

The Early Career & Military Achievements of Sher Shah Suri

Sher Shah Suri, whose original name was Farid was the founder of the Suri dynasty. Son of a petty jagirdar, neglected by his father and ill treated by his step-mother, he very successfully challenged the authority of Mughal emperor Humayun, drove him out of India and occupied the throne of Delhi.

All this clearly demonstrates his extra-ordinary qualities of his hand, head and heart. Once again Sher Shah established the Afghan Empire which had been taken over by Babur.

Sher Shah's early career:

The intrigues of his mother compelled the young Farid Khan to leave Sasaram (Bihar), the jagir of his father. He went to Jaunpur for studies. In his studies, he so distinguished himself that the subedar of Jaunpur was greatly impressed. He helped him to become the administrator of his father's jagir which prospered by his efforts. His step-mother's jealousy forced him to search for another employment and he took service under Bahar Khan, the ruler of South Bihar, who gave him the title of Sher Khan for his bravery in killing a tiger single-handed.

But the intrigues of his enemies compelled him to leave Bihar and join the camp of Babur in 1527. He rendered valuable help to Babur in the campaign against the Afghans in Bihar. In due course, Babur became suspicious of Sher Khan who soon slipped away.

As his former master Bahar Khan, the ruler of South Bihar had died, he was made the guardian and regent of the minor son of the deceased. Slowly he started grabbing all the powers of the kingdom. Meanwhile the ruler of Chunar died and

Sher Shah married his widow. This brought him the fort of Chunar and enormous wealth.

Military achievements of Sher Shah:

Military achievements of Sher Shah may be categorized under three heads namely:

- (i) Encounters with Humayun
- (ii) Other encounters
- (iii) Conquests after becoming emperor of Delhi.

1. Sher Shah's encounters with Humayun:

Following were the three encounters:

- (i) Encounter on the fort of Chunar and Sher Shah's diplomatic surrender.
- (ii) Battle of Chausa with Humayun and Sher Shah's victory.
- (iii) Battle of Kannauj and Sher Shah's decisive victory over Humayun. With the victory at Kannauj, Sher Shah became the ruler of Delhi. Agra, Sambhal and Gwalior etc., also came under his sway. This victory ended the rule of the Mughal dynasty for 15 years.

2. Sher Shah's other conquests:

(1) Battle at Surajgarh (1533):

Sher Shah defeated the combined forces of the Lohani chiefs of Bihar and Mohamud Shah of Bengal at Surajgarh. With this victory, whole of Bihar came under Sher Shah. Dr. Qanungo has described the importance of this victory in these words, "If Sher Shah had not been victorious at Surajgarh, he would have never figured in the political sphere of India and would not have got an opportunity to compete with Humayun... for the founding of an empire."

(2) Invasion of Bengal:

Sher Shah plundered Bengal several times and by capturing Gaur, the capital of Bengal, forced Mohammad Shah to seek refuge with Humayun.

3. Sher Shah's conquests after becoming the emperor of Delhi:

(i) Conquest of Punjab (1540-42):

Sher Shah immediately, after his accession to the throne conquered Punjab from Kamran, brother of Humayun.

(ii) Suppression of Khokhars (1542):

Sher Shah suppressed the turbulent Khokhars of the northern region of river Indus and Jhelum.

(iii) Conquest of Malwa (1542):

The ruler of Malwa had not helped Sher Shah in his struggle with Humayun. Therefore he attacked Malwa and annexed it to his empire.

(iv) Conquest of Raisin:

Sher Shah attacked Raisin – a Rajput principality and besieged it. Rajput ruler Purnamal entered into an agreement with Sher Shah that if he surrendered, his family would not be harmed. However Sher Shah did not honour this agreement. In the words of Dr. Ishwari Prasad, “Sher Shah behaved with him very cruelly.”

(v) and (vi) conquest of Multan and Sind (1543). Sher Shah conquered and annexed these provinces into his empire.

(vii) Conquest of Marwar (1543-1545):

Sher Shah brought Marwar under his control by forged letters and sowing dissensions in the army of Maldev, the ruler of Mewar.

(viii) Conquest of Kalinjar (1545) and death of Sher Shah. Sher Shah launched a fierce attack. He won but lost his life when he was grievously injured by the blast.

Impact of Sher Shah's Conquests:

Sher Shah was able to bring under his control a substantial part of India. The frontiers of his empire extended on the one hand from Punjab to Malwa and on the other from Bengal to Sind. He dislodged the Mughal emperor Humayun and founded the Sur dynasty. With large areas under his control, he was able to provide a sort of uniformity to the administrative system of India.

Factors Responsible for Sher Shah's Military Achievements:

1. Service in Babur's army:

Sher Shah had worked for sometime in the army of Babur. This enabled him to familiarize with the strength and weaknesses of the Mughal army.

2. Military organization:

Sher Shah took the following measures to strengthen his army.

(a) Strength:

Sher Shah maintained a strong standing army at the centre like Ala-ud-Din Khalji. His army included 1, 50,000 cavalry, 25,000 infantry, 3000 war elephants and a part of artillery.

(b) Recruitment:

He did not depend on the Jagirdars for the supply of soldiers whenever needed by the Sultan. He maintained a direct link and made them direct loyal to him and not through jagirdars.

(c) Descriptive identification:

With a view to checking fraudulent practices in army in inflating the figures of soldiers and horses, Sher Shah adopted the practices of maintaining the description (huliya) of the soldiers and that of branding (dag) of the horses.

(d) Payment in cash:

The soldiers were paid in cash whereas most of the officers were given the jagirs.

(e) Mostly Afghans in the army:

He recruited mostly Afghan soldiers from every part of the country and also from Afghanistan and gave them important posts in the army.

(f) Supplementary armies:

Besides the standing army under the direct command of the Sultan, provincial governors, nobles and subordinate rulers were also allowed to maintain their separate armies.

(g) Discipline in the army:

In the words of Qanungo, “The severe discipline in Sher Shah’s camp in one campaign was sufficient to turn a raw recruit into a seasoned veteran”.

3. Military strategies:

Sher Shah was a pastmaster in adopting successful war tactics. He believed in the maxim “Everything is fair in love and war”.

He knew fully well as where to make a tactical retreat, when to strike at the enemy, how to sow dissensions in the army camp, how to make friendship with the enemy of the enemy, how to pretend to retreat. In fact he knew how to win.

Following are some of the main instances of Sher Shah’s military strategy:

(i) Sher Shah's diplomatic surrender to Humayun at Chunar fort.

(ii) Sher Shah's false pretence of withdrawing but sudden attack at Humayun in the battle of Kannauj.

(iii) Sowing dissensions in Maldev's army by forged letters.

(iv) Arriving at some sort of understanding with the ruler of Gujarat and keeping Humayun engaged in conflict with him.

(v) Raising the cry of 'jihad' to infuse enthusiasm among his soldiers.

(vi) Going back from his promise with Rajput ruler Purnamal Chauhan and sudden attack by Sher Shah on him.

4. Making the best use of Humayun's weaknesses.