

Vol 13 | Issue 09 | Pages 08 | OCTOBER 15, 2020

# MERC TIMES



**MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE  
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR**



## WETLAND ENCROACHMENT ON RISE, EXPERTS WARN

Full  
Story on **P3**

INSIDE  
STORIES



Saffron production dwindling,  
farmers looking for other  
options  
**P02**



Paddy cultivators unable to find  
cheap labour for harvesting  
**P05**



Two entrepreneurs turn defunct fish  
pond into exotic lotus farm  
**P07**



## Years on, construction of health centre at Ari, Kangan still incomplete



Sabreena Mir

**K**ashmir's rural areas have long suffered due to the lack of basic health facilities. In Ganderbal's Ari Goripora, Kangan, work was started for the new health centre building, eight years ago but is yet to be completed.

The health centre presently functions from the old building at present.

The work on the ten bedded health centre began in 2012 with budgetary allocation of 1.5 crores but has missed several deadlines, since.

"People in our area are facing serious problems. The staff is currently stationed in the old building which has a single room. The building was scheduled to be completed in two years", said Zahoor Ahmed, Sarpanch of Ari Goripora, Kangan.

Manzoor Ahmed (33), a resident of Ari Goripora said, "Health care facilities are woefully inadequate in our village. Poor villagers cannot afford to go for private treatment. At times, it becomes difficult to take the patients to sub-district hospital, Kangan, because of their critical condition or old age."

"Pregnant women face many problems. Work on this hospital should be completed immediately so that our troubles are put to an end."

The staff posted at the health centre also feel constrained.

"We don't have enough place to sit in the hospital. Paucity of space has forced us to cramp all departments in one room. The hospital staff as well as the people are suffering due to space constraints", said Dr. Sakeena.

It has been very difficult for us to treat patients in a single room during the ongoing pandemic." Residents have expressed dismay over the pace of work and urged the authorities to complete the work on the health centre without any further delay.



People in our area are facing serious problems. The staff is currently stationed in the old building which has a single room. The building was scheduled to be completed in two years



## Saffron production dwindling, farmers looking for other options

Murtaza Ali

**M**ohammad Yousuf, 55 is preparing to sow the oats seeds on his two acre land which once was rich for saffron cultivation. He used to get an average produce of 5 to 7 kilograms of saffron every year but, now seeds have decayed under the crust.

"Southern belt of Budgam district along with the bordering Pulwama are among the few locations which are considered favourable for saffron cultivation. The land here was affluent to cultivate saffron. We used to grow the crop from generations but the production has dropped severely in the last few years", Yousuf said.

Yousuf used to cultivate saffron along with his father.

"Saffron has been our main source of income. In addition to cultivation, we also used to sell saffron, but all that is closed now", he added.

As per the directorate of agriculture Kashmir's website, the production



Farmers are equally responsible for its destruction. Despite just having a four year cycle, farmers keep using same corms for 30 years which has degraded the quality and the productivity of the crop

of Kashmiri saffron has declined by 65% over last 22 years from 16 metric tonnes to 5.6 metric tonnes due to climate change, cheaper Iranian imports, poor irrigation, outdated farming and post-harvest practices.

Another farmer, Ghulam Ahmad still practices saffron farming in hope of some miracle which would

revive this red gold. "Despite crores being spent by the government to save this precious crop, nothing good has come out. Even with GI tag, nothing has helped farmers and growers", he said. "The government started irrigation scheme back in 2013 under National Saffron Mission but the scheme was never properly implemented", Ahmad added.

While talking to a saffron expert Dr. Ghulam Hassan, professor at Sher-i-Kashmir

Agricultural University of Science and Technology (SKAUST), he said, "Farmers are equally responsible for its destruction. Despite just having a four year cycle, farmers keep using same corms for 30 years which has degraded the quality and the productivity of the crop."

He also added that SKAUST in collaboration with foreign institutes are looking for ways to save the crop.



# Dilapidated condition of Gariend Chattabugh-Wadwan road irks Budgam residents

**Tamana Aarizoo**

The residents of central Kashmir's Budgam district have complained about the bad condition of road from Nasrullapora Gariend to Chattabugh Wadwan. Residents claim that the concerned authorities have failed to macadamize the road from last several years.

The majority of brick kilns in district Budgam fall in the vicinity of Nasrullapora, Gariend area. Trucks use this route to transport the material from one place to another. In addition, a huge number of local and commercial vehicles run on this road on a daily basis.

Sheikh Imaad, a local resident of Nasrullapora said, "Huge trenches have developed at several places on the road in which rain water gets logged due to which

commuters face huge inconvenience. This road has become a nightmare for the locals and the travelers."

Every day before leaving for school,



colleges and offices, we have to beg Sumo drivers to carry us to our destinations. Sometimes, we have to pay two times the approved fares as drivers say that bumpy roads cost them thousands in repairs

every year", said Athar Khursheed, a local resident of Gariend Budgam. Another local also alleged that the road which connects almost 20 major villages of the town has affected the business and other activities of the area.

"The curve at Wadwan where the road begins has been narrowed down to such an extent that drivers find it difficult to negotiate. Besides, there is not enough space for vehicles to cross the overhead railway bridge near Chattabugh. Residents have dug out the road to let the vehicles pass," said Shameem

Ahmad Wani Resident of Chattabugh.

Residents of the area have appealed the Deputy Commissioner Budgam and other concerned authorities to look into their grievances and take necessary steps.

# Wetland encroachment on rise, experts warn



**Tanweer Ahmad**

Wetlands in Kashmir act as a stop gap for migratory birds and are an ideal habitat for them to breed. Kashmir valley has a decent presence of wetlands which provide shelter to diverse flora and fauna and also act as a buffer during the floods. Smaller wetlands are mostly found in areas along rivers adjacent to agricultural land.

Most of the prominent wetlands in Kashmir like Wulur Lake, Hokersar and Shalle bugh have been encroached resulting in the habitat loss for these birds.

Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology, University of Kashmir, Dr. Bilal Ahmad Bhat while talking to MERC Times said that the wetlands are not only an ideal habitat for migratory birds but also act as indicators of environmental health. "These species, especially frogs

act as indicators of environmental health as they are sensitive to the slightest changes in the environment."

Most of the agricultural land in Shopian, Sopore, Kulgam and Anantnag has been converted to horticultural land due to which the ecosystem has suffered.

"For conservation of these bodies, we have management authorities. Different projects have been launched for their preservation. The government is doing its part but it all depends on how well these projects are implemented on ground."

"The methods for conservation should be purely scientific and free from any interference." Moreover, wetlands have become contaminated due to runoff from agricultural lands which is laden with pesticides and fertilizers, which has consequently degraded the quality of these bodies."



MERC TIMES



# Tourism badly hit after August 19

PEOPLE OF PAHALGAM DEMAND RECONCILIATION TO KICKBACK THEIR ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Asif Amin

With the surging COVID-19 cases in J&K, the number of tourists visiting the valley has declined since the August 5. This has severely affected the attraction of Pahalgam. Like other tourist places, people dependent on the tourism have been rendered without livelihood, with no hopes of any improvement soon.

The picturesque town looks deserted as all the shops, hotels and other establishments in the market remain closed. The local shopkeepers said that from last three months the local say, no tourist has visited the town.

The tourism sector in the Valley has had a tremendous impact, which not only resulted

in losses to the people associated with trade but has also rendered thousands of people jobless, who are directly or indirectly depend on the tourism.

Ashiq Hussain, a part-time tourist guide of Pahalgam hasn't earned even a single penny from last one year since the August 5. He said "people have not fully resumed the economic activities which are largely dependent on tourism without the influx of tourists, how would we earn because most people have no other source of income. But we can't resume the business activities again without the government support," a shopkeeper said.

According to the Times of India report around 8lakh tourists visited Kashmir in 2018, among them around 5lakh visited Pahalgam.

People associated with the business demand government assistance for helping them out from this dire situation.



# Water Scarcity in Aarigam, residents aghast

PEOPLE DEMAND SWIFT ACTION FROM JAL SHAKTI DEPARTMENT



Shagufta Rashid

The residents of Aarigam, Khan Sahib in Central Kashmir's Budgam district are up in arms

against the Jal Shakti department due to shortage of drinking water in the area. The residents say that they have to suffer a lot to obtain portable water. A water supply scheme meant for the area is unable to cater to the needs, as area is located at tail end of the supply.

"The supply of the water is such that even a glass takes several hours to get filled", said a local resident, Ghulam Mohiduddin Bhat, mockingly.

Majeed Ahmad Dar, another resident of Aarigam Khan Sahib said, "We are facing water shortage since April. However, from

the last few weeks, the situation has gone from bad to worse."

"Taps run dry most of the times and water supply is restricted to only a few hours during the night", he added. "We approached the authorities several times but to no avail," said Firdous Ahmad Ganaie, a resident of Aarigam Khan Sahib Budgam.

"Our women have to walk in this harsh winter to fetch water from wells and streams", he said. When contacted Executive Engineer PHE division Budgam, Gurmeet Singh said, "The issues of drinking water that the villagers face will be resolved soon. We have some technical problems due to which we could not supply sufficient water in the area."

"The supply issue will be resolved in coming weeks", he added



# Paddy cultivators unable to find cheap labour for harvesting



Musaib Iqbal

Paddy cultivators of Ganderbal district are facing a tough time in finding a cheap labour for harvesting amid the pandemic.

“I figure this may be the last season for developing paddy in the fields if this Covid 19 doesn’t disappear”, says Haji Ghulam Nabi, following a tiring day in the field in Nagbal area of central Kashmir’s Ganderbal district.

Haji left working on his fields after the cheaper labour from outside states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh became available. They would accomplish more work in less time and that too at a cheaper cost.

“If outside workers don’t come, I may stop cultivating paddy altogether”, he added.

Around two kilometres from Nagbal, in Darend, Mushtaq Ahmad, who has seven Kanal of land also works as a day labourer.

“To harvest paddy on one Kanal of land, a group of four neighbourhood workers is charging Rs3200. For similar work, outside workers used to charge Rs1000.”

“We are helpless. We need to keep the fields ready for the next

year”, he added.

“Paddy is the principle food here and its sweet taste can’t be found in the rice which is imported from Punjab”, says Syed Junaid. “The yield gives wage work to many, and the families here utilize large portions of harvest for their own consumption.”

This year, owners like Haji and Mushtaq, who own small holdings face double whammy. Because of the lockdown, they have been unable to go for their day labour jobs for which the normal rate here is Rs. 600 per day at block ovens, sand extraction pitches and construction sites.

On the other hand, during the ongoing harvest season, they had to employ labourers for harvesting their fields.

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

# Unavailability of public transport in Budgam

Azmat Maqbool

Public transport in central Kashmir’ Budgam district is unable to cater to public because of paucity of buses. The number of buses available in the district is significantly lower than the number required to meet people’s needs.

People in several Budgam villages such as Kulbugh, Razwen and Ratnipora are facing immense problems due to the lack of public transport service from the past many years.

According to locals, public transport, including cabs, buses and mini buses are usually not available to passengers during the day except during in the early morning hours causing problems for people. “Employees who do not have their private vehicle, find it difficult to reach office and are marked absent at times”, said Aijaz Ahmad.

Sahil Ameen, a student said, “In the absence of public transport, many passengers are forced to take lift from strangers, so that they can reach their destination on time.”

He further stated, “Majority of people cannot afford private vehicles. They have to rely on public transport.”

The commuting people have expressed dismay over the non-availability of public transport in the areas, saying it has increased their problems.

Meanwhile, the people have appealed to the higher authorities to look into the matter.

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





# Tech startup democratizing healthcare

Zakia Qurashi

**G**ofindd is an online health tech startup that aims at personalizing and digitizing the health records of a patient. The startup provides various medical services ranging from booking doctors, medical labs and ordering medicines.

Founded in 2019 by Syed Ubaid, Gofindd is the first online health tech startup in the valley with the ambition of providing an accurate prognosis of the diseases of a patient.

**The story so far:**

Syed Ubaid, a 23 year old science graduate, got the idea in 2017, when he used to accompany his elderly grandmother to the doctors. "Finding a suitable doctor and waiting in a long queue for hours to get an appointment is exhausting", said Ubaid.

"I used to accompany my grandmother for her medical checkups. We had to wait for hours with the huge bundle of medical reports to get an appointment", he added.

"It was then that the idea of Gofindd came to my mind."

In October 2018, Ubaid along with his partner participated in the J&K Startup Yatra held in JKEDI

Pampore. "We presented our idea there and won the second prize for Innovation and technology." After a break of few months they were incubated in JKEDI in May 2019, where they started to work on the idea but later on had to leave it midway because of the Internet blackout post August 5.

In March this year, they restarted their work and developed the basic product. "We have built the MVP (Minimal Viable Product) which is the basic product. It is also called as POC (Proof of Concept)",

explained Ubaid. "As for now, we only have the android version that can be downloaded from our website www.gofinddoc.com", he added.

In September this year, Ubaid along with his partner got selected in one of the top incubation centers of India; AIC-

BIMTECH, Noida, under the Khoj program.

"We are currently incubated in AIC-BIMTECH, Noida, for a three month program, where we are being mentored about different marketing and business strategies", he added.

"We are planning to launch it very soon. We are hoping to expand our idea in different geographies as well. Our aim is to democratize the healthcare system."



I used to accompany my grandmother for her medical checkups. We had to wait for hours with the huge bundle of medical reports to get an appointment

# Authorities order offline exams, students anxious

Ifra Mushtaq Moon

**W**ith the government having given a go ahead for the exams, the students, parents and the teachers alike, are anxious. Their anxiety isn't ill founded. The COVID-19 cases have been on steady rise and with winter approaching, apprehensions have only grown. The students having to appear in the exams without proper arrangements in place in current circumstances has created a fear psychosis.

Recently, 11th standard students across the valley were on roads, protesting for their mass promotion to the 12th standard. Apart from academics, it's the threat of the virus that has caused worry to the students and their parents.

Sharmeen, a class 8 student at Baramulla Public School said that she isn't comfortable with the idea of appearing in the exams given the current situation. "Exams demand constant focus but when you are worried about the person sitting next to you, if he or she has COVID, how



will you focus on your own paper?"

"Apart from that, we haven't really studied much. There's only so much we could do."

Another student, Shahzaib, appearing for the tenth class board exams next month

also expressed the same views. "I have the fear of contracting the virus in the back of my mind. The government has given us some relaxations but it will be very difficult to come out of this unscathed given the scale of the exams."

"I have old family members at my home. I could become a potential carrier and bring home the virus given the exposure. It's very scary."

Some parents feel the students should have been promoted directly to the next standard without putting them and their families at risk.

"Government should have promoted the students directly. They are taking unnecessary risks", said Aashiq Hussain, a father of two children who are appearing for board exams this year.

Shafeeqa Hassan, a teacher who teaches at a government middle school in Baramulla was of the view that if proper precautions were to be taken, the whole exercise can be done with ease. "With proper precautions in place, exams can be conducted without any hiccups but we have to ensure proper following of SOP's and guidelines."

## Two entrepreneurs turn defunct fish pond into exotic lotus farm



Marki Aadil

Two cousin brothers Bilal Ahmad Dar and Jalal-ud-din Dar hailing from Markipora, an obscure village of dense fruit orchards in north Kashmir's Pattan Baramulla have cultivated Lotus stem (Nadru) in their barren land.

Lotus stem, mostly wiped out from Wular and Dal Lakh, an expensive delicacy much loved in Kashmir, is sufficiently available in local vegetable markets, locally known as "Nadru."

Bilal and Jalal-ud-din have turned their barren land into a mesmerizing lotus garden which has become a focus of attraction into their village.

"It needs patience and skill", says Bilal.

To be one's own source of employment and to meet the ends, one needs to put in a lot of hard work and the hard work eventually pays off", he adds.

His cousin, Jalal-ud-din Dar said he came up with a fish farm at his native village after he completed his masters, but this fish farm business went bust. So he along with his cousin turned the fish pond into a lotus garden and started harvesting its stem.

"We do decent business from the harvested stems", they added. The duo while wanting to convey a message to youth said, "People should try to be self-reliant, think out of the box and be more innovative.



## Apple town grappling with prolonged power cuts

Jehangir Hussain

The boon chilling winters in Kashmir mark the beginning of unpredictable and prolonged electricity cuts, connectivity is lost and after few minutes homes reel in darkness.

People living in north Kashmir's Sopore reel under darkness as they alleged that Power Development Department resorts to frequent and arbitrary power cuts without any proper curtailment schedule. Javed Ahmed Najar who owns a workshop said, "We face a daily power cut of 6-8 hours. My work is totally dependent on electricity. If it continues, I'll run into out of savings."

Another local resident Umar Ahmed Parray, said, "we barely get electricity for two hours straight as winter is upon us." "How are we going to get through the winter without electricity?" he asked.

Meanwhile the PDD officials told MERC Times that, "people 24x7 supply but we have totally deficient infrastructure. Sometimes it is impossible to provide electricity every house hold all at once."

"Also, the load increases considerably during winter. We are compelled to resort to power cuts to ensure that the transformers don't go bust", he added.

WE BARELY GET ELECTRICITY FOR TWO HOURS STRAIGHT AS WINTER IS UPON US



MERC TIMES



# Govt lending helping hand to Kashmiri artisans

**Minhaj Masoodi**

**O**n a sunny autumn day, Ishfar Ali, an artist from Downtown, Srinagar, is painting a portrait of an old man at a stall that has given to him by the government at Kashmir Haat.

The government in order to give a flip to the artisan community whose sales have taken a shamble and drastic hit due to series of lockdowns in the valley, has organized a craft mela on October, 13. Initially, intended for only 15 days, it was extended by another two weeks to uplift further sales for the craftsmen. Ishfar feels immense gratitude for having been provided this opportunity. "I did decent business during this while. I did sales of around thirty five thousand rupees. In addition, I also made a lot of new contacts during this while and was also able to attract a lot of attention."

"Early on, many people used to come, but the number has gradually decreased," she adds

While, Ishfar may have been able to do go good business, not everyone feels the same. Another stall owner, Rayees says, "We did not do have any business

here. We have been sitting idle here for two weeks. There is no marketing from of government, no advertising. The mela has had no real impact."

"Even though, the stall fee was waived off, but unfortunately, there weren't any sales either." On the other hand government has asked to the civil society members, to actively buy the products from the artisans at Kashmir Haat he added

Talking to the manager Central Market Srinagar, Syed Mohammad Shafi about the mela, he said, "The artisans who are registered with the handicraft department have been sitting idle since August last year. The items that they have produced this past year has not been sold yet. So, the government provided stalls free of cost to the artisans and weavers to display and sell their items."

"Despite witnessing modest footfall, the total sales were around 14-15 lakh rupees. Out of the available 68 stalls, around 60 stalls were put up." However, the consensus among the stall owners was that the sales have been subdued and that the government has not done enough to promote the event.

MERC TIMES

**EDITORIAL TEAM**

Patron: Prof. Talat Ahmad, Vice-Chancellor | Chief Editor: Aaliya Ahmed | Editor: Syeda Afshana | Graphic Artist: Aga Shahi

Students Editorial Team: Minhaj Masoodi, Ifra Moon, Zakia Qurashi, Aqib Naseem, Junaid Andrabi.

e-mail: editor.merc@gmail.com | website: www.mercs.uok.edu.in