

MENTAL HEALTH

In today's fast-paced and increasingly complex world, mental health has become a critical component of overall well-being. While physical health often takes center stage, mental health is equally essential for leading a fulfilling and productive life. From emotional stability and stress management to maintaining relationships and performing well at work or school, good mental health forms the foundation of a balanced life.

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and behave. It also plays a significant role in how people handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Unfortunately, due to stigma, lack of awareness, and limited access to resources, mental health is still neglected in many communities.

One of the biggest challenges today is the growing prevalence of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and burnout. According to the World Health Organization, one in every eight people in the world lives with a mental disorder. These conditions can be triggered by various factors, including genetics, trauma, substance abuse, social isolation, financial stress, and even physical health conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the urgent need to address mental health, as isolation, fear, and uncertainty led to increased cases of anxiety and depression globally.

Mental health is particularly important for young people. Students, especially teenagers and college-goers, face enormous pressure from academics, social media, and family expectations. Many struggle silently, and without the right support, their mental health can deteriorate. Early intervention and awareness campaigns in schools and colleges can make a significant difference in identifying and supporting those in need.

Workplace mental health is another area of growing concern. Long working hours, high performance demands, and job insecurity can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Employers are increasingly realizing the importance of creating supportive environments, offering employee assistance programs, mental health days, and promoting open conversations around well-being.

Despite increased awareness, stigma around mental health continues to be a barrier. Many people hesitate to seek help for fear of being judged, misunderstood, or labeled as "weak." Public education campaigns, celebrity advocacy, and community initiatives are helping shift this narrative, but more work remains to be done. Normalizing conversations around mental health is key to creating a society where seeking help is seen as a strength, not a weakness.

Fortunately, mental health support is more accessible today than ever before. Online counseling platforms, teletherapy, mental wellness apps, and community centers offer resources for those seeking help. However, accessibility and affordability remain challenges in rural and underprivileged areas.

Let's end the scourge of Plastic Pollution

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Every year 5th of June is celebrated as the World Environment Day across the globe to mark the importance of nature and environment. It is the biggest international day for the environment. The major objective of the event is to create awareness on the protection of the nature and contemplate on growing environmental issues. The theme of 2025 World Environment Day is "Ending Global Plastic Pollution". On this day various government and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), individuals, communities, charities, institutions etc. create awareness on environmental issues. It is celebrated by organizing various seminars, webinars, lectures, conventions, campaigns, concerts, tree plantation, debates, essay writing, painting competitions etc. We can also celebrate the World Environment Day by organizing the digital media campaigns, by sending different videos, pictures, messages etc. through the Whatsapp, Facebook etc. The day is celebrated across the globe to tell the people that the nature should not be taken for granted and must be respected for its values. This event is led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and held annually since 1973, it has grown to be the largest global platform for environmental outreach.

Many drastic changes have occurred in the human life during the last half century and one of the most instantly observable is the abundance of plastic based products. Plastics continue to help society in innumerable ways but recently they are observed as environmental threats. Plastics are derived through reinforcing fillers, antioxidants with synthetic polymers and colourants. Plastics manufacturing require less energy as compared to metals and glass. Plastics meet large share of the modern society due to their low cost, light weight, high strength, environment stability, ease to carry etc. Plastics have imprints on environment and human health due to their hydrophobic and inert nature. Plastics disadvantages prevent them from becoming universal building block of human civilization.

Governments strictly control their use and impose laws governing their manufacture, disposal and recycling. Social need of plastics is well recognized and it is extremely difficult to select the alternatives of plastics.

Plastic is a necessary evil. It is estimated that every year the amount of disposed plastics can four times circle the earth. We can't live without plastics as every day we come across plastic in various forms such as bottles, grocery bags, food containers, computer keyboards, plastic mouse, coffee cup lids etc. It is startling to note that billions of tons of plastics are ending up in the oceans. Plastics take thousands of years to decay. Plastic is an incredibly useful material but it is made up of toxic compounds known to cause illness as it is non-biodegradable. Plastics negatively impact the natural environment and create problems for plants, wildlife and human beings. Plastics received social acceptance in 1600 BC. Ancient Mesoamericans firstly processed natural rubber into rubber bands, boots, coverings etc. Until 19th century man was relying on plastics, rubber and resins. The first plastic was developed by Belgium born American chemist Leo H. Baekeland called Bakelite. Alexander Parkes, a metallurgist from Birmingham developed man made plastic. Throughout his life he made lot of discoveries and secured 66 patents. In 1950 he produced flexible transparent material called as Parestine by blending Camphor and Nitrocellulose. Presently versatility of plastics has led to a great increase in their use. Environmentalists have denounced man made plastic as a long lasting pollutant which does not fully break down. It is very difficult to measure the pollution caused by the plastics.

There are more than 20 different types of plastics which cause pollution. Many parts of the world excessively use the plastics. The per capita consumption of plastics in India is 4%. It has been observed that the disposed plastics based consumer products and infrastructures are the major source of pollution from their manufacture. Plastic waste in big Indian cities averages just 50-

100gm/capita/day as compared to 1-2Kg in the Western world. In Delhi the highest plastic waste is piles as 690 tons/day. Generally, plastics are thrown away after the use but because they are durable, they persist in the environment. Improper disposal of plastic generates litters that drains into the rivers, streams and ultimately pollute the environment. Plastics laced with the chemicals are ingested by the animals that lead to infection and death. Polyolefin constitute the group of non-degradable plastics comprising low density polyethylene, high density polyethylene and polypropylene. They are used for the manufacturing of containers, bags and laminates. Their decomposition evolves carbon monoxide, furans, carbons and dioxins that cause the breathing problems. In order to incorporate certain characteristics several chemicals are added in the plastics. These are Bisphenol A, Phthalates, flame retardants etc. Styrene migrates significantly from polystyrene containers into containers contents when oily foods are heated in such containers. Styrofoam from tea cups, food containers and cutlery leaches styrene, an endocrine disrupter mimicking the female hormone estrogen and causes cancer, reproductive disorders, asthma and multiple organ damages. Their long time use causes ill effects on the nervous system and red blood cells. Antimony trioxide and Phthalate from Polyethylene terephthalate and Polyvinyl chloride affects the female hormone estrogen and allergies in the children. Cadmium leached from the plastic bags causes vomiting and heart enlargement. Lead exposure for long time causes degeneration of brain tissues.

Disposal of plastics through land filling evolves noxious additives, colorants and antioxidants are leached off from buried plastic waste that spread into groundwater and impose potential human health hazards. Contamination of plastics in the soil affects agricultural production. Thermal degradation of plastics releases noxious monomers, additives, halogenated hydrocarbons and oxides that adversely affect the human

health. The global plastic production and consumption have increased from the last five decades but their actual role as pollutants is uncertain. It is not certain that what level of exposure is caused by plastic waste and mechanism of their effect on human health is still not clear. Recycling of waste plastics can be done to reduce the hazardous impact on the environment. Recycling of the plastics helps to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Plastics picking and their recycling is an old business in India. Now this is a well-established urban-survival tactic in megacities that supports up to 0.5% of the poor population in many cities and saves the 10-15 per cent of the total waste management costs through the volume of plastic waste. Many small scale industries create job opportunities for many people for collection and recycling of plastic waste. Cottage industries recycling is still considered as unauthorized as the process often is done in closed doors and windows.

The jute or cloth bags can be promoted as the alternatives of plastics bags. It should be noted that in order to make paper bags we need to cut trees which ultimately can affect our lives. Toxic plastic such as polyvinyl chloride can be replaced with relatively less toxic polyethylene or metallocene polyolefin which have little effect on the environment. Biodegradable plastic bags can be used and advance research is required to develop biodegradable plastics. Bioplastics are biodegradable, non-petroleum in feedstock and supportive for farm sector. On this particular day, let us pledge to do whatever we can to do to protect our environment. We can avoid using our car on this day and save petrol and free the atmosphere from some pollution. We can recycle the papers and stop using plastic bags. We should make collective efforts to protect the environment. Proper legislation and the enhancement of ecological consciousness through education are the best ways to solve the problem of plastic pollution.

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Jammu-Srinagar Highway: A Lifeline in Crisis

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Highways are often regarded as the lifeline of a nation, enabling seamless movement of people and goods, and fostering economic growth. However, the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway (NH-44), particularly the stretch between Ramban and Banihal, tells a different story. This critical section has become notorious for its poor condition, frequent landslides, and routine closures - especially during the rainy season - causing immense hardship to commuters and disrupting connectivity in the region. The Jammu-Srinagar National Highway, one of the most crucial lifelines connecting the Kashmir Valley with the rest of the country, has unfortunately turned into a perilous route where tragic road accidents are becoming an all-too-frequent occurrence. On almost every alternate day, the newspapers report grievous incidents involving loss of life and property. The frequency of these mishaps has made this vital highway a corridor of sorrow and anguish for hundreds of families. It is not just a matter of news anymore; it is a burning issue that demands immediate and sincere intervention from the authorities. Thousands of vehicles, including trucks carrying essential supplies, buses with passengers, private cars, and commercial SUVs, ply this route every day. This constant movement underscores the strategic and economic importance of the highway. Yet, despite its significance, the condition of the road remains far from satisfactory. The stretch between Ramban and Banihal, in particular, is a cause for grave concern. The road surface is battered and broken in many areas, riddled with potholes, narrow curves, and makeshift repairs that cannot withstand even a brief spell of rain. For the drivers, every journey on this part of the highway is fraught with uncertainty, risk, and anxiety.

The geographical terrain of the Ramban-Banihal stretch only adds to the difficulty. Surrounded by steep hills, deep gorges, and fragile slopes, the region is naturally susceptible to landslides and shooting stones, especially during the monsoon and winter seasons. The menace of shooting stones has already claimed numerous lives, particularly of truck and bus drivers who brave these conditions every day to keep the supply chain moving. These unpredictable falling rocks descend from the hillsides



without warning, and in many cases, have led to instant fatalities. The authorities have not yet been able to implement effective long-term measures such as protective netting, slope stabilization, or early warning systems in these high-risk zones. In addition to the treacherous terrain and natural threats, human-made problems compound the crisis. The poor quality of construction, substandard materials used in repairs, and the lack of regular maintenance have left the highway vulnerable to fast deterioration. Despite several promises and multiple contracts awarded over the years, the pace of improvement remains dismal. Frequent halts due to repair work, landslides, or accidents result in massive traffic jams that stretch for kilometers. The travel time from Jammu to Srinagar, which was expected to decrease with ongoing infrastructure upgrades, has ironically increased due to persistent traffic jams, poor

road conditions, and the continued reliance on single-lane stretches. These jams are not just an inconvenience; they pose serious risks to the health and safety of travelers, who are often stranded for hours or even days without basic facilities like food, water, or medical help. During the rainy season, the situation becomes even worse. Continuous rainfall turns the road into a muddy and slippery trail, often causing complete closure of the highway for days together. The backlog created due to these closures leads to an unmanageable volume of traffic once the road is reopened, further escalating the chances of collisions and accidents. Emergency services often struggle to reach the sites in time due to congestion and lack of coordination. Ambulances, fire brigades, and police vehicles are often stuck in the same snarled traffic as civilians, rendering them ineffective when their assistance is needed the most.

One cannot ignore the psychological toll that this chaos takes on commuters. Drivers and passengers alike travel under constant stress, with many dreading the journey itself. Those who must use the road frequently, such as local traders, tourists, or patients seeking medical help in Jammu or Srinagar, often have to make difficult choices—either postpone travel plans or take the risk and hope to get through unscathed. Such uncertainty is unacceptable in the modern age, especially on a national highway of such immense significance. The government, both at the Union and State levels, must treat this issue with the urgency it deserves. There is a pressing need for comprehensive road audits to assess the condition of the entire stretch and identify the most vulnerable points. Technical experts must be involved to design and implement slope stabilization and rockfall protection systems. Advanced

monitoring tools such as real-time landslide detection systems, drone surveillance, and weather prediction models should be installed and integrated with traffic management protocols.

Moreover, the highway requires continuous and professionally managed maintenance rather than seasonal patchwork. Construction of tunnels, like the already operational Banihal-Qazigund tunnel, has shown that modern engineering can offer lasting solutions. Similar infrastructural innovations must be considered for other high-risk zones. Streamlining traffic management is another critical area. A central control system for managing vehicular flow, supported by live traffic updates, digital signboards, and dedicated traffic personnel, can greatly help in reducing bottlenecks and ensuring smoother transit. Public awareness is another key component. Drivers, especially those operating commercial vehicles, should undergo periodic training to handle high-altitude and slippery road conditions. Strict enforcement of traffic rules, particularly related to speed limits and vehicle fitness, is also essential. Vehicles in poor condition, overloaded trucks, or reckless driving must not be tolerated on such a delicate stretch of road.

The Jammu-Srinagar National Highway is more than just a road; it is the heartbeat of a region that depends on it for survival and connectivity. Its current condition, particularly the treacherous Ramban-Banihal stretch, reflects poorly on the infrastructure planning and disaster preparedness of the region. With every passing day and every accident reported, the cost of inaction grows higher - not just in terms of money but in lost lives and broken families. The road must not be allowed to remain a route of deaths. It is imperative that the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) takes immediate and decisive action to address this pressing issue. Expediting the four-laning project and prioritizing blacktopping of the damaged stretches can significantly improve travel conditions and ensure safer, uninterrupted connectivity. Timely execution and strict monitoring of work by contractors is not just a necessity - it's a responsibility that must be fulfilled to ease the suffering of thousands who rely on this vital highway every day.

Tracks to Tranquility: India's Soulful Odyssey from Katra to Kashmir

MAHADEEP SINGH JAMWAL

On a historic day that will forever be etched in the annals of Indian history, the first-ever train service from Katra to the Kashmir Valley was flagged off by the Honorable Prime Minister of India. The shrill whistle of the locomotive as it pierced the crisp Himalayan air did more than announce the departure of a train-it heralded the arrival of a new era. This was not merely a feat of engineering or transportation; it was a moment of national unification, of soul meeting soil, of Bharat embracing its crown with steel and spirit.

For decades, Jammu and Kashmir stood connected to the rest of the country more by emotion than infrastructure. The terrain was unforgiving, and the path through the Pir Panjal range-riddled with deep valleys, rugged peaks, and treacherous weather-posed monumental challenges. Despite these

hurdles, India remained undeterred in its resolve to bridge the gap, not just geographically but emotionally and psychologically. The railway link between Katra and Kashmir is the culmination of that determination.

The Katra station, already bustling with millions of pilgrims making their spiritual journey to the revered shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi, is now the starting point of another pilgrimage—a secular, nationalistic one. The journey from Katra to the snow-laden fields of Kashmir symbolizes the sacred thread that binds faith with fraternity and divinity with development. One of the most iconic landmarks of this railway line is the Chenab Bridge, an engineering marvel that stands taller than the Eiffel Tower. Rising 359 meters above the Chenab River, it is a bold assertion of India's technological prowess and the unshakable will to overcome the impossible. Designed to withstand

earthquakes, harsh winds, and the test of time, the bridge is not just a conduit for trains-it is a monument to national perseverance.

Each tunnel carved through the Pir Panjal range, each bridge laid across rushing rivers, and each station built amidst formidable terrain tells a story of grit, courage, and collaboration. These are not just elements of railway infrastructure—they are chapters in the epic of India's modern resurgence. For the people of Jammu and Kashmir, the train is more than a new means of transport—it is a lifeline. It brings with it the promise of access: to education, healthcare, markets, and opportunities that were once distant dreams. A student from Baramulla can now aspire to study in Delhi without the prohibitive burden of travel. A trader in Pulwama can reach clients in Amritsar, and a patient in Anantnag can receive timely treatment in

Jammu. The train narrows the distance that once isolated lives and livelihoods.

This link is not just a matter of logistics; it is an emotional bridge. It transforms the Kashmir Valley from a remote region to a connected contributor in India's collective journey. Every journey undertaken on this route now carries stories of pilgrims, soldiers, students, farmers, and families. Their lives, woven together on these tracks, narrate a single, unified story: India moves forward together.

The significance of this train goes beyond economics and convenience. It is a powerful expression of national integration. The route connects the spiritual capital of North India—Katra—with the cultural and natural paradise of Kashmir, bringing together elements of Hindu devotion and Sufi serenity. This is a manifestation of India's Ganga-Jamuni tezheeb—a syn-

cretic tradition where diversity does not divide but unites. The Katra-Kashmir railway is a powerful antidote to decades of alienation and conflict. It challenges old narratives of separation and isolation and replaces them with those of inclusion and unity. Tourists can now visit the Valley more easily, and Kashmiris can participate more fully in the national economy and culture. The movement of people and ideas is a catalyst for peace, understanding, and fraternity.

Flagging off this train was not just an act of inauguration—it was a declaration of intent. It reflected the vision of a leadership determined to include every inch of India in its development journey. What once appeared as a distant dream was transformed into reality through political will, bureaucratic resolve, and the collective strength of Indian engineers and workers. This is nation-building in its truest form—

where steel rails meet spiritual resolve, and where tunnels through mountains become passages through history.

Let future generations remember this day not merely as the launch of a train, but as the dawn of transformation. The Katra-Kashmir railway will be studied in textbooks not only for its technical triumphs but for its socio-political and emotional impact on the country. This is the story of India—resilient, inclusive, and forward-moving. This is the story of a whistle in the Himalayas that echoed through a billion hearts. It is the story of how a train became a bridge—not only across rivers and mountains but across cultures, communities, and consciousness. As this train snakes its way through the towering cliffs and misty valleys of the Himalayas, it carries a timeless truth: India is one. And united, it moves forward—toward tranquility, togetherness, and triumph.