

# Canals: the cultural icons of agricultural Pakistan

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Pakistan is basically an agricultural country - a land of exceptional environmental, cultural and biological diversity. There is the Makran coast line with beautiful beaches, Thar and Cholistan deserts with rare fauna and flora, the fertile Sindh and Punjab plains and northern areas with the world's second highest Himalayan peak K-2. Pakistan is also home to some of the largest glaciers outside the polar region.

**R**ains are less than 100 mm in lower Sindh to more than 700mm in the northern areas and temperatures as high as 50c in some parts of Sind or Baluchistan and as low as minus 30c in some northern areas. The four provinces of Pakistan namely Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan and Frontier have different languages and cultures but an excellent network of canals amalgamates them.

More than forty canals originate from the

rivers Indus, Kabul, Jehlum, Chenab, Ravi and Sutlej. They form the primary irrigation system and are vital signs and cultural icons of agricultural Pakistan. Water logging, salinity, floods and lowering of the water table are serious problems, which in some way or another are related to surface water sources: canals therefore sometimes have a great impact on the prosperity of the areas through which they flow.

Most of the Pakistani population is rural and

the canal network in these areas plays a vital role, like an arterial system. Areas in the immediate vicinity of canals are well irrigated hence more prosperous while the tail enders are less privileged. Villages are therefore more frequently located on either side of the canals. There are a number of bridges on the canals but they are insufficient to cater to the needs of each village. A makeshift boat bridge is at times devised for this purpose. Sometimes a cable ▶



is tied with tree trunks on the two banks of a canal and a boatman helps the villagers to cross with their families, bicycles and some gifts for exchange. This boat plays an important role in the day to day village life and very often shares the colorful and happy moments with the people crossing from both sides to attend marriage ceremonies or festivals. Occasionally however an overloaded boat overturns into a tragedy. The banks of the canals are covered with a number of herbs, shrubs and trees the most common being grasses, reeds and Acacia trees which yield Gum Acacia (also known as gum Arabic) as exudate. Canals are an exclusive habitat for wild life like the protected Blind Dolphin of Sind River, which at times escapes into the smaller canals. Turbines, on some canals generate electricity. Villagers enjoy swimming in canals which, in addition to their primary objective of irrigation, serve as a source of happiness in rustic life. Canal water is also used by villagers as a coolant for cold drinks or sometimes to cool seasonal fruits like water melon or mangoes.

A road along the bank of a canal flowing right through the center of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province is named "Marry Anne Schimmel Road" after the great German scholar. She is known for her dedicated studies on the national philosopher poet, Allama Iqbal. The banks of this canal have flower beds of rainbow colours, full of incomparable fragrance - an unforgettable sight in spring. Vast stretches of wheat, cotton or canola crops which can be seen along the canals are the fruits of their silent but persistent flow throughout the country. ■

