

# TRADE, MERCHANTS AND THIKANEDARS: REVISITING THE ECONOMY OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SHEKHAWATI

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to discuss the economic condition of eighteenth century Shekhawati particularly in the context of trade, merchants and Thikanedars. This paper formally attempts to throw light on the trade scenario, nexus between merchants and Thikanedars along with their role in the economy of respective region. In recent few years, regional studies have attained the several scholarly attentions particularly in the terms of economic history. There are several preliminary studies about the regional economy with the varied assumptions and approaches. In this case, Shekhawati region of Rajasthan is not exception to this, due to its dual geographical nature and other existing reasons during the respective century, there is almost a similar perception among the scholars that this region was not favourable for the trade and merchants activities. Mostly scholars have only underlined the economic negativity while positive sides of region have been missed out. In this regard, succeeding paper primarily concern to present the reasonable economic features of eighteenth century Shekhawati by analyzing the negative and positive aspects of region. The present study is based on my M.Phil Research, also endeavours to show the economic importance of Shekhawati in the history of India along with seeks to explore and examine the changes which took place in the sphere of regional economy.*

**Key Words:** *Shekhawati Region, trade scenario, role of merchant class, nexus between merchants and Thikanedars, development and changes in economy.*

## INTRODUCTION

A regional study of trade and merchants activity must begin by placing the region within the context of its natural resources and geographical position. The geographical condition of any region creates both barriers and opportunities and always plays crucial role behind the economic development. No region could develop on the lines, contrary to what

its natural resources and geographical condition permit. Hence, the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan cannot be exception to this. Shekhawati derived its name from Rao Shekha, Kachhwaha clan of Rajput<sup>1</sup> located in north-eastern part of Rajasthan constitutes the modern districts of Sikar and Jhunjhunu.<sup>2</sup> It has a unique history which considered as an opening gate for Rajasthan.<sup>3</sup> Generally, it is argued that Shekhawati region of Rajasthan with its dual geographical features characterised as a semi-

arid zone was not favourable for the trade and commercial activities. It is also argued that Shekhawati chiefs called Thikanedars directly or indirectly involved into the robbing activities, the traders or merchants usually robbed in this region.<sup>4</sup> The various kind of commercial taxes imposed on the traders, which were oppressive and unfavourable for the merchants and trade activities. This was the reason behind lacking of trade activities and also causes of the merchant class migration from this region.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, need to re-examine the above statements and revisit the contemporary economic scenario of Shekhawati region which is prime objective of this paper.

The political stability and instability also play crucial role behind the smooth functioning or disruption of trade and commerce in any region. During the eighteenth century, due to instable political atmosphere and constant interventions led by Maratha, agriculture and trade was badly affected. The frequently and oppressive demands of tribute by Maratha from Rajput chiefs and Merchants all was not well with the economy of Rajasthan.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it is said that Marathas activity did not posed much harm to the growth of trade and regional economy in Rajasthan. Some scholars have given details about the efforts made by different Rajput chiefs to boost the economy of their respective regions. On the eve of weakness and breakdown of Mughal central authority local Rajput chiefs practically became independent in their respective regions and they were willing to promote the trade and merchant activities particularly in the view of their personal economic interests.<sup>7</sup> In desert parts, state's income from the agricultural produce was not so meaningful therefore, Rajput chiefs were interested in searching of alternative base for income and wanted to balance their expenditures through the commercial taxes.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, they invited merchants to promote the trade practices in their respective territories. Undoubtedly, this step helped to the growth of trade practices in different parts of Rajasthan. Hence, in these contradictory arguments mainly centre around the disruption or growth of

trade and regional economy in eighteenth century Rajasthan, an attempt has been made in this succeeding paper to highlight the features of trade, role of merchant class along with their nexus with Thikanedars to understand the economic life of Shekhawati region during the period under review.

## TRADE SCENARIO IN SHEKHAWATI REGION

The prehistoric origin of Bagad-Shekhawati region of Rajasthan and its links with the Indus Valley Civilization even through the trade connectivity cannot be denied. The Ganeshwar and Kalibanga connection with Khetri and substantial use of copper tools indicates that copper was supplied to the Indus valley sites from the copper mines of Khetri-Nim Ka Thana belt of Shekhawati. The copper deposits of Khetri was within the easy reach of Indus valley people, trade activity and copper industry was well developed in region from the Harappan period.<sup>9</sup> Many historians like K.C Jain refers to some places of Shekhawati as ancient cities, pilgrimage centres and mint towns where trade and commercial activity was on.<sup>10</sup> Bagad-Shekhawati was very famous for its natural resources from the ancient period as it is said that copper was excavated from Khetri in Maurya period and even during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar.<sup>11</sup> The Ain-i-Akbari clearly refers that Babai, Singhana, Udaipur and Khetri were the copper mines and mints areas.<sup>12</sup> There were Taxals in Khetri, Babai and Singhana even up to the 1869 AD, when they closed by the British government. The lake of Revasa was famous for the salt production.<sup>13</sup>

As far as concern about the period of study, it is admitted that due to the political instability, semi-arid geographical position, feudalistic natures of Thikanedars and merchant class migration, Shekhawati was not favourable for the growth of trade and commerce. Thomas A. Timberg has emphasized the large scale merchant class migration from Rajasthan mostly from Shekhawati on the basis of oppressive laws, unfavourable political atmosphere, heavy and crudest form of taxation, worse climate condition, unattractive barren fields

and dearth of opportunity<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that number of migrated merchants from Shekhawati to the different parts of country was twice than the number of merchants stayed at homeland.<sup>15</sup> Ashin Das Gupta has analyzed it in a different perspective, particularly in the context of changes in contemporary politics and economic scenario.<sup>16</sup> It must be carefully born in mind that large scale of migration from Rajasthan as well as from Shekhawati may be true only about the nineteenth century. The rapid migration is more evident during the nineteenth century because of railway line construction between Delhi to Calcutta in 1860 AD.<sup>17</sup> However, the migration was not permanent in every case that was mostly in the nature of semi-permanent, periodic, short-term and fixed term.<sup>18</sup> During the eighteenth century, trend of merchant class migration was quite reverse and have several references which indicate that traders from the different parts of country also came to Rajasthan for the business affairs.<sup>19</sup> The merchants migrated from Shekhawati to all over India mainly in the view of expanding their business and to gain more profits. Many of them preferred to stay at homeland and used to send their agents in projected cities to see their business affairs. The movements of merchant class from one place to another remained a general phenomenon in eighteenth century Rajasthan, they established themselves at different places where could find better shelter and security particularly in the time of trouble.<sup>20</sup> Mostly migration was related to the better livelihood and other reasons were also responsible such as invitation by Rajput chiefs on the behalf of various facilities and concessions in taxes. For example, Bikaner Raja Surat Singh invited Mirzamal a famous merchant of Ramgarh-Shekhawati.<sup>21</sup> Shekhawati chiefs were not different they also followed the policy of inviting merchants for the trade practices. Devi Singh Shekhawat invited some prominent merchants of the age among them a famous Poddar merchant family took shelter in Ramgarh .<sup>22</sup>

It is assumed that Jats, Pindaris and more formidable Maratha upheavals devastated the economy of Shekhawati region and led traders to

leave it. Many scholars have shown in their studies that Maratha upheaval did not posed much harm to the growth of trade in Rajasthan, that case was not entirely different in Shekhawati. It is also admitted that displacement of Kayamkhanis by Shekhawats from the political scene of region led to the deprivation of some merchants from their role as estate officials.<sup>23</sup> The famous Marwari merchants known across the country for trade and commercial practices became more prominent during the eighteenth century onwards were closely connected with the Shekhawati. Apart from it, Birlas, Poddars, Agarwals and Maheshwari merchant families also rooted with the tract of Shekhawati.<sup>24</sup> The ancestors of Birlas, famous industrialist house of today were Kamdars in Surajgarh Thikana of Shekhawati.<sup>25</sup> The Kamdars or Mutsaddi were synonym of the state officials, several merchants participated in the administration of Shekhawati Thikanas as Modi and Diwan.<sup>26</sup>

As the matter of robbing activities is concerned, Shekhawati region was not exception in Rajasthan. If traders were harassed in the tract of Shekhawati by the act of robbing and plundering that cannot be denied. There were also the anti-social elements like other parts of Rajputana, who involved into the robbing activities. As traders of Pali with their camels loaded goods way to Rajgarh-Bikaner were looted near Nawalgarh-Shekhawati, then Jodhpur court wrote to Thakur Nawal Singh for recovering the goods from robbers.<sup>27</sup> In desert parts of Rajasthan, there were various nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of rebellions attitudes who always posed challenges to the safety of traders. Apart from it, inter-state wars and exploitation by local chiefs also discouraged the traders to avoid the routes which passed through the desert region.<sup>28</sup> The heavy and crudest form of taxation is concerned, Shekhawati was not exception even this mater. Several commercial taxes like Zakat and Rahdari realized by the Shekhawati Thikanedars seems to have been levied at a conventional rate in every villages through which trading goods used to pass.<sup>29</sup> If we look at other parts of Rajasthan find that Raja Surat Singh of Bikaner collected Zakat tax from

traders by increasing it 3 % to 8 %.<sup>30</sup> The excessive fiscal policy necessarily proved harmful for the inter-regional trade activity. The commercial taxes levied by the Shekhawati Thikanedars seem not more excessive than realized by the other Rajput rulers.

During the respective century, certain parts of Shekhawati like Fatehpur, Jhunjhunu and Singhana were under the Kayamkhanis rule. These were the great centres for the mercantile population, many merchants used to bear the title of Jhunjhunwala, Singhaniya and Fatahpuriya respectively. The Shekhawat chiefs and their counterparts Kayamkhanis Nawab both competing to each other in offering various facilities, protection and concession in taxes to the merchant class.<sup>31</sup> Over the time and influence, this competition resulted into a mercantile influx towards the Shekhawati region. Even after the displacement of Kayamkhanis by Shekhawats from the political scene of region, this mercantile influx remained crucial towards it. Shekhawati for its natural resources mainly in the context of minerals always remained a great centre of attraction for the neighbouring powers and even for the traders. Perhaps, one reason for the adventurousness of mercantile community towards the tract of Shekhawati was to explore the some new markets. Due to prevalence of share politics and equal division of estates, region remained divided into the several political holdings. The emergence of numerous individual Thikanedars with their large and small estates led to the growth of several mini-towns in Shekhawati. Such mini-towns served the economy of region as market places, where inter-regional trade practices also took place.<sup>32</sup> In addition the existence of multiple estates with separate administrative units meant that establishment of several new towns. As historians and sociologists have noted that the establishment of new towns, invitation of rich merchants and their service as bankers necessarily helped to the growth of local economy and the development of local as well as long distance trade. It is significant to state that mostly towns emerged and developed in Shekhawati region during the eighteenth century. Shiv Singh of Sikar fortified the growing town and

constructed a defensive city wall called “Shahar-i-Panah”. Devi Singh founded the Devgarh fort and town of Ramgarh famously known as the “Ramgarh of Merchants”. Thakur Nawal Singh established the town of Nawalgarh, like this some other towns also developed in respective region accompanied by the special invitation of merchant class.<sup>33</sup> The growing towns gradually developed as the important trade centres which remained a positive sign for the development of regional economy.

## TRADE, MARKETS AND PRODUCTION

A study of trade cannot be separated from the importance of trade routes, markets, agricultural and industrial production. The trade, agriculture and industries are interlinked with the each other, the progress of one depend upon the other.<sup>34</sup> Like other parts of Rajasthan agriculture was a chief occupation for the people of Shekhawati. Due to its dual geographical nature, there was great variation in the agricultural production however both Kharif and Rabi crops along with tobacco, opium, groundnut, vegetables and fruits grown sufficiently.<sup>35</sup> The availability of various kinds of trees provide gum as well as woods for the furniture, making carts and farming tools.<sup>36</sup> By and large, agricultural produces fulfilled the need of several crafts and cottage industrial works to flourish in the region. It must be carefully born in mind that due to diverse geographical feature, erratic rainfall, hilly and sandy semi-arid zone Shekhawati produced food grains in such abundance that was hardly in condition of export. The agricultural production, whatever cultivated in the region was probably sufficient to meet the local demand. However, some important articles and food grains which were inadequate to fulfil the local need used to import from the neighbouring regions. Agriculture, animal husbandry, industry and trade remained important segments of the economic life of Shekhawati during the Nababi and Thikanas rules. The people from different castes and classes were engaged in to the export and import trade. The group of people with camels loaded salt travelled to Hisar, Panipat, Sonipat, Patiala, Narnaul, Rewari and Delhi for selling. On the

return, they took gur, sugar and other items used to sale in villages. Apart from it, they used to visit Pushkar cattle fair for the cattle trades.<sup>37</sup>

Shekhawati region with its rich natural resources had played very significant role in both internal and external trade of the Rajasthan. Khetri, Babai, Singhan and Udaipur were the copper mines and mints areas.<sup>38</sup> The copper production at Khetri mine remained very significant throughout the respective century and copper often used to export outside Rajasthan. The copper industry was an important source of income and employment for the people of Shekhawati.<sup>39</sup> Beside the copper, other important minerals like niccale, cobalt, uranium, glass, iron, lime stone, alum, iron ore, sulphate, building stone and woods were found in region had substantial used in the craft and industrial works.<sup>40</sup> In the context of minerals, Shekhawati region occupied an important place in Rajasthan from the very early times. The salt and copper were most important minerals, Revasa, Didwana, Pitampuri, Sambhar lakes were very famous for the salt production.<sup>41</sup> The Banjaras broadly involved in the export and import trade were main instrument to carry salt from these lakes to the different adjoining regions.<sup>42</sup> There were Taxals in Khetri, Babai, Udaipur and Singhana of Shekhawati since the Mughal period, copper coins minting was on even during the Thikana period. Jarshahi and Madhopuri were famous coinages. The various traders were associated with the mining and supply of copper. The copper mines and mints remained great source of income for the region. The people from different castes and class associated with several works had a great contribution in economic life of region, produced several articles for the daily use. It seems that production from agriculture, crafts and industries in Shekhawati was largely associated with the domestic need and in some degree also engaged to meet the demands of neighbouring regions.

In Rajasthan, the fairs were organized at several places throughout the year with special invitation of merchants. The merchants of Shekhawati used to attend the fairs at different places. For example, merchants of Jhunjhunu and

Fatehpur were invited to attend the fairs at Kapardara.<sup>43</sup> In the annual fair at Mundawa near Nagaur, the merchants from Fatehpur, Nawalgarh, Churu, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Bhilwara etc were invited to participate with their merchandise goods.<sup>44</sup> In Shekhawati, various fairs were organized periodically around the religious places. Some of the important fairs like Shitla Mata, Jin Mata, Khatu Shyamji, Gangour and Gogaji were very famous. These religious places were not only the pilgrimage centres also were the local markets, where traders and people from the different regions assembled for the sale and purchasing. In periodically and annual fairs of Shekhawati, various rich merchants particularly Vaishyas and Thikanedars also used to visit frequently.<sup>45</sup> Probably, Thikanedars of that area where fairs were held played significant role in organizing, providing facilities and protection to the traders. On the other hand, the donations of merchant class helped in the growth of more organized fairs around the religious places which became main base for the fulfilment of local demands as well as consumption of the local manufactured goods. Undoubtedly, such types of fairs in Shekhawati helped to the growth of local economy and served the people demand what they desired.

Trade through different parts of the Rajasthan was facilitated by its favourable geographical position connected with the Punjab, Gujarat, Malwa, Delhi, Agra and Sindh-Multan.<sup>46</sup> The mercantile goods were transported through the bullock and camel carts. The camels known as the "ship of the desert" had extensive used in transportation of goods from one place to another.<sup>47</sup> It is also notable that the similar types of transport facilities were not suitable for all parts of Rajasthan due to diverse geographical features. In desert parts, camels were the most dependable and convenient means of transport.<sup>48</sup> There is no separate information available regarding the trade routes and means of transport for the Shekhawati region, oxen and mostly camels were used for the journey as well as for the transport. During the study of period little attention was paid by the Thikanedars

for the development of roads and transport system. There were several trade routes existed in Rajasthan since the early medieval period connecting all important towns and commercial centres.<sup>49</sup> From the available records it can be inferred that Shekhawati region was directly and indirectly connected with the different parts of Rajasthan through different trade routes.<sup>50</sup> Shekhawati remained an important link between the some commercial centres situated at Delhi, Nagaur, Bhiwani, Pali, Rajgarh, Jalor, Sirohi, Churu, Jodhpur, Jaipur, Sindh-Multan and Ahmedabad. The main items of export from the Shekhawati towns were the common salt, grain, wool, leather, wood, stone and minerals. There were approximately twelve towns in Shekhawati as main trading centres. The merchants mainly Baniyas of this region were involved in the trade professions. The traders of Shekhawati used to carry salt from Sambhar, Didwan and Rewasa lakes to sell at Delhi and other neighbouring regions. On the return, they took some commodities from there like Gur, Shakar, Khad and used to sell them in different parts of region.<sup>51</sup> However, due to the limited local demands the graph of trade activities remained smaller.

## MERCHANTS AND THIKANEDARS

Several scholars have emphasized the role of merchant class in the economic life of Rajasthan along with the nexus between Rajput rulers and merchants particularly in the view of their mutual interests. The close nexus or relation between them often remained crucial and very beneficial for the both parties. Here, in some pages an attempt has been made to highlight the role and importance of merchants in the economic life of Shekhawati and their linkages with the Thikanedars. In Shekhawati, both Kayamkhanis Nawab and Shekhawat rulers competed with each other to offering various facilities, protection and concession in taxes to the merchants. Over the time and influences, this competitive step may have resulted in the mercantile influx towards the region. The partial or full exemption in taxes attracted the merchants of the different regions towards the region. In this

process, Goenkas came to Dundlod, Poddar merchant family of Churu came to settle in Ramgarh.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently since the origins of several Thikanas along with emergence of numerous individual Thikanedars in Shekhawati also led to the continuation of this process.<sup>53</sup>

Thikanedars were willing to promote trade and merchants activity in their respective Thikanas, however it was closely associated with the personal economic interests. Apart from it, in semi-desert region Shekhawati income from the agricultural produce was not so meaningful. Therefore, Shekhawati Thikanedars were much interested in searching of a new source for income in the form of commercial taxes. In this course, like other Rajput rulers they also followed the policy of inviting merchants to settle down and trade through their respective territories. Shiv Singh Shekhawat made forts and palaces in Sikar, fortified the towns and constructed a defensive wall called 'Shahar-i-Panah'. Subsequently, Devi Singh founded town of Ramgarh known as 'Ramgarh of the merchants' and invited the prominent merchants of the age to settle down. In this course, Poddars merchant family took the residence there.<sup>54</sup> Such steps inevitably encouraged the movement of merchants and development of commercial practices in Shekhawati. The settled merchants in the different parts of region involved in the internal and external trade as well as in banking and money-lending services. The settled merchants served as the bankers to the local landed people and Thikanedars. To meet the revenue demand and for the agricultural works, peasantry had to depend upon the Mahajans. They often used to borrow money from the Mahajans for the payment of taxes.<sup>55</sup> The main function of Mahajans or money-lenders was to provide loans to peasants for their agricultural works which helped to the growth of local economy.

The widening gap between incomes and expenditures of the Rajput rulers was also an important reason for their constant indebtedness and financial dependency over the merchant class.<sup>56</sup> There were various wealthy merchants in Shekhawati, engaged in the banking services like

money-lending, money transfer and exchange. Among them Purohiths and Poddars were very famous bankers used to provide financial assistance to Thikanedars. They often provided large sum of money to Kaymkhanis Nawab for the payment of army salary. It is evident that Skhekhawat chief Shiv Singh took the financial assistance from the bankers of Jaipur during the organization of his expedition against the Kaymkhanis.<sup>57</sup> Thikanedars of Bissau got 400000 rupees in gift from the merchant of Calcutta on his visit. It is estimated that almost half 1.5 million rupees budget of the Sikar Thikana was met by the donation of merchant class.<sup>58</sup> All these reflect that merchants had great contribution in the economic affairs of Shekhawati Thikanas. The number of merchants also associated with the administrative affair of Thikanas. Many merchants served as administrative officials named Modi and Diwan.<sup>59</sup> When Nawalgarh was established by Thakur Nawal Singh in 1737 AD, numerous merchants were employed in the service of respective Thikana as agents.<sup>60</sup> It is also evident that the ancestors of Birlas were Kamdars (Mutsaddi-Officials) in Surajgarh Thikana. The famous merchant Poddars were the treasurers in Fatehpur Thikana.<sup>61</sup> Above facts clearly indicate that merchants had active participation also in the administrative affairs of Thikanas. The extra and maximum expenses of Thikanedars than their incomes made them more dependable upon the merchants. Thikanedars often used to borrow money or loan from the Mahajans to fulfil the gap between incomes and expenditures. This condition inevitably increased the importance of merchants and also shaped their close linkages with Thikanedars.

The merchants played very significant role in the local economy as well as in the administration of Shekhawati Thikanas. They helped in the growth of local economy as well as in the development of capital economy in Shekhawati. The merchants who went to the different parts of country to established their business but always remained connected with their homeland. It is a very famous idiom about the merchants of Shekhawati that "Log lota-dori lekar ghar se nikale the aur Karorpati bankar ghar

laute".<sup>129</sup> Merchants used to visit their homeland frequently from time to time and also invested their valuable wealth in villages which laid to the economic development of Shekhawati. On the other hand, Thikanedars also played vital role in the growth of local economy several land grants made by them to Charan, Bhats and religious places which were free from the taxes. They invited the traders to settle down in their respective Thikanas. They invested their capital in public welfare works and constructed several wells which were useful for the irrigation and agriculture. The number of estates and towns founded by them became base for the local markets as well as centres for the internal and external trade. During the respective century, numerous towns, forts, palaces, temples, Chhatris, tombs and wells were constructed under the patronage of Thikanedars with the active collaboration of merchant class. By and large, all these works helped to the development of regional economy.

It is very clear that both merchants and Thikanedars played vital role in the economic affair of Shekhawati. The merchants-Thikanedars relationship or nexus between them seems very fruitful for the both parties. The interaction between them remained very crucial in shaping of their mutual interests. The Shekhawati Thikanedar's policy facilitated the favourable space for the merchant class and gave them opportunity to entre in the economic and administrative affairs of Thikanas. In this process both merchants and Thikanedars benefited to each other. Thikanedars protected the interests of merchants by inviting and granting them various facilities along with concession in taxes. These favours and involvement of merchants in the administration of Thikanas considerably enhanced their power, position and prestige. On the other hand, merchants became an important financial instrument for the Thikanedars of Shekhawati. Hence, the mutual exchange of beneficial interests and close nexus between them remained an important theme.

## CONCLUSION

The forgoing analysis in this paper reveals almost a clear picture of trade and regional economy. Several arguments advocate about the lack of trade and merchants activities in the tract of Shekhawati. Despite of it, this study provides several instances to prove that trade and merchant activity was prevalent in region during the respective period. From our study it is also evident that Shekhawati region has played very significant role in both internal and external trade of Rajasthan from the very early times which remained also crucial during the eighteenth century. Shekhawati region for its rich natural resources remained a great centre of attraction for the neighbouring powers and also for the traders. Mostly towns were established in region during the eighteenth century. Agricultural based economy was not so meaningful in region therefore Shekhawati Thikanedars followed the policy of inviting reach merchants especially to promote the trade and commercial activity. The settled merchants served the region as bankers and helped to the development of capital economy. There was close nexus between the merchants and Thikanedars mainly based upon the mutual interests. The favours and patronage policy of Thikanedars brought active participation of merchants in economy and administrative affairs of region. Much of economic prosperity of region was due to the active participation of Marwari merchants through trade and banking services. However, the volume of trade in Shekhawati region remained very small and moderate being largely associated with the local needs and demands. It is reasonable to conclude that despite of several obstacles, trade and merchant activities considerably flourished in the respective region and finally resulted in the changes and development of local economy.

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