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MERC TIMES



**MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR**

KASHMIR'S CARPET INDUSTRY STARES AT A BLEAK FUTURE

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PUBG ban and its effects

Indian Government recently banned 117 Chinese apps along with a popular game PUBG. Considered one of the most popular games across the world, increasing concerns regarding its addictiveness ostensibly forced the government to ban the game in India. After the ban, some youth in Srinagar protested in press enclave against the decision.

IFRA HASSAN took a Vox pop with some PUBG fans and parents from Kashmir valley to know about their take on the ban.

Arsalan Nazir Srinagar

PUBG was the only source of my escape from the real world anxieties. Pandemic is taking a toll on our mental health, gaming was a way out. I don't understand the reason behind the ban. There are other ways to take on China. This ban should be revoked.

Muhammad Ismail Khan Srinagar Parent

I always saw my son playing this game on his phone. I advised him time and again to not play such addictive games. We have seen suicide cases because of this game. Government ban has come as a relief. I believe such types of games should be banned and our youth and kids should be allowed to only play educational and purposeful games.

Arif Hameed Srinagar

I have been one of the earliest players. I did not find it addictive or dangerous. It's up to me how much time do I spend playing this game. Now, it's Indian version. FAU-G will be launched. I'll give that a try as well, but ban on PUBG is not justified.

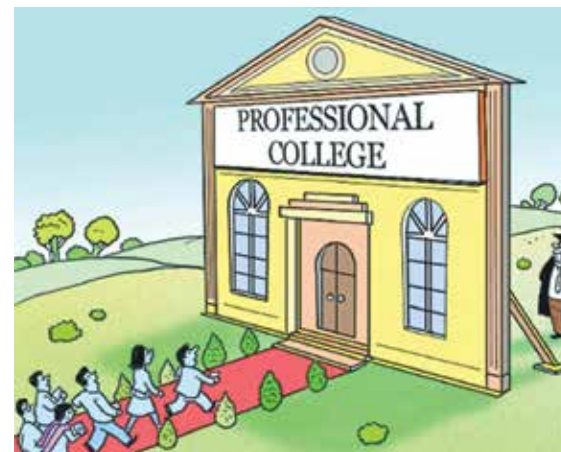
Younis Ahmad Ganie Anantnag

PUBG is an online game and our struggles with the erratic internet here in the valley made it less interesting to play on mobile phones. The ban is quite sad though. But only the mobile version has been banned. We can play this game on our PC's when the high speed internet is restored.

Muhammad Yousuf Parent Srinagar

My son had always demanded a high end smart phone for him to play this game. He used to end up playing late in the night. His schedule had totally changed. I'm really happy that this game has been banned. I must say, "Thank You" to the government.

Students stuck in jiggling venues of Polytechnic college



Sheikh Sehar

Eight years since its establishment, the government polytechnic college Bandipora is still functioning from a rented accommodation as its own building is still incomplete forcing the authorities to conduct class work from three different locations causing inconvenience to students.

The college according to students was inaugurated with much 'fanfare' but 'with a divided campus, students face hurdles and difficulties.

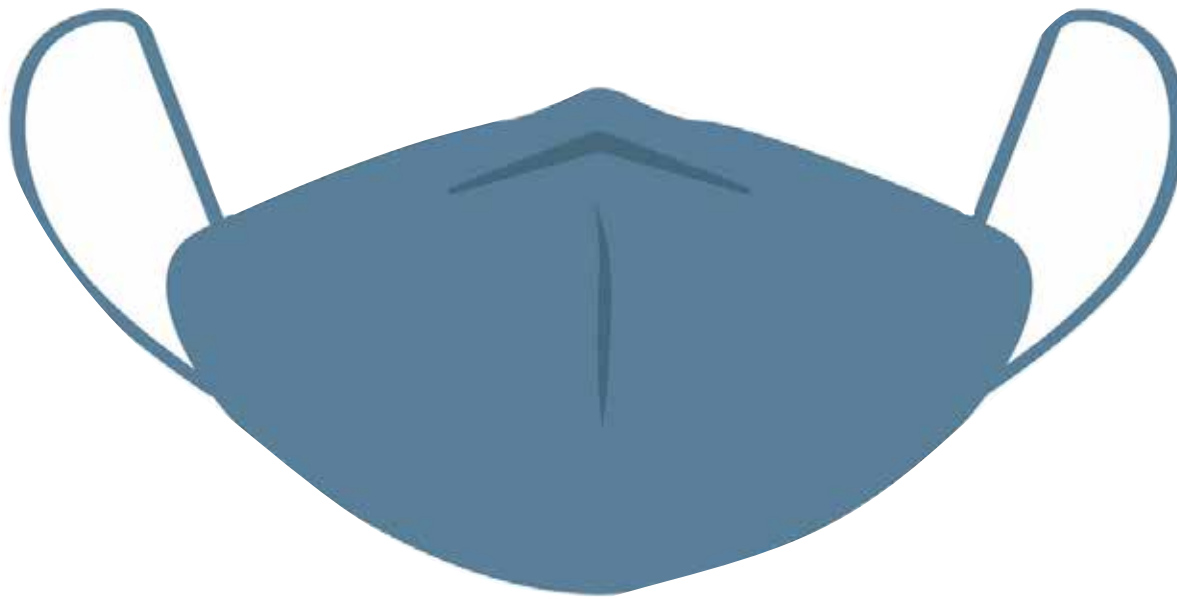
"Administrative block functions from a rented house while the two academic blocks function from two separate places", said a student of the college.

The Tourism and Hospitality Management block functions from Nebripora while the mechanical engineering department functions from Pachpan area. The college building meanwhile is coming at Watapora, Bandipora.

Principal Polytechnic College Bandipora Javid Iqbal Bhat when asked, said, "We have taken up the issue of delay in completion with the concerned authorities", adding, "The building is in the final stage of completion. We will shift into the new building by March 2021."

When contacted, DC Bandipora said, "The project suffered from delay because of lack of funds. It'll be made functional soon."

Administrative block functions from a rented house while the two academic blocks function from two separate places



Initiative to make masks picks up in Srinagar

Murtaza Ali

Zehra and her team of six members are working extra hours to achieve a target of making thirty thousand face masks by the end of this week. Over five months of hard work, Zehra, 23 along with her team has been working relentlessly to manufacture face masks amid the pandemic.

When the pandemic gripped Kashmir Valley and the panic was palpable in the air, essentials went in short supply. Masks, sanitizers which were now as valuable as gold went off shelves. It was then Zehra got the idea.

“I went to buy a mask which cost me 300 rupees, and at that time I wondered how a poor family could afford these highly priced masks. The masks disappeared from the market and there was a dire need of masks”, says Zehra.

She joined hands with two other girls to make masks from the plain cloth.

“We chose a place and started our work from there. Later four more volunteers joined our group”, she adds.

“It is our last consignment. My team manufactured over twenty eight thousand masks in last five months. Remaining two thousand will be available by the end of this



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week.”

A postgraduate in computer science from Central University, Zehra says she got the support from everyone. “From our families to administration, we got a lot of support. Because of our meagre resources we weren’t planning on making these many masks but administration and an NGO came forward to support our work.”

Sabreena, another team member has been doing the work while attending classes side by side. “Despite the pressure of exams and classes, I spent three hours here, stitching these masks.”

She along with other members got a certificate from the administration. “This is the first time I got some appreciation from the administration. A certificate as well. My parents are happy”, Sabreena said.

Asif Mir, member of the NGO that helped Zehra and her team with their work said that they had distributed more than fifty thousand masks in the valley. “It was challenging when everyone was scared, our team and some other volunteers came forward to help the society and these girls have done a great job.”





Reasons to stay alive

Bisma Riyaz

Reasons to Stay Alive by Matt Haig was published in 2015. It was the author's first dive into the realm of non-fiction. At 24, he found himself wanting to commit suicide, and in writing this book, he explains why he didn't.

Haig does his best to use his experiences with anxiety and depression to help those reading, see how he got through it and how he manages to live with them today. Haig believes that

sharing stories is a way of healing for those struggling with mental illness. To him, reading and writing have been invaluable friends in his travels.

Haig while advising the people struggling with mental health issues to open up writes, "When you are depressed you feel alone, and that no one is going through quite what you are going through. You are so scared of appearing in any way mad, you internalize everything, and you are so scared that people will alienate you further you clam up and don't speak

about it, which is a shame, as speaking about it helps."

The language of the book is very simple but lucid and is full of wisdom and warmth. His personal experiences, and an engaging nature of the book have touched and elucidated a subject that is often frowned upon in our society and looked down as a taboo. It is a must read for anyone who has suffered from mental health disorders or known someone who has had depression for better understanding and clarity on the subject.



Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris

Minhaj Masoodi

Much has been written and said about the genesis of Kashmir conundrum; several authors have analyzed the dispute from various perspectives and given their viewpoints. Christopher Snedden's "Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris", published by Hurst and Company, is one such attempt to understand one of the world's long standing disputes, a potential flashpoint between two nuclear armed neighbors, India and Pakistan.

Divided into five chapters, Snedden has properly contextualized the use of word 'Kashmir'. While the word 'Kashmir' does largely refer to the politically significant Kashmir valley, but in wider context it refers to the whole geopolitical entity, Jammu and Kashmir.

Subsequent chapters explore the journey of the state from under Dogra Rule to its present status as an internationally accepted dispute. It has also very briefly tried to explain the contemporaneous happenings in Jammu and Kashmir and tried to

explore any possible resolution of the dispute in near future in its last chapter.

The book talks about the British insecurities, the ever expanding Czarist Russia and their constant need to have a buffer state between the two mighty empires. Even though the two empires never went to war with each other but the British insecurities about a possible Russian invasion led the British to sell this prized and strategically important entity to a Dogra Chieftain, Raja Gulab Singh by means of a treaty concluded at Amritsar in 1846.

With regards to the sale of Kashmir to Gulab Singh by Britishers, Snedden remarks,

"The sale was a cold, hard real estate transaction in which the Kashmiris were never allowed to offer a bid."

The author talks in detail about the tyrannical and oppressive rule of the Dogra rulers upon the predominantly Muslim populace of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The author has not concentrated all his attention on the Kashmir valley but given significant space to other less talked about regions of Gilgit-Baltistan, Ladakh, 'Azad Kashmir',

Jammu, Poonch Jagir among others.

It highlights how Kashmir was viewed in particular periods. It has also linked the happenings in the late thirties of the 20th century in the Kashmir valley to the struggle for political awakening and emancipation in the subcontinent. Talking about how Indian leaders came into contact with Kashmiri leaders, notably Sheikh Abdullah and how Nehru-Sheikh friendship was to seal the fate of millions, Snedden has tried to address the India, Pakistan and also the China element in the whole story in a rather lucid manner, without any apparent biases.

However, while trying to explain the strategic and political importance of Kashmir to both India and Pakistan, Snedden gets dragged into the larger geopolitical battle in the region, which takes a bit of the sheen away from the book.

Overall, Snedden's work is exceptional, very well researched, bereft of snobbery and without any prejudices; a must read for anyone who wants to intimately understand as to what lies at the heart of the matter.



Kashmir's carpet industry stares at a bleak future

Junaid Andrabi

Kashmir's once bustling handicrafts sector is in doldrums after suffering frequent setbacks in the turmoil hit valley. The continuous lockdowns imposed post August 5 have knelt a death blow to an already struggling industry. Kashmiri carpet has had a very prominent place in handicrafts industry because of its quality and durability. The carpet industry has been a key cog in driving the sector forward.

However, after the abrogation of Article 370 last year, the losses of the people associated with the sector have grown manifold.

"We are facing major losses and are not able to earn anything. We haven't made a single carpet in the last one year",

said Nazir Ahmad, a carpet weaver from Chadoora, Budgam. "Carpets don't sell at good rates now because of which our livelihoods have suffered", he added.

Carpet exports have been on a decline for quite some time but the abrogation of Article 370 and the subsequent pandemic has further impacted the business.

Faheem Andrabi, a carpet trader lamented, "Many con men sell Chinese carpets in the name of Kashmiri carpets. After August, last year, this practice became more common. We weren't able to export enough carpets because of the lockdown and our market has been completely taken over."

"The COVID-19 induced lockdown which followed the August lockdown caused a sharp decline in the number of tourists coming to Kashmir, which has also impacted the carpet business," said

Ghulam Rasool, a carpet trader. "Not just in Kashmir but the exporters are also telling us that there are no buyers for carpets."

"Government must devise a robust strategy to safeguard the craft otherwise it would

become history and would be confined to museums and books," said Imran Baba, a local carpet weaver from Shalimar area. "Weavers should be rewarded and appreciated through incentives and easy loans. Markets and exhibitions must be made available for the carpet

industry. It will bring the dead craft to life," he further added.

According to estimates about one lakh people were associated with carpet making in Kashmir but the number has been on a steady decline ever since.



MERCANTILES



Doctors allege manhandling at Srinagar's hospital

Zakia Qurashi

The COVID-19 impacted majority of the healthcare sectors throughout the globe. The healthcare sector in most equipped countries crumbled one after the other. The scenario in Kashmir valley is no different. Valley hospitals were already under tremendous stress because of the paucity of infrastructure and understaffed hospitals.

With the available resources and the infrastructure, the medical staff in the valley have been doing an exceptional job by trying to contain the pandemic. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the hospitals in the valley with experts warning that our "Italy moment" has arrived.

However, the people instead of asking

questions from the government have been directing their ire against the doctors and nurses. Last month, in one of the leading hospitals of the valley, a senior resident was beaten up by the patient's attendant.

Dr. Mahpara, who is a senior doctor at a leading valley hospital had given her resignation when she was beaten up by an attendant. "I was posted in an isolation ward. I was on a round when a PG called me to have a look at a patient who was very sick", said Dr.

Mahpara. "When I told his attendant that the patient was having bilateral pneumonia and is suffering from COVID-19, he grabbed me by my collar and beat me up", she added.

"We were forced to go on a strike. There isn't any proper security. Our paramedical

staff is also not so huge. They are taking out the anger of maladministration on us", she further added.

Another resident doctor who wished not to be named said, "We have faced hardships while dealing with the patients and their attendants from the olden times but the COVID-19 has aggravated the situation manifold."

"Some of them think that the whole story about COVID-19 is a hoax and WHO pays us money once we label a patient as positive."

Though the instances of beating up medicos are not new, the cases of violence have only gone up since the COVID-19 outbreak. Doctor and the paramedical staff have been demanding security presence from the government and the hospital administrations across the valley.

Shalnaar healthcare centre in shambles, residents aghast

Shagufta Rashid

A far flung habitation at Shalnaar, Frestewaar in upper reaches of Budgam is lacking basic health care facilities.

Situated 22km away from Budgam town, a village of 450 people has a small dispensary but lacks basic facilities like beds, first aid kits and ambulance.

Ghulam Hassan Gors, a local resident of Shalnaar said, "We are facing immense hardships due to lack of proper healthcare infrastructure and we are being compelled to visit district hospital Budgam or sub-district hospital Khan Sahib for treatment."

"We have to visit the main District hospital in Budgam for even a minor abdominal pain," he added.

Due to non-availability of ambulance, village head, Siraj ud din Janjoo said that people have died because of being unable to get proper treatment on time.

"Recently, a heart patient felt unconscious. We couldn't rush him to the hospital because of non-availability of ambulance and the patient died at home."

"We tried to approach the Government

for management and development of the dispensary in the village, but received no response from them. They ignored all our demands and request", he added.

"Due to non-availability of ambulance in the village we have no other option than carrying patients on shoulders or in palanquins to hospital," Siraj said.

Although the health department emphasizes on the health status of people in rural areas, the countryside is poorly served, as healthcare facilities, both public and private, are largely concentrated in the cities of Srinagar and Jammu. The district Budgam health officials however, say the situation has improved over the years, but locals alleged that not even a single gynaecologist is available for the women. As a result, expecting mothers bear the brunt of poor health facilities.

"Pregnant women have to visit District Hospital Budgam for the proper checkup. It's always hard for them to travel that much distance despite the weather conditions and non-availability of proper transport facilities," said Naseema Bano, who works as Asha Worker in the village. "I help them reach the hospital for regular checkups and other facilities but I feel it's

not going right with them, they deserve better," she added.

Time and again, the villagers have protested for a hospital and ambulance in the village but all they have received are assurances. "If only assurances could have helped us, we would have happily agreed," said Lateef Ahmad Deedad.

"Now the COVID-19 has been another addition to our miseries. We are afraid of visiting district hospital because of fear of contracting the virus. Our village should at least get proper dispensary, an ambulance and most importantly a doctor who is available 24x7", added Lateef.



Rehabilitation centres paralyzed, patients suffer

Ifra Mushtaq Moon

Maqsood Ahmad, 32 is writhing in pain as his wife helps him stand up in their dimly lit one story house in Baramulla. Having suffered a fracture in both legs after falling from a tree last year, life has been difficult for Maqsood.

“I worked as a laborer. Last year, I was plucking fruits in a farm from a huge pear tree when I fell. Both my legs were shattered. I underwent three surgeries. After that doctors advised me to go for intense rehabilitation therapy”, says Maqsood, visibly in pain.

“I registered myself at Shafaqat Rehabilitation Centre, Srinagar for physiotherapy and strength building. Everything was going smoothly until this corona virus came. I haven’t attended a session since because the centre is shut.”

Rehabilitation and physiotherapy is an important part of the recovery process for persons who have undergone physical trauma. However, in wake of the pandemic, their care seems to have been badly hit.

“We had no option but to shut our centre because of the COVID-19. Physiotherapy, rehab is a contact based process. It cannot be done without

physical contact with the affected person. When the pandemic broke, we were left with no choice”, said Arif Baba, who runs a physiotherapy centre in Baramulla.

“We used to treat 25-30 patients per day. We don’t do that anymore. We try to guide them on phone now”, added Arif.

Impact of COVID-19 on this facet of healthcare has been one of the most under reported ones. Patients and physiotherapists are of the view that rehab processes should be restarted and governments should facilitate their opening by laying down SOPs and guidelines.

Government mulls reopening of schools, experts caution

Imran Bashir

Closure of educational institutions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge to education of students. As efforts to return to “normal” are on, the countries worldwide are trying to open up educational institutions. Indian government is also planning to re-open the institutions lest the education of students suffer. However, concerns have been raised from all sides over the move that government is mulling, more so in the Kashmir valley, where the number of cases is only increasing day by day.

Jahan Ara, a university student feels the reopening of educational institutions is not a bad idea albeit if done with proper precautionary measures. “Reopening of schools and colleges is not a bad idea. I think it’ll be a good step. We can take some preventive measures to keep ourselves safe.”

“I am craving to go back to university.”

However, not all agree with



this view. Badshah Mir, who is a government teacher at a school in central Kashmir’s Budgam district feels, it is not the appropriate time for reopening of schools. “Situation is not favorable. Reopening of schools

is not good when there is a health risk. We cannot expect children to take hundred percent precautions when adults have

been faltering.”

“Reopening of educational sector is needed but not at the cost of our lives”, he adds.

Dr Ariz Siddique, a health expert was of the view that educational institutions should not be reopened at this juncture. “When COVID -19 cases are drastically increasing, there is huge risk in reopening schools. We lack basic medical infrastructure. Our hospitals are grappling with the rising cases. It’ll not be a very good idea”, he said.

Anees ul Islam, head of a private school was in favour of odd even scheme. “We need to open schools on three day basis, with particular set of teachers for a given group based on odd and even roll numbers.”

On the other hand, government seems to be going ahead with reopening of schools to ensure that education is brought back on track after having derailed post August last year.





Humpora village craves for safe drinking water

Aaqib Naseem

Humpora, a hamlet in Langate, Handwara located half a mile from Tehsil headquarters at Kralgund, faces immense water shortage. Due to unavailability of clean water and government apathy, people of the area have been left to fend off for themselves. “Langate-Humpora water pipeline was discarded thirty years ago and the new Zagsundri pipeline was laid which carried water to every village except ours”, said Abdul Rashid, a local numberdar.

“We demand safe drinking water but our pleas seem to fall on deaf ears. We had repeatedly approached the then MLA but nothing substantial happened.”

Womenfolk in this 350 household hamlet carry water to their homes in pitchers from neighboring villages of



Pandithpora and Nahama braving hot summer sun and chilly winters. “It takes me half an hour to get water and every day I spend up to three hours fetching enough water for daily use”, said Fatima, a local woman.

“I am not able to do any house chores. My daughter who is just fifteen has to do all the work.”

Documents reveal water testing done by the erstwhile PHE department had declared the wells used for fetching water already unsafe for drinking purposes in 2017 but villagers are still using them due to non-availability of any alternate source. As a result, people have fallen sick.

Mohammad Yusuf Mir, a resident of Humpora alleged, “Jal Shakti department handed us requisite number of pipes to be laid from Gundchabootra to our village but the natives of Gundchabootra intervened and stopped the work.”

“Our department handed over some pipes to the locals to fix them and get water from the village of Gundchabootra but due to some political interference, the plan did not go through. We are working on the modalities and the issue would be resolved soon”, said an official of Jal Shakti department on the condition of anonymity.

Ganderbal village sans basic amenities



Nissar Lone

Residents of Gund Sarsingh, Sonamarg located in Central Kashmir’s Ganderbal district have complained about the lack of the basic amenities. Located on the

left side of the river Sindh, people complain of facing problems round the year.

Mohammad Afzal, a former panch of the village alleged, “Under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) construction of the road and a bridge

over river Sindh was started in 2018 but left incomplete.”

“The ration ghat of the village is 3 km away from our village. In absence of any proper roads, we have to carry the ration bags on our shoulders come rain, sunshine or snow”, he added. Apart from roads, there are improper footpaths in this village which makes a huge difficulties in the rainy seasons.

Ghulam Qadir, a local shop keeper said, “We have to cross the fields to reach the road and our clothes gets dirty and wet in rainy seasons. It gets particularly hard during winter.”

Another local, Bashir Ahmad said, “In case of any medical emergency, we have to get the patients out of here on our shoulders.”

Accusing the district administration of not paying any heed to their demands, the locals of the area have asked for the completion of the road and the bridge that was left incomplete.

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