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Manoj Sinha's J&K Assembly Address

LG Outlines Ambitious Development Roadmap for J&K; Opposition Storms House Over Statehood Silence

King C Bharati



Jammu, February 2026: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, in his address to the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly on February 2, presented a robust and ambitious vision for the region's future, while conspicuously omitting any timeline for the restoration of statehood, a silence that immediately triggered a political storm and walkouts from opposition benches. Marking the opening of the budget session, the LG's speech detailed a comprehensive strategy for economic growth, infrastructure development, and social welfare, but its failure to address core political aspirations has widened the trust deficit between the administration and the public.

In a speech that highlighted a 7% economic growth trajectory for J&K, the Lieutenant Governor laid out a series of transformative goals. He underscored unprecedented investments in hydropower, aiming to achieve a capacity of 3014 MW by the end of the year. This was coupled with announcements of expanded rail networks and a significant welfare measure providing 200 units of free electricity to deserving households. On the governance front, he emphasized a push towards digital efficiency with over 1,500 online services designed to curb corruption and enhance transparency, building upon fiscal reforms recommended by the Rangarajan Committee.

The address also showcased a commitment to grassroots development. The Holistic Agriculture Development Programme (HADP), with its 29 flagship projects, was presented as a cornerstone for empowering farmers. Initiatives for women's skill centres and comprehensive tribal welfare under the

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धर्म दान

हस्ताक्षर

The Unconventional Star's Journey from a Displaced Past to Global Acclaim

Rahul Bhat:The Kashmiri PanditWho Conquered Cannes, Netflix and the Black Lady

Vitasta Herald News Bureau



In the glittering, often predictable world of Indian cinema, some careers are not meteors but slow-burning stars, gathering intensity over time. Rahul Bhat's is one such story. A two-decade odyssey that began in strife-torn Srinagar and led him to the red carpets of Cannes and the pinnacle of OTT success has been anything but conventional. With recent major awards, including a Filmfare OTT trophy for his searing performance in the Netflix series Black Warrant, Bhat has cemented his place not as a fleeting celebrity, but as one of contemporary cinema's most compelling and intense actors—a man whose art is irrevocably shaped by his roots.

Born in 1977 into a Kashmiri Pandit family in Srinagar, Bhat's early life was marked by the trauma of displacement. His family was forced to leave the Valley during the turbulent 1990s, an experience he describes as "escaping terrorism, losing everything." This formative period of loss saw them move to Jammu before a teenage Rahul, fueled by cinematic dreams, set his sights on Mumbai. The journey was made possible by a profound sacrifice: his father took premature retirement from a secure government job to fund his son's aspirations. This act, as Bhat often recounts, instilled in him a formidable work ethic and became the emotional wellspring for the raw, wounded characters he would later embody.

His entry into the public eye began with modelling, where he won the Mr. Photogenic title at the 1998 Graviera Mr. India contest. This visibility quickly led to advertisements and music videos, but his true breakthrough came on television. As the male lead opposite Simone Singh in the hit serial Heena (1998–2003), Rahul Bhat became a household name. He showcased his versatility in subsequent shows, playing Lord Krishna in Draupadi and starring in the sitcom Cincinnati Bababoo. Yet, at the peak of his television fame, he made a strategic retreat. In 2007, he founded Filmtonic Entertainment, producing award-winning serials like Meri Doli Tere Angana. This phase as a producer sharpened his understanding of storytelling and the industry, making his eventual return to acting a deliberate and informed choice.

That return was nothing short of a cinematic rebirth. After a decade away from the big screen, he resurfaced in Anurag Kashyap's noir thriller Ugly (2013). Playing a struggling actor whose daughter's kidnapping unravels a world of moral decay, Bhat delivered a performance of searing vulnerability and desperation. The film premiered at the Cannes Directors' Fortnight, instantly repositioning him from a TV heartthrob to a serious actor on the international festival circuit. Ugly set the template for the roles that would define his career: complex, morally ambiguous men navigating fraught circumstances. He collaborated with India's most respected filmmakers, playing a contemporary Devdas in Sudhir Mishra's Daas Dev (2018) and a filmmaker accused of rape in the legal drama Section 375 (2019). He deepened his association with dark, psychological narratives in Anurag Kashyap's Dobaaraa (2022) and the neo-noir Kennedy (2023), the latter of which also premiered at Cannes, marking his second appearance at the prestigious festival.



Bhat's ambitions have always extended beyond national borders. He is the only Indian actor to have played the lead in a Chinese film, True Heroes, and he won multiple international Best Actor awards for his role as a factory supervisor fighting for workers' rights in the Indo-Canadian film Union Leader. This global footprint is set to expand with his Hollywood debut, Lost & Found in Kumbh, signalling his established status as a festival-favourite actor.

In 2025, his career reached a new zenith with the Netflix series Black Warrant. His portrayal of DSP Rajesh Tomar, a senior Tihar jailer whose moral compass erodes, was hailed as his strongest work since Ugly. Critics were effusive; Shubhra Gupta of The Indian Express called it his most "worthy role," while Nandini Ramnath of Scroll.in wrote that he "superbly portrays Tomar's concentrated perversion." The role brought him a new, younger OTT audience and a slew of awards, including the Filmfare OTT Award and the Indian Television Academy (ITA) Award for Best Supporting Actor.

Throughout his journey, Bhat has remained vocal about his identity as a Kashmiri Pandit. He speaks openly about the trauma of displacement and offers nuanced views on cinematic representations of Kashmir, appreciating that films like The Kashmir Files told his community's story while advocating for more layered narratives. His public persona is that of a restless, self-critical artist who values challenging roles over conventional stardom.

From a boy who lost his home in Srinagar to an actor celebrated on the world stage, Rahul Bhat's career is a powerful testament to resilience. His journey, marked by deliberate choices, quiet intensity, and a deep connection to his roots, makes him a symbolic figure—not just for his community, but for anyone who believes in the transformative power of art.





First Act of the Spade: Archaeological Excavation at Zehanpora, Baramulla, J&K

By Kuldeep Krishan Sidha (JKAS)

Director, Archives, Archaeology & Museums, Jammu & Kashmir



Archaeological Excavation at Zehanpora Baramulla is the first of its kind Archaeological Excavation undertaken by the Department in the History of the Department as well as J&K i.e. why it has been titled the ***"First Act of the Spade".***

The Project was conceived during the informal chat between the Undersigned and faculty of Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir that we have a site namely Zehanpora Baramulla which has been referred to by the pilgrims namely Xuan Zang, O-Koung, Fahien, Taranath and Others in their memoirs, a site where probably 4th Buddhist Council was held and a site where we have archaeological evidence related to Kushans, references in Kalhan's Rajtaringini which point towards the presence of Buddhist traditions in the region and the site is **Zehanpora Baramulla**.

Zehanpora Baramulla is geographically and strategically significant site as it was historically north-western entry route in to the Kashmir Valley, traditionally connecting the region with Gandhara and Central Asia. In the 7th Century C.E. the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang described entering the valley through the "stone gates" of Baramulla, noting the presence of numerous stupas and monasteries before residing at a major vihara at ***Ushkur*** which is in Baramulla only.

To proceed with the technological knowhow and the expertise thereof the Department entered into an MoU with Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir for collaboration and cooperation towards Archaeological Research, Exploration, Preservation, Conservation and Documentation of Archaeological Sites. The Project is one of its kind in the country



Zehenpora Baramulla The Site

wherein Archaeological Excavation is being carried out under convergence and dove-tailing of resources between the Government Department and an Educational Institution. And the coincidence has it that a Phd Scholar namely Dr. Mohammad Ajmal Shah who saw this photographs of ruins of Stupa Mound in Baramulla Kashmir at Guimet Museum Paris France 12 years ago was one of the signatories to the MoU as Senior Assistant Professor of Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir. Also, the project has proven a boon to the students of Department of Anthropology, Government Degree College Baramulla as 10 students along with the faculty not only participated in the excavation at Zehanpora but also added an added qualification and experience to their UG Program that too in their own District which has put them above par to the rest of the UG students of Anthropology/Archaeology in the Country.

The Department secured due permission from the Archaeological Survey of India for the excavation at site and proceeded with the systematic grid based excavation system establishing coordinates and spatial control with total station and UTM/WGS84 Zone 43N coordinate system in addition to field documentation, aerial photogrammetry using drone technology provided high-resolution orthomosaic images, digital surface models (DSM) and digital terrain models (DTM) that enabled accurate mapping of the site and the ability to perform spatial analysis. Detailed 3D representations of the buried structures and stratigraphic layers were made by terrestrial laser scanning technology (TLS) to produce high-quality architectural recordings. The excavation process took a measured approach to expose each layer of soil that was naturally formed, with a photographic record taken at the end of every day documenting soil changes, features and artefacts encountered during excavation. All notable discoveries had precise coordinate points and were documented in place through photography and hand-drawn diagrams.

The most significant evidence uncovered was "diaper-pebble/rubble wall" running parallel in east-west direction suggesting a foundation base of a large architectural complex and its curvature and alignment along with associated feature strongly indicating that it is formed part of an apsidal chaitya or prayer hall, a relatively rare architectural form in Kashmir, previously reported at Harwan Site at Srinagar. Additional evidences found include dense concentration of brickbats, lime- plastered surfaces, large stone boulders some of which represent collapsed pillars or super structural elements. Excavations near main stupa has exposed well-constructed buttress and lime-plastered foundation surface reflecting advance engineering techniques intended to counter environmental degradation/stress. Also, a near complete human skeleton has been discovered during excavation and a petrous portion of the temporal bone of the same has been collected



Excavation At Zehenpora Site



Historic photograph of the stupa mound at Baramulla (1925), documenting early recognition of Buddhist remains in the region.



Kushan Diaper Pebble Walls (Across Grid Layout) Being Excavated At Zehanpora Site

for the DNA analysis which will provide the genetic ancestry and reconstruction of population history. It has also raised curiosity towards the prevailing funerary practices of that time. The excavation has also yielded high concentration of pottery, charcoal, animal bones, ceramics, terracotta objects and metal artifacts comprising of iron nails, pins, brackets, rods, copper pin, copper earrings. Other notable finds till date include glass bangle fragments, a cowrie shell, a clay hopscotch piece.

The overall evidence supports that Zehanpora represents an early historic settlement and provides evidences about religious, domestic and ritualistic practices at that site. The presence of what appears to be an apsidal chaitya and an adjacent stupa and other architectural elements substantially support and provide that Zehanpora function as a part of a larger Buddhist monastic environment and the physical space point towards three primary functional spaces (construction space, ritual space and residential space).

On typological and architectural grounds the site can be broadly dated to the early historic period likely between 1st and 5th Century CE. The construction techniques and the finds are closely to the other Buddhist sites in Kashmir such as Harwan and Ushkur. However, radio carbon analysis will refine this chronology.

The archaeological excavation clearly underscores the archaeological importance of the site and has put Zehanpora at a critical position within the Buddhist cultural geography of Kashmir particularly along the Baramulla-Jhelum corridor. This site will confirm and reveal the Kashmir's Buddhist history and also signify Kashmir as vibrant centre of Buddhist learning. The mounds at Zehanpora which were dismissed as ordinary mounds has transformed the landscape into a sacred and historical site. The architectural style at Zehanpora closely resemble with Gandharan Art found in present day Afghanistan and Pakistan. The excavation proves that ancient Kashmir was serving as a bridge between the Indian heartland, Central Asia and Silk Road, it shifts the local identity from isolation to one of cosmopolitism and philosophy indicating that in the region Ideas, Art and Philosophy flowed freely. The technological validation with use of modern tools-drone surveys and archival research (19th Century French Photograph) has instilled sense of pride in the local community. The Zehanpora stretches the memory of Kashmir back to two millennia from the medieval and early modern periods and most significantly highlighting a period of religious transaction where Buddhism and later Hinduism co-existed and influenced one another. The excavations will continue, revelations will arrive and the history will come to the fore.

First Act of the Spade has revealed 2000 years ago civilizational history of Kashmir and me and my team are fortunate to have initiated this.

Rehabilitation with Systems, Not Slogans: Inside Relief Commissioner Arvind Karwani's Governance Model

From digitisation and housing to water security and festival preparedness, a ground-level account of migrant welfare reforms

Vitasta Herald Exclusive

By Rohit Bhat



Jammu, January, 2026: In an exclusive interaction with *Vitasta Herald*, Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner **Dr Arvind Karwani** offered a detailed account of the government's ongoing efforts to address long-pending issues faced by Kashmiri migrants. The interview, conducted by **Rohit Bhat**, provided clarity on key concerns ranging from food security integration and social welfare access to housing, water supply, property protection and institutional coordination.

At the centre of the discussion was the integration of migrant families into the national food security and social welfare database through the NFSA-linked digitisation process. Dr Karwani said the initiative, underway for nearly eighteen months, was driven by a simple but critical objective: ensuring that migrant families, many of whom were excluded from social security benefits for over three decades, could finally access schemes to which they were entitled.

He explained that the absence of digitised ration cards dating back to 1990 had kept thousands of migrant families outside the national database, affecting their access to benefits such as Ayushman Bharat, pensions and scholarships. Amendments brought in during 2024 to the Jammu and Kashmir food security framework enabled this integration.

While acknowledging technical glitches—such as incorrect state mapping on the national portal—he described these as teething issues of a new system, now being addressed in coordination with the National Informatics Centre.

Dr Karwani underlined that migrant status and existing ration scales remain fully protected. Multiple notifications and public advisories, he said, were issued to dispel fears and misinformation. He urged families who have not yet completed the process to do so at the earliest, noting that future welfare schemes would increasingly rely on national-level data integration.

As Jammu and Kashmir's migrant welfare framework enters a more structured phase, the interview offered a rare, detailed snapshot of how policy is being translated into processes on the ground—incrementally, imperfectly, but with visible intent to close gaps left open for decades.

Property protection emerged as another major focus. Dr Karwani detailed reforms made to the migrant immovable property grievance portal, which currently hosts over 10,000 complaints. A new feature now allows complainants to review and respond to district-level findings before final closure, addressing long-standing concerns about lack of satisfaction with on-ground assessments. Additionally, a high-level oversight committee, headed by the Home Secretary, has been constituted to monitor quality disposal of complaints and police investigations where required.

Turning to living conditions in migrant camps, Dr Karwani highlighted decisive interventions in water supply infrastructure. In Jagti, where summer shortages have been chronic, five borewells are nearing commissioning following detailed surveys. Similar issues have already been resolved in Nagrota and Purkhoo. Addressing recent health concerns, he clarified that official testing found no contamination at water sources, and appealed to residents to maintain household tanks and follow basic precautions during the monsoon.

On housing, the Relief Commissioner confirmed that a ₹ 6 crore detailed project report covering around 5,000 migrant quarters, along with schools, hospitals and community halls, has completed all administrative and financial clearances. Execution will begin through the Public Works Department in the 2026–27 financial year. While major renovations are pending, minor repairs continue on a priority basis. In Kashmir, under the Prime Minister's employment package, over 3,500 transit accommodation units have been constructed across 20 locations. Although several units are complete, possession is being delayed until allied works—such as boundary walls, lifts, internal roads, drainage and security infrastructure—are finished. Dr Karwani said the administration expects to begin large-scale handovers by April 2026.

He also made a direct appeal to better-off community members to voluntarily surrender unused migrant quarters so that widows, terminally ill persons and families fully dependent on relief can be accommodated.

He firmly rejected rumours linking surrender of quarters to loss of migrant status, calling such claims false and harmful.

Festival preparedness was another area of emphasis. With Herath approaching, Dr Karwani said multi-departmental coordination meetings have already been held to ensure timely availability of essential items, regulated pricing, adequate transport, sanitation, electricity and health services. Checking squads will be deployed to maintain quality and rates.

Looking ahead, Dr Karwani outlined a shift towards institutionalised governance of migrant infrastructure. Government orders issued in 2025 have brought multiple departments—public works, power, water, health, urban development, horticulture, education and youth services—into a coordinated framework with dedicated budgetary responsibility for migrant areas.

New projects, including a multi-purpose community hall at Jagti and additional infrastructure at Nagrota, Muthi and Purkhoo, are in the pipeline.

Finally, addressing grassroots representation, Dr Karwani supported the idea of democratically chosen lane or camp representatives to act as a bridge between residents and departments.

The administration, he said, would facilitate but not impose such a mechanism, allowing communities to choose their own representatives.

Throughout the interaction, Dr Karwani returned to a consistent theme: governance rooted in systems, transparency and coordination rather than ad hoc responses. "Positive criticism helps us improve," he said, adding that credible media engagement plays a vital role in keeping administration responsive.

As Jammu and Kashmir's migrant welfare framework enters a more structured phase, the interview offered a rare, detailed snapshot of how policy is being translated into processes on the ground—incrementally, imperfectly, but with visible intent to close gaps left open for decades.

The 1931 Conspiracy: Re-examining the British Plot to Weaken Maharaja Hari Singh

By Rajinder Hindu

History is often a narrative crafted by the powerful, where inconvenient truths are methodically buried beneath layers of political convenience. The events that unfolded in Jammu & Kashmir in 1931 are a classic example of this manipulation. For decades, this period has been portrayed as a "people's revolution" against an oppressive monarch. However, a deeper and more honest examination of the facts reveals a far more calculated truth: a British-engineered conspiracy designed to weaken a fiercely nationalist ruler and destabilize a strategically vital princely state.

That ruler was Maharaja Hari Singh.

Unlike many of his princely contemporaries, Maharaja Hari Singh refused to act as a subservient ally of the British Crown. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, his position was unambiguous: Jammu & Kashmir was an integral part of the Indian civilizational space, and the British had no moral or political right to rule India. He openly challenged their authority, restricted the influence of British officials within his administration, and asserted the sovereign dignity of his state. For an empire built on obedience and indirect rule, such defiance was intolerable.

The British understood that removing the Maharaja directly would be a risky and difficult endeavor. He was a legitimate ruler, popular in large sections of Jammu and Ladakh. Instead, they resorted to a familiar and insidious colonial playbook: create internal unrest under the guise of a mass movement, discredit the ruler as autocratic and communal, and exploit religious divisions to fracture social unity. The goal was not reform; it was destabilization. A weakened ruler and a divided society would make Jammu & Kashmir far easier to manipulate in the long run.

The events of 13 July 1931, routinely described as a spontaneous public uprising, were the culmination of this strategy. Inflammatory speeches were deliberately delivered, crowds were emotionally provoked, and administrative confusion was intentionally engineered. This manufactured incident was then swiftly projected to the world as proof of "popular anger" against the Maharaja, branding him a tyrant and eroding his legitimacy both at home and abroad. The narrative was amplified through sympathetic colonial channels, ensuring only one version of events reached the wider world.

In this charged environment, one figure rose rapidly to prominence: Sheikh Abdullah. His emergence was neither accidental nor entirely organic. He was given political platforms, promoted aggressively by English-language media, and projected as the sole voice of the Kashmiri Muslim population. By selectively highlighting grievances and giving the movement a strong religious tone, the British deepened communal divisions and diverted attention away from their own role in fueling the unrest. They required a leader who could oppose the Maharaja and weaken Jammu & Kashmir's natural alignment with India; Sheikh Abdullah fit that requirement perfectly.

The great irony of 1931 is that both Maharaja Hari Singh and Sheikh Abdullah were caught in the same British web, albeit playing vastly different roles. The Maharaja stood as a pro-India nationalist and a formidable obstacle to British strategy. In contrast, Sheikh Abdullah became a power-oriented regional politician and a willing tool for internal destabilization. While the Maharaja was isolated and demonized, Sheikh Abdullah was built up as a mass leader, allowing the British to weaken the state without appearing directly responsible.

The damage caused by this conspiracy was profound and enduring. It led to permanent political instability, deepened Hindu-Muslim divisions, and eroded the internal unity of the state, ultimately leaving behind a complicated and unresolved Kashmir question after 1947. Had this plot not been enacted, Jammu & Kashmir's political trajectory might have been very different, potentially preventing Pakistan's disruptive role in the region.

To understand Kashmir today, we must confront these uncomfortable historical realities. The events of 1931 were not a revolution but a calculated colonial maneuver. Maharaja Hari Singh was one of the earliest sentinels of Indian sovereignty in Jammu & Kashmir, and Sheikh Abdullah was shaped into a political weapon to undermine him. Only by separating truth from these manufactured narratives can we do justice to history and prevent its manipulation in the future.



J&K Govt Honours 56 Citizens With State Awards, Padma Glory for Kashmiri Pandits and Journalists

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jammu, February 2026: The Jammu and Kashmir government conferred UT-level State Awards on 56 achievers across bravery, public service, media, arts and social work at the Republic Day 2026 celebrations, even as two eminent J&K personalities figured in this year's Padma honours.

In the Outstanding Media Persons category, 12 journalists were felicitated, including PTI Srinagar Bureau Chief Inayat Jahangir and PTI video journalist **Somil Abrol** from Jammu. Other awardees were veteran scribe **Avtar Krishan Bhat**, **Vivek Suri, Dinesh Manhotra**, Bilal Ahmad Bhat, Razia Noor, **Sunil Ji Bhat,** Ishfaq Gowhar Zargar, Syed Khalid Hussain, Sarosh Kafeel and **Neeta Sharma**, reflecting a strong representation from both Jammu and Kashmir divisions and national outlets.

The awards also prominently featured members of the Kashmiri Pandit community. Social worker **Brij Lal Bhat**, a Kashmiri Pandit associated with the ***Ramakrishna Mission and Vivekananda Kendra in Nagdandi***, was named for the **Padma Shri** in Social Work, recognised nationally for his efforts towards reconciliation and rehabilitation of displaced Pandits.



Scholar Prof Shafi Shauq from J&K was conferred the Padma Shri in Literature and Education for his extensive multilingual literary contribution.

According to the order issued by GAD, the government has conferred the award in the category of Bravery to Adil Hussain Shah (Posthumously), son of Syed Hyder Shah, resident of Hapatnar, Pahalgam and Nikhil Kumar (PSI), son of Joginder Pal, resident of Swarn Nagar, Greater Kailash, Jammu.

In the field of Literature, the Jammu and Kashmir Government Award, 2026 has been conferred on Yashpaul Nirmal (Dogri litterateur), Ch. Hassan Parwaz (Gojri litterateur), Parwaiz Manoos (Pahari litterateur), Fayaz Dilbar (poet, posthumously), Kewal Krishan Sharma (writer/poet), and Rattan Lal Sharma (writer/editor & translator).

Other awardees included: in Performing Arts, Tanya Dev Gupta (singer), Anil Tickoo (actor), Dr Ayash Arif (actor/director), Abdul Hamid Bhat (rabab artist), Raman Singh Slathia (Dogri folk singer), Sunil Sharma (singer/music director), Ajay Kumar Sharma (theatre), Sudesh K. Verma (producer/director), and Neeraj Verma (tabla artist); in Excellence in Arts & Crafts, Sajjad Husain Bhat (sozni artisan), Bhushan Kesar (artist/art educator), Mohammad Shafi Bhat (kani artisan), Razia Mushtaq (artisan), and Ishfar Ali (paper-pulp craft instructor); in Social Reforms & Empowerment, Arhan Bagati (founder, KYARI), Home for the Aged & Infirm (social organisation), Mehjabeen Nabi (Care Foundation & Charitable Trust, Srinagar), and Saadat Nasir Wani Sogami (Team Red NGO, Kashmir); in Meritorious Public Service, Dr V. S. Senthil Kumar (Chief Conservator of Forests, Jammu), Tariq Ganai (Managing Director, J&K Medical Supplies Corporation), Rohit Sharma (Additional Secretary, GAD), Pooja Wazir (Superintending Engineer, PWD R&B), and Dr (Prof.) Majid Jahangir (Principal, GMC Baramulla); for Lifetime Achievement, Mohammad Shafi Pandit (Retd. IAS); in Outstanding Sports Persons, Aquib Nabi Dar and Brijesh Sharma (cricket), Rakesh Singh (deaf judo), Vishal Khajuria (judo), Saleem Kumar (wushu), Ravees Ahmad (pencak silat), Sudipti Khanna (gymnastics), Mohammad Iqbal (athlete/coach), and Aiyza Naz Chib (skating); in Outstanding Media Persons, Avtar Krishan Bhat, Vivek Suri, Somil Abrol, Dinesh Manhotra, Bilal Ahmad Bhat, Inayat Jahangir, Razia Noor, Sunil Ji Bhat, Ishfaq Gowhar Zargar, Syed Khalid Hussain, Sarosh Kafeel, and Neeta Sharma; and in Outstanding Industrial Entrepreneurship, Mohammad Niyaz-ul-Kabir (GR8 Sports), Sheikh Yameen (Heaventure Adventures Pvt. Ltd.), and Sunil Singh (Kishtwar Gold Walnut Farm).

Together, the UT awards and Padma honours highlighted J&K's journalists, intellectuals and community leaders as key voices in the region's cultural and social renewal.

Jaishankar's Munich Doctrine: India's Independent Path in a Fractured World

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Munich, Germany, February 2026 : In the high-stakes arena of global diplomacy, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar delivered a masterclass in strategic statecraft at the 62nd Munich Security Conference on February 14. Facing pointed questions about India's foreign policy choices, particularly its energy ties with Russia and trade dynamics with the United States, Jaishankar articulated a vision of a confident, independent India, masterfully navigating the complexities of a multipolar world.

The moment of reckoning came during a session with Financial Times editor Roula Khalaf, who questioned whether a new India-US trade framework, announced by President Trump on February 2, had forced New Delhi to curtail its imports of discounted Russian oil. Jaishankar's response was unequivocal and firm, framing India's position not as a concession but as a core principle. "We are very much wedded to strategic autonomy... It cuts across the political spectrum," he asserted. This statement directly countered recent claims from Washington that India had agreed to halt Russian oil purchases in exchange for significant tariff cuts under a forthcoming Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA).

Dismissing the political rhetoric, Jaishankar explained that India's oil procurement is guided by market realities—cost, availability, and risk—a pragmatic stance that implicitly rebuffs pressure from both the US and the European Union. He subtly pointed out the hypocrisy in Western criticism by noting that Europe's own trade volume with Russia remains substantial. This deft handling allowed him to sidestep domestic criticism from opposition parties, who accused the government of "acquiescing to Trump," and instead pivot to India's diplomatic successes, such as the "afterglow" of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement and the



recent visit of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, underscoring New Delhi's diversified partnerships.

Analysts view this as a prime example of India's successful multi-alignment. By continuing to import Russian crude (which has stabilized at around 40% of its total, down from peak levels), India not only saved billions and helped stabilize global energy markets, but it also refined these products for export, including to Europe and the US, without violating any sanctions. Simultaneously, it advanced towards a $500 billion bilateral trade goal with the US, all without crossing its own red lines on crucial sectors like agriculture and pharmaceuticals.

Jaishankar broadened this theme to articulate India's larger diplomatic philosophy. He dismissed calls like the one made by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at Davos for an alliance of "like-minded middle powers." Instead, he highlighted India's two-decade hallmark of participating in flexible, agenda-based coalitions like the Quad and BRICS, which allow for nimble diplomacy without the rigid constraints of formal alliances.

On other pressing global issues, his candor was on full display. He attributed delays in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) to the ongoing conflicts in West Asia but was careful to decouple the infrastructure project from the Palestine issue, stating that "connectivity is not a solution" to the political conflict. This pragmatism aligns with India's longstanding support for a two-state solution. Regarding the Quad, which faced uncertainty after a postponed 2025 summit, Jaishankar projected confidence. Citing recent high-level engagements with officials like US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and an upcoming meet in July 2025, he urged observers to "stay tuned," signaling continuity despite potential shifts in US policy.

Ultimately, Jaishankar's performance in Munich was more than a series of responses; it was the articulation of what could be called "strategic autonomy 2.0." It is a pragmatic, interest-led doctrine for navigating a world in flux, whether dealing with a recalibrated US under a second Trump administration, European energy dynamics, or a resilient Russia. While critics may decry any reduction in Russian oil as a "compromise," the data shows India has maintained significant imports, preserving its leverage. Positively, this balanced approach bolsters India's credibility as a bridge-builder on global stages like the G20 and the UN, cementing New Delhi's rise as an independent and indispensable pole in the 21st century.

Iran Signals Willingness to Compromise on Nuclear Program Amidst High-Stakes Talks

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Tehran, Iran, February 2026 : In a significant development amidst escalating regional tensions, Iran has indicated its readiness to consider compromises on its nuclear program, provided the United States is willing to seriously discuss the lifting of crippling economic sanctions. Speaking to the BBC in Tehran, Majid Takht-Ravanchi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, signaled a potential pathway forward in the protracted negotiations, placing the onus squarely on Washington to demonstrate its sincerity.

"The ball is in America's court to prove that they want to do a deal," Takht-Ravanchi stated, adding, "If they are sincere, I'm sure we will be on the road to an agreement." This declaration comes as a second round of indirect talks between the US and Iran is set to take place in Geneva, following an initial round in Oman earlier in February, which both sides have described as positive.



The diplomatic maneuvering unfolds against a backdrop of heightened military posturing. President Donald Trump has recently threatened strikes against Iran if a deal cannot be reached, and the US has been building up its military presence in the region. This follows Iran's violent repression of nationwide anti-government protests last month, which human rights groups claim resulted in thousands of deaths.

As evidence of its willingness to compromise, Takht-Ravanchi pointed to Tehran's offer to dilute its 60%-enriched uranium. This stockpile, which is near weapons-grade level, has been a major source of international concern and has deepened suspicions that Iran is moving towards developing a nuclear weapon—a charge it has consistently denied. "We are ready to discuss this and other issues related to our programme if they are ready to talk about sanctions," he affirmed, though he did not specify whether this meant lifting all or some of the sanctions.

However, Iran's flexibility appears to have its limits. Takht-Ravanchi reiterated Tehran's firm refusal to discuss its ballistic missile program, a key demand of both the United States and Israel. "When we were attacked by Israelis and Americans, our missiles came to our rescue, so how can we accept depriving ourselves of our defensive capabilities?" he stressed. He also made it clear that Iran's right to enrich uranium is non-negotiable, stating that the issue of "zero enrichment is not an issue anymore and... is not on the table." This stands in direct contradiction to recent comments from President Trump.

The senior diplomat, who is playing a crucial role in the current negotiations, also expressed concern over the conflicting messages emanating from Washington. While private diplomatic channels through Omani mediators suggest a US interest in a peaceful resolution, President Trump's public statements have often focused on regime change.

Questioning the US military build-up in the region, which now includes over 40,000 soldiers, Takht-Ravanchi warned that another war would be "traumatic, bad for everybody... everybody will suffer." He cautioned that if Iran felt it was facing an existential threat, it would "respond accordingly," making it clear that US military bases in the region would be considered legitimate targets.

Despite the high stakes and a deep-seated lack of trust—exacerbated by what Tehran views as sabotage attempts by Israel and a lack of seriousness in previous talks—Iranian officials are heading to Geneva with a sliver of hope. The recent inclusion of the US President's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in the talks has been seen by Iran as a positive signal of greater American engagement. While many observers remain skeptical, Takht-Ravanchi concluded that Iran would "do our best, but the other side also has to prove that they are also sincere."

UN Reports Civilian Casualties Continue in Sudan's Kordofan Despite Army Advances

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Geneva, February 2026: The United Nations has raised grave concerns over the ongoing loss of civilian life in Sudan's Greater Kordofan region, reporting that deadly drone strikes persist even after the national army successfully broke prolonged sieges by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The region, which comprises three states, has become the newest and most intense frontline in Sudan's devastating conflict, now approaching its third year.

Addressing the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva on Monday, Volker Turk, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, painted a grim picture of the situation on the ground. He confirmed that while the Sudanese army managed to end the RSF's blockades of al-Dalanj in late January and Kadugli in early February—cities where residents had faced severe hunger and medical shortages—the danger to non-combatants has not subsided.

"Drone strikes by both sides continue, resulting in dozens of civilian deaths and



injuries," Turk stated during a debate on Sudan. He revealed that his office had documented a staggering toll from late January to February 6, with over 90 civilians killed and 142 injured in aerial attacks carried out by both the RSF and the Sudanese armed forces.

These figures include several horrific incidents targeting essential services. The World Health Organization reported that three separate strikes on health facilities in South Kordofan last week alone claimed 31 lives. Further compounding the humanitarian crisis, the top U.N. official in Sudan confirmed that on February 6, trucks carrying vital food aid for displaced people outside the city of al-Obeid in North Kordofan were also hit.

In a statement released on Saturday, the RSF denied responsibility for these attacks and rejected accusations from the Sudanese government that it was behind a deadly strike on a bus carrying civilians.

The use of drones has become a defining and brutal feature of this war. Initially, they allowed the RSF to counter the army's dominance in the air, but their proliferation has led to numerous incidents of mass civilian casualties. Reports documented by Reuters have previously indicated that the RSF has used drones to systematically follow medical staff and target healthcare facilities.

Adding to the international concern, the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab reported last week that satellite imagery from February 4 showed at least 40 objects consistent with long-range Chinese kamikaze drones visible at the RSF-controlled Nyala airport in Darfur. While the group could not confirm their use

(Contd on Page 15)

A New Dawn in the South Caucasus

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Baku, Azerbaijan, February 2026 : In a diplomatic maneuver signaling a profound geopolitical shift, United States Vice President JD Vance this week cemented a new American-led framework for peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus. Following a historic first-ever visit to Armenia by a sitting US Vice President, Vance arrived in Azerbaijan on Tuesday to sign a complex strategic partnership with President Ilham Aliyev, effectively consolidating Washington's role as the key architect of a new era of cooperation between the two former foes.

At the heart of the Baku visit was the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership focused on economic, security, energy, and technology cooperation. President Aliyev hailed the agreement as the beginning of "an absolutely new phase" in relations between Azerbaijan and the United States. Echoing this forward-looking sentiment, Vice President Vance declared it was time "to create prosperity where once there was only fighting and conflict."

The ambitious vision is underpinned by concrete initiatives. Vance announced plans to send new patrol boats to Azerbaijan to enhance the security of its territorial waters. The agreement also points to expanded cooperation on critical minerals, leveraging the region's potential through the Middle Corridor transit systems. On the technological front, the partnership includes joint developments in artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure projects, aiming to modernize the region's economy. Highlighting Azerbaijan's growing role in global energy markets, President Aliyev noted, "Azerbaijan today provides energy security with its natural gas resources to 16 countries, 11 of them are NATO members, allies of the United States."

The main thrust of this new cooperation, however, is a monumental infrastructure project designed to physically and economically bind the region together: the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). Agreed upon during the US-brokered peace deal last August, TRIPP is a road-and-rail transport corridor that will connect mainland Azerbaijan with its autonomous Nakhchivan exclave, which is separated by Armenian territory. More significantly, it will integrate both nations into a new east-west trade route connecting Central Asia and the Caspian basin to Europe. The project envisions the development of land, maritime, and air transport infrastruc-



ture, alongside streamlined trade facilitation and customs procedures, fostering regional stability through deep economic interdependence. President Aliyev affirmed that the TRIPP project "will be another contribution to peace, development and cooperation in the region."

This American-led initiative also carries significant geopolitical weight. The partnership's call for security cooperation for

(Contd on Page 15)

New International Crew Arrives at Space Station After Unprecedented Medical Evacuation

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Cape Canaveral, USA, February 2026 : The International Space Station (ISS) is once again bustling with activity after the successful arrival of a new four-person crew, delivered by a SpaceX Dragon capsule on Saturday. The arrival marks a crucial step in restoring the orbital laboratory to its full operational capacity following an unprecedented medical emergency that forced an early return for the previous crew.

The new international team, comprising NASA astronauts Jessica Meir and Jack Hathaway, France's Sophie Adenot, and Russia's Andrey Fedyaev, launched from Cape Canaveral and docked with the station, located 277 miles above Earth, after a day-long journey. Their arrival was met with hugs and high-fives from the three remaining crew members, one American and two Russians, who had been managing the station's operations on a reduced scale.

This mission was expedited after a serious health issue affecting one of the previous astronauts prompted NASA to conduct its first medical evacuation from space in its 65-year history. Citing privacy



concerns, the agency has not disclosed the identity of the astronaut or the nature of the illness, but the situation required the ailing astronaut and three colleagues to return to Earth more than a month ahead of schedule last month. The sudden departure left the ISS understaffed, compelling NASA to temporarily pause spacewalks and scale back its research output.

The new crew brings a wealth of experience and diverse backgrounds to the orbiting outpost. Jessica Meir, a marine biologist, and Andrey Fedyaev, a former military pilot, are both veterans of space travel. During her first mission in 2019, Meir made history by participating in the first all-female spacewalk. For Jack Hathaway, a captain in the US Navy, and Sophie Adenot, a military helicopter pilot and only the second French woman to fly in space, this is their first mission.

NASA's live feed of the arrival captured the joyous moment the four newcomers floated through the hatch into the weightless environment of the station. "Bonjour," Adenot said, marking her entry. After an exuberant zero-gravity welcome, the newly formed seven-member crew posed for photos. "Let's get rolling," Meir said, signaling their readiness to begin their mission.

The team is scheduled to spend the next eight to nine months aboard the ISS, where they will resume a full schedule of scientific experiments and maintenance tasks, ensuring the continuity of humanity's longest-running orbital research laboratory.

Vitasta Herald

EDITORIAL

Relief and Return: It's Time for Real Action, Not Just Small Changes

Recent announcements from the Relief Commissioner about linking Kashmiri Pandit migrants to the National Food Security Act (NFSA) are a step in the right direction.

It is good to know that this will not take away anyone's "migrant status" or stop the monthly cash relief. Promises to increase this relief, fix the Jagti township, and finish the PM Package flats by April are also welcome news.

However, for a community that has suffered through a genocide and lived in exile for 36 years, these small administrative changes are not enough.

They help with the daily struggles of relief but do not solve the bigger problems of our return, justice, and dignity. The community is doubtful about every government announcement, not because they are negative, but because they have seen too many promises broken over the years.

The demands made at the huge protest in Jammu on February 9 are the same ones our community has been making for 36 years. Increasing the cash relief to Rs.25,000, creating 10,000 jobs for our educated youth, and giving full payment for our damaged properties are not just requests for help.

They are the basic needs to get back a small part of the life that was stolen from us. The final goal for our community has always been a safe and secure return to a separate, protected area in the Valley. This is the only way to ensure we are not scattered and lost forever.

The government's response, which is mostly assurances and future plans, does not show the urgency that is needed. Delays in getting things done have become a habit, which makes people believe these are just tactics to buy time, not real solutions. Even with official explanations, many feel that the NFSA forms are a way to weaken our unique identity as migrants and turn our collective struggle into individual welfare cases.

The time for small, temporary fixes is over. The Kashmiri Pandit community deserves a clear, time-bound plan that goes beyond transit camps and relief money. This plan must focus on creating safe, consolidated living areas for us in the Valley, so that our return is permanent and not a failed experiment. It must deliver on the promise of jobs, giving our young people a future in their homeland instead of a life of waiting.

Also, the demand for a real leadership committee, made up of trusted community members, must be met. For too long, decisions about Kashmiri Pandits have been made without actually talking to us. Such a committee is needed to build trust and make sure that government plans are effective and match what our community truly wants.

The government must understand that its duty to the Kashmiri Pandit community is a serious promise, made after the tragedy of 1990. The relief provided now is like a small bandage on a very deep wound. Real healing will only come from firm action on jobs, housing, security, and our political rights. Without this major shift, the government risks losing the community's trust for good.

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The Portable Homeland: Beyond the Myth of the 'Prosperous' Exile

How Kashmiri Hindus Carried Culture When Land Was Taken Away

By Arun Ambardar

History often teaches that when a people lose their land and political power, they slowly lose their identity. From ancient empires to vanished civilizations, the pattern appears unforgiving. Yet the experience of Kashmiri Hindus stands as a striking exception. It challenges conventional assumptions about exile, continuity and belonging, and exposes a quieter, more troubling narrative that has emerged around their survival.

The displacement of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990 destroyed an entire social and civil framework overnight. Homes were abandoned, temples desecrated and a way of life rooted in the Kashmir Valley was violently ruptured. In material terms, it was a near-total collapse. Yet what survived was something deeper and more enduring.

The distinction lies between sabhyata and sanskriti. Sabhyata refers to the external scaffolding of life — land, houses, institutions and political order. That structure was dismantled with ruthless efficiency. Sanskriti, however, is internal. It is the lived value system passed through habits, memory and discipline. The Kashmiri Hindu experience demonstrates that while land can be



seized and borders erased, values carried within people cannot be exiled.

Scattered across refugee camps and unfamiliar cities, the community adapted without surrendering its core. Education became the first pillar of survival. Deprived of ancestral land and livelihoods, families turned to learning as a new form of territory — portable, renewable and secure. Knowledge replaced property as the foundation on which life could be rebuilt anywhere. This was not accidental; it drew from a long civilisational reflex where learning was both sustenance and dignity.

Equally important was the preservation of ritual memory. Festivals such as Herath were observed with the same care in cramped tenements as they had been in the Valley. These acts were not nostalgia. They were statements of continuity, reminders that time had not broken their internal calendar even if geography had changed. Through ritual, the past remained present.

Another defining trait was restraint. Rather than public displays of grievance, the community organised quiet networks of service and mutual support. This discipline was not weakness.

It was a form of strength rooted in self-control and endurance. Service became a way of practising faith without spectacle, sustaining identity without confrontation.

Ironically, this resilience has been turned against the community. A narrative has taken hold suggesting that Kashmiri Hindus do not truly seek return because many have achieved economic stability outside Kashmir. This assumption, repeated casually, amounts to a form of civilisational denial.

Economic recovery was never a substitute for homeland. It was a necessity imposed by displacement. Prosperity became a tool for survival, not a replacement for belonging. To argue that financial security erases the longing for return is to misunderstand both exile and human attachment. Material stability does not cancel memory, just as earning a livelihood does not erase loss.

This logic places the community in a "golden cage". Their success is used to question the legitimacy of their grievance. It quietly shifts blame from the act of displacement to the resilience of those displaced. By this reasoning, survival itself becomes grounds for denial of justice.

The Kashmiri Hindu story therefore carries a lesson beyond its immediate context. It shows that a civilisation can endure even when the state fails to protect it. Inner strength and inherited wisdom can preserve identity where institutions collapse. The community today possesses material strength, yet remains in a state of separation from its spiritual and historical centre. Houses built in distant cities offer shelter, but home remains tied to the silence of sacred sites and the banks of the Vitasta.

This is not merely a tale of loss. It is also one of continuity. The diaspora represents a living thread that refuses to break. Culture, once internalised, proves resilient against time, distance and neglect.

In the end, the Kashmiri Hindu experience reminds us that civilisation is not only anchored in territory.

It lives in values carried forward, waiting. The homeland may be portable for a time, but the hope of return remains intact — not as sentiment, but as an unfinished chapter.

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Zyestha Devi: The Sacred Abode of Faith and Peace in the Zabarwan Hills

By Ravi Jogi

Jammu, February 2026: Nestled high in the serene and beautiful Zabarwan Hills of Srinagar, the sacred temple of Zyestha Devi stands as a living symbol of Kashmir's ancient spiritual tradition. The natural splendor of the Gopadari Tirtha, known today as Gupkar, surrounds the temple, its tranquil atmosphere providing immediate peace to the mind and soul of every devotee who makes the pilgrimage to this revered shrine.





The site's venerable history is etched into the pages of the ancient text, the Nilmat Purana, where it is described as 'Zeethyar', firmly establishing it as one of the oldest and most sacred pilgrimage sites in Kashmir. The shrine's origins are believed to be in the Jyeshtaruda Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, which over time, evolved into a prominent center for Shakti worship, specifically for the goddess Zyestha. For centuries, sages, scholars, and spiritual seekers have climbed these sacred heights to worship the Mother Goddess, seeking enlightenment and blessings.

According to legend, the temple is linked to the cosmic event of the Samudra Manthan. It is believed that Goddess Zyestha was created by Lord Shiva to vanquish the Asuras and rescue Goddess Lakshmi. After annihilating the demons, the Mother chose to seat herself in the sacred spring that lies within the temple complex, consecrating the site for eternity. To this day, devotees consider the crystal-clear water of this holy spring a symbol of celestial power, believing that its mere sight bestows serenity and spiritual energy. This sacred space holds immense religious significance, especially during the festival of Jyeth Ghat Pach Panchami, which commemorates the divine birth of Maa Zyestha. During this time, devotees gather in large numbers, and the atmosphere fills with profound spiritual energy. The celebration showcases Kashmiri traditions with offerings of "Taher" (sweet yellow rice), Kehwa, and Kulchas, creating an inclusive and joyous occasion. Pilgrims pour in from across Jammu & Kashmir and other parts of India, and the shrine offers free boarding and lodging, embodying the spirit of community and communal harmony.

Through centuries of ups and downs, the unwavering devotion of the Kashmiri Pandit community, especially in the more than three decades since the forced exodus, has kept the flame of faith at Zyestha Devi alive. The role of all past presidents and their committees since 1990 in the preservation, upkeep, and development of this holy shrine has been highly commendable.

Today, the shrine is progressing by leaps and bounds, witnessing tremendous infrastructural development under the current Zyestha Devi Management Committee, headed by its dedicated President, Mr. Ravinder Kumar Jogi. After the 2024 election results, the newly elected committee has remarkably transformed the complex. An extensive renovation of the entire campus was carried out, and a completely transparent online booking system was introduced, a move highly appreciated by devotees from India and abroad. The rooms for pilgrims have been renovated and equipped with all necessary amenities.

Keeping modern needs in mind, a new Havan Shala and a community kitchen have been built, and free Wi-Fi service has been launched throughout the complex. Through the committee's efforts, the government constructed a magnificent Meditation Hall at a cost of approximately two crore rupees, which has become a major attraction. The construction of new stone stairs leading from the main gate to the upper temple is also progressing rapidly, and four additional huts for pilgrims are currently under construction. In a testament to its commitment to service, the committee has extended its tradition of providing free food and accommodation during the annual Havan to the holy occasion of Zyeshtha Ashtami, providing great convenience to the large number of pilgrims who attend. The sacred shrine of Zyestha Devi is not just a religious site; it is an inseparable part of the religious history, identity, and ancient cultural traditions of Kashmir and the Kashmiri Pandit community. This sacred abode reminds us how deep the roots of faith are and how they endure through time. Even today, as devotees stand by the holy spring and look towards the hills, they experience a profound sense of peace and divinity—as if the Goddess Zyestha herself is bestowing her blessings.

'Hindu Samelan' Unites Community with Call for Cultural Preservation and Dharma

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jammu, February, 2026: A call for unity, cultural preservation, and adherence to dharma resonated through Anand Nagar, Bohri, on January 22, as a magnificent 'Hindu Samelan' brought together hundreds of people from all walks of life. The event, marked by spiritual discourses, ideological discussions, and community service, served as a powerful platform for reflection and strengthening societal bonds.

The programme commenced with the traditional lighting of the lamp, followed by a serene recitation of the 'Geeta Path' and devotional Bhajans beautifully rendered by students and women from the community, setting a pious tone for the proceedings.

The spiritual core of the event was anchored by the chief guest, Shri Shri 108 Mahant Keshav Das Mahraj. In his inspiring discourse, he elaborated on the rich traditions of Hinduism, emphasizing the importance of embracing the Hindu way of life as a path to a secure, safe, and healthy existence for individuals and society at large.

The main speaker, Prof. Verinder Koundal, delved into the essence of Hinduism, stressing the urgent need for a "Hindu awakening" to secure a sovereign future for subsequent generations. He spoke of the genesis of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as an organization created to ensure that 'Bharat' becomes a self-sustaining nation that cannot be subjugated again. Prof. Koundal applauded the selfless service of RSS workers during critical junctures in the nation's history, from the partition to various crises post-independence. He also detailed the 'Panch Parivartan' (five transformational acts) being undertaken in mission mode to build a self-reliant and 'Viksit Bharat'.

In his address, Ramesh Razdan highlighted the crucial role of such gatherings in strengthening community bonds. He made a heartfelt appeal to the younger generation, urging them to stay connected with their cultural roots and actively contribute to the preservation of their unique identity.

A particularly noteworthy and lauded feature of the Samelan was the heartfelt felicitation of local temple Panditjis and the Safai Karamcharis working in the area. This gesture of honouring those who serve the community at its spiritual and foundational levels was widely appreciated by all attendees. Alongside the main programme, a free medical checkup camp was organized for the public, and a display of books on culture and history was made available.

The event was formally opened with a welcome address by Ramesh Pandita, and a comprehensive vote of thanks was delivered by Chaman Lal Verma at its conclusion.





Rajiv Gandhi Foundation Backs Revival of Kashmir's Sufiana Mausiqi

Training, documentation and livelihood focus aim to sustain a centuries-old musical tradition

By Gulfam Barji

Budgam, February, 2026: In a significant boost to Kashmir's intangible cultural heritage, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has extended support to a comprehensive initiative aimed at reviving and sustaining Sufiana Mausiqi, the classical Sufi music tradition that has shaped Kashmir's spiritual and artistic landscape for centuries.

The project, launched on December 1, 2025, is being implemented in collaboration with the Tulkul Arts and Media Collective at Hanjigund Chadoora in Budgam, and will continue until March 31, 2027. Sufiana Mausiqi, once an integral part of Kashmir's courtly and spiritual life, has witnessed a gradual decline over recent decades due to socio-political disruptions, dwindling patronage and the erosion of traditional guru-shishya transmission.

The new initiative seeks to reverse this trend through an integrated approach that places equal emphasis on artistic training, systematic documentation and livelihood creation for the youth.

At the heart of the project is a structured training programme designed to introduce young participants to the theoretical and practical foundations of Sufiana Mausiqi. Master practitioners are expected to mentor students in vocal and instrumental performance, repertoire interpretation and the aesthetic principles that define the tradition.

Organisers say the aim is not only to train performers, but also to create informed custodians of the art form who understand its historical context and spiritual ethos.

Equally significant is the project's focus on documentation. Over the course of the programme, compositions, oral histories and performance practices associated with Sufiana Mausiqi will be recorded and archived. Cultural scholars involved in the initiative say this effort will help preserve knowledge that has largely remained undocumented and vulnerable to loss. The documentation is also expected to serve as a resource for future researchers, students and cultural institutions.

A distinctive feature of the initiative is its emphasis on livelihood-oriented skills linked to cultural practice. Alongside musical training, participants are being introduced to traditional instrument making, with special focus on the Santoor, a defining instrument of Kashmiri classical music.

By learning the craft of instrument construction and maintenance, young trainees are expected to gain employable skills rooted in heritage, offering an alternative to migration and informal labour.

Rayees Wathori, cultural activist and artist leading Tulkul Arts and Media Collective, described the initiative as a landmark intervention for Kashmir's cultural future. He said the programme responds to a long-felt need to reconnect the younger generation with their artistic inheritance while addressing economic realities.

According to Wathori, cultural revival can only be sustainable when it is linked to education, skill development and dignified livelihoods. He expressed gratitude to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation for supporting the project, noting that such institutional backing lends credibility and continuity to grassroots cultural efforts. He said the Foundation's involvement reflects a broader understanding that living traditions require long-term nurturing rather than symbolic recognition.

Cultural observers see the initiative as part of a wider reassessment of how heritage preservation is approached in Jammu and Kashmir. Rather than isolating art from everyday life, the project integrates music, craft and employment, positioning culture as a viable economic and social resource.

This approach is particularly relevant in rural areas such as Budgam, where opportunities for creative engagement and formal employment remain limited.

The project also carries wider implications for cultural identity. Sufiana Mausiqi has historically been associated with Kashmir's syncretic ethos, drawing from Persian, Central Asian and local influences.

Reviving the tradition is therefore seen not merely as an artistic exercise, but as a reaffirmation of the region's pluralistic cultural memory at a time of rapid social change.

Organisers say the coming months will focus on expanding outreach, identifying talented youth from surrounding areas and building networks with cultural institutions within and outside Jammu and Kashmir. Performances, workshops and public interactions are expected to form part of the programme, helping to reintroduce Sufiana Mausiqi to contemporary audiences. As the initiative progresses towards its 2027 conclusion, its success will be measured not only by performances staged or recordings produced, but by the emergence of a new generation of practitioners who can carry the tradition forward with confidence and economic security. By linking cultural continuity with skills and livelihoods, the project seeks to ensure that Sufiana Mausiqi remains a living, evolving tradition rather than a fading relic of Kashmir's past.



JK NOPRUF Demands Immediate Restoration of Old Pension Scheme for NPS Employees in J&K

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jammu, February 2026: The Jammu and Kashmir unit of the National Old Pension Restoration United Front (NOPRUF) has strongly reiterated its demand for the immediate restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) in favour of employees presently covered under the National Pension System (NPS).



Addressing the media, Mr. Sakoon Manir, UT General Secretary, NOPRUF Jammu and Kashmir, stated that thousands of government employees are facing serious financial insecurity and uncertainty regarding their post-retirement life due to the absence of a guaranteed pension under the NPS. He emphasized that social security after retirement is not a privilege but a fundamental right of employees who dedicate their entire lives to public service.

He further stated that OPS is highly beneficial for employees as it ensures a fixed monthly pension, family pension security, inflation protection through DA linkage, and complete financial stability in old age, thereby safeguarding the dignity of retired employees and their dependents.

Mr. Sakoon Manir highlighted that several Indian states—Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, and Jharkhand—have already restored the Old Pension Scheme, acknowledging the genuine concerns of employees and ensuring their financial dignity after retirement. In this context, he said, it becomes the moral as well as administrative responsibility of the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to take a similar progressive step in the interest of its workforce.

He further reminded that the Honourable Chief Minister had assured employees during the election period that their genuine issues, including the restoration of OPS, would be addressed sympathetically. However, even after the passage of sixteen months, employees continue to wait with hope and expectation for the fulfillment of this important commitment. He added that befooling employees during elections is neither appropriate nor acceptable, as government employees play a crucial and responsible role in running the administration and delivering public services to the people. If a promise has been made to employees, it must be honoured in letter and spirit through the immediate restoration of the Old Pension Scheme.

Explaining the drawbacks of the National Pension System, Mr. Sakoon Manir stated that NPS is market-linked, uncertain, and does not provide assured financial protection in old age. In contrast, the Old Pension Scheme guarantees a fixed monthly pension, family pension benefits, and long-term social security, thereby ensuring dignity and stability in the lives of retired employees and their families. He reiterated that restoration of OPS is not merely a financial demand but a matter of social justice, employee welfare, and administrative responsibility.

JK NOPRUF has therefore urged the Government to seriously consider the hardships of NPS employees and initiate immediate steps for the restoration of the Old Pension Scheme in Jammu and Kashmir. The organization expressed hope that the administration will take a compassionate and decisive stand to safeguard the future of thousands of employees and their families.

Mr. Sakoon Manir concluded by stating that employees across Jammu and Kashmir remain united, peaceful, and hopeful, and they firmly believe that justice will prevail.

He appealed to the Government to take an early and positive decision so that the long-pending demand of OPS restoration is fulfilled at the earliest in the larger interest of employee welfare, social security, and good governance.

Sonamarg Roars to Life; National Snow Shoe Championship, Cementing its All-Weather Destination Status

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Srinagar, February 2026 : The pristine, snow-laden meadows of Sonamarg echoed with the crunch of snow shoes and the cheers of enthusiasts as the 10th National Snow Shoe Championship was ceremoniously flagged off on Saturday. The event has drawn an impressive contingent of 178 athletes from 20 different states, transforming the scenic resort into a vibrant arena for national-level winter sports.

Syed Qamar Sajad, Director of Tourism for Kashmir, officially inaugurated the championship, highlighting it as a significant milestone in Jammu and Kashmir's winter sports calendar. He emphasized that hosting such prestigious national events plays a dual role: it provides a crucial platform for young athletes from across the country to showcase their talent while simultaneously boosting adventure tourism in the region.

"Events like the Snow Shoe Championship are vital for strengthening our local economy and firmly positioning Jammu and Kashmir on both the national and international tourism maps," stated the Director during the opening ceremony, which was attended by officials from various sports bodies, local administration, coaches, and a crowd of sports lovers. The participants, representing a diverse geographical spread from across India, were full of praise for the breathtaking beauty and the challenging, snow-covered terrain of Sonamarg, unanimously calling it an ideal and world-class venue for winter sports competitions. The championship is expected to



provide a significant impetus to winter tourism and inspire greater participation in adventure sports throughout the Union Territory. This vibrant winter activity in Sonamarg has been made possible by a landmark infrastructural development. The recent inauguration of a 6.5-kilometre tunnel at Gagangir on the Srinagar-Ladakh highway has effectively converted the resort into an all-weather tourist destination, a status it previously could not hold.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had inaugurated this crucial tunnel on January 13, 2025. The two-lane bypasses a treacherous, avalanche-prone, Z-shaped stretch of road that traditionally remained blocked for months during winter due to heavy snowfall. What was once a journey of hours over a hazardous, winding road is now a safe, 15-minute passage, ensuring that Sonamarg's gates are now open to tourists and athletes year-round, heralding a new era for tourism and sport in the region.

Kashmiri Pandits Mourn KP Activist 'Pintoo Ji Pandita' Who Helped Till Last Breath

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jagti (Jammu), February, 2026: The Kashmiri Pandit community worldwide is in mourning following the passing of beloved social activist Pintoo Ji Pandita, a resident of Jagti township near Nagrota, who remained dedicated to helping displaced families until his final moments.

Known for his tireless association with Global Solace, Pintoo Ji was immensely popular among Kashmiri Pandits and had supporters across the globe. He championed migrant welfare, addressing everyday struggles like ration distribution, relief aid, youth employment, and education access for camp residents. Community voices hailed him as a "pillar of strength" who bridged gaps between migrants, administration, and political leaders through protests, delegations, and welfare initiatives.



Kashmiri Pandit leaders, civil society figures, and political workers visited Jagti to console the family, terming his loss "irreplaceable" amid ongoing challenges of displacement and rehabilitation. Filmmaker Ashoke Pandit and numerous KP activists shared heartfelt tributes online, praising his round-the-clock availability and role in sustaining the township's spirit. Younger migrants pledged to uphold his legacy, vowing to advance fights for dignity, relief, and secure return to Kashmir. Pintoo Ji's global footprint through Global Solace endures as a beacon for the community's resilience.

Dr. Prerna Srivastava Pandit Conferred with Doctorate in Tourism & Hospitality Management

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jammu, February 2026: In a moment of great pride and academic achievement, Dr. Prerna Srivastava Pandit, Assistant Professor at Chandigarh University, has been awarded the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Tourism & Hospitality Management.

Her doctoral research, a noteworthy academic contribution to the field, is titled, "An Analytical Study of Disruptive Technology and its Impact on Housekeeping Employees in Star Category Hotels of Delhi NCR". The research, completed under the able guidance of Dr. Pankaj Kumar Tyagi, provides a critical analysis of how modern technologies are transforming one of the most vital departments in the hospitality industry.

Her work is especially relevant in today's rapidly evolving service sector.

Dr. Prerna Srivastava Pandit is the wife of Mr. Rakesh Pandit and the daughter-in-law



of the late Shri Triloki Nath Pandit, a respected resident of TRT, Nagrota, Jammu. The family and friends have extended their warm and sincere congratulations to Dr. Pandit on this significant academic milestone and wishes her continued success in all her future endeavors

Herath: The Maha-Shivratri of Kashmiri Pandits

Dr. Pawan Suri

Jammu, February, 2026: Maha-Shivratri, a major festival in Hinduism, marks a remembrance of 'overcoming darkness and ignorance' in life and holds profound significance in both the Shaivism and Yogic traditions.

Unlike most Hindu festivals celebrated during the day with cultural revelry, Maha-Shivratri is observed with an all-night vigil at Shiva temples.

In the Shaivism tradition, this is the night when Lord Shiva performs the heavenly dance of creation, preservation, and destruction, and devotees also worship through dance while chanting hymns and reading Shiva's scriptures.

In Yogic tradition, this is regarded as the brightest night of the soul, when the Adiyogi attains the state of nirvana or Shoonya. However, the most commonly accepted significance of Maha-Shivratri remains the sacred union of Shiva with Shakti, leading to their transformation into the household names of Shankar and Parvati.

While the festival is celebrated across the length and breadth of the country with enthusiasm and fervour, the traditions vary. For Kashmiri Pandits, Maha-Shivratri is the crown of all festivals. It is called 'Herath" in Kashmiri, a word derived from the Sanskrit "Hara-ratri," the "Night of Hara," or "Hari-shrat," the "Night of Delight." Another fascinating version traces its origin to the Persian word "Hairat," meaning "utter surprise or shock." It is said that during the Pathan rule, Governor





Jabar Khan, in a bid to disrupt the tradition of carving a Linga from snow, ordered that the festival be observed in the hot summer month of June/July (Har) instead of February/March.

The Kashmiri Hindus complied, and miraculously, the valley was cursed with an untimely and heavy snowfall in the peak of summer. The Pathans expressed Hairat—utter surprise—at this divine intervention, and since then, Shivratri came to be known as Hearath.

Apart from the difference in nomenclature, Kashmiri Pandits also celebrate it differ-



ently. The main day of worship falls one day earlier, on Trayodashi (the thirteenth day of the dark half of Phalguna), in contrast to the rest of the country which celebrates on Chaturdashi. It is celebrated as Bhairavotsava, with distinct rituals. As per this tradition, the linga appeared at pradoshakala (dusk) as a blazing column of fire, dazzling the deities Vatuka Bhairava and Rama Bhairava, who were then blessed to be worshipped by human beings.

Since both deities emerged from a pitcher full of water, the prayer begins with an auspicious ceremony called "Vatuk Barun," which involves filling a pitcher (Vatuk) with water and walnuts, representing the Vatuka Bhairava. This pitcher is then worshipped along with Shiva, Parvati, Kumara, Ganesha, and their attendant deities. The soaked walnuts are later distributed as Naivedya or Prasada.

For Kashmiri Pandits, the celebration is an elaborate affair spanning 23 days, from the first day of the Krishna Paksha of Phalguna to the eighth day of the Shukla Paksha. The first week is dedicated to cleansing the entire house. On Hurya Saptami (the 7th day), Puja materials like earthenware and walnuts are collected. On the 9th



and 10th days, daughters-in-law traditionally visit their parental homes and return with auspicious items. The main day of worship, Herath Truvah (Trayodashi), involves the elaborate Vatuk Puja, which lasts for hours after a day-long fast.

The following day, Chaturdashi, is called 'Salaam'—a day of feasting, fun, and enjoyment where relatives and friends greet each other, and children receive gifts of cash called Herath Kharach. Evening prayers continue until Amavasya (Dunya Mawas), when the women of the house carry the Vatuk vessels to a riverbank and empty the contents. The festival officially concludes on the eighth day of the Shukla Paksha.

Hearath has always been a powerful symbol of cultural identity and resilience for Kashmiri Pandits. However, in the three decades since the migration and exodus, a marked dilution in rituals has occurred, influenced by inter-caste marriages and the local traditions of the places where families now reside. It is easy to forget but difficult to remember, and while the flavour of Maha-Shivratri might have changed, its essence remains.

In the 18th century, our devotion was sanctified by an unexpected snowfall. Today, we remain hopeful that one day the weather will change again, and our faith will be revered by reconnecting us to our roots, so we may please our Lord Shiva (Vatuk Raja) with the water and walnuts from our own birthplace. Let this night be not just a night of wakefulness, but a night of awakening—a transition from darkness and ignorance to enlightenment and consciousness.



The Silent Epidemic: When Mothers Become Peddlers

By Bharti Kaul

Drug abuse is a global scourge, a destructive force that tears through the fabric of individuals, families, and communities. It refers not only to the use of illegal substances but also to the misuse of prescription drugs, leading to a cascade of physical, psychological, and social harm. The consequences are devastating: addiction, debilitating health problems, loss of productivity, and a descent into criminal behaviour. Relationships crumble, financial stability evaporates, and lives are irrevocably damaged.

Yet, within this grim reality, a more distressing and heartbreaking trend is emerging: the rise of women as drug peddlers. The very image of motherhood—the nurturer who protects and guides a child through thick and thin—is being tragically inverted. We now see mothers, sisters, and daughters not just falling prey to addiction but actively initiating others into its dark world. It is a phenomenon that shatters our most fundamental understanding of care and protection.

What drives a woman down this path? In a world rife with uncertainties, the reasons are multiple and complex. Poverty and the lack of economic opportunities are significant factors, pushing women into the drug trade as a means of survival. Many are coerced by partners or family members already enmeshed in this illicit business. The allure of an "upmarket and open" culture also plays a role, drawing women towards drugs as a symbol of glamour. What begins with a free, friendly offering of heroin soon morphs into a crippling addiction. Once trapped, the user is forced to beg, borrow, or steal to fund their habit, and many turn to peddling to secure their supply and an income.



The journey often starts innocently, with alcohol and tobacco, before escalating to substances like heroin or brown sugar. The initial puffs and drags may seem glamorous, a thrilling escape from reality. But slowly and steadily, this illusion consumes and destroys the intricate fabric of a healthy, happy life. Getting into the world of drugs is seductively easy; getting out is a precarious and dangerous battle. For those struggling to let go, addiction leads to severe physical and mental health issues, strained relationships, and, all too often, death.

For women, this battle is even more arduous. Two significant barriers hold them back from seeking help: the profound social stigma attached to female addiction and the stark lack of exclusive treatment centers designed for their specific needs. Women often fear judgment, isolation, and the loss of their families and social standing. This fear silences them, forcing them to suffer in isolation.

To address this growing crisis, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. We must establish exclusive, safe, and supportive treatment facilities for women. Large-scale awareness campaigns are needed to destigmatize addiction and educate the public that it is a disease, not a moral failing. Simultaneously, a stringent crackdown on the availability of drugs is crucial to cut off the supply at its source.

The road to recovery is a difficult one, often paved with shame, guilt, and the pain of fractured relationships. But it is a journey that must begin with hope. The mantra must be to steadily march towards recovery, saying a firm "no" to drugs. With the right mindset and unwavering support from family and friends, anyone can overcome addiction and thrive. Rehabilitation centers, where therapists help individuals confront their demons, are vital. Support groups, where one can connect with others facing similar struggles, provide motivation and encouragement. And a focus on self-care—exercise, meditation, and healthy habits—is essential to healing the body and mind.

Recovery is possible. It requires courage, professional help, and a community that chooses compassion over condemnation. It is time we recognize this silent epidemic for what it is and extend a hand of support, not judgment, to those who have lost their way.

(Bharti Kaul is an artist and Vice President of Vomedh)

With this 2nd issue of Vitasta Herald, we begin a new series, "Shrines and Temples of Kashmir", by author and researcher C.M. Bhat, documenting the Valley's sacred sites and historic shrines of enduring significance. We hope readers find this series worthy of reading, preserving and passing on to future generations."— Editor-in-Chief

Brari Maej, Village Murran, Pulwama

Coordinates: Lat. 33 degrees 86 minutes, Long. 74 degrees 80 minutes

By Chander M Bhat

Murran, nestled within Pulwama District, lies approximately two kilometers west of Pulwama town. Initially known as Panwangam,

Pulwama comprised four patties: Malikpora, Dangeropra, Chatpora, and Dulipora. Over time, Pulwangam evolved into Pulgam and eventually into its current name, Pulwama. To the east lies Matrigam, birthplace of the patriotic poet Pirzada Ghulam Ahmad 'Mahjoor'. Nearby, the hamlet of Haarpur marks the final resting place of the ascetic Nidhan Saab. Murran's natural beauty captivates with its picturesque landscapes...lush green pastures, untamed meadows,



verdant trees and shrubs, and sprawling paddy fields collectively paint a quintessential rural tableau. This charming village exudes a serene ambiance, enveloping visitors in the tranquility of its idyllic surroundings.

Located in the northwest of the village within Mohalla *Brarimaejpur*, the temple of Brari Maej holds a revered position. The term "*Brari*" finds its origins in "*Bhattarika*," signifying the venerated Mother. In Sanskrit, "*Bhattarika*" carries connotations of reverence and veneration, aligning with the significance of Brari Maej as the Divine Mother Uma. The temple's inception traces back to 1775 when the Bhat dynasty migrated from Sumbal to this village, establishing this sacred sanctuary as a focal point of devotion and spiritual reverence.

Sumbal, a picturesque village nestled in North Kashmir, holds a significant place in the annals of history as the ancestral birthplace of the illustrious Bhat dynasty. Despite its beauty, Sumbal faced the recurrent challenge of submersion during the rainy season. It was amidst this backdrop that Pandit Bhawani Bhat, known for his piety and orthodox beliefs, experienced a divine revelation on *Magh Ashtami*. In a celestial dream, the Divine Mother graced Pandit Bhawani Bhat's humble abode, filling the room with divine effulgence. With affectionate gaze, she beckoned him closer and spoke words of guidance, acknowledging his unwavering devotion and acknowledging the hardships faced during the rainy season. She directed him to follow a divine sign...a cat that would appear in his compound the following morning. Pandit Bhawani Bhat was instructed to pack his belongings and follow the cat, settling in the location where she led him, signaling their next place of habitation. The Divine Mother bestowed a prophecy, assuring dignity and honor for seven generations at the new settlement while foretelling the end of their lineage's residence in Murran by the eighth generation. With the revelation imparted, the Divine Mother vanished, leaving Pandit Bhawani Bhat with a divine mission and a profound sense of purpose.

As dawn broke, the promised divine cat materialized in the compound of Pandit Bhawani Bhat, confirming the prophetic vision. Promptly, Pandit Bhawani Bhat, having already prepared his scant belongings, embarked on a journey following the feline guide. With steadfast determination, he trailed the cat until they arrived at a village, whereupon the divine cat signaled a particular spot by gracefully waving the tip of her tail before vanishing into the ether. In the wake of her disappearance, a miraculous spring emerged from the very spot, a testament to the divine guidance bestowed upon Pandit Bhawani Bhat. This spring, later expanded and initially marked by the laying of a single piece of stone (*Pather Kein*), later became the focal point for the construction of a temple. Known as Brari Maej (Cat Mother), the temple was established to commemorate the divine intervention of the cat. In the year 1875, Shri Loket Bhat (1801-1876) honored the sacred site by installing an icon of the Divine Mother, perpetuating the legacy of divine guidance and spiritual reverence.

Surrounded by majestic Chinars, the Brari Maej temple stands as a serene sanctuary, nestled beside a grand spring with crystalline waters spanning approximately 15 meters in diameter. Facing eastward atop the upper bank of the spring, the temple exudes an aura of divine tranquility. The spring, captivating in its allure throughout the seasons, holds a mystical charm that enthralls those who seek solace in prayer along its banks, facilitating spiritual transformation. Reverberating with the echoes of spiritual ascension, the temple precincts bear witness to the transformative journeys of revered saints. Swami Ramji, a saint of profound stature, graced Murran with his presence for two decades before 1947, ascending to exalted spiritual heights. His contemporary, Swami Madhavananda Ji, enriched the spiritual landscape further, journeying from Varanasi to engage in rigorous yogic practices within these hallowed grounds. Legend whispers of Adi Shankaracharya's sojourn, spending five years in a cave behind the temple, delving into various paths of God realization...a sacred space that endures as a testament to the enduring quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Adjacent to the Brari Maej temple stands a Shivalaya, honoring Lord Shiva, enriching the spiritual landscape of the sacred grounds. Behind the main temple lies a marshy expanse known locally as *Saar*, adding a touch of natural serenity to the surroundings. Welcoming pilgrims and travelers are two *Dharmshalas*, thoughtfully constructed on the right side of the main entrance, offering accommodations for weary souls, wandering monks, dedicated *pujaris*, and other wayfarers seeking refuge. The temple's precincts are graced by the presence of numerous walnut trees, spreading their canopy over approximately ten Kanal of land, adding to the tranquil ambiance. Notably, amidst this serene landscape, a *breadmushuk* (salix caprea) tree stands tall, its flowers revered for their significance in the traditional *thaal barun* ritual. Procured a

Meet Chander M. Bhat



Chander M. Bhat, born on March 20th, 1960, in Murran, a village nestled in South Kashmir, concluded his professional journey as the Assistant Director Postal Services, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh within the Department of Posts, Government of India. Throughout his career, Bhat's expertise and passion for the postal domain have been evident, reflected not only in his administrative role but also in his prolific contributions as a writer. His articles, spanning topics from postal services to non-political subjects, have found widespread publication in numerous newspapers and magazines across the country.

Chander M. Bhat's illustrious career boasts numerous accomplishments, including the publication of "How to Collect Stamps" by the Department of Posts, which garnered genuine acclaim. His dedication to preserving the heritage of his village, Murran, culminated in the widely praised "Murran... My Village." With a profound depth of insight, Bhat showcases his versatility as an author with works like "Ocean by Drops," a collection of vibrant poems, and "Ancient History of Jammu and Kashmir," a testament to his research prowess. His contributions extend to valuable research papers such as "The Splendor that is Amarnath" and "Vitasta...The Sacred River of Kashmir," which have served as guiding lights during the exile of the Kashmiri Pandit community, of which Bhat is a member. With eighteen authored books under his belt, Bhat's current project focuses on documenting the 661 shrines and temples spread across all nine districts of Kashmir, further cementing his legacy as a meticulous chronicler of history and culture. First three volumes of "Kashmir... Shrines and Temples" have already hit the stalls. Volume 4 of this series is under print.

Mr. Bhat's exceptional contributions have been honored with numerous prestigious awards, including two Gold Medals for his outstanding exhibits on Jammu and Kashmir in Philately. He was the inaugural recipient of the Tika Lal Taploo Award for his significant cultural contributions to Kashmir and has been bestowed with accolades such as the Padam Sri Shri Moti Lal Saqi Gaurav Samman in 2015, the Kirti Samman in 2016, and the Sri Sharda Stabadi Samman in 2022, among many others, recognizing his enduring dedication and invaluable impact across various domains.

Mr. Bhat's creative prowess shines through in his design of 138 Special Covers, Special Cancellations, and other Philatelic materials for the Department of Posts, Government of India. His innovative designs not only celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh but also contribute significantly to the vibrant world of philately, leaving an indelible mark on collectors and enthusiasts alike.

For the past 36 years, Mr. Bhat has dedicated himself to "OAL...The Nest," an ambitious endeavor spanning six volumes that meticulously document the history of all 595 Kashmiri Pandit villages in Kashmir. Each voluminous tome stretches across more than 2500 pages, showcasing Mr. Bhat's unwavering commitment to preserving and chronicling the rich cultural heritage and historical significance of Kashmiri Pandits. His exhaustive research and dedication shine through in this monumental project, offering invaluable insights into Kashmiri Pandit history for generations to come.

Brari Maej.....

day before *Navrah* or *Soanth*, these blossoms hold sacred importance, symbolizing renewal and auspicious beginnings as they adorn the *thaal* on the morning of *Soanth* and the New Year's Day (*Navrah*), weaving a tapestry of tradition and spirituality within the temple's embrace.

The annual Yagna, a sacred ritual encompassing the cleansing of the spring post autumn, held profound significance at the Brari Maej temple. Essential items required for this ceremony were gathered from the villagers, with particular emphasis on contributions from the Pandit community. The occasion was further enriched by the theatrical performances staged by the Uma Natak Mandli. Before the exodus, it was customary for the elder members of the community to diligently perform daily puja rituals at the temple, embodying a deep seated commitment to spiritual devotion.

Numerous individuals have encountered profound spiritual revelations within the sacred confines of the Brari Maej temple, while others have been blessed with divine visions of Goddess Uma herself. The mystical allure of the spring extends beyond daylight hours, as many have attested to witnessing its ethereal radiance even in the darkest hours of the night. Such experiences serve as poignant reminders of the transcendental power that permeates this revered site, offering seekers of truth and enlightenment a gateway to spiritual awakening and divine communion.

One evening, when Pandit Sarwanand Bhat's cow failed to return from the pasture, all family members, except the women, embarked on a search. As dusk descended, Smt. Sampakuj, spurred by concern, ventured out alone in search of the missing bovine. To her astonishment, as she neared the Brari Maej temple from the Devspat paddy fields behind it, she encountered a surreal scene: little girls adorned in silk garments, joyfully playing within the temple precincts. Among them stood a remarkably beautiful girl, bathed in an ethereal glow that illuminated the surroundings. Overwhelmed by the divine aura, Smt. Sampakuj humbly offered her salutations to the Divine Mother, who herself was engaged in play with the children. Continuing her search, she soon found the cow a short distance away from the temple, returning home with a heart brimming with gratitude for the miraculous encounter.

Before partition, a cherished tradition among the women of Murran was to gather at the temple in the early hours, preceding the arrival of the men folk. Each woman, particularly from the Pandit families, upheld the ritual of "*brandeh fash*," cleansing the stairs of their homes as well as the sacred sites in the Valley. This sacred act was imbued with a sense of reverence, with women competing to be the first to perform it. One morning, Smt. Haarmal, wife of Pandit Zinda Bhat, awoke with a sense of urgency, fearing she was late for the customary ritual. Hastily, she made her way to the Brari Maej temple, where she washed her face before attending to the *liven dul*, the cleaning pot. With care and devotion, she filled it with fresh water and began the task of scrubbing the stairs. Once completed, she entered the temple to pay homage to the Divine Mother, honoring the sacred traditions passed down through generations with reverence and dedication.

Unaware of her early arrival, Smt. Haarmal completed her ritualistic duties at the Brari Maej temple before encountering a mysterious sight near the temple gate. A little girl, adorned in silk attire, appeared before her, gently advising her against arriving too early in the future, then vanishing into thin air. Filled with a mixture of astonishment and reverence, Smt. Haarmal hurried home to share her extraordinary encounter with her husband. It was later revealed by the village elders that the enigmatic girl was none other than the Divine Mother herself, imparting wisdom in disguise to the devout worshipper, leaving an indelible mark of divine intervention on the humble village of Murran.

Under the veil of dark nights, amidst the tranquil embrace of the Chinar trees, the sacred shrine of Murran exude an ethereal ambiance, inviting seekers to transcend the mundane and unite with the divine. Amidst the moonlit glow, the Brari Maej temple emerges as a beacon of mysticism, enchanting devotees with its otherworldly allure. Within its hallowed halls, bathed in moonbeams, devotees experience profound spiritual connections, transcending earthly boundaries to commune with the divine. These nocturnal sojourns offer glimpses of the mystical and the divine, weaving a tapestry of spiritual experiences that resonate deeply within the soul.

LG Outlines Ambitious Development Roadmap

Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY), covering 302 villages, were highlighted as key components of an inclusive growth model. In healthcare, the administration plans to establish new critical care blocks and has already doubled the number of medical college seats, significantly boosting the region's health infrastructure. Tourism was positioned as J&K's primary economic engine, with plans for new eco-tourism hubs and sports facilities to engage the youth, alongside a vow of zero-tolerance against drug abuse to protect the next generation.
On the critical issue of employment, the LG promised to fill 33,000 government posts in the next two years and to regularise 60,000 daily wagers and NREGA workers. While this addresses a long-standing demand amidst rising youth unemployment, the lack of specific timelines and modalities left many questioning the commitment. Similarly, migrant rehabilitation was touched upon, but without the concrete details many were hoping for.
However, the positive developmental agenda was immediately overshadowed by a fierce backlash from the opposition. Leader of the Opposition Sunil Sharma (BJP) and Sajad Lone (PC) led the charge, tabling amendments to insert a clear timeline for the restoration of statehood. They cited repeated assurances from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and a unanimous resolution previously passed by the Assembly on the matter. The rejection of these amendments by Speaker Abdul Rahim Rather sparked loud protests and led to a walkout by several MLAs.
Members from the PDP and NC joined the chorus of dissent, slamming the administration for its silence on the restoration of Articles 370 and 35A, as well as on the implementation of promised free electricity and gas cylinder schemes. They accused the LG of presenting an administrative checklist while ignoring the deep-seated political aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.
The sentiment on the opposition benches quickly found an echo in the public domain. Social media erupted, with the hashtag #StatehoodNow trending across platforms. Youth forums expressed frustration over the vague job promises, while Valley-based groups protested the perceived neglect of unemployment and recent hikes in power tariffs.
While Lieutenant Governor Sinha's development roadmap inspires confidence in Jammu and Kashmir's potential for economic ascent, the charged reaction from both political representatives and the public underscores a critical gap. Bridging this trust deficit will require more than just solid policy documents. A clear and credible political timeline, particularly on the restoration of statehood and concrete employment deliverables, is essential to transform this vision of progress into a unifying covenant for lasting peace in the region.

UN Reports Civilian Casualties..... in specific attacks, their presence signals a dangerous escalation in the conflict's technological capabilities.
Human rights workers had long feared that the cities in Kordofan would suffer a fate similar to that of al-Fashir in Darfur, which fell to the RSF in October 2025 after a brutal siege that resulted in mass killings. Turk added that thousands of people from al-Fashir are still missing. "Some were undoubtedly dead," he said, while others are believed to be held in detention conditions he described as inhumane. The ongoing violence underscores the severe and escalating humanitarian crisis that has already displaced millions and continues to claim innocent lives.

A New Dawn in the South Caucasus.... regional stability in the South Caucasus directly challenges Russia's long-held position as the main power broker in the area. Vance's visit to Baku was strategically preceded by his trip to Armenia, where he made history as the first sitting US Vice President to visit the country. In Yerevan, he signed an agreement with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to advance negotiations on a civil nuclear energy deal. He also announced that the US was ready to export advanced computer chips and surveillance drones to Armenia and to invest in the country's infrastructure, demonstrating a balanced and substantive engagement with both nations. Commending the leadership of the two former rivals who fought two bitter wars over the Karabakh region, Vance emphasized a future-oriented vision for peace. "Peace is not made by people who are too focused on the past," he stated in Armenia. "Peace is made by people who are focused on the future."
The dual visits and the comprehensive agreements signed represent a masterstroke of American economic statecraft, aiming to replace decades of conflict with a new foundation of shared interests and mutual prosperity, fundamentally reshaping the strategic landscape of the South Caucasus.

Voice of Kashmiri Satire Falls Silent: Rajinder Tickoo Passes Away

The artist who revived Ladishah for a generation leaves behind a legacy etched in wit, culture and conscience

Vitasta Herald News Bureau

Jammu, February 2026: Rajinder Tickoo, the veteran Kashmiri artist and broadcaster who became the most recognisable modern voice of Ladishah—Kashmir's traditional satirical folk form—passed away late last night in Jammu. His sudden demise has sent a wave of shock and sorrow across Jammu and Kashmir, particularly within the region's artistic, media and cultural fraternity. Tickoo was not merely a performer but a cultural phenomenon. Through sharp satire, understated humour and a commanding stage presence, he breathed new life into Ladishah, transforming it from a fading oral tradition into a contemporary medium of social reflection. For many viewers, especially through his immensely popular programme on ETV Urdu, Rajinder Tickoo became synonymous with Ladishah itself.
Kashmir Media Trust (KMT), expressing deep grief over his passing, described him as a towering custodian of Kashmir's artistic heritage. In a condolence message, the Trust said that his performances went far beyond entertainment, capturing the pulse of society while reaffirming Kashmiri cultural identity. "With his passing, Kashmir has lost a rare voice that spoke truth with humour and wisdom," the statement said.
Veteran actor and broadcaster Manoj Koul remembered Tickoo as both a remarkable artist and a deeply humane individual. He said Tickoo's voice, warmth and dedication to art and broadcasting had left an indelible impression on all who worked with him. "His contribution to Kashmir's cultural and media landscape will always be remembered," Koul noted, while extending condolences to the bereaved family.



Artist Kusuk Tikoo reflected on a broader cultural loss, linking the passing of creative minds like Rajinder Tickoo to the gradual erosion of platforms that once sustained artists. She lamented how the decline of creative institutions had led many artists into distress, adding that Tickoo's death felt like "another unnatural loss of a creative soul." Rajesh Raina, who played a pivotal role in introducing Ladishah to television audiences, recalled the moment Tickoo was first approached to perform the art form on ETV. Initially hesitant, Tickoo eventually embraced the format and went on to immortalise it for a new generation. "He became the face of Ladishah in Kashmir. He was an actor beyond words—a true artist," Raina said, adding that the void left by his departure would be impossible to fill.
According to reports, Tickoo passed away in a tragic incident during the night in Jammu, underscoring the suddenness of his loss. His death has once again drawn attention to the vulnerability of artists who carried Kashmir's cultural memory through decades of uncertainty and displacement. With Rajinder Tickoo's passing, Kashmir loses not just a performer, but a living tradition—one who used satire as a mirror to society and humour as a tool of resilience. His legacy will endure in the laughter he inspired, the truths he voiced, and the culture he safeguarded.
King C Bharati, Rohit Bhat and Rakesh Roshan Bhat, on behalf of Team Vitasta Herald, expressed deep condolences and paid tribute to Rajinder Tickoo's lifelong contribution to Kashmiri art, culture and media.

Heartiest Greetings on Herath & Maha Shivratri



On the auspicious occasion of **Herath,** I extend my heartfelt greetings and warm wishes to my **Kashmiri Pandit brothers and sisters.**

May this sacred festival, the crown of our unique traditions, bring peace, prosperity and joy to your homes.

To all Hindus celebrating across the globe, I convey my sincere wishes for a blessed and joyous **Maha Shivratri.**

May the divine grace of Lord Shiva and **Mata Parvati** illuminate our lives with harmony, strength and well-being.

Herath Mubarak | Happy Maha Shivratri

M.K. Yogi
Senior Leader, Apni Party
Incharge, Anantnag East Constituency (Shangus)

Herath & Maha Shivratri Greetings



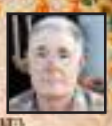
On the auspicious occasion of **Herath and Maha Shivratri,** I extend my warm greetings and best wishes to the Kashmiri Pandit community and the entire Hindu fraternity.

May Lord Shiva bless everyone with peace, good health, spiritual strength and harmony, and may this sacred festival inspire unity, resilience and hope for the future.

Herath Mubarak
Maha Shivratri Ki Hardik Shubhkamnayein

Sanjay Saraf
National Spokesperson and National General Secretary LJP

RK BHARATI FOUNDATION



Herath & Maha Shivratri Greetings

On the auspicious occasion of Herath, **RK Bharati Foundation (RKBF)** extends its heartfelt greetings and best wishes to the **Kashmiri Pandit community.**

May this sacred festival, rooted in our timeless spiritual and cultural heritage, bring peace, harmony, strength and prosperity to every home.

We also convey our warm greetings to the **Hindu** community across the world on the holy occasion of **Maha Shivratri.**

May the divine blessings of **Lord Shiva** and **Mata Parvati** guide humanity on the path of truth, justice and righteousness.

Herath Mubarak | Happy Maha Shivratri

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FORM IV
(See Rule 8)

Statement of ownership and other particulars

1.	**Place of publication:**	Jammu
2.	**Periodicity of publication:**	Monthly
3.	**Printer's Name:**	Munish Gupta
Nationality:		Indian
Address: 90/A, Gandhi Nagar, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir – 180004		
4.	**Publisher's Name:**	Sushma Kumari
Nationality:		Indian
Address: House No. 105, Zero Lane, Tomal Anand Nagar, Bohri, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir – 180002		
5.	**Editor's Name:**	Sushma Kumari
Nationality:		Indian
Address: House No. 105, Zero Lane, Tomal Anand Nagar, Bohri, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir – 180002		

6. Names and addresses of individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than one per cent of the total capital:
Sushma Kumari, House No. 105, Zero Lane, Tomal Anand Nagar, Bohri, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir – 180002

7. Name and address of the person who prints and publishes the newspaper:

Printed by:	Munish Gupta
Published by:	Sushma Kumari
Place:	Jammu

I, Sushma Kumari, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Date: Februry 01, 2026 **Place:** Jammu **Sd/-**
(Sushma Kumari)

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