

The Forgotten Mughals

A History of the Later Emperors of the House of Babar (1707-1857)

by G.S. Cheema

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In the age old tradition of civil servants indulging in intellectual pursuits while discharging their mundane administrative duties, G.S. Cheema has attempted to describe the last days of the once mighty Mughal empire. Beginning with the death of Aurangzeb, the author has presented an extremely detailed account of the civil wars, intrigues and downright treacheries which became the hallmark of the declining power of the Mughals. Of course, as the writer has duly pointed out, the exclusion of the Other, ostensibly the nearest and the dearest one, was the order of the day from the very beginning of Turkish, Mughal and Afghan royal houses. One of the slogans of the French Revolution was that the Other is hell, the Other must be annihilated. In the case of the political compulsions of ruling unruly kingdoms, there was probably no way out other than outright exclusion and execution of the Other who was considered to be an ominous danger to the throne, the throne that was still to be won. Practically, every pretender to the ultimate power had to be handled with absolute brutality. The author has been uniquely successful in presenting this gruesome picture of the most horrifying aspect of the political ambitions of the Mughals. "The five, perhaps six, possible claimants to the throne were murdered by Shah Jahan at the time of his succession. This is probably the worst of such massacres in Mughal history but the gloss of the Taj has blotted out its memories from the public mind. Shah Jahan seems to have been inspired by the traditions and practices prevalent at the court of Constantinople. The Ottomans had faced a similar problem but they had tackled it in their own characteristically ruthless manner. Muhammad the Great, conqueror

of Constantinople, had in the fifteenth century ordained that in order to ensure the 'peace of the world' sons and grandsons who ascended the throne would have the right to execute their brothers. Fearful massacres took place. At the accession of one sultan as many as nineteen princes were executed—the usual mode was by strangulation with a silken bowstring." The Mughals believed in either murder or blinding. The fashions kept on changing in the political struggles that followed the successive generations. Of course, the women played their normal important part in dividing and executing the royal order. The author has given detailed accounts of all these intrigues.

Some of the titles of the fifty chapters of this book can give the reader an idea of how extensive is the coverage of this bloody saga of the last days of the Mughal empire: The war of succession, The end of Kam Bakhsh, The reign of Shah Alam Bahadur Shah—turmoil in Rajasthan, The Sikh rebellion and the death of Bahadur Shah, Tka warning ye who have eyes—the fall of Farrukhsiyar, The Syes dictatorship and puppets on a string, First Maratha invasion of Hindustan, The court of merry monarch, Debacle at Karnal, The Persian on his throne, The morning after, Creeping chaos, River of blood—Ahmad Shah in Hindustan, The dictatorship of Najib ud-Daulah, The wanderings of Shah Alam, The fall of Abdul Ahad Majd ud-Daulah, The blind Padishah in Qila-I-Mualla etc. The whole text is replete with details and names most of whom the readers may have never heard of. The author has done his field-work with rigour and one can almost say, with hard labour.

On the whole, the book is very interesting to read. The only problem is that the details and the succession of

similar events, except the change of names, often become so monotonous that probably it would have been better if the author had delineated this course of history with a little more rigour and with a little more scientific and historical consciousness. After all, history is not simply recounting one event after another without any analysis whatsoever.

Another very serious problem with this text is its articulation. . . . just a few examples. . . . The terror of impending punishment *cries out* from his letters to his sons (p. 150). . . . Eventually, the emperor *determined* on war (367). . . . the imperialists finally *bunkered down* for a prolonged siege (ibid). . . . This move at once *angered* and alienated them (372). . . and the pursuers *contented themselves* with loot (ibid). . . . The emperor and the court had been *frantic with worry* (ibid). . . . It was up to Abdul Ahad now to *conciliate his former patron* (373). . . . At night the city was in tumult as *law and order threatened to break down* (ibid). The last sentence is the most fantastic. The author apparently does not believe in the agency of the subject. There is no such thing as a logical construct for him. As an administrative officer, he must have encountered numerous situations of this order. Obviously, if there is no human agency involved in the breakdown of law and order, there is none to be blamed for the tumult. Practically, every one of the five hundred odd pages has such expressions. But then what is wrong with it? If Khushwant Singh could get away for over fifty years with his Lahori English, why not Chandigarh IAS English?

HARJEET SINGH GILL
Professor Emeritus, JNU
New Delhi