

## **Administration of India under Sher Shah**

### **1. The Central Administration:**

#### **The Sultan:**

Sher Shah paid due respect to the sentiments and traditions of the Afghans with a view to win their respect and loyalty. But, he knew that the Afghan theory of kingship was not workable in India. Therefore, he changed the traditions of the Afghans and, in practice, came nearer the Turkish theory of kingship.

Therefore, he concentrated all administrative powers in his own person. His ministers enjoyed even less powers as compared with the ministers of the Mughuls. His ministers did not make decisions themselves.

All major decisions were taken by Sher Shah himself and the ministers and the nobles simply carried them out. Thus, Sher Shah was a despot whose aim was to do good to his subjects. For that purpose, Sher Shah worked hard for sixteen hours a day and looked after the working of every department of the state.

#### **The ministers:**

Though the ministers were, in fact, secretaries of Sher Shah as they had no power of initiative or final decision of any policy but they were there simply because of the convenience of the administration. There were departments whose administrative heads enjoyed the position of ministers.

#### **They were as follows:**

##### **(i) Diwan-i-Wazirat:**

The head of this department was the Wazir (Vazir). He was, primarily, the finance minister and looked after the income and expenditure of the state though he enjoyed a general supervisory authority over other ministers.

##### **(ii) Diwan-i-Arz:**

This department was under the Arz-i-Mumalik who was the army minister. He was not the commander-in-chief of the army but looked after the recruitment, organisation, discipline, disbursement of the salaries of the soldiers and officers and all sorts of supplies to the army.

##### **(iii) Diwan-i-Rasalat:**

The incharge of this department worked as foreign minister of the state. He received foreign envoys and ambassadors and maintained correspondence with foreign states. Sometimes, the charity and endowment department was also placed under him.

**(iv) Diwan-i-Insha:**

Its head was called Dabir-i-Khas who looked after internal correspondence of the state. The royal proclamation and despatches were sent by him to governors and other officers. He received their communications as well and reported them to the Sultan.

Besides these ministers, there were two other important departments of the state whose heads were not ministers but enjoyed equal consideration from the Sultan. The one was the Diwan-i-Qaza whose head was the chief Qazi. The chief Qazi was the head of the administration of justice only next to the Sultan.

The other was Diwan-i-Barid which was presided over by the Barid-i-Mumalik who was the head of the intelligence department. He looked after the newswriters and spies of the state who were posted at all important places in the empire. He also arranged the news carriers to carry the royal dak. There seems to have been another high official who looked after the royal household and personal safety of the Sultan.

**2. Provincial Administration:**

**(i) Suba or Iqta:**

Very little is known about the provincial administration of Sher Shah and whatever is known, historians have differed about it. Dr Qanungo has opined that 'there was no administrative unit called Iqta or Suba during the reign of Sher Shah. The largest administrative unit was the Sarkar.'

According to Dr Parmatma Saran there were Sub as where military governors were appointed by Sher Shah. According to Dr A.L. Srivastava, 'besides the Hindu rulers who had accepted the suzerainty of Sher Shah and were left free to manage their internal affairs, there were provinces called the Iqtas where military governors or Subedars were appointed. Subedars were appointed in Lahore, Malwa and Ajmer.'

Dr A.B. Pandey says that 'The head of a province was called the Hakim, Amin or Faujdar. Haibat Khan, Hakim of Panjab, was given the title of Masnad-i-Ala, allowed to keep 30,000 soldiers and the right to distribute Jagir among his officers.'

The same way, Khawas Khan was appointed the Subedar of Rajputana and was allowed to keep 20,000 soldiers.' Sher Shah devised yet another method to administer the distant province of Bengal. There was no military governor there.

The entire Suba was divided into Sarkars (districts), each being looked after by a military officer called the chief Shiqdar. Above all chief Shiqdars there was appointed a civilian officer called the Amin-i-Bangala with a small military force to supervise the administration of the province. Thus, there was no military governor in Bengal and there was no other officer commanding a sufficiently large force so as to be in a position to revolt against the Sultan.

Thus, there was no uniformity in the administration of provinces during the reign of Sher Shah. But all provinces were kept under strict discipline by Sher Shah and there occurred no revolt by any provincial governor except that in 1541 A.D. in Bengal which was quickly suppressed by the Sultan.

#### **(ii) Sarkars:**

Every Iqta or Suba was divided into several Sarkars or districts. There were two chief officers in every Sarkar. The one, Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran or chief Shiqdar was a military officer. He maintained peace in his Sarkar, supervised the work of his subordinate Shiqdars and helped in the collection of revenue and other taxes.

The other officer was the Munsif-i-Munsifan or the chief Munsif. He was, primarily, a judicial officer who decided only civil cases and looked after the working of his subordinate judicial officers in the Parganas. Certainly, both these officers must have been getting assistance from a large number of junior officers and other subordinates in carrying out their duties.

#### **(iii) Parganas:**

Each Sarkar was divided into smaller units called Parganas. There was a Shiqdar (military officer), Amin or Munsif (Civilian Judge), one Fotahdar (treasurer) and two Karkuns (clerks or writers) in each Pargana.

#### **(iv) Village:**

Sher Shah left the administration of villages in the hands of their hereditary officers like Chaukidars, Patwaris, etc. The village-panchayat (assembly) also enjoyed a large measure of independence in looking after the welfare of the people. All of them assisted state officials in collecting revenue and maintaining law and order.

Sher Shah introduced the system of transferring the officers of the Sarkars and Parganas every two or three years.

### **3. Finance (Revenue):**

The main sources of the income of the state were the land-revenue, unclaimed property, trade-tax, mint, salt-tax, Khams, viz., 1/5th of the plunder taken during the time of war, jizya and presents from subordinate rulers, governors, nobles, traders, etc. The main items of expenditure were the expenses to maintain the army, salaries of civilian officers and the expenditure of the royal household and the Sultan.

The local taxes were called abwabs which were levied mostly on production and consumption of various trade and professions and on transport.

The land-revenue, however, constituted the primary source of income of the state. Abul Fazl wrote that 'he introduced the system of Alauddin which he had read in Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi and, thus, became the object of praise for coming generations.' But this opinion of Abul Fazl concerning Sher Shah is not correct.

Sher Shah did not introduce the revenue-system of Alauddin blindly. Rather what he felt correct, he did. Sher Shah believed that the welfare of the state could be achieved only by looking after the welfare of the peasants. Therefore, he paid personal attention towards the revenue administration and introduced certain successful measures to improve it. His revenue administration has been regarded as one of the best during the medieval period.

#### **Its basic features were as follows:**

- (a) The system which Sher Shah introduced in most of the places was Ryotwari wherein the state kept direct relations with the peasants for the assessment and collection of the land revenue. However, the system could not be introduced in Multan, Malwa and Rajasthan where the Jagirdari system continued to exist.
- (b) All cultivable land was divided into three categories on the basis of production, viz., good, middle and bad.
- (c) The land was measured according to a uniform system and it was ascertained that what quality of land was possessed by each cultivator. An average of the produce was estimated in each case and then, according to Dr Qanungo, the peasants were asked to pay 1/4 of the average

produce. But according to Dr Parmatma Saran, Dr R.P. Tripathi and the majority of historians the cultivators were asked to pay 1/3 of their produce to the state.

(d) The state preferred to collect revenue in the form of cash and, for that purpose, prices of every variety of cereals were fixed in different places. Yet, the cultivators were given the facility to pay their revenue in kind as well.

(e) The revenue on perishable articles was, however, paid by the peasants in form of cash only.

(f) The peasants were given the facility to pay their revenue in two instalments in a year according to crop seasons.

(g) The peasants were given pattas (title deeds) by the state specifying the revenue which they had to pay and were asked to sign qabuliats (deeds of agreement) signifying their acceptance to pay the required revenue.

(h) The peasants had also to pay two more taxes, named the jaribana (Surveyor's fee) and the mahasilana (tax-collector's fee) to the state. These constituted 2 and a 1/2 per cent to 5 per cent of their produce.

(i) Besides these, the peasants had to pay 2 and a 1/2 per cent of their produce in kind to be returned to them in case of any natural calamity such as flood, famine, etc.

(j) According to the orders of the Sultan, the peasants were treated with generosity while fixing the revenue but once settled they were asked to pay their revenue without any mercy on behalf of the state.

(k) Every care was taken to protect the crop from destruction during the course of war and if damaged the peasants were compensated by the state.

The revenue administration of Sher Shah suffered from certain defects. The peasants who possessed middle and bad quality of land had to pay more as compared to the owners of good quality land under this system. The taxation under which the peasants had to pay 1/3 of their produce as revenue, the jaribana and the mahasilana and further tax for emergencies was, certainly, heavy for the peasants.

The peasants must have faced difficulty in paying the revenue in cash because of the difference in prices in different areas. The annual settlement of the revenue was inconvenient both to the peasants and state officials.

The system was not introduced in the lands of jagirdars and therefore, the peasants of those lands failed to draw any advantage out of it. There was corruption in the revenue department and Sher Shah failed to uproot it. That must have affected adversely the welfare of the peasants.

Yet, the measures introduced by Sher Shah had largely succeeded in doing good to the peasants and increasing the income of the state. The revenue system of Sher Shah, therefore, has been regarded as fairly good as compared with the system of other rulers of medieval India.

He comparatively did not charge much taxes from the peasants. He punished all those who troubled the peasants in any way and even took personal interest in safeguarding the interests of the peasants. All historians, therefore, have praised the revenue administration of Sher Shah.

**Dr K.R. Qanungo writes:**

“Had Sher Shah been spared for a decade or two more, the zamindars as a class would have disappeared and Hindustan could have become one vast expanse of arable land without a bush or bramble, cultivated under the zealous care of indefatigable farmers.”

**4. Justice:**

The Sultan was the highest judicial authority in the state and Sher Shah held his court every Wednesday in the evening. Next to him was the chief Qazi who was the head of the department of justice. There were subordinate Qazis in every district and in all important cities.

The cases concerning the revenue were decided by chief Munsifs in Sarkars and by Munsifs in Parganas while the criminal cases were decided by the chief Shiqdars and Shiqdars in their respective areas. The criminal law was severe and the offenders were punished by flogging, fines, imprisonment and even cutting of the limbs.

Sher Shah was a just ruler who dispensed justice without any discrimination between the rich and the poor, high or low. He used to say- “Justice is the most excellent of religious rites and it is approved both by the kings of the infidels and the faithfuls.”

He again expressed- “Justice does not consist in abstaining from oppression but in fair and honest dealing with men.” Sher Shah practised what he said and, on occasions, punished even his own relatives and nobles for high-handedness or oppression.

### **5. Police:**

There was no separate department of police at that time. The duty was performed by military officers in their respective areas. The local officers were held responsible for maintaining law and order and if they failed they were punished. In case the offender was not detected the loss was made up by the local officials.

In case of villages, if the local officers of the village failed to trace a murderer the headman of the village was given the penalty of death. Thus, the laws and their enforcement were severe but successful. Elliot has remarked- “In the time of Sher Shah, an old woman might place a basket of ornaments on her head and go on journey.”

### **6. Trade and Commerce:**

Sher Shah abolished all those duties which were charged on merchandise at different places within his empire. He ordered for the collection of trade-tax only at two places—one, when and where the goods entered the territory of his empire and, the other, where it was sold. This encouraged trade and commerce.

The police system, justice, protection of traders on roads, issue of good coins, etc., were also such measures of Sher Shah which induced development of trade and commerce. Sher Shah protected the property of traders and orders were issued to officers to look after the interests of the traders.

### **7. Currency:**

Sher Shah stopped the use of all old coins and debased coins and issued new coins of gold, silver and copper of all denominations of standard weights and of good metals. He also fixed up their relative values. His silver rupee and copper dam had the halves, quarters, eighths and sixteenths.

His rupee (without its inscription) lasted throughout the Mughul period and was retained by the English also up to 1835 A.D. V.A. Smith has remarked- “**This rupee is the basis of the existing British currency system.**” Thus, Sher Shah’s currency reforms were a great success.

### **8. Roads and Sarais:**

One of the greatest achievements of Sher Shah in administration was his construction of roads connecting important parts of his empire with his capital. He repaired many old roads and

constructed new ones also. He planted shade- giving trees and trees of fruits on both sides of the roads.

**Sher Shah reconstructed the following highways:**

- (a) The first which ran from Sonargaon (near Dacca) via Agra, Delhi and Lahore to the Indus,
- (b) The second which ran from Agra to Jodhpur and the fort of Chittor,
- (c) The third which ran from Agra to Burhanpur, and
- (d) The fourth which ran from Lahore to Multan.

These roads served many purposes, viz., the imperial defence, quick and regular despatch of news, facility of trade and commerce and convenience to the travellers. Sher Shah constructed nearly 1,700 sarais on both sides of the roads.

Each sarai had separate quarters for the Hindus and the Muslims, a well and a mosque and was looked after by a Shiqdar. Horses were kept there in readiness for the news carriers. Land was attached to every sarai to carry on its expenses. Dr Qanungo described these sarais as “veritable articles of the empire.”

**9. Intelligence Department:**

Sher Shah maintained a highly efficient espionage system. Spies were appointed at all important places and with all important officers. The head of the intelligence department was called the Darogha-i-Dak-Chauki. The spies were expected to inform the Sultan all important news immediately.

The defaulters were severely punished. Two horses were kept at every sarai so that the news-carriers could get fresh horses at short intervals to maintain speed. The success of Sher Shah’s administration largely depended on the efficient organisation of his spy-system.

**10. Religious Policy and Measures of Charity:**

Sher Shah was a Sunni Musalman and strictly followed the principles of Islam in his personal life. That is why, he arranged charity for the poor. The expenditure of the royal kitchen was 500 gold mohurs every day and food was distributed freely to all needy persons.



As regards his religious policy, historians have expressed different views. Dr S.R. Sharma says that “it was not different from other Turk and Afghan rulers of the Delhi Sultanate.” Dr Qanungo opined that “he was tolerant and respectful towards the Hindus.”

Dr R.P. Tripathi says that “Sher Shah was a tolerant monarch which is proved by the activities pursued in the fields of religion, literature and fine arts during his times. Malik Muhammad Jaisi wrote his Padmavat and Vaisnavism became quite popular in Mathura and its nearby area during his time. The buildings of Sher Shah also justify that he made no discrimination between Muslim, Afghan, Turks and Persian arts.”

Yet, Dr Tripathi regards him primarily the ruler of the Afghans. Sher Shah exhibited intolerance in religious affairs many times. He declared jihad when he fought against Rajput rulers. His treatment of Raja Puran Mal of Raisin was certainly a proof of religious bigotry. He constructed a mosque after destroying a temple at Jodhpur.

It is largely accepted that Sher Shah was liberal towards the Hindus in times of peace but, certainly, utilised the religious sentiments of the Muslims to serve his political ends particularly during times of war. Therefore, he was not as intolerant as his predecessor Muslim rulers and not so tolerant as future Mughul emperor, Akbar. He can be assigned a place somewhere between the two.

### **11. Buildings:**

Sher Shah constructed many buildings though he enjoyed a short span of rule as the Sultan. He constructed the fort of Rohtasgarh on the banks of the river Jhelam in the north-west and Purana Qila at Delhi. Sher Shah, after destroying the city of Kannauj, tried to build a new city named Sher Sur there and another city near the Purana Qila at Delhi. The mosque in Purana Qila has been regarded as a good example of Indo-Islamic architecture.

However, the best building constructed by him is his own mausoleum at Sasaram in Bihar. The mausoleum has been built in the midst of a lake on a lofty plinth and ranks among the most beautiful buildings in India. Dr Qanungo said that **“it is Muslim from outside but Hindu within.”**

Havel described that “the mausoleum is a portrait of Sher Shah’s personality and character.” Cunningham was half- inclined to prefer it to even the Taj Mahal while Percy Brown has praised every building of Sher Shah for designs and execution.

### **12. Military Administration:**

Sher Shah maintained a standing army at the centre like Ala-ud-din Khalji. His military strength consisted of 1,50,000 cavalry, 25,000 infantry, 5,000 elephants and a part of artillery. His artillery, probably, was the weakest part of his military strength while the cavalry consisted mostly of the Afghans.

However, other Muslims and the Hindus too were employed in the army. Sher Shah took personal interest in the recruitment, training, promotion, discipline, disbursement of salary and supply of arms, clothes, etc. to his soldiers. The soldiers were paid in cash while the officers were assigned jagirs.

He adopted the practices of maintaining the huliya of the soldiers and that of dag or branding of the horses. Besides the army of the Sultan, provincial governor, nobles and subordinate rulers were also allowed to maintain their separate armies which were called in for the assistance of the Sultan when needed.

Soldiers were kept in all forts and military cantonments spreading all over the territory of the empire. The strength of the army which was so spread in different parts of the empire must also be in large number. Sher Shah, certainly, succeeded in maintaining a large, disciplined and effective fighting force during his time.

Sher Shah's administration, both civil and military, has been regarded highly successful. Of course, he was not an innovator but he infused a new spirit in the old institutions and improved them. Sher Shah's success during the short period of his rule challenges the support given by historians to the administrative failures of Babur and many others on the ground of the short duration of their rule.

Sher Shah too got very little time to rule, yet, he occupies a place among the best administrators of medieval India. Abbas Khan Sarwani concluded- "Sher Shah, in his wisdom and experience, was a second Haidar." H.G. Keene has also commented- **"No government not even the British has shown so much wisdom as this Pathan."**

Sher Shah not only removed all disorders from the administration which had arisen after the disruption of the Delhi Sultanate but also prepared a firm base for future administrators, particularly for the Mughul emperor Akbar.

Several historians have described Sher Shah as the precursor of Akbar and he can, certainly, be assigned this place as an administrator. He provided an efficient administration to a large part of

northern India. It must have helped Akbar because he got a prepared base. Besides, he attempted certain measures successfully which became good examples for Akbar.

### **Character, Estimate and Place in History (The Greatest Afghan Ruler):**

The character of Sher Shah was not attractive. As he was born and brought up under odd circumstances, he lacked generosity and humanity. Primarily, he was a practical man. He clearly understood his aim and attempted to achieve it in a cold and calculated manner. He could not afford a single failure because that could destroy his entire career.

Therefore, his character lacked magnanimity and grace and was not attractive. Sher Shah was silent, calculating, worldly-wise and even selfish and he was prepared to adopt every means to achieve his aim. He treated everybody including his family members with the same cold attitude. He educated himself with the same purpose.

He studied Arabic and Persian, was interested in history and patronized scholars, yet he himself was not a scholar and no scholar flourished under his patronage. Thus, he received education and utilised it for practical ends. He believed in acquiring worldly success and he achieved it. On several occasions, he adopted dubious means to achieve his aim.

Certainly, the forts of Chunargarh, Raisin and Rohtasgarh (Bihar) were captured by recourse to stratagem and so was the case in his success against Maldeva of Marwar. Sher Shah did not believe merely in chivalry. He did not forget to use even unfair means to achieve his aim.

He attacked his enemy only when he felt that he was sure of his success and utilised the unpreparedness and weakness of his opponent to his best advantage. Thus, Sher Shah was a practical man. There was no place for generous sentiments and emotional foolishness in his character.

However, it is not accepted that Sher Shah was completely devoid of human feelings. When the ladies of the Mughul-Harem were produced before him after the battle of Chausa, he felt very unhappy at their distress and returned them with all respects to Humayun.

He was a religious man as well and had complete faith in God. He performed his daily religious rites punctually, arranged for charity to the poor and worked hard for the welfare of his subjects. Thus, Sher Shah was not emotional yet a dutiful and liberal monarch.

Sher Shah did not lack qualities of a soldier or that of a commander. He was courageous, capable of hard labour and expert in handling all weapons. He had killed a tiger single-handed in his young age and was awarded the title of Sher Khan by his then master. He participated in many wars as a soldier.

In no case he was a born commander but he had become quite a successful commander after gaining a long experience of wars. He fought his wars not for the sake of fighting but for winning them. He developed the art of winning the war with minimum cost and risk to himself. Therefore, he never lost a war during his life.

Besides, Sher Shah was a capable organiser. He organised the Afghans, fought against the Mughuls at the opportune time, turned them out of India and succeeded in establishing the Afghan empire for the second time in India. It was a glorious achievement of Sher Shah. Thus, the character of Sher Shah was not attractive but had all the virtues of a successful worldly-wise individual.

Sher Shah occupies an important place among the rulers of Indian history. Sir Woolseley Haig described him as **“the greatest Muslim ruler of India.”** Dr A.L. Srivastava ranks him just after Akbar, the Great. Dr J.N. Sarkar wrote- “Shivaji and Sher Shah were not only alike in character and genius but also grew up amidst like circumstances.”

Dr R.P. Tripathi has also agreed with him and wrote- “The personality which comes nearest to Sher Shah is that of Shivaji, the master builder of Maratha Nation.” Thus, among the rulers of medieval India, Sher Shah was, of course, not the greatest but certainly one of the great rulers.

Sher Shah succeeded brilliantly in his life. His first achievement was the organisation of the Afghans under his leadership. In a sense, he was the nation- builder of the Afghans. Prior to his arrival on the political scene, the Afghans were divided among themselves and lay defeated by the Mughuls.

Sher Shah brought them under his leadership, encouraged them to unite, utilised their sentiment of hatred against the Mughuls in his favour, provided them successful leadership and, thus, brought unity and sense of useful purpose among them.

He also successfully utilised their united strength against the Mughuls and captured the throne of Delhi. Thus, he was the nation-builder of the Afghans. However, Sher Shah failed to provide a stable unity to the Afghans. Just after his death, the Afghans were divided again. Therefore, Sher

Shah comes closer to Shivaji but is not equal to him in this field. The nation which Shivaji built up existed even after his death.

The war of Maratha-independence against Aurangzeb after the death of Shambhaji is a clear-cut proof of that. Not only this, the Marathas broke up the strength of Aurangzeb and, ultimately, became a first rate power in India primarily because of their national spirit provided by Shivaji to them.

The second achievement of Sher Shah was the capture of the throne of Delhi by his own efforts and merits. That was a rare achievement and the credit goes entirely to him. Sher Shah had no connections with any royal family. He was the son of a petty Jagirdar and was neglected by his father.

His cousins desired and tried to divide his hereditary Jagir after the death of his father. And, among the Afghans who could claim their leadership were the Lodi-princes, viz., Alam Khan Lodi and Mahmud Lodi, the relatives of the deceased Afghan ruler of Delhi, Ibrahim Lodi.

Besides were Bahadur Shah of Gujarat, his own master Muhammad Shah of Bihar and Nusrat Shah of Bengal. All of them were Afghans, all belonged to either a royal family or enjoyed independent status and power of their own and were in a better position to claim the leadership of the Afghans. Sher Shah stood no comparison with any of them in any way.

Yet, he bypassed them all, became the leader of the Afghans, turned out the powerful Mughuls from India and captured the throne of Delhi for himself and his family. This alone is sufficient to place Sher Shah among reputed rulers of Delhi.

But Sher Shah achieved more than this. His third success was in the field of administration. Sher Shah captured the throne of Delhi at the close of his life. He once expressed, "Alas, that I should have attained power, only at the close of the day."

Yet, he has been regarded as the one among most successful rulers of Delhi so far as the administration is concerned. Of course, Ala-ud-din Khalji occupies a better place than him as an innovator and Akbar, certainly, proved a better administrator than him.

But then, there is nobody else who can be ranked above him. The success which Sher Shah achieved in administration in a short period of his rule was unique and impressive. He is ranked among the best administrators of medieval India.

Therefore, Sher Shah was one among the great rulers of medieval India and, among the Afghan rulers, he was certainly the greatest.