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Late Marriages: Reason of Angst And Torment

Shahana

In a society such as ours, marriage as an institution is revered. However, off late the trend of late marriages has picked up, not due to one but many factors. The average age of marriage for males has increased from 24 to 32 while for females it has gone up from 21 to 28, making it a matter of grave concern.

Reasons for late marriages in Kashmir range from caste incompatibility to huge expenses and dowry related issues while some prefer to have a well-established career before entering into a marital knot. Subsequently deferred marriages have resulted in far reaching consequences ranging from depression and instability to frustration and suicide.

A research conducted by the Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir, revealed that “55% of the total population of Kashmir never actually gets married even after attaining the standard marriageable age.”

The study further stated, “In addition to moral, ethical, cultural and social implications, this increasing phenomenon has posed potential demographic threat to the local community.”

Extravaganza in marriages is another factor that contributes to late marriages. Kashmir has witnessed the new trend of serving dishes beyond limits in wedding feasts, even currency notes of the high denomination are presented to guests.

Others have to follow such trends compulsively to evade disgrace. But the poor families fail to withstand this pressure and find it difficult to get their daughters married.

Uzma wani, a Computer science student said that talking to one's parents about marriage is castigated in the society. “It's our parents who decide when and whether the child should get married and in the process of looking for the perfect partner, their children cross the actual marriageable age.”

National Health Profile 2015 compiled by Central Bureau of Health Intelligence, under Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, shows that mean age of marriage for females in JK is higher than any other state.



Rising Man-Animal Conflict Creating Fear Among People

Tamana Arizoo

Frequent incursions on the habitat of wild animals has resulted in increased incidents of man-animal conflict. Destroying of forests and habitat has forced these animals to come to areas of civilian population in search of food, consequently making people vulnerable to animal attacks.

Due to the unrelenting attacks from wild animals particularly leopards and bears, huge loss of human life as well as livestock has been reported particularly from areas of district Budgam. This has resulted in a fear psychosis among the residents.

The attacks have become frequent. This month alone, two attacks were witnessed in Khag area of Budgam. On 9th July, a 55 old year-old-person was attacked near his house, at Khag area, later the man was rescued by some passers-by. Similarly, on 11th July, a leopard dragged a three-year-old girl in Pallar area of Budgam. However, the baby was rescued by her brother.

Majid, a local resident of Naroo Budgam said, “The main reason of attacks is deforestation. We have destroyed their habitat and the wild animals are now creating havoc in the villages below. It has made the lives of common men miserable.”

“Authorities should distinct identify dangerous areas and should keep sign boards there”, said Shugufta, a resident of Khansaheb.

Wild animals in Kashmir have often come down to human habitations in recent years and have attacked villagers in the valley, especially since armed conflict began in the region in the 1990s. Animals have often been killed, captured or harmed in retaliation and these conflicts are a major threat to the continued survival of many species including the Asiatic Black Bear and the Common Leopard.



Outside And Safe: Open Air Community Classes Resume In Eidgah

Ifra Hassan

owing to the slow internet speed and unavailability of smartphones to students, engineer-turned-teacher, Muneer Alam has started free open-air classes at Eidgah in Srinagar.

Coronavirus has entailed a change in the global order. As it continues to spread across the globe, schools have been shut by majority of the countries in order to slowdown the transmission of the virus. However, the closure has affected the education of more than 1.5 billion school children throughout the world.

Students in Kashmir valley have been at the receiving end of this pandemic. Having being denied access to education for past one year, the conduct of online classes came as a much-needed respite. But the throttled 2G internet speed has played spoil sport. "I am a teacher and it's my responsibility to help my students as much as can. I tried online classes but poor internet speed and frequent shutdowns made it very difficult for students as well for teachers, that is why I went for open air classes. This way students don't face internet issues", said Alam.

Alam has been teaching students of class 11th and 12th and his idea is to inspire teachers of other localities to take similar



steps. Alam believes that this way the students will not waste their precious time and instead focus on their education and career.

"Students in our valley have been going through tough times and their education has been badly hit amid this lockdown. I also wanted them to share some moments in open air along with the learning process", he added.

Students follow SOP's, wearing masks and maintain physical distance. The class begins before the sunrise at the Eidgah where the number of students has risen substantially. Students are also happy with this initiative. Students believe that open air classes are better as compared to online classes. "I am attending classes from a week here and it

feels great", said Uzma Javaid, a student.

"Interaction and physical presence of teacher is what I consider important in learning process and that is what we get here. In online classes we hardly unmute ourselves and speak", she added

"Amid pandemic we are also going through a lot of mental stress. We are thankful to Muneer sir for this initiative", added Uzma.

Another student Ubaid Rashid said, "There are subjects like mathematics that are very difficult to understand through online classes and open-air classes made this thing easy for us."

"I am able to understand the concepts better. Class starts in early morning when our mind is always fresh. Also, there is no issue of connectivity", he added.



Mubashir Bashir

Players Unknown Battleground or PUBG as it is famously called is an online multiplayer game that has become a rage among the people, developed and published by PUBG corporation, a subsidiary of South Korean video game company Bluehole.

PUBG's impact on people's personal and professional life has jeopardized their holistic development. It has some intoxicating/addictive elements which work as prime movers for multiple disorders.

Most of the bad effects of video games are blamed on the violence they contain. That's what experts says about PUBG. Children who play more violent video games are more likely to have increased aggressive thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Recently, a thirteen-year-old boy from South Kashmir committed

suicide because his father did not give him his mobile phone for playing the game.

Due to the pandemic, people are looking for ways and means to pass these hard times. PUBG has become a loyal companion of many young boys and girls in the valley who want to escape the grim reality that has engulfed us. But it too has come at a cost. "Lockdown has left us with a plenty of time on our hands. I often play PUBG to kill my time", said Hafeez, a resident of Chadoora. "But it has messed up sleep schedule because I lose track of time while playing it", he added.

"I have become really cranky ever since I started playing PUBG during this pandemic. I get irritated a lot and most often take my frustration out on my siblings and parents", said another PUBG Player, Aijaz.

People who play this game for longer periods have reported different types of pains and injuries which include photosensitive epilepsy, head and eye strains, auditory hallucinations, wrist and neck pain while playing the game.

PUBG 'PANDEMIC'



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Covid Hits Non-Covid Patients As They Rush to Medical Shops

Zakia Qurashi

Coronavirus has restricted everyone to their homes because of its contagious nature. While the hospitals are overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, health concerns and welfare of non-COVID patients has taken a hit.

The healthcare system and the related infrastructure in rural Kashmir is particularly ill equipped and scarce. The awful condition of public health centres is quite lamentable, with government having failed to upgrade them in the recent years. In this time of pestilence, the rural medical shops have been serving the non-COVID patients.

“Government has always shown negligence towards the rural development. We are dependent on these small-time medical shops to get ourselves treated”, said Javid Ahmed, who works as a private teacher in a local school. “If they would not have been there, we would have died way before COVID would reach us”, added Javid.

“These local medical shops have been guised as a blessing for the people in these difficult times. They are providing the basic treatment to the patients suffering from acute ailments”, he further said.

While conversing with one of the nurses who runs a small clinic in her locality, she said, “The current situation opened the flood gates in the rural healthcare system where government had not shown any interest. It all came crumbling down. So, it is incumbent on us to treat them with our confined expertise.”

Deteriorating health of the residents of Kashmir has become a matter of serious concern and is evident from the grim condition of the top valley hospitals, the discrepancy in reports and the lack of basic facilities.

“I attend some 15-20 patients in a day. I try my best to provide them the basic medication and ease their suffering. The unavailability of local healthcare systems in the rural areas impels the people to visit the hospitals that are brimmed with the highly contagious coronavirus”, said Muhammad Razaak, a medical assistant while sitting in his small medical shop.

While talking to these medical professionals serving in rural Kashmir, a sense of uncertainty is seen in terms of their own protection against the contracting of this virus.

These local medical shops have been guised as a blessing for the people in these difficult times. They are providing the basic treatment to the patients suffering from acute ailments

Sports World Faces Existential Threat Due to Pandemic



Imran Bashir

After the outbreak of coronavirus, sporting activity across the world got suspended. The scenario is no different in Kashmir. The stadiums which were bustling with sports activities before the lockdown now present a deserted view.

Soliha Yousuf, an international Rugby player is now restricted to the confines of her home. She no longer ventures out to play or for a practice session. “It has badly affected our schedule. We used to get match schedules in March but no such schedule was announced this time”, says Soliha. “During summer we used to have evening practice sessions, and on Sunday, a full-day practice session. We used to train strenuously”, she added.

“We now remain in touch through webinars and video conferencing apps to discuss our training schedules and routines,” she said. “Since Rugby is a physical sport, webinars cannot be a substitute for training, but we try nonetheless”, Soliha added.

Fitness is always a top priority for sportspersons. During COVID lockdown, physios have been unable to reach their players. Players and coaches now try their workout sessions inside their homes to remain physically fit. “My wife bought a Peloton Bike for me, which is the cultish internet-connected fitness device. It has helped me stay fit during COVID lockdown”, said David Robertson, coach of Real Kashmir football club.

I used to participate in different cricket leagues across Kashmir and earn a handsome amount of money, but now due to lockdown I don't even have money for my daily expenses”, said a local cricketer, Aijaz Ahmad.

In the current situation, players in different sports are expecting their organizations to come forward with financial assistance for players who play at district levels. One such player, on the conditions of anonymity alleged, “The sports associations are only paying attention towards national level players and we are being completely neglected.”



8 X 4 Inch Screen, New Classroom

Minhaj Tasneem Masoodi

A way from school for close to a year, an 8x4 screen is the new classroom for Tahir Zahoor. The device that teachers have always tried to keep away from the school is the only connect between the teachers and the students—a new medium to study and learn.

In December last year, a virus was detected in China. Come July 2020, there's barely any country that has not been impacted by the virus. Every aspect of our lives has been impacted. Education has been one of the biggest casualties of the pandemic, more so in the valley. The education sector in valley was already in shambles due to the lockdown that was imposed post August 5 decision. The pandemic has further exacerbated the situation.

Tahir enrolled in GHSS Mujgund says he isn't happy with online classes. "I don't enjoy attending classes online. They are no substitute for the regular classes", he says.

The clock has struck 11. Tahir hurriedly takes some tea for his father, who's sitting at his shop. Son of a small-time shopkeeper, Tahir, after handing over the kettle to his father, heads home. He has to attend his classes online. Online classes are the new normal.

"Whenever teacher is teaching us, we face various problems. Sometimes, the audio breaks and other times we are simply not able to join the classes because the internet connectivity is so poor. It makes things very difficult to understand", he adds while attempting to join the class.

It is pertinent to mention that most online classes are held over Zoom and Google meet. While many security and privacy concerns have been raised over the Zoom video conferencing app, using Google meet on slow 2G internet is proving to be a headache for many.

Another concern for teachers has been abysmally low attendance of students. Syed Irfana,

a government teacher who teaches English said, "There are hundred students in my class. The highest attendance I have gotten so far is twenty-six." A major reason of that she said is, "Since most of the students in valley study in government schools and come from less privileged backgrounds, it is near impossible for them to afford a smartphone."

Masarat Farooq, daughter of a farmer said, "My father had a very basic phone. He had to borrow money to buy a smart phone for me. Otherwise, I would have missed my online classes."

Although majority of the students have had to suffer but many students, those with access to smartphones have been able to take advantage of the platform as well. Madiha Haroon, who studies in one of the posh schools of the valley said her studies were going nicely but 2G internet was being a hinderance for the smooth conduct of the classes.

"We are happy with the classes. Our teachers are making every effort to make things easier for us even with the limited resources they have." Teachers on the other hand are also not happy with the government decision. "Initially, I felt taking online class was a positive step. Now, with frequent internet shutdowns, slow internet speed, there's only so much we can do. It is really frustrating", said Nasreen Jan, a private school teacher. "But something is better than nothing. At least, students will remain in touch with the studies", she further added.

However, to negate the non-availability of smartphones and the connectivity issues faced by students due to poor internet quality, some teachers have started taking open air classes.

Recently, a photo of Muneer Alam, a mathematics teacher, teaching his students under open sky in Eidgah went viral on social media. The concept of starting community classes to tackle the aforementioned issues is one way to circumvent the problems that students are facing until the government deems fit to restore high speed internet in the valley.

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COVID And Marriages

Tanweer Ahmad

Virus outbreak has impacted everything around us. Marriage is one of the few events that Kashmiris look forward to every year. But the pandemic this year has played spoil sport. While some families have deferred marriages, few other marriage functions have taken place in a really simple manner. Tanweer Ahmad takes a Vox pop from different people to know their view about the impact of COVID-19 on marriages.

1. Afshana Ashraf: Due to the restrictions placed by government on weddings in view of the pandemic, people have saved a lot of money because they no longer need to invite distant relatives. Many people are also afraid of attending weddings for the fear of contracting the virus. Hence, people have been able to cut down on marriage expenses.

2. Minhaj Masoodi: Kashmiri weddings are normally all about pomp and show but due to the pandemic the weddings this year have been really sombre. Simple weddings however mean losses for people associated with the sector. Many people especially cooks used to earn their livelihood in this season. Their income has been badly hit. While poor people must have breathed a sigh of relief because of no societal pressure this year which forces them into a spending spree. Overall, it's a bag of mixed feelings

3. Aaqib Naseem: Marriage is one of a kind events in Kashmir. Even though people have had to sacrifice on the events but the real issues plaguing Kashmiri marriages like dowry and unnecessary customs still remain.



Slow pace of work on Sarband project irks Harwan residents

Adil Farooq Mir

Due to slow pace of work on the Sarband lake project in Harwan, farmers of the area are aghast. Located almost five kilometres away from the Dal Lake, Sarband Lake is an important source of irrigation for local farmers. Slow progress on the project has hit the production of local farmers. According to locals living in the area construction of the water supply project was started with a budget of 9.69 crores for facilitating agricultural and drinking water supply needs in the adjoining areas which include Harwan, Chandpora, Aarbal and Shalimar. But to their utter dismay the project has not been made fully functional.

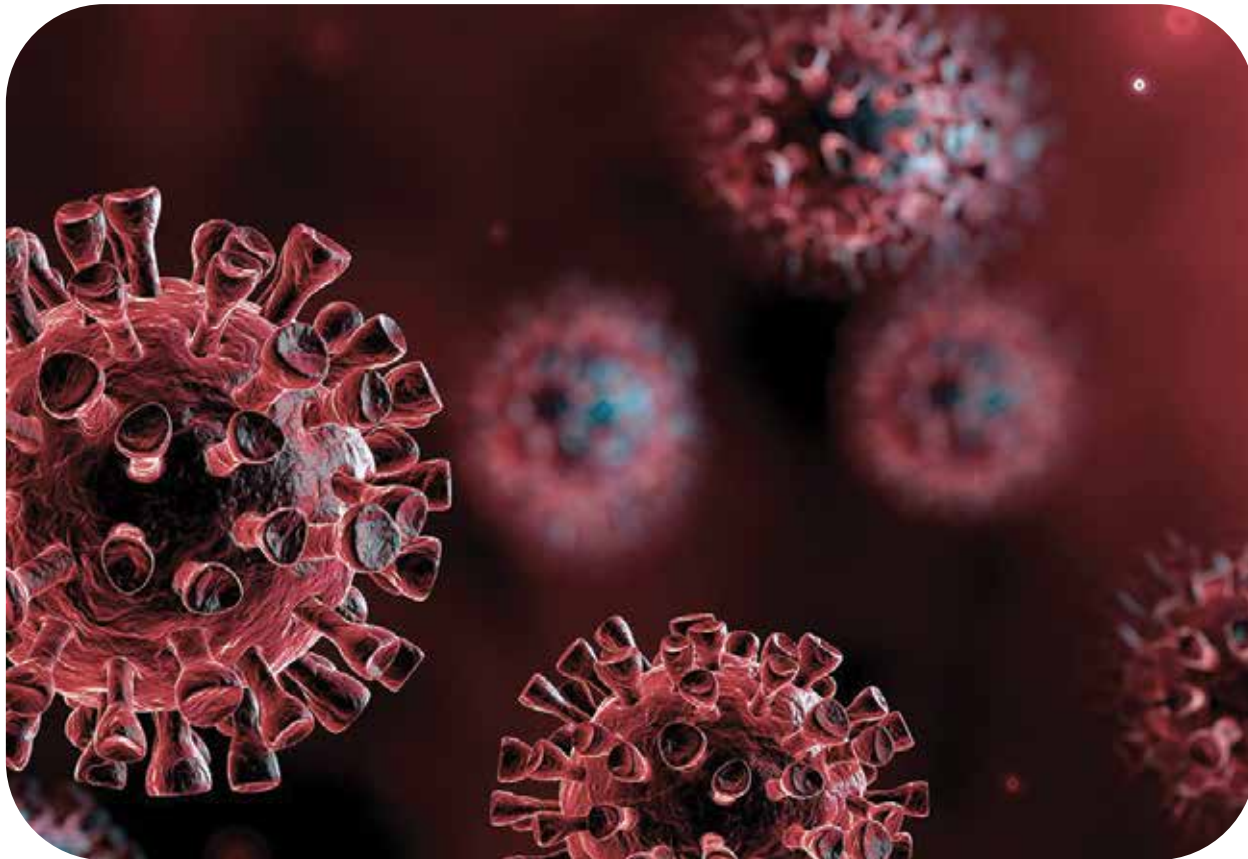
"We are suffering since decades. Due to the shortage of water, agricultural lands dry up during summer season every year. It causes a huge loss to us", said Muneeb Ahmad, a local resident of Aarbal.

"If the government has approved the project with a huge budget, why is irrigation department not working efficiently", said Musaab Ibrahim a local resident of Harwan. "We have written so many times to authorities about our problem but all in vain.

Nobody from administration is concerned about our sufferings due to delay in the Sarband Lake project completion", said a senior citizen from Shalimar.

Similarly, women of the area also showed their resentment against the administration. Shahzada, a local lady said, "we are being deprived of water not only for irrigation purposes but drinking too." "We are being totally neglected by authorities as the project has crossed many deadlines", she added.

As per reports, the project was started in 2013, but is yet to be completed. When contacted, concerned officials said "We are trying our best to complete the project in the least possible time. Due to the prevailing lockdown and uncertain conditions last year the progress on the work was hampered." "For better functioning and availability of fresh water we have to drudge the lake. In winters the water level remains low and it becomes impossible to drudge during the period, which is also a reason for incompletion of the project", they added. "We will soon make the water supply scheme functional for the general public", they further said.



The impact of COVID-19

Afshana Ashraf

It has been more than four months since the government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown because of Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of Covid-19 has created a global health crisis that has had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives. Covid-19 has affected different people in different ways with number of cases rising drastically each day.

“Although as a Kashmiri, it’s normal to be confined in homes for months on end but COVID induced lockdown has affected me a lot. My mental health has been impacted”, said Mehwish Bhat, a class 10 student, from Pampore. “It has affected the jobs of millions of people. And then some are like me as students whose studies have been badly affected”, she said.

Covid-19 has had a big impact on our

education. All educational institutions are closed and when it comes to online education we Kashmiris don’t have the privilege of high-speed internet. Throttled 2G has made our lives even more miserable. We are not able to attend our classes regularly”, she added.

Unemployment that has resulted as a consequence of loss of jobs due to the pandemic has forced people to resort to committing crimes as well. “A month back, my brother-in-law, who is a chemist by profession was tested positive for COVID-19. All his family members were put under quarantine by authorities for the safety of the other people. Burglars took advantage and looted their house”, said Rehaan, a resident of Khankabagh Pampore. “When they were caught, turned out, they had lost their jobs and were forced to resort to criminal ways for getting money”, added Rehaan.



It has affected the jobs of millions of people. And then some are like me as students whose studies have been badly affected

Three Pattan villages without drinking

Aadil Marki

Government claims of providing clean drinking water to all residents of J&K seems to have fallen flat as 3 villages in Pattan are still fetching water from muddy canals. Goshbugh, Aglar and Wussan have been living without any access to drinking water from last few decades.

“We feel like we are living in 20th century where tap water for us is a day dream. World is

developing new technologies and we agonizingly wait for laying of water pipelines in our area,” said a local. “We have registered our protests time and again but all in vain. The attitude of

administration has been indifferent. Nobody in administration is concerned about our problems”, he added.

Residents of the area said, “Six years ago, water reservoirs were constructed to supply us drinking water but to our dismay they have not been made functional yet.”

When contacted AEE of Jal Shakti Department said, “After construction of water supply project, irrigation and flood control department objected on it. We are trying our best to resolve the issue, we will soon make the water supply scheme functional.”

Residents added, “We had been assured many a times by officials that they would make the water reservoir functional but nothing happened has happened so far.”



COVID likely to impact Muharram gatherings



Shugufta Rashid

Muharram is the first month of Islamic Calendar marking the Islamic New Year of Muslims. The month of Muharram is of great religious significance to Islamic world particularly Shi'ites. The Grandson of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) achieved martyrdom during this month while fighting in Karbala.

In normal times, during the month of Muharram, Shi'ites used to take out processions to mourn the death of Prophet's Grandson. According to Aga Syed Abbas Naqvi, a prominent Shia Scholar, “Muharram is a month of remembrance and mourning for Shi'ites. During this month, Shi'ites participate in certain rituals to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain on the Day of Ashura. Ashura, in Arabic refers to the Tenth day of Muharram”.

This year COVID-19 has disrupted every aspect of life. Everything has been badly hit and most of the events all over globe are already suspended. Even Hajj has been limited to locals only. Muharram celebrations are also expected to be sombre this year.

Haider Ali, a resident from Budgam said, “Muharram processions will not be like they used to be before. Believers used to take part in huge numbers but this time people will avoid taking part in any mass congregation.” “Even though this is far from ideal, but in order to restrict the spread of COVID, we have no choice but to avoid any mass congregations”, he added.

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