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UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR

Girl Power





Who will make next Swarnai?

Attaul Munim Zahid

Bashir Ahmad Kharadi, 47, is firmly handling a block of wood against an electrical sander in his nine by eight shop tucked between two four-storey residential buildings. He occasionally looks away at the minaret of the Sufi saint Syed Simnania's shrine which overlooks his dingy shop. He hums some chants, returns his gaze to this wooden block, and starts boring small holes in it. Kharadi is again making a traditional Kashmiri musical instrument called Swarnai. When finished, this swarnai will adorn a shelf in the shop already stacked with years-old swarnai pieces.

"I still make it for my own happiness and satisfaction, even though the instrument is not in demand today and nobody has asked for it in many years," Kharadi says with a grimace.

According to Musicologists the Swarnai traveled from Iran through central Asia to Kashmir. The playing of Swarnai was regarded as extremely auspicious in Kashmiri culture, and the Bhandas of Kashmir prominently featured it in their plays. The players used to visit the farms during harvest time and perform for the farmers' amusement while also taking the crop for themselves in exchange for the performance. Swarnai is played with the mouth; musical notes are produced by blowing into it and pressing fingers against the stops.

Swarnai is made up of three components: the nai; a wooden pipe with nine holes, the barg, a locally-sourced wheatgrass reed, and a copper disc into which the barg is fixed.

To ensure accuracy, Kharadi asked Abdul Jamal, a local Swarnai player and Kangri maker, to play it for him. "Even a minute

Before starting to make a Swarnai, he would offer a ritual at the local shrine of Hazrat Mir Syed Simnani (RA), as he believed this instrument to be very pious

change can spoil its musical tones," Kharadi says.

Kharadi is a member of a line of artisans of Kulgam, thought to be the only professionals in Kashmir to have ever produced this traditional instrument. Mohammad Abdullah Kharadi, Bashir's father, was tasked by a businessman from Kishtwar to make a Swarnai. Once he got going on making it, he was successful on his first try.

The demand for Swarnai increased over time to the point where he gave up traditional carpentry and concentrated solely on this instrument. His reputation as a skilled Swarnai maker spread throughout Kashmir among its players, particularly the folk theater performers. Nearly 50 years into his practice, he received orders from all over Kashmir.

"Before starting to make a Swarnai, he would offer a ritual at the local shrine of Hazrat Mir Syed Simnani (RA), as he believed this instrument to be very pious," Kharadi said.

Abdullah passed away in 2012, but before

that he had given Kharadi the legacy of this craft. Kharadi had already started crafting Swarnai's at the age of 17.

Kharadi noted the declining interest in traditional musical instruments by stating that the last order for a Swarnai was placed about eight years ago. He has not sold a single Swarnai since then.

"The quantity of Swarnai my father and I produced varied greatly. Previously, districts in Kashmir and neighboring states would request such instruments, but now that modern music has taken center stage this art form is on its deathbed," Kharadi laments.

Abdullah's Swarnai sold for about Rs 400, whereas the same Swarnai today would sell for Rs 3500. It normally takes Kharadi a day or two to make it.

"No doubt I could earn a good amount of money out of it, but who wants traditional instruments now. There has also been no initiative from the government to save this rare craft," Kharadi says.

In order to make ends meet, Kharadi makes wooden household items like big spoons, bowls, meat-pounder, beater, pestle and other items which he then supplies to retailers in Srinagar.

"Swarnai making is just a hobby now; our main business is to make other items," Kharadi says.

Kharadi is proud of his craftsmanship, but he laments that no one in his family has taken over his art.

"I am the last one in my family to know this craft," Kharadi said. "Nobody after me will ever carve any instrument. I cannot ask my son to learn this, as I know it won't fetch him enough money to live."



Triumph of Taste

A Journey from Wheels to Flavors



Uzma Shabnam

In a testament to unwavering determination and relentless pursuit of dreams, Sumarthy Ji, a woman confined to a wheelchair, has defied the odds to establish her own spice factory. Her remarkable journey serves as a beacon of inspiration for those fortunate enough to witness it.

Originally from Sonwar, Srinagar, Sumarthy Ji reminisces about the days when she was able to walk. However, her life took an unexpected turn due to a severe bout of fever, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down at the tender age of 13. This abrupt loss of mobility plunged her into a period of despair and hopelessness.

"It was an incredibly tough time for me, and I had almost given up hope. I even questioned my own existence," shared Sumarthy Ji.

Supported by her family, Sumarthy Ji underwent medical treatment in Mumbai, an experience that transformed her perspective on life. Witnessing the struggles of other individuals, especially young girls and boys, she realized that her own challenges were insignificant in comparison.

"When I visited Mumbai, I saw the severe conditions young people faced while still embracing life. That's when I realized nothing was wrong with me anymore. This realization ignited a spark within me," she reflected.

Upon returning to Kashmir, Sumarthy Ji resolved to lead a purposeful life, embracing

the challenge despite her physical constraints. "I felt much better back in my hometown and wanted to move forward for my own betterment," she expressed.

Fueling her newfound determination was Sumarthy Ji's passion for sports. Despite being in a wheelchair, she took up basketball and quickly excelled at it. Recognized for her achievements, she participated at a national level, breaking stereotypes and inspiring others to pursue their aspirations with courage.

Her sporting achievements extended beyond basketball. Sumarthy Ji received commendation and awards from Talat Ahmad, the former vice-chancellor, for her participation in wheelchair racing, an event organized by Kashmir University.

Motivated by her experiences, Sumarthy Ji took a bold step into entrepreneurship, establishing her own spice factory at Khonmoh, an Industrial estate in Srinagar.

"I thought this is the right time to start something on my own, and I also wanted to generate employment among the youth. So, I started a spice factory," she explained.

With meticulous attention to detail and a profound understanding of flavors, Sumarthy Ji's brand, 'SadafMasalay,' quickly gained popularity for its exceptional quality and taste. She proudly employs around 10-15 people.

"I have not received any support from any organization. By the grace of Almighty, whatever I have achieved in my life is due to my efforts and hard work," she expressed.

Sumarthy Ji has touched the lives of those

around her with her indomitable spirit and resilience. Her journey from despair to success offers a ray of hope for all, proving that anyone can overcome obstacles with desire and dedication.

"It is my request to every wheelchair-bound person not to think any less of themselves," she emphasized. "There are a lot of people who complain that wheelchair-bound individuals are dependent on their families and are a burden to them. I totally disagree. I believe everyone is special and has been gifted with unique talents and skills by the Almighty."

When I visited Mumbai, I saw the severe conditions young people faced while still embracing life. That's when I realized nothing was wrong with me anymore. This realization ignited a spark within me

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Rumi Food Court: A Culinary Haven Uniting Students, Shrine Goers

Iqra Qayoom

Dargah Hazratbal has embraced a flavorful addition to its culinary landscape with the inauguration of the Rumi Food Court. This bustling hub has swiftly become a go-to destination for both locals and university students, creating an unexpected synergy between spiritual seekers and food enthusiasts.

In a strategic move, the local Auqaf has leased out prime property for a decade, transforming it into a thriving culinary destination. The collaboration between Auqaf and the leaseholders not only rejuvenated the property but also nurtured a sense of community collaboration. It's a win-win situation: the food court benefits from a prime location, and the Auqaf generates revenue for reinvestment in community development initiatives.

In a heartwarming development, the diverse customer base of the food court includes not only enthusiastic university students but also visitors to the nearby shrine. Pilgrims seeking spiritual solace now have the opportunity to complement their journey with a delightful culinary experience just steps away from their sacred destination.

This unexpected harmony between the food court and the shrine extends



beyond gastronomy; it fosters unity and community, bringing together people from various walks of life to savor the flavors and traditions of the region.

The food court's commitment to culinary diversity stands out as one of its defining features. Whether craving delectable desserts, freshly squeezed juices, or a global tour of cuisines, this gastronomic haven offers it all—from brownies and mocktails to a wide range of international and local dishes.

Beyond satisfying taste buds, the food court provides an inviting atmosphere that elevates the dining experience. With a refreshing and relaxing ambiance, grass-like decor, beautiful seating arrangements, and glass rooms, it offers a space where patrons can indulge their senses.

Local residents have expressed their excitement and satisfaction with the

new food court, emphasizing its positive impact on the community.

An appealing aspect of the food court is its popularity among university students. With a diverse array of food outlets offering affordable and tasty meal options, it has become a favored destination for those seeking a satisfying culinary experience on a budget.

The Rumi Food Court boasts a plethora of food outlets catering to various tastes—from international cuisines to local favorites. Sunny Smile Bakes, Pizza Box, Al-Baik, Seekh Nation, Blends (offering desserts, pizza, fried chicken, barbecues, and mocktails) ensure there's something to tantalize every palate.

Beyond being a culinary haven, the food court has evolved into a community gathering space. Its inviting ambiance and communal seating arrangements encourage social interactions, fostering the formation of foodie friendships.

Undoubtedly, the Rumi Food Court has made a flavorful impact, spreading joy among locals and attracting students in search of delicious and budget-friendly meals. With its diverse culinary offerings, it promises to be a culinary adventure that will continue to delight the taste buds of all who visit.

Water Scarcity Grips Bathipora Village in Budgam

Rayees Ramzan

Bathipora village in the Khag division of Budgam district has been grappling with a severe water shortage for over two decades, prompting locals to stage a protest against the Jal Shakti Department. The community expresses its longing for tap water, a fundamental necessity that has been denied to them for far too long.

Iqbal Ahmad, a resident of Bathipora village, voiced the frustrations of the community, "We don't have any proper water pipeline system in our village, and neither have we received any proper water supply for the last two decades." He added, "We don't know why our village has been left at the mercy of fate when the Jal Jeevan Mission promises to provide portable tap water to every household in the country."

Launched in 2019, the Jal Jeevan Mission aims to ensure a safe and

adequate drinking water supply through tap connections to every household in the country by 2024. However, the promises of the mission seem distant realities for the villagers of Bathipora.

Shakeela Bano, a woman married into Bathipora village seven years ago, shared the challenging daily routine of the women in her community. They are forced to walk a distance of 4 km from their village to collect water from an open water canal for drinking, cleaning, and washing purposes.

"While holding a 20-liter plastic water barrel on our heads, it poses harm to our skeletal system. Although we must carry the heavy water buckets, we cannot spend the entire day doing it. Our focus is needed for other obligations at home," explained Shakeela.

The lack of tap water in Bathipora village not only poses physical hardships for the residents but also poses health risks. Clean water is essential for maintaining hygiene,

preventing waterborne diseases, and ensuring the well-being of the community.

As the protest continues, the villagers of Bathipora call for immediate action from the Jal Shakti Department and the authorities to fulfill their long-standing demand for tap water. The struggle for access to a basic necessity should not persist for two decades, and it is time for the authorities to fulfill their responsibilities and meet the expectations of the people they serve.

Upon contacting JE Jal Shakti department, Khag division, it was stated that the water pipeline will be approved shortly for the village, after which the locals may have an uninterrupted water supply in the coming times.

We don't have any proper water pipeline system in our village, and neither have we received any proper water supply for the last two decades



Kupwara's young female power-lifting champion turns critics into admirers

Numan Bhat

Humaira Mohammad (22), from Kupwara choose to listen to her heart and passion and turned critics into admirers by making a name for herself in power-lifting.

Hailing from ITI colony Handwara in North Kashmir's Kupwara district the 21-year-old is currently pursuing her intermediate education from Higher Secondary Handwara and is a young professional powerlifter in north Kashmir.

"A year back, I weighed 70 KGs, unusual for my age group. To overcome this issue, I went to a gym located at my native place in Handwara," Humaira said

She says it was after regular workouts at the gym she realized her potential for lifting weights.

"Soon after seeing potential in me for weight lifting, gym coach Tabish Ramzan motivated me to participate in the competition," Humaira said.

She says after being convinced by the coach, she participated in the North Kashmir Deadlift Championship and bagged the gold medal, and remained overall runner-up in the open category in the competition.

She says initially she was criticized for choosing power-lifting as a sport.

"Initially, I was criticized a lot but after proving my mettle at different arenas my critics became numb, eventually turned towards my supporters," she added.

She says her family supported her through thick and thin in her powerlifting career.

"Whenever I felt low my parents would boost my confidence. I will never give up my dream of becoming an international power-lifter besides my medical studies," she says.

Talking about her achievement, young Humaira says that she was titled three times Miss North Kashmir from March 2022 to June 2022 in different competitions.

"In July 2022, I was also titled "Power woman of Kupwara" and remained runner up in Miss Kashmir competition held in December 2021," she claims.

She claims she remained runner-up in the 6th Kashmir power-lifting bench press and dead-lift championship held indoor hall Polo-ground Srinagar in August 2022.

"I bagged three gold medals in under 53kg weight category in World Raw power-lifting Federation (WRPF) held at Gindun Stadium Rajbagh in August 2022," she says.

In September 2022, she bagged gold in Deadlift and gold in powerlifting

in J&K UT State Power-lifting and Deadlift Championship in the under 63 kg (sub-junior) weight category and was awarded the title of best Power-lifter of Jammu and Kashmir held in Indoor stadium Jammu.

She has been good at studies since childhood and wants to become a radiologist and open her own clinic to serve people.

I bagged three gold medals in under 53kg weight category in World Raw power-lifting Federation (WRPF) held at Gindun Stadium Rajbagh in August 2022

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GMC Handwara Achieves Milestone with First MBBS Batch Enrollment

Nuzhat

The Government Medical College (GMC) Handwara has marked a significant milestone by enrolling its inaugural batch of MBBS students, a development viewed as a major step in enhancing access to quality healthcare in the peripheral areas of Jammu and Kashmir.

In the first round of counseling, all 85 seats in this medical college were successfully filled. Notably, 15 percent of the 1300 seats in J&K's medical colleges are allocated as part of the All-India quota, with J&K participating for the second consecutive year.

Firdous Giri, Secretary Board of Professional Examinations (BoPEE), mentioned that the aspirants have already joined the colleges, including GMC Handwara. He expressed satisfaction with the positive response the new medical college has received.

Dr. Yashpal Sharma, Director Coordination New GMC, emphasized that the establishment of the new GMC in Handwara has already positively impacted healthcare delivery in areas



distant from capital cities. He anticipates further enhancement with the addition of new batches.

Dr. Sharma highlighted that the faculty at GMC is accomplished, with senior doctors from reputable institutes rendering their services at the associated hospitals. He expressed confidence that

in a few years, the new batches will contribute to the strength of doctors, reducing the need for referrals.

"Access to healthcare and quality healthcare is the first goal of the medical college, in addition to improving the availability of doctors and avenues for medical education," Dr. Sharma added.

While acknowledging that the infrastructure at the new GMC is yet to be completed, he assured that there is no compromise on the delivery of education. Despite ongoing construction, all necessary resources for student studies are readily available.

GMC Handwara, with its catchment area being district Kupwara, addresses the urgent healthcare needs of one of the most underserved regions. The establishment of new medical colleges in J&K is part of a strategic initiative by the Centre to strengthen medical education and healthcare services in the region. These colleges aim to address challenges such as doctor shortages and unequal access to healthcare, especially in remote areas. In total, seven medical colleges have been established in J&K as part of this initiative, with five in the first phase.

Law Student at JMI overcomes physical challenges with hired writer's support

Syed Batool Andrabi

In the teeming academic halls of Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) New Delhi, an exemplary law student from Nowgam, Srinagar, has been consistently outshining his peers, securing the coveted position of class topper. However, what sets him apart is not only his exceptional intellect but also his determination in the face of a physical challenge.

This exceptional student, Junaid (name changed), has defied the odds from a young age, excelling in academics despite facing difficulty in writing independently. Struck by a physical disability, he has found a way to conquer this hurdle, ensuring it does not impede his educational aspirations.

During exam periods, this resilient student engages the assistance of a hired writer, a confirmation to his steadfast dedication to achieving his goals. With this invaluable support, he can effectively interpret his vast knowledge and understanding of the law into written form.

While discussing the choice of a writer who fits his demands, he said, "Securing a writer for my exams presents considerable obstacles." He added, "Consistently, it has

been a demanding endeavor for both my father and me to find a writer who meets all the university's specified criteria."

Junaid's father, a retired government official, said, "His story serves as an inspiring narrative, shedding light on the importance of determination and adaptability in overcoming life's challenges." He further stated, "His accomplishments stand as a beacon of hope for aspiring individuals facing similar obstacles, demonstrating that with the right support and determination, one can surpass any hindrance that comes their way."

"We have to hire a writer who is younger than him, not in a higher academic class, and has no affiliation with his profession. These are the specific criteria mandated by the university," said Junaid's mother, who is a government teacher.

"Given our limited connections in Delhi, we arrange a writer from Kashmir, a person whose intellect is reputable and who can manage within a reasonable budget. Additionally, we cover the airfare for the writer," she further added.

Junaid said, "I have hired several writers in the past, but recently, I exclusively

engage a person named Shahid, residing 15 kilometers away from my home. My father initially brought him in for my 6th-semester exams, and a strong rapport quickly developed between us. Unlike with other writers, I no longer face the challenge of having to repeat information for Shahid." He added, "His sharp wit and swift comprehension make it easy for him to grasp the content, enabling me to perform well in my exams with his assistance."

While attempting to reach out to Shahid about this, he expressed reluctance in providing any quote. He mentioned that he focuses on assisting his family with whatever earnings he can make as a student.

Given our limited connections in Delhi, we arrange a writer from Kashmir, a person whose intellect is reputable and who can manage within a reasonable budget. Additionally, we cover the airfare for the writer



Guardian of Chinar Trees

Mohsin Mushtaq

For nearly a decade, Abdul Ahad Khan's daily routine has been unwavering. Before dawn, he leaves his home in Nagri village and heads to the common land in the Band Wader forest area, where he has planted numerous chinar twigs. From dawn till 9 am, he tends to the saplings, watering, nurturing, and adding fertilizers to the soil. Afterwards, he returns to the village to engage in daily wage work. In the evening, he revisits the saplings, witnessing the growth of around 1,500 chinar trees before heading home.

The Chinar, also known as the oriental plane or *Platanus orientalis* in scientific terms, holds the esteemed position of being the official tree of Kashmir. With trunks reaching up to 25 meters, their leaves undergo a vibrant transformation from green to red and orange in autumn, capturing the attention of onlookers across the Union Territory and beyond. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, chinar trees offer shade, serve as habitats for various species, purify the air by filtering pollutants, and boast deep root systems that combat soil erosion.

However, the past few years have witnessed a decline in the chinar tree population across Kashmir, prompting

governmental efforts to safeguard and replenish them through plantation drives.

Khan's enduring commitment to Chinar preservation traces back to 2010. During a visit to an elevated area with friends, he was struck by the barrenness of the land, once lush with trees. "Sitting under the scorching sun in what was once a forest, I realized that someone had unnaturally intervened and plundered the trees. That day, I decided to dedicate my life to protecting nature," he recalls.

Initially, Khan sourced Chinar twigs from Srinagar nurseries and planted them in open forest land near his home. Gradually expanding his plantation area, he now collects Chinar twigs from a tree near the grave of a Sufi saint, close to his village. Khan personally bears all the costs associated with planting and nurturing the trees.

Majid Dar, a scholar from Kupwara, acknowledges Khan's impactful initiative, stating, "Khan's initiative has added much to the Band Wader forest. Without any support, he has been able to develop something that our future generations will benefit from."

In June of this year, the Deputy Commissioner of Kupwara felicitated Khan for his remarkable efforts. He now aspires to expand his initiative with the collaboration

of other individuals and authorities. "If the administration and communities join me, we can ensure that Chinar does not disappear from Kashmir," he passionately asserts.

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Gohal-Chaku Waterchestnut Industry Empowering Women Farmers

Numan Bhat

Water chestnuts, also known as ‘Singhara’, are a versatile and unique aquatic vegetable that can add a satisfying crunch and a refreshing, mildly sweet flavour to various dishes. Despite their name, water chestnuts are not nuts at all but rather the modified roots of an aquatic plant. They have been a staple in Asian cuisines for centuries and are now enjoyed worldwide for their distinct texture and taste.

The growing dried water chestnut industry in the village of Gohal-Chaku, which is situated in the Pattan Tehsil of the Baramulla region in North Kashmir, is operated by women.

This sector employs around 70% of the women in the village, acting as a powerful illustration of women’s empowerment.

Gohal village is situated approximately 7 kilometres from the main town of Pattan.

The women of this village put up endless effort to make a living and maintain their ancient ways of life despite countless obstacles.

Locals said that about 70% of the women in Gohal-Chaku are employed in the collecting, washing, and preparation of water chestnuts, which are sold to nearby traders or in various locations throughout the valley.

With the skills and knowledge of the profession being passed down from one generation of women to the next, this industry has achieved success for years.

A local of Chaku village, Insha Rasool, claimed that despite the difficulties the

women faced on a daily basis, they never used these difficulties as an excuse for complaining that they were unable to find a job.

For the past three years, she has been helping her mother make water chestnuts.

“Harsh weather conditions in Kashmir, a lack of proper resources and tools, and competition from other water chestnut growers in the valley make it difficult for us to sell our produce at a fair price,” she continued.

The Gohal-Chaku water chestnuts are renowned for their remarkable health advantages and mineral-rich make-up.

Firdousa Jan, 55, has spent her entire life cooking water chestnuts and is still working hard to provide for her family. She said that her creations have been handed down from their ancestors and are revered as gifts.

A traditional Kashmiri Daan-firewood stove is used to boil the chestnuts for 40 to 60 minutes while they are being prepared, said Firdousa. The chestnuts are then thoroughly cleaned of their burr.

“Checking the water content of the chestnuts, building a campfire, and buffeting the chestnuts with bamboo sticks or fat batons are all steps in the process of manufacturing dried chestnuts. Even now, some people have purchased equipment for this procedure”, she continued.

The men of the village typically work all day selling chestnuts in various valley locations, while the ladies prepare water chestnuts until late at night so they can have a fresh supply for the following day’s sales.

The women of Gohal-Chaku village

Chinar, also known as the oriental plane or *Platanus orientalis* in scientific terms, holds the esteemed position of being the official tree of Kashmir. With trunks reaching up to 25 meters, their leaves undergo a vibrant transformation from green to red and orange in autumn, capturing the attention of onlookers across the Union Territory and beyond.

should be recognised for their commitment to upholding their traditional methods of subsistence and helping to support their families.

The dried chestnuts cost about 200 rupees per kilogramme, according to Arshid Ahmad of Gohul village, who sells them in Baramulla.

“Every day, I sell around a kilo or two, and people prefer to eat it, especially those who have hyperthyroidism and diabetes”, he added.

Doctors usually suggest dried chestnuts to patients with diseases like hyperthyroidism and hyperglycemia because of their many health advantages.

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