

The last battle of panipat an event that paved way to the servitude

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Abstract

The third battle of Panipat, fought on 14 January 1761 between the Marathas led by Sadashiv raoBhau and a coalition of the Afghan ruler Ahmed Shah Abdali supported by Najibuddaulah, the Rohilla chiefs Hafiz Rehmat and Dunde Khan and the Nawab of Awadh Shujauddaulah, was arguably the largest battle fought anywhere in the world in the eighteenth century. The battle was fought on a large plain near the site now known as Kala Amb near Panipat city with the Yamuna river to the east and the old Shah nahr about six miles to the west at the village of Khukhrana. The city and fort of Panipat was behind the Maratha army and the Afghans stood on the road towards Delhi. In this manner the two armies blocked each other's paths to their homeland from the end of October 1760 onwards till the decisive battle on 14 January 1761. About six lakh men including camp followers, and several lakh beasts: horses, bullocks and elephants were in this close area for two and a half months utilising all food and firewood in the entire neighbourhood, until the battle began.

The battle between an Afghan king nearly a thousand miles away from his capital at Qandahar and a Maratha army at an equal distance from their base at Pune seems an extraordinary event. The antecedents of the battle were long and the differences appeared unbridgeable. From 1739, when Nadir Shah attacked Delhi and looted the accumulated two hundred-year treasure of the Mughals, the invasions recurred at intervals of a few years. In 1739, Ahmed Khan was Nadir Shah's personal servant. On Nadir Shah's death in 1747, Ahmed Khan assumed the role of an Afghan king and called himself Ahmed Shah Durrani or Abdali. He first attacked India in 1748 for its wealth but was defeated at Manupur near Sirhind by an army where Safdar Jung first showed his valour. However, Abdali returned better prepared in 1749, 1752 and again in 1757 when he finally reached Delhi. Here he treated the royals and the common people with extreme cruelty forcing them to give up their wealth. He also attacked Mathura and Brindavan, killing Hindus in a holy war. His return in 1758, saw the Marathas come to the north and take Delhi evicting Abdali's nominee Najibuddaulah. Najib was let off and asked to return to the Saharanpur region, even as the Maratha armies with some Mughal and later some Sikhs undertook the invasion of Punjab that Abdali had annexed.

Key words: Third battle of Panipat, Nadir Shah, Nanasaheb Peshwa, Raghunath Rao ,Malharrao Holkar

Introduction

The 1758 expedition pushed back Abdali's son and General from Lahore and the Marathas took charge of Lahore, Multan, Attock and Peshawar placing local officers supported by small number of their own troops. Delhi seemed to be out of reach of Abdali and the Maratha chief Raghunath rao – who was the younger brother of the Maratha Prime Minister Nanasaheb Peshwa – wrote to his brother that he had feelers from the Shah of Iran to attack Abdali from either side and share Qandahar and Kabul between them. However, Raghunath rao and Malharrao Holkar were recalled by the Peshwa and DattajiSindia was asked to take his place.

Dattaji and Jankoji Sindia accordingly left for the north with some clear instructions from the Peshwa. The securing of the border of Punjab was to be followed by crossing the Ganga by building a bridge of boats. The army was to crush the power of Najibuddaulah before proceeding east towards Awadh. Here Shujauddaulah – whose father Safdar Jung had once been a recipient of Maratha aid – was to be recruited for their cause and a combined expedition led into Bengal. It must be remembered this was just two years after the battle of Plassey. In the circumstances, Sindia met the returning elderly subedar Malharrao Holkar who advised him to take Najib's help to build the bridge of boats on the Ganga. Dattaji accordingly began talks with Najib who delayed the job until the commencement of monsoons. Meanwhile he sent missives to Abdali beseeching him to come to his help in India. By September Dattaji realised Najib had no intention of making the bridge and decided to attack him. Najib came to the west of the Ganga at Shukratal and took shelter in the natural fort there. Here he also used his 'bridge' to get supplies from his capital Najibabad. Najib also wrote to Shuja asking for help and telling him that if he did not do so, the Marathas would attack him next. Maratha forces meanwhile crossed the Ganga at Hardwar and began attacks on Najib's capital.

Shuja set out to help Najib, once his arch enemy, and the Marathas were surprised to find his well-equipped army led by the Naga gosains. They were pushed back across the Ganga. Just then, came news of Abdali's massive invasion and taking over the towns of Peshawar, Attock, Multan and Lahore. Moving across the doab, Dattaji crossed the Yamuna and readied to stop Abdali at Yamuna-nagar. He sent away his dependents also towards Kotputli in Rajputana. At Yamunanagar after a brief skirmish, Abdali crossed the Yamuna in December 1759 and joined Najib in the doab. To protect Delhi, Dattaji fell back towards Burari and posted soldiers at the fords on the river.

Objective:

This paper intends to bring out the battle of Panipat and its aftermath

Course of the war

The most important event of the period of Balaji was the third battle of Panipat which was fought between the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the ruler of Afghanistan. The Peshwa entered into a treaty with the Mughul emperor in 1752 A.D. By it the Mughul emperor gave the Marathas the right to collect chauth and sardeshmukhi from all over India and, in return, the Marathas were obliged to help the Emperor in times of need. Thus, the Marathas involved themselves directly with the politics at Delhi. By that time, the Mughul nobility had sharply divided itself into conflicting groups. Among them, the one group was that of the Indian Muslims and, the other one, that of the foreign Muslims particularly those of the Turanis. The Marathas were involved in that group-politics as well and supported the group of Indian Muslims. The group of foreign Muslims, therefore, tried to seek foreign help which they readily received from the ruler of Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah Abdali. Abdali claimed Kashmir, Multan and Punjab as his own provinces and, with a view to capture them, was keen to interfere in the politics of Delhi. The Mughul emperors were weak enough and could not check this group-rivalry. Thus, opposite groups of nobility got the support of the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali respectively and, with their help, tried to capture highest offices of the state and even change the monarchs for that purpose. This resulted in serious conflicts among them which brought their supporters, viz., the Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali in direct conflict against each other.

Thus, the weakness of Mughul emperors, the division of the nobility in contending groups, the ambition of the Marathas to gain influence in the North and, for that purpose, their promise, of support to the Mughul emperor and the ambition of Abdali to capture Kashmir, Multan and Punjab and, for that purpose, his support to the Turani group of nobility, etc., were primary

causes of the third battle of Panipat. Abdali had attacked India in 1752 A.D. and Emperor Ahmad Shah was forced to surrender Multan and Punjab to him. Abdali appointed Muin-ul-mulk as the subedar of those provinces and returned back. Muin-ul-mulk, however, died in 1753 A.D. His widow, Muglani Begum, of course, took up the administration of those provinces in her own hands but failed to govern them well. In 1754 A.D., the Marathas reached Delhi under the command of Raghunath Rao and helped VazirGaziuddin in raising Alamgir II to the Mughul throne in place of Ahmad Shah. That displeased the group of foreign nobles among whom one was Nazib-ud-daula. In 1756 A.D., VazirGaziuddin snatched away Multan and Punjab from Muglani Begum. That displeased Ahmad Shah Abdali and, when Muglani Begum and Nazib-ud-daula sought help from him, he attacked Punjab the same year. In 1757 A.D., Abdali reached Delhi. He appointed Nazib-ud-daula as Mir Bakshi, assigned Punjab to his son, Taimur Khan and, then, returned to Kabul. At that time the Peshwa had asked Raghunath Rao to proceed to Delhi but, before he could reach there, Abdali had retired. Raghunath Rao removed Nazib-ud-daula from the post of Mir Bakshi and appointed Ahmad Shah Bangash in his place. He attacked Punjab, forced Taimur Khan to leave it and then handed it over to Adina Beg. In 1759 A.D., Raghunath Rao returned to Poona and his place at Delhi was taken over by DattajiSindhia. Dattaji handed over Punjab to SabajiSindhia, opened negotiations with Nazib-ud-daula but, when failed, besieged him at Sakartal. Abdali was not indifferent towards these affairs. He attacked Punjab. SabajiSindhia fled away from there. Dattaji left Sakartal and moved to face Abdali. In January 1760, he fought a battle against Abdali at Loni near Delhi. He was defeated and killed and Delhi was occupied by Abdali. Nazib-ud-daula met Abdali in Delhi and requested him to stay in India till the Maratha menace was finished forever.

Internal turmoil of Maratha Confederacy

When the Peshwa heard of the death and defeat of Dattaji, he despatched a Maratha army under the command of Sadashiva Rao Bhau to the North with a view to turn out Abdali from India. The Maratha reached Delhi in August 1760 A.D. when Abdali had left it. Now both Abdali and Sadashiva Rao Bhau tried to win over different chiefs and rulers of north India to their respective sides. Abdali declared that his aim was not to stay in India but desired to turn out the Marathas of the South and place Emperor Shah Alam on the throne of Delhi. Nazib-ud-daula supported him and largely succeeded so that the Marathas failed to get support of any important Muslim chief in the North. Bhau claimed that he aimed at turning out the foreigner Abdali from India and, therefore, the ensuing contest was between the foreigners and the Indians. But Bhau was no diplomat. He failed to get support of any powerful chiefs in the North. The Rajput rulers were already dissatisfied with the Marathas. Bhau even lost the support of Suraj Mal, the Jat Raja of Bharatpur who felt disgusted with his behaviour and therefore, left the Maratha-camp. On the one hand, Nazib-ud-daula got Suja-ud-daula, the ruler of Avadh to the side of Abdali by pleading to him in the name of Islam. He successfully conspired with Malhar Rao Holkar as well. Bhau also proved incapable as a commander when compared to Abdali. He felt shortage of supplies.

Final phase

The Marathas, under Scindia, attacked Najib. Najib successfully fought a defensive action, however, keeping Scindia's forces at bay. By noon it looked as though Bhau would clinch victory for the Marathas once again. The Afghan left flank still held its own, but the centre was cut in two and the right was almost destroyed. Ahmad Shah had watched the fortunes of the battle from his tent, guarded by the still unbroken forces on his left. He sent his bodyguards to call up his 15,000 reserve troops from his camp and arranged them as a column in front of his cavalry of musketeers (Qizilbash) and 2,000 swivel-mounted shutarnaals or Ushtranaal—cannons—on the backs of camels.

The shaturnals, because of their positioning on camels, could fire an extensive salvo over the heads of their own infantry, at the Maratha cavalry. The Maratha cavalry was unable to withstand the muskets and camel-mounted swivel cannons of the Afghans. They could be fired without the rider having to dismount and were especially effective against fast-moving cavalry. Abdali therefore, sent 500 of his own bodyguards with orders to raise all able-bodied men out of camp and send them to the front. He sent 1,500 more to punish the front-line troops who attempted to flee the battle and kill without mercy any soldier who would not return to the fight. These extra troops, along with 4,000 of his reserve troops, went to support the broken ranks of the Rohillas on the right. The remainder of the reserve, 10,000 strong, were sent to the aid of Shah Wali, still labouring unequally against the Bhau in the centre of the field. These mailed warriors were to charge with the Vizier in close order and at full gallop. Whenever they charged the enemy in front, the chief of the staff and Najib were directed to fall upon either flank.

With their own men in the firing line, the Maratha artillery could not respond to the shaturnals and the cavalry charge. Some 7,000 Maratha cavalry and infantry were killed before the hand-to-hand fighting began at around midday, the tired Maratha infantry began to succumb to the onslaught of attacks from fresh Afghan reserves, protected by armoured leather jackets

End game

Finally, he proceeded towards Panipat where Abdali had already reached. In November 1760, both the armies faced each other though the battle was fought on January 14, 1761 A.D. On January 14, the Marathas attacked Abdali at 9 a.m. Malhar Rao Holkar fled away during the course of battle. The artillery of Ibrahim Gardi damaged Abdali's army very much. But, by the evening, the Marathas were badly defeated. Most of the Maratha soldiers were killed and the rest of them fled away. The massacre of the Marathas continued till next day. Many important Maratha chiefs including Bhau, son of the Peshwa, Viswas Rao, Jaswant Rao Pawar, Tukoji Sindhia etc. were killed in the battle. There was not a single family in Maharashtra which had not to grieve on the death of one of its relative. Primary causes of the defeat of the Marathas were the diplomatic failure of Bhau and the superiority of Abdali against Bhau as a commander. Besides, there were a large number of women and servants in the Maratha camp who were simply burden to the army. The effective fighting force of the Marathas numbered only 45,000 while the army of Abdali consisted of nearly 60,000 soldiers.

Bhau lost control over Doab and therefore, felt scarcity of supplies. He wasted three months by camping before Abdali at Panipat and engaged in battle when, from the last two months, the Maratha army was semi-starved. The Marathas did not use their guerilla method of warfare. Instead they depended too much on the artillery under Ibrahim Gardi and therefore, fought a defensive battle. Abdali had better cavalry than the Marathas. Bhau failed to get the support of the Rajputs and the Jats which also was a cause of their defeat. Therefore, conditions were such that the defeat of the Marathas was nearly a foregone conclusion. Historians have differed regarding the results of this battle. Sardesai expressed the view that, certainly, the Marathas suffered loss of life but neither the power of the Marathas was destroyed nor any change came in their ideal.

On the contrary, Dr Jadunath Sarkar has expressed the view that it was a very serious defeat of the Marathas. During the course of this battle, the Marathas lost the ablest of their leaders which opened the way for weak and corrupt chiefs like Raghunath Rao to enter the arena of Maratha-leadership. The battle weakened the Peshwa which resulted in the

disintegration of the Maratha empire. It checked the progress of the Marathas towards north India. Of course, Sindhia remained protector of the Mughul emperor for some time but the Marathas failed to strengthen their hold over the North. That is why the British could get the chance of eliminating the French in India and capture power in Bengal also. The battle destroyed the prestige of the Marathas and they were no more considered invincible. The Marathas took a long time to reconsolidate their power and the time was utilised by other powers to strengthen themselves. After their defeat in this battle, the Marathas could no longer claim to be the foremost power in India. They, rather, became one of the powers in India. Thus, the defeat of the Marathas in the third battle of Panipat was the beginning of their downfall.

Outcome

Durrani had both numeric as well as qualitative superiority over Marathas. The combined Afghan army was much larger than that of Marathas. Though the infantry of Marathas was organized along European lines and their army had some of the best French-made guns of the time, their artillery was static and lacked mobility against the fast-moving Afghan forces. The heavy mounted artillery of Afghans proved much better in the battlefield than the light artillery of Marathas. [page needed] None of the other Hindu Kings joined forces to fight Abdali. Allies of Abdali, namely, Najib, Shuja and the Rohillas knew North India very well. He was also diplomatic, striking agreements with Hindu leaders, especially the Jats and Rajputs, and former rivals like the Nawab of Awadh, appealing to him in the name of religion.

Moreover, the senior Maratha chiefs constantly bickered with one another. Each had ambitions of carving out their independent states and had no interest in fighting against a common enemy. Some of them did not support the idea of a round battle and wanted to fight using guerilla tactics instead of charging the enemy head-on.[citation needed] The Marathas were fighting alone at a place which was 1000 miles away from their capital Pune.

Raghunathrao was supposed to go north to handle the situation. Raghunathrao asked for large amount and an army, which was denied by SadashivraoBhau, his cousin and Diwan of Peshwa, so he declined to go .SadashivraoBhau was there upon made commander in chief of the Maratha Army, under whom the Battle of Panipat was fought. Peshwa's decision to appoint SadashivraoBhau as the Supreme Commander instead of Malharrao Holkar or Raghunathrao proved to be an unfortunate one, as Sadashivrao was totally ignorant of the political and military situation in North India.

If Holkar had remained in the battlefield, the Maratha defeat would have been delayed but not averted. Ahmad Shah's superiority in pitched battle could have been negated if the Marathas had conducted their traditional ganimi kava, or guerrilla warfare, as advised by Malharrao Holkar, in Punjab and in north India. Abdali was in no position to maintain his field army in India indefinitely.

Conclusion

To save their kingdom, the Mughals once again changed sides and welcomed the Afghans to Delhi. The Mughals remained in nominal control over small areas of India, but were never a force again. The empire officially ended in 1857 when its last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, was accused of being involved in the Sepoy Mutiny and exiled.

The valour displayed by the Marathas was praised by Ahmad Shah Abdali.

“ The Marathas fought with the greatest valour which was beyond the capacity of other races. These dauntless blood-shedders didn't fall short in fighting and doing glorious deeds. But ultimately we won with our superior tactics and with the grace of the Divine Lord. ”

The Third Battle of Panipat saw an enormous number of deaths and injuries in a single day of battle. It was the last major battle between indigenous South Asian military powers until the creation of Pakistan and India in 1947.

The Marathas' expansion was delayed due to the battle, and infighting soon broke out within the empire. They recovered their position under the next Peshwa Madhavrao I and by 1771 were back in control of the north, finally occupying Delhi. However, after the death of Madhavrao, due to infighting and increasing pressure from the British, their claims to empire only officially ended in 1818 after three wars with the British.

Meanwhile, the Sikhs—whose rebellion was the original reason Ahmad invaded—were left largely untouched by the battle. They soon retook Lahore. When Ahmad Shah returned in March 1764 he was forced to break off his siege after only two weeks due to a rebellion in Afghanistan. He returned again in 1767, but was unable to win any decisive battle. With his own troops complaining about not being paid, he eventually lost the region to the Sikhs, who remained in control until 1849 when it was annexed by the British Empire.

The battle was referred to in Rudyard Kipling's poem "With Scindia to Delhi".

“ Our hands and scarfs were saffron-dyed for signal of despair,

When we went forth to Paniput to battle with the ~Mlech~,

Ere we came back from Paniput and left a kingdom there.”

It is, however, also remembered as a scene of valour on both sides. Santaji Wagh's corpse was found with over 40 mortal wounds. The bravery of Vishwas Rao, the Peshwa's son, and Sadashiv Bhau was acknowledged even by the Afghans.

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