors to job opportunities and enhancing their children's education through scholarships and post-middle school employment prospects.

As time advanced, the educational shortcomings of the community began to impede their progress. Despite their substantial contributions to the region, they faced ongoing challenges, particularly the absence of educational resources, including schools in their rugged mountainous areas. The Pashtun community continued to adapt to changing circumstances.

In 1970, significant alterations in the Pashtun community's status and classification came to the fore. Until that point, the community had enjoyed a 12% reservation within a specific backward class category. However, they remained uninformed about the specifics of these benefits, which encompassed scholarships and other forms of assistance for their children.

While the community's representation remains modest, these individuals stand as beacons of hope and inspiration for the Pashtun people. Among the notable personalities who have made a profound impact in the Pashtun community are figures like ZulfiqarAalam Khan, a lawyer, Shoaib Khan, an Assistant Professor, Jahangeer Ahmad Khan, a Pahari Announcer at Aakaash Vani Srinagar, and Bashir Ahmed Khan, a retired teacher.

TOXIC PARENTING



Parenting is a very challenging responsibility. We, as parents, should be able to create a balance. We should not be extremely authoritarian or permissive towards our children.

When children are not encouraged to try, explore, master, or take the risk of failing, they frequently feel inadequate and powerless. Restrained by fearful and nervous parents, these kids frequently grow up to be fearful and nervous adults.

Over-control by parents in choosing careers is pushing teens towards depression, anxiety and suicide. What was once a nurturing responsibility has, for some reasons, transformed into a burdensome duty, lacking the essential elements of love and affection.

Syed Batool Andrabi

A young boy's forced pursuit of an IIT dream culminated in a devastating end, raising pertinent questions about the consequences of parental pressure on the career choices of their children. A Class 12 student hailing from Srinagar, who had been forcefully sent to Kota for IIT coaching by his parents, ended his life at the young age of 18, about a month ago. The boy was a sixth-grade student when he was first sent to Kota, was pushed into the relentless pursuit of becoming an IITian against his own will. His parents, harbouring dreams of academic success, believed that an early exposure to the rigorous environment of Kota would mould him for success.

However, the young student, deeply attached to his family, particularly his mother, was devastated by the separation. Despite his pleas, his family, driven by their ambition, insisted that he should study in Kota.

Struggling to acclimate to the challenging environment, the boy witnessed his peers engaging in harmful activities like smoking and drugs. He first

resisted but gradually found drifted to this path, as it seemed the only way to cope with the alienating surroundings.

His family, preoccupied with his academic success, remained oblivious to his emotional struggles. Despite three failed attempts at rehabilitation, the family persisted in sending him back to Kota, prioritizing their dream of seeing him as an IITian.

The tragic climax unfolded during a heated argument with his mother. Distraught and feeling cornered, the young teenager retreated to his room and hanged himself from a ceiling fan, leaving behind a shattered family.

Relatives and acquaintances, grappling

with the aftermath, expressed their grief. A close relative lamented, “We repeatedly tried to convey the toll it was taking on him, but they were fixated on the IIT dream. It’s devastating that it had to end like this.”

Another family friend said: “The pressure on these young minds is immense. It’s a wake-up call for parents to consider the mental well-being of their children along with their academic pursuits.”

A former classmate shared, “We saw the struggle he went through, but it seemed like no one was really listening. It’s a tragic reminder of the importance of understanding and supporting mental health in our academic systems.”

The narratives of affected individuals illuminate how parents compel their children into specific career choices while trying to fulfil their unmet dreams through their children.

Tragically, such coercive influence can lead to severe consequences, exemplified by the above heart-wrenching incident in Srinagar.

Dr. Yuman Kawoos, a Clinical Psychiatrist and lecturer at the Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Srinagar said: “Parenting is a very challenging responsibility. We, as parents, should be able to create a balance. We should not be extremely authoritarian or permissive towards our children. We should rather try to create a balance. We should keep a scope for discussions.”

She also emphasized on the crucial role of open communication and understanding in creating an environment conducive to the mental well-being of children.

Conversations with students serve as poignant reminders of the significant impact parental decisions can have on the trajectory of their lives. Instances of suppressed aspirations leading to anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts underscore the dire consequences of parental pressure on career choices.

“I spent 3 to 4 months at home, which, genuinely speaking, was the worst time of my life. Uncertain about my future, I was surprised when my parents eventually decided to abandon their initial decision. One day, my mom approached me and said, ‘Go for your dream career choice; your Baba and I have decided to give up on our previous stance.’ At that time, Kashmir University entrance exams were underway. I took the exam, got selected, and now

I am here at KU’s Law School. Despite being admitted to my dream course, I still feel drained due to the anxiety and depression I endured in the past. Had my parents understood my aspirations at the right time, things would have worked well for me, and perhaps I could have retained my intellectual capabilities, which were impacted due to depression. Even now, more than a year later, I sometimes feel like giving up on my life because I cannot shrug off the fact that my parents became my worst enemies when I shared my dreams with them. This thought continues to haunt me.”

Aiman Lateef, a student, shared a story about one of her close relatives. “At an early age, this child was sent far from home to live with some close relatives. Unfortunately, these relatives subjected the child to menial household chores in addition to the demands of school. This was a time when children typically enjoy their childhood—playing, and spending time with their immediate family. However, this child, rather tragically, was burdened with the responsibilities of a homemaker,” she said.

“She was tasked with chores such as washing clothes and cleaning the house, yet her efforts were unappreciated, and she was unjustly blamed for not doing enough. These circumstances led to a deepening sense of despair and depression,” Aiman said.

One day, her parents went to visit her and discovered that she was unwell and unwilling to attend school. Concerned, they took her for a medical check-up, during which the doctor diagnosed her with clinical depression. At that time, she was just 11 years old.

Instead of seeking proper treatment and understanding, her parents chose to suppress her the fact because they associated depression with stigma.

Frightened and unable to share her feelings with anyone, her confidence is now shattered, said Aiman.

Aisha Jahangir shared insights on toxic parenting, highlighting the adverse impact on children. She said, “Parents imposing their expectations contribute to rising suicide cases. In Kashmir, women are often restricted from studying or working outside the region. Parents should recognize that their children are their own flesh and blood, understanding their ambitions instead

of suppressing their dreams. Creating awareness among parents is crucial for a better understanding of their children.”

What Experts Say?

Dr. Tasleema, the Dean of the School of Education and Behavioural Science in Kashmir, said, “I’ve observed parents compelling their children into specific career paths, such as medicine or engineering, disregarding their children’s capabilities. Parents often set high expectations without considering their children’s interests and potentials. They are mindful of our children’s physical health but neglect their mental well-being. It’s crucial not to subject them to unnecessary competition with their peers.”

The problem of toxic parenting is not Kashmir specific but exists world-wide, compelling psychologists to conduct several studies and research on the issue.

Building on this research, psychologists categorise parenting into two main archetypes: Authoritarian and permissive. However, the modern parenting landscape often witnesses a deviation towards extremes, with parents oscillating between authoritative and permissive styles. Notably, the current paradigm reflects a trend where parents, juggling demanding schedules and home responsibilities, channel their frustrations onto their children. What was once a nurturing responsibility has, for some reasons, transformed into a burdensome duty, lacking the essential elements of love and affection.

Clinical psychologist Dr. Susan states, “When children are not encouraged to try, explore, master, or take the risk of failing, they frequently feel inadequate and powerless. Restrained by fearful and nervous parents, these kids frequently grow up to be fearful and nervous adults. They find it challenging to grow up as a result. Many never get over the need for constant supervision and guidance from their parents. Because of this, their parents still barge in, control, and often times take over their lives; this is another example of toxic parenting, and it is something we should look into.”

Various vegetables, including tomatoes, bottle gourds, brinjals, turnips, dandelion leaves, fenugreek leaves, lotus stems, Iberian knapweed, quince, and different types of collard greens, are sun-dried during the peak summer months. These dried

vegetables are then rehydrated by soaking them in hot water and subsequently sautéed in oil and spices, creating the distinct flavors associated with Kashmiri winter meals.

Individuals like Hafeeza Bano, a 49-year-old from Soura, Srinagar, express their deep connection to the tradition, having prepared dried vegetables since childhood. The sun-dried form of various vegetables becomes a staple in Kashmiri winter cuisine, reflecting the taste of the region.

The demand for hokh syun extends beyond Kashmir, reaching places as far as Kargil, Leh, and Jammu. Dealers like Bashir Ahmad Dar from Noorbagh area in Srinagar highlight the consignments of sun-dried veggies sent to these regions by the end of autumn each year.

Historically, the consumption of dried vegetables was deemed essential in Kashmir due to the fear of severe winters, with limited accessibility to fresh produce. The tradition continues despite the availability of fresh vegetables throughout the year.

Saleema, a 55-year-old, emphasizes the importance of passing down the knowledge of traditions to the younger generation. The practice of drying vegetables was particularly crucial in the past when self-sufficiency and reliance on dried vegetables were essential during the long winters when the Srinagar-Jammu NH road would be closed due to heavy snowfall.

While the consumption of dried vegetables has somewhat diminished with the availability of fresh produce, they remain a part of Kashmiri cuisine. Saleema stresses the need to convey the advantages of these traditions to the younger generation, preserving a rich cultural legacy.

The dried vegetables are not only associated with tradition but also believed to have health benefits. Different varieties are thought to aid in preventing colds, fevers, coughs, chest infections, and other health issues. For example, dried dandelion leaves (Hochh Hand) are considered good for anemic patients due to their high iron content, and dried Iberian knapweed (Kraich) is believed to be beneficial for eyesight.

In addition to maintaining cultural identity, dried vegetables offer a connection to the region’s rich heritage, providing both culinary enjoyment and potential health benefits. The practice persists as a testament to the resilience of traditions in the face of evolving lifestyles.

RISING FROM RUBBLE



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

Uri's journey post- earthquake 2005 speaks of survival, community bonds, and rebuilding lives beyond debris. Despite enduring loss it epitomizes human strength amidst adversity.

Younis

In the quiet of a serene October morning in 2005, Jammu and Kashmir faced a seismic force, leaving a heart-breaking tale etched forever in its landscape. The earthquake of magnitude 7.6 struck Muzaffarabad, plunging families into ruins and despair. Uri, bearing staggering losses, emerged as a symbol of both resilience and devastation.

After the disaster, Uri became a powerful example of strength amidst adversity. More than 550 lives were lost, and thousands were wounded, leaving behind a once-vibrant community now struggling with economic and social ruin. This grim reality continues to loom large over the town, casting a long shadow on its landscape.

Next to the modest cattle shed, Hakim Zadi, 55, recounts a story heavy with sorrow. "In the gentle morning light, everything was usual – tending to my cattle. My son Iftikar, unaware of the looming disaster, was at school. Suddenly, the ground shook violently. Dust billowed from the mountains – an earthquake, reshaping my entire world in an instant. Panic gripped me.

Frantically, I hurried towards Iftikar's

school, only a few meters away. In a heartbreaking instant, the sturdy walls collapsed, shattering my world. Amidst the chaos of ruins, I desperately searched for my son.

Hakim, recounting the tragedy, rushed to find his son Iftikar amidst the crumbling school walls, a desperate search ending in heartbreak as his son slipped away. With the help of others, "we uncovered him from the debris. His life hung by a fragile thread, connecting us in those terrifying moments".

After the tremors subsided, a heavy cloak of grief settled in. Iftikar, once full of life, lay in a coma at SKIMS Soura Institute. Hope flickered during our vigil, but it faded into a cruel mirage. He slipped away, leaving an irreplaceable void in my heart. His laughter's echo haunts the silence, a reminder of a life cut short.

"The tragedy took my child and my home," he mourns, the ruins mirroring his shattered world. The place that once brimmed with family warmth now lay in ruins. The wreckage outside reflected the devastation within me. My life's landscape had changed irreversibly.

The 2019 Earthquake Disaster Risk Index Report painted a stark picture of the aftermath in the Kashmir valley after the 2005 earthquake. Its findings resonated with the devastating impact witnessed by individuals like Hakim Zadi, who not only lost loved ones but also saw their homes crumble, a painful reality reflected in the staggering numbers: 1500 lives lost and 450,000 collapsed buildings due to the earthquake. The report underscored the tragic consequence of substandard concrete structures, amplifying the immense loss suffered by communities affected by the catastrophe.

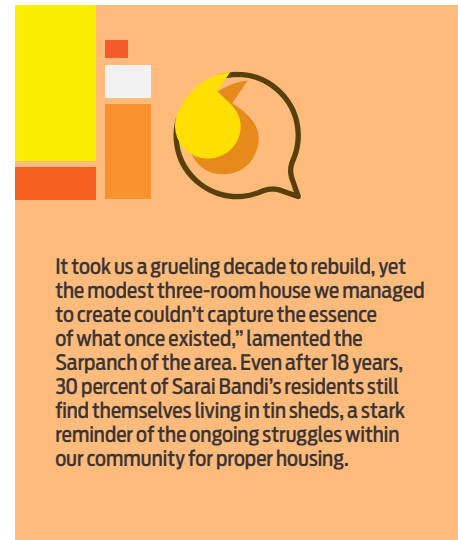
“It took us a grueling decade to rebuild, yet the modest three-room house we managed to create couldn’t capture the essence of what once existed,” lamented the Sarpanch of the area. Even after 18 years, 30 percent of Sarai Bandi’s residents still find themselves living in tin sheds, a stark reminder of the ongoing struggles within our community for proper housing.

Amidst the haunting aftermath, stories of survival and loss echo through the villages. Hussain from Sarai Bandi laments the unfulfilled rebuilding, while Abid from Sultan Daki recalls nights under a tattered plastic sheet. He watched his two-story haven crumble. “Our refuge, a simple shed, protected us until 2013 when we finally built a new house in 2014,” he recalled, recounting nights spent under a worn-out 10x10 plastic sheet, a feeble shield against the elements. “Amidst the rain’s symphony, we huddled together, seeking comfort and safety.”

Irshad Khawaja of Uri, initially mistaking the tremors for routine shelling, faced a crumbling home and the heart-wrenching search for loved ones amidst the debris. “My home fell apart right in front of me,” Khawaja lamented, recalling the terrifying escape from imminent danger. “And in that moment of pause, the mountains echoed with the ominous crash of huge boulders.”

During that time, hope and construction were linked on the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road, where the Border Road Organization (BRO) led an ambitious expansion project. Sixty determined individuals from Nambla and Bilalabad villages in Uri joined hands with the BRO team, extending their efforts beyond their community to contribute to this collective task.

However, when the earthquake



It took us a grueling decade to rebuild, yet the modest three-room house we managed to create couldn’t capture the essence of what once existed,” lamented the Sarpanch of the area. Even after 18 years, 30 percent of Sarai Bandi’s residents still find themselves living in tin sheds, a stark reminder of the ongoing struggles within our community for proper housing.

shattered the calm, tragedy overshadowed the expected progress. These villagers, set off in two vehicles, filled with dreams, but faced the harsh wrath of nature during the earthquake. The powerful force of the earthquake swallowed both vehicles in the rubble, leaving a sad aftermath. It became a solemn tribute to those who had hoped for a brighter future, yet tragically met their end under the rubble of their dreams.

Azmat Noor, whose husband was among the laborers who lost their lives, shared a heart-breaking story. “Only four brave souls survived the disaster; the other 56 were trapped under the debris,” she sorrowfully recounted, highlighting the weight of the collective loss from the calamity.

The construction project, once a symbol of progress, transformed into a silent memorial witnessing the fragility of life. In the strong hearts of Uri’s locals, the story goes beyond numbers and physical destruction. It’s a tale of a community united by hardship, where people hold onto hope amid the wreckage, piecing together not only their homes but their fractured spirits. Uri’s emotional landscape speaks of resilience, showcasing the power that emerges when a town refuses to be solely shaped by the tragedies it faces.

The memories of that doomsday persist as a collective trauma, a shared pain carried by those who’ve been gathering their strength over nearly two decades. Every day for the people of Uri is a struggle against both the physical scars and the hidden emotional wounds of mental distress and constant anxiety. As the sun sat on that fateful day, Uri changed forever, its scars etched into its collective memory.



LAST WHISPER OF ROSES

The scent of roses, a perfume woven into the very fabric of Srinagar, hangs heavily in the air. It is not the fleeting fragrance of a blooming garden but a heady, concentrated aroma that seeps through the cracks of time, carrying with it the whispers of centuries past.

This intoxicating fragrance emanates from a tiny shop tucked away in the heart of the city's old quarter, its faded sign bearing the name "Arq-i-Gulab Dukaan."

Sunlight filters through the dust-laden windows of the shop, located in the Zaina Kadal area of Srinagar, exactly near the Shah Hamadan shrine (Khanqah-e-Maula), casting dappled light on the weathered floorboards. Abdul Aziz Kozgar, the last rosewater maker of Srinagar, sits amidst antique jars and copper distillers, a lone sentinel guarding a dying legacy.

Srinagar's rose water is a symphony of

nature and human skill. The fertile soil of the valley, nurtured by the cool mountain air, provides the perfect cradle for the Damask rose (*Rosa damascena*), a flower prized for its potent fragrance. This "Koshur Gulab," as it is affectionately known, yields petals that are handpicked at dawn, when the morning dew still clings to their velvety surfaces.

At 70 years old, Kozgar embodies the spirit of his shop, his features etched with the passage of time and the dedication to his craft. His hands, gnarled and stained with the essence of countless roses, move with practiced ease as he tends to the ancient copper still. Each stroke, each twist, is a testament to a lineage that stretches back 400 years, to the time when his ancestors migrated from Türkiye, bringing with them the secrets of rosewater distillation.

The journey from rose petal to precious rose water is a dance of meticulous care and time-honored tradition. In copper

Kozgar's heart aches with the fading fragrance of his legacy. His hands, though still skilled, are beginning to betray his age. The rose water business, once a thriving enterprise, is now a whisper of its former glory. The thought of his shop closing weighs heavily on his soul.

Zainab Shafiq



FILE PHOTO/Source: INTERNET

As stills, as old as the craft itself, the petals undergo a gentle steam distillation. As the steam rises, carrying the essence of the roses, a transformation unfolds. The fragrant vapors condense, yielding a clear, ethereal liquid – the embodiment of nature’s bounty.

“This shop whispers stories,” Kozgar says, his voice a soft murmur that mingles with the gentle gurgle of the still. “It speaks of emperors and poets, of love and loss, of beauty preserved in a single, precious drop.” He gestures towards the rows of glass jars, each filled with a shimmering liquid that captures the essence of the Kashmiri rose. “This isn’t just rosewater,” he says, his voice laced with pride. “This is the soul of Kashmir, distilled into a fragrant elixir.”

The art of rose water making in Srinagar is more than just a profession; it is a legacy passed down through generations. Families, with their hands stained with the essence of roses, meticulously safeguard the authenticity of the craft. Each step, from petal selection to distillation, is imbued with the wisdom and expertise of those who came before.

Kozgar’s rosewater is a far cry from the mass-produced varieties found on store shelves. Using a meticulous process passed down through generations, he transforms the delicate petals of the Damask rose into a pure, potent extract.

The aroma is unlike anything commercially available, a heady blend of floral sweetness and earthy depth. But the future of this legacy is uncertain. Like the rose petals that fade with time, the demand for handcrafted rosewater has dwindled. Younger generations, lured by the convenience and affordability of modern products, seem oblivious to the magic contained within the ‘Arq-i-Gulab Dukaan’.

“The fragrance may fade,” Kozgar sighs, “but the memory will linger. The memory of a time when beauty was crafted by hand, when tradition was a valued treasure.” In his eyes, there is a glimmer of hope, a flicker of defiance.

He continues to tend to his craft, his passion undimmed by the

challenges he faces. He believes that the beauty and legacy of rosewater will find its way back to the hearts of the people, that the last breath of this fragrance will not be its last.

The world outside the Arq-i-Gulab Dukaan has moved on. Modern, factory-made rose water floods the market, its synthetic aroma a pale imitation of the handcrafted fragrance – which only costs ₹40 per litre.

But more than just producers of a coveted commodity, the rose water makers of Srinagar are the guardians of a cultural legacy. Their dedication to their craft ensures that the traditions and knowledge passed down through generations continue to thrive. As the aroma of Damask roses continues to permeate the air, it serves as a reminder of the enduring spirit of Kashmir and its people.

The scent of roses, once a ubiquitous melody in the city’s symphony, now hangs like a ghostly echo in the air. The fields that once cradled the fragrant blooms are now replaced by concrete and glass, their vibrant colors swallowed by the monotonous grey of progress.

Kozgar’s heart aches with the fading fragrance of his legacy. His hands, though still skilled, are beginning to betray his age. The rose water business, once a thriving enterprise, is now a whisper of its former glory. The thought of his shop closing, of the tradition dying with him, weighs heavily on his soul.

“I want to keep this legacy alive,” he says, his voice trembling with emotion. “But I need help. I need someone to teach, to share the secrets of this ancient craft.” His eyes search the crowded streets, scanning for a spark of interest, a flicker of hope amidst the sea of oblivious faces. But the faces stare back, indifferent to the fading scent of a forgotten tradition.

As the sun dips below the horizon, casting long shadows across the shop, Kozgar sits amidst his bottles of rosewater, his heart heavy with the weight of a legacy fading into fragrance. The last rose of summer withers in his grasp, a poignant reminder of a beauty lost and a tradition on the verge of extinction.

CULINARY MAVERICKS



Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**

Dell Delicacy's empowering journey in the heart of Kashmir is a convention defying initiative transforming not just the livelihoods of its partners but challenging societal norms as well. It's a group of seven women rewriting the narrative of empowerment in Kashmir.

Masrat Nabi

In the Habak, Shanpora area of Srinagar, a group of young women is weaving a remarkable tapestry of change. Bound by a shared vision, they have embarked on an extraordinary journey through a Self-Help Group (SHG) that defies conventions, transforming not just their livelihoods but challenging societal norms. Led by Rumeena Ahad, a Master's in Social Work graduate, this group of seven women is rewriting the narrative of empowerment in the picturesque valleys of Kashmir.

Their story goes beyond breaking barriers; it's a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who refuse to be confined by societal expectations. In a society where tradition often imposes strict gender roles, this SHG stands as a beacon of empowerment, challenging norms with determination and resilience.

Reflecting on their journey, Rumeena shares, "Seven of us formed a self-help group and underwent training in cooking, focusing on different varieties of fish through the J&K government's Rural Livelihoods Mission. We wanted to prove that women are capable of anything they set their minds to, including thriving in unconventional professions."

Their culinary venture, known as Dell Delicacy, began its flavorful odyssey with a debut at the Tulip Garden Food Festival in 2018, where they were honored with the first prize. This marked a significant shift in societal perceptions, proving that women can excel in domains traditionally dominated by men. Rumeena acknowledges the challenges they faced, stating, "We faced strong opposition from some people, but we stood by our resolve and did not give up. Today, it is a reality, and people have accepted it and moved on." Since then, Dell Delicacy has sizzled its way through numerous exhibitions and food festivals, leaving a trail of satisfied palates.

Rumeena's inspiration to create Dell Delicacy arose from her personal experiences and understanding of the challenges women face in public spaces dominated by men. The stall aims not only to provide delicious food but also to break barriers, challenge norms, and empower women in a space they can truly savor.

"In our journey, we met with a symphony of contrasting notes – the echoes of laughter and criticism. Yet, undeterred, we stand resilient against the mocking whispers. In this culinary odyssey, skepticism

becomes the catalyst for our unwavering determination,” says Rumeena.

Dell Delicacy has evolved beyond being just a food stall; it has transformed into a powerful testament to the fortitude found in chasing dreams. Through laughter and critique, their passion remains unwavering, fueled by the uplifting voices that recognize the extraordinary within the ordinary. This stall stands as a testament to the resilience born from pursuing dreams amidst adversity, reminding everyone that encouragement always resonates louder than criticism.

“From the vibrant streets of Kashmir to the prestigious G20 event, we have transcended boundaries, turning culinary aspirations into a global affair. Our stalls graced the G20 event held in the heart of Kashmir, receiving numerous orders from

private gatherings and government events,” shares Rumeena.

“As we stand behind the counter of Dell Delicacy, we are not merely serving dishes; we are serving a vision of inclusivity, empowerment, and breaking barriers. Our food stall isn’t just a business; it’s a statement that women can create spaces where they feel not only welcomed but celebrated,” emphasizes Rumeena.

Dell Delicacy’s journey is an ode to the potential found in daring to be different. It serves as a reminder that in the pursuit of unique ideas, in the face of challenges, and the embrace of innovation, lies the promise of transforming not only the culinary landscape but also the broader canvas of livelihoods in Kashmir valleys. This stall has become a symbol of hope and inspiration.

Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**



Pew Research Center study unveiling complex relationship between social media and emotional well-being. It suggests restricting daily social media use to just 30 minutes can lead to substantial improvements in well-being, mitigating feelings of loneliness and depression.

Sheezan Naseer

NAVIGATING DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

In the dynamic landscape of today’s digital age, social media has seamlessly woven itself into the fabric of our daily lives, profoundly influencing our emotional well-being. As we navigate this intricate terrain, a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center illuminates the pervasive nature of social media, revealing that a staggering 72% of adults in the United States are active users, with

69% engaging on a daily basis. Notably, the younger demographic, comprising 90% of adults aged 18-29, stands out as fervent participants in this ever-expanding digital realm.

The research landscape further delineates the nuanced connection between social media and emotions. A study published in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology suggests that

restricting daily social media use to just 30 minutes can lead to substantial improvements in well-being, mitigating feelings of loneliness and depression. However, in a contrasting narrative, a study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* associates social media use with an increased risk of depression and anxiety among adolescents.

Delving into the psychological intricacies, specific examples highlight the profound impact of social media on our emotional states. Whether triggered by envy from friends' vacation photos or anxiety induced by negative news articles, individuals often find themselves in a whirlwind of emotions. Unhealthy comparisons prevalent in the digital realm contribute to self-pity and diminished self-confidence, underscoring the psychological toll of excessive social media engagement.

Experts in the field advocate for a judicious approach to screen time, urging a return to activities that foster genuine human interaction. The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes stringent screen time limits for children and stresses the importance of adults actively engaging in pursuits that nurture social bonds.

Counseling Psychologist Uzma Zaffar Sheikh sheds light on the darker side of social media comparisons, stating, "Sometimes, individuals get so obsessed that they resort to damaging their own well-being." Uzma advocates for achievable goals, emphasizing that while healthy comparison can be beneficial, it often takes a detrimental turn. Individuals may set unrealistic goals based on social media content, contributing to mental health issues. The recommendation is to focus on achieving shorter, more realistic goals.

Beyond the emotional realm, the impact of social media extends to physiological aspects, notably disrupting sleep patterns. The passage explores the role of melatonin, a hormone crucial for regulating sleep cycles, emphasizing that mobile phone use, especially at night, interferes with melatonin secretion. Additionally, interference with dopamine, the hormone associated with feelings of happiness, can contribute to mild symptoms of depression or pre-depression.

Recognizing the collective

responsibility, efforts to limit screen time are advised to extend beyond the individual to encompass entire families. Strategies such as setting goals, creating screen-free zones, and participating in shared activities are recommended to contribute to a healthier digital environment. Technological tools and apps are suggested to monitor progress and maintain accountability in the collective endeavor to strike a balance.

Individuals are encouraged to make intentional decisions about their daily screen time, setting realistic goals and gradually decreasing screen time over time. Specific recommendations include designated times for screen use, demarcated screen-free zones, and replacement of screen time with alternative activities.

The call to strike a balance between virtual and real-life interactions resonates strongly. Emphasizing the need to focus on uniqueness, showcase positives, and regain human interaction, the passage warns of a potential surge in mental health issues if the current trajectory of excessive social media use continues.

Understanding the evolving relationship between social media and emotional well-being is imperative in this digital era. While it has ushered in unprecedented connectivity, it also presents challenges in influencing our perceptions, emotions, and, ultimately, our mental health.

The emotional connection to social media is not merely an abstract concept; it manifests in concrete examples. The envy triggered by a friend's vacation photos or the anxiety induced by negative news articles are just glimpses into the profound influence social media exerts on our emotional states. The passage delves deeper into the psychological impact, shedding light on how individuals lose self-reflection, succumb to unhealthy comparisons, and grapple with emotions such as self-pity and diminished self-confidence.

Experts advocate for a more intentional approach to screen time, urging individuals to reengage in activities that foster genuine human connections. However, the impact on self-esteem remains a critical aspect of the social media-emotion connection. Comparisons on social media often lead individuals down a perilous path of

pursuing unattainable goals. The passage provides practical insights into building healthy self-esteem, advocating for self-acceptance, identification of strengths and values, and the celebration of personal achievements.

As we grapple with the evolving landscape of social media and its profound impact on emotions, the passage serves as a reminder that the journey towards emotional well-being requires a holistic approach. It encourages self-reflection, intentional screen time management, and

a return to the fundamental importance of human interaction.

Moving forward, it's imperative to embrace strategies that foster healthy self-esteem, prioritize genuine human connection, and strike a harmonious balance between the virtual and the real. Whether through mindful screen time management, building positive self-images, or cherishing authentic human interactions, individuals have the agency to chart a course for emotional resilience in the ever-evolving digital era.

Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**



ECHOES OF ETERNITY

In the verdant valleys of Kashmir, a tapestry of architectural brilliance unfolds, woven through the annals of time, tracing a journey that spans five millennia. From the serene era of Buddhist rule to the opulence of Hindu and Muslim dynasties, the landscape resonates with the echoes of temples, shrines, and monuments.

The excavations at Harwan and Ushkura lay bare the ancient foundations of a monastic haven, where a Stupa and Chaitya once stood proudly. Stone structures, bearing the imprints of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine influences, showcase the kaleidoscope of artistic evolution that shaped Kashmir's architectural identity. The Kashmirians, known as Sastra-Silpinas, earned renown across India for their unparalleled skill in construction.

In the epochs of Hindu and Muslim reigns, architectural marvels adorned the

Kashmiri panorama. The Shankarashara temple, Loduv temple, Pravaresa, and Narasthan stand testament to an era where creativity flourished. Aryan Lalitaditya, the visionary, orchestrated the birth of the city of Parihaspura, a jewel in the crown of sophisticated Aryan architecture.

The Muslim rule ushered in an era of resplendent structures – shrines, mosques, bridges, and roads. The Jama Masjid Srinagar, born in 1320 with a woodwork and 'Khatamand' design infused with Iranian and Islamic influences, endured the fiery trials of destruction, only to rise anew during the reign of Zainul Abedin.

The Mughal era left an indelible mark on Kashmir's landscape. Harwan, Nishat, Shalimar, and Chashma Shahi, crafted by Mughal emperors, stand as enduring symbols of architectural grandeur.

As the river of time flowed into the

Tapestry of rich Kashmiri architecture stands witness to the grandeur of different dynasties who ruled the Valley across ages.

From the serene era of Buddhist rule to the opulence of Hindu and Muslim dynasties, the landscape resonates with the echoes of temples, shrines, and monuments.

**Qurat-ul-Ain
Batkaloo**

modern era, the architectural metamorphosis witnessed a profound evolution. From humble Kuccha houses to the solidity of Pakka structures, and the grace of wooden dwellings with Dubbs, science and technology catalyzed a revolution. Cemented behemoths, 5-star hotels, Alama Iqbal Library, NIT buildings, railway bridges, tunnels, and the resplendent new Hazratbal shrine, fashioned from marble with a modern aesthetic, redefine the skyline.

Principal conservation architect Saima Iqbal, custodian of Kashmir's heritage, laments the decline. The embrace of modernity, with cement replacing mud and iron supplanting timber, is reshaping the architectural ethos. Natural resources dwindle, and traditional building materials become scarce as the city expands, embracing contemporary styles and materials.

Qualified architect Ishrat Nowshehri, guardian of the old and herald of the new, notes a shift in consciousness. People consult architects for their spatial alchemy, recognizing the transformative touch that transcends the capabilities of a common

mason. Traditional and contemporary designs dance harmoniously in her portfolio, adorning government buildings, hotels, and residences alike.

Former chief engineer Mohammad Sultan Najar unveils the engineering marvels that defy the tremors of the earth. A five-star hotel, soaring above and beneath the earth, stands as a testament to seismic safety, a saga of construction prowess narrated with pride.

In the heart of this evolution, carpenter Mohammad Altaf, the custodian of wood's legacy, witnesses changing tastes. Traditional woods like Deodar and Kairu find new life through intricate carvings, yet machine-made plywood replaces the dwindling local resources.

The kaleidoscopic history of art, culture, and architecture in Kashmir spans the epochs — Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Mughal, and Dogra. In the modern crescendo, the symphony of technology and engineering resounds, shaping and reshaping the architectural soul of Kashmir, echoing the eternal saga of creativity and adaptation.

SHAKY QUAKE

What a difficult feeling to express, even for the bravest among the braves. One may, on an odd day, find the courage to fight a giant singlehandedly but what can be done against a force of nature? A situation where the most courageous find it the most difficult, where displaying bravery is foolishness, where there is no certainty of a calm whatsoever, and where you just simply run out of time repeatedly every second. What can I say about it that hasn't already been said? To guess what it is, is for you to decode as I narrate to you the moment when I awakened to the bed swaying abnormally, gently at first, and because I'm half asleep, I felt small jerks of a tremor. Sitting up, I switched on the bedside lamp. It's Tuesday, 10:20 pm, the angle of the clock that will possibly terrorize me for a decade, there was an earthquake of 6.6 Magnitude on a Richter scale. I just feel that the value of 6.6 does not do justice to the intensity of the situation, it is just too simple a value to understand the fear it creates. The floor started to shake harder as I try to stand, I saw my cat in front of me, numb and weak, I wanted to believe it is a dream, I just hoped it to not be a reality, I wanted my cat to stand up for me and say it is okay, for a moment I just wanted to believe in the impossible with a string of truth stuck in my throat reminding me of the reality. Meanwhile, a surge throws me backward. Suddenly my room came alive, like an angry beast shaking a lesser one with its teeth. It lurches one way and then the other, and the air fills with the building's inhuman noises: rumbles and groans, the screeching of metal. Around me, pictures thud against walls; drawers open and bang shut;

This first-person narrative piece recounts the writer's experience during a 6.6-magnitude earthquake. It talks about the fear, helplessness, and aftermath, emphasising the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of such events and reflecting life and the bravery displayed by both humans and pets.

Mehroob Mushtaq



window curtains shriek on their rods. I quickly ran towards my family downstairs in our house. For a second each one of us felt it will be fine in some time but all of us immediately felt an aftershock of the earthquake, everything started moving in a wave pattern as a river makes its way and I whispered to myself, " Oh my God! Is this the end? and if it is not then I don't want to know what the end feels like"

Under my feet, there was trembling. I perceived a faint growl in the distance. The trees hovering above me began to sway intensively while the tall grass grazing my ankles stirred in an unruly pattern. Then followed that awful, lethal silence, which could only mean one thing — destruction. My heart wanted to hug my cat but my body just couldn't do it, I just felt helpless, holding my tears back unable to see as the tears had already made their way to the eye-lining just waiting to roll down the cheeks and at this moment, I just couldn't hear anything, for a moment, everything seemed to move in a slow motion, I am silent and shout, loud enough to reach the skies is lingering at my throat, waiting to

come out to seek some courage. Amidst all this I saw my family expressionless and clueless, moving here and there randomly. We somehow went out into the garden. There just was no place to hide, everywhere seemed like nowhere. However, we all went to the open-air playground, where we can feel the aftershock but it was a safe place to stay. I just wanted to forget everything that had happened.

Finally, when the shaking stopped, everything was a blur when my eyes hazily opened again. The sky was cloudy, and suddenly the lightning occurred to complete the jigsaw puzzle of fear. The greyness was suffocating, and the calm was frightening. The repugnant fog kept me from seeing the things around me, as I felt something around my feet, my beloved cat. The shout that was stuck in my throat along with the thread of truth came out as I tumbled down fully conscious, the only difference is that I had earlier thought that the shout will reach up to the skies but when it came out it could well have heard by the entire universe except the people around me as nobody around me even reacted to the shout, such was the vehemence of the atmosphere. I moved a bit and felt the roughness of the footpath from the sidewalk under my arms and legs. I tried to stand up, but my body was motionless. Pain surged through me with every movement I attempted to make. I had no strength to position myself on my feet. I slowly craned my neck to the left to face the house to see if it was still there, hoping it was.

The earthquake lasted for 30 to 50 seconds and if anybody ever tells you that a second felt like a year. As we somehow started moving, I started considering my family, my friends, and my cat. I thought to myself that God mentions that one day all you will be thinking and worried about is yourself and everyone will be just on their own and if you doubt that feeling then let me tell you, it is true.

It has been a few days since this incident happened but I haven't forgotten it one bit. It's not the incident that is scary, it's the nature of that incident, it is about the fragility and the fact that you have no control over it at all. I often look at my cat and feel that it may never be able to explain the incident, it was even more helpless than me at that moment but a lot braver.

Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**



TRAFFICKED BRIDES

The issue of bride trafficking is a distressing and complex phenomenon that involves the deceitful recruitment and transportation of women from one region to another for the purpose of marriage. In the context presented, women from states such as Bihar, Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh are trafficked to become brides in Kashmir. Deceptive tactics, abductions, and promises of financial gain are commonly used to lure these women into marriages, often in regions with imbalanced sex ratios like Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan.

Terms such as "paro" and "molki" are used to refer to trafficked brides in Haryana, emphasizing the exploitative nature of the practice. In Kashmir, women from states with a high Muslim population, such as West Bengal, are brought in for marriage. The motivation behind this trafficking includes economic factors, as men from impoverished families seek matches outside their state to avoid the high costs associated with local brides.

The narratives of "trafficked" brides, such as Nisha Begum and Tasleema, highlight the deceptive practices and challenges they face. Nisha Begum's account reveals how she was misled by a middleman, sold for a meager sum, and compelled into marriage

in Kashmir. Tasleema, on the other hand, expresses the initial challenges of adapting to a new environment but also mentions finding love over time. Both women, however, depict the economic struggles they face in their new lives.

Ghulam Mustafa Pandit's role as a middleman sheds light on the systemic nature of this issue. His involvement in facilitating marriages, even for his own son, underscores the normalization of these practices in certain communities. The financial transactions involved in these marriages further expose the exploitative nature of the system.

The mention of dozens of trafficked women residing in the Baramulla area of North Kashmir and the 2014 survey by 'Empower People' highlights the widespread nature of this problem. It suggests that there is a significant population of women who have been trafficked for marriage, residing in various villages in North India.

The stories of these trafficked brides bring attention to the urgent need for awareness, intervention, and policy measures to address this form of exploitation. It is crucial to recognize the human rights violations involved and work towards dismantling the structures that perpetuate such practices.

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Razia Shaban

Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**





Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

VICTIM OF FEEDER-8

Assigned the task of repairing Feeder-8 in Gole Market, Amin's routine diligence included confirming the shutdown of electricity with the concerned receiving station. However, despite taking precautions, he experienced a severe electric shock of 11000 watts during the execution, leaving him hanging but miraculously alive.

The aftermath of the incident involved a grueling recovery at Srinagar's SMHS and SKIMS, with meager contributions from co-workers and Airtel India, the company associated with the cellular tower where the feeder was fixed. Amin's financial strain during rehabilitation, amounting to Rs 3.5 lakhs in 47 days, was partially covered by contributions, emphasizing the challenges faced by workers in such situations.

Amin's journey includes awaiting regularization, a promise yet to be fulfilled by the government. Official records reveal the alarming toll on workers in Kashmir's Power Department, with 300 men losing their lives, 101 deaths between 2010-2021, and 2000 daily wagers reported injured or disabled in the line of duty in the last two decades.

Financial burdens and concerns about societal judgment, especially regarding his newlywed status, added to Amin's struggles. However, familial support, including his father's reassurance and the acceptance

of the girl's family, provided a glimmer of hope.

Post-recovery, Amin faced the additional challenge of infertility resulting from the traumatic incident. Despite seeking medical and faith-based help, the struggles persisted. Throughout these challenges, Amin found unwavering support in his wife, who approached the situation with understanding and positivity.

The narrative delves into the emotional toll on Amin, including moments of contemplating suicide on the banks of the Jhelum. The turning point in his life came with a call from a colleague, leading to the revelation of his regularization during a visit to the Chief Engineer's office.

Amin's story concludes with a reflection on his current role at Sekidafar, where he symbolically presses a button, marking a new chapter in his life. However, the broader issues within the Power Development Department are highlighted, with over 5000 non-regularized laborers facing precarious conditions and a blame game between officials and laborers regarding safety procedures and training.

The narrative captures the complexity of challenges faced by workers in Kashmir's power sector, emphasizing the need for addressing systemic issues and ensuring the well-being of those who contribute to the essential services in the region.

The narrative of Mohammad Amin unfolds as a poignant account of resilience, struggle, and eventual triumph over adversity. Amin, a 37-year-old casual laborer in Kashmir's power department, shares the story of a life-changing incident that occurred eleven years ago.

Haseeb Ibn Hameed



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

DRIED DELICACIES

Various vegetables, including tomatoes, bottle gourds, brinjals, turnips, dandelion leaves, fenugreek leaves, lotus stems, Iberian knapweed, quince, and different types of collard greens, are sun-dried during the peak summer months. These dried vegetables are then rehydrated by soaking them in hot water and subsequently sautéed in oil and spices, creating the distinct flavors associated with Kashmiri winter meals.

Individuals like Hafeeza Bano, a 49-year-old from Soura, Srinagar, express their deep connection to the tradition, having prepared dried vegetables since childhood. The sun-dried form of various vegetables becomes a staple in Kashmiri winter cuisine, reflecting the taste of the region.

The demand for hokh syun extends beyond Kashmir, reaching places as far as Kargil, Leh, and Jammu. Dealers like Bashir Ahmad Dar from Noorbagh area in Srinagar highlight the consignments of sun-dried veggies sent to these regions by the end of autumn each year.

Historically, the consumption of dried vegetables was deemed essential in Kashmir due to the fear of severe winters, with limited accessibility to fresh produce. The tradition continues despite the availability of fresh vegetables throughout the year.

Saleema, a 55-year-old, emphasizes the

importance of passing down the knowledge of traditions to the younger generation. The practice of drying vegetables was particularly crucial in the past when self-sufficiency and reliance on dried vegetables were essential during the long winters when the Srinagar-Jammu NH road would be closed due to heavy snowfall.

While the consumption of dried vegetables has somewhat diminished with the availability of fresh produce, they remain a part of Kashmiri cuisine. Saleema stresses the need to convey the advantages of these traditions to the younger generation, preserving a rich cultural legacy.

The dried vegetables are not only associated with tradition but also believed to have health benefits. Different varieties are thought to aid in preventing colds, fevers, coughs, chest infections, and other health issues. For example, dried dandelion leaves (Hochh Hand) are considered good for anemic patients due to their high iron content, and dried Iberian knapweed (Kraich) is believed to be beneficial for eyesight.

In addition to maintaining cultural identity, dried vegetables offer a connection to the region's rich heritage, providing both culinary enjoyment and potential health benefits. The practice persists as a testament to the resilience of traditions in the face of evolving lifestyles.

The tradition of Houkh Seun, or dried vegetables, holds a significant place in Kashmir's culinary culture, particularly during the harsh winter months. People cook these vegetables in various preparations during 'Chillai Kalan', the coldest period of winter marked by extremely low temperatures.

Seerat Bashir

MASS MARRIAGES: TRANSFORMATIVE PATH TO EQUALITY IN KASHMIR



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

In recent times, the trend of mass weddings has gained momentum in Kashmir, offering a solution to the financial barriers and societal norms surrounding weddings, particularly for underprivileged individuals. For Baba Wayil though this practice started 750 years ago.

Munaza Illahi

The evolving tradition of mass marriages in Kashmir has deep roots in the region's history and cultural traditions. The village of Baba Wayil has a history of opposing lavish weddings and heavy dowries owing to the teachings of a Sufi saint over 750 years ago. In recent times, the trend of mass weddings has gained momentum, offering a solution to the financial barriers and societal norms surrounding weddings, particularly for underprivileged individuals.

NGOs such as 'We the Helping Hands Foundation' and 'Al-Noor Yateem Trust' have played a significant role in organizing mass marriage ceremonies, providing a lifeline for those unable to afford traditional weddings. These initiatives go beyond uniting couples and serve as beacons of simplicity and relief for underprivileged and orphaned girls facing the possibility of remaining unmarried due to financial constraints.

The mass weddings in Kashmir present a counter-narrative to extravagant societal benchmarks, advocating for simplicity and community support over financial burdens. By redefining the narrative around delayed

marriages and navigating the complexities of dowry demands and detrimental rituals, these organizations are contributing to a more equitable and compassionate society.

The history of mass marriage ceremonies in Kashmir reflects a blend of cultural traditions and the efforts of Sufi saints challenging the norms of extravagant weddings. Modern organizations like 'We the Helping Hands Foundation' and 'Al-Noor Yateem Trust' respond to contemporary challenges, becoming catalysts for change.

In a recent mass marriage ceremony organized by Al-Noor Yateem Trust in Srinagar, 100 girls from poor families found their partners, aiming to assist those facing social and financial barriers to marriage. Shabir Ahmed, Chairman of Al-Noor Yateem Trust, traces back their tradition to 2012, adopting orphaned and financially disadvantaged girls for annual wedding ceremonies. Unfortunately, the evolving nature of 'Nikah' has transformed into a financial burden for economically challenged girls.

Umar Wani, Chairman of 'We the Helping Hand Foundation,' emphasizes

simplicity during Nikkah, offering a lifeline to poor, orphaned girls restrained by societal customs like dowry demands. The organization has shouldered the marriage expenses of over 400 girls, standing as a counterforce to hedonistic trends and overlooking the struggles of underprivileged neighbors. With their help, around 615 couples have tied the knot, emphasizing the impact of mass marriages in reshaping societal norms.

These initiatives in Kashmir are not just about uniting couples; they are empowering individuals and redefining the social fabric. They steer the region towards a future where love and union are not bound by economic disparities or extravagant customs, contributing to the transformation of a society grappling with the complexities of late marriages and societal expectations.

In conclusion, the evolving tradition of mass marriages in Kashmir is not merely a cultural practice but a response to contemporary challenges. NGOs are playing a pivotal role in this transformation, offering hope, simplicity, and relief to those marginalized by financial constraints. As these organizations continue to script stories of collective giving and community support, Kashmir's social landscape is undergoing a gradual but profound shift towards inclusivity, equality, and compassion.

The journey of mass marriages in Kashmir serves as a beacon for regions facing similar challenges. The power of collective action in reshaping societal norms and fostering community support is evident. As these mass marriage initiatives gain momentum, their impact transcends the borders of Kashmir, inspiring other communities to consider alternative paths to marriage, free from the shackles of financial burdens and extravagant expectations.

These mass marriages are not just about the present; they are about building bridges between generations. They are a testament to the adaptability of traditions to meet the needs of contemporary society. By marrying tradition with modernity, these ceremonies reflect a nuanced understanding of cultural heritage, allowing it to evolve while retaining its essence. The elders in these communities, who once adhered to conventional norms, now find themselves endorsing these transformative initiatives, recognizing the need for change and inclusivity.

However, challenges persist. The societal pressure to conform to established norms remains a formidable obstacle. Mass marriages, while alleviating financial burdens, may still face resistance from those entrenched in conventional practices. As these initiatives continue, it becomes imperative to address societal perceptions and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of marriage in Kashmir.

Looking ahead, the future prospects seem promising. With each mass marriage, the narrative of simplicity, resilience, and community support strengthens. The stories of these couples, once marginalized by societal norms, now stand as testimonies to the transformative power of collective action. As these narratives permeate through the social fabric of Kashmir, they have the potential to create a ripple effect, challenging norms not just in weddings but in societal expectations at large.

What began as a response to financial constraints has grown into a movement reshaping the very foundations of societal expectations. The NGOs leading this charge have become architects of change, crafting a narrative where love knows no economic boundaries, and unions are celebrated for their simplicity rather than extravagance.

The journey continues, and as each mass marriage ceremony unfolds, it not only unites couples but also bridges the gap between tradition and modernity. The evolving tradition of mass marriages in Kashmir is not just an alternative to conventional weddings; it is a statement—a declaration that simplicity, compassion, and collective support can redefine the contours of societal norms.

In a world often entangled in complexities, the simplicity of a Nikah, with its roots in centuries-old traditions, becomes a beacon guiding communities towards a future where love and union are cherished without the weight of financial burdens. The journey of mass marriages in Kashmir is a testament to the resilience of traditions, the adaptability of communities, and the transformative power of collective action. As the journey unfolds, it invites other communities to reconsider their paths, fostering a world where weddings are celebrations of love, unburdened by societal expectations.



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

LAWYER TURNS INTEGRATED FARMER

Syed Shazia Lateef, a 31-year-old woman from Moloo Chitragam village in South Kashmir's Shopian district, has transitioned from a career in law to become a pioneer in integrative farming. Shazia is not only cultivating conventional and exotic vegetables but also providing employment opportunities to over a dozen individuals in her community.

Married into a family with a rich history of traditional farming, Shazia initially had limited knowledge about agriculture. However, the COVID-19 lockdown brought a revelation to her life. She discovered that her family's self-sustaining practices, including poultry, dairy, vegetables, fish, and fruits, kept them unaffected by the outside world's disruptions. This realization sparked a profound change in her priorities and career path. Shazia made the bold decision to shift from her active law practice to a full-time farming endeavor.

While talking to MERC Times, she said, "My inlaws have been associated with traditional farming since generations. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the entire world was shut, but I found that in my family there was hardly any difference because poultry, dairy, vegetables, fish, fruits were all homegrown. This made me rethink my whole life and my priorities in it. I switched from my active law practice to

full-time farming."

In 2020, with her in-laws' generations of farming expertise, Shazia combined her fresh perspective with traditional wisdom to create an innovative integrative farming model. Her approach involved merging various farming sectors, such as dairy with vermicomposting and poultry with composting. She also diversified crop cultivation, transitioning from conventional to exotic varieties and from traditional to hybrid plants.

"Since I was new to farming and my in-laws were already having generations of experience, so I added my own innovation to traditional farming. My methodology was an integrative farming model where I integrated our farming sectors like Dairy vermicomposting, Poultry-Composting, conventional to exotic varieties, Traditional to hybrid," Shazia said.

Guided by the Agriculture Department, Shazia diversified her crop portfolio to include exotic vegetables like Nadur (lotus), broccoli, cauliflower, grapes, kiwi, and plum. She also ventured into backyard poultry, rabbitry, and fish farming, focusing on trout and carp. This strategic diversification resulted in higher returns from existing resources. Shazia's farm transformed into a hub for agricultural learning, where fellow farmers came to acquire knowledge about

Married into a family of farmers, Shazia initially had limited knowledge about agriculture. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown she discovered its benefits which motivated her to shift from her active law practice to a full-time farming endeavor.

Junaid Manzoor Dar

innovative farming practices. “Our farm has been turned into a farming school where farmers come and learn new innovations,” she said.

In 2022, their vegetables were exported to the UAE through the Agriculture Department. Shazia’s fields encompass traditional apple orchards (15 kanals), high-density, and medium-density apple cultivation (15 kanals), grape, plum, and kiwi orchards (5 kanals). She also cultivates a wide range of vegetables, both conventional and exotic, along with pulses and sweet corn. Her livestock includes broiler poultry (12k/cycle), backyard layers (van Raja, Kadaknath, Rir), guinea fowl, turkeys, and a rabbitry. Shazia also manages fish farms for trout (10k fingerlings) and carp (5k). Furthermore, her farm houses a dairy unit and produces vermicompost and compost. Besides Shazia and her family of 10 members, her farming venture provides employment to 10 full-time workers, along with casual laborers.

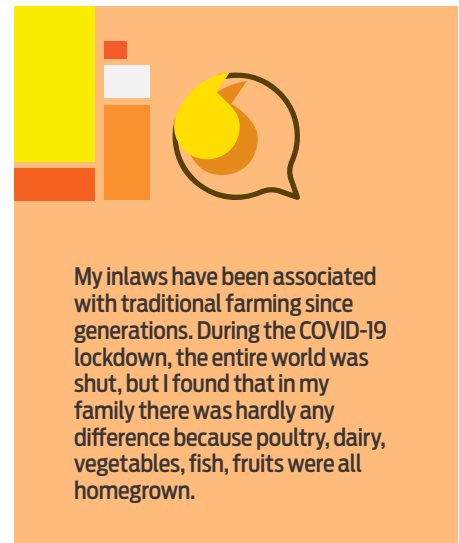
Shazia proudly mentioned, “Our integrated farming unit now employs 10 full-time workers who receive a monthly salary of 10 thousand rupees each, amounting to a total of 13 lakh rupees per year. This has not only improved our farm’s productivity but also contributed to the livelihoods of these individuals.”

Farooq Ahmad, an employee in Shazia’s integrated farm, said, “I’ve been a part of Shazia’s integrated farming venture for the past four years, and it’s been an incredible journey. Working here has not only provided me with a stable job but also taught me valuable skills in sustainable agriculture.”

Another employee, Iqbal Ah said, “I’ve witnessed how Shazia’s innovative approach has not only revitalized the farm but also provided stable employment. It’s a place where traditional wisdom meets modern techniques, making it an inspiring workplace.”

Shazia’s husband Gulbudin Ahmad Mir reflected on the contrasting aspects of their careers, saying, “Working in a government job, I experience my fair share of stress, and I can’t employ anyone myself. However, my wife’s choice to pursue farming not only provides her with a stress-free environment but also allows her to create job opportunities for individuals.”

He said, “I’m incredibly proud of Shazia’s dedication and determination in transitioning from law to farming. Her innovative approach to integrated farming



My inlaws have been associated with traditional farming since generations. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the entire world was shut, but I found that in my family there was hardly any difference because poultry, dairy, vegetables, fish, fruits were all homegrown.

has not only transformed our farm but also the lives of many in our community.”

Shazia’s husband acknowledged her significant role in their farming journey, saying, “Her contribution to our farming is monumental; she transformed our traditional methods into a modern, integrated system. Shazia has given our farming a fresh perspective and a modern shape that has greatly enhanced its efficiency and sustainability.”

“Our poultry farming faced a significant setback, resulting in a loss of 20 lakh rupees last year. If we had solely concentrated on poultry, it could have led to the closure of our business. However, thanks to integrated farming, we were able to overcome this loss and maintain the sustainability of our farm,” Shazia’s husband said.

Shazia’s husband also clarified their approach to farming, stating, “Our vegetable cultivation is primarily organic, although it’s not 100 percent organic. We haven’t used any pesticides on vegetables, but I must mention that we do apply medicine on our apple trees. However, we refrain from using chemical fertilizers, and while applying medicine to the apple trees, there’s a possibility of some residue reaching the vegetables.” Shazia sells their vegetables to Parimpora Mandi Srinagar, further contributing to the local agricultural market and providing their produce to a wider community.

Shazia’s journey towards integrated farming wasn’t without its fair share of challenges. She faced social pressure as many questioned her transition from a law profession to nurturing animals and cultivating crops. “On the economic front, one of the most significant challenges

Shazia encountered was when she decided to venture into vermicompost production and bring exotic birds into her farm. To kickstart these initiatives, she needed a substantial investment in lakhs. Faced with this financial hurdle, Shazia made a courageous decision and sold her jewelry to fund these projects.”

He said that even within her own family, there were skeptics who questioned her choices. Some relatives insisted that she was making a mistake, as there was no certainty in this unconventional path. However, Shazia remained steadfast in her vision for integrated farming, proving that this innovative approach could lead to success.

Shazia’s farming venture is truly a family affair. Her family members play vital roles in different aspects of the farm. Ghulam Mohammad Mir, her father-in-law, is not only her mentor but also a guiding force in their farming practices. Mukhtar Ah Mir, her brother-in-law, primarily oversees the horticulture sector, ensuring the health and productivity of their fruit orchards. Sister-in-law Gulshan Jan takes care of the exotic birds, contributing to the farm’s diverse ecosystem.

Shazia and her husband, Gulbudin Ahmad Mir, are deeply involved in research and development (R&D), constantly seeking innovative approaches to enhance their farming methods. Currently, they

are experimenting with Azolla, a water fern that can have various applications in sustainable agriculture. In addition to their farming endeavors, Shazia and her husband are parents to two young daughters, Maryam, who is four years old, and Fatima, who is two years old.

Her husband, Gulbudin Ahmad Mir informed the Gaon Connection that the integrated farm generates an approximate total annual turnover of 4 crore rupees. After accounting for expenses across all sectors, the integrated farm yields a combined annual profit of around 25 lakhs rupees. According to Nazir Ahmad Bhat, agricultural extension officer of Tahab, “We provided training to Shazia, and it’s good to see how she has modernized and effectively introduced new ideas in her department.” He continued, “Furthermore, I’m pleased to share that the Agriculture Department has exported their vegetables to UAE, thanks to Shazia’s efforts and the high-quality produce from her farm. This not only boosts the local agricultural market but also brings recognition to the region’s sustainable farming practices on an international scale.”

He also said that growing exotic vegetables has opened a new window for Kashmiri farmers, and the agriculture department is organizing events to aware and educate people about exotic and local vegetables.

VALLEY’S LAST SANTOOR MAKER

Ghulam Muhammad Zaz from downtown Srinagar is the last Santoor maker in Kashmir who is trying hard to preserving the musical heritage of the valley. For him it’s a sacred tradition that goes beyond mere source of livelihood.

Faisal Anjum

Nestled within the labyrinthine alleys of Zainakadal and FatehKadal in the heart of the old city of Srinagar resides a living legend – Ghulam Muhammad Zaz, the last santoor maker of Kashmir. Born in 1941, Zaz carries forward a legacy that spans an astonishing eight generations. His family’s roots run deep in this historic enclave, their livelihood intricately woven with the art of crafting musical instruments.

“I spent my childhood within my family, as since the very beginning we have our roots in this place only,” Zaz reflects, his eyes twinkling with memories

of bygone days. “This area is called Zainakadal and FatehKadal; Fateh Kadal is just adjacent. This is the old city; our bread and butter was from our making of musical instruments.”

Zaz’s father, Abdul Ahad Zaz, and his uncle, the late Ghulam Rasool Zaz, were maestros in their own right. The craft was not merely an occupation; it was an ancestral heritage, passed down through the generations like a cherished heirloom. “Before me has come and gone, now it’s me,” Zaz remarks with a sense of quiet pride.

Yet, for Zaz, the significance of his



Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**

craft extends far beyond a livelihood. It is a sacred tradition, an extension of the work of Sufis and saints who wove melodies into the fabric of life. “Wise people since the very old, used to listen and work on these instruments,” he says, his voice tinged with reverence. “We were fortunate that we were part of the same work.”

As a child, Zaz observed his elders at work, his keen eyes absorbing the minutiae of instrument-making. “I was very observant of the details,” he recalls, a hint of nostalgia in his smile. “Until, slowly, my mind started making notes, of the discussions about the instrument they used to make. Eventually, I mastered the making of instruments too.”

Crafting a musical instrument, Zaz opines, is akin to writing a chapter. It requires patience, precision, and a deep understanding of the art. “The longer the chapter, the better is your knowledge,” he muses. “Now there are few who take the shortcut, who would write the same chapter on a single page, it would be of the same taste, but the challenge is of meeting all ends.”

And Zaz meets that challenge with aplomb. Santoor, Dilruba, Tanpura, Indian Sitar, Sur Bahaar, Tavuu – each instrument is a testament to his mastery. He dares anyone in Jammu and Kashmir to claim superior knowledge of their craftsmanship. “I challenge anyone in Jammu and Kashmir who knows about the making of them more than I do,” he declares, his eyes gleaming with confidence. “I would surrender my

work if there is one.”

The luminaries who elevated the Santoor to celestial heights in Kashmir owe their success, in no small part, to Ghulam Muhammad Zaz. “The reason Santoor took to skies here in Kashmir is because of the two sons of the soil,” Zaz states with a touch of solemnity. “One is, Shiv Kumar Sharma, and the other was Bajan Lal Sopori.”

Shiv Kumar Sharma and Bajan Lal Sopori, both revered masters, were not just contemporaries; they were kindred spirits in their dedication to their art. “Shiv Kumar was almost of my age, and Bajan Lal was a bit younger; he was my younger brother’s age,” Zaz reminisces. “Shiv Kumar was the first to update Santoor into Indian Musical, no other could do that.”

As the conversation draws to a close, Zaz’s gaze turns introspective. “What our olds gave us, this was all because of that,” he reflects. “I was just a recipient of the knowledge. It’s from my father’s, grandfather’s blessings, may Allah reward them that I am here today, and I was able to do because of them only, because of their advice.”

Ghulam Muhammad Zaz, the last santoor maker of Kashmir, is a living testament to the enduring power of heritage and the boundless possibilities that lie within the hands of a master craftsman. His hands have shaped melodies that resonate through time, and his legacy will echo in the hearts of musicians and music lovers for generations to come.

WAITING FOR SAVIOR

Picture Courtesy: INTERNET



Khushal Sar is a lake located in the Srinagar area of Jammu and Kashmir. Unfortunately, the lake is currently in a highly deteriorated condition, facing issues such as encroachments, constructions, and landfilling. Once stretching from Zoonimar up to Aali Masjid, the lake has significantly reduced in size. Connected to Anchar lake via a small channel and linked to Gilsar lake through a narrow strait and a bridge named Gil Kadal, Khushal Sar's ecological health is at risk.

Historically, Khushal Sar was a vibrant and pristine water body considered the pride of the city. It provided portable water for locals and was known for its picturesque scenery, delectable lake products like 'Nadru,' and various activities such as boating and swimming. However, the construction of Dr. Ali Jan road in the 1970s led to the deterioration of the lake. The road obliterated significant parts of Khushal Sar, and with growing population and construction, the lake has become a victim of encroachment and pollution.

The sewage and trash from the expanding population around the lake, combined with numerous constructions, have turned Khushal Sar into a complete cesspool. Polythene and garbage have choked the lake, and noxious weeds like Azolla and Alligator grasses are thriving, suffocating the

underwater life. Effluents from Nallah Amir Khan, coming from Nigeen and Dal lakes, further contribute to the pollution.

The alleged neglect of Khushal Sar by government authorities, particularly the Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC), has allowed influential individuals to encroach upon the lake for construction purposes. The absence of proper supervision and conservation efforts has resulted in the shrinking and extinction of this once-glorious water body.

The formation of floating islands and the reduction of Nallah Amir Khan to a narrow passage choked with weeds have further complicated the lake's condition. Even though local residents have raised concerns and informed the SMC, no visible action has been taken against the encroachers. There are allegations of a nexus between some SMC officials and the land grabbers, hindering any effective intervention.

The residents are demanding a high-level inquiry into the illegal constructions around Khushal Sar. Despite being a significant tourist destination, the lake's current state raises questions about the government's commitment to protecting vital water bodies in the region. The residents emphasize the urgency of addressing these issues to prevent the further degradation of Khushal Sar.

Khushal Sar which literally means 'the prosperous lake' has shrunk significantly over last many decades and its ecological health is at risk. Once a pristine water body connected to other water bodies of Srinagar, the lake has been reduced to a cesspool.

Taha Wani

DARKROOM'S COLORFUL WORLD



Picture Courtesy: **INTERNET**

Abdul Khaliq and Hilal worked seamlessly, transferring negatives through the trays. The photos hung magically around them, perfectly developed and ready for collection. The memories were saved by the expertise of the father-son duo.

Yameen Dar

A crowd of unemployed individuals had gathered outside the photo studio in Ganderbal town. Those who had recently returned from a trip, fortunate enough to escape the harsh winters of Kashmir, formed one queue, distinct from the others by an invisible wall. They flaunted sun-tanned skin, creating a perceived elite group that included middle-aged men and retired government officials. This group engaged in a spirited debate, drawing the attention of the unemployed individuals, whose queue was separated from the elite by both the sun-tanned group and a cluster of college students.

The studio's door, adorned with a cliché Kashmiri ply board design, was bluish with a tinted glass fixed within the frame. The owner of the studio, Abdul Khaliq Lanker, stood just beneath the top of the door, facing the elite group and the waiting queue. Anticipating the settlement of the elite's debate, Abdul Khaliq engaged them in conversation about the recent political shifts in the Valley. This diversion successfully bought him some time as the chaos unfolded inside the photo studio.

Hilal, Abdul Khaliq's eldest son and the photo-developer, faced a nightmare within the studio. A chemical called Developer, used to develop negatives, had spilled all over the floor. Its toxic fumes had spoiled many developed images, particularly those belonging to the elites, the sun-tanned, and the unemployed. The accidental exposure of film rolls to direct light rendered them useless. Lanker Studios, the oldest and most trusted in the district, faced a loss of trust that day, unable to serve new customers without film rolls.

To salvage the situation, Hilal called his younger brother, Ahmed, to bring all the negatives stored at their house along with a bottle of Developer. Meanwhile, inside the studio, Hilal meticulously cleaned the space, discarding the spoiled photo papers. Unlike his father, Abdul Khaliq, Hilal was cautious about the chemicals, wearing proper gear to protect himself from potential health hazards.

The darkroom, a critical space for photo development, required precision and adherence to safety protocols. Hilal followed the standard modus operandi – face mask, gloves, and glasses. Inside this

closed room, the process involved selecting a negative, placing it in the emitter tray, emitting the image onto photo paper, and then progressing through trays of Developer, Stop, and Fixer. Each negative took about 3-4 minutes to develop.

Outside, the conversation among the elites was settling, and Abdul Khaliq's attention shifted to the friction between the two groups exchanging grins. Ahmed arrived, bringing a tote bag containing film rolls and a wooden box covered with opaque tape. The darkroom operation commenced, and Ahmed collected cameras and film rolls from the waiting customers, providing relief to some.

The magicians – Abdul Khaliq and Hilal – worked seamlessly, transferring negatives through the trays. Despite the chaos earlier, the photos hung magically around them, perfectly developed and ready for collection. The tea parties of the elites, family portraits of the sun-tanned,

and picnic memories of the college students were saved by the expertise of the father-son duo.

Abdul Khaliq, seated behind his desk, observed the ongoing conversations. The elites were still engaged, but their words held no meaning for him. He shifted his focus to the college students and new customers, assisting them with their inquiries about passport-sized photos and footwear.

One of the college students approached Abdul Khaliq for passport-sized photos, and he threw an envelope towards the student, gesturing towards Hilal for payment. Amid the ongoing discussions, another customer inquired about shoes. Abdul Khaliq, a wise businessman, had expanded his business to include footwear, explaining that both businesses complemented each other – a good picture required a good journey, and a good journey required quality footwear.

TRANSFORMING ART, EMPOWERING LIVES

In the evolving landscape of Kashmir, marked by shifting dynamics, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as champions dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich art and culture of the region. Two prominent organizations making a significant impact are the Kashmir Film Foundation and the Kashmir Eves Organization.

The Kashmir Film Foundation is at the forefront of promoting Kashmiri art and culture while serving as a crucial bridge between local filmmakers and the community. Through initiatives such as film screenings and workshops, the foundation provides a platform for artists to showcase their work, fostering a sense of community and contributing to the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. These events transcend mere exhibitions, becoming dynamic gatherings that celebrate and explore the diverse narratives and visual traditions of Kashmir. By organizing workshops and training programs, the foundation empowers aspiring filmmakers,

The Kashmir Film Foundation and The Kashmir Eves Organization continue to lead efforts to nurture the creative spirit and foster positive change in the lives of individuals and communities. On the path of progress the role of art and culture remains as vital as ever for society.

Faizan Khurshid

Through its focus on women's development and empowerment, KEO enriches the lives of individual women and significantly contributes to the cultural and economic growth of the region. The organization's initiatives include vocational training and entrepreneurship programs, empowering women to pursue meaningful and sustainable livelihoods.

ensuring the continued growth of the filmmaking community in the region.

The workshops organized by the foundation cover various aspects of filmmaking, offering participants theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience. This comprehensive approach contributes to the development of a skilled and vibrant filmmaking community in Kashmir, with a ripple effect that positively influences the

broader artistic and cultural landscape.

Another influential NGO, the Kashmir Eves Organization (KEO), is dedicated to improving the socio-economic status of women in Kashmir, striving to foster a more inclusive and equitable society. Through its focus on women's development and empowerment, KEO enriches the lives of individual women and significantly contributes to the cultural and economic growth of the region. The organization's initiatives include vocational training and entrepreneurship programs, empowering women to pursue meaningful and sustainable livelihoods.

The KEO is also a vocal advocate for gender equality and women's rights, organizing events and workshops to raise awareness about these crucial issues. The

organization collaborates with educational institutions and governmental bodies to create policies that support women's rights, actively influencing systemic changes for the long-term empowerment of women in Kashmir.

In a region where the preservation and promotion of art and culture play a vital role in shaping the narrative, these NGOs are indispensable. The Kashmir Film Foundation and the Kashmir Eves Organization continue to lead efforts to nurture the creative spirit and foster positive change in the lives of individuals and communities. As Kashmir moves towards peace and progress, the role of art and culture remains as vital as ever, and these NGOs are poised to continue playing a pivotal role in these endeavors.

SLEEP TROUBLES



The pervasive challenge of insomnia and its far-reaching effects have gripped Kashmir like a haunting apparition. The victims find themselves ensnared in a web of silence hesitant to seek solace from psychiatric consultations due to the looming fear of social stigma.

Asiya Nazir

A haunting specter looms over the serene nights of Kashmir—the pervasive grip of insomnia. Amidst the breathtaking beauty of the region, individuals grappling with this condition find themselves ensnared in a web of silence, hesitant to seek solace from psychiatric consultations due to the looming fear of social stigma.

Insomnia, a condition not confined by a specific number of sleep hours, has evolved into a serious concern in Kashmir, intricately woven into the fabric of increasing psychiatric disorders. The roots of this issue run deep, with the historical conflict initially playing a role, and the ever-evolving cultural trends further complicating matters.

Dr. Arshid Hussain, an experienced psychiatrist in Kashmir, provides insights, asserting that insomnia is not a standalone ailment but rather a manifestation of underlying physiological or pathological factors. Environmental changes, such as fluctuating room temperatures, or physical ailments, often contribute to the distressing inability to find rest. The delicate balance between work and rest, orchestrated by the brain in a circadian rhythm, is disrupted, leading to an imbalance that alters sleep patterns. In a society where the norm is eight hours of sleep, this disruption takes a toll on both mental and physical well-being.

Burhan, a 21-year-old graduate, is ensnared in the relentless grip of insomnia. His nights are marked by futile attempts to sleep, aided by sleeping pills that induce drowsiness without providing the coveted relief. Burhan's inner turmoil extends beyond sleep as he grapples with existential questions, yearning for financial independence and distraction from his persistent problems. His history is marked by aggression, stemming from the loss of his mother during childhood. The scars of his emotional battles manifest physically, creating a poignant narrative that intertwines insomnia with broader mental health struggles.

Burhan's story is not an isolated case. His journey encapsulates the complexity of intertwined ailments, including epilepsy, a neurological disorder, and a thyroid disorder, further compounding his sleeplessness. The quest for a solution weaves through alternative treatments, from herbal remedies under a Unani doctor to psychiatric consultations, unveiling the intricate layers of a multifaceted health puzzle. Burhan's sister paints a picture of the collateral damage of a prolonged struggle—diminished energy, withdrawal from daily responsibilities, and a belief that medication since childhood has added to the array of issues.

Medical experts posit that insomnia, a pervasive concern worldwide, often takes root in stress stemming from personal losses, health problems, or environmental factors. Dr. Hussain reflects on the evolution of insomnia causes in Kashmir, highlighting the shift from pre-1989 nightmares to post-conflict real fears, such as the Midnight Knock Syndrome, and the current blend of cultural changes, depressions, stressful lives, and occupational pressures.

The digital age introduces Anika, an active

Facebook user with a distinct narrative. Her insomnia is intertwined with a thyroid disorder and post-operative discomfort, transforming her once-scheduled sleep into a nightmarish experience. Yet, she adapts, immersing herself in the online realm until exhaustion grants her elusive reprieve. Farhan, a village boy working night shifts in a Delhi BPO, unwittingly succumbs to insomnia as his health pays the toll for an unorthodox work schedule.


Insomnia, often a precursor to more profound mental health issues, serves as a gateway for psychiatric investigations. A ten-year-old boy, initially presented with sleep disorders, unravels into a diagnosis of schizophrenia, underscoring the intricate link between sleep patterns and mental health. Worldwide, insomnia afflicts 30-50% of the general population, with 10% experiencing chronic insomnia.

In Kashmir, psychiatrists emphasize the role of less physical exertion in contributing to sleep disturbances, advocating for primary insomnia treatment through physical exercise. Spirituality becomes a beacon in this landscape, with psychiatrists often integrating religious elements into their approaches, recognizing the profound power of belief in the healing process.

As time passes, the symphony of insomnia plays on, not merely as a standalone ailment but as a reflection of deeper societal and individual afflictions. The narrative spans the contours of historical conflicts, cultural shifts, and the intricate dance between physical and mental health. In the quest for sleep, Kashmir's inhabitants find themselves entangled in a labyrinth of interconnected challenges, where the lines blur between cause and effect, and the pursuit of rest becomes a metaphor for a collective journey toward healing.



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET



Burhan, a 21-year-old graduate, is ensnared in the relentless grip of insomnia. His nights are marked by futile attempts to sleep, aided by sleeping pills that induce drowsiness without providing the coveted relief. Burhan's inner turmoil extends beyond sleep as he grapples with existential questions, yearning for financial independence and distraction from his persistent problems.



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

A TALE OF DEDICATION, PROTEST IN ANGANWADI

Born in Lok Bawan, Anantnag, in 1975, Fahmeeda Akhtar's life journey has been intricately woven with her dedication to Anganwadi service, despite a leg impairment requiring walking support.

The Jammu and Kashmir administrative council approved a new human resources strategy for Anganwadi staff and assistance in November 2022, specifying the termination of services for Anganwadi workers and helpers at the age of 60, with vacancies to be filled through a prescribed method. This policy was met with strong opposition from the staff and sparked protests against its potential negative impact, with Fahmeeda emerging as a prominent leader in these demonstrations.

Recalling her journey, Fahmeeda reminisces about joining Anganwadi in 1991, stating, "Initially, I was unaware of its government affiliation due to my young age." Despite receiving a meager monthly salary of 150 rupees or occasionally a box of beans, Fahmeeda's commitment to fighting injustice among her coworkers became a driving force.

In Jammu and Kashmir, where Anganwadi workers and helpers are paid Rs 5,100 and Rs 2,500, respectively, demands for an increase in the state's share have persisted since 2010, accompanied by months-long delays in salary payments.

Despite Prime Minister Modi's promise in September 2018 to raise salaries for Anganwadi workers and aides nationwide, calls for higher pay led to detentions and job

terminations. Fahmeeda emphasizes, "The wage disparities are stark when compared to other regions, where employees receive significantly higher pay."

Fahmeeda's advocacy extends beyond herself, representing 34,000 female Anganwadi employees and assistance in opposing the new HR policy. District-based protests have been initiated to challenge conditions such as considering a worker disengaged for marrying outside her district.

"I don't require this position or this pay; however, thousands of women are in need of it, whether they are widows, divorced women, or women from poor families. I cannot just ignore them and live my life without fighting for their rights," Fahmeeda asserts.

Acknowledging her brothers' concerns for her safety, Fahmeeda remains resolute in her commitment to the women who trust her. Despite facing ongoing challenges, including late wage payments, Fahmeeda has taken legal action, filing a petition in the high court to contest the unjust Human Resources policy. If necessary, she expresses readiness to escalate the fight to the Supreme Court, emphasizing her dedication to the cause over personal pursuits.

"I made a personal sacrifice by never marrying because I believed that if I did, I would have to dedicate my life solely to my husband and children. Instead, I chose to dedicate my life to working for the betterment of humanity," Fahmeeda exclaims.

Fahmeeda Akhtar finds herself at the forefront of protests in Jammu and Kashmir against the new HR policy, decrying prolonged delays in salary payments. Fahmeeda shares her campaign for the respect of female workers and the passion that fuels her activism.

Sadaf Shabir



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

STITCHING DREAMS

In the tranquil district of Kupwara, amidst the breathtaking landscapes of Jammu and Kashmir, a tale of resilience unfolds. It's a story woven with the intricate threads of passion, determination, and the delicate art of crewel embroidery.

Razia Sultan, a young entrepreneur from the picturesque Trehgam in Kupwara, has crafted her success story, transforming her love for handicrafts into a flourishing venture that not only sustains her but also empowers the women around her.

Razia's journey defies conventional paths often taken in these regions. "I never pinned my hopes on a government job," she reflects, marking the beginning of her unique narrative. In 2012, marked by personal loss as her father passed away, Razia turned towards her love for handicrafts, seeking solace and opportunity.

The Handicrafts Department, Kupwara, introduced a Crewel Elementary Training Centre in her native village in 2013. Razia, along with other village girls, embarked on a transformative journey that extended into two more years of intensive training. A modest stipend supported these budding artisans, fostering not just skills but also dreams.

"The initial training was a revelation," Razia recalls. Encouraged by the response, the batch, including Razia, delved into

advanced training for two more years. At 19, she became a crafts instructor, earning a monthly salary. For Razia, this amount symbolized financial stability and the joy of doing something she loved.

In 2018, Razia's commitment earned her a State Level Award from the handicrafts department, igniting a newfound passion for the art. The 'Karkhandar' scheme offered advanced training in design and marketing to meritorious pass-outs. Razia's 'karkhana' was selected under this scheme, marking a significant juncture in her entrepreneurial journey.

Seizing the opportunity, Razia meticulously crafted 285 meters of crewel cloth and produced 236 intricately embroidered cushion covers. Over the next five months, she generated substantial revenue, transforming her venture into a sustainable source of livelihood.

Today, Razia's crewel embroidery unit stands as a beacon of success. The venture not only sustains her but empowers the women working alongside her. The monthly income reflects not just financial success but the resilience of a young woman who dared to chart her course against convention.

Razia's impact extends beyond finance; she mentors over 200 girls who have undergone training under her tutelage. Believing ardently in the transformative

Razia Sultan, a young entrepreneur from the picturesque Trehgam in Kupwara, has crafted her success story, transforming her love for handicrafts into a flourishing venture that not only sustains her but also empowers the women around her.

Iqra Nabi Lone

power of financial independence, Razia emphasizes the importance of every woman becoming self-reliant, fostering confidence and empowerment.

"Every woman should become financially independent," Razia asserts. Her words echo through the valleys of Kupwara, resonating with a vision of empowered women contributing not just to households but also to the socio-economic fabric of the region.

Razia Sultan, with her crewel embroidery venture, stands as a living testament to the idea that economic empowerment, rooted in passion and skill, can transcend boundaries. As she continues to stitch dreams into reality in the heart of Kupwara, her story inspires a new generation of women to thread their paths to success – a legacy woven with determination, resilience, and the timeless art of crewel embroidery.

NO END TO **POWER WOES**



The introduction of smart meters promised a revolution in managing energy efficiently. However, Kashmiri residents are grappling with a dire situation amid ongoing power crises. Frustration and dissatisfaction prevail as these technological advancements fail to deliver.

Fozia Baba

In the heart of Kashmir, the bitter reality of winter cuts deeper than the cold itself. Unforeseen power cuts have cast a dark veil over the valley, leaving its resilient inhabitants battling not just the biting temperatures but a relentless struggle for reliable electricity.

The installation of smart meters, envisioned as a solution for efficient energy

control, has paradoxically deepened the locals' plight in Kashmir. The promise of technological advancement has fallen short, amplifying the struggle rather than easing it. As temperatures plummet, the pressing need for immediate and effective solutions becomes increasingly apparent, underscoring the necessity for a holistic approach to address the recurring winter

hardships faced by the community.

In Srinagar, the introduction of smart meters promised a revolution in managing energy efficiently. However, Kashmiri residents are grappling with a dire situation amid ongoing power crises. Frustration and dissatisfaction prevail as these technological advancements fail to deliver the continuous and reliable electricity supply they were expected to provide.

Residents, disillusioned by receiving only three to four hours of electricity daily, question the very purpose of these smart meters, emphasizing the pressing need for a robust power distribution system to ensure reliable access to electricity.

In Batamaloo, Srinagar, a resident questioned the rationale behind the installation of smart meters amidst severe electricity scarcity, "Why have they installed these smart meters if they can't give us constant electricity? We're only getting three to four hours of electricity a day, and that's not enough for our daily needs."

Expressing dissatisfaction with receiving only a few hours of electricity daily, the locals' distress highlights the critical need for a robust power distribution system to ensure reliable access to electricity.

This acute shortage of electricity poses immense challenges for the population, impacting their daily routines, disrupting essential household appliances, and disrupting normalcy. Residents' disappointment underscores the urgency to address the current power distribution system's inadequacies and implement effective solutions for consistent electricity access.

Fayaz Ahmed, aged 45, another resident of Srinagar, described this winter as the most severe in terms of power interruptions. Despite the deployment of smart meters, the ongoing challenge showcases the stark contrast that technological progress hasn't eased the hardships faced.

"In this year's winter, we've experienced the most severe power interruptions," shared Fayaz "It feels like the cold outside is creeping into our homes, and we're grappling not just with the cold but also the stark reality that even smart meters can't spare us from this adversity."

The Kashmir Power Distribution Corporation Limited (KPDCL) initially disclosed a plan for power reduction,

anticipating scheduled cuts ranging from 32 to 56 hours weekly. However, these cuts have extended beyond the scheduled hours, causing significant strain on households and businesses, disrupting regular activities and impeding productivity. Residential areas bear the brunt, compelling families to adapt to the unreliability of electricity supply.

Shameema, a housewife, highlighted the challenges of homemaking in the absence of electricity, underscoring the silent dedication of housewives to their daily duties.

"Washing dishes and clothes become a tough job in the cold water, making homemaking hard. Fighting against the cold not only tests someone's strength but shows how devoted housewives are to their daily tasks."

As power interruptions persist, heightened apprehensions grip vulnerable demographics, particularly the elderly and individuals dependent on electronic medical devices. The lack of consistent power raises serious concerns regarding its impact on at-risk groups, notably older individuals and those reliant on electricity-powered medical devices.

"Amidst constant power cuts, survival becomes a challenge," emphasized Ghulam Qadir, 65, who battles asthma and relies on an electric asthma machine. "This winter has been tough. Despite the presence of so-called smart meters, we face relentless power disruptions. It's not just inconvenient; it's a struggle. I cannot afford a generator; their daily charges of 500-600 rupees are a substantial burden for people like us. We urge the government to consider the plight of the sick, who are left helpless in their homes. It's not merely about comfort; it's a matter of survival."

The adverse effects on businesses, especially smaller establishments, have been substantial due to these persistent power issues. Sikander, a shopkeeper, expressed the impact of unscheduled power cuts on his 24/7 Xerox store, resulting in significant losses and compromising his service delivery to clients and students.

"Regrettably, these unexpected power interruptions have severely impacted me, resulting in substantial losses," expressed Sikander. "It's disheartening to acknowledge that due to power problems, I'm unable to fulfill their expectations. It's not solely about business; it's about the



Picture Courtesy: INTERNET

commitments I make to my customers.”

As per the recently released power curtailment schedule by the PDD, areas with metered connections are facing daily power cuts of up to 4.5 hours, whereas non-metered areas are enduring eight-hour power cuts. Anticipations suggest that these durations might extend further in the upcoming months.

The Power Development Department (PDD) stated that Jammu and Kashmir experienced a significant decline in power generation due to an unprecedented dry spell during the summer, impacting the power supply.

H Rajesh Prasad, the principal secretary of the UT's Power Development Department (PDD), explained, “The prolonged dry spell has substantially reduced water flow in the rivers, thereby decreasing our generation capacity. Initially, our power projects, mainly Baglihar, generated about 1,050 MW. However, by the end of September, this dropped to around 700 MW, and currently, it stands at approximately 200 MW to 250 MW. This drastic decline has notably affected the overall power supply.”

Among 21 lakh households, approximately 50% have been metered, and smart meters have been implemented in about 4 lakh households. The installation of smart meters faced resistance in various parts of the region, hindering efforts for uninterrupted electricity, as emphasized by the UT administration's aim for complete

metering in all areas.

Amidst the crisis, the KPDCL undertook rigorous inspections and disconnections to tackle unauthorized usage and electricity theft. The KPDCL conducted more than 10,000 inspections and disconnected over 11,000 consumers within the last 10 days of November in the Union Territory. During this period, the department imposed fines amounting to Rs 85.24 crore. These fines were imposed for exceeding agreed-upon load capacities and for electricity theft via ‘hooking’ onto power supply lines.

Through overnight inspections, department officers have been confiscating makeshift heating devices and boilers. Meanwhile, consumers have criticized the department for inconsistent supply, especially during the challenging winter period.

Responsible electricity usage and conservation emerge as crucial strategies to alleviate strain on the already burdened winter power resources. Recognizing the dedication of power department representatives in ensuring uninterrupted electricity supply, especially during severe weather, remains vital. Valuing electricity preservation aids communities in developing resilience in adverse weather conditions. In the quest for a sustainable future, responsible electricity usage plays a pivotal role, addressing both immediate challenges and long-term resource conservation.

MERC ROUND-UP





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