INTRODUCTION

The famous narrative of the last Battle of Panipat, translated from the Persian of Kasi Rai, a *mutasaddi* or secretary in the service of Suja-ud-daula, Vazir of Oudh, by Lieut. Col. James Browne, Resident at Delhi, 1782-85, and author of *India Tracts* (1788) has long been almost inaccessible to students, buried away in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. III (1799). The original Persian manuscript has perished. "Though this narrative is written from memory," the author tells us, "and long since the events happened, I do not believe that I have omitted any circumstances of importance," and the translation, we are warned by Col. Browne, is "far from literal, as I endeavoured to make the style as unadorned as possible". Nor do we know much of Kasi Rai, besides the fact that he had been a trusted servant of Safdar Jang, the old Vazir of Oudh.[1] He was a Deccani who had followed the fortunes of his countrymen to Northern India and was equally at home in Persian and Marathi. He is, of course, much more reliable when speaking of events in Northern India of which he was an eye-witness, than when repeating what he heard about the Deccan. In spite of these defects, the document is one of great historical importance. It is the most detailed account we possess of the battle, and is the work of an eye-witness who evidently desires to give an impartial narrative of what he saw and heard. He had many friends in both armies, and he was equally impressed by the gallantry of the Marathas and by the masterly strategy of their opponent, the Abdali monarch.

In only one respect may we suspect the author of unconscious prejudice and that is, in his views respecting the policy and character of the Bhao Saheb. Kasi Rai had served all his life in Hindustan. He naturally

[1] A letter of his to the Peshwa is given in Rajwade VI, 408.

shared the views of the great Maratha chiefs, Holkar and Sindia, who looked on the Peshwa as an intruder in Northern India, who, if he won, would send his *jasuds* to collect all the revenues and make them "wash his *dhotors*". Hence Kasi Rai depicts the Bhao Saheb as haughty and arrogant and describes him as foolishly despising the sage advice of Holkar and Suraj Mal as the chatter of "goatherds" and *zamindars*, and as obstinately set on a plan of campaign foredoomed to failure.[2] Later historians, with few exceptions, have followed this view. But is it really the correct one? The Hindustani princes were all in favour of guerilla warfare on the traditional lines, made familiar by the great Sivaji in his campaigns. But the flat plains of Hindustan were as different from the rugged Deccan fastnesses, as the effete mercenaries of Bijapur or Delhi were from the fierce Afghan horsemen. Holkar and Sindia had already, in the year before, tried the traditional Maratha guerilla tactics upon the Abdali, with singular ill-success. At Badaon Ghat, on the Jamna River, Nazib Khan had scattered the army of the Sindias to the four winds of heaven, leaving Dattaji Sindia dead on the field. At Sikandra, Pasand Khan had caught Malharrao Holkar napping, and had sent him flying out of the province like a hunted hare, with only a handful of followers. On the other hand, the Bhao's experience at Udgir had convinced him of the superiority of the trained sepoys and mobile artillery of Ibrahim Khan. The truth is, that the supposed superiority of the Marathas in guerilla warfare was a myth. The Afghans with their tireless Turki steeds, outrode them and outmaneuvered them. Pasand Khan rode nearly one hundred miles in twenty-four hours, when he surprised Malharrao Holkar. Attai Khan performed an almost equally remarkable feat, when he caught Govind Pant Bundele. In the skirmishing outside Panipat, the Afghans almost invariably had the better of it. On the other

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[2] See also Nana Farnavis, *Autobiography*, p.56, *infra*.

hand, when it came to shock action, the Maratha cavalry, with its superb *élan*, almost invariably routed their opponents. In the pitched battles outside Panipat, Holkar on 23rd November and Mehendale on 7th December, inflicted such losses that the Afghans withdrew their camp, and all but retreated altogether. In the action at Panipat itself, the Maratha centre charged with such impetuosity that the Afghans had no time to spur their steeds to a gallop, with the result that their opponents cut their way right through the enemy's line of battle, and came within an ace of winning a complete victory, in spite of the fact that their horses had been confined for many weeks in their entrenchments. The Bhao, then, was justified in thinking that his proper policy was *not* to dissipate his energies in guerilla warfare, but to force his opponents to accept battle in the open field.

The Bhao has also been sharply criticized for shutting himself up in Panipat. "A city besieged is a city taken," as Bazaine found to his cost at Metz. But here the fault was clearly not the Bhao Saheb's. As the remarkable passage quoted in the Appendix clearly shows, he was acting under the orders of the Peshwa. He had been negotiating with the Afghans, who were themselves in considerable straits, when he received peremptory orders from the Peshwa to break off negotiations, as he himself was following with the main army of the Deccan.[3] This changed the whole outlook. The Bhau's policy was now obviously to pin the Abdali to the ground, until the Grand Army of the Deccan arrived, when the Afghans would be caught between the jaws of the nut cracker. Meanwhile, secure behind his entrenchments, he endeavoured to provoke his opponents to attack him, when he could rely upon Ibrahim Gardi's artillery to decide the fortunes of the day. But the Peshwa, an indolent voluptuary, idled away his

[3] See Appendix C.

time at Paithan until 27th December, when it was too late.[4] The Bhao, reduced to starvation, had to give battle single-handed: even then, he would have won, had not the Abdali, with the prescience of a great soldier, kept in hand a reserve of 10,000 heavy cavalry, which he launched at the psychological moment upon the exhausted Marathas, with instantaneous effect. The Peshwa afterwards gave ample proof of his guilty conscience, when he tried to shift the responsibility for the disaster upon the shoulder of Vinchurkar, Powar, Holkar and other scapegoats. It is without surprise that we learn that he died of remorse within six months of the disaster for which his criminal neglect was chiefly responsible.

The Bhao Saheb's conduct in the final phase of the battle has come in for its share of criticism. It is difficult to see what else he could have done. Visvasrao was dead. His flanks were crumbling beneath the sledge-hammer blows of the fresh Afghan reserves. His bolt was spent, and his instinct as a soldier told him that the end had come. He sent word to Holkar "to do as he had bid" i.e. to extricate himself before it was too late and to cover the retreat to Delhi of the women and non-combatants. Then, after a last look at the countenance of his beloved nephew, whose placid beauty in death moved the hearts of even the savage Afghans, he mounted his favourite Arab, collected all the men he could, and rode, like the gallant gentleman he was, into the forefront of the battle, to find a soldier's death. When last seen, he was fighting, with the proud disdain which characterized all his action, against a horde of filthy plunderers, who finally murdered him for the sake of the magnificent jewels he was wearing. He had refused quarter.

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[4] Apparently the Abdali was intercepting correspondence. On December 21st the Peshwa writes that he has had no news from the Bhao since November 14th, when he was in close touch with the enemy. He adds that he is pushing on northwards. But on December 27th he was still at Paithan. Nothing can excuse this delay (*Rajwade,* Vol III, No. 210).

In two respects the Bhao was very gravely at fault. He never should have allowed women and non-combatants to accompany the army to the field. They should have been left in Delhi, under the charge of Naro Shankar. As it was, they exhausted the ample granaries of Panipat, which would otherwise have kept the force well supplied with food until the advent of the Grand Army of the Deccan. In that case, the fatal *sortie* need never have taken place. And secondly, the Abdali should have not been suffered to cross the Jamna at Bagpat. This was due to bad discipline. The Marathas, whose love of plunder was proverbial, were so absorbed in ransacking Kunjpur that they allowed the enemy to slip out of their sight. But after all, the general who wins a campaign is the one who makes the fewest mistakes. The Bhao Saheb did not commit a tithe of the blunders of both Wellington and Napoleon in the Waterloo campaign. He lost, not because he was a bad general, but because his opponent was a better one.

In conclusion, it is hardly necessary to draw the reader's attention to the human interest of this document. Even at this distance of time, the pulses leap as we read of the Abdali, reflectively pulling at his hookah as he watches the long lines of the Marathas deploying for action in the dim winter dawn: the Vazir, in full armour, rallying his men with the cry, "Our country is far off, my friends; whither do you fly?": the choking dust: the combatants rolling on the ground, locked in a deadly embrace: the cries of "Din! Din!" and "Har, Har, Mahadev!" and lastly, the dramatic annihilation of one of the most splendid and gallant armies that ever took the field. A defeat is, under some circumstances, as honourable as a victory; and never, in all their annals, did the Maratha armies cover themselves with greater glory, than when the flower of the chivalry of the Deccan perished on the

stricken field of Panipat, fighting against the enemies of their creed and country.

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Poona, 1926