



How Was Sher Shah's Administration Structured?

Description

Sher Shah Suri, despite his relatively brief reign from 1540 to 1545, left an indelible mark on [Indian history](#), primarily through his profound administrative reforms. His ascendance to power after defeating the Mughal emperor Humayun provided him the opportunity to implement a system of governance that was both innovative and deeply rooted in existing traditions. Understanding how Sher Shah's administration was structured is crucial for grasping its lasting influence on subsequent Indian empires, most notably the Mughals under Akbar, who significantly adopted and refined many of his methods. His genius lay in reorganizing and streamlining various aspects of statecraft, leading to a more stable, just, and prosperous realm.

His administrative model was not built entirely from scratch. Instead, Sher Shah meticulously studied and improved upon the existing structures of the Delhi Sultanate. He possessed a keen understanding of governance, derived from his early experiences managing his father's jagir. This practical background allowed him to identify inefficiencies and areas needing reform, enabling him to craft a system celebrated for its efficiency and equity.

Sher Shah's Administrative Foundations

The administrative foundations laid by Sher Shah were characterized by a strong centralized authority coupled with a well-defined local structure. His vision was to create a state where law and order prevailed, justice was accessible, and economic activities could flourish without hindrance. He recognized that a robust administration was essential not just for revenue collection but also for the overall well-being and security of his subjects.

Sher Shah's administration aimed at bringing stability after a period of political fragmentation. He saw the necessity of linking the central government directly to the local population, ensuring that state policies were implemented uniformly and grievances addressed promptly. This approach minimized the power of intermediaries and established a more direct relationship between the ruler and the ruled, fostering loyalty and efficient governance. This continuity with the Sultanate period's administrative principles, albeit with significant improvements, formed a strong base for his empire.

Structuring the State: Central and Local Administration

The structure of Sher Shah's state administration was hierarchical and well-organized, reflecting a deliberate attempt to manage a vast and diverse empire effectively.

Central Administration

At the apex of the administration was the Sultan himself, Sher Shah, who was the ultimate authority in all matters—executive, legislative, and judicial. He personally supervised all departments and often made critical decisions. To assist him, a council of ministers and various departments (Diwans) were established, each with specific responsibilities.

The most prominent of these departments included:

- **Diwan-i-Wazarat:** This was the finance department, headed by the Wazir. Its primary function was to manage the state's revenue and expenditure. It oversaw land revenue collection, maintained financial records, and allocated funds for various state activities, including the army, public works, and the royal household. The efficiency of this department was critical for the solvency and strength of the empire.
- **Diwan-i-Ariz:** This was the military department, headed by the Ariz-i-Mumalik. Its responsibilities included the recruitment, organization, discipline, and payment of the army. This department played a central role in maintaining Sher Shah's formidable standing army and ensuring its readiness for deployment.

While the framework highlights these two, it is understood that other departments would have existed for correspondence, justice, and foreign affairs, though their specific names are not provided in the scope of this discussion. The central administration thus functioned as the brain of the empire, directing policies and ensuring their execution across the vast territories.

Local Administration

Sher Shah divided his kingdom into a structured system of administrative units to ensure effective governance at the grassroots level. This local structure was crucial for maintaining law and order, collecting revenue, and delivering justice.

The kingdom was primarily divided into:

- **Sarkars (Districts):** Each Sarkar was an aggregation of several Parganas. At the head of each Sarkar were two principal officers:
 - **Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran:** Responsible for maintaining law and order, general administration, and supervising the Shiqdars of the Parganas.
 - **Munsif-i-Munsifan:** Primarily responsible for revenue administration and judicial matters, overseeing the Amins of the Parganas. Their role was to hear civil cases and ensure equitable revenue assessment.
- **Parganas (Sub-districts):** These were the fundamental local administrative units, comprising several villages. Each Pargana had several officials:
 - **Shiqdar:** Maintained law and order within the Pargana and assisted in revenue collection.

- **Amin:** The chief revenue official, responsible for land measurement and revenue assessment.
- **Qanungo:** Maintained records of land, produce, and revenue statistics. He was a repository of local knowledge regarding agricultural practices and land tenure.
- **Karkuns:** Clerks who assisted the Amin and Qanungo in maintaining records and other administrative tasks.

At this stage, one issue becomes clear: this layered structure allowed for both effective central control and responsiveness to local conditions. The system ensured that authority flowed from the centre to the periphery, while also providing mechanisms for local issues to be addressed within a clear administrative framework. This integration of central directives with local implementation was a hallmark of Sher Shah's administrative genius.

Reforms in Justice, Land Revenue, and Military

Sher Shah's administrative prowess is most evident in his comprehensive reforms concerning justice, land revenue, and the military. These reforms were interconnected, designed to create a stable and prosperous state.

Justice System

Sher Shah was renowned for his commitment to justice, often being referred to as 'Sultan-ul-Adl' (King of Justice). He believed that impartial justice was essential for social order and economic stability.

- He established courts at various levels, ensuring that justice was accessible to all.
- Cases were heard by a range of officials depending on the administrative level. At the Pargana level, the Shiqdar and Amin handled minor disputes. At the Sarkar level, the Munsif-i-Munsifan presided over civil cases, while criminal cases and appeals were heard by the Amir, Qazi, or Mir-i-Adal at the higher levels.
- A distinctive feature was the principle of **local responsibility for crimes**. Village headmen (Muqaddams) were held accountable for crimes committed within their jurisdiction. If a crime occurred and the culprit was not apprehended, the Muqaddam had to either produce the criminal or compensate the victim. This measure significantly reduced crime rates and ensured public safety.
- Sher Shah himself held court every morning, hearing petitions and dispensing justice directly, underscoring his personal commitment to fairness.

Now this becomes important: by ensuring a strong and impartial justice system, Sher Shah directly contributed to the sense of security among his subjects. This stability was crucial for trade, agriculture, and overall economic development, fostering trust in the administration.

Land Revenue System

The land revenue system under Sher Shah was perhaps his most significant reform, providing a stable financial backbone for his empire. He aimed to establish a direct relationship between the state and the cultivators, eliminating exploitative intermediaries.

- **Systematic Measurement:** For the first time, a systematic survey and measurement of cultivable land was undertaken. This crucial task was initiated by Raja Todar Mal, who would later serve Akbar.
- **Sikandari Gaja:** Land was measured using the **Sikandari gaja** (yard of Sikandar Lodi), a uniform standard measuring 32 digits. This ensured accuracy and consistency in land assessment.
- **Revenue Fixation:** The land was classified into three categories—good, middling, and bad—based on fertility. The average produce of these three categories was calculated, and **one-third of this average produce** was fixed as the state's share. This could be paid either in cash or kind, depending on the crop and local preferences.
- **Patta and Qabuliyat:** To protect the rights of the cultivators and ensure transparency, Sher Shah introduced two key documents:
 - **Patta (Title Deed):** A document issued by the state to the cultivator, specifying the area of land, the type of crop, and the amount of revenue to be paid.
 - **Qabuliyat (Deed of Agreement):** A counterpart document signed by the cultivator, agreeing to the terms and conditions outlined in the Patta.These documents minimized arbitrary taxation and provided security of tenure to the farmers.
- **Crop Loans and Remissions:** Sher Shah also showed concern for the farmers by providing interest-free loans (taccavi) during times of distress and granting remissions of revenue in case of crop failure due to natural calamities.

This system aimed at minimizing exploitation and ensuring state revenue while establishing a direct link with the farmer. Its fairness and efficiency were widely appreciated and served as a blueprint for future land revenue administrations.

Military Reforms

A strong military was indispensable for maintaining Sher Shah's empire and deterring external threats. His reforms brought discipline, efficiency, and loyalty to the armed forces.

- **Standing Army:** Sher Shah maintained a large, well-organized standing army directly recruited and paid by the central government. This eliminated the dependence on unreliable feudal levies.
- **Cash Salaries:** Soldiers were paid regular cash salaries, ensuring their loyalty and preventing them from resorting to plunder for sustenance. This was a significant departure from the practice of granting jagirs or land assignments for military service.
- **Chehra (Descriptive Rolls):** To prevent fraud and ensure that only fit and capable soldiers were recruited, Sher Shah revived the practice of maintaining **chehra**, or descriptive rolls of every soldier. These rolls included details of their physical appearance, tribe, and military skills.
- **Dagh (Horse Branding):** To prevent the substitution of good horses with inferior ones during inspections or active service, the system of **dagh**, or branding of horses, was strictly enforced. Each horse in the imperial army was branded with the imperial mark.
- **Fortifications:** He also strengthened existing forts and constructed new ones to secure his frontiers and strategic locations.

These military reforms brought discipline and efficiency, ensuring that Sher Shah had a loyal and potent force at his command, capable of both defence and expansion.

Economic Infrastructure and Cultural Contributions

Beyond direct administration, Sher Shah understood that a strong economy and cultural patronage were vital for a thriving empire.

Economic Infrastructure

Sher Shah's focus on infrastructure development was visionary, significantly boosting trade, communication, and administrative control.

- **Road Network:** He is famous for constructing and improving a vast network of roads. Four major roads were built or extensively repaired:
 - The Grand Trunk Road (then called Sadak-e-Azam), stretching from Sonargaon in Bengal to Attock in the Punjab.
 - From Agra to Jodhpur and Chittor.
 - From Lahore to Multan.
 - From Agra to Burhanpur.These roads were critical for military movements, trade, and the quick transfer of administrative information.
- **Sarais (Rest Houses):** Along these roads, Sher Shah constructed **sarais (rest houses)** at regular intervals, typically every two koses (about 8 km). These sarais provided lodging, food, water, and security for travellers, merchants, and government officials. They also served as post offices (Dak Chauki), facilitating rapid communication across the empire, and sometimes as market places.
- **Currency Reform:** Sher Shah introduced a standardized metallic currency, which simplified trade and commerce. He issued new coins of silver and copper:
 - The **silver Rupee (Rupiya)**, weighing 178 grains, which became the standard currency for centuries.
 - The **copper Dam**, which was standardized and used for smaller transactions.This standardization replaced the debased and mixed coinage of previous reigns, providing a stable monetary system.

The development of infrastructure was directly linked to trade, communication, and military movement, thus strengthening the administration and fostering economic prosperity.

Cultural Contributions

Sher Shah was also a patron of architecture, and his buildings showcase a unique blend of Afghan and indigenous styles, often seen as a precursor to Mughal architecture.

- **Sher Shah's Mausoleum at Sasaram:** This magnificent octagonal tomb, built in the middle of an artificial lake, is considered an architectural masterpiece. Its robust construction, intricate detailing, and serene setting reflect a fusion of Afghan and Hindu architectural elements.
- **Buildings within Purana Qila (Old Fort) in Delhi:** The Qila-i-Kuhna Mosque and the Sher Mandal (an octagonal two-storied structure) within the Purana Qila complex are notable examples of Sur architecture. These structures exhibit fine craftsmanship and architectural innovation, such

as the use of marble and red sandstone, and intricate inlay work.

These cultural contributions demonstrated the stability and artistic vision of his reign, leaving a physical legacy that endured beyond his lifetime.

An Evaluation of Sher Shah's Administrative Legacy

Sher Shah Suri's administrative legacy is profound and far-reaching, especially given the short span of his rule. He established a highly centralized yet efficiently distributed administrative system that brought unprecedented order and stability to North India. His reforms in land revenue, justice, military organization, and infrastructure were not merely incremental improvements; they were foundational changes that significantly transformed the character of governance in the subcontinent.

His land revenue system, characterized by direct assessment, measurement, and the patta-qabuliyat documents, became the blueprint for subsequent administrations, most notably that of Akbar. The principles of fairness, transparency, and direct state-cultivator relationship that he pioneered ensured agricultural prosperity and a stable state income. Similarly, his military reforms, with their emphasis on discipline, direct payment, and branding, laid the groundwork for a formidable imperial army.

In terms of state building, Sher Shah's administration provided a model of efficient and equitable governance. He demonstrated that a ruler could effectively manage a large empire by decentralizing authority while retaining central control, ensuring justice, and promoting economic growth through strategic infrastructure development. His currency reforms streamlined commerce and provided a stable monetary system that endured for centuries.

While his reign was brief, its impact was disproportionately large. Many of his administrative principles and practices were adopted and further refined by Akbar, leading to the zenith of Mughal administration. This demonstrates a clear continuity with the Sultanate period, where he drew existing practices, and also provided a direct comparison with the Mughal administration, showing how Sher Shah built a strong state that others could then expand upon. He essentially created a strong, centralized, and efficient state model that served as a benchmark for subsequent rulers in India.

UPSC Perspective

Sher Shah's administrative structure is a critical topic for the UPSC [Civil Services Examination](#), offering insights into medieval Indian statecraft and governance.

- **Prelims focus:**

- Key terms: Sarkars, Parganas, Diwan-i-Wazarat, Sikandari gaja, patta, qabuliyat, chehra, dagh, rupee, Grand Trunk Road, Sur architecture.
- Officials: Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran, Munsif-i-Munsifan, Shiqdar, Amin, Qanungo.
- Specific architectural examples: Sher Shah's Mausoleum, buildings within Purana Qila.

- **Mains focus:**

- Analysis of administrative principles (centralization, direct links with cultivators, justice).
- Impact on governance and state building in medieval India.
- Continuity with Sultanate period administration (building on existing structures).

- Comparison with Mughal administration (Akbar's adoption and refinement of his reforms).
- Contributions to state building and the legacy of efficient administration.

Common Student Confusion

Many students often confuse the **Sikandari gaja** (32 digits) used by Sher Shah with the **Gaj-e-Elahi** (41 digits) which was introduced later by Emperor Akbar for land measurement. It is important to remember that while both were measurement units for land, they were distinct and belonged to different periods of rule, though both aimed for standardization. Another common misunderstanding is attributing all administrative reforms to Sher Shah as completely novel inventions, without recognizing his astute ability to adapt, improve, and systematically implement existing Sultanate administrative structures as a foundational base. His genius lay in refinement and systematic application, rather than wholesale invention.

Short Revision Points

- Sher Shah built upon Sultanate administration, dividing his kingdom into Sarkars and Parganas.
- Central administration had specific departments (Diwans) like finance (Diwan-i-Wazarat) and military (Diwan-i-Ariz).
- Justice involved local responsibility for crimes and hearing of cases by Amir, Qazi, or Mir-i-Adal.
- Land revenue was fixed at one-third of produce after land measurement by Raja Todar Mal using Sikandari gaja. Farmers received patta and signed qabuliyat.
- Military reforms included cash salaries, descriptive rolls (chehra), and horse branding (dagh).
- Four major roads, including the Grand Trunk Road, were built with sarais every two koses.
- Coin reforms introduced silver rupee and copper dam.
- Sur architecture included octagonal tombs (Sher Shah's Mausoleum) and buildings within Purana Qila.

FAQs

1. What were the main administrative divisions under Sher Shah?

Sher Shah primarily divided his kingdom into Sarkars (districts) and Parganas (sub-districts).

2. How did Sher Shah reform the land revenue system?

He introduced a systematic land measurement using Sikandari gaja, fixed revenue at one-third of the average produce, and implemented the use of patta (title deed) and qabuliyat (deed of agreement) for transparency.

3. Name two important architectural contributions of Sher Shah.

Two important architectural contributions are Sher Shah's Mausoleum at Sasaram and buildings within the Purana Qila complex in Delhi, such as the Qila-i-Kuhna Mosque.

Understanding Sher Shah's administrative structure is more than just memorizing facts; it is about comprehending the principles of good governance that shaped medieval India and continue to resonate today. For civil services aspirants, a detailed analysis of his reforms provides invaluable insights into effective statecraft, a subject of paramount importance for the UPSC examination. Aspirants seeking to master such intricate historical topics and develop a holistic understanding for their preparation can find expert guidance and comprehensive study materials at institutions specializing in [UPSC coaching](#). In

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