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Kashmiri walnut industry badly hit

Full Story on **P5**



MERC
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INSIDE
STORIES



Saffron production witnessing rapid decline
P03



Onion growers seek government assistance
P05



COVID-19 and online classes: unveiling digital divide
P07



Saffron production witnessing rapid decline

Afshana Ashraf

Known as the saffron bowl of Kashmir, Pampore's saffron production over the last few years is seeing a dip.

Kashmiri saffron is grown in Pampore town, which is located about half an hour drive from Srinagar city. The area is known for growing finest quality saffron in the world. However, over the last few years, the saffron production has been witnessing a continuous drop. The drop in production has been ascribed to various factors.

As per a report, over the past 24 years, the saffron farmed lands in Kashmir have dropped by 65%. The saffron cost dipped by 48% when India imported saffron from Iran. The import induced a tremendous

in the market that many in the business opted out.

From Rs. 250 per gram in 2007 to now being sold at Rs. 120 per gram this year, the prices have also come down drastically. "We not only have witnessed a drop in our production but are also witnessing competition globally", said Mumin Iqbal, a saffron seller.

As per the experts, the reason for drop in production is because of the poor agricultural practices employed by the saffron farmers. Also, the government apathy has been cited as the reason for the setbacks in the marketing and sale of saffron. The G.I Tag hasn't had an impact on ground. According to reports, the total consumption of saffron in India is 40 metric tonnes. Saffron provides livelihood to the hundreds of Kashmiris who are

dependent on the crop for their living in or outside Kashmir.



We not only have witnessed a drop in our production but are also witnessing competition globally



Burglars on prowl in Kralgund

Aaqib Naseem

Burglars on 10th November struck at midnight and looted three shops in north Kashmir's Kralgund.

It was the second major incident of theft in the main market Kralgund, Qaziabad in a space of two months.

"Breaking into shops at midnight has become common in the area", said a local. The robbed shops include a garment shop, a bakery, and a grocery belonging to Tanweer Ahmad, Tahir Ahmad, and Aashiq Hussain respectively.

Burglars broke down the locks and shutters of the shops. MERC Times while talking to Tanweer Ahmad who owns a garment shop said, "I had bought winter stock worth more than 6 lakh rupees. All that has now vanished into thin air."

"JKEDI had helped me establish my business in the market but burglars have left me empty-handed."

"I am running this bakery for the last ten years. This is the first time my shop has been robbed. I had forgotten the cash in the drawer. There's nothing left", Tahir Ahmed with a helpless smile.

All the shopkeepers including President

and Secretary of the Shopkeepers Association, Shameem Ahmad and the Fayaz Ahmad held protest against the robbery. They demand quick action against the rising cases of robberies in the market. The police officials when contacted said, "We have taken cognizance of the matter and set investigation into motion". Shopkeepers also demanded installation of street lights and security cameras in the market. "For the last few years we are requesting authorities to install street lights but they never listen to us. Our pleas seem to fall on deaf ears", said President, Shameem Ahmad.

Last month two shops were robbed which included a medical shop and a dry fruit shop. "More than 4 lakh have been looted," claimed Javid Ahmad Mir, owner of the shop. Looted items include dry fruits and cash. "We have registered a case against the robbery and it's been a month, police are yet to find robbers," added Mir. "More than 300 shops have been established in the last 10 years in the market and most are established on JKEDI and other self-help schemes and loans. If these robberies don't end, some of us may wind up their businesses", said Fayaz Ahmed.



We have registered a case against the robbery and it's been a month, police are yet to find robbers

Batnisar waterfall turning into a popular spot



Ifra Moon

Namblan, Batnisar, a small waterfall located in Sheeri, 8 kilometers from main town Baramulla has become a centre of attraction for locals, particularly youth.

Youth have been thronging to the place as this place has become a favourite offbeat destination to provide a respite to the locals from the busy daily life. The place can be reached after a half hour trek to the place from the road. However, the track is very narrow and at places has space

for only one person to tread across. Haris Shah, a member of a Baramulla based adventure group said, "The place has a huge potential to be developed as a good tourist site." However, the government will have to ensure that proper fencing is erected because it has steep slope on one side while the track is incredibly narrow at other places." As per locals, an estimated 500 people visit the spot daily to swim or to have fun. Talking to Tehseen Qazi, a local, he said, "The place should be brought on tourism map and developed properly. It can become a good spot for family picnics and also give a flip to the local tourism." "Also, government can decorate the place by installing a lighting system." It is pertinent to mention that during the lockdown, youth from Baramulla district and beyond thronged the place to get a breather from the stringent curbs that were imposed throughout the valley. Locals have demanded that place be developed as a tourist site.



Stray dogs create panic in Gogji Bagh

Bisma Riyaz

Packs of stray dogs roaming in Gogji Bagh, Srinagar is hampering the movement of people as they allege being given a deaf ear by the administration.

As per the people numerous individuals were attacked by dogs with one child even mauled to death. The local residents feel frightened going out alone due to the unleashing dog terror.

“Few months ago, a woman was attacked by a pack of dogs, the canines left the women with serious bite injuries,” said Kumail, a resident of Gogji bagh.

Locals allege that the administration was not taking any action despite complaints of stray dogs biting people.

“Even after registering many complaints with the authorities, no one is taking any action in this regard,” said Bashaarat, a local resident.

“Stray dog menace has made our lives a living hell. You see pack of stray dogs everywhere especially where there’s garbage,” Bashaarat added.

SMC Commissioner, Gazanfar Ali, when contacted in this regard said, “The matter has been brought into my notice and I’ve directed the concerned staff to take prompt action.”

Unofficial estimates and local NGOs put the number of dogs in the valley at more than a million, triggering fears of increasing dog-man conflict in the next few years if the dog population is not checked.



Rising unemployment; youth stares at bleak future



Zakia Qurashi

Unemployment in Kashmir has been on rise for quite some time now. However, after the successive lockdowns pertaining to the abrogation of the special status of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir allied with Covid-19 pandemic has yet again given a serious blow to the hopes of the local youth.

Kashmir has always been an uncertain land with limited opportunities for the youth to take advantage from. This dubiety of being unemployed and unable to provide for family is also taking toll on the mental health of unemployed youth in the valley.

Many youth who after getting degrees are unable to land jobs for themselves are compelled to join conventional businesses to earn a living. Faizan Wani, a post graduate in Mathematics, said,

“Because of the unavailability of the jobs in my field I had no choice but to join my father’s fruit business.”

Another young engineering graduate expressed the same helplessness. “I completed my engineering degree four years back and till now I have not found a suitable job for myself. Now I have joined my father in his hardware business”, said Adil Altaf.

It is even hard for the doctorate holders to adjust themselves in a suitable job here. Despite being overqualified they apply for class IV posts thus compromise remains the only solution for them.

A young doctorate holder (name withheld) said, “For me what is disheartening is that I have to apply for Class IV jobs even knowing that I am over qualified but it is my need to get a job at this point of my life. I’m desperate.”

“It seems that I wasted ten years of my life for nothing.” she added.



Kashmiri walnut industry badly hit

Sabreena Mir

Kashmir is the main contributor to India's walnut production however frequent lockdowns allied with the introduction of the foreign walnuts is posing severe challenges for the Kashmir's walnut industry.

Locally referred to as "Doun" walnuts are a lucrative cash crop and face huge demand among tourists. Kashmiri walnuts are famous for their taste and superior quality. They are of high demand in local and international markets. However amid frequent lockdowns following the abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and the pandemic shutdown Kashmir's walnut industry is staring at a huge loss.

Abdul Qayoom, 34, a walnut grower from central Kashmir's Ganderbal, who has been growing walnuts from last ten years said, "Walnut production involves fewer losses in pre harvesting and post harvesting stages as



compared to other crops but the scenario in Kashmir is makes us vulnerable to regular losses,"

Kashmiri walnut also has a huge market outside India. Even though the production of walnut in Kashmir has increased in comparison to last few years, it has been facing tough competition from California walnuts.

"We want to overcome the losses we have faced till now," said Bashir Ahmed (40), a

walnut grower from Gund Kangan.

Walnuts grown in Kashmir valley are certified to be organic. Over 89,000 hectares of land are under walnut cultivation in the valley with Baramulla, Ganderbal, Uri, Anantnag, Kupwara, Rajouri, Doda and Poonch being the major growing centres.

Mr. Manzoor Ahmed, Chief Horticulture officer Ganderbal while talking to MERC Times on this issue said,

"We will try our level best to help the walnut industry overcome the previous losses,"

Walnuts usually grow well in cool climatic conditions. The production of a good quality walnut crop is however, dependent on altitude, temperature fluctuations and humidity/moisture during the main fruit development stage. Frost or snow during flowering destroys the young flowers and new shoots, and affect the crop production.

Onion growers seek government assistance

Marki Aadil

Termed as the hub of quality onions, farmers of Pattan demand help from the government to overcome the losses faced during natural calamities.

Onions are widely cultivated throughout valley. In recent years, 'Model village' Palhalan, Pattan in north Kashmir's Baramulla district has emerged as the centre of quality onions. Most of the people in the belt grow onion seeds. They sow seeds in the last week of August and the plants are ready to be transplanted to the fields by the month of November. They eventually offer their hard labored harvest for sale to distributors and street vendors on the national highway.

"We offer a stock of onion seeds every year and family cultivates onion at an average of 3 Kanals & then sell it to local



distributors in Nov-December," said Zahoor Ahmad Sheikh who cultivates onions on over 5 Kanals of land per year.

These farmers work hard regardless of the harsh winters or hot summers.

"Despite chilly winter, we visit different areas to sell our stock," Ashiq Ahmad, 42, a local farmer said.

But this sector has been worst hit by the

recent calamities and forced the low cost supply of the production resulting in less or no profits.

"We have been associated with onion cultivation from decades, but so far the recent years have been tough because our crops were affected by excessive rains," Mushtaq Ahmad, another farmer said.

Now the farmers want some compensation from the Government to clear their debts and buy modern tools for harvesting the crops. Locals

have also demanded that government look into matter and come up with incentives to facilitate further production and create better market opportunities for the growers.

"We request the administration to please look into our grievances and address them," Ghulam Nabi, another local farmer said.

However on dialing the official numbers our call met no response.



POWER OUTAGES



Frequent power cuts risky for COVID-19 patients

Minhaj Masoodi

Amid the shortage of beds with oxygen facilities, families of Covid-19 patients are providing oxygen therapy at home, however the sombre power scenario in Kalamabad is threatening the lives of such patients, as electricity continues playing hide and seek with people.

In Kalamabad, a remote hamlet in Handwara town, Mudasir Qureshy is setting up a generator as a backup. Mudasir, who works as a teacher in

“She needs at least 5 litres of oxygen per day. But with electricity playing hide and seek, the oxygen concentrator doesn’t work.” Mudasir added.

The thought of losing his mother sends shivers down his spine. So, he has bought a generator as a backup, in case of an emergency. But not all are privileged enough to buy such equipments.

People across Kashmir valley, particularly, those living in rural areas have been up in arms against the Power Development Department (PDD) for having failed to maintain a steady supply during this month.

“I am a poor man who is barely able to make ends meet; I can’t afford to buy a generator.” Saleem Ahmad, 45, a local said.

It is pertinent to mention, that the Kashmir valley witnesses a surge in power demand during winter months due to added load from heating devices. Another care taker of a patient, Mushtaq Ahmad, a small time business man from Sopore had to take loan from the bank to buy a generator for the oxygen concentrator.

“The electricity is playing havoc in our lives. We were forced to turn to banks to buy a generator

because.”

the education department lost his father last week due to post COVID complications. His mother is also on continuous oxygen support. The electricity outages with the onset of winter have become a norm across the valley.

But for people like Mudasir, who have patients dependent on oxygen support at home, face a double whammy. “My father died last week due to post COVID complications. My mother needs continuous oxygen support,” he said.

A senior PDD official while talking on this issue said, “Due to the pandemic, people prefer to stay in separate rooms. And since, every room has a separate heating device. The load on our feeders has increased, leading to increased power cuts.”

Meanwhile people have expressed serious concerns over the frequent and unscheduled curtailments saying that their lives are being put at risk.





COVID-19 and online classes: unveiling digital divide



Syed Junaid

Following the acquiescence of educational institutions in shifting online to contain the spread of virus, academicians are finding it tough to make peace with the new normal, as they jiggle fat books and electronic gadgets.

After the government decided to impose a lockdown in March in the wake of Pandemic, most of the educational institutions moved online to continue their activities. Despite facing difficulties early on due to a throttled 2G, students and teachers managed to keep the classes going. Slowly, as the lockdown was eased, the activities resumed somewhat. Business units and transport resumed gradually.

Education has been one of the hard hit sectors which still remain shut in the erstwhile state of J&K.

“Schools cannot finish the syllabus for board exams with online classes,” said Showkat Ahmad Baba, a teacher in education department

from Shalimar area of Srinagar city.

“Some subjects are easy to teach and study online but subjects like physics, mathematics, and chemistry are really hard to understand online,” he added.

Though all schools have jumped on the bandwagon concerning this new trend but the stake holders are yet unsure of its outcome.

“To complete the syllabus to a student’s satisfaction, schools should be allowed to function following all SOP’s,” said Kaiser Iqbal, a lecturer in education department.

“Online classes may help the more privileged sections, but the bulk of students can barely afford mobile phones and high speed internet charges,” Mir Muhib, a student from Shalimar area of Srinagar Said.

“Poor internet connectivity further adds to our woes, making in-person classes for doubt-clearing sessions even more urgent.” Sahiba, a class 11th student said.

Meanwhile Kashmir University

Students Guild, a student organized body of University students has also been requesting authorities for resumption of offline class work.

“We want the 4th semester classes to be offline because there is no reason to keep the semester online as all other business establishments are resuming their work,” the letter submitted to the concerned authorities by the Guild read.

While speaking with MERC Times on this issue, a top official of the Education department said,

“Decision to reopen Colleges, Universities can only be taken only after government issues new guidelines,”

“As of now, we have not got any intimation with regard to reopening of colleges and universities from the government,” the official added.

Though at many places in Kashmir open-air classes were conducted, but it is yet to be seen how Educational institutions are going to cater to the needs and demands of the students.



Budgam boy fetches Taiwan University fellowship



Murtaza Ali

Amid the aura of despair that has engulfed Kashmir following the Pandemic, a student from Budgam brought laurels to his land by winning a scholarship to Taiwan.

Hailing from Budgam, Mohammad Asif, an engineer by profession had completed his B.Tech from Islamic University and then went on to continue his masters in Madras Technical University, he now been offered a fully funded fellowship in Taiwan National University for doctoral degree in computer engineering.

"I have struggled two years for this opportunity", said Asif.

As per him Madras University changed his perspective of the studies and added more dimensions to his life as a student. Recalling how different professors helped him throughout his student career he said,

"The professors helped used to spend extra time with me seeing my interest in research," Asif says,

Asif's research is based on computer language procedure and how can it be used for fact checking process over 5.0.

"My work will benefit consumers who are dependent on the internet and have always been curious about

the authenticity of the information available on the internet."

"Such programs would help news organizations, news reporters to check the different reports which are circulating on the internet", he added.

Asif had already performed some research on the topic during his master's program. Back in university days, he witnessed a lot of false propaganda being circulated on social media regarding Kashmir. So then he decided to develop a programme which could detect fake news and help consumers to consume filtered information.

While reflecting on the hardships that he had to face in getting through his research he said,

"My proposal was rejected several times by different universities. I applied for national as well as international universities but no one accepted me initially." But later after taking some help from his professor and amending some basic changes in his research proposal, he got a call from the Taiwan National University. However, Mohammad Yousuf, Asif's father despite being happy is also anxious. A carpenter by profession, he says,

"I am very happy that he got a chance to study abroad but I am worried too because of the current happenings across the globe."

Budgam residents decry illegal encroachments

Shagufta Rashid

Budgam residents have complained of encroachments of roads and footpaths by shopkeepers and vendors in the main market.

Residents have accused district administration of failing to remove encroachments and haphazard parking, causing nuisance to the public. Ghulam Nabi Dar, a local said, People allege that there is no proper parking in the town, as cab drivers have occupied space at various places, forcing people to park by roadsides. They further averred that Shopkeepers lay their stuff on the road, causing congestion on the main road and The presence of street vendors also gives a tough time to commuters.

Irfan Ahmad Bhat, a local shopkeeper said, "The traffic gets blocked due to poor design. There are two major passenger cab stands that are operating illegally within the town, thus occupying roads."

According to residents, dozens of vehicles are lined up on the road creating a bottleneck. On the other hand, the hawkers and shopkeepers also cause problems. The road also leads to two major sub district hospitals and the ambulances have to navigate through congested roads.

"It seems district administration is non-existent and everyone is doing whatever they like to do. The administration needs to wake up to do their job effectively," said Riyaz Ahmed, a local. Mr. Shahbaaz Ahmad Mirza,

Deputy Commissioner (DC) Budgam while speaking to MERC Times said that steps were being taken on both short term and long term basis to de-congest the town.

"We are taking a string of measures. Our major focus is on the long-term remedies", he added.

Deputy Commissioner further said that apart from frequent drives to ensure temporary relief the administration has created Detailed Project Reports (DPR's) on how to de-congest the major bottlenecks in the town.