



Shafqat: Helping special children with compassion

3



Happy days of tourism in Kashmir

4



Tale of city's favourite Kulfi shop

7

Rouf Ahmad Dar

Kashmir valley, which is known for its art and crafts, is home to the tradition of shawl weaving and embroidery work. Kanihama, a small village on Srinagar-Gulmarg highway is known for Kani Shawls, one of the popular shawl varieties.

The original name of the village, elders say, was "Gund Karhama" until it became famous for its Kani Shawls and hence the name "Kanihama" ("Kani" for Kani shawl and "Hama" for village).

It was through the efforts of 14th century saint Shah-i-Hamdan (RA) that the art reached Kanihama. Sultan Qutub-ud-Din, who was the then ruler of Kashmir, patronized the trade till it reached its zenith. It is said that Napoleon in 1776 presented a Kashmiri shawl to his Empress Josphine, which set a new trend in European fashion.

The Kani shawls weaved at Kanihama are of great quality and exported to Europe and America. Apart from foreign buyers, people of other states of India also like these shawls as much as foreign people do.

Kani shawl weaving used to be the mainstay of village's economy apart from agriculture. The Kani shawl weaving used to fetch the locals good profit. However, the craft received a severe blow from vested interests who started to tag the machine-made cheap shawls as genuine handmade Kani shawls.

Besides, due to lack of patronage, the local shawl weavers also abandoned the traditional art and looked up for alternative avenues of employment.

Ten year back there were about 5000 handlooms operating in Kanihama. The number has now been reduced to just 1500.

The artisans who had inherited this art from their

Kanihama and dying art of Kani Shawl weaving



ancestors are no longer interested in retaining and propagating this art. They are now switching over to other professions as the art does not fetch the profit as it used to do in the past.

Moreover, the young generation is not interested in taking over Kani Shawl weaving because of economic uncertainty associated with it.

Mushtaq Ahmad Dar, 30, who inherits this art from his father and manages five handlooms says, "The state government also shows indifference towards this art and is not providing any platform to showcase it."

Lamenting on the pathetic condition of the weavers, Mushtaq

adds, "If a weaver applies for a loan in Khadi Village Industry he has to fulfill hectic formalities."

Ghulam Qadir Hajam, 50, who has been associated with Kani Shawl weaving from the last 35 years says, "I would not let my children to come in this profession as the art is very difficult without much economical rewards. Instead I would recommend them to do other job so that atleast our poverty is alleviated to some extent."

The process of Kani Shawl weaving is complex and needs high degree of skill and patience. One shawl may take six months to two years for completion. Kani shawl weaving is done in a well organised and co-ordinated manner. Raw wool for Kani Shawls is procured from Ladakh. The wool is obtained from Pashmina Goat, known locally as Lena Rama, mostly found in Changthang area of Ladakh. The raw wool is cleaned and spun into yarn on the traditional spinning wheel.

The yarn is then soaked in rice water and then dried so as to make it easy to handle and increase its strength. The yarn is ready to be loaded on the handloom so as to make the framework of the shawl according to its size. After the framework comes the turn of needles without eyes (locally called as "tojis"). The "tojis" are made from smooth and light wood locally called "Kani" and hence the name "Kani Shawl." The "tojis" (50 or more) are tapered at both the ends, wrapped with coloured yarn and fixed on the one side of the handloom which is also the backside of the shawl (kani shawl is weaved from backside). Under the supervision of the instructor called "Tarn-guru" the weavers knot the coloured yarn of the "tojis" with the framework of the shawl made by yarn.

The knots are made according to a set design which is already written on paper called "taleem-e-kakud" in a language which only the "tarn-guru" can interpret.

The process of weaving line by line is repeated again and again till the final product (kani shawl) is not made which may even take six months to two years to complete.

Lal Chowk Beautification: Bane or Boon

Arif Hussain Nadaf

Lal chowk, the heart of Srinagar city, has a historical importance, both politically as well as commercially. This is perhaps the reason why the state government decided to embark on an ambitious "beautification project." The officials claim that it will restore Lal Chowk's past glory. However, many people question the development of the park at the city centre particularly when it was already facing traffic congestion.

Lal Chowk has been witness to changing political scenario of Kashmir. Leaders like Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah and Jawahar Lal Nehru addressed Kashmiris here. During the past 20 years of turmoil, this place has also witnessed bloodshed with explosions to gunbattles to violent processions.

In February this year, Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah announced a development package of two crore rupees for beautification of Lal Chowk. Surprisingly, the work began soon after. While some people appreciated the step others criticised it on various grounds. They believe the plan fell short of people's expectations and on the contrary created problems for them.

Lal chowk was already suffering from huge traffic rush. Now with the construction of a fenced park within it has further increased the problems.

"There was no need to construct the park here. Instead they (Government) should have developed Pratap Park for public amusement. Road widening and repairs should have been



done first," said Noor Muhammad, a Srinagar resident said.

"The area here should be increased not decreased like this in order to prevent traffic jams. Lal chowk has been lacking a parking place so there is a dire need to create a parking place first. This is misappropriation of public funds by state government," he added.

Meanwhile, majority of the shopkeepers

at Lal Chowk also oppose the "beautification" project.

A local shopkeeper, Ahmadullah said, "Lal Chowk is prone to attacks and gunbattles so the tourists who would be coming to this park can be easy victims."

However, the shopkeepers appreciated the reconstruction of the footpath by the authorities.

Bad weather hits agriculture

Farooz Ahmad Bhat

Untimely and heavy rainfall in the last week of May has resulted in damage of Rabi crops. Pulwama, rich in agriculture and horticulture produce, has been one of the worst hit districts with Mustard and oats being the main affected crops.

Oats is dried and stored for cattle in winter season. But this time major crop was decomposed. Same is the case with mustard, which received heavy rainfall from reaping till thrashing. Mustard was kept in ricks and when opened, it was found sprouted and decomposed.

"We enjoyed a good crop this year, but Allah had other ideas," said Ghulam Mohi-ud-din, a local farmer.

The plantation of paddy was also delayed due to inclement weather. In Pulwama, there is a difference of about 15 to 20 days among different areas as far as paddy plantation is concerned.



The areas which fall downstream undertake plantation first followed by the upstream areas. This is done to prevent shortage of water. However, with the bad weather this year the entire district is going to plant paddy simultaneously leading to water shortage and related

problems.

"We plant paddy by 15th May but this year we are late by 12-15 days," said Ghulam Nabi Kouchey, another farmer.

Moreover, torrential rains lowered the temperature damaging paddy saplings in some areas while in other areas the saplings were ready to

be planted, but the land was not prepared.

"The Agriculture Department is monitoring the situation and has informed people to protect the saplings by applying fertilizers," said Agriculture Extension Officer, Pulwama, Zameer Ahmad Khan.

Some areas were also hit by hailstorm adding to the worries of local orchard owners.

The fruits are falling prematurely especially apples, pears and apricots. The trees have been attacked by various diseases and pests.

"Due to bad weather, the foliage has been damaged. Various diseases have attacked the fruits. The orchard owners should spray prescribed chemicals," said Ahrar, an officer of horticulture department.

The milk production in the district has also reduced due to low temperature. The cattle couldn't be fed properly as they were kept indoors.

"We do not have mechanized dairy farms and are dependent on traditional methods of rearing cattle. This has led to decrease in milk production," said Assistant Veterinarian at Animal Husbandry Talangam, Pulwama, Jalal-u-din.

Shafqat: Helping special children with compassion



Umar Sultan

When Asma (name changed), was brought to SHAFQAT, a school for children with mental illnesses and multiple disabilities in 2008, her teacher, Dr Ambreen, was little optimistic about the improvement of this new comer. Two years later, Asma studies with normal children in one of the best known schools of the valley.

“Initially Asma’s case looked like a Severe one (third stage of sickness in which special children are categorized, with bleak chances of recovery). She was having behavioural problem and would vomit whatever was given to her for eating,” says Ambreen.

Asma would also retort every single word the teachers put across to her. But she began improving within a year.

Today Asma studies in Prime Public School, Srinagar and her past is a closed chapter. “She is normal now,” says Ambreen, who often visits her former pupil.

Asma is one of the beneficiaries of SHAFQAT. Every year, many children with disabilities are admitted for “treatment” in the school. Most of them are “discharged” only after they recover.

The school has a noble aim: to make otherwise dependent Special

Children, independent of others’ assistance to carry daily chores.

“We train them how to maintain themselves, interact with others and how to go about in the market etc,” says Ambreen.

The school also trains these children in handicrafts to make them economically self-reliant.

SHAFQAT was set up in year 2000 by Voluntary Medical Society (VMS), a philanthropy driven venture by some valley-based senior medicos, established in 1970. Earlier, the VMS teams would visit far off villages of Kashmir to organize free medical and awareness camps for special children. But as the situation changed in late eighties and far flung areas were thrown out of bounds for common people in Kashmir, VMS activities were confined to Srinagar district only.

“Sometimes we managed to

visit Uri in North Kashmir, but usually it was difficult to go beyond Srinagar safely,” says an official at SHAFQAT.

Earlier, the VMS teams would visit far off villages of Kashmir to organize free medical and awareness camps for special children. But as the situation changed in late eighties and far flung areas were thrown out of bounds for common people in Kashmir, VMS activities were confined to Srinagar district only.

children from different parts of Srinagar and Budgam districts to SHAFQAT, housed in a single-storied building near Hajj House in Bemina, Srinagar and drops them back at their respective places after

the school is off.

The VMS management has already started construction of a boarding school at Bemina campus. The Society aims to bring Special Children from all parts of valley to the school for treatment.

The children, enrolled in the school, are divided into three categories as per their intelligence quotient. “We keep the students into three groups - Mild, Moderate and Severe,” Says Abdul Rouf, a Speech Therapist at SHAFQAT.

“Children in Mild-Group have higher chances for development and they are usually integrated into the mainstream,” says Rouf.

“The children in Moderate Group also pull through if given the required care, but they carry some traces of their past. While as children in the Severe Group have very bleak chances of improvement,” he adds.

“In all the cases, the parental care is a must along with therapies at school,” says Dr Ambreen.

Another thing that determines the chances of one’s recovery is the early treatment. If the initial time is lapsed, the children may lose their ability to recover.

“Time is an important factor for the beginning of treatment in case of Special Children,” says Ambreen, adding, “Some students fail to respond to the treatment simply because they are brought here late.”

Abid, 28, son of a well-off businessman is suffering from speech problem. He was brought to the school only few years ago and has not shown much improvement since.

The school staff speaks, with a sense of relief and accomplishment, about the discharged students.

Yaqoob, a 20-year-old boy from central district of Budgam, who was brought at an early age to the facility, passed his matriculation examination last year.

However, he has not been discharged yet. “He needs therapy for some more time as he cannot still speak properly,” says the speech therapist.

But there are some worries too. Ambreen says the Special Children need special care constantly even after they are discharged from the school.

“Some students even relapse due to lack of care by parents,” she says.

Lost charm of Mahraj Gunj

Heritage market on verge of extinction!

Mohammad Anwar | Shah Waseem

Once the hub of economic and commercial activities in Kashmir, Mahraj Gunj market of old city, has lost much of its glory, thanks to government "apathy and indifference".

"This market has a history of more than 200 years. Goods worth crores used to be supplied from here to every nook and corner of the valley. It was the centre of all commercial activities up to 1947," says Ghulam Rasool Sheikh, President of Mahraj Gunj Traders Association.

"The market lost its significance due to political turmoil in late 40's, the business ebbed to its low afterwards and government's negligence turned things from bad to worse. They gave preference to uptown markets and totally ignored this historical market," laments Sheikh.

Sheikh sees lack of electricity, transport and congested roads as main causes of market's downfall.



"Trucks laden with goods find it difficult to enter the narrow by-lanes of Mahraj Gunj," says Sheikh.

Highlighting the need to restore Mahraj Gunj, Sheikh who also runs a shop in this market says, "This market houses around 2000 shops and all essential commodities are available here but due to lack of direct transport, people, mostly retailers, prefer uptown markets and the

situation is such that near about 85 per cent of shops have zero counter sale while rest run on debt.

"We pay more taxes than any other market, still we are neglected. If the market's charm is restored, it will boost trade and in turn government can earn more revenue out of it," suggests Sheikh.

According to Sheikh, despite frequent appeals by the trade association nothing has been done so far to revamp the market.

Turning nostalgic Manzoor Ahmad, a cloth merchant recalls good old days when this market used to be abuzz with people.

"We would import goods from England, Germany and many other countries, which wouldn't have been even available in big markets of India."

"The condition of roads is worse and there is no parking facility, which stops the visitors from coming here and as such the future of this market appears bleak," asserts Manzoor while another shopkeeper nods in affirmation.

Happy days of tourism in Kashmir

Govt too cautious to celebrate

Rakib Altaf

Abdul Razak is a happy man these days. He hardly gets time for lunch while he rows his shikara full of tourists around the Dal Lake.

Kashmir is witnessing a huge rush of tourists this year. "This year has been considerably a good one. It is wonderful. Such numbers of tourists haven't come here in last five years together," he says

He may be exaggerating but president of the Houseboat Owners' Association, Manzoor Wangoo says the tourist season this year has, quite unusually, begun early.

"The marketing strategy by tourism department in outside states and other countries has helped. Usually our tourist season would begin mid-April but this year it began in March itself. We expect a good number in the coming months," he says.

Tourists to Kashmir come mostly from the tropical Indian states. The fewer foreigners include mainly Europeans. But president of the Kashmir Hotel Owners' Association, Mushtaq Ahmed, says government promotion events and word-of-the-mouth publicity have

gone to farther countries this time.

"This year the number of tourists from Far-East countries like Malaysia and Thailand has improved a lot. We also expect many tourists from Gulf countries like Dubai in June."

Tourism in the state was badly hit when the armed uprising began in the early nineties. Many people ran out of business and were forced to either switch jobs or live in poverty.

A sharp decline in violence over the recent years saw tourism picking up in the valley.

There have been better tourist seasons in the past. A record of sorts was created eleven years ago when tourists slept on roads due to full occupancy of hotels and houseboats. The present numbers do not match up. But a local, Showkat Ahmed,



believes things to have definitely changed for better now.

"There were times when I earned just forty to fifty rupees in a month. Nowadays I earn around 1500 rupees a day. Thank God things are totally different. I cannot tell you how happy I am after facing so many hardships."

"Tourists are coming and I can earn a lot for my family. But I pray that things remain the same

forever now," he says.

Strangely, though the tourist season has had a good start this year, the government seems to be wary of playing it up. The chief Minister simply refused to answer questions regarding tourism on many occasions recently.

Unlike the previous years the state tourism department has not organized any celebratory functions.

COOL DELIGHT

Tale of city's favourite *Kulfi* shop

Arshi Javid

Manzoor Ahmed Khan is busy peeling-off Kulfi sticks at his home. He occasionally calls out to Mahadev, his helper for last eight years, and instructs him to buck up with the work. Their hands follow mechanical movements; taking out coarse sticks from one box, flaking off them and arranging them in another box.

"Kulfi sticks are made from wheat straw. It is necessary to flak off them, else a coarse straw may irritate a customer's tongue and throat," informs Manzoor.

Manzoor is a flabby middle-aged man. He has been selling kulfi or Ice-Cream along with his brother Ghulam Nabi Khan for four decades now. His creased hands tell a story of long struggle but the spark of his eyes wins over the fatigue.

"Forty years ago, we started selling Kulfis on a cart which was painted with portraits of film stars and 15 years later we shifted to this shop. Since then there has been no looking back", he says.

Manzoor's elder brother Ghulam Nabi Khan learnt the art of kulfi-making from a Bengali Sweet-Meat seller more than forty years ago. A young man then, Ghulam Nabi kept innovating with the newly learnt recipe and started a business of his own. The special kulfi was a

hit and Manzoor did not wait to join the business.

The two brothers own the Dil-Bahaar ice cream shop near Sarai

Kulfi sticks are made from wheat straw. It is necessary to flak off them, else a coarse straw may irritate a customer's tongue and throat.

Bala, Amira Kadal. Manzoor says, "Isn't the word Dil-Bahaar soothing to hear? It somehow makes the customers curious to taste our kulfi atleast once."

"Dil-Bahaar provides you Mann ki thandak (coolness of mind)," his wife laughingly adds.

Although the Kulfi shop is situated in a congested area, yet it doesn't deter kulfi lovers. The setting of the shop is interesting. Interestingly the Khans owe their success partly to women. Ever since the shop was opened, its customers have mostly been school girls and working ladies.

"I have been coming to this place since 1987. I was a college student then. Every visit here conjures up delicious memories", says Arifa, an employee with education department.

But apart from local Kashmiris, tourists are seen hollering for sampling this delight. Ankit Gujral is among the many

tourists, who frequent this place, whenever he visits Kashmir.

"I have eaten kulfi at Delhi, but it tastes remarkable here. Show me a place where you find kulfi for Rs 5," he says as others in his group nod in agreement.

Manzoor's hair is graying now. But till now he has not shared the recipe, which he learnt from his brother, with anyone. Even the long-time helpers at his shop are kept at bay.

"How can we disclose the recipe? It is my Trade-Secret. But I can tell you that our kulfi has evolved with time. Ours is different because the proportion of ingredients is slightly different."

"I know I have to pass it on though. I am just waiting for the right time to teach my son. It's a secret that he'll have to keep," he says.

Kulfi is traditionally prepared by boiling flavored cardamom on a low flame with continuous stirring. The mixture is then poured into moulds which in turn are put in ice for hardening.

Each day after the morning prayers Manzoor and his brother start with their job. The thought of expanding their business has, however, never crossed their minds. "Kashmir has summer for only four months. For the remaining eight months we sell groundnuts. Buying another shop will be useless."

"But we are definitely working towards luring more and more customers. Our kulfi should be the best at the cheapest rates," he adds.

During a normal summer day, swarm of customers throng the shop to grab a kulfi. Selling kulfis at fairly reasonable rates of Rs 5 and Rs 10, he claims to earn 10,000 to 15,000 rupees on a sunny day while a rainy day fetches merely Rs 3000 or more.

Manzoor suddenly gazes at the sky and his face turns grim. The poignancy is disturbing. Though it is summer in Kashmir gray clouds are forming in the sky. He keeps looking towards the containers filled with semi-condensed kulfi mixture. He wraps up the conversation "Look above, it's not always a win-win situation for us. Everything will get wasted today".

A driver's love for newspapers

Irfan Aziz

He is a story teller for his fellow drivers and conductors. Though they occasionally pull his leg for his habit of reading many newspapers, they surround him whenever there is a news concerning them like transport strike and petrol or diesel hike.

Anaytullah, a bus driver from Wanigam Pattan, is known for his attachment with the newspapers.

"After reaching Batamaloo, I straightaway fetch newspaper copies," he says, adding, "I subscribe six newspapers daily. I have to spend 15 rupees a day."

Anaytullah, middle-class dropout, has been reading newspapers since his childhood. He learnt reading newspaper from his father and his uncle.

"Newspaper is my life partner. My tensions vanish when I read newspapers," he says while having a cup of tea and flipping through the newspapers.

He says newspaper reading has helped him improve his language.

Not many people get newspapers in his village. Students come to him to see date sheets, results and other information in newspapers.

Anaytullah keeps all the newspapers stored. He has been retaining important newspaper cuttings in a file since early 90s.

He reads newspapers before going to bed as he does not get much time during the day.

Besides reading newspapers, he listens to Voice of America and national news from Delhi. He is very much interested in reading sports news.

"I advise my children to read newspapers. It increases knowledge," Anaytullah says with a smile and in a tone of confidence.



Dearth of funds, power cuts affect work at Sericulture Div Mirgund

Harris Zargar

Lack of funds and infrastructure coupled with frequent power cuts are affecting work at Sericulture Division, Mirgund, complain the staff and faculty.

"We don't have requisite chemicals and equipments in the Research laboratory. The funds provided are insufficient," says Laboratory and Field Assistant Sayeed Afsal.

"Since the division works under Sher-i-Kashmir Agriculture University of Science and Technology (SKAUST), and is involved in scientific research programmes in sericulture, there should have been an uninterrupted power supply to the division, but there are

frequent power cuts," he adds.

The division has a botanical section dealing with research on mulberry cultivation and diseases. The zoological section deals with rearing and research on silkworms. Apart from research, the division is used for academic purposes both at graduate and post graduate level.

Khurshid Ahmad, a senior technical assistant and a faculty member at the division says, "There is not even a proper infrastructure for academic purposes here. Most of the polyhouses are conventional and not foolproof. It affects the research to a large extent."

"The only reason is lack of proper funding," he adds.

Silkworm rearing is done round the year but in Kashmir it is only a two-month affair. There is only spring rearing of silkworms in the valley.

Director Sericulture Mirgund, Afifa Kambili admits that due to environmental constraints non-seasonal rearing is avoided.

"There are artificial methods, but it reduces the output both qualitatively and quantitatively," she says.

"Power cuts are hampering the work. But the matter has been taken up with the Power Development Department and the problem will be soon rectified. The research department and the faculty are doing well and the funds provided are sufficient," Afifa maintained.

Silk rearing regaining popularity



Tawseef Wani

In the wake of the decline in Valley's silk industry over the years, Sericulture Development Department (SDD) and Sericulture Division of Sheri Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (SKUAST) are working for promotion of silk rearing among people resulting in an increase in silk production.

"With the eruption of armed conflict, the trade witnessed decline. However, it has now started to emerge again. Every year we distribute around 10,000 mulberry saplings among farmers free of cost," says Dr Mushtaq, in charge HOD Moriculture at sericulture division Mirgund Pattan.

SDD pays for the saplings of Goshorami, which costs eight rupees each. These are in turn

distributed among the farmers by the Sericulture Division.

The saplings (poly tubes) are grown by a special technique called poly house technique which reduces the period of conventional growth method by one year.

SDD has planted 35,000 mulberry trees on a land spanning 18 hectares. The farm produces around 800 metric tonnes of silk annually out of which 80 per cent is being exported outside.

The farmers are too benefited by this trade. The cocoon markets are being installed at district levels for the sale of cocoons and each kilogram fetches 500 rupees. This is the easiest way of earning money in a lesser period of time particularly for poor farmers.

"Every farmer earns at least 20 to 30,000 rupees in a single rearing of silk-worms," says Dr Mushtaq.

Public places in Bandipora: Safe havens for drug addicts

Civil society expresses concern

Sheikh Saleem

Public parks, bus stand and even Eidgah in Bandipora district have become a safe haven for drug addicts. The addicts after procuring syrups, injections and tablets from nearby chemists take refuge in these parks as is evident from the empty bottles of cough syrups and injections left behind in the corners of the parks and bust stand.

Codeine, Spasmo-proxyvon, Corex, Fortbin, Norphin, Dexovon, Parvon and a number of steroids are in rampant use by drug addicts. Nishat Park, Wular Vantage Park, Sports Stadium Bandipora and Jaroka Bagh are frequently visited by drug abusers in late evenings.

The newly constructed bus stand, Eidgah, Nishat Park and the old Sumo Stand are some open places which are being frequented by addicts.

Anguished over the increasing trend of drug abuse amongst youngsters, a local social worker Nizamudin Wani claims that 70 to 80 per cent players of the district had succumbed to this evil.

"In absence of proper check, the youth are fast getting caught in this menace. Even the female students are openly using narcotics and injections nowadays," Wani says.

Use of Iodex on bread, inhaling of adhesive, boot polish and petrol are on rise in the upper reaches of

the district. The local students union recently submitted a memorandum to district magistrate stating, "The

and cannabis. Far more surprising is the easy availability of these products among schoolchildren," says a social



Addictive drugs seized by Bandipora police

police should raid the area between Ward no 1 to 6 and Nishat Park, Eidgah, Bus stand and nab the traffickers."

Senior citizens accused police of giving free hand to the people involved in drug trade in the area. "The health authorities also have failed to check the drug abuse with addictive- drugs easily available in the market," alleges Taha Mubashir, another social worker.

"It is shocking to find school-going children from affluent families getting hooked to narcotics, analgesics, stimulants, depressants

worker, Sheikh Waseem.

Expressing concern over the growing drug addiction, reputed scholar and poet, Abdul Rashid Nazki says, "Thefts, shop lifting incidents, which were not heard of few decades ago, are common now due to growing unemployment and drug addiction."

"Government should come up with a concrete plan to curb the menace of drug addiction," he adds.

During the current year, some 20 addicts and peddlers have been already arrested and booked by local police.

A large number of chemists in Bandipora town, Aythmulla, Watpora, Aloosa, Mangnipora, Arin, Nadihal and Hajin are selling narcotics and habit-forming drugs without proper medical prescription.

An executive member of District Chemists Association Bandipora, Muhammad Muzaffer says, "We have extended support to the health authorities to take action against the guilty drug store owners. However, it needs a proper check from both police and health department."

Muzaffer suggested that once the medical shops dealing with drugs are sealed and the offenders are brought to book, the crimes will decline.

Pertinently, police busted two gangs of drug peddlers last month by arresting about eight peddlers, four each from Bandipora and Sumbal township.

Meanwhile, Executive Magistrate Bandipora, Mushtaq Ahmed told MERC Times that on the direction of Deputy Commissioner Bandipora, a squad has been formed to act against growing drug addiction in the district.

"We are going to act tough against drug addiction but public support is must. If anybody has any information about the illegal drug trade he/she can contact the magistrate office and his/her identification will be kept a secret," Mushtaq assured.

Farmers decry Govt decision to turn agri land into bus stand

Firdoose-ul-Islam

The government's decision to convert 25 acres (200 kanals) of fertile agricultural land on the banks of Khemli river, Kupwara into a bus stand has irked people who term it as a brazen violation of government's own policy on conversion of agricultural land.

"This huge area of land has been a source of livelihood to farmers of Dudhwan, Regipora and Branwari villages. The land has been inherited by us from our forefathers. Our generations have cultivated it. Now they (government) are snatching it from us and that too for an unproductive purpose," says Ghulam Mohammed, an elderly villager.

"I have four sons and three of them are farmers. Where will they

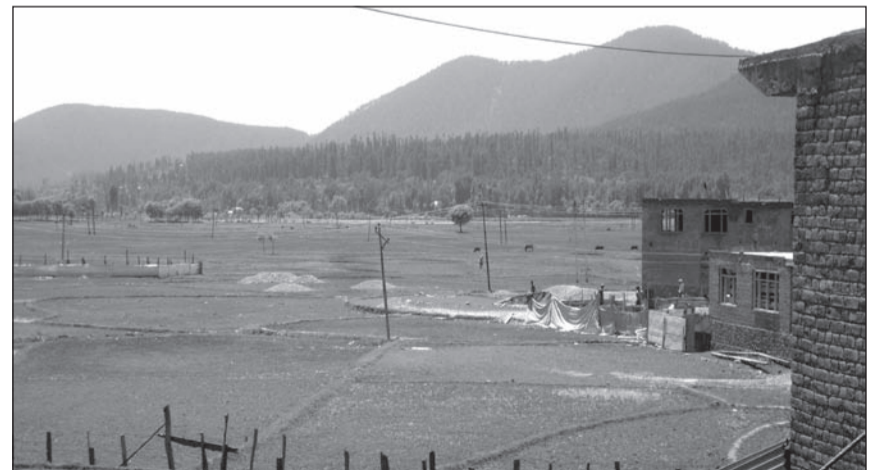
go after being deprived of their only resource?" questions another local farmer, Ajaz Ahmed.

Pertinently, the government has ordered compensation of about 2.5 lakhs per kanal which according Haji Wali Muhammad, a local, is too insufficient. "They are offering us peanuts for gold," he adds.

"The market rate is around ten lakhs per kanal. They are not paying us even the half. On the other hand, the land provides us a continuous income of around 20000 per month," says Wali.

People suspect that the bus stand may pollute the river, which flows nearby.

"The public bus stand will attract a huge rush of shopkeepers and vendors. This means a lot of waste will be generated which will



slowly but definitely pollute the water," says Abdul Rasheed, a local.

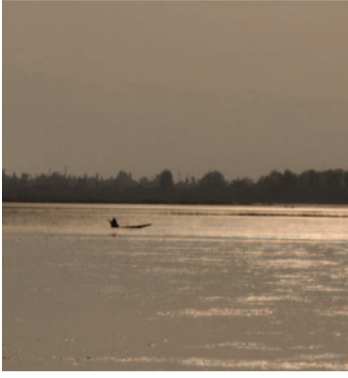
When contacted, Tehsildar, Abdul Rashid Shah said he cannot comment on the matter as it pertains the higher authorities.

Deputy Commissioner could

not be contacted despite repeated attempts.

Meanwhile, the farmers have threatened to launch public agitation. They also plan to move the court if the government fails to address the issue.

Dal in Sunlight and Shade



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