

The Battle of Haldighati (1576): A Critical Review

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Abstract

The Battle of Haldighati, fought in June 1576 between the forces of Maharana Pratap of Mewar and the Mughal imperial army commanded by Raja Man Singh of Amber, occupies an unusual position in South Asian historical memory. It was a relatively short engagement, yet it became a durable symbol of Rajput resistance, political sovereignty and heroic sacrifice. This review reassesses the battle by separating three questions that are frequently conflated: the immediate tactical result, the operational consequences of the campaign, and the long-term strategic objective of Mughal policy toward Mewar. The article compares the principal contemporary Persian sources—especially Abu'l-Fazl's *Akbarnama*, 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'uni's *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, and Nizamuddin Ahmad's *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*—with later Rajasthani historiography, colonial-era writing and modern scholarship. Particular attention is given to source bias, chronology, army estimates, geography, the role of Rajput and Afghan contingents, the Bhils, the withdrawal of Pratap, the occupation of Gogunda, and the subsequent continuation of resistance. The review argues that the most defensible formulation is that Haldighati constituted a Mughal tactical/operational success but not a decisive strategic conquest of Mewar. Pratap's survival and the subsequent recovery of territory demonstrate that battlefield possession did not equal political pacification. At the same time, claims of an unambiguous Mewar battlefield victory cannot be sustained from the strongest contemporary evidence. Haldighati is therefore best understood as one phase of a prolonged contest over sovereignty, rather than as a self-contained war whose meaning can be reduced to a binary victory/defeat label.

Keywords: Haldighati, Maharana Pratap, Akbar; Man Singh, Mewar, Mughal Empire, Rajput polity, military history, historiography, Aravallis

Methodological note: The review distinguishes primary evidence from later memory and treats exact troop numbers and dramatic battlefield anecdotes cautiously.

INTRODUCTION

Few sixteenth-century battles in India have generated a historical memory as powerful as Haldighati. The engagement is remembered through monuments, school textbooks, oral traditions, poems, paintings and public commemorations, while the name of Maharana Pratap has become closely associated with resistance to imperial incorporation. Yet the historian faces a methodological problem: the surviving evidence does not speak with a single voice. The principal narratives were produced in different political and cultural settings, and the later memory of the battle has frequently been projected backwards into the sixteenth century.

The battle occurred within the wider process by which Akbar transformed the Mughal state from a contested North Indian monarchy into an expansive imperial formation. Rajasthan was strategically important because it connected northern India with Gujarat and because several Rajput houses could be incorporated into imperial service. Amber, Bikaner, Jodhpur and other Rajput states developed relationships with the Mughals of varying intensity. Mewar, however, retained a distinctive Sisodia claim to sovereignty and had already suffered the fall of Chittor to Akbar in 1567–68. The accession of Maharana Pratap in 1572 therefore occurred in a political environment in which accommodation and resistance were both possible but carried profound implications for Mewar's status.

This review uses a deliberately three-level definition of victory. First is the tactical level: which army maintained the field and achieved its immediate battlefield objectives? Second is the operational level: which side converted the engagement into control of the surrounding theatre? Third is the strategic level: did the campaign achieve its political purpose? This framework avoids the common error of treating the end of fighting on a particular field as synonymous with the outcome of the war.

The article also distinguishes evidence from tradition. The heroism of Pratap, Jhala Man Singh, Hakim Khan Sur, the Bhil allies and others is integral to Mewar's historical memory. But individual episodes—especially highly dramatic descriptions of Chetak, exact troop numbers, or claims that a single charge determined the entire battle—require source criticism. Historical respect for a tradition does not require treating every later detail as contemporary evidence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: MEWAR, CHITTOR AND AKBAR

Mewar's political importance cannot be understood solely through the personal rivalry of two rulers. The Sisodia state had a long history of conflict and accommodation with neighbouring powers, and its political culture attached exceptional importance to the autonomy of the ruling house. The capture of Chittor by Akbar in 1567–68 was consequently more than the acquisition of a fortress. Chittor was a centre of dynastic prestige and a symbol of Mewar's political legitimacy. Its loss weakened the state materially while leaving the question of Sisodia sovereignty unresolved.

Akbar's Rajput policy was pragmatic and flexible. It combined warfare with incorporation, negotiation, matrimonial alliances, mansabs and recognition of local elites. A Rajput ruler who entered the imperial order could preserve substantial status while acknowledging the emperor's paramountcy. The political issue with Pratap was therefore not simply whether he would continue ruling Mewar; it was the terms on which he would rule and the degree to which he would acknowledge Akbar's supremacy.

The missions associated with Jalal Khan Qurchi, Raja Man Singh, Raja Bhagwant Das and Raja Todar Mal belong to a diplomatic sequence that preceded the campaign. The details of the negotiations are not equally secure in all later accounts, but the larger pattern is consistent: Akbar sought accommodation before resorting to a major military operation. Pratap did not accept the form of submission demanded by the imperial court. This refusal was politically consequential because Mewar's non-compliance stood out against the increasingly successful incorporation of Rajput rulers into Mughal service.

The conflict should not be described as a simple Hindu–Muslim war. The Mughal army contained important Rajput contingents, including Kachhwaha officers; Pratap's side included the Afghan commander Hakim Khan Sur and other Muslims. Political allegiance in sixteenth-century Rajasthan crossed religious boundaries. The central issues were sovereignty, dynastic legitimacy, regional power, imperial incorporation and control of strategic territory.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE OPERATIONAL THEATRE

The geography of the Aravallis is essential to military interpretation. Haldighati is a mountain pass whose name derives from the yellowish appearance of the local soil. The wider theatre around Gogunda and Khamnor combines ridges, narrow passages, broken ground and routes connecting the interior of Mewar with the plains. Such terrain could constrain the deployment of a numerically superior army and create opportunities for a sudden mounted attack.

The geographical advantage was nevertheless double-edged. A narrow pass could help an inferior force concentrate its shock at a selected point, but once the battle moved beyond the constricted zone, the larger army could deploy more effectively. The tactical problem for Pratap was therefore to exploit surprise and terrain without becoming trapped in a prolonged open engagement. For Man Singh, the problem was to absorb the initial assault and convert superior resources into sustained control.

The traditional identification of the battle with Haldighati itself also requires care. Contemporary and near-contemporary sources use different place names, including references to Khamnore and Gogunda. The modern name 'Battle of Haldighati' became especially influential through later historical writing. This does not invalidate the name, but it reminds us that battlefield geography should be reconstructed from several kinds of evidence rather than assumed from modern memorial geography.

THE ARMIES: COMMAND, COMPOSITION AND THE PROBLEM OF NUMBERS

The Mughal force was commanded by Raja Man Singh of Amber, one of Akbar's most prominent Rajput commanders. The imperial army was not a homogeneous 'Mughal' body. It consisted of Turani, Irani, Indian Muslim and Rajput elements organized within the Mughal military system. Among the commanders named in the sources are Asaf Khan, Sayyid Hashim of the Barha group, Jagannath and other officers. The presence of Rajput commanders on the imperial side is central to understanding the political character of the war.

Pratap's army was likewise a coalition rather than a purely dynastic force. Sisodia and other Rajput chiefs formed its core, while Hakim Khan Sur is remembered as an important Afghan commander. The Bhils of the Aravalli region provided local knowledge and support to the Mewar resistance. The participation of such groups is militarily significant because knowledge of tracks, water sources, forests and mountain routes becomes disproportionately valuable in broken terrain.

Exact troop numbers are among the least secure elements of the traditional narrative. Different chronicles and later historians give different figures, and large numbers have sometimes been repeated without adequate source criticism. A publication-quality account should therefore avoid false precision. The secure conclusion is comparative rather than numerical: Man Singh commanded a materially stronger imperial force with greater depth and resources, while Pratap operated under severe constraints and relied heavily on terrain, mobility and personal leadership.

The question of artillery must also be treated cautiously. Mughal warfare possessed sophisticated firearms and artillery capabilities, but the tactical value of heavy guns depended on terrain, deployment space and logistics. In a broken mountain environment, cavalry shock and close combat could become more decisive than the artillery advantage visible on open plains. Haldighati consequently illustrates the interaction of military technology and geography rather than a simple contest between weapons.

THE BATTLE: TACTICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The opening phase is best understood as a high-risk Mewar attempt to impose tactical shock before the

imperial army could exploit its greater resources. The Mewar force attacked aggressively. Contemporary Mughal testimony does not support the caricature of an effortless imperial victory; the initial assault was serious enough to disrupt Mughal formations and create a dangerous situation for the imperial command. The psychological effect of a sudden cavalry attack should not be underestimated. Cavalry shock could create local superiority even when the attacking army was smaller overall. In Haldighati, the difficult ground amplified this effect by restricting the ability of the imperial force to deploy its full strength immediately. Pratap's personal participation reinforced the morale and momentum of his troops.

Yet tactical surprise could not by itself determine the campaign. The Mughal army possessed reserves and experienced commanders. Once the initial shock had been absorbed, the imperial force could reorganize and counterattack. The decisive analytical point is therefore that the first phase and the final position of the armies need not have the same 'winner'. Mewar could achieve tactical success at one moment while losing the ability to hold the field over the entire engagement.

The famous attack directed toward the Mughal command has been preserved in later heroic narratives. The historical core—that Pratap personally fought and that the imperial command was under pressure—is credible. The exact sequence of individual encounters is much less secure. This is where the historian must resist turning heroic literature into a minute-by-minute operational report.

The tradition of Jhala Man Singh taking upon himself the visible symbols of Pratap's authority is especially important. Whether every later detail can be independently verified, the story expresses a broader tactical reality: protecting the commander-in-chief was essential. The survival of Pratap allowed Mewar's resistance to continue after the battlefield encounter. In military terms, command preservation was strategically more important than the preservation of a particular tactical position.

The withdrawal of Pratap should consequently not be described as an escape in the pejorative sense. A commander who recognizes that a pitched engagement is no longer favourable can preserve the force by withdrawing into terrain where the opponent's advantages are reduced. The subsequent history of Mewar demonstrates that this was not the end of the conflict.

THE DEBATE OVER THE RESULT

The conventional academic interpretation is that the Mughal army won the battle in the immediate military sense. Pratap withdrew; the imperial army remained in possession of the field and moved into Gogunda. This is the strongest conclusion if the unit of analysis is the engagement itself. The Mughal side therefore has the stronger claim to a tactical victory.

However, the word 'victory' becomes problematic when the question shifts to strategy. Akbar's broader objective was to bring Mewar into a stable relationship of imperial subordination. Haldighati did not accomplish that objective. Pratap survived, resistance continued, and the Mughals faced repeated difficulty converting military presence into durable control of the entire Mewar theatre.

This distinction explains why two apparently contradictory statements can both contain truth: the Mughal army could win the battle, while Maharana Pratap could ultimately preserve the political capacity of Mewar to resist. The latter is not evidence that Pratap won the battlefield engagement. It is evidence that the battle did not settle the political contest.

Arguments that Pratap 'definitely won Haldighati' often rely on later evidence concerning Mughal difficulties in maintaining Gogunda and subsequent Mewar recovery. That evidence is valuable for assessing the campaign's strategic consequences, but it cannot be retroactively converted into proof that the Mughal army lost the engagement itself. Conversely, arguments that the Mughals 'conquered Mewar

at Haldighati' confuse battlefield control with political pacification. The strongest interpretation lies between these extremes.

GOGUNDA AND THE LIMITS OF OCCUPATION

The Mughal occupation of Gogunda after the battle is important evidence against the claim of an outright Mewar battlefield victory. It demonstrates that the imperial army had sufficient operational strength to advance and establish a position after Pratap's withdrawal. Yet the conditions under which the Mughal force operated also reveal the limits of that success. A mountain theatre imposed serious demands on supply, security and communications.

The imperial presence around Gogunda therefore should be evaluated not simply by asking whether Mughal soldiers entered a place, but whether they could administer and secure the surrounding countryside. A pre-modern empire could occupy a fort or town while still facing an active enemy in the hills. This distinction between garrisoning nodes and controlling a landscape is particularly relevant to Mewar.

The subsequent Mughal campaigns against Pratap reinforce this interpretation. The imperial state repeatedly returned to the problem because the political objective remained incomplete. The continuation of military pressure after 1576 is evidence that Haldighati was not a conclusive settlement.

THE LONG WAR AFTER HALDIGHATI

The most important consequence of Haldighati was that the war changed character. Pratap increasingly exploited the Aravalli environment and avoided making his survival dependent upon repeated pitched battles against a superior imperial force. Mobility, local intelligence, surprise and attacks on vulnerable communications were better suited to Mewar's material circumstances.

The resistance also depended on political and economic reconstruction. A ruler cannot wage prolonged war without food, horses, weapons, revenue and loyal chiefs. The traditions surrounding Bhama Shah therefore point to a genuine structural issue even when later accounts may magnify precise financial figures. Likewise, the Bhils were not merely picturesque auxiliaries; local communities were part of the social infrastructure that made resistance in the hills possible.

The campaign traditionally associated with Dewair in 1582 occupies an important place in accounts of Mewar's recovery. Its interpretation varies, but the broader pattern is clear: the post-Haldighati period was one of continued contestation rather than passive submission. Pratap was able to recover substantial areas of Mewar and re-establish the functioning of his polity in territories beyond direct Mughal control. The strategic significance is therefore cumulative. Haldighati prevented neither Mughal penetration nor Mewar's temporary losses, but it also failed to destroy the Sisodia political centre. The resulting conflict became a contest of endurance in which the empire's greater resources had to be repeatedly applied against a smaller polity adapted to difficult terrain.

RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE DANGER OF ANACHRONISM

Modern public discussion sometimes presents Haldighati as a Hindu–Muslim war. This is historically inadequate. The Mughal army included Rajput elites, while Pratap's forces included Muslims such as Hakim Khan Sur. Rajput rulers themselves adopted different political strategies: some entered Mughal service and retained substantial status; others resisted. Religious identity therefore cannot explain the alignments.

The more historically defensible interpretation is that the conflict concerned political sovereignty and imperial incorporation. This does not mean that religion was irrelevant to sixteenth-century political culture. It means that religion was not the sole or even sufficient explanatory variable. Dynastic honour, territory, political hierarchy and the institutional expansion of the Mughal state were intertwined.

Anachronism is especially dangerous here because later concepts of nationalism can be projected onto a sixteenth-century polity. It is legitimate to say that later Indians interpreted Pratap as a symbol of resistance or independence. It is less defensible to assume that the sixteenth-century actors possessed a modern conception of the nation-state. The historian should preserve the distinction between historical action and later historical meaning.

PRIMARY SOURCES AND SOURCE CRITICISM

The Akbarnama of Abu'l-Fazl is the most important official Mughal narrative for the campaign. Abu'l-Fazl wrote within the imperial court and presented Akbar's reign through a language of kingship, order and imperial legitimacy. His account is indispensable for chronology, commanders and the imperial interpretation of events, but its courtly purpose requires critical reading.

Bada'uni's Muntakhab al-Tawarikh is especially valuable because Bada'uni was present in the Mughal army during the Haldighati campaign. His account is not a neutral modern eyewitness report: he had his own religious and intellectual agenda and wrote from within the Mughal world. Nevertheless, proximity to the event makes his testimony exceptionally important, especially when compared with Abu'l-Fazl.

Nizamuddin Ahmad's Tabaqat-i-Akbari supplies another contemporary perspective. Comparison among these Persian sources helps identify elements that recur across narratives and therefore deserve greater confidence. Disagreement among them is equally useful because it exposes where later certainty may be unwarranted.

Rajasthani sources and bardic traditions preserve a different memory. They are indispensable for recovering Mewar's self-representation, ideals of honour, sacrifice and sovereignty. But they are not automatically more reliable simply because they offer the Mewar side. The same critical principle must be applied to every source: date, provenance, genre, patronage, transmission, purpose and proximity to events must be considered.

Colonial historiography, particularly James Tod, had a profound influence on the modern image of Rajput Rajasthan. Tod's work preserved valuable topographical and genealogical information but also romanticized Rajput martial culture and shaped later vernacular and nationalist narratives. Modern scholarship on Tod's influence has demonstrated that colonial knowledge production itself became part of the history of Rajput memory.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

The historiography of Haldighati can be organized into five broad phases. The first is the contemporary Mughal record. The second is the regional and courtly memory of Mewar. The third is colonial-era reconstruction, especially under James Tod. The fourth is twentieth-century nationalist and regional scholarship. The fifth is contemporary public history, in which the question of 'who won?' has become politically charged.

The Mughal chronicles establish the basic framework for a battlefield defeat of Pratap: the imperial army fought, the Mewar force withdrew, and Mughal forces occupied Gogunda. Yet these texts were not written from an Olympian viewpoint. They served imperial legitimacy. Their evidence is therefore

strongest when several independent details converge and weakest when they move from reporting to rhetorical celebration.

Mewar's traditions perform the inverse function. They preserve the moral meaning of resistance and explain why Pratap's retreat did not become a story of political humiliation. The hero is not defined by possession of the battlefield but by refusal to surrender sovereignty. This is a legitimate historical subject—the formation of political memory—but it is not identical to a military reconstruction.

James Tod transformed the historical image of Rajasthan for English-language readers. His romantic representation of Rajput chivalry deeply influenced subsequent scholarship and public memory. Later writers such as Gauri Shankar Ojha and G. N. Sharma attempted more systematic regional histories, while Jadunath Sarkar and other historians situated Pratap within broader Mughal military and political history. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes source comparison, state formation, regional identities and the construction of historical memory.

The modern 'Pratap won' debate often arises because historians answer different questions without stating their criteria. If victory means holding the battlefield, the evidence favours the Mughal side. If victory means preventing permanent political incorporation, the result is much more ambiguous. If victory means the creation of a durable cultural symbol of resistance, Mewar clearly achieved an extraordinary afterlife. A rigorous article should not collapse these three meanings into one.

MILITARY INTERPRETATION: WHY THE BATTLE MATTERS

Haldighati offers a compact case study in the relationship between tactical shock and strategic endurance. Pratap's initial attack demonstrates how a smaller force can obtain local superiority through surprise, terrain and aggressive cavalry. Man Singh's recovery demonstrates the importance of reserves, depth and command structure. Pratap's withdrawal demonstrates that preservation of the political command may be more valuable than tactical persistence.

The battle also illustrates the limits of conventional 'decisive battle' theory in a fragmented landscape. An empire may win a pitched engagement yet face a much harder problem of securing mountain corridors, villages and supply routes. Conversely, a resisting polity may lose a battle yet preserve its political centre and continue fighting. In such circumstances the strategic outcome emerges from repeated interactions rather than from a single day.

The Mewar strategy after 1576 resembles a broader pre-modern pattern in which states with limited resources exploit terrain and social networks to impose disproportionate costs on imperial armies. It would be anachronistic to call every later action 'guerrilla warfare' in the modern doctrinal sense, but the description of decentralized, mobile and terrain-dependent resistance is useful if carefully qualified.

The Mughal response demonstrates the opposite logic: the empire repeatedly mobilized resources to force the issue. The contrast between imperial depth and Mewar's local adaptation is perhaps the central military lesson of the conflict.

CHRONOLOGY

Selected chronology of the Mewar–Mughal conflict. Dates and event labels follow the broad consensus; some specific campaign dates vary in the secondary literature.

c. 1567–68 — Akbar's campaign and capture of Chittor; major transformation of Mewar's political and territorial position.

1572 — Maharana Pratap succeeds to the Mewar throne.

1572–76 — Diplomatic pressure and negotiations concerning Mewar's relationship with the Mughal Empire.

June 1576 — Battle of Haldighati/Khamnore; Mughal forces under Raja Man Singh engage Pratap's army.

After June 1576 — Mughal forces occupy Gogunda; Pratap continues resistance.

1576–80s — Repeated Mughal pressure and Mewar adaptation to mountain warfare.

1582 — Dewair campaign becomes an important marker of Mewar's recovery in later historiography.

1580s–1590s — Pratap consolidates recovered territories and develops new centres of administration.

1597 — Death of Maharana Pratap; Amar Singh succeeds him.

CONCLUSION

The Battle of Haldighati should neither be reduced to a simplistic Mughal triumph nor transformed into an unqualified battlefield victory for Maharana Pratap. The contemporary evidence is strongest on the immediate outcome: the Mewar army withdrew and the imperial army held the field and occupied Gogunda. In that tactical and operational sense, the Mughal side achieved the stronger result.

But the battle did not accomplish the larger political objective of permanently incorporating Mewar. Pratap survived, reorganized, continued resistance and recovered substantial territory. The Mughal Empire therefore won an engagement without obtaining a final settlement. This is why the strategic significance of Haldighati cannot be measured by the battlefield alone.

The most defensible scholarly formulation is consequently: Haldighati was a Mughal tactical victory and an incomplete strategic success, while Maharana Pratap's survival and subsequent recovery transformed the defeat of a single engagement into a long-term story of political resistance. This conclusion preserves the evidentiary value of the Mughal chronicles without accepting their imperial rhetoric as the whole story, and it recognizes the importance of Mewar traditions without treating later heroic elaboration as contemporary reportage.

The enduring importance of Haldighati ultimately lies in this tension between event and memory. Historically, it was one battle in a prolonged Mewar–Mughal conflict. Culturally, it became a symbol of sovereignty, sacrifice and resistance. A publication-quality history must address both: reconstruct the event critically and explain why its meaning has remained so powerful.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL NOTES / FOOTNOTES

1. The date 18 June 1576 is the date most commonly adopted in modern historical writing; older regional and colonial works occasionally give different dates. The discrepancy illustrates the need to distinguish contemporary calendrical systems and later conversions.
2. Abu'l-Fazl's court position makes the Akbarnama an official imperial narrative. It is therefore indispensable but should be read alongside Bada'uni and Nizamuddin Ahmad.
3. Bada'uni's presence with the Mughal force is one reason his account receives special attention in modern reconstructions; his own ideological position, however, means that 'eyewitness' does not equal 'unbiased'.
4. The exact composition and size of the armies remain uncertain. This review deliberately avoids presenting a single numerical figure as settled fact.
5. The term 'Mughal army' is used as shorthand for the imperial force. It should not be interpreted as an ethnically homogeneous Mughal body.

6. The role of the Bhils is historically significant, but later nationalist narratives sometimes turn their participation into a simplified symbol. Their contribution should be studied through regional history and local traditions.
7. The Chetak narrative is central to cultural memory. The historical core of Pratap's mounted withdrawal is more secure than every detail of the later literary story.
8. 'Guerrilla warfare' is used cautiously here as an analytical shorthand for mobile, decentralized, terrain-dependent resistance; it should not be projected backwards as a modern military doctrine.
9. Gogunda is important because occupation of an administrative centre demonstrates an immediate Mughal operational success while the difficulties of sustained control demonstrate the limits of that success.
10. The later recovery of Mewar is evidence for the strategic consequences of the war, not proof that Pratap won the Haldighati engagement itself.
11. The phrase 'war of independence' is retained only when qualified. Sixteenth-century Mewar did not possess a modern nation-state conception; 'sovereignty' and 'political autonomy' are more precise historical terms.
12. The historiography of James Tod should be treated as both a source for nineteenth-century knowledge of Rajasthan and an object of study in the construction of Rajput historical memory.

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