

Battle of Wadgaon

The battle of Wadgaon was a decisive engagement between the Maratha Empire and the British East India Company. Fought on 12-13 January 1779, it ended in a victory for the Maratha forces, altering the balance of the First Anglo-Maratha War.

This article will give details about the battle of Wadgaon which will be useful for candidates appearing for the Government exams this year.

Background of the battle of Wadgaon

The port of Bombay (Mumbai) had been under British rule since 1661. With the rise of the Maratha Empire in the second half of the 18th century, the British felt it wise to secure the port and its supply route which ran through Vasai and Pune, both in Maratha territory. The British had further cause to fear when the Maratha Empire made overtures to their French rivals.

They took advantage of the intrigue in the Maratha courts by supporting a rival claimant to the throne, Ragunathrao. The Treaty of Surat was thus signed on 6 March 1775 in which British assistance would be lent to Raghunathrao in return for control of forts at Salsette and Bassein.

When word got around about this treaty the Marathas granted the French a port on the west coast prompting the British to send their army in return.

The East India Company sent a near 4000 man strong army which was further complemented by an additional force by Ragunath Rao with artillery.

Meanwhile, the Maratha army drew in its forces from all corners of its empire. Numbering near ten thousand, the large Maratha army was commanded by Mahadji Shinde and Tukojirai Holkar.

Events during the Battle of Wadgaon

Mahadji Shinde continually harassed the British forces along their line of march by attacking the supply lines. When these supply lines were cut, the British were forced to set camp at Talegaon, barely a few hours from Pune. But there would be no respite for the British. They were set upon by a Maratha force whose cavalry attacked them on all sides. Further, the British supply problems were made worse as a scorched earth policy employed by the Marathas.

Seeing no other option, the British were forced to withdraw from Talegaon during the night. They were ambushed near the village of Wadgaon leading to devastating losses on their part. Completely surrounded by 13th January 1779 the British sought to discuss surrender terms which were accepted by the Maratha leadership. The result was the 'Treaty of Wadgaon' signed on 16 January. The terms of the treaty stipulated that the East India Company (founded on December 31, 1600) would relinquish all territories acquired since 1773.

The aftermath of the Battle of Wadgaon

Due to the generosity of the Maratha leaders, the British were allowed to withdraw to Bombay. This was to have ramifications not just for the Maratha empire but for the history of the Indian subcontinent as these same troops would fight once more against the Marathas during the Second Anglo-Maratha War.

The Treaty of Wadgaon was rejected out of hand by Warren Hastings, the Governor-General in Bengal. His reasoning was that the British generals who fought at Wadgaon did not have the necessary powers to sign such an agreement. Declaring the treaty null and void, he ordered British forces in Bombay to secure their interests and renew the war efforts against the Maratha Empire. The Anglo-Maratha wars would continue in the coming years.