

Abandoned Railway Station BhoeAsal –Reverberation from 1945

Abstract

This study observes the documentation of abandoned Railway stations of BhoeAsal, which once served several vicinities of Kasur District of Pakistan. Early twentieth century brought new means of transportation such as the increased population of motor cycles which is in easy access of people even in villages, new private and government bus services and cars and most of all improvements in roads. So for this reason railway could not live up to the expectations of its promoters due to increased fares and delayed arrivals of trains. Many rural stations were badly affected due to less number of passengers that generated an odd ratio in expenses and revenue. Increased amount of rail fares led to a rapid decline in passenger numbers when more convenient and less expensive forms of transport became available.

The trickle of railway closures is becoming greater than before and turning into a torrent. BhoeAsal station is also one out of those stations on Lahore-Sahiwal Section that are completely non operational. BhoeAsal station served the people of many surrounding area in the District of Kasur for 69 years. A station which served longer as one of the best provider of transportation is now a picture of displeasure for the residents of surrounding areas. It has turned into such a history that brings stress to the faces of people which once were privileged with it. Gradually the memory of such lost lines and stations is fading and this is important to remind people of their former existence.

Key Words: Abandoned, Dilapidated, Heritage lost, Negligence of State, Down Fall of Pakistan Railways.

Introduction

The railways are the real image of our country's factual situation. It was said that if you want to see Pakistan, see its railways and this notion came to us from the brilliant history of railways in country. Sir Henry Edward Frere conceived the idea of Railway Line in country and recommended Karachi to be Seaport in 1855. Survey for construction of Railway line started in 1858 and Railway line was proposed from Karachi to Kotri. First Railway line for public was opened on 13th May 1861 from Karachi to Kotri, a distance of 169kms. In 1897, line from Kimari to Kotri converted to double track. During British era most of the sections of Pakistan Railway were constructed. At the time of independence North Western Railway (NWR) was fabricated with 1,847 route miles in India and 5,048 route miles in Pakistan. Since 1954 Railway line tracks followed various developments, upgrading and changes. At present the route kilometer is 7791 and running track kilometer is 9092. ¹

At the time of partition many stations in the country were established in commercial point of view which increased in number with the passage of time. Nevertheless, at present a large numbers of stations are closed due to various reasons, mainly less number of passengers travelling from those stations is one reason, quoted by Railway Officials. And now Pakistan has hundreds of such railway stations that are closed. Unfortunately more and more stations are closing and Pakistan Railways is facing a fast decline. Decades of neglect has brought Pakistan Railways in a bad reputation. A number of locomotives that Pakistan Railways have are not in working condition. Trains get delayed and passengers get aggravated. Increase in train fare, delayed trains, insufficient facilities brought people nothing just disappointment and they protested several times, but nothing could fix the declining situation.

BhoehAsal station is also one out of those stations on Lahore-Sahiwal Section that are completely non operational. Various structures of this station have transformed into wreck in its present shape. It was established before partition in 1945 and was closed on 28th August 2014. BhoehAsal station served the people of many surrounding area in the District of Kasur for 69 years. It was established as a B-Class station equipped with every facility a station requires. A station which served longer as one of the best means of transportation is now a picture of displeasure for the residents of surrounding areas. It has turned into such a history that brings stress to the faces of people which once were privileged with it. The purpose of this research paper is to document features of structures of BhoehAsal station and related information. Station building is falling into pieces though it speaks a history that is not be forgotten.

Abandoned RailwayStation of BhoehAsal

BhoehAsal is a Union Council of Kasur District in the Punjab province of Pakistan. It is a town with all basic facilities and was once privileged with a Railway station as best means of transportation. It is situated on Lahore- Sahiwal-Karachi railway track and on Raiwind-Pattoki Road. There are two versions about the origin of BhoehAsal by the locals of that area. First, Bhoeh and Asal were two Sikh brothers and the settlement was developed on their name.² Second, bhoeh was the name of a Sikh and Asal was the known cast of J bradr who were Sikh by origin and later converted to Muslims, now known as Ju .

BhoehAsal railway station, when established, had all the facilities required by a B-Class station, including Station, Platform, Signal Cabin, Yard, Passenger Lounge (Mus f rKh na), Lamp Room, Points, Signals, and Gates. This station is situated among KotRadhaKishan and Changa Manga. It was established before partition with a single track, on Lahore-Sahiwal section in 1945, traffic on BhoehAsal station was terminated in 2012 and turned completely non operational on 28-08-2014.³ (Plate.1)



Plate.1 BhoelAsal, Town of Kasur District in Punjab, Pakistan.

In between Lahore-Sahiwal section there are 17 other stations including Lahore Cantt (6.13km), Walton (4.88km), Kotlakhpat (3.42km), Kana Kacha (7.31km), JiaBagga (8.56km), Raiwand (9.73km), Prem Nagar (7.84km), KotRadhaKishan (7.16km), BhoelAsal (7.66km), Changa Manga (8.14), Pattoki (12.77km), Sehjowal (7.84km), Habibabad (4.87km), RenalaKhurd (16.01km), Kissan (8.34km), Okara (8.72km), OkaraCantt (12.42km), Yousafwala (14.56km), Sahiwal (9.60km). According to these statistics Lahore-Sahiwal section has 165.96 km running track.⁴ Complete Sahiwal Section was war affected included BhoelAsal during 1971. Bomb blast on railway track near signal cabin damaged the track which was maintained later.⁵

According to the statistics of 2014, twenty stations were closed in Rawalpindi Division, eight in Multan Division, 57 in Karachi Division, 18 in Lahore Division, 30 in Sukkur Division, three in Peshawar Division whereas none was closed in Quetta Division. In Lahore Division closed stations include BhoelAsal, Sehjowal, Qadarabad, BastiQutab Shah, JankiChuttha, Jaranwala, Nishatabad, Srirampura, RayyaKhas, Maulviwala, Athalpur, Sahianwala, Janiwala, Chak Ibrahim Bhatti, KotMul Chand, Baddomalhi and Pejowali.⁶

From KotRadhaKisha, driving on Raiwand-Pattoki road approximately eight kilometers before Changa Manga, the road turns right for BhoelAsal. Following that road after a few meters one sees railway track. From that track 20-25 trains in a day pass without a stopover on that station. And those moments filled with displeasure recall the residents of that area, the days when they were privileged with traveling by trains.

Facing railway track, standing on that point looking at right side across railway line in east, one can see a traditional hand pump near a graveyard, opposite to that graveyard are a few more buildings, out of which the first one was a wailah (pinfold, an enclosure of cattle). Next to pinfold is a Civil Veterinary Dispensary, a few steps ahead is Jan z hg h (place for funereal prayer), and last building adjacent to Jan z hg h is Basic Health center working under Punjab Rural Services Program. (Plate.2)



Plate.2 Veterinary Hospital, Heath Center, Grave yard and Jan z hg h near Railway Track.

BhoehAsal station is a picture of despair and recklessness now. It was not a desolate place but once enjoyed good days. Distance of BhoehAsal Station from Kimari is 1156.53kms. Which once served people of 10 vicinities including Chak 18, Chak 17, Chak 15, Chak 14, Gandhi nOt , H k m SinghW la, Sajan Singh W la, M jh W la, PandatW la. Today residents of all these areas are suffering non availability of trains that used to be best transportation for long distances.⁷

Abaseen Express, Chiltan Express, Sakhi Abbas Express, Okara Express and Passenger Train used to stopover BhoehAsal. These trains facilitated longer residents of BhoehAsal but one by one, these trains finally terminated in 2012 and finally BhoehAsal Station was completely closed on 28th August 2014.⁸ Now many trains pass by this station but none stops there and the station building and other railways structures are facing decay. Most affected passengers of BhoehAsal were ones who were travelling for Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta. Passengers travelling within city opted travelling by road transportations which were taking small

amount of fares from passengers than rail. Locals opted to go by road due to the increase in railway fares and to save their time as well because none of the train were reaching on time which was a reason of frustration for travelers.⁹

BhoeAsal station was facilitated with a single line before partition when it was established. But the track is converted to broad gauge double line in 2012.¹⁰ We can also see a number of ET Masts with portals installed, that are fixed somewhere in between and also on both sides of tracks.

The doubling of track from Khaniwal to Raiwand (246kms) was approved by ECNEC on August 4, 2005. Work was commenced in the financial year 2005-6. The section from Khaniwal to Sahiwal (119km) was completed and opened for traffic on September 17, 2011. The section from Raiwand to BhoeAsal (22km) was completed and opened for traffic on September 12, 2012.¹¹ These statistics show that the station was closed earlier than the installation of double track.

The electric traction system between Lahore to Khaniwal was installed on single line in 1969 with a fleet of 29 Electric Locomotives which remained in operation up to October 2009. On launching of Doubling of Track Project from Khaniwal to Raiwand the operation of train with ET Locomotive was suspended. After completion of Doubling of Track Project between Khaniwal-Sahiwal the ET operation on single line was not possible, hence it was completely closed in November 2009.¹² Wireless ET Masts and portal of this project are now standing rusted on both sides of railway line showing a picture of desolation and telling a story of negligence and disregard.

Dilapidated structure of East Signal Cabin is another prominent structure standing alone across the railway lines.(Plate.3) In good days this signal cabin was equipped with mechanical interlocking system for TII. Traditionally designed signal cabin in two levels has reduced to rubble. Upper level windows and lower level ventilators are disappeared only the openings with tattered wooden frames in the walls witness their existence in the structure. Access to lower and upper level is from south side of the cabin. A 15 steps metal stair leads to the upper level that has lost half of its metal railing whereas entrance to the lower level room was once through a door which is now just an opening of 198cm x 91cm. Total constructed area of signal cabin from ground is 524cm x 433cm with an extended roof.

Structure of signal cabin is constructed with bricks, further painted with yellow and over layered additional with white wash. Chipped of paint clearly shows these layers. Main façade of signal cabin on eastern side shows written information about the station mentioning East Cabin BhoeAsal, Dec 1945, in one line and above this line is written TII which is the indication of Traffic Type. North western walls of the structure are symmetrically divided for windows and ventilators suggested by the existing openings, though the ventilators of west wall are filled with bricks perhaps to prevent from wind or dust to come from west.



Plate.3 Signal Cabin. Doors, Windows, Ventilators and Stairs.

Dilapidated condition of the building of signal cabin is putting a depressing impact on the visual amenity of its surroundings. Significant damage has occurred to exterior as well as interior of this structure. The wooden roof dividing whole space of cabin in two levels is completely disappeared. It may have been shifted to reuse for some other stations, stated by D.G. Vigilant, Captain Asif Ali. Further he stated, 'when a station is closed all the reusable items are taken off from the station or station building and either reused for other stations in

construction or repair works or sometimes deposited in the store for future demands.

Upper level of the signal cabin has two remains of old days when station was working. One, a fire place with a triangular concrete extension and the other is wooden ET phone board still hung on the north wall. The floor of upper cabin is always built with wooden logs within which mechanical interlocking system is fixed for function. These wooden logs can be easily replaced that is why the complete structure of the wooden floor has been removed from this cabin. Signal cabin is located, elevated and built in such a way that enables to have a good view of signal, points and lines from there. Signal post and bracketed Home signal can be clearly viewed from windows.

Another important feature of signal cabin that remains is a horizontally fixed steel beam in the east wall. This beam retains the load of walls above the running interlocking mechanism of point rodding that passes through an opening under this beam. The mechanical interlocking system is further attached with the railway lines for changing points. Levers of mechanical interlocking are operated from upper level and the rods run through lower level of signal cabin and pass through the wall on ground. That is why; lower level of signal cabin is kept clean so nothing disturbs the mechanism installed while operation.

A yard is passing in between signal cabin and railway lines. This yard was meant for, loading and unloading of railroad cars or locomotives. This yard has a crossing for keeping systematic stock stored off the mainline, so that they do not hinder the regular flow of traffic. This yard is now half hidden under the growth of wild grass. Track of yard holds wooden and metal sleepers that can be seen through the wild tufts of grass.

A very prominent feature of this station is existing remains of signal post standing left to signal cabin and adjacent to line. Signal post has lost the brightness of its paint which was once painted white from top to three meters above rail level. The post below is black according to rules.¹³ Height of this signal post is standard eight meters, whereas the fitting marks of deck board on post are one meter below top. Semaphore which once was controlled through the point bolting mechanism is also disappeared from this signal post. Now remains of cables are hanging with signal post. Bracketed Home signal has also lost its parts including deck board and semaphores. Remains of outer signal of BhoeAsal are 402 meters (1,320ft) from Home signal..

Karachi to Lahore double track passes by BhoeAsal and the Condition of track structure is good. Track lines are fastened with sleepers by using various coach screws included nut bolt and latest spring locks. Sleepers of the yard, at different intervals are fastened by spikes. Two dissimilar kinds of screws are also used in the fastening of track. One kind is with hexagonal nut and bolt and the other with latest spring locks. These both kinds of screws are used in the installation of Broad Gauge Double Track from Karachi to Lahore. Existing railway tracks at BhoeAsal do not only provide a variety of screws but also provide variety of sleepers that were used in the installation of tracks at various times. Old Yard track is fixed with wooden and metal sleepers whereas main Karachi to Lahore broad gauge double track is fixed with Pre-stressed Concrete

(PSC) Mono Block Sleepers. Some spare concrete sleepers are kept beside railway line close to station building that is very often required for maintenance of track, to replace with damaged ones. These sleepers are also used by the residents of Bhoehasal for different purposes. These sleepers are used by people as seats to sit under the shade of tree and relax. On same site a bull was also tied with a sleeper because due to its heavy weight bull cannot drag it.

Pakistan Railways own, five concrete sleepers factories located at Sukkur, Khaniwal, KohatCantt, Shahinabad and Kotri. The factory at Sukkur was established in 1967, first in the Sub-Continent. Other four factories came up in 1979-80. Factory at Sukkur and Khaniwal are manufacturing Pre-stressed Concrete (PSC) Mono Block Sleepers while CSF/Kohat-Cantt is manufacturing Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) Twin Block Sleepers.¹⁴

Standing on this railway line, facing east at a distance of few meters is the raised platform with a historical station building. This platform is approximately one meter high from the ground. Platform on the sides can be accessed by a slope and is paved with grey and red tuff tiles set in a geometrical pattern. This pattern is designed in long vertical lines following the length of the platform. Pattern is followed by regular intervals with a setting of two vertical and two horizontal tiles fixed together in each line. Colour and pattern both give elegance to the appearance of this platform which is built on an elevated space. An interesting feature of this platform is bell post painted in black and white. Hanging hook of this post is still fixed though the bell is missing. These traditional bells on railway stations were meant for communication in between railway staff following specific coding system. Station masters used such bells to convey messages to cabin man, door guards and sometimes to passengers about the arrival and departure of the trains. Nowadays this communication is done telephonically. Platform still gives fresh look in comparison of other structures. It seems as not much time has passed this platform was renovated with modern tuff tiles.

In the center of the platform exists historical station building with five rooms according to their function. (Plate.4) These rooms are accessed through a veranda of five round arches. Right side arch is set on walls on both sides rather pillars. The width of walls is used for benches constructed with bricks. Veranda is divided by a wall in between booking office and waiting room generating enough space on both sides to construct benches with walls. Level of the station building is eight centimeter raised from the level of platform. The total area of station building is 16 x9 meters. Like other B-Class stations, Bhoehasal station building is comprised of station master room, assistant station master room, store or parcel room, booking or ticket collection room and waiting room. Facing station building room on the extreme right was waiting room. Next to that was booking office. Next to booking office the room is divided into two sections these sections were meant for the booking of luggage and parcels. And the room on left end was the room of station master.¹⁵ Façade of the station shows two texts written in black on white washed surface. One text mentioning the name of the station, Bhoehasal in Urdu and English and TI,¹⁶ whilst the other mentioning VTP (vision testing point). Both of these are mandatory information provided in every station.



Plate.4 BhoelAsal Station Building..

Interior of all the rooms is in dreadful condition due to the damages occurred with negligence and by removing items, from the structures. Some of the windows and doors are missing from these rooms. Decrepit condition of these rooms is telling a story of its memorable past. Window of booking office and a wooden projection (may be a shelf) fixed with wall in same room narrates the story of its past.

On the left end of the station building is an extended structure of toilet. It has one door facing south and a ventilator in the wall facing north. Toilet is facilitated with a well planned sewerage system. Drain from toilet is falling in a gutter from where another drain letting the water goes out from gutter into main drain. A water spout from the roof of this toilet is also falling in same main drain. Outside to toilet is fixed a hand pump which is out of order now and many of its parts are missing. Defacement and damages have turned the whole structure of station building in the state of desolation.

A few meters from station building towards south stands the ramshackle lamp room (batt gaud m). Like other structures of station door and windows of lamp room also have been removed. Roof is also broken down perhaps to get iron rods of lintel. It is constructed on traditional pattern, comprised of two sections. One section was store and other workshop for the maintenance of lights. This structure is completely devastated. .

At a distance of few meters behind lamp room are standing ruins of passenger's lounge. It is a conventional British red brick construction, with arches and arched windows, now surrounded by residential houses. Passenger's lounge is not facing station building; rather access to its rooms is from other side. Structure is completely frayed, standing without roof with crisply falling bricks that have lost their binding grip. The remains of this awe-inspiring structure suggest the presence of three sections with extended arched shelters in front of each entrance. These shelters may have provided shade to passengers. Facing the entrance side first section on right side is forming space of room with two arched windows, out

of which one is closed and one open. Next section is another room like enclosure with one window which is open. While the last section is comparatively larger in size with four windows out of which one is open and the rest of the windows are closed by filling with bricks. Open area in front of lounge is transformed in a pinfold (wailah) where many wooden mangers are kept and some buffalos are tied under tree. The whole structure of this passenger's lounge is dangerously breaking down. Besides this structure a hand pump is installed which is still in order and people still availing the facility of water from this pump. Regardless of the dilapidated condition of this structure, it still looks eye-catching due to its red brick work and style of construction.

Decades old bricks are good in quality but such precious material is going waste. When a station is closed most of the reusable items are removed and taken to other places or deposited in store for further demands. But, sometimes to move the construction material such as bricks, tuff tiles etc the transportation cost more than the cost of material. So most of such materials disappear either by the process of decay or taken by residents for their use.¹⁷

A little distant from passenger's lounge is another building, strangely built with an enclosure that has main entrance in south, developing a compound. Entrance from main façade is from north side, opposite to the main entrance. This building is comprised of two rooms accessed from a small corridor. Above this corridor are nine ventilators at a height where they are touching the extended lintel of the roof that looks like shade over these openings. Adjacent to these rooms is an open veranda facing east. Like all other structures of this station this building is also in decrepit condition.

Wonderfully constricted structures of such closed stations are turning to ruins. Not only BhoehAsal station, hundreds and hundreds stations are facing same fate. These are important heritage sites that belong to unforgettable history of this country. Rather leaving them to decay this valuable heritage should be preserved or used for new productive projects. As closed stations now fall within the realms of archaeology so to preserve them is important before they completely disappear from this land.

Conclusion

Several abandoned railway lines and stations in Pakistan have turned to history. Many totally closed and some relocated on new suitable locations. Railway stations rapidly closing since last few decades, sometime of them totally disappeared and some turned into historical sites.

Early twentieth century brought new means of transportation such as the increased population of motor cycles which is in easy access of people even in villages, new private and government bus services and cars and most of all improvements in roads. So for this reason railway could not live up to the expectations of its promoters due to increased fares and delayed arrivals. Many rural stations were badly affected due to less number of passengers that generated an odd ratio in expenses and revenue. Increased amount of rail fares led to a rapid decline in passenger numbers when more convenient and less expensive forms of transport became available.

The trickle of railway closures is becoming greater than before and turning into a torrent due to the negligence of concerned authorities that are responsible for the development of this department. Gradually the memory of such lost lines and stations is fading and this is important to remind people of their former existence.

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- ¹⁶ TI and TII are kind of traffic which is controlled from the point where it is written. BhoehAsal signal cabin controls TII whereas station controls TI.
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