



The Echo

INTERNSHIP SPECIAL



APRIL-JUNE, 2022 | VOLUME 13 | ISSUE 02 | PAGES 08



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Virtual Game

With more and more kids getting access to fast internet and smart phones, the Covid-19 initiated restrictions have created a new generation of youth who play online and make some money too, **RAASHID ANDRABI** reports.

I do not have a specific figure, but we made around Rs 3-5 lakh in 2021," said Nomaan Kadla, an online gamer based in Kashmir. "We made the decision to start our gaming career and have since competed in several successful tournaments, earning a respectable amount of money." Kadla said in Kashmir's "ups and downs" they lost good money during the enforced Internet outages.

Subzero is one of Kashmir's well-known gaming squads. It was founded by four friends from Srinagar in October 2018. Kadla, Izzo, Meax, and Jc (in-game names) formed a random squad to play the game and later formed a team Subzero.

The group gradually began to compete in national events, winning a number of them.

"These tournaments made us proud as we gave the game every bit of talent we had," Nomaan said. Their squad even hosted many online gaming competitions within Kashmir with a decent prize pool and a large audience.

New Era

The new generation is no longer rebuked for spending hours next to a console, PC, or smartphone, now. From tabletops to virtual reality, the online is taking the gaming zone by storm. The world of online gaming, eSports, has exploded in popularity in just a few short years. What makes it interesting is that eSports have emerged as a highly sought-after lucrative job for youth as the Smartphone penetration has gone up with almost everything getting digitized.

Unlike traditional sports, eSports helps them become famous, gain fortunes, and adds to their dazzling reputation. Now eSports is about to be a medal sport at the Asian Games and are poised to make future Olympic appearances. The 2022 Games in Hangzhou, China, will see eSports compete for 24 awards across eight different game categories.

New Generation

Fahad Bhat, a 25-year-old student from remote Kupwara is one of India's estimated 400 million-plus online gamers. When India announced lockdown in March 2020 to flatten the Covid-19 curve, Bhat started playing online games.

"I was playing games like PUBG, Ludo, and a few other games for hours a day during the peak lockdown," Fahad said. "It was one of the few ways to stay in touch with people."

Fahad recently purchased a new PUBG ID for Rs 10,000 and is now



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itching to purchase more in-game items. Battleground Mobile India (the Indian version of PUBG) hosts tournaments in which millions of players compete for the trophy and whopping cash prizes. He also competed in the tournament last month but was eliminated in the first round owing to a lack of a fast internet connection and a good gaming phone.

"At any cost, I need a new phone and Wi-Fi; I cannot keep losing like this," Fahad stated. "This is a disgrace for someone who has been playing the game for years."

Pubg, Freefire, Fortnite, and many other online games are now much more than games. These platforms have changed into serious business. Fahad, who now has been a gamer for four years, earns more than Rs 5000 a month in the game by playing for just one or two hours a day. He participates in different tournaments organized by different clans

across the country.

"I and my teammates have also started a YouTube channel for streaming our gameplay. It earns you money as well as makes you famous real quickly. I always look up to Jonathan, one of the top online streamers of India," Fahad said. "He now has millions of followers, and wins competitions which have a prize pool of millions of rupees."

Father's Dilemma

Fahad's father, Ghulam Rasool Bhat, also talked about his son and the online games. "His entire day would be consumed by either his phone or computer, which negatively affected both his education and his behaviour," Bhat Sr said. "He did not have a set eating or sleeping schedule. This makes us very anxious about his future."

A few months ago, Bhat said, his son approached him and handed me over Rs

10,000. Shocked, when he asked him his source, the son replied: "I won an online game, and this is the prize money."

Convinced that he is not "spoiling" his time on the phone, Bhat has now permitted his son to play the videogames. "I believe he could make a livelihood from it," Bhat said.

Hope of Future

This is an industry to look forward to, said Jasiya, a female gamer from Srinagar. Pursuing masters in commerce from the University of Kashmir, Jasiya has been playing games since her childhood.

"I used to play Mario, Contra, and a wide range of other games. With the passage of time, gaming shifted to mobile, and we followed suit," she said. "I began my mobile gaming career with well-known games such as Clash of Clans, Call of Duty, and, most importantly, PUBG."

Jasiya has been playing PUBG since 2019 - usually for most of the night, she considers it a watershed moment for Indian streamers. She has been streaming her game on her YouTube throughout.

Jasiya is Kashmir's first female streamer. She said she expected a lot of support. Instead, the vulgar messages bombarded her inbox thus pushing her to mental distress.

For a long time now, Jasiya is organising online gaming tournaments in Kashmir, with a large audience and huge cash prizes. Her YouTube channel has around 50k subscribers and hundreds of thousands of views. "All praise to God, I make a good living from this, and I hope to make an impact in the streaming world soon," she asserted.

Crucial Two Years

Online gaming in India became hugely popular in the last two years. Covid-19 lockdown helped in its popularity. As restrictions impacted all other sectors, the internet became the new highway of information, sales and gaming. In the global shift, Kashmir did not lag behind.

A group of friends have also opened a PUBG-themed restaurant in Srinagar called Winner's Dinner, where the major attraction is the decoration, which is done with war room tables and other items found in the game such as shirts, cooking pans, and so on. There are also posters and PUBG maps on the cafe walls.

As hardcore PUBG enthusiasts might have guessed already, 'chicken dinner' is one of the most popular dishes served by the cafe. And interestingly enough, other food items are named after various levels of PUBG.

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EDITORIAL

Media Internships



The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (DJMC) that was set up in 2008 has always prioritised pedagogical techniques focussed on hands-on media trainings. Media students are trained thoroughly at all stages of media production—be it reporting, writing, editing, photography or broadcasting.

The department also aims at collaborating with media industry so as to provide professional training to students. Besides, media internships have been a routine affair with the department since its inception. As an essential part of the course curriculum, media students are supposed to do six to eight weeks long internship with a reputed media organisation.

Internships are a must for any media student. Besides providing students with the hands-on experience they need to gain a better understanding of the media production, media internships can also help them build a wider network of professional contacts. Like in any other field, professional connections could prove crucial to establishing a career in media.

Students who partake in media internships often develop a greater sense of inquisitiveness. The current senior batch of the DJMC has interned with various media institutions ranging from news organisations, public relation departments to advertising agencies.

The students who have interned in print journalism have mostly worked for the reputed Valley-based weekly newsmagazine, *Kashmir Life* besides few others. In order to showcase the work of students and encourage them to work tirelessly in the field, the current edition of *The Echo* has given space to internship stories by Journalism students.

Local Cricket: Then and Now



ARJUMAND WANI

It was a crispy winter day, when a faceoff between MCC Pulwama and Tahab-11 in Chandgam cricket ground (Lanka) was going on. The young cricketers paid no heed to the intense cold wave that had gripped the Valley for the past two weeks as all their focus was on the game. The ground was crowded with spectators, all sporting *Pherans*, a loose gown. Many of them carried *Kangris*, a traditional fire pot used to fight winter chill.

Kashmiris are cricket-crazy people. The sport is being played and enjoyed since decades in the Valley. There is a long list of cricketers who made it to Ranji and other coveted tournaments. Cricketers like Parvez Rasool, Abdul Samad and Umar Nazir are the new additions.

“Today cricketers are full of talent. The young boys are enough competent to play at national and international level and have a bright future in the sport,” says Rafiq Ahmad Wani, captain of three decades old Marry Gold cricket team.

He, however, says, he felt the lack of discipline among the young cricketers.

“The young cricketers are aggressive in nature and this may create problems in their cricketing future. They must control their aggression both on and off the play field,” Rafiq adds.

Another cricketer Syed Suhail Qadiri, 38, says, “It was 1998 and I was in my teens when I first

started playing cricket with a leather ball and Marry Gold then a popular team allowed me to play in the team.”

Sharing his experience, Qadiri says, cricket had changed significantly since he began to play.

“Playing cricket back then was both cheaper and riskier than it is now, when we must pay a good sum of money as fee to participate in tournaments, but it is also safer as we have better protecting equipment,” he says.

A young player of Pulwama’s MCC team Abid Hussain Mir (29), known for his all-round performance says, the parents have now begun to realise the importance of the sport.

“There was a time when my parents would loath to watch me playing cricket. However, after seeing few Kashmiri cricketers at big platforms like IPL, they encouraged me to play,” he said.



Today cricketers are full of talent. The young boys are enough competent to play at national and international level and have a bright future in the sport

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National Scene

According to a report by KPMG, one of the world’s big four accounting organisations, mobile game downloads in India were 5.6 billion in six months ending September 2020, up by 1.8 billion. The number of Indian internet gamers is expected to increase from 360 million in 2020 to 510 million in 2022. India’s online gaming market will generate Rs 136 billion (\$1.80 billion) in revenue by 2022 end. According to the report, it is expected to rise at a compound annual growth rate of 21 per cent over the next five years to Rs 290 billion (\$3.84 billion).

While the industry has grown, it has also faced its own set of obstacles. Due to a lack of clarity, the concepts of Sports, online gaming, fantasy

sports, and real money gaming remain rather hazy, resulting in misunderstanding and general scepticism about the sector. Industry analysts believe that this might hinder further investments into the sector in near future.

However, the flip side is that even though online gaming will have money, it will still lack the rigour of the real game and the respect that offline games enjoy.

Unlike physical gaming, online players come from all demographics, income levels and gender. Though still a male-dominated industry, there are more than 20 million women gamers. Of late, the game has moved out of the bulky PCs and consoles to compact, multipurpose gaming devices.

The two games might be distant from each other but they involve two different sets of people. Offline will not be impacted by the way people play online and vice versa.



An Off-Road Debate

In the last few years, sections within the younger lot take their super-duper vehicles on tracks in the fragile ecological space of Kashmir and it has triggered a fierce debate, reports **FIRDOUS PARRAY**.

Kashmir Off-Road, Kashmir's first-ever car racing club, was founded by Ali Sajid and Farah Zaidi in 2017. The objective was to bring together adventure seekers to explore Kashmir in a unique way and to promote motorsport.

In the last four years, the club organized a number of motor-sport, off-road competition events and overland expeditions in Kashmir. They have also organized Motor-sport events like Frozen Rush, India's first snow off-road competition and Mudzilla, an extreme 4x4 competition event.

"Our overland adventure travel division has explored and promoted some unique and unexplored tourist destinations in Kashmir," Ali Sajad said. "Our annual Gurez Overland Expedition, which we have been conducting since 2017, has put this destination on the adventure travel tourist destinations of Kashmir, with tourists coming from all over India. These activities create opportunity and employment for locals."

But the initiative has triggered an adverse response. Jauhar Rafeeq, a PhD scholar at the Faculty of Forestry in SKUAST Kashmir, wrote detailed write-ups detailing how the off-roading events are a "threat to forest ecosystem". "Increasing activities of off-Roading in Kashmir forests", especially during the past several lockdowns, Rafeeq wrote in various Srinagar newspapers is causing "serious ill effects on forest ecosystems" and an increase in such activities affects "not just the flora but fauna as well". Such activities have resulted in "deterioration of soil, damage to vegetation, habitat degradation, more pollution, habitat disturbances and ultimately [such activities will] pose a serious threat to the wildlife of the region".

Noise pollution caused by driving these heavy vehicles, playing music and honking has an adverse effect on the animals and birds living in these habitats, he insisted.

Irfan Jeelani, a bird watcher and founder of the Birds of Kashmir group, has an opinion not different from Rafeeq. "Meadows act as important feeding and breeding grounds for a number of bird species and when these vehicles traverse these otherwise silent habitats, it disturbs the birds and sometimes when



Meadows act as important feeding and breeding grounds for a number of bird species and when these vehicles traverse these otherwise silent habitats, it disturbs the birds and sometimes when there is too much noise, birds are forced to leave the place



there is too much noise, birds are forced to leave the place," Jeelani said.

On July 23, 2021, Hyper Kashmir Adventures and Holidays shared a video clip on their Facebook page captioned "Shopian Mughal Road Dubjan off-road expedition" showing motor cars in a meadow but strongly reacted to it.

"Recreational Off-road vehicles are a serious threat to jungle ecosystems," Jawad Nasir, a social media user reacted on his call. "It causes land degradation, soil toxicity, destruction of root systems, and accelerates the loss of rare species." Condemning such an adventurer activity, he labelled it as a

"money-making module". "It disturbs wildlife and pollutes the air. Bringing heavy machines into virgin lands, especially if it is done as a money-making module, is condemnable. This is never a good trend to follow. This needs serious public activism against these activities before it is late."

When the off-road participants shared some of their photographs on social media, it triggered a chain reaction on June 29, 2021. "How can a vehicle be allowed to be on such lands? Destruction of meadows and mountains by these rallies goes unabated. The government is silent and so is civil society," one social media user reacted. "I think you off-roaders should be booked under the law for ruining the beautiful nature," Tweeted another.

But off-roading is a trend that lot many people are desperate to enjoy. This essentially is a game for the affluent. People who love the game wish to see off-roading thrive, but within the boundaries of environmental ethics, legal rulings and keeping in mind the different laws governing the fragile ecology of Kashmir.

Nadeem Qadri, an environmental lawyer, is of the opinion that "there are many routes that can be used for off-roading activities for meadows are not meant for it. It is both unethical as well as against the basic fundamentals of conservation".

"Off-roading activities should not be carried out in forests keeping in view their negative impacts on forest ecosystems", said Jauhar Rafeeq.

Apart from the higher levels of pollution like noise and air pollution, the damage to grass cover resulting in disturbance of soil compositions and density are major concerns. The vegetation damage, as a result, is a serious issue and should certainly raise eyeballs. The trend is impacting the fragile ecosystem at microscopic levels.

People who are against the idea of permitting vehicles deep into forests say that the forests are protected to the extent that nobody can extract timber unless it is diseased or fallen material. "If this is the status of protection, how can dozens of cars race against each other to get deep into the woods," an environmental science student said. "Race on roads, oceans and deserts is plausible but forests, I doubt."

A Living Orchard

After completing his twelfth class, Manjit Singh took his father's idea of life seriously. Working within the orchard, he is creating a model of growth, reports **FIRDOUS PARRAY**.



Young entrepreneur, Manjit Singh, in his orchard farm. PHOTO: **FIRDOUS PARRAY**.

If the surroundings do not offer adequate opportunities, it is better to look around within the space that is immediately yours. That is precisely what Manjeet Singh did.

Watching the state of economics in the Kashmir market and the drying up of jobs in the public and private sector, Singh, 24, started exploring the possibilities of work within his home at Chatrugam. Within a few years, he has emerged as a successful entrepreneur with no debts and a possibility to take his business to the next level.

Singh did his matriculation and spent two years at the Government Higher Secondary School, Bajwani. He completed his twelfth class in 2016.

Manjeet Singh, a twenty-four-year-old Sikh from Chatrugam Tral, has opened farming units of sheep, poultry, cows, rabbit, and orchards with different varieties of fruits, like apples, pear, cherry, peach and plum. He is one of the successful young entrepreneurs who started his business while in difficult conditions.

Soon after, while sitting in his orchard spread over 25 kanals of land, just in front of his home, he had a Eureka moment. He decided to start with a poultry farm within the apple orchard without disturbing the ecosystem. It was a success.

"Currently I have 300-400 chickens of 500 grams weight," Manjit said. "Another flock of 100 chickens has crossed an average weight of a kilogram each." Fed with greenery and being raised in a natural environment, the flocks grow quite fast and lay eggs too. "I sell the eggs to the local market in Tral and there is a good demand."

Unlike the traditional farms that feeding Kashmir, Manjit is rearing the local chicken species that fetch almost double the price in the Kashmir market. His farm is a free-range farm where the chicken roams around, and are not caged, which makes them healthier, strong and their meat is hugely nutritious.

With one success and still a lot of space around,

Manjeet started a sheep farm on the margins of his orchard. The small herd graze within the orchard without disturbing the apple trees. For most of the summer, he sends his herd up the Tral meadows deep inside the hills for grazing. Right now he has more than 80 sheep.

"There is always a huge demand for meat and chicken in Kashmir," Manjeet said. "To fulfill this demand all unemployed youth must establish sheep farms."

While taking care of the twin farms, Manjit explored inter-cropping and started growing vegetables. "I grow all the vegetables that the local market requires," Manjit said. On average, he sells almost a ton of vegetables every season and that is not his main income.

Young entrepreneur, Manjit Singh in his orchard farm where he is making successful experiments with growth and profit. KL Image: Firdous Parray

Very recently, he started a rabbit farm. Off late, rabbit rearing has become a popular hobby among pet lovers. He got two pairs of rabbits.

"They have given birth to a dozen babies and I sell these rabbit kittens after a month at affordable prices, which ranges from Rs 200 to 400 an animal," Manjit said.

What is remarkable is that Manjit has understood the ecosystem in which species complement each other. "I use the hen manure and sheep poo for my orchard as manure and this has improved the yield," Manjit said. "The orchard's apple production has increased from 1000 to 3000 boxes in all these years."

All this was done by Manjit without seeking any funds from anybody. "I am not indebted to any financial institution," he said. "I do not require it because all these projects are not so capital intensive." His support, however, came from his parents. Right now, six persons are manning his farms.

Manjit gives credit for his success to his father,

a serving employee of the animal husbandry department. Farming was his father's idea. Though there were challenging issues initially, Manjit said his family supported him in the thick and thin of it.

"The concept of setting up these small farms was developed by my father," Manjit said. "I am happy that instead of wasting time and waiting for a government job I started earning a good amount early."

The early success has broadened the horizon of his thinking. "I have a big dream to set up more such units if the government provides financial support or training," he said.



Currently I have 300-400 chickens of 500 grams weight. Another flock of 100 chickens has crossed an average weight of a kilogram each. I sell the eggs to the local market in Tral and there is a good demand

Dhaka Despatches

Kashmir's desperation to have a doctor in a family helped Bangladesh emerge as the new destination for medical training. After a medical student's mysterious death recently, **RAASHID ANDRABI** talked to many students and found everything is not hunky-dory.

Kashmiri parents are literally busy in a race to have at least one doctor at home. Triggering huge commerce, this race has converted Dhaka into Kashmir's major destination for medical studies. An average of 700 to 800 students flies to Bangladesh in a year. In five to six years, parents foot a bill of not less than Rs 40 lakh.

But not every student in Bangladesh is all right. Many of them have stories to share. These disturbing stories may not be everybody's story and it may not be happening in all the colleges where Kashmiris study but these stories do exist. Of the dozen-odd students approached last week, four were able to pen down their problems and give vent to the crisis they believe they are in. They could be a minority but they are facing it. All of them agreed to write only after being assured that their names would not be revealed.

'I am On Anti-Depressants'

I'd always wanted to be a doctor, but I couldn't get into a medical school in Kashmir. As a result, I persuaded my parents to allow me the opportunity to continue my education in Bangladesh. As a foreigner in Dhaka, I had to contend with several challenges, which are to be expected in a new country. Our teachers are mostly doctors. Some are friendly, but others perceive us as simple Dollars going around. Teachers are the role models of the students, but what if the teacher you look up to traumatizes you or wants money or other favours in exchange for him not purposefully failing you in exams. Imagine all of your hard work is for nothing. In Kashmir, there is a popular idea that Bangladesh grants degrees to anyone who throws money at them, but this is all a lie. I don't feel like I have a life now. "I am on anti-depressants for one year."

'I Need A Doc Before Becoming One'

"Our offline classes started in September 2021 after Covid lockdown ended. Because of a visa snag, I arrived in Bangladesh in the second week of October. On the 13th of October at approximately 10 pm, I arrived at the hostel and was about to enter when the guard stopped me and asked for my name, Id(entity), and other information, which I provided. He told me that I could not stay in the hostel. I was a little worried, so I asked him why he couldn't let me in. He replied, "Your registration has been revoked, and your admission has been cancelled by the college administration, thus you are not a student of our college, and as a fact, I am unable to allow you to the hostel. It was 10:30 pm, and they asked me to go to any hotel. I had flown from Kashmir alone, without any friends. I asked them to please let me stay at the hostel because it would be problematic for me to find a hotel at 10:30 pm as a female, but they wouldn't even let me sit inside for 10 minutes. Then I headed for a one-hour walk on the road. I contacted the college secretary and the hostel in charge, but no one answered for an hour.

After an hour, I begged the hostel in charge to let me remain for the night, she eventually agreed. The next day the secretary told me that staying here was pointless. I was trembling and wailing because they were telling me to return home after two years. My registration was cancelled because I returned home during the epidemic and my agent failed to submit my certificate. My agency persuaded the college secretary to try to handle my equivalency, although



Students of International Medical College, Dhaka, protesting against the suspension of a Kashmir student. **FILE PHOTO.**

he was unable to do so for three months in a row. I was not allowed to eat in the hostel for more than three months.

I wasn't allowed to join classes for three months, so I was confined inside a hostel room. Today, I have my certificates and my registration is complete, but our exams began on January 2nd and as a result, I was unable to sit in the exams.

"We Thought of Suicide"

"I am a third-year medical student at an international medical school. We have a lot of issues here, such as the issue of favouritism and negligence by teachers. These actions have caused many students to take antidepressants. They set their own rules and show favoritism to kids who excel academically. We have already lost a lot of time that our parents, as well as ourselves, are counting on us for. Mentally, I'm at my lowest point; I've never felt so hopeless before. Nothing makes sense when you feel like you've lost self-control. We even feel suicidal or use medicines in order to sleep peacefully, if only for a while. I urge all foreign students in Bangladesh to keep an eye out for one another. Seniors, in particular, should look after their younger ones. Perhaps you'll be able to save someone's life.

With so much money and hope on the line, it's impossible to simply quit.

"They Humiliated My Family"

I'm currently a third-year student here and like the rest of us, I have suffered my share of mental trauma. I never wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to study literature and was interested in the arts. My parents didn't approve and neither did anyone else in my family. I wanted to go to Delhi and study in some good college. My parents got me admitted here instead. I protested a lot, in the beginning, I eventually gave in to their wishes. When I got here it was nothing like what I had expected.

I knew I would have to study a lot but it wasn't just

that. I had never stayed away from my family for a single night. Now I was alone in a whole new country. On top of all that I was already struggling with my mental health. In such a state the smallest gesture can either make a person better or throw off their balance completely.

I was trying hard, barely slept. We used to study till fajr but still kept failing. Our teachers were not even humane leave alone encouraging. They call you a failure at your face. Even if you have a medical emergency they say it's no excuse because it isn't their fault.

I was attending all classes. Some nine months passed this way and I used to cry every day. I couldn't tell my parents because I thought they'd get worried. Then Article 370 happened and I couldn't talk to my family for two months. That pushed me into a spiral of depression I couldn't get out of. I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder with anxiety. I got self-destructive, got insomnia, lost weight and eventually got suicidal. I remember crying every night wishing I would die.

Once I called a friend at 3 am, crying, telling him I wanted to die. He talked me out of it, stayed on the phone till morning and told me we would visit a doctor. And then forgot about it. That's how it is here.

Sometime later I decided to go home when I wasn't getting better. All the medicines had made me numb and lifeless. I used to sleep for days altogether. When I got home my father cried looking at me, I looked miserable. I had just got home and came to know my aunt had recently passed away. I had planned on seeing her first when I got back. She was sick and I hadn't seen her in years. That guilt and grief tore me apart. I stayed home for eight days and went back.

In a few days, corona hit, and lockdown happened. When we got back home we were treated like a biohazard. All of us were quarantined. Those days of staying in the hotel with strangers in the state of mind I was in, was a cherry on top.

But Covid was a blessing in disguise as I got to stay at home which made me better. I even stopped taking medicines. When we had to come back nine months later for final exams hell set to lose again. All the while we had appeared in exams online. And the same HOD called me up and accused me of changing my number so didn't have to appear in the exam. She insulted my family and said it was the fault of my upbringing.

Finals went over like that, crying and not sleeping. I failed a subject. Our supplementary exams were announced in the middle of lockdown. Flights were suspended so we had to travel by road. We were turned away at the border for not having complete documents. The embassy was closed for the next two days. Stayed in a hotel for a few days until eventually flights resumed.

A day of sanity and the rest of the week is a rollercoaster ride. There is already a lot of pressure on studies. But having a toxic environment and no support is what breaks one back.

I heard some people debate about this girl's death. They said if she didn't want to be here why didn't she just go back home. But I know it isn't that easy. There is this guilt of not being enough that comes with it, of letting your parent's expectations down. When you can't do anything about all these things, the helplessness is unspeakable.

Pheran Fusion

Finding the traditional loose cloak too archaic, scores of Kashmiri designers and investors brought in a turnaround in one of Kashmir's key identity symbols, the *Pheran*. It has triggered new commerce, created new jobs and made tweed relevant to wool-abundant Vale. Now the chick cloak is as trendy in Srinagar as Cashmere was in Napoleon's Paris, reports **INSHA SHIRAZI**.

Is the *pheran* now the same as we wore when we were young?" asks Ghulam Qadir, an elderly Shehr-e-Khas in Srinagar. Amazed by the way, the long loose cloak has changed its character from being a requirement to a statement, he thinks he has nothing much to relate with the new garment.

"We used to wear the *pheran* to protect ourselves from the extreme cold and to keep the Kangir inside it," the gentleman said. "I used to keep my grandchildren inside my *pheran*. They would take it as a game and would get warmed up at no cost."

The *pheran* has changed its character and it now lacks space for the 'game' parents used to play with the kids. From a requirement, the cloak has moved to be a fashion statement and an identity symbol.

The fact is that Kashmir is personified culturally by *pheran*, traditional attire that has evolved over the centuries. There is a lot of dispute and debate about its origins. Some say it has evolved from the Persian word *pariehan*, which means clothing but there is a counter-narrative suggesting that Nilmat Purana has a mention of *pravarna* and the *pheran* could be its evolved name. People keen to accredit historic figures even attribute *pheran* to Badshah, the Zain ul Abidin. So many chroniclers attribute its introduction to the Mughal era with the motive of taking away the martial nature of the residents from their character. Even Walter Lawrence believes so but there are no clear details to substantiate all this.

A gender-neutral outfit, it would be used throughout the year with lighter models in summer, especially by women. Since it covers most of the body, has a loose-fitting dress and descends just below the knees, it never was in a clash with culture, faith or the weather. During Kashmir's abject poor days, this was the only garment that people would use.

Mass Surge

What is clear, however, is that the *pheran* has evolved as a piece of garment, and a symbol of identity. Available in traditional and modern patterns, *pheran* is now part of every cupboard in every family – some retaining it for requirement and many for its fashion. Interestingly, however, the cloak has bounced back to the market as material changes in its character have made it worth use outside home, offices and the schools. It has replaced a coat and a jacket and is trendy. Syed Tabasum is a seamstress in Hawal, a profession she adopted when she was 16. She says the *pheran* is in huge demand for the last few, primarily because it is a style statement. "Every day, I get a lot of calls from clients who want the *pheran* stitched," she said. "Stitching *pheran* is a well-paying job," Tabassum said though she is stitching a lot of garments but *pheran* has emerged her favourite because of the demand and the costs its stitching involves. "Earlier *pheran* would be for elders but now it is for all ages – children, women and the youngsters."

"I have never seen such a radical transformation in *pheran* as we are seeing now," Tabasum insisted. "There are plenty of styles – *Qurab pheran*, *Ladheh pheran*, *makhmal pheran*, new coat type *pheran*, and special design *pheran* for brides."

Bouncing Back

At one point in time, *pheran* had become such a negative attire that people were not being permitted into offices with their *pheran*'s on. Even students were denied permission to classrooms. Alia, a

university student, remembers the day she was disallowed into the classroom with her *pheran*. "Now *pheran* no longer resembles with that traditional cloak it was all about. It is a coat or a jacket and everybody dons it now," Alia said

The turnaround came after some residents holding positions of power and authority started donning *pheran*. At one point in time, a circuit of IAS officers during Shah Feasal's IAS days were seen in official functions in *pherans*, so were the ministers. Those days, the powerful would gift their friends in Delhi a piece of *pheran*. Prime Ministers' VP Singh and Narendra Modi were seen wearing *pherans* publicly, something that Mrs Indira Gandhi would normally do during her frequent Kashmir jaunts.

The trend was quickly picked by social media as the internet offered a new democratic set-up. Soon, this was linked with the culture and the wool resource as Kashmir is one of the major wool producers but has given up the entire infrastructure of processing even one per cent of the raw material. The designers jumped in and created marvellous designs that suit twenty-first-century fashion. An identity issue, some



non-resident Kashmiris attempted wearing it publicly offshore and it triggered a new buzz. That was how the turnaround took place.

Online Sales

Soon, various internet sites started offering *pherans*, and it started triggering a market appetite. Now readymade *pherans* available are available with dozens of apparel stores and people have started investing in the new trend. These garments come in diverse styles. The change was adopted by urban Kashmir much faster even as the peripheral Kashmir still stays with the classic and the base model.

Khan Majid is a *pheran* retailer, whose basket includes *tilla pherans*, *pashmina pherans*, and simple classic *pherans*. *Tilla pherans* are cloaks having gold thread embroidery and used to be a key item in Kashmir women's cupboard. These went out of fashion for almost two decades only to bounce back with a huge appetite within and outside Srinagar.

"We earn honourably especially from *tilla* embroidery *pherans*, which are in high demand," Khan said. "Earlier, we used to sell cloth for *pheran*, which used to be *patu*. Now the fabric used in *pheran* is diverse – velvet, china wool, *makhmal*, and *pashmina*."

The *pheran* variety is now huge – Tweed *pherans*, *pherans* with patches and designer arms, box pattern with big buttons, *pherans* with zip collar and pockets in front, and *pherans* with patches on sleeves and pockets have all been popular in recent years.

Tweed Is Back

This has helped the policymakers in Jammu and Kashmir to get the focus back to the Kashmir tweed, which, by no means is inferior to the Harris Tweed that sells at more than ten times more costly than the one Kashmir produces. It is more because of brand promotion rather than any superiority in composition. At one point, the government did enter into a relationship with the Raymond's to market the Kashmir tweed. The experiment did not fail but the lack of follow up killed the initiative. Now the surge in local demand has improved production.

"There are three interventions on the tweed front," Mahmood Ahmad, Director Industries and Handicrafts said. "In Bandipore, we have a cluster under a World Bank-funded project in which with the handholding of an NGO, *Rangasutra*, we are helping artisans to produce hand-spun and hand-woven tweed." The NGO is helping in the capacity building by improving colours, designs and efficiency of looms. There are similar clusters in Pulwama and Kulgam. By an average, from these three clusters, almost 30-50,000 meters are produced in a year. Being hand-spun, it sells around Rs 1000, a meter.

In the industries department, the revived Bemina Woollen Mills is into the mechanised tweed, which is now available in 50 shades and with as many patterns. On a yearly basis, around 150 thousand meters are produced in a year. "If the demand appreciates as we expect, we can run the machines in two shifts and improve the production," Mahmood said. It is now one of the best tweed showrooms in Srinagar where people can get cloth or place an order for a coat, or jacket under the famous *Poshish* brand.

One of the key factors for reviving the Mills was to utilise part of the wool raw material. Kashmir is India's second major wool producer with an estimated production of 75 lakh kilograms. "Our wool has 18-24 micron size, which is the second-best after Cashmere fibre but the crisis was that we were not utilising this raw material," Mahmood said. "Even now, we are not using more than a million kilograms." Machine-made tweed sells at Rs 400.

Women ExclusiveThe larger reality is that instead of males, it is the female who are behind the change in *pheran*'s design and demand. *Tilla pheran*, silk with embroidering *pheran*, *Kani pheran*, *quraab pheran* with *tilla*, *ari kam pheran*, *zeavij keam pheran*, *Makhmal tilli pheran*, pearl work (*mokhti keam*) *pheran* – all these costly cloaks were traditionally part of the bride's trousseau. As *lehanga* got in, all these costly *pherans* became part of the routine.

However, the local demand in all these patterns has revolutionized the modern *pheran*. These *pherans* are not limited to Kashmir; people from across Jammu and Kashmir use them. For a change, some of the Bollywood biggies even use it.

After Kashmir gave up the wool sector, *pheran* fashion was solely dependent on the imported fabric from Punjab. Off late, however, a variety of textiles are used and these include some produced locally. The colours of *pheran* used to be limited, but thanks to advancements in the textile business, colours can now be added to the fabric used to make *pheran*, according to Dilawar, a fabric entrepreneur.

"I prefer to wear pheran instead of jackets and coats because the garment provides tremendous warmth and addresses my cultural moorings too," Arooj, a university student, said. "My teachers and friends also wear designed pherans."

Brand Gets In

As the modern designer and fashion circuit got in, now brands have emerged. While some brands are running exclusive stores, a few are available online and doing good. Only *Pherans* is a brand being promoted by Esha and Lubna Malhotra. *Poshish* is being promoted by the Handloom department for years now, both in coats, jackets and *pherans*.

Malhotras said it was difficult for them to break the stigma associated with *pherans* because the cliché designs had prevented any intervention. Achieving a harmonious synergy between traditional and modern *pherans* was challenging, they said because people were not ready to embrace it at first.

We realised as Kashmiris that traditional *pherans* did not have a lot of international recognition," they believe. "Traditional *pherans* are largely regional, if not national in scope. Our instructors and students frequently complained about *pherans*, citing their poor quality, the restricted number of designs available, and their desire for more modern *patterns*, among other reasons."

By then, they were studying. During the Covid19 lockdown, they realised they needed to start acting on their vision. For the past year and a half, their brand was embraced by the people. "We prefer x in the summer, and choose tweed or something warm like china wool in the winter," one of the Malhotras' said.

The two sisters belong to a family that is in the textile business for 150 years. Running a major wholesale chain, they work with OCM, Raymond, Gul Ahmad, and other national and international textile mills. This helps them find the best fabric



for their *pheran* brand. Wool apart, they use Velvet, linen, viscose, blended textiles, and many other yarns. For embroidery, they send the half-finished product to Punjab, Jaipur, Lucknow, Bareilly, and Surat. "We wish to combine all of the cultures in order to make these *pherans* universally available and recognised, and this will give the new modern *pheran* a contemporary feel, we are using the latest digital machines to print our fabrics and work on them." one of them said.

Many Choices

In the last few years, many designers threw their hats into the *pheran* rung and are doing good. Spruce World, for instance, is selling its *pherans* online and offline.

Mohsin Abad, its promoter, said he started in 2019, with basic and classic *pherans*. "This restricted our clientele to elderly *persons* as quite a few people from younger lot felt attracted towards our products," Mohsin said. As he moved to improved trendy designs, his company's situation changed. "I have 50,000 clients right now." He hired a team of designers for creating elegant *pheran* and the market accepted their product in 2020 and 2021. "We also an offline store each at Bemina and Qamarwari and both are doing good," he said.

Major Online Retailers

Now, *Pherans* are sold by Amazon and Flipkart as well. A local company, *Modest Attires* managed a tie-up with major online retailers and is shipping *pherans* outside Jammu and Kashmir.

Umar, the *Modest Attires* promoter was into e-commerce around four years ago. In 2021, he got into *pherans* and said he is happy with the response.

"We sell many sorts of *pherans*, ranging in age from youngsters to the elderly; traditional to contemporary for both the genders," Umar said, insisting that apart from online, they have offline operations in Batamalo, Lal Chowk, and Chadoora. "The modern *pheran* is trendy; it is more

of a coat than a *pheran*."

Hybrid Pherans

Lark could be the oldest *pheran* manufacturer and retailer in Kashmir. Khalid Azmatullah said his company is in *pheran* business for over 25 years. They are now making hybrid *pherans*, which the company calls *Raglan pheran*, a hybrid between *Raglan Coat* and *Kashmiri Pheran*.

Raglan Overcoat has an interesting story. During the Battle of Waterloo, British soldier Lord FitzRoy Somerset lost his arm to a French sniper in June 1815. He continued with the army but always had problems with the tunics. In 1851 when British tailoring company, *Aquascutum* started, its promoter, John Emery responded to the soldier's request and created the *Raglan coat*. It is a typical overcoat that is being used globally. All modern *pherans* are closed *Raglan coats*.

"We source the fabric for these hybrid *pherans* from China and South Korea," Faizan, Azmatullah's son, said. "We employ high-quality materials for these *pherans* because they are in high demand." His personal experience while handling the clients said the people prefer better *pheran* than a poor quality coat or a jacket. "In younger lot, the cultural identity is part of the *pheran* so they prefer it over other winter garments," he said.

Skiing in Gulmarg: An Anecdote

ARJUMAND WANI

Gulmarg is known as the world's third-highest ski resort at an elevation of 3950 metres. The awe-inspiring location is known around the world for its majestic Apharwat (4390m) peak and powdery snow runs, the longest ski slope in Asia.

Despite having a penchant for adventurous sports and being a native, I had never visited Gulmarg during the frosty winters till recently.

I was selected by my university-Islamic University of Science and Technology-where I am currently pursuing a postgraduate programme in Journalism and Mass Communication. I was among the 12 lucky selectees to participate in a 14-day long basic skiing course, which began on March 3 and culminated on March 18, 2022.

On the first day of the course, when I wore a pair of ski boots, weighing approximately 5-8 kg each shoe, I found it difficult to walk in these heavy shoes and began taking baby steps. But after a couple of days, I realised that I have to live with these weighty pair of shoes for more or less next two weeks.

Next day carrying skis and poles (two sticks to balance body) on our shoulders, we left our hotel at around half past 9 am and walked in a single file towards a baby slope (beginner's slope).

Ghulam Nabi Reshi, a middle-aged trainer sporting



chevron moustache and roughly 5.5" tall, was waiting for us near the slope. He gave us a rundown about the history of skis and helped us to put them on.

He asked us to move in circular motions with skis. As we began, I fell on the ground clumsily. But I enjoyed the fun and felt a temptation to go for a run.

When we were taken to the top of a baby slope it was hard to stand there. As we crashed into the powdery snow, it caused a laughing roit.

Reshi instructed us how to maintain balance by putting pressure on the inner edges of your skis. In next few days, I learnt the game. And gradually as my confidence grew, I took long runs.

Now, the steeper slopes, such 85 degree and Highland slopes piqued my interest. These slopes are meant for skilled skiers. As I was better off than others, I was allowed by our trainer to ski on these slopes.

On the last day of our course, I also skied on the Phase 1, a kilometer long steep location where only professional skiers ski.

Each time, I skied down the slopes, the icy winds of Gulmarg serenaded my face and a strange feeling would overtake me.

On the last day of the course, our Vice Chancellor, Shakeel A. Romshoo showed up and felicitated the three top skiers with trophies. And then then he sprang the surprise when he said:

"...And the first prize goes to Arjumand from the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication".

Harvesting of **cherry** at peak in Kashmir

Kashmir produces around 15,000 tons of cherries annually, with Shopian district being the highest producer. Over the past couple of years, farmers have suffered huge losses due to COVID-19 lockdowns. However, this year the farmers are cherishing the high yield of cherries. Harvesting of the fruit begins in June, when specially-trained workers begin hand-picking cherries. **PHOTOS AND TEXT BY FIRDOUS PARRY.**



A Kashmiri farmer plucks cherries in an orchard at Maldaer village in South Kashmir Shopian district.



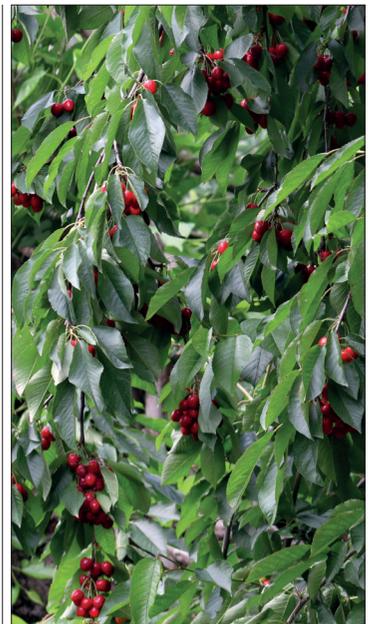
Farmers collect cherries in baskets and pack them in boxes during the harvest season.



A Kashmiri boy holding a branch of a cherry, while posing for a photograph.



A non-local labourer plucks cherries from a tree and collects them in a basket.



Ripe cherries harvested in May and June.



Fruit being sorted and packed in the orchard itself.



A woman shows cherries during the grading of the fruit.