ABSTRACT

It has been frequently stated that the Mughal monarchy ran into a deep crisis after the death of the last great emperor, Aurangzeb in 1707. The crisis was thought to have found its expression in the succession of even ‘inferior’, weak emperors who disgraced the public esteem of the ruling house. The lack of an indisputable order of succession not only split the power of the dynastic family and divided the Mughal nobility among themselves, but the frequent struggles for the throne in the early eighteenth century plunged the entire society into war causing permanent political conflict and long term devastation of the Imperial finances and the economy as a whole.

Indeed, the war of succession between Aurangzeb’s three sons lasted almost three years. This work (Life of Times of Bahadur Shah 1707-12) proposes that the egotistical claims to power of ‘unfit’ candidates and the unsound motives of their ‘greedy’ and ‘evil minded’ supporters subverted the idea of an unchallengeable imperial authority in the person of the emperor, and the loss of his authority eroded to the same degree the unity of the Empire. Before the accession of Muhammad Shah in 1719 four wars of succession has been fought which, according to Zahiruddin Mallick, “proved a serious drain on the financial resources of the government. Every war entailed great diversion of resources to
military uses, putting a severe strain upon the already depleted treasury. The disaster of battle and plunder told heavily on all classes. Problems of post-war adjustments deepened the economic crisis which had for long gripped the Empire”.

It is quite clear that wars following the death of Aurangzeb temporarily gave rise to intense conflicts and increased tensions within the realm; any short-term power vacuum at the centre immediately developed into factional struggles among the nobility. The first two chapters of the present work analyse the above mentioned problem being faced by the empire. The third chapter deals with the Rajput problem inherited by Bahadur Shah and how far he was successful in setting right the wrongs done by Aurangzeb.

Chapter four narrates the Deccan story where the proverbial ‘Spanish Ulcer’ was eating into the vitals of Mughal Empire. After fixing Kam Bakhsh, Bahadur Shah was in a position to solve the Maratha problem. However, so many vested interest had grown in Deccan that Bahadur Shah had to somehow get out of it and moved towards North India where another monster in the form of Banda Singh Bahadur was raising its head.
Chapter five deals with the above problem and highlights how the rivalry and divided counsels within the nobility led to the escape of Banda Bahadur.

Chapter six concentrates on the socio-cultural scene during the 18th century and concludes that the century witnessed the climax of an endless process of absorption, assimilation and adjustment of diverse elements and tendencies that had gone centuries giving shape and complexion to the cultural tradition of India.

The last chapter with the heading ‘conclusion’ apart from taking a overview of the five years of Bahadur Shah’s reign also looks into the benevolent and reckless character of Bahadur Shah which resulted in him being referred to as “Shah-i-bikhabr. Last but not the least the jagirdari crisis which increased manifold owing to reckless grant of jagir by Bahadur shah has been also evaluated.

In this thesis we have tried to see the trajectory of trial and error being adopted by Bahadur Shah and have come to conclusion that he might have succeeded in evolving lasting solutions to some of the problems if he had lived longer.