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THE Echo



Chief Minister visits IUST

Inaugurates nursing colleges at Awantipora, Charar-e-Sharief

SHERFUN NISA/ UFAQ FATIMA

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti, inaugurated two nursing colleges at Awantipora and Charar-e-Sharief on December 3. After inaugurating the colleges, she visited the Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST), where she interacted with university officials and faculty.

The CM, who was accompanied by senior politicians, was informed about the infrastructure and functioning of the varsity.

In his inaugural address, IUST Vice Chancellor, Prof Mushtaq A Sidiqi, dealt at length with the achievements, challenges and requirements of the university.

Prof Sidiqi said, IUST has attained a satisfactory achievement over the past 11 years, with its infrastructure being developed "from one building to a cluster of buildings".

"The major challenge for IUST is to have knowledge-intensive teaching, which was also pointed out by the NAAC

team that visited the varsity previous year. They suggested us to appoint senior faculty to achieve this goal," he said

Requesting the Chief Minister to raise funds for the varsity, Prof Sidiqi said there was a dire need to

construct more hostels and residential quarters in IUST so as to "save the precious time of students and faculty, which gets wasted in travelling for three hours each day".

Among others, Vice Chairman J&K Muslim Wakf Board, Peer Muhammad Hussain, Minister of State for Forest and Fisheries, Zahoor

Ahmad Mir, and Minister of State for Hajj and Auqaf, Syed Farooq Ahmad Andrabi, were present on the occasion.

The CM also visited the proposed site of AIIMS, and took on the spot appraisal of the process of land acquisition for the purpose of creating facilities of drinking water and power supply at the site.

She was informed that a receiving station was being established at the site at a cost of Rs 15.53 crore by the Power Development Department. She was also informed that five tube wells were being set

up to ensure a dedicated water supply to AIIMS campus.

The CM was also briefed about the status of establishment of three nursing colleges by Waqf Council at Rajouri, Jammu and Kishtwar.



Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti, inaugurating Syed Mantaqi Memorial College of Nursing and Medical Technology at Awantipora on December 3, 2016.

“IUST has attained a satisfactory achievement over the past 11 years, with its infrastructure being developed from one building to a cluster of buildings”

Technology essence of IUST: Mehbooba Mufti

CM stresses on imparting skills training to students, allots Rs 4.5 cr to Mantaqi School

UFAQ FATIMA/ SHERFUN NISA

S tating that Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST) was the dream of her late father, Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, said the varsity was established with a purpose of imparting technological knowledge to youth of Kashmir.

Speaking at the inaugural ceremony of Syed Mantaqi Memorial College of Nursing and Medical Technology, Awantipora on December 3, Mehbooba said technology was the essence of IUST.

"My father and former Chief Minister, Mufti Muhammad Syed, believed that technology is the strength of a nation. He wanted to make IUST a technology-oriented university, so that Kashmiri youth can compete at international level," said Mehbooba, who announced a grant of Rs 4.5 crore and two buses for the Mantaqi School, Awantipora, on the occasion.

"It was the trust, coordination and hope between my father, and the people of Awantipora, which have come to existence in the shape of this university," she added.

Appreciating former and incumbent Vice Chancellors of IUST, she said, they have worked hard to upgrade the infrastructure and introduce professional courses in the university. "The university administration should introduce more skill-based courses in the curriculum to widen choices for students and also generate employment," she said.

The CM, who was the chief guest for the event organised by IUST, further said the past



The university administration should introduce more skill-based courses in the curriculum to widen choices for students and also generate employment"



five months when Kashmir reeled under curfew and shutdowns, were the biggest constraint in the way of development of the Valley. "We would have by now laid foundation of AIIMS and even started official work there, but the conditions did not allow us," she lamented.

Thanking people of Awantipora to maintain peace for past five months, she laid emphasis on saving the children of Kashmir "by providing pens in their hands instead of stones". "Stones and guns are not the solution of any problem, rather dialogue is," she said.

Regarding development of Awantipora, she said she will take care of the civic issues the place is faced with. She added that locals shall be preferred for class-IV jobs in IUST

and AIIMS.



CMYK



Pampore playground turns into garbage dump

MUKHTAR DAR

Once a vibrant field, the sole playground of Pampore in district Pulwama of south Kashmir lies in shambles for the past three decades. The ground lying along the national highway has reduced to a dumping site, courtesy official apathy.

"Every day heaps of garbage are being dumped on this ground, where earlier various games and sports, like Football, Volleyball and Cricket, would be played. The condition of this ground continues to be like this since 1987," says Ghulam Qadir, 70, a resident of Pampore.

"The ground, which once would help people stay fit, now poses serious health threats to them," he adds.

The ground that spreads over around 35 Kanals attracts no players now owing to its pathetic condition. "This is the only playground of Pampore, which is quite an extensive place. If it would be maintained properly, it could provide a good opportunity for practicing to the budding sports persons of Frestabal, Drangbal, Namblabal and other sub-regions of Pampore," says Muhammad Sultan, a local.

The locals say, they have time and again raised the issue with the concerned authorities. As per them, even as the ground was repaired sometime back, it has not been managed properly. "As a result, its condition has not improved."

"In spite of having our own playground, our children are forced to play on streets, which makes us worry about their safety," says Aaqib Khanday, another local. Locals demand that the concerned authorities should repair and maintain the ground on regular basis.

When contacted, municipality officials of Pampore said the repair work of the playground had been started way back in 2014. "However due to the devastating floods of 2014 and political unrest of 2016, the work could not be completed," they said. They added that the fencing of the playground will be done soon. Regarding dumping of garbage on the playground, they said, it is the responsibility of residents not to throw garbage there.

DESPITE RISE IN DRUG ADDICTION, VALLEY SANS REHABILITATION CENTERS

SAJID ALI

Despite that drug abuse is growing in Kashmir, the law enforcing agencies have failed to check the menace. Even as thousands of drug addicts seek counseling and rehabilitation, the Valley has merely three drug de-addiction centers.

According to the official figures of Police Control Room Drug De-Addiction Center (PCRDDC), more than 1568 drug addicts applied for rehabilitation in Kashmir in 2015-2016, among whom 1347 patients were discharged after OPD counseling. Remaining 105 were admitted, while 116 patients were kept in the waiting list due to space constraints in the center.

The drug de-addiction centers, governed by Government Psychiatric Disease Hospital, Srinagar, at Sri Maharaja Hari Singh Hospital Srinagar (SMHS) and Jawahar Lal Nehru Memorial Hospital (JLNM) received more than 12,00 applications for drug de-addiction counseling.

"The actual number of drug addicts is much higher than those who apply for counseling. However, they do not come forward for counseling fearing infamy in society or in family," opines Dr Maqbool Dar, Head of the Department, Government Psychiatric Diseases Hospital, Srinagar.

Renowned psychiatrist, Dr Mushtaq Margoob, in his study, *The Menace of Drug Abuse in Kashmir*, notes that more than two lakh people in Kashmir are addicted to multiple drugs.

Sociologists believe that there is a dire need to engage these drug addicts through drug de-addiction centers, "for they are a part of Kashmiri social fabric".

"Kashmir needs at least two de-addiction centers in every district and some more centers in the capital cities, Srinagar and Jammu. If things continued with the same trend, a vast portion of our society can paralyse in near future," warns Prof Khurshid Ahmad, noted sociologist.

Due to easy availability of drugs in the markets in Kashmir, youngsters, mostly students—

including girls as well—from 15 to 35 years of age, fall prey to multiple drugs, like tobacco, cannabis, alcohol, benzodiazepines (sleeping pills), opiates (codeine, heroin, morphine), brown sugar and inhalants (Fevicol SR, glue, paint thinner, petrol, shoe polish, etc).

Sensing these perils in the society, Directorate of Health established drug de-addiction centers in Kashmir at SMHS and JLNM hospitals under Government Psychiatric Disease Hospital. Taking cue from health



department, Jammu and Kashmir Police established drug de-addiction center in 2008, which was later extended to North Kashmir's Baramulla district and South Kashmir's Anantnag district owing to higher number of cases.

Dr Muzaffar, who currently heads PCRDDC, fears that in near future, "this growing peril can cost several lives, especially of girls". "Our daughters and sisters can be attacked or robbed at any place, while going to market, office or schools. Since we are used to calm and safe environment, we can fall prey to any such serious situation," he reveals.

Similarly, Substance Induced Psychosis Disorder, whereby a person loses his or her senses after taking drugs or behaves more or less like an animal is rising in Kashmir. Every drug de-addiction center receives numerous cases, wherein family members or friends have fallen victims to the aggression of drug addicts.

"The actual number of drug addicts is much higher than those who apply for counseling. However, they do not seek counseling fearing infamy"

Book café culture picks up in Kashmir

MUZAMIL MATTOO

With an idea to revive book reading culture in Kashmir, the trend of book cafés is picking up in the Valley. These cafés offer a variety of books that people can read for free.

At many places in the Valley, a good number of book cafés have been set up. Besides, many coffee shops are offering book reading facilities, while some book shops are also serving coffee to their customers.

Some of the prominent book cafés in Srinagar include Books-N-Bricks at Gogji Bagh, Gulshan Books café at Nehru Park and The Other Side café at Jehangir Chowk.

"The idea behind setting up the book café was to provide the people with a space where they can enjoy coffee and books simultaneously," opines Muneeb Mir, a young entrepreneur, who established Valley's first book café in 2014, namely The Other Side café.

"We already had many coffee shops in Kashmir, but I wanted to introduce something new. So I did a lot of research about it. It took me two years to set up a book café, as this was the first of its kind in Kashmir," he adds.

Most of the book cafés are as spacious

as libraries. These have especially been designed to offer people a comfortable and calm space to read.

Gulshan Books café, which was set up in May 2016 at the famous island in Nehru Park, Srinagar, has divided the area of the café into three parts—one for books section, another for the café purpose, and the third one for library purpose, where people can read for free without any time limit.

"We provide a good space to people to read the books available in the library. We also provide them a calm atmosphere so that they can read books comfortably," says Sheikh Aijaz, Chief Executive Officer, Gulshan Books.

Gulshan Books is particular about offering books on history of Kashmir to tourists as well as youth of Kashmir, "so that people are well acquainted with Kashmir history".

"We have kept costly books in the library, which many people can't afford to buy. Most of them focus on Jammu and Kashmir history," says Aijaz.

Readers also prefer to visit Books-N-Bricks, an American diner, set up in partnership by two entrepreneurs, Danish Rasool and Arsalan Sajad, in 2015 with an aim to cater to the passion for books



Gulshan Books café at Nehru Park, Srinagar.

"The idea behind setting up the book café was to provide the people with a space where they can enjoy coffee and books simultaneously"

among youth.

Apart from providing a space for reading, the café also offers a collection of second-hand books, which readers can buy at low costs.

"Here we have kept some books that do not cost more than Rs 150. These books are different from the books that people are familiar with, so that they read new books with new ideas," says Rasool.

Book cafés have evoked a good response from people in Kashmir. "Earlier, people used to have just a cursory look on the book covers, but now there are many takers for our books, who even buy these books," he adds.

It is believed that earlier book reading had not been a favorite pastime for many in Kashmir. Besides, with the inception of social media and new media technologies, books were the last thing to attract youth. "However, with the introduction of book cafés in the Valley, the current young generation is increasingly getting attracted to books," says Mir, adding that they aim to make people understand the significance of books.



Kashmiri traditional games on verge of extinction

Children playing hotchpotch on a street at Pantha Chowk at Srinagar outskirts.

RIYAZ BHAT

From traditional sports to modern games, Valley youngsters have undergone a drastic change in their leisure interests. Nowadays, youth and children prefer playing online and video games rather than traditional games.

The traditional games had been planned and developed by locals several decades back to enhance the perceptual and sportsmanship skills of the youngsters. The games included *Saz Loung* (hopscotch), *Sath Katri* or *Santooli* or *Garam*, *Bante Zaar* or *Tanga-ya-chaut* (marbles), *Gaant-i-Byear* (kite flying), *Tchoori Tchhape* (hide and seek), *Dajji ball* (cloth ball), *Turai Kar* and *Joutas*. However, now, the traditional games are on the verge of extinction.

A traditional outdoor game, *Joutas*, for instance, was being played by blind-folding a player with a piece of cloth, while other players would tease him. The player was supposed to touch others by concentrating on the direction of wind. "This game was developed by our ancestors to enhance our concentration and hearing power," says 60-year-old Muhammad Yousuf

Bhat of Pampore.

Most traditional games involve movement of the body, which includes running, jumping, hitting or racing. Some research studies conducted on benefits of traditional games have found that these games yield better results than modern games, as they involve physical exercise.

Health experts deem that traditional games would keep youngsters physically and mentally active, "whereas modern games have given rise to sedentary lifestyle". "There were many games like hopscotch and kite flying that were full of activities. Such games would improve the logic and reasoning of youngsters, which would help them solve their problems along with the help and critical evaluation of elders," says Dr Tafazul Malik, a psychiatrist at Sri Maharaja Hari Singh (SMHS) hospital, Srinagar. He adds that during a game involving

physical activity, youngsters learn to deal with frustration after a loss, with excitement after a win and with anger after facing a bad turn.

"However, today's online games do not involve physical activity and social interaction. Nowadays, kids can spend whole day on a computer or mobile phone rather than with their parents, siblings or friends that renders them anti-social," he says.

The experts opine that traditional games are better than even modern outdoor sports like Cricket or Football that involve a risk of injuries while playing, "whereas in traditional games there is a minimum threat of injuries".

During the past, traditional games in Kashmir used to be a part of educational curriculum, which would help kids build strong physique and socialize with different age groups. "Before the advent of video and online

"Traditional games would keep youngsters physically and mentally active, whereas online and video games have given rise to sedentary lifestyle"

Digital games lead to health issues: Experts

Banks promote cashless economy

SHERFUN NISA/ UFAQ FATIMA

To generate awareness among students about 'cashless economy', Dean Student's Welfare, Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST), organised a session under Vittiya Sakshatra Abiyon on December 21.

Students were given a presentation by officials from ICICI and HDFC banks about net banking and various cash transfer applications like Eazy App. They were asked to use these apps on their mobile phones and were taught how to make transactions through different ways.

"These apps have made the money transfer easy and will take India to a different digital level," said Naveet Singh, Regional Head Sales, ICICI Bank. Talking to The Echo, Ifra Amin, Assistant Professor, Electronic and Communications department, IUST, said, they have organised the event to teach students about how to transfer cash "with or without Internet". Senior Branch Manager, ICICI Bank, Umar Bhat, said, the main purpose of the session was to enlighten youngsters as to how to make banking digital. "We have started our campaigns

"Cash transfer applications have made the money transfer easy and will take India to a different digital level"

from this month to make people aware about the digital banking. We provide them with services

on their mobile phones, for it is cumbersome for a person to visit a bank for transferring money," he said.

While interacting with students, Yasir Gulzar from HDFC Bank, said, net banking is the need of the hour "and we, especially youth, should be well informed about it".

Students expressed their satisfaction over participating in the session. "This has been a good experience. We learnt easy way of transferring money from our mobile devices," said Samina Tabbasum, student of Arabic department, IUST.

A student from Electronics and Communication Engineering department, IUST, Dawar Ali, said the event enhanced the knowledge of students about easy access to bank accounts and transfer of money.

Magam emerging as cycling hub of Kashmir

Produces 40 plus trained cyclists; 'Govt. to sanction Rs 200 crore for Valley sports'

ZUBAIR AMIN

Setting an unorthodox trend in the sporting culture of Kashmir, Magam, some 20 kilometers from the city, is gradually emerging as a hub of cycling in the Valley.

In twin villages, Kanihama and Kawoosa, of this Tehsil, there are more than 40 young professional cyclists, while the youngsters from the adjoining villages are lately taking cue, and are slowly making their way into cycling.

Cricket and Football no more allure the youth of this place, which is evident from the fact that among this group, 22 cyclists have managed to buy expensive imported cycles costing Rs two lakh each.

"This speaks volumes about the spirit of youth and their love for cycling. Most of the cyclists come from poor families, yet they have managed to buy imported cycles," says Akbar Khan, celebrated cyclist of Kawoosa village. Akbar Khan, who is an important member of this group, has represented India at international level in the Track Asia Cup.

Many cyclists have participated in state and national level events. Recently, a 15-year-old-boy,

Bilal Ahmad, was selected for National Cycling Academy of India. He is most likely to get a chance of representing India in 20-20 Olympics, if India qualifies for the same.

Magam youth are enthusiastic about taking cycling as career. Some dream of participating in Olympics, while others look forward to represent India at national level. To achieve these goals, these cyclists are toiling hard day in and day out on the roads of Budgam and Baramulla.

Every day at 5 am, this group gathers at Kawoosa, Narbal. By 9 am, after cycling for four hours, they come back from the places like Gulmarg and Doodh Pathri after covering a distance of 100-110 kilometers.

However, these daily rides have not been a cakewalk for these youngsters, as many challenges confront them.

From lack of equipment to discouragement of the government, there are many issues that make them worry about their future.

"We face tremendous issues. Foremost, government does not provide us equipment. Once I had to take a loan from bank for buying a cycle. Then we don't have trainers and coaching staff, which further worsens the situation," says Abdul Waheed, who has participated in state as well as national cycling events.

Another reputed cyclist of the area, wishing anonymity, blames authorities of negligence, saying, "Government is not considering the needs of cyclists and instead views cycling as a game of aliens." He says, a number of cyclists, who have represented state at national level, are yet to be covered under SRO-349, which appoints these sportspersons in various government departments.

Vice Chairman, District Sports Council, Budgam, Rifat Abdullah, admits that "government is not doing much" for the development of cycling in general and particularly for endorsing young cyclists of Magam.

Abdullah states that Magam is emerging as a big cycling hub not only in J&K but in India, and that there is a need of more support from the government. He, however, adds that the government is soon going to release a package of Rs 200 crore for the development of sports in Kashmir, "and cycling shall be among top priority of sports authorities".

"Under the package, an excellence center will be established, where youngsters will be trained, and equipment and proper diet shall be provided to them. So I am optimistic about the future of cycling in the Valley," says Abdullah.

He adds that they have forwarded a proposal to the Sports Authority of India to develop a velodrome (an arena for track cycling) from Narbal to Gulmarg for its high altitude topography, which is favorable for cycling.

KASHMIR HAAT FACES BRUNT OF GOVT APATHY

SAJID ALI

Kashmir Haat, which earlier would allure tourists as well as locals to various art exhibitions, is now losing its sheen, courtesy official apathy. A platform for artisans from all corners of the state, the exhibition ground, located centrally in Srinagar city, has reduced to merely a playground.

The ground, which is spread over 300 Kanals of land, has cow dung scattered all over, while its garden posts are uprooted or stolen.

Employees working in Jammu and Kashmir Handicrafts department said, every year the concerned authorities receive a hefty sum of money for the renovation of Kashmir Haat on contract basis. They, however, alleged that officials spend only a small amount on the renovation task, "while the rest goes into their pockets".

"That is the reason they are letting the exhibition ground go to shambles," said an official pleading anonymity.

He added that every winter coniferous trees and decorative items like chandeliers worth over Rs 30,000 are either stolen or vandalized. "But nobody pays a heed to that either," he said.

"Every year the concerned authorities receive a hefty sum of money for the renovation of Kashmir Haat. They, however, spend only a small amount on the renovation task, while the rest goes into their pockets"

Another official added that the sweepers, who work on substantive basis and are supposed to keep the ground clean, do not sweep the dung and garbage scattered all over the ground.

"If we compare the Delhi Haat with Kashmir Haat, there is a black-and-white difference between the two," he said.

The exhibition ground was thrown open in 1946 under the name *Numayish Gah* for exhibition and sale of Kashmiri handicrafts. However, the market witnessed a major downfall after the outbreak of militancy

Local boys playing cricket on the historic Kashmir Haat ground

in 1990 when the ground was occupied by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel. Later in July 2005, the ground was renovated and again thrown open to public by the then J&K Chief Minister, late Mufti Muhammad Syed.

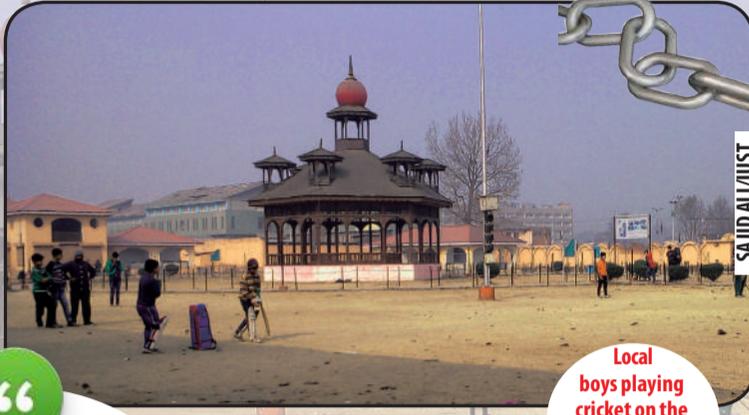
When contacted, Director Jammu and Kashmir Handicrafts department, Gazanfar Ali, said the main obstacle they were facing to renovate the ground was the issue of car parking, "which, however, we have taken care of in our grand plan".

"We have formulated and forwarded a plan to renovate and make the Kashmir Haat glory of Srinagar. In fact, we have sent the plan to World Bank to seek the loan of Rs 52 crores, which may be sanctioned this year," he said.

He further added that the ground was renovated after 2014 floods and even many exhibitions were held there.

Refuting the allegation of neglecting the ground for yearly contracts, he said, it is an "utter lie and has no ground reality".

Gazanfar further said the department shall also place security pickets at the entry and exit points of the ground, "so that no one trespasses in the ground to play games or pollute the ground".



SAJID ALI/UST

Lack of cold stores hits Kashmir apple industry

Valley produces 20 lakh MT apples annually, only 63,000 MT cold stored

ZUBAIR AMIN

Despite being the largest apple producing region in south Asia, Kashmir Valley does not have ample cold storage facilities for the apples produced.

Kashmir produces 20 lakh metric tonnes of apples annually, however only three percent of the total production can be cold stored due to dearth of cold storage facilities in the Valley.

According to the officials at the department of Horticulture, storage capacity for the apples should be 20 percent of total production in Kashmir, however the Valley has the capacity for only 3.28 percent of the total production.

Official figures reveal that against the required cold storage of 3,83,089 metric tonnes, Valley has a cold storage capacity of only 63,000 metric tonnes, accounting for a deficit of 3,20,089 metric tonnes.

As per the official data, there is a shortfall of 33,285 tons in the central Kashmir against the requirement of 46,785 metric tonnes. Similarly, in south Kashmir, there is a shortfall of 1,13,911 metric tonnes against the requirement of 1,63,491 metric tonnes.

Interestingly, north Kashmir that includes the highest apple producing district Baramulla requires cold storage for a crop of 1,72,813 metric tonnes, however it has not even a single functional cold storage unit.

Apple growers and traders across the Valley lament over the dearth of

cold storage facilities for the apples, saying, "It is hitting our trade badly". They accuse successive governments of callous approach towards the apple industry.

President New Kashmir Fruit Association Parip-mora, Srinagar, Bashir Ahmad Bashir, says they had approached government many a time and spent huge sum to set up cold store units on 'no profit-no loss basis', "however, government did not cooperate with the proposal".

"We have spent about 25 lakhs in getting all kinds of document-work done, but the bureaucratic issues in various departments have been hampering our proposal of setting up the cold stores," Bashir says.

"Keeping in view the apple production and the number of people dependent on it, Valley should have hundreds of cold storage units. But instead, it has just a few cold stores," says Bashir, adding that the horticulture sector forms the main source of economy for the most proportion of people in the Valley.

As per the growers, every year they suffer a loss of crores of rupees due to lack of cold storage facilities. They lament that they are forced to sell their fruits even when the demand or rates are low.

"Keeping in view the apple production and the number of people dependent on it, Valley should have hundreds of cold storage units. But instead, it has just a few cold stores"

"This year I had a production of 3,000 apple boxes, but I had to sell them as soon as I harvested the crop fearing damage to crop without the adequate post-harvesting facilities. Market prices were low and I suffered a loss of lakhs of rupees," says Abdul Rashid Dar, a grower from the south Kashmir's Shopian district.

He adds that if there would be ample cold storage facilities, farmers will sell the fruit only when the market is conducive.

There are 20 apple cold storage units in Kashmir Valley, however many of them are either non-functional or have been closed.

"In Pulwama district, there are 18 units, eight of which are functioning,



while as the paper-work for eight others is underway. Two of the units had been closed after they were occupied by armed forces," divulge officials at the Small Industries Development Corporation (SIDCO).

"And there are two units in north Kashmir's Sopore town, however both of them are closed," they add.

To mention, setting up a cold storage unit in the Valley is purely private based with government providing the subsidy. People seeking to set up a cold storage unit have to register with the state Horticulture department. The department is supposed to provide subsidy to the applicant after proper documentation. However, the Fruit Association accuses the department of "creating difficulties instead of any help".

Many growers believe that lack of awareness among them is the major hurdle in setting up cold stores.

"Apple growers in the Valley are still not well aware about the post-harvesting techniques like packing

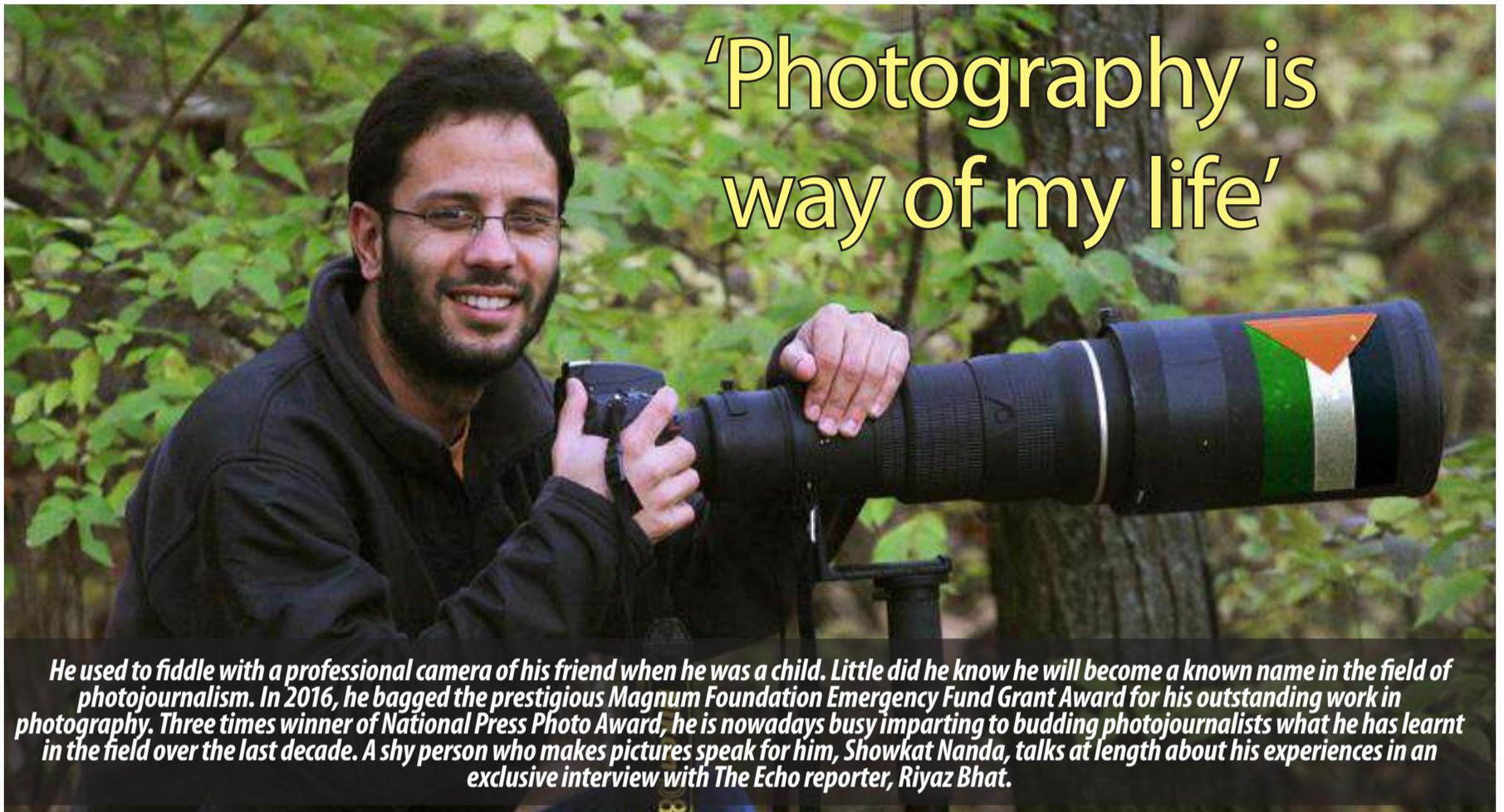
and cold storage, which are very important for the apple crop," says Khurram Shafi Mir, who runs two cold storage units with a capacity of 11,000 metric tonnes in the south Kashmir's Pulwama district.

"First you have to make people aware about the value of cold storage, so that they come forward in this direction. This is the job of the concerned authorities," he adds.

Admitting that there is a shortfall of cold storage facilities, authorities at the department of Horticulture say growers are not coming forward to set up their own cold storage units. Authorities, however, state that the move by the government to reduce the subsidy rates is keeping the growers away.

"Earlier government would provide subsidy of Rs 70,000 per metric ton to set up a unit, which has now been reduced to 20,000 per metric ton. That is why, people are reluctant to set up cold storage units in the Valley," says P K Sharma, Director Horticulture Kashmir Division.





'Photography is way of my life'

He used to fiddle with a professional camera of his friend when he was a child. Little did he know he will become a known name in the field of photojournalism. In 2016, he bagged the prestigious Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund Grant Award for his outstanding work in photography. Three times winner of National Press Photo Award, he is nowadays busy imparting to budding photojournalists what he has learnt in the field over the last decade. A shy person who makes pictures speak for him, Showkat Nanda, talks at length about his experiences in an exclusive interview with The Echo reporter, Riyaz Bhat.

Q. You are an international award-winning photojournalist, who has inspired many Kashmiri youngsters to take up photography as profession. What has inspired you to join this field?

A. As a kid, I was quite interested in visuals and photography. I used to capture lots of photographs with a Single Lens Reflex (SLR) camera of my friend. However, I never wanted to be a photojournalist but a cardiac surgeon. I took Science subjects in my 12th standard and even graduated in the same. For post-graduation, I appeared in three different subjects including Mass Communication and Journalism, in which I was least interested. Even my family did not want me to pursue Journalism. But then, result of Journalism subject was declared first and I got selected in Media Education Research Centre (MERC), University of Kashmir. I was really happy with my results and joined the course. Now that I was pursuing Journalism, and photography had already been my interest, for me photojournalism was the best field to opt for. Eventually I realised that the aim of being a doctor was just a distracted ambition.

Q. What has actually fascinated you towards photography?

A. I have always been very shy. Thus, I chose pictures to speak for me and used photography as an alternative to express myself. Unlike others, who choose a profession because of external factors, I chose photojournalism because of internal factor. It has been a way of my life. I won the first national award in 2006 for directing a short film *Bailos* as a part of my Master's course. It was only after that my teachers first began to recognise me as I was very shy to express anything verbally.

Q. For pursuing career in a technical subject like photography, one needs to receive a specialised training rather than merely studying a Master's course. Did you receive any such training?

A. I was a self-taught photographer and University of Kashmir gave me an edge. Here I must make a mention of my photography teacher, Faheen Sir, who used to teach us creative angle of photojournalism. You know, otherwise, there is no photojournalism specialization in the university. Meanwhile, I joined *Association Francaise de Conchyliologie (AFC)*, which is a quarterly magazine of the French Conchologist Association, as trainee photographer from 2006 to 2007. Later, I received my formal education in photojournalism from University of Missouri, United States (US) and did two-year Master's course in photojournalism.

Q. Enlighten us about your achievements.

A. The biggest achievement of my life and a turning point came in 2011 when I received three National Press Photo Awards including one 'picture of the year'. After that, my work got published in international journals also and I won a fellowship. In 2012, I was declared among top 20 'story tellers of tomorrow' by Vii Photo Agency. In 2015, I won Climate Change photography award by Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). In 2016, I won the most prestigious award of my life, namely 'Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund Grant Award'. Besides all this, my work has been published in *Washington post*, *Aljazeera*, *Vogue Magazine*, *Vox Magazine*, and many other publications.

Q. What are your current engagements in photojournalism?

A. Nowadays I do not work as a news photographer but in documentary photography. Currently, I am working on a couple of projects for *Magnum Photo Agency*. My most important photo-project right now is about half widows of Kashmir—women whose husbands have disappeared during conflict. Besides, I have been visiting the Islamic University of Science and Technology as a guest faculty since 2009, and have also conducted workshops in University of Kashmir and Central

University of Kashmir. I have also taught in United States of America and carried out many important photo-projects there as well.

Q. What is the most challenging part of this profession?

A. There are many challenges and the biggest among them is that the field of photography is shrinking. It does not have the scope it had 20 years before. So, one needs to find one's niche to fit in the world of photography. In this context, I am conducting workshops to convey the young photographers how the contemporary field of photojournalism is. They need to see what the current happenings in the field of photography are. They should make a definite choice and work on it to create their own style rather than following anything or anyone blindly.

Q. What does photography mean to you and how much do you enjoy it?

A. As I said, photography is the way of my life. I cannot imagine myself without telling stories through it. It is the most enjoyable profession I have come across. Every day you capture a new picture is different from the previous capture. So, every day is a new day in photography. Also, I like to connect with people and narrate their stories to the world. This profession not only keeps me busy but also gives me the satisfaction and enjoyment.

Q. What do you like to do in your spare time apart from photography?

A. I love to hang out with friends and discuss things with them, especially photography. Besides it, book reading is one of the craziest obsessions I have.

Q. How difficult do you find to capture pictures, especially news photographs, in a conflict-hit region like Kashmir?

A. It is both easy and difficult. Easy in the way that Kashmir is full of stories. But it is difficult to approach a subject or story in Kashmir because the situation in the Valley keeps changing in the social context. People here are not camera-friendly because of the conflict and they get conscious. A professional photographer with camera is similar to a doctor with stethoscope as it is his bread and butter. But such mind-set is yet to be achieved in Kashmir. Here photography is still not taken like other professions.

Q. How much talented, you feel, Kashmiri youth are with respect to photography?

A. There is immense talent in Kashmir. The only reservation I have is that the youngsters are not able to utilise this talent properly for many reasons. It is very important for them to know how to utilize this talent in a proper way. They should know what the international standard of photography is and should improve their work accordingly.

Q. How do you promote and encourage this talent in Kashmir?

A. I am conducting workshops in different universities. Last year, I conducted workshop in MERC on visual story-telling to make the aspiring photographers understand how photography should be used in telling a story. Wherever I teach, I try to show the students how to incorporate the sense of story-telling in photography, which would be my biggest contribution in nourishing the young talent in Kashmir.



"There is immense talent in Kashmir, which, however, the youngsters are not able to utilise properly for many reasons. It is very important for them to know how to utilize this talent in a proper way"



"Currently, I am working on a couple of projects for Magnum Photo Agency. My most important photo-project right now is about half widows of Kashmir—women whose husbands have disappeared during conflict"



Famous tourist spot Pahalgam sans proper hospital

SHOWKAT RASHID

Despite being a famous tourist destination and the transit point for lakhs of pilgrims visiting the Amaranth Shrine annually, Pahalgam still lies without a full-fledged hospital.

All in the name of healthcare facility, Pahalgam had been provided with an allopathic dispensary—Government Civil Hospital—which was upgraded to Primary Health Centre in 2015. The health centre, however, is managed by a single doctor.

“The sanctioned staff of the health centre comprises two senior pharmacists, one female multi-purpose worker, one driver and nine nursing orderlies. The hospital doesn’t have even a female doctor or gynecologist,” informed Dr Tula Singh, Block Medical Officer, Saller, adding that another sanctioned post of doctor for the hospital lies vacant for years.

“It is not an easy task to handle the patient rush. To cope with this situation, we mostly depute doctors working in other public health centres to the health centre,” he said. Officials said some doctors from Block Saller Pahalgam are deputed during the Yatra season on temporary basis.

The health centre caters to the population of the upper areas of Frislan, Aru, Mandilan, Ganeshbal, Mammal, Lidru and other areas, however, residents said, due to dearth of the staff and machinery, it hardly serves any purpose. They said most of the times the patients are rushed to Anantnag district hospital, which, however, lies far away.

“It is very difficult to rush emergency patients or delivery cases from the upper reaches to district hospital Anantnag, which is around 45 Kilometers away from Pahalgam, and most of them die on their way,” said Fayaz Ahmad, a resident.

“Even for nose bleeding, they refer us to the district hospital. Patients, especially pregnant women, face numerous hurdles,” he said.

Bilal Ahmad Khan, another resident, said during winters it gets worse, since it is difficult to take patients to the district hospital due to road blockage, “so for whole

winter we remain on the mercy of the Almighty”.

Locals alleged that they are being forced to go to local medicates and other private doctors, “who demand hefty amount for the consultation”.

The health centre also lacks machinery for conducting ultrasonography tests, mobile intensive care ambulance and other essential equipment.

Mushtaq Magray, a social activist, who heads a coalition of unions, rued the inattentive attitude of government and health department in particular towards the issue. “We keep highlighting such grave issues, but the officials at the helm of affairs continue to ignore our pleas,” he said.

Magray added that a brigade of doctors and para-medical staffs being deputed in the hospital only during Yatra period, while for rest of the year, only one or two doctors manage the entire hospital. The sitting MLA, Muhammad Altaf Ahmad Kaloo, and civil society groups in Pahalgam are worried about the dearth of doctors, machinery and inadequate facilities.

Center also exposes the tall claims of the government of revamping the health department and providing better facilities to tourists and pilgrims. MLA Pahalgam, Altaf Ahmad Kaloo, also chaired a meeting of several civil society groups and trade unions at Pahalgam in this regard. However, despite this, nothing has been done.

“It is very difficult to rush emergency patients or delivery cases from the upper reaches to district hospital Anantnag, which is around 45 Kilometers away from Pahalgam, and most of them die on their way”

Chain stitch artisans feel pinch of machine-made embroidery

‘Art has fallen prey to govt apathy’

AAMIR ALI

He is in a state of despair, as bundles of chain stitch patterned rugs worth lakhs of rupees are lying unsold in his warehouse. He desperately waits for customers to buy his patterned rugs of chain stitch, which is believed to be one of the finest handicrafts of Kashmir.

Muhammad Ibrahim, a craftsman while leaning his back against a bundle of patterned rugs at his storehouse says because of machine-made products, which are being dubiously dubbed as Kashmiri handicraft outside Kashmir, his stocks of patterned rugs remain unsold for years.

Chain stitch art, which is done by a hook locally called ‘Aari’ on a white background has been witnessing huge decline for last couple of years because of machine-made products.

“Chain stitch embroidery has a very rich history and a great demand all over the world because of the high quality of embroidery done on patterned rugs. However, due to government negligence in dealing with fake Kashmiri crafts, this art is declining day by day,” says Ibrahim, who has been doing this business since 1988.

While ruffling up his hair frequently, distraught Ibrahim says 10 years before, he had almost 500 artisans, but now he is left with only 50 artisans, “since people in scores are leaving this art”.

“Many people who export machine-made patterned chain stitch rugs outside the state or country are hoodwinking customers in the name of Kashmiri handicrafts. Owing to this, Kashmiri artisans who are engaged with this work lose their customers,” says Ibrahim, who while talking intermittently put his heads into his hands dejectedly.

Chain stitch that is mostly exported to outside country comes in different sizes, viz., 2×3, 3×5, 6×4, 6×9, 8×12, 9×12, etc. Its design ranges from floral patterns to animal and human forms. The yarn used in embroidery by artisans is Two-ply, Three-

ply and silk.

Chain stitch, which is famous for its uniformity and quality of stitches, is done by skilled locals of Kashmir, mostly village girls, as a part-time job.

A craftswoman, Hajira of Verinag, who has been doing this business for last 15 years, says, she has around 50 artisans, majority of whom are girls.

“Mostly village girls are doing chain stitch work as part time job to earn their livelihood,” says dispirited Hajira.

She adds that she has a large stack of patterned rugs lying in her store. “But because of non-availability of sellers in the market, my stocks are being eaten by cloth moths and dust mites,” she laments.

Ibrahim while expressing his indignation towards government, says, they have raised their voice number of times, “but it seems our voice have fallen on deaf ears”.

Artisans opine that the People’s Democratic Party had promised them during election campaign to revive this art, but, they add, government has not passed any scheme in this regard until now.

Talking to *The Echo*, Assistant Director, Handicrafts, Bashir Ahmad Bhat, says, till now state government has not imposed ban on the machinery used for making chain stitch patterned rugs.

“Still our department has constituted ‘Quality Control Wing’, whose job is to survey and confiscate such machines,” he continues.

Bhat adds that they are providing one lakh loan to every registered artisan with only four percent interest. “Apart from this, we have many other schemes for chain stitch workers like credit card schemes and financial schemes,” Bhat says.

Authorities may have been claiming to make efforts to save this art. But the fact is chain stitch is not just losing its sheen but artisans as well. They feel it is a responsibility of government to confiscate such machines from people and save this beautiful Kashmiri hand art from dying an untimely death.

Many people who export machine-made patterned chain stitch rugs outside the state or country are hoodwinking customers in the name of Kashmiri handicrafts

Modern designs revive Pheran culture in Kashmir

SHAH MOHSIN

Kashmiri Pheran, which for past some time was finding notakers with the arrival of western garments in the Valley, is now again in demand in the market. Innovations in patterns, fabric and designs of embroidery have brought the Pheran

culture back in Kashmir.

Pheran is a traditional wool doak worn in winters to keep body warm. Historians believe, there are no firm narratives suggesting the history of Pheran in Kashmir, “but there are several historical perspectives about it”.

“Some ancient historians have claimed that Pheran has its roots in Persian-Kashmiri nexus of culture and tradition of medieval time, whereas some assert that it came to Kashmir after the arrival of Mughals in late 16th century,” divulges Prof Farooq Fayaz of Department of History, University of Kashmir.

Traders opine that the business of Pheran was declining a couple of years back, “however, now the business has picked up again”. “Earlier we would hardly sell 2,000 Pherans in a season from November to March, but now we sell more than 6,000 Pherans per season,” says Mudasar Ahmad a

shopkeeper at Lal Chowk.

The main factor responsible for Pheran’s revival is believed to be the integration of modern designs—credit of which is mostly given to Muhammad Sadiq, owner of Fashion House, a famous tailoring and cloth merchant shop located alongside Jhelum Bund in the city.

“I introduced numerous designs way back in 1986, but people did not like them. It was only after the former Chief Minister, Dr Farooq Abdullah, purchased a designer Pheran from us some years back, Pheran was back in demand,” says Sadiq.

“Now these designs have become a vogue throughout Kashmir and even worldwide, especially for the past four years,” he says, adding that they design Pherans for ministers, actors, bureaucrats, doctors and national as well as international tourists. Sadiq opines that earlier a Pheran

would cost hardly Rs 500 to 1000, “but now we use expensive cloth and different designs, which cost more than Rs 3500 to 5000.” “Various new designs of Pheran with hood, buttons, strips and especially multi-colored embroidery has raised its demand in the market,” he adds.

Another trader, Javaid Ahmad, owner of New Cottage Showroom at Lal Chowk area of the city, says, Pheran was earlier thought of as a cloth used to keep a person warm, “but today it depicts more about the Kashmiri culture and advancement in the suiting of people.”

“These newly designed Pherans attract tourists, who travel from different parts of the world,” he adds.

Talking to *The Echo*, young girls share that they enjoy wearing Pheran of new designs. “Pheran is our culture and quite comfortable as compared to long coats,” says Neelofar Khan, a second year student.

Vox Pop

Demonetisation- Hit or Miss?

On November 8, 2016, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, announced the scrapping of all 500 and 1000 rupees Indian currency notes from the midnight and also announced the issuance of new 500 and 2000 rupees notes in exchange of the old notes. The time limit fixed to deposit old notes in

banks was set to December 30, 2016. It was told that after the fixed time the person bearing demonetised notes will have to face a legal action and a huge penalty will be imposed on the accused. The Modi-led government claimed that demonetisation would set crack-down on the growing black

money and corruption in the country. However, in the days following the demonetization, banks and ATMs across the country faced severe cash shortage with adverse effect on a number of small businesses, agriculture and transportation. People seeking to exchange their notes had to stand in long

queues, and more than 85 deaths due to the inconveniences caused to people in queues were reported. In this regard, *The Echo* talked to a few people, seeking their views on demonetisation. Here is what they feel.

AS TOLD TO SHOWKAT RASHID



“It was not a well-thought decision. We are facing a havoc of problems here in New Delhi from the day old notes were banned. The ATMs are running out of cash. I am finding difficulties even in paying my tuition fee. No one is happy about this decision. We wake up early and stand in long ATM queues to withdraw some cash. However, most of the times, we return empty handed.”

Ayaz Riyaz Wani, Law student



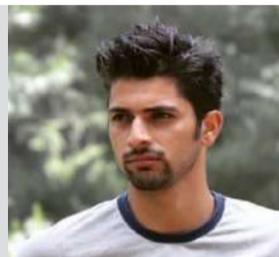
“I have never faced such crisis of money in my life. My business has been badly affected as people have no money to buy things. I am facing problems even in buying stock from the market for my shop.”

–Zahid Nisar Lone, businessman



“No doubt we have faced problems and witnessed deaths, but in the long run it will definitely serve us and mostly poor people would be benefited from this move. Prices of commodities shall also remain under control.”

–Zakariya Saba, Lakhnow-based reporter



“Scrapping old notes immediately without doing enough homework was not a wise move. The government should have informed people months before demonetisation took place. They should have trained people about e-payments and used different media channels to aware people before implementing the ban.”

–Aadil Malik, M.Tech student



“Every change comes with certain responsibilities and a promising future. The authorities were not responsible enough in handling the situation, but yes it definitely has a promising future for the whole country. I don't personally like Bhartiya Janata Party but I support them for this move.”

–Aarif Asgar, Mumbai-based journalist



“Life has been difficult since demonetisation. We fail to pay money to our landlord at times. We have to prioritize things while buying anything, be it books or even essential commodities.”

–Majid Mohi-ud-din, B.Tech student

Polythene ban a repeated failure of government

SHAH MOHSIN

In spite of ban on the use of polythene in place, Valley traders continue selling goods in polythene bags. These bags can be seen in almost all the markets of cities and rural areas.

The use of polythene and other non-biodegradable material, including non-decomposable plastic, has been prohibited thrice over the past decade, however markets present a different story of enactment of the ban.

“A multi-time ban on polythene bags in Kashmir seems a useless exercise from the government that is proving toothless for both shopkeepers and consumers using polythene,” said Majid Ashraf, an Environmental Science student.

The departments like Pollution Control Board (PCB), Municipal Corporations and other local bodies, which are entrusted with the job of controlling pollution of all sorts, have been lenient in putting into practice the High Court's declared ban on polythene bags.

The state government had declared a blanket ban on polythene carry bags of any thickness throughout the Valley in SRO-182 on June 18, 2008. In exercise of powers conferred by Jammu and Kashmir Non-Biodegradable Material (Management, Handling and Disposal) Act, 2007, and the consequent Jammu and Kashmir Non-Biodegradable Material (Management, Handling and Disposal) Rules, 2009, manufacturing, trade, transportation or use of polythene carry bags became illegal in the state. The act also grants the nodal powers to PCB, Srinagar Municipal Corporation

(SMC) and smaller municipal bodies liable for implementing the ban on the ground.

In the decade's time, almost all the controlling authorities under different coalition governments including present PDP-BJP merger have failed to put curb on the markets as well as the polythene production firms.

Places like Delhi and other metropolitan states, where the pollution levels have reached above normal, had earlier banned the over-usage of non-biodegradable materials, but the J&K government announced the blanket ban on the materials of this sort.

A fruit vendor in Srinagar city, Abdul Rehman, selling fruits in polythene bags when asked about the ban on polythene mockingly replied, “The government should stop the clandestine manufacture and smuggling of polythene inside the Valley. Polythene is as much available as water in the state.”

This happens despite the government's proposal to install polythene scanners at toll post in Lakhampur and other check points like Lower Munda, and Jammu and Udhampur railway stations to curb the smuggling of polythene into the state

In response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), Division Bench of J&K High Court comprising Chief Justice Mahesh Kumar Mittal and Justice Hasnain Massodi, had asked the state government to take effective measures to stop transportation of polythene

carry bags into the state. The Court had asked the government to take steps to stop both entry and manufacture of polythene at the entry point and origin, respectively.

A major pollutant with no natural mechanism of degradation has abundant presence in the Valley, which subsequently causes soil pollution and contamination of other water bodies. The Valley's famous Dal Lake and tourist resorts have been found in this dangerous circle of pollution. Various NGOs have been fighting to end the menace of polythene in the Valley.

“It is a matter of social responsibility. All the citizens should develop a sense of environmental protection in them. Kashmiris will have to stand up for themselves, the government alone can't make it a successful campaign,” said Muhammad Haris, a class IV employee, SMC.

When asked about this failed polythene ban campaign in the state, Commissioner SMC, Bashir Ahmad Khan, said, the “irresponsible” attitude of people has failed the campaign. “If a campaign like 15-day ‘odd-even’ campaign can be successful in Delhi, why can't a three-day ‘say no to polythene’ campaign be successful in Kashmir?” he asked.

“Several departments come under the implication circle like PCB, which must be vigilant on the smuggling and transportation of the polythene materials,” he added.



22 years on, daily wagers seek job regularization

AAMIR ALI

Tall claims of government to eradicate unemployment in Jammu and Kashmir notwithstanding, thousands of casual labourers in the state are waiting for job regularisation for past couple of decades. Due to low stipends, the labourers face tremendous hardships in managing the family expenses. One of the daily wagers, Ghulam Mohammad Ganai (50), from Kangan Baramulla, has been waiting for his job regularization since 1994. When he was appointed as daily wager in Public Health Engineering (PHE) department, his salary was Rs 1800. “But I was satisfied because I thought this job would be regularized in coming years. Since then I have been waiting for this dream to come true,” narrates Ganai, who now looks like an octogenarian man with wrinkled face and grey hair.

“Whenever I approach any MLA of our constituency, they always write on my application ‘please help’ instead of helping me themselves,” says Ganai, who now wants to “commit suicide to escape from this never-ending struggle”.

According to official data, presently there are more than 61,000 casual labourers and daily wagers in Jammu and Kashmir, who have been appointed in different departments. Most of them have been appointed way back in 1994 but have not been regularized since then.

Casual labourers opine that the successive governments have promised them a number of times, especially during elections, to regularize their jobs, but to no avail. “They have often lured us with false promises, but end up doing nothing for us,” they say.

Although the casual labourers have protested on numerous occasions, thousands of them still have been seeking job regularization policy in the state for last couple of decades.

“Whenever we raise our voice for our rights, instead of solving our problems, the authorities treat us with baton charges and teargas canisters, and even detain us,” Sajad Ahmad Parray, president of Jammu and Kashmir Casual Labourers Association, says.

Ganai, a lone breadwinner for his family, has two daughters and two sons. His elder daughter has turned 25, which is now a cause of worry for him. With wanton marital customs, rites and his penury, her wedlock seems impossible.

“Whenever I approach any MLA of our constituency, they always write on my application ‘please help’ instead of helping me themselves”

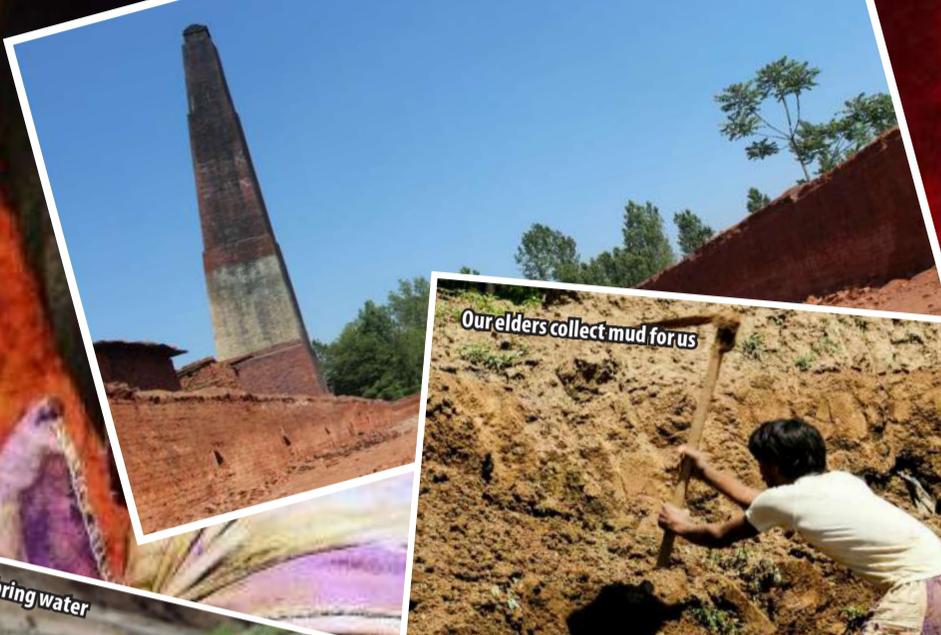
Because of economic problems and family pressure, Ganai's wife died in 1995. Due to this incident, his daughters had to drop out of the school.

Another daily wager, Showket Ahmad (45) from Natipora, Srinagar, who is a graduate in Sciences says, he is facing many problems, for merely Rs 4,500 as monthly salary is not enough to manage expenses of family in the present world.

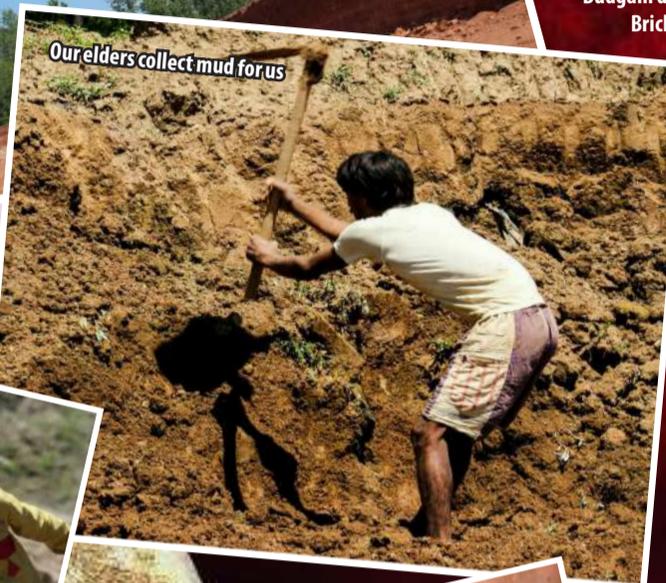
“We are doing more work than permanent employees who earn Rs 50,000 monthly salary,” says Ahmad, who is quite experienced

in his field. The labourers accuse government of hoodwinking Kashmiri youth with regard to providing employment. “Government has ordered many schemes, but have not implemented them till now. Even last year government passed an order to regularize daily wagers but later they brushed the matter under the carpet,” says Ghulam Qadir Mir (44), a casual labourer from Chadora, Budgam, who has to struggle hard to make both ends meet for his family. That is why, his daughter, who is a student, is doing a part-time job to earn her own livings.

We live near a brick kiln and make bricks for living



Our elders collect mud for us



We bring water



And together we mould



It is a job of the whole family



Your homes cost us our childhood



And ironically, there is no home for us-the homemaker



Living on a bri(n)ck

In Kashmir, bricks are made in the outskirts of the capital city of Srinagar, where both local and non-local labourers work together. The brick industry is generally confined to rural and sub-urban areas and generates employment for hundreds of households. Out of almost 300 brick kilns, the central Kashmir's Budgam district has 230 of them.

Brick kilns, which are almost unheard of in the developed countries, are one the leading causes of air pollution in Kashmir. The industry not only harms the environment, but also affects the health of workers associated with it. The large amount of smoke emanating from these kilns on daily basis causes serious respiratory and other ailments to them. What makes it worse is the involvement of hundreds of non-local children, who work as manual labourers along with their families, losing not only their childhood, but health as well.

Photo-story by AABID BHAT.