

An African Diaspora in Medieval Deccan: The Military-Labour Market and its Social Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study the social dimensions of the working of the military-labour market in the Deccan region, from the 14th to the 17th century, with special reference to an African diaspora group in medieval India, that is, the Habshis, an ethnic group of Ethiopian extraction. In order to better appreciate the distinctions and commonalities of their trajectory of societal evolution in comparison to other social groups within the contemporary Deccan, a comparative study of the Habshis with another ethnic group, the Marathas, has been attempted as a case study. It is aimed at investigating how two distinct patterns of military-labour engagement, that is, through military slavery in the case of the Habshis, as well as through enlisting the support of freeborn auxiliaries in the case of the Marathas, impacted the social evolution of these two communities, as well as the various dimensions of that impact. Dimensions such as the upward social mobility of these groups, the caste-class location that their rise conferred upon them, the question of gender, as well as how their distinct vintages had an impact on their subsequent demographic development, will be taken up for investigation in this study.

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking and recurrent features of medieval Indian history is the cyclical rise and fall of empires, a dynamic that profoundly shaped the subcontinent's political, social, and economic structures. This process was far more than a series of mere political turnovers; it had significant and wide-ranging consequences for society at large. Among these, a particularly important effect was the persistent and growing demand for military manpower, which rulers across regions were compelled to meet in order to secure and expand their domains. The Delhi Sultanate provides a notable example: its administrative and fiscal arrangements were closely tied to the maintenance of a large and professional army, creating a structural and continuous demand for military labour drawn from various social and economic strata. With the eventual fragmentation of the Sultanate and the rise of regional polities, competition among emerging centres of power intensified, resulting in frequent conflicts and skirmishes. These inter-state struggles further amplified the demand for armed personnel, thereby expanding the military-labour market and influencing patterns of recruitment, social mobility, and economic organization.

This persistent demand for military manpower also had significant ramifications for economic and demographic structures. To sustain large armies, rulers reorganized agrarian and fiscal systems, often increasing taxation, granting land revenues, and monetizing resources to fund their military apparatus. The Sultanate and subsequent regional powers relied heavily on revenues from agriculture and trade, which shaped production patterns and encouraged the development of local markets. At the same time, the mobility of soldiers, mercenaries, and military officials facilitated demographic shifts, leading to the emergence of settlements around strategic forts, trade hubs, and military encampments. These movements contributed to cultural exchange, urbanization, and the integration of diverse communities into the political and economic life of the region. In this manner, the cyclical rise and fall of empires was not only a political phenomenon but also a catalyst for profound social, economic, and demographic transformations, illustrating the intricate interconnections between warfare, state formation, and broader historical processes in medieval India.

Dirk Kolff has conceptualized the military-labour market as a structured system for the recruitment, sale, and mobilization of military manpower, highlighting its profound and multi-layered social consequences. He demonstrates that the growth of this market in North India had far-reaching implications, influencing both local communities and the highest levels of ruling elites. The expansion of military opportunities reshaped social hierarchies and facilitated the emergence of new elite caste-class groups, such as the Rajputs, Pathans, and Barha Sayyids. The Rajputs, for example, consolidated and burnished their Kshatriya identity through their martial service in regional armies and in the employ of the Delhi Sultanate, while the Pathans, often recruited as mercenary soldiers, translated their battlefield prowess into social and political authority. Similarly, the Barha Sayyids leveraged their Ashraf status and military accomplishments to assert aristocratic claims, frequently serving as kingmakers in the Mughal court and occupying prominent positions in imperial administration. Kolff also emphasizes that the military-labour market exerted a transformative influence on popular religious movements. Peasants, forming a significant portion of the military manpower, were drawn into movements such as Sikhism, which developed a pronounced martial character under leaders like Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh. Ascetic orders, particularly the Naga Sadhus, similarly adopted militarized forms of organization, reflecting the permeation of martial ethos into religious life. Beyond social and religious spheres, the military-labour market reshaped rural political structures: new rural aristocracies, often linked to military recruitment networks, emerged as dominant actors in local governance, landholding, and socio-economic organization. Villages producing or supporting military manpower frequently acquired strategic importance, and local elites gained authority and prestige through connections with regional or imperial armies. Kolff's analysis, therefore, reveals that the military-labour market was far more than a mechanism for mobilizing armed forces; it functioned as a catalytic force driving profound socio-political, economic, and religious transformations, fundamentally reconfiguring North Indian society during the medieval period.

The substantial and ever-growing demand for military manpower in medieval India was met through two primary mechanisms. The first involved

the institution of military slavery, while the second relied on the recruitment of military auxiliaries—socially mobile groups closely linked to imperial military administrations, who sought to leverage their martial skills as a vehicle for upward social and political mobility. Military slavery, as an institution, had deep roots in the Central Islamic Lands and had attained particular prominence under the Abbasid Caliphate, where slave-soldiers, known as ghulams or mamluks, who distinguished themselves on the battlefield were often elevated to positions of considerable administrative and political authority. This model of military recruitment and organization was subsequently adopted and adapted by successor polities, including the Samanids, Seljuks, Ghaznavids, and Ghurids, all of whom relied on slave-soldiers not merely as a dependable source of armed manpower but also as an influential socio-political constituency. The Delhi Sultanate inherited and further institutionalized this practice, employing Turkish slave-soldiers who combined military service with critical administrative responsibilities, thereby occupying a dual role as both instruments of warfare and agents of governance. Equally significant were the military auxiliaries, composed of socially buoyant groups such as local chieftains, frontier warriors, and regional mercenary bands, who were attached to the imperial military apparatus. These auxiliaries were motivated by the prospect of enhancing their social standing through demonstrated martial competence, often acquiring land grants, titles, or administrative offices as rewards for service. Prominent examples include the Rajput clans, referred to as 'ranagan' (ranas), 'rautan' (rauts) or 'takkaran' (thakurs) in the medieval Indo-Persian sources, who, while initially autonomous, were gradually incorporated as auxiliary forces, providing cavalry and fort garrisons in return for jagirs and political privileges. Similarly, the Khokhars and other Punjabi warrior groups served as auxiliaries during both defensive and expansionist campaigns of the early Delhi Sultanate, their loyalty and effectiveness translating into socio-political leverage in their home regions. The integration of these auxiliaries into the military-labour system had profound social and cultural ramifications for rural society. Villages and regions that supplied or hosted military auxiliaries gained strategic and economic importance, often receiving imperial patronage, revenue exemptions, or enhanced local authority. This process facilitated the emergence of new rural elites, who exercised

considerable control over land, resources, and the peasant population, thereby altering pre-existing patterns of local governance and social hierarchy. The military credentials of these groups also enabled them to assert social prestige, often merging martial prowess with claims to aristocratic or quasi-noble status. Moreover, the presence of auxiliaries brought with it new cultural influences—military traditions, martial rituals, and codes of honour—which permeated local society, reshaping communal identities and social relations. In combination with the institution of military slavery, the auxiliary system exemplifies the intricate interplay between military imperatives, social mobility, and cultural transformation in medieval North India. These mechanisms collectively not only addressed the immediate demands of warfare but also produced lasting socio-political and cultural changes, demonstrating how the organization of military manpower became a driving force in the broader historical evolution of the Delhi Sultanate and its surrounding regions.

The conquest of the Deccan by the Delhi Sultanate and the subsequent transplantation of several of its political and administrative institutions into the region, when combined with a series of indigenous social, economic, and cultural transformations already underway in Deccani society, created the conditions for the emergence of new social and military forces. The same dual pattern of military labour engagement that we have seen in northern India, that is, military slavery as well as free auxiliary service, was replicated in the Deccan too. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the social implications of the military-labour market in the Deccan from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, focusing on how the recruitment, organization, and deployment of military manpower reshaped contemporary society.

For this purpose, two ethnic communities—the Habshis and the Marathas—have been selected as case studies, as they exemplify two distinct modes of engagement with the military-labour system: one through military slavery, and the other through the enlistment of auxiliary forces. The Habshis, often of African origin and brought into the Deccan as slave-soldiers, illustrate the transplantation and adaptation of the military-slavery model. Rising through the ranks on the basis of their martial skill, some Habshis attained high military and administrative offices in

Deccani sultanates such as the Bahmani and its successor states, acquiring both political authority and social prestige. Their integration into the military and political fabric of the Deccan also facilitated upward social mobility, allowing them to negotiate new forms of elite status, consolidate economic power through land grants or stipends, and influence courtly and regional politics.

In contrast, the Marathas, primarily indigenous to the Western Deccan, engaged with the military-labour system as auxiliary forces, providing infantry, cavalry, and logistical support to various sultanates. Unlike the Habshis, their entry into the military system was largely voluntary and closely linked to local social hierarchies, offering a pathway to social and economic advancement without the formal institution of slavery. Maratha warriors often leveraged their military service to acquire landholdings, exercise influence over village governance, and enhance their caste-class status, ultimately contributing to the emergence of a distinct rural aristocracy embedded within broader Deccani political structures.

By examining these two communities, the study explores the multifaceted impacts of military participation on Deccani society. It investigates how the contrasting modes of recruitment shaped patterns of upward mobility, the reconfiguration of caste-class hierarchies, the negotiation of gender roles within these communities, and the processes of ethnogenesis that informed their demographic development and collective identity over time. Through this dual lens of military slavery and auxiliary service, the research illuminates the complex ways in which the military-labour market served not merely as a mechanism of warfare and state consolidation but as a transformative social force, reshaping the political, economic, and cultural contours of the Deccan between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.

II. THE MILITARY-LABOUR MARKET AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The Deccan between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries offered significant avenues for social advancement to individuals and groups possessing martial skill and strategic acumen. A clear and direct correlation existed between military service—whether undertaken as a free agent or through servile channels—and the capacity to capitalize on emergent opportunities to

achieve upward social mobility. Both individuals and entire ethnic communities could leverage their military contributions to gain recognition, wealth, and political influence, though the transformation of social status was often more historically visible and consequential in the case of collective ethnic groups. By entering royal service as providers of essential military manpower, these actors frequently succeeded in integrating themselves into the ruling strata, attaining positions of considerable administrative, political, and even hereditary authority.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the cases of the Habshis and the Marathas, two politically and militarily prominent ethnic communities in the Deccan during the period under study. Both groups exemplify how engagement with the military-labour market facilitated processes of upward mobility, allowing them to emerge as ruling entities in their own right. The Habshis, largely of Ethiopian origin, whose group nomenclature derived from the Arabic word for Ethiopia or Abyssinia (*habash*), and initially integrated into Deccani courts as slave-soldiers, demonstrate the potential for servile military labor to translate into socio-political power, with the career of Malik Ambar serving as a paradigmatic example. Through exceptional leadership, strategic insight, and military competence, Malik Ambar rose from servile beginnings to become the *de facto* ruler and administrator of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate, exercising authority comparable to hereditary nobility and instituting administrative, fiscal, and military reforms that reshaped regional governance. In contrast, the Marathas, primarily indigenous to the Western Deccan, engaged the military-labour market as free soldiers and auxiliaries, utilizing their martial prowess to secure land, wealth, and political standing. The Bhonsle family, in particular, illustrates how free military service could be transformed into dynastic authority, culminating in the consolidation of semi-autonomous rule and the creation of a political and military power base capable of influencing the broader Deccan polity.

The upward mobility of these groups had profound implications beyond individual or group status, affecting the social, political, and cultural structures of Deccani society. Their rise challenged pre-existing caste-class hierarchies, creating new elite formations and redistributing authority and resources within both urban and rural contexts. Habshi and Maratha involvement in military and

administrative spheres facilitated the integration of new martial and cultural norms, introducing practices, rituals, and organizational models that reshaped courtly culture, local governance, and rural social relations. Moreover, these processes of upward mobility and ethnogenesis contributed to demographic changes, as newly empowered groups established settlements, patronized trade and craft communities, and created enduring networks of influence across the region. Collectively, the experiences of the Habshis and Marathas illustrate that the military-labour market in the Deccan functioned not merely as a mechanism for warfare and state consolidation but as a transformative social and cultural arena, wherein martial skill, strategic opportunity, and institutional patronage combined to redefine the contours of power, identity, and societal organization over the long term.

To begin with, we find Habshis, originally introduced in the Deccan as military slaves, well-entrenched in positions of power and influence from the very beginning of the Deccan's political secession from the Delhi Sultanate. Habshi ex-slave noblemen, for example, had already come to occupy important administrative positions in the royal court during the Bahmani Sultanate itself. We are told, for example, that when Ahmad Shah 'Wali' Bahmani made a bid for the crown against his estranged brother at Gulbarga, he was helped to power by some important Habshi commanders of the army. Similarly we are told of several Habshi nobles in Ala-ud-Din Ahmad Bahmani's court. Later on, we even learn of Habshi military slaves going on to become provincial governors; two instances of this development are Khudawand Khan, the governor of Mahur, and Dastur Dinar, the governor of Gulbarga.

With the collapse of the Bahmani Sultanate in the early decades of the 16th century, the geopolitical landscape of the Deccan was altered considerably, with the emergence of five new centres of power, in addition to the tottering Vijayanagara Empire, who were locked in perpetual conflict for mastery over the Deccan. What did not alter, however, was the importance of the Habshi slave-nobles and warlords in this confused political scenario. The Habshi slave-commanders were able to retain their power and influence, and to even utilize their military edge to serve personal political ends, burrowing their way deeper inside the Deccani ruling classes. This much is evident without

as much as a shadow of doubt from the contemporary accounts. The rebellion by the Deccani noble, Jamal Khan, during the reign of Ismail Nizam Shah in Ahmadnagar was supported by several Habshi generals of note. We are also told of the flight of Dilawar Khan, the Habshi regent who had risen to become the de facto ruler of Bijapur, to Ahmadnagar in order to seek refuge from his enemies. This example is particularly illustrative, since it shows that the Habshi dominance at court was not something peculiar to the Nizam Shahis, but a phenomenon that had come to exist across all the Deccani sultanates. Moreover, during the outbreak of the succession dispute and the civil war in Ahmadnagar following Burhan Nizam Shah II's death, two Habshi commanders/ amirs in the Deccani noble Ikhlas Khan's faction, Nihang Khan and Habash Khan, had risen to become the kingmakers in volatile political situation, with Nihang Khan even going on to become the Peshwa or the chief minister of the state. Closer to Ambar's own time, his first patron in India, Chengiz Khan, who was himself a Habshi and an ex-slave, had risen to become the Peshwa of Ahmadnagar.

These examples highlight two critical aspects of the socio-political trajectory of the Habshis in the Deccan. Firstly, the rapid upward mobility of the Habshis—from their initial status as military slaves to positions within the nobility—was a long-term process that predates the rise of Malik Ambar. His career, therefore, should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon but rather as the culmination of an ongoing socio-political trajectory in which successive generations of Habshi military slaves leveraged martial skill and administrative competence to achieve elevated status. Secondly, these cases demonstrate that Habshi military slaves had consolidated their aristocratic status to such an extent that they were no longer content to function merely as subordinate officers or aides to the ruling elite; rather, they emerged as autonomous political actors and kingmakers in their own right. Prominent examples include Dilawar Khan of Bijapur and Nihang Khan of Ahmadnagar, whose careers exemplify the strategic use of military prowess and political influence to pursue self-aggrandizement. By capitalizing on both their martial expertise and their positions within the administrative and military hierarchies, these Habshi figures transformed the very contours of power within the Deccan sultanates, asserting authority that at times rivaled that of the hereditary rulers themselves. This phenomenon underscores

how the intersection of military service, social mobility, and political opportunity facilitated the emergence of new centers of authority, reshaping the political landscape of the region and demonstrating the transformative potential inherent in exploiting the opportunities offered by the military-labour market.

Ambar's own rapid rise after his manumission following his master's death is also noteworthy. This seems to have happened quite early in his career, since the correspondence between the Spanish kings and their factors or viceroys along the Konkan coast dating from the early 17th century already refers to him as 'mellique' (malik) or chief, and reveals that he had already been made the governor of Konkan by then. References are also made in these letters to his growing military might, which may be a potential source of trouble for the Spanish interests along the Konkan coast. Likewise, when the Mughals had invaded Ahmadnagar and already occupied a substantial portion of the Deccan, Sabaji Anant, an influential Marathi notable, nominated Malik Ambar for the position of Peshwa, as it was believed that only he could carry out this difficult responsibility. Ambar's career and his rise from a military slave to a commander and governor, to the premiership of the Ahmadnagar sultanate, to finally becoming the chief power behind the throne is, therefore, also illustrative of this long-continuing process of upward social mobility.

The case of the Marathas, although different from the Habshis in that they were freemen and not military slaves, shows a similar trajectory of an upwardly mobile people, rising into the ranks of nobility through military service to the sultanates of the Deccan. For instance, the names of certain Maratha military commanders appear as early as the reign of the Bahmanis themselves, although in the context of their support to the rebel leaders and the pretenders to the throne. Moreover, as early as the 16th century itself, we see the Maratha chiefs in influential positions within the administrative set-ups of the successor-states of the Bahmanis. For instance, we are told of Burhan Nizam Shah I appointing a Marathi Brahmin, Kawerseen, as his Peshwa, in addition to enlisting the help of several Maratha commanders. Likewise, Ibrahim Adil Shah of Bijapur had replaced Persian as the language of the administration with Marathi, besides the Bijapuri army seeing an increased participation of Maratha bargeers or guerrilla cavalymen in his reign. All of this evidence points

to not only a greater military, but also civil influence of the Marathas in the administration.

Besides, right from the inception of the five Deccani Sultanates, there is evidence pointing towards a rise of the Maratha military commanders up the administrative ladder- from commanding units of the army, they were promoted to become the garrison chiefs of the forts as well as commanders of the royal army itself, with jagirs attached to their positions. This development is a remarkable one, since it shows their transition into a landed aristocracy through military service. There are several examples within the Adil Shahi sultanate, for instance, which reinforce this pattern of upward social mobility through successful military careers. The rise of the Nimbalkar family of Phaltan, from military commanders under the Bahmanis, to the status of the sardeshmukhs of Phaltan, is attested by the Bijapuri state papers, especially the sanads. The Ghatges, who were, likewise, military commanders and held a land grant under the Bahmanis, rose to become the sardeshmukhs of the pargana Maun under Ibrahim Adil Shah. The careers of the Ghorpade, Mane, and Kapse families also display a similar trajectory.

The career of the Bhonsle family also exhibits a similar pattern. Their rise from being sirdars, or freelance military commanders attached to royal armies, to the status of nobility under the Nizam Shahis, and after the liquidation of Ahmadnagar, under the Adil Shahis, fits in with the wider trend of upward mobility. Based on a careful perusal of the Bijapuri state papers, Sir Jadunath Sarkar has plotted the gradual rise of Shahji Bhonsle, the father of Shivaji, under the Adil Shahis to the status of a nobleman or jagirdar.

III. CASTE-CLASS LOCATION, RACE, AND THE MILITARY-LABOUR MARKET

The question of social mobility generated by the expansion of the military-labour market in the Deccan between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries is deeply intertwined with broader issues of social status. In this context, social hierarchy cannot be understood solely in terms of wealth or political influence; it must also be analyzed through the intersecting dimensions of caste, class, and, particularly in the case of the Habshis, race. The Habshis' trajectory raises critical questions about how martial skill, political authority, racial identity, and social class collectively shaped their position

within Deccani society. Their military prowess and accumulation of political power were instrumental in negotiating social acceptance and elite status, yet these achievements had to contend with prevailing social prejudices, hierarchical norms, and racialized perceptions within the broader polity. Over time, the Habshis' sustained engagement in military and administrative roles facilitated processes of ethnogenesis, enabling them to consolidate a distinct communal identity that was simultaneously elite, martial, and racially marked.

Similarly, the military successes of the Marathas must be understood in relation to their caste-class positioning within the Deccan. Sustained martial service allowed Maratha warriors to assert social prestige, secure land and administrative privileges, and establish semi-autonomous authority in both rural and urban centers. These developments contributed to the formation of new rural and regional elites, reshaping local governance structures and altering traditional hierarchies. The processes through which the Habshis and Marathas navigated the military-labour market also had demographic consequences: Habshi families, through the accumulation of wealth and political power, were able to establish settlements, intermarry, and form enduring networks of influence, while the Marathas' military engagement facilitated the spread of their communities across strategic regions, reinforcing both their numerical presence and their socio-political clout.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that military service in the Deccan was not simply an instrument of warfare or state consolidation, but a powerful mechanism of social transformation. It enabled upward mobility, redefined caste and class hierarchies, and facilitated the creation of distinct ethnic and social identities. We will take up some of these issues for deliberation here.

So far as the question of the Habshis and their social status is concerned, two points are particularly worthy of attention. Firstly, one may note that the strictures and disabilities associated with the institution of slavery were considerably less rigid in the Deccan than in North India. For instance, as per the custom prevalent locally, after the master's death, a slave was considered to be automatically freed, and the technical procedures of manumission remained mainly a matter of formality. Secondly, the structure of Deccan's social hierarchy, although by no means completely

flexible, was less rigid than the system prevalent in North India. While the ruling classes in Mughal North India were constituted around the notion of Turko-Persian supremacy and racial chauvinism, and later also the Rajput notion of caste supremacy, the Deccani ruling classes were organized around the race-neutral, ethnicity-neutral ideology of 'salt', that is, the ethos of fidelity to the royal master in exchange for his favours, the metaphor 'having eaten the master's salt' standing for having sworn an oath of loyalty to the master.

These factors, by lending a measure of flexibility to the Deccani ruling classes, facilitated the upward mobility of ascendant social groups and helped them cement their position as members of the ruling classes.

Important qualifications, however, may be made in this regard, and the process, it may be noted, was not altogether without friction. For instance, when Murtaza Nizam Shah's senior 'Persian' wife taunted the daughter of Malik Ambar, who was another wife of the Sultan, she referred to Ambar's daughter as a 'mere slave girl'. This imprecation reveals the continued stereotyping of the Habshis as 'slaves' despite having attained legal freedom and even having secured entry into the ruling classes; in a way, the association of slavery with race continued to prevail.

Nor should it be assumed that the Habshis themselves formed a uniform social group. References are made to Malik Ambar's subordinate soldiers, some thousand Habshi youth (bachhegan), many of whom were also his slaves, fighting under him. Thus, social stratification and differentiation were present among the Habshis themselves as well, in this case, depending on their military standing.

In the case of the Marathas, one also notices an interesting correlation between military success, class, and caste, that is, between military and social statuses. Let us consider the case of the Bhonsles. In the Sanskrit epic poem *Shiva Bharat*, Maloji Bhonsle, the grandfather of Shivaji, is described as the one hailing from the 'solar race', which is a hint towards his Kshatriya status. This characterization, although retrospective, is corroborated by a letter written by Shahji Bhonsle to the Adil Shahi court demanding rectification of the irregularities related to his jagirs being done by the central administration. In the letter, he claims Rajput origins for his family. From these pieces of evidence, it is

clear that by the 17th century, and even before the birth of Shivaji, the Bhonsle clan was traditionally regarded as having Kshatriya origins. However, what is more interesting is the conversation between Shivaji and the sage Gagabhat immediately before Shivaji's coronation, whose details are provided to us by the Sanskrit eulogy Parnala Parvata Grahan Akhyanam. Gagabhat, on meeting Shivaji, gives two reasons in order to convince Shivaji to adopt the royal insignia. Apart from his Sisodia Kshatriya genealogy, another reason, which, as per him, justified Shivaji's adoption of regalia such as the canopy (chhatr) was his impressive military victories, him having 'overawed the governments of four Emperors'. Here we see how military success and genealogy, or in Weber's terminology, both hereditary and personal charisma, combine to define Shivaji's royal status.

IV. GENDER, POLITICS, DEMOGRAPHY, AND THE MILITARY-LABOUR MARKET

The dynamics of the military –labour market, while exercising their influence on other aspects of the Deccani society, were also closely related to the question of gender. How the military –labour market operated in the Deccan influenced, and was in turn influenced by, the working of gender dynamics.

Hypergamy, or more specifically, marrying into royalty, had emerged as a way of cementing one's newfound political status buttressed by one's military might, and this is particularly demonstrable in the case of Malik Ambar. His daughter's marriage with Murtaza Nizam Shah brought the young sultan, already a protégé of his, under closer control, and thereby served to cement his own position as the Peshwa of the kingdom and its virtual ruler.

The marriage of Malik Ambar's son with Yaqut Khan, a Habshi nobleman of Bijapur, was oriented to similar ends and emblematic of a trend within the Habshi aristocrats of the various Deccani kingdoms of cementing their social status through such intermarriages; such marital alliances, by replicating royal matrimonial alliances, signalled the projection of their status as members of the ruling class.

Finally, the interaction between the military–labour market and gender dynamics played a significant role in shaping the demographic, social, and political trajectories of the Habshi community in the Deccan. As Eaton has demonstrated, the Habshis brought into the Deccan were overwhelmingly male and recruited primarily for

military service. The near–total absence of Habshi women constituted a significant constraint on the community's demographic expansion, as natural population growth through endogamous marriage was impossible. This demographic imbalance compelled Habshi men to intermarry with women from local Deccani communities, resulting over time in the gradual assimilation of the Habshis into the broader social and cultural milieu. While these men could achieve remarkable social and political mobility, the lack of a self-reproducing population limited the community's ability to maintain a distinct, enduring ethnic identity. This situation contrasts sharply with the African populations in the New World, where the importation of both male and female slaves facilitated the emergence of locally self-sustaining African–American communities with a persistent ethnic identity.

Additional constraints on the demographic sustainability of the Habshis included the relatively small numbers in which they were imported and the selective nature of their recruitment, which prioritized martial and administrative skill over the establishment of family networks or community cohesion. Moreover, the occupational demands of military service—frequent deployments, campaigns, and postings across different regions—limited the formation of stable, localized Habshi settlements and impeded long-term demographic consolidation. These constraints, however, did not prevent the Habshis from exercising substantial political influence. Figures such as Malik Ambar were able to create extensive networks of loyalty and patronage that extended across sultanate territories, leveraging military and administrative positions to assert authority, influence succession disputes, and shape regional policies. Yet, the absence of a demographically autonomous community meant that this influence relied heavily on the abilities of exceptional individuals rather than a broad-based Habshi constituency, making their political power contingent and personalized rather than institutionalized.

In contrast, the Marathas, as indigenous inhabitants of the Deccan, were not constrained by demographic limitations or gender imbalances. Their population was self-reproducing, allowing for natural growth and the continuous transmission of social, cultural, and martial traditions across generations. This internal demographic stability enabled the Marathas to consolidate their influence more broadly and institutionally, rather than

depending solely on the exceptional abilities of a few individuals. The community could maintain continuity in both rural and urban contexts, establish enduring networks of power and patronage, and create semi-autonomous political structures that endured over decades. Furthermore, their status as native actors in the Deccan meant that their social mobility, landholding, and political authority could be negotiated within an already familiar social and cultural framework, facilitating a more sustainable and collective form of power consolidation. Unlike the Habshis, the Marathas' demographic self-sufficiency and rootedness in local society allowed them to transform military success into long-term social and political dominance, ultimately shaping the broader structure of Deccani polity. The opposite experience of the Habshis, thus, illustrates how demographic constraints, coupled with gender imbalances and the exigencies of military service, shaped not only patterns of social integration and assimilation but also the structure, durability, and nature of political power among immigrant military communities in the Deccan. Their trajectory demonstrates that while military skill could facilitate extraordinary upward mobility and temporary dominance, sustainable political influence often required a demographically stable and self-reproducing population, which the Habshis lacked.

V. CONCLUSION

The study of the Habshis and the Marathas as pivotal actors in the Deccan's military-labour market between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries reveals the profound social, political, and cultural transformations engendered by military service in early modern South India. Far from being limited to the realm of warfare, engagement with the military-labour system operated as a key mechanism for negotiating social mobility, reconfiguring caste and class hierarchies, and mediating the intersections of race, gender, and ethnic identity. The upward mobility of the Habshis, despite the demographic and gender constraints they faced, illustrates the potential of military skill and political acumen to transform marginalized groups into influential actors capable of shaping the political landscape. Similarly, the Marathas' engagement as indigenous auxiliaries demonstrates how native communities leveraged military prowess to consolidate socio-political authority, establish

durable networks of power, and achieve long-term demographic and cultural continuity.

The juxtaposition of these two groups highlights the heterogeneous and fluid nature of Deccani society, a dynamic "melting pot" in which diverse social processes operated simultaneously, intersected, and mutually reinforced each other. The interconnection of military service, social status, ethnicity, and gender underscores the necessity of studying social phenomena as interdependent rather than in isolation, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the forces that shaped the region's historical trajectory. Moreover, the experiences of the Habshis and Marathas reveal the dual role of the military-labour market as both an instrument of state power and a driver of social transformation, demonstrating how opportunities for upward mobility could be structured, exploited, and institutionalized across time.

In sum, the examination of these communities underscores the transformative potential of military engagement in shaping social hierarchies, political authority, and cultural identity in the Deccan. Their histories exemplify the complex interplay between individual agency, group strategies, and structural forces, offering valuable insights into the broader dynamics of early modern South Indian society. Future research may further explore how these processes influenced subsequent political developments, patterns of ethnogenesis, and the consolidation of regional polities, thereby deepening our understanding of the enduring legacy of the military-labour market in shaping the social and political landscape of the Deccan.

VI. NOTES

1. Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military-Labour Market in Hindustan; 1450 -1850* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-31.
2. See Peter Jackson, "Turkish Slaves on Islam's Indian Frontier" in *Slavery and South Asian History*, ed. Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (Indiana University Press, 2006).
3. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, (Africa World Press, 2003), 194.
4. *Ibid*, 194- 195.
5. *Ibid*, 195.

6. Muhammad Qasim Firishta (English tr. John Briggs), *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, (R. Cambrey & Co., 1909), 165- 168.
7. *Ibid*, 171-174.
8. *Ibid*, 178-184.
9. Richard M. Eaton, "The Rise and Fall of Military Slavery in the Deccan, 1450- 1650" in Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*, 116.
10. B.G. Tamaskar, *The Life and Work of Malik Ambar*, (Idara-i-Adabiyat Dilhi, 2009), 28- 30
11. *Ibid*, 31.
12. James Grant Duff, *A History of the Mahrattas*, Vol. I, (Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1826), 75.
13. *Ibid*, 81.
14. *Ibid*, 87.
15. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *House of Shivaji: Studies and Documents on Maratha History (The Royal Period)*, (M. C. Sarkar and Sons Ltd., 1955), 26-90.
16. Eaton, "Military Slavery", in Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*, 122-123.
17. *Ibid*, 125-126.
18. *Ibid*, 126-127.
19. R.P. Patwardhan, *Maratha Sources*, Part I, 3.
20. *Ibid*, 25.
21. *Ibid*, 123.
22. Eaton, "Military Slavery", in Chatterjee and Eaton, *Slavery in South Asia*, 125.
23. *Ibid*, 126.
7. Sarkar, Sir Jadunath. *House of Shivaji: Studies and Documents on Maratha History (The Royal Period)*. Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar and Sons Ltd., 1955.
8. Tamaskar, B. G. *The Life and Work of Malik Ambar*. Delhi: Idara-i-Adabiyat Dihli, 2009.

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3. Grant Duff, James. *A History of the Mahrattas*. Vol. I. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1826.
4. Jayasuriya, Shihan de S., and Richard Pankhurst, eds. *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003
5. Kolff, Dirk H. A. *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military-Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
6. Patwardhan, R. P., ed. *Maratha Sources*, Part I. Poona, 1928. (Includes extracts from Shiv Bharat, Shahji's letter to the Adil Shahi court, and Parnala Parvata Grahan Akhyanam.)