

Struggle for Empire in North India—II

Mughals and Afghans (1525–1555)

CENTRAL ASIA AND BABUR

Important changes took place in Central and West Asia during the fifteenth century. After the disintegration of the Mongol empire in the fourteenth century, Timur united Iran and Turan under one rule once again. Timur's empire extended from the lower Volga to the river Indus, and included Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Iran, Trans-Oxiana, Afghanistan and a part of the Punjab. Timur died in 1405, but his grandson, Shahrukh Mirza (d. 1448), was able to keep intact a large part of his empire. He gave patronage to arts and letters, and in his time, Samarqand and Herat became the cultural centres of West Asia. The ruler of Samarqand had great prestige in the entire Islamic world.

The power of the Timurids declined rapidly during the second half of the fifteenth century, largely owing to the Timurid tradition of partitioning the empire. The various Timurid principalities which arose always fought and wrangled among themselves. This provided an opportunity to two new elements to come to the forefront. From the north, a Turko-Mongol tribe, the Uzbeks, thrust into Trans-Oxiana. The Uzbeks had become Muslims, but were looked down upon by the Timurids who considered them to be uncultured barbarians. Further to the west, a new dynasty, the Safavid dynasty, began to dominate Iran. The Safavids were descended from an order of saints who traced their ancestry to the Prophet. They supported the Shiite sect among the Muslims, and persecuted those who were not prepared to accept the Shiite tenets. The Uzbeks, on the other hand, were Sunnis. Thus, political conflict between these two elements was embittered by sectarian strife. Further to the west of Iran, the power of the Ottoman Turks was growing. They wanted to dominate eastern Europe as well as Iraq and Iran. (See Map A, Appendix)

Thus the scene was set for the conflict of three mighty empires in Asia during the sixteenth century.

In 1494, at the young age of twelve, Babur succeeded to Farghana, a small state in Trans-Oxiana. Oblivious of the Uzbek danger, the Timurid princes were busy fighting one another. Babur, too, made a bid to conquer Samarqand from his uncle. He won the city twice but lost it in no time on both the occasions. The second time the Uzbek chief, Shaibani Khan, was called in to help oust Babur. Shaibani defeated Babur and conquered Samarqand. Soon, he overran the rest of the Timurid kingdoms in the area. This forced Babur to move towards Kabul which he conquered in 1504. For the next fourteen years, Babur kept biding his time for the re-conquest of his homeland from the Uzbeks. He tried to enlist the help of his uncle, the ruler of Herat, in the enterprise but to no avail. Ultimately, Herat, too, was overrun by Shaibani Khan. This led to a direct conflict between the Uzbeks and the Safavids since the latter also laid claim to Herat and the surrounding area which is called Khurasan by contemporary writers. In a famous battle in 1510, near Merv, Shah Ismail, the shah of Iran, defeated and killed Shaibani Khan. Babur now made another attempt to recover Samarqand, this time with the help of the Iranian forces. He was duly installed at Samarqand, but chafed under the control of the Iranian generals who wanted to treat Babur as the governor of an Iranian province rather than as an independent prince. Meanwhile, the Uzbeks recovered rapidly from their defeat. Once again Babur was ousted from Samarqand and had to return to Kabul. Finally, Shah Ismail himself was defeated by the Ottoman sultan in 1514, thus leaving the Uzbeks masters of Trans-Oxiana.

These developments finally forced Babur to look towards India.

CONQUEST OF INDIA

Babur says that from the time he obtained Kabul (1504), to his victory at Panipat, 'I had never ceased to think of the conquest of Hindustan.' But he had never found a suitable opportunity for undertaking it, 'hindered as I was sometimes by the apprehensions of my *begs*, sometimes by the disagreement between my brothers and myself.' Like countless earlier invaders from Central Asia, Babur was drawn

to India by the lure of its fabulous wealth. India was the land of gold and riches. Babur's ancestor, Timur, had not only carried away a vast treasure and many skillful artisans who helped him to consolidate his Asian empire and beautify his capital, but also annexed some areas in the Punjab. These areas remained in the possession of Timur's successors for several generations. When Babur conquered Afghanistan, he felt that he had a legitimate right to these areas.

Another reason why Babur coveted the Punjab *parganas* was the meagre income of Kabul. The historian Abul Fazl remarks: 'He (Babur) ruled over Badakhshan, Qandhar and Kabul which did not yield sufficient income for the requirements of the army; in fact, in some of the border territories the expense on controlling the armies and administration was greater than the income.' With these meagre resources Babur could not provide well for his *begs* and kinsmen. He was also apprehensive of an Uzbek attack on Kabul and considered India to be a good place of refuge, and a suitable base for operations against the Uzbeks.

The political situation in northwest India was suitable for Babur's entry into India. Sikandar Lodi had died in 1517, and Ibrahim Lodi had succeeded him. Ibrahim's efforts to create a strong, centralised empire had alarmed the Afghan chiefs as well as the Rajputs. One of the most powerful of the Afghan chiefs was Daulat Khan Lodi, the governor of the Punjab, who was almost an independent ruler. Daulat Khan attempted to conciliate Ibrahim Lodi by sending his son to his court to pay homage. At the same time, he wanted to strengthen his position by annexing the frontier tracts of Bhira, etc.

In 1518-19, Babur conquered the powerful fort of Bhira. He then sent letters and verbal messages to Daulat Khan and Ibrahim Lodi, asking for the cession of the areas which had belonged to the Turks. But Daulat Khan detained Babur's envoy at Lahore, neither granting him audience nor allowing him to go to Ibrahim Lodi. When Babur returned to Kabul, Daulat Khan occupied Bhira, and expelled Babur's agents posted there.

In 1520-21, Babur once again crossed the Indus, and easily captured Bhira and Sialkot, the twin gateways to Hindustan. Lahore also capitulated to him. He might have proceeded further but for the news of a revolt at Qandhar. He retraced his steps, and after a siege

of a year and a half recaptured Qandhar. Thus reassured, Babur was once again able to turn his attention towards India.

It was about this time that Babur received an embassy from Daulat Khan Lodi, led by his son, Dilawar Khan. They invited Babur to India, and suggested that he should displace Ibrahim Lodi since he was a tyrant and enjoyed no support from his nobles. It is probable that a messenger from Rana Sanga arrived at the same time, inviting Babur to invade India. These embassies convinced Babur that the time was ripe for his conquest of the whole of the Punjab if not of India itself.

In 1525, while Babur was at Peshawar, he received the news that Daulat Khan Lodi had changed sides again. He had collected an army of 30,000–40,000 men, ousted Babur's men from Sialkot and was marching to Lahore. At Babur's approach, the army of Daulat Khan melted away. Daulat Khan submitted and was pardoned. Thus, within three weeks of crossing the Indus, Babur became the master of the Punjab.

THE BATTLE OF PANIPAT (20 APRIL 1526)

A conflict with Ibrahim Lodi, the ruler of Delhi, was inevitable, and Babur prepared for it by marching towards Delhi. Ibrahim Lodi met Babur at Panipat with a force estimated at 100,000 men and 1000 elephants. Since the Indian armies generally contained large hordes of servants, the fighting men on Ibrahim Lodi's side must have been far less than this figure. Babur had crossed the Indus with a force of 12,000, but this had been swelled by his army in India, and the large number of Hindustani nobles and soldiers who joined Babur in the Punjab. Even then, Babur's army was numerically inferior. Babur strengthened his position by resting one wing of his army on the city of Panipat which had a large number of houses, and protected the other by means of a ditch filled with branches of trees. In front, he lashed together a large number of carts, to act as a defending wall. Between two carts, breastworks were erected on which soldiers could rest their guns and fire. Babur calls his device an Ottoman (Rumi) device, for it had been used by the Ottomans in their famous battle against Shah Ismail of Iran. Babur had also secured the services of

two Ottoman master-gunners, Ustad Ali and Mustafa. The use of gunpowder had been gradually developing in India. Babur says that he used it for the first time in his attacks on the fortress of Bhira. Apparently, gunpowder was known in India but its use for artillery became common in north India with the advent of Babur.

Ibrahim Lodi had no idea of the strongly defended position of Babur. He had apparently expected Babur to fight a mobile mode of warfare which was usual with the Central Asians, making rapid advance or retreat as the need arose. After skirmishing for seven or eight days, Ibrahim Lodi's forces came out for the fateful battle. Seeing the strength of Babur's position, they hesitated. While Ibrahim was still reorganising his forces, the two extreme wings of Babur's army wheeled round and attacked Ibrahim's forces from the side and rear. Babur's gunners used their guns with good effect from the front. But Babur gives a large part of the credit of his victory to his bowmen. Curiously, he makes little reference to Ibrahim's elephants. Apparently, Ibrahim had little time to use them.

Despite these early setbacks, Ibrahim Lodi's army fought valiantly. The battle raged for two or three hours. Ibrahim Lodi fought to the last, with a group of 5000-6000 people around him. It is estimated that besides him, more than 15,000 of his men were killed in the battle.

The battle of Panipat is regarded as one of the decisive battles of Indian history. It broke the back of Lodi power, and brought under Babur's control the entire area upto Delhi and Agra. The treasures stored up by Ibrahim Lodi at Agra relieved Babur from his financial difficulties. The rich territory up to Jaunpur also lay open to Babur. However, Babur had to wage two hard-fought battles, one against Rana Sanga of Mewar, and the other against the eastern Afghans, before he could consolidate his hold on this area. Viewed from this angle, the battle of Panipat was not as decisive in the political field as has been made out. Its real importance lies in the fact that it opened a new phase in the struggle for domination in north India.

The difficulties of Babur after his victory at Panipat were manifold. Many of his *begs* were not prepared for a long campaign in India. With the onset of the hot weather, their misgivings had increased. They were far away from home in a strange and hostile land. Babur

tells us that the people of India displayed 'remarkable hostility', abandoning their villages at the approach of the Mughal armies. Obviously, the memories of Timur's sacking and plundering of the towns and villages were still fresh in their minds.

Babur knew that the resources in India alone would enable him to found a strong empire and satisfy his *begs*. 'Not for us the poverty of Kabul again', he records in his diary. He thus took a firm stand, proclaiming his intention to stay on in India, and granting leave to a number of his *begs* who wanted to go back to Kabul. This immediately cleared the air. But it also invited the hostility of Rana Sanga who began his preparations for a showdown with Babur.

THE BATTLE OF KHANWA

The growing conflict between Rana Sanga and Ibrahim Lodi for the domination of eastern Rajasthan and Malwa has already been mentioned. After defeating Mahmud Khalji of Malwa, the influence of the rana had gradually extended up to Piliya Khar—a small river in the neighbourhood of Agra. The establishment of an empire in the Indo-Gangetic valley by Babur was a threat to Rana Sanga. Sanga set afoot preparations to expel Babur or, at any rate, to confine him to the Punjab.

Babur accuses Rana Sanga of breach of agreement. He says that Sanga had invited him to India, and promised to join him against Ibrahim Lodi, but made no move while he (Babur) conquered Delhi and Agra. We do not know what precise promises Sanga had made. He might have hoped for a long-drawn-out warfare during which he (Sanga) would have been able to seize the areas he coveted. Or, he might have hoped that like Timur, Babur would withdraw after sacking Delhi and weakening the Lodis. Babur's decision to stay on in India completely changed the situation.

Many Afghans, including Mahmud Lodi, a younger brother of Ibrahim Lodi, rallied to Rana Sanga, in the hope of regaining the throne of Delhi in case Sanga won. Hasan Khan Mewati, the ruler of Mewat, also cast in his lot with Sanga. Almost all the Rajput rulers of note sent contingents to serve under Rana Sanga.

The reputation of Rana Sanga, and his early success against some of the outlying Mughal posts such as Bayanā, demoralised Babur's soldiers. To rally them, Babur solemnly declared the war against Sanga to be a *jihad*. On the eve of the battle, he emptied all the wine jars and broke the wine flasks to demonstrate what a staunch Muslim he was. He also banned the sale and purchase of wine throughout his dominions and abolished customs taxes for Muslims.

Having carefully selected a site, Babur entrenched himself at Khanwa about 40 km from Agra. As at Panipat, he lashed together a number of wagons as an outer bastion and dug a trench in front for double protection. Gaps were left in the defences for his musketeers to fire and advance behind wheeled tripods.

The battle of Khanwa (1527) was fiercely contested. According to Babur, Sanga's forces exceeded 200,000 including 10,000 Afghan cavalrymen, and an equal force fielded by Hasan Khan Mewati. As usual, these figures may be greatly exaggerated, though Babur's forces were undoubtedly inferior in number. Sanga made fierce attacks on Babur's right and almost breached it. However, the Mughal artillery took a heavy toll of life, and slowly, Sanga's forces were pushed back. At this juncture, Babur ordered his soldiers in the centre, who had been sheltering behind their tripods, to launch an attack. The artillery also advanced behind the chained wagons. As at Panipat, Babur's flanking parties which attacked from the side and rear also came into play. Sanga's forces were thus hemmed in, and were defeated after a great slaughter. Rana Sanga escaped and wanted to renew the conflict with Babur. But he was poisoned by his own nobles who considered such a course to be dangerous and suicidal.

Thus died one of the most valiant warriors produced by Rajasthan. With Sanga's death, the dream of a united Rajasthan extending up to Agra received a serious setback.

The battle of Khanwa secured Babur's position in the Delhi-Agra region. Babur strengthened his position further by conquering the chain of forts—Gwaliyar, Dholpur, etc., east of Agra. He also annexed large parts of Alwar from Hasan Khan Mewati. He then led a campaign against Medini Rai of Chanderi in Malwa. Chanderi was captured after the Rajput defenders had died fighting to the last man and their women performed *jauhar*. Babur had to cut short his plan

of further campaigns in the area on hearing of the growing activities of the Afghans in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

THE AFGHANS

Although the Afghans had been defeated, they had not been reconciled to the Mughal rule. Eastern Uttar Pradesh was still under the domination of the Afghan chiefs who had tendered their allegiance to Babur but were prepared to throw it off at any time. The Afghan sardars were being backed by Nusrat Shah, the ruler of Bengal, who had married a daughter of Ibrahim Lodi. Earlier, the Afghans had ousted the Mughal officials in eastern Uttar Pradesh and reached up to Kanauj. But their greatest weakness was the lack of a popular leader. After some time, Mahmud Lodi, a brother of Ibrahim Lodi, who had fought against Babur at Khanwa, reached Bihar. The Afghans hailed him as their ruler, and mustered strong under him.

This was a threat which Babur could not ignore. Hence, at the beginning of 1529, he left Agra for the east. Crossing the Ganga near Banaras, he faced the combined forces of the Afghans and Nusrat Shah of Bengal at the crossing of the river Ghagra. Although Babur crossed the river, and compelled the Bengal and the Afghan armies to retreat, he could not win a decisive victory. Being ill, and anxious about the situation in Central Asia, Babur decided to patch up an agreement with the Afghans. He put forward a vague claim for suzerainty over Bihar, but left most of it in the hands of the Afghan chiefs. He also patched up a treaty with Nusrat Shah of Bengal. He then returned to Agra. Shortly afterwards, Babur died near Lahore while on his way to Kabul.

SIGNIFICANCE OF BABUR'S ADVENT INTO INDIA

Babur's advent into India was significant from many points of view. For the first time since the downfall of the Kushan empire, Kabul and Qandhar became integral parts of an empire comprising north India. Since these areas had always acted as staging places for an

invasion of India, by dominating them Babur and his successors were able to give to India security from external invasions for almost 200 years. Economically also, the control of Kabul and Qandhar strengthened India's foreign trade since these two towns were the starting points for caravans meant for China in the east, and the Mediterranean seaports in the west. Thus, India could take a greater share in the great trans-Asian trade.

In north India, Babur smashed the power of the Lodis and the Rajput confederacy led by Rana Sanga. Thereby, he destroyed the balance of power in the area. This was a long step towards the establishment of an all-India empire. However, a number of conditions had still to be fulfilled before this could be achieved.

Babur introduced a new mode of warfare in India. Although gunpowder was known in India earlier, Babur showed what a skilled combination of artillery and cavalry could achieve. His victories led to rapid popularisation of gunpowder and artillery in India. Since artillery was expensive, it favoured those rulers who had large resources at their command. Hence the era of small kingdoms ended.

By his new military methods as well as by his personal conduct, Babur re-established the prestige of the Crown which had been eroded since the death of Firuz Tughlaq. Although Sikandar Lodi and Ibrahim Lodi had tried to re-establish the prestige of the Crown, Afghan ideas of tribal independence and equality had resulted only in a partial success. Babur had the prestige of being a descendant of two of the most famous warriors of Asia, Chingiz and Timur. None of his nobles could, therefore, claim a status of equality with him, or aspire to his throne. The challenge to his position, if any, could come only from a Timurid prince.

Babur endeared himself to his *begs* by his personal qualities. He was always prepared to share the hardships with his soldiers. Once, at the height of winter, Babur was returning to Kabul. The snow was so deep that horses would sink into it and parties of soldiers had to trample the snow so that the horses could pass. Without hesitation, Babur joined in the back-breaking task. Following Babur's example, his *begs* also joined in the task.

Babur was fond of wine and good company and was a good and merry companion. At the same time, he was a stern disciplinarian

and a hard taskmaster. He took good care of his *begs*, and was prepared to excuse many of their faults as long as they were not disloyal. He was prepared to adopt the same attitude towards his Afghan and Indian nobles. However, he did have a streak of cruelty, probably inherited from his ancestors, for he made towers of skulls from the heads of his opponents on a number of occasions. These, and other instances of personal cruelty, have to be seen in the context of the harsh time in which Babur lived.

An orthodox Sunni, Babur was not bigoted or led by the religious divines. At a time when there was a bitter sectarian feud between the Shias and the Sunnis in Iran and Turan, his court was free from theological and sectarian conflicts. He declared the battle against Sanga a *jihad* and assumed the title of *ghazi* after the victory, but the reasons were clearly political. Though his reign was a period of war, only a few instances can be found of destruction of temples. There is no evidence that the mosques built at Sambhal and Ayodhya by the local governors were built by breaking the Hindu temples there. Perhaps, they only repaired existing mosques, and put in an inscription in honour of Babur.

Babur was deeply learned in Persian and Arabic, and is regarded as one of the two most famous writers in the Turkish language which was his mother tongue. As a prose writer, he had no equal, and his famous memoirs, the *Tuzuk-i-Baburi*, is considered one of the classics of world literature. His other works include a *masnavi* and the Turkish translation of a well-known Sufi work. He was in touch with the famous poets and artists of the time and describes their works in his memoirs. He was a keen naturalist, and has described the flora and fauna of India in considerable detail. He laid out a number of formal gardens with running water thereby establishing a tradition of building gardens.

Babur introduced a new concept of the state which was to be based on the strength and prestige of the Crown, absence of religious and sectarian bigotry, and the careful fostering of culture and the fine arts. He thus provided a precedent and a direction for his successors.

HUMAYUN'S CONQUEST OF GUJARAT AND HIS TUSSELE WITH SHER SHAH

Humayun succeeded Babur in December 1530 at the young age of 23. He had to grapple with a number of problems left behind by Babur. The administration had not yet been consolidated, and the finances were precarious. The Afghans had not been subdued, and were nursing the hope of expelling the Mughals from India. Finally, there was the Timurid legacy of partitioning the empire among all the brothers. Babur had counselled Humayun to deal kindly with his brothers, but had not favoured the partitioning of the infant Mughal empire, which would have been disastrous.

When Humayun ascended the throne at Agra, the empire included Kabul and Qandhar, while there was loose control over Badakhshan beyond the Hindukush mountains. Kabul and Qandhar were under the charge of Humayun's younger brother, Kamran. It was only natural that they should remain in his charge. However, Kamran was not satisfied with these poverty-stricken areas. He marched on Lahore and Multan, and occupied them. Humayun, who was busy elsewhere, and did not want to start a civil war, had little option but to agree. Kamran accepted the suzerainty of Humayun, and promised to help him whenever necessary. Kamran's action created the apprehension that the other brothers of Humayun might also follow the same path whenever an opportunity arose. However, by formally granting the Punjab and Multan to Kamran, Humayun had the immediate advantage that he was free to devote his attention to the eastern parts without having to bother about his western frontier.

Apart from these, Humayun had to deal with the rapid growth of the power of the Afghans in the east, and the growing power and sweep of Bahadur Shah, the ruler of Gujarat. At the outset, Humayun was inclined to consider the Afghan danger to be the more serious of the two. In 1532, at a place called Dadrah, he defeated the Afghan forces which had conquered Bihar and overrun Jaunpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. After this success, Humayun besieged Chunar. This powerful fort commanded the land and the river route between Agra and the east, and was known as the gateway of eastern India. It had recently come in the possession of an Afghan sardar, Sher Khan, who had become the most powerful of the Afghan sardars.

After the siege of Chunar had gone on for four months, Sher Khan persuaded Humayun to allow him to retain possession of the fort. In return, he promised to be loyal to the Mughals, and sent one of his sons to Humayun as a hostage. Humayun accepted the offer because he was anxious to return to Agra. The rapid increase in the power of Bahadur Shah of Gujarat, and his activities in the areas bordering Agra, had alarmed him. He was not prepared to continue the siege of Chunar under the command of a noble since that would have meant dividing his forces.

Bahadur Shah, who was of almost the same age as Humayun, was an able and ambitious ruler. Ascending the throne in 1526, he first overran and conquered Malwa. He then turned to Rajasthan and besieged Chittor. Soon he reduced the Rajput defenders to sore straits. According to some later legends, Rani Karnavati, the widow of Rana Sanga, sent a *rakhi* to Humayun seeking his help, and Humayun gallantly responded. No contemporary writer has mentioned the story, and it may not be true. However, it is a fact that Humayun moved from Agra to Gwalior, and due to fear of Mughal intervention, Bahadur Shah patched up a treaty with the rana, leaving the fort in his hands after extracting a large indemnity in cash and kind.

During the next year and a half, Humayun spent his time in building a new city at Delhi, which he named Dinpanah. He organised many grand feasts and festivities during the period. Humayun has been blamed for wasting valuable time in these activities, while Sher Khan was steadily augmenting his power in the east. It has also been said that Humayun's inactivity was due to his habit of taking opium. Neither of these charges is fully true. Babur had continued to use opium, after he gave up wine. Humayun took opium occasionally in place of or in addition to wine, as did many of his nobles. But neither Babur nor Humayun was an opium addict. The building of Dinpanah was meant to impress friends and foes alike. It could also serve as a second capital in case Agra was threatened by Bahadur Shah who, in the meantime, had conquered Ajmer and overrun eastern Rajasthan.

Bahadur Shah offered a still greater challenge to Humayun. He had made his court the refuge of all those who feared or hated the

Mughals. He again invested Chittor and, simultaneously, supplied arms and men to Tatar Khan, a cousin of Ibrahim Lodi. Tatar Khan was to invade Agra with a force of 40,000 while diversions were to be made in the north and the east.

Humayun easily defeated the challenge posed by Tatar Khan. The Afghan forces melted away at the approach of the Mughals, and Tatar Khan was defeated and killed. Determined to end the threat from Bahadur Shah's side once for all, Humayun now invaded Malwa.

In the struggle which followed, Humayun showed considerable military skill, and remarkable personal valour. Bahadur Shah did not dare face the Mughals. He abandoned Chittor which he had captured, and fortified himself at a camp at Mandor. But Humayun's cautious tactics forced him to flee to Mandu after spiking his guns, but leaving behind all his rich equipage. Humayun was hot on his heels. He invested the fortress of Mandu and captured it without much opposition. Bahadur Shah fled from Mandu to Champaner. A small party scaled the fort of Champaner by a path considered inaccessible. Humayun was the 41st man to scale the walls. Bahadur Shah now fled to Ahmedabad and finally to Kathiawar. Thus, the rich provinces of Malwa and Gujarat, as well as the large treasures hoarded by the Gujarat rulers at Mandu and Champaner, fell into the hands of Humayun.

Both Gujarat and Malwa were lost as quickly as they had been gained. After the victory, Humayun placed Gujarat under the command of his younger brother, Askari, and then retired to Mandu which was centrally located and enjoyed a fine climate. The major problem was the deep attachment of the people to the Gujarati rule. Askari was inexperienced, and the Mughal nobles were divided. A series of popular uprisings, military actions by Bahadur Shah's nobles, and the rapid revival of Bahadur Shah's power, unnerved Askari. He fell back upon Champaner, but received no help from the commander of the fort who doubted his intentions. Hence, Askari decided to return to Agra. This immediately raised the fear that he might try to displace Humayun from Agra, or attempt to carve out a separate empire for himself. Deciding to take no chances, Humayun abandoned Malwa and moved after Askari by forced marches. He overtook Askari in Rajasthan, the two brothers were reconciled, and returned to Agra. Meanwhile, both Gujarat and Malwa were lost.

The Gujarat campaign was not a complete failure. While it did not add to the Mughal territories, it destroyed forever the threat posed to the Mughals by Bahadur Shah: Humayun was now in a position to concentrate all his resources in the struggle against Sher Khan and the Afghans. Soon after, Bahadur Shah drowned in a scuffle with the Portuguese on board one of their ships. This ended whatever danger remained from the side of Gujarat.

SHER KHAN

During Humayun's Malwa campaign (February 1535 to February 1537), Sher Khan had further strengthened his position. He had made himself the unquestioned master of Bihar. The Afghans from far and near had rallied round him. Though he continued to profess loyalty to the Mughals, he systematically planned to expel the Mughals from India. He was in close touch with Bahadur Shah who had helped him with heavy subsidies. These resources enabled him to recruit and maintain a large and efficient army which included 1200 elephants. Shortly after Humayun's return to Agra, he had used this army to defeat the Bengal king, and compel him to pay an indemnity of 13,00,000 *dinars* (gold coins).

After equipping a new army, Humayun marched against Sher Khan and besieged Chunar towards the end of the year. Humayun felt it would be dangerous to leave such a powerful fort behind, threatening his line of communications. However, the fort was strongly defended by the Afghans. Despite the best efforts by the master-gunner, Rumi Khan, it took six months for Humayun to capture it. Meanwhile, Sher Khan captured by treachery the powerful fort of Rohtas where he could leave his family in safety. He then invaded Bengal for a second time, and captured Gaur, its capital.

Thus, Sher Khan completely outmanoeuvred Humayun. Humayun should have realised that he was in no position to offer a military challenge to Sher Khan without more careful preparations. However, he was unable to grasp the political and military situation facing him. After his victory over Gaur, Sher Khan made an offer to Humayun that he would surrender Bihar and pay an annual tribute of ten lakhs of *dinars* if he was allowed to retain Bengal. It is not clear

how far Sher Khan was sincere in making this offer. But Humayun was not prepared to leave Bengal to Sher Khan. Bengal was the land of gold, rich in manufactures, and a centre for foreign trade. Moreover, the king of Bengal who had reached Humayun's camp in a wounded condition, urged that resistance to Sher Khan was still continuing. All these factors led Humayun to reject Sher Khan's offer and decide upon a campaign to Bengal. Soon after, the Bengal king succumbed to his wounds. Humayun had, thus, to undertake the campaign to Bengal all alone.

Humayun's march to Bengal, was the prelude to the disaster which overtook his army at Chausa almost a year later. Sher Khan had left Bengal and was in south Bihar. He let Humayun advance into Bengal without opposition so that he might disrupt Humayun's communications and bottle him up in Bengal. Arriving at Gaur, Humayun quickly took steps to establish law and order. But this did not solve any of his problems. His situation was made worse by the attempt of his younger brother, Hindal, to assume the Crown himself at Agra. Due to this and Sher Khan's activities, Humayun was totally cut off from all news and supplies from Agra.

After a stay of three to four months at Gaur, Humayun started back for Agra, leaving a small garrison behind. Despite the rumblings of discontent in the nobility, the rainy season, and the constant harrying attacks of the Afghans, Humayun managed to get his army back to Chausa near Buxar, without any serious loss. This was a big achievement for which Humayun deserves credit. Meanwhile, Kamran had advanced from Lahore to Agra to quell Hindal's rebellion. Though not disloyal, Kamran made no attempt to send reinforcements to Humayun which might have swung the military balance in favour of the Mughals.

Despite these setbacks, Humayun was still confident of success against Sher Khan. He forgot that he was facing an Afghan army which was very different from the one a year before. It had gained battle experience and confidence under the leadership of the most skilful general the Afghans ever produced. Misled by an offer of peace from Sher Khan, Humayun crossed to the eastern bank of the Karmnasa river, giving full scope to the Afghan horsemen encamped there to attack. Humayun showed not only bad political sense, but

bad generalship as well. He chose his ground badly, and allowed himself to be taken unawares.

Humayun barely escaped with his life from the battle field, swimming across the river with the help of a water-carrier. Immense booty fell in Sher Khan's hands. About 7000 Mughal soldiers and many prominent nobles were killed.

After the defeat at Chausa (March 1539), only the fullest unity among the Timurid princes and the nobles could have saved the Mughals. Kamran had a battle-hardened force of 10,000 troops under his command at Agra. But he was not prepared to loan them to Humayun as he had lost confidence in Humayun's generalship. On the other hand, Humayun was not prepared to entrust the command of the armies to Kamran, lest the latter use it to assume power himself. The suspicions between the brothers grew till Kamran decided to return to Lahore with the bulk of his army.

The army hastily assembled by Humayun at Agra was no match against Sher Khan. However, the battle of Kanauj (May 1540) was bitterly contested. Both the younger brothers of Humayun, Askari and Hindal, fought valiantly but to no avail.

The battle of Kanauj decided the issue between Sher Khan and the Mughals. Humayun, now, became a prince without a kingdom, Kabul and Qandhar remaining under Kamran. He wandered about in Sindh and its neighbouring regions for the next two and a half years, hatching various schemes to regain his kingdom. But neither the rulers of Sindh nor Maldeo, the powerful ruler of Marwar, were prepared to help him in this enterprise. Worse, his own brothers turned against him, and tried to have him killed or imprisoned. Humayun faced all these trials and tribulations with fortitude and courage. It was during this period that Humayun's character showed itself at its best. Ultimately, Humayun took shelter at the court of the Iranian king, and with his help recaptured Qandhar and Kabul in 1545.

It is clear that the major cause of Humayun's failure against Sher Khan was his inability to understand the nature of the Afghan power. Due to the existence of large numbers of Afghan tribes scattered over north India, the Afghans could always reunite under a capable leader and pose a challenge. Without winning over the local rulers and

zamindars to their side, the Mughals were bound to remain numerically inferior. In the beginning, Humayun was, on the whole, loyally served by his brothers. Real differences among them arose only after Sher Khan's victories. Some historians have unduly exaggerated the early differences of Humayun with his brothers, and his alleged faults of character. Though not as vigorous as Babur, Humayun showed himself to be a competent general and politician, till his ill-conceived Bengal campaign. In both the battles with Sher Khan, the latter showed himself to be a superior general.

Humayun's life was a romantic one. He went from riches to rags, and again from rags to riches. In 1555, following the breakup of the Sur empire, he was able to recover Delhi. But he did not live long to enjoy the fruits of the victory. He died from a fall from the first floor of the library building in his fort at Delhi. His favourite wife built a magnificent mausoleum for him near the fort. This building marks a new phase in the style of architecture in north India, its most remarkable feature being the magnificent dome of marble.

SHER SHAH AND THE SUR EMPIRE (1540-55)

Sher Shah ascended the throne of Delhi at the age of 54 or so. We do not know much about his early life. His original name was Farid and his father was a small *jagirdar* at Jaunpur. Farid acquired sound administrative experience by looking after the affairs of his father's *jagir*. Following the defeat and death of Ibrahim Lodi and the confusion in Afghan affairs, he emerged as one of the most important Afghan sardar. The title of Sher Khan was given to him by his patron for killing a tiger (*sher*) or, for services rendered. Soon, Sher Khan emerged as the right-hand of the ruler of Bihar, and its master in all but name. This was before the death of Babur. The rise of Sher Khan to prominence was, thus, not a sudden one.

As a ruler, Sher Shah ruled the mightiest empire which had come into existence in north India since the time of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. His empire extended from Bengal to the Indus, excluding Kashmir. In the west, he conquered Malwa, and almost the entire Rajasthan. Malwa was then in a weak and distracted condition and in no position to offer any resistance. It was during the Malwa

campaign that an episode took place which is a blot on the memory of Sher Shah. Puran Mal, the possessor of the powerful fort of Chanderi, had vacated the fort on a binding oath of safe conduct. However, he and his party of 1000 Rajputs, along with their families, were treacherously attacked, and killed outside the fort. The theologians ruled that no faith need be kept with an infidel, and that Puran Mal deserved punishment because he had oppressed Muslims, and kept Muslim women in his house. The situation in Rajasthan was different. Maldeo, the ruler of Marwar who had ascended the *gaddi* in 1532, had rapidly brought the whole of western and northern Rajasthan under his control. He further expanded his territories during Humayun's conflict with Sher Shah. With the help of the Bhatias of Jaisalmer, he conquered Ajmer. In his career of conquest he came into conflict with the rulers of the area, including Mewar. His latest act had been the conquest of Bikaner. In the course of the conflict, the Bikaner ruler was killed after a gallant resistance. His sons, Kalyan Das and Bhim, sought shelter at the court of Sher Shah. Many others, including his relation, Biram Deo of Merta, whom Maldeo had dispossessed from his holding, also repaired to Sher Shah's court.

Maldeo's attempt to create a large centralised state in Rajasthan under his aegis was bound to be regarded as a threat by the ruler of Delhi and Agra. It was believed that Maldeo had an army of 50,000. However, there is no evidence that Maldeo coveted Delhi or Agra. Now, as before, the bone of contention between the two was the domination of the strategically important eastern Rajasthan.

The Rajput and Afghan forces clashed at Samel (1544) between Ajmer and Jodhpur. After waiting for about a month, Maldeo, considering it suicidal to attack the strongly fortified Afghan camp in the absence of a strong artillery, and wanted to retreat to Jodhpur and Siwana where he could prepare a better defence. Divided counsel, with some of the Rajput sardars considering any retreat to be dishonourable, or suspicion sown in the minds of Maldeo about the loyalty of some of his sardars on account of Sher Shah's ruse of dropping some letters addressed to Rajput commanders near Maldeo's camp, resulted in Maldeo withdrawing the bulk of his forces towards Jodhpur. Some Rajput sardars refused to retreat. With a small force of about, 10,000 they vigorously attacked Sher Shah's centre and

created confusion in his army. Soon, superior number and Afghan gunfire halted the Rajput charge, and led to their defeat.

The battle of Samel sealed the fate of Rajasthan. Sher Shah now besieged and conquered Ajmer and Jodhpur, forcing Maldeo to take shelter in the fort of Siwana where he died soon afterwards. Sher Shah then turned towards Mewar. The rana was in no position to resist, and sent the keys of Chittor to Sher Shah who set up his outposts up to Mount Abu.

Thus, in a brief period of ten months, Sher Shah overran almost the entire Rajasthan. His last campaign was against Kalinjar, a strong fort that was the key to Bundelkhand. During the siege, a gun burst and severely injured Sher Shah. He died (1545) after he heard that the fort had been captured.

Sher Shah was succeeded by his second son, Islam Shah, who ruled till 1553. Islam Shah was a capable ruler and general, but most of his energies were occupied with the rebellions raised by his brothers, and with tribal feuds among the Afghans. These and the ever-present fear of a renewed Mughal invasion prevented Islam Shah from attempting to expand his empire. His death at a young age led to a civil war among his successors. This provided Humayun the opportunity he had been seeking for recovering his empire in India. In two hotly contested battles in 1555, he defeated the Afghans, and recovered Delhi and Agra.

CONTRIBUTION OF SHER SHAH

The Sur empire may be considered in many ways as a continuation and culmination of the Delhi Sultanat, the advent of Babur and Humayun being in the nature of an interregnum. Amongst the foremost contributions of Sher Shah was his re-establishment of law and order across the length and breadth of his empire. He dealt sternly with robbers and dacoits, and with zamindars who refused to pay land revenue or disobeyed the orders of the government. We are told by Abbas Khan Sarwani, the historian of Sher Shah, that the zamindars were so cowed down that none of them dared to raise the banner of rebellion against him, or to molest the travellers passing through their territories.

Sher Shah paid great attention to the fostering of trade and commerce and the improvement of communications in his kingdom. Sher Shah restored the old imperial road called the Grand Trunk Road, from the river Indus in the west to Sonargaon in Bengal. He also built a road from Agra to Jodhpur and Chittor, evidently linking up with the road to the Gujarat seaports. He built a third road from Lahore to Multan. Multan was at that time the staging point for caravans going to West and Central Asia. For the convenience of travellers, Sher Shah built a sarai at a distance of every two *kos* (about eight km) on these roads. The sarai was a fortified lodging or inn where travellers could pass the night and also keep their goods in safe custody. Separate lodgings for Hindus and Muslims were provided in these sarais. Brahmins were appointed for providing bed and food to the Hindu travellers, and grain for their horses. Abbas Khan says, 'It was a rule in these sarais that whoever entered them received provision suitable to his rank, and food and litter for his cattle, from government.' Efforts were made to settle villages around the sarais, and land was set apart in these villages for the expenses of the sarais. Every sarai had several watchmen under the control of a *shahna* (custodian).

We are told that Sher Shah built 1700 sarais in all. Some of these are still existing, which shows how strong they were. His roads and sarais have been called 'the arteries of the empire'. They helped in quickening trade and commerce in the country. Many of the sarais developed into market-towns (*qasbas*) to which peasants flocked to sell their produce. The sarais were also used as stages for the news service or *dak-chowki*. The organisation of these *dak-chowkis* has been described in an earlier chapter. By means of these, Sher Shah kept himself informed of the developments in his vast empire.

Sher Shah also introduced other reforms to promote the growth of trade and commerce. In his entire empire, customs duty for goods were paid only at two places: goods produced in Bengal or imported from outside paid customs duty at the border of Bengal and Bihar at Sikrigali, and goods coming from West and Central Asia paid customs duty at the Indus. No one was allowed to levy customs at roads, ferries or towns anywhere else. Duty was paid a second time at the time of sale of goods.

Sher Shah directed his governors and *amils* to treat merchants and travellers well in every way, and not to harm them at all. If a merchant died, they were not to seize his goods as if they were unowned. Sher Shah enjoined upon them the dictum of Shaikh Nizami: 'If a merchant should die in your country it is a perfidy to lay hands on his property.' Sher Shah made the local village headmen (*muqaddams*) and zamindars responsible for any loss that a merchant suffered on the roads. If the goods were stolen; the *muqaddams* and the zamindars had to produce them, or point out the haunts of the thieves or highway robbers, failing which they had to undergo the punishment meant for thieves and robbers. The same law was applied in cases of murders on the roads. It was a barbarous law to make the innocent responsible for the wicked but it seems to have been effective.

In the picturesque language of Abbas Sarwani, 'a decrepit old woman might place a basketful of gold ornaments on her head and go on a journey, and no thief or robber would come near her for fear of the punishment which Sher Shah inflicted.'

The currency reforms of Sher Shah also helped in the growth of commerce and handicrafts. He struck fine coins of gold, silver and copper of uniform standard in place of the earlier debased coins of mixed metal. His silver rupee was so well executed that it remained a standard coin for centuries after him. His attempt to fix standard weights and measures all over the empire were also helpful for trade and commerce.

Sher Shah did not make many changes in the administrative divisions prevailing since the Sultanat period. A number of villages comprised a *pargana*. The *pargana* was under the charge of the *shiqdar*, who looked after law and order and general administration, and the *munsif* or *amil* who looked after the collection of land revenue. Accounts were maintained both in Persian and the local languages (Hindavi). Above the *pargana* was the *shiq* or *sarkar* under the charge of the *shiqdar-i-shiqdaran* or *faujdar* and a *munsif-i-munsifan*. It seems that only the designations of these officers were new since both *pargana* and *sarkar* were units of administration in the earlier period also.

A number of *sarkars* were sometimes grouped into provinces, but we do not know how many of such provinces existed and the pattern

of provincial administration. It seems that the provincial governors were all-powerful in some areas. In some areas such as Bengal, real power remained in the hands of tribal chiefs and the governor exercised only a loose control over them.

Sher Shah apparently continued the central machinery of administration which had been developed during the Sultanat period. However, we do not have much information about it. Sher Shah did not favour leaving too much authority in the hands of ministers. He worked exceedingly hard, devoting himself to the affairs of the state from early morning to late at night. He also toured the country constantly to know the condition of the people. But no single individual, however hardworking, could look after all the affairs of a vast country like India. Sher Shah's excessive centralisation of authority in his hands was a source of weakness, and its harmful effects became apparent when a masterful sovereign like him ceased to sit on the throne.

Sher Shah paid special attention to the land revenue system, the army, and justice. Having administered his father's jagir for a number of years, and then as the virtual ruler of Bihar, Sher Shah knew the working of the land revenue system at all levels. With the help of a capable team of administrators, he toned up the entire system. The produce of land was no longer to be based on guess work, or by dividing the crops in the fields or on the threshing floor. Sher Shah insisted on measurement of the sown land. A crop rate (called *ray*) was drawn up, laying down the state's share of the different types of crops. This could then be converted into cash on the basis of the prevailing market rates in different areas. The share of the state was one-third of the produce. The lands were divided into good, bad and middling. Their average produce was computed, and one-third of it became the share of the state. The peasants were given the option of paying in cash or kind, though the state preferred cash.

The areas sown, the type of crops cultivated, and the amount each peasant had to pay was written down on a paper called *patta* and each peasant was informed of it. No one was allowed to charge from the peasants anything extra. Even the rates which the members of the measuring party were to get for their work were laid down. In order to guard against famine and other natural calamities, a cess at the rate of two and a half *seers* per *bigha* was also levied.

Sher Shah was very solicitous for the welfare of the peasantry. He used to say, 'The cultivators are blameless, they submit to those in power, and if I oppress them they will abandon their villages, and the country will be ruined and deserted, and it will be a long time before it again becomes prosperous.' Since there was plenty of land available for cultivation in those days, the desertion of villages by the peasants in case of oppression was a real threat and helped in putting a limit on the exploitation of the peasants by the rulers.

Sher Shah set up a strong army in order to administer his vast empire. He dispensed with tribal levies under tribal chiefs, and recruited soldiers directly, after verifying their character. Every soldier had his descriptive roll (*chehra*) recorded, and his horse branded with the imperial sign so that horses of inferior quality may not be substituted. Sher Shah seems to have borrowed this system, known as the *dagh* (branding) system, from the military reforms of Alaaddin Khalji. The strength of Sher Shah's personal army is put at 1,50,000 cavalry and 25,000 infantry armed with matchlocks or bows, 5,000 elephants and a park of artillery. He set up cantonments in different parts of the empire and a strong garrison was posted in each of them.

Sher Shah placed considerable emphasis on justice. He used to say, 'Justice is the most excellent of religious rites, and it is approved alike by the king of infidels and of the faithful'. He did not spare oppressors whether they were high nobles, men of his own tribe or near relations. *Qazis* were appointed at different places for justice but, as before, the village panchayats and zamindars also dealt with civil and criminal cases at the local level.

A big step forward in the dispensation of justice was, however, taken by Sher Shah's son and successor, Islam Shah. Islam Shah codified the laws, thus doing away with the necessity of depending on a special set of people who could interpret the Islamic law. Islam Shah also tried to curb the powers and privileges of the nobles, and to pay cash salaries to soldiers. But most of the regulations disappeared with his death.

There is no doubt that Sher Shah was a remarkable figure. He established a sound system of administration in his brief reign of five years. He was also a great builder. The tomb which he built for himself at Sasaram during his lifetime is regarded as one of the masterpieces

of architecture. It is considered as a culmination of the earlier style of architecture and a starting point for the new style which developed later.

Sher Shah also built a new city on the bank of the Yamuna near Delhi. The only survivor of this is the Old Fort (Purana Qila) and the fine mosque within it.

Sher Shah also patronized the learned men. Some of the finest works in Hindi, such as the *Padmavat* of Malik Muhammad Jaisi, were completed during his reign.

Sher Shah was not a bigot in the religious sphere, as is evident from his social and economic policy. Neither Islam Shah nor he depended on the *ulama*, though they respected them a great deal. Religious slogans were sometimes used to justify political actions. The treacherous murder of Puran Mal and his associates after he had vacated the fort of Raisen in Malwa on the basis of a binding oath is one such example. Sher Shah did not, however, initiate any new liberal policies. *Jizyah* continued to be collected from the Hindus, while his nobility was drawn almost exclusively from the Afghans.

Thus, the state under the Surs remained an Afghan institution based on race and tribe. A fundamental change came about only with the emergence of Akbar.