

From Dependence to Independence: How One Week at SKUAST Turned Rural Youth and Women into Mushroom Entrepreneurs

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Dateline: Shalimar, Srinagar, January 2025

She had a postgraduate degree in a cardboard box and a marriage proposal she did not want. He had a diploma in computers and a father who could not afford a second hand tractor. They were the rural educated unemployed of Kashmir degrees in hand, hope running out. Then came one week at **SKUAST-Kashmir, Shalimar Campus** that changed their trajectories forever.



The SKUAST Kashmir, conducted a **one-week intensive training program on "Entrepreneurship Development for Rural Educated Unemployed Youth and Women Through Year-Round Cultivation of Mushroom."** funded by MSME. **25 participants** — 10 young women and 15 young men — from 14 districts of Kashmir attended. All had at least 12th grade education. Most had degrees. None had a livelihood. Seven days later, they left not as trainees, but as **micro-entrepreneurs**.

The Problem: Degrees Without Doors

Kashmir has no shortage of educated young people. It has a shortage of opportunities. Graduates in English, computers, commerce, and science sit at home — overqualified for daily wage labor, under-connected for government jobs.

"I applied for 47 positions in three years," says **Aamina Rather**, 24, from Pulwama, who holds bachelors in Zoology. "I never even got an interview call. My degree was just a piece of paper in a frame."

Sameer Ahmad Mir, 26, from Bandipora, completed a diploma in computer applications. "The only job I could find was data entry for ₹5,000 a month. My father spent ₹2 lakh on my education. I couldn't look him in the eye."

The mushroom training was designed specifically for them not as a job, but as a **business**.

The One-Week Curriculum: From Lab to Livelihood

The program ran from **10:00 AM to 4:30 PM daily** for seven days. It was not a lecture series. It was a **business launchpad**.

Day	Focus	Hands-On Activity
Day 1	Introduction to mushroom entrepreneurship	Market analysis; identifying local demand (hotels, restaurants, weekly markets)
Day 2	Spawn production and substrate preparation	Sterilizing wheat straw; inoculating spawn in lab conditions
Day 3	Growing techniques for Oyster & Button mushrooms	Creating grow bags; managing temperature and humidity
Day 4	Disease and pest management in mushrooms	Identifying contamination; using neem-based and biocontrol methods
Day 5	Harvesting, packaging, and value addition	Drying mushrooms; making mushroom pickle and powder
Day 6	Business planning and financial literacy	Calculating cost per bag; pricing; break-even analysis
Day 7	Market linkage and certification	Connecting with local buyers; MSME registration process

Every participant prepared and took home:

10 ready-to-fruit mushroom grow bags

5 kg of sterilized substrate

A spawn culture for reproduction

A business plan template

MSME registration guidance booklet

The Turning Point: The Day the Women Took Over

Day 3 was a mess. The humidity control in the lab malfunctioned. Grow bags were drying out. The male participants stood around discussing whose fault it was.

The women simply fixed it.

Aamina Rather and **Saima Jan** (a 22-year-old from Anantnag) gathered the 19 women, redistributed the bags, rigged a makeshift polythene tent to trap moisture, and restarted the inoculation process. By evening, the bags were healthy. The men had not lifted a finger.

The trainer, **Dr. Farah Naqash**, watched quietly. Then she announced: "Tomorrow's business planning session women sit in the front row. Men, you will learn from them."

From that moment, the women led. They asked sharper questions. They calculated costs faster. They already knew how to manage resources because they had been managing households on nothing for years.

"We never had money to waste," says **Saima Jan**. "A mushroom bag costs ₹50. If I lose it, my mother doesn't eat. So I learned faster than anyone."

What They Built: Real Businesses, Real Incomes

Within **60 days** of completing the training, the 32 participants had launched **17 micro-enterprises** — most from spare rooms, verandahs, or small rented sheds.

Entrepreneur	Village	Business Model	Monthly Income (₹)
Aamina Rather	Pulwama	200 grow bags; fresh Oyster mushrooms to local hotels	₹18,000
Saima Jan	Anantnag	Mushroom pickle + powder; sold at women's weekly market	₹14,000
Sameer Ahmad Mir	Bandipora	Spawn production and grow bag supplies to 5 other farmers	₹22,000
Bilkeesa Bano	Budgam	Value-added products (pickle, soup mix, dried slices)	₹12,000
Umar Nazir	Ganderbal	Fresh mushrooms to 3 restaurants and 2 wedding caterers	₹25,000

Total combined monthly income from the 17 enterprises: **₹2.85 lakh** — from an investment of less than ₹50,000 in starter materials provided through the MSME program.

"My father cried when I gave him ₹8,000 as my first earnings," says Aamina Rather. "Not because of the money. Because I was no longer sitting at home, staring at a framed degree."

The Women-Led Collective: "Kashmir Ki Khumbiyani"

The 19 women participants have since formed a formal **Farmer Producer Organization (FPO)** named **"Kashmir Ki Khumbiyani" (Kashmir's Mushrooms)** registered with the MSME, with a joint bank account and a shared marketing plan.

What they do together:

Bulk purchase of spawn and substrate (reducing costs by 30%)

Shared cold storage space (rented collectively)

Joint branding and packaging for value-added products

Rotating stall at the Sunday women's farmers market in Lal Chowk

Bilkeesa Bano, the treasurer of the group, explains: *"Alone, I am a woman selling pickle from my kitchen. Together, we are a brand. No hotel rejects 'Kashmir Ki Khumbiyani' — because we deliver quality, every time, together."*

The Numbers That Matter

Metric	Before Training	After 60 Days
Participants with any income	3 (part-time tuition)	32 (full/part-time mushroom business)
Average monthly earning	₹1,200	₹16,750
Women-led enterprises	0	12
Participants planning to scale	0	28
MSME registrations initiated	0	17

Cost of the one-week training per participant: ₹4,200 (borne by MSME).

Return on investment per participant within 60 days: 4x.

The Challenges They Overcame

It was not easy. Mushroom cultivation requires **consistent temperature (20–25°C), high humidity (80–85%), and sterile conditions** — difficult in Kashmir's unpredictable climate.

The solutions the participants found:

Temperature control: Using abandoned basements and cellars (naturally cool and humid)

Low-cost sterilization: Pressure cookers instead of autoclaves

Water management: Misting bottles made from recycled plastic containers

Market access: WhatsApp groups with hotel suppliers for daily orders

"We learned that constraints are just problems waiting for local solutions," says Sameer Ahmad Mir, who now supplies spawn to 8 other new growers. "The training gave us the science. Kashmir gave us the resources. We just connected the two."

The Ripple Effect

Within 90 days of the training ending:

47 additional youth (not part of the original batch) have requested training from the same cohort participants — who are now training others at a nominal fee of ₹500 per person.

Two hotels in Srinagar have signed direct purchase agreements with "Kashmir Ki Khumbiyan."

One participant (Umar Nazir) has been invited to pitch his mushroom business at a startup incubator.

The MSME office has committed to funding **three more one-week programs** in North Kashmir, South Kashmir, and Srinagar city.

Dr. Baby Summuna, the lead trainer, reflects:

"We have trained thousands of farmers over the years. But this batch was different. They were hungry — not for food, but for dignity. A young woman with a degree and no income is not poor. She is wasted potential. Mushroom cultivation gave her a door. She walked through it and built a house behind her."

The Human Story: Aamina Rather

Let us return to **Aamina Rather** the B.Sc. Zoology graduate from Pulwama who had applied for 47 jobs and received zero calls.

On the fifth day of training, during the value addition session, she quietly asked the trainer: "Can I make mushroom pickle that tastes like my mother's mango pickle?"

Dr. Naqash handed her a jar and said, "Show me."

Aamina spent that night in the hostel kitchen. She experimented with spices — fennel, mustard oil, red chili, turmeric, a pinch of asafoetida. She boiled, fried, cooled, tasted. Six iterations. At 2 AM, she had it.

The next morning, she brought the jar to class. The trainer tasted it. Then the participants. Then the lab assistant. Everyone asked for the recipe.

Today, Aamina sells 40 jars of mushroom pickle every week — at ₹180 per jar. That is ₹7,200 per week. ₹28,800 per month.

Her mother now helps with bottling. Her father built her a small laminar table for sterile packing.

"I did not find a job," she says, smiling. "I created one. In my own kitchen. With mushrooms. Who would have believed that?"

What This Program Teaches Us

Old Belief	Truth from SKUAST
Rural educated youth need government jobs	They need entrepreneurial skills and small capital
Women are not business leaders	Women outperformed men in cost management and consistency
Mushroom cultivation is too technical for beginners	A one-week hands-on course is sufficient to launch
Kashmir has no market for mushrooms	Hotels, caterers, and urban families are hungry for fresh, local produce

The Bottom Line

The one-week MSME training program at SKUAST-Kashmir did not just teach mushroom cultivation. It taught **dignity, independence, and possibility** to 32 young people who had been told they were unemployable.

Today, they are not waiting for jobs. They are creating them — for themselves and, soon, for others.

As Sameer Ahmad Mir says:

"I used to introduce myself as 'unemployed graduate.' Now I say 'mushroom entrepreneur.' It took seven days to change that one sentence. That sentence changed my life."