

# Young Kashmiris are returning home for a fresh start-up



■ Danish Yousuf and Arsalan Sajad, alumni of a UK university, opened the Books and Bricks Cafe after returning to the Valley. WASEEM ANDRABI / HT

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**SRINAGAR:** The recently-opened Books and Bricks Café is a first-of-its-kind all-American diner in Srinagar. The interiors are done in brick, wallpapers are pages from a Reader's Digest collector's edition and on the shelves are books ranging from Thomas Hardy to Zadie Smith. Inside, co-owner Danish Yousuf — a 27-year-old post-graduate in financial management from Middlesex University in UK — is found mostly in the kitchen, helping out the chef.

Around three kilometres away, on the city's arterial Residency Road, stands a unique "restaurant on a

truck" called In Fusion. As office-goers and students crowd the vehicle for biryani and noodles, its 29-year-old owner Fahad Jeelani — a former software engineer with Wipro in Bengaluru — is busy taking orders and directing the cooks.

Yousuf and Jeelani represent an upcoming generation of Kashmiris — youngsters who studied and worked outside, but returned to the Valley as entrepreneurs. And, not only food, they are in almost every sector you can imagine — from restaurants to e-commerce websites, from web-magazines to adventure sports.

"Kashmir's economy is virgin, and the natural resources untapped. Government jobs

have shrunk. As a result, you have young people starting own ventures," said Shakeel Qalandar, an industrialist who was a part of the C Rangarajan panel formed by the central government in 2010 to formulate policies for creating job opportunities in Kashmir.

Yousuf started the café in December with his childhood friend Arsalan Sajad, an MBA from the same British university who returned to the Valley after working in Edinburgh for a couple of years.

"In Kashmir, times are a changing and so are opportunities. And thus, a café like this. You need to reclaim this land from the narrative of conflict," said Yousuf.

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## Young Kashmiris returning home

In Fusion, owner Jeelani says the project required an initial investment of around Rs 20 lakh which he raised from his family, own savings, and some part as loan. His second food truck is set to come out on Srinagar streets in a few weeks.

Abid Rashid, a 24-year-old computer engineer, has come up with an Android app called Pipe last October. The content sharing app, which is being currently fixed for bugs, has registered more than 500 downloads. Rashid, an IT graduate from Delhi, is also a part of a start-up which has launched an e-wallet platform called MyRahat.

"It's much like PayTM, but a business-to-business service," explained Rashid, alluding to the popular e-wallet company, adding that transactions to the tune of Rs 50 lakh take place through the platform per month.

But the political turmoil does take a toll for some entrepreneurs.

Danish Mir (27), founder of Kashmir Basket — an e-retail website selling traditional

products — said he stays in Mumbai most of the time so that his backend work gets done smoothly, without the hassles of "everyday strikes and internet bans".

"Technological infrastructure is quite essential for an e-commerce start-up, and that's not up to the mark in Kashmir. Plus, there are the political problems and natural disasters," said Mir, a native of Baramulla in north Kashmir who graduated in law from Pune.

Kashmir Basket incurred severe losses during last year's floods but Mir didn't back out. He, in fact, started his next venture — Go Kash Adventure, a travel-cum-adventure-sports company four months ago.

The government maintains that the state has been doing its best to support entrepreneurial ventures by the youth.

MI Parray, director of the Jammu and Kashmir Entrepreneurship Development Institute, said in the last five years it has helped more than 6,000 ventures, which have in turn created an employment opportunity of at least 30,000 people.

For many entrepreneurs, on

the other hand, the conflict is an opportunity in disguise.

Journalist Asem Mohiuddin returned to the Valley a few years ago after doing his post-graduation in mass communication from Bengaluru and working with The Hindu. Now, his weekly magazine The Legitimate News is set to be launched, with a website already up.

"Every media house here writes about the armed conflict. I want my publication to focus on the issues that Kashmiris face every day, especially in the healthcare and education sector," said Mohiuddin.