

## UNIT 69 – UPSC - Third Battle of Panipat

**India's History : Modern India : Third battle of Panipat: Ahmed Shah Abdali defeats the Marathas; Accession of Madhava Rao Peshwa ; Rise of Hyder ali : 1761**

### TITLE



### Prelude to Panipat

The Mughal Empire of north-western India had been in decline for some time after Ahmad Shah's first attacks against them in 1749, eventually culminating in his sacking of Delhi in 1757. He left them in nominal control however, which proved to be a fateful mistake when his son, Timur Shah, proved to be utterly incapable of maintaining control of the Afgan troops. Soon the local Sikh population rose in revolt and asked for the protection of the Marathas, who were soon in Lahore. Timur ran for the hills of Afganistan.

Ahmad Shah could not allow this to go unchecked, and in 1759 rose an army from the Pashtun tribes with help from the Baloch, and invaded India once again. By the end of the year they had reached Lahore, but Marathas continued to pour into the conflict and by 1760 had formed a huge single army of over 100,000 to block him.

Setting up defensive works in the excellent ground near Panipat, they blocked Ahmad's access back to Afganistan. They then moved in almost 150 pieces of modern

long-range rifled artillery from France. With a range of several kilometres, these guns were some of the best in the world and a powerful force that had previously made the Marathas invincible on the battlefield.

## Siege

The Afgan forces arrived in late 1760 to find the Marathas in well-prepared works. Realizing a direct attack was hopeless, they set up for a siege. The resulting face-off lasted two months. During this time Ahmad continued to receive supplies from locals, but the Marathas own supply line was cut off.

Realizing the situation was not in their favour, the Marathas under Sadashiv Bhau decided to break the siege. His plan was to pulverise the enemy formations with cannon fire and not to employ his cavalry until the Muslims were thoroughly softened up. With the Afgans now broken, he would move camp in a defensive formation towards Delhi, where they were assured supplies.

The line would be formed up some 12km across, with the artillery in front, protected by infantry, pikemen, musketeers and bowmen. The cavalry was instructed to wait behind the artillery, ready to be thrown in when control of battlefield had been established.

Behind this line was another ring of 30,000 young Maratha soldiers who were not battle tested, and then the roughly 30,000 civilians entrained. Many were middle class men, women and children on their pilgrimage to the Hindu holy places and shrines, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see Aryavarta (Aryan Land). The civilians were supremely confident in the Maratha army, regarding it as one of the best in the world, and definitely one of the most powerful in Asia. Behind the civilians was yet another protective infantry line, of young inexperienced soldiers.

## Battle opens

Before dawn on January 14, 1761 the Maratha forces emerged from the trenches, pushing the artillery into position on their pre-arranged lines, some 2km from the Afgans. Seeing that the battle was on, Ahmad positioned his 60 smoothbore cannon and opened fire. However, because of the short range of the weapons, the Maratha lines remained untouched. Ahmad then launched a cavalry attack to break their lines.

The first defensive salvo of the Marathas went over the Afgan's heads and inflicted very little damage, but the Afgan attack was nevertheless broken by Maratha bowmen and pikemen, along with some musketeers stationed close to the artillery positions. The second and subsequent salvos were fired at point blank range, and the resulting carnage sent the Afgans reeling back to their lines. The European-style plan had worked just as envisioned.

The Marathas then started moving their formation forward, led by the artillery. The Afgans responded with repeated cavalry attacks, all of which failed. About 17,000 Afgan cavalry and infantrymen lost their lives in this opening stage of the battle. Gaping holes were opened in their ranks, and in some places the Afgans and their Indian Muslim allies began to run away.

## The Marathas cavalry charge

At this stage it looked as though Bhausaheb would clinch victory for the Marathas once again. However, some of the Maratha lieutenants, jealous of the exploits of their artillery chiefs, decided to exploit the gaps in the enemy lines despite strict instructions not to charge or engage Afgan cavalry. They Maratha horsemen raced through their own artillery lines and charged towards the demoralised Afgans, intending to cut the faltering army in two.

The over-enthusiasm of the charge saw many of the Maratha horses exhausted long before they had traveled the two kilometres to the Afgan lines, some simply collapsed. Making matters worse was the suffocating odour of the rotting corpses of men and animals from the fighting of the previous months.

In response, the Afgan officers stiffened their troops' resistance. Abdali called up his reserves and cavalry of musketeers, who fired an extensive salvo at the Maratha cavalry, who were unable to withstand the rifled muskets of the Afgans.

With their own men in the firing line, the Maratha artillery could not respond, and about 7,000 Maratha cavalry and infantry perished before the hand-to-hand fighting began at around 2PM. By 4PM the tired Maratha infantry began to succumb to the onslaught of attacks from fresh Afgan reserves protected by their armoured leather jackets.

## Attack from within

The Maratha Muslim logistics infantrymen (Rohillas), who had not been trusted to fight in the front line because their loyalty was suspect, or, rather, who were suspected of being loyal to the Koran or fellow Muslims and not to their country, now responded to the calls of the Afgan army for jihad and revolted. This caused brought confusion and great consternation to loyal Maratha soldiers, who thought that the enemy had attacked from behind.

Sadashivrao Bhau, seeing his forward lines dwindling and civilians behind, felt he had no choice but to come down from his elephant and take a direct part in the battle on horseback at the head of his troops. He left instructions with his bodyguards that, if the battle were lost, they must kill his wife Parvati bai, as he could not abide the thought of her being dishonoured by Afgans.

Some Maratha soldiers, seeing that their general had disappeared from his elephant, panicked and began to flee. Vishwasrao, the son of Prime Minister Nansahaheb, had

already fallen to Afgan sniper fire, shot in the head. Sadashivrao Bhau and his bodyguard fought to the end, the Maratha leader having three horses shot out from under him.

## Rout

The Afgans pursued the fleeing Maratha army and the civilians, while the Maratha front lines remained largely intact, with some of their artillery units fighting until sundown. Choosing not to launch a night attack, made good their escape that night. Parvati bai escaped the armageddon with her bodyguards, and eventually returned to Pune.

The Afgan cavalry and pikemen ran wild through the streets of Panipat, killing any Maratha soldiers or civilians who offered and resistance. About 6,000 women and children sought shelter with Shuja (allies of Abdali) whose Hindu officers persuaded him to protect them.



Afgan officers who had lost their kin in battle were permitted to carry out massacres the next day, also in Panipat and the surrounding area. They arranged victory mounds of severed heads outside their camps. About 10,000 Maratha civilians and soldiers alike were slain this way on 15th January 1761. Many of the fleeing Maratha women jumped into the Panipat well rather than risk rape and dishonour. Many others did their best to hide in the streets of Panipat when the North Indian Hindus of the town refused to give them refuge.

Abdali's soldiers arrested about 10,000 women and another 10,000 young children and men brought them to their camps. The women were raped, many committed suicide because of constant rapes perpetrated on them. All of the prisoners were exchanged or sold as sex slaves to Afganistan or North India, transported on carts, camels and elephants in bamboo cages.

A conservative estimate places Maratha losses at 35,000 on the Panipat battlefield itself, and another 10,000 or more in surrounding areas. The Afgans are thought to have lost some 30,000.

## Following the battle

To save their kingdom, the Mughals once again changed sides and welcomed the Afgans to Delhi. However the news soon rose that Marathas in the south had organised another 100,000 men to avenge their loss and rescue the prisoners. He left Delhi two months after the battle, heading for Afganistan with his loot of 500 elephants, 1500 camels, 50,000 horses and about 22,000 women and children.

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 was accused of being involved in the Sepoy Mutiny and exiled.

The Marathas expansion was stopped in the battle, and soon broke into infighting within their empire. They never regained any unity, and were soon under increasing pressure from the British. Their claims to empire were officially ended in 1818.

Meanwhile the Sihks, the original reason Ahmad invaded, were left largely untouched by the battle. They soon re-took Lahore. When Ahmad returned in March 1764 he was forced to break off his siege after only two weeks due to rebellion in Afganistan. He returned again in 1767, but was unable to win any decisive battle. With his own troops arguing over a lack of pay, he eventually abandoned the district to the Sihks, who remained in control until 1849.