



Administrative Reforms under Sher Shah Suri: Foundations of Fiscal, Commercial, and Infrastructural Governance

Hikmatullah Aman

Department of Contemporary History of Afghanistan, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kabul University, Kabul 1015, Afghanistan.

Corresponding Authors*

Hikmatullah Aman

Article History

Received: 16.12.2025

Accepted: 25.01.2026

Published: 03.02.2026



Abstract: This review examines the administrative reforms introduced by Sher Shah Suri, founder of the Sur Empire in North India. After defeating Mughal ruler Humayun at Kannauj in 1540, Sher Shah took the throne. Although his reign was brief, he is known for effective policies that improved governance and boosted trade. Many of his reforms in revenue, currency, infrastructure, and market regulation were later adopted by the Mughal state and, with changes, continued under later rulers, including the East India Company, into the mid-nineteenth century (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952). This study uses a critical analysis of historical sources, focusing on original Persian chronicles and their English translations, along with modern scholarship in English and local languages (Misra, 1977; Burton, 1968). Using these sources, the paper reconstructs Sher Shah's administrative changes and argues that his reforms formed an important link between earlier Indo-Islamic governance and later imperial systems.

Keywords: sher shah suri, administration, innovation, reforms, revenue, currency

Introduction:

The examination of Sher Shah Suri's administrative reforms is of considerable scholarly importance, as it sheds light on a pivotal phase in the development of statecraft in North India that both preceded and influenced subsequent Mughal governance. Historical research consistently observes that, despite the brevity of Sher Shah's reign, he introduced institutional measures that reinforced political stability, facilitated commerce, and enhanced long-distance communication. Notable reforms attributed to his administration include the introduction and standardization of currency (notably the rupiya), the establishment of systematic land-revenue assessment, and the expansion and maintenance of strategic road networks—initiatives that contributed to the integration of markets and administration throughout the empire (Misra, 1952; Sarwani, 1974).

Sher Shah's career is also positioned in Afghan historical memory as part of a broader tradition in which ambitious leaders rose through determination and military competence. He is portrayed in the narrative tradition not merely as a conqueror but as a ruler attentive to civil order: strict toward disorder yet protective toward vulnerable groups, including the weak and destitute. This dual image—soldier and administrator—appears consistently in both near-contemporary

accounts and later historiography, particularly when describing his emphasis on public works such as roads, wells, tree-planting for travelers, and measures intended to suppress brigandage and secure highways (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952). The Grand Trunk Road is often regarded as a lasting monument to this governance vision, connecting regions from Bengal to the northwest and serving as a vital spine for trade, travel, and imperial mobility (Misra, 1952).

At the level of administrative practice, Sher Shah is described as unusually attentive to governmental detail—so much so that royal oral instructions were reportedly written down by officials, contributing to the emergence of an operational administrative code. Later writers have compared his administrative intensity to prominent reforming rulers in other contexts, using this comparison to emphasize that his achievements as a ruler may be more significant than many of his battlefield victories (Sarwani, 1974). Yet interpretations of Sher Shah's character and legacy differ across sources. Many accounts were produced under Mughal patronage after Sher Shah had temporarily displaced the Mughals, and therefore some portray him unfavorably; however, other writers and the material evidence of his reforms support a more balanced evaluation, acknowledging both his strengths and imperfections (Misra, 1977; Burton, 1968).

Despite Sher Shah's acknowledged contributions, there remains a shortage of comprehensive academic work that systematically evaluates the long-term sustainability of his reforms and their evolution under later imperial systems. Scholarship often reports his administrative measures descriptively or treats them as mere precursors to Akbar's statecraft, while more sustained comparative analysis—especially linking Sher Shah's practices to later Mughal and British administrative structures—receives less direct treatment (Burton, 1968; Misra, 1952). Addressing this gap is important not only for historical understanding but also for appreciating how early administrative designs can shape long-term governance patterns.

In response, this study reconstructs Sher Shah's administrative innovations through a critical engagement with contemporary Persian chronicles and later historical analyses. It also proceeds from the argument that reliance on a limited set of translated excerpts has at times produced incomplete pictures of Sher Shah's administration; therefore, the study emphasizes a broader engagement with source traditions and their translations where available (Misra, 1977). The paper is guided by the following objectives: (1) to highlight Sher Shah's political consolidation and the circumstances of Mughal displacement; (2) to analyze his governance policies and administrative structure; and (3) to discuss his land-revenue system and its later influence, particularly in Mughal and British frameworks of fiscal administration (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952).

Historiographical Positioning and Analytical Framework

While Sher Shah Suri's administrative reforms have received sustained attention in Indo-Persian chronicles and modern historical writing, much of the existing literature treats these reforms either descriptively or as precursors to Akbar's governance. This review adopts a different approach by situating Sher Shah's administration within broader debates on early modern state formation, bureaucratic rationalization, and fiscal centralization. By synthesizing narrative, fiscal, and institutional evidence across Persian chronicles and modern historiography, the paper evaluates not only *what* reforms were introduced but *why* they proved durable across successive regimes.

Method and Material

This study uses a library-based historical research design. Data are drawn primarily from contemporary and near-contemporary Persian chronicles that document Sher Shah Suri's administration, including *Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi*, *Makhzan-i-Afghana*, and *Tarikh-i-Daudi*,

alongside related narrative and administrative accounts such as *Humayun-Nama*, *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, *Akbar Nama*, and *Ain-i-Akbari* (Sarwani, 1974). These sources are supplemented with modern scholarly works that analyze Sher Shah's governance, revenue settlement, trade policy, and historical legacy (e.g., Qanungo, Misra, and other later historians) (Burton, 1968; Misra, 1952; Misra, 1977).

In addition to published materials, relevant historical references were consulted in major libraries, including the Himachal Pradesh Library (Shimla), Kabul University Library, and Nangarhar University Library. The analysis proceeds through comparative reading and source triangulation, particularly where Mughal-period narratives may reflect partisan evaluation of Sher Shah's rule (Misra, 1977).

Methodologically, this study follows a critical historiographical approach. Persian chronicles are read not as neutral administrative records but as texts shaped by patronage, political rivalry, and retrospective legitimation. Mughal-period narratives, in particular, are evaluated against numismatic evidence and independent regional accounts to mitigate dynastic bias. Modern historical works are used comparatively to trace interpretive shifts in understanding Sher Shah's administration across colonial and postcolonial scholarship.

Discussion

History of Sher Shah Sur (Iqtidar Husain)

Modern scholarship has attempted to resolve interpretive problems within the Persian chronicle tradition, particularly in relation to agrarian terminology and rural social structure. Iqtidar Husain's account is used in this paper because it directly addresses confusion in Abbas Khan Sarwani's usage of rural categories. Sarwani frequently employs the term *raiya* broadly, at times in a manner that collapses distinctions among groups such as *muqaddam*, *mustajir*, and *muzarian*. This interpretive limitation is often linked to Sarwani's context—writing under Akbar—where he may not have possessed detailed familiarity with the differentiated agrarian hierarchy of earlier decades (Misra, 1977). By highlighting these terminological issues, later historians provide an analytical key for reading the chronicles more critically, rather than treating every administrative label as stable or uniformly applied across regions and periods.

Sher Shah's Institutions

Sher Shah's institutions should be understood as an interlocking governance system rather than isolated reforms. The chronicles and later analyses repeatedly stress that Sher Shah did not merely issue policies; he constructed administrative mechanisms that could enforce them through standardized offices, written records, periodic inspection, and transfers of personnel. A recurring theme is that Sher Shah's governance combined the revival of established Indo-Islamic administrative features with innovations that strengthened central oversight and integrated local units into the imperial fiscal and justice framework (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952). This institutional approach is particularly visible in his parallel assignment of civil and military responsibilities at lower administrative levels and in his reliance on documentation (*karkuns*, accounts, registers) to reduce arbitrariness in revenue assessment and collection.

Administration of Sher Shah

Sher Shah is frequently characterized as the architect of a highly functional administrative system, and even Mughal-leaning narratives often concede the effectiveness of his governance while describing him as a political rival. His five-year reign is consistently presented as a period of rapid administrative reorganization, introducing "wise and salutary changes" across governmental domains (Sarwani, 1974). Importantly, many reforms are described as either (a) revival and refinement of earlier Hindu and Muslim administrative practices or (b) innovations

that later served as a bridge between older administrative traditions and more systematic early modern governance (Sarwani, 1974).

Modern historians emphasize that revenue and currency arrangements long attributed to Akbar were substantially rooted in Sher Shah's policy design, with later Mughal documentation—especially Abul Fazl's narrative influence—contributing to a Mughal-centric attribution of administrative achievements (Burton, 1968; Misra, 1952). Sarwani's chronicle also presents Sher Shah as unusually attentive to administrative details, claiming that his experience from early service, combined with disciplined engagement in state affairs, produced a ruler highly acquainted with civil administration (Sarwani, 1974).

Chief Administrative Officers of Sher Shah

The administrative system established by Sher Shah Suri rested on a carefully designed hierarchy of officials whose responsibilities were clearly defined and deliberately separated to prevent the concentration of power and minimize corruption. Contemporary chronicles and later historians consistently emphasize that Sher Shah sought to balance military authority with civil administration, particularly at the local and intermediate levels of governance (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952).

At the pargana level, two principal officers formed the core of administration: the Shiqdar and the Amin. The Shiqdar was primarily responsible for maintaining law and order and performing police duties within his jurisdiction. Equipped with an armed retinue, he executed royal farmans, ensured public security, and assisted the Amin when necessary during revenue collection. Despite his military background, the Shiqdar's authority was deliberately limited. He was not empowered to punish the population independently for resistance or non-payment of revenue, a restriction intended to prevent arbitrary coercion and abuse of power (Sarwani, 1974).

In contrast, the Amin functioned as the chief civil and fiscal officer of the pargana. He was responsible for assessing land revenue, supervising its collection, and managing financial records. Subordinate officials—including clerks (karkuns) and the treasurer—operated under his supervision. However, Sher Shah instituted a system of collective and individual accountability, ensuring that these officials were directly answerable to the central government. This administrative arrangement reflects Sher Shah's concern with transparency and fiscal discipline, particularly in a context where revenue extraction had often been associated with local oppression (Burton, 1968). Sarwani explicitly characterizes Amin's role as that of an "impartial umpire" between the state and the cultivators, underscoring the normative expectation of fairness in revenue administration (Sarwani, 1974).

Above the pargana officials stood the Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran, or Chief Shiqdar, who supervised several parganas within a sarkar. Typically a noble of considerable standing, the Chief Shiqdar commanded a substantial police force—ranging from two to five thousand troops—depending on local conditions and the temperament of the peasantry. His principal responsibility was to maintain order, protect highways, and ensure compliance with revenue demands. In cases of organized resistance or lawlessness, he was authorized to impose exemplary punishment to deter wider rebellion, reflecting Sher Shah's belief in firm enforcement once lawful assessment had been completed (Sarwani, 1974).

Parallel to the Chief Shiqdar was the Munsif-i-Munsifan, the chief civil supervisory officer at the sarkar level. His role combined elements of judicial oversight and administrative supervision. While he performed functions comparable to those of a *diwan*, revenue administration was not centralized in his office; instead, Sher Shah maintained direct links between pargana officials and the imperial secretariat. The Munsif-i-Munsifan was primarily tasked with monitoring the

conduct of local officials, preventing oppression of cultivators, resolving boundary disputes between parganas, and safeguarding the integrity of the administrative system (Burton, 1968).

Together, these officers formed a system characterized by functional specialization, mutual supervision, and direct accountability to the central authority. By separating military enforcement from fiscal assessment and introducing multiple layers of oversight, Sher Shah created an administrative framework that reduced opportunities for corruption while strengthening imperial control. This structure not only stabilized governance during his reign but also provided a durable model later adopted—often with minimal modification—by the Mughal administration (Misra, 1952; Sarwani, 1974).

Village Administration of Sher Shah

Village administration under Sher Shah Suri constituted the foundational layer of his broader administrative system and played a critical role in implementing state authority at the grassroots level. Contemporary accounts indicate that Sher Shah did not attempt to dismantle traditional village institutions; instead, he incorporated them into a centralized framework of supervision and accountability, thereby preserving local continuity while strengthening imperial control (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952).

At the village level, two key functionaries were responsible for day-to-day administration: the Muqaddam and the Patwari. The Muqaddam acted as the chief village representative and intermediary between the cultivators and the state. His primary responsibility was to collect revenue from the cultivators within his jurisdiction and remit it to the state officials at the pargana level. In return for this service, the Muqaddam was entitled to a fixed percentage of the collected revenue, officially sanctioned by the government. This remuneration system aimed to incentivize efficiency while formally recognizing the Muqaddam's administrative role (Sarwani, 1974).

The Patwari functioned as the record-keeper of the village. He maintained detailed registers of cultivators, landholdings, crop patterns, and revenue obligations. These records were essential for ensuring accuracy in assessment and for resolving disputes related to land ownership and cultivation. By institutionalizing written documentation at the village level, Sher Shah strengthened fiscal transparency and reduced reliance on arbitrary estimation, which had often characterized earlier revenue practices (Burton, 1968).

Above clusters of villages, the Shiqdar and Amin—already discussed in the previous section—exercised supervisory authority. While the Shiqdar was responsible for maintaining law and order, the Amin oversaw revenue assessment and collection. Given the substantial sums involved in revenue handling, the Amin was assisted by clerks, and the collected funds were deposited with the Khazanadar or Fotedar (treasurer), who held custody of the state's financial resources (Sarwani, 1974). This layered arrangement ensured that no single official exercised unchecked control over revenue, thereby reducing the risk of embezzlement.

Sher Shah's village administration reflects a deliberate attempt to integrate traditional rural authority into an imperial administrative structure. While hereditary village officials such as Muqaddams and Patwaris continued to function, they were placed under systematic supervision and made accountable to higher administrative tiers. This approach allowed Sher Shah to extract revenue efficiently without provoking widespread rural resistance, while simultaneously embedding village communities more firmly within the fiscal and administrative apparatus of the state (Misra, 1952).

Pargana Administration under Sher Shah Suri

The pargana constituted the most significant operational unit in Sher Shah Suri's administrative system, serving as the primary interface between village society and imperial authority. Sher Shah deliberately selected the pargana as the basic fiscal and administrative unit because it allowed effective control without undermining the autonomy of village communities, which had long formed the backbone of rural organization in India (Burton, 1968; Misra, 1952).

At the center of pargana administration stood the Amin, who was directly appointed by the central government. One of his most important responsibilities was the measurement of land. The Amin supervised the demarcation of village boundaries, assessed the area under cultivation, and resolved disputes related to land size and ownership through actual physical measurement rather than estimation. This emphasis on measurement marked a decisive shift toward rationalized revenue administration and minimized conflicts arising from arbitrary assessments (Sarwani, 1974).

Supporting the Amin in revenue administration was the Quanungo, whose position differed from that of other officials. Unlike the Amin, the Quanungo was not usually appointed by the state; rather, he functioned as a hereditary semi-official deeply embedded in local society. His primary role was to maintain records concerning agricultural conditions, cropping patterns, customary practices, and historical revenue arrangements. By retaining the Quanungo, Sher Shah ensured continuity of local knowledge while simultaneously integrating it into the imperial fiscal framework (Burton, 1968).

The administrative arrangement at the pargana level also included clerical staff (*karkuns*), who maintained accounts and registers in both Persian and Hindi. This bilingual record-keeping system was intended to facilitate transparency and communication between imperial officials and local populations, reducing misunderstanding and manipulation of records (Sarwani, 1974). Revenue collected from villages was carefully recorded and transmitted upward through official channels, reinforcing direct fiscal linkage between the pargana and the central administration.

Through this structure, Sher Shah sought to achieve three interconnected objectives: accuracy in revenue assessment, prevention of corruption, and protection of cultivators from excessive demands. The pargana thus functioned not merely as a fiscal unit but as a carefully regulated administrative space where state authority operated through documentation, supervision, and local expertise rather than unchecked coercion. This model later became the foundation upon which Mughal revenue administration—particularly under Akbar—was developed and expanded (Misra, 1952).

Sarkar Administration under Sher Shah Suri

Above the pargana stood the sarkar, which functioned as the principal intermediate administrative unit in Sher Shah Suri's system. A sarkar consisted of several parganas and served as the key supervisory level through which the central government monitored local administration. Sher Shah deliberately avoided creating larger territorial divisions comparable to later Mughal *subhas*, reflecting his preference for a compact and closely supervised administrative structure (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952).

Each sarkar was administered by two principal officials: the Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran and the Munsif-i-Munsifan. This dual arrangement mirrored Sher Shah's broader administrative philosophy of separating military and civil authority. The Shiqdar-i-Shiqdaran functioned as the chief military and police officer of the sarkar. He supervised the Shiqdars of individual parganas, maintained public order, safeguarded highways, and ensured compliance with state authority. Given the

varying geographical and social conditions across regions, the strength of his armed contingent differed from sarkar to sarkar (Sarwani, 1974).

Parallel to the chief Shiqdar was the Munsif-i-Munsifan, who served as the senior civil and judicial supervisory officer. His responsibilities included overseeing the conduct of Amin, Quanungo, and other civil officials, resolving disputes—particularly boundary disputes between parganas—and ensuring that officials neither oppressed the population nor misappropriated state revenue. Although his role resembled that of a *diwan*, revenue affairs were not centralized in his office. Instead, Sher Shah maintained a direct relationship between pargana officials and the imperial secretariat, thereby limiting the accumulation of power at the sarkar level (Burton, 1968).

A distinctive feature of Sher Shah's sarkar administration was his opposition to large military governorships. Unlike later Mughal practice, Sher Shah generally avoided appointing powerful provincial governors with extensive military authority. His ideal model was that of Bengal, where he appointed Qazi Fazihat as governor of the entire province. This position carried no direct military command and involved primarily supervisory duties, such as maintaining harmony among officials of equal rank and preventing administrative disputes (Misra, 1952). Sher Shah intended to extend this civilian model to other provinces but was often constrained by strategic and military necessities.

In regions of strategic importance, Sher Shah was compelled to appoint governors with military forces to ensure security and territorial stability. Even in such cases, however, he ensured that finance and justice remained under the direct control of the central government, thereby preventing provincial authorities from becoming autonomous power centers (Misra, 1952). This balance between necessity and control reflects Sher Shah's pragmatic approach to governance.

To further curb corruption and inefficiency, Sher Shah adopted a policy of frequent transfer of officials, typically every two or three years. This practice applied to both civil and military officers at the sarkar level and was intended to prevent the formation of local power bases and personal alliances that could undermine state authority. As a result, the administrative machinery—from village to sarkar—operated through a system of interconnected yet closely monitored offices, reinforcing the link between the ruler and the ruled (Hasan, 1989).

Sher Shah's Land Revenue System

The land revenue system constituted the core of Sher Shah Suri's administrative reforms and represents one of his most enduring contributions to governance in the Indian subcontinent. Sher Shah ascended the throne with a fully conceived and practically tested revenue scheme, which he had earlier implemented at Sasaram. This prior experimentation enabled him to extend the system across his empire with confidence and administrative clarity (Misra, 1952; Sarwani, 1974).

A defining feature of Sher Shah's revenue system was the systematic survey and measurement of land. He ordered the use of the *gaz* standardized under Sultan Sikandar Lodi, measuring approximately 91 centimeters. Land measurement was conducted using ropes, a practice later modified by Akbar through the substitution of bamboo. Agricultural land was measured in bighas (also referred to interchangeably as *jarib*), with one bigha comprising 3,600 square gaz. This emphasis on uniform measurement marked a decisive break from arbitrary estimation and represented a move toward rationalized fiscal governance (Asher, 1977; Misra, 1952).

Revenue assessment under Sher Shah was based on a scientific method of averaging agricultural output. The state calculated expected production by adding together the yields of good, average, and poor harvests and dividing the total by three. From this average yield, one-fourth was fixed

as the state's share. This method ensured a degree of equity by accounting for variations in soil quality and agricultural productivity, thereby protecting cultivators from excessive demands while safeguarding state revenue (Burton, 1968).

Cultivators (*rayats*) were granted the option to pay revenue either in kind or in cash, though cash payment was generally preferred by the administration. This flexibility was particularly important during a period marked by fluctuations in agricultural output and scarcity of specie, especially in the early years of Sher Shah's reign, when commerce had not fully recovered from political instability (Sarwani, 1974). The system thus distributed risk between the state and the cultivator, making annual assessment more practical and less oppressive than long-term settlements.

Sher Shah articulated a clear guiding principle for his revenue officials: "Be lenient at the time of assessment, but show no mercy at the time of collection." This policy reflected his belief that fairness in assessment would legitimize firmness in collection. However, resistance or rebellion during revenue collection was met with severe punishment to prevent disorder from spreading. Sher Shah regarded revenue compliance as essential to political stability and did not tolerate challenges to state authority once lawful assessment had been completed (Sarwani, 1974).

A notable humanitarian aspect of Sher Shah's policy was his protection of agricultural cultivation, even during military campaigns. Contemporary sources describe how Sher Shah personally inspected cultivated fields during marches and stationed guards to prevent damage by troops. When destruction of crops was unavoidable due to narrow roads or strategic necessity, he ordered official surveys of the damaged land and provided monetary compensation to the affected cultivators. This practice enhanced popular trust in the state and encouraged local populations to support, rather than flee from, his advancing armies (Sarwani, 1974).

In order to strengthen state resources and reduce fiscal leakage, Sher Shah abolished the practice of granting jagirs to soldiers in lieu of salaries and resumed lands held in mortmain. He also investigated religious endowments accumulated under previous regimes, particularly those acquired through bribery or administrative manipulation. While resuming excess holdings, he ensured that rightful possessions were restored, thereby balancing fiscal consolidation with a measure of equity (Misra, 1952).

The cumulative effect of these reforms was a revenue system that increased state income while simultaneously serving the broader interests of the population. Sher Shah's system later became popularly known as Todar Mal's Bandobast, though modern historians emphasize that its intellectual and administrative foundations were laid during Sher Shah's reign. In its essential features, this system persisted throughout the Mughal period and survived into British India under revenue arrangements such as the rayatwari settlement, demonstrating the long-term viability of Sher Shah's fiscal vision (Burton, 1968; Misra, 1952).

Enforcement of Revenue Policy under Sher Shah Suri: Case Studies

Sher Shah Suri's revenue system was not merely a theoretical framework but was actively enforced through firm administrative action across diverse regions of his empire. Contemporary chronicles repeatedly emphasize that while Sher Shah encouraged fairness and moderation in revenue assessment, he was uncompromising in enforcing compliance once lawful demands had been fixed. This combination of equity and severity formed a central pillar of his governance philosophy (Sarwani, 1974; Burton, 1968).

Several regional case examples illustrate how Sher Shah ensured the practical implementation of his revenue policies. In the hill regions of Nagarkot, Jwalamukhi, and Jammu, Sher Shah entrusted Hamid Khan Kakar with administrative authority. Despite the geographical difficulty

and resistance of hill populations, revenue was successfully assessed and collected through systematic measurement of fields. This episode demonstrates the regime's determination to extend standardized fiscal practices even to peripheral and challenging territories (Burton, 1968).

Similarly, in Sarkar Sambhal, Isa Khan Sarwani confronted entrenched resistance from rebellious zamindars who had long relied on forest strongholds to evade state authority. According to Abbas Khan Sarwani, these zamindars were subdued to such an extent that they were compelled to destroy their own jungle defenses and submit to revenue assessment based on land measurement. This case underscores Sher Shah's objective of dismantling localized centers of defiance and integrating them into the imperial fiscal structure (Sarwani, 1974).

In Qannauj, the enforcement of revenue policy was carried out by Bairak Niazi, who disarmed turbulent groups and compelled them to pay revenue assessed through measurement. This episode reflects Sher Shah's consistent reliance on disciplined force to suppress disorder while reinforcing the authority of administrative procedures over arbitrary extraction (Burton, 1968).

Resistance was particularly intense in the riverine regions along the Jamuna and Chambal, where zamindars and cultivators had become accustomed to defying central authority during prolonged periods of political instability. Abbas Sarwani records that Sher Shah dispatched a force of 12,000 troops from Sarkar Sarhind to suppress rebellion in these areas. The operation resulted in the restoration of order and the successful collection of revenue according to measurement. Sarwani emphasizes that the fear and authority inspired by Sher Shah's response ensured long-term compliance, as reflected in the statement recorded in Elliot's compilation that the inhabitants thereafter paid revenue regularly to the treasurers (Sarwani, 1974; Aquil, 2003).

Later historians have reflected on the broader implications of these enforcement measures. Kalikaranjan Qanungo argues that had Sher Shah's reign continued for another decade or two, the zamindari system—particularly in its more lawless forms—might have been fundamentally transformed. According to this interpretation, Sher Shah's relentless suppression of brigandage and jungle-based resistance would have converted vast areas into stable agricultural land. At the same time, Qanungo notes that Sher Shah pragmatically created new zamindaris in frontier regions, where such intermediaries could serve as defensive buffers rather than threats to internal stability (Burton, 1968).

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Sher Shah's revenue administration was enforced through a combination of institutional discipline, strategic military intervention, and political pragmatism. While his policies were undoubtedly severe toward persistent defiance, they were grounded in a broader objective of establishing uniform administration, fiscal regularity, and long-term stability across the empire.

Tariff, Trade, and Customs Policy under Sher Shah Suri

Sher Shah Suri's reconstruction of the tariff and customs system represents one of the most forward-looking aspects of his administrative reforms and played a decisive role in reviving trade in North India. Prior to his accession, inland commerce had been severely hampered by a proliferation of internal customs duties levied by various authorities at ferries, highways, towns, and villages. This multiplicity of imposts restricted the movement of goods, narrowed markets, and contributed to economic stagnation. Sher Shah addressed this problem through a comprehensive restructuring of customs policy aimed at facilitating free internal trade and strengthening state revenues through regulated, centralized taxation (Khan, 1925; Misra, 1977).

A central feature of Sher Shah's policy was the abolition of internal customs duties throughout the empire. He permitted the levy of customs only at two points: at the frontiers of the kingdom and at the place of sale within the empire. By eliminating duties along roads, ferries, and

intermediate markets, Sher Shah removed major obstacles to commercial circulation and allowed merchants to transport goods across long distances without fear of repeated exactions. This policy marked a significant departure from earlier practices and demonstrates Sher Shah's understanding of the relationship between commercial freedom and imperial prosperity (Khan, 1925; Misra, 1977).

The protection of merchants and travelers formed an integral component of this economic strategy. Sher Shah issued strict instructions to governors and revenue officials to ensure that traders were treated with fairness and security. Muqaddams were made responsible for safeguarding the limits of their villages, and any harm inflicted upon travelers within their jurisdiction could result in severe punishment. Abbas Khan Sarwani records that if a merchant died while traveling through the empire, officials were forbidden to seize his property, reflecting a moral and legal commitment to commercial trust and contractual integrity (Sarwani, 1974).

Sher Shah further regulated official conduct in marketplaces by forbidding state officials from purchasing goods at prices below prevailing market rates. This measure sought to prevent exploitation of merchants by officials wielding administrative power and to ensure that markets functioned on principles of fairness rather than coercion. Such regulation reinforced confidence among traders and contributed to the expansion of commercial activity (Misra, 1977).

In regional practice, Sher Shah demonstrated administrative flexibility. For instance, foreign goods entering Bengal were exempted from import duties. This exemption appears to have been driven not by ideology but by practical considerations, as Bengal's geographical conditions—characterized by multiple river routes, mountain passes, and coastal access—made effective customs enforcement difficult. Rather than impose unworkable controls, Sher Shah opted for a policy that encouraged trade while avoiding administrative inefficiency (Misra, 1977).

The cumulative impact of Sher Shah's tariff and trade reforms was a marked revival of commerce and an increase in material prosperity across the empire. By reducing arbitrary exactions, ensuring the safety of merchants, and centralizing customs collection, Sher Shah created a commercial environment that supported long-distance trade and integrated regional markets into a unified economic system. Contemporary historians consistently regard this policy as evidence of Sher Shah's farsighted statesmanship and as a key factor in stabilizing his empire despite its short duration (Khan, 1925; Misra, 1977).

Currency Reforms under Sher Shah Suri

Sher Shah Suri's currency reforms constitute one of the most significant yet historically under-documented aspects of his administration. Contemporary Persian chronicles provide limited and often fragmented information regarding monetary policy, making it difficult to reconstruct the full scope of these reforms solely from narrative sources. As a result, numismatic evidence—the study of surviving coins—has proven indispensable for understanding Sher Shah's political authority, territorial expansion, and administrative consolidation (Misra, 1952; Burton, 1968).

Numismatic records reveal that Sher Shah systematically expanded and regularized the minting system across his empire. Although the establishment of mints was not entirely unknown before his reign, Sher Shah significantly extended this practice by founding mints in major administrative and strategic centers. This development allowed coinage to serve not only as a medium of exchange but also as an indicator of political control and imperial integration. Indeed, several territorial acquisitions—such as the conquest of Sindh—are attested more clearly through mint evidence than through contemporary written chronicles, underscoring the historical value of coinage as a source (Burton, 1968).

Sher Shah's coinage illustrates the rapid administrative stabilization of newly conquered regions. Coins were issued from Ujjain (1542) and Sakkar–Bakkar in Sindh (1543) within months of conquest, suggesting that land surveys, administrative reorganization, and mint establishment followed closely behind military expansion. In addition, Sher Shah founded new towns and renamed older ones after himself, often designating them as mint towns—a practice intended both to commemorate his authority and to reinforce administrative control. Confusion among historians regarding similarly named mint towns likely arose from the recurrence of the name *Shergarh*, applied to multiple locations (Burton, 1968).

In terms of physical characteristics, Sher Shah introduced both square and circular coins, with the circular form representing a refinement over earlier, cruder designs. His monetary system included gold coins of high purity weighing approximately 166–168.5 grains, silver rupees weighing around 180 grains (with about 175 grains of pure silver), half-rupees of approximately 88 grains, and copper *dams* varying between 311 and 322 grains. According to Thomas, the copper dam was originally standardized at 323.5 grains, with a fixed exchange ratio of 64 copper dams to one silver rupee (Misra, 1952).

Sher Shah's coins were notable not only for their technical precision but also for their symbolic and cultural features. The inscriptions were bilingual, appearing in both Persian and Nagari, reflecting administrative inclusivity and practical communication with diverse populations. His adherence to orthodox Sunni Islam was expressed through the inclusion of the names of the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman, and Ali—on certain coins. One notable square coin minted at Sharifabad in 1539 displays these names positioned around the central inscription, alongside royal titles emphasizing justice, divine support, and legitimacy (Burton, 1968).

Coins issued under Sher Shah have been identified from numerous mint towns, including Agra, Gwalior, Kalpi, Chunar, Sambhal, Ujjain, Delhi (Shergarh), Qannauj (Shergarh), Sakkar–Bakkar, Lahore, and others, indicating the geographical breadth of his authority. The distribution of these mints further supports the argument that Sher Shah's administration achieved a high degree of territorial integration within a remarkably short period (Misra, 1952).

Modern historians regard Sher Shah's reign as a turning point in the history of Indian coinage. By abolishing the debased mixed-metal currency of earlier rulers and introducing standardized gold, silver, and copper coinage, Sher Shah laid the foundation for a monetary system that endured throughout the Mughal period and continued under the East India Company until 1835. Vincent A. Smith explicitly credits Sher Shah with establishing the reformed currency system that later rulers merely inherited and refined. Beyond its symbolic value, this standardized currency significantly facilitated revenue collection and commercial exchange, reinforcing the fiscal and economic stability of the empire (Misra, 1952; Burton, 1968).

Roads, Sarais, and the Communication System under Sher Shah Suri

The construction of roads and the establishment of sarais formed one of the most visible and enduring components of Sher Shah Suri's administrative vision. These measures were conceived not merely as public works but as integral instruments of imperial governance, serving military, administrative, commercial, and social functions simultaneously. Contemporary historians consistently emphasize that effective communication and mobility were essential to the success of Sher Shah's highly centralized administrative system (Misra, 1952; Misra, 1977).

Sher Shah undertook the reconstruction and expansion of a network of imperial roads that connected the major political, military, and commercial centers of his empire. The most extensive and renowned of these was the road stretching from Sonargaon near Dhaka in Bengal to the Indus, covering approximately 1,500 kos. In addition to this principal artery, Sher Shah

constructed three other major roads: one connecting Agra to Burhanpur on the frontier of the Deccan, another linking Agra to Jodhpur and the fort of Chittor, and a fourth extending from Lahore to Multan. Together, these roads formed a strategic grid that facilitated rapid troop movement, administrative inspection, and commercial exchange across vast distances (Misra, 1952).

The roads were carefully planned and maintained. Trees were planted on both sides to provide shade and comfort for travelers, and landowners along these routes were made responsible for preventing brigandage and ensuring the safety of those passing through their territories. Sher Shah's insistence on protecting travelers reflected his broader concern with law, order, and public welfare. In this respect, his road policy drew upon earlier Hindu traditions that regarded the construction of roads and rest houses as a pious duty, while surpassing the limited infrastructural efforts of earlier Muslim rulers, whose architectural energies were often directed toward mosques or monumental cities rather than public utilities (Misra, 1952).

Closely linked to the road system was the establishment of sarais (rest houses) at intervals of approximately two kos along major routes. Historical accounts indicate that Sher Shah constructed around 1,700 sarais throughout his empire. These sarais were designed to accommodate travelers of different religious communities, with separate quarters for Hindus and Muslims, reflecting a policy of inclusiveness in public administration. At the gates of sarais, pots of water were placed for public use, and arrangements were made for the provision of food, bedding, and fodder for animals according to the rank and status of travelers (Sarwani, 1974).

Each sarai was equipped with essential infrastructure, including a well and a mosque built of burnt brick. Religious and service personnel—such as an imam, a muazzin, and watchmen—were appointed, and their maintenance was supported through land grants attached to the sarais. For Hindu travelers, Brahmins were settled in sarais to provide hospitality and necessary services. Surrounding villages were often established near these sarais, which gradually developed into market centers where peasants could sell agricultural produce and purchase goods, thereby stimulating local economic activity (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1977).

The sarais also functioned as nodes in an efficient communication and intelligence network. In each sarai, two government horses were kept for the rapid transmission of news and official correspondence. This relay system enabled information from distant parts of the empire to reach the central authority within a remarkably short time. Persian historians uniformly attest to the speed and reliability of this postal system, which allowed Sher Shah to remain closely informed about administrative developments across his territories (Misra, 1977).

These improvements in roads, sarais, and communication had far-reaching administrative consequences. They facilitated the frequent transfer of officials—a key feature of Sher Shah's anti-corruption policy—enabled swift dispatch of orders, and supported the continuous movement of troops when necessary. At the same time, improved security and infrastructure encouraged inland trade, enhanced social interaction between regions, and contributed to the overall peace and prosperity of the empire. The communication system thus acted as the operational backbone of Sher Shah's administrative machinery, reinforcing centralized control while promoting economic integration (Misra, 1952; Misra, 1977).

Sher Shah Suri and Mughal Administration

A comparison between Sher Shah Suri's administrative system and that of Akbar reveals both continuity and divergence. While Akbar expanded and systematized revenue administration through the zabt and dahsala systems, many of its foundational principles—land measurement, standardized assessment, cash revenue preference, and separation of civil and military

authority—were already operational under Sher Shah. The Mughal achievement lay less in innovation than in institutional longevity, whereas Sher Shah's significance rests in conceptual design and rapid implementation under adverse political conditions.

Limitations and Constraints of Sher Shah's Administration

Despite its strengths, Sher Shah's administrative system faced inherent limitations. Its reliance on coercive enforcement, particularly against zamindars, generated compliance but may have limited voluntary integration in certain regions. Moreover, the short duration of his reign restricted institutional consolidation, leaving many reforms dependent on personal authority rather than autonomous bureaucratic momentum. These constraints help explain why subsequent regimes could modify or appropriate his system rather than replicate it unchanged.

Conclusion

Despite the brevity of his reign (1540–1545), **Sher Shah Suri** occupies a distinguished position in the administrative history of the Indian subcontinent. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that Sher Shah's significance lies not merely in his military success or political displacement of the Mughals, but in the coherent and systematic administrative order he established across his empire. His governance combined firmness in enforcement with rationalized procedures, producing an administrative framework that proved durable well beyond his lifetime.

Sher Shah's reforms were comprehensive in scope. At the core of his administration stood a carefully structured revenue system grounded in land measurement, standardized assessment, and documented record-keeping. By fixing the state's demand at one-fourth of the average produce and allowing payment in cash or kind, Sher Shah sought to balance fiscal stability with the economic capacity of cultivators. His guiding principle—leniency in assessment coupled with strictness in collection—reflected an effort to legitimize state authority through procedural fairness, while ensuring compliance through decisive enforcement (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1952). Measures such as compensation for crop damage during military movements and the resumption of improperly held jagir and mortmain lands further illustrate his concern with both justice and fiscal consolidation.

Equally significant were Sher Shah's institutional arrangements at the village, pargana, and sarkar levels. By separating military and civil functions among officials such as the Shiqdar, Amin, and Munsif-i-Munsifan, and by subjecting these officers to regular transfers and central supervision, he reduced opportunities for corruption and curtailed the emergence of local power bases. This administrative design allowed the central government to maintain direct oversight of finance and justice, even in strategically sensitive regions where military governors were unavoidable (Burton, 1968; Hasan, 1989).

Sher Shah's economic policies further reinforced imperial integration. His abolition of internal customs duties, protection of merchants, and regulation of official conduct in markets revived inland trade and expanded commercial activity. These measures were complemented by far-reaching currency reforms that replaced debased coinage with standardized gold, silver, and copper issues. Numismatic evidence confirms that Sher Shah's monetary system achieved a level of precision and stability that later Mughal rulers inherited and refined, and which ultimately survived into the British period, forming the basis of modern Indian currency (Misra, 1952; Burton, 1968).

Perhaps the most visible legacy of Sher Shah's administration lies in his investment in infrastructure and communication. The construction of major roads—most notably the Grand Trunk Road—and the establishment of an extensive network of sarais transformed mobility,

facilitated trade, enabled rapid military deployment, and sustained an efficient postal system. These developments strengthened central control while simultaneously promoting economic and social interaction across regions. The inclusive design of sarais, with provisions for both Hindus and Muslims, further reflects a pragmatic and integrative approach to governance (Sarwani, 1974; Misra, 1977).

Taken together, the evidence supports the conclusion that Sher Shah Suri was not a transitional or incidental ruler but a deliberate and innovative architect of early modern administration in South Asia. Many reforms later attributed to Mughal governance—particularly under Akbar—were rooted in Sher Shah's policies and institutional arrangements. Their survival through successive regimes, including British colonial administration, attests to their structural soundness and administrative foresight. Reassessing Sher Shah's reign through a comprehensive and source-based analysis thus allows for a more balanced understanding of state formation in the Indian subcontinent and restores Sher Shah Suri to his rightful place among the foremost administrators of Indian history.

This review contributes to existing scholarship by reframing Sher Shah Suri not as a transitional ruler overshadowed by Mughal consolidation, but as a principal architect of early modern governance in South Asia. His administration represents a decisive moment in the evolution of bureaucratic rationality, fiscal discipline, and infrastructural integration. Recognizing these contributions allows for a more nuanced understanding of continuity and change in Indian administrative history.

Declaration

The author declares that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere in any form. All sources used in the preparation of this paper have been duly acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic conventions. The manuscript is submitted with the full consent of the author and reflects an honest and accurate representation of the research conducted.

Publication Ethics

This study has been conducted in full compliance with accepted principles of academic integrity and publication ethics. As a library-based historical review, the research did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data and therefore did not require ethical clearance from an institutional review board. The author has taken due care to avoid plagiarism, data fabrication, or misrepresentation of sources. All primary and secondary materials have been critically examined and appropriately referenced, and interpretations are presented transparently and responsibly.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest—financial, institutional, personal, or professional—that could have influenced the research process or the outcomes of this study. The research was conducted independently without any external funding or commercial involvement.

Author Contribution

The author solely conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, collected and analyzed primary and secondary sources, and wrote the entire manuscript. The author is also responsible for the interpretation of data, revision of the text, and final approval of the version submitted for publication.

References

- Alamgiri, A., Alamgiri, A., Akbari, A., & Akbari, A. (n.d.). *Oriental sources*. In *Studies in Indo-Muslim history* (pp. 1122–1836).
- Aquil, R. (2003). Reconsidering sovereignty and governance under the Afghans: North India in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 26(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400308723405>
- Asher, C. B. (1977). The mausoleum of Sher Shah Suri. *Artibus Asiae*, 39(3), 273–298.
- Burton, J. (1968). Review of *Sher Shah and his times* by K. Qanungo. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 31(1), 166–167. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00146309>
- Hasan, S. B. (1989). *Administrative system of Sher Shah Suri* (Unpublished M.Phil. dissertation). Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.
- Khan, Z. A. (1925). *Sher Shah Suri: Emperor of India*. Civil and Military Gazette Press.
- Misra, S. C. (1952). Revenue system of Sher Shah. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 15, 232–239.
- Misra, S. C. (1977). Abbas Khan Sarwani and his *Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi*: Some underlying concepts. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 38, 231–238.
- Sarwani, A. K. (1974). *Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi* (Trans. B. P. Ambashthya). K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute.
- Deyell, J. S. (1987). *The development of Akbar's currency system and the monetary integration of the conquered kingdoms*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Farid, A. (2019). Sher Shah Suri was a ruler and a reformer. *Journal of Historical Studies*, 5(2), 45–63.
- Iftikhar, R. (2016). Communication and surveillance in India: Sher Shah Suri's regime (1540–1545). *Pakistan Vision*, 17(2), 145–162.
- Qanungo, K. R. (1965). *Sher Shah and His Times*. Bombay: Orient Longman.
- Richards, J. F. (1993). *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. F. (2024). Official revenues and money flows in a Mughal province. In *Power, Administration and Finance in Mughal India*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, V. A. (1919). *The Oxford History of India*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Habib, I. (1963). *The agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556–1707*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Hanif, S., Yasir, M., & Zaib, A. (2022). Economic conditions of Akbar's reign through numismatic evidence. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 3(4), 89–102.
- Khan, W. A., Ali, M. I., & Askari, M. U. (2023). Security threats to trade management during the Mughal era in South Asia (1500–1750). *South Asian Studies*, 38(1), 1–15.
- Elliot, H. M., & Dowson, J. (1867–1877). *The history of India as told by its own historians* (Vols. 4–5). London: Trübner & Co.