

UNIT 94 – UPSC - The Battle of Haldighati

India's History : Medieval India : The Battle of Haldighati - 1576

Haldighati

The battle of Haldighati has gone down in the annals of Indian history as one which showcased the great valour of the Rajput troops led by their scion Rana Pratap. The result was indecisive, but the battle was truly symbolic of the raw courage, spirit of sacrifice, and loyalty of the Rajputs in their heroic defence of their motherland.

Location

Haldighati, is a small village in the Aravalli Hills about 44 km north of Udaipur and about 1,839 m. above sea level. Beyond this is Haldighati Pass, a narrow defile almost a kilometre in length, running south to northeast and finally ending in a broad plain. An interesting geographical feature of the pass is its soft yellow soil, which when crumbled resembles the turmeric (haldi), which gives the place its name. It was here that the famous Battle of Haldighati was fought on June 18, 1576 between Maharana PRATAP SINGH of Mewar and the Imperial army of Emperor Akbar of Delhi.

The Moghul and the Rajput



Haldighati, Battle of (June 18, 1576), a four-hour confrontation between the Imperial forces of Mughal Emperor AKBAR and Maharana PRATAP SINGH I (1572-1597) of Mewar. Despite it being an indecisive battle - an inglorious success of sorts for the Mughals and "a glorious defeat" for Mewar - it has entered the annals as one of the kingdom's most memorable episodes. By the mid 1500s, in his bid to rule all of India, Emperor Akbar had forced all Rajput kingdoms, except Mewar, to become part of his empire. Wanting to make this leading Rajput state obey, he tried force, but failed. Changing his tactics, throughout 1573 he sent a series of envoys to Pratap with a peace treaty. However, although Pratap was agreeable to signing it, he was emphatic that it had to be conciliation on his terms: he would not become subservient to any other ruler (particularly a foreigner) and Mewar would not sacrifice its independence. Frustrated and humiliated, Akbar gathered his armies together, placed them under the command of Mughal general Asaf Khan and Pratap's archenemy, fellow Rajput

MAN SINGH of Amber, and gave the order to destroy Mewar. On May 3, the Mughals marched south towards the village of Haldighati where a pass accessed the terrain of Pratap Singh and his temporary capital of Kumbhalgarh.

The Battle



June 18, 1576. Before sunrise, the Mughal army was on the move. As dawn broke, the Bhil lookouts saw the huge force crossing the river and assembling near Khamnor. Pratap Singh moved his men into the neck of Haldighati Pass. They halted, prepared to wait for the opportune moment to strike. The legendary warrior was impressive in his helmet, and chain-armour over a white tunic (still preserved in Udaipur's City Palace Museum). He sat proudly upon Chetak, his handsome white Arab stallion that had been his closest ally in many battles. The horse was clad in colourful mail that ended with a mask resembling a grotesque elephant, designed to terrify an opponent's steed and to protect the horse from the enemy's war elephants, on the assumption that elephants will not harm younger elephants. Pratap clasped his huge sword in one hand; his other gripped the ancient banner of the House of Mewar, the crimson field with the golden face of the Sun God in the centre. The sun climbed higher. Faces ran with perspiration. The muffled thunder of the Mughal army came ever nearer. The ground began to tremble. Soon, a cloud of dust was rising above distant treetops, filtering the morning sun. The Maharana led his group into the larger phalanx of troops under Qazi Khan. His war elephants brought up the rear. There was immediate panic. As the rows of youths hailed arrows into the Mewar ranks, the surprised skirmishers balked, then stumbled back across the uneven, rock-strewn terrain. Vicious thorn bushes tore into their skin and clothing. They collided headlong with the warrior youths. Chaos reigned. Horses screamed in fear. Swords slashed. Muskets cracked. Bows twanged; arrows ripped into bodies. Brave men uttered war cries; others their death howls.

A band of Mughal Rajputs turned and fled, straight into a line of troops moving in from the right. The dead and wounded of both sides began to clutter the pass. The ground was already running scarlet. Pratap's group galloped out of the defile and immediately clashed with Qazi Khan and the Sheikzadas of Sikri. The onslaught was vicious; the enemy broke and fled and did not stop until they were at least 16 km beyond the river, where they were confronted by the rear guard. They re-formed for a new assault. Already Pratap and Chetak had sustained several wounds. Undaunted, the Maharana, holding high the crimson banner, led his men deeper into the enemy's ranks. A wall of the Emperor's war-elephants, brought forward to stop the advance of the Mewar elephants, halted his relentless victory charge. A stray musket ball killed the mahout of a Mughal elephant. Out of control, it ran amok, trampling all in its path. The opposing elephants impacted, huge tusks ripping into flanks,

broadswords in trunks slicing open any unprotected flesh. Fighting off all comers, Pratap and his men pressed on into the heart of the enemy, trying to encounter Man Singh and the heavy artillery. The death of the first would throw the Mughal forces into disarray, and the loss of the artillery would at least neutralise the massive advantage the Mughals had over Mewar.

Above the din of battle, he heard a familiar war cry, and spun round in his saddle. Man Singh was standing in his elephant's howdah, trying to encourage his men to stem the rout by the Mewar warriors. Pratap spurred his steed to a determined gallop towards Man Singh. Lances, swords or arrows could not stop his fury. He cut his way through to the Mughal general. Chetak skidded to a halt, throwing up dust, but collided with the elephant's plate armour. He reared up against the huge beast, his forelegs glancing off its tusks. Man Singh was partly obscured by his mahout, but Pratap heaved his lance at the howdah. The weapon passed through the driver's body, killing him instantly, and smashed against the howdah's metal plates. Man Singh had disappeared. Thinking he had killed Man Singh, Pratap let out a triumphal cry of revenge. The uncontrolled elephant swung around in panic. The broadsword attached to its trunk slashed through the tendons of one of Chetak's hind legs.

Unaware of this, Pratap wheeled Chetak to rejoin his men. The horse now had the use of only three of his legs but, enveloped by the furore, he persisted valiantly. Man Singh had simply ducked behind the howdah's railing for protection. Moments later, he scrambled down on to the elephant's neck in a desperate effort to control its panicked rush through Mughal lines. Imperial cavalry, who had rushed to guard their commander, now surrounded Pratap. A Mughal officer, Bahlol Khan, charged the Maharana. Steel rang against steel. Pratap mustered his energy for one almighty blow. His heavy sword sliced through the Mughal's headpiece and, like a hot knife through soft butter, hewed straight down through the Mughal's body, even disembowelling his horse. Other Mughals were now on top of Pratap. Chetak was limping and stumbling. Pratap fought his way back to the main body of the Mewar force, which was steadily forcing the Mughals into retreat. Suddenly, a great commotion of kettledrums came from the rear of the Imperial ranks. Across the sea of bloodied, mud-caked bodies, the Rajputs saw the Mughal reserves making their entry. And, to Pratap's dismay, Man Singh followed closely at the head of battle-weary soldiers and horsemen.

Pratap's first impulse was to make another attempt to destroy the Rajput traitor, possibly meeting death in a blaze of glory. One of his officers, Jhala Man of Sadri, snatched the royal standard of Mewar from Pratap's hand, determined to fight a rear guard action until Pratap's army had reached the protection of the defile. "Ride swiftly to safety!" he yelled. Reluctantly but wisely, Pratap shouted an order to his remaining chiefs to take their men to the village of Koliyari, where arrangements had been made for treating the wounded.

Waving the Sun-God banner, Jhala rallied his men to meet the enemy's counter-attack, as the remainder of the Mewar army disappeared into the cover of the hills. Bringing up the rear, Pratap stopped upon an outcrop of rock. He turned to look back at the swirling dust haze that all but hid the horrendous spectacle of the

battleground. Through it came the tumult of shots, the clashing swords, the cries of victory and death. For a few moments, he was able to follow the progress of his crimson banner. Then it, too, fell. An attendant came back and took Pratap's bridle. "We tarry too long, Highness." They continued on. Chetak was now limping badly. Pratap, too, was now faint from loss of blood; he had sustained seven severe wounds from musket, sword and lance.



Pratap was pursued by two Mughal horsemen but was saved by his brother, SAKTA. However, having carried his master to safety, Chetak died. Pratap joined the remainder of his men, recovered from his wounds, then continued his guerilla resistance (see PRATAP SINGH I, MAHARANA). Despite temporary victory for the Mughals, the battle of Haldighati is significant for the tenacity displayed by the Rajputs, allied with the Bhils, and the art of defensive mountain warfare which Maharana Pratap Singh perfected and which his successors were proud, and wise, to use.