The State at War in South Asia
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INTRODUCTION

Warfare and state building have been inextricably intertwined since prehistory. From the time of the great river valley civilizations wars have played a crucial role in determining the nature of a state. In recent times researchers such as William H. McNeill and Bruce D. Porter have studied warfare’s contribution to state building in modern Europe. What these works fail to address is how effectively these states have conducted military operations. Furthermore, these historians generally lump most of the Western European nation-states into one category. Their military success has more often than not been attributed to their abilities to harness the resources for war rather than to their armed forces’ innate operational abilities. This is not to say that there are no studies of individual armed forces’ military effectiveness. Case studies of the combat effectiveness of European states include Victor Davis Hanson’s works on ancient Greek warfare, Geoffrey Parker’s work on Spain’s army in the Netherlands, and John Keegan’s overview of the European armies from the medieval to the modern era. The main difference between these works and those by Porter and McNeill is that they concentrate on a particular time period and do not seek to offer a long-term evolutionary perspective on combat effectiveness.

What these works all share, however, is a generalized assumption about the nature of European warfare, specifically, that the “Western” way of war is inherently superior to the “non-Western” way. Hanson, in his book The Western Way of War, states that the fifth-century Greeks evolved a Western way of battle that called for a “decisive” confrontation between foot soldiers that sharply contrasted with the non-Western style of ambush, skirmish, ritual conflict, and single combat between heroes. Parker, in his landmark work The Military Revolution, notes that Western invaders were distinct from the tribal societies of America, Africa, and Asia in that they “fought to kill.” State-organized military forces like those of Mughal India were inferior to the West because they “remained[,] essentially, aggregations of individual heroic warriors.” This idea is further developed in Keegan’s A History of Warfare. In it Keegan articulates a clear distinction between “Oriental” and “Western” war cultures. He characterizes the former by evasion, delay, and indirectness with the central goal of restraint. In contrast, “Western” militaries celebrated the ruthless face-to-face battle. In the eighteenth century, when the gunpowder revolution added a technological edge to this style of
warfare, the final element in the superior Western style of warfare was put in place.\(^5\)

Perhaps the fullest expression of the Western military culture’s superiority is found in Hanson’s book *Carnage and Culture*. In it Hanson greatly expands his thesis on Western military superiority. He notes that in the 2,500 years since the Greeks introduced a decisive type of direct infantry confrontation, the West has continued to dominate the world with its military superiority. However, Hanson goes beyond a mere focus on the West’s military superiority; instead, he develops a comprehensive, albeit unconvincing, argument that the West developed a congruent superiority in intellectual, political, and economic arenas.\(^6\) A far more thought provoking and qualified study of military culture can be found in John Lynn’s book *Battle*. Lynn offers a more modest but ultimately far more prescient thesis that argues for the importance of the cultural approach to military history. What sets Lynn’s refreshing approach apart from the staid stereotypes of Hanson, Keegan, and Parker is his acknowledgment that each case study in his book is unique and does not fall into a neat Western or non-Western category.\(^7\)

The notion of inherent Western military superiority has even spilled over into the study of South Asian militaries. In his book *Societies and Military Power* Stephen Peter Rosen embraces Keegan’s and Hanson’s notion that the Western military establishment’s superiority comes from the societal structures that underpin it. However, Rosen’s thesis is more focused because he chose to concentrate on India rather than the entire “Orient,” and he based his case on a specific examination of the social structures generated from India’s caste system. Rosen’s central thesis is that Indian armies were always weaker than European armies because they maintained close links to Indian society. As a result, these armies reflected the caste and ethnic divisions that plagued Indian societies and could not match the European armies’ battlefield discipline and organizational stability.\(^8\) However, Rosen’s thesis does not consider that factors other than cultural and societal may offer more plausible explanations for the Indian military system’s weaknesses when compared to the West.

This book is an attempt to offer alternatives to the above-mentioned theses. Its focus is not on warfare’s role in state building but on how the state from prehistory to modern times has managed to wage war. In other words, this is an exploration of the state’s military effectiveness – another neglected aspect of the currently available studies of warfare and state building. Furthermore, the book examines South Asia as a case study. South Asia makes a compelling example for two main reasons. First, it has at different times since prehistory undergone long periods of isolation from external in-
fluences. Second, it has endured equally lengthy periods of foreign influence and domination. The central theme that runs through this book is an analysis of how the Indian state in its many guises has waged war. In order to accomplish this I have followed the relatively unorthodox step of combining detailed battle history with a general discussion of state building, politics, and strategy.

My attempt to construct battle history has several reasons behind it. First, a need exists to establish a clear picture of how a state’s strategic plans translate into operational reality. Without a qualified examination of the battles (i.e., the “operational art”) themselves, our understanding of military evolution in the subcontinent is essentially incomplete. Additionally, I want to regenerate interest in battle histories, seemingly a lost cause in the current historical trend. The few works that venture into South Asian military history focus exclusively on the region’s social and cultural development. A case in point is Seema Alavi’s The Sepoys and the Company. Alavi’s work, which concentrates on British India from 1770 to 1830, rejects the notion that military capability had anything to do with the East India Company’s dominance of North India. Alavi attempts to break away from “guts-and-glory” history by focusing exclusively on the East India Company Army’s social and cultural aspects. According to Alavi, the company’s ability to generate knowledge of “Indian customs and religious practices” through its recruitment of Indian soldiers enabled it to dominate North India. The study ignores the fact that the East India Company managed to engage in an exhaustive study of its sepoys’ customs and traditions only after its successful military domination of the North Indian powers.

Finally, Indian military history students have few scholarly studies of battle histories available to them. However, I want to point out that this book is only a small start in this massive undertaking. I readily acknowledge that many gaps exist in the battle reconstructions, especially in the prehistoric and medieval periods. There is a wealth of archaeological, epigraphical, and even archival material that remains untapped. My hope is that these battle studies will kindle an interest and desire in others to seize the baton in this quest. I also want to point out that this study’s limited scope restricts me from engaging in the meticulous battle reconstruction, which focuses heavily on individual soldiers’ experiences, that Keegan first introduced in his book The Face of Battle. Finally, this is by no means a comprehensive review of all the “major” battles, campaigns, and wars fought on the subcontinent. Instead, it examines only those conflicts that offer us the most insight into the introduction of new tactics, organization, and technology. As a result, some famous wars such as the sepoy rebellion or mutiny of 1857 have not been dis-
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On the other hand, I have examined in some detail engagements that have traditionally been considered “obscure.” A case in point is the Maratha-Afghan campaign of 1763, which culminated in the pivotal battle at Panipat in North India and witnessed an Indian state entity’s first large-scale use of European-style infantry armed with matchlocks.

To achieve its goals the book presents a considerable amount of historical data and analysis in thirteen chapters. These chapters have been categorized into six parts, which serve as the work’s periodization. Part 1 begins with the Indus Valley civilization, progresses to the early and later Vedic periods, discusses the classical period, and culminates with the medieval period. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the nature of state formation in addition to examining various Indian states’ war-making abilities. The chapters show that state formation and warfare proceeded hand in hand, feeding and indeed relying upon each other throughout this period.

Parts 2 and 3 deal with the British conquest of and empire in India. In a sense they constitute the book’s core because of the British bureaucracy’s excellent records, which are now freely available to researchers. Part 2 examines the wars of colonial conquest and devotes considerable attention to state formation and the intense military competition this process generated among the mutually competing Indian states and the British East India Company. Central to this part’s discussion is the introduction of Western professional infantry armies and civil bureaucracies to the subcontinent. Part 3 investigates the British-Indian Empire’s military system. Here the focus is not so much on state formation but on state building and its subsequent impact on the military. By the early twentieth century the Indian state had evolved a system of “dyarchy,” whereby the British controlled all aspects of the central government and the Indian nationalist politicians ran the regional governments. The maintenance, operational use, and indeed military effectiveness of the armed forces hinged on the often contentious debates between the British government in London, the British government in India, and the Indian nationalist politicians. Chapter 8 examines the evolution of the Indian army officer corps, which figured prominently in successive British-Indian governments’ plans to create a modern Indian army that would be capable of helping to police the British Empire and even to assist the British army against its European rivals. Part 3 concludes by analyzing how this particular colonial military legacy provided independent India with a relatively modern and professional army free of domestic political ambitions.

Part 4 covers the period from independence in 1947 to 1971 and focuses upon a chronological analysis of India’s major wars. I have restricted my examination to the various Indian Congress government’s nation-building pri-
orities from 1947 to 1971. This part examines the clash between the socialist economic policies of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the need for the rapid expansion and modernization of the armed forces in the face of multiple external threats. These chapters also discuss postcolonial civil military relations and their impact upon the military effectiveness of the armed forces.

Researching part 4 was challenging, although the hurdles were very different from those represented by part 1. Here the problem was not the lack of information but the censorship of available information. The Indian government has been loath to give independent researchers access to its military and politically sensitive civilian archives. To circumvent this roadblock I relied heavily on published material, including biographies, regimental histories, campaign histories, and investigative reports. Furthermore, the Internet now offers a relatively convenient venue for participants, observers, and researchers to publish their experiences and opinions. More importantly, this new publishing arena has proved to be difficult for the government to control and censor. Since a considerable portion of the battle histories in this part revolves around the three Indo-Pakistan wars, I have used comparative sources from each side to reconstruct the battles.

Part 5 includes a single chapter that examines internal insurgencies, regional interventions, and Himalayan border conflicts. These low intensity conflicts have engaged the Indian security forces since independence and represent the greatest threat to the Indian state system’s continued existence. I have included the Sri Lankan intervention and the Himalayan boundary dispute with Pakistan because they have either a close connection to domestic insurgencies or the potential to do so. This chapter analyzes how the Indian state has evolved and implemented strategies to combat these threats as well as Indian security forces’ operational conduct and counterinsurgency doctrines against an array of other threats from low intensity insurgencies to high intensity insurgencies to near conventional war. Research for chapter 12 was conducted in a manner similar to that for part 4. A welcome added source was the remarkable proliferation of media coverage of South Asian conflicts largely due to the communications revolution of the 1990s, which decisively outstripped most state entities’ antiquated censorship abilities. Of particular interest is the news media’s mobility and technological sophistication. During the recent conflict in the Kargil region of Kashmir, news crews from India, Pakistan, Europe, and the United States covered the battles from both sides of the border, often during engagements, resulting in real-time coverage. The impact of this unprecedented generation of audiovisual archives has yet to be gauged, but it is certainly changing the way researchers tackle the difficult issue of near term history.
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Part 6 culminates this project. In chapter 13 I examine the structural and material evolution of the Indian armed forces’ three branches – the army, navy, and air force – within the context of India’s changing economic and defense priorities since the 1980s. Chapter 13 also concludes the book with a study of defense policy making in independent India, now a regional power, and the strategic and doctrinal evolution of its armed forces.

Although the book has a general focus on South Asia, it does not examine the peripheral regions that constitute Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. Furthermore, in the postindependence period this book focuses exclusively on the Republic of India and not on Pakistan and Bangladesh.
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Part One