

‘WE SEEK CLIMATE JUSTICE FOR HIMALAYA’

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW OF
PROF SHAKIL A ROMSHOO - PAGE 4, 5



Totem of Nund Reshi's town continues to charm Kashmir



Ali Mohammad Dar. PHOTO: QURRAT UL EIN

QURRAT UL EIN

A veteran in the hometown of Kashmir's patron saint tells a charming chronicle of craft and culture. The good-old radio and hookah is all what Ali Mohammad Dar needs to make the finest firepot of Kashmir.

Artisans of his repute are known for their reclusive routine. They drift into their zones for conceiving some charming object. As men of few words, they sustain the Kashmir handicraft industry with their underpaid skill-slog and yet being dismissed as "high-headed men" otherwise struggling for means.

Out of his secluded space, Dar produces a decorative piece known for its appeal and appearance. The engagement is exhaustive, but the septuagenarian skill-man is ensuring that his patron saint's town totem continues to charm and warm Kashmir.

His hometown Charar-i-Sharief is buzzing with meditative moorings. The old souk that survived the conflict conflagration of 1995 is packed with devotees and drifters. The overcast day is sending arctic vibes and making the marketplace a cold storage. Snow and shower forecasts are being discussed, as peasants and punters shop for the native delicacies.

Adjacent to the bustling bazar, the mood inside Dar's workroom is melodic and misty. Multicolored wickers are scattered all around. Stacks of earthen-pots are resting at a corner.

The old artisan makes the town's speciality with his devotional commitment as reflected from his body language. His white beard and aged face make Dar as one of the oldest craftsmen active today.

"Our Kanger is different from others," says the craftsman with certain throw in his tone and tenor. "It's known for beauty and brilliance."

Dar's speciality is Charar Kanger, the totem being attributed to Nund Reshi by townspeople. "Charar Kanger is considered as tobruk [lucky charm]," Dar says. "People buy it more often than any other Kanger because of its connotation with Sheikh-ul-Aalam."

Also known as Nund Reshi, Sheikh Noor Ud Din Noorani is considered as the patron

saint of the valley. His Sufi philosophy of life and prophetic poetry makes masses his ardent followers. They consider Charar-i-Sharief as their "venerated Vatican" they flock on the saint's annual Urs. They bring home a special object: Charar Kanger.

Dar has been weaving the same speciality for the last 40 years now. He learnt the art from his neighbourhood master, Khazir Mohammad Malik.

"Back then, Kanger was the only heater in the valley," the craftsman continues. "No heating devices were there to keep Kashmir warm except this ember-stoked wicker beauty."

As a novice, Dar even learnt about many more types of Kanger from his mentors. "But after their demise," he says, "the craft of Kanger lost many techniques and treatments."

But despite that diminished depth and dexterity now, Dar is proficient in forty Kanger designs—selling them between Rs 300 to Rs 1000.

"People mostly prefer Charar-e-Kanger for marriage purposes," Dar continues to weave the firepot yarn. "That's why it's also called 'Bride Kanger'. People grace their happy occasions with this firepot, burn izbandh in it during their auspicious events and also present it as a gift to their loved ones."

The beauty of Charar Kanger comes from its bigger frame festooned with mirror work, captivating and colourful elements. Wicker is given more artistic look as craftsmen spend days to shimmer it like a bride. The whole process is a journey itself.

"First the wicker and earthen pots are brought from upper reaches of town," Dar says. "Wickers are sundried before coloured and crafted around earthen pots."

But despite these decorative details, the old are struggling, while the young stays indifferent in this Kashmir handicraft as well.

"We do it because we have faith," Dar says. "The young aren't up for it as they look at this profession as some roadside business when it's a skill-based art which everyone can't do. It's part of our culture and we should practise it. But to inculcate that sense and spirit, we should catch them young."

Khaak Saar |

A half-century-old Harissa shop tickling taste buds of Srinagarites

MINZAH MEHRAJ

Over the last five decades, Muhammad Ashraf, a Harissa seller at Rajouri Kadal here in Downtown here never fails to trickle taste buds of customers with sumptuous and flavourful Harissa, the popular winter delicacy of Kashmir.

His 'Khaak Saar' Harissa joint is known to be one of the ace Harissa outlets in this Downtown locality for over 50 years and never fails to attract Harissa lovers from every corner of Kashmir in the wee hours of the morning.

During the winter, Ashraf prepares this soothing combination of rice, meat, and spices known as Harissa, which is the most popular dish in chilling winters, primarily in Srinagar.

There are dozens of outlets that sell this winter delicacy, but his mammoth experience has made him the popular one is known by Srinagarites of all ages.

Currently, in his 60s, Ashraf began his career as a chef at the hotel of his family, "Khaak Saar," in Lal Chowk, when he was in his heydays.

"Even though I used to work at our hotel, I always wanted to launch my own venture. So eventually, I launched my own Harissa business naming it Khaak Saar after our hotel name decades back". Said Ashraf.

He says that with his passion to serve quality products, he got immense love of people and that is what made him survive for a long.

"People from different places come here in morning to enjoy the Harissa, and some pack it for their families and loved ones. I have done my best to keep the quality intact for decades, and honesty is what counts when doing business, and that is what has kept me going despite all odds," he adds.

Ashraf says that Harissa has made its way from traditional Harissa shops to kitchen and fancy restaurants but the taste that one gets by making it in an authentic way is unmatched.

"Nowadays, Harissa is made even in homes, but the real taste lies with the traditional

procedure, which is done in the earthen pot, not in the modern utensils used in the homes. Nowadays, people use to make Harissa in their own quick procedures, but it needs a lot of patience, and the non-traditional way cannot give that vibe and taste which the actual procedure gives," he said.

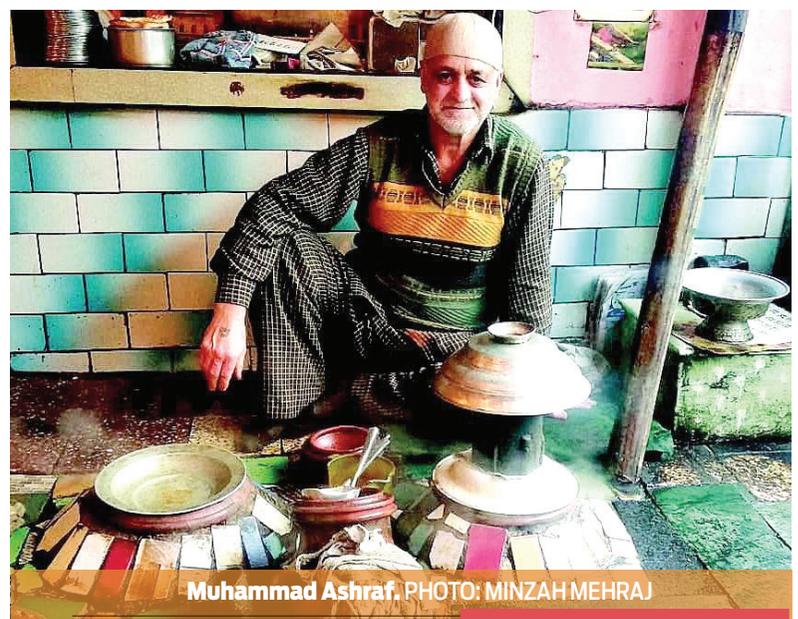
Harissa necessitates handwork, which Ashraf does with zeal and utmost dedication. "After 11 am when the customers leave and the big pot of Harissa is empty, I start making the delicacy for the following day, where rice gruel is made in a large earthen pot. Along with bones, sheep or goat meat, fennel seeds, cinnamon, cloves, green and black cardamom, fried Kashmiri shallots, and salt are added to this. The clay pot is covered with a lid after cooking has been going on," says Ashraf.

Around 4 am, Ashraf wakes up, offers fair prayers, and leaves for his shop to start his day. "The bones from which the flesh has fallen off are removed using a metallic hand which is attached to a long handle. Mustard oil is added to this meaty slush and the mixture is mashed with a large wooden until it has the consistency for Harissa. I feel happy when people enjoy the dish here, and I can see the satisfaction on their faces. That is the best reward for me," he said.

Having earned huge fame and fondness among locals for his art of making the delicious Harissa in the town, Ashraf has carved out a sort of brand for himself, and every customer is in praises for this Harissa man.

"For the past ten years, every time I crave for Harissa, I go to this specific shop right before I went office. It sells the best Harissa, and it is must visit for every Harissa lover," says Adil, a local of Rajouri Kadal.

According to Ashraf, there are very few young people nowadays who are interested in foodpreneurship. "Everyone is busy with education and looking for jobs, which is ok, but young people should be interested in establishing of something of their own," he said.



Muhammad Ashraf. PHOTO: MINZAH MEHRAJ



PHOTO: AAMIR ABDULLAH

South Kashmir: The Last of the Horse-Cart Drivers

A handful of horse-cart drivers are literally guarding the tradition with their lives in southern Anantnag district. The 'tangawallas', as they are called locally, say they will keep ferrying people in their carts until they are alive.

AAMIR ABDULLAH

Amidst the swift-developing technologies and the introduction of electric vehicles, the determination of these classical drivers to continue this old-age tradition appears to be a blind alley.

Inherited from his family, 80-year-old Ghulam Mohammad Bhat has been ferrying people on his cart for over four decades, and that hasn't made him frail at all, he asserts.

Notwithstanding the ups and downs he has faced during this long journey, Bhat is reluctant to give up hope and is willing to continue with this by-gone tradition "at all costs."

For Bhat, a resident of Seer Hamdan in Anantnag, his Tanga is his most cherished asset, and as the day ends, his enthusiasm doesn't. The next morning he returns to work, much hopeful that the day will bring decent earnings as usual, he says.

Like Bhat, 70-year-old Gulzar Ahmad Wagay has never considered the earnings less than enough for him and his household. He has been in this profession for over three decades and feeding his family of sixteen.

"All thanks to the Almighty who never disappoints and sends provisions. I have nothing more to ask for in my life," says Wagay.

From ferrying Bollywood actors and top government officials, these drivers have witnessed the golden period of their profession, even as they strive to keep it alive today.

Before cars took over in the early nineties, Tangas were the most dominant form of transportation in both urban and rural areas of Kashmir.

While they are rarely seen in the city now, Tangas are still used for transporting commuters in north Kashmir's Sopore and south Kashmir's Anantnag districts.

However, the people associated with it are those who have been involved in this profession for decades, while it has no new takers, making the tradition fade away into



Tanga is a precious part of our culture, and I take pride in riding it to help keep it going"

oblivion.

But there are passengers like Imtiyaz who are loyal to this mode of transportation and believe travelling in Tanga makes one inhale fresh air and "witness life unhindered while moving through places in a different style."

"It's a precious part of our culture, and I take pride in riding it to help keep it going," Imtiyaz says.

"Whatever is left of this tradition is because of our own efforts and unwavering spirit to cling on to this endangered tradition," says Gulzar Ahmad Wagay.

"Like e-vehicles, Tangas are also pollution-free and are in no way harmful to the environment while they are cheaper too," Wagay says.

PHOTO: AAMIR ABDULLAH



'WE SEEK CLIMATE

India has assumed the first-ever leadership of G20 on December 1, 2022, wherein 20 big world-order players meet under one banner to analyse, discuss and shape up key strategies serving as a roadmap for future. Even though the flagship marathon usually revolves around global economic goals, over a period of time, the impetus has been widened to certain other pressing and contemporary issues concerning life-existence and security. As the high-profile events pick up pace with top-functionaries of 19 countries and the European Union, the hopes and aspirations run high as Jammu and Kashmir shall serve as host of one of the key-events likely to take place this year.

In an exclusive interview with *The Echo* reporters, **KALEEM GEELANI** and **SHEREEN NAMAN**, Vice Chancellor, Islamic University of Science and Technology, **Prof Shakil A Romshoo**, discusses at length the significance and possible outcomes of the India's remarkable presidency of G20, and its takeaway for J&K in particular. Prof Romshoo, who has undoubtedly earned an international recognition for his outstanding contribution to Earth Sciences, continues to be the vocal champion for Climate Change, which is among the major flashpoints of the **G20**.

G20, as you know, has a long history of addressing the crucial issues concerning the stability and security of the mankind. From dealing with the macro-economic issues to narrowing it down to other crucial issues, the countries have evaluated and discussed it all. Could you tell us how important are the goals G20 entails this year?

Well, G20 is a crucial forum at the global level. Since its foundation in 1999, the European Union, 19 countries and some other world bodies are part of it. G20 represents a large (two-third) population of the world. Two-third geographical area is almost 80 to 85 percent of the world GDP (Gross Domestic Product). One good thing about G20 is that it rotates among the countries. This year, G20 is being held in India, so it provides an opportunity to our country, besides other countries, to be a part of the solution to some grave global issues. If you look at the G20 agenda this year, 20 important concerns (themes) are to be addressed with the collective wisdom of people of the 20 countries. Every country, every human being, every sector of economic activity and every aspect of human life is affected by the climate change. It is not that the world does not acknowledge these concerns; it does. In fact, that is how the Paris agreement came into effect in 2015. It is a binding agreement, which 200 countries are party to. The 19 countries that are the part of G20 have a very significant role to play in meeting the Paris agreement's obligations because almost all these countries are the biggest emitters of the greenhouse

gases. So, they can play a vital role in minimizing the impacts of the climatic change. Besides, this year's agenda is 'Sustainable Development Goals,' which means we have to achieve the target of accomplishing these 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, which again is a huge challenge for the world. Therefore, G20 has a very important role to play in achieving these goals besides economic development goals, climate change mitigation, financial security and other some objectives.

Talking about Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar is likely to host a G20 event. What could it mean for the Himalayan region and what are the possible expectations from this high-profile image?

You see, scores of programmes, meetings, discussions and workshops have been planned all over the country. Besides, Y20—Youth 20 and some other important events are being held in Jammu and Kashmir. All universities of the union territory are a part of the Y20 event. Not only people from the universities of J&K, but from other countries as well join the deliberations and preceding of these meetings, analyse the status of the global concerns, and seek solutions to them. So, this is the collective wisdom of the people of this place, the country and the world. They basically develop a strategy in order to address these issues in a better way. Thus, it is a great opportunity for us. Even as at the global level we are not responsible for the climate change, unfortunately, we face the maximum brunt of it. So, it is essential for us to express our concerns loudly and



clearly. See, there are no industries in J&K, which means we are not emitting the greenhouse gases that are responsible for the rising temperatures and global warming. We have the most important resources in J&K and Ladakh in the form of glaciers. The water that emanates from these 18000 glaciers is being provided to about 400 million people. The livelihood of the people of J&K and Ladakh regions is linked to the sustainability of these glaciers. But now, they are melting under the climate change. So, this is a high time for us and for the country to speak up about these issues, and raise awareness among the people living not only in J&K but in the entire Himalayas and other mountain regions. There is a dire need for chalking out a strategy, wherein we will be compensated for the losses we suffer. The climate justice is an important aspect of the negotiations that is being talked about. And I believe, we are a community that deserves to get climate justice.

With the ever-increasing focus in climate change on environmental sustainability, how would G20 seek to address the concerns and major challenges globally? Since you have been extensively researching on various issues impacting life, what according to you are the various crucial or worrying trends, which demand immediate attention in line with the G20?

As I said, we have set 2030 as the target for meeting and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. However, we seem to be nowhere these in 2030 and even in 2040. For example, one of the Sustainable Development Goals is that we have to bring down the impacts of climate change overall and we have to take an action on that. There are so many other issues and it will take us another 40 to 50 years if we really follow our commitments. The targets that we, as part of the global community have set for ourselves — whether it is the Paris agreement or Kyoto protocol or any other international binding agreements that the countries have entered into it—will take a lot of time because it is a very complex issue overall. There is a large disparity within



PHOTO: ADEEB AHMAD/IUST

JUSTICE FOR HIMALAYA'



PHOTO: ADEEB AHMAD/IUST

the countries and between the countries as far as achieving Sustainable Development Goals is concerned. A lot of work needs to be done. So, having said that, again I would say that G20 is an opportunity for people worldwide to address these issues. At IUST, we have conducted several programs regarding G20 and we are soon going to have a national brainstorming on Sustainable Development Goals under the G20.

You talked about bridging the gap. Do you think in the events like G20, we need to keep people on-board like marginalized communities or the people who have been affected by the climate change? Do you think those people need to be taken on board with policy makers and then frame policies accordingly?

They are already a part of this process. If you have a look on the G20 India website, you will come across scores of activities, workshops and meetings that have been planned till the summit. There are deliberations about the marginalized communities, whom we frequently refer to as Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe and so on. Non-governmental organisations and community leaders are a part of those deliberations. So definitely, every segment is involved. Mainstreaming SDGs in development planning is a global challenge indeed.

Given the focus on green energy, which also got a major share in this year's budget, IUST has launched a G20 campaign for energy conservation. What else is there in the store for future as India moves through its goal to net zero emission by 2070?

See, this is a global concern. Energy security is very important at the global level because it is linked to so many things, like financial stability, economic development, climate change and so on. Nowadays, switch over from non-renewable energy to renewable energy is a major goal, which is where we can address

many of the global problems. Hence, you will see that a lot of investment is going on into it. Lot of research is being done so as to have a very efficient renewable energy generation all over the world. India has committed to be carbon-neutral economy by 2070. As of now, we have about 75 percent energy coming out from coal, which we call a dirty source of energy because it emits large amount of greenhouse gases that lead to climate change, pollution and other adverse aspects. Our Prime Minister has made a bold commitment before the international community that we will be carbon neutral by 2070. And by 2030, we will be reducing Greenhouse gases by 30 percent. A lot of emphasis is on the renewable energy, which means we are getting into an era of solar power generation, photovoltaic and electric vehicles. This is an era where there will be a lot of investment, and jobs. IUST is very much aware of that, as you know, about 60 percent of our energy requirement is coming from solar power. We have a plan to establish a solar park of 10 megawatts that will help us to meet 100 percent of our energy requirement. Additionally, we will be able to supply this renewable energy to the local community as well as AIMS, which is coming up in our vicinity. We are soon starting skill-based courses in these areas, so that the requirement for the trained and skilled manpower in the field of renewable energy is met. We are very conscious about it and I hope we will be able to contribute to providing human resources required locally and nationally.

You have actively been involved in environmental issues for decades. Could you throw some light on the policies that were drafted during climate convention held in Egypt and which countries incurred huge losses due to it?

Well, several unaddressed important issues related to climate change were discussed and approved during the climate convention held in Cairo Egypt, especially those of some developing countries that suffered massive devastation and losses due to disasters like avalanches, floods and earthquakes. One such

instance is the devastating floods of Pakistan—again a developing country—wherein 30 million people were displaced and thousands of others dead. That is because of extreme climate change, for which greenhouse gases are largely responsible. Developing countries are the most affected even with less industrialization. Our own Kashmir Valley too faces the brunt of climate change, though we are the least responsible for the global phenomenon. In nutshell, we can say that global warming is a global problem and needs to be addressed by joining efforts globally.

Italy has already made environment education compulsory in their school curriculum since 2019, which is believed to help fight the climate crisis. As the head of a premier educational institution, what are your views on it?

I believe, a culture of environmental consciousness needs to be created that we all have to do together. Some issues are really important for all of us. Kashmir is a paradise on earth and we have inherited a beautiful piece of land from nature. However, for the past 40-50 years, we have been facing problems related to environment including climate change. Nobody is caring for environment. We are not environmentally conscious society. Not a single indicator of environment is fine here. The quality of air turns harmful in autumn and winters in the Valley since wood is burnt here that gives impetus to air pollution. Horticulture is a thriving economy for Kashmir, but people are openly burning horticulture pruned material in autumn, thus increasing air pollution significantly. Harmful pesticides are being used by orchardists, who then later suffer from cancers and other ailments. Therefore, government needs to bring a change by making policy frameworks. It is their responsibility to provide renewable energy especially during winters. In other cold regions of the world, people don't burn wood, but instead densify it and turn it into wood pellets that can be used for hammams (winter heating). This way, this will protect the environment as well as benefit people. At IUST, I must tell you that we have established Department of Environment Sustainability and Climate Change, as we believe, it is important to generate knowledge and building capacity of youth to make them environmentally conscious.

Do you think that we need to consider different points of view now to mitigate the challenges faced by climate change?

Yes, of course! Climate change affects every aspect of human activity. You see, agriculture and horticulture is main source of livelihood in the Valley, which also gets affected by climate change, just like in areas like Kullu of Himachal Pradesh, where because of climate change they are not able to produce apple crops and instead are growing vegetables now. So, every sector of economy is affected in the country. I believe, specific climate change action plans for each sector must be framed, so that we can minimize the impact of climate change with the help of policy frameworks.

What message would you give to the youth and student community with regards to climate change?

Climate change being a burning issue, youth need to be made aware about it to help them become environmentally conscious citizens. Our universities, colleges and schools can play an important role in this regard, so that we can prepare our new generation better to tackle environmental issues.

"Even as we are not responsible for the climate change, we face the maximum brunt of it. So, it is essential for us to express our concerns loudly and clearly"



Kashmir Morels

Like carpets that Kashmir weaves but ill-affords for itself, the valley produces more than 25 tons of costly morels that sell at a cost higher than silver in the global market, reports TAZEEM NAZIR.

Come spring and hundreds of people living in the Kashmir foothills will leave for, what they say, the Gucci hunt. Usually arduous journeys, it is expertise and fate that helps collectors to locate the morels in the coniferous forests, the most expensive mushrooms that cannot be cultivated commercially. Locally, it is called Gucci or Kan Gutch.

A major Kashmir export, these mushrooms are a treasure for collectors and a taste for consumers. Collectors take months in harvesting these mushrooms and many weeks to sun-drying them before selling them.

Collectors offer interesting ideas about their hunts. These mushrooms grow in clumps on partly rotten tree trunks, topsoil, and leaves. "Some people say, these could be found anywhere near a spot that had seen a forest fire in the last season," one collector claimed. "But the crisis is that they may not grow at the same place next season." Another belief is that these mushrooms sprout after lightning strikes the ground. Usually, they start appearing in late March and can be collected up to May.

It looks distinct from the entire mushroom varieties. Its cap is faded brownish cream, yellow to tan, or faded brown to greyish brown. The edges of the ridges are usually lighter than the pits, and quite oval in outline, now and again bluntly cone-shaped with a rounded pinnacle or greater elongate. Caps are hollow and connected to the stem at the lower edge. The meat is fragile. The stem is white to pale yellow or pale yellow, hollow and straight, or with a bulbous or club-shaped base.

"I live near the forest. When I was 15, I used to go on a mushrooms hunt," Mohammad Waseem, a resident of Rayil in Ganderbal's Gund belt, said. "I used to go for fun but sometimes it would fetch me some morels. The season for harvesting these mushrooms starts after the snow lines start disappearing."

The morel pickers are supposed to be experts in their field. Nature grows lot of false morels as well and some of them are poisonous. The fake morels are almost akin to the prized mushroom but slightly differ in their caps which are rounder in false ones. Of over 14000 mushroom species only less than 3000 are edible.

Morels grow in higher reaches. "When we reach higher forests, we face difficulties in finding these mushrooms as they are scattered over the forest land," Zareefa, who goes on morel harvesting every year in Ganderbal hills, said. "At home, we put these mushrooms like beads in a thread and put the 'garland' to sundry. They need proper care otherwise fungus can hit the garlands of mushrooms and make them black."

Zareefa said she has heard that these mushrooms are very costly but we do not get much from it. "Earlier, we used to get Rs 10,000 for one kilogram but now we barely get half of it," Zareefa regretted, insisting that the dealers give too hoots to the struggle we put in to collect these rare plants. She has been collecting the morels for the last three years between April and June. "Families used to manage their living by selling these mushrooms, but now it is too difficult because we do not get much from it."

A Major Export

Harvesters apart, the morels are a key export. Though a small part of the yearly collection goes to the upmarket hotel chains, the bulk goes offshore. A conservative estimate puts the average yearly morel production at around 25 tons.

"We supply morels to Germany, France, Switzerland, and China," one Srinagar-based exporter, who talked on the condition of anonymity, said. "Routinely, we export around none tons a year. It mostly goes to different food industries." He puts



Morel Mushrooms, locally called Gucci or Kan Gutch are prized wild-growing Fungi that feed a high-end overseas market in Kashmir.

the cost for A-grade morel per kilogram at Rs 20,000 but insiders in the sector said it is way beyond it.

The exporter said the quantum of harvest in a year is linked to the weather conditions. Adverse weather hampers the harvest by Gujjars and Bakerwals, who are major contributors to the collection.

Admitting that there were problems in demand, another exporter Mohammad Affan said the global recession seriously compromised the rates. "These mushrooms are being sold either at supermarkets or are in demand from up market hotel chains," Affan said. "Because of Covid-19, tourism and travel were seriously impacted and the demand fell to an all-time low. The global slowdown has witnessed a 20 per cent fall in overseas demand and right now we see only 70 to 80 per cent sales."

Asked about the disinterest that mushroom collectors are exhibiting because of low returns, another exporter said the morels are being marketed through a complicated long chain. "It is not that we purchase from gatherers and then we sell in retail. The fact is that we sell to major business companies who sell to the retailers," the exporter said. "It has a lot to do with the size and quality of the mushroom, and age plays a key role." He said the per kilogram costs start from Rs 10,000 and it goes up to Rs 24000 depending upon these factors – the same season morel costs more than the one that was harvested last season. "Smaller qualities cost huge. Even in Kashmir, a 100-gram packet would cost you Rs 3000."

Morel exports said they are taking all the mandatory precautions in making the purchases. It is a zero-GST commodity but these exporters have to ensure they buy the mushroom from collectors who are certified by the forest department. "They must have the license," one exporter said. "It is a laborious process to establish that the mushroom falls in the zero tariff categories in GST. We do this for the farmers because they have only small quantities."

The morel mushroom collectors are scattered across Kashmir. Mostly in the foothills, they are in Kupwara, Budgam, Ganderbal and Pahalgam and other parts of south and north Kashmir. "While they are collected early spring, the morels are in demand

mostly during winters between September and March."

Masood Wafai, a mechanical engineer turned mushroom entrepreneur said the morels in Kashmir are surrounded by myths. "That morels sprout with lightning and thunder hitting the ground in higher reaches is baseless," Wafai, who recently attended a high-end interaction with academics, said. "These mushrooms require a particular temperature and environment to grow. The blacker the soil, the more the fungus would be around. The Directorate of mushroom research, which has been working on these morels for the last three years have succeeded in growing these mushrooms in laboratory conditions but they have not succeeded in the way they wanted. It is being said that China has already produced it successfully but they are not letting their secret out."

The Nutrient Worth

Even though the morels share a lot of their properties and nutrient structure with other mushrooms, the Gucci fungus is still costly. "The demand for these mushrooms is high because they are rich in nutrients and they shed almost 80 per cent of their water when dried and with water, they resume a much bigger size."

Beenish Zohra, a dietician, said Kashmir calls it Kan Gutch because they look like human ears. Known as *Morchella esculenta* to science this most sought-after macro-fungus has medicinal properties and is considered a dietary antioxidant. "The scientific research carried out on morels demonstrates that their anti-oxidative have immune-stimulatory and anti-inflammatory bioactivities besides being anti-tumour properties," Zohra said. "The morel contains high amounts of potassium, vitamins, and copper, which all contribute to a healthy nervous system and cardiovascular health. Besides, they carry the highest amount of vitamin D among edible mushrooms, in addition to vitamin B1m which is thiamine that breaks down the body's sugar content."

People suffering from Arthritis, have thyroid or liver issues or wish to resist fatigue are being suggested to use morels as part of the food. "By nature, these mushrooms are antiviral, lower the blood sugar, reduce the signs of ageing and improve immunity," Zohra added. "The healing capacities of the mushroom make it vital in traditional medicine baskets."

Zohra said that people who have mushroom allergy must avoid morels. Before they are cooked, they need to be cleaned properly because in certain cases insects remain trapped in their flesh. Over-consumption can lead to severe abdominal issues and can lead to abdominal pain, diarrhoea, nausea, and vomiting.

Climate Change

Morels do not grow in Jammu and Kashmir alone. In fact, the Mentire Himalayan range is home to precious mushrooms. Off late, however, there are reports that the availability of the mushroom has gone down and the research carried out by the Solan-based Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) Directorate of Mushroom Research suggests that the increase in temperature is the key reason. Climate change, the research suggests is making this mushroom a victim.

At the same time, the experts suggest that the morel pickers must not uproot the mushroom totally. Instead, they must cut it from the stem. Besides, they suggest that if the pickers encounter a bunch at a spot, they must leave at least one mushroom untouched.

DJMC alumnus nominated as FCC Joint Secretary

Bringing laurels to Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST), Tawqeer Hussain—alumnus of Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (DJMC)—has been nominated as Joint Secretary to the prestigious Foreign Correspondents Club (FCC).

Hussain, who has done his Master's in Journalism in 2011, has a vast experience of covering India and South Asia, with special focus on Foreign Affairs. Hailing from Dooru South Kashmir,

Hussain currently works as Special Correspondent (South Asia) with Japanese national newspaper, *The Yomiuri Shimbun*. His articles and stories also appear in various national and international publications like *The Hindu*, *Business Line*, *Aljazeera*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun*, *Al Arabiya*, *7 News Australia* and others.

To mention, the FCC represents hundreds of journalists of foreign origin currently based in India as well as Indian journalists working with foreign organisations.



Dried vegetables continue to treat taste buds of Srinagarites

Amid sub-zero temperature, city markets offer **centuries-old treat** to locals



HUMA MASROOR

Standing in a line to buy dried vegetables, Ajaz Ahmad waits amid bone-chilling winter at the famous market of Hazratbal here. This market provides a variety of dried vegetables which are traditionally eaten all over Kashmir for centuries.

"These dried veggies are known to keep you warm amid winter. Earlier, people used to grow them at home mostly, but now vendors across Srinagar sell these. I often come here to buy these vegetables for my family," Ahmad said.

People are known to relish vegetables like dried tomato, turnip, bottle gourd, brinjal, and some other leafy vegetables amidst winter in Srinagar. These Srinagar markets are providing enough options for locals to choose from while the traders earn their livelihood.

"We mostly get these dried vegetables from villages in Kashmir, then sell them here in the city. These vegetables are good for health and are among the old traditions of Kashmir. Many sellers who are indulging in farming dry these



"We mostly get dried vegetables from villages and then sell them in the city. This is the old tradition of Kashmir"

vegetables over the months and store them to sell in winter. The market is good, and it is enough to make ends meet", said Muhammad Shafi, a vendor at Hazratbal.

He further added that "the dried vegetables always remain in good demand during winters due to extreme cold as it helps people to keep themselves warm."

Many vegetable vendors across Srinagar dry vegetables during summers, usually from June to October, by keeping them in direct sunlight or on the rooftops for days so that it gets dry completely.

"There are no chemicals in them, and no preservatives are used, which makes these vegetables a harmless treat. Over the years, with kitchen gardens disappearing, people are relying on sellers like us to enjoy this winter treat," said Manzoor Ahmad, a vegetable seller at Nowhatta area.

Many locals who have kitchen gardens in Srinagar traditionally grow vegetables in bulk to dry them for winter.

"We don't dry too many vegetables, but the

basic vegetables like tomato, turnip, bottle gourd, brinjal have been used in dried from our house for years," said Zareefa Begum.

She said that in addition to vegetables, there are also some spices that dry in summer, like Mint, Fenugreek, Coriander, and Fennel seeds, to add amazing taste to their daily cuisine.

These veggies are specially dried and stored for winter because, during heavy snowfall in Kashmir, people prefer to stay indoors and have these at hand to use readily. These dried vegetables don't go stale, so people prefer these.

Historians say that Kashmir being a place where multiple crops are not grown throughout the year due to its peculiar climate, has given rise to dried vegetables. They say that due to the central Asian roots of Kashmir, its climate and topography have always made dried vegetables feasible to the Kashmir culinary culture. For decades, the locals in Srinagar and other parts of Valley have found a business opportunity in it, and markets in Srinagar are full of dried vegetables in winter.

South Kashmir trio pool money, develop cricket ground

AAMIR ABDULLAH

Famous for its vast expanse of apple orchards, Marhama is the second largest village in south Kashmir's Anantnag district, but despite being home to 2300 families, the place lacked a proper cricket ground until last year.

In 2019, Chirag Aamir, a former state-level cricketer inspired by the sophisticated sports infrastructure outside J&K, discussed with his other two friends the idea of having something similar in their own village.

As Covid-19 induced lockdown forced them inside their homes the following year, the trio contemplated the idea and the work began.

Asking the help from the administration, the friends got permission to develop a state-owned field in Dallovhaad area. However, developing a rough ground wasn't easy and the process required financial resources and determination.

Chirag and his two friends, Khurshid Ahmad and Aamir Magray - all farmers by profession - pooled their money and proved their strong will when the procurement of a pitch-roller was rejected by the administration making them order one on their own. The pitch-roller, ordered from Punjab, cost them Rs seven-lakhs, said



Chirag.

When the ground was finally prepared for cricket in December 2022 it hosted its maiden event, Marhama Premier League (MPL) where teams from several districts of the valley took part while the inauguration of the tournament was done by renowned Kashmiri cricketer Parvez Rasool, who hails from the same tehsil.

"Playing in the famed MCG in Australia may remain a dream for these young cricketers of

south Kashmir, but our initiative has enabled them to play at the Marhama Cricket Ground (MCG) of their own," Chirag quipped.

Chirag, who also owns a sports equipment shop, feels the initiative was done at the right time. "The menace of drugs and overuse of smartphones was toppling the youth of this area, but with a high-quality ground to play, most of them have shunned their bad habits now," he claimed.

The MCG has instilled hope in the village boys, who now see a chance of polishing their skills and making it to the national-level cricket.

Though fenced on the sides, MCG still lacks a proper water connection, changing rooms for the players and other facilities.

Having spent over Rs eight lakh from their own pockets, which they aspire to earn back over time by organising tournaments, the trio is hopeful that the government will assist them in upgrading the ground further.



"Playing in the famed MCG in Australia may remain a dream for these young cricketers of south Kashmir, but our initiative has enabled them to play at the MCG of their own"

2 years on, drainage project yet to be completed on Ali Jan Road

Commuters aghast as pending construction work triggers traffic jam

MINZAH MEHRAJ

Despite passing of two years, drainage project on the Ali Jan Road on city outskirts here is yet to be completed causing inconvenience to commuters.

The locals said that the ongoing project is creating traffic jams in the locality hindering even essential services.

Javid Ahmad, who owns a provisional shop on Ali Jan Road, is concerned about the challenges caused by the incomplete drainage project on the vital road leading to Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS).

"The road has become one way here, causing traffic congestion. I haven't seen much development in a long time. It is a hospital road, and the work should not take this long to complete," Ahmad said.

Started in March 2021, the drainage work on the Ali Jan Road has faced several hiccups so far, with legal and land ownership issues delaying the works occasionally.

Locals said the commuters and shopkeepers of the area have long been left to suffer due to apathy of officials. They said the ongoing winter season has further exacerbated the problems,



as open drainage poses threat to local residents, making them deal with drainage water issues seeping into their houses and lanes.

"It has been two years, and the work is still incomplete, causing many problems to the locals. During winter, it is bound to increase our problems and worries," said Faisal Ahmad, a local.

The officials of the National Buildings

Construction Corporation (NBCC) which is executing the project claims that their men and machinery are on the job to ensure the completion of work by March.

"We were allotted a different land before on which its owner got stay. The procedure took five months, then the court came to a conclusion to shuffle the land with the one on

which now the work is going on," said Shehraan Nisar, the engineer in charge of the project.

Officials said that due to the land shuffle, they had to change the design requiring new calculations and increasing the timeline of the said project.

"We attempted to make a manhole, but owing to increased water flow, it did not work. Seven pumps are operational 24 hours a day, but there is no control over the water. Because there is no working drain, a pump was designed to dispose of the sewage on the main road," added Nisar.

The project, as per officials, is divided into two parts, the in-fall pump and outfall pump. The outfall pump is nearing completion while as the in-fall pump will require another two months till completion.

Meanwhile, the inordinate delays in the project have left the road without any blacktopping this year. "Our work is nearly complete. The blacktopping needs a little more work. It was postponed due to the ongoing drainage system maintenance. Because of delays in the work, we could not finish work on the road completely," said Qayoom Kirmani, Superintending Engineer (SE), R&B Department.