

Ima

In a short span of five years (1540-45), during which Sher Shah extended his rule over the large part of the Northern India, he left a name which the later generations have honored as that of a great administrator and a just ruler.

The administration of Sher Shah was on the same pattern as was established by the Sultans of Delhi. All powers were vested in the king. He was the chief executive, legislator, judge and the commander-in-chief of the army rolled into one. Besides, he was a firm ruler and took keen interest in day to day affairs of the state.

Administrative Heads

Sher Shah was assisted by the heads of the civil, military and ecclesiastical departments. The Vakil functioned as the chief secretary; the Vazir was in-charge of public finance and accounts; and a 'private secretary' looked after records, received reports from news writers and spies and drafted royal orders. A military secretary headed the army department, whereas the artillery was headed by the Mir-i-Atish.

Sher Shah instructed his administrator and commanders to keep him regularly informed about the progress of their work. He posted his own independent agents and spies all over his kingdom. Their duty was to keep him posted with whatever they found affected Imperial interests.

Sher Shah also organised an efficient system of postal messengers. The horses were provided to them in most cases. Change of horses was also provided to them at convenient posts throughout his empire.. At posts, free meals were provided for Hindus and Muslims alike as a part of royal charities.

Units of Administration

The empire was divided, first into 47 and later on into 50 large units of administration. These administrative units were smaller than provinces but larger than districts, somewhat like the Commissioner's Divisions of today. These administrators conducted all civil and military functions in their persons. They had large garrison forces under their command, very often distributed in various important places under their charge. The units of administration in Sher Shah's time may be said to be, in ascending order, the village, pargana, sarkar, (shiq), and may be subah.

Revenue Administration

The administrators, their staff and the forces under their command seem to have been paid by assignment of the revenue of parts of the areas administered by them.

Land revenue formed of the chief source of the state-income. But custom duties, sales tax, excise tax, additional cesses on land, cattle-tax, grazing tax, professional tax on some industries and ferry dues also added to the state's revenues. Some income was also derived from some of the industrial and commercial undertakings of the state. Hindus paid the jazia also. This was levied on all the able-bodied adult male Hindus.

Assessment of Land Revenue

Sher Shah made a substantial change in the assessment of land revenue and introduced some improvements in the method of its collection.

According to the traditional system, the state claimed a substantial share of the produce. This required detailed supervision all over the country. He had earlier tried to collect land revenue in cash and calculated according to the area of the land under the cultivator.

Sher Shah aimed at introducing a system of land revenue where the cultivator (ryot) was asked to pay, primarily in kind, one-third of the expected produce of the crop from the land under cultivation.

Under Sher Shah's rule land was measured and records were maintained. The unit of measurement was gaz-i Sikander-i. An average of produce per bigha for every crop was struck by taking into account the produce of the best, the middle and the worst land for every crop. Every season the extent of area under every crop was entered in the records for every cultivator against his name.

This area was supposed to be measured in every season. But it is quite likely that the primary measurement was made when the system was first introduced, and served the purpose subsequently.

The records of the holdings of every cultivator were detailed and specified not only the entire area cultivated by him but its sub-division also. Subsequently, it was considered sufficient to record the sub-unit under cultivation, their area could be recorded from the earlier records.

At many places, the old system continued where by the state claimed one-third of the actual produce (not the estimated and expected) of every cultivator.

Sometimes concessions in rates were made to the local custom, as in Multan, where only one-fourth of the produce was claimed. Sher Shah might have preferred to collect some of the land revenue in cash. Since no definite information is available on how the demand was assessed in cash, it is fair to suppose that the conversion was done at the current market rates.

Collection of Land Revenue

Land revenue was collected by the village headman, (muqaddam or mukhiya) who charged an additional 5 percent for performing this task. Another 5 percent seems to have been collected for the expenses incurred on visiting officials.

In other words it means the burden on land remained quite heavy and the peasants in spite of some relief because of the better law and order situation, continued are to be exploited by those who controlled the state power.

The amount of revenue varied according to the extent of area under cultivation and types of crops cultivated. An increase in area meant higher collection; cultivation of more valuable crops also increased the state's share. The state, therefore, encourage not only the bringing of new land under the plough but also the introduction of crops with a higher cash yield. Interest-free loans were given to the cultivators for both the purposes.

An interesting innovation in the system of collection was also introduced. The revenue officials supplied the village headman demandships indicating what every cultivator had to pay. The dues were vigorously collected as the headman was bound to pay the exact amount due every season. The cultivators were granted receipts for what they had paid so that there could be no undue exaction.

The Patwari kept the land records for one or more villages. He was the lowest of the officials but still occupied a vital role in the land administration.

Revenue Officials

The pargana was the main unit for revenue collection. It consisted of a large number of villages, some what a tehsil taluqa of today.

He had one clerk to help him in keeping local records in the local language; another clerk would prepare records in Persian for submission to the capital, Shiqdar was responsible for transmitting the collection to the centre in cash or in kind, as per orders. The treasury received the money thus collected.

Administration of Justice

Sher Shah was known for his even-handed justice and capacity for examining thoroughly all disputes brought before him. Sher Shah was very strict in administering justice in one of his farmans.

All types of cases seem to have come up to the royal court. They came not so much in appeal against the decisions of the lower courts as direct demands for justice from the highest in the realm when the complaint had failed to get it elsewhere.

Investigation of crimes as well as adjudication of cases was a royal function in cases that were brought up to the court.

Religious Policy

Besides the traditional Qazi courts and revenue courts, Sher Shah "seems to have set up regular courts under a Mir-i-Adl, (judge) in every Pargana. Revenue officials decided revenue disputes.

Qazis, mostly stationed in towns and cities decided civil and criminal cases among Muslims and criminal cases against Hindus. Cases among the Hindus, and such case among converts to Islam as depended on local customs must have been decided by the Panchayats of various types. In the villages the Panchs were sure to be conversant with local affairs and customs and could be expected to decide cases fairly.

Oaths carried much greater weight than they do today and they settled many quarrels. Muslim criminal law did not take circumstantial evidence into consideration; cases were decided by the statements of at least two eye witnesses, or upon the confession of the accused. Sher Shah followed a liberal police with regard to the Hindus and he did not interfere in their day-to-day religious practices.

The Army

Sher Shah revived Alauddin Khilji's system of branding the horses of every royal trooper. He also raised a full-fledged royal standing army.

Soldiers were recruited as royal soldiers and their horses were branded. Salaries were paid by the state rather than by the commanders of the garrisons under whom they served. He had a very large standing army under his own command and another, distributed all over his dominions.

Garrison commanders were granted separate jagirs for their own use and land revenue from some other specified area was set apart for the maintenance of the royal troops serving under them. In case of any attempt at diverting the income from the portion assigned for the troops, punishment followed swiftly and surely.

Promotion of education

For the education of Muslims, a Maktab was attached to every mosque for imparting elementary education and teaching Arabic and Persian. Madrasas were set up for higher education. Endowments and grants were given to educational institutions and provisions were also made for scholarships on the basis of merit.

Public Works

About 1700 sarais were constructed on both sides of the roads. Each sarai had separate rooms for the Hindus and the Muslims and had a well and a mosque. Sarais also served as Dak Chaukis. In view of the special significance of these sarais, they were called as "veritable arteries of the empire."

Sher Shah constructed a network of roads connecting important parts of his empire within his capital. He repaired old roads. Two horses were kept at every sarai so that the news-carriers could get fresh horses at short intervals to maintain speed.

Sher Shah was very particular about the welfare of the peasants. He used to say, "If I oppress them they will abandon their villages and the country will be mined and deserted." By his shrewd capacity for organizing, unique forethought and intimate knowledge of administration, he made necessary arrangements for smooth and efficient administration and controlling the coveted empire.

Encouragement to Trade and Industry

Sher Shah took every care for encouraging trade and industry. In those times, the worst obstacle in the movement of goods from one place to another was the levying of transit duties on goods by all those who were stronger enough to collect them. He abolished this levy entirely except a few places.

Free movement of goods needed good roads. Sher Shah repaired old roads and opened new roadways so that Agra, the capital, stood connected with Bengal on one side, and Rohtas on another, Burhanpur on the third side and Ajmer on the fourth. A fifth road connected Lahore with Multan.

Serais or rest houses dotted all along the highways constructed by Sher Shah. The serais were enclosed buildings with Chowkidars. Here goods could be stored; and men and mounts found shelter and provision. Safety of life and goods was assured. Every important serai was even provided with a separate lodge for the king and aristocratic people.

Hence, trade and commerce benefitted greatly, as Sher Shah rigorously enforced the responsibility of keeping peace and order on every locality itself.

Currency Reforms

The coins and currency reforms of Sher Shah Suri were one of his most outstanding achievements. He found on his accession that the currency system had practically broken down. There was the debasement of the current coins and the absence of a fixed ratio between the coins and various metals.

He took steps to issue a large number of new silver coins which subsequently became known as 'dam'. Both the silver rupee and copper dam had their halves, quarters, eighths and sixteenths. Next, he abolished all old and mixed metal currency coins. He fixed a rate between the copper and silver coins. His silver rupee coins weighed 180 grains, of which 175 grains were pure silver. This rupee, minus its inscription, lasted throughout the Mughal period and was retained by the English East India Company up to 1835.

Sher Shah's name and title and place of mint were invariably inscribed on the coins in Arabic characters.

Some of his coins bore his name in Devanagari script and some had the names of first four Khalifas in addition. Gold coins of pure metal of various weights, such as 166.4 grains, 167 grains and 168.5 grains, were executed. The ratio of exchange between the dam and the rupee was 64 to 1. The ratios between the various gold coins and the silver ones were fixed on a permanent basis.

The currency reforms of Sher Shah Suri proved very useful and did away with a great deal of inconvenience which was experienced by the general public and particularly by the trading community. These reforms have elicited high praise from modern numismatists.