

Battle of Kili

The Battle of Kili was fought between the Mongols of the Chagatai Khanate under Qutlugh Khwaja and the Delhi Sultanate led Alauddin Khilji in 1299. It resulted in the expulsion of the Mongol forces from the Indian Subcontinent.

This article will further give details about the battle of Kili within the context of the IAS Exam.

Background of the Battle of Kili

After the civil wars of the mid-13th century, the once mighty Mongol Empire split into four independent Khanates, with the least known being the Chagatai Khanate. Hemmed in by the Golden Horde, Ilkhanate and Yuan, the only direction the Chagatais could expand not at the expense of their fellow Mongols was south towards the Indian subcontinent, whose northern half was ruled by the Delhi Sultanate.

The relationship between the Delhi Sultanate and the Mongols began in the 1220s when Genghis Khan (also spelt as Chengiz) chased the Khwarizmi Prince to the borders of the sultanate. For reasons not known fully but alluded to his campaigns in Persia and China at the time, Genghis Khan turned towards the east instead of heading southwards.

Until the 1250s, the Delhi Sultanate followed a policy of diplomacy to stave off Mongol raids but they bore little results evident by the fall of Punjab. Then the new ruler of the sultanate, Balban changed its policy to become more aggressive to the Mongols. He retook Multan and Lahore worked towards fortifying the mountainous borders of India

Balban died in 1287 and he was succeeded by his grandson, Kayqubad. Meanwhile the Mongol Empire had splintered into four different khanates following the death of Genghis Khan in 1227. One of these, the Chagatai Khanate came under the control of Duwa and his son Qutlug Khwaja. They made alliances with other Mongol tribes in the region, building up their forces for an southward expansion.

In 1290, Kayqubad was murdered and the throne was seized by the founder of the famed Khilji Dynasty Jalal-al-Din Khilji. Jalal was already an accomplished commander who had earlier repelled a Mongol incursion at Bar-Ram in 1292. Then in 1296, his nephew Alaudin Khilji killed his uncle and usurped power.

He started a number of reforms to consolidate power and to prepare against future Mongol invasions, such as paying the army in cash and retaining personal control instead of delegating it to his generals.

In 1299 on the orders of Duwa Khan's sons Qutlug Khwaja and Temur Buqa marched towards Delhi with a force of 50,000-60,000 horsemen. The numbers of the Mongols prove this was a full scale invasion instead of a punitive raid. Intending to strike at Delhi while the sultanates main army was campaigning in Gujarat, the Mongols bypassed several towns and villages in the process.

They were met by a sultanate force led by Zafar Khan at the river Yamuna. The Delhi forces were defeated and forced to retreat to Delhi. Fear and panic gripped the city upon the news of the defeat and Alauddin held a council on the course of action to be taken. Despite his advisors stating that the Mongols were too numerous, too powerful and too close, Alauddin decided to give battle and marched out with whatever forces he could raise, towards Kili, north of Delhi.

Events during the Battle of Kili

Sources describe Alauddin having a force of 300,000 with 2700 war elephants, but modern historians give a more feasible number at 70,000 with 700 elephants. Still outnumbering the 50,000-60,000 Mongols. Both the forces deployed in the standard formation for steppe armies - a center and two wings. The sultan took the center while Zafar Khan took the right wing and Ulug Khan the left wing. The elephants were dispersed among the three.

Like the Mongols the Delhi Forces relied on horse archers, light and heavy cavalry, with much of their armies experienced in the same style of warfare as the Mongols.

Zafar Khan, seeking to avenge his defeat at the Yamuna, led the first charge attacking the Mongols on the left flank which broke before him. Zafar gave chase to drive them from the field but as he was led away from the main army he had found that he had fallen for the oldest Mongol trick in the book - a feigned retreat.

Zafar Khan was encircled by the Mongol Army in an ambush. His Sultan made little effort to rescue him as the mistrust of his subordinates' popularity was too great. Abandoned and surrounded, Zafar fought on until he was captured. Qutlugh Khwaja was impressed by his courage and offered him to join the Mongols even offering him to make him the sultan. Zafar Khan refused, remaining loyal to the sultan who had abandoned him. Qutlug ordered his execution and all of his men and elephants.

With this victory, it seemed Qutlug would triumph over Alauddin Khilji and conquer the sultanate. But the Mongols retreated instead because Qutlug was injured during the melee that ensued at Zafar Khan's execution. Qutlug died of his injuries and the Mongols had lost their prince and an invasion with little result

Alauddin allowed them to retreat safely, and then returned to Delhi

Aftermath of the battle of Kili

The defeat at Kili did not halt subsequent Mongol invasions into India as subsequent invasions would take place in 1303, 1305 and 1306. But all of these would fail as the aura of Mongol invincibility was permanently broken.

Although Zafar Khan died fighting in the battle, Alauddin resented the fact that he had disobeyed the royal orders. Nobody in the royal court praised his gallantry; on the contrary, Alauddin denounced his recklessness and disobedience.