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# First Battle of Panipat — 500 Years That Made India

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# First Battle of Panipat — 500 Years That Made India

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## WHY IN NEWS

**April 21, 2026 marks the 500th anniversary** of the **First Battle of Panipat** (April 21, 1526) — one of the most consequential battles in South Asian history. Babur’s victory over Sultan Ibrahim Lodi ended the **Delhi Sultanate** that had ruled North India since 1206, and established the **Mughal Empire** that would shape the subcontinent for over 300 years. The battle is also a watershed in military history: it marked the **first large-scale use of gunpowder weapons in an open-field battle in India**.

## THE DELHI SULTANATE ON THE EVE OF PANIPAT

### Lodi Dynasty Context

By 1526, the **Lodi dynasty** (1451–1526) — the last ruling house of the Delhi Sultanate — was in severe decline:

- **Ibrahim Lodi** (r. 1517–1526) was autocratic and had alienated the Afghan nobility
- Rival Afghan chiefs and governors had revolted repeatedly
- **Daulat Khan Lodi** (Governor of Punjab) and **Rana Sanga of Mewar** — both enemies of Ibrahim — separately invited Babur to invade India
- The Sultanate’s military strength was large on paper (~100,000 soldiers, 100+ war elephants) but tactically obsolete

### The Delhi Sultanate Timeline

DYNASTY	PERIOD	KEY RULERS
Mamluk (Slave)	1206–1290	Qutb-ud-din Aibak, Iltutmish, Razia Sultana, Balban
Khalji	1290–1320	Jalal-ud-din Khalji, Alauddin Khalji
Tughlaq	1320–1414	Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Firuz Shah Tughlaq
Sayyid	1414–1451	Khizr Khan
<b>Lodi</b>	<b>1451–1526</b>	Bahlul Lodi, Sikandar Lodi, <b>Ibrahim Lodi</b>

## BABUR — THE CHALLENGER

### Background

**Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur** (1483–1530) was a Timurid prince from **Fergana** (modern Uzbekistan), a descendant of **Timur (Tamerlane)** on his father’s side and **Genghis Khan** on his mother’s side. After losing his ancestral lands to the Uzbeks, he seized **Kabul** in 1504 and used it as a base for multiple raids into the Punjab (1519–1524).

CAMPAIGN	YEAR	RESULT
First Punjab raid	1519	Raids; no permanent conquest
Second to fourth raids	1520–1524	Progressively deeper penetration
Fifth campaign — decisive	1525–1526	Leads to Panipat

By 1525, Babur had assembled a force of approximately **12,000 seasoned Central Asian cavalry** hardened by decades of warfare in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

## THE BATTLE — APRIL 21, 1526

### Location

**Panipat**, on the banks of the Yamuna, approximately 90 km north of Delhi in modern Haryana. The flat, open plains of Panipat provided ideal ground for cavalry manoeuvre — and for artillery.

### The Asymmetry

FACTOR	BABUR	IBRAHIM LODI
Army size	~12,000	~100,000
Cavalry quality	Elite Central Asian; mobile	Dense, less mobile
Artillery	Ottoman matchlocks + field cannon	None (war elephants only)
Tactics	Tulughma + Araba	Mass frontal formation
Leadership	Experienced, personally commanding	Ibrahim in central mass

## The Tulughma Tactic

Babur deployed the **Tulughma** (crescent or enveloping formation) — a Central Asian cavalry technique:

- ❶ **Centre:** Araba (wagon/cart) fortification with chained carts protecting flanks of gunners
- ❷ **Right and Left wings:** Cavalry divided into forward and rearward divisions
- ❸ **Attack sequence:** Wings swept around the enemy flanks while the centre held; cavalry closed behind Ibrahim's army, cutting off retreat

This created a **double envelopment** — Ibrahim's vast army, compressed into a dense mass, had no room to manoeuvre.

## The Ottoman Innovation — Rumi Artillery

Babur employed **Ustad Ali Quli** — an Ottoman master gunner — whose **matchlock firearms (tufang)** and **field artillery (top)** were decisive:

- War elephants of the Lodi army, panicked by the noise and smoke of gunfire, **turned and trampled their own infantry**
- Ibrahim's numerical superiority became a liability as the dense formation could not absorb the shock of coordinated artillery and cavalry attack
- Ibrahim Lodi **died on the battlefield** — the last Sultan to die fighting in India until Siraj-ud-Daulah at Plassey (1757)

## CONSEQUENCES OF PANIPAT

### Immediate

- Delhi and Agra fell to Babur within days
- The Lodi treasury — enormous wealth accumulated over generations — funded the early Mughal state
- Babur was now master of the **Punjab, Delhi, and Agra**

## The Second Battle of Panipat (1556)

**Akbar** (under regent Bairam Khan) defeated **Hemu (Hem Chandra Vikramaditya)** at the **Second Battle of Panipat** — re-establishing Mughal power after Humayun's reign of exile. Hemu was the last Hindu king to sit on the Delhi throne.

## The Third Battle of Panipat (1761)

**Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali)** of Afghanistan defeated the **Maratha Confederacy** — a catastrophic blow to Maratha ambitions for pan-Indian dominance, often described as the event that prevented the Marathas from succeeding the Mughals as rulers of India.

### Panipat's Strategic Geography

BATTLE	YEAR	VICTOR	DEFEATED	OUTCOME
<b>First</b>	<b>1526</b>	<b>Babur</b>	<b>Ibrahim Lodi</b>	<b>Mughal Empire founded; Delhi Sultanate ended</b>
Second	1556	Akbar/Bairam Khan	Hemu	Mughal restoration after Humayun's exile
Third	1761	Ahmad Shah Durrani	Maratha Confederacy	Maratha Pan-India ambitions ended

All three decisive battles occurred at **Panipat** — reflecting the town's strategic position as the gateway to the Gangetic Plain from the northwest, the traditional invasion route into India through the Khyber Pass.

## THE MUGHAL EMPIRE — BABUR'S LEGACY

Babur's victory created a dynasty that would rule India (in varying degrees) until **1857**:

EMPEROR	PERIOD	CONTRIBUTION
<b>Babur</b>	1526–1530	Founded empire; Baburnama (autobiography)
Humayun	1530–1540, 1555–1556	Lost/regained empire; Humayun's Tomb (UNESCO WHS)
<b>Akbar</b>	1556–1605	Greatest Mughal; Din-i-Ilahi; Mansabdari; Fatehpur Sikri
Jahangir	1605–1627	Art patronage; Nurjahan influence
Shah Jahan	1628–1658	Taj Mahal, Red Fort, Jama Masjid
Aurangzeb	1658–1707	Greatest territorial extent; Deccan wars; decline begins
<i>Declining emperors</i>	1707–1857	Fragmentation; Maratha, British ascendancy
<b>Bahadur Shah Zafar</b>	1837–1857	Last Mughal; exiled to Rangoon after 1857

## Baburnama — A Historical Document

The **Baburnama** (Memoirs of Babur) — written in **Chagatai Turkic** — is among the world’s first autobiographical works by a head of state. It describes Babur’s campaigns, observations of Indian flora and fauna, and candid personal reflections. Translated into Persian (Akbarnama period) and later into multiple languages, it is a primary historical source of immense value.

### UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Medieval History	Delhi Sultanate, Lodi dynasty, Babur, Mughal founding, Panipat battles
GS1 — Culture	Baburnama, Timurid heritage, architecture (Mughal school)
GS1 — Geography	Panipat’s strategic location, invasion routes, Gangetic Plain gateway
Mains Keywords	Panipat, Babur, Ibrahim Lodi, Tulughma, Rumi artillery, Delhi Sultanate, Mughal Empire, Baburnama, Timurid

### FACTS CORNER

- **Date:** April 21, 1526 — 500 years ago today
- **Babur’s army:** ~12,000 (vs. Ibrahim Lodi’s ~100,000)
- **Babur’s lineage:** Timur (Tamerlane) on father’s side; Genghis Khan on mother’s side
- **Decisive advantage:** Tulughma flanking tactic + Rumi (Ottoman) matchlocks and artillery
- **Ibrahim Lodi:** Died on the battlefield — the last Delhi Sultan to fall in battle
- **Baburnama:** Written in Chagatai Turkic; first great memoir by an Indian ruler
- **Second Battle of Panipat (1556):** Akbar (Bairam Khan) vs. Hemu — Mughal restoration
- **Third Battle of Panipat (1761):** Ahmad Shah Durrani vs. Marathas — Maratha blow
- **Last Mughal:** Bahadur Shah Zafar, exiled to Rangoon after 1857 uprising
- **Panipat location:** ~90 km north of Delhi, on Yamuna plains, modern Haryana
- **Ustad Ali Quli:** Ottoman master gunner who commanded Babur’s artillery
- **War elephants:** Turned against Lodi forces after panicking from gunfire

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