The Decline of the Mughal Empire

THE great Mughal Empire, the envy of its contemporaries, for almost two centuries, declined and disintegrated during the first hair of the 18th century. The Mughal Emperors lost their power and glory and their empire shrank to a few square miles around Delhi. In the end, in 1803, Delhi itself was occupied by the British array and the proud Mughal Emperor was reduced to the status of a mere pensioner of a foreign power. A study of the process of decline of this great Empire is most instructive. It reveals some of the defects and weaknesses of India‟s medieval social, economic and political structure which were responsible for the eventual subjugation of the country by the English East India Company.

The unity and stability of the Empire had been shaken up during the long and strong reign of Aurangzeb; yet in spile of his many harmful policies, the Mughal administration was still quite efficient and the Mughal army quite strong at the time, of his death in 1707. Moreover, the Mughal dynasty still commanded respect in the country.

On Aurangzeb‟s death his three sons fought among themselves for the throne The 65-year old Bahadur Shah emerged victorious. He was learned, dignified, and able. He followed a policy of compromise and conciliation, and there was evidence of the reversal of some of the narrowminded policies and measures adopted by Aurangzeb. He adopted a more tolerant attitude towards the Hindu chiefs and rajas. There was no destruction of temples in his reign, In the beginning, he made an attempt to gain greater control over the Rajput states of Amber and Marwar (Jodhpur) by replacing Jai Singh by his younger brother Vijai Singh at Amber and by forcing Ajit Singh of Marwar to submit to Mughal authority. He also made an attempt to garrison the cities of Amber and Jodhpur. This attempt was, however, met with firnj resistance. This may have made him recognisc the folly of his actions for he soon arrived at a settlement with the two states, though the settlement was not magnanimous. Though their states were restored to the Rajas Jai Singh and Ajit Singh, their demand for high *matisabs* and the offices of *sitbahdars* of important provinces such as Malwa and Gujarat was not accepted. His policy towards the Maratha *sardars* (chiefs) was that of half-hearted conciliation.

While he granted them the *sardeshmukhi* of the Deccan, he failed to grant them the *chauth* and thus to satisfy them fully. He also did not recognise Shahu as the rightful Maratha King. He thus let Tara Bai and Shahu tight for supremacy over the Maratha Kingdom. The result was that Shahu and the Maratha *sardars* remained dissatisfied and the Deccan continued to be a prey to disorder. There could be no restoration of peace and order so long as the Maratha *sardars* fought one another as well as fought against the Mughal authority.

Bahadur Shah had tried to conciliate the rebellious Sikhs by making peace with Guru Go bind Singh and giving him a high *mansab* (rank), But when, after the death of the Guru, the Sikhs once again raised the banner of revolt m the Punjab under the leadership of Banda Bahadur, the Emperor decided to take strong measures and himself led a campaign against the rebels, who soon controlled practically the entire territory between the Sutlej and the Jamuna, reaching the close neighbourhood of Delhi. Even though he succeeded in capturing Lohgarh, a fort built by Guru Gobind Singh north-east of Ambala at the foothills of the Himalayas, and other important Sikh strongholds, the Sikhs could not be crushed and in 1712 they recovered the fort of Lohgarh.

Bahadur Shah conciliated C ha tarsal, the Bundela chief, who remained a loyal feudatory, and the Jat chief Churaman, who joined him in the campaign against Banda Bahadur.

There was further deterioration in the field of administration in Bahadur Shah"s reign. The position of state finances worsened as a result of his reckless grants of jagirs and promotions. During his reign the remnants of the Royal treasure, amounting in 1707 to some 13 crores of rupees, were exhausted.

Bahadur Shah was groping towards a solution of the problems besetting the Empiie. Given time, he might have revived the Imperial fortunes. Unfortunately, his death in 1712 plunged the Empire once again into civil war.

A new element entered Mughal politics in this and the succeeding wars of succession. While previously the contest for power had been between royal princes, and the nobles had merely aided the aspirants to the throne, now ambitious nobles became direct contenders for power and used princes as mere pawns to capttire the seats of authority. In the civil war following Bahadur Shah's death, one of his less able sons, Jahandar Shah, won because he was supported by Zulfiqar Khan, the most powerful noble of the time.

Jahandar Shah was a weak and degenerate prince who was wholly devoted to pleasure. He lacked good manners and dignity and decency.

During Jahandar Shah"s reign, the administration was virtually in the hands of the extremely capable and energetic Zulfiqar Khan, who had become his *wazir*. Zulfiqar Khan believed that it was necessary to establish friendly relations with the Rajput rajas and the Maratha *sardars* and to conciliate the Hindu chieftains in general in order to strengthen his own position at the Court and to save the Empire. Therefore, he rapidly reversed the policies of Aurangzeb The hated *jizyah* was abolished. Jai Singh of Amber was given the title of Mirza Raja Sawai and appointed Governor of Malwa; Ajit Singh of Marwar was awarded the title of Maharaja and appointed

Governor of Gujarat. Zulfiqar Khan confirmed the earlier private arrangement that his deputy in the Deccan, Daud Khan Panni, had concluded with the Maratha King Shahu in 1711 By this arrangement, the Maratha ruler was granted the *chmah* and *xardeshmtkln* of the Deccan on the condition that these collections would be made by the Mughal officials and then handed over to the Maralha officials. Zulfiqar Khan also conciliated Churaman Jat and Chhatarsal Bundela. Only towards Banda and the Sikhs he continued the old policy of suppression

Zulfiqar Khan made an attempt to improve the finances of the Empire by checking the reckless growth of jagirs and offices. He also tried to compel the *mansabdars* (nobles) to maintain their official quota of troops. An evil tendency encouraged by him was that of *\jar ah* or revenue-farming. Instead of collecting land revenue at a fixed rate as under Todar Mai‟s land revenue settlement, the Government began to contract with revenue farmers and middlemen to pay the Government a fixed amount of money while they were left free to collect whatever thay could from the peasant. This led to increased oppression, of the peasant.

Many jealous nobles secretly worked against Zulfiqar Khan. Worse still, the Emperor too did not give him his trust and cooperation in full measure. The Emperor's ears were poisoned against Zulfiqar Khan by unscrupulous favourites. He was told that his *wazir* was becoming too powerful and ambitious and might even overthrow the Emperor himself. The cowardly Emperor dared not dismiss the powerful *wazir,* but he began to intrigue against him secretly. Nothing could have been more destructive of heallhy administration.

Jahandar Shah‟s inglorious reign came to an early end in January 1713 when he was defeated at Agra Farrukh Siyar, his nephew.

Farrukh Siyar owed his victory to the Saiyid brothers, Abdullah Khan and Husain All Khan Baraha, who were therefore given the offices of *wazir* and *mtr bakshi* respectively The two brothers soon acquired dominant control over tnc affairs of the state. Farrukh Siyar lacked the capacity to rule. He was cowardly, cruel, undependable and faithless. Moreover, he allowed himself to be influenced by worthless favourites and flatterers.

In spite of his weaknesses, Farrukh Siyar was not willing to give the Saiyid brothers a free hand but wanted to exercise personal authority. On the other liand, the Saiyid brothers were convinced that administration could be carried on properly, the decay of the Empire checked, and their own position safeguarded only if they wielded real authority and the Emperor merely reigned without ruling. Thus there ensued a prolonged struggle for power between the Emperor Farrukh Siyar and his *wazir* and *mir iakshi.* Year after year the ungrateful Emperor intrigued to overthrow the two brothers; year after year, he failed. In the end, in 1719, the Saiyid brothers deposed him and killed him. In his place they raised to the throne in quick succession two young princes' who died of consumption. The Saiyid brothers now made the 18-year old Muhammad Shah the Emperor of India. The three successors of Farrukh Siyar were mere puppets in the hands of the Saiyids. Even their personal liberty to meet people and to move around was

restricted. Thus, from 1713 until 1720, when they were overthrown, the Saiyid'brothers wielded the administrative power of the state.

The Saiyid brothers adopted the policy of religious tolerance. They believed that India could be ruled harmoniously only by associating Hindu chiefs and nobles with the Muslim nobles in governing the country. Again, they sought to conciliate and use the Rajputs, the Marathas, and the Jats in their struggle against Farrukh Siyar and the rival nobles. They abolished the *jizyah* immediately after Farrukh Siyar‟s accession to the throne. Similarly, the pilgrim tax was abolished from a number of places. They won over to their side Ajit Singh of Marwar, Jai Singh of Amber, and many other Rajput princes by giving them high positions of influence in the administration. They made an alliance with Churaman, the Jat chieftain. In the later years of their administration they reached an agreement with King Shahu by granting him the *swarajya* (of Shivaji) and the right to collect the *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* of the six provinces of the Deccan. In return, Shahu agreed to support them in the Deccan with 15,000 mounted soldiers.

The Saiyid brothers made a vigorous effort to contain rebellions and to save the Empire from administrative disintegration. They failed in these tasks mainly because they were faced with constant political rivalry, quarrels, and conspiracies at the court. This continued friction in the ruling circles disorganised and even paralysed administration at all levels. Lawlessness and disorder spread everywhere. The financial position of the state deteriorated rapidly as zamindars and rebellious elements refused to pay land revenue, officials misappropriated state revenues, and central income declined because of the spread of revenue farming. As a result, the salaries of the officials and soldiers could not be paid regularly and the soldiers became indisciplined and even mutinous.

Even though the Saiyid brothers had tried hard to conciliate and befriend all sections or the nobility, a powerful group of nobles headed by Nizam-ul-Mulk and his fathei's cousin Muhammad Amin Khan began to conspire against them. These nobles were jealous of the growing power of the two brothers. The deposition and murder of Farrukh Siyar frightened many of them: if the Emperor could be, killed, what safety was there for mere nobles? Moreover, the murder of the Emperor created a wave of public revulsion against the two brothers. They were looked down upon as traitors—persons who had not been „true to their salt‟ *(namak haram).* Many of the nobles of Aurangzeb‟s reign also disliked the Saiyid alliance with the Rajput and the Maratha chicfs and their liberal policy towards the Hindus. These nobles declared that the Saiyids were following anti-Mughal and anti-Islamic policies. They thus tried to arouse the fanatical sections of the Muslim, nobility against the Saiyid brothers. The anti-Saiyid nobles were supported by Emperor Muhammad Shah who wanted to free himself from the control of the two brothers. In 1720, they succeeded in treacherously assassinating Husain A!i Khan, the younger of the two brothers. Abdullah Khan tried to fight back but was defeated near Agra. Thus ended the domination of the Mughal Empire by the Saiyid brothers known in Indian history as „king makers‟.

Muhammad Shah‟s long reign of nearly 30 years (1719-1748) was the last chance of saving the Empire There wcie no quick changes of imperial authority as in the period 1707-1720. When his reign began Mughal prestige among the people was still an important political factor. The Mughal army and particularly the Mughal artillery was still a force to reckon with. Administration in northern India had deteriorated but not broken down yet. The Maratha *sanlais* were still confined to the South, while the Rajput rajas continued to be loyal to the Mughal dynasty. A strong and farsighted ruler supported by a nobility conscious of its peril might still have saved the situation. But JVluhammad Shah was not the man of the moment. He was weak-minded and frivolous and over- fond of a life of ease and luxury. Hs neglected the affairs of state. Instead of giving full support to able i*vazhs* such as Nizam-ul-Mulk, he fell under the evil influence of corrupt and worthless flatterers and intrigued against his own ministers. He even shared in the bribes taken by his favourite courtiers.

Disgusted with the fickle-mindedness and suspicious nature of the Emperor and the constant quarrels at the court, Nizum-ul-Mulk, the most powerful noble of the time, decided to follow his own[1] ambition. He had become the *wazir* in 1722 and had made a vigorous attempt to reform the administration. He now decided to leave the Emperor and his Empire to their fate and to strike out on his own. He relinquished his office in October 1724 and marched South to found the state of Hyderabad in the Deccan. “His departure was symbolic of the flight of loyalty and virtue from the Empire.” The physical break-up of the Mughal Empire had begun.

The other powerful and ambitious nobles also now began to utilise their energies for carving out semi-independent states. Hereditary nawabs owing nominal allegiance to the Emperor at Delhi arose in many parts of the country, for example, in Bengal, Hyderabad, Avadh, and the Punjab. Everywhere petty zamindars, rajas and nawabs raised tht banner of rebellion and independence. The Marathi *sardars* began their northern expansion and overran Malwa, Gujarat and Bundelkhand, Then, in 1738-1739, Nadir Shah descended upon the plains of northern India, and the Empire lay prostrate.

Nadir Shah had risen from shepherd boy to *Shah* (King) by saving Persia from sure decline and disintegration. In the beginning of the 18th century Persia, hitherto a powerful and far flung Empire, was under the weak rule of the declining Safavi dynasty. It was threatened by internal rebellions and foreign attacks. In the east, the Abdali tribesmen revolted and occupied Herat, and the Ghalzai tribesmen detatched the province of Qandahar. Similar revolts occurred m the north and west. In Shir van, religious persecution of the *Sunnis* by fanatical *Shias* led to rebellion. Here, *“Swm mullahs* were put to death, mosques were profaned and turned into stables, and religious works were destroyed." In 1721, the Ghalzai chief of Qandahar, Mahmud, invaded Persia and occupied Isfahan, the capital. Russia under Peter the Great was determined to push southward. Peter began his invasion of Persia in July 1722 and soon forced Persia to sign away several of her provinces on the Caspian Sea, including the town of Baku, Turkey, deprived of most of her European possessions, also hoped to make good the loss at Persia's cost. In the spring of 1723, Turkey declared war on Persia and rapidly pushed

through Georgia and then penetrated south. In June 1724, Russia and Turkey signed a treaty dividing all northern and most of western Persia between them. At this stage, in 1726, Nadir emerged as a major supporter of Tahmsap and as his most brilliant commander. In 1729 he won back Herat after defeating the Abdalis and expelled the Ghalzais from Isfahan and central and southern Persia. After long and bitter warfare he compelled Turkey to give back all conquered territory. In 1735, he signed a treaty with Russia receiving back all seized territory. Next year, he deposed the last of the Safavi rulers and made himself the Shah. In the following years, he reconquered the province of Qandahar.

Nadir Shah was attracted to India by the fabulous wealth for which it was always famous. Continual campaigns had made Persia virtually bankrupt. Money was needed desperately to maintain his mercenary army. Spoils from India could be a solution. At the same time, the visible weakness of the Mughal Empire made such spoliation possible. He entered Indian territory towards the end of 1738, without meeting with any opposition. For years the defences of the northwest frontier had been neglected. The danger was not fully recognised till the enemy had occupied Lahore. Hurried preparations were then made for the defence of Delhi, but the faction-ndden nobles refused to unite even in sight of the enemy, They could not agree on a plan for defence or on the commander of the defending forces. Disunity, poor leadership, and mutual jealousies and distrust could lead only to defeat. The two armies rret at Karnal on 13th February 1739 and the invader inflicted a crushing defeat on the Mughal army. The Emperor Muhammad Shah was taken prisoner and Nadir Shah marched on to Delhi. A terrible massacre of the citizens of the imperial capital was ordered by Nadir Shah as a reprisal against the killing of some of his soldiers. The greedy invader took possession of the royal treasury and other royal property, levied tribute on the leading nobles, and plundered the rich of Delhi. His total plunder has been estimated at 70 crores of rupees. This enabled him to exempt his own Kingdom from taxation for three years! He also carried away the famous Koh-i-nur diamond and the jewel-studded Peacock Throne of Shahjahan. He compelled Muhammad Shah to cede to him all the provinces of the Empire west of the river Indus.

Nadir Shah's invasion inflicted immense damage on the Mughal Empire. It caused an irreparable loss of prestige and exposed the hidden weakness of the Empire to the Maratha *sardars* and the foreign trading companies. The central administration was thoroughly paralysed temporarily. The invasion ruined imperial finances and adversely affected the economic life of the country. The impoverished nobles began to rack-rent and oppress the peasantry even more m an effort to recover I heir lost fortunes. They also fought one another over rich jagirs and high offices more desperately than ever. The loss of Kabul and the areas to the west of the Indus once again opened the Empire to the threat of invasions from the North-West. A vital line of defence had disappeared.

It is surprising indeed that the Empire seemed to revive some of its strength after Nadir Shah‟s departure, even though the area under its effective control shrank rapidly. But the revival was deceptive and superficial. After Muhammad

Shah‟s death in 1748, bitter struggles and even civil war toroke out among unscrupulous and power hungry nobles. Furthermore, as a result of the weakening of the north-western defences, the Empire was devastated by the repeated invasions of Ahmed Shah Abdali, one of Nadir Shah‟s ablest generals, who had succeeded m establishing his authority over Afghanistan after his master‟s death. Abdali repeatedly invaded and plundered northern India right down to Delhi and Mathura between 1748 and 1767. In 1761, he defeated the Marathas in the Third Battle of Panipat and thus gave a big blow to their ambition of controlling the Mughal Emperor and thereby dominating the country, He did not, however, found a new Afghan kingdom in India. He and his successors could not even retain the Punjab which they soon lost to the Sikh chiefs.

As a result of the invasions of Nadir Shah and Abdali and the suicidal internal feuds of the Mughal nobility, the Mughal Empire had by 1761 ceased to exist in practice as an all-India Empire. It remained merely as the Kingdom of Delhi. Delhi itself was a scene of „daily not and tumult‟. The descendants of the Grand Mughals no longer participated actively in the struggle for the Empire of India, but the various contenders for power found it politically useful to hide behind their name. This gave to the Mughal dynasty a long lease oC life on the nominal throne of Delhi.

Shah Alam II, who ascended the throne in 1759, spent the initial years as an Emperor wandering from place to place far away from his capital, for he lived in mortal fear of his own *waztr*. He was a man of some ability and ample courage. But the Empire was by now beyond redemption. In 1764, he joined Mir Qasim of Bengal and Shuja-ud-Daula of Avadh in declaring war upon the English East India Company. Defeated by the British at the Battle of Buxar, he lived for several years at Allahabad as a pensioner of the East India Company, He left the British shelter in 1772 and returned to Delhi under the protective arm of the Marathas. The British occupied Delhi in 1803 and from that year till 1857, when the Mughal dynasty was finally extinguished, the Mughal Emperors merely served as a political front for the English. In fact, the continuation of the Mughal monarchy after 1759, when it had ceased to be a military power, was due to the poweiful hold that the Mughal dynasty had on the minds of the people of India as the symbol of the political unity of the country.

Causes of the Decline of the Mughal Empire

When a mighty empire like lhat of the Great Mughals decays and falls it is because many factois and forces have been at work. The beginnings of the decline of the Mughal Empire are to be traced to the strong rule of Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb inherited a large empire, yet he adopted a policy of extending it further to the farthest geographical limits in the south at great expense in men and materials. Tn reality, the existing means of communication and the economic and political structure of the country made it difficult to establish a stable centralised administration over all parts of the country Thus Aurangzeb‟s objective of unifying the entire country under one central political authority was, though justifiable in
theory, not easy in practice.

One of the basic failures of Aurangzeb lay in the realm of statesmanship. He

was not willing to accept to the full the Maratha demand for regional autonomy, failing to grasp the fact that Shivaji and other Maratha *sardars* represented forces which could not be easily crushed. Akbar, placed in similar circumstances, had made an alliance with the Rajput princes and chiefs. Aurangzeb too would have been well-advised to win over the Maratha *sardars.* Instead, he chose to suppress them. His futile but arduous campaign against the Marathas extended over many years; it drained the resources of his Empire and ruined the trade aad industry of the Deccan. His absence from the north for over 25 years and his failure to subdue the Marathas led to deterioration in administration ; this undermined the prestige of the Empire and its army, led to the neglect of the vital north-west frontier, and encouraged provincial and local officials to defy central authority and to dream of independence. Later, in the 18th century, Maiatha expansion in the north weakened central authority still further.

Aurangzeb‟s. conflict with some of the Rajput states also had serious consequences. Alliance with' the Rajput rajas with the consequent military support was one of the main pillars of Mughal strength m the past. Aurang7£b himself had in the beginning adhered to the Rajput alliance by raising Jaswant Singh of Marwar and Jai Singh of Amber to the highest of ranks, But his short-sighted attempt later to reduce the strength of the Raj put raj as and to re-extend imperial sway over their lands led to the withdrawal of their loyalty from the Mughal throne. Wars with the Rajput rajas further weakened the Empire and encouraged separation. In particular they tended to create a wall between the Hindu and the Muslim upper classes.

The strength of Aurangzeb's administration was challenged at its very nerve centre around Delhi by the Satnami, the Jat, and the Sikh uprisings. Even though the number of people involved in these uprisings was not large, they were significant because they were popular in character— peasants formed their backbone. AH of them were to a considerable extent the result of the oppression of the Mughal revenue officials over the peasantry. They showed that the peasantry was deeply dissatisfied with feudal oppression by zamindars, nobles, and the state,

Aurangzeb‟s religious orthodoxy and his policy towards the Hindu rulers seriously damaged the stability of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal state in the days of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shahjahan was basically a secular state. Its stability was essentially founded on the policy of noninterference with the religious beliefs and customs of the people, fostering of friendly relations between Hindus and Muslims, opening the doors of the highest offices of the state to nobles and chiefs belonging to different regions and professing different religions. The Mughal alliance with the Rajput rajas was a visible manifestation of this policy. Aurangzeb made an attempt to reverse this policy by imposing the *jizyah,* destroying many of the Hindu temples in the north, and putting certain restrictions on the Hindus. la this way he tended to alienate the Hindus, split Mughal society and, in particular, to widen the gulf between the Hindu and Muslim upper glasses. But the role of the religious policy of Aurangzeb m causing the decay of Mughal power should not be over-stressed. This

policy was followed only m the latter part of his reign. It was speedily abandoned by his successors. As we have seen earlier, the *jizyah* was abolished within a few years of Aurangzeb‟s death. Amicable relations with the Rajput and other Hindu nobles and chiefs were soon restored; and some of them such as Ajit Singh Rathor and Jai Singh Sawai rose to high officer under the later Mughals Relations with King Shahu and the Maratha *sardars* were also developed along political rather than religious lines. It should also be kept in "view that the Rajput, Jat, Maratha, and Sikh chieftains of the 18th century also did not behave as champions of the Hindus. Power and plunder were more important considerations to them than religious solidarity They were often as ruthless in fighting and looting the Hindus as the Muslims. In fact, neither the Hindus nor the Muslims formed a homogenous community at that time. The upper classes of both the religious groups formed the ruling class while the peasants and artisans, Hindu or Muslim, formed the under-privileged majority of society. Sometimes the Hindu and Muslim nobles and chiefs used religion as a weapon of propaganda to achieve their political aims. But even more often they formed mutual alliances against fellow coreligionists for gaining power, territory, or money. Moreover, both the Hindu and the Muslim nobles, zamindars, and chiefs ruthlessly oppressed and exploited the common people irrespective of their religion The Hindu peasantry of Maharashtra or Rajputana paid as high an amount in land revenue as did the Hindu or Muslim peasantry m Agra or Bengal or Avadh. Moreover, cordial cultural and social relations prevailed between the Hindu and Muslim upper classes of India.

If Aurangzeb left the Empire with many problems unsolved, the situation was further worsened by the ruinous wars of succession which followed his death. In the absence of any fixed rule of succession, the Mughal dynasty was always plagued after the death of a king by a civil war between the princes These wars of succession became extremely fierce and destructive during the 18th century. They resulted in great loss of life and property. Thousands of trained soldiers and hundreds of capable military commanders and efficient and tried officials wee killed. Moreover, these civil wars loosened the administrative fabric of the Empire. The nobility, the backbone of the Empire, was transformed into warring factions. Many of the local chiefs and officials utilised the conditions of uncertainty, and political chaos at the centre to consolidate their own position, to acquire greater autonomy, and to make their offices hereditary.

The weaknesses of Aurangzeb‟s reign and the evils of the wars of succession might still have been overcome if able, farsighted, and energetic rulers had appeared on the throne. Unfortunately, after Bahadur Shah‟s brief reign came a long reign of utterly worthless, weak-willed and luxury- loving kings. After all, in an autocratic, monarchical system of government, the character and personality of the ruler do play a crucial role. At the same time, this single factor need not be given too much importance. Aurangzeb was neither weak nor degenerate. He possessed great ability and capacity for work. He was free of vices common among kings and lived a simple and austere life. He undermined the great empire of his forefathers not because he lacked character or ability but because he lacked political, social and economic insight. It was not his

personality but his policies that were out of joint.

Apart from the personalities of the Great Mughals, the strength of the Mughal Empire lay in the organisation and character of its nobility. The weakness of the king could have been successfully overcome and covered up by ah alert, efficient, and loyal nobility. But (he character of the nobility had also deteriorated. Many nobles lived extravagantly and beyond their means. Many of them became ease-loving and fond of excessive luxury. Even when they went out to fight they surrounded themselves with comforts and frequently took their families with them. They were often poorly educated. Many of them neglected even the art of lighting. Earlier, many able persons from the lower classes had been able to rise to the ranks of nobility, thus infusing fresh blood into it. Later, the existing families of nobles began to monopolise all offices, barring the way to fresh comers. Not all the nobles, however, had become weak and inefficient. A large number of energetic and able officials and brave and brilliant military commanders came into prominence during the 18th century, but most of them did not benefit the Empire because they used their talents to promote their own interests and to fight each other rather than to serve the state and society.

In fact, contrary to the popular belief, the major weakness of the Mughal nobility during the 18th century lay, not in the decline in the average ability of the nobles or their moral decay, but in their selfishness and lack of devotion to the state and this, in turn, gave birth to corruption *in* administration and mutual bickering. In order to increase their power, prestige, and income, the nobles formed groups and factions against each other and even against the king. In their struggle for power they took recourse to force, fraud, and treachery. Their mutual quarrels exhausted the Empire, affected its cohesion, led to its dismemberment, and, in the end, made it an easy prey to foreign conquerors. And the most guilty in this respect were precisely those nobles who were active and able. It is they who shattered the unity of the Empire by carving out their own private principalities. Thus, the decadence of the later Mughal nobility lay not so much in private vice as in lack of public virtue and political foresight and in its devotion to the short-sighted pursuit of power. But these characteristics were not the monopoly of the Mughal nobility at the centre. They were found in equal measure among the rising Maratha chiefs, the Rajput rajas, the Jat, the Sikh, and the Bundela chiefs, the new rulers of autonomous provinces, and the other innumerable adventurers who rose to fame and power during the troubled 18th century.

One of the major causes of the growing selfishness and cliquishness of the nobles was the paucity of jagirs and the reduced income of the existing jagirs at a time when the number of nobles and their expenditure was going up So there ensued intense mutual rivalry among them for the possession of the existing jagirs. The heart of the matter perhaps was that no arrangement could have been made wluch would satisfy all the nobles, for there were just not enough offices and jagirs for all. The paucity of jagirs had some other consequences. The nobles tried to get the maximum income from their jagirs at the cost of the peasantry. They tried to transform their existing jagirs and offices into hereditary ones To balance their own budgets they tended to

appropriate *khalisah* (crown) lands, thus intensifying the financial crisis of the central Government. They invariably reduccd their expenditure by not maintaining their full quota of troops ind thus weakened the armed strength of the Empire

A basic cause of the downfall of the Mughal Empire was that it could no longer satisfy the minimum needs of its population The condition of the Indian peasant gradually worsened during the 17th and 18th centuries. While at no time perhaps was liis lot happy, in the 18th century his life, was "poor, nasty, miserable and uncertain'". The burden of land revenue went on increasing from Akbar's time. Moreover, constant transfer ol nobles from their jagirs also led to great evil. They tried to extract as much from a jagir as possible in the short period of their tenure as jagirdars. They made heavy demands on the peasants and cruelly oppressed them, often in violation of official regulations. After the death of Aurangzeb, the practice of *ijarah* or farming the; land revenue to the highest bidder, who was permitted to raise what he could from the peasantry, became more common both on jagir and *khahsah* (crown) lands. This led to ihe rise of a new class of revenue farmers and talukdars whose extortions from the peasantry often knew no bounds.

All these factors led to stagnation and deterioration in agriculture and the impoverishment of the peasant. Peasant discontent increased and
came to the surface. There are some instances of the peasants leaving the land to avoid paying taxes. Peasant discontent also found an outlet in a series of uprisings (the Satnamies, the Jats, the Sikhs, etc.) which eroded the stability and strength of the Empite. Many ruined peasants formed roving bands of robbers and adventurers, Often under the leadership of the zamindars, and thus undermined law and order and the efficiency of the Mughal administration.

As a matter of fact, agriculture was no longer producing enough surplus to meet the needs of the Empire, of constant warfare, and of the increased luxury of the Tuhng classes. If the Empire was to survive and regain its strength and if the people were to go forward, trade and industry alone could provide the additional economic resources. But it was precisely in trade and industry that stagnation was most evident. No r doubt the establishment of a large empire encouraged trade and industry in many ways and India"s industrial production increased to a marked extent. Both in the quality of its products and their quantity, Indian industry was quite advanced by contemporary world standards. But unlike jn Europe at this time, Indian industry did not make any new advances in science and technology. Similarly, the growth of trade was hampered by bad communications and by the self-sufficient nature of village economy. Moreover, emphasis on land as a source of wealth and government revenue led to the neglect of overseas trade and the navy. Perhaps n^t even the best of kings and nobles could have changed this situation. In the absence of scientific and technological development and a social, economic and political revolution, India lagged behind Europe economically and politically and succumbed to its pressure.

An important socio-political cause of the downfal of the Mughal Empire was the absence of the spirit of political nationalism among the people. This

was because India at the time lacked the elements which constitute a modern nation, The people of India did not feel that they were all Indians, nor were they conscious of oneness or of having common interests, even though elements of cultural unity had existed in the country for centuries. Therefore, there did not exist the ideal of living and dying for one‟s nation. Instead people were loyal to persons, tribes, castes, and religious sects.

In fact no group or class in the country was deeply interested in maintaining the unity of the country or the Empire. Such unity as did exist was imposed from above by strong rulers. The peasants‟ loyalty was confined to their village and caste. Moreover, they took little interest in the politics of the Empire; nor did they identify its interests with their own. They realised that they had little stake in it and that even its defence from external aggression was not their concern. The zamindars tended to rebel against any central authority which showed signs of

weakness. They were opposed to a strong, centralised state that curbed their power and autonomy.

The nobles had been earlier imbued with the exalted notion of loyalty to their dynasty. But this was mainly based on the high offices and privileges they obtained in return. With the decline of the dynasty, the nobles placed their stlf-i nterest and ambition above loyalty to the state and attacked the very unity of the Empire by carving out autonomous principalities. Even those who rebelled against the Empire, for example, the Marathas, the Jats, and the Rajputs, were interested in consolidating their regional, tribal, or personal power and had no notion of fighting for a nation called India or for its unity. The reality was that the existing character of the Indian economy, social relations, caste structure, and political institutions was such that the time was not yet ripe for the unification of Indian society or for its emergence as a nation

The Mughal Empire might have continued to ewst for a long time if its administration and firmed power had not broken down, mostly as a result of the factors discussed above. There was rapid decline in the administrative efficiency of the Empire during the 18th century Administration was neglected and law and order broke down in many parts of the country. Unruly zamindars openly defied central authority. Even the royal camp and Mughal armies on the march were often plundered by hostile elements. Corruption and bribery, indiscipline and inefficiency, disobedience and disloyalty prevailed on a large scale among officials at all levels. The Central Government was often on the verge of bankruptcy. The old accumulated wealth was exhausted while the existing sources of income were narrowed. Many provinces failed to remit provincial revenues to (he centre. The area of the *khahsah* lands was gradually reduced as Emperors tried to placate friendly nobles by granting j‟agirs out of these lands. The rebellious zamindars regularly withheld revenue. Efforts to increase income by oppressing the peasantry produced popular reaction.

Ultimately, the military strength of the Empire was affectcd. During the 18th century the Mughal army lacked discipline and fighting morale, Lack of finance made it difficult to maintain a large army Its soldiers and officers were not paid for months,

and, since they were mere mercenaries, they were constantly disaffected and often verged on a mutiny. Again, the noblemen-cum-commanders did not maintain their full quota of military contingents because of their own financial troubles Moreover, the crvit wars resulted in the death of many brilliant commanders and brave and experienced soldiers. Thus, the army, the ultimate sanction of an empire, and the pride of the Great Mughals, was so weakened that it could no longer curb the ambitious chiefs and nobles or defend the Empire from foreign aggression.