

The Military Barrack

Identifying Households, Becoming Mughal

Elephants, horses, matchlock guns, forts, and cannons are the objects that come to mind when we imagine early modern warfare. An illegible piece of paper, the size of the palm of our hand, measuring around eight by four and a half inches, is not something we think of as moving alongside enormous armies conquering lands from Damascus to Delhi. And yet, thousands of such fragments, called *'arz-o-chehreh* (descriptive or muster rolls) survive in archives across the Indian subcontinent.¹ A distant ancestor of the modern-day soldier's dog tag, the scattered detritus of the muster roll offers images of men arriving at military forts queuing up to have their names recorded. But this single sheet of paper did much more than that—it recorded detailed information about both horse and soldier. A scribe described man and horse's physical appearance, and then interrogated the soldier about his name, his city or region of origin, the language he spoke, who his father was, and which occupational group he belonged to—all social identifications people used to define themselves and others in premodern times. Spartan pieces of paper that bore witness to an active war reveal the many moving parts of the Mughal army's vast infrastructure in northernmost limits of peninsular India, where the imperial-regional war front began. Thousands of such intimate event-marked portraits capture the theater of early modern warfare.

Our journey across peninsular India begins here with a focus on the sociospatial site of the military barrack, one node in the Mughal frontier's vast infrastructure. From here, I reconstruct the bureaucratic encounter that generated the first meaning of *ghar*, the naming of home(s), for the purpose of social identification. Birthplaces, lineages, villages, cities, and forefathers were named, categorized, and defined through a dialogue between an imperial scribe and an ordinary soldier, bringing new social groups into the processes of becoming Mughal. Low-level

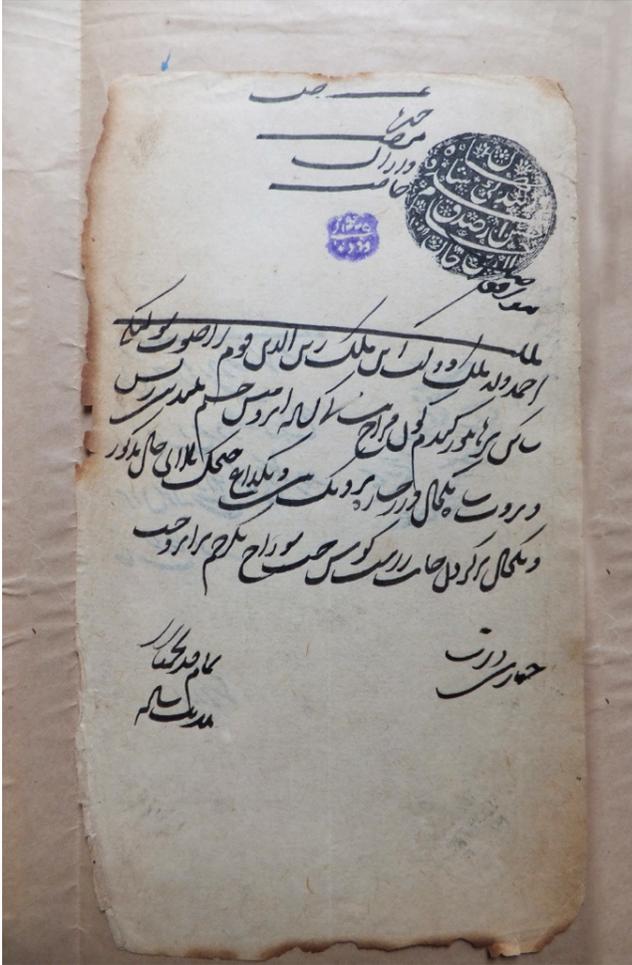


FIGURE 1. Muster or descriptive roll of Malik Ahmad, son of Malik Daulat, son of Malik Zainuddin, Rajput Solanki of Burhanpur. Mughal Record Room, Telangana State Archives, Acc. 35-699, Hyderabad, India.

administrative documents in Persian generated at the war front in peninsular India reveal how the Mughal state sought to harness the mobility and circulation of different social groups moving between political borders.² This chapter shows which gradations of categories the state saw when anchoring multiple households into its day-to-day functions.

The early modern state is viewed here from a bottom-up perspective and, crucially, as a material and mobile entity not fixed to a single center but forged at the crossroads of an imperial-regional battlefield in interaction with its nonelite subjects. What does this object called the muster roll tell us about how soldiers,

scribes, spies, inspectors, and paymasters from different social groups, affiliated by service to elite households, participated in state institutions? Historians often turn to what is written “in” a document to extract and produce narrative history—the usual stuff of when and where a battle happened, who won, who lost, and so forth. However, materiality, on the other hand, what a piece of historical evidence looks like, what kind of ink and paper it is fashioned from, how the contents are laid out, what formulae or codes signify different kinds of information, and the way it was produced also embody social formations and can tell us about how people and institutions interacted.³

In three parts, this chapter examines how materiality and mobility connected lineages of service under household chiefs to the state. Deposits of muster rolls can be found across different parts of South Asia. At first glance, this humble document type appears to offer little to the historian searching for a good, linear story. But these kinds of materials and the everyday function they fulfilled reveal the relationship between service and the ascription of social identities in premodern India. I begin by describing the physical appearance and social life of muster rolls, what they looked like, how they were collected, and how they operated in the world. Second, I turn to the social classifications we find on the muster roll, or its content, tracing out patterns of how mobile people understood themselves and others through a great variety of social identifications. In the third part, I illuminate the Mughal Deccan’s social and political conditions in the seventeenth century through a descriptive and demographic analysis of a cache of muster rolls. I put the region into a broader conversation about how early modern regimes bureaucratized and mobilized military resources across the world. To this end, I make three interrelated arguments. First, a pointillistic description of materiality and process unveils the humanity behind these documents, not just as objects for the historian’s consumption (and her desire to produce narrative) but as an embodied object that had a well-defined purpose, function, and journey in its own time. One of the more interesting things about materiality and documents, in particular, is that they persist and, therefore, can be taken up in different times and places and by people who put them to use for unintended functions. The movement, borrowing, and transmission of muster-writing practices across Mughal Hindustan and the Deccan illustrates how materiality transcended the spatial and temporal limits of political forms, fusing the infrastructure and institutions of two regions.

The movement of a material practice reflects, then, the circulation of soldiers and scribes, the social categories they used to identify themselves, and the Mughal Empire itself. Comparing hundreds of social identifications on muster rolls addresses a much larger question at the heart of global history—the hunt for an absolute thing called premodern identity—a search that is by no means unique to South Asian pasts.⁴ The documentary sediments left by early modern conquest illustrate how the movement of massive militaries into new territories created the need for clarifying notions of loyalty, identity, and community.⁵ Muster rolls show that in the wake of imperial expansion, soldiers and scribes used ever-finer



MAP 4. Mughal sites in the northern Deccan. Drawn by Kanika Kalra.

categories of self-identification that are difficult to understand with modern-day notions of ethnicity, tribe, and clan.⁶ Twentieth-century historians had used colonial terms like “warlike tribes” and “martial races” to categorize people who participated in premodern armies.⁷ However, social identifications, both of today and of centuries past, cannot be seen as self-contained, static, or timeless. Rather, through regular interactions between state and subject, social labels take on multidimensional and shifting meanings.

And finally, learning about how the muster roll worked tells us about how the Mughal Empire worked in peninsular India. Definitions of the term *Mughal* changed over time as the empire moved beyond Hindustan (northern India) and into other parts of the subcontinent. Documentary genres produced on a battlefield, like muster rolls, reveal the history of caste in circulation and the mobility of imperial institutions forged in interaction with preexisting regional social and political forms. Through the office of branding and mustering, I unveil the comprehensive institutional mechanisms of Mughal governance and its improvised, everyday workings.⁸ With regional warrior households spearheading territorial expansion, the Deccan sultanates began to emulate Mughal centralizing institutions, particularly the branding of horses and mustering. Relatedly, the Mughal army incorporated provincial elites whose contingents were more socially

homogenous into the cavalry sharing the same background as their chief. By tracing changes in pansubcontinental military recruitment networks, I contend that the Mughal army's enduring presence in this warfront actually made political-military campaigns in the southern centers much closer to the heart of the empire. Rather than having been a deviation from or an exception to imperial norms that made the empire decline in the eighteenth century, during the heyday of imperial expansion in the seventeenth century, peninsular India was the site of heightened centralization endlessly conditioned by interactions with nonimperial state forms.

As stated in the introduction, even today, the most conspicuous meaning of *ghar* emerges from the everyday encounters between bureaucrats and ordinary citizens. The Mughal scribe-soldier documentary dialogue investigated here traces the genealogy of this modern-day interaction. This fleeting, yet routine, dialogue captures how different social groups' senses of belonging changed as they moved between one ecological and cultural zone of the subcontinent to another. Even today, this bureaucratic interrogation of one's father's name and the place identified as home is followed by a further inquiry about the surname, —a crucial signifier through which people make sense of and slot each other into varying social categories across the subcontinent. These three inquiries may be followed up by clarifications of birth place, residence, caste, language, and so forth. At the heart of this encounter lies the naming of one's home(s) or *ghar* to a state agent, capturing experiences of internal migration, displacement, and circulation in the present and the past. The social context and processes that produced the Mughal descriptive roll remind us of its purpose as a premodern identity card of sorts, not one held by the bearer but one preserved at different sites of registration, where it was held for future uses by different offices that dispensed the state's revenues in the form of a salary.⁹ Given the documentary record from the Mughal Deccan, it would be ahistorical to think that this kind of encounter—where a state agency interrogates subjects to derive mutually understood, but not always stable, social identifications—was unique only to the last two hundred years of South Asian history. And yet, this assumption has been prevalent in decades of scholarship.¹⁰ Through a fragmentary documentary trail I explore here the lineages of this type of encounter between state and subject and suggests ways forward for writing the history of caste in circulation across precolonial Mughal South Asia.

FROM IDEAL TO PRACTICE: WRITING THE MUGHAL MUSTER

The Mughal army occupies an almost mythical status in the historian's imagination of premodern India.¹¹ In its prime, contemporary observers were also enthralled by its sight. In the late 1620s, the Persian émigré poet Hakim Atishi (whom we will meet in chapter 5), who settled in Bijapur, recounted the imperial army marching toward the city of Gulbarga in the northern Deccan so vast and

limitless that all the world's muster writers could not account for its sum (*sipāhī ke lashkar nawīsān-i dahr / ze jama 'hisābesh naburdand bahr*).¹² Atishi observed an everyday task, the accounting of thousands of Mughal soldiers performed by inconspicuous muster masters or *lashkar nawīs*, also known as *chehrah nawīs* or *chehrah āqāsī*—military scribes who counted, described, and cataloged pairs of men and horses. The muster master, along with other staff, produced many kinds of documents to keep track of human and animal resources on the Mughal Decan warfront which, by the early to mid-seventeenth century, included four *sūba* or provinces—Khandesh, Berar, Aurangabad, Telangana and lay north of the River Krishna (see Map 4).

Detailing the identities of thousands of man-beast pairs with both individual and dual characteristics stands in stark contrast to the Mughal army's legendary ineffability, captured in Atishi's observation above. Innumerable muster rolls scattered across the subcontinent unintentionally give face to the nameless troops and cavalry units that traversed vast distances across the subcontinent. Muster rolls survive in such large numbers partly because they functioned as valuable stand-ins for pay slips transferable to the soldier or his lord as cash salary at stipulated intervals. To do so, state agents produced a standardized, portable inanimate object, creating a correspondence between moving humans and animals and profiles on paper.

So how did people, in an era long before thumbprints, photographs, and QR codes, recreate the likenesses of individuals on paper and why? Akin to modern objects like the driver's license that lists the color of a person's eyes, hair, and birthmarks, along with their photo, address, and signature, the muster roll recorded an ordinary soldier's physiognomy, together with his social background, through a sequence of formulaic phrases. Producing a person's exactness on paper may seem impossible in the age before print and photography, but preindustrial states devoted innumerable human and material resources to producing documents that did so with great care.

From the muster to portraiture, we now know that the Mughals were obsessed with knowing who people were.¹³ Scribes were not simply describing a soldier's and horse's outer forms but gauging whether they were fit for service, at times noting whether personnel were worthy of promotion based on their moral and physical characteristics. Mughal musters are reflective of wider physiognomic practices and enumeration in the early modern world, but the practice of describing man and horse together on a single page also sets them apart from contemporaries. From the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, several studies have investigated the meanings of physical descriptions—from sailors to slave sale registers and manumission documents. For example, recording *hilya* or a description of the face was part of a long pre- and early Islamic textual tradition of *'ilm al-firāsa* or the art of reading physiognomy, which sought to connect outer characteristics with the inner qualities and moral attributes of a slave.¹⁴

Imperial scribes judged skin tone, scars, nose and eyebrow shapes, eye color, length of facial hair, and moustaches to be able to slot people into categories. Muster rolls enabled early modern regimes to confirm that a soldier and his horse actually existed, so that revenues could be disbursed to household chiefs who paid for soldiers' salaries and the maintenance of horses. These unique pieces of paper bound two individual creatures, man and horse, whose identities were both separate and united, into a mutually dependent relationship. Like modern identity documents that follow prescribed procedures, the muster roll was written with precision and its appearance reflected this; moreover, it adhered to formula or standardized conventions. In what follows, I describe the muster roll's materiality (texture, layout, ideal format, and formulaic language) and its documentary ecology and lifecycle, before turning to the difficulties, gaps, and everyday obstacles encountered in actually producing it.

In a sample of 2,438 musters from the 1630s to the 1660s, roughly 8 percent or 203 musters are of *khāssa mansabdār* (rank-holding household chiefs paid directly from the imperial treasury), all of whom were from the lowest ranks of Mughal nobility (below the rank of three hundred *zāt*/one hundred *sawār*), while the remaining 2,235 are musters of *tābinān* or retainers/troopers affiliated with a single *mansabdār* (rank holder).¹⁵ A *mansabdār*'s dual numerical rank included *zāt*, which indicated his position and salary in the imperial hierarchy, and *sawār*, which showed the number of horsemen the official was required to maintain in service. Provincial documents from the earliest period of Mughal presence in southern India shed light on the military's lowest echelons, who were far removed from the world of the ruling elites with ranks above one thousand, which previous studies have focused on.¹⁶

Mughal Deccan administrative documents measure around eight by four and a half inches and were written in the notoriously difficult to read *shikastah* (literally meaning broken) calligraphic style on unsized paper made from cloth detritus. Even after four hundred years of use, reuse, and damage, the appearance of these sheets is very white, consistent, and of high quality, suggesting the paper used for administrative documents was not cheap to manufacture and access to it was limited to specific offices and officeholders. Unsized paper, used for writing musters and related documents, is burnished and its fibers absorb ink to penetrate deeper than the paper's surface, which then prevents forgery and alteration. Sized paper used for manuscripts, on the other hand, allows for rewriting and corrections.¹⁷ We find no marks of corrections, crossing out, rubbed ink in Mughal musters from the seventeenth century.

The unforgeability of administrative paper was, however, no guarantee against the production of fake documents. Because they served as proxy pay slips, a descriptive roll could be forged for the sake of collecting salaries for men and horses who did not exist! Hinting at the dissonance between the actual, physical, and abstract paper presence of Mughal soldiers, one mid-eighteenth-century

observer, perhaps from disbelief, noted imperial forces in Delhi as being *mawjūdī, nah kāghazī* or “actually present, not merely on paper.”¹⁸ While changes on a written muster were almost impossible to make, the evil of false musters is something that even the colonial historian William Irvine lamented, citing it in the etiology of imperial decline in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ But, as we shall see in the subsequent discussion, improvisation was characteristic of the office of mustering and branding at the very outset of imperial expansion in southern India in the early seventeenth century, as scribes and inspection staff dealt with the problem of absentee soldiers who failed to report for mustering.

The use of space, format, layout, and the different hands detectable on a page reveal the descriptive roll’s multiple functions and stages of reuse. Given the modest size of low-level provincial documents, space on paper was a precious resource. These materials were quite unlike Mughal decrees (*farmān*), written on long and grand rotuli, with wasteful broad line spacing, exquisite calligraphy, meant for the purpose of being read aloud at court, what in the Fatimid context Marina Rustow has called “instruments of performance.”²⁰ Unlike higher classes of documents meant for public viewing, the muster circulated within the restrictive and everyday paper ecology of a provincial military bureaucracy. Lines of text were closely spaced and designated to be written on particular sections of a sheet’s front and back. Provincial scribes had neither the white space nor the energy to impress listeners in court, so they wrote with economy and brevity, squeezing in as few words as possible to capture the soldier’s body and being. They were more concerned with generating descriptive rolls with accuracy and efficiency than with producing narrative or explaining cause and effect information, which historians can more easily extract from other classes of documents and literary materials.

All Mughal administrative documents consist of several blocks of writing on the back and front of the sheet, each with different types of information. Let us cast our eye to the top of the document first. At the center top, a header of three to four stacked lines identifies the genre or type of document (*‘arz-o-chehrah/fihrist-i mullāzimān*), the office holders or level of staff the document was concerned with (*khāssa mansabdār/tābinān*), and the site where it was produced (Burhanpur/Malwa/Daulatabad). The title and main descriptive section are oriented horizontally on the front side. The extension of single letters in words enabled scribes to space each line and organize their writing. All the text in each writing block follows a nested baseline, with words stacked on top of each other toward the end to save space and fit in as much as possible. Turning to the back side, we find that not all text blocks are oriented horizontally, with later endorsements (*zimm*) and commentary (*sharh*) on the back written diagonally with an upward orientation. Endorsements named individuals who provided surety for the person whose descriptive roll was being recorded and the commentary explained what actions had been taken. The breed and condition of the soldier’s horse was noted on the

document's obverse along with a mark (*dāgh*), which was also branded onto the horse's hindquarters.²¹

Administrative paper was stored and used on multiple occasions. Signs of reuse on the page indicate at least two stages of use—the first when the paper was issued, sealed, and authorized for a particular office; in that case, a circular *nasta'liq* seal was placed in the top right corner. Right below the seal or next to it, we see the generic phrase *muwāfiq-i asl ast* meaning true copy, written in a hand different from the main body text of the document. The difference between the original (*asl*) and duplicate (*naql*) copy manifests itself as archival notation on the muster's page as well. The document's reverse indicates the second time the paper was used to verify soldier and horse. After two to three months, the copy would be verified against the mark on the horse's hindquarters with the day, month, and year using the formulaic phrase *muqābalah namūd* written on the back, left edge of the document.

As with men and horses, the quality of writing and description on musters corresponded to hierarchies in the imperial army. Not all were written with care and precision, there being variable levels of detail on different rolls for each type of military staff and service. Three classes of *chehrah* include around 203 musters of imperial rank holders paid directly from the treasury (*khāssa mansabdār*), with their numerical (*zāt*) and cavalry (*sawār*) rank sometimes recorded. These higher-status *khāssa* musters were written in better quality, darker ink and in a more legible hand than the over two thousand lower musters of horsemen (*tābinān*), written in weaker ink with a much quicker hand. In a third set of musters, we find a broad variety of military personnel (*ahshām*) with specialized occupations, followers, and infantry. These specialized military personnel include mounted matchlockmen or musketeers (*barqandāzān*),²² infantry (*piādeh*), cavalry (*sawār*), musketeers (*bandūqchī*), and menial servants who were village musicians (*shāgird pesha bajantārī*), archers (*daig andāzān*), and other laborers, who had musters written with a quicker hand, containing the fewest physiognomic details.

We may now turn to the established norms for creating a correspondence between the soldier's face and horse's body with what was on paper. What rules did the muster master follow while creating a description? The template and formulae for writing *chehrah* can be found in contemporary administrative manuals. In his *Siyāqnāma*, Delhi-based Khatri litterateur Nand Ram Mukhlis (ca. 1697–1750) laid out instructions for describing the countenance not just of soldiers and horses but a whole range of objects from elephants, camels, and bulls to different kinds of weapons, daggers, swords, guns, armor, and articles of clothing.²³ The manual's section, which is titled "*dar bayān-i nigāresh chehrahāye bāyad dānist*," noted what to pay attention to when recording these short portraits. Mukhlis starts with a sample description of a certain individual—"Muhammad Beg, son of Hasan 'Ali Beg, son of Razaq Beg, from the *qaum* of *mughal turkmān* [Mughal Turkmen], a resident of Mashhad, of wheatish complexion, broad forehead, open eyebrows,

sheep-eyed, long-nosed, with a black beard and moustache”—and then outlines each facial feature’s possible ways of description.²⁴

The manual lists parts of the face with the set of words appropriate for their description: complexion (*dar bayān-i rang*), forehead (*dar bayān-i pishānī*), eyebrows (*abrū*), eyes (*chashm*), nose (*bīnī*), cheeks (*‘āriz wa rukhsār*), temples and locks of hair (*shaqīqeh wa zulf*), ears (*gūsh*), lips and chin (*lab wa zankhandān*), beard and moustache (*rīsh-o-burūt*), and height expressed in terms of the soldier’s age (*qad*). The location of birthmarks (*masseh*), moles (*khāl*), wound scars and whether they were from a gun, sword, or spear (*zakhm-i shamshīr/tufang/barchī*), branding marks (*dāgh*) and smallpox scars (*dāgh-i chichak*) on any part of the face had to be recorded. A limited range of adjectives and phrases could be used to record each part. Eyes, for instance, could fall into the following six categories—deer-eyed (*āhū chashm*), sheep-eyed (*mīsh chashm*), blue-eyed (*azraq*), cat-eyed (*gurbeh chashm*), cataract (*gul chashm*), and blind (*kūr*). Eyebrows could be either joint (*pivastah*), slightly joint (*qadrī pivastah*), or unjoint (*uftadah abrū*), while complexion could be wheatish (*gandum rang*), greenish in color (*sabzfām*), white (*safīd pūst*), or reddish (*sorkh pūst*).

As with soldiers, the terminology for recording horses was specific—with combinations of colors and patterns: dark red (*nīleh surang nīleh*), streaked with grey lines or brindle (*turaq turaq lākvardī*), reddish or chestnut (*surang surmayī surang*), red and black mixed or bay (*ablaq mishkī ablaqī surang*), or greenish brown stripes or grullo (*turaq kishmishī turaq*). Specific terms for unique patterns on the animal’s forehead signified particular kinds of horses:

If the forehead is black and has stripes of red with some white [*turaq-i surang wa andak safīd*], record it as *nīl*. And, if the forehead is white and all four hands and legs are also white [stockings up the leg], write down *pechakliyān*.²⁵

Prescriptions in a manual bring us to the process and ideal steps for creating the muster. The scribe, reflecting on the soldier and horse standing in front of him, might have seen man and animal with a mixture of these characteristics and made modifications to prescribed descriptions. While the muster’s first part required asking the soldier specific questions about his father’s name, regions, and place(s) of residence, its latter part, with the physical description, probably did not entail any dialogue or interrogation, with the scribe merely looking and selecting phrases to create the soldier’s physical description on paper. The language of description—Persian—especially in its formulaic documentary form, was probably not familiar to most soldiers. Part of this encounter may have unfolded in Dakkani or Hindawi, panregional idioms that soldiers may have been somewhat familiar with, in addition to other languages they spoke, such as Marathi, Telugu, and Kannada.

In its ideal form, the office of branding and mustering observed a few sequential steps which had been streamlined in 1573 during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). This shift in military recruitment is frequently recounted in

administrative manuals and chronicles.²⁶ By the time the Mughal army moved toward the northern Deccan in the 1630s, these procedures were standardized with a clear division between those who were documented and those who produced the document. Regular soldier mustering and branding of horses established the basis on which Mughal military commanders drew a salary in the form of revenue assignments or cash. Soldiers were supposed to produce their horse along with their weapons, which they owned or could borrow from their military commander.²⁷ Depending on an officer's location, whether at court or in a province, anywhere from a fourth to a third of his horsemen were supposed to show up for mustering in order for the officer to draw salary. Failure or delays in doing so could result in the loss of up to a fourth (*chauthāi*) of his pay. The officer would have to return a portion of his pay according to the number of days he had delayed in branding, even in cases where a horse died between the date of verification and the date of branding.²⁸

Scribes and inspectors had well-defined functions. A separate department under a provincial paymaster (*bakshī*), along with a superintendent (*dārogha*), was responsible for the verification of brands (*dāgh-o-tashīhah*). The *bakshī* was not stationed in a single place but circulated with army units to different sites to supervise the branding of horses, while frequent orders were issued to the clerk (*mutasaddī*) for branding and verification of select individuals.²⁹ In branding certificates, we see frequent mentions of the names of the superintendent (*dārogha*), assessor (*amīn*),³⁰ and an officer who authenticated accounts and documents (*mushrif*).³¹ The *dārogha* would decide if the horse was healthy and permit the brand to be applied, sign the muster with a date and the phrase "one man and horse(s) were verified" (*yak nafar wa rās ba tashīhah rasīd*). A certificate with the seals of the *dārogha*, *amīn*, and the *mushrif* was issued to the military commander whose men had been inspected. Most musters from the Deccan are copies from the office of the provincial paymaster, who would have retained duplicates for the second inspection, which was supposed to take place after a gap of two or three months. In some instances, the seal corresponds with the name of lower-level officers, such as that of the *mushrif*, whose names are also mentioned on the page.³²

The muster functioned within a wider documentary ecology; its functions were enhanced by a number of auxiliary documentary forms. A second layer of materials supplemented the muster roll and the horse's branding certificate (*dāgh nāma-yi aspān*) by attesting and transmitting summaries to other offices and reporting on different households that served in distinct military occupations. The provincial centers in Daulatabad and Burhanpur received some summaries, such as the report of branding and verification (*roznamcha-yi dāgh-o-tashīhah*). Death certificates for horses (*saqtī nāma-yi aspān*) were issued to the persons who had been assigned to ride them.³³ An auxiliary class of materials, unique to provincial administration, includes several kinds of summary indices (*fihrist*) that confirmed appointments and salary increments. These single sheets of paper show multiple

dates of use that recorded changes in service and salary for generations from one or more households that had been in service, suggesting they were modified for future recordings.

Archival notation suggests these *fihris* or personnel lists were likely part of larger bound registers as they are marked with a folio number in upper-left-hand corners, indicating they were filed as part of larger sets or series of documents.³⁴ Unlike in the Ottoman context, full registers have not survived intact from Mughal India.³⁵ But endorsements on the back of the lists suggest different sites within the province through which the registers would have moved, while also including comments by high-level imperial agents on salary or rank increases granted.³⁶ While lists of imperial servants (*fihris-i mullāzimān*) employed in various occupations at checkpoints and forts show changes in salary, rank, and grants, a supplementary diary of branding and verification (*fihris-i roznamcha-i dāgh wa tashīhah*) attested the day-to-day activities of the office of mustering. One such *fihris*, for instance, recorded the service changes of two households—one of Muhammad Arab, Kamaluddin Turbati, a macebearer (*gurzburdār*), and the other of Muhammad Sharif and the other sons of Khwaja Nad ‘Ali Sabzwari, who formerly served as *wāqī‘a nawīs* (intelligencers or news writers) under Prince Aurangzeb. Endorsements (*zimm*) and commentary (*sharh*) on the back noted the *sūbadār* or provincial governor Shah Nawaz Khan’s evaluation of the son, Muhammad Sharif, as a young, industrious man, endorsing that his rank should be increased to one hundred *zāt* and fifteen *sawār*.³⁷ These summary indices supplemented the physical descriptions of military staff recorded on muster rolls. Therefore, a vast array of auxiliary documentary genres—from reports, branding certificates, summaries, and lists—were generated to affirm the work of mustering and branding. Copies were moved within provincial offices and stored for multiple uses.

Meticulous details on the muster belie the difficulties that arose in its production. Comparing the ideal imperially mandated processes of mustering against actual practices suggests that scribes and soldiers interrupted, modified, and adjusted their work to regional exigencies, thereby modifying imperial institutional mechanisms. We see central imperial institutions persisting despite changes in environment and social context, with regional constraints requiring the improvisation and adaptation of standardized practices. Military scribal staff modified norms to keep up with the task of tracking soldiers, weapons, and animals on a precarious battle front. In such circumstances, problems of staff shortages and soldier desertion also prevented formal procedures from being fully implemented.

In practice, the prescribed norms of mustering and branding had to contend with constraints on the ground and everyday modifications of imperial orders. One memorandum (*yāddāsht-i chehrah*), from January 19, 1638, emphasized the validity of musters produced for a certain Muhammad Rafi ‘, son of Muhammad Shafi ‘ in Ellichpur, in contradiction to an imperial *farmān*. The imperial order had stipulated that all troops should have their horses branded at Daulatabad (which

lay more than three hundred kilometers southwest of Ellichpur); the original descriptive rolls and branding certificates (*chehrah nawīs wa dāgh namūdah asl*) with the seal of the *sūbadār* were to be sent to the imperial court. It also added that a *mansabdār* should preserve the duplicate muster for himself (*naql rā pish-i khud nigāh dārad*).³⁸ The muster leaves (*awrāq-i chehrah*) brought by Muhammad Rafī‘, despite being produced at the wrong place, were to be considered valid. The muster roll was written and copied for multiple sites of preservation with at least one set of copies entering the personal archive of the lord whose men and horses were being inspected and identified.³⁹ Fixing mustering at one site was a problem because scribal staff were not always available. Imperial orders were therefore adjusted to these everyday challenges as long as the eventual outcome of mustering and verification was reached. The gap between the development (ideal) and implementation (practice) was real and accretive. Even so, the adjustments made on the ground to deal with practical difficulties did not undo the office’s main purpose, which was to track and control the movement of human and animal resources.

Memoranda commenting on branding and mustering reveal fraught relationships between different officeholders responsible for branding and inspection, contending over what fell under each scribe’s and inspection official’s purview. The skilled staff who could produce the muster with its prescribed formulae and codes were stretched thin on a battle front. In an undated memorandum, a *chehrah nawīs* voiced a complaint against his superiors:

When this humble servant writes the muster, the *amīn* compares and checks [*muqābalah namūdah*] which horse is *turkī*, *yābū*, and *tāzī*. After that, the *dārogha* compares it and sends it for branding. If by any chance, there happened to be differences, the *dārogha* and *amīn* discuss it and let the *chehrah nawīs* know. So, my request is that an order be issued to the *dārogha* and *amīn* [to work with me] and that if there are differences at the time of verification, they too should be held answerable, as per their responsibility. Although this humble servant writes the muster, these two individuals should be comparing as well as taking greater care and caution for the correct entries of the verification.⁴⁰

From the muster master’s perspective, he was responsible only for writing the description, not for verifying whether it was accurate. The *dārogha* and *amīn* were responsible for inspecting and checking the correspondence between paper and men and horses. The scribe recognized the limits of his ability to describe a person accurately on paper. Given such disagreements between military personnel, it should come as no surprise, then, that instead of the stipulated six months, one year to one and a half years, the gap between the original and the second date of branding in actual muster rolls is much longer. They show intervals of three to five, and sometimes as great as seven years.⁴¹ Across different sites where the imperial army was spread out, mobility posed a reoccurring problem and limited the ability of still-evolving institutional mechanisms to inspect resources at regular intervals. Moreover, successfully fixing a location for branding horses and ensuring that the

dārogha and *amīn* actually turned up also proved to be an obstacle to mustering in line with formal procedure.⁴²

The exasperation evident in the above scribe's complaint sometimes translated to the common practice of deserting posts. When a *chehrah nawīs* fled, the work of branding and mustering was assigned to *topchī* or the commissaries of ordnance who, along with the *dārogha*, were put to the task. But, with the *topchī* also absent, *mewrah* or runners who carried messages between different forts and occasionally served as soldiers, were told to attend to branding.⁴³ From the *topchī* to the superintendent to the messenger, no other staff but the muster master actually knew how to formulate a descriptive roll. Highly specialized scribes were the only ones who could differentiate personnel in a moving army, enabling the incorporation of new social groups into what it meant to be Mughal. However, the scarcity of scribal labor meant that implementing imperial aims in a war front was often checkered with logistical challenges. Even high-level imperial actors witnessed these daily challenges. They acknowledged the Deccan sultanates' continued resilience more than fifteen years after their formal subjugation, attempting to implement several different measures to increase the region's revenues.⁴⁴ Mustering and branding lay at the core of maintaining conquest and territorial expansion. Hence, its inadequate implementation, the dearth of soldiers turning up for branding, and scribes fleeing their posts alarmed Mughal officials.⁴⁵ Ideal Mughal infrastructures, described in stationary chronicles and manuals, when viewed from the ground up through mobile documentary cultures, show that while centralization was required, even desired, actually realizing it was another matter.

The frequent image of absent soldiers and absent scribes raises questions about the human interactions that underlay the muster roll—when soldier and scribe did meet, what kind of questions were asked? How far did the soldier's self-identification match the scribe's description? Perhaps just as comic relief from the tedium of describing mundane imperial procedures, the seventeenth-century Venetian traveler Nicolò Manuzzi recounted one such encounter between a *kāyasth* (Hindu scribal caste) clerk and a soldier:

In Shāhjahān's time a soldier went to draw his pay, and the official, who was a *kāyasth*, could not attend to him at once, as he was busy. The angry soldier threatened him, saying he should have to smash his teeth with his sword. The official said nothing, and paid him; then, jesting, said that with his pen he could do more than he with his sword. The sharp-witted scribe, to get his revenge for the menace, wrote in the book where was entered the soldier's descriptive-roll that he had lost two of his front teeth. For it is the practice in the Mogul country to write the names and personal marks of those who are employed. Some months elapsed, and the soldier appeared again for his pay. The clerk opened the book and found by the description that he was not the man entitled to that pay, for he had two front teeth more than were recorded in the register of descriptive rolls. The soldier was put to confusion; his protests and

arguments were unavailing; and seeing no other course if he would not lose his pay and his place, he was obliged to have two front teeth extracted to agree with the record, and in that way got his pay.⁴⁶

Whatever the veracity of this account may be, the written word lay at the center of interaction between scribe and soldier. While most conversations between scribe and soldier probably included a standard, routine set of queries and were perhaps less cantankerous than the one above, the act of description was fraught with challenges. How were the soldier's answers heard and then modified, adapted, and translated on to paper? The scribe quickly pared down the soldier's answers into the information required in the muster's minimal format, without losing the details and specificity of what he had just been told. Physical descriptions of man and horse constituted just one portion of the muster. The scribe would not simply have had to look at the soldier; he would also have had to ask specific questions about how many generations a family had served in the imperial army, about the regions and place(s) of the soldier's origin, residence, and occupations, and about the ethnonym with which the soldier identified himself. The next section of this turns to this portion of the interrogation between state agent and subject that generated an array of social identifications on the muster roll. This everyday catechism between scribe and soldier was the fundamental building block that came long before singular notions of clan and community defined what it meant to be a Mughal.

INSCRIBING THE MUGHAL SOLDIER: NAMING, ETHNICITY, AND IDENTIFICATION

It is well known that a diversity of ethnic, linguistic, regional, and occupational groups constituted Mughal South Asia's social fabric. On administrative documents, scribes used the Arabic term *qaum* with a range of meanings—for example, *people*, *family*, and *kindred*—to define caste.⁴⁷ Under the broader umbrella of the term *Mughal*, scholars distill roughly seven to eight categories of “subnational or ethnic,” “caste and community” or “racial group”: Irani, Turani, Indian Muslim, Rajput, Afghan, Deccani, and non-Muslims or Miscellaneous. These aggregate categories, however, do not appear exactly as such on the musters. What we find on the document are many variations, reversals, and cross-cutting combinations of these ideal classifications. In political histories, we hear of such groups as opposing elite court factions battling for power in capital cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, and Bijapur.⁴⁸ But, what did these social identifications mean to ordinary subjects and how did they hear and utilize the terms, if at all? A single phrase on the muster roll, usually written after the soldier's name, such as *qaum-i rājpūt chauhān or jamā'at-i maratha bhonsle* (referring to a people or group, modified by various identifiers of place, lineage, region, city, clan, and language), helps answer this question

by reconstructing what signifiers of ethnic terms may have meant to mobile premodern actors.

Modern-day notions of ethnicity are inapplicable to understanding resonant yet vastly different pre-modern understandings of this concept. In precolonial societies, “ethnicity” signified a broad set of categories, including lineage, agnatic derivation from a common male ancestor, kinship, language, religion, denomination, occupation, city, region, or family organization. On dynamic, porous battle fronts across the early modern world, neatly defined territorial, spatial units and seamless, vertical lines of descent did not determine how people, who were constantly on the move, identified themselves. Premodern states pathologized, recognized, and differentiated descent through multiple identifiers of place, residence, occupation, region, and language. Postnomadic empires incorporated warbands by tying itinerant mounted horseman to rulers through administrative and institutional mechanisms rather than hereditary lines of descent.⁴⁹ Historians of Timurid-Mughal dynastic lines have shown the utility of a range of horizontal social practices that tied different social groups to the imperial project. From the common practice of intrafamilial adoption, when wives of kings and high-ranking elites took the children of other kin into their household, to the custom of taking fosters (*koka*) for strengthening a ruler’s ties to Sufi lineages—all these practices illustrate how, in a patriarchal but extremely mobile society, different practices created new social identities.⁵⁰

We want to extend these questions explored at the level of the royal household to consider practices in the state’s everyday institutions that interfaced with other parts of society. Routine bureaucratic tasks of registration and verification produced definitions of who was who and how each person should be identified, categorized, and verified. Like other early modern imperial polities, Mughal institutions emboldened and schematized social hierarchies to enhance the state’s coercive capacities. Precolonial identifications had meaning. It was not as if any individual could shape-shift and become whosoever he or she pleased. In other words, precolonial identifications were neither “fuzzy” nor “fluid.”⁵¹ Historians have demonstrated that social classifications corresponded to fixed hierarchies in Mughal society.⁵² Some social groups were more valued than others (as were some groups of horses compared to other breeds), and the imperial government regulated the proportion of men belonging to his own group that a household chief could recruit.⁵³ For instance, an individual hailing from a certain city in Iran, who had settled in northern India and had joined the Mughal court, was unlikely to recruit soldiers who also hailed from the same place and region. Mughal *mansabdārs* had a variety of soldiers under them who often did not share a common social background with their lord or chief. Further, the ethnic identities of subimperial elites were hierarchically understood and they played prescribed functions in the imperial state.

So, what happened to ethnicity when armies of household chiefs and their soldiers crossed long distances? More conceptual categories were needed to clarify

and keep track of who was who. When the Mughal Empire marched south, everyday interactions of scribes and soldiers sorted out who got to be an outsider and who got to be an insider. A dizzying assortment of soldiers and scribes used ever-finer social categories to define themselves, regardless of the ideal and aggregate types laid out in Persian chronicles.⁵⁴

Broadly speaking, there were two types of soldiers in the Mughal army: “northern,” which included a variety of groups hailing from different parts of Islamicate Eurasia based in northern India; and “southern,” which included those recruited near or around the battle front within south-central India. The Mughal military recruitment was akin to a *khānazād* system within the army organization in which entire households or generations of families were often employed under a common male ancestor.⁵⁵ While contingents of northern horsemen generally did not have a shared background, regionally recruited southern cavalry enlisted in homogenous units, a recruitment pattern already prevalent in the Deccan sultanates. In other words, political loyalties were generally unbound by ethnicity; it was possible to serve under a lord or household chief with whom a soldier did not share a common social, cultural, or linguistic background. Scribes and soldiers heard, used, and modified broad, more essentialized labels, such as Rajput (along with clan modifiers such as Chauhan, Solanki, etc.) and Deccani, to cut across religious, regional, and ethnic lines. At the same time, groups like the Afghans, which served in both imperial and regional sultanates’ armies, transcended political boundaries. They enlisted in more homogenous units composed mainly of Afghans but they also served in heterogeneous contingents under non-Afghan chiefs.

How did scribes define the term *Mughal* and all the social groups that fell under this political unit when the very limits of this idea were expanding? Were imperial taxonomies simply replicated by provincial scribes or did the imperial army’s movement and circulation set off processes of realignment and widen the range of identification categories? The way we think about these diverse identifications in Mughal India is very different from the way in which we think about different social groups in modern South Asian nation-states today. The essentialized notions of ethnicity, lineage, territory, and religion that underlie today’s classification systems are often inapplicable to the plurality of identifications we find on precolonial documents. In what follows, I analyze broad patterns of how such categories appear on muster rolls to reveal the multivalent and capacious meanings of social groupings.

We may begin with the broadest term associated with the geographic south—the heavily-debated “Deccani,” the meanings of which evolved over time, depending on whom one asked or whom was being opposed in which historical context.⁵⁶ The label *Deccani* did not always correspond to city, language, clan, agnatic descent, or ethnicity. It was, at best, a regional and political category into which a whole range of groups—Afghans, Habshis, Marathas, and a variety of Muslims based in southern India—could belong because they had served in the Deccan

sultanates or had resided in the region that was not a part of Mughal Hindustan.⁵⁷ One royal order, dated June 26, 1668, stipulated that one fourth deduction be made on the salaries of all Deccanis who had served in Bijapur or Golkonda and later joined imperial service (*jamā'at-i dakhaniyān ke az bijāpūr wa haidarābād bā irādeh bandagī-yi khalāyaq panāh mī āyand*).⁵⁸ The only exception to this deduction was any person who had recently arrived from Iran who, instead of joining the sultanates, had come directly into imperial service. The term *Deccani* had little to do with religion or fixed notions of space, as it could include local- and foreign-born elite, whether Hindu or a Muslim, and could refer to someone with Central Asian, African, or Maratha descent.

There are seven variations, then, through which this broad term for southerner appears on Mughal musters—*dakkanī* (of the Deccan region), *rājput-i-dakkanī* (referring mostly to Marathas but sometimes also to Habshis or Abyssinians), *pandit zunnārdār dakkanī* (a Brahman or wearer of the sacred thread from the Deccan), *rājput chauhān dakkanī* (claiming descent from Chauhan lineage, referring to Maratha soldiers), *shaykhzada dakkanī* (a Sunni Muslim from the Deccan), *pandit dakkanī* (a Brahman from the Deccan), *rājput bhonsla dakkanī* (a Maratha of the Bhonsle lineage, from the Deccan). Among the retainers, of the 5,000/5,000 rank *mansabdār* Maloji Bhonsle were Kayyaji, the son of Ranguji, and Temaji, the son of Kanhaiyaji, both identified as *rājput chauhān dakkanī*.⁵⁹ We may presume, citing a Chauhan warrior lineage, that both these men were Marathas.⁶⁰ Based on these variations, we can conclude that the identifications for southern or regionally recruited cavalry exhibit one or more of four characteristics—region, occupation, lineage, and jāti.

Indo-Africans also used the capacious term *dakkanī* to identify themselves. While the term *maratha* occurs only three times in the over two thousand musters from 1641 to 1656, many other groups embraced the term *rājput dakkanī*, even non-Marathas, like Habshis or Abyssinians/Ethiopians, who had resided in southern India for centuries.⁶¹ For instance, among the Abyssinian commander Habash Khan's horsemen, *rājput-i-dakkanī* was used to describe Mansur and Daulat, his sons, while other soldiers in his unit were identified with the more specific phenotypical label of *habshī*, an Arabic term used to identify Indo-Africans of Abyssinian or Ethiopian descent.⁶²

Retainers under southern *mansabdārs* shared their chief's social background, a regional recruitment norm prevalent in the Deccan sultanates. From the twelve musters for troops under *mansabdār* Narsoji Dhangar, for instance, ten soldiers identified as *dhangars* (cattle herders and shepherds from western India),⁶³ and two remaining ones as Marathas (*rājput dakkanī*), but both groups were broadly from the same region in the western Deccan.⁶⁴ Roughly 60 percent of the 154 musters of troops, under the 5,000/5,000 rank Maratha *mansabdār*, Maloji Bhonsle, hailed from the Deccan (identified with the following variations: *rājput dakkanī*, *rājput chauhān dakkanī*, *pandit zunnārdār dakkanī*, *rājput bhonsla dakkanī*).⁶⁵ The

imperial army embraced preexisting patterns of military recruitment in the Deccan by recruiting contingents organized around region, occupation, and lineage.

Single occupations or forms of military labor were sometimes the basis for homogenous contingents in both imperial and regional armies. For instance, in the muster rolls from 1641 to 1654, certain types of specialized military work were assigned to one particular social group. Musketeers (*bandūqchī*) and mounted matchlockmen (*barqandāzān*) stationed in the Deccan were overwhelmingly identified as *rājput*. These distinct groups of military laborers had specific salary disbursements. For example, under the *rājput chauhān mansabdār* Ghansham (who held a rank of one thousand), out of a total of 121 mounted musketeers (*barqandāzān-i hindūstān*), only seven were not Rajputs from Baksar (present-day Bihar in eastern India). All of Ghansham's men were granted a monthly salary (*māhiyānā*) of four and three quarters rupees on the day their horses were branded.⁶⁶ Similarly, single hereditary occupational groups also constituted the Deccan sultanates' much smaller *khāssa* armies. Identified under the broad label of menial occupations (*shāgird peshā*), these included horse keeper or equerry (*sā'is*), water carrier (*pakhālī*), horse breeder (*kabādī*), torch bearer (*mash' alchī*), with fixed specific salary rates.⁶⁷ Therefore, specialized military occupations were the basis for more homogeneity among certain groups that often hailed from one region and shared a background.

Northern and southern recruiting systems fused together particularly through the use of the most common term for warrior groups—*rājput*—which defied the logic of religion and region. While historians have often defined Rajputs as Hindus, the actual identifications on muster rolls contradict the association of this dilatable social identity with religion.⁶⁸ The term *rājput* appears in several different forms, most frequently occurring as *rājput chauhān* (members of the Chauhan order with alleged descent from branches of the Chahmana lineage).⁶⁹ It modifies less frequently occurring clan names like *kachwaha*, *solānki*, *jadon*, *khokar*, *badgujar*, *bundela*, and even some curious combinations, such as *rājput-i kurd* (?) and *rājput-i zunmārdār* (a Rajput wearing the sacred thread, possibly a Brahmin Rajput?).⁷⁰ Half of the fifty-two musters with the identification *rājput chauhān* do not have Indic names, so we have no reason to assume that they were all non-Muslims.

Premodern names were not an essential indicator of religious identity. We find a great diversity of Indic and Islamic ethnonyms and exonyms on musters with the identification *rājput*. For instance, Dawood, son of Kalu, and Chand Muhammad, son of Noor Muhammad, served under the *mansabdār* Kar Talab Khan, and both men identified themselves as *rājput chauhān* when their horses were branded on March 14, 1648.⁷¹ Similar instances of Rajput Muslims can be found listed under other lineages like Kachwaha and Solanki.⁷² Although the identifications on the vast majority of the sample musters are not glossed with collective, abstract nouns

like *qaum* or *jamā'at*, occasionally these terms were used to clarify groups such as Solanki Rajputs, who could be Hindus or Muslims.⁷³

Moving onto the remaining northern soldiers, we see that far more intricate pluralities may be observed in the case of Iranis, Turanis, and Afghans. Unlike southern soldiers, these labels show finer variations of region, city, area of residence, agnatic descent, ancestry, language, and occupation. Under the broad category of Iranis and Turanis, which may also be understood as Tajiks (urban, settled elites) versus Turkic (nomadic military) groups,⁷⁴ we find city names and regions (Sistani, Khurasani, Badakshi, Ghaznawi, Tabrizi, Andijani, Mawaraun-nahri, Mashhadi, Isfahani, Turbati, Tashkandi, etc.), as well as various nongenealogical ancestries (Turkomen, Baharlu, Jalayir, Mughal Sadat, Mughal Barlas, Qalmaq, Jalayir, Arghun, and so forth). Examples of ancestries modified by place or language include Jalayir of Andijan and Chagatay Jalayir. Place name *nisbat* denominations were sometimes modified by ethnicity (Arab Bukhari) or sect (Sadat Bukhari), signifying a Central Asian Arab and a *sayyid* from Bukhara (in present day-Uzbekistan), respectively.⁷⁵ Such specifications of space, city, ancestry, and language identifications were entirely absent from southern troops.

The ethnic marker “Mughal” or Mongol also appears on musters as a category that bridges Iranis and Turanis.⁷⁶ Scribes and soldiers used the term Mughal along with modifiers of lineage, sect, city or region—Mughal-i-sur, Mughal Tuni, Mughal Mazandarani, Mughal Sadat, Mughal Sadat Husayni, Mughal Isfahani, Mughal Badakhshi, Mughal Musawi, Mughal Nahavandi. In a later context of the eighteenth century, Simon Digby also observed Central Asian presence in the Deccan through the saintly biography, *Malfuzāt-i Naqshbandiyya*, which produced in the Mughal provincial capital of Aurangabad.⁷⁷ He also noted the blurring of nomadic and sedentary ethnic divisions in the Deccan and the rather loose application of the label *Mughal* to both Iranis or Tajiks and Turanis or those of Turkic stock. Indeed, the *Malfuzāt* represents the culmination of a much longer Mughal military presence in the Deccan, already evident in the musters from the early seventeenth century, where ethnographic markers were well defined but evolved homologously during conquest. Thus, in the context of a moving imperial army, a certain second-generation Turani, Turktaz Khan Bahadur, could “adopt Maratha customs” while serving in the imperial army.⁷⁸ In some cases, Digby also discerned that certain *chehrah āqāsī* were exclusively appointed to record Turani soldiers’ rolls. To muster masters who had recently arrived from Mughal Hindustan in the 1630s and 1640s, specificities among northern soldiers may have, therefore, been more legible than the internal variations among southern troops.

Such variations are visible among Afghans, the only group that exhibits both northern and southern recruitment patterns.⁷⁹ That is to say, muster rolls show many Afghans serving in heterogenous contingents, not sharing the same background as their *mansabdār*, but also simultaneously enlisted alongside masses of

other Afghan soldiers in more homogeneous contingents under both Afghan and non-Afghan chiefs. For instance, all but two from the twelve surviving musters of 1,000/800 rank *mansabdār* Usman Khan Rohilla were labeled either Afghan or Afghan Khalil.⁸⁰ Contingents with a majority of Afghan soldiers also served under non-Afghan chiefs, such as 4,000/4,000 rank *mansabdār* Rashid Khan Ansari and his son, a *mansabdār* of 1,500/1,000 rank, Asadullah, who had more than 50 and 80 percent Afghan soldiers respectively.⁸¹ Ethnic-based military recruitment was, therefore, more prevalent among Afghans than Iranis and Turanis. Pre-existing Afghan settlements in northern India, established on the basis of different descent groups and lineages (coming primarily from what is today southeastern and southwestern Afghanistan), may have shaped Afghan soldier recruitment in the imperial army when it began moving towards peninsular India.⁸²

Scribes labeled Afghans with great precision. The word *Afghan* appears on musters by itself or modified by several other markers that signified agnatic descent (*tā'ifa* and *qabila*),⁸³ group (*gurūh*), and factions (*firqa*), as well as names of cities and regions within Mughal Hindustan and Central Asia. The first category of Afghan musters in our sample contains Pakhtun descent groups composed of many different lineages (*-zai* or sons of the purported apical ancestor Qays);⁸⁴ the second show affiliations to geographic regions and cities within and beyond Mughal Hindustan; and a third indicate cross-cutting with other overarching categories such as Turani and Irani, representing a very long process of Afghan ethnogenesis. Tajiks and Turks had long been absorbed into the aforementioned lineages, which do not signify static, fixed origins, but ones that were transformed further with the continuous movement of Afghans into the Indian subcontinent.

The second category of Afghan labels, citing cities and regions within and beyond Mughal India, demonstrate a process of gradual differentiation. Examples of labels with geographic modifiers include Afghan-i Turbati (in present-day Balochistan), Afghan-i Tabrizi (from Tabriz in northwestern Iran), Afghan-i Qandhari (from Qandahar in present-day southern Afghanistan). These locales, both near and far from the Afghan homeland, suggest that some geographic labels may refer to Tajiks or settled urban elites, a sizable minority that inhabited the Sulayman Mountains, alongside the aforementioned pastoral-nomadic lineages.⁸⁵ From geographic regions within Mughal north India, we find Afghan-i Kashi (from Benaras or Varanasi in northern India), Afghan-i Mewati (from Mewat, a region south of Delhi that spans the present-day states of Haryana and Rajasthan), and Afghan Rohilla (from the Rohilkhand region in present-day Uttar Pradesh in northern India). The third and last set of labels show cross-cutting and overlap with other overarching categories during a period when confessional and ethnic identities were in flux. These include Afghan-i Turki, referring to someone who could be from both a Sarwani/Yusufzai/Kakar and Barlas/Qipchaki ancestry.⁸⁶ Similarly, the label Afghan-i Bakhtiyari refers to people who cut across the nomadic versus sedentary dichotomy (i.e., people who held multiple occupations, such as herders,

merchants, and farmers) and variably identified themselves as Tajik, Pakhtun, or *sayyid*, depending on the context.⁸⁷ The wide variety of Afghan labels, associated with lineages, geographies, and multivalent ancestries, attest to the slow processes of ethnogenesis, an outcome of large population movements and circulation across transregional distances.

While the descriptive roll offers direct clues about soldiers' identifications, unearthing the social groups to which scribal staff belonged is nearly impossible from the documents themselves. Overall, very little can be said about who muster masters were or what their level of literacy was with the language of administration—Persian.⁸⁸ While musters offer intricate physiognomic and social portraits of the Mughal soldier, they offer no trace or definitive sign of the Mughal scribes who generated this documentary genre. Since we do not find any signatures or any attestations with scribes' names, the muster master's social identity is far more difficult to deduce from clues on the page. I have yet to come across names of provincial *chehrah nawīs* that might illuminate which social groups held this office in the Mughal military. While citing names of higher-level scribal clerks, such as *wāqī'a nawīs* (intelligencer), and inspection staff, such as the *dārogha*, *amīn*, and *mushrif*, was fairly common across different classes of Mughal documents, the muster master remained anonymous.⁸⁹

One possible reason for the lack of specificity in regionally recruited soldier identifications in comparison to northern soldiers may have had to do with the scribes who wrote the muster. In the formative period when military offices were being established in the 1630s and 1640s, northern scribes, such as Kayasthas and other literate groups, may have accompanied the imperial army to the battle front.⁹⁰ To them, the specificities of northern soldiers may have been far more legible than the internal differences between less familiar groups from the Deccan. Especially since regionally recruited horseman served in more homogeneous contingents, scribes rarely seem to have interrogated particularities of cities, regions, and clans. The full integration of Maratha Brahmins as a scribal class into Mughal military administration may explain why late seventeenth-century musters show greater detail and specification of place and region than the early and mid-seventeenth-century materials analyzed here.⁹¹ Prior to this period, more specific labels (names of regions, cities, denomination, agnatic descent, etc.) described northern soldiers while capacious labels (Deccani) defined regionally-recruited personnel. In the sample of over two thousand muster rolls from the 1630s to the 1660s examined in this chapter, the interplay between scribes' (administrative/literate) and soldiers' (lay/illiterate) understandings and uses of widely accepted identifications demonstrate the distance of new social groups from and their gradual incorporation into imperial institutions.

To sum up, what does the analysis of the aggregate and the minutiae on the muster tell us about precolonial understandings of social identifications? The way people saw themselves and others changed as they moved across new landscapes.

The need for ever-finer categories contradicts the ideal types we associate with being Mughal, embodied in the idea that precolonial India was a fully formed, static, and pregiven entity. We know the story of a Mughal Hindustan in the post-colonial nation-state's self-image, with a strong center that held in balance a variety of subjects.⁹² But the minute identifications on musters reveal multiple ways of being Mughal, with subnational or ethnic groups, crossing sectarian, lineage, and regional divides. The idea that social identifications have inherent absolute values and are self-contained borrows from nineteenth- and twentieth-century understandings of ethnicity and race that tie social groups to fixed notions of territory and kinship.⁹³ Linking identifications to territory, descent, language, and sect prevents us from appreciating the inherent mobility of social taxonomies in precolonial times, wherein the movement of large armies changed the way everyday actors used, invented, and understood social categories. Just as contingents of regional soldiers joined the Mughal camp, changing the usages of bureaucratic social taxonomies, regional polities also embraced imperial institutional mechanisms. The outcomes of early modern conquest were not merely ones of absolute opposition, erasure, or a single battle transforming a blank frontier into an imperial outpost overnight. Rather, a gradual process unfolded, which meant that materiality moved across political borders, setting off processes of borrowing and cohabitation between empire and region.

IMPERIAL AND REGIONAL INTERSECTIONS

Eclectic categories for social identifications do not tell the tale of porous pre-modern identities nor of a monolithic Mughal state that came from northern India, taking over everything in the south that stood in its way. Zooming out diachronically, when compared to scholarship on other periods of South Asian history (ancient and medieval), Mughal historians are not unique in pointing out the deviance and exceptionalism of southern India. As Janaki Nair has argued, the category of "south India" has operated as an eternal exception to attest to the normativity of northern India across many different historical periods, a persistent convention in the sub-continent's historiography.⁹⁴ Despite overlapping mechanisms of rule, a Mughal centrality pervades both regional and imperial historiographies and much of the story we know, especially of the seventeenth century, is one of Mughal ascendancy and Deccan sultanates' decline.⁹⁵

By investigating what muster rolls look like and what is actually in them, we learn that the social identities distilled by modern historians were often broken down by premodern state and subject or were absent altogether. Muster rolls show the emerging proximity and integration of Mughal-Deccan state forms. Instead of casting the Deccan as an anomalous region where Mughal ambitions came to die, the muster master's daily paperwork can be viewed as a process of institutionalization, whereby centralizing power structures adjusted to regional circumstances

and patterns of recruitment. Moving armies and their personnel brought the institutional mechanisms of northern and southern India closer to each other. On a layered war front, greater centralization required improvisation and incorporation of existing regional patterns of war-making for pansubcontinental soldier recruitment.

Looking at regional records closely, we find that mustering of men and horses was one practice the Deccan courts began to implement in the seventeenth century, possibly in emulation of the Mughals, but certainly owing to the intensification of military campaigns under regional households in the Hyderabad-Karnatak. Under imperial suzerainty, semi-autonomous regional elites increasingly challenged sovereign power, which necessitated the standardization of military recruitment. At the same time, as we saw through the examination of social identifications, the Mughal army absorbed regionally recruited contingents in which troops shared the same background as their chief, a feature of military organization in Deccan courts.

A reevaluation of Mughal presence in southern India requires that we place empire alongside coexisting regional political forms—that is, the independent, non-Timurid Deccan sultanates whose administrative-military structures came to intersect with Mughal norms.⁹⁶ Studies of soldiering in regional sultanates' armies are much more sparse than works on military recruitment in Mughal Hindustan, although scholars have drawn out the ideal, normative articulations of centralized military revenue collection systems in the Deccan sultanates.⁹⁷ In the sultanate of Bijapur, two administrative distinctions shaped soldier recruitment. Officials appointed to centrally administered districts called *mu'āmalā* or *qal'ah* were supervised by a havalḍār appointed by the sultan, while others were assigned to cultivable lands (*muqāsā*) in districts called *tappa* or *pargana*. There were several kinds of *pargana* administration, with smaller portions of land under the purview of hereditary subordinate territorial chiefs (*deshmukh/desai*), usually Maratha Brahmins, Lingayats, and other literate groups. Both aristocratic-military orders and hereditary officials maintained troops at their own expense, mobilizing them in times of war.⁹⁸ The vast majority of fighters under these chiefs were mercenaries with variable levels of control and ownership over their own weapons, horses, and equipment.⁹⁹ Unlike Mughal Hindustan, the Deccan sultanates did not have an elaborate *mansab* ranking system or an ideological structure that tied distinct aristocratic lineages to kingly power.¹⁰⁰

From the time of the Bahmanis (ca. 1347–1527) on, a stratification of power remained the norm in southern Indian sultanates well into the seventeenth century, with a very small portion of the army (*khāssa khayl*) maintained directly by the king. Aristocratic military and hereditary chiefs thus recruited and maintained much of the armed forces.¹⁰¹ For instance, on the eve of war with the Nizam shahs of Ahmadnagar in the late 1620s, the appointment of selected Golkonda commanders was determined through their social composition, occupation of

soldiers, and the kind of revenue assignment that an appointee had been given by the sultan:

‘Ali Khan Beg Afshar, who was one of the servants of *kevān pāsān* [Sultan ‘Abdullah Qutb Shah], was given *tankhwāh* [share of the revenue] of 10,000 *hun* [gold coin], had a hundred young valiant Turks [*sad jawān bahādur-i turk*] in his contingent. Maryam Beg Zulfiqar, who was also a high-ranking servant of this court, got a *jāgīr* of 10,000 *hun*, had under him a hundred mounted gunners [*sawār tufangchī*]. Muhammad Sayyid Badakhshi was a brave young man in service of the court. Two of these aforementioned men were given *tankhwāh*. Sayyid Babu and Malik Makh-dum Dakkani and few other brave men from the Deccan [*ahl-i-dakkan*] were also appointed as *sardārs* of *muqāsā* or cultivable lands and given *tankhwāh*.¹⁰²

Chiefs of distinct lineages, who were tied to regional sultans through revenue assignments, controlled troops with a shared background or specialization in the same type of military labor. In the late 1620s, one Maratha *sardār*, Vithoji Kantiya, who had lent support to the Golkonda sultan against the Nizam shahs of Ahmadnagar and the forces of Bijapuri minister Murari Pandit, reached the city of Hyderabad. Soon after arriving with his wife, sons, nephew, and close relatives (*zan-i vithojī wa pīsar wa birādār zādeh wa qarābitān*), along with an army of two to three thousand Maratha soldiers (*afwāj-i marāthā*), Vithoji fell ill and passed away. Praising his troops’ loyalty and devotion (*‘ubūdīyat wa fidwīyat*), Sultan ‘Abdullah Qutb Shah (r. 1626–72) then appointed Vithoji’s sons and nephew to a *jāgīr*.¹⁰³ This pattern of incorporating household chiefs, their extended kin, and troops was common across the sultanates and it intensified in the seventeenth century as more and more territories came within the penumbra of a layered Mughal imperial conquest led by regional families. With the sultanates accepting imperial suzerainty, military expeditions intensified—as did the contentions between regional sultans and the most powerful military chiefs, who often asserted their autonomy, mobilizing their armed contingents to fortify independent strongholds. At a palpable distance from regional sovereigns, with greater control over manpower and independent military resources, both imperial and regional regimes depended on aristocratic-military households to facilitate territorial expansion.

Consider the case of Bijapur, where this tension between kingly and aristocratic centralization came to a head in Sultan Muhammad ‘Adil Shah’s reign (r. 1627–56), specifically through the implementation of horse branding.¹⁰⁴ Unlike in Mughal Hindustan, in the Deccan sultanates there was no equivalent to the muster master’s office, as the authority to brand horses and muster soldiers was still delegated to each aristocratic-military household chief. An excerpt from a *dastūru’l-‘amal* or administrative manual, perhaps the only surviving one we have from the Deccan sultanates, stipulated the instructions for branding horses.¹⁰⁵ When first appointed to a *jāgīr* or *muqāsa*, each household chief had to count the number of horses and men under him, placing his individual branding mark on the horse (*‘alāmāt-i dāgh-i khud*). On the other hand, the horses of

ministers (*wazīr*) would have the royal branding mark (*dāgh-i sarkārī bādshahī*). When household heads appeared at court, they would report on their army's count and the condition of their troops in distant provinces. A chief or commander of counting (*zābīteh shumār*) would compare any previous counts and investigate any discrepancies. The manual prescribed that some minor carelessness could be overlooked but any grievous error should be reprimanded (*agar taghāfil kardanī ast taghāfil kunand agar tahdīd kardanī ast tahdīd numāyand*). If the horse had already been branded and confirmed to return to service for another household chief, the master of brands would refresh this brand with his own brand (*agar aspī dāgh zadeh shudeh sābit-i dīgar be chākrī rujū 'shavad sāheb-i dāgh dāgh-i khud bar ān dāgh tāzeh kunad*).¹⁰⁶ While directives to regularize branding may have come from regional sultans, semi-autonomous provincial elites held on to their own brands, controlling the authority to regulate men and horses. Contemporary evidence from the seventeenth century attests to this tiered hierarchy between sultans and household chiefs, with the latter responsible for branding while reporting on the armies' conditions to the king.¹⁰⁷ Faced with the growing assertion of aristocratic-military and hereditary territorial elite households, the Deccan sultans therefore attempted to centralize military administration and incorporate Mughal recruitment procedures.¹⁰⁸ Despite this attempt to standardize military recruitment, the authority to brand remained under the control of regional household chiefs.

To sum up, in regional sultanates, the number of troops directly controlled by the sultan was much smaller than the number of soldiers under lesser grandees or heads of military households. With the increase in military expeditions, attempts were made to reorganize armies through centralizing mechanisms such as branding. Military commanders and hereditary territorial chiefs recruited their own men, maintaining weapons and horses with relative autonomy from sovereigns. As discussed here, this pattern of regional recruitment—sharing the chief's social background—transformed the Mughal army's profile when it began to recruit contingents within peninsular India. In regional sultanates, the onus of branding and mustering still fell on the aristocratic-military and hereditary chiefs rather than in a bureaucratic office with multiple scribes and inspectors, as was the case in Mughal military encampments that lay across the River Krishna.

MATERIALITY AND MILITARIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The story of the muster does not end at the River Krishna in south-central India. The Mughal muster's materiality and mobility resonate well beyond the subcontinent. Everyday archival practices translated the innate human need for creating conceptual categories into portable objects that lay at the core of military bureaucracies across the world. To hear their echoes, consider for a moment the following

two musters from opposite ends of the globe, Potosí (in present-day Bolivia) and Burhanpur (in central India):

Pedro Juan Dávila native of the Villa of Madrid, tall of body, brown face, graying, with a gap between the teeth, of the age of twenty-two years, son of Pedro Dávila. Enlisted this same day, and is named as corporal of the Guzmáns & the Captain's squadron, he has his own harquebus and they gave him sixty pesos for two payments. [December 23, 1624]¹⁰⁹

Malik Ahmad, son of Malik Daulat, son of Malik Zainuddin, of the *qaum* of Rajput Solanki. resident of Burhanpur, wheatish complexion, broad forehead, open eyebrows, sheep-eyed, long nose, beard and moustache black, one mole on the cheek close to the nose, with one small pox mark on top of the abovementioned mole, one mole on the neck on the right side, piercing in the left ear, scar on the left eyebrow, *zât* of twenty-four or *chahâr bistî*, approximate age/stature of thirty-three years.

Striped horse, some white hair on the forehead, on the left lobe dry scars, on the hindquarter few less visible scars, with a white line on either side, Turki horse.

Dated on 9 Zu al-Qa' dah.

Of the 19th Regnal Year [December 17, 1645]

It was checked and declared that the horse has become infirm.¹¹⁰

It is of course the case that Malik Ahmad, a Rajput Solanki, resident of Burhanpur in central India, and Pedro Juan Dávila, originally from Madrid in Spain and residing at that time in Potosí in South America, never met in real time. Yet the descriptive template to translate these men onto paper, one in Persian and the other in Spanish, is strikingly alike. The soldiers are identified in terms of place, height, complexion, distinct facial features like moles and scars, their ages, and agnatic descent. While Malik Ahmad's description is paired with that of his horse, Pedro Juan Dávila was a harquebusier or foot soldier with a matchlock. Both were perhaps soldiers of fortune who offered their military labor to armies settling into new lands. Malik Ahmad moved between the frontier city of Burhanpur to military forts dispersed across south-central India that had recently come under Mughals, while Dávila crossed the Atlantic to reach the famous Andean silver-mining city of Potosí, then under Spanish rule.¹¹¹

The lives of Malik Ahmad and Pedro Juan Dávila were indeed connected, but not because they intersected in time and space. Rather, both lived in inland cities where imperial infrastructures were being implemented—Potosí and Burhanpur—centers of the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, places that connected the global flow of goods and people. Gujarati textiles made their way overland via Burhanpur to port cities on the western coast of India, where they were exchanged for silver coins from Potosí. The growing presence of two early modern empires shaped the social fabric and political institutions of booming commercial cities where different worlds and kinds of people collided. In Potosí, an ethnic clash between Basques and other groups starting in 1622 led to martial law in 1623–24, when 230 foot soldiers were rounded up and their musters produced.¹¹² In

Burhanpur, on the other hand, lords paid directly from the imperial treasury failed to send their soldiers for mustering and branding; among them, Malik Ahmad appears to have been a low-ranking chief with very few retainers of his own, moving from a modest numerical rank of twenty-four to eighty *zāt* in the Mughal army.¹¹³

In both these worlds, people, animals, and things had to be tracked and accounted for to make sure no one fled and nothing was wasted. While the language for recording Dávila and Ahmad's physiognomy resonates, their musters survive today in different archival modes. Unlike the palm-sized single sheet of Mughal documents, the Potosí musters were recorded in larger registers, part of a miscellany of expenses and costs listed in composite records that accounted for the use of crown money. Arguably, from sailors to slaves and convicts, versions of descriptive rolls may be found in the archive of any early modern empire, performing the work of tracking, counting, listing, and describing imperial resources.¹¹⁴ Large, bureaucratic, centralized empires across the early modern world created mechanisms for reading and categorizing humans into what we today understand as caste and/or ethnicity. This object captures the dynamic continuum from mercenary to the professional soldier that scholars have long argued cannot be viewed as a teleological transition or as a path to modernization.¹¹⁵ For the global historian, the prodigious scatter of Mughal musters embodies the unevenness, overlap, and improvisation shared across military recruitment systems in different contexts throughout the early modern world.

Event-marked portraits bring marginal military personnel into the imaginary of the historian who, on first glance, may find little story to tell from such materials. And yet, this portrait of the everyday work performed in the Mughal war front's military sites, has shown otherwise. Shaping the state from the bottom up, the quiet everyday interactions between rulers and ruled created change over time and space. Since their discovery in the early twentieth century, Mughal archives from southern India have been simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible in writing the Mughal past. Despite frequent citation of over "150,000 documents from the Deccan," these materials have remained relatively inconspicuous in studies of Mughal India.¹¹⁶ In part, this concurrent acknowledgement and elision emerges from the dissonance between what the historian expects to demonstrate from these materials and what the document actually places before us. Part of the difficulty is that these materials do not lend themselves easily to narrating the way that court chronicles or other more elaborate forms of writing such as stylized prose or *inshā'* or the records from *qāzī* courts allow. Despite these challenges, previous generations of historians and archivists laid the groundwork for examining Mughal documentary genres, particularly for verifying chronicle-derived narrative histories, which have remained the dominant way of writing the Mughal past. By mostly bracketing Persian chronicles, this chapter has reexamined one documentary genre on its own terms and within the context of its production in the Mughal-Deccan battlefield.

The muster roll bore witness to cultures of circulation and mobility, where ordinary subjects participated in empire's two core institutions—the military and the bureaucracy. This artifact unsettles the idea that the “pre-modern state was, in many crucial respects, partially blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity.”¹¹⁷ On the contrary; the Mughals were obsessed with knowing who people were, but not necessarily for the purpose of discovering the authenticity or the absolute value of a thing called identity. The muster represents a literate state's attempts to develop mechanisms of identification for keeping track of the itinerant soldier and his most prized asset, the horse, along with a whole host of other resources. At the heart of this identification lay the soldier's declaration of *ghar* or home, articulated through multiple signifiers of lineages of service, place, language, occupation, and region. The scribe had a part to play in schematizing the northern versus the southern soldier, marking different degrees of heterogeneity within these categories. Imperial institutions shaped senses of where one's home was and what the experience of circulating on a war front layered with multiple political formations meant. From these fundamental material and bureaucratic processes of circulation through which homes were named and identified, we journey, in the next chapter, to the regional capital city of Bijapur and the Kanara and Konkan coasts. Here, we consider the politics of *ghar* within one itinerant household that negotiated the limits of an imperial-regional warfront, while articulating shifting senses of belonging through polyvocal critiques of what it meant to make and unravel the home in the Mughal world.