

Chapter

2

British Expansion Beyond Indian Frontiers (Nepal, Burma and Afghanistan, 1814–42)

In this chapter, you will read about the British colonial expansion beyond Indian frontiers. By 1818, with the defeat of the Marathas and the pensioning of the Peshwa, the British supremacy in India was complete. The British had conquered almost the whole of India except Sindh and Punjab and their annexation now was only a matter of time. The British followed a two-fold policy for the consolidation of the Raj—the introduction of a suitable administrative system and securing the newly conquered territories. In the process of securing British frontiers in India, several states were brought under direct or indirect control to serve as outposts against external threat.

Further, the East India Company also used India as a base to expand its control over lands of South and South-East Asia. During the period 1757 to 1857, English control was established from Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka in the south, Afghanistan in the north-west, Mauritius in the south-west to Andaman and Nicobar, Burma, Malaya and Philippines in the south-east. Only mainland Asia—China, Siam, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam—was left relatively untouched.

REASONS FOR EXPANSION BEYOND INDIAN FRONTIERS

Shifting Financial Base of the East India Company (from Trade to Land Revenue)

The province of Bengal was the first substantial area in the Asian mainland to pass under direct control of the English Company. Until now, the Company's primary source of income was trade, which soon began to face multifarious challenges.

By 1770s, Bengal had been milked dry and its economy was in shambles. This not only affected Company's profits but also jeopardised its extremely lucrative trade with China, as the Chinese at that time sold their goods only in exchange for silver which had been mostly provided from Bengal treasury. Further, the industrial revolution in England had gained strength and the industrial interests were demanding an end to the Company's trade monopoly in the East. The Company itself was getting involved in costly military conflicts in India with the country powers. In this context, with declining income from trade and increasing expenditure on armed conflict, the Company's financial base began to shift from trade and commerce to land revenue, **from business of trade to business of government**. This naturally pushed the Company to go ahead with continuous territorial expansion.

Need to Obtain Spices from South-East Asia for Trade

For several years, the Company had been carrying out profitable trade with China, especially in silks, nankeens (yellowish cotton cloth) and tea. But the Chinese traded mostly in exchange for silver, which had been provided by the Bengal treasury since 1757. With the depletion of Bengal's wealth, the Company sought to pay for China's trade, firstly, by replacing the silver with opium from Malwa region of Central India, and secondly, by obtaining costly spices (like clove and nutmeg) from South-East Asia for sale in China and Europe. This impelled the Company to expand itself into South-East Asia.

Need for New Markets and Supplies

The English Company's interest in expansion outside India was also fuelled by the need to find new markets for goods procured in India and also to procure supplies either for cross trade or for use by the Company's military forces.

Need to Safeguard Indian Empire

The Company also needed to safeguard its Indian empire and the trade routes to China and India. Hence, the Company's expansion outside India was also strategically driven.

Note: The first English conquests outside India were in the Straits of Malacca, later known as the **Straits Settlements** and comprised the ports of Penang (1791), Malacca and Singapore (1824). However, some of the major conquests are mentioned in detail below.

MAJOR CONQUESTS

Nepal

The Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16)

Historical Context

In 1768, the Gorkhas (hardy people belonging to the hill town of 'Gorkha') wrested the control of Kathmandu from the successors of Ranjit Malla of Bhatgaon. In their attempt to expand beyond the mountains, they were checked by the Chinese in the north. Hence, they pushed towards the frontiers of Bengal and Awadh, coming in contact and clash with the English in India.

In 1801, Governor-General Wellesley, in pursuance of his scheme of Subsidiary Alliance to consolidate Company's territories in India and create outposts against Tibet or China, forced the **Hindu Gorkha Kingdom of Nepal** to sign the treaty and accept a British Resident at Kathmandu. However, in 1803, the Resident left owing to Nepalese hostility. The following decade saw numerous problems all along the 1,100-km long border shared between Nepal and India.



A Gorkhali warrior

Causes

- Pursuance of British foreign and frontier policy- British did not want to solely depend on the Himalayas to provide India protection from the North. They looked at Nepal as a stable **buffer state** between India and Tibet or China.
- The ensuing border disputes.
- Expansionist policy followed by both the English and the Gorkhas.

The War

In May 1814, the Gorkhas attacked three police stations of **Butwal**, then under the English East India Company's authority. **Governor-General Hastings** took it as a challenge to Company's authority and decided to launch an offensive along the whole frontier, from the Sutlej to the Kosi.

In October 1814, Governor-General Hastings launched the Nepal War. The hill people put up a strong resistance and engaged the British in military conflict for over a year. Battles of **Butwal**, **Almora**, **Malaon** and **Makwanpur** were the important battles fought; all went in favour of the English.

The Nepalese were finally defeated and forced to sign the **Treaty of Sugauli (March 1816)**. As per the treaty, the British gained the districts of Garhwal and Kumaon (comprising a great portion of the **rich Terai forests**) and a resident was placed at Kathmandu. The north-west frontier of the Company was pushed up to the mountains as English also gained the entire area of the Sutlej hills comprising **hill stations of Simla, Mussoorie, Ranikhet, Landour and Nainital**.

After the Treaty of Sugauli, the British used a great deal of tact in their dealings with the rulers of Nepal. They treated Nepalese ruler as sovereign and in return, even they allowed no diplomatic mission, other than that of Britain into Nepal. **Nepal also maintained neutrality during the Revolt of 1857**, while the British enlisted a large number of Gorkhas as mercenaries in their army. About 5,000 Nepali men entered British service in 1815, most of whom were not 'real' Gorkhas but Kumaonis, Garhwalis and other Himalayan hill men. These groups, eventually lumped together under the term Gurkha, and became the backbone of British Indian forces.

Burma

First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26)

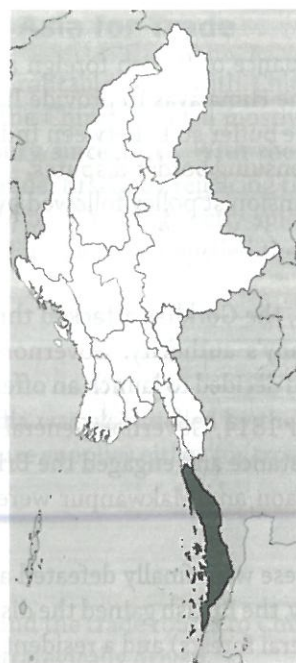
Immediate Cause

In 1823-24, the Burmese military, in its pursuit for rebels, entered and occupied Assam and Manipur and prepared to attack Chittagong. These territories were, however, claimed by the English in India. The British Indian army attacked Burma in retaliation, which came to be known as the First Anglo-Burmese War.

In 1824, the British Indian army attacked Burma. The main attack on Arakan region of Burma was launched from the sea. The Burmese forces led by Maha Bandula were easily defeated and the King was forced to sign a peace treaty, Treaty of Yandabo.



Arakan region, Burma



Tenasserim region, Burma

Treaty of Yandabo (24 February 1826)

As per the treaty,

- The English regained control over Assam, Manipur and occupied **Arakan** and **Tenasserim** region (Tavoy and Mergui). Thus the King lost most of his coast.
- The King was forced to accept a **British Resident** at his capital and pay war indemnity.

Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–53)

In 1839, the British Resident claimed that the Burmese did not treat him well and left. Meanwhile, Burma had emerged as a major supplier of timber (needed for ship-building and repair industry of the English Company based in Calcutta) and other costly items like tin, pepper and ivory. The deltas of the Irrawaddy River had also emerged as important suppliers of rice to Bengal and to the growing settlements in South-East Asia. These developments tempted the British to look for opportunity to annex Burma.

Immediate Cause

After the Treaty of Yandabo, several British merchants had settled on the southern coast of Burma and Rangoon. They often complained of ill-treatment at the hands of the Burmese.

Two British captains were heavily fined by the Burmese government on certain charges brought against them. Following this incident, the British merchants sent a petition to the then

Governor-General Lord Dalhousie, providing the desired opportunity. Thus, in 1852, Dalhousie decided to attack Burma on the pretext of restoring the dignity of the English.

The war started in 1852 and by 1853, the English had annexed Rangoon, Pegu (or Lower Burma) and the region upto Toungoo, thus gaining control of the entire coast of the Bay of Bengal. The Burmese King, Mindon Min, was forced to shift his capital to **Mandalay**.

The annexation of Pegu faced much criticism in Britain itself and was variously described as 'a very serious evil' and as motivated by 'exaggerated ambition to extend India to its illusory natural frontiers'.

The **London Times** commented, 'the maintenance of British prestige in India did not require fresh annexations.'

Note: Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885)—The Third Burmese War took place in 1885 when the English attacked Burma on the pretext that the king Thibaw Min was intriguing with the French in Vietnam to weaken English control over Asia. The war ended in English victory and annexation of Upper Burma. Thus Burma was turned into a province of British India (1937 onwards, Burma was governed as a separate colony).

Afghanistan

The Russian Threat

The idea of 'Russian peril' was propagated by **Lord Palmerston**, British Foreign Secretary in the mid-19th century and was first mentioned by William Bentinck.

The 19th century was a period of diplomatic competition between the British and Russian empires for spheres of influence in Asia known as '**the Great Game**' to the British and the 'Tournament of Shadows' to the Russians. Thus, for most of the 19th century, Russia was viewed as 'the enemy' in Britain, and any Russian advance into Central Asia was always assumed in London to be directed towards the conquest of India. In 1832, Britain had expanded its franchise which was condemned by Emperor Nicholas I of Russia. This set the stage for 'cold war between autocratic Russia and democratic Britain. Consequently, the 19th-century Russia's 'Special mission in the East' (more directed against the alleged 'Yellow Peril' of China rather than India) was misinterpreted. In 1837, Lord Palmerston, fearing the instability of Afghanistan, the Sindh, and the increasing power of the Sikh kingdom in the northwest, raised the spectre of a possible Russian invasion of British India through Afghanistan, the only entrance to India from Central Asia.

British Reaction to Russian Threat

The British reaction to the Russian threat was twofold.

- **Forward Policy:** One reaction was to secure commanding influence in Afghanistan, either by annexation or by creating it as a buffer state. This view was generally held by the members of the Conservative Party.

- **Policy of Masterly Inactivity (also known as the 'Stationary School')**: Another reaction was to reach a diplomatic understanding with Russia and follow a policy of watchful non-intervention as far as Afghanistan was concerned. This view was held by the Liberals.

In the 1830s, the British became over-anxious to protect Afghanistan leading to the First Anglo-Afghan War which proved to be a great disaster for the British. A direct consequence of this was the annexation of Sindh (1843) and Punjab (1849) in an attempt to recover the lost British prestige and made the British India's frontier directly co-terminus with that of Afghanistan.

The First Afghan War (1839–42)

The concern for imperial defence and search for a scientific border in the north-west brought the English in contact with the Afghans. Afghanistan was considered by the British as a **buffer state** against the Napoleonic France and Czarist Russia. It was felt that Afghanistan should be under the control of a friendly prince.

Dost Mohammad, the Amir (ruler) of Afghanistan was initially anxious for English friendship and sent a congratulatory letter to Auckland, on the latter's appointment as Governor-General. Dost, however, made his friendship conditional on the receipt of English help in recovering Peshawar from Ranjit Singh. Auckland decided to maintain neutrality and wrote, "It was not the practice of British Government to interfere in the affairs of independent states." In desperation, Dost Mohammad began showing signs of friendship with Russia.

Burnes Mission

In September 1837, Auckland sent Capt. Alexander Burnes to Kabul outwardly on a commercial mission, but in reality to judge the political situation there. Burnes reported from Kabul that the Amir was entirely 'English in views' but insisted that British pressure must be exerted on Ranjit Singh to restore Peshawar to the Afghans. But Auckland was adamant that Dost Muhammad must give up all hopes of obtaining Peshawar and that the Government of India was already rendering him a great service in keeping peace between Lahore and Kabul; hence Dost Muhammad must not conclude any alliance with British enemies. At this, Dost Muhammad felt despaired and received the Russian ambassador with much warmth. Having failed in his mission, Burnes left for India in April 1838.

The causes of the First Afghan War were as follows:

- The concern for imperial defence
- Search for a scientific border
- **Immediate cause:** Failure of Burnes' Mission

After the failure of Burnes' mission, Governor-General Auckland decided to follow a 'Forward Policy'; he planned to depose Dost Muhammad and entrust the country in the hands of some friendly prince.

Tripartite Treaty (26 June 1838)

As per the plan, a Tripartite Treaty was signed between the English, Shah Shuja (ex-ruler of Afghanistan) and Ranjit Singh. Following the treaty, combined forces of the three parties, known

as the '**Army of the Indus**' launched an attack on Kabul.

By July 1839, the army had captured Kandahar and Ghazni. Dost Mohammad felt so disheartened by these defeats that he gave up the fight and fled to Bemia, a town north-west of Kabul. Shah Shuja was placed on the Afghan throne.

However, the glitches in the plan became evident soon after. Shah Shuja was unacceptable to the people of Afghanistan and his position could be maintained only with the help of the British army. Thus, a small garrison was placed at Kabul under the command of **General Elphinstone**. But the English continued to face retaliations.

- In September 1840, Dost Muhammad, upon getting military help from the Wali of Kholoom, attacked the English but failed. Subsequently, he was arrested and sent to Calcutta as a prisoner.
- Again, in 1841, the **Afghans rose in rebellion** against the English. Several Englishmen in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Ghazni were killed, and their cantonments were seized. Burnes was also killed. Macnaghten, the British official was forced to sign a humiliating treaty with Akbar Khan (son of Dost Muhammad), agreeing to evacuate Afghanistan within three days. However, Macnaghten was murdered.
- In January 1842, the **disastrous retreat** began from Kabul. Elphinstone, along with his 4,500 army men and 12,000 camp followers were substantially annihilated in the snow covered passes. Shah Shuja was also murdered in April.

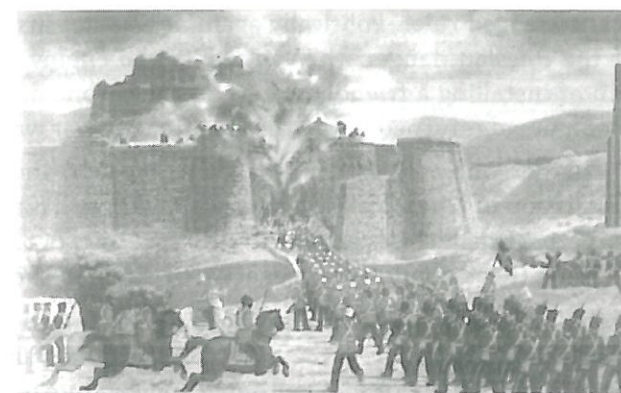
Auckland Replaced by Ellenborough

Auckland's grandiose plan had exploded like a balloon and he was soon replaced by Lord Ellenborough. Ellenborough ordered the forces to retreat after inflicting reprisals and securing the release of prisoners. Consequently, by September 1842, the combined British forces were able to re-establish control over Jalalabad, Kandahar and Kabul. The forces rescued the prisoners, demolished Kabul's main bazaar and then retreated through the Khyber Pass. Dost Muhammad was released and he re-established his authority in Kabul.

Evaluation of Auckland's Afghan Policy

The Afghan War came to be known as '**Disaster in Afghanistan**' and is described as "**a compound of folly, ignorance and arrogance**". It had proved to be too costly, and it was also a massive blow to the prestige of British Indian Army.

Auckland Afghan policy was subjected to universal condemnation. Morally, it was not justified as Auckland had contradicted his own previous stand of not interfering in internal affairs of independent states. Afghanistan was an independent state and Dost Muhammad was its



A British Indian force in action during the First Afghan War

acknowledged ruler. Politically again, it was not justified as Auckland took an exaggerated view of the Russian danger when in reality the enemy was several thousand miles away. The main aim of installing a friendly prince on the throne of Afghanistan could not be realized and Dost Muhammad returned to the throne after the war was over.

Further, one political crime leads to another. The passage of British troops through Sind and occupation of regions like Shikarpur, Bukkar and Karachi were in gross violation of the 'Treaty of Perpetual Friendship' concluded with the Amirs of Sind, and ultimately led to war and annexation of Sindh (Read about the annexation of Sindh in the next chapter).

Note: The Second Afghan War (1878–80) occurred at the time of Governor-General Lytton and ended with the **Treaty of Gandamak**. As per the treaty, the Amir Yakub Khan agreed to station a permanent British Resident at Kabul and conduct his foreign policy on advice of the Government of India. Afghanistan was created as a buffer state between British Indian and Russian Empire.

To sum up, in this chapter we learnt about the British efforts to colonise outside India. The English Company got interested in territories outside India mainly to protect and promote their trade and colonial interests. Indulging in diplomacy and war, the Company established its control over Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Andaman and Nicobar, Burma, Malaya, Philippines, Nepal and Burma. The areas it did not directly capture, it still wielded considerable influence. The high cost of such expansionist activities were borne by the Indian treasury (filled by the land revenue exacted by the Indian peasant), while the Indian sepoy provided the necessary cannon fodder. Thus, it was mainly at the cost of India and the Indian peasant and soldiers that England emerged as a dominant power in the whole of South Asia.

Prelim Capsule

British Expansion beyond Indian Frontiers (Nepal, Burma and Afghanistan)

Wars	Period	Important Details
Nepal War Lord Hastings	1814–16	Immediate context—Gorkha attack on three police stations of Butwal (1814), then under the English East India Company's authority. Main battles fought—Battles of Butwal , Almora , Malaon and Makwanpur ; all went in favor of the English. Ended with the Treaty of Sugauli (March 1816). Result—The British gained the districts of Garhwal and Kumaon (comprising a great portion of the rich Terai forests) and the entire area of the Sutlej hills comprising of hill stations of Simla, Mussorie, Ranikhet, Landour and Nainital .

First Burma War Lord Amherst	1824–26	Immediate context—The Burmese military, in its pursuit for rebels, entered and occupied Assam and Manipur and prepared to attack Chittagong. These territories were however claimed by the English in India. Ended with the Treaty of Yandabo . Result—The English regained control over Assam, Manipur and occupied Arakan and Tenasserim region (Tavoy and Mergui). Thus, the King lost most of his coast.
Second Burma War Lord Dalhousie	1852–53	Immediate context—Two British captains were heavily fined by the Burmese government. Dalhousie decided to attack Burma on the pretext of restoring the dignity of the English. Result—The English annexed Rangoon and Pegu (or Lower Burma).
Third Burma War Lord Dufferin	1885	The British annexed Upper Burma . Burma lost its independence.
First Afghan War Lord Auckland	1839–42	Immediate context—Failure of Burnes Mission . Result—Afghan invasion was a failure. The English who were forced to retreat, Shah Shuja was killed and Dost Muhammad re-establish his authority in Kabul.
Second Afghan War Lord Lytton	1878–80	Ended with the Treaty of Gandamak . Result—Amir Yakub Khan agreed to station a permanent British Resident at Kabul and conduct his foreign policy with advice of the Government of India. Afghanistan was created as a buffer state between British Indian and Russian Empire.



Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. With whom did the British sign the Treaty of Yandabo?

(a) Afghanistan (b) Burma (c) Nepal (d) Vietnam
2. Who was the Governor-General of India during the First Anglo–Burma war?

(a) Lord Cornwallis (b) Lord Hastings (c) Robert Clive (d) Lord Dalhousie
3. Who was the Governor General of India during the First Anglo–Afghan war?

(a) Lord Wavell (b) Lord Hastings (c) William Auckland (d) Lord Dalhousie
4. Treaty of Sugauli was signed in which year?

(a) 1813 (b) 1814 (c) 1815 (d) 1816
5. Treaty of Sugauli was signed between the British and _____?

(a) The Amirs of Afghanistan (b) The Gorkhas of Nepal (c) Taimur Shah of Afghanistan (d) Mindon Min of Burma



Practice Questions – Main Exam

1. Discuss the reasons that led to British expansion beyond Indian frontiers?
2. Evaluate the role of Lord Auckland in the context of Anglo-Afghan relations.
3. Why was the First Anglo-Afghan war described as “a compound of folly, ignorance and arrogance”. Discuss
4. Write short notes on each of the following:
 - (a) Anglo-Nepal war
 - (b) Treaty of Sugauli
5. What were the causes of Second Anglo-Burmese war? Discuss the outcome of the war.

Answers

Practice Questions – Preliminary Exam

1. (b)
2. (b)
3. (c)
4. (d)
5. (b)