

OPIUM IN ASSAM: INTRODUCTION AND ITS PREVENTION DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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It is believed that opium was introduced in India by the Arabs and Persians. The Mughals introduced it in Assam, when the Ahoms were ruling this eastern part of India. Captain Welsh, who was sent to Assam by Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General of Bengal, reported in 1792 that reigning Ahom king Gaurinath Singha was always found intoxicated with opium. During his time Assam was plunged into a civil war. The chief of Darrang (on the north bank of Brahmaputra river) brought some Barkandazes (mercenary soldiers) mainly Rajputs from North India and Bengal, who were more or less addicted to opium. They remained at Beltola, (within present Greater Guwahati area) where they grew opium for the first time in the history of Assam during the reign of Ahom king Lakshmi Singha in about 1795. Even Captain Butler in his book 'Travels and Adventure in Assam' published in 1853 also mentioned that opium was introduced in Assam in 1794 when the British troops assisted the Ahom Raja against the Mattaks. (a tribe of Assam inhabiting in the eastern part during the Ahom rule)

It is to be noted here that opium as a medicine was prescribed by the doctors to the patients suffering from certain diseases. So, it was not banned in totality in the world. The League of Nations prepared an index figure of opium to be used for medicinal purpose and according to the index only 6 seers in 10,000 populations was to be used for medicinal purpose. In Assam, opium was taken by the

consumers in two different ways, by eating and by smoking which were known as kanikhowa and kanipankhowa respectively in local languages. When it was taken in small pillules or made into decoction mixing it with water, it came to be known as kanikhowa. But when the opium decoction was mixed with betel-nut leaves and then smoked it was called kanipankhowa. The habit of taking opium either by eating or smoking had been spread throughout the province. At first, it remained within the influential class only. The affluent class consumed it as a fashion. In important social gatherings like marriages and funerals, it became a fashion of taking opium. Gradually, the habit of taking the drug began to spread amongst the masses. The people used to take it as deterrent of kala-azar, the dreadful fever which had taken numerous lives during the early period of British rule in Assam. There were often gatherings of the old opium smokers in the villages. The youth also grouped at distant places to smoke. The Kania-seba, a purported semi-religious ceremony was also started amongst the more ignorant classes, at which opium was distributed with the object of averting sickness or other impending trouble. The distribution and consumption of opium was also common at Namgoa or religious services. However, it must be maintained that semi-religious uses of opium appeared to be purely the invention of interested opium consumers without any authority from the Sastras. The habit grew mostly amongst the ethnic tribes like Mikirs, Kacharis, Mataks, etc. In many ethnic tribal dominated areas of Assam, most importantly in Nowgong (present Nagaon and Marigaon districts) district of colonial period, poppy cultivation was undertaken extensively. The eating habit did not remain along with the native population. It began to spread into the tea-gardens, where un-healthiness of the compound compelled them to take opium as remedy from dysentery, typhoid etc. The Ahoms did not like the spread of this drug. Hence, it is known that they had taken stern measures to prevent its growing in the country. The preventive measure was the imposition of tax on poppy cultivation at the rate of Rs.12 per pura of land (i.e. 3 acres). It was believed that such high demand would deter the people from growing this evil drug. It was believed that consumption of opium was responsible for converting the Assamese 'once a hardy,

industrious, enterprising race into an effeminate, weak and indolent and degenerated people'. Hence, prohibition of opium became an urgent need for the protection of the Assamese race. The Government also began to think for imposing restriction on cultivation of poppy as it affected the revenues. The cultivation of poppy was undertaken mainly in the chapari mahal and basti lands which was assessed at a lower rate than rupit lands. But the Government did not want total prohibition; rather they introduced abkari opium in the province by 1850's holding the view that opium addicts would automatically abandon the habit when they found it costlier. But the Government also knew it well that often the addicted persons would seek any means to get their things and they would not protest against any increased price of opium. Thus the colonial Government secured one of the important sources of revenue in the province. The numbers of opium eaters began to increase even after the introduction of Government opium. Moreover, the cultivation of poppy was also grown at an alarming rate. The intellectuals of Assam like Ananadaram Dhekial Phukan, Hem Chandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua, Radhanath Changkakati etc. demanded total prohibition of opium in Assam. On the other hand, Maniram Dewan in his petition to Mills condemned the introduction of Government opium and recommended a policy of gradual eradication of poppy cultivation. In spite of the wholesale spread of poppy cultivation, the Government did not want to impose restrictive measures until 1860s. The Government policy was one of callous indifferent to the interest of the local people. The tea-planters believing that wide-spread consumption of opium would make the local people apathetic to work urged upon the Government to ban the cultivation and sale of opium in the province. At last, the colonial Government realised the mission of Whiteman's Burden and imposed restriction on the cultivation of poppy only by the local people in 1860s and increased the rates of non-rupit lands by 15 to 30 per cent in all the districts of Assam except Kamrup. But the Government policy was criticised by the Tiwas of Nowgong which led to skirmishes between the local people and British force on 17th October, 1861

where Assistant Commissioner Lt. Singer had lost his life. This incident is known as Phulaguri Dhewa in the history of Assam

Even in England, a section of the Parliamentarians opposed the imposition of tax on opium and on selling of Government opium. In 1870, in the House of Commons, Sir Wilfrid Lawson moved a resolution condemning the raising of revenue from opium. In 1875, Sir Mark Stewart, a Scottish Conservative member in the British Parliament submitted a motion for gradual withdrawal by the Indian Government from the cultivation and manufacture of opium. But the Government of Assam did not want to lose the profitable source of revenue. It tried to establish its monopoly on opium and made it easily accessible to the addicted local people by introducing different systems. First, it started the system of licensing to vendors free of charge. In 1874, it introduced the system of fixed license fee under which any persons could open any numbers of shops if the fees had been paid. In 1877 the Mahal system (revenue unit) was introduced. Under this system, the right to sell opium in a Mahal in Assam proper was given to a purchaser of license. The Mahaldar got the right to sell opium at definite numbers of places. But the Mahal system could be last long as the Government failed to control the Mahaldars. Hence, after abolishing it, the Government reverted to the old system of licensing individual shops in 1884, but to the highest bidder in public auction. Gradually, the Government reduced the numbers of shops, but increased the prices of opium. The system continued till the launch of Non-cooperation Movement by Gandhi with inherent doctrine of stopping the practice of eating opium. After that the rationing of shops and ven-fee-per-seer system was resorted to in April 1921 by which the licensed shops were allowed to sell a certain quantity of opium at a certain fixed price per seer.

It was found that in Bengal the Government issued opium to the licence holder at a fixed price which was varied according to local circumstances from Rs. 16 to Rs. 32 per seer. The shop keepers sold it to the consumers from Rs.20 to Rs. 65 per seer. The auction price in Assam varied from Rs. 36

to Rs.180. By 1873-74, there were about 5,131 opium shops in Assam. In 1892 it was found that the Government revenue from opium by way of licences and excise in Assam Rs. 28,080.00 as licence fees and Rs.1, 58,710.00 as Government duty and locally consumption of opium during the same year was 1,333 maunds. The total revenue was Rs. 186,790.00. The revenue was collected from 866 shops. Amongst the districts of Lower Assam, the number of shops was comparatively high. It was found that there were shops within 3 or 4 miles of one another.

But as the opposition from different sections of Assam began to grow, the Government was compelled to appoint a commission under A.W. Botham on 10 December, 1912 to inquire into the matter of complete prohibition of opium in the province and its repercussion as well as matter of maximum limit of possession of opium. Kali Prasad Chaliha, Kutubuddin Ahmad and Radha nath Phukan were the members of the commission. It realized that there was the practice of taking opium in company even by the family members, but it did not recommend total prohibition of opium. However, it recommended that minimum age for purchasers might be raised from 14 to 20. By that the Assamese members of the Legislative Council and Assembly raised their voice against the Government patronage of opium. In 1920 Ghanashyam Baruah moved a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council which suggested a measure of personal registration of the opium-eaters at least in the Brahmaputra Valley with enforcement of the rationing shops in other parts of the province to eradicate this evil. But that resolution was not passed. The Government contention was that any considerable reduction of consumption must be brought about not by cutting off the legitimate supply, but by a diminution in the demand. The Non-cooperation Movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920-21 had many socio-economic goals and programmes to be achieved. One of the important items was the prohibition of liquor and opium as well as the Government traffic in these drugs. The leaders and members of the Congress in Assam vigorously campaigned against opium. In spite of the hostility of the Government,

the opium-eaters as well as the European managers of the tea-gardens, the Congress volunteers carried on their anti-opium campaign in the province. The movement achieved tremendous success in the province. Visit of Gandhi in Assam in August, 1921 had given impetus to the revolutionary spirit of the people, who for quite sometimes had been opposing the Government opium policy without achieving much. Now, the Congress volunteers had carried the message of Gandhi to the remotest areas and asked the addicts to abandon the habit of taking opium. They even resorted to the picketing of shops selling opium and other such drugs. Due to the strenuous works of such volunteers revenue collected by the Government from those drugs drastically dropped down. At Dibrugarh, many of the mahaldars, both vendors of opium and liquor, were almost ruined for want of customers.

The League of Nations' Geneva Conference was scheduled to be held in 1924-25. The Government of India's intention of presenting a bright picture induced the All India Congress Committee to appoint an enquiry committee under the leadership of C.F. Andrews to get first hand information of the evil thing in Assam. The Assam Opium Enquiry Committee was formed which included many Congress leaders like Kuladhar Chaliha (President), Rohinikanta Hatibaruah (Secretary), Tarunram Phukan, Nabinchandra Bordoloi, Krishnanath Sarmah, Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury and Omeo Kumar Das. The Committee visited many opium-centres of the province like Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Nowgong, North Lakhimpur etc. and met people of all shades. The committee recommended the use of opium by registered persons above the age of 40; persons below 40 years of age should take it as medicine prescribed by the qualified doctors; opium should be treated as poison under a Dangerous Drugs Act. In July 1927, the Legislative Council passed a resolution moved by Rohinikanta Hatibaruah which recommended complete prohibition of opium within ten years. The resolution was carried on to the effect that the ration of opium-eaters below 50 years of age was to be reduced by 10 per cent every year until Assam was free from the drug habits. During the time of Civil Disobedience Movement, an

anti-opium campaign was organised in different parts of the province. In some instances addicts had been persuaded to surrender their cards by which they could collect the drug from the shops. In May, 1930 a conference was held at Shimla to consider the steps to be taken to reduce the amount of consumption, where it was more than 30 seers per 10,000 persons per annum and designated those areas as ‘Black Spots’. In Assam four upper districts and Sadiya Frontier Tract were defined as ‘Black Spots’. It was found that taking the plains areas Lakhimpur had the highest consumption (62 seers per 10,000 persons). Again taking the hill tracts consumption was highest at Sadiya Frontier Tract (94 seers per 10,000 persons). The Government again constituted a committee in 1933 with Nichols-Roy as the Chairman and Brindaban Chandra Goswami, Nilambar Datta, Mahendranath Gohain, Abdur Rahim Choudhury, E. S. Roffey, and Rohini Kumar Choudhury as members to examine different aspects of the opium such as its extent, causes and effects in the plains area, hill districts, and tea gardens. However, the recommendations of the committee were not acceptable to the demand of that people, who wanted complete prohibition of opium in the province. Although the committee’s work were seemed to be pro-Government, however, it should be borne in mind that it was Nichols-Roy whose temperance work in the Legislative Council resulted in passing out a resolution for a 10 per cent yearly cut in opium rationing in 1921. The effort in the direction of total prohibition of opium in the province was still continuing until the installation of a popular representative Government. Installation of Congress Ministry under the leadership Gopinath Bordoloi was a turning point in the history of resistance movement against opium. Bordoloi, himself involved in the picketing of opium shops during the Non-Cooperation and Civil-Disobedience Movements declared total prohibition in the two sub-divisions of Dibrugarh and Sibsagar from 15th April, 1939. Opium addicts were being treated at different treatment centres and temporary clinics opened especially for the addicts. Although the Government lost the revenue earned from opium, which was amounted to Rs.4, 50,000, in 1940, however, the campaign was not stopped. Finally, the Saadulla Government (1939-41) declared 26th February, 1941 as the

Prohibition Day and extended the opium prohibition scheme to the entire province with effect from 1st March, 1941.

Thus it is found that opium or kani introduced towards the latter part of Ahom monarchy became a favourite drug of both the rich and poor people of Assam. Though a segment of population realised the evil effects of this drug on the inhabitants, and accordingly pleaded for its abolition from the province, however, their views were contradicted by the colonial Government, which could see it a source of revenue. So, in spite of appointment of various commissions under pressure from different sections, to enquire into different aspects the drug, they were not in favour of its total abolition. The popular movements that began against the British rule under the banner of Indian National Congress made the people of Assam aware about this pernicious drug. At last, the representative Government of the province finally prohibited it in 1941.

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