

Peasant Struggles in Shekhawati in the Early Twentieth Century*

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This work has been published earlier in [Swaminathan and Rawal \(eds.\) \(2015\), Socio-Economic Surveys of Two Villages in Rajasthan: A Study of Agrarian Relations, Tulika Books, New Delhi.](#)

Jagirdari System in Shekhawati

The Jagirdari system originated in Rajputana in the medieval period as a system of military control and administration of the Rajput states. By the early twentieth century, the Jagirdari system of Jaipur state, of which Shekhawati was a part, had evolved into an extremely complex system of land administration. Land was divided between jagir (or thikana) and khalsa lands. Jagirs were awarded to Rajput military chiefs, who administered it relatively autonomously, in return for payment of revenue and provision of military services to Jaipur state.¹ Jaipur principality and big Jagirdars kept some land directly under their control, on which they determined the rates of revenue and collected it through their revenue collectors. These were called the khalsa lands. Jaipur state had no khalsa land of its own in Shekhawati and all land was in control of different Jagirdars. Big Jagirdars like Rao Raja of Sikar had considerable khalsa land, on which they determined rates of revenue, and jagir land, which was in turn awarded to smaller Jagirdars. Sub-infeudation was a fundamental feature of the Jagirdari system in Jaipur state and it was common for Jagirdars to award different parts of the jagir to smaller Jagirdars (Stern, 1988). There were many categories of Jagirdars, with variations in respect of the size of the land, on account of whether the award had been made by the State or by a superior Jagirdar, and on account of types of obligations towards the superior authority. There were several categories of small Jagirdars – at the bottom of the ladder were the bhumia jagirdars – who did not have any military capabilities and merely provided revenue to the superior Jagirdars or to the Rajput crown (Tod, 1920, Sisson, 1971, Stern, 1988 and Sharma, 1992). About half of the land in Sikar was Jagir of Rao Raja of Sikar (that is, on this land revenue was paid by peasants directly to Rao Raja) while the rest was, in turn, awarded to smaller Jagirdars, who collected revenue from peasants (Pande, 1982 and Ram, 1986). All jagir holders in Shekhawati belonged to different clans of Rajput caste.

Sikar was the biggest thikana under Jaipur principality. It covered about 3.7 lakh hectares (1455 square miles) of land and consisted 436 villages (Tod, 1920 and Ram, 1986). According to accounts provided by James Tod for the early 19th century, Sikar Thikana accounted for about 35 per cent of total revenue collected by Jaipur

principality from various jagirs (Tod, 1920). Land was cultivated by tenants-at-will who could be alienated by the Jagirdars unilaterally and arbitrarily. Of various peasant castes that worked as tenants, Jats were the most numerous and cultivated the largest share of land. According to 1931 Census data, Jats accounted for 25.7 per cent of the population and cultivated (as tenants) 56.7 per cent of the agricultural land in Sikar thikana.²

In the early twentieth century, conditions of peasants in Sikar thikana, and in Jaipur state in general, were characterised by very high burden of land revenue and other taxes imposed by the Jagirdars. The rates of land revenue were determined arbitrarily and were changed at will by the Jagirdars. Jaipur state and big Jagirdars usually auctioned the right of revenue collection on their khalsa land to the highest bidder. There were no definite laws regarding land revenue and no official records were maintained. As explained by Sharma (1990 and 1992), under the prevalent practice, revenue officers of the thikana, who were called latara, made a visual assessment (kunt) of the standing crop of the peasants. The share of land revenue was determined on the basis of this visual estimate. The rate of land revenue was usually fixed as half of the estimated production but could be set at a higher level arbitrarily. The visual estimate was typically considerably higher than the actual production and available records suggest that, in some cases, the land revenue even exceeded the actual production. Among other reasons, rates of land revenue were increased beyond 50 per cent to meet requirements of Jagirdars on accounts of wars, birth, deaths and marriages in their families, and for coronation ceremonies of inheritors.

Not only were peasants charged very high land revenue, they also had to pay a very large number of other taxes (lag), which together were even higher in value than the land revenue. Taxes were imposed for keeping animals, for using natural resources like firewood from trees, for using water for animals and irrigation, and for use of pastures and wild bushes. Taxes (zakat) were imposed on goods transported from one village to another and from one thikana to another. In addition, peasants also had to provide various kinds of unpaid labour services (bag) as well as meet other demands (for example, providing camels to Jagirdars). Peasant castes, including Jats, were subject to various civic restrictions: for example, they were not allowed to wear gold ornaments, ride horses and elephants, and in some cases, not even allowed to live in pucca houses (Sharma, 1990 and 1992).

Peasant Struggles in Shekhawati

Major struggles of peasants against the Jagirdari system started in Sikar in the 1920s. Historians of these peasant struggles have identified several factors that inspired the Jat peasantry in Shekhawati to struggle against Jagirdari oppression. Arya Samaj, which had considerable influence among the Jat peasantry, was instrumental in motivating peasants to oppose excesses of Jagirdars (Ram, 1986). Peasant movements elsewhere in Rajasthan, most notably the Bijolia peasant struggle, and other contemporary peasant struggles in the country, were also directly influential (Ram, 1986, Pande, 1986 and Sharma 1990).³ Jats in areas under the control of the British had acquired considerable political and economic power. Jat leaders from these areas were actively involved in organising Jats in Shekhawati to protest against excesses of Rajput Jagirdars (Stern, 1988 and Sharma, 1992). Sharma (1992) notes the influence of international developments, in particular of peasants from Shekhawati who joined

the British army and participated in the First World War, and of the Russian revolution on leaders of Bijolia and Shekhawati peasant struggles.

Peasant struggles in Shekhawati originated in 1922 as protests against arbitrary increases in demands of land revenue by the Rao Raja (thikanedar) of Sikar in a year that had seen widespread draught and crop failures in Sikar.

Sharma (1992) has identified three phases in the peasant struggles in Shekhawati between 1920s and 1950s, when the Jagirdari system was abolished.

Phase I: Struggles between 1922 and 1930

The first phase, from 1922 to about 1930, was of incipient attempts to demand relief against excesses of the Jagirdars, in particular, Rao Raja of Sikar. During this phase, representatives of peasants took advantage of contradictions between the Jagirdars and the Jaipur state, which was then directly under British administration, and appealed to the Jaipur state and British authorities against excesses of Rao Raja. Establishment of Shekhawati Jat Sabha in 1925, as an arm of the All-India Jat Mahasabha, provided the organisational basis for the peasant movements in this phase.⁴ Major success of the peasant movement in this phase was the reversal of increases in land revenue as a result of interventions by the Jaipur state. This was a major achievement, which encouraged peasants to further intensify their struggles. It is also noteworthy since, as a result of struggles of peasants, Jaipur state was forced to intervene in matters that were until then considered an autonomous domain of the Jagirdars. However, these achievements only provided them temporary relief, and larger demands of peasants – in respect of abolition of labour services, regulation of other taxes, in respect of their civic rights, and for improvements of facilities for health and education – remained unmet.

Phase II: 1930 through 1938

According to Sharma (1992), the second phase, from 1930 through 1938, was a period of organisational consolidation of the Shekhawati Peasant Movement. Kisan Jat Panchayats and Kisan Sabhas were organised during these period. Shekhawati Kisan Sabha, headed by Tarkeshwar Sharma, was formed with the support of Socialists within the Congress. During this phase of the Shekhawati peasant movement, lines of struggles were more sharply drawn between Jat tenants and Jagirdars. A number of violent incidents took place between Jat peasants and Rajput Jagirdars, and the strength of peasants grew (Sisson 1971 and Sharma 1992). In August 1934, under pressure from the British, the Rao Raja of Sikar agreed to a number of demands of the peasants including waiver of taxes, permission to use pasture land for grazing, and abolition of bag (unpaid labour services). However, the agreement was not implemented and peasants further intensified their struggle.

Phase III: 1938 through 1940s

The third phase, from 1938 until end of 1940s, was a period in which the Indian National Congress, through the Jaipur State Praja Mandal, became involved in issues of peasantry in Shekhawati. Involvement, and coming to dominance, of Praja Mandal critically determined the future course of the peasant movement and eventual abolition of Jagirdari system in early 1950s. Until 1938, the Congress leadership had been indifferent, and had openly dissociated itself, from peasant struggles in Rajasthan. Praja Mandal, which was re-established in 1938, was primarily urban-based, and was led by rich marwari bania community and brahmans.⁵ While Praja Mandal leadership realised the importance of co-opting a mature peasant movement of Shekhawati for expanding political influence of Praja Mandal in the region, sections of Kisan Panchayats and Kisan Sabhas were opposed to the peasant movement becoming a part of the Praja Mandals (Sisson, 1971 and Pande, 1982). The Shekhawati Kisan Sabha continued to function independently and organised Kisan Sabhas in Shekhawati. In 1938-39, Kisan Sabhas faced repression from the Jaipur State, and most of its leaders were either imprisoned or were forced to leave the State (Pande, 1982).

In 1938, the Jaipur State forcibly took over administration of Sikar thikana and sent Rao Raja Kalyan Singh into exile. Following this, land settlement was done in the khalsa lands that were earlier under direct administration of Rao Raja. However, despite a considerable decline in powers of smaller Jagirdars, Jaipur state and the British could not implement land settlement in jagir areas. In this phase, initially, both the Jaipur state and thikanedars tried to get support of the peasants by offering them concessions. However, with intensification of the Quit India movement, the peasant movement came under a broad leadership of Praja Mandal, and Jaipur state and the British tried to repress the movement (Sharma, 1992).

It is clear that peasant struggles in Shekhawati had been led throughout the three phases by peasants belonging to Jat caste. Caste organisations of Jats – Shekhawati Jat Sabha in the 1920s, and Shekhawati Jat Kisan Panchayat – were at the forefront of these struggles through the 1930s and 1940s. Although not organised as Jats, and not as large a group numerically, Brahmans were an ally of Jats in these struggles. Although Brahman enjoyed a high caste and social position, they were economically poor. A number of leaders in the movement, of whom the most prominent was Tarakeshwar Sharma, came from Brahman caste.

Marwari trader community, although wealthy, had no political position in the Jaipur state and did not have civic rights comparable to the ruling Rajputs. They had been influenced by the Congress, and had organised non-cooperation and swadeshi movements in Shekhawati since 1921. While Marwari traders-cum-moneylenders were themselves a parasitic class, and Jat peasants were wary of them, Marwari community tacitly supported struggles against Rajput Jagirdars by providing funds and by facilitating contacts with the British (Sharma, 1990).

There had been a few attempts at organising joint struggles of peasants from other castes but these were not successful. In late 1920s, leaders of All India Jat Mahasbha formed Ahir Jat Gujjar and Rajput Sabha in order to bring all peasant castes together. However, Jats of Shekhawati left this organisation in 1929 to organise their movement separately. There was an uprising of Bairwa (Chamar) peasants in Unaira

thikana in 1946. All India State People Bairwa Mahasabha provided leadership to an independent movement of Bairwa peasants in Unaira between 1946 and 1949, a period in which Jat peasant movements had merged into Praja Mandal (Sharma, 1990). Sisson (1966) notes that there was some participation of Sirvi and Vishnoi untouchable castes in Kisan Sabhas in Shekhawati in late 1940s.

Abolition of Jagirdari System and Emergence of a New Land Structure

The most important legislation for abolition of the Jagirdari System, the Rajasthan Land Reforms and Resumption of Jagir Act, was adopted in 1952. Iyer (1995) has provided a summary of legislative process of abolition of Jagirdari System in Rajasthan. As of December 16, 1957, government resumed all rights on jagir lands. However, khalsa lands, orchards, non-agricultural lands, wells and buildings continued to belong to the Jagirdars. Jagirdars were given a compensation equivalent to seven times the net income from land, which was assessed at 30 per cent of the value of produce (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2011). On erstwhile jagir lands, ownership (khatedari) rights were provided to those who were until then recognised only as tenants. In Rajasthan as a whole, a total of 200 lakh hectares of jagir land were resumed under Jagirdari Abolition acts (Iyer, 1995). Given the strength of peasant movement in Sikar, Jagirdari Abolition Act was implemented very successfully in Sikar.

According to the account provided by Rudolph and Rudolph (2011), big Jagirdars of Rajasthan, who had substantial khalsa lands that were exempted from resumption under the Jagirdari Abolition Act, formed an association, the Kshatriya Mahasabha, and negotiated through legal and political means for higher compensation for the jagir lands. On the other hand, most small Jagirdars had no khalsa land. Between 1943 and 1946, organisations of small Jagirdars demanded that a part of their jagir land be treated as khalsa land (Ram, 1986). In the 1950s, small Jagirdars formed a separate association, Bhuswami Sangh, to struggle for an exemption of small Jagirs from resumption under the Act.⁶ However, as a result of strong political strength of the Jat peasantry by now, Bhuswami Sangh, did not succeed in getting its demands accepted despite violent struggles in the early 1950s (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2011). In Shekhawati, where all land was classified as jagir land, this had major implications.

Large Rajput Jagirdars in other parts of Rajasthan obtained substantial compensation on account of resumption of jagirs and had the khalsa land left for themselves. These families joined the Congress party and continued to wield considerable social and political power in Rajasthan (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2011).

In contrast, given that almost all land in Sikar was classified as jagir land, Jagirdars of Sikar lost most of their land and were impoverished. On the other hand, tenant peasants, who had faced worst forms of social oppression at the hands of Rajput Jagirdars, came to get ownership (khatedari) rights over land that they had cultivated as tenants. Of all the various castes, Jats had been the biggest tenants and were most organised. They were, thus, the biggest beneficiaries of Jagirdari abolition. In this process, Jagirdari abolition clearly turned upside down the relative economic positions of Jat peasants and Rajputs. In this respect, the experience of Jagirdari abolition in Sikar was unique.

As in most of India, implementation of land ceilings and land redistribution were not implemented seriously in Rajasthan. Land reform laws were marred by serious loopholes, which were used by large landowners to evade ceilings (Iyer, 1996b). Land ceilings were introduced in Rajasthan in 1960 through a provision of the Rajasthan Tenancy Act, 1955.⁷ Given a vast variation in quality of land in Rajasthan, the ceilings defined under Rajasthan Tenancy Act ranged from 22 acres to 336 acres per family (Government of India, 1966). These ceilings could be relaxed for families having more than five members (Iyer, 1995). There was a gap of three years between enactment of provision of land ceiling and formulation of rules (Government of India, 1966). Such a prolonged delay only helped in concealing ceiling surplus land through benami transfers. Given a vast variation in applicable ceilings, various kinds of relaxations that were allowed, and lack of political support for implementation of the programme, very little progress was made in implementation of land ceiling. Using data for 1970-71, Bandyopadhyay (1986) estimated ceiling surplus land in Rajasthan to be about 40 lakh hectares. In contrast, until 2007, only about 2.3 lakh hectares of ceiling surplus land have been taken possession of (Government of India, 2008). This was only about 1 per cent of cultivable land in the State. Tenancy laws in Rajasthan do not restrict leasing of land and merely specify statutory rates of rent that can be charged. Even these provisions for regulating terms of tenancy are applicable to only those tenants and sub-tenants who have a legally-valid contract between the lessor and the lessee (Srinivas, 1995). This obviously excludes a vast majority of tenancy contracts that remain informal and oral.

Historical evidence reviewed here shows that the emergence of economically and politically dominant landlords from among Jat, and to a smaller extent Brahmin, castes in Shekhawati is a relatively recent phenomenon. Peasant struggles in Shekhawati in the first half of the twentieth century brought an end to the shackles of the Jagirdari system. Jagirdari Abolition brought about a fundamental change in structure of control over land in Shekhawati with tenants-at-will getting ownership rights over land.

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Footnotes:

1 The need of Jaipur state to mobilise military services through the Jagirdars declined considerably after the Jaipur state signed a treaty of subordinate domination with the British in 1818. After this treaty, external affairs became a responsibility of the British. However, the state still depended upon Jagirdars to provide military for managing internal affairs.

2 Census of India, 1931 cited in Stern (1988), Ram (1986) and Sharma (1992).

3 Harlal Singh, a prominent Jat leader from Shekhawati, met Bijay Singh Pathik and Baba Sitaram Das, the most important leaders of the Bijolia movement in 1921 (Ram, 1986). Ram Narain Chaudhary, another leader of the Bijolia movement, was directly involved in initial efforts at building the peasant movements in Shekhawati (Sharma, 1990).

4 All-India Jat Mahasabha was closely related to Arya Samaj. The link with the All-India Jat Mahasabha also provided support of Jat peasant leaders from British areas, most importantly Punjab (Ram, 1986 and Sharma, 1992).

5 Jammalal Bajaj and G. D. Birla were in the leadership of the Praja Mandal.

6 The Jagirdari system in Rajasthan followed strict rules of primogeniture and Jagirs were inherited by the eldest son in the family. Younger sons of big Jagirdars served in courts and as managers of estates. With abolition of the Jagirdari system, this section of Rajputs also faced an economic ruin and joined small Jagirdars in Bhuswami Sangh (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2011).

7 A separate Rajasthan Imposition of Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act was enacted in 1973.

*** This article was originally published in the Statistics on Indian Economy and Society on September 13, 2017.**