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## Reading Tarikh-I-Sher Shahi as a source for reconstructing Mughal history

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### Abstract

Through a primary reading of the text, ably supplemented by secondary works I argue that a text like Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi, which is mainly viewed as a biography of Sher Shah or as an extension of Afghan history in India, when read with greater attention can provide a detailed understanding on themes concerning those with the Mughals. It is only by directing our attention to the large chunks of historical information on Mughal military world, on the Mughal engagement with different social classes as also those concerning the evolving literary culture that one can discern the efficacy of the text as a source for retrieving Mughal history.

**Keywords:** Counterinsurgency, gendarmes, Fabian tactics, Zaban-I-Gomago, rightful, tactics

### Introduction

#### Tarikh-I-Sher Shahi- Beyond A Biographical Reading

The Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi of Abbas Khan Sarwani, is a sine qua non in the studies on Sher Shah. The text is abound with vivid information and details on Sher Shah's early life, his political career, his military exploits, administrative measures, failures and successes. Since Abbas Khan was connected to Sher Shah through his marriage, he had the means to verify the authenticity of his account from some of the then living trustworthy nobles who fought under Sher Shah against the Mughals. It was written in about 1579-86 AD at the instance of Mughal emperor Akbar and thus Abbas Khan had the privilege to avail the documents and records of the Mughal archives also.

The text throws light on Afghan traditions as well like the recording of beliefs, usages and customs related to the Afghans. For example, describing the influence of the step-mother of Sher Khan over his father, Miyan Hasan, Abbas Khan says: It has been advised by learned men not to depend on women, not to inform them of their secrets, not to consult them in state affairs and not to let them know the account of wealth and store of things other than the eatables. The time she knows that her husband suffers from his love for her, she no longer feels subordinated and considers him as her servant. Similarly, When Miyan Hasan died, one of the step-brothers of Sher Khan, Sulayman, put on his head the turban of his deceased father. This made Miyan Nizam, Sher Khan's own brother, angry; he took the turban off Sulayman's head and said: It does not behove you that in spite of there being Farid, the elder brother you put the turban of Miyan Hasan on your own head. Be afraid of God; are you not ashamed before the people of God to act contrary to the law (qaida) and custom (dastur)?<sup>[1]</sup> However, I find it quite startling that text has mostly been seen as an account of Sher Shah's life or as an extension of the history of the Afghans in India and has rarely been looked at as a source for retrieving Mughal history. This is largely due to its lack of order, eulogised setting and rampant exaggerations. But a close scrutiny of the text may however lead to a whole range of information concerning different aspects of Mughal history. It is this that I wish to focus on as one discusses the text further.

A major contribution of the text lies in its description of social life of the period, particularly in the ways in which it describes the engagement of the Mughal state with different social classes in general and the zamindars in particular. Like modern practitioners of counterinsurgency, they understood the need to gain the support of the population, using both the offer of reward and the threat of punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Raza, 164.

District commanders had the task of convincing the inhabitants that the central government, not local leadership, was the institution best capable of protecting them and their property and ensuring prosperity. In many cases the population was encouraged to actively participate in the keeping of order, with local militias co-opted to serve as gendarmes and auxiliaries. Preferential treatment for the obedient was complemented by harsh penalties for the recalcitrant. Sher Shah, displayed his mastery of the principles of counterinsurgency while serving as the governor of a province. This is ably displayed in the text in the following lines

*He said.* "The cultivators are the source of prosperity. I have encouraged them... and shall always watch over their condition, that no man may oppress and injure them; for if a ruler cannot protect humble peasantry from the lawless, it is tyranny to exact revenue from them. There are certain zamindars (Local chieftains) who have not presented themselves at the Governor's court, do not pay their full revenue, and harass the villages in their neighbourhood. I cannot have patience while they refuse to come to me, and continue to oppress and injure the people." He ordered his father's nobles to saddle 200 horses, and to see how many soldiers there were in the pargana, and he sent for all the... men of his tribe who were without jagirs, (land grants) and said to them, "I will give you subsistence and clothing... Whatever goods or money you may get from the plunder of these rebels is yours, nor will I ever require it of you; and whoever among you may distinguish himself, for him I will procure a good Jagir. I will myself give you horses to ride on."<sup>[2]</sup>

The author's account of Bairam Khan's asylum under the Katehriya chief Mitra Sen is interesting as also a unique feature of the text for the incident has hardly found mention in other texts. Sher Shah was once was part of Mughal state structure but eventually turned into an important Mughal adversary this fact has rendered the text a distinct character thereby allowing it to perform multiple functions as a text. For example:

Abbas sarwani, an Afghan, was engaged by a Mughal employer to write a history of an Afghan hero, the foe of the employer's father Humayan. The Tarikh-i Sher Shahi certainly presents an idealized picture of Sher Shah and the Afghans serving him. The Afghans, Abbas Khan shows, were united under Sher Shah as never before. All dissensions and bickering had disappeared from among them. The Afghans were not inferior to the Mughals in fighting skill. When united under one leader, they could drive the Mughals out of India. The Mughals had not conquered the country by the sword but through the internal dissensions of Afghans themselves. Thus, for Sarwani the Afghans were irresistible.

However In praising Sher Shah and criticising the Mughals, the author resorted to the technique of hints and innuendos (Zaban-I-Gomago) which Ziauddin Barani expounded in the Tarikh-I-Firozshahi. We can see that Abbas Khan was careful of the susceptibilities of the Mughals. He never himself criticized them directly. The statement that the Mughals are not superior to the Afghans in the art of warfare, that the Mughals do not possess the power of endurance in the battlefield and that their king has handed over all the affairs of the govern- ment to his corrupt and

greedy nobles is attributed to Sher Shah. Thus by putting his criticism of the Mughals, their government and their king in the mouth of Sher Shah, a dead man, Abbas Khan ensured for himself a safe ground.

Andrew De La Garza believes that amongst the accounts of Mughal heroes enjoying the "wholesome sherbet of martyrdom" and wicked enemies being forced to taste the "bitter wine of defeat" there are genuine efforts to think critically and learn the lessons of past campaigns. Perhaps the most striking example of these is the Tarikh-i SherShahi, a biography of the man who nearly destroyed the Mughal Empire. Commissioned by Akbar and written by a serving officer, this work contains extensive, detailed analysis of Sher Shah Suri's battles and campaigns. Equipment, tactics and doctrine are discussed at length, and the narrative includes explanations of irregular that this document was created so that the Mughals could learn both from their own mistakes and from the exploits of a gifted enemy commander and then incorporate these examples into their policy going forward warfare and counterinsurgency as well as major combat operations. It appears obvious that this document was created so that the Mughals could learn both from their own mistakes and from the exploits of a gifted enemy commander and then incorporate these examples into their policy going forward<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **On the Mughal military system**

The Tarikh provides a sound reflection of the military culture of the period. The portions of the text that deal with the Mughal-Afghan relations (ch.3) highlighting the conflicts that ensued between the two sides reflect upon the prevailing military culture of the time. Besides mentioning the weapons and weaponry that found use with the two parties the Tarikh details how Shersah studied Mughal tactics and technology and improved upon them. During his rise to power the Afghan Emperor greatly accelerated the pace of innovation by combining the traditional Central Asian way of war with new technology and tactics from the West. This novel military system was further refined and adapted to the unique environment of India by him.

The text vividly describes how Sher Shah assembled his own force of cavalry, artillery and musket-armed foot soldiers, adding innovations such as infantry drill and a rationalized system of ranks and pay grades. He also implemented a census and conscription for ethnic Afghans and veterans of the old Lodi army. Andrew de la Garza opines that Military drafts of any sort were rare in South Asia during this period and that Sher Shah Suri was one exception. He imposed conscription on ethnic Afghans during the campaign to overthrow the Mughals. His war against Humayun, believes Andrew de Garza was one of the few conflicts of this era that had any objective of national liberation or restoration—the effort to return the Afghans to their "rightful" place as the rulers and ruling class of India—and that may have had much to do with Sher Shah's unusual methods.

The Tarikh accords great significance to the battles of Chausa and Kanauj, this can be understood from the sheer space and level of detailing these events enjoy in the text (ch.4, 5, 6). Here the author has provided a heavily eulogized picture of the afghan involvement, for example he sees them as invincible forces under Sher Shah and has

<sup>2</sup> Garza, Mughals at war, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Garza, Mughals at war, 234.

argued that the Afghans were quite deceptive in their operation ability and manoeuvrability besides being guided by the near perfect strategy and tactics of Sher Shah. The following para highlights this best:

*Having let his noose of subjugation around the neck of the times, he had brought the entire country of hind under his possession. Being proud of his young age, superior airs and abundance of followers and retinues which had no equals in valour and manliness and at whose striking's by arrows and spears the elephants would not hold their ground and out of fear of whose fire emitting-swords even the blood of the enemy changed into water, emperor Humayun despised the number and strength of Ser Khan's forces who were all Afghans. (Pg 383,384 Tarikh-i-SherShahi).*

However for Garza the battles at Chausa in 1539 and Kanauj in 1540 were not important so much for the details of their conduct or even for their outcome. Neither was it a fair test of Mughal leadership or tactics. Sher Shah made very certain of that. He well understood the lethality of the new weapons and the hazards of combat under the new system and distinguished himself through his mastery of deception and evasive, Fabian tactics, only offering battle under the most ideal circumstances. He preferred raids on supply lines and sieges of isolated outposts until the enemy was sufficiently worn down physically and mentally to be defeated at minimal cost. At Chausa Sher Shah duped Humayun by pretending to accept a cease fire and then routed his forces with a surprise night attack. While, Kanauj was lost after a large body of camp followers and laborers panicked at the sight of the advancing enemy and tried to crowd inside the wagon laager with Humayun's soldiers. Thus for Garza it was tactics and strategies highlighted in the text that stand out for him <sup>[4]</sup>.

#### **Tarikh-I-SherShahi as an important linguistic document of its time**

Ramiz Raza in his critical analysis of Tarikh-i-SherShahi has pointed out the significance of the text as a linguistic document. He argues that contrary to the general tendency in standard Persian where irrational plural subjects require verbs in singular form Abbas Khan, following the rule of concord between the subject and its verb, uses the plural form throughout the book.

Besides this, he highlights that there are expressions which reflect a clear influence of Indian languages or ways of saying in the text. He cites the following as an example:

Laskar-I Xud-Ra Ba-Aqab-I- In Bulandi Ki Minumayad Panah Sazem. (Let us build a shelter for our army behind that height which is visible). Through this Raza argues that one of the characteristics of Abbas Khan's prose consists in the Indo Persianization of local expressions and concepts <sup>[5]</sup>.

It is clear from the above discussion that the Tarikh-i-SherShahi is an important linguistic document. Modern writers have criticized Abbas Khan for ignoring the rules of Persian grammar. This criticism is mainly based on the assumption that whatever does not correspond with the regular Persian, in the Tarikh-i-SherShahi, is incorrect and erratic. As Abbas Khan was not a learned and versatile writer, he could not imitate the style and language of the great masters of standard Persian. He wrote in a local Indo-

Afghan style, selecting expressions and vocabularies from his own cultural and social environment. Thus, the Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi, except for a few ornamental passages, is an important example of local Indo-Persian current in the 16th century.

#### **Conclusion**

The discussion above highlights that the Tarikh-i-SherShahi is reflective of the prevailing Mughal military culture, the engagement of the state with different social classes as also of the literary practices of the time. The text is found to be conforming to the ideas highlighted by different scholars on these themes. While the discussion on military culture upholds the arguments and understandings provided by scholars like Dirk Kolf (On the existence of a military labour market in pre-colonial India) and Jos Gommans (On the use of different war animals and knowledge of the surrounding environment). The discussion of the ever evolving literary world of the Mughals too finds agreement among scholars. Similarly, the other discussed themes too stand their ground in terms of historical validity. Thus, one can argue that even though the account provided by Abbas Sarwani is highly eulogistic and fraught with exaggerations the Tarikh is a productive and effective source for reconstructing Mughal history.

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<sup>4</sup> Garza, Mughals at war, 73.

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