

What Is Wrong With Our Teens?

Sucides attempts on rise, society helpless

GAZI ABBAS SHAHID

Budgam: At about 8:30 in the morning, Abrar's (name changed) mother goes to wake his 19- year old son for college, she knocks on his door for a couple of minutes but there is no response. She gets worried that Abrar may be ill as usually he wakes up at around 7:00 am.

Worried, she calls out to her husband to wake their son up. Abrar's father, Rafiq Dar (name changed) goes near the door of his son's room and calls out to his son " Abrar, wake up , you'll be late for college, are you sick?" , but there is no answer from inside.

Rafiq calls his son's cell, he could hear the phone ringing from outside the door but Abrar isn't picking up. The couple gets worried and finally Rafiq decides to break the door open.

What they saw next, shattered all the dreams and hopes of this middle-class family. Abrar was lying on his bed, motionless, he was foaming at mouth and his skin was pale. Next to the bed, there lay a half-empty bottle of poison and numerous empty strips of sleeping pills.

Abrar's mother cries out in agony and horror, she couldn't come to terms with the terrible truth that her son was dead, that he had committed suicide. She tears her hair out, scratches her face. Rafiq tries to hold her but he himself is dumb folded . His eyes had become still and his gaze fixed on his son's lifeless corpse.

Even though shattered by this hor-



rific scene, Rafiq regains his composure momentarily and out of some faint sense of hope to save his only son, he picks up Abrar's motionless body, loads him in to the back of his car and drives to a nearby hospital, where he is declared dead on arrival.

Later, an autopsy revealed that Abrar had died at around 3:30 am in the morning due to an overdose of sleeping pills and common household rat-poison.

Checking the call records from Abrar's cell, the cops revealed that the only call he had made that fateful night was to his girlfriend and apparently they had a fight as was revealed from the call recordings from Abrar's smartphone.

Nobody could ever suspect that a fun-loving boy like Abrar could ever resort to suicide. " He was so full of life, even in tense situations such as when we about to lose a cricket match, he was the one who would cheer everybody up by telling a joke or playing a prank" recalls his friend and college-mate Waseem with tears in his eyes. " Moreover, he was very religious, I would have never imagined that he of all others would commit suicide, Allah rest his soul"



Suicidal tendency is a disease and it should be treated as such, but in Kashmir it is a very complex phenomenon, a seemingly happy youth maybe a total wreck from the inside, our social structure is such that it inhibits us from expressing our feelings to our elders, this has disastrous results on the psyche of a person, especially youth and ultimately lead to suicides."

adds Waseem.

More detailed inquiry into Abrar's suicide revealed that his girlfriend who belonged to a well-off business family was soon going to be engaged to be married and she had asked him to tell his parents about their relationship and ask her folks for her hand in marriage. But Abrar was

aware that his father was going through a financial crisis and could not afford to pay for the engagement, so he didn't dare ask him. Moreover, he knew that his girlfriend belonged to a rich family and her parents would not approve of their union.

Abrar's story is one of the hundreds of cases of teen suicides that are reported each year especially during the last decade and a half, and then there are the thousands of such cases that go unreported because of the religious structure of our society, where suicide is considered as a taboo/sin rather than a psychiatric disease.

Almost everyday we come across newspaper reports, TV or Radio broadcasts about a young teen boy or girl ending his/her life but hardly ever do we see a report that dwells in-depth about why a normal, seemingly happy teenager commits such an extreme act.

According to Dr.Akash, a leading psychiatrist working at District Hospital Budgam, teenagers living in the valley are more susceptible to psychiatric problems when compared to those living in other areas of the India as

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YDF toiling hard to develop Budgam

■ AIJAZ GANAI

Budgam: Dejected by the callous attitude and failure of the local administration as well as politicians in promoting development in the area, youth in Central Kashmir's Budgam town have taken the matters in their own hands and started the Youth Development Front (YDF), an NGO to work for development in various spheres of life.

Presently comprised of 25 members, all well-educated youth between the ages of 25-30, the NGO has now been working since the last eight months and has organised various seminars and events to create awareness among the masses about various social and developmental issues such as the recently concluded cleanliness drive that was won YDF appreciation from Budgam's civil society.

As per the constitution of the organisation, YDF has explicitly declared itself as a Non-Profit organisation without any political affiliations or religious bias. "YDF is a youth movement with an aim to work towards the betterment of our society, we do not have any political affiliation nor are we

against any party or leader, our sole objective is the development of this area that has been neglected by successive governments for far too long" says, Sheikh Firdous, President YDF.

The YDF allege that Budgam is lagging behind in development as it has been overlooked by the authorities since it was declared a district back in 1979 and part of the problem is the lack of awareness among the residents who don't know how to fight for their rights. "It's a travesty of justice that even though being only 10-11 kms away from the summer capital Srinagar, Budgam district has been neglected by the state since the get-go, we are lagging behind in all spheres of development" laments Mudasir Lone, an active member of YDF.

Over the past eight months YDF has sent delegations to various government offices on a frequent basis for addressing public grievances such as shortage of water supply, electricity, etc and their efforts have provided relief to many a people. "Wherever we find that some injustice is being done or corruption is taking place, we work towards addressing such issues and provide relief to the aggrieved" says Mudasir.

Impressed by the works of these bold youngsters, Budgam's civil society as well as people from all walks of life in the town are all praise for them and shown the much needed support for their cause.

"It's not like a couple of boys came together and decided to start an NGO out of the blue, they (YDF) are a well organised unit with an elaborate constitution and well thought-off aims and objectives that are clear-cut and have practicality, not ambiguous" believes Nisar Badgami, a member of Budgam's civil society.

"They (YDF) are doing wonderful work, fighting for the rights of others is a virtue highly regarded in our religion, we are proud of them" Badgami declares proudly.

In order to be a member of the NGO, a minimum qualification of 12th standard and an age limit of 25-40 years has been set by the controlling body of YDF. "We want young educated youth who can comprehend the complexities of society's problems and have a stake in development" believes Nisar Ahmad Bhat, Vice-President, YDF.

"Although we need the blessings and support of our elders but I believe that youth, especially those with a good educa-

tion have a larger stake in the society's development compared to the older folk" he adds.

When asked about their sphere of activity, the YDF humbly accepted that due to limited man-power and financial resources, they have for the time-being concentrated their activities to main town Budgam only but will expand as they continue to grow in the future. "We don't want to chew more than we can swallow, we have limited resources and the only funding we have comes from volunteers and individual members but we will expand this movement to other areas of the district in time as we grow" says Syed Waseem, a member of YDF.

Apart for working towards developmental goals, YDF aims to promote peace, brotherhood, unity and tranquility among various sections of the society and eliminating various social evils prevailing in the society. "Eliminating religious, ethnic and social biases and social evils such as communalism and sectarianism is the need of the hour as these are a major barrier to the development of a healthy society" believes Secretary YDF, Shujat Hussain.

Teens...

the pressures here are manifold. "We are living in a conflict environment and here the pressures are multi-faceted, failure in examinations, unsuccessful love affairs, unhappy married and family life, frustration because of unemployment etc., but a special reason of suicide in Kashmir is the uncertain political situation" says the doctor.

"In such uncertain conditions, a healthy psychological and mental growth is not possible and people resort to an extreme act like suicide to get away from this scenario" he adds.

"The Kashmiri people face many such problems which give rise to the trend of suicide in the society, especially among the teens who have a very low level of tolerance to cope with these difficult situations" Akash believes.

"Suicidal tendency is a disease and it should be treated as such, but in Kashmir it is a very complex phenomenon, a seemingly happy youth maybe a total wreck from the inside, our social structure is such that it inhibits us from expressing our feelings to our elders, this has disastrous results on the psyche of a person, especially youth and ultimately lead to suicides" observes Dr. Akash.

According to him, the move from joint to nuclear families is another major reason for youth suicides in the valley. "We have become disconnected, today the parents don't have enough time for their children, they buy them expensive electronic gadgets and motor-vehicles, but don't spend enough time with them or listen to their problems and concerns"

the psychologist believes.

"In a joint-family, we had elders who would counsel children and act as role-models for them but that trend has declined drastically and teens in a small family feel alone as there is nobody who would listen to their problems or cater to their spiritual needs" he adds.

Another psychologist, Dr. Mohsin Wani believes the two main causes of suicides among the youth in Kashmir are failure in exams and a troubled/failed love affair. "Teens these days are so lost in themselves, they have become disconnected because of all the communication gadgets such as smartphones, laptops, fast internet services, etc available at their fingertips" says Dr. Mohsin.

Mohsin blames the growth of social-networking sites and instant messaging services like Whats App and others for the rise in mental disorders among the youth. "The idea here is clear, the youth compete for popularity on social networking sites, teen boys and girls become intimate friends without even knowing each other personally, all this is too much to comprehend for an average teenager and even if a tiny fraction of their social existence fall out of place, it leads to depression." he believes.

According to some psychologists, blind race for materialism, ever-increasing unemployment etc. also give rise to incidents of suicide, particularly among the youth. According to a sociologist, he found in a survey that among those who committed suicide, most were between 17 and 26 years of age and sadly enough, as many as 62 percent of them were women and girls. The blind race for material comforts, unnecessary and

superfluous expenditure, promoted by a materialistic culture, have so much worried parents that they find it difficult to get their daughters married. Many of the young boys and girls have crossed their marriageable age while their parents find great difficulty in getting them married and this puts a mental burden not only on parents but on their children also, particularly girls.

On the employment front, in the Valley alone more than three lakh well-educated youth are facing unemployment. As many as 5000 engineers, same number of doctors and other professional experts too are facing unemployment. A much higher number of persons are facing under-employment, i.e., employed but their salaries are not commensurate to their qualifications and experience etc.

According to a survey, the incidents of suicides were almost negligible before the advent of the armed conflict in late 80s and early 90s but over the years because of lingering violence, Kashmiris have become the victims of post-traumatic stress disorders. This is evident from the number of patients registered in the state's only mental healthcare facility where about one and half lakh patients are registered as of December 2013 compared to a meagre 1200 in the late 80s.

Majority of doctors believe the number of such mental patients to be much higher, but isn't on the records as a majority of people do not go the hospitals for treatment for varied reasons.

The survey also indicates that 77.4 percent of people attempting suicide were women. Of these 11 percent opted to end their lives during pregnancy. The ratio of suicide in rural and urban areas, as

per the survey is 85 and 15 respectively. The proportion of illiterate and literate victims has been 40 and 60 respectively. A total of 76.92 percent people committing suicide were within the age group of 16 to 25 years. This, the survey attributes to the fear of death among youth as a result of continued disturbances. The remaining percentage is said to be of the age group of 26 to 40. Interestingly no person above 40 has committed suicide during the troubled decade. As per the survey 59.68 percent people resorting to suicides were unmarried. About 84 percent of people opting to end their lives chose consuming poison for the purpose thinking that this was the easiest way to embrace death.

According to Mirwaiz Central Kashmir, Moulvi Abdul Ganie, lack of a proper Islamic education and over-exposure to mainstream Indian and western culture propagated via mass media is the single most influential reason for the rise in youth suicides.

"Parents nowadays lay stress on the school education of their children, whereas they fail to teach even the basic tenets of Islam, had this not been the case they would have made them aware that committing suicide is un-Islamic and the one who commits suicide has to suffer in the hereafter, even Namaz-e-Janaza becomes Baatil (void) for the deceased in this case" says Moulvi Abdul Ganie.

"Our children are exposed to vulgarity and un-Islamic culture via the mass media on a regular basis and this destroys their sense of right and wrong and leads to spiritual deterioration and mental disorders" he believes.

THE GHOST OF FEBRILE FITS

SHAKIR MIR

Srinagar: 42-year-old Nusrat Amin was tending to the kitchen when she heard her sister cry from the next room. Panicked, Nusrat left her job midway and lunged towards the door. From what she saw in the room would leave her bursting into tears and flailing her arms for help. The body of her 2-year-old son Abdullah had become stiff. His hands and legs had been twitching; eyeballs rolled backwards and mouth frothing. He was unconscious. Nusrat immediately took him to the bathroom and placed him directly under the stream of lukewarm water. She kept shaking him gently until Abdullah regained conscious. In the meantime, alarmed by the din of cries and screams, entire neighborhood had turned up in their lawn.

In medical parlance Abdullah's condition is called a Febrile Seizure, commonly termed as fever fit. Febrile seizures are brought by fever in infants or small children. During seizure, a child often loses consciousness and shakes, moving limbs on both sides of the body. Less commonly, the child becomes

"Febrile seizures are not then dangerous unless the fit is an epileptic one which is quite a separate kind of seizure, so due to lack of enough knowledge, frightened care-givers often run to hospitals seeking medical help which can cause inconvenience to some more needy patients."

rigid or has twitches in only a portion of the body, such as an arm or a leg, or on the right or the left side only. They last for only few minutes but are extremely very frightening to see.

The case of Abdullah shows just how incredible capacity febrile fits wield to precipitate terror in panic-stricken parents. But in a bizarre irony, medical practitioners explain the condition to be relatively harmless.

"Febrile seizures are not dangerous neither do they cause any after effects," says Dr. M.R Sofi, a Sopore-based pediatrician. "Febrile fits take

place when a child's rectal temperature rises above 102 degrees. They are not harmful and certainly do not cause death."

Approximately one in every 25 children has at least one febrile seizure. Febrile fits usually occur in children between the ages of 6 months and 5 year. The older a child is when the first febrile seizure occurs, the less likely that child is to have more. "A child is more likely to have a fever fit if his immediate relative has had one during their own childhood," he says.

According to Dr. Sofi, a child becomes prone to fits when his temperature shoots up which his developing brain remains too sensitive to withstand. "A child's brain is very sensitive to the rise and fall of body temperature as a result a child may often slip into a fit."

Even as febrile seizures remain harmless, Dr. Sofi still cautions against the wrong way of treating them. "When a fit takes place, we must first ensure that the mouth is not closed. When possible, gently remove any objects from the child's mouth. The child should not be held or restrained during a seizure. Our efforts must focus to lower down the body temperature as quickly as we

Febrile fits take place when a child's rectal temperature rises above 102 degrees. They are not harmful and certainly do not cause death."

can. Never immerse the child in cold water which may turn the things dangerous them. Try to pour some lukewarm water. If fit lasts for more than 10 minutes which happens very rarely, take the child to the nearby hospital."

Dr. Sofi believes that frightened parents often rush to hospitals once fits take place which causes unnecessary ruckus. "As I said, febrile seizures are not then dangerous unless the fit is an epileptic one which is quite a separate kind of seizure, so due to lack of enough knowledge, frightened care-givers often run to hospitals seeking medical help which can cause inconvenience to some more needy patients."

Seizures, Dr. Sofi says, are fully preventable and do not entail any after-effects. "We only need to take right measures and right time."

Meanwhile, Nusrat sits silently in the room full of visiting relatives who offer condolences in the aftermath of that terrible session. She holds Abdullah in her lap and struggles with keeping away his temperature from rising using a wet cloth folding, unknown to the fact that she has far outrun the ghoul of Febrile seizure she is so scared of.

IUST IN PICTURES



Minister for Higher Education, Mohammad Akbar Lone, VC IUST, Prof A R Trag (right) and Registrar IUST, Prof A G Rather (left) at the inaugral function of the 2-day cultural event Prestige held at the campus.

Participants from other institutions performing at the cultural event Prestige



Bollywood Director, Gurmeet Singh interacting with the media students at IUST.

School Children displaying their artistic skills during the 2-day event



Photos : Noman Parvaz

IUST Organises 2-day Seminar on Nursi

Signs MoU with IFSC

Awantipora: Two-day international workshop on Bediuzzamaan Said Nursi and his Risale-i Nur was organised by Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST) in collaboration with Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IFSC), Turkey here on August 21-22.

The workshop is titled "Role and Place of Said Nursi's Thought in 21st Century" and is organized by the department of Islamic Studies of IUST.

The inaugural session was chaired by Vice Chancellor of Jamia Milia Islamia, Prof. Talat Ahmad while other dignitaries present in the presidium included Vice Chancellor, IUST and Guest of Honour, Prof A R Trag, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, Prof Faris Kaya, Prof Hamidullah Marazi of Kashmir University's Shah-i-Hamdan Institute of Islamic Studies and Head Department of Islamic Studies, IUST, Dr Ghulam Nabi.

In his address, Prof Talat while deliberating upon the teachings of Nursi said contribution of this Turkish great was relevant and imperative to the present day religious as well as political scenario across the Muslim world. "In the age of inter-religious, intra-religious and regional conflicts, the teachings of Nursi in general and the workshop in particular has great relevance to address many issues," he added.

Prof A R Traq, while addressing the gathering, highlighted the contribution of Nursi in motivating the non-believers towards the Islam and its teachings. "He



dimensional scholar whose focus and aim was to implement the teachings of Islam among the society members. "Nursi was an advocate of peace and reconciliation. "Islam is religion of peace and prosperity, not hostility. That is what Nursi believed in and propagated," he added.

In his key note address, Prof Faris Kaya gave a detailed account of life of Nursi. He said that, from an early age, Nursi dedicated himself in service of religious propagation.

He said that the great Turkish scholar was a proponent of development of an institute that will impart education on both

and democracy. In fact, he tried to modernize the late Ottoman Empire," he added.

Prof Hamidullah Marazi also talked about the life and struggle of Nursi.

Dr. Ghulam Nabi and Dr. Afroz Bisati delivered the welcome address and Vote of thanks respectively.

The second day of the seminar began with third and final technical session of the two day international workshop was presided over by Prof. Faris Kaya of IFSC. The session began with a power point presentation of the lead paper titled "Tawhidi Paradigm in the Light of Risale-i Nur" by Prof. Necati Aydin of IFSC who detailed about

mad Bisati of Department of Islamic Studies while as the second paper "Message to Youth in Badiuzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur" was present by Dr Iqbal Qureshi of International Centre for Spiritual Studies, IUST. Dr. Ghulam Nabi, Department of Islamic Studies IUST and Dr. Parvez Mir of School of Business Studies, IUST also present papers on topics "I'jaz al Quraan in Risale-i Nur" and "Peace and brotherhood in Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur" respectively.

Later on, in the valedictory session was chaired by Vice Chancellor, IUST, Prof A R Trag was held at the auditorium. Other dignitaries present in the presidium included Registrar, IUST, Prof A G Rather, chairman of the Executive Board of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, Prof Faris Kaya, Prof Hamidullah Marazi of Kashmir University's Shah-i-Hamdan Institute of Islamic Studies and Head Department of Islamic Studies, IUST, Dr Ghulam Nabi.

During the concluding session Prof Trag expressed satisfaction over the successful culmination of the seminar.

He said that it has been an endeavor of IUST to promote participation of students, scholars and faculty members of the varsity in workshops, seminars and conferences.

He also stressed on a prolonged coordination between the IUST and the IFSC for extensive student-faculty exchange programmes in the future.

He said that IUST will welcome participation of students and experts from other Muslim countries. "It is in the best interests of the students and scholars to participate in such academic endeavors," he added.

In his address, Prof Faris Kaya said that the workshop was a beginning towards a long-term partnership between IFSC and IUST. "We are ready to support the activities aimed at developing the academic culture within this institution," he added.

It is pertinent to mention that the IUST and IFSC signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU).

Detailing about the MoU, Registrar IUST, A G rather said that it (MoU) was a step towards development of academic exchange programmes between the two institutions.

He said that apart from sponsoring the academic visits of students and faculty, the IFSC has agreed to provide scholarships to the IUST students.

He said that both the institution will work together to establish a Nursi centre at IUST in near future. "In the MoU, it has also been agreed that joint workshops and seminars will be held at both Turkey and in Kashmir," he added.

Prof. Hamidullah Marazi, Dr Ghulam Nabi Gani, Dr Showkat Hussain and Dr G N Khaki and Prof A R Bhat of Kashmir University also spoke on the occasion.



(Nursi) used logic and reasoning to convince people about the existence of God," he said.

He asserted that Nursi was a multi-

religious and Physical Sciences.

Kaya said that besides being a fervent religious scholar, Nursi was a sharp hold on the socio-political subjects. "Apart from religious issues, Nursi wrote on Freedom

the relevance of Tawhidi paradigm in modern times.

Afterwards, a paper on "An Introduction to Badiuzzaman said Nursi's Thought on Sufism" was presented by Dr Afroz Ah-

Scribbling, Diary Of Kashmir's Orphan



With over 2 lakh orphans in JK, the misery of these unfortunate souls has no end. They have lost a parent, a guardian, a caretaker and Kashmir seems to have lost its sense of responsibility.

■ UMAR DEWANI

Pampore: Like a pre-supper prayer, a glare at a picture everyday has become routine for 13-year old Aqib Lateef of Pampore. Though the beckoning picture gives him a bout of joy for a moment, it also stirs a wave of dismay as it explains an unfortunate reality that he lives with. A person in this picture smiles at Aqib each times he looks at it. A smile of affection, responsibility and love, but confined to just a frame forever. The picture is of Mohammad Lateef, father of Aqib, a truck driver, lynched to death by a violent mob at Jammu in 2008 during the Amarnath land row agitation.

Every day, Aqib fastens his eyes on a picture and sees his father nicely posed with a benevolent smile spurring a responsive smile by Aqib and explaining the gloomy reality of a life that he has learnt to live.

The death of his father put an unending burden of responsibilities on these tender shoulders. An age meant to pursue the joy of playing with friends has endured him to think and act like grown up men. He issues daily rosters for the family to act upon starting with issuing directive to motivate his elder sisters for reciting the Holy Quran. "If we don't follow his orders," says one of his elder sisters, "he gets upset and stops talking to us for days."

The elders in the house have created an atmosphere to make Aqib believe that he is in-charge at the house and he can manage things as his father did. Aqib's mother, 28, with a stoic look listens to her

A study in 2009 by UK-based child rights organization, Save The Children, has revealed that estimated population of orphans in Jammu and Kashmir is 2.14 lakh and 37 percent of them were orphaned due to the armed conflict

children reciting Quran from hallway. She sometimes repeats the verses with her three children. "I would recite this page before you," Aqib says to his elder sisters as they sat together in a huddle. Two sisters adore their only brother so much that they never oppose him on any matter. After an hour of recitation, Aqib puts the Quran on the shelf and rubs his tender hands onto his face. "Wiping hands over the face after reciting Allah's words, give strength and keep me away from sins," he says.

Like his father, he returns to his mother in the kitchen asking her for money to bring food items meant for the lunch. "She doesn't have money," Aqib tells me later. "I know that. We are very poor. No one in our family earns." That day Aqib brought 1 kg cabbage and few onions. When a shopkeeper asked for money, he pledged to pay him later that month. "I don't know how I would pay him," he says, "but Allah shall help me to pay his debt."

Aqib is one among the thousands of unfortunate children in Kashmir who

have lost their parents at a very tender age during all these years of conflict and violence here. During the year in which his father died more than sixty people lost their lives after they were protesting against transfer of land to the Amarnath Shrine Board.

Aqib's father was not the part of these protests; he was out of valley to earn a living to sustain his family. He, in fact, became a victim of the violence that escalated in Jammu after the government revoked the land transfer order. He was killed and his children orphaned.

A study in 2009 by UK-based child rights organization, Save The Children, has revealed that estimated population of orphans in Jammu and Kashmir is 2.14 lakh and 37 percent of them were orphaned due to the armed conflict. The responsibility to take care of lakhs of children like Aqib was the duty of the orphanages and the society; however, both seem to shy away from their responsibility. According to a survey done recently Orphanages in JK are a 120 crore business but only a few fortunate children benefit from them.

Aqib's family, though, survives on the small donations from the local mosques and neighbors. "Once we survived on only tea for many days until our relatives came to know about it. They brought us food then. A friend of my father has donated the house we live in," he reveals.

Aqib is in class six and likes science and mathematics. "School authorities, after learning that we have become orphans, stopped asking for fee. Principal is good man, and he profoundly would call me at school and ask me if I need anything," Aqib says. His school is 5-km away

from his home. They have to board bus twice. He says, giggling, "When conductor would ask for the fare, which we don't have, I would point my finger anywhere in the bus and tell him that there is my relative and he would pay. Most of the times he would believe me."

He dreams of becoming a doctor one day; his sisters would spend two hours every day to help him study so that he can pursue his dream. "He likes science," says his sister. "He always talks about the human body parts and knows a lot about the organs and their working." "He tells me that heart is on left side, it pumps blood and he also knows a lot about kidney, lungs, spine, intestines and bones. He points his hands swiftly to show the organs on his own body," the proud sister adds.

Children love to watch cartoon shows on TV but Aqib has no desire for that. He says he sometimes watches Discovery channel at a neighbour's house. "They show everything that I read in books. One day I would buy a television," he says ardently. His mother has a lot of hope in his son, she sees a doctor in him. "Aqib will treat patients one day in his own clinic and will earn lots of money. He has to earn a lot of money to get his sisters married," she says. While the mothers was saying all this, Aqib interrupts saying his mother has many expectations. "If something happens to me, who will look after them," a visible upset Aqib murmurs. "Is there any part time job in the city so that I can earn few bucks and aid my hapless mother," Aqib told this reporter before bidding adieu. The names of Aqib's mother and sisters have been concealed on his request

Kashmiri Weddings: Social Integration or Extravaganza?

█ GAZI ABBAS SHAHID

Awantipora: From expensive clothes and jewellery for the bride and the groom to an extravagant feast, the Wazwan, prepared in traditional Kashmiri style for the guests, Kashmiri weddings are a unique extravaganza that bring families and friends together.

Although considered to be an occasion that strengthens the bonds of kinship between relatives, but over the years this social event has become more about show boding and lavish spending. Thus, transforming the Kashmiri weddings into an extravaganza that has become too expensive for common folks to afford, as many activists believe.

A social event like no other, Kashmiri weddings are more than an occasion of two people getting married, they are a loud pompous affair full of fireworks, expensive clothes and of course, good food. "We Kashmiris love living life King-size and the same is reflected in our wedding ceremonies", says Maqsood Hussain, a newly-wed and a contractor by profession. "And then the fact that we (Kashmiris) are foodies, and what better excuse for eating good food than a Big Fat Kashmiri Wedding" he adds with a smirk.

The unofficial wedding celebrations start a couple of months before the actual date of the wedding itself as friends and relatives start flooding into the bride's and groom's house and this goes on until the Big Bash itself, the grand wedding day. "Weddings in Kashmir are an occasion that are responsible for maintaining the tightly knit social fabric of Kashmiri society in general and Kashmiri families in particular in today's individualistic and materialistic times, this is a healthy trend and should remain intact" believes M.Farooqi, a sociologist.

A brief history of changing trends

Traditionally, the Kashmiri weddings used to be a simple affair in the old days, the weddings used to be conducted in a simple manner with the groom's side taking care of all the expenses, a trend that went on till the 1940's. From the wedding attire (Vardan in Kashmiri) for the bride to the feast (Wazwan), everything was organized by groom's parents. At the end of the ceremony, guests were provided with return gifts known as "Bogh". All the things required for the weddings were contributed by relatives.

Up until the mid-1980s, the wedding attire remained fairly traditional consisting of a canvas pheran (cloak) adorned with intricate zariwork and heavy silver jewellery for the bride. The late 80's saw the rise of the dowry system in Kashmir, the groom's side became more and more demanding and expected a lot of things from the bride's side.

Western and mainstream culture gained ground during the early 90's changing the trends in Kashmiri marriages once more as sari's and other Indian and western outfits started to replace the traditional wedding attire. The outlook of weddings celebrations also started to change as a more western/Indian flavour started to creep in. But this era could not sustain for long

due to the rise of insurgency and brought in an age of frugal marriages as conflict dominated the social scenario.

The dawn of the new millennium once again brought about a sea of change in the scenario of Kashmiri weddings as the situation improved gradually. Lavish and extravagant weddings with expensive décor and grand feasts started to be organised, more focus was paid to the overall ambience of the location where the wedding feast was to be served and the wedding conducted.

The groomsmen (Baraat) accompanying the groom in a convoy of expensive cars and the groom himself seated in a lavish luxury car enroute to the bride's home for the wedding feast (Maharaaz Saal) gradually became a norm, especially in urban areas.

The Present Scenario



File Photo

In recent times, Kashmiri wedding ceremonies have had another make-over as add-ons from Punjabi and mainstream Indian aka Bollywood culture seem to have crept in.

Kashmir weddings today have become more complex than ever and a fast growing trend in Kashmir especially in urban areas is conducting of marriage ceremonies in Banquet Halls or Hotels, where the traditional system of serving Wazwan has been replaced by the buffet system.

Sociologists believe that this trend has been brought about by the fast-moving hectic lifestyle prevalent in urban areas and breakdown of traditional joint families into nuclear families.

"See, it's not a question of money, they are heavy spenders, but people living in nuclear families with a hectic urban lifestyle simply do not have the time or the human resources that can pull-off a traditional style wedding" maintains M.Farooqi. "Moreover, they are socially disconnected from their extended families and thus do not have the required man-power who could lend a hand on such occasions" he adds.

Though believed to be an occasion that unites families and friends, social-activists believe that Kashmiri weddings are becoming more and more extravagant and expensive rapidly. An average wedding in Kashmir costs around Rs.10-

15 lakhs that goes upto a crore if the family is well-off, figures that are well beyond a common man's reach and often drives him into heavy debt in order to pay for the wedding expenses.

The Wazwan, a specially prepared multi-dish cuisine prepared on special occasions by the traditional Kashmiri chefs (Waza), remains one of the most expensive commodities when planning the budget of a wedding.

At the special wedding feast known as Maharaz Saal (a traditional feast the groom and his relatives/friends (Baraat) have at the bride's house) on average, a single plate (plate) costs around Rs.4200 to 4500 that costs about Rs.50,000 for an average of 40 guests or ten plates.

At the normal wedding feasts at both the bride's and groom's home, a single plate costs

changed on both sides, post-wedding feasts/parties, etc have resulted in enormous rise in wedding expenses.

"With their extravagant spending on weddings, those who can afford to spend set a bad example for those who cannot, this is a negative trend and should not be encouraged" feels Bashir Badgami, a social-activist from Badgam.

People who intend to organize simple weddings often succumb to societal pressures and finally decide to go for a lavish wedding for the fear of being seen as an outcast in the society. Some years back the government had set rules for a limited course meal in Wazwan and to observe austere weddings but that seems to have been thrown out of the window.

"That idea seems far-fetched today as people are ready to spend whatever amount of money they have for a grand wedding, it has become a status symbol and a point of prestige for everyone" believes Ghulam Hassan, whose daughter's wedding is coming up.

Kashmir being a Muslim dominated and highly orthodox religious society, rise in extravagant and expensive weddings has also received harsh criticism from religious leaders of all sects in the valley. "Islam teaches us to live a modest life and not to indulge in extravagant spending, having such type of flashy weddings are in direct contrast to the Prophet's (s) sunnah (lifestyle)" says Mirwaiz Central Kashmir, Moulvi Abdul Ganie.

"Just think, how much good you can do with that extra money that you are spending only to feed your ego, A rich man can instead donate some amount to an orphanage or to some other noble cause and a poor person can use that extra money to provide better facilities and better life conditions for his family" believes Moulvi Abdul Ganie.

The introduction of elements from other cultures such as majestic lighting, music and sound arrangements, hiring of catering services, trend of hiring wedding planners, etc have only added to the grandeur and ultimately the expense on weddings. While this may be the case but these grand weddings are becoming a booming business and the wedding planner industry has recently started emerging as a profitable business in the valley, especially in urban areas.

"We had hired a wedding planner for our son's wedding back in 2012 and it turned out to be a great decision, the pressure of planning, gathering and getting stuff to and fro was no more on our shoulders, they (wedding planners) managed everything from sending invites to catering, shamyana, etc and we could enjoy our son's wedding in a relaxed mood" reveals Mohammad Ramzan, who after being satisfied with the wedding planners work last time around intends to hire them again for his daughter's wedding later this year.

"Nowadays, weddings are more about how much one can afford, certainly if you can afford all other luxuries of life like a luxury car, expensive smartphone, etc, then most probably you can also afford a big fat Kashmiri wedding" reveals a wedding planner based in Srinagar.

around Rs.2200 to 2500, and on an average of 400 guests or roughly a hundred plates costs around Rs. 2.5 lakhs for a mid-level wazwan meal with 16-17 dishes and 2.5 kg of mutton per plate.

However, the high society weddings in Kashmir are on a whole new level, exotic locations and posh marriage halls are booked to conduct the ceremonies and detailed attention is paid to the ambience of the place as a bright and vibrant décor beautified with majestic lighting is put into place.

Professional music bands are hired to play at the weddings, baskets of flowers and bouquets are used extensively to adorn the place where the groom is supposed to sit and professional photographers/videographers replacing the local shooting walas are flown in from outside the state to capture the wedding in an artistic manner. Colossal shamyanas made of a special fabric, embellished with intricate hand work designs and fitted with multi-coloured lights are put up and expensive catering services are hired who besides serving the traditional wazwan, serve continental and other Indian cuisine to the guests.

Grand and colossal white-houses (shamyanas), special wedding feasts, costly gifts ex-

Saffron Crop At Crossroads

■ SUHAIL BHAT

Pampore : In the backdrop of huge bare mountains the vast hillocks of brown earth shaded randomly with willow and almond trees, In the middle, a group of non- local labors singing in chorus "lollipop layle"- a bojpuri song while tilling the uplands.

There are non locals everywhere and It seems, as if, we are in a place other than Kashmir. The only Kashmiri looking man is sitting slouching on a rare patch of grass under an almond tree .He is an old man , wearing a pheran , skull cap tilted slightly at an angle and stoical face. He is watching the laborers carefully with occasional shouts of "Beej mat kato" don't harm the corp.

Every time the short handle hoe hits the ground, a puff of dust swirls in the air, covering their faces with grime and sweat.

At this time there is nothing on the pale earth and it looks like a barren land, but with in a few weeks it would be under a purple carpet peppered with yellow and red threads: saffron, known as "kong" in local parlance .It grows just 13 km away from Srinagar city in the uplands of Pampore commonly known as -wuder. Pampore is known for saffron all over the world but this red gold is facing challenges from different corners.

The saffron, *crocus sativus* , is a small purple flower that blooms every fall in Kashmir. The spice as we know is the bright red orange stigma from this crocus. Each flower contains three stigma, of approximately one inch in length cultivated on the well drained Karewan soils of Kashmir.

The widening of road along the national highway vandalizing the saffron land The widening of road along the national highway vandalizing the saffron land.

Once the bulb has been placed in a square it will live on for fourteen years without any help for the cultivator, new bulb being produced and old bulb rotting away. The time for planting out the bulb is in July and august .The cultivator has to break up the surface gently few times and to ensure the proper drainage of the plot by digging a neat trench on all four sides .The flower appears about the middle of October, the purple blooms and overpowering scent of it turn the dry , uninviting plateau above Pampore into a rare and wonderful garden.

Kashmiri saffron is valued all over the



Photo : Suhail Bhat

world. But what makes Kashmir saffron different. As per Abdul Rashid, a saffron grower said, "the stigmas are extremely long with a thick head, besides, when you put a stigma in the mouth your whole mouth turns yellow."

The potency of saffron is measured by international organization of standardization test 3632. The lowest rating is grade from 80 to 110 while above 190 is considered premium and Kashmir saffron falls in this category.

Even more intriguing is the fact that the entire harvesting, drying and packaging process is done by hand.

In 1997, saffron covered 5400 hectares in Kashmir, which by now has reduced to 3000 hectares. Likewise saffron field has fallen from 3.1kg per hectare to 2.3kg per hectare during this period. There are number of factors responsible, the heavy industry setup nearby its place of growth , factories spewing out dust 24 hours a day is damaging its delicacy.

"I have never adulterated saffron but the people who take it from us adulterate it to earn more money, they are the real culprits not the poor farmers," Manzoor Ahmad, a worried local farmer said.

The biggest long term challenge is the adulteration of saffron. Cheap fake brands of saffron sell vigorously on the streets of Srinagar. And its virtually impossible for a non professional to distinguish between a fake and real one. This has damaged the image of saffron and ultimately resulted in drop of prices.

Conversion of vast areas of land like Yachenambal in residential colonies has made the situation worse. Over the last few years people from different parts of Kashmir have acquired saffron land with the help of land mafia and raised private housing colonies, one of them is now ironically called saffron colony.

However, government has put a ban on such constructions. Under the saffron act no one would be allowed to convert the saffron land into residential areas but both buyers and sellers are getting away, because of government apathy. People are selling karewa land to contractors for extraction of saffron soil particularly in the areas like patalbagh, chandhara, sambora, galander, thus severely reducing the land under saffron cultivation. And all this is happening under the very nose of the authorities who are supposed to stop such vandalisation .The extraction and cutting of land also render the adjacent areas ineffective for saffron cultivation, thereby, is a concern for growers.

"My land is being cut from three sides, cracks have developed in it making it unfit for saffron cultivation," Bilal wani shared the concern.

The National Mission on saffron was sanctioned in 2010 but actual work under the mission started in 2011-12. This scheme has been sanctioned by government of India at the total cost of 372.18 crores, of which GOI share is 288.06 crores and farmers share is 84.12 crores. The mission is proposed to be completed within 4 years aimed

at economic revival of J&K saffron sector. under this project the farmers would be exposed to the modern agricultural techniques. It aims at raises the production to 5kg per hectare.

Rehman, a local farmer has also registered his land to get benefits. And this time he follow the guidelines of agriculture. Although, Rehman was first apprehensive about the success of mission and thought it as a tactic by govt to take possession of their land . But by attending several awareness programs he finally availed the benefit. Under this scheme farmers are provided the corms , recommended fungicides to control corm rot diseases team of experts would supervise the process of sowing. And farmers would be d provide financial assistance to buy new corn.

"I have done everything as per their guidelines but the produce has not increased," Reham said with dissatisfaction.

It is a well known fact that good quality saffron fetches right prize in the international market. At present , there is no mechanism to enforce adoption of quality standards and fix the price based on the quality of farmers gate level. Good prices can only be ensured by fixing quality standards and enforcing them.

Although, government is claiming to have done their job by introducing schemes like national saffron mission, but the ground reality is that production is still low. Adulteration continues to threat the authenticity and illegal construction has reduced the arable land