Military Culture in Eighteenth-century South Asia and its Influence in the Unification of Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The military culture of eighteenth-century of South Asia was marked by growing influence of British East India Company, the decline of the Mughal Empire, the rise of emerging powers such as Maratha and Sikh, and the unification of the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. This paper provides an introduction to the major empires of the eighteenth-century South Asia and their respective military cultures. It further highlights their influence on Nepal's unification campaign. Important aspects of military culture, including military organization, tactics, strategy, fortifications and leadership are discussed in this paper. The paper also situates Nepal's unification campaign within the broader regional transformations marked by the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the East India Company, the Maratha Empire, and the Sikh Khalsa Empire.

Introduction

Nepal's unification campaign began in the early 18th century under dynamic leadership of a charismatic king in the House of Gorkha, Prithvi Narayan Shah, followed by his daughter-in-law Rajendra Laxmi, and most significantly by his youngest son Bahadur Shah. The unified country Nepal emerged in a subcontinent marked by the decline of traditional powers, political fragmentation and growing influence of Western powers. This paper focuses on key aspects of this military culture, including geopolitical context, military organization, strategies and tactics, fortification, and Leadership aspects of this military culture.

Research Methodology

The research problem addressed in this article is to determine the extent of influence of military culture of the 18th century South Asian powers on Nepal's unification.To address the research problem, point-by-point Method is followed, alternating between discussion on military culture of 18th century powers of South Asia and Nepal before moving to the next theme. Review of

literature focuses on identifying the similarities and differences across different aspects of their military culture. Books, journal articles, podcasts and web pages were consulted for the review. Additional data were collected through interviews with experts in military history and through observation of historical sites and museums. The article is limited to the 18th century timeframe. The article includes only selected prominent South Asian empires that significantly influenced the unification of Nepal including Mughals, Marathas, Sikhs and British East India Company. Other contemporary powers, including the Ahom, Rajput, Awadh, Nawabs of Bengal, Mysore and European companies including French, Portuguese, Dutch and Danish companies, are excluded.

Geopolitical Context

In the year 1600 when the British East India Company was founded and Akbar was at the height of his power as the Badshah of India, few would have imagined the fate that would befall their empires in the 18th century. The geopolitical landscape of early 18th century South Asia became a stage for profound political transformations, including served the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of regional powers like the Marathas, Mysore, and Sikh confederacy (Approach IAS, 2025; Coutinho, 2021). From the beginning of 18th century, European influence on warfare steadily expanded through their multinational trading companies in South Asia. These companies developed their own armed while the traditional empires of South Asia were losing their grip (Mughal Diplomacy, 2019, p. 214). The traditional forces of the region faced the western organization and weaponries and eventually incorporated these elements into their own armies. The largest empire of northern and central India- the Mughal Empire which reached its peak of power around 1700 C.E. during the rule of Aurganzeb, was on the verge of decline. This decline paved the way for the emergence of successor states such as the Marathas, Sikhs, Awadh and Nawabs of Bengal, each with distinct military traditions (JETIR, 2024, p. 7).

The regional developments also extended to the Himalayan region. By the 13th century, Nepal was divided into more than sixty principalities. However, with the advent of Prithvi Narayan Shah, campaign of unifying the 'pebble-like' principalities of the Southern Himalayan region into a 'rock-like' kingdom initiated under Gorkha state. The timing of Nepal's unification was favorable given the weakness of the traditional powers of the region; however, it was challenging, as Western empires completed for control with their modern weaponries and military techniques (Stiller, 1975, p. 45–47).

In summary, South Asia's diverse terrains, - including the Himalayan rugged mountains, the Gangetic plains, the Western Ghats, the desert of Rajputana —shaped unique and varied military cultures, each adapted to its geographical context (JETIR, 2024, p. 9). Located in the northernmost part of South Asia, P. N. Shah's inspiration for unification likely arose from his understanding of the geopolitical situation, his princely tradition, efforts of his father, advices from his maternal uncle- Udyota Sen, a careful analysis of the Mughal military's weaknesses, and colonial ambitions of the British East India Company, combined with his own acute strategic insight (Stiller, 1975).

The Decline of the Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire was founded by Babur following his victory over Ibrahim Lodi at the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 (Narayana, 2019, p. 1269). It became one of the most powerful empires in 16th and 17th century Indian history, under the rule of emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Akbar expanded the empire through military conquests and diplomacy, implemented a centralized administration and promoted religious tolerance. He divided the empire into twelve Subahs each administered by a Subahdars. Although illiterate, he strengthened his empire, which became rich in culture, architecture and trade (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023; BA Notes, 2023, p. 1). However, after Aurangzeb's death in early 18th century, the empire began to decline due to Aurganzeb's intolerance against Hindus, succession disputes, regional revolts, and the rise of powers like the Marathas and British (Heehs, 2004, p. 87).

The influence of more than 200 years of Mughal Empire was widely visible in lifestyles of common people and royal families of other powers in the region, including the principalities of Nepal. Even the Kings of |Kathmandu valley and Gorkha adopted royal traditions influenced by Mughals (Tandon. G, personal communication, December 5, 2025). Mughal influence is evident in coinage and architectural designs of many temples and other structures of Kathmandu valley and Mithila region (Siddiqui, 2020, p. 4; Acharya, 2023, p 115). The Mughal military culture influenced the entire subcontinent, leading to the development of both similar and contrasting military features among other powers.

The Maratha Empire

Under the leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji I, the Maratha Empire emerged as a powerful Indian state in the 17th century. It became a major force resisting Mughal rule and expanded across much of India throughout the 18th century. They established a decentralized administration with regional leaders (Sardars) under a central authority. Their confederacy was led by Peshwa; thehereditary prime minister along with key chiefs of Bhonsle, Scindia, Holkar, and Gaekwad families (The Indosphere, 2023, p. 4). At its peak in the late 18th century, the empire controlled vast territories in central and northern India. However, internal conflicts, particularly over the post of Peshwa, also contributed to the decline of Maratha power (Alam, 2013). Although they belatedly understood the ultimate aims of British, their defeats at the Third Battle of Panipat (1761) severely weakened the empire at its core (Gupta, 2017). The British East India Company (BEIC) employed their shrewd diplomatic and strong military methods to gain complete victory over the Marathas through three Anglo-Maratha Wars and Doctrine of Lapse in mid-19th century (Chandra, 2009, p. 312).

Nepal and the Maratha empire had no official relations until the 19th century. Despite political isolation in the 18th century, Maratha Empire maintained religious and cultural ties with Hindu Kingdom of Nepal (The Indosphere, 2023, p. 9; Acharya, 2023, p. 116). After a series of defeats suffered by the Rajputs against Mughals, Maratha Confederate and the Kingdom of Nepal remained the only strong Hindu empires in South Asia. The records of Pashupatinath temple include details of Maratha Kings and Peshwas who paid homage there. In addition, the Brahmin caste of *Marhatha* of Nepal claims to be Maratha Brahmin who

migrated from Maharastra of India to Nepal during the medieval period (Tandon, G.,) personal communication, December 5, 2025). Later, in the 19th century, Bhimsen Thapa proposed for unity among Hindu kingdoms of South Asia, but this initiative remained incomplete.

The Sikh Khalsa Empire

Sikh tradition, established by Guru Nanak Sahib, took a decisive turn when Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, was publicly beheaded in 1675 on the orders of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb for defending Hindus. With the aim of protecting the innocent from religious persecution, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru and the son of Guru Teg Bahadur, established the Khalsa in 1699. Khalsa warriors were bound by the five Ks-*Kesh, Kara, Kanga, Kacchera, and Kirpan* (MCLEOD, 1991, p. 29). After his death, the Sikhs organized themselves into twelve military confederacies called *misls,* each led by *Sardar*. These misls were unified into a single Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early 19th century (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2025, p. 3).

During the 18th century, the Sikhs resisted Mughal and Afghan invasions under leaders like Banda Singh Bahadur, a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh, who briefly established Sikh rule before being executed by the Mughals (Institute of Sikh Studies, 2025, p. 5). Despite repeated attacks by the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Sikhs gradually consolidated power in Punjab. By the late 18th century, Maharaja Ranjit Singh began uniting the misls, ultimately forming the Sikh Empire (Gupta, 1991, p 201). He created a strong, secular state based in Punjab with Lahore as its capital. He modernized his army with the assistance of European officers and maintained peace with the British through diplomacy (Ray, 2007, pp. 379-380). The empire included Punjab, Kashmir, and parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the18[th] century, Nepal had no disputes or formal relations with the Sikhs. However, the Nepal-Sikh War of 1809 broke out, which was an undesired situation for both Khalsa Empire and Nepal, as both were fierce fighters with strong war ethics and unbounded courage (Singh, 2008, p. 47). After Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, the Sikh Empire weakened due to internal power struggles. The British defeated the Sikhs in the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) and Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49), annexing Punjab in 1849 and thereby ending the empire.

European East India Companies

With the landing of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in Kerala (South India) in 1498, Europeans established their foothold in South Asia. Following the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, the French, and the Danes arrived seeking trade dominance (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012, pp. 44–45). European East India Companies competed against one another for dominance in the 17th and throughout the 18th century (Keay, 1991, p. 45). In this race, the British East India Company (BEIC) surpassed other European trade firms. The Company's victories in the Battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) paved the way for British dominance and the establishment of the Bengal Presidency (Bayly, 1988, p. 68). The French lost the tug of war against the British after losing their citadel at Pondicherry in 1761. The Dutch, too, were pushed out of Sri Lanka within few years by the BEIC. With no European competitors, the BEIC had a free hand in India except for the local regional powers (Kulke & Rothermund, 2016, pp. 214–215).

In 1765, after the defeat in the Battle of Buxar, the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II granted the Company revenue rights (Diwani) over Bengal, and later judicial rights as well (Travers, 2007, p. 91). The BEIC then established the Bengal Presidency in 1765, a British administrative division that significantly expanded its influence throughout the 18th century. Initially centered in Bengal, it eventually took control of present-day Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha (Marshall, 1987, p. 112). After consolidating the Bengal Presidency, the British gained significant economic control over Bengal, exploiting it as their base for imperial expansion across India.

P. N. Shah was well aware of British imperialist policies and their ambitions (Jayshwal & Shah, 2022, p. 14). He sent his informants to Benaras to obtain updates on the situation in Indian states and British activities (Subedi,R. personal communication, December 5, 2025). His thoughts and advice in the Divyopadesh clearly state his intent to to instructhis courtiers and generals to keep the new nation in balance between the empires of both north and the rising power of south. What proved him correct about the intentions of the BEIC was the British attack in 1767 under Captain Kinloch against Nepali troops leading to the Battle of Sindhuli Gadhi (Shah, 2022, p. 14).

Military Organization

This section is focuses on study of the military organizations of Mughal Empire followed by Marathan, Punjabi and other relevant empires of 18th century, and examines how they influenced the military organization of Nepali Army during the unification campaign.

Mughal Military Organization

The Mughal empire is considered the largest empire of the region for more than three centuries. A system of hierarchical ranking of officers who held both military and civil authority, called the Mansabdari, was developed by Akbar during the 16th–17th century. Mansabdars were graded by dual ranks-Zat (personal rank/infantry complement) and Sawar (horsemen)-and were required to maintain troops accordingly (Gommans, 2002, p. 41).

Mansabdars were either paid in cash (Nagdi) or assigned land revenue rights (Jagir) (Streusand, 2011, p. 118). After Aurangzeb's death, the Mansabdari system weakened to the point of dysfunction, facilitating the rise of sub-regional powers such as the Nawabs of Bengal and Awadh, as well as the Marathas and Sikhs, who increasingly trained forces on European lines or hired mercenaries (Streusand, 2011, p. 156).

Under Emperor Muhammad Shah (1719–1748), fiscal strain intensified, with salary claims outstripping treasury reserves at roughly a 3:1 ratio; provincial governors or *Subahdars* began maintaining independent forces, signaling Mughal loss of control (Alam, 2013, p. 97). External shocks from Nadir Shah's invasion from Iran in 1739 and subsequent Durrani incursions from Afghanistan further degraded military capacity. The defeat at Buxar in 1764 exposed their organizational fault lines (Gommans, 2002, p. 201). The Mughals increasingly relied on mercenary formations, including Rohilla Afghans of Pashtun origin*;* Pindaris -irregular horsemen who sold their services and often engaged in raiding; Maratha auxiliaries; and later European-trained sepoys (*Oxford History of the British Empire*, 1998, p. 274).

As the Mughal empire declined, Nawabs of Bengal and Awadh became practically independent. However, they too relied on mercenaries and Europeantrained sepoys as Mughal power waned (Regmi, 1978, p. 142). The Nawab of Awadh's forces exemplified a hybrid military model in which traditional cavalry, artillery, and locally raised infantry operated alongside Europeanstyle units (Whelpton, 2005, p. 87). In 1757, the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj udDaulah, lost the Battle of Plassey to the BEIC due to betrayal by Jafar Ali. The victorious BEIC installed Jafar Ali as Siraj udDaulah's replacement in 1757. However, when Jafar Ali failed to comply with British orders, he was replaced by his own son- in-law, Mir Qasim, as Nawab of Bengal in 1760 (Jayshwal & Shah, 2022, p. 34).

In 1762–63, Mir Qasim accepted a request from the ousted King of Makwanpur Digbandhan Sen, to attack Nepali (Gorkhali) forces at Makwanpur Fort. Mir Qasim sent his general, Gurgin Khan, with a force of between 25,000 and30,000 to attack Makwanpur. Gurgin Khan's force decisively defeated by Gorkhali troops, who captured modern arms and war materials from the retreating forces (Whelpton, 2005, p. 129; Jayshwal & Shah, 2022, p. 36). Learning from the organization of the defeated contingent and acquiring their modern weapons, P.N. Shah reformed the Gorkhali army by raising five disciplined companies—an important turning point in the modernization of the Nepalese military organization (Regmi, 1978, p. 148; Whelpton, 2005, p. 131).

These of Mughal-styled military appointments such as Subedar, Jamadar, Kharidar, Hawaldar, Amaldar was widely practiced in Gorkha Army before and during the unification campaign. This demonstrates the influence of the Mughals on the South Asian military organizations including Nepal. The reorganization of army into companies, comprising approximately 100 soldiers in each was in line with the Mughal organizational practices (Subedi, R. personal communication, December 5, 2025).

Maratha Military Organization

The Maratha Empire developed a dynamic and adaptive military culture that played a crucial role in the administration of the Maratha Confederacy. Emerging from the guerrilla warfare (*ganimi kava*) tactics of Chhatrapati Shivaji in the 17th century alongside traditional cavalry, the Maratha military challenged the Mughals, dominated central India, and resisted European colonial powers until the early 19th century (Gordon, 1993, p. 47). It flourished in central and western India until the wars with the British East India Company (Gordon, 1993, p. 53). Rapid mobility and decentralized command structures were adopted by the Marathas which was not possible within Mughal military hierarchy. The agility of Maratha forces inadapting to changing political and military circumstances contributed significantly to their rise in power. However, the extensive employment of mercenaries diluted patriotic sentiments ultimately leading to defeat when facing the centrally controlled Western military forces (Kulkarni, 2000, p. 184). Distinct organizational features of the Maratha were *Sardari System* and a strong *Cavalry System*. *Sardars* were regional commanders who maintained private armies within the Maratha confederate and were nominally loyal to the *Peshwa*, the prime minister. For instance, Sardar of the Bhonsle contingent at Nagpur commanded 15,000 cavalry and 10,000 infantries in 1760 (Gordon, 1993, p 162)

The cavalry organization included *Bargirs, Shiledars, and Pindaris. Bargirs were* state-provided cavalry, which comprisingmore than half of forces of the Marathas. Mercenary cavalry-*Shiledars* comprised of a quarter of the forces, while irregular raiders-*Pindaris* accounted for one tenth of the strength (Kulkarni, 2000, p. 190).

Internal rivalries and conflicts between Peshwas, Holkars, and Scindias weakened centralized command. Moreover, the Third Battle of Panipat of 1761 against Ahmad Shah Durrani dealt a major blow to the Marathas causing erosion of morale and power. The gradual loss of Maratha power continued until the Third Anglo-Maratha Wars (1817-1818), which dismantled the Maratha confederation (Gordon, 1993, p. 201).

Although Nepali forces had no direct collaboration or contact with the Marathas, rajas and aristocrats of the principalities likely absorbed military and cultural influences. The Rajput Thakuris of the Nepali principalities, who traced their ancestral lineage to Indian Hindu kingdoms, reflected these influences in their military culture (Tandon, G., personal communication, December 5, 2025). The Hindu martial traditions were commonly shared by both Marathas and Nepali fighters. The Marathas used battle cry *'Har Har Mahadev, Jai Bhawani',* whereas Nepali soldiers used '*Jay Gorakh Kali, Ayo Gorkhali'*. Moreover, visits to Banaras, Pashupatinath and Muktinath by the Hindu rulers had, undoubtedly influenced the spiritual dimensions of the armed forces of Hindu states (Acharya, 2023, p.114). Military appointments such as *Sardar* and *Kaji* were used by both the Maratha and Nepali militaries. P.N Shah's visit to Banaras in 1744, and his observation of Balwant Singh's clan-based military likely highlighted the importance of clan-based army. These observations likely influenced the establishment of clan-based companies in the Nepali Army in 1762 (Regmi, 1978, p. 128; Whelpton, 2005, p. 94).

The Sikh Military Organization-Misls

The military organization of the Sikh Confederacy (1716–1799) comprised twelve Misls (clan-based militias) in 18th century. Each Misl had its own territory and army; the army mainly included Jat and Sikh cavalry led by Jathedars (warrior chiefs). By the end of 18th century, each Misl comprised approximately 5,000 cavaliers with total of around 70,000 men in 12 Misls. Each Misl had a command structure consisting of elected Sardars. The Sardars of the Misls participated in a collective decision-making body called the Sarbat Khalsa whenever major campaigns were to be decided (Singh, 2008, p. 32). Banda Singh Bahadur (1670–1716), a disciple of Guru Govind Singh, led the Sikh Army's first strike against the Mughals but was decisively defeated and executed publicly. Learning from the loss, Misls consolidated their control through guerrilla tactics combined with cavalry maneuvers (McLeod, 1997, p. 121). Later, under the leadership of Ranjit Singh in 19th century, the Khalsa Army was united and modernized with European training and weaponry (Singh, 2008, p. 45).

Nepali forces came nto contact with Sikhs in early the 19th century only. Hence, until the 18th century, Nepal's relations with the Sikhs were limited to informal channels (Subedi.R, personal communication, December 5, 2025). The Sikh empire was gradually rising in the Punjab region and had not reached the Himalayan region bordering the expanding Nepal. A collision between the two expanding empires was therefore imminent (Singh, 2008, p. 112). The two expanding powers eventually clashed during Sikh-Nepal War of 1809.

Influence of European Military Organization in South Asia

European military culture began influencing South Asia in the 16th century with the arrival of the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, French, and British. Initially, Europeans operated as maritime traders, but they soon built fortified settlements and fielded professional armies (Keay, 1991, p. 45). They introduced firearms, artillery, linear infantry tactics, and disciplined drill formations-distinct from traditional South Asian warfare, which often emphasized cavalry and elephants (Bayly, 1988, p. 72). By the early 18th century, European powers, especially the British and French, actively intervened in regional conflicts, training Indian sepoys in European-style warfare. The Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Carnatic Wars showcased the growing dominance of European military techniques in South Asia.

BEIC did not maintain a single army; rather, it allowed each presidency, or regional administration, to raise its own army. By the late 18th century, the Bengal, Bombay, and Madras presidencies maintained their own armies with distinct traditions. Given its proximity with Himalayas, particularly Nepal, the Bengal Presidency and its army further below discussed further below. It is noteworthy that before the 19th century, BEIC army had no generals, ten colonels and only thirty lieutenant colonels (Menezes, 1993, p. 72). A captain typically commanded a native battalion, a major commanded a European battalion, and a colonel commanded a presidency army.

The Bengal Presidency, established by the BEIC after the Battle of Plassey (1757), developed a structured military system to consolidate power in the region. The British military organization known as Bengal Army consisted of European and native troops, governed by a mix of Company officers and local recruits (Marshall, 2003, p. 98). It was initially composed of British commanders leading European and local units (Roy, 2011, p. 45). Native Hindu soldiers from Bihar and Awadh, as well as Bengalis formed sepoy regiments (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 72). The Bengal Native Infantry formed the core of the army and was organized into battalions (Roy, 2011, p. 48), while the Bengal European Regiment, composed of British soldiers, served as an elite force (Marshall, 2003, p. 112). The Artillery Corps operated cannons and field artillery, which proved crucial in battles such as the Battle of Buxar, 1764 (Singh, 2005, p. 89). Cavalry units were primarily used for reconnaissance and skirmishes (Chatterjee, 2013, p. 75), while district Faujdars, the local military officers, maintained law and order in rural areas (Roy, 2011, p. 52).

After Lord Clive's reforms in 1765, the Bengal Army was restructured to reduce dependence on unreliable mercenaries (Singh, 2005, p. 93). He also emphasized harsh discipline and European-style training (Marshall, 2003, p. 118). The rejuvenated Bengal Presidency's military became the dominant force in eastern and northern India, paving the way for British colonial expansion. The BEIC garrisoned British regular army and their private army, collectively known as the 'Army in India'.

Regional empires of South Asia shifted from traditional forces to disciplined infantry formations, influenced and transformed by French and British military tactics (Hasrat, 1970). Europeans influenced Mughal warfare, including the use of drilled infantry and artillery from 17th century. Marathas too adopted European-style infantry and artillery by the mid-18th century under the leadership of Madhavrao I and Mahadji Scindia. Under Scindia, French

mercenary Benoît de Boigne formed disciplined infantry battalions with muskets and bayonets in Maratha Army, strengthened by modernized artillery, including field guns and howitzers**.** By the late 18th century, European cannons were integrated in the Sikh Army captured from Afghan and Mughal arsenals. Western-style drilled infantry under leaders such as Jassa Singh Ahluwalia (Gordon, 1993, p. 162). The Nepali armed forces under P.N Shah also had a component known as *Telinga,* which was trained in the Western style and influenced by the *Bengali Telinga* force formed under British presidency (Bajracharya & Nepal, 1971, p 33). Moreover, the organization of companies of Nepali Army formed by P.N Shah was based on the British style (Sharma et al., 1992, p.99).

Nepali (Gorkha) Military Organization

P. N. Shah learned about the Mughal style of organization mainly during his visit to Benaras and attack by Mir Qasim's force in Makwanpur Fort. During his visit to Gorakhpur and Benaras in 1743, he studied the military system of Balwant Singh (Regmi, 1978, p. 128). Moreover, the system of Subedar (provincial governors), practiced by Nawabs of Bengal, was roughly followed by Bahadur Shah in his army. In the Nepali Army, a Subahdar was the commander of a company consisting of roughly 100 men under him (Sharma et, al, 1992, p.99). The Jagir system practiced in Mughal administration, was also applied to Nepali soldiers, albeit with some unique differences from the Mughal model. The Battle of Sindhuli Gadhi gave an opportunity for P.N. Shah to understand British military features. Moreover, the victory against Captain Kinloch enhanced the morale of Nepali soldiers in their campaigns against other principalities of the Himalayan region. The arms and ammunition gained from the battles against Gurgin Khan and Captain Kinloch helped him build a strong and organized Nepali force (Chittaranjan, 2075, p. 132). The capture of 500 rifles and two cannons from Gurghin Khan was a milestone in reorganizing Nepali Army for P.N Shah (Vaidya, 1971, p. 205). After the Battle of Makwanpur in 1762, the companies formed were named after Hindu gods, and the colors of each unit were dedicated to the respective deities. Thereafter, P.N Shah formed each company comprising approximately 100 soldiers. Bahadur Shah closely studied Western military organization during his exile in Bettiah. After returning to Nepal, he reformed organization of the Nepali Army and introduced the ranks such as Captain, Major, and Adjutant (Sharma et. al., 1992, p.100)

The Nepali Army was distinctly divided into temporary and permanent force. On the one hand, temporary forces functioned like militias and were grouped and employed on an ad hoc basis through the Jhara system. The permanent army, on the other hand, was permanently garrisoned under the leadership of Umrao. Some important features of Nepali armed forces included recruitment practices, welfare systems such as Jhara, Marawat, and meritocracy. Recruitment based on a tribal setup was a major aspect of the Nepali Army. The army had significant tribal components, particularly Magars, Gurungs, and Khas. Other tribes comprised a smaller proportion of the army (Regmi, 1999, p. 54). As discussed above, tribal-based recruitment was practiced by the Mughals and the Marathas, including the peasant cavalry (Bargirs), and the forces of Balwant Singh of Benaras were closely observed by P.N Shah and Bahadur Shah.

The *Jhara* system was a conscription method introduced in Gorkha by Narbhupal Shah, which required each household to provide a soldier of aged between twelve and eighty. From a family of five active members, at least one member was required to contribute in Jhara (Bajracharya, Note No3, pp. 364-65). Based on this system, Gorkha created a standing force of 12,000 by 1768 (Stiller, 1975). However, the *Jhara* system was a weak link. Recognizing the weaknesses of the system, P.N. Shah maintained a more effective arrangement by granting Jagir rights warriors. The Jagir system was also commonly practiced system in traditional forces in Mughul empire. Instead of a salary, a piece of land was given to the jagirdar and the ownership of the land had to be renewed annually (Sharma, Vaidya, & Manandhar, 1992, p. 81).

The Marwat system was another unique military institution introduced by Prithvi Narayan Shah to strengthen his army at its roots. A soldier's family was granted a land in the form of Jagir. Under this system, the eldest son could inherit the position upon his father's death in the battlefield. The Marwat system provided a sense of pride and security to the soldier and his family. The system motivated the young men to join the Nepali Army and fight until his death with confidence that their families would remain secure and their offspring employed (Stiller, 1975, p. 175).

Merit-Based promotion was a major organizational feature of the Nepali Army. P.N. Shah and his son Bahadur Shah's efforts in placing capable commanders long the frontiers brought success in both the east and western fronts (Sharma et al., 1992, p 102). The Gorkhali military culture gave emphasis to courage and loyalty in battle, with loyalty assuring promotion and privileges regardless of one's birth or initial status. This promise of social mobility for able-bodied men from all classes became a crucial factor in forming a strong organization capable of unifying Nepal (Stiller, 2023, p. 37).

Bahadur Shah's efforts in strengthening the organization of the Nepali Army's were no less significant than those of others. He maintained three types of infantry forces in army: the first armed with Khukri, the second equipped with bow and arrows, and the third carrying barreled weapons. Each company comprised of 100 oldiers, and nearly 78 companies active during his regency. A Company within the Kathmandu valley was commanded by Subedar, whereas those outside the valley were commanded by a Captain (Bajracharya, Note No. 3, pp. 376–380).

Strategies and tactics

The strategies and tactics followed by the regional powers formed an integral part of their military culture. The use of different arms and corresponding tactics formed the basis of battle design for each empire. Some important aspects of their strategies and tactics are discussed below.

Battlefield Tactics

Mughal tactics were based on centralized imperial command. The Mughals used strong cavalry on the wings, aided by war elephants at the center. A large number of infantry musketeers were deployed at the front and flanks. employed concentrated formations; however, slow maneuverability and a lack of flexibility in command were their major disadvantages (Bayly, 1988, p. 198; Alam, 2013, p. 48).

The Marathas possessed new firearms and uniforms, and their forces consisted of brave and skilled individuals, but did not function as an obedient unit under central command. Although De Boigne attempted to teach the importance of Western style of fighting in pitched battles, Maratha fighters retained a deeply rooted culture of hit-and-run tactics learned from Shivaji. Light cavalry squadrons of Marathas dispersed in columns focusing on extreme mobility and strong fort network. The decentralized confederacy led to fragmentation within the Maratha armed forces, causing coordination issues. It increased their vulnerability against enemy equipped with strong artillery in the battlefield. In contrast, emerging powers developed adaptability according to the situation and constantly evolved their tactics and strategies to survive. Their lack of cohesive line formations was their greatest shortcoming in the battles against the BEIC (Gordon, 1993, pp. 88–90; Kulkarni, 2000, pp. 92–95).

The Sikh combined religious and military training at the Akal Takht under a unified command known as the Dal Khalsa. They conducted attacked using cavalry squadrons with mounted skirmishes. A cavalryman was armed with a spear, a matchlock and a scimitar and could attack at more than double the speed of infantry (Francklin.W, 1805, p.107-112). Khalsa cavalry strikes, employing the *Dhai-phut* tactic were so powerful that they produced a shock effect on the enemy (Grewal, 1998, pp. 78–80; McLeod, 1997, pp. 134–136). Under this tactic, a body of cavalry would attack a position, retreat, reload their muskets, and return to attack it again. Their emphasis onstrong cavalry was aimed at compensating for weaknesses in artillery and therefore avoiding pitched battles. They combined artillery batteries and infantry block with cavalry.

The BEIC had modern artillery pieces together with its drilled and highly disciplined infantry. Infantry battalions formed linear formations, delivering in volley fire and forming defensive squares. The BEIC had noted lack of discipline in South Asian forces and exploited it to the utmost (Keay, 1991, pp. 214–216; Marshall, 1987, pp. 118–120).

The Nepali Army focused on guerrilla tactics for both offensive operations and the defense of mountain forts. The use of traditional arms and rigid mountain tactics in the First Battle of Nuwakot in 1742 taught hard lessons to the ambitious king. The loss of the battle pushed P.N. Shah to obtain modern weapons from Benaras and modify his tactics. With newly acquired weapons and multidirectional attack tactics, he captured Nuwakot in 1744. With renewed zeal, P.N. Shah's forces fought at Kirtipur in the Battle of Makwanpur Gadhi against Gurgin Khan in 1763, which added more tactical knowledge and adaptations in Nepali Army, including latest weapons. The introduction of new weapons, together with accumulated combat experience, led to development of more adaptive tactics in Nepali forces. However, defeat was repeated in his second attempt to capture Kirtipur in 1764. Victory of Makwanpur eventually led to the capture of Kirtipur on the third attempt. The Battle of Sindhuli was a test of Nepali tactics at their peak. It provided the Nepali Army with practical in siege warfare, infantry assaults and guerrilla warfare which were extensively exploited during the unification campaign's further phases (Stiller, 1975, pp. 89–94; Regmi, 1978, pp. 131–134; Whelpton, 2005, pp. 96–100).

Diplomatic alliances and Isolationism

Isolationism was a double-edged weapon for the powers of South Asia. The Mughal empire, though the largest regional power, had been isolated from modern technology of Western powers throughout the eighteenthcentury. Ultimately, this isolationism contributed to downfall of the empire (Bayly, 1988, p. 201). In Nepal's case, P.N. Shah's long-term strategy, outlined in the *Divya Upadesh*, was one of military consolidation and economic self-sufficiency, combined with a policy of strategic isolation from the British. This preemptive anti-colonial stance contrasted with many other South Asian polities, which were were either collapsing under Mughal decline or being drawn into alliances with European powers (Regmi, 1978, p. 128; Baral, 2023, p. 42). He consciously discouraged foreign trade and expelled Christian missionaries, viewing them as agents of foreign influence (Baral, 2023). For a rising Himalayan kingdom, this strategy contributed for its survival and expansion.

Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification strategy skillfully incorporated diplomacy and strategic alliances, lessons adapted from the volatile, power-balancing politics of 18th century South Asia. Recognizing that he could not fight all rivals simultaneously, a lesson likely drawn from observing the chaotic fragmentation of the Mughal Empire and the strategic maneuvering of rising powers such as the Marathas and the British East India Company (EIC), Shah prioritized neutralizing immediate threats (Regmi, 1978, p. 128). He achieved this by forming non-aggression pacts or friendly alliances with powerful neighboring kingdoms such as Lamjung, Tanahun, and Palpa. This diplomatic maneuver was critical, as it secured Gorkha's flanks, prevented the formation of a strong anti-Gorkha coalition, and allowed Shah to concentrate his military resources entirely on economically isolating and conquering the wealthy Kathmandu Valley, while simultaneously observing the EIC's methods to carefully in order to steer Nepal toward a strategy of cautious autonomy (Basnyat, 2022).

Economic Warfare and Blockade

Economic warfare and blockade strategies were highly interconnected and crucial tools for South Asian forces in the eighteenth century, serving as a primary means to debilitate rival states by disrupting their commercial lifelines and resource acquisition. The Maratha Confederacy employed scorched-earth tactics and widespread raids such as the Bargi incursions in Bengal, to plunder wealth, disrupt agriculture, and compelled to pay tribute like Chauth, thereby weakening the Mughal economy (Gordon, 1993, p. 128). The growing maritime and military power of the British East India Company (BEIC) enabled it to enforce naval blockades on rival port cities (such as those controlled by Mysore and the Marathas), cutting off access to crucial imports such as war materials and customs revenue, thereby transforming commercial competition into an effective form of economic conquest that crippled their indigenous opponents (Marshall, 1993, pp. 214–216).

Prithvi Narayan Shah's successful unification of Nepal involved systematically imposing a severe land blockade on Kirtipur and, subsequently, on the kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley. Seizing control of strategically important surrounding territories to deny them essential food supplies and foreign trade with India and Tibet ultimately forcing their surrender, was the primary objective (Whelpton, 2005, pp. 82–85).

Fortifications

Permanent fortifications played an important role in military strategies in 18th century. South Asian powers. Fortifications were crucial for both strategic expansion, economic blockade, and defensive operations (Regmi, 1978, p. 132).

Location, purpose and architecture

Majority of Mughal forts were large and comfortably constructed in cities and on plains, with only a few located on hilltops. The Red Fort of Delhi, Agra Fort, and Lahore Fort are some of the examples used not only for military purpose, but also as administrative centers and royal residences (Keay, 1991, pp. 214–216; Bayly, 1988, p. 72). None of the forts of other other South Asian empires of South Asia were as grand or comfortable as Mughal forts. The forts of all other empires were primarily built with defensive and strategic considerations in mind. Mughal forts were distinctly grand in architectural design. With nearly perfect symmetrical bulbous domes and pointed arches, they contained lavish interior features (Keay, 1991, pp. 214–216; Bayly, 1988, p. 72).

Marathas built their forts mainly on hilltop of Western Ghats n the Maharashtra region of India. With the aim of conducting guerrilla warfare, they transformed the rugged terrain of the mountain into strategically advantageous battleground (Gordon, 1993, pp. 88–90). Notable examples of Maratha forts include Raighad Fort and Sinhagad Fort. Maratha and Nepali forts were primarily designed for defense rather than aesthetic appeal. The Marathas maintained a network of hill forts (e.g., Raigad, Sinhagad, Purandar)**,** which functioned as both military strongholds' administrative centers. Fort commanders known as Killedars, played a crucial role in defending these forts during sieges. Unlike European-style fortifications, Maratha forts were adapted to Deccan terrain, utilizing natural features as defensive advantages (Stiller, 1975, pp. 89–91; Whelpton, 2005, p. 97).

The Sikh extensively employed jungle forts and forts modified from earlier empires (e.g., Lohgarh, Amritsar) as refuges (Grewal, 1998, p. 78). They also relied on forts to conduct guerrilla warfare and to resist Mughal and Afghan invasions (Grewal, 1998, pp. 101–102). Sikh forts exhibited architectural elements somewhat similar to those of Mughals and Rajput forts, including domes and pointed arches.

Nepali forts were unique in their form and design compared to those of other regional powers of South Asia. Control of forts was essential for defense enforcing economic blockades and territorial expansions (Basnyat, 2018, pp. 3–5). Exploiting Nepal's diverse terrain, forts were constructed on Terai plains, mid hill slopes, high Himalayan mountains, and even the Tibetan plateau, following local architectural traditions. Unlike Mughal and Maratha forts, locally available materials such as rocks, bricks and wood are primarily utilized (Whelpton, 2005, pp. 96–100). Historically, the majority of the Nepali forts used in eighteenth century were either constructed by earlier principalities or by Bahadur Shah (Subedi. R, personal communication, 5th December 2025). Sen forts were constructed in central and eastern Nepal whereas, Bahadur Shah and his generals constructed forts in western Nepal (Stiller, 1975, pp. 89–94; Regmi, 1978, pp. 131–134). For the success of unification efforts, capture of key hill forts was essential, spanning from east to western Nepal. The capture of Nuwakot, Makawanpur,

Kirtipur and Sindhuli Gadhi forts was key to enabling enabled P.N. Shah to cut supply lines and isolate the Kathmandu Valley kingdoms. He also utilized Sindhuli Gadhi as a killing ground in 1767 to defeat the BEIC force under Captain Kinloch, thereby demonstrating the importance of fortified positions (Regmi, 1978, pp. 131–133).

Military Leadership

Mughal leadership

Mughal leadership was traditionally centralized and aristocratic, derived from Islamic values and the legendary Mongol-Timurid legacy. Dynamic Badshahs (emperors) such as Babur, Humayun Akbar, and Aurangzeb shaped this leadership style (Chandra, 2005, pp. 112–115; Alam, 2013, pp. 47–49). Babur was a ruthless military strategist who emphasized mobile reserves (Keay, 1991, p. 48). Akbar's Mansabdari system integrated diverse elites. The same system later led to loyalty to their local masters rather than the emperor, which developed opportunist military officials changing sides during war (Bayly, 1988, pp. 101–102; Keay, 1991, pp. 132–133). While Aurangzeb emphasized orthodox Islamic values, it strained imperial cohesion (Alam, 2013, pp. 102–104). It weakened Mughal army, which led to ultimate decline of the empire (Bayly, 1988, pp. 177–179; Keay, 1991, pp. 210–212).

Maratha Leadership

The Maratha style of military leadership during the 18th century was a dynamic blend of centralized monarchy and guerrilla warfare. In its earlier phase, centralized military planning under the Peshwas was practiced, which evolved into a decentralized confederate system among powerful military families in its later phase. (Gordon, 1993, pp. 22–24, 56). Legends of Chhatrapati Shivaji as friend of the virtuous and patron of religion were widespread among Maratha leaders. His commandership was the spirit of the Maratha army. Shivaji's perfection in surprise attacks using light cavalry, the use of competent espionage system and extensive knowledge regarding the terrain were idolized by later leaders. (Kulkarni, 2000, pp. 92–95). Another significant aspect of Maratha leadership was the influence of female rulers. For instance, the Maharani Tarabai, hailed as *Bhadrakali*, unified the factional chiefs and personally led Maratha army against Mughal emperor Aurangzeb after the death of her husband, Chhatrapati Rajaram in 1700 and remained an active stateswoman until her death in 1761 (Sarkar, 1952, pp. 162-165).

Sikh Khalsa Leadership

Sikh Khalsa style of leadership was a transformative style rooted in spiritual discipline and selfless service. It represented a blend of patriotism and religion, embodied by Guru Gobind Singh, who founded the Khalsa brotherhood as an order of militant ascetics. He initiated social reforms, instituted a political and religious bond, and inspired a militaristic spirit within the brotherhood and the wider Sikh community. Ideals of courage, integrity, and social upliftment were emphasized throughout this leadership tradition (McLeod, 1997, pp. 134–136).

Nepali Leadership

Nepali leadership style in 18th century was characterized by the charismatic leadership of King Prithivi Narayan Shah. Autocratic monarchial authority was his major leadership characteristic. His leadership emphasized a centralized strategic vision and the ability to adapt and learn from defeat, which became crucial in consolidating Nepal's fragmented polities into a unified kingdom (Whelpton, 2005, pp. 96–100). Implementing meritocratic policies and welfare schemes guaranteed the loyalty and motivation of his commanders and troops (Stiller, 1975, pp. 72–75). P.N. Shah likely learned more about leadership from his battlefield experience against Gurgin Khan and Captain Kinloch. P.N. Shah's youngest son, Bahadur Shah, was a even more ferocious leader than his father. During his exile in Betia, he had learned leadership from local Bengali commanders and officers of BEIC, with whom he had a very good relation. He used his energy and knowledge of leadership in expanding the western borders of Nepal, adding more territory to Nepal than even P.N. Shah had acheived. However, volatile leadership and constitutional court culture dominated by powerful families slowly decayed the leadership and resulted in political instability in 19th century.

Findings

Point-to-point method employed in the study highlighted some interesting findings about the interrelation of military culture in contemporary powers of South Asia in the 18th century. The research found that Nepali military culture is basically authentic and original, though some aspects appear to be inspired or rather assimilated from military cultures of other regional powers. P.N. Shah learned many lessons from losses and victories against his adversaries, both local and overseas. Loss of the first battle of Nuwakot took him to Banaras, where he learnt about Bengali, Awadhi and British warfare. The victory in the battle of Makawanpur against Gurgin Khan introduced 'Company' system, a Western military organization, in Nepali Army. The victory in the battle of Sindhuli Gadhi taught Nepali Army the importance of guerrilla warfare amalgamated with fortress tactics. The battle gave confidence in Nepali soldiers in their capability to defend their motherland against powerful Western power such as the BEIC. Though Nepali Army didn't come in direct contact or relation with the Marathas and Sikhs in 18th century, informal cultural exchanges and intelligence from agents influenced Nepali way of warfare.

The study also found that, in comparison to other contemporary South Asian powers, Nepal was less influenced by western weaponry and the western way of warfare. The tactics of pitched battle were almost avoided by all the regional powers, which the BEIC exploited the most on every battlefield. The concept of fortification was adequately used by all powers, but more effectively by Nepali and Maratha forces. Maratha and Nepali forces were adept in mixing guerrilla warfare and fortification. Though religion was a prime identity factor in all the regional powers, none of the actors followed any classical religious ethics on the battlefield. The final finding of the study is that strong forts, mobility, and disciplined troops became prime factors in Nepal's successful unification efforts and resistance against colonial powers. Even today, these factors remain a strength of Nepal's unity.

Conclusion

The 18th century marked a turning point in South Asia's military history, with the decline of the Mughal Empire, the rise of regional powers such as the Marathas and Sikhs, and the increasing influence of the British East India Company. These military cultures both directly and indirectly shaped Nepal's unification campaign under King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his son, Bahadur Shah. Learning from the weaknesses of the Mughals and the adaptive warfare of the Marathas and Sikhs, the unifiers of Nepal emphasized disciplined organization, self-reliance, and strategic foresight. While most South Asian powers succumbed to colonial rule, Nepal succeeded in uniting its territories and successfully maintaining sovereignty. This success stemmed from a pragmatic synthesis of regional military experiences and the strategic vision of its leaders. The unification of Nepal thus stands as a unique example of how adaptive military culture, leadership, and geography combined to forge a strong and independent Himalayan state.

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