
UNIT 12 BRITISH EXPANSION BEYOND INDIAN FRONTIERS

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims to acquaint you with the story of English colonial expansion outside India. It involves a brief description of colonising efforts and an explanation as to how and why this happened. After you have read this Unit you would:

- learn the general causes of the English trade and expansion outside India
- discover how and where the East India Company expanded their influence, and
- understand how in the areas they did not directly capture, they still wielded considerable influence.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In earlier Units you have already read about the nature of imperialism. You have also read about the manner in which the resources of Bengal were used to conquer the rest of India and enrich the owners of the East India Company. This Unit hopes to make you more familiar with the constant expansion that characterises colonialism, and the use of the wealth of one colony to expand and consolidate control over another.

The East India Company used the resources of India to consolidate its position over the lands of South and South-East Asia. Using India as a base, English control during the period 1757-1857, was established from Sri Lanka in the South, Mauritius in the South-West, Afghanistan in the North-West, Nepal in the North, to Andaman and Nicobar, Burma, Malaya, and Phillipines in the South-East. Only mainland Asia—China, Siam, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—was left relatively untouched. But there too, as in the case of China, the English wielded considerable influence after 1842.

The story of this expansion is closely linked with the fortunes and aspirations of the English East India Company in India and in China. It might therefore be useful to recount in brief the relevant portions of the history of the Company.

12.2 EAST INDIA COMPANY'S TRADE

Maintaining active trade with India and China at the same time, served a very useful purpose for the Company. They could use the Indian products for the Chinese market and thereby maximise their profits. But there were other important benefits also. Let us look at the details of the trade.

12.2.1 Trade with India

You have already read how, through the battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) the East India Company had acquired the *de jure* control of the province of Bengal which became the first substantial area in the Asian mainland to pass under direct British control.

By the 1770s, Bengal had been milked dry, its economy was in shambles. Consequently the profits of the East India Company declined and the Company started reporting massive losses. Such losses were doubly troublesome because not only did they hurt the dividends of the powerful shareholders of the Company in England but also jeopardised the extremely lucrative trade with China. Chinese tea, silks, and nankeens sold at a high profit in Europe and the Company had the English monopoly over this trade; but the Chinese at this time sold their goods only in exchange of silver; and the silver had been provided mostly by Bengal. The Company therefore had to request a loan from the English parliament to overcome these losses. In return the parliament insisted on having some say in the running of the Company, and forced it to accept the Regulating Act of 1772.

In the meanwhile, in England, the industrial revolution was gaining strength and industrial interests were demanding the revocation of the trade monopoly over the East which the Company enjoyed. Minimally, they insisted, that they too be given a share of the markets that the Company exploited. In India, at the same time, the Company was increasingly getting involved in costly armed conflicts with Indian states over the control of land, and its financial base was gradually shifting from trade and commerce to land revenue, from the business of trade to the business of government.

12.2.2 Trade with China

While the Company was establishing itself in India it had a growing trade with China. As in India, so in China—the Company had the monopoly over trade.

The Company's first trade contact with China was established in 1701. In the next fifty years it had grown into a profitable trade in silks, nankeens and tea. But from the Company's point of view there were two key problems faced by this trade:

- That the Chinese government controlled it closely by restricting it to the port city of Canton; and
- the Chinese traded mostly in exchange of silver, and preferred the Spanish silver dollar made of silver.

Control over the treasury of Bengal in 1757 had provided a substantial solution to the second problem. But by 1769, the wealth of Bengal was severely depleted. In the following years the Company sought to pay for the China trade by

- replacing silver with the opium grown in the Malwa region of Central India; and
- by obtaining high-priced spices from South-East Asia for sale in China and Europe. The latter impelled the Company to expand itself into South-East Asia.

12.2.3 General Causes for Expansion

English interest in expansion outside India, it may be said, was influenced by two major factors:

Markets and supplies: the need to find new markets for goods procured in India, for supplies to be exchanged in trade with China, and for material that would come in handy for equipping and feeding the English military in South and South-East Asia;

Strategic: the need to safeguard the Indian empire and the trade routes to China and India. To this could be added two minor factors: one, the compulsions of British foreign policy in Europe; and two, the interests and policies of the bureaucracy in India. Of course, the relative importance of these factors varied from situation to situation as will be evident from the discussion in this Unit

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Why did the East India Company need to expand outside India? Answer in fifty words.

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- 2) Why was Bengal important in the China trade? Answer in fifty words.

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12.3 STRAITS SETTLEMENTS

The first English settlements outside India were in the Straits of Malacca. These, in the nineteenth century, came to be known as the Straits Settlements.

12.3:1 Penang

In 1592, the first English ship, the *Edward Bonaventure*, reached the island of Penang in the Straits of Malacca. By 1600, the East India Company had established twelve factories in the Malay archipelago. But by 1625, it felt that the Malaya spices did not provide adequate profits and then decided to concentrate its trade activities on India. Private British traders, though, continued to maintain trade contact with the Straits, trading mostly in tin, ivory, and pepper from the Straits and cotton piece-goods from India.

With the expansion of the Company's trade with China increasingly the need was felt to find a safe port of call in the eastern seas for the East Indians on their journey to and from China. The decision to seriously expand towards the East came in 1782, when the French admiral de Suffren, using Achehese ports in Northern Sumatra was able to drive off all English commerce from the Bay of Bengal. The only port where the Company's ships could hitherto repair was Bombay on the Western coast of India.

Thus in 1784, Francis Light, acting on behalf of the East India Company, signed an agreement with the Sultan of Kedah allowing an English settlement on the island of Penang. The English in return promised to help the Sultan militarily in case of attacks from his neighbours.

The government of Madras, however, refused to ratify this agreement for fear that it would involve the Company in unnecessary wars without bringing in adequate gains. At this the Sultan of Kedah tried to retake Penang by force. His armies, however,

were defeated by Fracia Light. In the subsequent treaty, signed in 1791, Penang was handed over to the English in return of an annual payment to the Sultan. The English were given control over a small strip of land on the Malayan mainland opposite Penang. The English were thus able to establish a major naval station on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. The added advantage was that the trade in Sumatran pepper, about 60% of world produce in pepper, passed through Penang.

In 1805, Penang was made into a presidency like Bombay and Madras, administered by a Governor. Bengal paid for the maintenance of the Settlement at Penang. Its over 50 British officers drew their salary from the Bengal-treasury and the average deficit of Penang during these years was paid by Bengal.

12.3.2 Sumatra

In the meanwhile, in 1783, the British had also established contact with the Bugi rulers at Riau in Sumatra. The Company's government in Bengal felt that a settlement at Riau would safeguard the trade routes to China and make Riau an entrepot of archipelagic trade. But a Dutch attack on the Bugis in 1784, forced the East India Company to shelve its plans.

At this point events from Europe intervened. In 1787, in Europe, joint intervention by the English and Prussians overthrew the government in Holland. The English asked the new government for the grant of control over Trincomali in Sri Lanka and Riau—all in return for certain commercial concessions in India and an understanding prohibiting British navigation east of Sumatra. The Dutch, however, did not agree.

In the meanwhile the French revolution took place and the armies of the French revolution, in 1794, overran Holland. The new Dutch government was hostile to the English. The English on their part retaliated by conquering the Dutch possessions in India, Sri Lanka, west coast of Sumatra, Molucca, Menado in Sulawesi, Malacca, and Riau.

No action was taken against the Dutch possession of Java because by the second half of the 1790s the Governor-General in India, Wellesley, had involved the Company in costly wars within India and the French seemed to threaten India from Egypt in the West. However, when the Dutch in Europe allied once again with Napoleon then the Board of Control, in August 1810, instructed the Governor-General Minto, to expel the Dutch from Java in order to prevent the French from having another base in South-East Asia. Over a hundred ships and 12,000 men from India were used to establish English control over Java.

The restoration of peace and friendly relations with the Dutch in Europe after 1813, made for a reordering of the conquests in South-East Asia. The English retained Sri Lanka and Penang for strategic reasons. But by now the commercial importance of the archipelago had come down because clove and nutmeg, the two important spices of the archipelagic trade were now cultivated outside the Moluccas too. Moreover, the opium grown in Malwa was fast replacing all other goods in the China trade. The Dutch then were given back their colonies in the Straits.

12.3.3 Singapore

Stamford Raffles, who had been the Lieutenant Governor of Java during the period of English occupation, however, voiced the fear that if South-East was left to the Dutch they may wholly exclude English trade from the region. Hastings, the Governor-General in India agreed, and allowed Raffles to look for a suitable settlement in the Malayan archipelago. On intervening in the complicated internal politics of the empire of Johore, Raffles was able to obtain permission from the Sultan in February 1819, to establish a garrison of the British Indian army, and open English factories on the island of Singapore.

The Dutch objected severely to the English penetration of Singapore and threatened war. The Directors of the Company too thought that Raffles had done wrong in garrisoning it, but nevertheless they waited for Hastings to explain his support for Raffles. The explanation, however, came from the profits that the settlement made and by 1825 it regularly accounted for almost two-thirds of the trade passing

through the Straits. By 1824, then the British government persuaded the Dutch to allow the Sultan of Johore (who currently was under Dutch control) to cede the entire island to Great Britain.

12.3.4 Straits Settlements—Crown Colony

Finally, in 1867, the three major ports constituting the Straits Settlements—Penang, Malacca, Singapore—were separated from the Indian administration and brought under the direct control of Britain. Expansion into the Straits then had been influenced by a mixture of strategic and commercial reasons. India provided the men and money for expansion. She also, as in the case of Penang, bore the financial burden of maladministration; but profits to the Company, such as they were made in Singapore, were not brought to India but instead went to England.

12.4 BURMA

The case of Burma involved the interplay of a different set of commercial and strategic reasons. Burma exported some costly items like tin, pepper, and ivory. More importantly it was a major supplier of timber for the small but important ship-building and repair industry based in Calcutta. Also, towards the end of the eighteenth century the deltas of the Irrawady river became important suppliers of rice to the growing settlements in the South-East and to Bengal.

Early on, in 1753, the East India Company had tried to establish a settlement at Negrais on the coast of lower Burma. In 1758-59, the Burmese king Alaungpaya, with some justification, accused the English of helping Burmese rebels, and in 1759, had all the English at Negrais killed. The Company's Directors, on their side did not react to the situation because they had decided that Negrais was after all not worth its cost. After that the Company kept clear of Burma for about twenty years. There was very little contact between the English and the Burmese. Towards its Asian neighbours, however, Burma continued to be very aggressive. In 1823-24, the Burmese military, pursuing rebels, entered and occupied Assam and Manipur and prepared to attack Chittagong. These territories of Assam, Manipur, and Chittagong, however, were claimed by the English in India. The resultant attack by British Indian army on Burma has come to be known as the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26).

12.4.1 Anglo-Burmese War-I

In 1824, the English attacked Burma, three regiments of the Bengal army, however, mutined when they were asked to march across Chittagong into the neighbouring Arakan region of Burma. The main attack there was led from the sea. The Burmese forces were easily defeated. The king was forced to accept a peace treaty (Treaty of Yandabo, 24 February 1826) which gave the English control over Assam, Manipur, Arakan, Tavoy, and Mergui. Thus the king lost most of his coast and was left with upper and central Burma, Pegu, and the mouths of the Irrawady. He was forced to accept a British Resident at his capital and pay an indemnity of £ 1,000,000. The war had involved 40,000 men of the British Indian army of which 15,000 died. The expenses of the invasion were also very high.

12.4.2 Anglo-Burmese War-II

The Resident, however, claimed that the Burmese did not treat him with dignity and left in 1839. In the meanwhile the China trade had expanded, English settlements in South-East Asia too had enlarged considerably, and therefore the English needed easier access to Burmese timber to repair ships and to the Irrawady rice bowl to feed settlers. In 1852, then, the Governor-General Dalhousie decided to attack Burma on the pretext of restoring the dignity of the English. The Second Anglo-Burmese War started in 1852, and by 1853 the English had annexed Pegu and the region up to Toungoo. The Burmese king Mindon Min was forced to shift his capital to Mandalay. The English had thus gained control over the entire coast of the Bay of Bengal. Later in the century, in 1885, the English finally annexed the whole of

Burma on the pretext that king Thibaw Min was a tyrant and intriguing with the French in Vietnam to weaken English control over Asia. Burma was made into a province of British India.



6. An Indian Sepoy

Check Your Progress 2

Write five lines on the two Anglo-Burmese Wars.

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- 2) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×).
- i) By the treaty of 1791, the British paid 6000 a year to the Sultan of Kedah.
 - ii) British wanted a settlement in Sumatra to safeguard their trade routes to China.
 - iii) The British wanted to control the Straits Settlement, mainly to teach a lesson to the Dutch.

12.5 LESSER SETTLEMENTS

Lesser settlements or settlements of relatively minor strategic importance included the neighbouring areas of Borneo and Philippines, Andaman and Nicobar island, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. These settlements had attracted the attention of other colonial powers also—like Holland, Spain, France and Denmark. Let us look at the British efforts in these areas.

12.5.1 Borneo and Phillipines

In 1701, the English East India Company established a fortified factory at Banjermassin on the south coast of Borneo primarily to trade in pepper. But their interference in local affairs soon made them unpopular and in 1707, they were driven out. English ships maintained a desultory contact with Borneo till 1756, when the Dutch managed to establish a monopoly over pepper exports.

After that the next English attempt to settle in Borneo came in 1762, during the Seven Years War in Europe. When Spain declared war on England, in 1762 an English expedition was sent from Bengal to the Spanish colony of Phillipines. It captured Manila in October 1762. In Manila the English freed the Sultan of Sulu who was being kept a prisoner by the Spanish. In gratitude the Sultan ceded the island of Balambangan towards the north of Borneo to the English. Manila was restored to the Spanish in 1764, by the Treaty of Paris (signed in 1763) which concluded the Seven Years War, on condition that the Royal Phillipines Company would purchase Indian Textiles exclusively from English merchants. A fort built at Balambangan was attacked and destroyed by the locals in 1775. Subsequently the Company decided that Borneo and the Phillipines were simply not worth the effort of keeping them and did not try to resettle there. Henceforth it confined most of its trade and colonizing efforts on the Straits Settlements.

12.5.2 Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Other Minor Settlements of the Company in the Indian Ocean included the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius.

Both the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Sri Lanka owed their importance to their strategic location along the trade routes to China. In 1789, the English established a settlement at Port Blair at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to service the ships on the China route. But when the Company acquired Penang and Trincomali, it abandoned Port Blair in 1796. Thereafter the Company resettled Port

Blair in 1857 as a penal colony. In the meanwhile Denmark had annexed Nicobar Island in 1756, and established a small colony trading in coconut, betelnut, and birds' nest. The English removed the Danes in 1809, while acquiring all other Danish factories in India.

12.5.3 Sri Lanka

The Dutch East India Company had initially, in the seventeenth century, planned to have Colombo as the Dutch centre of power in the East. But by the eighteenth century the Dutch had established themselves in Java and Sri Lanka became of only local importance. The English too, then, let Sri Lanka be.

The Sri Lankan port of Trincomali had developed in the eighteenth century, as an Indian Ocean roadstead involving coastal shipping carrying rice from Bengal, cowries from the Maldives, arecanut from Malabar, and the spices, cardamom, and pepper over which the Dutch had a monopoly.

But when during the European wars of the 1790s the Dutch government allied with the French, the English forced the Sri Lankan Dutch to leave. In February 1796, Sri Lanka passed from the hands of the Dutch to the English, and in 1798, Sri Lanka was declared a crown colony—i.e. a colony administered directly by the government in England, and not by the East India Company in India.

12.5.4 Mauritius

Like Sri Lanka, Mauritius, to the South-West of India in the Indian Ocean, was a colony with relatively minor economic importance. In 1721, the French East India Company occupied Mauritius and renamed it the Ile de France. It was developed as a naval station to attack ships of the English East India Company. During the second and third Anglo-French wars French Ships from Mauritius came to launch unsuccessful attacks on the English at Madras and off the Coromandel coast.

In 1810, Minto the Governor-General, organized an expedition to remove the French from Mauritius. After capture the Ile de France was reverted back to its earlier Dutch name—Mauritius; and the name of the neighbouring Ile de Bourbon was changed to Reunion. However, the Company did not take up the responsibility of governing the islands; they were handed over to the British government and became a crown colony.

12.6 NEPAL

On mainland South Asia English expansion outside India, during our period, was mainly confined to Nepal and Afghanistan.

The first intervention of the East India Company in Nepal came in 1767, when the Council in Calcutta ordered an attack from Patna into the Nepal Valley. The hills, for sometime past, had been disturbed. The Gorkha chief Raja Prithvi Narayan Shah had attacked the Nepal valley with the aim of occupying the kingship of Nepal. This had disrupted the trade between Nepal and Patna and therefore the Company asked Captain Kinloch of Patna to attack Prithvi Narayan Shah. The Gorkhas repulsed the attack.

In the following years the Gorkhas were able to defeat the Malla rulers of Nepal and Prithvi Narayan Shah became the king of Nepal. His successors signed an infructuous commercial treaty in 1792, with the East India Company's representative at Patna.

By the end of the century the English had become a power to be reckoned with in South Asia. Governor-General Wellesley had begun pursuing his scheme of Subsidiary Alliance in order to expand and consolidate the Company's territories in India. It was at this time, in 1801, that the English sought to obtain a treaty from Nepal (signed in October 1801) in which the Nepalese agreed to allow an English Resident at Kathmandu. The Resident was under order to investigate the economy

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of Nepal, especially the supposed in-flow of gold from Tibet, and the rich timber and pine forests. But due to the hostility of the Nepalese government the Resident had to withdraw to India in March 1803. In the following decade the English and the Nepalese had numerous problems over the possession of border villages along the 1,100 kilometers long border that they shared.

In October 1814, then, Governor-General Hastings started the Nepal War. The Company's army led by Generals Marley, Ochterlony, and Wood and Colonel Nicolls, had organized a concerted attack, hoping to engage the Nepalese all along the border. But they had underestimated the fighting process of the hill people. It took over a year for Nepal to be defeated and agree, in the Treaty of Sagauli (December 1815), to leave the entire area of the Sutlej hills, Garhwal, and Kumaon in the hands of the English, and accept a Resident at Kathmandu once again.

Having obtained the rich forests of the Terai region the English decided that Nepal did not serve any further economic or strategic purpose. Henceforth they retained little interest in Nepal affairs.

12.7 AFGHANISTAN

Through the 1830s, the officers of the Company insisted that Afghanistan was important as a buffer against Napoleonic France and Tsarist Russia. In 1836, Dost Muhammad, the then ruler of Afghanistan offered his friendship to the English in return for English help in re-possessing the Peshawar valley which Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler of Punjab had taken away from the Afghans. Governor-General Auckland, however, refused to intercede with Ranjit Singh and instead proposed that the Afghans promise not to ally with any other country like Russia, France, or Turkey. Dost Muhammad responded by showing signs of friendship towards Russia.

At this Auckland planned to depose Dost by force. The Court of Directors concurred. The plan was put into action by Tripartite Treaty signed on 26 June 1838 between Shah Shuja an ex-ruler of Afghanistan, Ranjit Singh and the English. Following this treaty a force comprising the armies of the Company, Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja was assembled to attack Kabul, depose Dost Muhammad, and establish Shah Shuja on the throne.

The "Army of the Indus" as it was called captured Kandhar in April 1839, and Ghazni in July. Dost Muhammad was so disheartened by these defeats that he gave up the fight and fled to Bamiyan, a town to the North-West of Kabul. Shah Shuja was made the ruler of Afghanistan. British troops, however, instead of withdrawing to India began to garrison Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandhar, and Ghazni.

In the meanwhile, in September 1840, Dost Muhammad was able to get military help from the Wali of Kholoom. He attacked the English in September but failed. He was forced to surrender in November and was sent to Calcutta as a prisoner.

In the spring of 1841, however, popular unrest against the English started. Open rebellion broke out at many points in September 1841. The English in Kabul town were killed and their cantonment besieged. The same happened at Ghazni, Jalalabad, and Kandhar; and the entire Gorkha battalion at Kohistan was done to death. In December finally, the English were forced to accept the humiliating condition of evacuating Afghanistan within three days. The retreating forces were in turn attacked on the snow covered passes and substantially annihilated.

By May 1842, however, the English forces were able to regroup and re-establish control over Jalalabad and Kandhar. Then with the help of reinforcements from India Kabul was re-taken in September. The costs of this victory were, however, too high. Quite apart from the cost in men and money, the Afghan War proved that the British Indian armies were not invincible and could be defeated with suitable tactics as those used by the hill tribes of Afghanistan. Henceforth the English decided to confine themselves within the North-West Frontier and not venture into Afghanistan militarily.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Why were the English interested in Burma? Answer in fifty words.

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2) How did the officers of the Company justify the Afghan War? Answer in five lines.

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3) Why did the English lose interest in Nepal? Answer in five lines.

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Map-3 The British Indian Empire and the neighbouring countries

12.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we saw that the English got interested in territories outside India to facilitate their trade by establishing control over lands as distant as the Phillipines. Control over some places like Mauritius and Sri Lanka enabled them to further safeguard their Indian empire and its trade routes. And on occasions, as in the case of Afghanistan and Nepal, the English indulged themselves in adventures of diplomacy and war. The high cost of all these activities was borne by the Indian treasury and the Indian sepoy provided the necessary cannon fodder. It was mainly at the cost of India that England became the dominant power in the whole of South Asia and the Asian lands on the Indian ocean.

12.9 KEY WORDS

East Indiamen : The large armed cargo ships of the East India Company.

Entrepot : Storehouse, mart, commercial centre for the export, import, collection and distribution of goods.

French revolutionary wars : For two and a half decades starting c. 1790 the armies of France were involved in warfare all over Europe. Holland was one of the first countries to be conquered, the ruling regime was overthrown and a republican government took over. This government co-operated with the French war effort till the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815.

Indemnity : Literally it means compensation for damages. In our context it refers to the damages claimed by the East India Company from a country defeated in war.

Nankeen : Kind of cotton cloth originally made in Nanking, the chief city of the province of Kiangsu, in China. Nanking literally means "southern capital" just as Beijing (Peking) means "northern capital".

Opium and the China trade : In the late eighteenth century western "country" merchants (i.e. merchants, English and Non-English) who traded along the coasts of Asia but did not owe any formal allegiance to any of the Companies) discovered a rapidly expanding illegal market for opium in China. In 1820 over 60,000 kilograms of opium was smuggled in. By 1830 the figure had crossed 2,000,000 kilograms per year and the Chinese had started paying for it in the Spanish silver dollar. In 1835-36, for example, China paid 4,500,000 dollar for this drug.

12.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-sec. 12.2.3.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 12.2.1.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 12.4.1 and 12.4.2.
- 2) i) ii) iii)

Check your Progress 3

- 1) See Sec. 12.4.
- 2) See Sec. 12.7.
- 3) See Sec. 12.6.