



## Opium: Popularity and Consequences in Colonial Assam, India

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### Abstract

*Opium which was used by the Assamese people as a medicine and also confined only with the nobility and upper classes as a luxury item during the Ahom rule, colonial British Government made the drug as easily accessible with the motives of maximisation of revenue collection in the province. The paper thus attempts to highlight how the opium popularity among the Assamese people caused the large-scale labour importation into Assam as there was popular notion amongst the British officials that Assamese were mostly opium addicted and unfit as labours. The paper also tried to understand the changes that occurred in socio-economic life of Assam and even how the opium issues organised the Assamese people politically, through 'raij mel' to oppose British Colonial Government.*

**Keywords:** Opium, Indolent, Lazy, Immigration, Raij Mel, Kala-azar.

### Introduction

Opium had been the most popular commodity and widely discussed issue in Assam during the colonial rule. There is no authentic record of the date when the opium drug was first introduced in Assam. But it believed that Assamese people were introduced to the poppy plant and its use during the days of the Mughal invasion of Assam in the seventeenth century. However, until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, opium-addiction remained a vice and was confined only to a few noble and rich men of the society in Assam<sup>1</sup>. Assamese people cultivated poppy in their *bari lands* (homestead) for their own consumption. Though it believed that poppy was cultivated and consumed by the Assamese people even during the Ahom rule, but it was alleged that British Colonial Government made it a commodity of universal consumption. Trade and maximization of revenue collection had been the prime objectives of the British East India Company Government in Assam. Accordingly when the company government came to know the opium weakness of the Assamese people, made the opium as popular commodity. The drug used to be collected by saturating strips of coarse cotton cloth-each about three inches broad – in the juice obtained from incisions made into the poppy plant. Dried and lightly rolled up, these strips of cloth, known as *Kanee*. Poorer people prepared a drink by dissolving this *kanee* in water. Richer people extracted *madak* from it by evaporating the water, and they smoked it<sup>2</sup>.

**Cultivation of Poppy in Assam:** According to Maniram Dewan, poppy was first cultivated by Rajput Barkendazes at Beltala in the vicinity of Guwahati during the reign of Swargadeo Lakshmi Singha<sup>3</sup>. It was through their agency that the opium habit spread through its length and breadth. Thomas Welsh, in 1792 observed that "poppy was growing in luxuriance in most of the lower provinces of Assam and Swargadeo Gaurinath Singha was an opium addict"<sup>4</sup>. In 1809, Buchanan

Hamilton wrote that opium in Assam was 'raised in abundance for consumption and there is much used'<sup>5</sup>.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan witness a great change in the case of poppy cultivation, he noted in 1829 that there was almost no place in Assam where poppy was not cultivated<sup>2</sup>. Opium became a common drug to all Assamese that even A.J. Moffatt Mills, when visited the province in 1853 to enquire into the local conditions, he was convinced that "three-fourth of the population are opium eaters and men, women and children alike use the drug"<sup>6</sup>.

The people have, however, brought opium habit upon themselves. When *kala-azar* made its appearance, an idea was floated by some cases it bore fruit, and several young men and women took to the drug in apprehension of an attack by the malarial fever. Kali Ram Chaudhari, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Nagaon wrote-

"I myself have seen instances of conversion of total abstainers into opium-eaters. I should not be understood to say that there was no opium-eating before the appearance of the *kala-azar*. There were certainly a large number of people who used to take opium in one kind or other"<sup>7</sup>.

But when the British government had the knowledge that the general people of Assam also have weakness to opium, taking advantage of this situation the British made it an article of universal consumption of the people of Assam and by doing so they augmented their revenues by leaps and bounds. For which the number of opium eater growing rapidly. Sir Andrew John Moffatt Mills, in the course of his official tour and inquiry in 1853, found that 75% per cent of the people of Assam were opium eaters<sup>7</sup>. It was presumed rightly that within 28 years of

British rule (1826-53) the use of opium became most universal. While Government was convinced of the injurious effects resulting from taking the drug in excess, it was of opinion that "it use has, with many, almost become a necessity of life, and in a damp climate like Assam, it is perhaps beneficial if taken with moderation"<sup>8</sup>. In the same vein, Johnston Long, Civil Surgeon of Sibsagar also wrote in 1853 that "...the lower orders in Assam were not permitted to grow the poppy or to use opium in any way" and the "unrestricted use of opium almost the peasantry of Assam were not permitted to grow poppy, or to use opium in any way, and the "unrestricted use of opium amongst the peasantry of Assam are not of very old data"<sup>3</sup>.

**Effect of the Habit:** Opium has also its share in degrading its consumers. Opium is a habit forming drug, even when taken in moderation; it is perfectly clear that certain deterious effects manifest themselves. The most noticeable physical effect is a gradual weakening of the body which is accentuated when the addicts in his craving for the drug stunts himself or the bare necessities of food and clothing. It undoubtedly leads to physical, mental and moral deterioration. Addicts lose their will-power, their judgment become defective. The habitual use of opium incapacitates the individual from discharging his duties if the dose is not forthcoming at the right time<sup>9</sup>. Those who take to opium eating are generally averse to labour. According to Gunabhiram Barooah "the consumers are weak in body and in mind, slow, lazy, forgetful, with willingness to swear and tell lies and commit petty thefts"<sup>10</sup>.

**Mills wrote in his Report thus:** "The use of opium has with many almost become a necessary of life, and in a damp country like Assam it is perhaps beneficial if taken with moderation, but experience has shown that to allow every man to grow the plant and manufacture the drug unrestrictedly is almost injurious to the morale of the people. Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it"<sup>3</sup>.

Though Mr. Mills supported the consumption of opium but he advocated the abolition of cultivation of poppy and production of drug locally. Because

"deficiency of available labour in a province so thinly populated but greatly aggravated owing to the immoderate use of opium" consequent on the cultivation of poppy throughout the province of Assam being unrestricted, the Assam Company solicited the Governor-General of India that 'the cultivation of the poppy either altogether (be) prohibited or its cultivation heavily taxed; with the simultaneous introduction of Government opium for sale so as to realize a sizable amount of revenue for the Government and thereby to force the Assamese opium-eaters to labour to purchase the luxury"<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore British intension on the one hand was to root out the source of indigenous supply of opium so as to make room for the sale of the government opium, and on the other hand forced the opium eaters to offer themselves as labourers to the tea

garden. Because the economy of Assam still remained in a state of non-monetization and the money remained a scare commodity with the people. The scheme was very clear to Mills. In his word: "It seems to me that the simplest and most effectual plan into the stations and into the Mofussil, at certain places, a sufficient quantity of Government opium for consumption of the people"<sup>12</sup>.

Colonel Francis Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontiers, was the prime mover for both the suppression of the poppy cultivation and introduction of sufficient quantity of government drug for sale in the province. In reply to an official dispatch of the Bengal Government dated 20th January 1860, Jenkins while expressing his opinion in favour of immediate suppression of the poppy cultivation with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1860, said; "there will be no difficulty in supplying any part of Assam with the government drug through ordinary vendors and in fact the necessary measure to this effect have already been established." Further Jenkins made it known to the Bengal Government that the measure would result in "a very large increase to the Government Revenue provided no stoppage in the necessary full supply of the drug to the collectors asks place as has hitherto on more than one occasion occurred." He also suggested for the introduction of the same *Abkaree* laws for the sale of opium in Assam which were in force in the Bengal province<sup>13</sup>. Accordingly the poppy cultivation in Assam was banned in May 1860. It may be mentioned in passing that during a 20 years period from 1879-93, the British Colonial Government in Assam sold a total of 31,392 *maunds* of opium and realized a net price of Rs. 3,14,55,576, and a license fee of Rs. 47,60,657 from the opium sellers. In this way they exploited the people of Assam in terms of opium revenue itself to the tune of Rs. 3,62,16,233<sup>12</sup>. The following extract from the statistics shows that increase of revenue have been steadily accompanied by diminished consumption:

**Prohibition of opium:** The discovery of tea in the jungle of Assam attracted large number of British businessmen to invest in tea plantation in Assam. British planter have immediately experience that the scanty populated province, local people were opium eaters which make them a lazy to work which make acute shortage in the plantation. British tea planters appealed for a ban on opium. But the government was not in favour to lose revenue which collected from poppy cultivation. Mills recommendation was that 'the simplest and most effectual plan is to suppress the cultivation at once and pour into stations and into Mofussil, at certain places, a sufficient quantity of government opium for the consumption of the people. To solve the labour shortage in the province Mills concluded- 'opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it'<sup>3</sup>. Government finally banned poppy cultivation with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1860 and allowed the government to operate opium monopoly in the province. In 1873-74 there were as many as 5,137 licensed opium shops to vend the drug at the grassroots<sup>4</sup>. The consumption of opium during the past five years in the five districts of Assam proper was<sup>15</sup>:

**Table-1**  
**The statistics of opium in Assam**

Year	Population of the province	No. of shops	Treasury price of opium per seer	Total consumption (opium and its compounds)			Total revenue collected	Consumption per head of population		Revenue per head of population		Revenue per tola of consumption	
				Mds.	S.	c.		Rs.	Tola	As.	P.	As.	P.
1873-74	4,094,972	5,137	Rs. 22 & 23	Mds. 1,856	S. 32	c. 0	Rs. 11,71,816	Tola 1.45	As. 4	P. 7	As. 3	P. 2	
1881-82	4,881,426	1,404	26	1,582	37	6	15,53,600	1.03	5	1	4	11	
1891-92	5,433,199	977	37	1,369	25	4	19,16,369	.80	5	7	6	11	
1894-95	5,433,199	845	37	1,376	28	11	19,36,037	.81	5	8	7	0	

**Table-2**  
**Consumption of Opium in the Brahmaputra Valley**

District	1890-91	1891-92	1892-93	1893-94	1894-95	Increase or decrease in 1894-95 as compared with 1893-94
Kamrup	Mds. 1451/2	Mds. 154	Mds. 1501/2	Mds. 154	Mds. 1471/2	Mds. -63/4
Darrang	1883/4	178	2001/4	208	1943/4	-131/4
Nowgong	2023/4	2311/4	2111/4	2033/4	2091/2	+53/4
Sibsagar	3571/2	3553/4	351	3601/4	3653/4	+51/2
Lakhimpur	3133/4	3531/2	3293/4	353	3553/4	+23/4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,2081/4</b>	<b>1,2721/2</b>	<b>1,2423/4</b>	<b>1,279</b>	<b>1,273</b>	<b>-6</b>

**Opium and Importation of Labour from outside of Assam:**

The total acreage under tea in Assam proper increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to about 8,000 acres by 1859, and the output of tea from 29,267 lbs to more than one million lbs. Faced by an acute labour shortage, the planter community urged the government in 1859 to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Another recommendation of theirs was to put a ban on poppy cultivation and sale of opium, the widespread consumption of which was believed to have made the local people apathetic towards work<sup>16</sup>. The cultivation of poppy in Assam proper had almost trebled while the population had increased by 10 per cent or so under British rule between 1826 and 1853<sup>17</sup>.

After some initial hesitation, the government ordered a 15 to 30 per cent increase in the land revenue rates on the dry crop lands of four districts- Lakhimpur, Sibsaigar, Darrang, and Nawgong<sup>18</sup>. It also placed a ban on the cultivation of poppy in 1860, but the lucrative monopoly sale of Company's readymade opium, that had been yielding a profit to the government, was continued. The sale price of this opium was increased; however, from Rs. 14 per seer in 1860 to Rs. 20 in 1862 and Rs. 23 by

1873<sup>3</sup>. The addicts were thus forced to purchase high-priced government opium instead of growing it themselves. It appears that prohibition of the cultivation of poppy- practically the only crop peasants could readily dispose of for a cash earning- and raising of the opium price were both motivated nor so much by humanitarian as by revenue considerations<sup>17</sup>.

The beginning of modern political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley can be traced from 1853, when Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial-Phukan (1829-1859) submitted their memorials to A.J. Moffat Mills, who had come to enquire into the conditions of the province and to recommend measures for improvement<sup>19</sup>. One of his two memorials, Maniram Dewan charged that the continued sale of *abkari* opium by the government had made the people unfit for agriculture. The memorial recommended both an immediate stop to the sale of monopoly opium and a phased programme of gradual prohibition of poppy cultivation within twenty years. As to the opium policy, Dhekial Phukan warned that the replacement of locally produced opium by *abkari* opium, sold on a monopoly basis by the government, would not at all lead to eradication of the evil. He rather suggested that the sale of government opium be discontinued forthwith and that local poppy cultivation be

subjected to heavy taxation- the tax being enhanced progressively from time to time. Thus the opium policy advocated by him was basically the same as Dewan's<sup>17</sup>.

The land revenue rates on both dry and wet crops were uniformly and arbitrarily doubled in 1868, throughout Assam proper<sup>20</sup>. As a result of these enhanced rates, which were implemented during 1860-71, the total land revenue demand jumped up from Rs. 1,001,773 in 1864-65 to Rs. 2,165,157 in 1872-73<sup>17</sup>. In some parts of Assam, people reacted to the new assessment by organising *raij mels* (people's assemblies). This was at a time when the acreage under food grains was failing to increase sufficiently to meet the rising local demand for food. Food prices were higher in Assam than in any part of neighbouring Bengal.

The increase in land revenue on dry crop lands in 1861 was much resented in Nagaon. However, it was the 1860 ban on poppy cultivation that affected the peasant economy of Nagaon the most, as poppy was largely cultivated in the district. At the same time British Government again tried to impose tax on betel-nut (*tamul*) and betel leaf (*paan*) cultivation which added fuel to fire amongst the peasants of Nagaon, mainly the tribal (Lalung) people of Phulaguri area<sup>21</sup>.

A number of more than 1,500 peasants from Nagaon and neighbouring areas were marched peacefully to the District Magistrate Office in September 1861 to give a petition to the Magistrate. District Magistrate treated the demonstrator *ryots* in a high-handed and provocative manner, and even did not allow them to enter his office compound. They were even fined on several occasions for allegedly making noise within the court compound.

A *raij mel* was thereupon held at Phulaguri in October 1861. The assembly was scheduled to be in session for five days to ensure participation from distant villages. Approximately 1,000 people assembled by 15<sup>th</sup> October, 500-600 of who were armed with *lathis*. To handle the situation, armed police force was sent but assembled people driven them out. Then Deputy Commissioner sent Lt. Singer an ADC to study the situation. By 17 October, 3,000 to 4,000 people had gathered in the *raij mel*. On the same day police tried to disperse *raij mel* by arresting few of their leaders. They were asked to vacate the place and Mr. Singer ordered to seize their bamboo *lathis*. This action made the people infuriated, which ultimately led to the clashes between the police and the peasants. In the clash, Lt. Singer was beaten to death. This episode of heroic resistance by the people to the increasing tax burden and bureaucratic mindlessness is still very much alive in folk memory as the '*Phulaguri Dhawa*'<sup>21</sup>.

It was popular notion amongst the British officers about the indigenous people was that most of them were opium addicted, which made them indolent and lazy. Along with this popular notion, local Assamese people on the other hand denied to work

as a labourers under the Company Government. The self-sufficient village economy as a rule, neither included, nor compelled by circumstances to have come in search of work<sup>22</sup>. But changes occurred on the socio-economic scenario of the Assam when indigenous tea plant, coal and oil were discovered in Assam. Defying as wage-earners by the Assamese local people, British capitalist had to face a serious labour shortage in to the province. Hence, large numbers of cheap labours were recruited from outside of the province.

## Conclusion

Opium had been the most important discussing matter both inside and outside of the Assembly throughout the Colonial rule in Assam. It was said that opium was introduced in Assam during the days of Mughal invasion of Assam in the seventeenth century. However, opium-addiction remained a vice and limited only to a few rich men until the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century. But taking advantages of the Assamese people's weakness to opium, the British made it an article of universal consumption. The Colonial Government put on the poppy cultivation and supplied their readymade opium through the vendor system and by doing so they augmented their revenues by leaps and bounds. But changes occurred on the socio-economic scenario of Assam when indigenous tea plant, coal and oil were discovered. For the extension of the garden and other avenues of employment need pliant labour force. The British Capitalists find it difficult as there was labour shortage in the province. As it was popular notion against the Assamese people and widely circulated that Assamese people were mostly opium addicted and unfit for the hard labour. But restriction imposed on cultivation of poppy which ultimately help to rise political and socio-cultural Renaissance in the form of '*Raij Mel*' in Assam. The '*raij mel*' which was initiated during the '*Phulaguri Dhawa*' also played an important role in the Indians freedom struggle against the British.

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