INTRODUCTION

There had been a trend of writing history mainly concentrating on an emperor and his achievements. As a consequence, the modern scholars working on Mughal history were faced with a paucity of other aspects of the empire which also played vital role in shaping the apparatus of the state. Present by, the earlier trend of concentrating on the biographies of emperors has undergone a drastic change. Now attempts are being made to bring into light different aspects of history to understand the subject more clearly. With the publication of M. Athar Ali’s, *Apparatus of the Mughal Empire* and *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, (1985), Satish Chandra’s *Parties and the Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740* and Afzal Husain’s *The Nobility Under Akbar and Jahangir: A study of Family Groups*, (1999) together with some articles and monographs on the lives of important nobles and families of nobles, began the trend of writing accounts of the nobles also. From these valuable works it is quite clear that different families and individual nobles at the Mughal court played very significant role in moulding the course of Mughal polity. The present work on Asaf Khan signifies that he played a crucial role during the period of Emperor Jahangir as well as in time of Emperor Shahjahan as well. His close association with both the above mentioned emperors greatly strengthened his position and influence at the Mughal court. Besides, being an eminent political figure Asaf Khan embodied in himself different social and cultural qualities. Therefore, we intend to write a biography of Asaf Khan
highlighting his power and position in the contemporary politics and also his socio-cultural contribution in Mughal Indian history.

Abul Hasan Asaf Khan was born in Persia in 1569 C.E. He was the grandson of Khwaja Muhammad Sharif who was a native of Tehran and son of ItImad-ud Daulah Mirza Ghayas Beg and Asmat Bano. He was the elder brother of Mehrunnisa (later Nur Mahal and then Nur Jahan), the most celebrated wife of Emperor Jahangir. He accompanied his father in his journey to India. At the time he left his native place he was only eight years old. He was married to the daughter of Ghayasuddin Ali Asaf Khan. The political career of Asaf Khan started after 1611 following the marriage of his sister, Empress Nur Jahan with the Emperor Jahangir. He was bestowed with the title of Itiqad Khan.

The present work is broadly divided in to five chapters.

In the first chapter we have discussed about the near relatives of Asaf Khan who already entered into the Mughal service during Akbar’s period, and his important family members in to Mughal court. It also includes a discussion on and his other relatives, daughters and sons and those who got important positions in the Mughal court.

Asaf Khan’s grandfather Khwaja Muhammad Sharif was wazir of Tatar Sultan of Khurasan Qazaq Khan, son of Muhammad Khan. His father and forefathers had held the post at the Darul Sultanat Isfahan mainly as auditor.
general under the kings of Persia. Khwaja Muhammad Sharif had two brothers Khwaja Mirza Ahmad and Khwajagi Khwaja, and two sons namely Muhammad Tahir and a younger son Khwaja Ghayasuddin Muhammad.

Sharif’s family was related through matrimonial relation to another distinguished family of Aqa Mulla Dawatdar Qazwini of Iran who was one of the chief courtiers of Shah Tahmasp Safavi. Muhammad Sharif was married with the daughter of Aqa Mulla and Ghayas Beg who was married to the daughter of Mirza Ala-ud Dawlah son of Agha Mulla.

Asaf Khan’s father Ghayas Beg entered into Mughal service during Akbar’s reign. He was presented by Malik Masud to Emperor Akbar at Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar admitted him into imperial service with the mansab of 300. Subsequently on account of his ability he reached the rank of 7,000 zat and 7,000 sawar which he retained till his death in 1622. He also emerged as one of the most faithful officers of the Emperor Akbar and later on Emperor Jahangir.

Besides, among the near relatives of Asaf Khan who had earlier migrated to India, were Mirza Ghayasuddin (who also got the title of Asaf Khan in 1573) son of Aqa Mulla Dawatdar Qarwini and Asaf Khan Jafar Beg the grandson of Aqa Mulla and father-in-law of Ghayas Beg. Another relative of Asaf Khan, Asaf Khan Jafar Beg was also presented to Akbar by his uncle Ghayasuddin Ali Asaf Khan in the year 1577. In the beginning, Jafar Beg had a command of 20 (do bisti) and was
attached with his uncle. Earlier he was dissatisfied with his rank, later on he was awarded with the rank of 2000 and the title of Asaf Khan.

Abul Hasan Asaf Khan had two brothers namely Muhammad Sharif, and Itiqad Khan and four sisters among whom Mehrunnisa became famous as Nur Jahan. Initially married with Ali Quli Beg and after his murder, Mehrunnisa became the wife of Emperor Jahangir. Asaf Khan had three sons and seven daughters. Out of three sons only Abu Talib Shaista Khan and Mirza Bahmanyar rose to great heights of power during the reign of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb. Asaf Khan’s second daughter Arjumand Bano, later Known as Mumtaz Mahal, was given in marriage to Prince Khurram in 1612. The services and the position held by the family members of Abul Hasan Asaf Khan in the time of Akbar clearly indicates that they were counted among the important nobles of the emperor and had proved their worthiness in dealing with the affairs of state which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

In the second chapter we would discuss about the early career of Asaf Khan in Jahangir’s reign. After the death of Emperor Akbar in 1605 which led to accession crisis, assumption of power by Jahangir and his marriage with Nur Jahan in 1611 will be discussed in the light of the debate among modern the historians on ‘junta’. The assumption that the marriage of Jahangir with Nur Jahan in 1611 proved a turning point so far as the positions of the family members of Asaf Khan is concerned, does not seem to be very convincing. From the reading of
Beni Prasad’s work and his theory of so-called ‘Nur Jahan Junta’ it appears that Nur Jahan’s relation with Jahangir was the only reason for providing ample opportunity to rise of Asaf Khan and other members of her family. If we carefully examine the period between 1605 to 1611 we come to a conclusion that there is ample information that clearly indicates that various reasons were responsible for the rise of Asaf Khan’s family members.

Death of Akbar in 1605 broadly divided the Mughal nobility into two distinct factions– supporters of Prince Salim and those who wanted to enthrone Prince Khusrau. The family of Itimad-ud-Daulah received a setback and lost the confidence of Jahangir because of the involvement of Nuruddin, son of Ghayasuddin Ali Asaf Khan, and Muhammad Sharif, the elder brother of Asaf Khan, in a conspiracy was hatched by some of the nobles with Khusrau and Muhammad Sharif, the elder brother of Asaf Khan, in the conspiracy which was aimed at releasing Prince Khusrau from imprisonment and killing the Emperor Jahangir. But when Asaf Khan came to know of this development he proved his loyalty to the Emperor and communicated it to Salabat Khan. It is interesting to note that Itimad-ud-Daulah and many of his family members were arrested and received no attention of the Emperor for a long period of about four years (1606 – 1610). Contrary to this we find that Jahangir gave rapid promotions to his close friends and associates who had stood loyal during his princehood as well as during
the accession crisis. Because of the indifferent attitude of many leading nobles of Akbar at the time of his accession Jahangir, lost his faith in them.

The position of the family of Nur Jahan during the so called Nur Jahan ‘ Junta’ period (1611-1621) was also largely determined by the political expediency of the Mughal Empire. As we know that most of the expeditions of Jahangir during his early years failed due to the inexperienced nobles who had been created and rapidly promoted by Jahangir to counter the old and experienced nobles of Akbar. The successive failures of the Mughals at different fronts forced Jahangir to realise the importance of those nobles who had been neglected by this time due to their dubious role during his accession crisis. The result was that Asaf Khan along with others was again recognised by Jahangir for his services to the Mughal Empire. A thorough study of the developments taking place at the Mughal court from 1605 to1611 and possible causes of the rise Asaf Khan and his family members after 1611 would be dealt with in detail in this chapter.

Third chapter has been divided into two sections dealing with two different rebellions, i.e., rebellion of Khurram (1622-26) and rebellion of Mahabat Khan (1627). When we study these rebellions carefully, we find that both happened subsequently. The revolt of Prince Khurram placed his father-in-law Asaf Khan in great dilemma. Open support of Asaf Khan to his son-in-law would ultimately ruin his position at the court. Keeping in mind the adverse consequences he decided to
support Khurram secretly. Because of this Asaf Khan, throughout the revolt period did not extend any kind of help openly.

After the rebellion of Khurram was suppressed and the rebel was forced to submit, Asaf Khan diverted his attention towards the strongest enemy of Prince Khurram who was Mahabat Khan. Because of this, shortly after the revolt, Asaf Khan very wisely succeeded in impressing Jahangir about the arrogance of Mahabat Khan. Many charges were levelled against Mahabat Khan and as a consequence he was asked to present himself at the court. He also succeeded in separating Mahabat Khan from the union of Prince Parwez who might pose strong threat to Prince Khurram in the contest to the throne. By doing so Asaf Khan removed the strong challenges which could be expected to surface during the war of succession in near future. This Chapter clearly indicates that Asaf Khan was a far-sighted man and dealt with the crisis very wisely.

Fourth Chapter discusses those favourable conditions which elevated the position of Asaf Khan to the highest degree. By the time of the death of Jahangir, Asaf Khan and his other family members had reached the zenith in terms of ranks and influence. As is said above, Asaf Khan keeping in mind the fast declining health of Jahangir had his own calculations in regard to the accession of his son-in-law Shahjahan. The other nobles at the court of Jahangir also held the view that the most suitable candidate for the throne was Prince Khurram identified as Shahjahan after 1619. It may be viewed that Asaf Khan would have faced no great
problem in bringing the leading nobles of Jahangir to the support of his son-in-law. At this juncture, Asaf Khan had an edge over his sister, Nur Jahan. The attempts of Nur Jahan to place a candidate of her choice to the throne immediately after Jahangir’s death ended in a fiasco. Asaf Khan with the support of many senior nobles placed Dawar Bakhsh, a candidate on the throne, who could be removed whenever they wished, to avoid any confusion and sent a fast messenger Banarasi Das to Khurram at Junnar near Ahmad Nagar border in the Deccan, with the message to hasten to Agra to take the charge of the realm. The rivals were finally defeated and most of the rebellious elements were put to death. Finally as the consequence of the efforts of Asaf Khan, his son-in-law Khurram, ascended the throne at Agra in January 1628.

After the accession of Shahjahan it is evident that the credit for bringing the fortune to the side of Shahjahan substantially goes to Asaf Khan. As a special favour to his father-in-law Shahjahan honoured him with the mansab of 8000 / 8000 and the title of Yamin-ud Daulah was also awarded to him. Not only this, a grand reception was arranged by the Emperor when Asaf Khan came to the court from Lahore with the ladies of imperial household. The most prestigious post of wakil was also conferred upon him. A number of supporters of Shahjahan were also promoted and appointed to high positions on the recommendation of Asaf Khan. In the subsequent period, Asaf Khan was given a very high mansab of 9000 / 9000 (do aspa sih aspa). During the reign of Shahjahan, Asaf Khan fully proved
his dynamic qualities of leadership in the battlefield and in supervising the administration of the Empire or state.

In chapter fifth those aspects of life of Asaf Khan are discussed which distinguished him from the other nobles of his time. He has been described as a man of varied interests in the contemporary sources. He was scientific in thought, a good writer and had a correct idiom, was a good conversationalist, spoke gently in a non-sensual term and never escaped his tongue. He was a good accountant and auditor and attended to the accounts of the amils of khalisa (crown lands). Mughal Emperors namely Jahangir and Shahjahan made frequent visits to his house. He always organized lavish feasts and banquets for Jahangir and Shahjahan and arranged them in a very nice way. His interest in construction of buildings and gardens etc. will be discussed in detail. Records entitle as *English Factories in India* contained information about his keen interest in trade and commerce and that once he maintained a ship called *Jehangir* for the purpose of trade. He had a liberal mind and introduced many Hindus to the Mughal court. His personality, power and position at the Mughal court and privileges will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

These Chapters are followed by a conclusion and a few appendixes.