



**From the
Hinter Land**

A town with railway cul

ASGHAR JAVED says that completion of various bypasses bridge in Khanewal will greatly relieve the pressure on the t

Located near medieval Multan, Khanewal comparatively is a recently founded town.

Its only claim to fame is that, it is an important destination on the map of Pakistan Railways. Busy Railway Junction, Railway Workshop, Pre-stressed Concrete Sleeper Factory and huge shunting yards have developed a sort of railway culture in this agricultural market town. National Highway also passes touching the town but people mostly use railways for travelling and transportation.

This area was a vast grazing land before the excavation of Lower Bari Doab Canal. As per the local lore, the grass from this land used to go as far as Burma during the Second World War. Travelling from Lahore to Khanewal on the National Highways, one still finds the forestland on the west of the highway and railway track (that are laid side by side). Legend has it that Dewan Sanwal Mal, famous Sikh governor of Multan appointed Farid Khan as an administrator in order to collect the grazing tax from the livestock owners who founded the town. The other story is that Daha tribe inhabited the area over 300 years ago. The hamlet was named 'Khan-e-wal' after Daha Khans. Canal Colony was established here in 1912. With the growth in population, the modern town was planed and set up in 16 blocks. Khanewal was declared district headquarters on July 1, 1985.

Strategic forestland – with wild bushy trees and thorny undergrowth – in the suburbs of the town is ideally suited for any industrial project. Rail and road communication network, main national arteries, web of 'farm to market roads' and airport in Multan are close at hand. Javed



Iqbal, a progressive farmer says, "food processing and packing plant should be installed in Khanewal with target markets of its products mix in Muslim world where presently the food trade is monopolised by countries like Australia, New Zealand or Holland." Iqbal has quite an interest in international marketing. He surprised me by telling that melons with neatly

trimmed stems sold in cardboard or wooden boxes can cost from 2,500 to 10,000 yen in Japan. "We have lot of quality fruit in Pakistan that could be marketed world wide as gift items. The national airliner has earned 3.5 million US Dollars by airlifting 4,000 tons (to Gulf, Middle East and United Kingdom) out of total 7,000 tons exportable mangoes produced in one season,"

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he said. Dynamic consumer and service oriented ideas!

Those who take their chance on the train to Khanewal have to muscle their way to this town through waves of tongas, rickshaws and animal drawn carts. And, that is the first taste (and smell) of the railway town, which is full of animal transport. But first they have to negotiate layers of persistent sellers who roam about on the railway station exhibiting their merchandise on shoulders – from baby garments from

Faisalabad to blue pottery from Multan. Over crowding, population increase, power outages and water shortages have all played their role in turning this small hamlet into a sprawling slum.

Animal transport is probably the most pervasive and correctable problem of Khanewal. The common means of transport in the town is sturdy and inexpensive tonga. It is Khanewal's vehicle of convenience, which has come to symbolise the town. The tongas (and rehras) move very slow and cannot keep pace with other traffic – hence cause traffic congestion on dilapidated roads where right of way has already been reduced due to excessive encroachments. The refuse of the horses and donkeys is a common cause of tautness and fill the atmosphere with offensive odour.

Sometime very young boys are also seen holding the reins of horses put before the tongas overloaded with passengers and goods. Accidents involving animals (untrained, wild, afraid horses or unwilling donkeys) are the commonest scenes on roads. Much more than tongas and rehras registered with municipality come from the suburbs to do the business

in the town every day.

"Tonga is the only business I can do," informed a Kochwan who started talking while bringing me to our destination down town. "I bring

schoolgirls from an adjoining village to the town and take them home after school. And, "during school hours I work at the Railway Station and bus terminal in the town. My incomes varies between three to seven hundred rupees a day," he added.

Situated on Karachi-Peshawar main rail and road national arteries, Khanewal has exponentially growing trade links with Faisalabad – a major cotton trade centre of Pakistan. Degree colleges (one for boys and another

for girls) in the town are playing important role in the education of the youth in the area.

A short walk in the town reveals the neglect of all concerned agencies. It seems that the town does not have a soul. Stadium is poorly maintained and hardly used. The whiff from open sewerage drain passing adjacent to the stadium is prevailing all around. Similarly the road passing in front of the mosque (between Block number 1 and Block number 2) remains full of mud and a bowl like locality Ghraib Abad Muhallah – over 125 years old, remains inundated even in dry seasons. And, a light shower plays havoc with the roads and streets in the town and water enters the houses.

So after the sweat, joy and frustration of the journey, what has the town to offer in terms of social life or culinary delights. Nothing really. Certainly, there are no operas, theatres and concerts nor was Khanewal ever famous for its cuisine. What it offers is down to earth and limited to the very basic. For your appetite, there are many eating joints serving Karahi Gosht with a rich splash of desi makhani though. People usually go to Multan for any 'celebration' or recreation. But the town is littered with private clinics and private schools – both proliferating professions anywhere in the country. You can see one at every corner.

The town has somewhat unruly character – very individualistic, very rustic, and very intimate; yet unpredictable. I developed my relationship with the town in early 1990s. I loved it in winter mornings. It is only in summers that it fidgeted, freaked and became moody. These days, lot of work seems to commence simultaneously in order to improve the infrastructure in the town, which will make the quality of life in the town better. Completion of various bypasses and overhead bridge will greatly relief the pressure on the town roads, as the heavy traffic will pass without entering the town. May be than it will be possible to set up an industrial area, which was once planned in Chicha Watni, but has yet not materialised. ■

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