

Споживчі товари, які викликають залежність, і мережі збуту – опіум у колоніальному асамі

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У статті зроблено спробу проаналізувати, як мережа споживчих товарів переплітається з обігом і обміном «нелегальних» товарів у прикордонних районах. Автор також намагається зрозуміти особливості того, як пов'язані інтереси торгівлі та антропологія споживання – «наркокультура» у контексті. Стратегічне розташування Асаму забезпечило штату роль форпоста імперських інтересів у системі імперіалізму. Саме тут було вжито заходів для посилення централізованого контролю за обігом «сумнівного товару», який було важко контролювати. У цій статті увагу зосереджено на з'ясуванні того, яку роль відіграє опіум у прийнятті важливих політичних рішень, які пропагують імперські інтереси в колоніальній глибинці. Ідентифікація корінних асамських народностей виявилася неефективною, причиною чого згідно з колоніальними записами і на думку місцевого населення стало поширення опіуму, що вимагало негайного втручання для виправлення ситуації. До середини дев'ятнадцятого сторіччя опіум, вочевидь, став невід'ємною частиною буднів асамців, так само, як і нищівні наслідки його популярності. Опіум спершу вважався ознакою розкоші, але внаслідок «проникнення в низи» він став істотною соціальною проблемою. Таким швидким поширенням опіум, безперечно, завдячує традиційній схильності до експериментування з різними стимуляторами: від рисового пива до тютюну та жування бетельного горіха, що значно сприяло швидкому проникненню опіуму в суспільне та культурне життя асамців. Цей процес супроводили соціальні, економічні, а згодом і політичні впливи, про що свідчать колоніальні звіти, записи місіонерів і спогади місцевого населення. Імперія дуже скоро побачила, що з традиції споживання опіуму на колоніальному прикордонні можна здобути фінансову вигоду.

*Translated by Polyglot Translation Bureau
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Addictive Consumables and Networks of Commerce - Opium in Colonial Assam

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Abstract: The essay attempts at an interpretation of the interweaved networks of consumption mannerisms and the flow and exchange of 'illicit' commodities across frontiers. It also seeks to attempt an understanding of the subtle relationships between the intertwined interests of commerce and the anthropology of consumption. The metamorphosis of opium from a luxury to a necessity was attended with social, economic and political ramifications. The mapping of the demographics of addiction and patterns of use was essential to sustaining the colonial project. It entailed the quantification of people's habits as normal and the deviant or pathological which required targeted intervention.

Keywords – Addictive, Opium, Culture, Taste, Commerce, Imperial, Assam

I. Introduction

Though certainly not central to the local economy, Opium undeniably weaved the politics and commerce of the northeast frontier of British India into a story of surveillance and control. Opium was all over the frontier. Assam's strategic location ensured its configuration into Imperialism as an anchor of Imperial interests. It was aimed at strengthening attempts at centralized control over the flow of an 'ambiguous commodity,' where control was both difficult to implement and enforce. This essay focusses on the establishing opium as influencing major policy decisions fostering imperial interests in a colonial hinterland. A focus on the direction of trade and traffic of commodities passing through Assam around 1833, reveals the stimulus arisen for trade through Shan provinces into China through the newly conquered frontier. At the crisscross of consumption and commerce, Opium was the 'perfect modern commodity of exchange,' containing great value in small bulk. Reclaiming the West Yunnan trade, which had been seriously threatened with attempts to prohibit the transit across Burma along with the prohibitory decrees of the Qing regime had rendered it imperative to explore possibilities of reclaiming the 'sheer magnitude' of the monopoly trade in opium, which they had to forsake. Centralised control of the land routes through which opium was being poured into Yunnan (southwest China) was aimed at the development of as Baumler notes, 'a comprehensive monopoly of opium exports.' [1]

It attempts at an interpretation of the interweaved networks of consumption mannerisms and the flow and exchange of 'illicit' commodities across frontiers that helped in identifying certain landscapes as ambiguous-desirable yet dangerous. The mapping of the demographics of addiction and the variant patterns of usage was concomitant to sustaining the colonial project and a significant part of the surveillance modality.

II. 'Taste Making and Trend Setting': Defining a practice of Opium Consumption and Experience

An aristocratic luxury during the period of the Ahoms, colonial reports, missionary accounts and native opinion attest to the devastating effects of opium, which had become a necessity during the mid nineteenth century Assam. Opium eating had visibly become an integral part of the daily life of the Assamese. The metamorphosis of opium from luxury to necessity was attended with social, economic, and later on political ramifications. What was its influence on the behaviour, in short the all-encompassing influence of opium on the Assamese society? It is in this context that an analysis of the prevalent 'sister cultures' which facilitated opium's easy infiltration into the physical, social and cultural life of the people of Assam would enable an understanding of 'the type of soil on which opium was to grow.' [2] Assam has been a home to various racial groups-the Miris, Mishimis, Kacharis, Ahoms, Koch, Mech and Lalungs etc.each with its own social outlook, mannerisms and its traditional stimulant who varyingly used *laopani* (rice beer), *mad, phatika* (type of beer/wine prepared from rice), *dhapat* (tobacco) and *pan tamul* (betel nut chewing).

III. Redefining the culture of taste: From Tobacco Smoking and Betel-Chewing to Opium Eating

While tobacco smoking was an 'intellectual recreation,'[3] the 'romance of betel-chewing' was a favourite indulgence prevalent in Assam.The habit is regarded to have been imported into Assam by the tribe of the Khasis. In Assam, it was a popularly held belief that no one can speak Assamese until he begins chewing betel. It implied that chewing betel nut and paan facilitated social interactions, as is the case with chewing of betel in Indonesia and chewing khat in Yemen. Specially processed chewing tobacco with betel was also a favourite with the Assamese. Further the use of silver box (tema), plate (bata) or bowl (batti)[4] as the betel chewing paraphernalia resembles closely to the fashionable opium smoking pipes etc., which became the basis of the culture of opium consumption in China. *Paan* was an important ingredient in the preparation of opium for smoking; the opium decoction was mixed with dried betel leaves. *Paan* was also chewed after eating opium to reduce the bitter taste of the opium preparation. Stale betel leaves were beaten into a paste and then mixed with raw opium.The opium paste was then inserted in a pipe, which was then lighted and smoked.Exactly when the habit of opium smoking first obtained a foothold in Assam or when the preparations made for smoking were first introduced, is not quite clear. Assam apart, up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, no writer had recorded the smoking of opium in India, although it prevailed in China.

Certainly, Assam's 'ethno geographic diversity' had an important role to play. Assam's commercial relations with Yunnan in China where the opium had already been imbibed in social and cultural ethos of the Chinese way of life. Nevertheless, opium consumption had seeped deep into the lowest strata of the society and its impact was being felt on all aspects of a societal framework. It was the 'downward filtration' of opium, to the lower classes, that made it a visible social phenomenon. In China, opium, after tea, had become a trendsetter. Equally important was the kind of opium was consumed. In Assam, the local name for processed opium is *kane*.

It certainly was a favourite indulgence, which was cherished by the users, as is evidenced by the distinctive mode of preparation, which imparted to it a distinctive characteristic, if it can possibly be referred to as 'Assamization of opium.' The Assamese were accustomed to tobacco smoking, which later was experimented with opium (kanipaankowa). Similar was the use of betelnut and paan in preparation of opium for eating (kanimolikhowa). Whether to them it was a favourite pastime, an aphrodisiac or a panacea is yet to be ascertained with certainty.The imageries of 'opium intoxicated, effeminate and indolent Assamese' was attended by a host of economic, social, administrative and legal ramifications for the province. Imperial concerns were quick to identify a culture of consumption with commercial significance in a colonial frontier.The nineteenth century witnessed the entrenchment of colonial interests in Assam and it's integration within the configurations of opium imperialism of the East India Company. The variant patterns of usage enabled in exploring the 'indigenous usage of psychoactives' alongside mirroring the society's level of political complexity. They were 'great opium eaters'-such identification spawned up the propaganda of the 'civilizing mission' ushering in a new era of material exploitation and political domination. This identification was also to have a significant impact on the development of medical regulation of opiate and their use.

References

- [1] Baumler,Alan. The Chinese and the Opium under the Republic.USA:State University of New York, 2007
- [2] Yangwen observes that it would be difficult to understand opium's assimilation into the Chinese social life without 'contextualising' it within the existing cultures of consumption in China as tea, tobacco and snuff including the culinary tradition involving the use of herbs, etc.See, Yangwen, Zheng. The Social Life of opium in China. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Borua, Chandra Profulla. *Fundamentals of Assamese Culture*.Guwahati :(?)1965, p.21.