

POLITICS, INTERVENTION AND RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SHEKHAWATI REGION

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research paper is to explore the aspects of politics, intervention and resistance and to throw light on the political scenario of the eighteenth century Shekhawati Region, Rajasthan. This paper attempts to discuss the constant struggle which took place between Shekhawats Rajput and the outer forces mainly for the establishment of supremacy in the region of Shekhawati. The present study also endeavours to show the historical character of Shekhawats and importance of their main holding Shekhawati in the history of eighteenth century India. The present paper which is based on my M.Phil Research, mainly deals with the eighteenth century Shekhawati, particularly in the context of interventions laid by the some existing and new rival powers and in return resistance from the Shekhawats to defend their territory and political interests. The respective paper also seeks to explore and examine the changes which took place in the sphere of politics in particular region during this respective century.

Key Words: *Shekhawats, nature of politics, changes in political scenario, intervention, resistance and policy of defence.*

INTRODUCTION

The weakness and declining process of the Mughal Empire, which had begun during the early eighteenth century, closely affected the balance of politics and power structures in Rajasthan like other parts of India.¹ During the eve of Mughal decline, some peculiar changes took place such as taking assignments or Jagirs became unpopular and difficult to collect revenue for its assignees. The decay of central authority necessarily strengthened the local chiefs and Zamindars in Rajasthan, they carved out several small principalities and struggling with each other to enhance and strength their power and position.² The Zamindars or chiefs used to pay

tribute for one or two years then discontinued, this condition led to the Mughals intervention in Rajasthan from time to time.

In such case, Shekhawati region of Rajasthan was no exception to this. The political events and circumstances of the Eighteenth century Indian history which is characterized as a transition phase and marked by the political diversity and the rise of regional politics also affected this region like other parts of Rajasthan. It was an eventful period in the history of Shekhawati particularly in the context of politics. The Shekhawati region reflects very complex and complicated political atmosphere during this respective century. It was the period, when lots of political events and activities were

going on in this region such as the displacement of Kayamkhanis and Nagad Pathans by Shekhawats from the political scene of region. The Sekhawats Rajput who had clan affinity and blood relation with the Kachhawaha ruling family of Jaipur state, emerged as a dominant power in all over Shekhawati. This was the time, when Mughal Emperor's hold getting weakened from this region and Jaipur state trying to hold control over it. There was intervention, resistance and struggle between the internal and external forces.

Along with, there was a bitter dispute over the rights and status between Jaipur rulers and Shekhawats. Amber rulers and the Shekhawats were engaged into the bitter dispute over their rights, status and authority.³ Since the origin of numerous Thikanas in the eighteenth century Shekhawati and subsequent events such as rise of Kacchwaha ruler Sawai Jaisingh, Maratha intervention and beginning of British paramountcy in Rajputana framed a background of conflict. The period of eighteenth century also remarks the rise of several Thikanas in Shekhawati along with the emergence of numerous individual chiefs called Thikanedars.⁴ At this juncture, during this crucial phase of the Indian history, Shekhawati region was standing between the some existing powers like Mughals, Amber rulers and some of the new rival powers like Maratha, Jats, Pindaris and British so on, and the whole Shekhawati region was under the control of Shekhawats. Thus a knock of struggles, interventions and resistance began for establishing the dominance and supremacy in the region. Hence in this succeeding paper, it will be crucial to highlight that what forms of politics, intervention and resistance was prevalent in the region during the respective century and more important how Shekhawats defended their territory and political interests in this complex and complicated political atmosphere.

ASPECTS OF POLITICS IN SHEKHAWATI

If we look carefully at political scenario of the eighteenth century Shekhawati, one may find that

the politics of this region was passing through a transition phase. As the Kayamkhanis Nawab, who were ruling over the Fatehpur-Jhunjhunu of Shekhawati since the reign of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq were defeated and displaced by Shekhawats in 1731 AD. Other hand, Nagad-Pathans Nawab also known as Afghan Pathan, were ruling over the Narhar-Shekhawati since the reign of Sultan Bahlol Lodhi, were conquered by Shekhawats in 1732 AD.⁵ By this more than two hundred years of Kayamkhanis Nawabi from the Fatehpur-Jhunjhunu and long standing local domination of Nagad-Pathans from the Narhar came to end and whole Shekhawati region passed into the hands of Shekhawats.

The political conversion from Kayamkhanis and Nagad-Pathans to Shekhawats rule, reflects the beginning of a new era and an important phase in the political history of Shekhawati, which brought this region under the single dominant power of Shekhawats, before it, this region was divided into the several small holdings between the different Rajput clans. The displacement of Kyamkhanis and Afghan Pathans from the certain parts of the Shekhawati and the establishment of Shekhawats rule over it may be characterized as a rise of regional power and politics. The territorial acquisition of Kayamkhanis based Fatehpur-Jhunjhunu by Shekhawats also may be characterized as a clan-conquest of this area and shifting of politics from one clan to another. There are some divergent views regarding the conquest of Fatehpur, Jhunjhunu, Narhar and defeat of Kyamkhanis and Nagad Pathans by Shekhawats.⁶ However, strengths and abilities of the Shekhawats cannot be denied, which brought them on top and made them single dominant power in all over Shekhawati. Through the influence of time and space, Shekhawats and their descendants established themselves in all over Shekhawati and made strong forts, organized army, officials to strength their position.

Let us to examine the nature of politics under Shekhawats, as Col. James Tod refers to Shekhawati as a confederation or union of Shekhawats which emerged from the Amber state.

Through the influence of time and space attained its power and consideration almost equivalent to the parent state. James Tod remarks that it had no written laws, neither a permanent federation nor any visible or recognised head, just it runs through a sense of common interests.⁷ However, it should not be supposed that there was no any political system found in Shekhawati confederation. Many other writers have thrown sufficient light on the administrative system and nature of politics under Shekhawats. However, it has been noticed that there was no uniform political or administrative system in all Thikanas of Shekhawati, they reflect great diversity such as some bigger Thikanas used to maintained their army, retainers, police, officials, customs, exercise and judicial system while the smaller Thikanas were not do the same. As the head of Thikanas, Thikanedars handled the criminal and judicial affairs through their private decisions. Subsequently, a court was established in Jhujhunu and Khetri for the political and judicial purposes.⁸

Perhaps the politics was more federal, cooperative and something centralized during the reign of some powerful Shekhawat chiefs like Shiv Singh and Shardul Singh but after them politics of Shekhawats gradually reflects the nature of disintegration and decentralization. As after death of Shardul Singh Shekhawat in 1742 AD, his estate was divided and shared out between his five surviving sons. The division of estates amongst the Shekhawats kinsmen and the estates which they inherited jointly known as "Panchpana".⁹ Such estates division reflects the emergence of the notion of "share politics" in Shekhawati. The division of estates on the principle of equal sharing was also known as "bhai-bant" in Rajasthan. As under the practice of bhai-bant system, areas conquered by kiths of Rajput rulers became their own seats and in return they obliged to rendered service to their heads.¹⁰ The system of bhai-bant has some parallels in early practises of territorial sharing, which usually played great role behind the growth of kingdom in size. Unlike the other Rajput rulers, Shekhawats did not follow the rule of primogeniture in the affair of succession. They shifted away from the more

common practice that of inheritance share through the rule of primogeniture. On the contrary, Shekhawats distributed their estates amongst their sons equally. This condition led to the emergence of numerous small and big estates called Thikanas in Shekhawati.¹¹ It also led to the process of balkanization and fragmentation of politics which gave space to the neighbouring powers to take advantage of it.¹²

The existence of numerous Thikanas and individual chiefs called Thikanedars also led to the rise of internal conflicts and confrontation among the Shekhawats. Thikanas holders even fought to each other for enhancing their powers and territories. Here we can include the notion of "might is right" which was occasionally functioning in the sphere of politics. However, the division also ensured that each one will care about the common interests, it has been noticed that they fought jointly at various occasion against the outsiders and there was a strong brotherhood among them which gave a birth of Panchpana federation.¹³ The Shekhawats adopted the some short of the splendour of Mughal court, they used to held Darbar in their splendid Diwan-i-Khas in Havelis. The Shekhawats also adopted the administrative and revenue system of the Mughals. They used to maintained the retainers, police post, custom posts and courts.¹⁴ Perhaps, feudalism was an integral part of the social life in Shekhawati which also affected the politics and power structure of region. The feudalism in Shekhawati, functioned as an overriding political-administrative system, along with social and economic formation underpinning the institution of castes and groups.¹⁵ The feudal mode of social relation as a dominant force also guided the political life. Here, we can trace the continuity of past social formation and semi-feudalism in the sphere of politics.

FORMS OF INTERVENTION AND RESISTANCE

Geographically and strategically Shekhawati region has always been in a sensitive position. It was close

to the imperial capital, served as a buffer zone between Delhi, Bikaner, Nagaur and Jaipur so on and also this region considered as an opening gate of Rajasthan. Abul Fazl in Ain-i-Akbari and some other scholars have shown in their studies that Shekhawati region was very famous and rich for its natural resources from the early times. Khetri, Babai, Sighana and Udaipur were the copper mines areas while Revasa, Didwana and Sambhar lakes were very famous for the salt productions in Shekhawati.¹⁶ Undoubtedly, this condition led to flourish the political activities towards it and became a centre of attraction for the outsiders and neighbouring powers to intervene and capture over it. Other hand, the powerful existence of Shekhawats and their refusal of tribute payment also brought this region under the zealous notice of supreme powers. The constant intervention led by Jaipur state, Mughals, Pindaris and frequently monetary demand by Marathas badly affected the economy and political condition of region.¹⁷

During the eighteenth century, series of interference in the affair of Shekhawati took place, more formidable intervention by Sawai Jaisingh in affair of Khandela in 1718 AD.¹⁸ Subsequently, an intervention led by Jaipur state in 1734 AD, when Jaipur state officials reached at Jhunjhunu to establish a custom post and police station, in return Shekhawat's resistance took place. Jaipur state officials were sent back by the agents of Shardul Singh Shekhawats, with claiming that this area belongs to us and we will collect the custom duties from here.¹⁹ The internal conflict and enmity among the Shekhawats also proved harmful and brought Jaipur Maharaja's interference in the affairs of Shekhawati. It is more evident during the reign of Amber ruler Sawai Jaisingh, when Udaisingh of Khandela attacked on Manoharpura in 1727 AD. Even during a expedition led by Devi Singh of Sikar in neighboring territory of his Shekhawats kinsmen brought the intervention of Jaipur state on board. Thus Sawai Jaisingh ascertains some short of his supremacy over Shekhawats and made them tributaries. It was the result of internal strife, conflicts and family dispute among the Shekhawats,

which gave an opportunity to Sawai Jaisingh to pursue the matter.²⁰

After Sawai Jaisingh's death the political scenario just changed rapidly, due to gradual decline in central power of the Jaipur state, from then and onwards Jaipur Maharaja's intervention in Shekhawati almost came to an over. However, the little bit of interference from Jaipur rulers was still there but Shekhawats had enough ability to handle the situation and to defend their territory from them. Shekhawats did not used to pay tribute regularly, when Maharaja Jagat Singh sent an agent for the collection of tribute arrears. Then agent was insulted and sent back by Narsinghdas Shekhawat of Khandela. After it Jaipur state sent an army expedition to Shekhawati. This time Shekhawats assembled and a battle took place at Fatehpur resulted in heavy casualties on both sides.²¹ In 1802 AD, when Jaipur state forces attacked on Bissau, combined forces of Shekhawats attacked back and successfully repelled them and Nabir Khan, commander of the Jaipur forces was killed.²² Thus the Jaipur state always tried to make control over Shekhawati throughout the century but never got success. Amir Khan Pindaris, during the reign of Maharaja Jagat Singh attacked on Jaipur and also made inroad to Shekhawati, Shekhawats took stand against them and saved their territory. When Rao Mitra Sen Ahir of Rewari attacked on Shekhawati in 1775 AD, then he was defeated by Shekhawats under the command of Devi Singh. Kayamkhanis with the help of some Baluchis and Sindhis attacked on Fatehpur and took the possession over it but very soon Fatehpur was recaptured by Shekhawats.²³

The Mughals intervention in Rajasthan as well as in Shekhawati should be consider as some peculiar changes which took place shortly after the death of Mughal emperor Auranzeb like taking assignments-Jagirs became less beneficial and due to gradual decline in central authority revenue collection become much difficult task. The Rajput chiefs could not be brought under the effective control, some of them paid revenues to Mughals for one or two year then discontinued.²⁴ This condition led to the Mughals intervention inroad into the affair

of Rajputana. Whatever, the revenues secured from them by Mughals only on the behalf of force intervention and military expedition, such as from the Shekhawats. Mostly intervention came from the Mughals in the region of Shekhawati was just for the collection of revenues or tribute arrears from Shekhawats.

The powerful existence and growing influence of the Shekhawats also brought them under the zealous notice of Mughals. When Shiv Singh Shekhawat of Sikar made a fort and palace in 1724 AD also fortified the growing town and constructed a defensive wall called "Shahar-i-Panah". Soon after, he was asked by the Mughal imperial command to dismantle the fort and defensive city wall with the acquisition of involvement in robbery of wealthy Agra merchants and using ill gotten activities on his constructions. Then Shiv Singh shouts for gathering his Shekhawats kinsmen to fight against the Mughal army. Amber rulers Sawai Jaisingh's intervention defuse the situation of war and fight was averted.²⁵ In 1774 AD, an imperial expedition sent by Mughal emperor Shah Alam-II under the command of Najaf Quli Khan to recover the arrears from Shekhawati. Col. James Tod remarks that all Shekhawat chieftains who refused to comply with the demand of Najaf Quli Khan retain in captive. They were released, when agreed to pay their share of tribute arrears. However, Shekhawats had no intention to pay tribute arrear hence a battle took place between Mughal army and joint forces of Shekhawats at Madan in 1775 AD. In this battle Shekhawat forces fought bravely and both sides suffered badly. From Mughals Side, Pir Khan died in battle and Merta Sen fled away from the battle field.²⁶ Wazir Najaf Quli Khan set his last wave to establish Mughal Supremacy in Rajputana and also made inroad to Shekhawati in 1778, but he was defeated by Shekhawats. After that Shekhawats faced another imperial expedition under the command of Murtaza Khan to collect the arrears. Shekhawats assembled under the command of Devi Singh, a battle took place at Khatu-Shyamji in 1780 AD, resulted in both sides suffering more discomfort for the Mughals by and large Shekhawats remained

victorious. Wazir Najaf Quli Khan died in 1778 AD and Mirza Najaf Khan died in 1782 AD, with this last hope of the revival of Mughal supremacy and its intervention disappeared from Shekhawati.²⁷

MARATHA INTERVENTION AND POLICY OF DEFENCE

In fact, the history of Maratha penetrations into Rajasthan from 1737 to 1818 reflects the feature of constant raids, ruthless plundering, exorbitant exactions and interference in the internal affairs of Rajput rulers. It is realized that from beginning to end of the Maratha power all was not well with the political and economic condition of Rajasthan.²⁸ Maratha intervention badly affected the political, economic and financial condition of Rajput rulers. Shortly after Sawai Jaisingh's death, dispute over the succession between Ishwari Singh and Madho Singh brought Maratha intervention into the Jaipur territory.²⁹ In this way, Shekhawati region also came into the contact of Maratha upheaval. The Maratha freebooters and their acts of plundering and frequently monetary demands badly affected the economy of Shekhawati. During the gradual decline of central authority, Maratha subjected the Jaipur state to lump-sum tribute and also included to Shekhawati for tribute payments. The Maratha intervention in Shekhawati and their frequently monetary demands created big problem for Shekhawats to fulfill this demand and more important to save the territory from them.

The weak successors of Sawai Jaisingh became helpless and unable to handle the Maratha. As Jaipur state wrote to Sikar Thikana that "I can't help you, you must do the best, as you can for yourself". Therefore, Shekhawats had to deal directly with Maratha. Sikar including other Thikanas of Shekhawati for a time directly paid tribute to Maratha.³⁰ Before this Shekhawats used to pay tribute to Jaipur state mainly for the protection from foreign invasions. Shekhawats on the accounts of connection with Jaipur Maharaja Sawai Jaisingh indeed enjoyed protection from Maratha raids but after him the weakness and inability of Jaipur rulers

enforced them to come forward and deal directly. Strategically, Shekhawats also joined the party with Rajput rulers against Maratha. They fought bravely with Jaipur rulers against the Maratha at various occasions such as in the battle of Bagru and Chastu.³¹ In the battle of Bagru in 1748, Shiv Singh Shekhawat with the collaboration of Jaipur Maharaja Ishwari Singh fought bravely against Maratha, he wounded badly and died very soon.³²

After crushing defeat of Maratha at the third battle of Panipat by Ahmad Shah Abdali, an attempt was made by the Jaipur ruler Madho Singh to reject the Maratha suzerainty but Maratha regained their power very soon and he was forced to pay 25 lakhs as a penalty.³³ Maratha succeeded more firmly and also realized heavy tribute from the Shekhawats. Approximately, more than 4,50,000 rupees collected by Maratha from Shekhaawats, which caused economic ruin of Shekhawati.³⁴ On the account of Maharaja Pratap Singh's default in tribute payment, Maratha leader Sindhia marched against him. Then Shekhawats came forward to help out, a battle took place in 1787 AD at Tonga, Maratha force severely routed by the joint forces. Very soon they faced another Maratha threats at the battle of Merta in 1790.³⁵ Soon after the battle of Merta, Maratha entered into Shekhawati and attacked on Babai, which was completely devastated and in defence 80 Shekhawats scarified their lives. After that Maratha advanced to Khandela and started negotiation for settlement with Shekhawats but it remained unsolved. Inder Singh Shekhawat of Khandela attacked on Maratha but he was killed with his followers.³⁶ Subsequently, Maratha also proceeded to Udaipurwati and committed many barbarous acts. After the four days of havoc they left it in a ruined condition. Then Maratha marched against the Shekhawats of Jhunjhunu, Singhana and Khetri.³⁷ In this course, some Shekhawat chiefs left their estates to save themselves but after sometimes they return back when situation become normal. Many Shekhawats chiefs performed hand-to-hand battle with Maratha and many of them scarified their lives in defence of their territories.

To avoid the Maratha upheaval, Shekhawats sometimes paid heavy tribute, fought jointly with other Rajput rulers and performed hand to hand battles. Subsequently, they also came forward to make alliance with British because they knew very well that without a powerful support, Maratha could not be expelled from Rajputana. On the other hand, British policy to exclude the Maratha from Rajputana and established themselves strongly in all over India was more important. Therefore, British Government came forward to bring Rajput rulers in a subsidiary alliance and also made separate agreement with Shekhawat Chiefs. Abhay Singh Shekhawat developed a friendly relationship with the British and helped them in coming expeditions.³⁸ By the combined efforts of British and Rajput chiefs, the Maratha chapter succeeded to close and finally ended in coming few years.

CONCLUSION

Hence, in the end, the above discussion made in this paper clearly indicates towards a complex and very complicated political atmosphere in the tract of Shekhawati during the period of study. The fiscal demands, tributes and territorial interests of the some existing and new rival powers formed the background of intervention and resistance. Due to the series of interventions led by Amber rulers, Mughals, Pindaris and Maratha, the politics of this region became more chaotic and instable. However, Shekhawats all time maintained their powerful existence in the tract of Shekhawati through their constant struggle, resistance and performance of wars. It is significant to mention that Shekhawats maintained their existence strongly by facing their counterparts successfully. Shekhawats played both defensive and attacking role. Such as sometimes they took defensive approach, fought bravely with performance of power, offered great resistance and sometimes they solved the problem through negotiations and agreements. They also paid tributes and services to Mughals, Jaipur rulers and also fulfilled the fiscal demands of Maratha. But it should not be only considered that Shekhawats were weak and helpless. It was a part of their strategy which

was running behind to save the territory and political interests from the contemporary supreme powers. That should be also considered as the impact of contemporary political scenario, which enforced them to take different stands and more important to realize that circumstances in which Shekhawats rule was functioning, struggling and facing ups and down.

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