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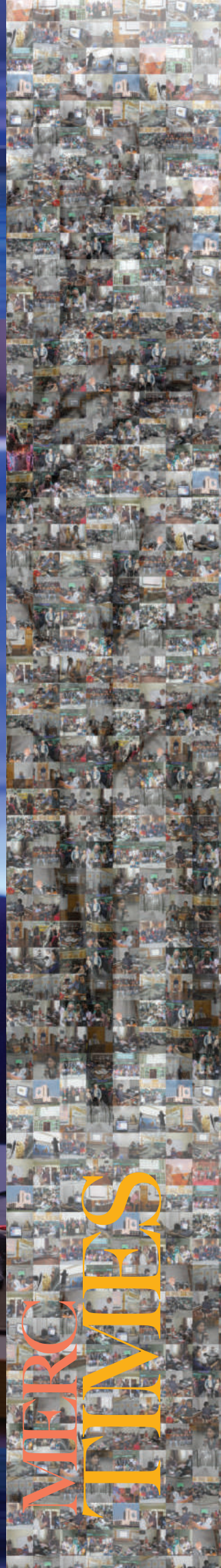
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MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR



It's MashiQ time

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Number of female drug addicts on rise in Kashmir

Mahek Yaseen

Drug abuse in Kashmir is increasing rapidly. Substance abuse among teenagers and young people is becoming a trend. Usually such things would be associated more with males as they would be mostly exposed to such influences easily, but shockingly women are also getting involved in drug abuse and becoming peddlers as well. And as per the experts their numbers are rising.

According to the survey conducted by the United Nations Drug Control Program, there are about 70,000 addicts in Kashmir, who are mainly young people and students between the ages of 17 and 35, of whom about 4,000 are women, i.e. H. 31% are women.

A female drug abuser, who agreed to talk to the reporter on the condition of anonymity, said that it all started with smoking marijuana. "Basically it was with my friends. I was a teenager and it looked so trendy and hip to me. That's how I got into it. After that I started taking pills also," she said.

She didn't realise getting addicted to it till it hit her health. "I wasn't addicted, I did it for fun. I mean, I enjoyed it. But once it started affecting my health I gave up the habit. But I still smoked normal cigarettes, two or three times a day," she said.

Dr. Fazal-e-Roub, registrar at the Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (IMHANS), said: "It's certainly increasing a lot. Teenage or youth in Kashmiri indulges in substance abuse, including women who have had a tough childhood, what we refer to as adverse childhood experiences or trauma, who are more vulnerable or



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peddling substance abuse."

He further said, "Up to 2016 around 500 drug addicts were reported across Kashmir, but from 2019 to 2021 the number has risen to 23,000 and after that study increase has been seen in the numbers by the day."

Dr Fazal said that both married and unmarried women indulge in drug abuse. Married women indulge in substance abuse because their husband is a peddler or their husband is a drug addict or they also abused drugs before marriage, and unmarried women become addicted to it because of their psychiatric problems. "Before 2016 they were taking pills or opioids but now heroin is mostly used," he added.

The data manager at IMHANS said that two female abusers died while under

treatment here. One committed suicide and another died from the overdose. According to the data manager a female drug abuser said that she got addicted through medicine, but after checking the history, it was found that her husband was a drug peddler.

Female abusers also face problems during pregnancy. The data manager said that in many cases we see premature birth or postnatal death or their babies are transferred to intensive care unit as they have neonatal abstinence syndrome.

"Hepatitis C virus is a common disease that drug users suffer from because they swap needles when injecting and there is also a risk of getting HIV-AIDS, said Dr Fazal.

Dr.Yassir Rather, a psychiatrist at IMHANS, said: "Mental health issues are the main reason why women engage in this and they try to find the escape root to overcome this or we can say that lack of supervision is also one of the main reasons."

Dr.Fazal said: "To control drug addiction in Kashmir, we must destigmatize mental illness and trauma, raise awareness of drug addiction, and improve access to rehabilitation centres and community interventions."

Wasim Kakroo, clinical psychologist said, "Substance abuse is an addiction, a person will indulge in it when they cannot cope with the difficult emotions such as depression, anxiety or guilt."

He further said that substance abuse is not just a moral retreat, but a disorder in which a person's biological, sociological and psychological parameters play a role. He also said that genetics also plays own role in the substance abuse.



Pottery with modern touch finds new market in Kashmir

Syeda Sakeena

Pottery is enjoying a boom after a steep decline for many years now. People in the Valley would use earthen ware more commonly, however, in last thirty years their use dwindled. Plastic and other metal products became more common over the years.

“Young generation somehow lost touch with their traditional crafts, however, from some years now we see some young people have revived interest in earthen ware and pottery,” Abdul Majeed Kumar said.

Kumar is a potter by profession and has been practicing pottery since decades.

“All the essential stuff, from kitchen utensils to showpieces, can be made from clay. There is a huge potential for pottery, and most importantly, it is environment-friendly as well,” Shoaib, a member of a potter family, said.

Kashmiri potters are known for making musical instruments like



All the essential stuff, from kitchen utensils to showpieces, can be made from clay. There is a huge potential for pottery,

“Tambaknaer” and “Noet”, and also most commonly used thing like “Kangir”, an earthen pot covered with willow which is used to keep one warm in chilling winters.

There are various other decorative items made of clay like piggy banks (bigwaer), different shapes of cups, plates, toys and teapots among other utensils which are becoming now popular. And in order to make the commodities attractive they are modifying the designs and pattern in accordance with contemporary trends.

Many new restaurants have come up in the valley where tea cups and Biryani platters made of clay are used. These are in again, so this trend has created a new demand for pottery.

An entrepreneur Aijaz Ahmad said that they are promoting mud-utensils also for the health benefits. “These are good for human health and are very eco-friendly, so the clay products are the best choice,” he said.

The Central government and the Union Territory government of Jammu and Kashmir have taken various steps to revive the tradition of pottery and restore its lost glory.

Thousands throng Hazratbal Shrine on eve of Eid-e-Milad

Ashiq Hussain

First 12 days of Rabi-ul-Awal are celebrated with religious fervor at Dargah Hazratbal. It is known as one of the most important shrines in Srinagar because it houses the Moi-e-Muqaddas, which is believed to be a strand of hair from the beard of Prophet of Islam.

The Hazratbal Shrine is situated on the banks of the famous Dal Lake in Srinagar. This unmatched reverence is anchored in the love and respect for the Prophet.

“The Prophet came to this world in this blessed month of Rabi-ul-Awal. Special dua-wa-azkar are offered after every prayer during the first 12 days. We say ‘naat’ after morning prayer in addition to Awwad-e-Fatiha and Durood. People are busy reciting naats, reading Quran inside and around the holy shrine,” said Peerzada Bilal Ahmed Shah, administrator of the shrine.

“The Moi-e-Muqaddas is displayed

(ziyarat) on the 12 and 13 Rabi-ul-Awal and the following Friday after each prayer; a huge number of devotees assemble to have a glimpse of the Holy relic. Also, on the 12th night-long prayers are offered (Shab),” he added.

He also said that devotees in thousands and even lakhs from far places visit the revered place to offer prayers on these days. Many officials pay visits to make proper arrangements for these days.

The holy Relic was displayed on Sunday, October 9, 12 Rabi-ul-Awal after each prayer. Thousands of devotees paid visits from different districts of Kashmir, including many political leaders like Farooq Abdullah. Darakhshan Andrabi, the Chairman Waqf Board organized a rally from NIT, Srinagar to Dargah Sharif.

“I came from Pulwama to offer prayers and have a glimpse of the holy relic at Dargah Sharif. I feel blessed after having the glimpse. Now I can return home happily”, said Ghulam Qadir, a devotee.



The Moi-e-Muqaddas is displayed (ziyarat) on the 12 and 13 Rabi-ul-Awal and the following Friday after each prayer; a huge number of devotees assemble to have a glimpse of the Holy relic



The 'Eventgrid' Girl

Babra Wani

Meet 25 year old girl who runs an online event management company. Hailing from district Kulgam of South Kashmir, a young girl is chasing her passion. Saima Rehman Magray is leading Kashmir's first online event management company, Eventgrid. Saima holds an MBA degree and is also a sitting member of Hausla JKTPO.

In a conversation with MERC Times, Saima said, "After completing my graduation I got to spend time with my family and I got to see the social side of my life as well, I was free for some time due to COVID and this lead me to witness quite a few weddings, and birthday parties but in those events, I could see a gloom over the general atmosphere of happiness. And I enquired about what is missing and what could be done to amplify the happy atmosphere of these events, this lead me to open this event management company."

Eventgrid is an online event management company which specialises in managing events like weddings, birthday parties, religious events, feasts, family get togethers etc. It also provides other services. Saima said that the need of founding this company came from her own experience of parties and gatherings she attended.

Though it was never easy, she said. For



her event management came up with its own sets of challenges.

"Event management may seem easy but it is not. This field is full of challenges and it pushes one to the edge if not organized well. It demands a lot of patience and practice," she said, adding, "I have been lucky because my family has been very supportive but still as I said we live in a society that's yet to provide proper place to women and her dreams. The only known challenge for me is that I am the first girl in this field and I have got to stand against some big names alone."

"Being a woman is not a weakness but when you are out venturing something like this you got to have support and as a woman, I think women are not supported much when it comes to owning a business,"

she further explained.

"I do believe that patriarchy is still an issue and on top of that being a girl who has to work with men all the time comes with connotations and stigmas. I have never let my gender come in between me and my work," she said.

Working with an all-men-team, Saima said her younger brother is her biggest support, "My family has always been very supportive and my younger brother who helps me in managing this enterprise has been a prime support."

For Saima the start of her business had been slow but she said, "Well the start was pretty slow because this business is new to this state and people hardly know about it. But with each passing day our audience is growing."

About her future plans, she said she wants to go "national" with her enterprise, "My aspiration is to go national with this and join the list of successful women entrepreneurs." She further said, "Well to be honest future is pretty unsure and uncertain, so I don't have an exact answer but I do have hope that in coming years I see this business growing more and more. My team is not very big but there are many vendors involved with from Kashmir and even outside Kashmir. And many more people who are always ready and whose work has always been appreciated."

New Parliament complex to get Kashmiri silk carpets

Tabinda Maqsood

A batch of handcrafted silk carpets for the new Indian Parliament complex is almost finished by artisans from Budgam's Khag neighborhood. These carpets for the Parliament are made by at least 12 families involved in the craft in Khanpora and Shuglipura. At least 50 artists have been slaving away on this project for the last few months.

According to Hamid, a carpet weaver who lives in the neighborhood, "The entire project will be finished in a week." He said, "Half of the villagers here are involved in this craft, and it is a matter of pride for us to weave carpets for the Parliament of India."



"Due to its delicate design, it was a very challenging assignment that we completed and enhanced in beauty," he further added.

On 12 carpets, four unique patterns that were derived from the patterns of the conventional Kashmiri Pashmina shawls, are displayed, he said.

Another weaver stated that they are delighted to know that Kashmiri carpets will be on display in the new Parliament. This would assist in promoting their trade.

An important portion of Kashmir's handicraft exports come from the region's reputation for fine carpet making. The rise of machine made carpets has, however, caused a decline in the industry.



Anantnag youth creates gaming app 'MashiQ'



Ahtisham Nazki

A young entrepreneur Rouf Bashir from south Kashmir's Anantnag district has created a gaming application "MashiQ" with the purpose of de-stressing students from examination and academic pressure.

Rouf, an MBA pass out from Mumbai University had a stable job at a private bank. He left the job and moved back home, since he always wanted to do something different and also improve educational system in Kashmir.

"I have seen students getting frustrated during their studies or competitive exams. And the only escape route for them at that time is either social media or online games which in the long run has many adverse effects," he said.

"This is why I thought to create something interesting that would act as a source of entertainment, education and earning as well. This is exactly how MashiQ came into being," he added.

MashiQ is an interactive gaming application that tests user's English vocabulary and grammatical skills by asking different questions and with each right answer given, users are rewarded with money. This application also incorporates some of the features from famous games like Dream11 and PUBG.

"When I sat down to brainstorm the idea, I thought of some famous games that our children mostly play and different features that made them interesting and engaging in nature. So I incorporated some of those important features in our application," he said.

"It is very interactive and easy to use application where users have to simply

answer questions quickly to win money," he added.

This reward-based game is targeted at both children and adults and can easily be played by people having basic knowledge of English language. On installing the application users are rewarded with rupees 50 but they have to pay a nominal charge of 10 coins every time for participation.

"On first time installation a user would be credited with rupees 50 in the wallet of the application. Then each time a user takes part in a game or a tournament, he or she has to pay 10 coins. The more right answers you give, the more levels you pass and the more money you win," he said.

However, the minimum redeemable amount in the initial phase of the application is Rs 200. The earnings can be transferred from the wallet to the users bank account through UPI.

"There is a sophisticated grading system in place. All your earnings are saved in the wallet of the application and later can easily be withdrawn to your bank account," he said.

In addition to this, MashiQ offers many game modes. A gamer can enter a tournament or create his room with a group of friends or players across the globe and challenge them for a number of coins as the winning amount.

"Just like PUBG, you can enter a tournament or simply create your own rooms with friends and enjoy," he said.

The application also provides its users with different gaming options like "Guess a Word" where a player has to guess the right word in the stipulated time. The other game is 'daily MashiQ', where 5 to 10 questions are asked to a user who has to answer each question within 10 seconds.

"I have seen people outside Jammu and



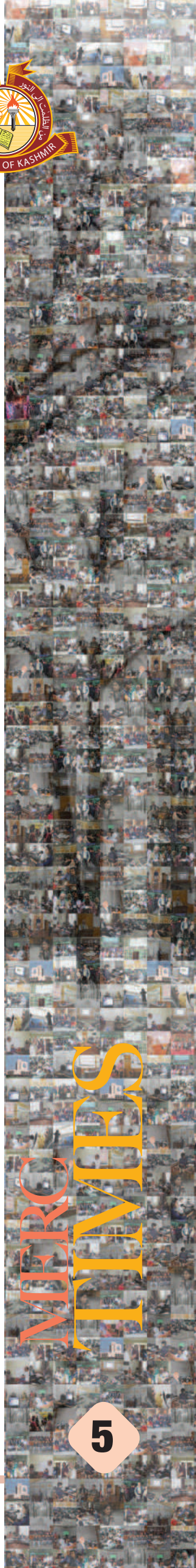
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Kashmir play brain teasers like Sudoku. This inspired me to create something on the similar lines digitally," Rouf said.

With a good initial response from the people of Kashmir, Rouf and his small team is planning to make the application more exam-oriented by including more subjects in the game. They are also increasing the winning amount at each level so that students can get benefited.

"This is just a small beginning; I have a lot more in store. One step at a time. I started with the English language first because it is a universal language, we would add other subjects and languages in the game soon, so that our youth can prepare for their exams in a fun way," he said.

Currently Rouf runs an institute, Nucleus Institute of Excellence at Anantnag which is the first NEET integrated institute in the valley.



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Despite HC ban, PDA fails to stop illegal constructions at Pahalgam

Mohammad Saleet

Pahalgam a health resort and one of the largest attractive tourist destination in Kashmir is dwindling its beauty due to the illegal construction of hotels.

The High Court of Jammu and Kashmir put a blanket ban on any construction within the ambit of PDA, Pahalgam development authority, the ban was put in place after the locals of the area approached the High court in 2010 seeking the ban on constructions to get rid of illegal structures and land Mafia and to save the ecological sensitive areas of pahalgam.

Despite the High Court orders, hundreds of illegal structures have been made over

the years said a local Ravees Ahmad who owns a hotel in pahalgam, he alleged that the PDA, officials over the years have minted a large amount of money from the hoteliers and gave them green signal in making these illegal structures. He further added, "The ban was put in place so that the beauty of Pahalgam doesn't fade away, if only the structures are there then what remains behind for the tourists to explore, the tourists travel thousands of miles just to explore the natural beauty, they don't come to see these giant hotels but the government's failure to protect this place is taking toll on the livelihoods of the people associated with tourism."

"The influential people enjoying political patronage carry out the construction work

but if the local of the area or the people having poor background comes up with any renovation the authorities demolish it without any prior notice," said a local Zubair Ahmad.

The CEO of PDA Mr. Masrat Hashim, said to the MERC Times, "The constructions have been stopped on asking about the continuation of construction during night hours he said we'll look into it."

The MERC Times also contacted the DFO of the area Rouf Ahmad who said that any construction that took place under his area of domain will be demolished. He further added, "There are some lapses in the system but our team ensures no construction further comes up in our area. I will go to any extent to protect the wild life area."

Medical Education outside country costs more than money

Haiba Iftikhar

For the past ten years, Bangladesh has been regarded as the best place for MBBS students. A huge number of students from different regions of Jammu and Kashmir are enrolled in medical schools across Bangladesh every year.

Bangladesh has an edge over other South Asian countries and also to Central Asian countries due to distance and the availability of English as a language of communication.

Among the academic disciplines, it is asserted that the study of medicine comes with the highest levels of stress, which has a detrimental effect on the physical and mental well-being of medical students. Exam anxiety, high parental expectations, peer pressure, lack of free time, financial difficulties, strained relationships, and a desire for higher education are just a few of the many variables that have been connected to the emergence of stress among undergraduate medical students.

Additionally, given the low opinions others have of their education and competency, these students usually experience problems with identity and acceptability in the valley.

Many people continue to reject these physicians as "second-hand"

professionals, even calling them "Bangladeshi maal."

People must understand that Kashmiris have the fewest prospects at home. Not all of us can qualify for NEET, a first year medical student in Bangladesh, Iqra said.

Recently, sudden death of a student sent shockwaves through the valley, unsettling everyone, especially Kashmiri students studying in Bangladesh.

Mehreen and Abida, the cousins, were so upset by the situation that they chose to return home. Mehreen said, "We literally had to abandon our degree because it was affecting our mental health."

The duo had joined just a month before the incident. Some students find campus life to be rather difficult, because they are not sensitive enough before they travel to an unfamiliar place far from home.

"I had no idea that I'd be thrown into this remote rural campus. I was in a complete state of stress, shock and despair," said Abrar, who left his degree in 2022 after a year of joining a medical college situated on the outskirts of Dhaka.

The grading system is also strict and puts young children to the test. "I had always been enthusiastic about being a doctor, but after failing to qualify for NEET. I joined a very renowned medical college in Dhaka. Besides food being horrible, my whole life turned upside

down," Hazqah, 21 said.

Hazqah further said that as soon as she joined the college, she was thrown into a whirlpool of never-ending exams, some of which she even failed, and finally left two months after joining this year.

While it is well known that many postgraduate students pursue desired degrees abroad, one may ask what drives undergraduate students. After all, it can't be easy to leave the conveniences of home and family behind to spend years in a distant country where the weather, language, food, and education are all unfamiliar.



I had always been enthusiastic about being a doctor, but after failing to qualify for NEET. I joined a very renowned medical college in Dhaka. Besides food being horrible, my whole life turned upside down



Tomato flu a variant of HFMD, no need to panic: Experts

Irtiza Rafiq

On a plastic hallway chair at Mehar Clinic, in old city Habba Kadal, five years old Sheikh Inaaya, a student at a leading missionary school, has skipped her classes and is waiting for her turn. Whole of her class has been suspended owing to the incidence of Head Foot and Mouth Disorder (HFMD) in Srinagar.

“It began with mild fever and a sore throat. A day later, she developed small red spots on her body which changed to blisters first and next day to ulcers. We got scared, because the symptoms resembled, what they were calling as tomato flu in news,” said Sheikh Tariq, Inaaya’s father.

Tomato flu found its way in local parlance after the media reported the emergence of a new disease in southern states of country. Dr Harjeet Rai, epidemiologist and State Surveillance Officer, Jammu division said, “These blisters start as red-coloured small sores and resemble tomatoes when they enlarge. That is why we call it tomato flu, a name which media hyped up as a novel dangerous infection when in fact it is just another variant of HFMD.”

He reasoned that the scare is unnecessary as HFMD has been quite commonly reported in India mainly in children and even in adults having a weak immunity. “The only difference in this new variant is the additional symptoms



The only difference in this new variant is the additional symptoms of joint pain and high-grade fever. These symptoms appear from day three to seven, and can last upto 10 days maximum

of joint pain and high-grade fever. These symptoms appear from day three to seven, and can last upto 10 days maximum,” the doctor noted.

But the joint pain Dr Rai talks about was a panic button for Arifa Mir when her son Eimaan, six, couldn’t walk home from his bus stop. He is a student of Tyndale Biscoe school. “When schools reopened after COVID, the school authorities used to call parents if their wards would feel sick. They didn’t do it this time when I believe it was most needed,” Arifa complained that the schools should have done screening as they did during the COVID times.

Speaking about the closure of KG classes Aftab Hussain, PRO TBMS said, “It was just a precautionary measure.” He further said a team of health department has already visited their school, who have informed them “there is an outbreak of the disease across Kashmir and there was a need for taking necessary steps.” As a response the school has suspended classes of most vulnerable age group, he said.

But the health officials had a different take on the matter. The officials said that as of now 13 cases of HFMD have been confirmed and all of them are students.

It is to be noted that the Centre has directed all states and union territories for stepping up surveillance for HFMD but it wasn’t done till the outbreak in a Srinagar based school. Later, Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP), Srinagar, sprung into action by alerting surveillance officers in all districts about the disease.

A precautionary list has been issued by its Srinagar unit on September 30. The Directorate of Health Services and Directorate of School Education Kashmir have also issued advisories on the same day. All of these advisories read HFMD is highly contagious and can be contracted through contact with an Infected person’s saliva, fluid from blisters, faeces, hugging, kissing, respiratory droplets that are sprayed into the air or by direct contact with unwashed hands or a surface containing traces of the virus.

Kashmir willow bat ‘GR8’ makes entry into worldcup-2022

Aadil Shafi

Apart from being famous for its saffron, pashmina, carpets and papier mache etc, Kashmir will now be known for its cricket bats as in recent ICC worldcup-2022 four players from UAE team used Kashmir willow bats throughout the world cup.

“We have been manufacturing cricket bats since decades, but it was for the first time that these bats are being used in international cricket that too in Worldcup-2022” said Fawzul Kabir, a bat manufacturing company owner from Sangam in South Kashmir’s Anantnag District.

Kabir owns the manufacturing unit under name of GR8 which was established in 1974

by his late father Mohammad Kabir and is happy that their manufactured bat has made it to the international cricket.

29 year-old Fawzul Kabir is an MBA pass out from the Islamic University of Science and Technology, Awantipora. He is currently pursuing PhD from a university in Canada.

While talking about the hard struggle behind convincing ICT players to use their manufactured bats he said, “After many hard ships only few players of Oman agreed to play with our bats.”

He is hopeful that after its entry in the ICT Kashmir made bats will start picking up. “We have already sent consignment to around one dozen countries and many orders are also in the queue,” he said, adding “this is a new beginning for us and we are

hopeful that more international players will use our bats as well.”

“We are hopeful that Kashmiri bats will emerge as an alternative to English willow bats as Kashmir willow bats are produced at a lower cost,” he said.

“Now our aim is to send our bats to every country and we believe that the time will come soon when we will see more and more players playing with GR8 bats,” remarked Kabir.



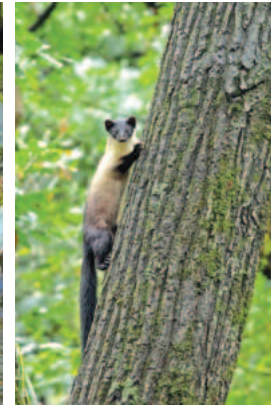
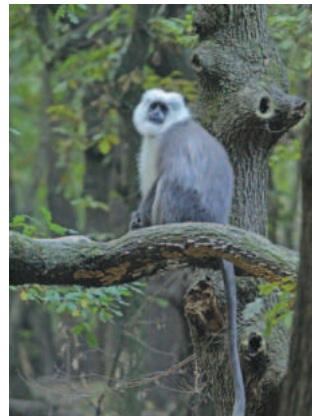
We have been manufacturing cricket bats since decades, but it was for the first time that these bats are being used in international cricket that too in Worldcup-2022

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Wildlife in Kashmir

Muzamil Bhat

Apart from being rich in landscapes, **waterfalls, mountains, and lakes**, Kashmir is also rich in its wildlife biodiversity. Having **4 National Parks, 14 Wildlife Sanctuaries, and 30 Conservation / Wetland Reserves** makes this place heaven for wildlife enthusiasts. Wildlife photographers from different parts of the world come here to shoot different species of animals and **birds** including some rare animals like **Markhor (Screw-horned goat), Hangul (Kashmir Stag), Snow-leopard, Himalayan Black Bear** etc.



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All 'digitods' need is YouTube

Saqiba Gul

The digital incantations like baby sharks sitting on a wall eating sugar and watching the stars twinkle, leave the digital natives spell bound courtesy, YouTube. The new-age babysitting for toddlers requires a smart phone set as an irreplaceable toy the "digitods" can play with the whole time without getting bored.

The "Digitods", who have grown up with touch screen access since birth, scrolls and strolls through the videos till they jump to their desired watch, all the while negotiating any unhappening thumbnails. They arguably possess the same skill as required to operate a fighter jet!

A research titled "Touch-screen technology usage in toddlers" by Caroline Ahearne and team concluded that from two years of age toddlers have the ability to interact purposefully with touch-screen devices and demonstrate a variety of common skills required to utilise touch-screen technology.

Parental mediation is a significant means to limit and control the child's screen time and media usage. Parents need to ensure media literacy about age-appropriate content. Researches explain how crucial it is for parents to have an adequate understanding of how the media works, its effects on children, and alternative activities for children, in order to improve the quality of their parental mediation.



YouTube exposes the kid to every kind of content. The YouTube Kids app was launched in 2015 to provide more child-appropriate content. Parents have the ability to select an age range and timer for the application. However, the result is children are now directly advertised to, creating a political space of branding and lucrative children's marketing. Leaver gives an analysis of the "Angry Birds" franchise that apps are an integral part of social network markets and are "far from straightforward". The YouTube Kids app extends the reach of YouTube the company and the platform into the lives of young children.

High frequent media use in early childhood is likely to have a negative impact on psychosocial development, positive effects such as knowledge transfer may be seen beyond the age of 18 months. As parental media use is a strong predictor of child media

habits, reducing parental media use and enhancing parent-child interactions might be important areas to address when trying to change the media behavior of young children.

Schwarzer, C., Grafe, N., Hiemisch, A. et al in "Associations of media use and early childhood development" revealed high media use by mothers was associated with high media use in children. Increasing parent-child interactions were associated with better body motor, cognition, language, and social-emotional outcomes in children.

The digital rights that modern psychologists and researchers such as Sonia Livingstone in her book "Parenting for a digital future" suggests a forward-looking framework for policy and regulation designed to advance children's rights to expression, connection and play online as well as offline.

Touch-screen technology usage in toddlers" by Caroline Ahearne and team concluded that from two years of age toddlers have the ability to interact purposefully with touch-screen devices and demonstrate a variety of common skills required to utilise touch-screen technology

Springs in South Kashmir are drying up

Mohammad Saleet

Anantnag district in South Kashmir has earned its name from the sheer abundance of springs in the area. 'Anant' in Sanskrit means innumerable and 'nag' is a Kashmiri word for spring. Kandipora village in Tehsil Bijbehara of Anantnag district is particularly known for its natural springs.

There are 20 springs in the village. Villagers use the water from the springs to satisfy various needs. It is used for washing clothes and utensils. This water is particularly considered better for drinking given its mineral richness. In fact the springs also provide a meeting place to village women who gather there for various chores.

Tragically, out of 20 springs only seven have water in them, others have dried up. 'Nagrud' is one such spring that is drying up. A local resident Tariq Ahmad said that the spring was blessed with pure water. Its source was unknown, but it would



There are 20 springs in the village. Villagers use the water from the springs to satisfy various needs. It is used for washing clothes and utensils. This water is particularly considered better for drinking given its mineral richness.

provide fresh water throughout the year. In summers the water used to be cold and in winters it would remain warm.

The locals of the area are anguished. They accuse the government of not taking any concrete steps for saving these springs. They said that the water supply in the village is pathetic, had the government built water schemes on the springs there would have been no such problem. The encroachments by locals have also endangered these springs.

On September 23, students of Government Degree College Bijbehara launched their campaign of saving these springs. They took out a rally to Kandipora.

"It's heartbreaking to see these natural springs in such a deplorable state, particularly this Nagrud," said Aqif Shafi, a student at GDC Bijbehara who also happens to be a local of this village.

The Nagrud's water level is decreasing every year. "Neither the Block officers nor the Halqa Panchayat are paying attention to this spring," he further said.



Police lunches campaign to curb menace of underage driving in Sgr

Haiba Iftikhar

Underage driving has been a huge issue concerning both parents and authorities alike. Underage drivers are particularly apparent on city roads. Today's youth value a fast-paced, fun-filled existence, and as a result, they frequently drive high-powered motor vehicles in an unruly manner. By allowing their underage children to drive parents put both their children and the public in danger.

"To prevent underage drivers, traffic officers must severely penalize violators and hold parents or vehicle owners liable," said a local in Srinagar city.

The concerns were even higher when two juveniles were apprehended by police after a hit-and-run case in Srinagar's Rajbagh area that killed a youth from Kupwara last June. The fathers of the duo were also detained for providing the vehicle to the minors.

Later in July, a man was sentenced to three years in prison for allowing a minor to drive his vehicle.

According to Section 199-A of the Motor



Some of these kids have to come from far-off areas and lack of transportation facilities forces them to drive their own vehicles. It is no excuse whatsoever for underage driving as it puts many lives at risk

Vehicle Act of 1988, when an offence under the Act is committed by a juvenile, the guardian of such juvenile or the owner of the motor vehicle is deemed culpable and may be prosecuted and punished, accordingly.

Immediately after these cases, the

court directed the Inspector General of Police (Traffic) to run a campaign against the menace of minor driving, which the court stated is the leading cause of road accidents.

Srinagar Police initiated a special effort in coordination with the Traffic Police to check on juveniles driving in the city and resolved to take legal action against their legal guardians.

"Underage driving is banned. However, we witness kids speeding, and many times, in order to save them, other vehicles clash and create terrible accidents," explained Yousuf, a resident of Jawaharnagar.

Yousuf further said that parents are solely liable for such mishaps, and they must face equal penalty.

The menace is even more rampant, especially in areas surrounding tuition centers.

"Some of these kids have to come from far-off areas and lack of transportation facilities forces them to drive their own vehicles. It is no excuse whatsoever for underage driving as it puts many lives at risk," said Zahoor, a teacher at a local tuition centre at Parraypora.

Kashmir's last gunsmiths struggle for survival

Suheel Nissar

On a weekday morning, the Zaroo Gun Factory in the Rainawari area of Srinagar city looks desolate. Machines and tools are covered with dust as if unused for a long time. The gun-manufacturing firm has been producing rifles since 1953. It is mostly shut now.

The workers at the Zaroo Firearm Plant are the valley's only gunsmiths; numerous others have shut their businesses because of the decades long slump in the sales.

"Since the authorities put a two-year prohibition on firearm fabrication in 1989, at the beginning of the militancy, things have never been similar again. This business has never regained its strength since," said the plant's third proprietor, Farooq Ahmad Zaroo.

Although the outdated and local guns



would be used mostly for hunting or kept for ornamental purposes but the government perhaps thought the ban is necessary to keep the weapons out of circulation, Farooq's son Burhan Ahmad Zaroo said.

Gun making, in Kashmir, has a long history that goes back to the Mughal era.

Kashmir-made guns would be gifted to India's rulers and elites in the early and middle decades of the 20th century, and the local gun manufactures had a booming

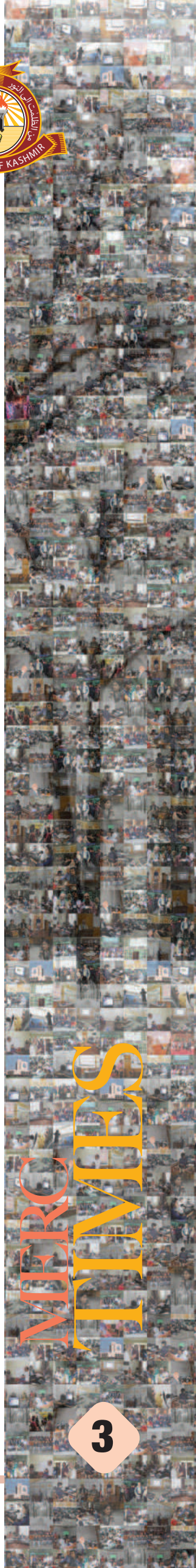
business in the years leading up to India's partition in 1947.

Kashmir-made rifles were exceptionally valued before 1947, when Kashmir was an autonomous regal state, because of their walnut stocks, with motifs of Chinar leaves carved on them.

Ghulam Ahmad Zaroo, was the first from the Zaroo's family to lay out a firearm manufacturing plant in Kashmir. He shifted to Srinagar at the invitation of Maharaja Hari Singh, the last leader of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, for whom he made muzzleloader weapons, said his son, Farooq Ahmad Zaroo.

Farooq's son, Burhan Ahmad Zaroo, may be the last member of the Zaroo family to try to make a living by making guns. He has joined the company after seeing the number of employees drop from 50 to only two.

Contd. on P5



MERC TIMES



Century old house in Srinagar turned into Art Gallery



Tabinda Maqsood

In Aali Kadal area of old Srinagar city, Bait-ul-Meeras, a century-old structure, has been transformed into an art centre and museum. According to the coordinator of Bait-ul-Meeras, Hakeem Javeed, the HELP Foundation has taken this step so that the next generation in Jammu & Kashmir is well informed of our previous legacy.

The house actually belonged to a renowned and powerful Pandit family of the Kaul dynasty. As per the historical sources Ram Joo Kaul, a well-known moneylender in his day, resided in this house with his siblings and their families.

Between 1885 and 1925, the building was built under the reign of Maharaja

Pratap Singh, the Dogra king. The Pandit community's religious, political, and social meetings took place mostly in this house. This structure is recorded in the historical account "Waqayah-e-Kashmir" (Events of Kashmir) by Kashmiri historian Mufti Mohammed Shah Saadat.

Everything from traditional clothing to crafts, jewellery, and utensils from the past Kashmiri culture are on display at this heritage structure that serves as an art museum.

The main aim is to inform and educate young people about the richness of Kashmiri culture. These utensils, jewellery, and traditional clothing are examples of the work and craftsmanship that demonstrate the depth of our ancestors' culture.

The antiques on display, according to another co-worker Rumaisa, are from the private collections of Nighat Shafi Pandit, the chairman of the HELP Foundation, and Mubashir Kathwari. 'CORALS - Gems & Jewels' has been operated by the Kathwari family at Polo View Road since 1954, and Mubashir is the fourth generation of the renowned 'Kabir Joo and Sons' jewellers from Zainakadal in the old city.

"Everyone is free to exchange their artefact collection. Additionally, if someone wants to only display for two months, they can do that as well. It is preferable to display rare artefacts so that others can benefit rather than keeping them at home," she added.

The name Bait-ul-Meeras, which translates to "the heritage home," was chosen by the HELP Foundation, which founded the art gallery. The coordinator explained that we have programmes here to teach children about the history of carpets and Pashmina shawls, as well as how they are made by hand.

He continued by saying that this four-story old house is the perfect illustration of the Valley's unique architectural style. Several hundred antiques from more than a century ago are on show. These artefacts, which include antique jewellery, silverware, traditional attire, and crafts, were put together for the museum show over the course of almost a year.

Promoting Kashmiri language, a young writer publishes his debut novel 'Khwaban Khayalan Manz'

Mahwish Mushtaq

In order to preserve and promote the Kashmiri language, which has been witnessing a downward trend for the last couple of decades, a young Kashmiri writer from Ganderbal has published his debut novel, "Khwaban Khayalan Manz."

At the age of 22, Asif Tariq Bhat has already established himself as a poet, writer, and now novelist.

A resident of the Duderhama area of Ganderbal district, Asif is presently pursuing his masters in the Kashmiri language from the Central University of Kashmir.



He began his writing journey at a very young age and till date many of his poems and short stories have been published in a local Kashmiri journal. "Khwaban Khayalan

Manz" is his debut novel in the Kashmiri language, published by Ali Mohammed and Sons.

The deteriorating condition and his great love for his mother tongue prompted him to write this novel in order to put some effort into preserving it.

"We all know how our mother tongue is being treated and neglected on a daily basis by our own people. Our new generation hardly talks in Kashmiri, let alone reads or writes anything in it. But this novel is a little effort from my side to preserve and promote this beautiful language," Asif said.

"This novel was not written overnight; it was the result of many years of painstaking work, it's like a dream

Contd. on P6



Mother of three tops class 10 exams in Kashmir

Ahtisham Nazki

Women in Kashmir often leave their studies and dreams halfway through after marriage. However, breaking this societal norm, Sabrina Khalik a resident of Bategam area of north Kashmir's Kupwara district, in an inspiring feat, topped her class 10 biannual exams with a percentage of 93.

Sabrina got 467 out of 500 marks, highest across Kashmir valley with A1 grade in four subjects Maths, Urdu, Science, and Social Science.

She had left her studies way back in 2012, when she was still in class 9 due to her marriage. All these years she remained occupied with her family and never got time to resume her studies until last year. "But last year, I made up my mind and took my exams and with the grace of Almighty I achieved something that still feels like a dream to me," she added.

She also said that preparing for her exams was not easy owing to huge responsibilities of three kids and never ending, daily household chores. But she somehow managed to spare couple of hours daily from her busy routine in order to focus on her preparation.

"I was very young when I got married. And, unfortunately, after marriage I was not able to continue my studies. Having three children made it even more difficult for me to resume my studies," she said.

However, despite being a bright



In the first week itself, my excitement and courage wore down, as I could not grasp and remember anything, may be due to a decade long break. But despite these little hiccups, I kept pushing and things became easier with each passing day

student in her school days, resuming studies after a decade felt like a futile exercise initially as she could not retain anything she studied for her exams.

"In the first week itself, my excitement and courage wore down, as I could not grasp and remember anything, may be due to a

decade long break. But despite these little hiccups, I kept pushing and things became easier with each passing day," she said.

Achieving such a feat, however, would not have been possible without the support of her husband and mother-in-law.

"My husband and mother-in-law played a huge role in this success. It was my mother-in-law who pushed me to fill up the examination form which gave me a lot of confidence. First I am thankful to the Almighty and then to my husband and mother-in-law," she said.

Sabrina has not only become a role model for women but everyone who often give up on studies and dreams due to marriage and other problems.

Peer Suhaib, a government employee who lives in a neighbouring village of Sabrina, said that her achievement has not only inspired married women but entire young generation of the adjoining areas.

"She has made our entire district proud. I have two daughters, and she is already a role model for them. She has proven that if you have the will and determination nothing is impossible," he said.

Aadil Farooq a medical student said that she has shown us how age is no bar in seeking knowledge and education. "If you are passionate about something and you love doing it then nothing can stop you, not even your age. Seeking education has no age limitation. Her achievement will boost the confidence of many other women across Kashmir," he said.

Contd. from P5

"If I hadn't assisted my family in this business, it would have closed down long ago," Burhan said, adding, "If things keep going this way, I won't let my kids to do this business."

The market for domestic weapons has totally collapsed over the last ten years due to dwindling demand. "Making and selling guns is very difficult in Kashmir," he said.

The gun factory's output has decreased because of shortage of labour and also because of the time lost in taking the approval. The labour shortage is also because many workers have left the factory to find other means of earning. The new firearms have to be put through extensive testing before sending them to the market, which is another reason for delay in the arrival of the finished products. All of the barrels are shipped to ordnance factories in different parts of India

for examination. Following that, they must wait for the official approval. This delay defers the returns and slows down the business cycle that automatically results in less work.

"The guns are docked in the facilities for a year or longer before they meet the legal conditions that allow them to be sold and for our business to get any returns," Burhan said.

While such measures may be necessary for safety and security, this procedure is time-consuming and costly, and the whole scope of this obligation belongs to us. This demonstrates the government's lack of involvement in our business's resurrection, he further added.

The Zaroo family's third and fourth generation keeps the factory running by repair orders only.

"The customer base has dwindled even more," Burhan said, adding "with the occasional licensed customer stepping in only for a repair on an old rifle. It's a big from from the 1940s, when

the region was dominated by more than 50 gun manufactures."

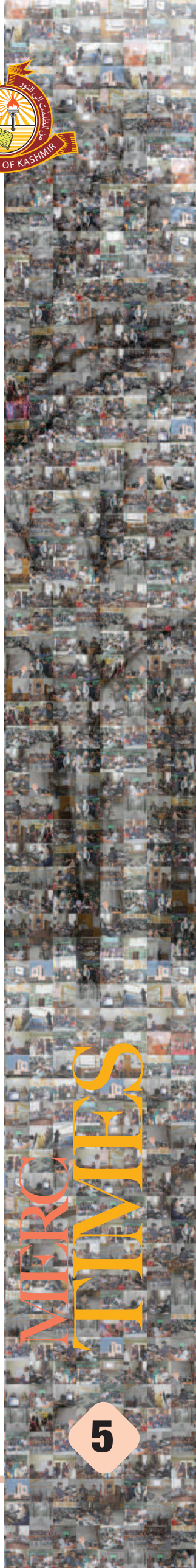
Now only two gun manufactures have remained in Kashmir: the Zaroo Gun Factory and Shubhana and Sons, both are planning to close and shift to another line of business.

"Now the fate of the business is in the hands of the government," Farooq said.

If the government doesn't want to keep the industry going in Kashmir, they should give us any other business, he added.

The Zaroo family blames government policies for the collapse of the last two Kashmir gun manufactures, which are losing trained artisans to other businesses.

Meanwhile, the gun-making sector looks to be prospering in Jammu, the UT's southern region, with roughly 30 gun factories and over a hundred arms dealers benefiting from the demise of Kashmir's factories.



MERC TIMES



COVID-19 increases agonising OCDs

Tuba Ashrafr

The pandemic has heightened the OCDs such as fear of germs leading to habit of excessive cleansing and washing when it comes to people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

The COVID-19 has disrupted millions of lives and continues to take toll on people's physical and mental health. The prolonged uncertainty brought on by the Corona virus has heightened the challenge of maintaining mental well being, particularly for people with conditions that manifest in controlling outcomes like OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder).

The mental health condition known as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental disorder in which the person's brain produces false alarms about situations that are not at all threatening because its warning mechanism is not operating properly.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions may contribute to a deterioration in mental health; individuals with OCD. It is a condition defined by recurrent obsessions and compulsions. It has been hypothesised that the focus on hygiene and contamination during the pandemic could exacerbate obsessive compulsive symptoms in young people.

Challenges of OCD and Coronavirus

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) have faced unique challenges during the COVID-19. Once in every thirty minutes, like clockwise Aisha washes her hands and checks if the windows are shut. "I have not relaxed for about a year, there is the prevalent fear of germs and contamination and pandemic has increased to my obsession," says Aisha.

OCD foundation defines it as a "mental health disorder that affects people of all ages and walks of life and occurs when a

person gets caught in a cycle of obsessions and compulsions." WHO lists OCD amongst top ten most disabling illnesses.

Ahmad, who asked that his last name be withheld due to fear of professional repercussion, "This pandemic has been really difficult for me. The compulsions in my head have definitely gotten worse. The pandemic, in general, was a new experience for everybody, but for me, feeling anxiety and feeling uncomfortable wasn't new, but the home no longer felt safer."

Naseema, 40, waits for her husband to fall asleep as the night falls. Married

Rehana, 35, got married, her husband dismissed her frequent hand washing and a rigorous dusting of the house as fixation for cleanliness. Six years into the marriage, he got thoroughly annoyed with her compulsive tidying. The last straw came when her husband tested positive for COVID-19 and had to be sent into quarantine. When he returned home after testing negative, he noticed a strange behavior in his wife.

Every time he came in her close proximity, she cringed and avoided him. Consequently, it led to a severe rift in their relationship and he decided to divorce her.

"The reason for her obsession with cleanliness is Rehana's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which was never addressed and had worsened because of pandemic so much she thought, she would contract the virus from me and hence avoided me," says Rehana's ex-husband.

Dr Wasim Kakroo, a clinical psychologist says that people with OCD experience persistent on recurrent thoughts that are disturbing and cause anxiety. People with OCD try to cope with these intrusive thoughts. Pre COVID issues, which did not get noticed before, have suddenly assumed massive proportions leading to great frustrations. "Epidemiologists have revealed that the prevalence of pandemic has increased in Obsessive disorder especially those with washing compulsions," he said.

"OCD may develop at any age from childhood through adulthood. Although it can strike at any age, there are two age groups in which it often manifests. The first occurs between the age of 10-12, while the second is between late adolescents and early adulthood. OCD can be treated by connecting with a therapist which includes both psychotherapy and medication," says Dr. Wasim Kakroo.



happily, the routine of going to bed at different timings is not that old for the couple. Naseema's husband investigated and found that Naseema does not sleep first. Her practice is to come out of bed silently, check clothes of her husband take money out from his pockets. Put the coins in a tub and wash them with detergent for a long period of time.

Finally, Naseema consulted a doctor and held a number of counselling sessions, she was diagnosed with OCD. "Pandemic has added to her behavior of repeated and unwanted obsessions of cleaning and washing clothes, coins recurrently," says Naseema's husband.

Contd. from P4

come true for me and i am happy and proud of its completion," he further added.

Arif has written many poems and short stories before, but writing a novel was something he always wanted to do. It took him a couple of years of hard work and finally have finished and published it.

His fascination with the Kashmiri language grew at a very young age owing to famous folktales narrated to him by his parents and elders especially at bedtime.

"I always found the Kashmiri language unique and beautiful. The very sound of it, when my parents and grandparents narrated me stories,

amazed me, and it still does. Folktales had a huge impact on my inclination towards this language," he said.

Noted poets Rahaman Rahi and Zareef Ahmad Zareef have impressed him a lot in his life. In fact, Zareef Ahmad Zareef later became his guide and teacher as well.

"I have a great deal of respect for these two poets. They are legends of the Kashmiri language and literature, and I feel so lucky that Zareef Sahab became my teacher and guide, and I owe a lot to him as well," he said.

Apart from his writing endeavours, Asif also conducts Kashmiri speaking courses online, and till date he has already completed the course with 10

batches.

"I have been teaching online Kashmiri speaking courses as well. It has been two years already and the interesting part of the story is that not only locals but many non-locals have also shown interest in learning this language," he said.

Asif is very passionate about the Kashmiri language and wants young people to put in efforts to preserve and promote it, especially for coming generations.

"I am doing whatever little I can in my capacity, but preserving and promoting this language would require a lot of effort, especially from our youth. I hope the youth of Kashmir will take care of this beautiful language," he said.



Untreated UTIs can cause serious problems in conceiving, experts

Andleeb

Increasing number of UTIs (Urinary Tract Infections) among young women in Kashmir is worrying nephrologists who strongly seek attention to contributing factors like smoking, stress, and a sedentary lifestyle. The global trend of rising non-communicable diseases burden diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and UTI has not spared Kashmir.



Urinary Tract Infection is one of the most common urinary disorders in women and ranks amongst the most prevalent bacterial infections. It is an infection in any part of the urinary system which starts with a vaginal infection.

Farheen, 32 said, "I got married happily in 2016. Then in 2018, I conceived. I was excited that I am going to become a mother, but I got wrecked up with UTI and my kidneys got hit up and I had to abort my baby."

"Till now I am childless. In any society, the birth of a child is the climax of a happy union, fulfilment of a cherished dream, and ultimate desire of a married couple," she added.

A study by the Indian Society of Assisted Reproduction (ISAR) has highlighted that infertility affects roughly 10-14% of Indian couples and is more common in cities where

one out of every six couples are seeking help.

Fiza, 26, got married in 2014. The couple waited for six years before taking wedding vows, but destiny had other things in store for them. Despite being financially stable, both struggled to become parents. It led to marital discord and both decided to end their marriage.

"I was constantly in panic. Doctors detected some medical issues because of which I was not able to conceive. I was having continuous 'kahrun' (urination) for six years of my marriage. Later, I got diagnosed with UTI and doctors advised me to avoid intimacy. I was shattered. It was completely a waste of time," Fiza said.

The National Family Health Survey data for 2019-2021 revealed that Jammu &

Kashmir had the lowest Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in the country.

Ifra 33 said, "I have bacterial colonization in the urinary tract which has involved my kidneys and ureters. After being told by doctors that I should not marry due to this infection, my dream of becoming a wife and mother ended there."

UTI is common in elderly people. For women over the age of 65, the rate of UTIs is over 10% and the rate can increase to almost 30% for women over the age of 85. Risk factors for developing UTIs in the aging population are different from those in the younger population. In adults symptoms of a bladder infection involve increased urinary frequency, burning sensation or urination (kahrun), blood in urine or change in urine color and foul smelling urine. Pregnant women are at an increased risk for UTIs starting in week six till week 24 because of changes in the urinary tract. In rare cases, UTI and pregnancy influence the risk of miscarriage even infant mortality. Untreated UTIs can cause serious problems for the mother and baby during pregnancy. The miscarriages occur by an infection around the baby, which leads to a bag of water breaking before any pain or bleeding, Dr. Tasaduq explained.

Kashmiri barber community is losing its traditional business, space

Mohammad Abu Bakar

Bashir Ahmad Hajam parks his rusted bicycle next to the police station at the public bus stop in Anantnag in morning. He begins cleaning his barbershop by opening the shutter that covers the shop, to start his day at work. He is trying to keep his enthusiasm although he knows that he is not going to get many customers.

Hair salons in Kashmir have been more than shops for hair cutting and shaving. These were favourite places of men for gossip. Most of the political and social issues were discussed threadbare on these shops. Therefore, these shops colloquially called 'Nayid Waan' would be the places to read the public pulse on most critical issues. However, the local barbers have lost most of their business to non-local barbers and the loss of business consequently led to the loss of



the space that these shops provided for public debate and gossip.

The non-local barbers managed to takeover because of their skill to give modern, fashionable, bollywood type haircuts and also by using latest equipment.

"I have been in this line of work for a very long time, but it is now very difficult for a person like me to find enough work in this environment where people do not like coming

to me. I always open my shop with a hope, but by the evening it dies down again, and it has been a routine now," Bashir Ahmad said.

Bashir's shop is leased, and during the past six years he has had difficulty repaying his loans. The only time he saw slight increase in the business was during COVID when non-local barbers left the valley.

"Although it was dangerous," he admitted, "during COVID, I nevertheless managed to do a decent business, earning more than what I used to earn previously," he said.

Bashir has wife, two children, and a sick mother in his family. And he is managing the expenses with great difficulty.

The majority of the street barbers are from the 'Hajam community' which is considered low-cast. The marginalisation of the community is also responsible for pushing their progeny away from the ancestral trade.

MERC TIMES



Saffron Cultivation in Kashmir

Seerat Nissar

Saffron, a cash crop, is cultivated on 3700 hectares of land in Kashmir, mostly in South Kashmir's Pampore village. Kashmir is the only place in India where saffron is grown. Saffron is usually used in local Kahwa tea, while most of it is sent to the other states of the country and even outside the country where it is mainly used for food preparations and in Ayurvedic medicines.



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