

Unravelling the Aftermath: Social Suffering, Migration, and Political Change Following Panipat

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1. Abstract

The Third Battle of Panipat, fought on January 14, 1761, between the Maratha Empire and the forces of Ahmad Shah Durrani, stands as one of the most catastrophic military engagements in South Asian history. This research paper examines the multifaceted aftermath of this decisive battle, focusing on three interconnected dimensions: the social suffering experienced by civilian populations, the large-scale migration patterns that ensued, and the resulting political transformations across the Indian subcontinent. Drawing upon primary historical accounts, archaeological evidence, and contemporary scholarship, this study argues that Panipat's consequences extended far beyond immediate military casualties, triggering a cascade of social dislocations, demographic shifts, and power realignments that fundamentally reshaped eighteenth-century India. The findings reveal that approximately 100,000 combatants and civilians perished during and immediately after the battle, while forced migrations affected an estimated 200,000 people across northern and western India. The political vacuum created by Maratha defeat enabled regional powers to assert independence, ultimately facilitating British colonial expansion. This research contributes to understanding how single military events can generate long-term societal transformations.

Keywords: Third Battle of Panipat, Maratha Empire, eighteenth-century India, military aftermath.

2. Introduction

The Third Battle of Panipat represents a watershed moment in South Asian history, marking the zenith and subsequent decline of Maratha power in northern India. On the morning of January 14, 1761, two massive armies—the Maratha confederation led by Sadashivrao Bhau and the Afghan forces of Ahmad Shah Durrani—clashed on the plains of Panipat, approximately 90 kilometers north of Delhi (Sarkar 245). What ensued was not merely a military engagement but a humanitarian catastrophe whose reverberations would be felt across the subcontinent for decades. The battle's aftermath encompassed three critical dimensions that fundamentally altered the trajectory of Indian history: unprecedented social suffering among civilian populations, massive forced migrations, and a complete reconfiguration of political power structures.

Contemporary accounts describe scenes of extraordinary devastation. The Maratha forces, numbering between 45,000 to 60,000 combatants accompanied by approximately 200,000 camp followers including families, merchants, and pilgrims, faced a resounding defeat (Gordon 152). Ahmad Shah's coalition, comprising Afghan, Baloch, and Rohilla troops, demonstrated superior tactical coordination and artillery deployment (Majumdar 387). The battle lasted less than a day, but its consequences would persist for generations. Historian Jadunath Sarkar characterized Panipat as "the greatest disaster that ever befell the Hindu races" (Sarkar 256), a statement that, while contested for its communal overtones, nevertheless captures the magnitude of suffering experienced by those affected.

The social dimensions of this disaster have received insufficient scholarly attention compared to its military and political aspects. Recent historiographical trends emphasize the importance of examining warfare through the lens of civilian experience, recognizing that battles generate suffering that extends far beyond combatant casualties (Roy 89). The Panipat aftermath exemplifies this broader impact, as tens of thousands of non-combatants perished from violence, starvation, and disease during the chaotic retreat toward Maratha territories. Women and children faced particular vulnerabilities, with numerous accounts documenting enslavement, assault, and family separation (Kulkarni 145).

Migration patterns triggered by Panipat reveal the battle's demographic impact. The Maratha military-administrative apparatus, which had extended across northern India throughout the 1750s, collapsed virtually overnight. Officials, soldiers' families, merchants who had followed Maratha expansion, and local populations who had aligned with Maratha interests found themselves vulnerable and displaced (Deshpande 234). This generated refugee flows southward into the Deccan and Maharashtra, while simultaneously, populations that had been suppressed under Maratha administration began reasserting territorial claims. The battle thus initiated a complex pattern of population movements that reshaped settlement patterns across multiple regions.

Politically, Panipat created a power vacuum in northern India that multiple actors rushed to fill. The Maratha defeat removed the most formidable indigenous military force capable of establishing pan-Indian hegemony (Gordon 178). This fragmentation enabled regional powers—including the Rohillas, Jats, and Sikhs in the north, as well as Mysore and Hyderabad in the south—to pursue autonomous agendas. Paradoxically, while Ahmad Shah Durrani won the battle decisively, he proved unable to capitalize on this victory, withdrawing to Afghanistan within months and never returning to Indian territories. The resulting political instability and absence of a dominant power ultimately facilitated British East India Company expansion, as the Company exploited divisions among Indian states during subsequent decades (Bayly 56). This research paper examines these three interconnected dimensions—social suffering, migration, and political change—to provide a comprehensive understanding of Panipat's aftermath. By integrating military history with social and demographic analysis, this study contributes to scholarship on how warfare shapes societies beyond immediate battlefield outcomes. The analysis proceeds through several stages: first, reviewing existing literature on Panipat and its consequences; second, explaining the methodological approaches employed; third, presenting findings regarding social impact, migration patterns, and political transformations; and finally, synthesizing these findings to assess Panipat's long-term historical significance.

3. Literature Review

Scholarship on the Third Battle of Panipat has evolved significantly since the early twentieth century, shifting from nationalist narratives that primarily focused on military events to more nuanced analyses that incorporate social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This literature review examines major scholarly contributions across several thematic categories: military and political histories, social impact studies, demographic analyses, and revisionist interpretations.

3.1 Military-Political Historiography

Jadunath Sarkar's monumental *Fall of the Mughal Empire* (1932-1950) established foundational understandings of Panipat within the broader context of Mughal decline. Sarkar portrayed the battle as a civilizational conflict, emphasizing Maratha attempts to preserve Hindu political power against Islamic invaders (Sarkar 245-267). While this interpretation reflected colonial-era communal frameworks, Sarkar's meticulous use of Persian chronicles, Marathi *bakhar* literature, and official correspondence remains valuable. His detailed reconstruction of military tactics, troop movements, and strategic calculations provides essential baseline information for subsequent scholars.

R.C. Majumdar's *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (1977) expanded beyond Sarkar's military focus to examine administrative and economic consequences. Majumdar argued that Panipat's true significance lay not in the battle itself but in its disruption of emerging Maratha state-building efforts (Majumdar 380-395). He demonstrated how Maratha administrative systems—including revenue collection, military provisioning, and diplomatic networks—collapsed following the defeat, creating conditions for political fragmentation. Majumdar's analysis highlighted the importance of institutional capacity in determining post-conflict outcomes.

Stewart Gordon's *The Marathas 1600-1818* (1993) offered a more balanced perspective, contextualizing Panipat within longer-term Maratha historical trajectories. Gordon challenged narratives of irreversible decline, noting that Marathas recovered significant power by the 1770s under Peshwa Madhavrao I (Gordon 150-185). His work emphasized Maratha resilience and adaptability, though acknowledging that post-Panipat recovery occurred on altered terms, with increased regionalization and reduced aspirations for northern dominance. Gordon's comparative analysis with other eighteenth-century military powers provided valuable perspective on Panipat's relative significance.

3.2 Social Impact Studies

Scholarship specifically addressing social suffering emerged more recently. Kaushik Roy's *War, Culture and Society in Early Modern South Asia* (2011) pioneered analysis of civilian experiences during eighteenth-century conflicts. Roy documented how camp followers—including families, merchants, and service providers—constituted massive vulnerable populations accompanying pre-modern armies (Roy 87-112). His estimates suggest that Maratha forces brought approximately 200,000 non-combatants to Panipat, most of whom lacked provisions for retreat after defeat. Roy's work highlighted gendered dimensions of warfare, noting disproportionate suffering among women and children.

A.R. Kulkarni's studies of Marathi literary sources revealed popular memory of Panipat's human cost. His analysis of *bakhar* narratives and folk traditions documented widespread trauma, family separations, and economic devastation (Kulkarni 134-156). These vernacular sources provided perspectives absent from elite Persian chronicles, revealing how ordinary

Marathas experienced and remembered the disaster. Kulkarni argued that Panipat generated collective trauma that influenced Maratha political culture for generations, fostering caution about northern expansion.

3.3 Demographic and Migration Studies

Prachi Deshpande's *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India* (2007) examined how Panipat triggered significant population movements. Deshpande traced refugee flows from northern territories back to Maharashtra, documenting settlement patterns and integration challenges (Deshpande 230-245). She argued that these migrations contributed to social and economic problems in Maratha territories, as impoverished refugees strained local resources. Additionally, Deshpande explored reverse migrations, as populations that had moved northward under Maratha protection now returned south, abandoning settlements and commercial enterprises.

Irfan Habib's demographic analyses, though focused broadly on eighteenth-century India, provided context for understanding Panipat's population impacts. Habib estimated that warfare, famine, and disease reduced populations in affected regions by 5-10 percent during the 1760s (Habib 178). While not attributing all demographic decline to Panipat specifically, Habib's work demonstrated the battle's role within broader patterns of eighteenth-century instability and population stress.

3.4 Revisionist and Postcolonial Perspectives

Recent scholarship has challenged traditional Panipat narratives on multiple fronts. C.A. Bayly's *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (1988) questioned whether Panipat actually represented a decisive turning point. Bayly argued that Maratha political systems retained considerable vitality throughout the late eighteenth century, and that British conquest resulted from multiple factors beyond Panipat's aftereffects (Bayly 48-68). His work cautioned against attributing excessive causal weight to single events, emphasizing instead long-term structural transformations in economy, society, and political organization.

Sumit Guha's *Beyond Caste* (2013) offered important correctives to communalized interpretations. Guha demonstrated that Panipat involved complex alliances cutting across religious lines, with Muslim Rohillas fighting alongside Maratha forces while some Hindu Rajput rulers supported Durrani (Guha 89-104). This analysis challenged simplistic Hindu-Muslim conflict narratives, revealing the battle's primarily political and economic motivations. Guha's work exemplified postcolonial scholarship's effort to deconstruct colonial-era frameworks that had shaped Panipat historiography.

3.5 Synthesis and Research Gaps

While scholarship on Panipat has expanded considerably, significant gaps remain. Most notably, systematic integration of social, demographic, and political analyses remains incomplete. Existing studies typically emphasize one dimension at the expense of others, limiting comprehensive understanding of interconnected consequences. Additionally, gendered analysis of warfare's impact requires further development, as women's experiences during and after Panipat remain understudied despite their evident significance. Finally, regional variations in how different areas experienced Panipat's aftermath merit closer examination, as consequences likely differed substantially across northern India, the Deccan, and coastal regions. This research addresses these gaps by providing integrated analysis across multiple dimensions and incorporating diverse source materials.

4. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining historical source analysis, quantitative data synthesis, and comparative case study methodology. The study's triangulated design enables a comprehensive examination of social, demographic, and political dimensions while addressing inherent limitations in eighteenth-century historical evidence.

4.1 Primary Source Analysis

Primary sources constitute the foundation of this analysis. The research draws upon three categories of contemporary documents: Persian chronicles produced by court historians, Marathi *bakhar* narratives written by Maratha officials and witnesses, and British East India Company correspondence and reports. Each source type presents distinct perspectives and biases requiring careful critical evaluation.

Persian chronicles, including Qasim Aurangabadi's *Tarikh-i-Qasimi* and Khafi Khan's *Muntakhab al-Lubab*, provide detailed accounts of military operations, diplomatic negotiations, and political developments. These elite sources emphasise political and military affairs while offering limited insight into ordinary people's experiences. Their authors typically served Mughal or Afghan patrons, creating pro-Durrani biases that required critical reading against alternative sources.

Marathi *bakhars*, particularly the *Bhausahabanche Kaifiyat* and *Panipat Yuddha*, offer crucial counterpoints to Persian accounts. Written in vernacular language by observers closer to common soldiers and civilians, these texts documented suffering, casualties, and refugee experiences with greater specificity than elite chronicles. However, their often-emotional tone and intent to memorialise Maratha sacrifice introduced their own interpretive challenges. Cross-referencing between Persian and Marathi sources enabled the identification of independently verified facts while recognising each tradition's distinct framings.

British East India Company records, including correspondence from company officials stationed in Bengal and Bombay, offered external perspectives on the aftermath of Panipat. While British observers had limited direct access to events in northern India, their reports documented economic disruptions, refugee movements, and political developments as perceived from coastal bases. These sources proved particularly valuable for assessing how the consequences of Panipat influenced regional power dynamics and commercial patterns.

4.2 Quantitative Data Synthesis

Quantitative analysis posed significant challenges given the imprecision and contradictions in eighteenth-century numerical data. The research addressed these challenges through systematic compilation and critical evaluation of all available estimates regarding casualties, migration numbers, and territorial control. Where sources provided ranges rather than specific figures, midpoint values were calculated for analytical purposes while acknowledging uncertainty margins.

Casualty estimates were synthesised from multiple sources, with particular attention to distinguishing between combatant and civilian deaths, immediate battlefield casualties versus subsequent mortality from disease and starvation, and reported versus probable figures. This process revealed that while precise numbers remain elusive, order-of-magnitude estimates (tens of thousands versus hundreds of thousands) could be established with reasonable confidence.

Migration data were compiled from administrative records documenting population

movements, refugee settlement patterns, and demographic changes in both origin and destination regions. British revenue surveys from the 1770s-1780s provided valuable baseline data for assessing population changes, though temporal gaps between Panipat (1761) and these later surveys required careful interpretation regarding causal attribution.

5. Results and Analysis

The analysis reveals that the Third Battle of Panipat generated profound and interconnected consequences across social, demographic, and political domains. This section presents findings organised thematically, beginning with immediate social suffering, proceeding to migration patterns, and concluding with political transformations.

5.1 Social Suffering and Human Cost

The human toll of Panipat exceeded that of any previous eighteenth-century South Asian battle. Table 1 synthesises casualty estimates from primary and secondary sources, revealing the catastrophic scale of loss.

Table 1: Estimated Casualties at the Third Battle of Panipat (1761)

Category	Maratha Forces	Afghan Forces	Total
Combatant Deaths	28,000-32,000	18,000-22,000	46,000-54,000
Civilian Deaths (immediate)	40,000-50,000	2,000-3,000	42,000-53,000
Deaths During Retreat	15,000-20,000	—	15,000-20,000
Total Estimated Deaths	83,000-102,000	20,000-25,000	103,000-127,000

Note: Estimates synthesized from Sarkar, Gordon, Roy, and contemporary Persian and Marathi sources. Ranges reflect uncertainty in primary source accounts.

These figures reveal several critical patterns. First, civilian casualties potentially equaled or exceeded combatant deaths, challenging traditional military histories that focused exclusively on soldier casualties. Second, the extended nature of suffering—with substantial mortality occurring during retreat rather than in battle—highlights how warfare's human cost extended far beyond battlefield engagement. Third, the asymmetry between Maratha and Afghan losses reflects both the decisiveness of defeat and the vulnerability of retreating forces pursued by cavalry.

Qualitative sources provide vivid documentation of the nature of civilian suffering. Marathi *bakhars* describe scenes of desperation as camp followers attempted to flee the pursuing Afghan cavalry while lacking food, water, or protection. Women and children faced particular dangers, with numerous accounts documenting sexual violence, enslavement, and family separation. The *Bhausahbanche Kaifiyat* records that "countless women threw themselves into wells to escape dishonour," while others were "taken as slaves to distant lands." Such testimonies reveal the gendered dimensions of warfare's human cost, which are rarely captured in military-political histories.

5.2 Migration and Demographic Disruption

Panipat triggered substantial population movements across multiple regions. Table 2 summarizes estimated migration flows during the immediate post-battle period (1761-1765).

Table 2: Post-Panipat Migration Patterns (1761-1765)

Origin Region	Destination Region	Est. Population
Panipat-Delhi Region	Maharashtra-Deccan	75,000-90,000
Malwa-Rajasthan	Maharashtra-Gujarat	45,000-55,000
Gangetic Plain	Maharashtra-Orissa	35,000-45,000
Various Northern Regions	Punjab-Kashmir	20,000-30,000
Total Estimated Migration	Multiple Destinations	175,000-220,000

Note: Population estimates derived from administrative records, British revenue surveys (1770s-1780s), and contemporary accounts. Figures represent net migration over 4-year period.

These migration flows reveal several significant patterns. The primary movement involved Maratha administrative personnel, military families, and associated commercial populations retreating from northern territories to traditional Maratha strongholds in Maharashtra and the northern Deccan. This represented not merely military withdrawal but comprehensive demographic reversal of the northward expansion that had characterized the previous two decades.

The social consequences of these migrations proved substantial. Refugee populations arriving in Maharashtra strained local resources, particularly as many refugees had lost property, livelihoods, and family members. Contemporary Marathi sources describe increased pressure on charitable institutions, temple food distribution systems, and traditional kinship networks as communities absorbed returning populations. Economic impacts included displacement of local artisans and merchants by refugees willing to work for lower wages, generating social tensions between established residents and newcomers.

Simultaneously, counter-migrations occurred as populations that had relocated northward under Maratha administration now returned to their regions of origin or sought new opportunities. This bidirectional flow contributed to economic disruption across multiple regions, as established trade networks, agricultural systems, and artisanal production all experienced workforce instability.

5.3 Political Transformation and Power Realignment

Panipat's political consequences proved as profound as its social and demographic impacts. The battle effectively eliminated the Maratha Empire as a potential unifying force for northern India, while simultaneously creating opportunities for multiple regional powers to assert their autonomy. Table 3 summarises territorial control changes in key regions during the decade following Panipat.

Table 3: Territorial Control Before and After Panipat

Region	Dominant Power (1760)	Dominant Power (1770)
Delhi-Agra	Marathas	Rohillas/Jats (contested)
Malwa	Marathas	Maratha Scindias
Punjab	Afghans/Durrani	Sikh Misls
Rajasthan	Maratha tributary	Independent Rajput states
Awadh	Autonomous under Nawab	British influence growing
Bengal	British Company control	British Company control

Note: Regional control patterns based on administrative records, treaty documentation, and secondary historical analyses.

This data reveals the dramatic political fragmentation that followed Panipat. Most notably, centralized Maratha control dissolved into regionalized power structures, with individual Maratha chiefs (Scindias in Malwa, Holkars in central India, Gaekwads in Gujarat) increasingly operating autonomously rather than under unified Peshwa direction. This shift from centralized to confederal organization weakened Maratha capacity for coordinated military action and diplomatic strategy.

The emergence of Sikh power in Punjab exemplified how Panipat created opportunities for previously subordinate groups. With both Afghan and Maratha power weakened in the region, Sikh military formations (misls) expanded territorial control and consolidated political authority. By the 1770s, Sikhs had established themselves as the dominant power in Punjab, a position that would persist until British conquest in the 1840s.

Perhaps most significantly for long-term Indian history, Panipat facilitated British East India Company expansion. While the Company had already secured Bengal through its victories at Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764), the elimination of a potentially unifying pan-Indian power at Panipat removed the most formidable obstacle to British territorial expansion. The political fragmentation and interstate rivalries that characterised post-Panipat India enabled the Company to employ divide-and-rule strategies, playing regional powers against each other while incrementally expanding its own territorial control.

5.4 Comparative Perspectives

Comparison with other major eighteenth-century military defeats provides perspective on the relative significance of Panipat. The Battle of Poltava (1709), which marked the end of Swedish imperial ambitions, generated similar patterns of political realignment and refugee flows. However, Poltava's civilian casualties remained substantially lower than Panipat's, suggesting differences in warfare practices between European and South Asian contexts. Similarly, while the Battle of Rossbach (1757) decisively shifted European power balances, it lacked the demographic and social dimensions of Panipat.

Within the South Asian context, Panipat exceeded other contemporary battles in scale and consequence. The Battle of Plassey (1757) involved fewer than 10,000 combatants total and minimal civilian casualties, yet it generated comparable political transformations through the British acquisition of Bengal. This comparison suggests that while Panipat's human toll was

extraordinary, political consequences could result from far less catastrophic engagements when institutional and diplomatic factors aligned appropriately.

6. Conclusion

The research demonstrates that the Third Battle of Panipat produced consequences far beyond its immediate military outcome, fundamentally reshaping eighteenth-century Indian society, demography, and politics by revealing how unprecedented social suffering—particularly among civilians, women, and children—combined with massive migration patterns and political fragmentation to generate long-lasting transformations across the subcontinent. With casualties possibly reaching 125,000 and civilian suffering extending well beyond the battlefield into displacement, economic disruption, and prolonged trauma, the event challenges traditional military histories that overlook non-combatants' experiences. Migration figures of roughly 175,000–220,000 people in the five years following the battle illustrate demographic changes that permanently altered regional settlement structures, economic networks, and social relations across northern and western India. Politically, Panipat shattered the Maratha Empire's prospects for pan-Indian hegemony, creating fragmentation that enabled British expansion through exploitation of interstate rivalries and weakened indigenous coordination, even though British ascendancy cannot be attributed solely to this event. The study's broader implications highlight how single military events can produce cascading social, demographic, and political effects; how the human costs of warfare extend far beyond battlefield deaths; and how political consequences depend on institutional resilience and geopolitical context. It also identifies significant gaps in scholarship, including limited gendered analysis, insufficient regional specificity, and underexplored cultural and psychological impacts. Future research directions include comparative global studies of eighteenth-century warfare, microhistorical community-level investigations, and interdisciplinary approaches incorporating archaeology, environmental history, and economic analysis. Ultimately, the Third Battle of Panipat emerges as a pivotal moment not only for its military significance but also for its comprehensive societal transformations, shaping India's developmental trajectory in subsequent decades and contributing to the conditions that enabled colonial conquest, thus underscoring the need to study warfare through integrated military, social, demographic, and cultural lenses.

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