CHAPTER - X

CURRENCY REFORMS

The Persian chronicles are lacking in the information regarding currency reforms carried out by Sher Shah and are "hopelessly imperfect." ¹ Had it not been for the extant coins of Sher Shah, many important details of his reign would have been consigned to oblivion. The contribution of numismatics to the political history of Sher Shah has been extraordinarily invaluable. For example such important facts as his conquest of Sindh had escaped the notice of all the contemporary historians and chroniclers whereas this can be borne out by the presence of names of numerous mints on his coins. "The method of establishing mints at more important centres, though not unknown to his predecessors, was largely developed by Sher Shah and adopted by Akbar and the succeeding Mughal emperors. From this time, therefore, Delhi coinage acquires an added interest for the students of political geography as marking with some degree of precision the extent and influence of the Delhi Empire." ² That Sher Shah's empire extended as far as Mount Abu and Sakkar-Bakkar (in Sindh), is known only from his coins. Some of the inconsistencies of Abbas and the conflicting dates found in

¹. Qanungo's Sher Shah p.382.

other histories would have, in the absence of these coins, confused the utmost exertion and ingenuity of scholars to construct the chronology of this reign. His coins also illustrate the rapidity with which the conquered domains settled under his rule. The land survey, construction of roads and establishment of mint towns seem to follow almost in the wake of his conquering armies. The issue of coins from Ujjain in 949 A.H., from Sakkar - Bakkar (Sindh) in 950 A.H., from Mount Abu in 951, - scarcely six months after his conquest of these places, --- confirms this view. Another is the founding of a number of towns after his own name, and renaming the old ones, to immortalize his own name, e.g., Sher-garh urf Delhi, Sher-garh urf Qanauj, Sher-garh urf Sakkar-Bakkar. But for the fortunate insertion of urf (meaning alias), we would have been at a loss to know what particular town was meant by Sher-garh. The error might have arisen of confounding all mint-towns bearing that name with the fort of Sher-garh
3 near Sasaram, which he built perhaps before his conquest of Bengal. The numismatic experts have not been able to identify Rasulpur from which mint a coin of 950 is extant (Rasulpur urf ?). Badaoni tells us that Sher Shah "destroyed the fortress of Shamsabad, and removed it to another place, calling it by the name of Rasulpur. Now, however, at the date of writing (of Badaoni's history) it

3. 20 miles south-west of Sasaram, now in ruins (see V.A. Smith's Akbar, foot-note 1, p.155) Martin's Eastern India also contains description of it.
PLATE I
COINS OF SHER SHAH

COURTESY: INDIAN MUSEUM, CALCUTTA

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has been repopulated in its old position". (Ranking, p.472). This leaves no room for doubt that the complete reading of the mint-name should be Rasulpur urf Shamsabad.  

Sher Shah’s coins were both square and circular in shape, the latter being an improvement upon the cruder designs of old. Gold coins of pure metal weighing 167 grs., 168.5 grs., and 166.4 grs., half-rupees of 88 grs., and copper dams varying in weight between 311 grs., and 322 grs. have been found. Thomas says in Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi that the dam had "originally an intentional standard of 323.5 grs". The rate of exchange between copper and silver was 64 to 1. A few coins of fancy design are extant illustrating "the artistic model upon which the best specimens were based".  

The inscription of the coins is bilingual, the king’s name being written both in Persian and Nagari.  

His orthodox sunni faith finds expression in the presence of the names of the first four caliphs of Islam, viz., Abu Bakr, Umar, Ali and Usman. One square-shaped coin with dotted margin (struck at Sharifabad in 946 A.H.) bears on the obverse the name of Abu Bakr on the top, Usman at the bottom, Umar on the right and Ali on the left. The King’s  

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4. For the list of coins of Sher Shah, see pp. 84-109 of Wright’s book  
6. The name of the king was variously spelt, e.g., Sri Ser Sahi (Agra); Sri Sar Sah (Gwalior); Sri Siri Sah.
On his accession to the throne Sher Shah found the currency of the Empire in no less deplorable a condition than agriculture. It had practically broken down owing to the scarcity of specie, the debasement of the metal, and the absence of any fixed standard of relative value between the lower metals and gold. "He quickly reconstructed the currency upon the most comprehensive basis, making a clean sweep of the old mixed metal currency and other anomalies. He issued in very large numbers a new copper coin, known later as dam, with its subdivisions of halves, quarters, eighths and sixteenths ---- to satisfy the immediate need of the Empire, viz., cash to pay the revenue."9


The significance of currency reforms of Sher Shah lies in the fact that the reformed system of currency not only lasted throughout the Mughal period but was also adopted by the East India Company which was carried on till the middle of the 19th century.

"Sher Shah's reign constitutes an important test point in the annals of Indian coinage, not only in its specific mint reforms, but also as correcting the progressive detriorations of the previous kings, and as introducing many of those reforms which the succeeding Mughals claimed as their own".10 Vincent A. Smith, one of the authorities on Indian coinage, says, "Sher Shah...is entitled to the honour of establishing the reformed system of currency, which lasted throughout the Mughal period, was maintained by the East India Company down to 1835, and is the basis of the existing British currency. He finally abolished the inconvenient billion coinage of mixed metal, and struck well-executed pieces in gold, silver, and copper, to a fixed standard of both weight and fineness. His silver rupees, which weigh 180 grains, and contain 175 grains of pure silver, being thus practically equal in value to the modern rupee, often have the king's name in Nagari characters in addition to the usual Arabic inscriptions.11

10. Thomas' Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi, p.403
11. Imperial Gazetteer of India, ii., pp.145-146.
Sher Shah's currency reforms helped considerably the prompt collection of revenue for the State and in the furtherance of trade and commerce throughout the Empire.

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