At the height of its glory, the Mughal Empire—an essentially Turkish imperial power which ruled from the early sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries—controlled most of the Indian subcontinent and parts of what is now Afghanistan. Although Babur, a Chaghatai Turkish leader, laid the foundation of the Mughals in 1526 CE, the empire's classic period began with the accession of Akbar in 1556 CE, ending with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 CE. During this period of the Great Mughals, the empire was marked by vast acquisitions of territory, a highly centralized administrative system that efficiently connected these different regions, innovations in economy and religion, and significant architectural activity—for many Mughal monuments, their most visible legacy, date back to this period.

India on the Eve of Babur's Ascent

After the disintegration of the Tughlaq dynasty in the early fifteenth century, northern India faced political instability as both the Sayyids and the Lodis failed to cope with disruptive forces. The insecurity of the Northwestern borders and the frequent rebellions of the nobles added to the general political chaos and weakened the center further. While the Punjab in the north was under the hold of Daulat Khan Lodi—who was opposed to Ibrahim Lodi's domination—Sind and Multan, to the west of Delhi, had transformed into independent principalities since the Tughlaq rule. The south too was dominated by the powerful kingdoms of Vijayanagar and Bahmani, with the latter having broken up into the five independent sultanates of Ahmednagar, Berar, Bijapur, Golconda and Bidar. Meanwhile in all this political turmoil, the three Central Indian kingdoms of Gujarat, Malwa and Mewar were vying to retain their supremacy.

Gujarat was ruled by Muzaffar Shah II, while the power of Sultan Mahmud Khilji II of Malwa was on the decline. During this period, under the leadership of the Sisodia ruler Rana Sanga, Mewar was the most powerful kingdom. Malwa's fertile soil and prime location as the key trade route to the seaports of Gujarat made it a coveted place for Mewar and Gujarat, as well as for the Lodis. Besides, Malwa had other advantages—it

was a place to procure good elephants and served as a buffer zone against the Lodis for both Mewar and Gujarat. The incompetence of the sultan of Malwa, however, made the kingdom prone to internal strife; and not even the intervention of its able prime minister, Medini Rai, could improve the situation. Thus, conditions were ripe for Rana Sanga to successfully extend his influence over Malwa and Gujarat, establishing his sway almost completely over Rajputana with the occupation of Ranthambhor and Chanderi.

It was the same story towards the east, where Nusrat Shah of the Hussaini dynasty was ruling in Bengal. The Afghan chieftains, Nasir Khan Lohani and Maruf Farmuli among others, had succeeded in helping Sultan Muhammad Shah form the kingdom of Jaunpur. In addition to these kingdoms, there were other small Afghan chieftaincies around Agra, operating more or less independently—such as that of Hasan Khan in Mewat, Nizam Khan in Bayana, Muhammad Zaitun in Dholpur, Tatar Khan Sarang Khani in Gwalior, Hussain Khan Lohani in Rapri, Qutub Khan in Etawa, Alam Khan in Kalpi and Qasim Sambhali in Sambhal.

The political situation in the Indian subcontinent on the eve of Babur's ascent was thus complex to say the least. Analyzing these political complexities, the British historian, Rushbrooke Williams proposed an interesting line of thought. Awarding the power of the Rajput confederacy with utmost importance, he proposes that had Babur not entered India when he did, the Rajputs—led by their illustrious leader Rana Sanga—would have captured power in northern India. Basing his assumption on the *Baburnama* (Babur's account of India), which refers to the 'five Musalman rulers'—the Lodis, Gujarat, Malwa, Bahmani and Bengal—and the two 'pagans' (Rana Sanga and Vijayanagar), he argues that the regional states were aligned with each other on the basis of religion and the Rajput confederacy meant to establish a Hindu empire by overthrowing the Islamic rule in India. Such observations, however, are questionable as there

is no evidence to prove that these powers were hostile to each other on religious grounds. Babur, in fact, admits in his memoirs that many Rajput chieftains were submissive to Muslim rulers. Further, many Muslim chieftains, such as Hasan Khan Mewati and Mahmud Lodi were part of the Rajput confederacy formed by Rana Sanga against Babur. It may also be noted that Babur was more wary of the Afghans than of Rana Sanga and it was Mahmud Lodi not Rana Sanga, who proclaimed himself as the sultan of Delhi. In this context, therefore, the theory of Rushbrooke Williams becomes unacceptable when the historical situation is analyzed objectively.