UNIT 5: BRITISH OCCUPATION OF ASSAM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 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,

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit begins with a brief background of the Burmese invasion of Assam. We are going to discuss the factors that led to foreign intervention in Assam. We will also discuss in detail the circumstances leading to the British intervention in Assam as a result of the latter's fight against the Burmese. 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. The significance and the consequent changes that occurred in the political history of Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo have been dealt with in detail.

5.3 ANGLO-BURMESE WARS

Prior to the intervention of the British East India Company, Assam was ruled by the Ahom dynasty. However, from the middle of the 18th century the Ahom monarchy began to decline due to incompetence and inefficiency of the of the Ahom monarchs and the mutual rivalry among the nobles. The situation became worse after the death of Kamaleswar Singha in 1811. After his death, Purnananda Buragohain and other nobles decided to place Chandrakanta Singha, the brother of the deceased king on the throne. As the new king Chandrakanta Singha was a minor at that time, Purnananda Buragohain took full advantage of the situation and became the defacto ruler of the Ahom kingdom. Chandrakanta was reduced to the position of a puppet ruler.

However, young king Chandrakanta Singha did not want to remain a puppet king forever. He was a pleasure loving ruler, but was also hungry for power. The king developed a close friendship with a youth of his own age named Satram, the son of the officer incharge of the training of cocks and their association brought about far reaching changes in the political situation of that time. The king appointed Satram as the Charingiya Phukan. In the words of Dr S.L Baruah, 'Satram gradually became the friend, philosopher and guide of the king'. The rapid rise of Satram and his close proximity to the king created resentment among the Ahom nobility. The Prime Minister Purnananda Buragohain raised objections in this regard but king Chandrakanta did not pay any heed. Encouraged by the king`s patronage, Satram gradually became so powerful that he started dreaming of becoming the king. With this aim in view, Satram, with the secret approval of Chandrakanta hatched a conspiracy to murder Purnananda Buragohain.But the plot was discovered. All the conspirators except Satram were executed and Satram was banished to Namrup where he was later killed by some Nagas.

Meanwhile, the political situation of Assam took a new turn with the appointment of Badan Chandra as the *Barphukan* (Viceroy in charge of Lower Assam) at Guwahati after the death of Kaliabhomora Barphukan. 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 some local chief's enroute. The Burmese defeated the Ahom soldiers in

several battles, suppressed all opposition and installed Chandrakanta Singha to his position and returned to their own country with huge war booty.

- **Second Burmese Invasion (1819)**

  After the departure of the Burmese the internal quarrel of the Ahom monarchy reached its climax. During this anarchical situation, Purnananda Buragohain died or as some say, committed suicide. Badan Chandra Barphukan was also assassinated by a mercenary soldier named Rup Singh and Chandrakanta was deposed. Purandar Singha, a member of the Ahom royal family was now placed on the Ahom throne. When the Burmese king came to know about these developments, he became furious and immediately sent a strong army under the command of Alamingi to avenge the death of Badan Chandra and reinstate Chandrakanta Singha. This led to the *second Burmese invasion* in 1819. Consequently, the Ahom king Purandar Singha fled to Guwahati. The Burmese advanced to Jorhat and released Chandrakanta Singha and placed him on the throne. Having thus established their authority in Assam, Ala Mingi left Assam in April 1819 and Mingimaha Tilwa was given the charge of affairs with a force 2000 men.

- **Third Burmese Invasion (1821)**

  However, Chandrakanta Singha soon began to feel suspicious of the true intentions of the Burmese. He became anxious about his own safety and fled to Calcutta. The Burmese then placed Jogeswar Singha (1821-1824) on the throne of Assam. Meanwhile, Chandrakanta Singha made a brave attempt to drive away the Burmese from Assam but he suffered a major defeat in the battle of Hadira *Chowk*i (check post) in June, 1822. Assam, thus, went under direct Burmese rule and came to be considered a province of the Burmese Empire.

Although it appears that the Burmese attacked Assam taking advantage of the anarchical condition and military weakness of Ahom monarchy at the instance of Badan Chandra Barphukan, yet the real intention of the Burmese invasions of Assam lay deeper, as they were guided by their

imperialist policy of expansion towards the East after their Westward expansion.

- **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.

Let us now briefly discuss the course of the first Anglo-Burmese War. The war was fought in three sectors- Assam, Arakan and Rangoon. The British force in Assam was placed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Mac Moraine. He died of cholera in May 1824 and was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Richards. David Scot maintained a close relation with the commander and provided all necessary help from outside. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the war began early in March 1824.The British force left Goalpara on 13th March and arrived in Guwahati on 28th March. The British under Captain Sneyd captured Guwahati quite easily without bloodshed as the Burmese had already evacuated it. Thus, in less than a month Guwahati, Raha and Nowgong fell into the hands of the British. Due to the onset of monsoon the hostilities were suspended but operations were renewed in November again. The Burmese now made a hasty retreat to Upper Assam and fell back upon the fort of Rangpur. The Burmese could not face the British due to lack of reinforcement, internal dissensions and due to lack of food supply. Thus, they were compelled to leave Rangpur in March 1825 and the Brahmaputra Valley was freed from Burmese occupation. According to A.C.Banerjee, the occupation of Rangpur practically completed the British conquest of Assam.

The war in Arakan and Rangoon continued for several months. By January, 1826 the expulsion of the Burmese from Manipur was complete. The campaign in Arakan ended in April 1825. According to A.C. Banerjee, the campaign of Burma proper, which started auspiciously for the British with the occupation of Rangoon in May 1824 and the death of Mingimaha Bandula in April, 1825, came to a close in February 1826 when the main British army under General Sir Archibald Campbell reached Yandaboo, a village, within four days march from Ava. The Burmese were no longer in a position to offer any resistance and sued for peace. Thus, on 24 February, 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the Burmese Government at Ava and the British East India Company, terminating the first Anglo-Burmese War.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Fill in the blanks:

a) Kamaleswar Singha died in the year ……..…..

b) Chandrakanta Singha developed a close friendship with …….

c) Purnananda to appoint Badan Chandra as ……..……

d) ……..…… assassinated Badan Chandra Barphukan.

e) Burma occupied the island of ……..…….. on the Chittagong frontier.

f) The British under Captain ……..…… captured Guwahati quite easily.

2. Name the Ahom kings installed by the Burmese.

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3. Who was the Governor General of India at the time of first Anglo–Burmese War?

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4. When did Mingimaha Bandula die?

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5.4 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.

Nemesis-

Punishment or defeat that is deserved and cannot be avoided.

Cupidity-Strong desire for more wealth, possession and power.

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 India Company in Assam. By Article 2 of the Treaty of Yandaboo, the king of Burma renounced all claims upon, and agreed to abstain from all future interference with, the principality of Assam and its dependencies, and also with the contiguous petty States of Cachar and Jayantia. With regard to Manipur it was stipulated that should Gambhir Singh desire to return to that country, he should be recognized by the king of Ava as the Rajah there of.

The result of the first Anglo-Burmese War proved to be a turning point in the history of Assam. According to K.N. Dutta, in the ordinary course Assam should have at once been restored to her rightful rulers whom the Burmese had dispossessed, but *nemesis* had come upon the internal quarrels that sapped the vitality of the Assamese people and their rulers even before the Burmese came and exposed their land to the *cupidity* of rival conquerors. The British, who had occupied the land during the course of the war, took advantage of the same dissensions amongst the princes and the nobles of Assam and the general distraction of the people and kept it under their own occupation by right of conquest from the Burmese (and not from Assamese), contrary to the earlier promise they made at the beginning of the war that they would restore the old native government in it after the war was over.

It may be mentioned here that at the time of the beginning of the war, the British had announced that they were not led to this country by the thirst of conquest and promised that they would re-establish a government adapted to the Assamese needs and calculated to promote the happiness of all classes in Assam. However, the British could not control their imperialistic attitude with regard to Assam and took all measures to occupy Assam permanently. Thus, after the Treaty of Yandaboo, Assam went under the British rule within a short period of time.