

Second Battle of Panipat

The Second Battle of Panipat took place on 5 November 1556, between the emperor of north India, Hemu, and the forces of the Mughal emperor Akbar.

The second battle of Panipat was a turning point in Indian Medieval history and as such it is an important topic in the Indian Medieval History segment of the UPSC 2021.

This article will give details about the Second Battle of Panipat

Background of the Second Battle of Panipat

Humayun, the son of Babur, had lost his father's holdings in India when he was driven out of the country by Sher Shah Suri following the Battle of Chausa. Sher Shah would establish the Sur Dynasty later on in 1540.

Upon Sher Shah's death in 1545, he was succeeded by Islam Shah Suri. Islam Shah would be a capable ruler but his death in 1554 would throw the Sur empire in chaos. Plagued by succession struggles and rebellions, Humayun would take advantage of this internal strife to reclaim lost territories.

In a climactic battle near Delhi on 23 July 1555, the Afghans under Sikander Shah Suri were defeated by the Mughals, gaining control of both Agra and Delhi.

Firoz Khan, the 12-year old successor to Islam Shah was murdered by his uncle Adil Shah Suri. Adil Shah Suri had little interest in governing the remnants of the Sur Empire and instead the state of affairs was left to Hemu. Hemu was an old Hindu associate of Sher Shah who had risen through the ranks to become Adil Shah's Chief minister as well as the general of the Sur army.

Humayun Died on 27 January 1556. This provided an opportunity for Hemu to reclaim lost territory. Marching from Bengal, his army drove the Mughals out of key areas such as Bharthana, Lakhna etc.

The Mughal Governor of Agra fled upon hearing that the Sur army was marching on the city. Hemu pursued the governor all the way to Tughlakabad, a village outside Delhi. He came upon the forces of governor Tardi Beg Khan, and defeated him in a pitched battle. Thus Hemu took possession of Delhi and claimed royal status, proclaiming himself Vikramaditya.

Meanwhile Akbar, having heard of the news of his father's demise and the events at Tughlakabad, marched forth with his army along with his guardian Bairam Khan.

On the way, through sheer stroke of luck, an advance party from Akbar's army under Ali Quli Khan Shaibani located and captured an artillery train belonging to Hemu. This would prove to be a major setback for Hemu in the battle to come.

On 5 November 1556, the Mughal army met Hemu's army at the historic battlefield of Panipat.

Events during the Battle of Panipat

Although Hemu's army numerically outnumbered the Mughal army with far greater numbers of cavalry and elephants. Moreover they were experienced veterans in their battles from Bengal to Punjab.

But what the Mughals lacked in numbers they made it up with technology. The artillery captured days earlier would even the odds in the coming battle.

Arrayed both of their armies in formation, each waited for the other to make their opening moves.

Hemu began the attack and unleashed his elephants onto the Mughals. The resulting charge broke the Mughal ranks and formation but instead of retreating, the Mughals instead attacked the sides of Hemu's cavalry with missiles.

The elephants were not able to get to most of the Mughal army due to the presence of a deep chasm. Soon the Elephants themselves were under attack by Mughal cavalry forcing Hemu to withdraw.

Witnessing the slaking of momentum of the Afghans, the Mughal Cavalry charged and encircled upon the Afghan centre. Witnessing the encirclement, Hemu personally led a charge to prevent this encirclement. Despite the loss of his lieutenants, he led counterattack after counterattack with his remaining elephants. The charge paid off however as the withering losses of the Mughals began to mount.

Fully taking advantage of the chaos caused by his heavy cavalry, Hemu drove back the wings of the Mughal army and arrayed his forces to crush the Mughal centre. However, he was struck by a Mughal arrow in the eye and was rendered unconscious as a result. Seeing this the Afghan army panicked, breaking formation and was in a headlong retreat

In the end the battle ended in a complete victory for the Mughals. Hemu's army suffered 5000 fatalities while Mughal losses were minimal by comparison.

Aftermath of the Second Battle of Panipat

Hemu was captured hours after the battle concluded and brought to the Mughal camp. Near death and unconscious, Bairam Khan took the action of executing Hemu. Some of his supporters and relatives were also executed as a warning for anyone who would think of rebelling against the Mughal Empire.

Adil Shah did not fare any better with Hemu's passing. He was defeated and killed in a battle in Bengal by Khazir Khan in April 1557. Hemu's elephants were later integrated into the Mughal Army and as a result they became the mainstay of the armed forces of the empire for years to come.

The Second Battle of Panipat would consolidate Mughal power in North India, which would provide them a base to carry out their conquest of the rest of the Indian subcontinent in the years to come.