

B. A. English (Honours) Part I, Paper I

Historical Background & the Characteristics of the

Elizabethan Age

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- ❖ The reigning period (1558-1603) of Queen Elizabeth I is known as Elizabethan Age but the literary influence of this period was so great that even the reigning period(1603-1625) of James I is also sometimes included in the broad umbrella of Elizabethan Age.
- ❖ After the reigns of Edward and Mary, Elizabeth came to power in 1558.
- ❖ The accession of Elizabeth to the English throne was like a fresh morning after a long dark night in the history of England.
- ❖ In Milton's words, England became "a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks."
- ❖ This is also called the golden age of English literature because it reached the zenith of its development in this age. As it was an age in which 'men lived intensely, thought intensely, and wrote intensely'.
- ❖ Literature is the popularly defined as the mirror of society. As English national life progressed by gigantic leaps under the command of Queen Elizabeth, such was the case with English literature also.
- ❖ Chief Characteristics of Elizabethan Age:
 - (a) Religious Tolerism- when Elizabeth came to throne, she found that whole of her kingdom was divided in the name of religion; some were catholic, some protestant, Scotland had followed Reformation while Ireland followed its own traditional religion.

Both Catholics and Protestants were at loggerheads with each other before she came to reign, but here also the charming personality of Elizabeth had its role to play. Though she was a Protestant, she favoured both the groups with equal zeal and she was successful in establishing a balance between the views of Catholics and that of Protestants. After that both the groups started living amicably together in an unprecedented way. Elizabeth became one of the most popular monarchs in English history, particularly after 1588, when the English defeated the Spanish Armada (a large fleet of ships), which had been sent by Spain to conquer England and restore Catholicism.

(b) Social Contentment-The trade in England flourished in full bloom during this period, which not only brought immense wealth but it also made it a powerful nation. For the first time the need of the poor were met categorically and it brought such social satisfaction that was never seen before. A lot of employment was generated. The living standard of people was upgraded. All these factors played an important role in flourishing the national literature.

(c) Unbounded Enthusiasm & Patriotism- It was an age of unbounded enthusiasm in English life and the English had a feeling of proud in being English. Thus a very strong sense of patriotism became one of the remarkable features of this age. Many an explorer like Drake, Gilbert, Raleigh, and Hawkins discovered a new world beyond seas to English men's eyes. New colonies were established and as a result literature strove to find this match and to a great extent it succeeded. As W. J.

Long says, “dreams and deeds increase side by side, and the dream is ever greater than the deed. That is the meaning of literature.”

There was a synthesis of great thought and action, imagination and intellect in this age. And this synthesis found its adequate expression in one genre of literature and that was drama which reached rapidly to the highest stage of its development.

Sources:-

1. W. J. Long's *English Literature: Its History and its Significance for the Life of the English Speaking World*
2. Edward Albert's *History of English Literature*
3. W. H. Hudson's *An Outline History of English Literature*
4. <https://esol.britishcouncil.org/content/learners/uk-life/life-uk-test/elizabethan-period>