

UNIT 98 – UPSC - Sher Shah Suri

India's History : Medieval India : Sher Shah Suri defeats Humayan - 1539

Sher Shah - The Lion King



Babur's victories at Panipat and Gorga did not result in the complete annihilation of the Afghan chiefs. They were seething with discontent against the newly founded alien rule, and only needed the guidance of one strong personality to coalesce their isolated efforts in to an organized national resistance against it. This they got in Sher Khan Sur, who effected the revival of the Afghan power and established a glorious, though short lived, regime in India by ousting the newly established Mughul authority.

The career of Sher Khan Sur, the hero of Indo-Muslim revival, is as fascinating as that of Babur and not less instructive than that of the great Mughul, Akbar. Originally bearing the name of Farid, he began his life in a humble way, and, like many other great men in history, had to pass through various trials and vicissitudes of fortune before he rose to prominence by dint of his personal merit. His grandfather, Ibrahim, an Afghan of the Sur tribe, lived near Peshawar and his father's name Hasan. Ibrahim migrated with his son to the east in quest of military service in the early part of Buhlul Lodi's reign and both first entered the service of Mahabat Khan Sur, jagirdar of the paraganas of Hariana and Bakhala in the Punjab, and settled in the paragana of Bajwara or Bejoura. After some time Ibrahim got employment under Jamal Khan Sarang Khani of Hissar Firuza in the Delhi district, who conferred upon Ibrahim some villages in the paragana of Narnaul for the maintenance of forty horsemen in his service. Farid was born probably near Narnaul. Farid was soon taken to Sasaram by his father, Hasan, who had been granted a jagir there by his master, Umar Khan Sarwahi, entitled Khan-I-Azam, when the latter got the governorship of Jaunpur. Hasan, like the other nobles of his time, was a polygamist, and Farid's step-mother had predominant influence over him. This made him indifferent to Farid whereupon the latter left home at the age of twenty-two and went to Jaunpur. Thus the Afghan youth was forced into a life of adventure and struggle, which cast his mind and character in a heroic mould. For some time he devoted himself to study. By indefatigable industry and steady application, Farid early attracted the attention of his teachers at Jaunpur and quickly gained an uncommon acquaintance with the Persian language and literature. He was capable of reproducing from memory the Gulistan, Bustan and Sikandar-namah. 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 and to administer the paraganas of Sasaram and Khawaspur, both then within the jurisdiction of Sarkar. The successful administration

of those two places by Farid served to increase his step-mother's jealousy, and so leaving Sasaram once again he went to Agra.

On the death of his father, Farid took possession of his paternal jagir on the strength of a royal foreman, which he had been able to procure at Agra. In 1522 he got into the service of Bahar Khan Lohani, the independent ruler of Bihar, whose favour he soon secured by discharging his duties honestly and assiduously. His master conferred on him the title of Sher Khan for his having shown gallantry by killing a tiger single-handed, and also soon rewarded his ability and faithfulness by appointing him his deputy (Vakil) and tutor (Ataliq) of his minor son, Jalal Khan. But perverse destiny again went against Sher. His enemies poisoned his master's mind against him, and he was once more deprived of his father's jagir. "Impressed by the complete success of Mughul arms" and with the prospect of future gain, he now joined Babur's camp, where he remained from April, 1527, to June, 1528. In return for the valuable services he rendered to Babur in his eastern campaigns, the latter restored Sasaram to him.

Sher soon left the Mughul service and came back to Bihar to become again its deputy governor and guardian of his former pupil, Jalal Khan. While the minor king remained as the nominal ruler of Bihar, Sher became the virtual head of its government. In the course of four years he won over the greater part of the army to his cause and "elevated himself to a state of complete independence". Meanwhile, the fortress of Chunar, luckily came into his possession. Taj Khan, the Lord of Chunar, was killed by his eldest son, who had risen against his father for his infatuation with a younger wife, Lad Malika. This widow, however, married Sher Khan and gave him the fortress of Chunar. Humayun besieged Chunar in 1531, but Sher Khan had taken no part in the Afghan rising of that year and saved his position by a timely submission to the Mughul invader. The rapid and unexpected rise of Sher at the expense of the Lohani Afghans made the latter, and even Jalal Khan, impatient of his control. They tried to get rid of this dictator. The attempt, however, failed owing to his "unusual circumspection". They then entered into an alliance (Sept., 1533) with Mahmud Shah, the King of Bengal, who was naturally eager to check the rise of Sher, which prejudiced his own prestige and power. But the brave Afghan deputy inflicted a defeat on the allied troops of the Bengal Sultan and the Lohanis at Surajgarh, on the banks of the Kiul river, east of the town of Bihar (1534). The victory at Surajgarh was indeed a turning-point in the career of Sher. "Great as it was as a military achievement, it was greater in its far-reaching political result... But for the victory at Surajgarh, the jagirdar of Sasaram would never have emerged from his obscurity into the arena of politics to run, in spite of himself, a race for the Empire with hereditary crowned heads like Bahadur Shah and Humayun Padshah." It made him the undisputed ruler of Bihar in fact as well as in name.



Sher had an opportunity to increase his power when Humayun marched against Bahadur Shah of Gujarat. He suddenly invaded Bengal and appeared before its capital, Gaur, not by the usual route through the Taliagarhi passes (near modern Sahebganj on the E.I. Ry. Loop line), but by another unfrequented and less circuitous one. Mahmud Shah, the weak ruler of Bengal, without making any serious attempt to oppose the Afghan invader, concluded peace with him by paying him a large sum, amounting to thirteen lacs of gold pieces, and by ceding to him a territory extending from Kiul to Sakrigali, ninety miles in length with a breadth of thirty miles. These fresh acquisitions considerably enhanced Sher's power and prestige, and, after the expulsion of Bahadur Shah of Gujarat to Diu, many of the distinguished Afghan nobles joined their rising leader in the east. Thus strengthened, Sher again invaded Bengal about the middle of October, 1537, with a view to conquering it permanently, and closely besieged the city of Gaur. Humayun, who on his way back from Gujarat and Malwa had been wasting his time at Agra, in his usual fashion, realized the gravity of the Afghan menace in the east rather too late and marched to oppose Sher Khan in the second week of December, 1537. But instead of proceeding straight to Gaur, by which he could have frustrated the designs of Sher Khan in alliance with the Sultan of Bengal, he besieged Chunar. The brave garrison of Sher Khan at Chunar baffled all the attempts of the assailants for six months, while Sher Khan was left free to utilize that time for the reduction of Gaur by April, 1538. Sher Khan had also captured the fortress of Rohtas by questionable means and had sent his family and wealth there. Baffled in Bihar, Humayun turned towards Bengal and entered Gaur in July, 1538. But Sher Khan, cleverly avoiding any open contest with him in Bengal, went to occupy the Mughul territories in Bihar and Jaunpur and plunder the tract as far west as Kanauj.

Humayun, who was then whiling away his time in idleness and festivities at Gaur, was disconcerted on hearing of Sher's activities in the west and left Bengal for Agra before his return should be cut off. But he was opposed on the way, at Chaunsa near Buxar, by Sher Khan and his Afghan followers and suffered a heavy defeat in June, 1539. Most of the Mughul soldiers were drowned or captured; and the life of their unlucky ruler was saved by a water-carrier, who carried him on his water-skin across the Ganges, into which he had recklessly jumped. The victory over the sovereign of Delhi widened the limit of Sher Khan's ambition and made him the de facto ruler of the territories extending from Kanauj in the west to the hills of Assam and Chittagong in the east and from the Himalayas in the north to the hills of Jharkhand (from Rohtas to Birbhum) and the Bay of Bengal in the south. To legalize what he had gained by the

strength of arms and strategy, he now assumed the royal title of Sher Shah and ordered the Khutba to be read and the coins to be struck in his name. Next year Humayun made another attempt to recover his fortune, though he could not secure the co-operation of his brothers in spite of his best attempts. On the 17th May, 1540, the Mughuls and the Afghans met again opposite Kanauj. The army of Humayun, hopelessly demoralized, half-hearted and badly officered, was severely defeated by the Afghans at the battle of the Ganges or Bilgram, commonly known as the battle of Kanauj, and Humayun just managed to escape. Thus the work of Babur in India was undone, and then sovereignty of Hindustan once more passed to the Afghans. From this time Humayun had to lead the life of a wanderer for about fifteen years. The sons of Babur failed to combine even at such a critical moment, though Humayun went to Lahore and did his best to win them over. Their selfishness triumphed over common interests and Sher Shah was able to extend his authority to the Punjab also. The Afghan ruler marched, with his usual promptitude and vigour, to subdue the warlike hill tribes of the Gakkhar country, situated between the upper courses of the Indus and the Jhelum. He ravaged this territory but could not thoroughly reduce the Gakkars, as he had to proceed hurriedly to Bengal in March, 1541, where his deputy had imprudently rebelled against his authority. He dismissed the rebel, "changed the military character of the provincial administration and substituted a completely new mechanism, at once original in principle and efficient in working". The province was divided into several districts, each of which was to be governed by an officer appointed directly by him and responsible to him alone.

Sher Shah next turned his attention against the Rajputs of the west, who had not yet recovered fully from the blow of Khanau. Having subjugated Malwa in A.D. 1542, he marched against Puran Mal of Raisen in Central India. After some resistance the garrison of the fort of Raisen capitulated, the Rajputs agreeing to evacuate the fort on condition that they were allowed to pass "unmolested" beyond the frontier of Malwa. But the Afghans fell furiously on the people of the fort as soon as the latter had come outside the walls. To save their wives and children from disgrace, the Rajputs took their lives, and themselves died to a man, fighting bravely against their formidable foe, in 1543. The Raisen incident has been condemned by several writers as a great blot on the character of Sher Shah. Sind and Multan were annexed to the Afghan Empire by the governor of Punjab. There remained only one more formidable enemy of Sher Shah to be subdued. He was Maldev, the Rajput ruler of Marwar, a consummate general and energetic ruler, whose territories extended over about 10,000 sq. miles. Instigated by some disaffected Rajput chiefs whose territories had been conquered by Maldev, Sher Khan led an expedition against the Rathor chief in AD 1544. Maldev, on his part, was not unprepared. Considering it inadvisable to risk an open battle with the Rathors in their own country, Sher Shah had recourse to a stratagem. He sent to Maldev a few forged letters, said to have been written to him by the Rajput generals, promising him their help, and thus succeeded in frightening the Rathor ruler, who retreated from the field and took refuge in the fortress of Sivan. In spite of this, the generals of the Rajput army, like Jeta and Kama, with their followers opposed Sher Shah's army and fought with desperate valour, but only to meet a warrior's death. Sher Shah won a victory, though at great cost, with the loss of several thousand Afghans on the battlefield and coming near to losing his empire. The Rajputs lost a chance of revival and the path was left open for undisputed Afghan supremacy over Northern India. After this

success, Sher Shah reduced to submission the whole region from Ajmer to Abu and marched to besiege the fort of Kalinjar. He succeeded in capturing the fort, but died from an accidental explosion of gunpowder on the 22nd May, 1545.

A brave warrior and a successful conqueror, Sher Shah was the architect of a brilliant administrative system, which elicited admiration even from eulogists of his enemies, the Mughuls. In fact, his qualities as a ruler were more remarkable than his victories on the field of battle. His brief reign of five years was marked by the introduction of wise and salutary changes in every conceivable branch of administration. Some of these were by way of revival and reformation of the traditional features of the old administrative systems of India, Hindu as well as Muslim, while others were entirely original in character, and form, indeed, a link between ancient and modern India. "No government—not even the British," affirms Mr. Keene, "has shown so much wisdom as this Pathan." Though Sher Shah's government was a highly centralized system, crowned by a bureaucracy, with real power concentrated in the hands of the King, he was not an unbridled autocrat, regardless of the rights and interests of the people. In the spirit of an enlightened despot, he "attempted to found an empire broadly based upon the people's will".

For convenience of administration, the whole Empire was divided into forty-seven units (sarkars), each of which was again divided into several paraganas. The paragona had one Ami, one Shiqdar, one treasurer, one Hindu writer and one Persian writer to keep accounts. Over the next higher administrative unit, the sarkar, were placed a Shiqdar-I-Shiqdaran and a Munsif-I-Munsifan to supervise the work of the paragona officers. To check undue influence of the officers in their respective jurisdictions, the King devised the plan of transferring them every two or three years, which, however, could not be long-enduring owing to the brief span of his rule. Every branch of the administration was subject to Sher Shah's personal supervision. Like Asoka and Harsha, he acted up to the maxim that "it behooves the great to be always active". Sher Shah's land revenue reforms, based on wise and humane principles, have unique importance in the administrative history of India; for they served as the model for future agrarian systems. After a careful and proper survey of the lands, he settled the land revenue direct with the cultivators, the State demand being fixed at one-fourth or one-third of the average produce, payable either in kind or in cash, the latter method being preferred. For actual collection of revenue the Government utilized the services of officers like the Amins, the Maqadams, the Shiqdars, the Qanungos and the Patwaris. Punctual and full paying of the assessed amount was insisted on and enforced, if necessary, by Sher Shah. He instructed the revenue officials to show leniency at the time of assessment and to be strict at the time of collection of revenues. The rights of the tenants were duly recognized and the liabilities of each were clearly defined in the kabuliyat (deed of agreement), which the State took from him, and the patta (title-deed), which it gave him in return. Remissions of rents were made, and probably loans were advanced to the tenants in case of damage to crops caused by the encampment of soldiers, or the insufficiency of rain. These revenue reforms increased the resources of the State and at the same time conduced to the interest of the people.

The currency and tariff reforms of Sher Shah were also calculated to improve the general economic condition of his Empire. He not only introduced some specific changes in the mint but also tried to rectify "the progressive deterioration 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 considerably helped the cause of commerce by facilitating easy and cheap transport of merchandise. This was further helped by the improvement of communications. For the purpose of imperial defense, as well as for the convenience of the people, Sher Shah connected the important places of his kingdom by a chain of excellent roads. The longest of these, the Grand Trunk Road, which still survives, extends for 1,500 kilos from Sonargaon in Eastern Bengal to the Indus. One road ran from Agra to Burhanpur, another from Agra to Jodhpur and the fort of Chitor, and a fourth from Lahore to Multan. Following the traditions of some rulers of the past, Sher Shah planted shad-giving trees on both sides of the established roads, and sarais or rest-houses at different stages, separate arrangements being provided for the Muslims and the Hindus. These sarais also served the purpose of post-houses, which facilitated quick exchange of news and supplied the Government with information from different parts of the Empire. The maintenance of an efficient system of espionage also enabled the ruler to know what happened in his kingdom. To secure peace and order, the police system was reorganized, and the principle of local responsibility for local crimes was enforced. Thus 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 to by all the Muslim writers. "Such was the state of safety of the highway," observes Nizam-ud-din, who had no reason to be partial towards Sher Shah, "that if any one carried a purse full of gold (pieces) and slept in the desert (deserted places) for nights, there was no need for keeping watch."

Sher Shah had a 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 near relatives of the King being spared from its decrees. In the paragona, civil suits were disposed of by the Amin, and other cases, mostly criminal, by the Qazi and the Mir-I-Adal. Several paraganas 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. Though a pious Muslim, Sher Shah was not a fierce bigot. His treatment of the Hindus in general was tolerant and just. He employed Hindus in important offices of the State, one of his best generals being Brahamjit Gaur. "His attitude towards Hinduism," observes Dr. Qanungo, "was not of contemptuous sufferance but of respectful deference; it received due recognition in the State." Sher Shah realized the importance of maintaining a strong and efficient army, and so reorganized it, borrowing largely the main principles of 'Ala-ud-din Khalji's military system. The services of a body of armed retainers, or of a feudal levy, were not considered sufficient for his needs; he took care to maintain a regular army, the soldiers being bound to him, through their immediate commanding officer, by the strong tie of personal devotion and discipline. He had under his direct command a large force consisting of 150,000 cavalry, 25,000 infantry, 300 elephants and artillery. Garrisons were maintained at different strategic points of the kingdom; each of these, called a fauj, was under the command of a faujdar. Sher Shah enforced strict discipline in the army and took ample precautions to prevent corruption among

the soldiers. Besides duly supervising the recruitment of soldiers, he personally fixed their salaries, took their descriptive rolls and revived the practice of branding horses.

Sher Shah is indeed a striking personality in the history of Medieval India. By virtue of sheer merit and ability he rose from a very humble position to be the leader of Afghan revival, and one of the greatest rulers that India has produced. His "military character" was marked by "a rare combination of caution and enterprise"; his political conduct was, on the whole, just and humane; his religious attitude was free from medieval bigotry; and his excellent taste in building is well attested, even today, by his noble mausoleum at Sasaram. He applied his indefatigable industry to the service of the State, and his reforms were well calculated to secure the interests of the people. He had, remarks Erskine, "more of the spirit of a legislator and a guardian of his people than any prince before Akbar". In fact, the real significance of his reign lies in the fact that he embodied in himself those very qualities which are needed for the building of a national State in India, and he prepared the ground for the glorious Akbaride regime in more ways than one. But for his accidental death after only five years' rule, the restoration of the Mughuls would not have been accomplished so soon. As Smith observes: "If Sher Shah had been spared, the 'Great Moghuls' would not have appeared on the stage of history." His right to the throne of India was better than that of Humayun. While Humayun had inherited the conquests of a Central Asian adventurer, who had not been able to create any strong claim, except that of force, for the rule of his dynasty in India, Sher Shah's family, hailing from the frontier, had lived within India for three generations. Further, the latter's equipment for kingship was exceptionally high, and had achieved a good deal more than the mere conquest of territories.



During his reign Sher Shah gave a new vigour and trend to the early Indian postal system. So in 1970 India released a special postage stamp honouring the memory of this great and popular ruler and one of the early pioneers of a nation-wide postal service. He was born about the year 1472. He was an outstanding administrator. He introduced the new silver rupee-coin "Rupiya" based on a ratio of 40 copper-coin pieces (paise) per rupee. On his earliest Bengal coins, he inscribed his name as "Sri Ser Sahi" in both Devnagari and Persian scripts. Sher Shah was also a great road-builder. The longest road built on his orders known as the Grand Trunk Road (Shahrah-i-Azim) - now known as National Highway-2. It was during the reign of Sher Shah Suri that the foundation of a well-organised nationwide postal system was laid. The design of the stamp is vertical and depicts a portrait of Sher Shah Suri.