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BEYOND HOME AND CAMPUS: RISE OF PAID STUDY SPACES IN SRINAGAR

AAMINA SALAAM

At 11 pm on a chilly winter evening in Rajbagh, Srinagar, the streets are mostly deserted, with only the occasional passerby or distant vehicle breaking the silence.

Inside a privately run reading room tucked above a row of shops, rows of students sit bent over laptops and notebooks. Some are medical aspirants attending online lectures through headphones, others are revising civil services notes under stark white tube lights. Across Srinagar, paid study spaces often called reading rooms or study centres have emerged as a parallel academic infrastructure.

More than a dozen private reading rooms have come up across Srinagar, according to operators who run multiple centres in the city, concentrated in neighbourhoods like Rajbagh, Hyderpora, Parraypora and Bemina, areas already known for coaching institutes and student hostels.

Not all operate round the clock. While several offer 24x7 access, others close late at night or function

seasonally, depending on demand and infrastructure costs such as heating and electricity. What unites them is a steady stream of students willing to pay for something increasingly scarce: uninterrupted time and silence.

Who is filling these spaces?

The users cut across categories. College students, competitive exam aspirants, hostel residents and outstation students all share these halls. Many say neither home nor campus libraries offer workable study conditions.

“At home, there are chores, visitors and a comfort that makes you lazy,” he said. “Here, when you see everyone studying, you automatically feel you should study too,” said Khalid, a student from Hyderpora who has been using one such space for over a year. Asif, a student from Handwara living in a hostel, echoed this. “The hostel environment is messy. You cannot study all day there,” he said. “Here, the surroundings are made for studying. That is the difference.”

A female postgraduate student from Srinagar who uses a reading room in Bemina said studying in a shared

space helped her regulate her routine. “When you are at home, your day keeps stretching and nothing feels fixed,” she said. “Here, I know when I sit down, I have to study. Even on days when motivation is low, the environment pushes you to keep going.”

Ironically, the rise of these physical spaces has coincided with an explosion of online learning. According to operators, most students using reading rooms now attend online coaching classes. Operators trace the increased demand to post-pandemic study habits.

Junaid, who runs a 24x7 study centre with around 160 seats in Magarmal Bagh, said the turning point came after the COVID-19 pandemic.

“After the pandemic, coaching shifted online,” he said. “Students prefer online classes, but they cannot study at home because of distractions. That is why they come here to attend online lectures in a disciplined environment.” This contradiction – digital access paired with physical dependence – is not accidental, according to Dr. Aadil Showket Bakhshi, Assistant Professor

“Students prefer online classes, but they cannot study at home because of distractions. That is why they come here to attend online lectures in a disciplined environment”

at Kashmir University’s Media Education Research Centre.

“Online education has expanded reach and convenience,” Bakhshi said. “But paid study spaces provide what digital platforms cannot: time, discipline, focus and the ability to plan preparation. These spaces are filling gaps that homes and institutions have not addressed.”

He pointed out that similar ecosystems have existed elsewhere. “Places like Rajinder Nagar in Delhi or Kota in Rajasthan show how physical study

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Editor Speaks

INTERNSHIPS: BRIDGING INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA

In today's rapidly evolving professional landscape, internships have transformed from optional résumé fillers into essential stepping stones for career development. This special edition of Times Echo shines a spotlight on internships done by our Master's students with reputed daily, Kashmir Observer—not merely as short-term engagements, but as powerful experiences that shape skills, perspectives and ambitions.

At their core, internships represent the intersection of academic knowledge and real-world application. Classrooms provide the foundation, but internships test that knowledge against practical challenges. Deadlines, teamwork, problem-solving under pressure—these are the lessons that define professional readiness.

Educational institutions and media organisations share a collective responsibility here. Universities must integrate internships meaningfully into curricula, ensuring they align with students' academic goals. Employers, on the other hand, must design programs that prioritize mentorship, skill-building and fair compensation.

A well-structured internship is not a favour to students—it is an investment in the future workforce.

In an era defined by competition and constant change, internships also offer a crucial advantage: adaptability. Interns learn to navigate unfamiliar environments, embrace feedback and continuously evolve—qualities that are indispensable in any career.

As we present this Internship Special Edition, Times Echo encourages students to approach internships not as mere requirements, but as opportunities to learn, question, and grow. At the same time, we urge media houses to uphold the true spirit of internships—education, empowerment and ethical engagement. Because when done right, internships are the foundation upon which meaningful careers are built.

From Stigma to Style: Thrift Culture Gains Momentum in Kashmir

NAZAKAT ASLAM

Inside a small thrift store in Srinagar, bundled jackets and overcoats are stacked on woven mats and hung along the walls as customers sift through them. The air carries a mix of fabric dust and chatter, shopkeepers negotiating prices, youngsters comparing brands, and the occasional rustle of hangers sliding across metal rods. What was once a quiet, overlooked corner of the city's retail scene has now become a hub of youthful energy.

Across Kashmir, thrift culture is steadily expanding, reshaping the region's fashion landscape as young consumers increasingly turn to second-hand branded clothing for affordability, accessibility, and style. Once dismissed and socially stigmatised, thrifting has emerged as a growing retail segment, fuelled by social media visibility, rising brand awareness, and shifting consumer preferences, particularly among Generation Z.

For decades, thrift clothing in the Valley was closely tied to economic compulsion. One

of the earliest voices to witness this transition is Nadeem Nazir Sheikh of Thrift Kashmir, who has been in the business for years. He recalls a time when customers approached thrift shops discreetly, wary of being recognised.

"Earlier, people would come quietly and avoid being seen. Today, customers openly ask for specific brands," Sheikh said.

According to him, buyers in the 25–35 age group now dominate the market, reflecting greater familiarity with international fashion houses and a clearer understanding of brand value. What once catered largely to those with limited purchasing power now attracts brand-aware customers actively seeking premium labels.

However, the market's rapid expansion has also brought challenges. Sheikh pointed to the growing influx of lower-quality imports, particularly Chinese stock, which has made it difficult for customers to distinguish between premium and inferior bundles.

"Korean imports continue to be regarded as superior in quality but are frequently misrepresented in the supply chain," he noted. For many young shoppers, this evolving thrift culture is closely tied to identity and self-expression. Faizan, a regular thrift customer, vividly recalls his first purchase.

"The first thrifted item I bought was a branded jacket. What really drew me to it wasn't just the price, but the fact that it felt different and unique compared to what everyone else was wearing," he said.

At the time, thrifting was not widely discussed, making the experience feel more like a personal experiment than a fashion statement. Over time, however, his perception changed. "I see thrifted clothes as a way to express personal style, stay connected with global fashion trends, and still be practical," he added.

Yet, despite its growing popularity, thrifting has not shed its stigma entirely. Adeeba, a Srinagar resident, says the concept does not appeal to her. "I also don't like the idea of wearing someone else's clothes," she said.

"Clothes that have already been worn don't attract me, so I've never given thrifting a chance."

As attitudes shift among younger consumers, the changing perception of thrift clothing has also reshaped the business itself. Zamin Zahoor of Thrift Valley Srinagar observed that thrift clothing, once casually labelled and demeaned, has now gained significant popularity among youngsters.

He also warned of risks associated with the business. "Many scammers pass off Chinese

bundles as Korean ones, so anyone planning to enter the thrifting business should choose suppliers carefully," he said.

Echoing this view, Danish Imtiaz of Apna Brand

identified digital access as a defining factor behind the sector's growth. Affordability, he said, remains at the core of thrift culture's appeal.

"With branded clothing from companies like Nike and Adidas often priced at Rs. 10,000 or more, thrifting offers a practical alternative," Imtiaz said.

The growing demand has also encouraged new businesses to emerge across the Valley. Murtaza Nisar of Vintage Visions said the inclination of Generation Z towards thrift fashion played a decisive role in his decision to enter the trade. "Gen Z is more inclined towards this culture, and that's why I entered this business," he said. For older generations, however, thrift clothing continues to carry a very different meaning. Mymoona, an elderly resident, recalls a time when such garments were sold by the roadside and meant strictly for those who could not afford new clothes.

"Back then, thrifting was tied to economic hardship, not fashion," she said.

"I feel this practice should remain for those who genuinely need it. If someone can afford new clothes, they should buy them instead of used ones after all, these are worn clothes, no matter how branded they are," she added.

As thrift culture continues to evolve in Kashmir, it is increasingly shaped by more than cost alone. Brand consciousness, digital exposure, and practicality now influence how second-hand clothing is consumed and perceived, particularly among younger shoppers. Yet acceptance remains uneven. While thrift stores gain visibility and profitability, a section of society continues to associate used clothing with deprivation rather than choice, underscoring an unresolved tension between necessity, aspiration, and identity in the Valley's changing fashion economy.



Times Echo



SMALL EARNINGS, BIG INDEPENDENCE FOR KASHMIR'S RURAL WOMEN

Women in Kashmir's rural belts turn orchard residue and kitchen gardens into independent income, streams, claiming a seat at the household financial table.

SAQIA MUZAFAR

As winter tightens its grip over Kashmir, Saleema, 55, is selling the last sacks of charcoal she prepared after the apple season ended earlier this year. Stored in a corner of her home, the charcoal is sold to neighbours and familiar buyers who arrive through the day. The earnings are modest, but carefully counted.

"I sell one sack for only Rs 300, but this is my own earning," Saleema said. "It may not be much, but it helps me buy what we need without asking anyone."

Across rural Kashmir, women engage in a range of seasonal, home-based livelihoods that become more visible as winter approaches. Carried out within villages and largely from home or fields, this work follows patterns women have long been familiar with.

From collecting and selling fallen apples, locally known as giraan, to making charcoal and drying winter produce, these activities form an informal economy that allows women to earn on their own terms and manage their own income.

"The income from farm produce usually goes to the men in the family," Saleema said. "These small things, like making charcoal from twigs or selling fallen apples, are our own work. We work hard for it, and whatever we earn from this stays with us."

Kitchen Gardens as Income Spaces

Kitchen gardens form another important source of income for rural women during this period. Vegetables grown around homes are sold locally, adding to household cash reserves.

"I grow all kinds of vegetables in my kitchen garden, including kidney beans, chillies, leafy greens, and garlic," said Naseema Akther, a resident of Tiken village in Pulwama district. "I do not depend entirely on my husband for money."

She said she has saved nearly Rs.10,000 from selling vegetables grown at home. "With this income, I buy household es-

entials and things for myself. Sometimes, I also support my husband and children with this money," she said.

Different Villages, Similar Patterns

While the nature of work varies by location, the pattern remains consistent across rural areas. In apple-growing belts, women collect and sell fallen fruit once orchards are cleared. In other regions, charcoal making and the sale of dried winter produce dominate the season.

"After harvesting apples, we cut branches and collect dry leaves and residues. That is when we start making charcoal. This work begins in autumn and continues during winter," a woman from Shopian said.

"These activities are repeated every year, we know what sells and when."

eration reduce during the colder month.

Officials at the Hub for Empowerment of Women at the Social Welfare Office in Pulwama said seasonal livelihoods play a significant role in women's economic participation.

An official from the department said economic independence depends on access to income-generating opportunities. "While government and private jobs exist, there is a lot of saturation. Many rural women earn their livelihood from home-based activities," the official said.

She added that the focus is on strengthening household-level income sources. "Kitchen gardens, orchards, fallen apples, and charcoal making use resources already available at home. This makes it easier for women to earn without additional burden," she said.

For many women, income-generating work is carried out alongside household responsibilities. "We do this work in between everything else," said Naseema. "There is no fixed time. Sometimes we work early, sometimes late. Whatever needs to be done at home comes first, then we do this."

Women involved said the lack of fixed hours allows flexibility but also stretches the workday, particularly during months when daylight hours are short.

While these small seasonal incomes do not transform lives, they offer something many women value deeply. The ability to earn, decide, and spend independently, even in limited amounts, gives them a measure of control within otherwise constrained circumstances.



The scale of earnings differs from household to household, depending on the availability of raw material, demand, and local networks.

Managing Their Own Earnings

Women said they usually decide how the money they earn is spent. The income is commonly used for groceries, fuel, electricity bills, medicines, school-related expenses, and other household needs during winter.

"This money is for the house," said a woman who sells eggs and dried vegetables. "We keep it with us and use it when needed."

Several women said household expenses are often planned around earning seasons, knowing that opportunities for cash gen-

Knowledge Passed Down

uch of the work women engage in is learned informally within families. Techniques for drying vegetables, identifying usable fallen apples, and making charcoal are passed down over generations.

"My mother taught me how to dry vegetables and store them," said Jameela Akhter, a woman from Kulgam engaged in seasonal selling.

Several women said younger family members observe and assist, though not all intend to continue the work. Some said daughters help during peak seasons but prefer education or salaried jobs in the future. "This work has always been there," Jameela said. "We learned it by watching our elders."

"With this income, I buy household essentials and things for myself. Sometimes, I also support my husband and children with this money"

LEARNING ACROSS THE WATERS: AN ISLAND SCHOOL IN SAIDA KADAL

AAMINA SALAAM

In the tranquil backdrop of Dal Lake's interiors, where small water channels meander across floating gardens and willow groves, a tiny island in Saida Kadal bears something unique—a school where learning literally happens "across the waters."

For the children here, the day starts not with the blast of a bus horn but with the soft dip of an oar. Students are transported in boats, rowed by parents or older brothers and sisters, across glinting waters, past fishing nets and lotus flowers, to a small building that is ringed on all sides by the lake.

The Saida Kadal Primary School, which has been around for over two decades, is attended by over 80 students from interior hamlets of the lake. The region, reached only by boat, lacks another educational facility within walking distance. "We don't have bridges here. The lake is our road," explains Ghulam Ahmad, a boatman whose two sons study at the school. "If we miss the boat in the morning, the children miss the first lessons."

Within the school compound, there are two diminutive classrooms containing creaky benches, worn-out blackboards,

and a few learning charts. There is a lack of resources, but there is no shortage of motivation among the teachers. Shabnam Jan, the headmistress, states, "Our



greatest challenge is not the water, but the weather. During winter, the lake freezes; during summer, monsoon rains make the journey dangerous. But the kids just keep coming."

Teachers also tend to encounter logistical challenges. Several commute from Srinagar's city, rowing half the distance before walking along narrow bunds.

"Sometimes, we carry extra clothes for the children who reach here soaked," Shabnam smiles.

In spite of these difficulties, the school has

witnessed a remarkable determination on the part of its students. Last year, some of the students from this island school gained admission to higher secondary schools in the city. "They may have smaller classrooms," remarks Abdul Rashid, an old man from around there, "but they have bigger dreams than anyone else."

The location itself provides a poetic touch

to everyday life here. Outside recess time, kids use the grassy area behind, the lake shining within a few paces. In fall, leaves from the chinar trees float on the water; in spring, flowers from the nearby orchards sweeten the air. But not even beauty can wash away difficulty. The people have been calling for improved infrastructure—a footbridge to link the island with the main road, and updated facilities for the school.

Local education officials recognize the special challenges but refer to budgetary limitations. "We are cognizant of the needs of Saida Kadal's island school," states an Education Department official. "Infrastructure improvement plans are under consideration."

Until then, the school is a witness to resilience—a location where the lake's rhythm and the pursuit of education cannot be separated. In the peaceful mornings, as the initial boats pierce the calm waters, the island is filled with children's voices chanting their lessons, their giggles permeating across the lake. For Saida Kadal's students, education is not merely a right; it's a daily journey.

WHY MORE KASHMIRI FAMILIES ARE RETHINKING GOLD AT WEDDINGS

Rising prices are pushing families to cut back on jewellery, rethink traditions, and make difficult compromises

SAQIA MUZAFAR

One evening last week, a post in Yakjut, an all-Kashmiri women's Facebook group, drew an unusually large number of responses. A bride-to-be asked a simple question: What are the options for those who cannot afford heavy gold sets anymore?

Within hours, the comments filled up. Women suggested lighter jewellery, heirloom pieces, imitation sets for pre-wedding functions, even renting gold. Some shared their own compromises, others spoke of pressure, guilt, and quiet negotiations at home.

The discussion revealed something that rarely finds public expression: families are actively searching for alternatives as rising gold prices reshape weddings across Kashmir.

For decades, gold has held a special place in Kashmiri weddings, not merely as jewellery, but as assurance. Families saved for it silently, piece by piece,

believing it would one day secure their children's future and uphold family dignity. Today, however, steep price rises are unsettling these long-held beliefs, forcing households to revisit wedding plans shaped over years.

Despite changing lifestyles and conversations around simpler ceremonies, social expectations remain rigid. Fouzia Jan, a bride-to-be, says gold continues to be a measure by which weddings are judged.

"People may not say it openly, but everyone notices how much gold the bride wears," she says. "That pressure never really goes away."

In her case, rising prices have reshaped decisions made long ago. Heavy traditional jewellery has been replaced with lighter designs, fewer pieces, and careful budgeting. Some items have been postponed altogether.

"These were not last-minute choices," Fouzia says. "We sat down many times, calculating and recalculating. In the end, practicality won."

For pre-wedding functions, she plans to wear imitation jewellery, a decision that would have seemed unthinkable a few years ago. "It looks fine," she says, pausing, "but emotionally it still feels like a compromise."

What often remains invisible, families say, is that the pressure does not rest only on the bride's side.

A groom-to-be, speaking on condition of anonymity, says expectations follow them

too. "There is an unspoken rule that the groom's family must give a gold to the daughter-in-law," he says. "If that doesn't happen, people talk about respect, status, upbringing."

With prices rising sharply, meeting these expectations has become difficult. "No one asks whether you can afford it," he adds. "They only see what is given."

Parents describe weddings as emotionally exhausting in ways they had not anticipated. Ghulam Rasool, who is preparing for his daughter's wedding, says the joy of the occasion is overshadowed by constant worry. "We started saving early, thinking we were doing the right thing," he says. "But now, every visit to the market reminds us how insufficient those savings have become."

For families with modest incomes, gold was never meant to be an immediate expense. It was a long-term safeguard, something to fall back on during emergencies. Today, many parents feel that safeguard slipping away.

"As parents, you want to give your child dignity," Rasool says. "But dignity has become expensive."

In local markets, the strain is visible. Irfan, a gold trader, says prices have climbed unusually fast. In 2024, gold was selling at around Rs.65,000 per pound. By 2026, the same pound has crossed nearly Rs.1.08 lakh. Smaller items show an even sharper rise. A gold biscuit that cost about Rs.4,000 in 2024 is now priced close to Rs.15,000. Currently, gold is selling

at around Rs. 11,900 per gram, nearly Rs.600 higher than the same period last year, even though winter months typically see lower wedding demand.

"This kind of increase usually happens during peak wedding seasons," Irfan says. "This time, it has come early and sharply." Buying behaviour has changed. Customers spend longer asking questions and calculating weights, often leaving without purchasing. Many now exchange old jewellery instead of buying new pieces. "People are hesitant," Irfan says. "Every gram is thought through."

Jewellers say lighter sets, minimal designs, and postponed purchases have become common. What was once chosen for beauty and tradition is now weighed against affordability and necessity.

Beyond prices, families speak of sleepless nights, quiet comparisons, and an anxiety about how their wedding will be perceived. These pressures are rarely discussed openly, yet they shape every decision.

As gold prices continue to rise, weddings are changing quietly, not through public declarations, but through smaller purchases, delayed plans and careful compromises. The ceremonies may look familiar, but beneath them lies a growing unease.

The question raised in an online women's group lingers far beyond social media: in a time of tightening economic pressures, should weddings still be judged by the weight of gold exchanged, or by the peace and dignity of the families involved?



Bakarwal Families in Pulwama Give Up Seasonal Migration

‘Health Risks, Lost Livelihoods, Broken Schooling’

ARSHINA ASLAM

For generations, seasonal migration defined the lives of Bakarwal families in Jammu and Kashmir. Moving with livestock between the plains in winter and high-altitude pastures in summer was not just an economic activity but a way of life. That tradition, however, is gradually changing, as some Bakarwal families in south Kashmir give up migration and choose permanent settlement, citing livelihood losses, health risks and disruption to their children’s education.

In villages like Rahmoo in Pulwama district, small clusters of tin sheds and mud houses now stand where migrant families have begun to settle. The decision, families say, has not been easy and follows years of hardship on migration routes.

“Migration was our identity, but it became too difficult,” said Yousuf, a Bakarwal man who settled in Rahmoo two years ago.

“We were losing animals, falling sick, and our children were missing school every year.”

For women, the shift away from migration is closely tied to years of personal struggle. Shahida, a Bakarwal woman, said she was married at the age of 17 and had to manage household responsibilities, livestock and long-distance travel simultaneously. Migration, she said, left no space for education or personal growth.

“There was no time to think about myself,” she said. “We were always moving, and

“We were losing animals, falling sick and our children were missing school every year”

responsibilities kept increasing.”

Migration, she explained, involved long journeys on foot, cooking on makeshift hearths, fetching water, caring for children and livestock, and enduring harsh weather. Pregnancies during migration were particularly difficult due to the absence of healthcare facilities along travel routes.

“Pregnancy during migration was the hardest,” Shahida said. “There was no doctor, no hospital, and still we had to keep moving.”

After recently delivering a child, Shahida



developed complications and was initially taken to a government hospital in Srinagar. She said inadequate treatment forced the family to shift her to a private nursing home in Pulwama, where medical expenses reached nearly Rs. 70,000. To manage the cost, the family borrowed money and sold livestock, pushing them into debt.

Repeated livestock losses during migration finally forced her family to settle permanently two years ago. “Animals would fall sick and die on the way,” she said. “Here, at least our husbands can find other work alongside herding.”

Shameema, another Bakarwal woman in the settlement, shared a similar experience. Married young, she had to leave school and spend years moving between seasonal camps. “I had dreams,” she said. “Now I want my child to study and live differently.”

For many families, education has become the decisive factor. Zubair Ahmad said his younger brother dropped out of school because frequent relocation disrupted his studies. “He felt lost every time he joined a new school,” he said. “Settling down felt like the only solution.”

Parents said permanent settlement had allowed their children to attend school

for a full academic year for the first time. However, access to education remains uneven. Many families lack basic documents such as Aadhaar cards and birth certificates, making school enrolment difficult.

Women in the settlement also reported poor access to menstrual hygiene facilities and healthcare outreach. Gulshan said they still wash and reuse cloth. “No one has come to educate us about hygiene,” she said, adding that women hesitate to

visit health centres without female health workers. Repeated attempts to contact officials from the concerned departments for comment were unsuccessful.

For now, the families say their demands are modest: recognition of their settlements, access to basic documents, secure land, education for their children and healthcare that does not push them into debt. Holding her newborn, Shahida summed up the decision that changed her family’s life. “We left the mountains so that our children do not have to live the life we did.”

Twelve-year-old Shaheen has been unable to enrol because officials asked her family to produce records from Rajouri, where they migrated earlier. “We do not have the money or support to travel back,” her family said.

Livelihoods after settlement remain fragile. While livestock continues to play a role, most families now depend on daily wage labour, orchard work, small farming, selling firewood and transporting fodder. Some women sell milk and dairy products in nearby villages. Income is irregular, and winters are particularly harsh, with many families living in temporary shelters and relying on borrowed money.

Families said government welfare schemes for Scheduled Tribe communities exist largely on paper. Lack of awareness, documentation hurdles and repeated visits to government offices prevent access to scholarships, healthcare benefits and livelihood support. Promises of land allotment also remain unfulfilled.

visit health centres without female health workers.

“Migration was our identity, but it became too difficult”

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Holding her newborn, Shahida summed up the decision that changed her family’s life. “We left the mountains so that our children do not have to live the life we did.”

WHAT DIGITAL FAME IS DOING TO KASHMIRI CULTURE

As influencers gain power online, the line between expression and responsibility is thinning, and young minds are paying the price

NAZAKAT ASLAM

The digital world in Kashmir has grown faster than anyone imagined. Phones, data plans, and social media platforms have turned everyday users into public voices. Influencers now sit where teachers, storytellers, writers, and cultural thinkers once stood.

A single reel or video can reach thousands within minutes, shaping opinions, trends, and attitudes in ways that felt impossible not long ago. This shift brings energy, creativity, and possibility, though it also brings serious questions about direction and intent.

Many creators deserve recognition. Several invest time in documenting local history, celebrating dialects, explaining traditions, and reflecting on everyday life in the valley. Some highlight small businesses, neighbourhood cafés, street vendors, and family-run shops, helping them attract customers and stay afloat. Content like this strengthens community bonds and builds pride without shouting for attention. Digital storytelling, when handled with care, opens doors that once stayed shut.

The problem begins when popularity becomes the sole goal. Influence gives power, and power asks for responsibility. A growing number of online personalities seem detached from this truth. Feeds overflow with exaggerated performances, reckless claims, and content designed mainly to provoke reaction.

Substance slips to the margins as spectacle dominates attention. Clarity gives way to confusion, and screens overflow with noise that offers little lasting value. Obscenity, vulgar humour, and shock tactics often hide behind the language of freedom and engagement. Cultural boundaries blur, dignity weakens, and decency feels



negotiable. Attention becomes currency, and any method that draws clicks appears acceptable. Meaning takes a back seat while reactions drive the engine.

Online conflicts add fuel to this fire. Public feuds, accusations, call-outs, and staged controversies attract far more attention than thoughtful discussion. Numbers replace integrity, and empathy loses ground to outrage. In this race for visibility, ethics bend easily. The louder the content, the faster it travels, and the cycle repeats.

Technology plays its own role in this shift. Algorithms reward engagement without weighing consequence. Content that sparks anger or curiosity spreads quickly, while layered conversations struggle to surface. Audiences adapt to what they see most often.

Over time, expectations change. Volume starts to feel like value. Shallow narratives feel normal. Misinformation blends into entertainment until the line becomes hard to see. Young people stand at the center

of this transformation. They do more than watch digital platforms. They live inside them.

Screens shape how the world looks, sounds, and feels. When irresponsible voices dominate online spaces, younger viewers absorb lessons without realizing it. Visibility starts to feel equal to worth, while controversy begins to look like success. Consumption habits follow this pattern. Content that shouts attracts more attention than content that explains. Credibility loses importance when excitement leads the way.

Algorithms amplify these preferences, feeding users similar material again and again. Over time, thinking slows, fact-checking fades, and reflection feels unnecessary.

Watching creators gain fame through insults, distortion, or manufactured drama sends a clear message. Popularity comes from provocation, while respect feels optional. This message influences how young users speak, post, and imagine their own online presence. Creation

turns performative, and dialogue turns combative.

Cultural understanding also suffers in this process. Simplified and misleading portrayals of Kashmir circulate widely, stripped of depth and context. Reels and short videos flatten complex histories into digestible fragments. Language, traditions, and collective memory appear distorted or reduced to trends. Young people encountering these images often meet diluted versions of their own identity.

Learning gives way to spectacle, and depth fractures into algorithm-friendly pieces. This environment trains attention spans and moral judgment. Constant exposure to exaggerated conflict lowers tolerance for nuance while raising comfort with misinformation.

Scrolling becomes habitual, and the influence runs deeper than it appears on the surface. Influencers function as informal educators whether they accept

A single reel or video can reach thousands within minutes, shaping opinions, trends and attitudes in ways that felt impossible not long ago.

the title or reject it. Their words, tone, and choices leave marks.

Responsible creators can inform, preserve culture and encourage curiosity.

Careless ones reshape values in damaging ways. Influence without accountability silently moulds what young people admire, imitate, and believe. Despite all this, the digital space in Kashmir still holds promise.

Creativity, storytelling, and connection remain possible. The question lies in which voices grow louder and which values guide them. The future of online culture depends less on technology and more on the choices people make when the camera turns on.

from page 1....(study space in sringar) environments become growth points for aspirants," he said. "Kashmir is now seeing a local version of that pattern."

"When we started, students did not even understand what a reading room was," said Shafat Ahmad Bhat, who runs seven such study spaces under the name Insight Library across Srinagar, Ganderbal and Handwara. "Now they actively seek zero-disturbance environments. Awareness has grown because students have seen results."

Nawaz, owner of reading rooms in Rajbagh, said shared living arrangements also play a role. "In hostels or rented rooms, three students may share one space with different schedules," he said. "A library gives them personal space without disturbance."

Students describe the shift as practical rather than aspirational. With limited campus library hours, unreliable power supply at home, crowded households and growing digital fatigue, paid study spaces have become a workaround rather than a luxury.

How much does silence cost?

Affordability remains a key concern. Monthly fees in Srinagar's study spaces typically range from around Rs 800 to Rs 2,500, depending on location, seating type, heating, power backup and 24x7 access.

Junaid said charges vary by season. "In winters, heating costs go up, so fees change," he said. Nawaz added that concessions are often offered. "If a student is from a weaker financial background, we provide relief," he said.

Still, students acknowledge the

burden. One regular user said, "We are unemployed and depend on our parents. If fees were lower, it would reduce pressure."

Most reading rooms in Srinagar are mixed-gender spaces, though usage patterns differ. Operators say women students tend to use late-night hours less frequently, particularly in centres without full-time supervision.

To address concerns, many centres have CCTV cameras, caretakers on duty and strict rules on conduct and phone use. Discipline, operators say, is central to their appeal. "If someone disturbs others, they are warned," Junaid said. "Students themselves help enforce silence."

While safety is not the primary driver of demand, it remains a factor shaping how and when students use these spaces.

For academics, the trend raises larger questions about public infrastructure. Dr Bakhshi warned that growing dependence on paid study spaces reflects institutional shortcomings.

"When students have to pay for silence and electricity, it raises equity concerns," he said. "Learning environments should ideally be public goods."

Operators agree in part. "If the government built more public libraries or supported such spaces, students would not have to pay as much," Nawaz said.

Until that happens, Srinagar's reading rooms continue to fill up night after night, quietly reshaping how education happens in the city, one paid hour of silence at a time.

TEEN HORMONAL HEALTH WORSENS IN KASHMIR AS LIFESTYLES CHANGE

NAZAKAT ASLAM

When 15-year-old Aaliya began feeling tired all the time, her family initially blamed school stress. Between early mornings, tuition classes and hours spent on her phone after homework, exhaustion had become routine. What unsettled her mother more, however, was that Aaliya's sleep had become erratic and her mood unpredictable.

A medical consultation later suggested that sustained academic pressure, reduced physical activity and prolonged screen exposure were contributing to hormonal imbalance. Aaliya's experience, doctors say, is becoming increasingly common among adolescent girls across Kashmir.

Doctors across the region report a marked rise in hormonal and reproductive health concerns among adolescents, with patients as young as 11 presenting with clusters of symptoms that extend well beyond menstrual irregularities.

Medical professionals attribute this shift to changing adolescent lifestyles shaped by prolonged screen exposure, academic pressure, disrupted sleep cycles, poor dietary habits, declining physical activity and sustained psychological stress.

Gynaecologists say outpatient departments are increasingly seeing school-going girls between the ages of 11 and 16 with symptoms that include sudden weight gain or loss, persistent acne, disturbed sleep, anxiety, early ovarian cyst formation and PCOS-like hormonal patterns.

"What concerns us is the constellation of symptoms we are seeing in very young girls," said Dr Sumaira Jan, gynaecologist and obstetrician. "We are observing insulin resistance patterns, cystic ovarian changes on ultrasound, significant weight shifts and stress-linked hormonal imbalance. Ten years ago, it was uncommon to see PCOS-like features in a 12-year-old. Today, it is no longer unusual."

Doctors stress that disruptions taking root during adolescence, if left unaddressed, are more likely to persist into adulthood as chronic reproductive, metabolic or mental health conditions.

Health experts caution that reproductive health conversations in Kashmir often begin much later than they should, usually when women seek care for fertility-related concerns in their twenties or thirties. By then, many hormonal patterns have already stabilised, making intervention more complex.

Dr Jan noted that PCOS-spectrum symptoms are now being identified during adolescence itself, often linked to sedentary routines, irregular eating patterns, high screen dependence and sustained academic stress.

"Earlier, these patterns would surface clinically much later," she said. "Now, hormonal dysregulation is being detected while the endocrine system is still devel-

oping. If these trajectories are not corrected during adolescence, they tend to consolidate and become much harder to reverse in adulthood."

Another school-going girl, aged 13, said she was advised to modify her daily routine after developing early signs of hormonal disturbance.

"After school I used to stay on my phone for hours. All our work was online," she said. "I felt exhausted all the time. Now my mother makes sure I go for walks every day."

Doctors say such accounts underline the importance of addressing adolescent reproductive health in real time, rather than treating it as a retrospective concern once complications emerge later in life.

Medical professionals consistently point to reduced physical activity, calorie-dense diets and chronic stress as key contributors to adolescent hormonal disruption.

WEIGHT OF MARKS ON KASHMIRI YOUNG MINDS

Every year, board results take over public talk, while students shoulder the real pressure in silence. If we judge success through curiosity, creativity, and personal growth, we can change how young lives actually take shape.

NAZAKAT ASLAM

Classes 10 and 12 board results are out, and the valley is alive with celebration and comparison. Families cheer top scorers with sweets and applause, social media fills with congratulations, and everyone wants to see how students measure up.

Amid the excitement, one question stands out: do marks truly reflect a student's potential, or have they come to define a young person's worth?

Board exam scores have long acted as society's shortcut for achievement. High marks open doors, win praise, and promise opportunities, while lower marks often bring disappointment and leave students feeling they have failed.

Parents play a big role in this system. Rewards, expectations, and subtle messages link performance to self-esteem. Hard work matters, but assuming that effort must always produce perfect results puts enormous pressure on students and shapes how they see themselves.

Every year, reports emerge of students taking their own lives after failing an exam or falling short of expectations. These tragedies show a culture that places unbearable demands on children, turning a single score into a measure of their value. When society treats numbers as the only measure of worth, setbacks feel permanent, and some students see no way forward.

Parents often know these scores matter less as life moves on. Colleges, universities, and workplaces value creativity, problem-solving, and perseverance far more than a number on a sheet. History is full of people who struggled academically but achieved remarkable success later. Despite this understanding, society passes the same pressures to the next generation, shaping how children perceive achievement and failure.

Children grow up surrounded by constant competition, from classroom rankings to regional exams, and they absorb the belief that one test can shape their entire future. This expectation adds stress, erodes confidence, and weighs heavily on their well-being.

The education system increases this pressure. Schools and boards treat exams as defining moments, rewarding memorization and rankings while offering little guidance or emotional support. Without trained counselors, students choose streams based on marks rather than interests or strengths. Schools highlight toppers as proof of success, and coaching centers intensify the fear of falling behind, leaving children anxious and unsure of their potential.

Students face disruptions to education, uncertainty about future opportunities, and limited exposure to alternative career paths. The system amplifies these challenges. Conversations about recovering from setbacks, exploring vocational paths, or pursuing creative careers are rare, leaving students to see failure as a personal flaw rather than a step in learning.

Examination results also dictate the paths students follow. High scorers face expectations to pursue medical or non-medical streams, while others are guided toward arts or easier options.

This rigid hierarchy ignores individual talent, personal interest, and long-term fulfillment, often steering students into choices they later regret.

Society celebrates triumphs after struggle, but it rarely acknowledges the many students who face setbacks without immediate success. One exam cannot define a young person's journey, yet judgment, comparison, and silence often make it feel that way.

Every year, discussions about exam pressure resurface after tragedies or emotional news stories, but public attention fades quickly. Students continue to carry the burden of unmet expectations for months, sometimes years, while the world moves on.

Society must treat marks as one measure among many. True success grows from creativity, curiosity, emotional intelligence, and personal development. Students deserve guidance that emphasizes learning, exploration, and discovery over rankings alone. Valuing effort, perseverance, and the courage to try new things can create a culture where setbacks become opportunities to grow rather than sources of shame.

CROWDED & UNSAFE: WOMEN SPEAK OF HARASSMENT DURING DAILY COMMUTES

ARSHINA ASLAM

Bilquees boards the bus every morning knowing what to expect. The journey to her office in Pulwama is brief, but the unease often lingers far beyond the ride. On most days, the bus fills within minutes. As passengers push in, personal space disappears. Bilquees keeps her bag clutched close to her body, using it as a barrier. She avoids eye contact and keeps her gaze fixed outside the window.

One morning, a man seated beside her began staring as soon as the bus started moving. When the vehicle slowed at a stop, his shoulder brushed against hers. She shifted slightly, but the space was too tight to move away. No one noticed. No one asked. "I could feel his eyes on me the entire time," she said. "I wanted to say something, but I was scared people would question me instead."

When she finally got off the bus, the relief was immediate, but it was followed by a familiar sense of exhaustion. "By the time I reach my office, I already feel drained," she said.

For Bilquees, silence has become part of her routine commute. She said such experiences are not rare and are shared by many women, including students and elderly passengers, who rely on public transport daily.

Women travelling by buses and trains continue to face unwanted behaviour despite increased awareness and legal safeguards. Fear of stigma, social judgement, and the conditions of overcrowded transport often discourage them from reporting these incidents.

A college student from Pampore, who travels daily to Srinagar for classes, said

buses are often the most stressful part of her day.

"There are days when men stand too close deliberately," she said. "If the bus jerks, they use it as an excuse. You feel uncomfortable, but you also feel helpless because the bus is full and everyone is in

of crimes against women are reported in Jammu and Kashmir each year, including cases of molestation and other sexual offences. Officials acknowledge, however, that incidents in public transport are significantly underreported, as many women choose silence over confrontation.

and the She-Box system, which operates through internal and local committees.

Women can report incidents through these platforms, she said, adding that emergency support was also available at bus stands and railway stations, where police personnel are deployed. Helpline numbers such as 181 ensure a rapid response when complaints are lodged.

Despite these measures, social stigma continues to deter many women from coming forward. "Many fear being blamed or judged," the official said. "Confidentiality is maintained. Counselling is the first step, and if required, legal action is initiated through paralegal support."

On prevention, the official highlighted basic but often overlooked issues such as the misuse of seats reserved for women in government buses, which are frequently occupied by men.

Yet, some women say breaking the silence, even once, can change the atmosphere inside a crowded bus.

Insha Jan, a young woman recalled a rare moment when she spoke up during a crowded bus ride. "My voice was shaking, but I said it out loud," she said. The man got off at the next stop. "What stayed with me was how other women looked relieved," she added. "It made me realise that silence protects the wrongdoer." However, for women like Bilquees, the daily commute continues to be a test of endurance. Until public transport becomes a space where women can travel without fear, buses may remain crowded yet deeply unsafe for many.



a hurry.

She said she often times her commute to avoid peak hours, even if it means leaving home much earlier. "Missing one bus can mean being late for class, but taking the crowded one feels worse," she added.

Another female commuter, who requested anonymity, recalled that inappropriate behaviour was widespread during the mid-1990s, when public buses were the primary mode of transport.

"Awareness was low then, and women rarely spoke up," she said. "Today, awareness has improved, but overcrowding still makes buses and trains unsafe for many women."

Official records indicate that hundreds

An official from the Social Welfare Department in Pulwama, working under the Hub for Empowerment of Women, said forced proximity in crowded public transport remained a major concern.

"When buses and trains are overcrowded, and men and women are compelled to travel together in close quarters, the chances of such incidents increase," the official said.

She explained that cases of misconduct in public transport fell under relevant legal provisions dealing with sexual offences in public spaces. At the district level, support mechanisms are available through the Sakhi One Stop Centre, which addresses violence in both public and private spaces,

atmosphere inside a crowded bus.

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Why Kashmir's Weather is Defying Forecasts and Memory

NAZAKAT ASLAM

Kashmir's weather is becoming increasingly difficult to predict, with recent winters marked by sharp local contrasts, unusual temperature behaviour and sudden extreme events that experts say were rare in the past.

This winter offered a stark example. While the system brought heavy snow to parts of Budgam, Sanat Nagar and higher reaches of the Pir Panjal range, Srinagar remained largely unaffected.

Independent weather forecaster Faizan Arif attributed these anomalies to changing atmospheric conditions linked to climate change, which are making accurate forecasting more challenging. "Forecasting has become more challenging," Arif said.

Arif believes weather forecasting has become more complex even as technology has improved. While modern models have enhanced overall accuracy, Arif said climate change has introduced new uncertainties by producing phenomena that were previously unknown. "Forecast accuracy has improved overall, but uncertainty has increased because we are now seeing events that did not exist earlier," he said.

Accurate forecasting is especially critical

in Kashmir, where agriculture and horticulture support a large portion of the population. In the past, declining water levels have led to crop losses of nearly 25 percent after farmers were unable to cultivate paddy, highlighting the close link between weather predictions and economic stability.

According to him, the unusual snowfall pattern this winter was caused by a prolonged western disturbance accompanied by unusually strong winds. "It is new for us to see snowfall in one area and none just three kilometres away. Such large variations were rare earlier," Arif said.

He explained that persistent winds prevented cold air from settling over Srinagar, a necessary condition for snowfall. At the same time, a layer of warmer air remained trapped above the city. Vertical mixing in the atmosphere pulled this warmer air downward, creating instability and prolonging the weather system. "For snowfall, cold air needs to settle. Persistent winds and a trapped warm layer over Srinagar did not allow that to happen," he said.

The episode also produced an unusual temperature pattern. Arif noted that night temperatures rose above daytime maximums, a phenomenon he said he had

never witnessed before. "This was the first time I saw night temperatures exceeding daytime temperatures, and no weather model had forecast it," he said.

For many residents, such changes are unsettling. Bashir Ahmad, a 67-year-old Srinagar resident, recalled winters from his childhood when snow blanketed the city without exception. "I still remember my childhood winters. Snow was everywhere. There was not a single corner left uncovered," he said. "It was not just about beauty. That snow was what the region depended on. Today, the need for it is greater than ever, but it no longer comes the way it used to. The winters now scare me because they feel uncertain and unfamiliar."

Experts say such incidents are no longer isolated. Kashmir is increasingly witnessing extended dry spells followed by intense rainfall or snowfall compressed into a few hours. In some cases, precipitation equivalent to nearly two months occurs in a single day, a phenomenon internationally classified as an extreme event.

"These events cause damage, disrupt electricity supply, increase surface runoff and do not allow proper groundwater recharge," Arif said, warning that the long-term ecological impact could be

severe.

Air quality has also emerged as a growing concern. The common perception that Kashmir's air remains clean year-round does not hold true, particularly in urban areas. Traffic-heavy zones are reporting rising PM2.5 and PM10 levels, indicating a steady increase in pollution in densely populated centres.

Arif also cautioned against the spread of misinformation on social media, where exaggerated headlines often circulate faster than verified forecasts. "People read headlines, not forecasts. Sensationalism creates panic, even when the forecast itself is accurate," he said.

What the region is experiencing, Arif added, is not part of natural variability. "This is not routine weather change. What we are seeing is a clear signal of climate change," he said.

As extreme and unpredictable weather events become more frequent, the question facing Kashmir is no longer whether the climate is changing, but whether the region is prepared to understand, adapt to and plan for a future in which the weather no longer behaves as it once did.