

UNIT 54 – UPSC - Third Anglo-Maratha Battle: Pindari

India's History : Modern India : The Pindari war - 1817-1818

Pindari



Of uncertain origin, the term 'Pindari' described a type of irregular light horse-cum-bandit which flourished in central India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, originating with the break-up of the Mogul armies. Of no one race, tribe or religion, they included any to whom the prospect of lawlessness appealed, including Marathas, Afghans and Jats; generally organised in loose bands led by chieftains, they sometimes served the Maratha states, receiving no wage but even paying for the prospect of loot and plunder. They congregated in Malwa, with the tacit approval of Sindhia and Holkar, from where they set out, usually in November, to plunder throughout Hindustan, into British territory and even to the Coromandel coast. The most powerful chieftain, Amir Khan, had regularly organised regiments, estimated at 12,000 light horse, 10,000 infantry and an estimated artillery train of between 80 and 200 guns; to which other Pindari bands added a further 15,000 cavalry, 1,500 infantry and 20 guns.

By 1817 the ravages of these bandits had become intolerable, so the Governor General (and Commander in-Chief), the Earl of Moira (later Marquess HASTINGS) determined to crush them; but the renewed hostility of the Maratha powers turned what began as a drive against freebooters into a war against the peshwa, Indore, and the Bhonsla raja of Nagpore. (Jaswant Rao Holkar of Indore had died in 1811, and in the minority of his successor, his favourite mistress became regent; she was murdered by the Indore military commanders in 1817 who committed their forces to the peshwa when hostilities began). To combat this menace, the Governor General formed two armies, taking personal command of the Grand Army which assembled at Cawnpore in four divisions, each of two infantry and a cavalry brigade; and General Sir Thomas Hislop's Army of the Deccan, seven divisions strong. Troops from all three presidencies were involved.

Two of the possible foes provided little opposition; Sindhia was pressured into neutrality, and by signing the Treaty of Gwalior agreed to take action against the Pindaris, whom he had been protecting; and the Pindaris themselves did not pose the predicted threat. Amir Khan accepted conditions imposed by the British and disbanded his forces, in return for a territorial settlement which became the state of

Tonk in Rajputana; the remaining Pindari forces were attacked and dispersed, one of their principal leaders, Karim, surrendering, and another, Chitu, fled to the jungles where he was killed by a tiger.

Marathas finally crushed



More serious was the reaction of the other Marathas, whose simmering discontent turned into open war in November 1817. As Peshwa Baji Rao II assembled his forces, the commander of the British units at Poona, Colonel C. B. BURR, withdrew from the cantonments with the Resident, and concentrated on a ridge at Kirkee. The residency at Poona was burned, and on 5 November 1817 the Peshwa's army moved to attack the position at Kirkee; their strength was estimated as up to 18,000 cavalry, 8,000 infantry and fourteen guns, against which Burr had five Bombay sepoy battalions and an auxiliary battalion, about 2,000 strong, and 800 Europeans (Bombay Europeans and a detachment of 65th Foot). Burr attacked immediately and the Marathas bolted, the Peshwa's entire force being routed for the loss of nineteen dead and 67 wounded, only two of these casualties falling upon BURR's European troops. General Lionel SMITH arrived to reinforce BURR on the 13th, and on 17 November another action was fought at Poona, which completed the defeat of the Peshwa's army.

At Nagpore the Bhonsla mustered his forces, ostensibly for a drive against the Pindaris, but turned against the British when news was received of the Peshwa's revolt. The British force at Nagpore was only about 1,300 strong, comprising three troops of 6th Bengal Cavalry, the 1/20th and 1/24th Madras Native Infantry, and some auxiliaries, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel H. S. SCOTT. Like BURR, Scott withdrew from the cantonments to a defensible position; at Seetabuldee on 26 November 18,000 men of the Nagpore army, including some 3,000 Arabs employed by the Bhonsla, attacked him. After a fight of some eighteen hours the Nagpore army withdrew, Scott's force having sustained 367 casualties, testimony to the determination with which sepoy units could fight, even without European support. On 12 December relief arrived in the form of Brigadier-General J. DOVETON's 2nd Division of the Army of the Deccan, which assaulted Nagpore on 16 December. After several hours' fighting the 21,000-strong Nagpore army was routed, some thousands

withdrawing into the city, where they capitulated on 24 December after several days of bombardment.

Despite the defeat at Poona, the Peshwa's army was still in being and, about 28,000 strong on New Year's Day 1818 fell upon a British detachment at Coiygaum. Commanded by Captain STAUNTON of the 21st Bombay Native Infantry, this comprised only about 600 of his own battalion, two Madras Artillery 6pdrs and 300 auxiliary horse. Staunton occupied that part of Corygaum village not held by the enemy, and a house-to-house fight raged from noon until 9 p.m. This remarkable defence, in which only Staunton and two other officers remained unscathed, resisted all efforts of the Peshwa's army, which retired and broke up upon news of the approach of General Lionel Smith. Concerning the exertions of the British officers (even two assistant-surgeons, one of whom was killed, had led bayonet-charges throughout the day), Smith described their efforts as 'almost unparalleled ... in such a struggle the presence of a single European was of the utmost consequence, and seemed to inspire the native soldiers with the usual confidence of success'; but this action, coming at the end of a 28-mile march, reflected equal credit upon the sepoys as upon their leaders.

After vainly attempting to negotiate to prevent the state becoming hostile, Sir Thomas HISLOP engaged the army of Indore at Mahidpore on 23 December 1817. The Indore forces mustered some 30,000 light horse, 5,000 infantry and 100 guns; Hislop's 5,500-strong 1st and 3rd Divisions of the Army of the Deccan included few Europeans, only the flank companies of the 1st Foot and Madras Europeans. Because of the disparity in numbers, Hislop attacked immediately; the Maratha horse fled, but the infantry and gunners (trained in European style) made a gallant stand until they were overthrown. Hislop lost 174 killed, 614 wounded and three missing. Mahidpore virtually ended the war, as peace was concluded with Indore shortly after. Following a chase, Baji Rao II surrendered to Sir John MALCOLM in May 1818, and was sent as a state pensioner to Bithur, near Cawnpore, devoid of power or influence; his heir, Nana Sahib, would become infamous forty years later. An infant was recognised as raja of Nagpore, under British guardianship, and when the Bhonsla died without direct heirs in 1853, his territory was annexed. The war finally ended the power of the Maratha states, although Gwalior was still not completely negated as an opponent.