EXPANSION UNDER BALAJI BAJIRAO

- **Territorial expansion** - Building on gains from the time of Bajirao I, the Marathas solidified control over Malwa & Bundelkhand. By 1731, Bundelkhand was already effectively under Maratha control, & following the Battle of Bhopal, the Malwa region was also brought into their administration.
- **Intervention in Hyderabad** - Following the death of Asaf Jah in 1748, the Marathas exploited the political instability in Hyderabad. They interfered in the succession disputes involving Nasir Jung, Muzaffar Jung & Salabat Jung allowing them to seize control of certain territories in eastern Maharashtra & parts of Madhya Pradesh.
- **Securing strategic trade routes** - The Marathas captured vital economic centers that were essential for trade. These included Burhanpur, a major trading town on the Grand Trunk Road route, & Bijapur in northern Karnataka, which had been the capital of the former Bijapur dynasty.
- **Consolidation of power** - By 1749, after Chhatrapati Shahu's death & signing of the Treaty of Sangola, the Peshwa became the undisputed ruler of the Maratha empire, fully integrating these territorial gains under centralized control.

BACKGROUND OF AHMAD SHAH ABDALI INVASIONS

- **Legacy of Nadir Shah** - After Nadir Shah's invasion of India in 1739 which included the Battle of Karnal & the ransacking of Delhi, he was murdered. Ahmad Shah Abdali eventually rose to power, bringing the Persian empire under Afghan control.
- **Abdali's invasions** - Between 1748 & 1764, Ahmad Shah Abdali invaded India approximately five times. His fourth major invasion is famously known as the Third Battle of Panipat which was a pivotal event that neutralized both Maratha & Mughal political influence in North India.
- **Maratha intervention** - Following earlier invasions Abdali left his son, Taimur Shah Abdali, in charge of Lahore. After the Marathas solidified their control over the Mughal court in 1752 - installing their own preferred vizier - they felt compelled to intervene when Abdali's forces raided Delhi in 1757, causing the Marathas' political standing to weaken.

IMPACT OF ABDALI'S INVASIONS

- **Weakening Maratha control in Delhi** - By 1752, the Marathas had established significant influence over the Mughal court, appointing their own Wazir, Imad-Ul-Mulk. However during Abdali's invasion of Delhi, Imad fled, which severely weakened

Maratha control over the capital.

- **Raghunath Rao's northern expedition** - In response to the loss of Delhi, the Marathas sent Raghunath Rao, cousin of the Peshwa, on an expedition to the North. He successfully recaptured the Delhi court & continued his campaign into the North West.
- **Defeat of Taimur Shah** - Raghunath Rao achieved a major victory by defeating Taimur Shah, who had been installed as the Governor in Lahore. Taimur Shah was forced to flee to Kabul, which was a significant blow to Ahmad Shah Abdali's political prestige.
- **Abdali's return & revenge** - Humiliated by the defeat of his son, Ahmad Shah returned to India in 1759 to reclaim his position & inflict damage on the Marathas.
- **The death of Dattaji Scindia** - By this time the Marathas had stationed Dattaji Scindia in Delhi to oversee their interests. Ahmad Shah attacked, resulting in the death of Dattaji Scindia. His death was a massive shock to the Maratha empire & compelled the Peshwa to respond aggressively to reclaim their lost prestige & seek vengeance.

MARATHA STRATEGIC RESPONSE

- **Leadership & command** - Following the death of

Dattoji Scindia, the Peshwa decided to strike back at Ahmad Shah. Although the Peshwa himself, Baloji Baji Rao, did not lead the campaign - partially due to personal reasons, such as his upcoming second marriage - the army was placed under the command of his son, Vishwas Rao, with nominal military leadership provided by his cousin Sadashiv Rao Bhau.

* Army composition - The expeditionary force consisted of approximately 45,000 to 60,000 soldiers. However, a significant strategic error was the inclusion of nearly 200,000 non-combatants.
* The religious pilgrimage factor - Many within this non combatant group were families & pilgrims who viewed the journey as an opportunity to visit holy sites in North India such as Kashi, Badrinath & Kurukshetra, which were generally inaccessible to them while living in the Deccan. The Marathas failed to discourage this movement, leading to massive logistical burdens & a high civilian death toll during the subsequent battle.

DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES

* Diplomatic failure - Despite their military expansion, the Marathas failed to secure alliances with other Northern powers. Their history of demanding Chauth from various kingdoms - including the Rajputs,

Awadh & Mughals had alienated potential allies. By the time of the conflict, they stood largely alone.

* **The stance of Awadh** - Shuja-ud-Daula, the ruler of Awadh, was a critical political player. Although he previously had cordial relations with the Marathas, he ultimately sided with Ahmad Shah. His primary motivation was to secure the position of Wazir within the declining Mughal empire, a role that has been contested by the Marathas.

* **Strategic movements around Delhi** - Following his return to India, Ahmad Shah occupied Delhi in 1759. Influenced by Najib-ud-Daula, he moved his forces towards Meerut to address local unrest, effectively drawing the Maratha forces into a complex campaign. By June 1760, Maratha forces reached the Delhi area, but they were hampered by the monsoon season, which caused the Yamuna to flood & disrupted their logistics.

THE MILITARY CAMP AT KUNJPURA

* **The siege of Kunjpura** - Facing a severe resource crunch & lack of support from Northern rulers, Sadashiv Rao Bhau decided to move further north to Kunjpura. This was a strategic move to capture the Afghan treasury stores & potentially link up with Sikh forces. Though the lack of formal diplomatic contact with the

Sikhs meant this support never materialized.

- **Failed strategic planning** - Despite initial objectives to secure the Afghan treasury at Kunjpura, the Maratha leadership under Sadashiv Rao Bhau faced internal friction. Key commanders, including Malhar Rao Holkar, clashed with Bhau over his rigid, often exclusionary leadership style, which Holkar viewed as arrogant & detrimental to unified command.
- **Alienation of Allies** - The Marathas further isolated themselves by antagonizing Suraj Mal, the leader of the Jats & the only Hindu ruler in North India willing to support them. Suraj Mal ultimately withdrew his support in July 1760, & Malhar Rao Holkar began secret, independent diplomatic efforts signalling a breakdown in Maratha alliance structure.
- **The capture of Delhi** - By October 1760, environmental factors shifted the advantage. As the monsoon ended & Yamuna waters receded, the landscape became traversable again. Ahmad Shah took advantage of this by moving from Meerut to capture Delhi, forcing the Maratha forces into a disadvantageous position where they were cut off from their primary supply lines.

STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

- **Geographical obstruction** - By October 1760, Ahmad Shah Abdali had captured Delhi & moved north. The Maratha forces, having also reached the region found themselves in a difficult position where they could not perform a strategic retreat without direct confrontation
- **The deadlock** - Both armies ended up blocking each others' paths. For the Marathas to return to the Deccan region, they had to pass through Abdali's army. For Abdali to return to Afghanistan, he had to pass through the Maratha army.
- **Consequences** - Because neither side could move without engaging the other, they were forced into a position where the Third Battle of Panipat became inevitable & exceptionally deadly, as they were literally blocking each other's only exit routes.

DIPLOMATIC & SUPPLY STRUGGLES

- **Negotiation rounds** - From October to December 1760 continuous negotiations occured between the Marathas & Ahmad Shah. The core dispute centered on control over Delhi & Multan, with both sides refusing to concede territory.
- **Supply line failure** - The Marathas faced a critical shortage of food as their supply lines were cut off.

In their attempt to reopen these lines, frequent skirmishes broke out between October 1760 & January 1761, resulting in approximately 7,000 casualties before the main battle even began.

THE PATH TO THE BATTLE

- **Severe famine** - By Dec 1760, the resource crunch had peaked & by Jan 12, 1761, the Maratha camp had completely run out of food. The army was forced to consume their own baggage camels to survive, leaving the troops in a state of starvation for 2 days.
- **Final decision** - Under immense pressure from military commanders who saw no other option, Sadashivrao Bhau finally ordered the battle drums to sound on the early morning of Jan 14, 1761, marking the initiation of the final conflict.

THE THIRD BATTLE OF PANIPAT

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- **Strategic situation** - By Oct 1760, the opposing armies faced each other in reverse directions. The Marathas were in a difficult position, as they had entered an area where they lacked political support & clear supply lines, leaving them diplomatically

isolated.

- **The eve of battle** - With food shortages causing desperation within the camps, the Maratha commanders famously declared that they would rather die on the battlefield than succumb to hunger.
- **Outbreak of war** - The active warfare began early in the morning on January 14, 1761. The Afghan forces consisted of approximately 42,000 soldiers. The Maratha forces were estimated between 45,000 & 60,000.
- **Logistical crisis** - A significant disadvantage for the Marathas was the presence of approximately 200,000 pilgrims accompanying their camp. These non-combatants strained the food supply, forcing a split in resources between the soldiers & the pilgrims & compromising the army's supply lines

MODERN MILITARY TECHNOLOGY IN 18th CENTURY

- **Artillery developments** - By 1761, military technology had shifted towards a more modern era. The Marathas utilized over 200 cannons, a massive upgrade from the 20 cannons Babur brought to India centuries earlier. Conversely, the Afghans employed light cannons called zamburak that were mounted on camels for greater mobility & ease of fire.
- **Musketry evolution** - Different types of muskets

came into use during this period.

- **Matchlock Muskets** - These were standard, widespread technology in India. They required a complex, manual process of adding gunpowder, inserting a bullet, & using a fuse, making them slow to reload.
- **Flintlock Muskets** - These began appearing in the Indian theatre, utilizing a more efficient trigger based mechanism that significantly improved reliability & firing speed compared to matchlocks.
- **Bayonet** - The British were noted for their innovative use of the bayonet as a defensive tool Because reloading muskets took 20-30 secs, the bayonet allowed soldiers to defend themselves in close-quarters combat while in the midst of a reload, a tactical advantage that fundamentally shifted the nature of infantry warfare.
- **Cavalry Armor** - The traditional Indian cavalry relied on chain mail jackets & helmets. These were highly effective at protecting against most weapons, as they included an underlying laminar jacket that made it nearly impossible to penetrate the torso.
- **Vulnerability & high profile casualties** - Due to the high level of bodily protection, the only effective targets were the head or eyes. Vishwasrao Bhau was killed by a head injury, as a projectile penetrated

his helmet. This loss was catastrophic, as the death of a primary leader often caused a Brahmanical or Royal army to lose morale & retreat.

- **Strategic insight** - While technologies like muskets & chain mail were widespread among both Maratha & Afghan forces, the outcome of the battle ultimately rested on superior leadership, tactical formations, & the ability to maintain command structures, rather than the military equipment itself.

BATTLE FORMATION & DEPLOYMENT

- **Maratha forces deployment**
  - **Centre** - Sadashiv Rao Bhau & Vishwas Rao led the central division with the elite cavalry force organized by Bajirao.
  - **Artillery** - Commanded by Ibrahim Khan Gardi, positioned to provide heavy defensive support.
  - **Right wing** - Supported by a large cavalry division under Damaji Gaekwad & Vitthal Shivdev.
  - **Left wing** - Led by Shamsher Bahadur, son of Bajirao & Mastani alongside Jankoji Scindia & Malhar Rao Holkar.
- **Afghan forces deployment**
  - **Centre** - Ahmad Shah Abdali commanded the central forces.

- **Right wing** - Under Shah Wali Khan.
- **Left wing** - Led by Rahmat Khan & Amir Khan
- **Additional forces** - Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh stood with his troops, including 10,000 Naga Sadhus. This period highlights the critical tactical formations & the leadership hierarchy present just before the major engagement of the battle.

THE COURSE OF THE BATTLE & STRATEGIC BLUNDER

- **Maratha tactical misstep** - The maratha cavalry launched an uncoordinated, direct charge against the Afghan forces, missing a potential "golden opportunity" to win the battle.
- **Afghan Counter-Attack** - Ibrahim Khan Gardi's artillery, which was effectively holding off the Afghans, was forced to stop due to the chaos caused by the premature cavalry charge, allowing the Afghan forces to regroup.
- **Collapse of the flanks** - By midday, both the Maratha left & right wings had effectively ceased to function as coherent units.
- **Strategic retreat & treachery** - Following a signal from Najib Khan Rohilla, Malhar Rao Holkar abruptly withdrew from the battlefield. This move is interpreted by historians as a calculated act of treachery that exposed the

Maratha formation.

- **Fragmentation of the lines** - Witnessing the retreat of the right wing, Jankoji Scindia attempted to reinforce the centre by abandoning his post, which only created further confusion & left the Maratha forces unable to repel the incoming charges.
- **The final blow** - With the flanks broken & the artillery & cavalry exhausted, Sadashiv Rao Bhau & Vishwas Rao were forced into a direct, high stakes confrontation in the centre. The Afghan forces, having previously set their sights on this objective, executed a planned strike that resulted in the death of Vishwas Rao, effectively ending the Maratha resistance.

AFTERMATH & HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES

- **Commanders' fate** - The death of Vishwasrao & Sadashivrao Bhau effectively ended the Maratha resistance. Jankoji Scindia was captured & buried alive on the orders of Ahmad Shah Abdali. Mahadji Scindia, the brother of Jankoji, managed to escape the battlefield. He later emerged as a critical figure in Maratha politics.
- **Casualties & losses** - The Maratha army arrived with over 50,000 soldiers & 200,000 non-combatants By the time the survivors reached Maharashtra, only

about 15,000 remained. Parvati Bai, the wife of Sadashivrao Bhau, was captured & forced into exile

- **Massacre & Human Rights Abuses** - Eyewitness accounts from John Hamilton of the Bombay Gazette & Kashiraj Pandit confirm systematic slaughter. Over three days - January 14, 15 & 16, 1761 - the victors killed between 40,000 & 80,000 people. Many of the captured Maratha soldiers & civilians were taken as prisoners of war, sold into slavery, or sent to Central Asia & Baluchistan.
- **Leadership failures** - Ahmad Shah struggled to pay his own troops, leading to these brutal actions to appease his army. Simultaneously, Sadashiv Rao Bhau had pleaded for reinforcements from the Peshwa since October 1760, but Peshwa Balaji Bajirao was occupied with his second marriage on Dec 27, 1760. By the time the Peshwa mobilized 80,000 troops to march north, it was too late.

POLITICAL IMPACT & REASONS FOR MARATHA DEFEAT

- **The Peshwa's delayed response** - In spite of urgent reinforcements by Sadashivrao Bhau, Balaji did not march north until late December.
- **Missed diplomatic opportunities** - A significant missed opportunity was the failure to reach a compromise with Ahmad Shah. The Marathas could have potentially

reached an agreement to limit their control to Delhi leaving the Punjab & Sutlej regions under Abdali's sphere, but the Marathas refused.

- **Defining the outcome** - Historians often characterize this battle not by who would rule India, but by identifying who would not rule it. The battle effectively shattered the Maratha military machine, destroying their top tier cavalry & killing 27 of their most prominent military commanders.

* **Reasons for defeat**

- **Army size** - Abdali's forces (60,000+) outnumbered the Marathas (45,000+)
- **Logistics & alliances** - The Maratha camp suffered from a critical lack of resources & failed to secure vital regional allies like Suraj Mal, who withdrew his support after his advice was ignored.
- **Internal friction** - The defeat revealed deep-seated divisions within the Maratha leadership. Tensions surfaced between Sadashivrao Bhau & other commanders like Malhar Rao Holkar & Damaji Gaekwad, leading to accusations of treachery & fueling internal political instability.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE & INTERPRETATIONS

- **Cultural impact** - While the battle was a catastrophic military defeat, it later became a symbol used to

foster Maratha nationalism in Maharashtra

- The Peshwa's passing - Following the news of the defeat, Peshwa Balaji Bajirao died of a heart attack in June 1761.
- Leadership transition - His successor, Madhav Rao Peshwa who reigned from 1761 to 1772 is recognized as one of the greatest military commanders who successfully restored Maratha power after the disaster.
- Historical perspectives
- Jadunath Sarkar - Emphasized the internal civil war & structural weaknesses of the Maratha state.
- Sidney Owen - Argued the battle did not destroy the Marathas entirely, but left them vulnerable to eventual British subjugation through the Anglo Maratha wars.
- R.B. Sardesai - Highlighted that while the Marathas were fighting amongst themselves, Robert Clive was in England planning the future of the British empire in India.