

Dengue Surge Demands Action

As rains return across large parts of India, so does the annual threat of dengue fever-a disease that continues to claim lives, overwhelm hospitals, and expose weaknesses in public health planning. Recent weeks have seen a sharp spike in dengue cases in several states, including Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. Hospital beds are filling rapidly, diagnostic labs are overloaded, and panic is growing among the public. This situation is not new. Every year, we face this crisis, yet our response remains reactive instead of preventive.

Dengue is spread by the Aedes aegypti mosquito, which thrives in stagnant water and unhygienic conditions. These breeding grounds-clogged drains, open water tanks, discarded containers-are preventable. Still, year after year, we see the same mistakes repeated. Civic authorities often launch fogging drives, cleanliness campaigns, and public announcements only after infections have surged. The failure lies in not acting before the outbreak begins. Rain arrives at a predictable time every year, and so should our preventive measures. Early fogging, timely garbage clearance, and awareness campaigns before the rains can make a significant difference.

At the same time, the public must play its part. Dengue cannot be controlled by the government alone. Citizens must ensure there is no stagnant water in or around their homes. Water coolers, plant pots, and construction sites are common breeding areas. Cleanliness and vigilance should become daily habits during the monsoon. Schools, RWAs, market associations, and religious places must also participate in spreading awareness and maintaining hygiene. Without community participation, even the best-laid government plans will fail.

The growing number of dengue cases has also exposed the strain on our healthcare infrastructure. Government hospitals are stretched beyond capacity, often lacking enough beds or platelets for critical patients. Private hospitals, while better equipped, remain out of reach for many due to high costs. What's worse is the lack of a real-time national surveillance system to track and manage outbreaks. An updated, centralized database could help identify hotspots, distribute resources efficiently, and deploy emergency responses more effectively.

Additionally, experts point to climate change and unplanned urbanization* as major contributors to the increasing spread of dengue. Rising temperatures and erratic rainfall have expanded the breeding period and habitat for mosquitoes. Unchecked urban construction and poor drainage systems create ideal environments for mosquito larvae. In this context, the fight against dengue must also be seen as part of a larger battle for sustainable urban development and climate resilience.

So, what is the way forward? First, we need a comprehensive, year-round anti-dengue strategy. Municipal bodies must carry out regular fogging and sanitation work even in dry seasons. Schools and local organizations should be actively involved in awareness campaigns. Health workers should conduct door-to-door inspections, especially in vulnerable areas. At the same time, governments must invest in better hospital preparedness, emergency platelet supplies, and affordable treatment options. Technological solutions such as GIS mapping of dengue cases, eco-friendly mosquito control methods, and smart surveillance systems should be part of our long-term strategy.

Empowering the Tribal Communities in J&K

■ DR. BANARSI LAL

As per 2011 Census, the tribal population of India is 10.43 crore which constitutes about 8.6 per cent of the total population. There are about 705 ethnic groups which are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. The draft of the 'National Tribal Policy' has characterized the concept with primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness with the public at large, geographical isolation, social and economic backwardness. As per 2011 Census, 11.9 per cent population of J&K constitute as the tribal community which is about 0.14 per cent of the population of the country. Literacy rate among the tribals is also low. Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir are indigenously and culturally rich community which was listed in the category of Scheduled Tribe in 1991. Tribals play significant role in the overall regional development of J&K. Gujjars and Bakarwals are the third largest group in J&K after Kashmiri Muslims and Dogra community. Gujjars are widely distributed and maintain their ethnic hegemony. The Gujjars and Bakarwals are the predominant tribal communities in the intermediate hill zone of Jammu and Kashmir. They are mostly inhabitants of the border districts of Rajouri and Poonch followed by Anantnag, Udhampur, Reasi and Doda districts. Gujjars and Bakerwals continue to be a unique community with their own social, cultural and linguistic identities. They are predominantly rural as 95.3 per cent of them reside in villages. Adverse terrain conditions, inaccessibility of the areas, absence of all weather roads, lack of infrastructure facilities, unsteady agricultural economy and ignorance, added to the backwardness of the tribal population living in far-flung and difficult areas. Gojri language should be given due recognition, which has its long indigenous root and inalienable part of their culture. They are the dominant ethnic group of the region and should be fully involved in the development of J&K.

The term 'nomad' has been derived from Greek root word 'nemo' meaning pasture. The Dictionary meaning of nomad refers to that a category of people who own herds of cattle such as sheep, goats, buffaloes etc. and do not have a permanent home rather moving in search of pasture to feed their cattle. Nomadism is one oldest ways of life in the history of mankind. In present era, the highest numbers of pastoral nomads live in the South Asia. India alone is the home of five hundred nomadic groups i.e. 7 percent of total Indian population. Gujjar community of J&K inhab-

it mostly in the hilly regions of the Union Territory of J&K. Their major occupations are herding of buffaloes in the hilly pastures and cultivation of maize on the terraced hilly slopes. There is need to pave the path for their empowerment and integrate this nomadic community in the national mainstream which ultimately can be supportive in the development of J&K. The Gujjars and Bakarwals of the western Himalaya of Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and its adjoining areas are such significant cultural groups, whose major section is still in nomadic stage. In Jammu and Kashmir, there are twelve scheduled tribes living in different parts of J&K. These two tribal groups (Gujjars and Bakarwals) of Jammu and Kashmir constitute more than ten 10 per cent of J&K total population. The significant features of these tribal groups are not only their nomadic life style but also cultural syncretism and a long history in the Indian society. This significant section of our society plays an important role in the development process of J&K. The Scheduled Tribe status has been given to this nomadic group about two decades back. There is need to study the socio-cultural heritage of the Gujjar community and to explore constraints affecting their development and empowerment. Gujjar and other smaller tribal communities' of Jammu and Kashmir have less per centage in the political and economic power structure. There is need to give emphasis in various developmental programmes and schemes for the tribals. There is scarcity of existing studies on these communities. Lack of information on latest technologies restricts their further scope of development and empowerment. There is an immense scope for an in-depth study of this significant community of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for the overwhelming majority of the tribal population in J&K. Agricultural modernization has since long been introduced in the tribal areas of J&K, primarily with a view to raise the level of income, standard of living and lifestyle of the tribal people.

Traditionally a pastoral nomadic or semi-nomadic group today leads to sedentary lives in the North and North Western part of the country. The people of this community are widely distributed in the states/Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra with disproportionate popula-

tion size and density. The regional variation is not only in terms of their population but also in cultural pattern, customs, family marriage kinship, social hierarchy and occupation. Generally the Gujjars in the plains areas are agriculturalist while in mountainous region having live stocks and pastures. Like many other Indian communities, Gujjar community has gone through the process of acculturation in different regions. During this long process of cultural-contact, this group has accommodated and adapted with regional cultures during the course of migration and preserved its own cultural heritage. Different historians has propounded different theories for this significant Indian social group. Gurjars are traced from White Hun, Sythian tribes, Chalukya and other from 465 A.D. to 13 century A.D. One most prevalent theory is that, before entering in Indian sub-continent Gurjars were the inhabitants of Gurjistan (presently in Georgia) a territory situated between the Black sea and Caspian sea, later on migrated eastward. There are some well known theories of Gujjar's origin. Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir have no authentic historical records of their migration. There is also a scarcity of focused studies on Gujjar community. The lack of consensus about the" origin in Indian sub-continent is itself evidence of their long historical roots in this sub-continent. In India there is a wide spread of Gujjar community in more than eight states in India. This large distributed community is divided into endogamous sub-groups or sub-castes in different regions. These regional sub-groups have both similarity as well as diversity within the Gujjar community itself. Jammu and Kashmir has two major divisions of the Gujjar community on the basis of their occupation namely- Jamindar and Dhodhi. Further these sub-groups, like other Indian castes and sub-castes, are divided into various clans. These clans also vary from region to region or state to state. H. A. Rose (1919) in their ethnographic survey reported eight major clans in present Punjab region namely - Bhadana, Chala, Kasena, Munin, Tur, Chokar, Rawat and Madan. Rajasthan alone shows more than twenty nine clans. The ethnographic survey of Himachal Pradesh and Punjab reveals more than fifteen clans each. Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir has reported only seven clans i.e. Kasana, Chechi, Padhana, Lodha, Khatana, Paswar and Bangri. There are evidences of similar clans existing in two or more regions. For instance, Poswal, Banjara, Chechi, Chohan or Chauhan, Gursi or Gors, Khatana, Bhadhana. Information of Gujjar

sub-groups and clans are limited and insufficient owing to lack of enumeration based on caste population and their changes with time. Efforts are needed for their recognition and their share of empowerment. KVKs are playing a key role to educate and train the tribal farmers of J&K and upgrading their skills on modern agricultural and allied sectors technologies.

Though many attempts have been made through different schemes under Tribal Sub Plan for the upliftment of this section of people, the benefits accrued through such programmes were not sustainable as they were not trained to improve the land base available at their disposal for integrated farming and allied income generating activities. The government has been prioritizing the education of these nomadic communities at the grass-roots level to arm their children with education and knowledge. Many organisations are acquainting the tribal community with the scientific and sustainable crop and animal husbandry practices thus making their traditional practices more economical. Devising and demonstrating the integrated farming models at community farms are enabling them to take up agriculture and animal husbandry as an enterprise or vocation. Tribal people are provided quality seed, new breeds of livestock, poultry, farm machinery, timely fertilizers, marketing facilities etc. are ensuring income and employment opportunities for tribal population. They are facilitated in popularizing scientific and mechanized agriculture to increase their crop production and thus improving their livelihood. The hilly areas of J&K have tremendous scope for improving the productivity of major cereals especially maize and wheat. Also there is a good scope for increase in availability of fodder round the year. There is potential for increasing the area under vegetables, fruits and for developing floriculture industry in the region. Spices especially onion, garlic, ginger and turmeric which are at the dearth of extinction from some tribal areas of J&K can be boosted. There is need to revive these crops in the districts. The SHGs among the tribal women and FPOs formation can empower the tribal farmers of J&K.KVKs promoted organic and natural farming, mushroom farming, sericulture and backyard poultry farming etc. among the tribal farmers. Some specific programmes can be supportive to empower the tribal communities of Union Territory of J&K.

(The writer is Chief Scientist & Head of KVK Reasi SKUAST-J)

Environmental hazards on the rise in Jammu and Kashmir

■ MOHAMMAD HANIEF



The mountains and valleys of Jammu and Kashmir have long been a refuge of scenic abundance, but the region now finds itself confronting an unrelenting cascade of environmental threats that cut across its varied landscapes. This is no longer a localised crisis confined to alpine pastures or lake-fronts; the unfolding realities-from the Jammu plains to the high Himalaya-paint a picture of a territory where extreme weather; rapid land-use change, retreating glaciers, and governance gaps are combining to undermine livelihoods, public health, and ecological resilience.

The summer of 2025 made the new normal brutally visible. A cloudburst in mid-August sent a wall of water racing through remote hamlets on the Machail Mata pilgrimage route in Kishtwar district, killing scores and exposing the fragility of high-altitude settlements and pilgrimage logistics. Rescue teams found communities cut off, houses buried in mud and debris, and rivers transformed into destructive torrents in a matter of minutes-an acute illustration of how sudden hydrological events now threaten lives and infrastructure across the territory.

Those flash floods were followed by widespread heavy rains through August and September that battered large parts of Jammu and Kashmir: The Jammu division suffered extensive damage, with thousands of houses destroyed or rendered uninhabitable and vast tracts of farmland



washed away, while parts of the Valley endured disrupted water supplies, road closures, and localized inundations. The geographic spread of these events underlined a worrying truth: both the Jammu plains and the mountainous Kashmir Valley are now vulnerable to extremes that the existing protective systems were not designed to handle.

The hydrological shocks are intensified by long-term climatic shifts. Scientific monitoring and regional studies have recorded accelerating glacial retreat across the Western Himalaya and Zaskar ranges, with some glaciers showing markedly faster rates of shrinkage and attendant growth in proglacial lakes. These changes threaten seasonal water availability for irrigation and hydropower downstream and increase the risk of glacial lake

outburst floods-events that could wreak havoc across river basins if early warning, monitoring and mitigation are not substantially scaled up. Forest loss and rising incidents of fire have added another layer of instability. Across districts from Kishtwar and Doda to parts of Baramulla and Anantnag, dry spells and human activity have contributed to an uptick in fire episodes that scar both remote forests and peri-urban green belts. The removal of tree cover accelerates erosion, makes slopes more prone to landslides during heavy rains, and reduces the landscape's ability to absorb and slow runoff-factors that directly amplify flood and debris flow impacts downstream. The nexus between deforestation, slope instability and disaster exposure is becoming starkly evident as extreme rainfall events grow more fre-

quent.

Meanwhile, the tourism boom that has driven recent economic recovery in many parts of the territory carries its own environmental price. An influx of visitors-both domestic and international-has overloaded waste management systems in popular hotspots from Gulmarg to newer offbeat valleys, producing visible litter; overflowing dumping sites, and sanitation stresses where infrastructure is weak. Improper disposal of solid waste and untreated sewage is increasingly evident along lakeshores and riverbanks, which degrades aquatic habitats and poses public health threats to local residents dependent on these waters. The growth in short-term accommodation and commercial facilities has also pushed construction into sensitive zones, eroding traditional buffers and wetlands that once helped modulate floods.

Water bodies that once defined the region's identity are under severe pressure. Iconic lakes and wetlands, long central to ecology, livelihoods and tourism, are suffering from siltation, nutrient loading, and contamination by untreated waste. The ecological degradation of these wetlands not only reduces biodiversity and fish populations but also diminishes their role as natural sponges during heavy rains. For communities that depend on lake-fisheries, reed harvesting, and tourism, the economic fallout is mounting alongside environmental decline.

Agriculture, the backbone of many rural economies in Jammu and Kashmir, is being reshaped by climatic unpredictability and soil health decline. Erratic precipitation, shifting snowmelt patterns and

episodic droughts are complicating sowing and harvesting windows, while intensified use of chemical inputs in some areas is degrading long-term fertility and contaminating waterways. Fruit growers-whose apples, walnuts and saffron contribute substantially to regional incomes-have felt the impact acutely when transport links fail during floods or produce spoils due to delayed market access. The result is an erosion of resilience in communities that historically depended on predictable seasonal cycles.

Layered over natural hazards are human pressures that amplify risk. Illegal and unregulated extraction of riverbed materials and minor minerals has altered channel morphology and weakened embankments, increasing susceptibility to flood damage. Large infrastructure projects, road expansions and tunnel works, if advanced without rigorous environmental safeguards, can aggravate slope destabilization and fragment wildlife corridors. While regulatory bodies have expanded monitoring capacities in recent years, enforcement remains uneven, particularly in remote reaches where state presence and institutional capacity are limited.

Public health consequences of environmental degradation are manifesting in multiple ways. Rising air pollution episodes in urban centres during winter inversions, contaminated water sources near dumping grounds, and vector proliferation in stagnant floodwaters all pose immediate health risks. The most vulnerable populations-residents of informal settlements, low-income families near dumping sites, and rural households dependent on local water-

are disproportionately affected, exacerbating inequality and eroding social resilience in the face of repeated hazards.

Despite the magnitude of the challenges, pathways for action exist. Strengthening early warning systems for cloudbursts and flash floods, expanding glacier and hydrological monitoring networks, formalizing waste management and sanitation infrastructure in tourism hotspots, and enforcing sustainable land-use planning are urgent priorities. Community-led watershed protection, reforestation of degraded slopes, and stricter oversight of mining and construction can reduce exposure and restore some measure of ecological function. Equally important is integrating disaster risk reduction with livelihood support so that resilience measures are socially inclusive and economically feasible.

The environmental predicament of Jammu and Kashmir is not an abstract threat; it is reshaping daily life across the region. From Jammu's lowlands to the high passes of the Valley and the fragile cryosphere of the west Himalaya, hazards now intersect with development and culture in ways that demand coordinated, science-based and community-anchored responses. The loss of a forest or a wetland or a season's crop would be a local blow, but the accumulation of these losses threatens the territorial fabric itself. If the past few seasons are any guide, the window to act decisively is narrowing-and the cost of delay will be measured not only in degraded landscapes but in human lives and livelihoods.

(The author is a senior analyst in Kashmir)

Festival celebrations from traditional to digital

■ VIJAY GARG

Festivals have always been a cornerstone of human culture, serving as moments of joy, reflection, and community bonding. Traditionally, these celebrations have been marked by rituals, gatherings, and age-old customs passed down through generations. However, as the digital age dawned, the way we celebrate festivals has undergone a significant transformation. This blog explores the journey of festivals from their traditional roots to their current digital incarnations, shedding light on how technology has redefined our festive experiences.

The Traditional Essence of Festivals: Historically, festivals were deeply intertwined with religious, agricultural, or cultural practices. Whether it was the lighting of lamps during Diwali in India, the grand parades of Carnival in Brazil, or the quiet reflection of Thanksgiving in the United States, festivals were characterized by physical gatherings, shared meals, and communal participation.

Cultural Significance: Festivals were a means of preserving cultural identity. Rituals, traditional attire, music, and

dance were integral parts of these celebrations, serving as a bridge between generations.

Community Bonding: Festivals brought communities together, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. They were often the backdrop for strengthening familial ties and renewing friendships.

Physical Participation: From decorating homes to participating in processions, the physical involvement in festivals was seen as an essential part of the celebration.

The Advent of Technology: With the rise of the internet and digital technologies, the landscape of festival celebrations began to shift. The convenience, connectivity, and creativity enabled by digital platforms have introduced new ways to celebrate, particularly in an increasingly globalized and tech-savvy world.

Virtual Gatherings: One of the most significant changes has been the shift from physical gatherings to virtual ones. Social media platforms like Facebook, Zoom, and Instagram have become popular venues for hosting virtual festival celebrations, allowing people to connect with loved ones across the globe in real-time.

Digital Decorations: Traditional decorations have also seen a digital makeover. Augmented Reality (AR) and virtual design tools allow individuals to create festive atmospheres in their homes with minimal physical effort. Apps now offer everything from virtual Diwali lamps to customizable Christmas trees.

Online Shopping and Gifting: The rise of e-commerce has revolutionized how we shop for festivals. Instead of bustling markets, people now browse online stores for decorations, gifts, and festive attire. Digital gift cards and virtual presents have also become common, catering to the needs of a fast-paced, digital-first world.

The Impact of Social Media: Social media has not only changed how we celebrate but also how we share our celebrations. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have turned festivals into global events, where trends can go viral and cross-cultural exchanges are the norm.

Hashtag Holidays: Hashtags like MerryChristmas or Diwali2025 have become a way for people to share their festive experiences with a global audience. These digital footprints create a sense of

a worldwide community celebrating together.

Influencer Culture: Influencers play a significant role in shaping modern festival celebrations. From fashion tips for Eid to innovative Diwali recipes, influencers provide inspiration and set trends that resonate with their followers.

Virtual Challenges and Contests: Social media has also introduced interactive elements to festivals. Virtual challenges, such as decorating contests or dance-offs, engage users and create a participatory culture around the celebration.

The Role of Digital in Preserving Traditions: Interestingly, while digital platforms have introduced new ways of celebrating, they have also played a crucial role in preserving and reviving traditional practices. Online tutorials, virtual workshops, and cultural apps have made it easier for younger generations to learn about and participate in traditional rituals.

Educational Content: YouTube channels and blogs dedicated to traditional crafts, recipes, and rituals have ensured that cultural knowledge is not lost but rather

adapted to modern contexts.

Global Accessibility: Digital platforms have made it possible for diaspora communities to stay connected to their cultural roots. Livestreams of temple ceremonies, virtual Seder dinners, or online cultural festivals allow people to participate in traditional celebrations regardless of their location.

Challenges and Criticisms: Despite the many benefits, the digitalization of festivals has its challenges. The shift to virtual celebrations can sometimes lead to a loss of the personal touch and emotional connection that physical gatherings provide. Additionally, the commercialization of festivals through online platforms has raised concerns about the dilution of cultural and religious significance.

Loss of Physical Connection: Virtual gatherings, while convenient, cannot fully replicate the warmth and intimacy of face-to-face interactions. The sensory experiences-such as the aroma of festive foods, the sound of traditional music, and the feel of intricate decorations-are often missing in digital celebrations.

Commercialization: The commercializa-

tion of festivals through online ads, sales, and promotions can sometimes overshadow the true meaning of the celebration, turning it into a consumer-driven event rather than a cultural or religious observance.

Conclusion: The evolution of festival celebrations from traditional to digital reflects broader societal changes driven by technology. While the essence of festivals-community, tradition, and celebration-remains intact, the methods of participation have evolved to accommodate our increasingly digital lives. As we move forward, the challenge will be to balance the convenience of digital celebrations with the richness of traditional practices, ensuring that festivals continue to be meaningful, inclusive, and joyous occasions for all.

This topic offers a comprehensive look at how festival celebrations have transformed in the digital age while encouraging readers to reflect on the balance between tradition and modernity in their own celebrations.

(The writer is Retired Principal & Educational columnist)

