



6. Military Transformation and State Formation in Medieval India: From Warrior Lineages to Imperial Armies

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Abstract

This article examines military transformation as a constitutive process of state formation in medieval and early modern India rather than as a succession of battlefield innovations. Drawing on a critical synthesis of scholarship on warrior lineages, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Mughal Empire, it identifies four interdependent mechanisms: the incorporation of martial elites into agrarian and courtly orders; the fiscal and administrative regulation of cavalry, military labor, and supplies; the coordination of composite armies through ranking, documentation, and logistical work; and adaptation to diverse frontier environments. The analysis argues that change was cumulative but non-linear. Early medieval lineages converted military capacity into locally grounded authority, while Sultanate rulers attempted to discipline mobile cavalry and noble power through centralized revenue, market, and inspection regimes. Mughal institutions did not simply replace these arrangements with a modern standing army; they scaled a heterogeneous military labor market through mansab, jagir, muster, and campaign networks. Gunpowder mattered, but its effects depended on transport, specialist labor, intelligence, provisioning, and environmental knowledge. The article therefore reframes the transition from warrior lineages to imperial armies as a shift in the coordination and redistribution of coercive resources. This perspective also cautions against uncritical use of state-failure and European military-revolution models, which can obscure negotiated sovereignty, regional variation, and the indispensable work of non-combatants.

Keywords: Delhi Sultanate; Mughal Empire; military labor; state formation; mansabdari; logistics; environmental history

Introduction

Military history has often been written as a chronology of rulers, invasions, weapons, and decisive battles. Such a framework is too narrow for medieval India because armies were also institutions of taxation, employment, mobility, communication, and elite integration. The capacity to wage war depended on access to horses, elephants, grain, cash, transport animals, artisans, intelligence, and roads; it also depended on political arrangements that bound commanders and local powerholders to a ruler. War-making consequently shaped the state not only through conquest but through the routines required to assemble and sustain armed forces. The central question of this article is therefore not whether medieval Indian polities possessed increasingly “modern” armies, but how changing forms of military organization redistributed coercive resources and altered relationships among rulers, elites, producers, and mobile workers.



The long transition considered here begins with the proliferation and social embedding of warrior lineages in early medieval India, moves through the military-fiscal experiments of the Delhi Sultanate, and culminates in the composite imperial armies of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughals. This chronology does not imply a simple progression from decentralized to centralized power. Early warrior houses were already linked to agrarian expansion, courtly culture, and documentary claims; Sultanate rulers combined centralizing initiatives with dependence on iqta holders and mobile military specialists; Mughal emperors relied on an elaborate hierarchy while leaving recruitment and command partly in the hands of mansabdars. Across these periods, political authority was produced through mixtures of delegation and supervision rather than through exclusive control of violence.

The article advances three related arguments. First, military transformation was primarily organizational: it involved the management of labor, revenue, rank, supplies, and information as much as weaponry. Second, centralization was a recurrent project rather than a settled condition. Branding horses, mustering retainers, assigning revenue, fixing ranks, and regulating markets were efforts to make dispersed resources visible and usable, but they generated evasion, bargaining, and new elite dependencies. Third, geography and environment were active variables. Monsoon cycles, river systems, mountain corridors, arid frontiers, and fortified landscapes shaped the composition, speed, and logistical burden of armies. Together, these arguments recast state formation as the historically contingent coordination of people and resources across varied social and ecological settings (Gommans, 2002; Jackson, 1999; Nath, 2019).

This approach also addresses weaknesses in the source manuscript from which the present article was developed. Repetitive ruler-centered sections have been consolidated; poorly supported numerical claims and unverified descriptions have been removed; and the bibliography has been rebuilt around established monographs and peer-reviewed studies. The result is a thematic research article rather than an encyclopedic survey. Its contribution is historiographical: it brings scholarship on lineage, fiscal institutions, military labor, logistics, technology, and environment into a single explanatory framework and identifies where models derived from modern state failure or the European Military Revolution require qualification.

Historiographical Approach

The study uses a qualitative historiographical method. It compares how major works define the relationship between military organization and political authority, paying attention to their units of analysis, source bases, and implicit models of change. The corpus combines political and military histories of the Delhi Sultanate (Digby, 1971; Jackson, 1999), studies of agrarian and imperial institutions (Habib, 1999; Richards, 1993), research on military labor markets (Kolff, 1990), and analyses of Mughal warfare, logistics, and environment (de la Garza, 2016; Gommans, 2002; Nath, 2019, 2021). Scholarship on courtly lineage formation and political legitimacy extends the analysis beyond formal army administration (Alam, 1997; Ali, 2007), while comparative geographic and political-theory studies clarify the possibilities and limits of broader conceptual models (Syros, 2021; Wink, 2002).

These works operate at different scales. Jackson (1999) reconstructs the Sultanate through dynastic conflict, Mongol pressure, political institutions, and military constraints. Digby (1971) narrows attention to the acquisition and administration of warhorses and elephants, demonstrating how apparently tactical assets depended on supply systems. Habib (1999) and Richards (1993) place Mughal military institutions within agrarian revenue and imperial administration. Kolff (1990) shifts the focus from states to a mobile market of armed peasants and retainers, while Nath (2021) widens “military labor” beyond soldiers to the non-combatant workers who made campaigns possible. These approaches are treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive because state capacity, labor supply, and logistics illuminate different parts of the same process.

The analysis is interpretive and does not claim to establish new quantitative estimates. Persian chronicles and administrative texts frequently use normative language, stylized numbers, and moralized portraits of rulers. Modern scholars disagree about how directly these texts describe institutional practice. Accordingly, the article distinguishes between prescriptive claims and demonstrated administrative capacity. It also avoids treating “medieval India” as a homogeneous space: the discussion is centered on northern India and the major formations of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, with maritime and Indian Ocean evidence used to expose land-centered assumptions rather than to imply institutional equivalence.

Warrior Lineages and Authority

The point of departure is the making of warrior elites within expanding agrarian and courtly worlds. Ali (2007) argues that the multiplication of ruling lineages in early medieval India was connected to the spread of settlements, land grants, and locally grounded political households. Martial status was not simply inherited from a timeless warrior caste; it was produced through claims to genealogy, patronage of learned groups, public inscription, and participation in a political culture that valued both controlled violence and refined conduct. Lineage formation therefore joined coercion to legitimacy. A successful warrior house had to transform victory into recognized precedence, landed support, and durable alliances.

This insight complicates narratives that begin state formation only with centralized bureaucracies. The early medieval polity was not devoid of institutions because authority was distributed among households, temples, Brahmanical recipients, local chiefs, and agrarian communities. Military capacity emerged from these social formations. Land and revenue supported retainers; genealogies stabilized claims; and courtly norms distinguished legitimate violence from banditry or uncontrolled force. Warrior lineages were thus nodes connecting armed followings to cultivation, redistribution, and cultural authority. Their significance persisted even when later empires sought to rank, transfer, or discipline them.

The persistence of locally embedded military labor is particularly visible in Kolff’s (1990) account of Hindustan between 1450 and 1850. Kolff depicts a large and mobile market in which armed peasants, Rajput groups, Afghans, and other specialists entered service under changing employers. Service was contractual and reputational as well as ethnic or territorial. Military identities could harden through repeated recruitment and brokerage, but they remained tied to migration, agrarian households, and

opportunities for pay. This perspective reverses a state-centered assumption: armies did not simply create soldiers; rulers competed to mobilize populations that already possessed weapons, martial skills, and traditions of service.

Military labor markets also constrained sovereignty. A ruler who depended on commanders with personal followings could not automatically convert their troops into an impersonal state force. Payment delays, unattractive campaigns, or superior opportunities elsewhere could weaken loyalty. Conversely, service enabled local leaders to accumulate resources and status that could later support rebellion or autonomous rule. The tension between mobility and control helps explain why successive regimes invested in documentary procedures, inspections, rank systems, revenue assignments, and symbolic incorporation. Such devices were technologies of coordination: they sought to connect socially dispersed warriors to an imperial center without eliminating the networks through which those warriors were recruited.

The Delhi Sultanate

Cavalry, Supplies, and Supervision

The Delhi Sultanate confronted a fundamental logistical problem: cavalry was essential to war, yet high-quality horses were costly, mobile, vulnerable to disease, and often imported through long-distance networks. Digby's (1971) study of warhorses and elephants demonstrates that military power depended on acquisition, maintenance, inspection, and replacement. The horse was not merely a weapon platform but an administrative object. Its quality affected pay and combat value, while the risk of substitution or false musters encouraged rulers to develop branding and descriptive registration. Elephants likewise carried tactical, transport, ceremonial, and political meanings, but they imposed substantial provisioning and handling requirements.

Alauddin Khalji's reign (1296-1316) is commonly treated as a major centralizing episode because repeated Mongol attacks and expansionist campaigns demanded a large, reliable force. The reforms attributed to his administration linked direct cash payment, horse branding (dagh), descriptive rolls of soldiers (chehra), revenue intervention, intelligence, and market regulation. These policies should be understood as an integrated military-fiscal strategy rather than as isolated acts of authoritarian ingenuity. Cash salaries required predictable revenue; low controlled prices in Delhi increased the purchasing power of salaries; horse inspection reduced fraudulent claims; and intelligence limited collusion among officers and merchants (Jackson, 1999).

The significance of these measures lies less in whether every regulation operated uniformly than in the administrative problem they reveal. A cavalry army assembled through nobles and commanders created information asymmetry: the center could not easily know whether paid contingents existed at the stated strength or whether horses met required standards. Branding, rolls, and musters translated persons and animals into records that could be compared with claims on the treasury. They also curtailed the ability of intermediaries to convert military obligations into private gain. Centralization, in this sense, meant increasing the ruler's capacity to verify and redirect resources, not abolishing all delegation.

These policies depended on agrarian extraction. The Sultanate's ability to pay troops and hold frontier garrisons rested on revenue from cultivated regions, particularly areas close enough to Delhi to be assessed and supervised. Stronger collection could sustain defense and conquest, but it also shifted burdens onto peasants and rural intermediaries. Military effectiveness and social stability therefore existed in tension. Measures that increased the center's short-term command of grain and cash could undermine production or provoke resistance when assessment became excessive. The fiscal-military system was consequently not a neutral administrative achievement; it redistributed risk and surplus among cultivators, local elites, merchants, soldiers, and the court.

Crisis, Governance, and Limits

The reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325-1351) exposes the limits of command-driven expansion. Chroniclers linked ambitious campaigns, fiscal experiments, coercive punishment, rebellion, and population displacement in a moral narrative of misrule. Syros (2021) rereads these accounts through the language of capacity, security, and legitimacy gaps, contrasting Muhammad's failure with the reputedly restorative governance of Firuz Shah Tughluq. This framework usefully separates different dimensions of political breakdown. A state may retain armies while losing revenue compliance, local security, or elite acceptance; decline need not mean immediate institutional disappearance.

Yet the modern category of "state failure" must be used cautiously. Sultanate sovereignty was layered and negotiated, and chroniclers wrote didactic political history rather than neutral administrative reports. Their depiction of catastrophe served arguments about justice, prudence, and the moral obligations of rulership. To call the Sultanate a failed state risks measuring it against territorial and service-provision expectations formed in the modern era. The more historically productive question is how war, taxation, and punishment altered the coalitions on which authority depended. Muhammad's difficulties show that coercive ambition could exceed the fiscal, informational, and logistical means available to sustain it.

Accounts of Firuz Shah's reign emphasize moderation, public works, more predictable taxation, elite accommodation, and the management of dependent military households. These policies can be read as attempts to rebuild legitimacy and stabilize extraction after disorder. However, accommodation also created long-term problems when offices and military obligations became hereditary or when favored groups accumulated autonomous influence. The contrast with Alauddin is therefore not simply between good and bad governance. It reveals alternative strategies: intensive central supervision on one hand and distributive incorporation on the other. Both could strengthen rule under particular conditions, and both could generate vulnerabilities.

The Sultanate experience establishes a pattern that continued under the Mughals. Rulers needed mobile forces, but those forces depended on locally extracted resources and intermediaries. Inspection and discipline made military obligations more legible, while grants and honors secured cooperation. Neither strategy was sufficient alone. The state had to alternate between concentration and delegation, balancing the treasury's demand for revenue against the political need to reward elites and preserve cultivation. Military transformation occurred within this unstable relationship rather than through the creation of a fully salaried national army.

The Mughal Military Order

Mansab, Jagir, and Integration

The Mughal Empire expanded these practices into a more elaborate imperial order. Under Akbar and his successors, mansab assigned numerical rank, status, remuneration, and military obligation to imperial officers. The system incorporated nobles from varied regional, ethnic, and religious backgrounds while placing them within a hierarchy defined by the emperor. Mansabdars generally maintained contingents and received payment in cash or through transferable revenue assignments known as jagirs. The arrangement linked the ruling elite, fiscal administration, and military recruitment without collapsing them into a single centrally housed army (Richards, 1993).

Mansabdari was effective because it combined standardization with flexibility. Rank created a shared language of precedence and obligation, yet commanders recruited through kinship, locality, patronage, and the wider military labor market. Transfers reduced the chance that a jagirdar would convert a revenue assignment into an independent hereditary domain, while musters, horse branding, and administrative reporting sought to verify service. The emperor could therefore coordinate heterogeneous forces through graded status and documentation. At the same time, the system remained dependent on the bargaining power and recruitment networks of nobles.

The jagir connected cavalry obligations to agrarian surplus. Imperial expansion generated new assignments and revenue expectations, but the value recorded for a territory did not always equal actual collection. Competition for productive jagirs and pressure on local society were therefore structural features of the system, not accidental corruption. Habib (1999) emphasizes the centrality of land revenue to Mughal political economy, while Richards (1993) shows how territorial expansion, coinage, administration, and military organization reinforced one another. The army's apparent mobility rested on immobile fields and on the labor of cultivators, collectors, accountants, and transporters.

State building also required cultural and political integration. Alam (1997) argues that Mughal authority was produced through negotiation with diverse regional traditions and elites, not solely through coercion. Imperial service offered rank and resources, while court ritual and Persianate political idioms articulated loyalty to the sovereign. Rajput rulers, Central Asian and Iranian migrants, Indian Muslims, and other groups entered the nobility on unequal but institutionally comparable terms. Military incorporation thus created an imperial aristocracy whose members competed for favor while sharing an interest in the durability of the system.

Composite Forces and Command

The Mughal army was composite rather than uniform. It included contingents maintained by mansabdars, household troops, artillery, matchlockmen, archers, infantry, elephants, engineers, river craft, allied forces, and large numbers of camp workers. This composition challenges the assumption that centralization requires direct state employment of every soldier. Mughal strength lay in coordinating components with different chains of recruitment and expertise. The emperor and senior commanders combined them for particular campaigns, adapting the balance of cavalry, firearms, siege craft, and transport to the theater of operations (de la Garza, 2016; Gommans, 2002).

De la Garza (2016) interprets the military system from Babur to Akbar as an Indian military revolution, emphasizing the integration of Central Asian cavalry traditions, gunpowder weapons, and South Asian resources. The formulation correctly rejects the idea that South Asia passively received European military modernity. Babur's field artillery and matchlocks contributed to victories, and later rulers expanded artillery, fortification, and combined-arms capabilities. However, technological possession did not itself produce empire. Weapons had to be manufactured or obtained, moved, supplied with powder, protected, repaired, and coordinated with cavalry and infantry.

Gommans (2002) places Mughal warfare within frontier systems and long-distance corridors. Cavalry mobility remained critical, especially across the high roads connecting northern India with Central and western Asia. Frontier warfare demanded negotiation with local powers and adaptation to ecological zones where standard imperial practices were less effective. The Mughal army's strength was therefore not a fixed tactical formula but the capacity to assemble different combinations of men, animals, technologies, and local knowledge. Expansion reflected organizational adaptability rather than the universal superiority of a single arm.

This perspective also clarifies continuity with earlier formations. Horse branding, muster, revenue assignment, and elite contingents did not originate wholly with the Mughals. Their innovation lay in scale, regularization, and integration. Mansab provided an imperial grid within which mobile military entrepreneurs could be ranked and rewarded; jagir attached their service to revenue without granting unrestricted ownership; and a dense documentary apparatus made claims more comparable across the empire. Transformation was therefore cumulative. Mughal institutions recombined Sultanate practices and wider Persianate-Timurid traditions in response to South Asian conditions.

Logistics, Labor, and Environment

Beyond Combat

Campaign histories often privilege soldiers and battles, but armies moved because many more people produced, carried, repaired, and communicated. Nath (2021) argues that military labor should include all work consciously directed toward military objectives, not only combat. Mughal campaigns required porters, animal handlers, boatmen, carpenters, smiths, miners, sappers, road makers, tent makers, grain dealers, cooks, messengers, clerks, spies, and medical or religious personnel. These workers built siege approaches, moved artillery, maintained animals, procured food, crossed rivers, and sustained the camp as a temporary city.

This wider category changes the interpretation of state capacity. An emperor could not maintain permanent control over every worker needed for a major campaign. Military power therefore depended on the ability to mobilize markets, local communities, contractors, and compelled labor at the right place and time. Cash payments, requisition, political pressure, and elite brokerage could all be used. Success was measured not only by troop numbers but by coordination across occupational groups. A campaign that failed to secure fodder, boats, draft animals, or siege specialists could stall despite battlefield superiority.

Logistical labor also redistributed the costs of empire. Local populations supplied grain, animals, transport, and workers, voluntarily or under coercion. Armies stimulated demand and circulated cash,

but they could also deplete stores, damage cultivation, and expose routes to violence. The camp's economic effects were thus ambivalent. The same network that projected imperial authority could intensify local extraction. Incorporating non-combatant labor into military history makes visible the social groups whose work enabled conquest but who rarely appear in elite narratives as political actors.

Environmental Adaptation

The environment set conditions for movement and supply. Nath (2019) shows that Mughal campaigns were conducted through constant negotiation with terrain, climate, seasons, water, and biological limits. Horses required fodder and suffered in humid or disease-prone zones; heavy artillery demanded roads, draft power, and engineering; rivers could be barriers, supply arteries, or theaters of war; and monsoon timing shaped operational calendars. Commanders needed environmental information and local expertise as much as tactical skill.

Regional variation therefore produced different military assemblages. Open plains favored cavalry mobility, while forests, hills, river deltas, and fortified plateaus required infantry, boats, pioneers, artillery, or allied specialists in changing proportions. Bengal and Assam made riverine transport and naval labor indispensable. Sieges converted landscapes into engineered spaces through trenches, covered approaches, mines, batteries, and the movement of earth and timber. Forts were not passive objects: their location, water supply, access routes, and surrounding productive zones influenced whether they could be defended or reduced.

Wink's (2002) geographic history of the Indian Ocean broadens this point by showing how river basins, coasts, islands, and maritime frontiers structured settlement, commerce, and violence. His analysis is not a direct account of Sultanate or Mughal military administration, but it exposes the limits of a land-centered narrative. Coastal policing, piracy, port control, and the circulation of horses and other strategic goods connected inland empires to maritime systems. The military value of a port or river crossing derived from its position within commercial and ecological networks, not merely from fortification.

Environmental adaptation was also political. Empires relied on boatmen, forest communities, frontier chiefs, pastoralists, and regional brokers who possessed knowledge unavailable to central officers. Their cooperation could not always be secured through rank alone. Concessions, negotiated service, and recognition of local authority were often necessary. Geography thus reinforced the composite character of imperial power: central institutions worked through situated expertise. The ability to adapt without fully homogenizing military practice was a major source of resilience.

Technology and Transformation

Gunpowder weapons changed siege and field warfare, but their importance should not be isolated from institutions. Artillery and matchlocks required metalworking, powder production, trained crews, transport, and protection. Heavy cannon could intimidate and breach walls, yet their operational value declined when terrain prevented movement or when supply failed. Smaller firearms expanded infantry firepower but did not make cavalry obsolete. Mughal warfare continued to rely on mounted mobility,

archery, elephants, fortifications, and close combat alongside gunpowder (de la Garza, 2016; Gommans, 2002).

The concept of a Military Revolution is useful when it directs attention to mutually reinforcing changes in weapons, organization, finance, and administration. It becomes misleading when it assumes that South Asian change should reproduce a European sequence from firearms to disciplined infantry, fiscal centralization, and the nation-state. Mughal armies developed within a dense military labor market and an agrarian revenue regime in which nobles maintained substantial contingents. Their institutions were sophisticated without converging on the European state model. Comparison should therefore identify distinct solutions to shared problems rather than rank societies on a single scale of modernity.

A similar caution applies to narratives of uninterrupted centralization. Documentary systems made troops and revenue more legible, but records did not eliminate negotiation. Mansabdars could present deficient contingents, jagir values could diverge from collections, and local resistance could raise the cost of enforcement. Technology likewise created dependencies on specialists and materials. Every expansion of coordinating capacity produced new points of vulnerability. Military transformation should therefore be measured by changing relationships among coercion, information, labor, and resources rather than by the existence of particular weapons or formal offices.

Discussion

The synthesis supports a relational model of military state formation. In this model, the state is not a unitary actor that first acquires resources and then wages war. It is an arrangement continually made through the mobilization of resources for war and governance. Warrior lineages converted martial followings into landed and cultural authority; Sultanate rulers attempted to supervise cavalry, revenue, prices, and noble power; Mughal emperors coordinated a wider imperial elite through rank, revenue assignment, and documentary verification. Each formation joined coercion to social institutions and depended on actors whose interests did not fully coincide with those of the center.

Four mechanisms recur across the chronology. The first is incorporation: rulers transformed potential rivals into service elites through titles, grants, marriages, courtly recognition, and rank. The second is legibility: branding, rolls, musters, accounts, and revenue estimates made claims about troops and resources administratively comparable. The third is circulation: cash, jagirs, plunder, salaries, horses, and honors moved between agrarian localities, markets, camps, and courts. The fourth is adaptation: armies altered composition and procedure in response to terrain, climate, enemy tactics, and available labor. Political authority grew when these mechanisms reinforced one another and weakened when fiscal demand, elite bargaining, or logistical reach became misaligned.

This model explains why centralization and decentralization often coexisted. Imperial centers set ranks and standards, but commanders recruited through personal networks. Revenue was assigned by the state, but collection depended on local knowledge and power. Artillery represented specialized imperial capacity, but its movement required locally mobilized labor. Rather than signs of administrative incompleteness, these combinations were normal features of large premodern empires.



The crucial issue was whether delegation remained compatible with imperial objectives and whether the center could rotate, inspect, reward, and punish its agents at acceptable cost.

The model also revises the meaning of military effectiveness. Victory in battle mattered, but sustained effectiveness required the reproduction of forces over time. A polity had to protect cultivation, maintain markets, manage elite competition, secure strategic animals and materials, and move information across distance. Excessive extraction could finance immediate campaigns while eroding future revenue and legitimacy. Conversely, accommodative distribution could restore stability while empowering intermediaries. Effective rule was therefore an intertemporal balancing problem: the resources consumed by war had to be regenerated through political and economic arrangements that populations would tolerate or could not successfully resist.

Finally, the historiography reveals important silences. Elite chronicles and administrative texts foreground rulers and commanders, while the labor of women, camp followers, artisans, transporters, and coerced local populations remains unevenly documented. Maritime institutions are less integrated into mainstream narratives than land campaigns. Regional military cultures outside the Delhi-Mughal axis also require fuller comparison. Future research could combine Persian narrative and administrative sources with regional-language materials, archaeology, environmental data, and spatial analysis to reconstruct supply routes, seasonal movement, and the local social costs of campaigning.

Conclusion

The movement from warrior lineages to imperial armies was not a transition from social violence to a state monopoly of force. It was a transformation in the scale and techniques through which rulers coordinated already militarized societies. Early lineages embedded armed power in agrarian expansion and courtly legitimacy. The Delhi Sultanate developed stronger fiscal, market, intelligence, and inspection mechanisms to supervise cavalry and elite service. The Mughals extended these practices through mansab, jagir, muster, and a composite command structure that integrated diverse commanders and military workers across a vast territory.

Technology contributed to this process, but it was effective only within systems of finance, labor, transport, and knowledge. Artillery, firearms, horses, elephants, and forts all generated logistical requirements. Non-combatant workers and local specialists were therefore central to imperial expansion, while environments shaped what armies could do and when. The most convincing account of military transformation is consequently neither a ruler-centered catalogue of reforms nor a diffusion story about superior weapons. It is an analysis of how coercive capacity was assembled from agrarian revenue, mobile labor, elite brokerage, documentation, and ecological adaptation.

This interpretation has two broader implications. First, state formation should be studied as a process of negotiated coordination rather than as a linear march toward centralization. Second, comparative frameworks must remain sensitive to institutional difference. Concepts such as state failure and military revolution can sharpen questions, but they should not impose modern territorial expectations or European developmental sequences on South Asian evidence. Medieval and early modern Indian polities were powerful precisely because they combined hierarchy with delegation and standardization with regional flexibility; their vulnerabilities arose from the same composite arrangements.



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