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Supplies diminishing at Paan Gali

NEW Anarkali's Paan Gali, popular among the women for its wide range of Indian beauty aids and other products, is losing ground as a result of diminishing supplies due to the suspension of rail travel between Pakistan and India since Jan 1.

The Paan Gali traders, who have thrived for several years on the smuggled supplies of Indian goods by *khepias*, are now finding it quite hard, if not impossible, to maintain the past momentum of their business owing to falling supplies.

Traders report that their sales have drastically come down because of the short supplies of

the products that have long been in great demand.

Many traders are reported to have shifted to other markets while some are in the process of changing over to some other business. "Our business is going through its most depressed period because of the reduced supplies and fewer buyers," says a trader.

Zaheer Ansari, a local trader, said 90 per cent of the products sold by the Paan Gali shopkeepers before December used to be of Indian origin. But most of them are now selling local items. Since the ban on rail travel, he said, the share of these items had grown to 80-90 per cent.

Paan Gali has always been popular with women because of a wide variety of Indian products, including cosmetics, clothes, banarsi and cotton saris, artificial jewellery, toiletries, tonics, shoes, oil, etc. The bustle of the past years is no longer to be seen here.

India suspended air, rail, and bus travel with Pakistan for an indefinite period after a suicide attack on its parliament building in December last, blaming Pakistan for supporting the terrorists.

The suspension of rail travel between the two countries suddenly plugged a major source of cheap supplies to the Paan Gali.

Although, the traders say, the popular Indian items continue to flow into the country from Dubai, these have become a lot costlier. "High prices have deprived us of our competitive edge," says a trader.

The shopkeepers say the Indian goods have long been brought into the country via Dubai. But, they say, the products brought in through this route normally found their way on the shelves of the trendy departmental stores in the richer localities of the city.

"We always had an edge over them due to lower rates as the *khepias* supplying these goods to us did not have to pay customs

duties or to bear the high cost of transportation from Dubai to Lahore via Karachi. Now the situation has changed. We're getting supplies at higher rates. This has forced our retail prices to go up. Why should people from Model Town or Gulberg or, for that matter, any other distant part of the city travel to Paan Gali for purchasing something which is available at a nearby trendy and airconditioned store for the same price?," wondered an old shopkeeper.

Ansari said the government's decision to ban Indian TV channels on cable had also affected their sales.

As is apparent from its name,

Paan Gali was the main wholesale market of betel leaf and a variety of chewing tobacco some 15 years ago before it became a major market for Indian consumer goods.

There are around 50 shops in the gali. None of the traders is satisfied with the civic authorities as far as the provision of facilities such as sewerage, collection of solid waste or regular cleaning of the market is concerned.

"In the absence of any assistance from the civic agencies, the shopkeepers have made their own arrangements to take care of such problems," said a trader. — **TANIA QURESHI**

