

Battle of Phalked

The Battle of Palkhed was fought between the Maratha Army led by Peshwa Balaji Rao I and the forces of Hyderabad led by Nizam Asaf Jah I. Fought on February 28, 1728, the battle ended in a decisive victory for the Maratha Forces.

This article will give further details about the Battle of Palkhed within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

Background of the Battle of Palkhed

The Maratha Empire had begun to carve out a territory following the fragmentation of the Mughal Empire. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's son and successor, Shambhuji Raje, continued his expansion of the empire energetically. To aid him in his task he appointed as his Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath Rao. The new Peshwa expanded the Maratha Empire's border with relative ease.

Meanwhile, in 1724, Mughal control of Hyderabad was formally ended when a noble, Asaf Jah I declared himself as the Nizam and set out to carve out a kingdom of his own.

To achieve this, the Nizam aimed to weaken the Maratha Empire by supporting rival factions currently vying for the throne following the death of Shambhuji Raje. He supported the faction led by Sambhuji II, a son of Shambhuji Raje's half-brother Rajaram. This angered Shahuji, son of Shambhuji Raje, who had already been proclaimed as Chhatrapati.

In addition, the Nizam also halted the collection of taxes, directly challenging the authority of the Marathas. Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath was succeeded by his son Baji Rao who argued successfully that the time was ripe for a Maratha expansion into the northern domains of the Mughal Empire. To this end, Peshwa Baji Rao turned his attention towards Nizam Asaf Jah I setting the stage for the battle of Palkhed.

Initial Manoeuvres before the battle of Palkhed

The initial moves began when one of Nizam's generals attempted to invade the northern parts of Maratha territories. He was repulsed by the swift-moving Maratha cavalry. Peshwa Baji Rao, joined by many contingents of the Maratha Army on his way to Nizam's territory. Crossing the Godavari, he invaded the very heart of the Nizam's territories. Using his swift mobile cavalry, Peshwa Baji Rao sacked cities after cities in the region, while the Nizam's army tried to keep pace.

Peshwa Baji Rao's strategy was to separate the Nizam from his heavy artillery guns, which would be a trump card should a pitched battle occur. Tired from chasing a mobile enemy, the Nizam changed his strategy and marched straight into the Maratha heartland making his way towards Purandar fort. The Nizam made no effort to besiege the Maratha forts. He instead crowned Sambhaji II as king and

proceeded to pillage the surrounding area in order to lure Peshwa Baji Rao into making battle so he could bear on him with his heavy artillery.

Peshwa Baji Rao did not take the bait.

Instead, he made his way towards Aurangabad, an important city of the Deccan, turning the tables on the Nizam in the process.

When word of this reached him, it forced the Nizam to finally abandon most of his heavy guns in order to reach Aurangabad before its destruction. To reach the city, he would have to cross the Godavari at the town of Palkhed, an opportunity that Peshwa Baji Rao would exploit.

Events during the battle of Palkhed

Crossing the Godavari took time due to a large baggage train, but the Nizam's forces crossed it eventually. The Nizam's vanguard camped around the town of Palkhed, unaware that Peshwa Baji Rao was already positioned nearby. Anticipating that the Nizam would cross the Godavari near this town, the Peshwa had surrounded the Nizam's camp in a horse-shoe formation.

Suddenly, Maratha skirmishers emerged from their hiding spot and began harassing the Nizam's vanguard. Following a brief confrontation, the skirmishers began retreating back to their main formation.

The Nizam, realising he had walked into a trap, made a desperate charge against the surrounding Maratha army but this only made his forces vulnerable to cavalry attacks from all the sides.

Meanwhile, a contingent of Maratha forces had moved behind the Nizam's lines and cut him off from his remaining guns and the rear guard still trying to cross the river. The Nizam realised he was truly cut off and the situation was hopeless, thus he was forced to open negotiations with the Maratha commander.

The aftermath of the battle of Palkhed

Nizam Asaf Jah I was forced to agree to every term set by Peshwa Baji Rao which included abandoning the cause of Sambhaji II and above all accepting the Maratha right to collect taxes in all of his territories in the Deccan.

The battle of Palkhed not only demonstrated the tactical genius of Peshwa Baji Rao but also ensured the role of the Marathas as a prominent power within the Indian subcontinent in the decades to come, demarcating the irreversible decline of the Mughal Empire in the process.