

**Name:** Kshitij

**Name of the Supervisor:** Dr Samana Zafar

**Topic:** The Profession Of Soldiering In North India From Mid-Fifteenth To Eighteenth Century

**Department / Faculty:** Department of History and Culture, Faculty of Humanities and Languages, JMI

### **Key Findings**

This study examines the transformation of the military labour pool in North India from the mid-fifteenth to the eighteenth century, a period spanning the decline of the Delhi Sultanate, the consolidation of Mughal power, and the emergence of successor states. It argues that military service evolved from an elite, slave-based institution into a broad and flexible profession involving Afghans, Rajputs, tribal groups, armed peasants, and religious specialists. Military labour functioned not merely as state employment but as a critical medium for social mobility, identity formation, and cultural performance.

The decline of military slavery in the fifteenth century marks a foundational shift. The dominance of elite Turkish slaves (bandagan) under the Delhi Sultanate gradually gave way to Afghan tribal leaders and Indian-born commanders integrated through kinship, patronage, and shared martial culture rather than natal alienation. Political instability, decentralisation, and the rise of regional states such as Gujarat, Malwa, Jaunpur, and Bengal created demand for large, flexible armies, accelerating the expansion of a diversified military labour pool.

Under the Mughal Empire, particularly during Akbar's reign, military service was reorganised through the mansabdari system. While this system aimed to centralise recruitment and control, it remained dependent on semi-autonomous warlords, zamindars, and caste-based networks. The Mughal state could not fully absorb the decentralised military labour market and instead relied on intermediaries who operated between imperial service and local autonomy. These actors often resisted complete incorporation while leveraging their armed power for political and economic gain.

This flexible military system enabled significant upward mobility for groups such as Purbiya Rajputs, armed peasantry, and tribal warbands. Soldiering offered access to land, titles, and recognition, while facilitating the construction of new social identities, especially among groups aspiring to Rajput status. In regions like eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, military service became a culturally sanctioned pathway for young men to assert masculinity, clan honour, and kinship solidarity. Martial values were reinforced through cultural practices such as hunting, wrestling, stick-fighting, and devotional singing, highlighting the performative dimension of military labour.

Methodologically, the study combines political and military history with social and cultural analysis. Drawing on Persian chronicles, vernacular poetry, bardic epics, colonial gazetteers, and travel accounts, it reveals how military service was imagined and remembered. Oral traditions and folk ballads from Bhojpuri-speaking regions celebrate ancestral warriors, legitimising later claims to Rajput identity and demonstrating the historical fluidity of caste formation.

The thesis also foregrounds highway insecurity as a key driver of military demand in the seventeenth century. Merchants, pilgrims, and officials relied on armed escorts provided by Rajputs, Pathans, Kolis, and religious communities such as Charans and Bairagis. These practices blurred the line between protection and banditry, embedding martial service within local economies and political bargaining. Mughal attempts to regulate escort services and unauthorised tolls were largely ineffective, underscoring imperial dependence on these intermediaries.

A central case study focuses on the Raikwar Rajputs, whose transition from militarised peasant-warriors to landed elites exemplifies social mobility through military service. By serving imperial and regional powers and converting martial capital into land and revenue rights, the Raikwars constructed a genealogy rooted in valour and loyalty. Though codified as caste under colonial rule, their identity emerged from fluid military engagements and strategic alliances.

The study challenges sharp divisions between the Mughal and colonial periods, arguing for continuity in military recruitment. Successor states such as Awadh, Banaras, and Baroda institutionalised semi-professional armies through intermediaries, such as jamadars, before British expansion. The East India Company later exploited this mature labour pool, particularly among Purbiyas, highlighting indigenous agency across political transitions.

Finally, the thesis addresses the sustainability of the status gained through military service. While some groups successfully converted military capital into lasting landholdings and ritual recognition, outcomes varied by geography, resources, narrative construction, and adaptability. Rejecting romanticised views of martial lineages, the study highlights the precarity underlying social mobility.

Overall, the thesis contributes to the new military history of South Asia by historicising military labour as a dynamic social institution. It demonstrates that, in early modern North India, soldiering was not merely a response to state demand but a deeply embedded practice that shaped identities, communities, and imperial trajectories.