
Sher Shah, Achievements And His Place In History

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Abstract

Afghan revival under Sher Shah Suri and his successors, marking a pivotal period in Indian history. Following the decline of the Delhi Sultanate, Sher Shah Suri, a regional Afghan leader, seized power and established a robust administrative system, reviving Afghan dominance in the region. His reign (1540-1545) saw significant reforms, including the introduction of a standardized currency, a reorganized revenue system, and extensive infrastructure development. After Sher Shah's death, his successors, Islam Shah and Adil Shah, continued his policies, expanding Afghan control and consolidating power. This research analyzes the key factors contributing to the Afghan revival, including strategic alliances, military campaigns, and administrative innovations, highlighting the lasting impact of Sher Shah's legacy on Indian politics, economy, and culture.

Keywords:

Sher Shah Suri, Afghan revival, Delhi Sultanate, Administrative reforms, Medieval India, Sher Shah Suri, Afghan revival, Sur Empire, Medieval India, Mughal Empire, Humayun, Akbar, Islamic rule in India, Administrative reforms, Revenue system, Currency reform, Governance, Economic development, Trade and commerce, Agriculture, Taxation, Fiscal policy, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bengal, North India, Empire building, Imperialism, Regionalism Medieval period, Pre-Mughal era, Early modern India

Introduction

Sher Shah is considered as one of the greatest ruler of medieval India as he acquired empire by his own efforts and gave it sound administration.

The career of Sher Khan Sur, the hero of Indo-Muslim revival is as fascinating as that of Babur, his original name was Farid. He was the son of Haran, an Afghan chief of the Sur tribe, who held the Jagir of Sasaram in Bihar under the governor of Jaunpur. He began his life in a humble way and had to pass through trials and vicissitudes of fortune before he rose to prominence by dint of his personal merits. Farid's step-mother ill-treated him. He was neglected by his father. In 1494, Farid left his house and went to Jaunpur. Thus the Afghan youth was forced into a life of adventure and struggle. For some time, he devoted himself to study, he was capable of reproducing from memory the Gulistan, Bostan and Sikandarnama etc. Being pleased with this promising youth, Jamal Khan his father's patron effected a reconciliation between him and his father, who allowed him to return to Sasaram. He administered his father's Jagir very efficiently. But it only increased his step-mother's jealousy. Once again he left home

and went to Agra. When his father died, Daulat Khan procured the imperial fireman for the Jagir in Farid's name.

Farid entered the service of Bihar Khan Lohani, who ruled the country from Jaunpur to Bihar. When Farid slew a tiger in a hunting excursion, Bihar Khan gave him the title of Sher Khan or tiger lord. Through the intrigue of his half-brother Sulaiman, Sher Khan lost his Jagir. For some time, he served the governor of Jaunpur. Then went to Agra and joined Babur's army.

For about two years (1527-28), he remained at Agra and studied the Mughal military organization and noticed its defects carefully. He caught the attention of Babur who told one of his ministers, "Keep an eye on Sher Khan he is a clever man and the marks of royalty are visible on his forehead. Sher Khan soon left the Mughal service and came back to Bihar. About this time Bihar Khan Lohani died and Sher Khan became the guardian of his minor son Jalal Khan, his former pupil. He now became the virtual master of Bihar. His next move was to secure the fort of Chunar by marrying the widow of its owner. After the death of Babur came the formidable Afghan rebellion headed by Mahmud Lodi (brother of Ibrahim Lodi). When Humayun besieged this Fort, Sher Khan managed to retain it by making a show of submission.

The rapid growth of Sher Khan's power excited the jealousy of the Afghan nobles of Bihar. They made common cause against him and also enlisted the support of Mahmud Shah, the king of Bengal. But Sher Khan inflicted a crushing defeat on the combined armies of the allies at Surajgarh in 1536. This victory made him the undisputed master of Bihar. His ambition rose high and henceforth he began to mature plans for expelling the Mughals out of India and re-establish the Afghan Supremacy in India. He moved cautiously for the realization of his aims. In 1530, he got the fort of Chunar by marrying Lad Malik the widow of its late ruler Taj Khan. After consolidating his position in Bihar, he turned his attention towards Bengal and conquered it in 1537. When Humayun marched against him he once again eluded him and allowed him to occupy Bengal without any resistance. He himself retired to Rohtasgarh. Soon he reoccupied Bihar and Jaunpur etc.

The news of Sher Khan's success in Bihar and Bengal alarmed Humayun. He hurried from Gujrat but instead of proceeding straight to Gaur, where he might have secured the cooperation of the Bengal Sultan, he wasted six months in besieging Chunar. Meanwhile Sher Khan conquered Gaur, the capital of Bengal and the Fort of Rohtas. When Humayun proceeded towards Gaur, Sher Khan instead of offering resistance lured him into a perilous advance into Bengal with the object of cutting off his retreat. Humayun conquered Gaur and therefore at a time gave himself up to pleasure and festivities. In the meanwhile Sher Khan recovered Chunar, occupied Jaunpur and carried his ravages as far west as Kanauj. His activities aroused Humayun to a sense of the real danger of his position. He left Bengal and set out for Agra but Sher Khan (who now proclaimed himself as Sher Shah) intercepted his March and completely surprised and defeated his army at Chausa near Buxar in 1539. Humayun narrowly escaped a watery grave in the Ganges by the good services of a water carrier. Sher Khan now proclaimed himself

the emperor of India in the very next year (1540 A.D.), he defeated Humayun at Kanauj and became the all-powerful master of Hindustan. After his victory he destroyed Kanauj, was famous city since of Harsha's times. Kanauj became a town in Farrukhabad district but it remained famous for scent. Now it is a district city in U.P.

Humayun thus disposed of Sher Shah, turned his attention to the extension of his empire. He hurried to the Punjab then held by Kamrand Kamran made peace with Sher Shah by ceding the Punjab. Sind and Multan were also conquered.

In 1542 Sher Shah invaded Malwa after subduing Gwalior. The Fort of Ranthambhor was surrendered to Sher Shah. In 1543 Sher Shah laid siege to Raisen the fortress of Puran Mal on the pretext of punishing him for enslaving many women of Chanderi. Sher Shah swore on the Quran that the lives and property of Puran Mal and his relations would be spared and trusting him Puran Mal surrendered. But Sher Shah broke his promise in the most shameless manner and massacred all the Rajputs including Puran Mal and his relatives.

Sher Shah had still one more formidable enemy to cope with viz. Maldeo, the Rathor Chief of Marwar. He was an able general and was well prepared to meet the enemy. Finding him too strong to be easily subdued, Sher Shah had recourse to a stratagem. He tricked the Raja by forged letters suggesting treachery on the part of some of the Rajput generals. Thereupon Maldeo fled away but his Rajput soldiers offered a gallant resistance. Sher Shah's plan, no doubt proved successful but the Rajput cavalry made such a desperate attack on his army that he narrowly escaped. Impressed by the Rajput valour he exclaimed, "I had nearly lost the empire of Hindustan for a handful of bajra (millet).

Then Sher Shah paid his attention towards Mewar and in 1544, he easily won Chittor and Ajmer. This Sesodio State had sink into insignificance after the death of Ranasanga. His son Udai Singh was as yet an infant and so could not offer any resistance to the Afghans. However, soon after Sher Shah's death in 1545, most of the Rajput States once again reasserted their independence and became powerful to be won by Akbar.

Sher Shah's last expedition was against the Rajput fort of Kalinjar in Bundelkhand. When all methods of occupying the fort failed, Sher Shah ordered the walls to the fort to be blown up by the gunpowder. But as luck would have it, he himself was seriously wounded by the explosion of mine on May 22, 1545 and died a little later. The fort of Kalinjar was occupied but at a heavy cost and with the mortal wound on Sher Shah himself but it ended Chandel supremacy in Bundelkhand.

Thus, within a short period of five years, Sher Shah laid the foundation of a vast empire, which extended from the Brahmaputra in the east to the Jhelum in the west and from the Himalayas in the north to the river Narmada in the south. It included almost the whole of northern India except Assam, Kashmir and North Frontier Province and Gujrat and some petty states.

"Sher Shah was the first Musalman ruler, who studied seriously. He had the genius to see that government must be popularized and that the king must govern for the benefit to his subjects" Dr. Crooke. Sher Shah was undoubtedly one of the ablest rulers of India. He consolidated his power practically the whole of North India in a few years. The system of administration that he evolved combined the best elements in the Hindu and Muslim tradition of India. His administrative reforms which based on Ala-ud-Din's institution in some respects. He had a powerful army of 150,000 cavalry, 25,000 infantry, 300 war elephants and a grand park of artillery and kept it under his direct control.

1. In order to make a direct contact with his soldiers, he himself recruited them and fixed their salaries according to their merits.
2. The practices of branding the horses and maintaining the descriptive roles of the soldiers were revised to avoid fraud and mal- practices in the army.
3. The troops were paid fixed and regular salaries from the State treasury so that they might not feel any convenience because of the delay in their pay.
4. Sher Shah treated his soldiers very kindly and did everything to remove their difficulties but he did not let his kindness interfere with the discipline and efficiency of the army. If any soldier was found guilty of indiscipline, he was severely dealt with.
5. Many new forts were built at strategic places while the old ones were properly repaired. Strong garrisons were put to guard them under the charge of Faujdars. The Fort of Rohtas alone could accommodate as many as 5000 soldiers.
6. A majority of soldiers in the army were the Afghans but persons of other nationalities were also given high position. One of his trusted generals was Brahmajis Gaur.

Central Administration. Sher Shah himself was the head of the central government and all the civil and military powers of the state were centralized in his favor. His short rule of five years was marked by many beneficent reforms in every branch of administration. He divided his whole empire into forty-seven division called Sarkars and these again sub-divided into smaller administrative units called Parganas

The Sarkars were administered by two high officers known as Shiqdars and Munsifs who also supervised the work of the subordinate officers of the Parganas. To prevent the undue local influence of the officers in their jurisdictions; Sher Shah introduced the device of transferring them every two or three years. He was a strict disciplinarian and personally suppressed the details of every branch of administration. He took special care for the maintenance of peace and order. He had always the welfare of the people at his heart. In the words of Crooks, "Sher Shah was the first ruler who attempted to found an Indian Empire broadly based upon the peoples will." The village community was responsible for crimes within its borders. He himself possessed knowledge of local affairs as he rose from Jaghir's management of local administration. Thus he proved a great administrator and maintained administration on sound lines.

The empire was divided into 47 Sarkars. Each Sarkar comprised a large number of parganas. The chief officers in Parganas were a Munsif (Judge), Shiqdar incharge of law and order, Amin incharge for collection of revenue, treasurer and a Hindi and Persian visitor. Each Pargana was sub-divided into villages. In each village there were Muqaddam, the Chaudhary and the Patwari. The village Panchayatas also played an important part in the administration of villages and in managing local affairs and in deciding local disputes.

Sher Shah's land revenue policy is an important landmark in the history of Indian agrarian systems. It was based on sound principles and so it supplied an excellent model to the future rulers of India. (i) First of all he got the whole land measured and then fixed the land revenue on actual measurement, (ii) 1/4 to 1/3 of the total produce was fixed as the share of the state. The cultivators were allowed to pay their revenue either in cash or in kind. Sometime the ryots were allowed to pay their revenue to officers. For the benefit of the cultivators, the officers were instructed to be lenient at the time of assessment but they were not to show any mercy at the time of collection. Sher Shah was very careful to the interests of the cultivators. In times of famine and droughts advances were liberally made to the sufferers. The soldiers were specially instructed not to damage the crops while marching. Any soldier, who was found guilty of violation of this rule was deprived of his ears and the suffered cultivator was paid the full compensation for his loss. This land revenue system worked so efficiently that it was adopted not only by Emperor Akbar but also by the Britishers. Keene has remarked, "No government not even the British has shown so much wisdom as this Pathan." It is for his reforms and administrative measures that Sher Shah deserves a place in the forefront of the medieval history. His system should permanency.

To secure peace and order, the police system was reorganized and the principle of local responsibility for local crimes was enforced. The village headmen were made responsible for the detection of criminals and maintenance of peace in the rural areas. The efficiency of the system has been testified by all the Muslim writers. "Such was the state of safety of the highway", observes Nizamuddin, who had no reason to be partial towards Sher Shah, "that if anyone carried a purse full of gold pieces and slept in the desert for nights, that was no need for keeping watch". If there was any case of theft or robbery anywhere, the Muqaddam of that area was held responsible for that. He had either to trace the culprit or make good the loss. Likewise if there was any case of murder, the Muqaddam had to trace the murderer or in case of his inability to do so, he himself had to lose his life. Judged by modern standard, the system may appear too crude but it resulted in complete security of life and property and brought peace and prosperity.

In order to keep himself well informed about everything that was going on in his provinces and to keep a strict watch on his governors and other state officials, Sher Shah organized an Intelligence Department and appointed some very efficient spies, With the help of these spies, he kept himself in touch with every part of his kingdom and was able to check corruption and rebellions in time. In fact much of the success of Sher Shah's administration was due to the efficiency of his spy system.

Sher Shah had a very strong sense of justice and its administration under him was even handed, no distinction being made between the high and the low, and not even the close relatives of the king being spared from its decrees. In the Parganas, the civil suits were disposed of by the Amin and other criminal cases were disposed of by the Qazi and the Mir-i-Adal. Several Parganas had over them. a Munsif-i-Munsifan to try civil cases. At the capital city there were the chief Qazi, the Imperial Sadr and above all the Emperor as the highest authority in judicial as in other matters. Justice was non- technical, quick and cheap. emphasis was on justice than on technical hair splitting.

For the purpose of Imperial defence and to serve trade and commerce as well as for the convenience and the people, Sher Shah connected the important places of his kingdom by the a chain of excellent roads. The longest of these, the Grand trunk by Road which still survives extended for 1500 'Kos' from Sonargaon in Eastern Bengal to the Indus. Another road ran from Agra to Bushanpur, another from Agra to Jodhpur and the fort of Chittor and a fourth from Lahore to Multan. Following the traditions of some rulers of the past, Sher Shah planted shade giving trees on both sides of the important roads and rest-houses at different places were built at regular intervals to accommodate the Hindus and the Muslims separately. These Sarais' or rest-houses also served as dak chawkis and rest- houses for the government servants and the public alike. In the words of Dr. Qanungo, "These Sarais were the variable arteries of the empire diffusing new life among the hitherto benumbed limbs." In fact the various roads and Sarais built by Sher Shah Suri were much responsible for the success of his administration and the promotion of trade and commerce. He introduced Portal system through Chauni of horse messengers which is still followed where there is no bus or rail system.

Sher Shah's currency and tariff reforms were also calculated to improve the general economic condition of the empire. He not only introduced specific changes on the mint but also tried to rectify "the progress minting of the previous kings". He reformed the tariff by removing vexatious customs and permitting the imposition of customs on articles of trade only at the frontiers and in the places of sale. This greatly helped the cause of trade and commerce by facilitating easy and cheap transport of merchandise. In those days debasing of the coins was very common. The coins of all the previous kings were also in circulation, which caused a good deal of confusion. The exact ratio between the various coins of different kinds was not also known. Sher Shah issued a large number of gold, silver and copper coins. Fixed their ratio to each other and thin abolished all the old metal currency. His silver rupee continued during the Mughal period and with some modifications upto 1947. This disappeared with the introduction of decimal system.

For the promotion of trade and commerce, he also took various steps. Establishment of roads and introduction of new currency brought about a great commercial prosperity. Unnecessary taxes and customs were abolished.

Sher Shah was very liberal in the matter of making charitable endowments and grants. Various makhtabs and Madarsas were established and stipends were granted both to the teachers and the taught.

The poor and the destitute were given all possible relief. Free kitchens were provided where free food was distributed among the needy and the destitutes. He spent 80,000 Asharfees on these free kitchens.

He was a Sunni Musalman, but he was well disposed towards other sects and religions. The Hindus were treated well and got justice at his hands. He allowed religious toleration. His best generals were mostly Hindus. A large portion of his army was also composed of Hindus. They enjoyed equal comforts and facilities in the Sarais, which he had constructed on the road sides. He did not destroy the Hindu temples or compelled them to become Muslims. He allowed them to worship freely in their own way.

Sher Shah ruled only for five years and during this short period, he was not expected to pay any attention towards the promotion of arts and architecture. Even then he left behind him some of the most magnificent fort of Rohtasgarh on the Jhelum to serve as the first line of defence on the north-west frontier. The Purana Qila of Delhi is also said to have been built by Sher Shah Suri. His own tomb at Sasaram in Bihar is one of the most magnificent buildings in India. Sher Shah was a great builder. He built a new city at Delhi. The achievements of Sher Shah entitle him to a very high place in the medieval history of India. The main principles of state policy of Sher Shah were: (i) Fairness of character of the officials; (ii) Proper discharge of duties; (iii) Close contact with the people to understand their difficulties; (iv) Centralization; (v) Secularism; (vi) Kindness and service; (vii) Public welfare; and (viii) Proper control over the provinces. It has been rightly remarked about him, "No government not even the Britishers have shown so much wisdom as the Pathan" according to Keene.

In the words of Dr. Smith, "Had Sher Shah lived longer, had his successors been as capable as he was, great Mughal would not have come on the stage of Indian history". He was the apostle of Indian unity "who was able to reconcile religion and politics and create a bracing atmosphere in which the Indian nationality might thrive like an organic growth". He was industrious, a great military leader, an able administrator, a tolerant ruler, a great patron of art and literature, a true servant of the people, a nation builder and above all a forerunner of Akbar in ability and statesmanship.

Sher Shah was a man of versatile genius. He was very industrious and never wasted a single minute. He supervised the whole administration work personally and minutely. He was keenly interested in the welfare of the people. But in warfare, he did not hesitate to employ cunningness and conceits. He subjugated Malwa and Mewar by employing questionable methods. He was a shrewd person and believed end justifies the means.

He was a brave soldier and a great military leader. He possessed extraordinary patience and foresight. He was courageous and knew to strike at the right moment. He was conversant with the latest war tactics and always took the enemy by surprise. He enjoyed the full confidence of his soldiers. The way he conquered the whole of northern India and defeated Humayun speaks volumes of his great quality as a military leader. He knew Mughal tactics as he worked under Babur and used them against Humayun.

Great as a conqueror Sher Shah was greater still as a ruler. He was the first Muslim ruler of India, who displayed a real aptitude for sound administration. He is remembered as one of the greatest administrators that India has ever produced. He organized the whole system of administration and introduced various reforms. He was a constructive genius of high order. Dr. Qanungo remarks about him, "The works of his administrative genius did not perish with his dynasty and lasted throughout the Mughal period. It forms the substructure of our present administrative system."

Leader. Sher Shah treated all his subjects alike and did not persecute anyone because of his religious belief. He proved himself to be a great statesman, who did not let mix religion with politics. He sought the cooperation of the Hindus and people of other communities. He allowed them to hold responsible positions according to their merits and efficiency. His most favorite military general was a Hindu. He gave impartial justice to people of all communities and firmly believed that justice is the most excellent of all the religious rites.

Sher Shah was himself a well-educated person. He had proficiency both in Arabic and Persian. Gulistan Bostan and Sikandar Nawab were at his finger tips. He was a great patron of art and literature. He established a large number of schools and granted stipends both to the teachers and the students. He built various cities, forts, bridges, sarais, palaces and roads etc. The mausoleum of Sher Shah at Sasaram in Bihar built on a high plinth in the midst of a beautiful lake is one of the most beautiful and artistic buildings designed and executed in early India. He built Purana Qila and Mosque at Delhi which is still called Sher Shah road. High Court of Delhi and Chidyaghar is situated on this road.

Sher Shah was a despot like any other Sultan of Delhi, but his was a benevolent despotism. He had the welfare of his people always in his mind. He completely put an end to the lawless activities of the thieves and the robbers. His biographer Akbar Khan observes that, "And in the time of Sher Shah's rule an old woman might place a basket full of gold ornaments on her head and go on a journey and no thief or robber would come near her for fear of punishment which Sher Shah inflicted."

He was the most successful ruler, who in a short span of five years of his rule was able to achieve far more than other rulers could do in their long reign. Firstly he followed a liberal policy and gave equal opportunity to all his subjects irrespective of their caste and creed. He gave equal justice to all and did not discriminate between the high and low, rich and the poor, the Hindus and the Muslims. He improved the means of communication by constructing roads and Sarais which served also as dak chaukis. He made the roads quite safe from the thieves and robbers. Thus he fostered a national feeling among the people. By reforming the custom duties and unnecessary taxes, he encouraged trade and industry in the country and this brought economic prosperity to the people. He improved agriculture. He is regarded a nation builder for the Afghan people in the same way as Shivaji was a nation builder for the Marathas. The many salutary reforms, which he carried out within the short space of stormy reign of five years bear eloquent testimony to his enlightened statesmanship. He knew how to conquer as well how to organize and consolidate and administer.

His statesmanship is best shown by the fact that his reforms had an importance beyond the immediate time. They were a precious legacy to the Mughal Emperors. His system of land revenue, his administrative reforms and his policy of religious toleration prepared the ground for Akbar's glorious work. He thus proved himself to be the worthy forerunner of the best of the Mughal emperors.

Sher Shah's government may be described as benevolent despotism like that of Fredrick the Great etc.

Conclusion,

Sher Shah Suri's reign marked a pivotal moment in Indian history, revitalizing Afghan power and laying the groundwork for a robust administrative system. His innovative reforms, including a standardized currency, reorganized revenue system, and extensive infrastructure development, had a lasting impact on India's economic and political landscape. Despite facing challenges from the Mughal Empire, Sher Shah's successors, Islam Shah and Adil Shah, continued his policies, solidifying Afghan control and cultural influence. The Sur Empire's legacy serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Afghan leadership, shaping the course of Indian history and leaving an enduring imprint on its architecture, culture, and governance. Sher Shah Suri's visionary leadership and administrative acumen remain a compelling chapter in the narrative of medieval India.



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