

# What UNESCO's 'Creative City' recognition means for Srinagar

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A boatman rows his shikara past a chinat tree during the autumn season, at Dal lake, in Srinagar, on Nov. 8, 2021, Photo by S. Irfan/ PTI

Srinagar, which has earned itself a place in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in the craft and folk art category, is the only city in India from a list of 49 worldwide to earn this honour this year.



Applications for the creative city tag are sought by UNESCO every year under seven categories—craft and folk art, media arts, film, design, gastronomy, literature and music. Launched in 2004, UCCN is aimed at promoting cooperation among member cities with the larger goal of sustainable urban development.

As of now, a total of 246 cities make up this network. The idea is to build cities that are resilient, sustainable and future-proof, thus supporting the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development at the local level.

In India, applications are routed through the Union ministry of culture. This year, Srinagar and Gwalior had applied to join the network. Only Srinagar could make it to the coveted list, drawing applause from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who called it a "fitting recognition of the vibrant cultural ethos of Srinagar".

Under the restoration and strengthening of livelihoods component of the World Bank-funded Jhelum Tawi Flood Recovery Project (JTFRP), the preparation of the dossier for the UCCN application started in 2018. A consultancy, INTACH-Drona JV, was hired for the purpose after undertaking a consultation process with all stakeholders, such as Srinagar's civic body, industries and commerce department, handicrafts department, and artisan/ trade bodies.

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JTFRP CEO Syed Abid Rasheed Shah said earnest efforts were being made since 2019 to bring Srinagar's arts and crafts on the international platform. He said it was because of J&K lieutenant governor Manoj Sinha's guidance that the unique recognition could be achieved.

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Srinagar's UCCN application in 2019 was not successful as only two cities are selected every year, says Iftikhar Hakim, director (planning and coordination), JTFRP. Accordingly, the dossier was redrafted and submitted by the Srinagar Municipal Corporation this year. "The hard work and perseverance of all stakeholders paid off, with Srinagar finally making it to the coveted list," says Hakim.

Since 2015, three Indian cities have been recognised as members of UCCN—Jaipur and Varanasi in 2015 and Chennai in 2017. No applications were invited in 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19. This year, Gwalior was recommended for music and Srinagar for crafts and folk arts.



Hakim says the recognition of Srinagar is acknowledgement of the World Bank's projects in the non-farm livelihood sector under which clusters for artisans in the handicrafts sector were developed. The inclusion of Srinagar in UCCN, according to him, has paved a way for the city to represent its handicrafts on the global stage through UNESCO.

Srinagar houses hundreds of artisan workshops in its lanes. Among them is Mohd Riyaz Mir, a Kashmir handicrafts businessman with outlets in the Valley and Gulf countries. He says the UCCN tag is true recognition of the skill and creativity of artisans. "These creative artisans, known for their work in Sozni embroidery, carpet weaving, paper mache, copper work, etc are the silent ambassadors of Kashmir. It will bring more recognition to our craft globally," he says.

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