INTRODUCTION

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Attempts at periodisation are somewhat arbitrary as history is a continuous stream of events and ideas. Nevertheless periodisation has been found to be convenient. Again the historical century does not always coincide with the chronological century. Chronologically the eighteenth century falls between 1701 and 1800. In European history the eighteenth century ends with the fall of Napoleon in 1815. To a student of political history in India, the eighteenth century covers the period from 1707 to 1803 i.e., from the death of Aurangzeb to the occupation of Delhi by Lord Lake, while to a student of socio-economic history the eighteenth century extends till 1813, up to which time the East India Company pursued a policy of laissez faire in the social affairs of the country. Economically the period was one of transition and decline due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution and some other factors.

The reputed contemporary historian of the eighteenth century, Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, bewails: ‘...every part of India has gone to ruin, and every one of its discouraged inhabitants have broken their hearts. Life itself is become disgusting to most. So that, on comparing the present times with the past, one is apt to think that the world is overspread with blindness, and that the earth is totally overwhelmed with an everlasting darkness’. To understand why he made this remark, it is necessary to analyse the characteristics of the eighteenth century. Generally speaking the eighteenth century in India is an age of decadence—decadence in political life, monarchy, aristocracy, army; decadence in society; decadence in economic life; a pervasive and tragic decadence no doubt.

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(i) Decline of monarchy: In a despotism everything fundamentally depends on the character of the ruler. With the end of the age of the Great Mughals began the age of the 'Later' or perhaps better, 'Lesser' Mughals. By character, ability and temperament they were unfit to steer the ship of state and conduct the task of administration.

In theory the position of the Emperor remained as before. He was the head of the state, shadow of God and sovereign ruler. But in practice in the eighteenth century as a result of a vast metamorphosis the unlimited absolutism of the emperors of old disappeared for ever. They became sometimes the tool or prisoner of either the wazir, or the empress, and sometimes of the nobles or favourites. An emperor was deposed and another set up instead. Some were blinded, others put to death. Further, the empire of Aurangzeb was the largest single empire of pre-British days. But now in this century only a fraction of it remained. In name the Emperor was master of the universe (Shah Alam) but in practice he just remained the king of a small area from Delhi to Palam (az Dihli ta Palam). From 1526-1707 the average reign period of the Great Mughals was 30 years. In the age of the Later Mughals this diminished to merely 10 years. Again it was not unusual to witness a rule of only a year or even a few months. This difference in the reign periods enables us to understand the real nature of monarchy, the change that took place in monarchical authority now. A King is usually described as the 'Creator of the Age'. So with the decline of the monarchy inevitably began the decline of the age.

(ii) The Problem of the Wizarat: The growing weakness of the monarchy demanded a Bismarckian Wazir, at once strong, able, efficient, honest and unselfish. But in the age of political instability and corrupt atmosphere, no wazir possessed the necessary qualifications or could work efficiently.

(iii) Decline of the aristocracy and Party Groups: A natural and final culmination of the decline of monarchy
was the decline of the aristocracy in the century. In those days the nobles were generally described as the 'Pillars of state' (arkan i daulat). From Akbar to Aurangzeb they had most loyally and obediently served the cause of the empire, and made remarkable contributions to the expansion and consolidation of the empire as well as to the administrative organization. But now it is they who became the instruments of breakdown of the empire. They now began to indulge in unabashed, naked despotism and endeavoured to monopolise power and privileges under their own authority either in the court or in the provinces. The easiest way to do so was through groups of their own supporters. Thus the various nobles formed party groups or coteries which coloured not only their mutual rivalries but also affected policies and administration.

(iv) Administrative decline and military inefficiency: In the absence of a strong monarchy and consequential advent of a selfish and ambitious aristocracy the breakdown of administration was only natural. The governmental organisation set up by Sher Shah and Akbar completely broke down in the 18th century. The process of breakdown did not begin immediately after the death of Aurangzeb. Some faint signs had already crept up even before that, as far back as the time of Jahangir. Due to the influence of the strong personality of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb its outward framework held together in spite of the cracks. At the same time there was financial bankruptcy which dislocated not only the normal governmental mechanism but also the jagirdari and mansabdari systems and the military organization based thereon. In fact some writers like Irvine consider military inefficiency as the sole reason for the decline of the empire.

(v) Internal Insecurity: With the withering of the strong Mughal arm, the disruptive forces within raised their ugly heads. Internal security vanished in the universal tendency of the stronger to ride roughshod over the weaker. Brigandage and highway robbery, never
completely removed even during the heyday of the Mughals, now became the order of the day. The marauding activities of the discontented nationalities, the Marathas, the Rajputs, the Sikhs, the Jats and the Bundelas not only added to the internal chaos but also ruined agriculture and the economic stability of the land.

(vi) Foreign invasions: The Mughal government, which failed to maintain internal peace was hardly likely to keep the ambitious foreign invaders at bay. The successive and repeated invasions of Nadir Shah of Persia, Ahmad Shah Abdali and Zaman Shah of Kabul, involved the empire in ‘disgrace, spoliation and dismemberment’ and created a terror-complex in the minds of the people.

(vii) A century of horror: The stark anarchy prevailing in the Mughal empire is comparable to the devils’ dance. The state was torn asunder in the universal civil war, treacherous conspiracies, brutal murders, numerous unspeakable barbarous oppression and foreign invasions. In the words of Acharya Jadunath Sarkar, Indo-Mughal civilisation was now like a spent bullet without any capacity of doing good.

(viii) Hindu Revival: The eighteenth century was not only a period of decline of the Mughal empire but also one of a Hindu revival. The momentum of Hindu revival was generated in the fourteenth century by Vijaynagar, encouraged by the disintegration of the Sultanate and illustrated by the rise of a few Hindu succession states, deriving spiritual stimulus, from the socio-religio-cultural movements. The first Mughal empire came to be challenged unsuccessfully by the Rajputs but successfully by the Indo-Moslem Afghans. The revival of the (second) Mughal empire under Akbar was in reality the result of his Hindu entente,—the Rajputs balancing the Afghans. The crescendo of intolerance in the post-Akbaride period culminated in the reign of Aurangzeb. The simmering Hindu discontent was as much due to politico-religious as to agrarian discontent in
some cases. Now the discontented nationalities, the Marathas, the Sikhs, the Rajputs, the Jats and the Bundelas, found not only a respite but also an opportunity in the decline of the Mughal empire, not only to establish their own independence but even, if possible, to expand their dominions in an imperialistic bid. This Hindu revival was, however, not inspired by any all-India outlook or a cultural renaissance. It had essentially a narrow regional or local basis, sprouting from self-interest. The Hindu cause was weakened irretrievably by lack of cooperation among the nationalities and by lack of internal cohesion even within a particular Hindu power.

(ix) Rise of new States: The decline and dismemberment of the Mughal empire generated centrifugal forces in the empire. It was now virtually a carcase, whose outer limbs came to be sequestrated by ambitious and capable governors or adventurers who became virtually independent of imperial control and founded local dynasties, in the Punjab, Bengal, Hyderabad and Oudh. In several ways this local independence proved for sometime at least a source of strong and beneficial government much better than imperial rule.

(x) Intervention of Foreign Companies: The weakness of the Mughal empire and the internecine disputes in its succession states in the Deccan and eastern provinces encouraged the European trading companies to fish in the troubled waters by joining one or the other of the warring candidates and introducing an additional element of complexity in the already tangled web of Indian politics. The Portuguese had already gone into the limbo a century earlier. Out of the remaining, the French, the Dutch and the Danes failed one by one and ultimately the English succeeded in establishing their stable foothold on the country.