UNIT 9: ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BRITISH RULE AND ANTI-BRITISH MOVEMENTS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- discuss the Burmese invasion of Assam,
- describe the circumstances leading to British intervention in Assam and the Anglo-Burmese wars,
- explain the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo and the significance of this historic treaty in the history of Assam,
- describe the British administrative system in Assam,
- discuss the revolt of 1857 in Assam.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

After a detailed study of the socio-economic condition and the polity of Assam during the Ahom rule, we will now discuss the Burmese invasion of Assam. We are going to discuss the factors that led to foreign intervention in Assam. A brief account of the course of the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824) has also been discussed as well as the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo that brought about an end to the war. In addition to all these political developments, we are also going to discuss the revolt of 1857 in Assam.

Badan Chandra was unscrupulous, arrogant and very oppressive. Moreover, he was a strong enemy of Purnananda Buragohain. It was, therefore, a blunder on the part of Purnananda to appoint Badan Chandra as Barphukan. Dr S.L. Baruah has rightly observed, "By this act of his the premier was not only digging his own grave, but was also brining the 'Great Deluge'-the Burmese invasion to Assam".

Initially for a short period of time Badan Chandra loyally discharged his duty as the Barphukan. But this did not last long; soon he revived his lust for power and wealth and grew arrogant. He let loose a reign of terror and atrocities on the people of Kamrup.To put an end to Badanchandra's oppressive rule, Purnananda Buragohain sent a force to apprehend the Barphukan. But Badan Chandra got the scent of this in advance and managed to escape to Rangpur in Bengal.

At Rangpur he tried to persuade the Governor General of the English East India Company to send an army for aid of the Ahom king and lodged a complaint against the misrule of Prime Minister Purnananda Buragohain. He sought British intervention and military help to curb the power of Purnananda and to restore the authority of the king. But the supreme government at Calcutta refused to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ahom kingdom. Badan Chandra then opened negotiation with the Calcutta agent of the Burmese government and with his help reached Burma to persuade the Burmese to intervene in the affairs of the Ahom kingdom.

Unlike the British, Badan Chandra got a favourable response from the Burmese authorities. The Burmese decided to take advantage of the prevailing political chaos in Assam in order to fulfill their own imperialistic designs. It was, therefore, a golden opportunity for the Burmese when Badan Chandra appealed in the court of king Badawpaya seeking his aid against Purnananda Burhagohain and the Burmese king immediately agreed to help Badan Chandra Barphukan.

In March 1817, an army of 8000 soldiers was dispatched to invade Assam under Badan Chandra Barphukan. This was the *first Burmese invasion* of Assam. On its way to Assam through the Patkai-Nongyang route, the strength of the army increased to about 16,000 after being joined by

- **British Intervention and the First Anglo-Burmese War**

Towards the close of the 18th century, Burma under rule of Al-ang Paya (1733-60) emerged as a strong kingdom. During the reign of his son Badawpaya (1772-92), Burma began to follow an imperialistic policy. Its imperialistic design began to materialize in full scale when Burma occupied Upper and Lower Burma, conquered Arakan and occupied Manipur. In order to lay their hands to the rich province of Bengal, the Burmese began to make frequent inroads into the territory of Bengal. The British Government initially only observed the situation and took no action against the Burmese. They were in favour of mutual settlement through negotiations. But the Burmese were not in favour of such negotiations. In November 1823, a serious situation developed when Burma occupied the island of Shahpuri on the Chittagong frontier.

In the North-East frontier, the Burmese occupied Manipur in 1819 after ousting its Rajah Gambhir Singh. There were danger signals on the Sylhet frontier. Manipur was already in the hands of the Burmese and the Burmese now threatened to attack Cachar and came very close to the frontier of the British India province of Bengal.

Meanwhile, David Scott had been appointed as the agent to the Governor General on the North-East frontier in addition to his post of Civil Commissioner of Rangpur. Early in February, 1824 he informed the supreme government in detail about the Burmese threat to Bengal. According to him the Burmese army might use any one of the three possible routes to invade Bengal. The routes, according to Scott, were from Manipur through Tipperah and Cachar; from Assam by Cachar and Jaintia; from Assam through the Brahmaputra. He wrote that it would be most difficult for the British to prevent the Burmese war boats if they chose the third route. He, thus, strongly favoured British intervention in Assam in order to drive out the Burmese.

At the recommendation of David Scott, the Governor General Lord Amherst (1823-28) declared war against king of Ava (Amarapura) on March 5, 1824. Thus began the *First Anglo-Burmese War*. The expulsion of the Burmese from Assam was regarded as one of the main objectives of the war.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Answer the following questions:

a) In how many sectors the first Anglo-Burmese war was fought?

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b) Where did Chandrakanta Singha face a defeat from the Burmese?

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Q2: Name the Ahom kings installed by the Burmese.

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Q3: Who was the Governor General of India at the time of first Anglo–Burmese War?

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Q4: When did Mingimaha Bandula die?

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Q5: When was the Treaty of Yandaboo signed?

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9.4 THE TREATY OF YANDABOO AND BRITISH CONQUEST OF ASSAM

We have discussed so far the background of the Burmese invasion of Assam and the circumstances that led to British intervention. However, the real motive of this Anglo-Burmese rivalry and the British intervention of Assam were the imperialistic and colonial aspirations of both the parties. Hence, after the Burmese invasion of Assam, the British began their campaign against the Burmese (The First Burmese War, 1824-26). First, Lower Assam was freed, and then the British defeated the Burmese in Upper Assam leading to the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo.

The Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the Burmese and the British on February 24, 1826. This treaty constituted an important landmark in the history of Assam. The treaty brought an end to the 600 years of Ahom rule in Assam and it marked the beginning of the rule of the British East

the administration of the two territorial units, namely, Lower and Upper Assam. After the treaty Assam was divided into two divisions: Western or Lower Assam and Eastern or Upper Assam with Biswanath as the boundary on the North bank.

Lower Assam comprised Kamrup, Nagaon and parts of Darrang with headquarters at Guwahati. Upper Assam comprised the remaining parts of Darrang, extending from Biswanath to the river Buridihing, excluding the Matak country, with its headquarters at Rangpur. Each division was placed under the control of a commissioner. David Scott was placed in charge of Lower Assam and was declared the Senior Commissioner. Colonel Richards was appointed in charge of Upper Assam with headquarters at Rangpur and was declared the Junior Commissioner. He was to exercise civil functions in Eastern Assam in addition to his military duties.

Inspite of having two Commissioners, David Scott was made in charge of overall administration in order to maintain uniformity in the administrative set up. Scott was to hold exclusive charge of political relation with the states and tribes of the entire region. Thus, it is clearly seen that David Scott was the most powerful official of that time. Although each Commissioner was to perform his civil duties independently, they were expected to be in constant touch with each other even in respect of the matters connected with their respective units. They were empowered to decide civil disputes, to administer criminal justice, to organize police system and to set up jails. In December, Lieutenant Colonel Richards resigned from his post and he was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. At the same time Adam White was appointed as Scott‘s assistant in Guwahati and Captain Davidson was appointed as an assistant in Goalpara.

It may be mentioned here that even during the initial period of military occupation, the British felt it necessary to adopt two different general principles in regard to the administration of the two above mentioned territorial units.i.e, Lower Assam and Upper Assam. There was a possibility of retaining Lower Assam under direct British rule and the British permanently annexed Lower Assam to the British territory in 1828. However that was not the case with Upper Assam. The future of Upper Assam still remained unsettled.

restoration of the Ahom monarchy in Upper Assam because the revenues collected from Upper Assam would not be enough for the maintenance of British administration. Secondly, the restoration would satisfy the Ahoms, particularly the Ahom nobility.

The Central Government was not convinced by the arguments of Scott and so the question of the final settlement regarding Upper Assam was deferred. Lord William Bentinck who succeeded Lord Amherst as the Governor-General in 1828 took a realistic view of the whole situation. The administrative confusion and the hostile attitude of the Ahom nobility prompted Bentinck to take a definite decision on the question of Upper Assam without any further delay. On April 24, 1833 Purandar Singha was formally installed as a ruler of Upper Assam. But on the pretext of misgovernance, Upper Assam was brought under the direct control of the Company in 1838. Since then the people of Upper Assam had been dissatisfied with the rule of Company. By the treaty of 1826, the British had appointed Bar Senapati, the Chief of the Morans of Matak to provide a contingent of three hundred *paiks* in lieu of tribute. A new treaty was imposed on his successor Maju Gohain on the condition of paying an annual tribute of 10,000 rupees. This treaty was not liked by the Moran tribe on religious grounds. The British Government annexed the state of Matak in November, 1839. The British followed an expansionist policy and annexed the different states of the North-Eastern region one after another without any regard for the feelings of the people of Assam. This greatly increased the resentment of the people of Assam against the British rule.



***Paiks* :** Male servants for rendering services.

The new government was solely concerned with the collection of taxes but did not pay heed to the miserable economic condition of the ryots. Their condition deteriorated as the extortion of the government went on increasing. The British had failed to fulfill the promises they made to the people of Assam before the first Anglo-Burmese war. It was the aristocracy, which first reacted to this new situation with their abortive attempt. Each new administrative measure introduced by the British was a serious blow to the old aristocracy. The abolition of slavery in 1843 by the British Government created resentment as it eroded the power and privileges of the old



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: Who was placed in charge of Lower Assam in the British introduced administration?

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Q7: Who succeeded Lord Amherst as the Governor-General?

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Q8: Who was popularly known as Maniram Dewan?

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9.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit we have learnt,

- the circumstances leading to the Burmese invasion of Assam and the consequent intervention of the British in Assam.
- the first Anglo-Burmese war and its results.
- the administrative set up introduced by the British with reference to the administrative reforms of David Scott and Robertson.
- the revolt of 1857 in Assam.

9.8 FURTHER READING

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