



Sher Shah Suri and age of reforms: Reflecting the various dimension of reign, reforms and shadow of Mughal administration, rejecting notion of dark age

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how the historiography has ignored the positive aspects of Medieval India and understood in notion of dark age which is infamous epithet of medieval period in India. This discussion would demonstrate another aspects of medieval India where development and reforms took place with mention of Sher Shah Suri as ruler. the reign of Sher Shah Suri, a ruler whose presence in medieval history of India remarks a significant phase. The age of sixteenth century and its beginning period witnessed a remarkable turbulence when Sultanate was overthrown at back and Mughal dominion led by Babur has not expanded in countryside. Humayun who has succeeded Babur did not made his space and his court politics and other circumstances went against him causing his defeat in hands of Sher Shah Suri. Sher Shah Suri (1540–1545) was one of medieval India's most capable kings. He made significant military, administrative, and economic improvements that affected the Mughal Empire's future government, despite his short five-year reign. After defeating the Mughal emperor Humayun at the Battle of Kannauj in 1540, Sher Shah established the Sur Empire and put laws in place for efficient management, revenue collection, road construction, currency standardization, and maintaining law and order. His reforms created a strong administrative structure that was eventually inherited and enhanced by the Mughal rulers, especially Akbar. This essay examines Sher Shah Suri's leadership achievements and evaluates the impact of his innovations on medieval Indian governance. The core structure of this paper is to demonstrate how Sher Shah Suri has initiated various reforms ahead of his time and how the empire grew signifying the administrative skill, further its result will be analysed in positive and negative aspects creating the roadmap for Mughal Empire.

Keywords: Sher Shah Suri, Dark Age, Stereotype, Assumption, Bias, Reforms, Currency, Roads, Justice, Revenue, Mughals.

Introduction

Sher Shah Suri originally named “Farid Khan” ruled over the Indian subcontinent especially northern region from 1540-1545 AD. He established the Sur Empire after defeating the Mughal Emperor Humayun in the battle of Kannauj. Although Sher Shah ruled for short span of five years, the empire underwent a positive transformation in terms of political, economic, and social sphere. The reign of Sher Shah Suri proved to be the model structure for the succeeding rulers, and he is celebrated for the reforms being brought in his empire. The historiography has ignored various aspects of medieval phase and theory of assumption, bias and stereotype of modern historiography has put Sher Shah Suri in behind and his contribution has not been highlighted properly in its entirety.

Dualism Principle” attribute significance of ‘Negative’ for the grandeur existence of ‘Positive’ said “Ziauddin Barani”. ‘Colonial historians attributed an epithet “Dark Age” to ‘Medieval India’ to present themselves in positive light and nationalist historian considered Medieval and Modern phase as characteristic of invasion on culture, religion and prosperity of classical phase of India however the reign of Sher Shah Suri reject any such claims and statistics showed the empire witnessed many positive changes. These notion of complete positive image of ancient India becomes assumption without any evidence and emotions attached led the ‘Stereotype’ of Ancient India as “Heavenly Phase devoid of any evil practice” and post -stage as something in negative light.

Assumptions in conventional terms is understood as a “fundamental belief or tenet that is taken for granted and requires no reconfirmation when it forms a basic premise”.

In historiography, assumptions, emotions and stereotypes are interlinked to create wider framework “Generalization” leading to “Bias”. For writing history “Human Beings” forms an important entity however “Other Agencies” part of human beings also becomes subject to study, writings of present historians are determined based on these entities. What constitutes the characteristics of these entities is two sets of factors i.e., Emotions and Stereotypes which defines the identity of the subject.

‘Bias’ is product of assumptions, stereotypes, emotions and generalization. The Assumptions are set of constructed facts, and it is inherent in any civilization and society. Under this discussion, the constructed facts become “Hard Facts” in span of time, and it becomes operational tool in further period leading itself to “stereotype” wherein the Hard Facts cannot be questioned.

However, this stereotype growing further cast its significance in writings i.e., ‘Bias’ but further works on this notion discarded this idea and there is need to follow objectivity while dealing these notions in Historical context. Being ruler for a short span, he pioneered various measures and reforms, further enunciated by later period ruler. As a ruler he needs to be placed on high pedestal since he took the issue of safety, standardization of currency, roads construction, and revenue reforms with serious note and worked efficiently and meticulously in striving the empire towards prosperity and expansion covering major part of northern and eastern India He expanded his empire from the Indus to the region of Bengal throughout his regime and brought a sense of viability in regime, suppressed the rebellion with this valor and caliber.

The law-and-order situation strengthened since safety of people and their livelihood forms the major area of focus, disturbing elements in the empire was controlled with strict measures. Sher Shah held the Zamindars in league with robbers and dacoits to be the key agent in deteriorating security of roads in his region. Thus he punished the *Zamindars, muqaddams and chowdharis* and charged the amount of theft and lost, if the robbery occurred in respective zamindari areas.

Hence Zamindars in fear of punishment and compensation ensured the safety of his areas and helped the royal authorities in restricting the dacoits and robbers. Henceforth he took stern action against Zamindars and rebels of area such as Fath Khan Jat of Dipalpur, Sambhal, Lucknow, and Kannauj. It is seen the zamindars and rebels of the area were suppressed to the extent that they cut their jungles with their own hand they had nursed for their nefarious activities and caused threat to the safety of the road. Apart from ensuring the safety of roads, Sher Shah ensured the construction of new roads and expansion of old ones, to foster trade and commerce, military movement and improved the communication of the empire.

Henceforth he restored the old imperial road from the river Indus in the west to Sonargaon in Bengal. He also built a road from Agra to Jodhpur and Chittor, linked up with the roads leading to the sea ports of Gujarat. The third road he built from Lahore to Multan which was the starting point for caravans to west and central Asia. He built fourth road from Agra to Burhanpur, again linking the road with sea ports of Gujarat. To ensure safety and convenience to travelers, he built several Sarais on highways at distance of two *karohs* (4 miles). Separate apartments were built for Hindu and Muslim travelers, Muslim and Brahman cooks were appointed separately for providing cooked food to respective travelers, further uncooked food supplies were also provided to travelers who followed their distinct caste rules.

An official was appointed called *Shahna* entrusted with the task of safeguarding the goods of merchants, supervised and look after the management of sarais, provided with rent free land in the neighborhood for their expenses and for the expense of the *imam* and *muezzin* for the mosque which was built in each sarai. He made effort in standardizing the currency and weights and measures. He brought the concept of *rupiya*, struck fine coins of silver and copper of uniform standard and debased the coins of mixed metal of earlier times. This measure provided the trade and commerce an impetus in bring buoyancy in economy.

He also set up markets in every *sarai* where nearby peasants and merchants could sell their grains and products called *mandis* and later this *mandis* became the nucleus of the growth of towns (*qasbas*) where trade and handicrafts developed. The sarais also used as *Dak Chowkis* for which two horses were kept at every sarai, by relays of horse news from a distance of 300 *Kos* could reach in a day. The most important development of the Sher Shah Suri regime was its revenue policy and its improvement. Although system of measurement of area sown and estimate of produce was prevalent from the reign of Alauddin Khilji called *Zabt*, however the measure of Sher Shah Suri was different from the earlier methods. The earlier pattern of crop yield was based on the sample cutting in the sown area. Under Sher Shah, lands were divided into three categories – *good, bad,*

and middling, the average yield computed by the measurement by string of tied rope.

One third of the average yield was the share of the state. On this basis, a crop rate (*ray*) was drawn up, so that as soon as sown field was measured, the share of the state could be determined and was written on a paper called *patta*. Further it could be converted into rupees on the basis of local rates. The peasant was given choice to pay the measured revenue either in cash or kind, though Sher Shah preferred cash. The branding system of horses (*dagh*) and descriptive rolls (*chehra*), developed during Alauddin Khilji regime became abandoned until Sher Shah Suri, however Sher Shah revived the old practice and strengthened his military armament.

Thus he used to personally monitor the every soldier and fixed his pay before he was inducted into the army and had the horse branded in his own presence. He maintained a personal army of 150,000 cavalry, 25000 infantry, men, including matchlock men and bowmen, a park of artillery and 5000 war elephants. In addition there were nobles, some of whom were called commanders of 20,000 sawars or 10000 sawars or 5000 sawars; however it is not known how they were paid. It seems to be they were paid by land assignment called *Iqta*. Sher Shah also emphasized his rule on justice. He quoted “Justice is the most excellent of religious rites and is approved alike by the king of infidel and of the faithful. Also “None of the devotion and prayers can be equated with justice and here all infidels and Islam are at one point”.

Conclusion

It is to be noted Sher Shah structured his governance on well formulated pattern, the administration was based on the division of duty to various officials and the region was divided into various segments. The lowest unit was the *pargana* consisted of number of villages. Each village had a headman called *muqaddam* who looked after the law and order. The *pargana* was under the charge of *shiqdar* who look after the general administration and a *munsif* or *amil* whose responsibility was to measure the land for land revenue, they were assisted by two clerks who maintained account both in Persian and local language. Above the *pargana* was a *shiq* also called *sarkar* under the headship of *faujdar* or the *muqta*. Thus Sher Shah Suri is understood as capable and successful ruler in the medieval period and he needs to be celebrated for his achievement in his regime. He brought uniformity and transparency in his empire and followed the principle of a ruler irrespective of religion and sects.

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