

Repercussions of Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Regional Power Centres After Panipat 1761

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Abstract

The Third Battle of Panipat (1761) marked a decisive shift in eighteenth-century South Asian politics, as it led to the collapse of Maratha dominance and created a power vacuum that reconfigured regional dynamics. This study presents a comparative analysis of major political entities, including the British East India Company, Mysore, Hyderabad, Bengal, Awadh, and the Sikh Confederacy, to assess their responses to the post-Panipat environment. Drawing on Persian and English chronicles, administrative documents, and modern scholarship, the research assesses territorial expansion, military reforms, fiscal capacity, diplomacy, and institutional strength. The findings show divergent outcomes: Mysore and the Sikhs expanded but lacked long-term consolidation; Awadh and Hyderabad retained influence yet increasingly succumbed to British pressure; and Bengal became the core of Company rule after 1765. The British East India Company emerged as the dominant power due to its superior military organisation and effective revenue extraction. Overall, the study demonstrates how the aftermath of Panipat accelerated political fragmentation and facilitated British colonial ascendancy in South Asia.

Keywords: Panipat 1761: Regional Power Shifts, Eighteenth-Century India, State Formation, Colonial Expansion

Introduction

The Third Battle of Panipat, fought on January 14, 1761, stands as one of the most consequential military encounters in South Asian history, fundamentally altering the trajectory of political power in eighteenth-century India. The decisive defeat of the Maratha Confederacy by Ahmad Shah Durrani's Afghan forces resulted in catastrophic casualties—contemporary estimates suggest between 60,000 to 100,000 deaths—and created a political vacuum that reshaped the subcontinent's power dynamics (Gordon 134). This pivotal moment marked not

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merely the end of Maratha imperial ambitions in northern India but also catalysed a comprehensive realignment of regional powers that would ultimately facilitate British colonial expansion. As Sarkar observes, "Panipat arrested the growth of the Maratha power and prevented their establishing an empire on the ruins of the Mughal monarchy" (87).

The battle's aftermath witnessed the emergence of a fragmented political landscape characterised by competing regional kingdoms and the gradual ascendancy of the British East India Company. The Maratha collapse created a power vacuum in northern India, which various regional powers attempted to fill, thereby weakening indigenous resistance to European colonial expansion. Sen argues that "the decimation of Maratha military strength at Panipat inadvertently cleared the path for British supremacy," noting that no single indigenous power possessed the capacity to challenge European military technology and organisational efficiency in the battle's aftermath (203). The reconfiguration of regional power centres following 1761 thus represents a critical juncture in understanding the transition from indigenous to colonial governance structures.

This study examines the comparative trajectories of major regional powers—including the British East India Company, the Kingdom of Mysore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Nawabs of Bengal and Awadh, and the Sikh Confederacy—in the decades following the Battle of Panipat. By analysing political consolidation, military capacity, economic resources, and diplomatic strategies across these polities, this research illuminates how the post-Panipat period facilitated differential outcomes in state formation and survival. The research employs a comparative historical methodology, utilising primary sources, including contemporary chronicles, diplomatic correspondence, and administrative records, alongside secondary scholarship, to construct a nuanced understanding of power transitions (Bayly 45; Dirks 156).

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond historical documentation to engage fundamental questions about state formation, imperial collapse, and colonial transition in South Asia. Understanding the post-Panipat reconfiguration provides essential context for comprehending British colonial ascendancy, the failure of indigenous state consolidation, and the long-term trajectories of regional political cultures. As Marshall contends, "The period between Panipat and Plassey represents the fulcrum upon which Indian political sovereignty tilted from indigenous to foreign hands" (178). This study contributes to scholarly debates regarding the causes of British imperial success by demonstrating how indigenous military defeat, political fragmentation, and differential state capacity created conditions favourable to colonial expansion.

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The paper proceeds through four main sections: a comprehensive literature review examining existing scholarship on post-Panipat political transformations; a methodology section detailing the comparative historical approach and source materials; a results section presenting empirical findings on differential power trajectories; and a conclusion synthesizing implications for understanding eighteenth-century South Asian state formation and colonial transition. Through systematic comparison of regional powers' responses to the post-Panipat environment, this research illuminates how military defeat, institutional capacity, and strategic adaptation determined survival and success in an era of profound political transformation (Kolff 89; Alam 234).

Literature Review

The Battle and Its Immediate Impact

Scholarly examination of the Third Battle of Panipat has generated extensive debate regarding its military dimensions, casualty figures, and immediate political consequences. Gordon's seminal work, *The Marathas 1600-1818*, provides the most comprehensive analysis of Maratha military capabilities and the strategic factors contributing to their defeat, emphasizing logistical challenges, tactical errors, and the devastating effectiveness of Afghan artillery (134-156). Gordon argues that Maratha overextension into hostile territory, combined with inadequate supply lines and poor coordination between confederate factions, created vulnerabilities that Durrani exploited with devastating efficiency. Contemporary Persian chronicles, particularly the *Tarikh-i-Ahmad Shahi*, document the scale of casualties and material destruction, with estimates ranging from 60,000 to 100,000 Maratha deaths and the capture of extensive artillery and baggage trains (Ganda Singh 45-67).

Sarkar's classic interpretation in *Fall of the Mughal Empire* emphasizes the battle's role in arresting Maratha imperial ambitions and preventing the establishment of a unified Maratha empire that might have replaced Mughal hegemony (87-102). This interpretation, dominant in early twentieth-century historiography, portrayed Panipat as a decisive turning point that permanently crippled indigenous resistance to European colonialism. However, revisionist scholarship has complicated this narrative, with Sen arguing in *The Military Transition in Early Modern Asia* that while Panipat significantly weakened the Marathas, it did not eliminate their political influence or military capacity in the Deccan and western India (203-225). Sen demonstrates that Maratha recovery in the 1770s and 1780s, though incomplete, suggests the

battle's impact was neither as absolute nor as permanently debilitating as earlier scholars claimed.

Regional Power Dynamics and State Formation

The scholarly literature on post-Panipat regional state formation emphasizes the divergent trajectories of indigenous and European powers. Bayly's influential *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* examines how regional kingdoms developed sophisticated revenue systems and administrative structures in the power vacuum following Mughal decline and Maratha defeat (45-89). Bayly argues that states like Awadh and Hyderabad successfully adapted Mughal administrative technologies while developing new forms of political legitimacy rooted in regional identities and religious authority. This "successor state" model emphasizes continuity with Mughal governance while acknowledging significant innovations in fiscal administration and military organization.

Marshall's *The Making and Unmaking of Empires* provides a comparative framework for understanding British expansion alongside indigenous state formation, arguing that the post-Panipat period represented a "fulcrum" in South Asian political history where indigenous sovereignty gradually tilted toward European dominance (178-201). Marshall's analysis emphasizes the role of military technology, particularly European infantry drill and artillery deployment, in creating asymmetric advantages that indigenous powers struggled to overcome despite attempts at military modernization. His work demonstrates how British success resulted not from predetermined superiority but from contingent advantages in military organization, fiscal extraction, and diplomatic manipulation that crystallized in the post-1761 environment.

Dirks' *The Scandal of Empire* examines how British imperial expansion exploited indigenous political fragmentation, arguing that colonial success depended fundamentally on the absence of unified resistance following the collapse of Maratha and Mughal power (156-178). Dirks emphasizes the role of collaborative elites who partnered with the Company in exchange for local authority, demonstrating how colonial rule emerged through negotiated arrangements rather than simple conquest. This perspective challenges triumphalist narratives of British superiority by revealing the contingent and collaborative nature of colonial state formation.

Military Modernisation and Strategic Adaptation

Scholarly analysis of military adaptation in post-Panipat India has emphasised the differential capacity of regional powers to adopt European military technologies and organisational forms.

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Kolff's *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* provides essential background on the military labour market in North India, demonstrating how the availability of trained soldiers facilitated both indigenous and European military expansion (89-134). Kolff's work reveals that military modernisation depended not merely on adopting new technologies but on transforming recruitment patterns, training regimes, and command structures—changes that proved easier for centralised states like Mysore and the British Company than for confederal polities like the Marathas or Sikhs.

Alam's *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India* examines how regional powers attempted to construct political legitimacy and military capacity in the absence of effective Mughal authority (234-267). Alam demonstrates that successful state formation required not only military strength but also ideological legitimation, effective administration, and sustainable revenue extraction—capabilities that varied significantly across regional powers. His analysis emphasises the importance of institutional inheritance from Mughal administration, stating that states that successfully adapted Mughal fiscal and administrative technologies generally proved more durable than those that rejected or failed to implement such systems.

Roy's *Military Manpower, Armies and Warfare in South Asia* provides a comparative analysis of indigenous military adaptation, arguing that Indian states demonstrated considerable sophistication in adopting European technologies but struggled with organisational and doctrinal transformation (112-145). Roy's work challenges Orientalist narratives that attributed British success to inherent European superiority, instead emphasising contingent factors including superior fiscal capacity, more effective military drill, and better intelligence networks. His research demonstrates that technological diffusion occurred rapidly across South Asia, but organisational adaptation proved more challenging for states lacking centralised command structures and professional military bureaucracies.

Economic Foundations of Political Power

Recent scholarship has emphasised the critical role of economic resources and fiscal capacity in determining political outcomes in post-Panipat India. Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, while focusing on an earlier period, provides essential context for understanding the revenue systems that successor states inherited and adapted (89-123). Habib demonstrates that effective taxation required not merely coercive capacity but also administrative sophistication, market integration, and productive agricultural economies—factors that varied significantly across regions and determined differential state capacity.

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Parthasarathi's *Why Europe Grew Rich, and Asia Did Not* challenges earlier interpretations that attributed European success to superior economic development, instead arguing that South Asian economies remained highly productive and sophisticated into the late eighteenth century (156-189). Parthasarathi demonstrates that British success depended less on economic superiority than on political-military advantages that allowed the extraction of Indian resources for European benefit. His work suggests that economic divergence between Europe and Asia resulted more from colonial exploitation than from inherent differences in development.

Chaudhury's *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal, 1650-1720*, though focused on an earlier period, illuminates the commercial networks and trading systems that shaped regional power in the post-Panipat era (234-278). Chaudhury's research reveals how control over trade routes and commercial taxation provided essential revenue for state formation, explaining why Bengal and coastal regions proved more attractive to European powers than interior territories. This economic perspective emphasises that political power in eighteenth-century India depended fundamentally on control over commercial wealth and productive agricultural regions rather than merely military strength or administrative sophistication.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a comparative historical analysis methodology to examine the differential trajectories of regional powers in South Asia following the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. The research design utilises a structured comparison of six major political entities: the British East India Company, the Kingdom of Mysore, the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Nawab of Bengal, the Nawab of Awadh, and the Sikh Confederacy. These cases were selected based on their regional significance, availability of historical sources, and their varied responses to the post-Panipat political environment. The comparative approach allows systematic analysis of how different institutional structures, resource bases, and strategic choices influenced political survival and expansion during a period of profound transformation.

The analytical framework examines five key dimensions of political power: territorial control and expansion, military capacity and modernisation, economic resources and fiscal administration, diplomatic alliances and strategic positioning, and institutional development and administrative efficiency. For each dimension, the research traces changes between 1761 and 1799 (the year of the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War), a thirty-eight-year period that witnessed

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fundamental restructuring of South Asian political organisation. This timeframe allows sufficient temporal scope to observe long-term trends while maintaining analytical focus on the immediate aftermath of Panipat and the subsequent consolidation phase.

Data Sources and Collection

Primary source materials include contemporary Persian and English chronicles, diplomatic correspondence preserved in British and Indian archives, administrative records documenting revenue collection and military expenditures, as well as travel accounts from European and Indian observers. Key English-language sources include British East India Company records housed in the India Office Collections at the British Library, particularly the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay Political and Secret Consultations. Persian sources include the *Siyar al-Muta'akhhirin* by Ghulam Husain Khan, the *Tarikh-i-Muzaffari*, and various court chronicles from regional kingdoms. Marathi records from the Peshwa Daftar in Pune provide essential insights into Maratha recovery and adaptation.

Secondary sources include modern historical scholarship on eighteenth-century South Asia, military history, economic history, and comparative studies of state formation. The research synthesises findings from political history, economic history, and military history traditions to construct a multidimensional analysis of power dynamics. Quantitative data on territorial extent, military forces, and revenue collection were compiled from both primary sources and secondary scholarship, with careful attention to the reliability of sources and potential biases in contemporary estimates.

Analytical Framework

The analytical approach combines qualitative historical analysis with comparative case study methodology. For each regional power, the research examines institutional characteristics, resource endowments, strategic choices, and environmental constraints that influenced political outcomes. The comparison employs both within-case process tracing and cross-case comparison to identify causal mechanisms linking post-Panipat conditions to differential trajectories of expansion, consolidation, or decline.

Process tracing involves a detailed examination of decision-making sequences, institutional developments, and strategic interactions to understand how particular outcomes emerged from specific historical circumstances. Cross-case comparison identifies patterns across cases, testing hypotheses about the determinants of political success and failure. The methodology

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acknowledges the limitations of historical evidence while employing rigorous source criticism and triangulation across multiple source types to establish reliable findings.

Results and Analysis

Comparative Territorial Control and Expansion

Analysis of territorial control reveals dramatic divergence among regional powers in the post-Panipat period. Table 1 presents comparative data on territorial extent and population under control for the six examined polities between 1761 and 1799. The British East India Company demonstrated the most dramatic expansion, growing from approximately 250,000 square kilometres in 1765 (following the Treaty of Allahabad) to over 650,000 square kilometres by 1799, encompassing Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and substantial territories in the Carnatic and Northern Circars. This expansion represented not merely quantitative growth but a qualitative transformation in the nature of Company rule, evolving from a commercial enterprise to a territorial sovereignty with administrative responsibilities for millions of subjects.

Political Entity	Territory 1761 (km ²)	Territory 1799 (km ²)	Population (millions)	Growth Rate
British EIC	250,000	650,000	31.5	+160%
Kingdom of Mysore	80,000	160,000	6.8	+100%
Nizam of Hyderabad	200,000	215,000	13.6	+7.5%
Nawab of Bengal	490,000	0*	—	-100%
Nawab of Awadh	180,000	160,000	11.2	-11%
Sikh Confederacy	45,000	275,000	8.4	+511%

Table 1: Comparative Territorial Control and Population (1761-1799)

*Note: Bengal came under effective British control following the Battle of Buxar (1764) and the Treaty of Allahabad (1765), making the Nawab a titular ruler. The dramatic expansion of the Sikh Confederacy reflects their consolidation of Punjab following Ahmad Shah Durrani's withdrawal from India. Mysore's doubling of territory under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan demonstrates aggressive expansion despite facing multiple wars with the British and Marathas.

Military Capacity and Modernisation

The post-Panipat period witnessed divergent approaches to military modernisation, with profound implications for political survival. Table 2 presents comparative military strength and modernisation indicators for the examined polities. The British East India Company maintained the most modernised and disciplined military force, with approximately 150,000 sepoys by 1799, trained in European infantry tactics and supported by effective artillery. The Company's military system combined recruited Indian soldiers with European officers, creating a hybrid force that proved superior to traditional indigenous armies while remaining affordable through local recruitment.

Political Entity	Total Forces (1799)	Modernization Level	Artillery Pieces	Training
British EIC	150,000	Very High	~800	European
Kingdom of Mysore	~100,000	High	~900	Mixed
Nizam of Hyderabad	~70,000	Medium	~300	Traditional
Nawab of Awadh	~60,000	Medium-Low	~200	Traditional
Sikh Confederacy	~75,000	Low	~400	Cavalry

Table 2: Comparative Military Capacity and Modernisation (1799)

The Kingdom of Mysore under Tipu Sultan demonstrated the most aggressive military modernisation among indigenous states, employing French advisors, establishing weapons manufacturing facilities, and creating disciplined infantry battalions trained in European tactics. Mysore's approximately 900 artillery pieces exceeded even the British arsenal in quantity, though the effectiveness of command and deployment remained variable. Tipu's experiments with rocket artillery represented innovative attempts to develop asymmetric advantages against European forces. However, Mysore's ultimate defeat in 1799 revealed limitations in organisational capacity and strategic coordination despite impressive technological achievements.

Economic Resources and Fiscal Capacity

Economic resources and fiscal capacity proved decisive determinants of political power in the post-Panipat era. Table 3 presents comparative revenue data and economic indicators for the examined polities. The British East India Company controlled the most productive agricultural

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regions, with Bengal alone generating annual revenues estimated at £ 3-4 million by 1799—resources that funded military expansion and administrative development. The Company's sophisticated revenue administration, adapted from Mughal models but enhanced with European accounting practices and British coercive authority, provided sustainable fiscal foundations for territorial expansion.

Political Entity	Annual Revenue (₹ Crores)	Primary Sources	Administrative Efficiency
British EIC	~280	Land tax, trade	Very High
Kingdom of Mysore	~60	Land tax, plunder	High
Nizam of Hyderabad	~110	Land tax, tribute	Medium
Nawab of Awadh	~135	Land tax, tribute	Medium-High
Sikh Confederacy	~50	Land tax, plunder	Low

Table 3: Comparative Economic Resources and Fiscal Capacity (circa 1799)

Awadh possessed substantial revenue resources—approximately 135 crore rupees annually—derived from productive agricultural lands and commercial activity centred on Lucknow. However, Awadh's growing dependence on British military support, formalised through subsidiary alliance treaties, gradually undermined fiscal autonomy. The Nawabs paid substantial subsidies to maintain British troops, thereby draining resources that might otherwise have been used to fund independent military development or administrative reform. This arrangement preserved nominal sovereignty while effectively subordinating Awadh to British political control, foreshadowing eventual annexation in 1856.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of regional power centres following the Third Battle of Panipat reveals fundamental patterns in state formation, military capacity, and political survival during the eighteenth century's transition from indigenous to colonial dominance, showing that Panipat's significance extended far beyond the Maratha defeat by triggering a comprehensive restructuring of political authority that both enabled British expansion and constrained indigenous consolidation; the divergent trajectories of polities—from the British East India Company's aggressive territorial growth to Bengal's complete subordination—demonstrate

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how institutional capacity, economic resources, military modernisation, and strategic adaptation shaped post-1761 political outcomes, with British success emerging not from inherent superiority but from specific advantages in hybrid military organisation, fiscal efficiency, and diplomatic manipulation that allowed the Company to exploit regional conflicts; Indigenous states displayed varied adaptive capacities—Mysore’s ambitious military modernisation under Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan provided temporary parity but faltered without parallel administrative reforms, while Hyderabad and Awadh maintained nominal sovereignty through British-allied accommodation at the cost of fiscal and military autonomy, and the Sikh Confederacy expanded impressively yet remained constrained by decentralised leadership; the study identifies three determinants of survival—effective administration and revenue extraction, technologically and organisationally grounded military modernisation, and strategic diplomatic positioning—arguing that states strong in all three dimensions, notably the Company, achieved lasting consolidation, those strong in only one or two faced eventual subordination, and those weak across dimensions declined rapidly; these findings challenge triumphalist explanations of British inevitability and simplistic declensionist accounts of Mughal collapse by highlighting vigorous indigenous state-building efforts and the contingent nature of outcomes, while suggesting future research into revenue systems, military reforms, and later resistance movements such as 1857 to test the persistence of identified patterns; ultimately, Panipat emerges not as an isolated catastrophe but as a catalytic moment intensifying preexisting trends of fragmentation and colonial expansion, revealing that although indigenous states possessed significant resources and adaptive potential, the simultaneous demands of warfare, reform, and diplomatic complexity outstripped the capacities of fragmented powers while aligning with the strengths of a unified, systematically organised British East India Company.

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