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 ever ‘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.

This work 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.

Indeed, the wars of succession between Aurangzeb’s three sons lasted almost two years. Bahadur Shah’s early death in 1712 was then instantly followed by a new war from which, after the short reign of Jahandar Shah, Farrukh Siyar emerged as the winner. With the help of the
Saiyid brothers he ascended the throne in 1713 and his reign was accompanied by so-called Civil Wars among the various factions at court. After his murder in 1719, two puppet kings were put on the throne whose reigns lasted only a few months. Before the accession of Mohammad Shah in 1719, four wars of succession had 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 the 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.

Although the Mughal dynasty was not replaced, the position of the emperor at the centre was *de facto* altered in a way ‘denaturalized’ during the first decades of the eighteenth century, as politics at the Mughal court in Delhi took on a new form and significance. Growing factionalism increasingly undermined the supreme authority of the emperor, but his loss of control over court politics was not in essence due
to individual, personal failures but denoted a shift in the relative weight of his power vis-à-vis that of factions of the nobility.

Faction building among nobles and their involvement in court politics were no new phenomena in the Mughal Empire. In their position as administrators and upholders of imperial power, the highest nobles as well as lower imperial officers in the localities had at all times been involved with politics, and individual nobles had always pursued their interests at the royal court in one form or another within the framework of the central political institution. The building of larger and more co-ordinated groups of nobles, or factions had occurred mainly at times of dispute over the Mughal succession. The formation of factions around princely contestants for the throne had been an integral part in the process of power bargaining in disputes or full blown wars of succession; at no time in the past, however, had this threatened or seriously challenged the dominance of the central power. Once the successor to the throne had been finally decided the imperial policy of reconciliation had integrated the opposing sections – with the result that the groupings, in this compact form, rapidly dissolved.

If we compare this pattern with the situation emerging from the late seventeenth century, onwards it appears that the main characteristics of the old kind of the faction had been its transitory nature and the major
difference to later factions must be sought in the establishment of much firmer, permanent groupings within the nobility.

The present work shall be elaborating upon the Barha Saiyids, who came to exercise their power in a forceful way in a period between 1713 to 1720. This group being headed by two brothers Abdullah Khan and Husani Ali Khan forms the crux of the present study.

The second chapter, deals with the background of these Barha Saiyids, where they came from, where they first settled and spread to different parts of Punjab and Western U.P. what role did they play in the Mughal nobility right from Akbar till Aurangzeb, their bravery in many battles they fought, and their role in suppressing many revolts against Mughal empire, especially the suppression of Mirzas in Gujrat at the time of Akbar, is the hallmark of the said chapter. Later on, at the time of Jahangir’s accession, the Barhas along with Shaikh Farid Bukhari played a decisive role. Again at the time of Khurram rebellion, the Barhas were used by the Mughal Emperor. The war of succession at the illness of Shahjahan gave the Barhas to exploit the opportunity. So we can conclude that the Barhas remained in the thick of things throughout the Mughal Empire, thereby negating the view point that the famous Saiyid brothers were upstart who came to enjoy supreme position out of nowhere.
Chapter three deals with the war of succession following the death of Bahadur Shah in 1712 between his four sons Jahandar Shah, Azim-ush-Shan, Rafi-ush-Shan and Shah Jahan was dominated by the attempts of the Asad-Khan-Zulfiqar Khan faction to finally secure the post of wazir denied to them by Bahadur Shah. The strongest candidate for the throne, Azim-ush Shan, was militarily and politically outmanoeuvred by an alliance between the three other brothers arranged by Zulfiqar Khan. Jahandar Shah was formally declared emperor one month after Bahadur Shah's death in March 1712. After the death in battle of the two remaining active contestants Zulfiqar Khan became wazir and assumed unprecedented powers and privileges formerly assigned exclusively to royal princes.

Zulfiqar Khan's wizarat was marked by a distinct policy of conciliation towards the Rajputs and the Marathas on the one hand, and a refusal to reintegrate the adherents of the defeated princes on the other. However, his rise to power not only threatened the authority of the emperor, but further alienated the faction around Chin Qulich Khan. Additional divisions occurred when smaller groups of Courtiers around the emperor tried to undermine the powerful position of Zulfiqar Khan. When the remaining claimant to the throne, Azim-ush-Shan's son Farrukh Siyar began his campaign against Jahandar Shah, the reigning
emperor and his wazir were unable either to pay the long overdue wages of their troops or to win the full support of the old nobility. Both contributed to the defeat of Jahandar Shah and Zulfiqar Khan in the battle of January 1713, after which Farrukh Siyar occupied the throne.

Chapter four and five deal with Farrukh Siyar’s victory which was largely due to the support of the Saiyid brothers, who were appointed to the two highest offices at Court and received dramatic increases in their mansabs. The families of the Saiyids of Barha had been in the service of the Mughal Emperors since Akbar’s times, but had only recently risen from their relatively obscure mansabdar positions to higher ranks and deputies to Farrukh Siyar’s father. Abdullah Khan was now made wazir and Husain Ali became mirbakhshi, which meant that the two key positions at court were now in the hands of one faction. Both brothers received additional governorships in the provinces of Multan and Bihar, which they governed through deputies; their uncle became governor of Ajmer province, and the remaining family and clan members were granted mansabs.

Zulfiqar Khan was killed and Asad Khan faction finally eliminated. The Saiyids tried to conciliate the remaining powerful faction of the old nobility around Nizam-ul Mulk, Mohammad Amin Khan and Abdus Samad Khan by appointing Nizam-ul-Mulk to a high mansab and
the governorship of the Deccan. The Deccan position was furnished with considerable additional privileges, introducing a significant degree of provincial independence. Abdus Samad Khan was made governor of Lahore and Muhammad Amin Khan took up the position of second *bakhshi* at court.

Emperor Farrukh Siyar reversed the conciliatory policy of his predecessors towards the Rajputs and entered into lengthy campaigns and negotiations which were eventually undermined by an alliance between the Rajputs and the Saiyid brothers. To counteract the growing power of *wazir*, who appointed their chosen allies to the most important posts, Farrukh Siyar allowed two of his own favourites, the experienced, high rank mansabdars Mir Jumla and Khan-I-Dauran to exercise significant influence and political decisions. Both courtiers, together with Farrukh Siyar himself, subverted the policies introduced by the Saiyids by manipulating administrative practices (such as delaying *farman* regarding appointments made by ministers and circumventing ministerial signatures), and equipped their own families with high *mansabs* and multiple court and provincial posts. Gradually the *jagirdari* system slipped out of the imperial administration’s control, as did negotiations with the Rajputs, the Marathas, the Jats, the Sikhs, who all became enmeshed in the dealings of the different factions within and beyond the
imperial Court. The struggle of the emperor against his *wazir* and *mirbakhshi* and the resulting extension of the power of the factions marked the end of the supreme authority of the Mughal emperor.

Increasingly threatened by the other factions at Court, the Saiyids eventually deposed Farrukh Siyar, blinded, imprisoned and finally killed him. Farrukh Siyar's cousin, Rafi-ud-Darjat, son of Rafi-ush-Shan, was put onto the throne in April 1719, following in June of the same year by his brother Rafi-ud-Daulah. After the death from disease of both these brothers, Muhammad Shah, son of Bahadur Shah's youngest son Jahan Shah, ascended the throne in September 1719, again under the directive of the Saiyids.

The demise of the Saiyids in November 1720, who had meanwhile systematically extended their alliances with the Rajputs and sections of the Marathas, was eventually brought about by Nizam-ul Mulk and Mohammad Amin Khan, with a large army, several Deccan governors and the leading Court nobles behind him.

Through the reshuffling of offices following the defeat of the Saiyids, the highest positions at Court and in the most strategically important provinces fell under the dominance of the Nizam-ul Mulk faction.
In chapter six – although Mughal empire underwent disintegration, the Mughal culture obtained its most fully developed forms and continued to exercise a tremendous influence on the contemporary society for a long time to come. The Muslims of India, who were assimilated into the vast cultural complex of the country, adopted native languages for common use in day to day life, though Persian remained the literary and official language till such time as it was dethroned by Urdu. Thus, our period of study i.e. roughly the first half of 18th century witnessed the climax of an endless process of absorption assimilation and adjustment of diverse elements and tendencies that has gone centuries giving shape and complexion to the cultural tradition of India.

Since there was a marked economic decline at the centre, coupled with the extravagance of the nobles and elites, the common man was the worst sufferers. The sources of 18th century are replete with the harsh conditions being faced by peasants and professional class. The cities and towns of North India in general and Delhi, Faizabad, Lucknow, Murshidabad and Azimabad in particular were dens of vice on the one hand and of piety and religiousness on the other hand. In every city there were large number of khanqahs (hospices), madrasas, and mosques, as also brothels and gambling dens. The pimps were active in every nook
and corner. There was a great contradiction in the attitudes of the people in general. They flocked the khanqahs and the shrines with devotion and visited the brothels too with enthusiasm.

Contrary to the claims of the opponents of Saiyids that they were anti-Mughal and sought to monopolize power for themselves, neither the policy and the practice of the Saiyids, nor an analysis of the actual party groupings support such an interpretation. But it suited their opponents to misrepresent the policy of the Saiyids and to give to the anti-Saiyid struggle the outer character of a struggle between the Mughals and the Hindustani. However, it was a monumental mistake on the Saiyids part to have deposed and killed Farrukh Siyar. Nevertheless, it is not denied even by those writers who are strongly opposed to the Saiyids that they strove hard to maintain law and order and that their military reputation and capabilities prevented a final breakdown of the administration.