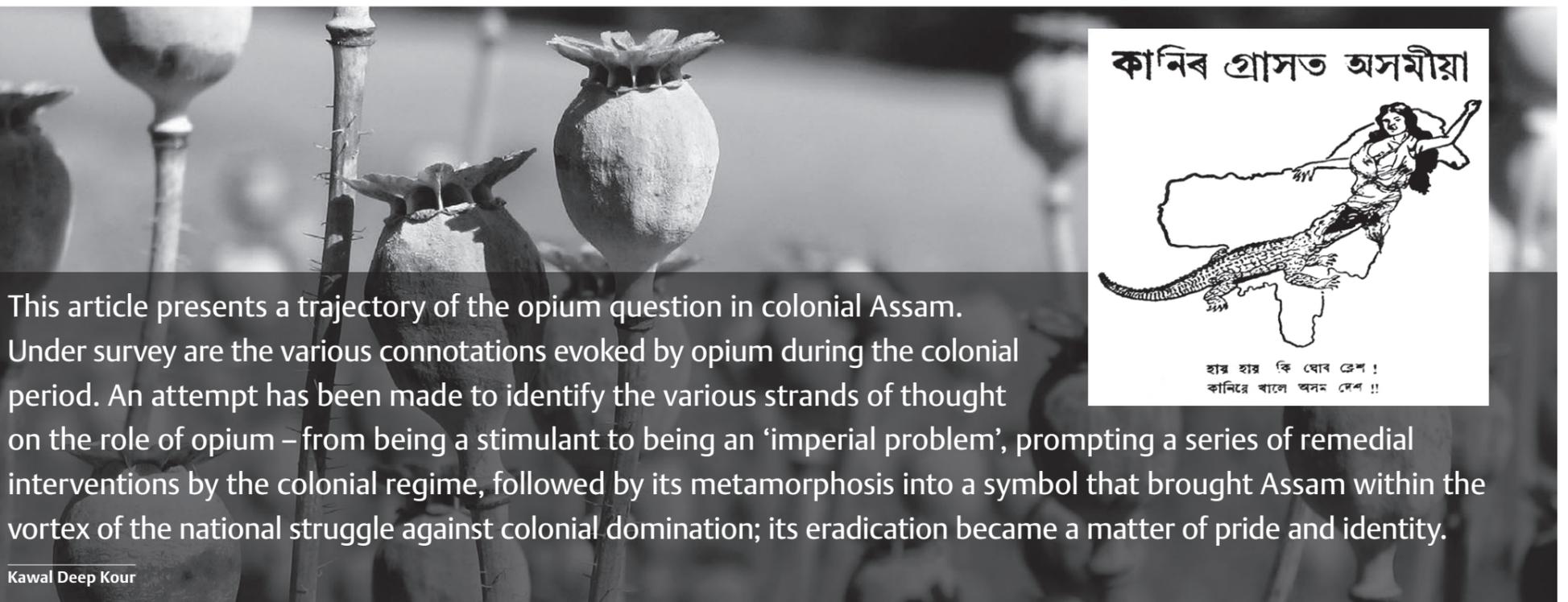


Opium, empire and Assam



This article presents a trajectory of the opium question in colonial Assam. Under survey are the various connotations evoked by opium during the colonial period. An attempt has been made to identify the various strands of thought on the role of opium – from being a stimulant to being an ‘imperial problem’, prompting a series of remedial interventions by the colonial regime, followed by its metamorphosis into a symbol that brought Assam within the vortex of the national struggle against colonial domination; its eradication became a matter of pride and identity.

Kawal Deep Kour

First opium in Assam

It is only conjectures that surround the introduction of opium in Assam. References to the use of poppy in Assam date back to the time of the Ahom-Mughal conflict.¹ Credence to the theory that the Mughal incursions in Assam had facilitated the introduction of opium in Assam is contained in the *Buranjis*,² which contains references to gifts from the *Paadshah* (the Mughal Emperor of Delhi) that included *afing* (opium),³ among other articles. According to the Assamese historian, S.K. Bhuyan, the cultivation of poppy and the habit of its consumption in Assam might have been imported by the bordering tribes from China where the production of this drug had been prevalent since earlier times.⁴

Contemporary travel accounts further attest to the presence of thriving commerce between the Assamese merchants (*mudois*) with the neighbouring hill tribes, and with China and Tibet. The Assamese merchants went to Yunnan in China by means of the line of trade running through Sadiya in upper Assam. In fact, it was the lucrative trade with Tibet and China passing through Assam that was perhaps the reason why the Indian kings (Turko Afghan) and the Ti-Shans had attempted to capture the Brahmaputra valley.

Maniram Dewan, in his account of the Ahom rule, records that it was during the reign of the Ahom monarch Lakshmi Singha, that the poppy seeds were introduced from Bengal and cultivated at Beltola, in the neighbourhood of present Guwahati (Assam). In Assam, the local name for processed opium was *kane*. It involved a unique method of preparing opium by absorbing the fresh juice of the poppy with a strip of cotton; this was then either eaten (*kanikhowa*) or smoked (*kanipankhowa*).

An imperial problem

By the early nineteenth century, colonial investigations into the landscape of the Brahmaputra valley resulted in a paradoxical identity for the fertile valley of Assam. It was hailed as a land of abundance, which was inhabited by lazy people. The excessive use of opium in Assam was identified as the reason for the ‘idle disposition’ of the people. The ‘opium plague’ soon became an ‘imperial problem’, with the European tea planters settled in Assam vociferously demanding colonial intervention to nip the evil in the bud.

The tea planters had high stakes in the newly developed tea gardens in Assam and they bemoaned the scarcity of local labour due to their indolence caused by their excessive use of opium. The cost of importing labour from initially China, and then from the central and eastern provinces of India, proved to be a costly affair. Thus, the colonial government embarked on a series of measures for dealing with the situation created by the opium menace.

Initially confined to the upper echelons of the society, opium was a status marker. It was the participation of the lower classes that made opium visible as a problem, resulting in a host of economic, social, administrative and legal ramifications for the province. In 1860, a governmental decree banned all private cultivation of poppy in Assam. While the colonial regime claimed to be guided by paternalist considerations, recent scholarship on the issue argues that it was guided more by economic than moral considerations.⁵

The official policy made a number of ‘opportunist’ shifts that moved from the prohibition of private cultivation, to the introduction of excise (*abkaree*), which would lead to revenue maximisation while progressively reducing the supply of opium; the shifts gradually reinforced the sense of an ‘Imperialism of Opium.’ This significantly restructured the opium issue in colonial Assam.

Anti-opium campaigns

Meanwhile the anti-opium rhetoric was strengthened by the participation of the American Baptist missionaries in Assam, who actively campaigned for amelioration of the social evils, including the eradication of opium abuse. However, the docile sensibility of the newly emerging Assamese middle class towards the entire opium issue continued to vacillate between conciliation and compromise into the early twentieth century. The apathy of the intelligentsia, and their policy of ‘prayer and petition’ towards the anti-opium campaigns, continued until Assam was eventually drawn into the nationalist struggle by M.K. Gandhi’s prohibition of intoxicants.

So agitated was the anti-opium sentiment at the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921 that the temperance initiative witnessed huge participation by the youth. For them, the act of *Nikaniakaran* (purging of opium) signified an upheaval of a new Assam struggle against the ‘Imperialism of Opium.’ Opium was enmeshed in the contours of nationalist politics alongside increasing international drug surveillance initiated by US and taken up with vigour by the League of Nations, which certainly played a catalytic role.

The formation of the legislative council in Assam in the early twentieth century made opium a celebrated legislative issue. Its eradication became a matter of recouping national pride, which had been besmirched by Assam’s reputation as a ‘black spot of India’ due to its levels of opium consumption, which far exceeded standards set by the League of Nations. Assam’s consumption rate was 256 seers per ten thousand of population, as opposed to the standard of 6 seers per ten thousand of population set by the League. The insensitivity and the callousness of the Government was challenged on the floor of the legislature by vocal votaries of the anti-opium campaign. In unison, the Assamese councillors now claimed, ‘The Government of India is robbing the infant province of Assam of its milk and supplying poison in its place.’

The Assamese intelligentsia stirred up the momentum of the movement through their fiery writings, which were publicised by the print press, against the evils of opium. The virulent attacks on the Council certainly built up a new political awakening, which was the rejuvenation of the people to ensure regeneration of the province of Assam and ensure ‘Assam a rightful place in the comity of the emerging federal state.’

In 1939, as a final assault, the Congress-coalition Government in Assam decided to launch a Total Prohibition of Opium campaign, which entailed a three-pronged strategy of Propaganda, Vigilance and Relief. Perhaps the most rousing facet of the prohibition drive was the tremendous outpour of public enthusiasm, recollecting the days of the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921-22, when under M.K. Gandhi the ‘opium restriction campaign’ witnessed a deluge of active cooperation from the people of the province. The government appeared unlikely to have missed this opportunity of rebuilding Assam and restoring provincial pride.

Above inset:
‘Assam in the
clutches of opium’
Alas! Alas! What
misery has
befallen Assam.
Image courtesy:
Tinidiniya Asamiya,
1939. Department
of Historical and
Antiquarian Studies,
Guwahati.



Assam pride and identity

The classification of the Assamese peoples as physical and mental degenerates, and the label of ‘black spot’, had struck at the core of Assamese identity. This battle against the ‘evil’ opium was an important landmark in the history of the emergence of Assamese nationalism, which received stimulus with the up-and-coming Assamese intelligentsia in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Opium was linked to societal degradation initially, and later at the hands of the intelligentsia emerged, as historian Guha remarks, ‘the weak point of imperialists where the nationalists struck hard.’⁶

Literary outpourings of eminent nineteenth century Assamese litterateurs, such as Hemchandra Barua and Lakshminath Bezbaruah, against a malady that threatened to sap the vitality of the Assamese peoples, reached their culmination with the *Nikaniakaran Parva* (Festival of Temperance). The propaganda against opium was, in a sense, an act of purification and defence and, simultaneously, an assertion of Assamese pride and identity and the rebuilding of a *Sonar Axom* (Golden Land of Assam).

Post-independence, attempts at enforcing total prohibition were enmeshed with contemporary political and economic realities. Following the inclusion of prohibition as one of the Directive Principles of State Policy, the prohibition of intoxicating liquors and narcotic drugs was viewed as an integral part of the national development plan. Despite fervent pleas by representatives from Assam to prohibit the cultivation of opium in other provinces to prevent its smuggling into Assam, no constitutional obligation was resolved for uniformity in the implementation of the Prohibition in India. Finance seems to have been a decisive factor in policies on prohibition and continues to be so till this day.

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Notes

- The powerful Ahom dynasty ruled Assam from 1228-1826. The Ahoms are considered to have been relatives of the great Tai peoples, and they settled in Assam after a long journey from their home in present day Thailand, across the Patkai hills and thence finally settling in Assam under an able general Sukapha, who became the first monarch of the Ahom dynasty.
- Assamese Chronicles are referred to as *Buranjis*. Written by official scribes of the Ahom rulers, they contain a descriptive and often authentic account of the reign of the Ahom kings.
- In Arabic, opium is referred to as *afing* or *afiyun*. The Sanskrit term for opium is *Ahiphena* or *Nagaphena*. See F. Moraes & D. Moraes. 2003. *Opium*. USA: Ronin Publishing.
- Bhuyan, S.K. “Asamat Kani” [Opium in Assam] in Birinchi. K. Barua (ed.). 1956. *Arunodoi Sambadpatrat Nagaonar Batori* [News on Nagaon in Arunodoi Magazine].
- The Opium monopoly was undoubtedly a lucrative source of revenue for the British East India Company. The prohibition of private cultivation of poppy was followed by the introduction of excise tax in Assam, which ensured a steady stream of revenue for the colonial coffers.
- Guha, Amalendu. 1991. *Medieval and early colonial Assam: society, polity, economy*. Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi & Co.