

Battle of Khanwa

The Battle of Khanwa was a decisive engagement between the Mughal forces under Babur and the Rajput alliance under Rana Sanga of Mewar. The battle was fought on 16 March 1527.

It ended in a decisive victory for the Mughal forces and would consolidate Babur and his descendants' rule for centuries to come.

The topic about the Battle of Khanwa is an important one within the context of the history segment of the IAS Exam.

Background of the Battle of Khanwa

Babur had embarked on a campaign of conquest to fulfill the legacy of his ancestor, Timur. Up until 1524, he was aiming to expand his rule in the Punjab region but certain events led to him expanding far beyond the original confines of Timur's erstwhile empire.

- The decline of the Delhi Sultanate under the Lodi Dynasty presented fresh opportunities for conquest
- Babur was invited by Daulat Khan Lodi to invade the Delhi Sultanate. Around the same time a proposal for an alliance was made by Rana Sangha.
- Rana Sangha proposed that while Babur would attack Delhi, the Rajputs would attack Agra. Babur seemingly agreed to this proposal.

However, Daulat Khan betrayed Babur and subverted the Mughal garrison at Sialkot and marched towards Lahore. The Mughals defeated Daulat Khan near the city and they were the undisputed lords of Punjab. Following this, Babur would go on to destroy Ibrahim Lodi's army at the first battle of Panipat, which would lead to the beginning of the Mughal Empire.

While these events took place, Rana Sangha made no move despite the Mughals taking over Agra. Historians such as Satish Chandra speculated that Rana Sanga was playing a waiting game to see who would be victorious and what their next move would be.

It is thought that Rana Sanga believed that Babur would just loot the treasuries of Delhi before moving back to Kabul. This would open the way for him to conquer the regions of Delhi and Agra. But when it became apparent that Babur intended to stay in India, Rana Sangha proceeded to build a grand alliance of Rajputs as well as Afghans who were wary of Babur's power.

The main objective of this coalition was to drive Babur away from India and restrict him to Afghanistan. It was then in the early months of March 1527, that Babur received news that an army of Afghans and Rajputs were on their way towards his positions in Agra.

Composition of the Armies at the Battle of Khanwa

Through many diplomatic means, Rana Sanga built a grand alliance not only of the Rajput Clans but also of other Afghan chiefs who had declared Mahmud Lodi, the younger son of Ibrahim Lodi, as the Sultan.

While the numbers of both the Rajput Alliance and Mughal Army have been exaggerated, it agreed that the Rajputs outnumbered the Mughals greatly. Moreover, Babur's army was demoralised hearing of the sheer number of their enemies and their fighting prowess. In order to instill morale, Babur announced that he would forego all vices including drinking wine and publicly broke his stores of liquor. It did have some effect on the morale of the Mughal Army.

Knowing well that the sheer numbers of the Rajput's would overwhelm his army, Babur came up with a defensive strategy which consisted of fortified encampments consisting of artillery. Combining the muskets and cannons, he would rain down a deadly blow on his enemies who did not possess firearms. The firing positions would be protected by carts fastened together with enough gaps for cavalry to advance.

The heavy Turkic horsemen stood behind carts, two contingents of elite horsemen were kept in the reserve for a flanking maneuver. Thus, a strong offensive-defensive formation had been prepared by Babur.

Events during the Battle of Khanwa

Arraying their forces in formation, the two sides were now face to face at Khanwa. Rana Sanga started the fight by leading a charge against the Mughal positions. The guns devastated and blunted the initial charge of the Rajput horses and elephants. Since the animals were not used to the sound produced by the firearms, they were frightened and the elephants even ended up trampling the Rajputs.

Finding the Mughal center well defended, Rana Sanga ordered an attack on the Mughal flanks. For hours the battle continued with the Mughals raining down bullets and arrows while the Rajputs could only respond at close range.

Babur's attempts at a flanking manoeuvre were disrupted as the Rajput cavalry relentlessly pushed back his men. Soon the sheer weight of the numbers began to take a toll on the Mughal army.

It was at this crucial juncture that the Rana Silhadi of Raisen betrayed Rana Sanga and went over to Babur's army. His numbers were enough to tilt the balance of power in the Mughal's favour. This forced the Rajput army to change their entire battle plan. During this time Rana Sanga was hit with a bullet and fell unconscious and this caused much confusion amongst the Rajput ranks. Taking advantage, the Mughals stepped up their attacks and soon the Rajput force began to wane.

The remaining Rajput commanders tried to rally their men by leading a frontal charge. All of the charges resulted in their deaths. Now left, almost leaderless, the Rajputs manage to spirit their unconscious king out of the battle zone. Those that remained were killed in large numbers and soon the battle ended in a defeat for the Rajputs and their Afghan allies.

Aftermath of the Battle of Khanwa

The battle of Khanwa consolidated the gains made during the first battle of Panipat on April 21, 1526. Although there would be a temporary setback to Mughal power under Humayaun following the rise of the Sur Empire, the Mughal dynasty would go on to rule India in the ensuing years.

Rana Sangha managed to survive the fiasco at Khanwa, but the grand alliance he had built did not. It was shattered for good due to this battle. He died on 30 January 1528, still yearning to fight against Babur to the bitter end.

Another consequence of the Battle of Khanwa was that the muskets and cannons would become a mainstay in many armies of the Indian subcontinent, Mughal or otherwise. Soon other kingdoms in India began to hire mercenaries to train their forces in gunpowder warfare and some even began to build their own cannons.

At the very least some of the outdated methods of warfare of subcontinent armies would be put to rest following the battle of Khanwa.