
Communication and Surveillance in India - Sher Shah Sur's Regime (1540-1545 A.D)

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Abstract

"East is east, and west is west; and never the twain shall meet."
(Rudyard Kipling)

The West and East have different cultures in the technological development in transportation and communication. These two meet so frequently in international setting but east encounters communication difficulties, breakdowns, misunderstandings, even conflict and confrontation because they fail to understand each other in intercultural communicates. Western idea of low-context communication, individualism, hierarchy and assertiveness portray the image of eastern societies as static and undeveloped. In this regard popular opinion from the side of west is that oriental despotism was a hurdle in the development of means of communications in oriental societies. This paper explores the misconceptions that east had no idea of transportation and communication. Even the postal system was the invention of the west. In medieval India, Sher Shah made a serious effort for effective system of communication. This paper also highlights the means of communication which provide a strong profile to Sher Shah Suri in the history of medieval kings. His policies made him

an ordinary oriental despot or a reformer as his foe (Nasir-ud-din Humayun, the Mughal King(1530-1555) gave tribute to him as Usta-a-Badshahan (Teacher of kings)¹

Introduction

Several historians have noted that traditional Indian sources considered the issue of intelligence and political communication in a considerable detail. Abu Raihan Alburni (1017) explains, long roads were a pre-requisite for the conduct of wide trade in North India. He mentioned two roads to the North West. One leads to Kashmir through Shirsharaha and Dahmala (capital of Jalandar) terminating at RajKiri. The other led to Ghazni (Afgahnistan) through Panipat, Jehlum and Kabul. A third road ran from Qanauj via Ahilwara (Patna) and Bazama (capital of Gujrat) to Somnath. A road led to Multan from Bazama and it connects with Loharani (Karachi).²

Indian concepts of surveillance, spying and information collection survived from the days of Arthashastra. Road signs are an important form of communication known as mass communication. Emperor Asoka (304-232BCE) ordered that stone pillars be posted along the royal road, 1700 miles long (2736 KM) trade route that ran from the Middle Eastern city of Susa to Northern India. He used these pillars for the propagation of the faith and direction for the travelers. He urged travelers to obey laws and to be a good citizen.³ The Sultans of Delhi (1206-1526) developed Chawki system as Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) indicated that the Chawaki system was very effective. He narrated travel on some roads was not safe. It appeared from his account that the supply of diverse commodities from different places to the main Emporia remained uninterrupted. Copper and horses imported through the port of Deccan were traded in the interior for cloth, wheat, millet and pluses.⁴

The great importance of communication and surveillance for Indian kingship was the reflection of social complexity. Despite the great size of Indian region, It was informatively a rich society, large proportion of the population travelled through distances in

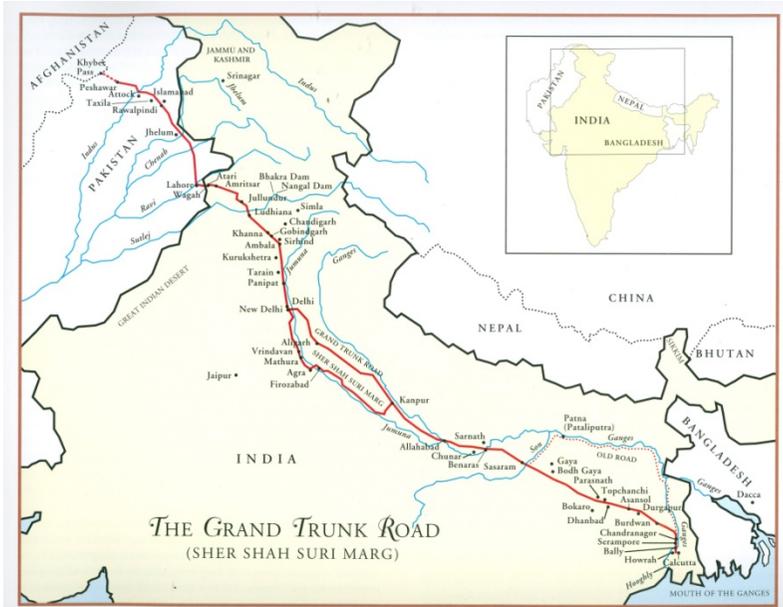
connections with marriages, pilgrimage and network of trade and marketing. From 16th century groups of pilgrims as large as 100,000 travelled huge distances from central and south India to attend the religious ceremonies around river Ganga. Money was generally used in these networks from 13th century to onward. The variety of local coinages did not imply a lack of economic integration. Flow of written communication between merchants was to collect information about the prices of different commodities. They were also aware of the general incidents occurred into a particular areas. Even the physical means of transportation were more developed at least during dry seasons. The people of north India used a variety of fast wheeled transport by using camels, ponies and horses.⁵

There were more than 200,000 river boatmen on the route between Delhi and Bengal alone in the twilight of the Mughals. Social communication was proportionately dense. All the great Indian states attempted to foster and organize these extensive news works through fast runners and intelligence gatherers Harkaras and Qasids (Arabic version of the runners), along with the provision of mints or of rest houses (Sarais) for the merchants were established were sources of information. The smooth functioning and protection of runner- this system was itself an important manifestation of successful kingship.⁶

Merchants had their own professional knowledge; account books attained a pattern that was common to the most part of India by 17th century. Even the individual merchants groups and families within them employed different types of merchants' short term and argot (mahajani) which cloaked their secrets. Traveling of Sufi mystic and Hindu religious head ascetics on pilgrimage carried large quantities of information. This network was not sound. Public knowledge was dense but the lines of communication which brought it were fragmented. So kings positioned new-writers and spies carefully, to tie together bundles of information from different cultural networks to pass them to center, imperial cities or camps.

The formal structure has often been described. Imperial news-writers (*Waqya nawis*) collected and processed the information. The information collected by the news writer placed in every district throughout the empire. These men wrote regular reports on the works of the officials and local magnates, plunders and malefactors occasionally on the affairs of merchants. They gathered materials from maintained sets of secret agents and writers (*Kufia Nawis*) who could act as a check on the other writers and postal officials.⁷

Mughal Empire (1526-1857) was considered to be one of the strongest empires of the time. It had a sound system of communication which was developed by the kings of the realm. Zahir-ud-din Babur (1526-1530) laid the foundation of system of communication by constructing *Char-Dwaris*. They served more like Agra to Kabul to erect a tower 12 Qaris (yard) high with a *char-dari* on the top of every 9th *kuroh*. At the distance of 18 *kuroh*, a *yamb* (six post horses were kept), an agreement was made for payment of post-masters as well as for the horse's corn.⁸



Sher Shah Suri was a great reformer and administrator. He adopted various means to improve the communication system in India i-e construction of roads and Serias. He appointed his trustworthy persons as the in charge of Serias. Sher Shah effectively improved the postal system through swift horses. He made an attempt to de-centralize the administrative system by empowering the governors. Sher Shah also reformed this administrative system. He ordered to construct the Grand Trunk road from Attock to Sonargaon (East Bengal) which became the eastern terminus. One of the main roads stretched from Sonargaon to Hazro in Punjab, another from Agra to Burhanpur, third from Agra to Jodhpur and Chittor, fourth from Lahore to Multan. Sher Shah also shortened the route between Agra to Delhi by cutting a new road through the fores, formerly travelers travelled to Delhi by the road ran through Doab"⁹ The grand Trunk road become a sign of development in India as

*"And now we come to the big road.....the great road which is the backbone of Hind.....all castes and all kinds of men move here. Look! Brahmins and chumars, banker and thinkers, barbers and banias, pilgrims and potters-----all the world going and coming. And truly the grand trunk road is a wonderful spectacle. It runs straight bearing without crowding India's traffic for fifteen hundred miles -----such a river of life as nowhere exist in the world."*¹⁰

Rudyard Kipling, (Kim)

Sher Shah issued orders to construct the Grand Trunk road from Attock to Delhi. This highway ran northward by the way of modern Narayangunj within the bounds of which is to found Chah Sarai (inn with a well) and a railway crossing known as Chashara. Then this road struck to north of Dacca through the Bhowal Zamindari to Sherpur Atiya; this road led to shahzadpur across the Karetya (Mymen singh district) ultimately end on Bogra. From Sherpur this road probably connect with the Rajshahi district to Gaur. This road followed the site of Rajmahal (bank of river

Ganga) the older road of Ghari to Bihar.¹¹ Sher Shah acted on the theory of local responsibility for the protection of the roads from thieves and highways from robbers. Abbas Khan Sherwani records a regulation in this context:

“For the protection and safety of the roads from the molestation of the thieves and robbers etc. rules were framed as follows. He strictly ordered his governors that if a robbery occurred in his kingdom and the culprit was not detected whatever the thief and highway robber might have robbed would have to be compensated by the Muqqadam (village head) of the place of occurrence and it would have occurred in such a place the jurisdiction of which was not known then the Muqqadam of the surrounding villages should be arrested and compelled to pay the restitution. If after the payment of fine the Muqqadam produced the thief and the robber and showed their hunting places, the Muqqadam of the village where the offender lived was liable to pay the amount taken as restitution previously from them. The thief and the robber should be punished severely in accordance with the holy religious law. If there was a murder case and the assassins absconded, the Muqqadams were arrested in the above mentioned process and were put to the prison and given a period within which they were to produce the murderers. If they produce the assassins or showed their residence, the Muqqadams were set free and murderers were killed. But a Muqqadam of a village in the jurisdiction of which murder was committed failed to do this, they were put to death”¹²

Sher Shah constructed 1700 Sarais along with these roads at a distance of every two kurohs (4 miles) for the maintenance of peace and for the rest of homeless travelers in every sarai separate lodgings were provided for Muslims and Hindus. At the gate of every sarai big jars full of water were kept for distribution of water among Hindus as well as Muslims. Near every sarai Muslims were settled for the entertainment of Muslim travelers and Brahmans for Hindus. Their duty was to provide them with cold and hot water, bed, food and ripe grain for their horses. It

was the rule that whosoever came to these sarais was supplied with provision according to the rank, grain and fodder for his cattle from the government store.

Markets were established near every sarai for sale and purchase. By the side of every sarai a village was founded. There were well, a jami mosque of fired bricks, an Imam, a muazzin were appointed in the mosque, a custodian (Shahnah), several watchmen were appointed (to look after the inns). They were all maintained from the income of the land near Sarai. Two horses were kept in every sarai to transmit news to the next station so that news from the distant as well as near places might reach him (Sher Shah) daily. On the both sides of the road shady trees were planted so that travelers might travel under the shady trees while hot wind blow and might also take rest and repose under the trees when they got tired by their journey. Two writers were deputed in every Sarai. Their duty was to record the particulars of every passerby (his name, the place of his residence) who came to the Sarai. Bhatiyaras lived in these Sarais with their families. The larger Sarais were run by more than one Bhatiyara, each caring for three or four rooms, a section of a Sarai. Sher Shah brought a number of married slaves and appointed them as attendants of these Sarais. Bhatiyaras were probably the descendents of this attendants.¹³

Every Sarai had two horses for transmitting news of far and near to the center, all the Sarais possessed 3400 horses for the said purpose. Sher Shah had 113,000 parganahs of Hind and he appointed Shiqdar in each paraganah.¹⁴ This system functioned so well that Sher Shah Suri got the news of disaffection of his Umrah, soldiers and Zamindars of distant provinces before they spread in the area concerned. Additionally, there were two "Tariqh nawis" or post houses clerks, who recorded the arrival and departure of mail carriers. Mails were carried by "mewars" and messengers who were essentially of tribal origin or belonged to the lower caste.

Sher Shah's messengers brought news from Bengal to Rohtas in Punjab (1400 miles approximately) in less than a week. It

means the average they travelled more than eight miles per hours. It is on the record that Husyan Shiqdar rode eight hundred Khurohs in one day in an emergency. Husain Khan Tashtdar was sent for some business from Bengal. He travelled day and night even during his sleep the villagers carried his bed. When he awoke he again continued his journey on the horse and went on his way. In this manner he reached Chittor from Gaur in three days. It was indeed 800 miles as the crow flies over some of the most impracticable parts of India.¹⁵

Sher Shah established a self sustaining postal system. The entire postal system was under the supervision of "Darogh-a-Dak .A superintendent known as "Darogh-a-Dak Chawki "was appointed. He served as the director of the post house, receiving the administrative dispatches for the conveyance to the ruler. The department of the correspondence was overseen by the Diwan –i- Insha.

This department issued letter and royal Farmans (orders) forwarding the same for the transmission to the Darogh-a-Dak Chawki. These Imperial correspondences were served by Mir Munshi, the head clerk before Sher Shah. Runners were employed throughout the Empire and often preferred to the mounted couriers, less conspicuous than horse men. They were very easily noticed and vital documents entrusted to them were less likely to be intercepted. Dak Chawkis were full of them. Officially at every three Kos (6 miles) there were Chawkis of Harkara who lived there and immediately ran to the next destination when they received the letters .The Harkaras, were appointed by the chief superintendent of the Harkaras (Daroghashi-Harkaras–kul). There were another important agency to circulate the news all over the empire. They got information through their agents and then prepared a list of secret papers; send it with the mail bag to the emperor. These were the important news of the area in which the relevant spy was deputed. The agents of Sher Shah Suri were stationed at the court of Nazim (administrator). These officers were known as Tarikh Nawis (historian) in the region of Sher Shah and later on Akbar nawis or waqia nawis (writer).They are the

servants of provincial government. Sher Shah kept himself well informed about their literal materialization through his spies. He himself made inquiries incognito from the people about the doing of the officials and all matter. He was easily accessible to all his subjects, patiently used to listen their grievances and sought to redressed them.¹⁶

Sher Shah knitted the fabric of provincial government with certain officials who provided the news of the provincial governments directly to the emperor." It was the duty of these servants who are in the know of things to keep the central authority informed of all the affairs such as disturbance of peace, the ingress and egress of travelers and rainfall etc. Every village has a writer and the discharge of whose duties is like the discharge of keeper's duties. His duties are to entering of the rights of ownership, the bounders of the lands and amounts of the tax in his diary. This is the truth of the village and all the machinery of its administration." On local level administration was in charge to look after the protection and security of the people so, that none of the judge malguzars should stretch his hand to oppress the subjects in any place. Amin also worked as an inspector in the department of branding the horses, markets and other semi executive duties where he checked the mal practices. In each Sarkar (unit of provincial admistration), Sher Shah had a munsif as his informer. Sometimes patwari(in charge of the land record)worked on the pay roll of sultan. They send the reports of each unit regularly to the emperor as they were directly appointed by the central authority.¹⁷

Sher Shah Suri remodeled the coinage on lines which were destined to leave their mark on the currency even up to the present day. These coins bore the name of the town from where it was issued along with the dates mentioned on these coins. Farid Khan assumed the title of Sher Shah when Humayun was isolated in Bengal and Hindal Mirza revolted in Agra. It is reflected through the coins struck in A.H 946. Edward Thomas remarks, "constitutes an important test point in the annals of Indian coinage, not only in its specific mint reforms but also correcting

the progressive deteriorations of the previous Kings, as introducing many of those improvement which the succeeding the Mughal claimed as their own". These coins also highlighted extension of Hindustan, surrender of the various fortresses and consolidation of Sher Shah's empire. He introduced the rupayyia or the rupee coin in the place of tanka and jetal (Indian currency).

Sher Shah also introduced a copper coin which Akbar (Mughal King) retained in his Monterey system as Dam-formally they called it paisa. This was named by Sher Shah Suri as mentioned in his catalogue of coins. Edward Thomas remarks,

*"constitute an important test -point in the annals of the Indian coinage, not only in its specific mint reforms but also as correcting the progressive deteriorations of the previous kings and as introducing many of those improvements which the succeeding Mughals claimed as their own."*¹⁸

Various over lapping system of watch and ward also brought news and information to the emperor, a staff of mass bearers carried massages around the imperial city or encampment and observed the workings of officials. The police office of the town (kotwal) had his own staff of constable and night watchmen (Chaukidars) who patrolled the streets day and night. They observed every house and brought reports of the town. These reports were also passed on to the intelligence officials of the court. In each village, a watchman was deputed either on the cash payment or on the share of grain heap. The office was hereditary often performed by the people of the lower cast. Village watchmen were sometimes drawn from the same community as the runners. These intelligence communities were also enlisted to convey the policies of the rulers out ward to the population. Official and runners also announced the royal orders and posted signs at the kotwal s office. The agents of the nobles and semi-independent ruler stationed with the ruler or with the regional governors listened to the open news reporters.¹⁹

Even a woman, daughter of Khayru was appointed on the post of Shahnah among the Sanbalis.

Tarikh-i-Daudi mentioned two incidents of the enforcement of the village responsibility. A horse was stolen from Sher Shah's camp in Thanesar then he summoned the Zimindars of 50 kos with this order that if the horse was not found within three days the Sher Shah will take the lives. They presented the thief before Sher Shah and he put him to the death. Another case, a murder was committed near Etawa on a piece of land which has long been disputed among the neighboring villages. Sher Shah directed that two men should be sent to cut down a tree which was near the spot where the murder was committed. He also ordered them if anyone prohibits them should be sent to him. A muqqadam of the village came forward to remonstrate and was dealt with accordingly. Sher Shah asked him how do you know that a tree being cut down from your area? if you know this then you must be knowing the murderer. The culprit was produced by the muqqadam who was forthwith executed.

In order to enforce laws Sher Shah posted spies with every force of his nobles so that he could collect the real facts of his state relating to the nobles subjects and soldiers as "The reporters are trustees of the kings. The favorite of the ruler are the guardian of the people." He did not impose the uniform system throughout his empire, but kept everything flexible to meet specific circumstances. The administrative reconstruction in Bengal was only for Bengal. In Punjab, Ajmer and Malwa Sher Shah retained the prevailing system of civil and military bureaucracy.²⁰

Sher Shah gave keen attention towards fortification of the different cities of India. A fort named as "little Ruhtas" was built to guard Kashmir. It was constructed on river Dihna, sixty kurohs from Lahore. It was so well fortified and strengthened due to threat of Ghakkars.

It is mentioned that the new fort which was constructed on river Beas cost eight crores and five lakh dam. He ordered to construct two forts in Delhi as strong as mountains as high as Pleiades. The small fort was constructed for the governor's residence and other named Khar Fort with a jami mosque which was decorated lavishly with red stones. The fortification of Delhi

was not yet completed when he died. It might be a Jahanpanah, which was old city of Delhi. The present purnah Qila in Delhi which has been identified by some with Din-e-punah of Humayun was the fort constructed by Sher Shah.²¹ In Qannawj, the ancient capital of Hindustan he ordered to construct a fort known as Sher Garh. His coins bear the inscription of Sher Garh. In the sources of Sher Shah this name appears as Sherpur. Sher Shah posted forces at every strategic point. He built another fort in Bhurkundah. Sher Shah Said, *"if I live long, I will build in every Sarkar a fort on the strategic point which may in the time of trouble serve the purpose of shelter for the oppressed. It would be an outpost for the rebels and I will convert all the earthen-work sarais into brick built one"*²²

It was a custom of Sher Shah that he did not give monthly allowances to anyone without branding; even the sweeper and maid servants of the palace were not given anything without being branded. They registered the descriptive rolls of men and horses. Sher Shah himself fixed the monthly salaries by looking at the men; in the presence of king the descriptive rolls were prepared.²³

Sher Shah Suri was adorned with the quality of justice and he thought all communities deserved it equally (non-believer and faithful). Sher Shah appointed Ham Chand as treasure and Raja Todar Mall as his finance minter, both were Hindus but it shows his religious tolerance. It is the most important fact that Sher Shah gave order to use nagri script in his coins and farmans when the Arabic script was familiar in Hindustan.

The re-use of nagri script on the coins especially on the silver coins of Surs had a historic significance. His attempt to re-introduce the nagri script appears to win the good –will of Hindu masses. Sher Shah, s silver coin to which he gave Sanskrit appellation of rupaiyya originated from the Sanskrit word rupahli also shows his efforts to reconcile with the Hindu subjects of his state. It has been found a stone inscription in Persian with the translation in Sanskrit belongs to the region of Sher Shah. It Shows that government issued public proclamation in the Persian, the official language of the state, its Sanskrit translation was given side

by side for the convenience of Hindu subjects. It means that Hindi was also patronized on the state level.²⁴

Sher Shah's 1st farman promulgates his notion of justice, "justice does not consist in abstaining from oppression but in fair and fair dealing with men....."

Dispensing justice equally to all the sections of the society means the religious bias could not affect the ruler's conduct towards his subject. Sher Shah also promoted the trade and commerce with an effective system of communication. He abolished many duties for merchants especially for travelers. He enforced only two duties which were levied on goods intended for sale. One was charged merchandized entered the frontier of his Mamlakat at Sonargaon in the East Bengal or coming from Khusran, probably at Hazro in Punjab where Sher Shah grand trunk road terminated and the other duty at the time of sale. Sher Shah created an incentive in trade by bringing it under the government control. He forbade his officials to purchase anything in the bazar except at the usual bazar rates and prices. In his 2nd farman, he also protected the interest of the consumers and merchants by maintain the uniformity of weights prices and quality of articles,

"All the merchants and shop keeper should take care of to maintain uniformity of weights, prices and quality of the article. If they act contrary to this they will be fined one hundred....." The Shahnas of markets were to see that the market regulations were properly carried out. The flourishing of the trade and commerce attracted foreign merchants. According to Tazkir al- Muluk *"countless merchants used to come from Turkey, Persia and Transoxiana, in large number and with immense quality of goods."*²⁵

The 11th Farman was issued in the name of superintendents of the roads repair, let them plant the trees of plums, khirni and mango on the both sides of the roads and let them have a proper distance, inns furnished with all articles of comfort so that the means of communication might be made more convenient and the

travelers might not be put to any in convenience." Sher Shah communicated many of his reforms through farmans.²⁶

The 2nd farman was issued regarding the merchants of the city. All merchants and shopkeeper should take care to maintain uniformity of weight, prices, and quality of articles. If they act contrary they will be fined. In 4th farman he addressed the officials of his kingdom. It is evident that the badness of the roads is one of the most important causes of the disturbance of the security. They should build pucca roads which contact the capital with other cities of kingdom. This linkage provides strengthen the administration.²⁷

The 3rd farman ensured the protection of the Hindu religious worship. The 13th farman concerning the reporting of the news. If someone mislead the Muslim regarding the shariat then he would be liable to royal punishment.²⁸

The 8th farman was issued to the custodians of the prison houses to improve the existing conditions of the prison houses.⁵ The period of Sher Shah Suri was a land Mark in the annals of South Asia. The period of this pathan king was very short but he simultaneously introduced a Mamlakat enduring institutions which formed the political and administrative unification of Hindustan. It was possible through the sound system of communication and surveillance though which he provide the necessities of life to both Hindus and Muslims and fixed an emolument of every individual of his raiyat.²⁹

Conclusion

Recent works on Indian history are considered to be related areas of colonial knowledge or discourse focusing on the learned theories of oriental's rather than day to day information and its sources. Several scholars have begun to consider the native information and its impact on the state formation. Nevertheless surveillances and social communication remains a poorly studied area. Indian intellectual history has been radically divorced from its social context than in many other areas of historical studies. The royal writer, chancellery, the public scribe, the spy, the

runner, the body of physicians and astrologer, other specialist tended to make up a loosely constellations of power in society. It is badly needed to address those areas which highlight the features of those societies which are ignored by the western scholars under the pen of modernism. The understanding of west about Indian society is based upon those ideas projected by the travelers like Hawkins. Bernier and even Manucci enumerate the idea of oriental despotism. The only reason behind this notion is lack of information and flow of information in Indian society. But the other side of the picture is quite different. It is identified that eastern kings ruled the empire with effective means of communication. European assumption about East portrays the image that the East India Company introduced the means of communication in India. India has a long history of surveillance and social communication .The contribution of Sher Shah Suri in empire building is commendable.

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