

First Battle of Tarain

The first battle of Tarain was fought in 1191 between the Ghurids, a Turkish tribe, led by Muhammad Ghori and the Rajputs led by Prithviraj Chauhan and his allies. The resulting engagement ended in victory for the Rajput forces.

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

Background of the Battle of Tarain

Following the decline of the Ghaznavid empire in the 12th century led to a power vacuum in which various tribes fought for control of the empire. Among these, the Ghurids emerged victoriously and managed to sack the erstwhile city of Ghazni by 1149. The Ghurid empire would be led by two brothers Muhammad Ghori (known as Mu'izz al-Din) and Ghiyas al-Din who embarked in an expansion policy which would encompass most of modern-day Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

Soon they looked towards expanding their empire east into India. At the time northern India was a collection of loose-states. Of the most powerful ones were the Chalukya dynasty in Gujarat, the Solanki dynasty of Jaichandra in Kanauj and the Rajput Chahamanas of Prithviraj Chauhan based out of Ajmer and Delhi. Muhammed Ghori sent an envoy to the court of Prithvi Raj Chauhan first to come to a settlement. The terms included conversion to Islam and accepting the suzerainty of the Ghurids. Prithvi Raj Chauhan refused.

Undeterred, Muhammad Ghori marched his army to the kingdom of the Chalukyas in 1178. He did this as the direct route to Delhi was blocked by the last remnants of the Ghaznavids located in Lahore and Multan. The Ghurid army was defeated by the Chalukya army and forced to retreat after suffering heavy casualties. Still not to be deterred by setbacks, Muhammad Ghori built up his forces and defeated the last remnants of the Ghaznavids when he took Lahore in 1186. Now the route lay open for Muhammad Ghori to attack Prithvi Raj Chauhan's kingdom.

Events during the First Battle of Tarain

Marching his forces into India, Muhammad Ghori proceeded to capture the important fort of Bathinda. The fall of Bathinda galvanised the Delhi forces into action. Prithviraj Chauhan's gathered his allies and led his army to face Muhammad Ghori in battle.

The two armies faced each other on the fields of Tarain, 150 kilometres north of Delhi in 1191. Although contemporary sources placed Prithviraj Chauhan's army at 200,000 in numbers, modern historians agree that it numbered at 50,000. Similarly, the size of the Ghurid forces was thought to be numbered at 100,000 but historians believed it was marginally smaller than Prithvi Raj Chauhan's forces.

The Ghurid army had an advantage in cavalry archers, famed for their mobility, putting the mainly infantry Rajput forces at a disadvantage. But the Rajputs had strength in numbers and elephants

The battle began with a probing attack by the Ghurid cavalry archers who peppered the Rajput formation with arrows. Prithvi Raj Chauhan responded immediately with an all-out attack which surprised the Ghurids. They were unused to the Rajput way of fighting which favoured close combat fighting. The Rajputs pursued the retreating horse archers and covered much ground until they were upon the main Ghurid army. To their credit, the Ghurid army held firm their ground resisting waves of infantry but the Rajput cavalry began to overwhelm the Ghurid flank.

It became clear to Muhammad Ghori that the close-quarter fighting favoured the Rajputs immensely. Unable to withstand the pressure on their flank, Muhammad's troops broke ranks and fled. Meanwhile, in the Ghurid centre, Rajput elephants put pressure on the remaining troops and they began to waver.

Attempting the salvage a desperate situation, Muhammad Ghori charged into the fray hoping to rally his troops. He came upon the commander of the Rajput forces, Govind Rai. Hurling his spear at Govind Rai, the projectile was blocked and in turn, Govind Rai hurled his own spear at Muhammad Ghori, its impact knocking him almost unconscious. His life was saved by his bodyguard who spirited him away from the battlefield. Seeing their commander retreating from the field, the morale of the Ghurids was further broken and they ran away from the field. The Rajput army pursued the Ghurids for almost 40 kilometres before Prithviraj Chauhan turned his attention toward laying siege to the fort at Bathinda, which fell in 1192.

The aftermath of the first battle of Tarain

This would not be the end of Ghurid incursions into India as Muhammad Ghori would return, having learnt his enemies strength and weaknesses and mindful of not to underestimate his opponents in battle.

Prithvi Raj Chauhan's inability to pursue and annihilate his foe and consolidate his borders would have detrimental effects in Indian history as the second battle of Tarain would prove.