

## *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 half 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 army 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 spite 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 firm resistance. This may have made him recognise 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 *matiasabs* 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.