

# Seventeenth Century England: A Historical Overview

by MV Shalhan Warrier

The 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were witness to varied change in Europe. The Reformation and the religious wars that flowed from it and were an integral part of it churned the totality of social existence in the length and breadth of Europe. A new class of tradesmen and artisans were growing in power and influence in the towns. Wealth translated into influence and the quest for power. The new mercantile social groups wanted power and therefore had to challenge the absolute authority of the monarch, indeed of the entire feudal order.

A thoroughgoing revolution known as the Reformation was set off by Martin Luther's challenge to the Roman Church and the Pope on Oct 31, 1517. From a critique of religious beliefs and practices, there also came a critique of the current social hierarchies and the conservative political order of absolutism. The Reformation also created avenues for the emergence of popular sects and movements. Such congregations of people threw up new ideas and attitudes in society challenging custom and tradition.

Beginning with the puritan revolt of the 1640s that awakened the spirit that the Church and State could be reformed and good governance ushered in with the co-operation of the King, Parliament and country. The Puritans believed in spiritual equality and human dignity, in extension of Protestant distrust of the clergy's role in mediation between the individual and God.

Clearly, these values could easily translate themselves into political rights upholding the freedom of speech, assembly and association and to hold institutions of

the state accountable to the people. Such political changes suited the new mercantile interests who wanted a greater share of political power and sought a reconfiguration of the structures and relations of political authority.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century the dominant form of the state in Europe came to be monarchical absolutism particularly so in England. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the expansion of trade and gradual colonisation of the Americas, major ports and associated cities came up in Europe. London was the biggest example of such urban settlement. New classes of people formed in these cities such as the mercantile community, the craftspeople and skilled workers. What began as a movement that challenged religious practices and institutions graduated to a generalised movement for social and cultural change.

The Puritans were a particular stream of Protestantism that questioned the prelate of the Anglican Church and demanded a return to the godliness and simplicity of original Christian tenets.

The transference of morality from the world of ritual and papal indulgence to personal conduct at the level of the individual in the Puritan scheme of things had this-worldly implications such as an emphasis on hard work, good conduct, individual reading of the Bible and individual seeking of spiritual satisfaction. The stress ~~for~~ <sup>on</sup> the individual created the ground for liberal ideas such as individual freedom and liberty. The spread of Puritan ideas and practices in England soon questioned existent sensibilities in the field of religious ideas and practices, social attitudes and culture. Such questioning ushered in radical changes in the fields of

politics, society and culture. All traditional institutions such as private property, marriage, the Bible and male superiority were disputed.

In England, through the enclosure movement, a section of the gentry had broken with the tradition of merely appropriating the surplus from the land and tied themselves to the fortunes of commerce and trade in general. They had more in common with the townsmen than with the traditional lords of the land.

The period after this, 1640-42, witnessed a number of riots and demonstrations, the major ones being the Irish and Scottish rebellions against the British government. The period 1642-45 was one of civil war. The tumultuous politics of the execution of King Charles I in 1649 by a popular decision followed. The period that follows is the Commonwealth and the Protectorate with Oliver Cromwell emerging as the single most important individual. The period of the Protectorate continued till the Restoration of 1660. Various disputes got settled and the Parliament was recognised as the supreme body whose decisions would prevail over even the King.

This period also saw the formation of important social groupings such as the Levellers and the Diggers who sought to break the stasis of feudal society with nascent socialist ideas.

Humanism had greatly paved way for shaping social vision, representing the demands of the privileged in society and of also opened new avenues for those not duly represented.