

What is Opium: Exploring the Meanings of Opium from an *'Exotic plant'* to *'Forbidden Fruit'*

'To cut an opium poppy capsule is to enter mythic time, to share in tradition stretching unbroken into prehistory and let the ancient traditions enter history again at the moment of the millenium.'

'Opium made the world go round': An Overview-

The Portuguese first realized and capitalized on the sale of opium, establishing a trade in the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese initially sold tobacco from their Brazilian colony in exchange for China's silk. Like other European nations, Portugal quickly discovered that opium provided a much better tool for trade. Dutch merchants were quick to enter the increasingly lucrative opium trade. The Dutch, like the Portugese focussed their efforts on controlling the Chinese market. Hence, the British didn't introduce the Chinese to opium; they were more efficient in supplying the drug than previous importers.

In 1773, following the conquest of Bengal, Warren Hastings, the governor of Bengal, redesigned the system of ensuring monopoly rights¹ in opium. It was to be administered by the Bengal Government, although the operations extended into the North-Western Provinces and Oudh and Punjab of British India and the native states in Central India and Rajputana.² The Government monopoly ensured control over production and consumption, as Smith emphasized; it was Warren Hastings who actually initiated the Anglo-Chinese opium trade by switching a consignment to Canton when war with the Dutch temporarily closed the market for opium in their East Indian colonies. Initially, the British East India Company, the monopoly that controlled trade

¹ No person may cultivate the poppy except with a license from the Government and every cultivator is bound by law to sell the opium produced from his crop to the Government ,

² These native states were princely states, not under the direct control of the British. The opium produced here was known by the generic name of 'Malwa opium'.

with India, tried to prevent British importation of opium into China since the illegal business interfered with the Company's legitimate trade. Based in Canton, representatives of the Company asked Warren Hastings, the Company governor of the newly conquered province of Bengal, to halt exports from India to China. Hastings readily agreed, calling the drug "a pernicious article of luxury". Financial and political realities, Hastings allowed the export of 3,450 chests of the contraband in two ships. In 1773, opium earned the Company 39,000 pound sterling. Twenty years later, the annual revenue from opium sold in China alone had ballooned 250,000 pounds. The popular drug was incrementally beginning to reverse the imbalance of trade between Britain and China. Between 1806 and 1809, China paid out seven million Spanish dollars for opium. The East India Company kept the price artificially high, which meant that only the upper classes could afford it. It was not just profit motive that made opium expensive and beyond the budget of most Chinese. The drug was officially illegal, and the East India Company did not want to antagonize the Chinese government.

A technological innovation upset the equilibrium. This was the invention of the steam engine -mechanized production of cotton by factories in the north of England.³ The surplus found a ready market in India, whose merchants paid for the product in cash. But to pay for the ever increasing amount of cotton, the Indians needed to cultivate and sell more opium. As a result, opium flooded into China. In 1858, the Treaty of Tienstin forced open China to' tolerate massive imports of a powerful addictive drug and various other injuries; what Briatin claimed was promoting 'free trade' that would bring China 'not only into the world market, but into world history'. Opium began as an answer to a crisis and by the end of the nineteenth century, itself developed into a major crisis. The Indian opium entering China in 1839 was enough to supply 10 million addicts. By 1900, there were as per an estimate, 40 million addicts⁴. Opium wrought havoc.

³ Headrick.R. Daniel, *Tentacles of Progress, Technology transfer in an age of Imperialism, 1850-1940*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988. Pg. 352-372

⁴ The following statement exhibits the consumption of opium spanning a period of twenty years. In 1816-3210 chests valued at 3,657,000 dollars; 1820-4770 chests valued at 8, 400,800 dollars, 1825-9621 chests

Opium purchased from the cultivators was sent to the two factories at Ghazipur and Patna (in Bihar), to be manufactured into articles of commerce, the 'Excise (Abkari) opium' and the 'Provision opium'⁵. It was claimed that the Indian opium maintained a high reputation in the Chinese market the drug is admitted to be far superior to the drug produced in China. And regarded to be by the time the company was investigated by the Crown and its monopoly ended in 1833, this operation had become too profitable to be shut down. Thereafter, the opium traffic was run as a British government enterprise, and this included raising and harvesting the crop, preparing the opium, licensing the smuggling operations, and laying out necessary bribes in China. Thus was forged a structural trade link between the economies of India, China and Britain which was to set on course a massive worldwide deliberation on the politics, economics and significantly the ethics of the Britain's Indian opium trade with China.

What did British India stand to gain? From 1870 to 1914, India ran an annual surplus of about 20 million pounds with China. In 1870, opium accounted for at least 13 million pounds, two-thirds of India's surplus with China. Europeans of this period preferred "informal empire" because it seemed to protect all interests that were really vital or profitable without the considerable cost of ruling over an alien society. Interestingly, the commodification of drug trades did not foster the sort of accumulation, which would lead the same kind of transformation in Asia as had occurred in Europe. In India, though it certainly spurred 'modern Indian entrepreneurship.' Significant Parsi families as Jamshedji Jejeebhoy & Co., Bharda & Sons., Messrs. Motichund & Co., Messrs.Cowasji & Co., Aga Mohammad and others reaped a fortune from the opium trade between India and China. As Amar Farooqi

valued at 7,608,205 dollars, in 1830-18,760 chests valued at 12,900,031 dollars, In 1832- 23,670 chests valued at 15,338,160 dollars, in 1836-23,670 chests valued at 17, 904,248 dollars. Refer, Medhurst,W.H. *China: its State and Prospects*.

⁵ Abkaree or excise opium was the manufactured opium retained for consumption in India through vendors and Provision opium, sold monthly by auction in Calcutta to merchants who export it. The Government issued advances to the peasants.

asserts, "Without opium there would be no Bombay."⁶Carl Trocki in his study also traces opium as an important link between the creation of Empire and capitalism in Asia. To quote, John King Fairbank, an authority on Chinese history, 'it was an accident of history that the dynamic British commercial interest in the China trade was centered not only on tea but on opium'. In addition, opium was no 'cotton or molasses'. What then is opium and what is in opium that endows it with power to create dependencies, destabilize societies and sustain empires?

The 'sleep-compelling poppy': The Botany and Pharmacology of *Papaver Somniferum*-

Opium is the juice of the opium poppy, the *Papaver Somniferum*, one of the oldest known cultivated plants. Around 4000 B.C, opium poppies were cultivated in the *Fertile Crescent* (now Iran and Iraq) by the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Southern Europe; archaeological digs in Switzerland have unearthed opium poppy seeds and pods, dating from the Neolithic age, around 5,500 B.C. The migration of opium from Europe to the Mediterraneanbga during the late Neolithic period following the tin and the amber routes from Lithuania and Switzerland south, through the passes of the Alps. During the Bronze and the Iron Age, poppy made itself at home throughout the ancient worlds, both as a food plant and as a medicine. With the Black Death of the fourteenth century, it disappeared. Being associated with the 'East', like the plague, made it a suspect. With the Arab traders, it travelled to Iran and then to the East, where it was a famed medicine, to be reintroduced several centuries later to Europe. The Sumerians called it the "hul-gil", the plant of joy. Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Persian texts from the 2nd century B.C, occurs in fragments of veterinary and gynecological papyri and is described by Theoprastus and Dioscorides in the *Materia Medica* as having pain-killing and sleep inducing properties. A document that survives from the Egyptian city of Thebes written in 1552, lists more than 700 medicinal uses for opium. The Romans acquired the knowledge of opium from the Greeks who called it mekone and the

⁶ Farooqi, Amar. *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006.

surviving texts of Galen, the second century physicians and advocate of the drug, influenced European medical knowledge for many centuries. Ancient Greeks called it the 'destroyer of grief'. Ancient cultures though, were well aware of its dangers as well.

⁷ Following the decline of the Roman Empire its use spread to Middle East, whence Arabs traders who called it *afioon*, carried it into North Africa and Spain, Persia, India and China. Although it is believed that around 330 B.C. Alexander the Great had introduced it in Persia. Before the Dutch introduced the Chinese to the art of smoking opium in a pipe⁸ by lacing it with tobacco which was introduced in China in 1620 A.D., who called it the *ying-su*, also *a-fu-yung*, which appears the Chinese equivalent of the Arabic *afiyun* for opium. Opium was primarily drunk.⁹ It has been frequently mentioned by the Chinese writers, who highly valued for its medicinal properties. Recipes for the use of opium medicinally appear in the works of the Chinese writers, who also seem to be aware of its negative properties.¹⁰ During the Mohammedan conquest of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the opium trade came to be established in Europe-the source of supply of opium into Britain, being neither China nor India but Turkey.¹¹ The references to opium in the literature of the fifteenth reflect the ubiquity of the opium use in Europe at that time, whence it became the 'stone of immortality' for the Renaissance doctors and a 'milk of paradise' for the Victorian writers.¹²

⁷ U.X.L. Encyclopedia of Drugs and Addictive Substances, vol.5, pp. 670-684.

⁸ While it is also believed that the practice of opium smoking was introduced by a famous eunuch, Cheng Ho, under the Ming dynasty, conducted several naval expeditions, in 1412-15, reaching Ceylon in South-East Asia. Giles, A.H. *Some Truths about opium*, Cambridge, 1923. p.9

⁹ A native author quoted in 1746, process of smoking opium with tobacco and hemp and was used as an aid to sensual indulgence.

¹⁰ References to the use of poppy as a cure for dysentery, cough and dysentery is available in Chinese literature, with a caution note, 'though its efficacy is quickly felt, unless taken with caution it will kill a man as though with a sword', mentioned to in the Chinese *Materia Medica* by Li-Shih-chen, published towards the end of the sixteenth century, mentioned by Giles, *Some Truths about opium*, pp.10-11.

¹¹ Turkey had captured more than 70% of the market even at the end of the nineteenth century.

¹² Opium was widely used in European society from the time of the Renaissance and writers have discussed opium as early as the 14th century. What alcohol had been to the twentieth century literature, opium was to the nineteenth century Romantics, Chaucer in his '*Knights Tale*' (1390 A.D.), describes the sleep inducing properties of the juice of poppy. De Quincey's addiction to laudanum, a tincture of opium and his 'opium dreams' immortalized in the *Confessions of an Opium eater* (1822 A.D.) which it is believed brought opium eating into public consciousness. and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* written under the 'effects' of

A steady stream of travelers to the Golden Crescent - Turkey, Persia and the Middle East wrote popular accounts of the recreational use of opium in these societies with explicit descriptions of the physical degeneracy and mental debauchery which was associated with the recreational use of opium- the 'Orientalist Version' which featured so prominently in the nineteenth century European discourse about opium use, following the opium menace in China. In the Middle East opium was widely recognised as a medical panacea by Muslim physicians long before its value was understood by their Christian counterparts. Opium came to be used among European doctors largely through the influence of Paracelsus (1493-1541), the great alchemist and physician. He popularized the use of laudanum(which he invented)- a mixture of opium and alcohol. While the eighteenth century 'narcotique'¹³ literature spoke exclusively of the medical use of opiates in Europe, it advanced a critique of everything from the East as characteristic of irrationality, luxury, sensuality and 'high anxiety' ¹⁴ over the degeneracy associated with the 'yellow menace', ¹⁵

The images of immigrant Chinese and opium dens in Victorian and Edwardian fiction should have been at least double-edged, since a vocal temperance opposition in England made it clear at the time that the English were contaminating the Chinese, not the other way around. Nevertheless, in a new genre of popular fiction, China invaded England through the East End opium den and proceeded to turn its citizens into addicts. The imperial adventure was inverted, and the Anglo-Chinese opium wars were written in reverse in a corner of London. This Chinese control of Britain would be anxiety-inducing enough.

What was to significantly transform the 'opium dreams' into a nightmarish experience and lead to a strong wave of dissent against this illusory 'sense of heaven' which was causing decadence and degeneration was the discovery of Morphine, the botanical

opium, although he is believed to have accused De Quincey of tasting opium for pleasure all been classic works of writers who have discussed their relationship with the drug.

¹³ Attributed to physicians, Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), the grandfather of Charles Darwin, who had a reputation of being the finest physicians of his day, was a very 'liberal dispenser of opium', evidently illustrated in his *Loves of the Plants* published in 1789 A.D, where he mentions on the effects of opium, 'In small quantities, it exhilarates the mind, raises the passions and invigorates the body, in large ones, it is succeeded by intoxication, languor, stupor and death' His medical textbook 'Zoonomia' prescribed opium as a remedy for hundreds of ailments, and John Brown (1735-1788 A.D.).

¹⁴

¹⁵ Moraes, F. *Opium*. Ronin Publishing, 2003,p.34

extract from opium, in 1803-04 by a Parisian pharmacist named Louis Derosne. A young German pharmacist Friedrich Sertuner, in 1805 published the first description of morphine. Morphine was the first alkaloid ever to be discovered and is regarded as the most powerful naturally occurring analgesic in the world. Morphine was potent than opium. This is significant for a number of reasons. It marks a shift in pharmacology from knowledge of plants and their properties to knowledge of refined potent substances with precisely defined physiological effects..This was also the period when the medicalization of narcotic use expanded. The medical concept of addiction was developed by German psychologists in the 1870's and was taken up quickly in France. The drug user became a specific type of personality, a 'toxicomane' or a drug addict. To this, criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso added the notion of 'degeneration', and the addict was claimed to have a hereditary biological disposition towards crime. This 'pathological impression' of hereditary nature intensified Western denunciation of opium.

A British physician Jon Jones and one of the earliest physicians investigating opium poppy in 1700 A.D. described raw opium as 'most turgid of the Milky Juice ' which bleeds from the unripe seed pod of the flower when it is slit with a blade. The milky juice is the fluid of a popular variety of opium poppy of genus *Papaver* and species *Somniferum*, one of the 110 cultivated varieties of poppy. Poppies do not occur in the wild state of growth. *P. somniferum* is only one of the two species that produce morphine (the active ingredient in opium) and the only one that is actively cultivated to produce the drug. The poppy is a tall thin plant of about 90-150 cms. When in bloom, its four sprouting leaves can be a variety of colours-white, pink, blue crimson or any combination of these. These leaves surround the inner pod. The pod has three layers, including an outer and inner compartment where its seeds are produced. Typically about the size of a golf ball, the plant contains two major products, the seeds (about 1,000 for every plant) which can be cultivated into new plants and opium. Perhaps, part of opium's success as a cultivated narcotic is the relative ease with which it can be

grown .With an annual 120 day growth cycle, opium can be grown under disparate soil conditions, but a dark rich soil that has been well farmed and is loose enough to allow the roots of the plant to set in is best. During the growth, it requires relatively little attention. The extraction of opium from the poppy is an arduous and laborious task, which has changed very little for thousands of years.

Highly valued in the ancient Roman, Sumerian and Egyptian cultures for its medicinal, euphoric and aphrodisiac properties, the ancients valued poppy for the oil obtained from its seeds, which was put to culinary use. Ancient Greek physicians also knew about the narcotic and analgesic power of opium Following its introduction in China and India, it for opium as a therapeutic drug and an aphrodisiac in India.

References to the recreational use of opium and to its aesthetic qualities can be found in the eighteenth century poetry and in the popular travel literature of the period, the famed travelogues of Abbe Raynal (1770)¹⁶, Bernier (1658-1668)¹⁷ and Tavernier (1670-1689)¹⁸. It is believed to have been introduced in India, around the fifteenth century by the Muslim invaders into Cambay and Malwa¹⁹ though it finds its first mention in the *Sarangdhara Samhita*²⁰, supposed to be written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D., as 'aphiphenā' and 'nagaphenā'. There is no description available of opium in great classics of Ayurveda like *Caraka Samhita*, *Susruta Samhita* and

¹⁶ He described Patna as being the 'most celebrated place in the world for the cultivation of poppy'. Also reported of a huge inland trade in opium, annually 3,000 to 4,000 chests were exported, each weighing 300 lbs. Raynal, A. *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and the West Indies*. English translation by J. Justamond. Vol. II. London, pp. 308-324

¹⁷ A French traveller who visited India in the sixteenth century. He reported at the large quantities of opium consumed by the Rajputs. In Vol. II. Tavernier, B.J. *Travels in India*, translated from the French edition *Le Voyageur Tavernier (1670-1689)* by V. Ball. Vol. I & II, Macmillan & Co. 1889.

¹⁸ Mentions the Dutch trade in opium which they obtained from Burhanpur in exchange for their pepper.

¹⁹ Emperor Akbar, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, when he conquered parts of Central India, found the Malwa opium as a characteristic product of that country. The court historian of Akbar, Abul Fazl, states that poppy culture was chiefly practiced in Allahabad, Fatehpur and Ghazipur. Opium was a state monopoly during the period of Mughal rule in India, which the East India Company was to later inherit. See, Batten, M.H.G. *The Opium Question*. Paper read before "the Society of arts" on 24th March, 1891.

²⁰ *Sarangdhara Samhita* is primarily a book on pharmacy and popular amongst the physicians of Rajasthan.

Ashtanga Hrdaya. It appears from the available classical Indian medical literature that opium was first used as an aphrodisiac, then as anti-diarrhoeal and thereafter as an analgesic and sleep-inducer.²¹

Following this, it now became conducive to try to understand what is opium, as it shifts its meaning with context. In 1924, a German chemist named Loius Lewin published a highly influential book titled, 'Phantastica: Narcotics and stimulating Drugs'. For the first time in the study of drugs, Lewin subdivided them by their effects. He described five categories, which are as applicable today as they were in the early 20th century: Euphoriant- lower the intensity of unpleasant emotions; Excitants- stimulate mental processing; Hypnotics- produce sleep; Inebriants- distorted perception and Phantasticants- produce hallucinations. There are three kinds of Commercial opium: a) Druggist opium is raw opium meant to manufacture medicinal opium, where the morphine content is around 8% to 10%. b) Manufacturer's opium is used for the isolation of principal alkaloids- morphine, narcotine and papavarine. c) Prepared Opium is also called 'soft opium', which is used for smoking. In India, it is called chandu.

Submitted by:

Kawal Deep Kour
Doctoral Student, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.

²¹ Chaturvedi, G.N.Tiwari, S.K. and Rai, N.P. *Medicinal uses of opium and cannabis in Medieval India*. Department of Kayachikitsa, Institute of Medical Sciences, B.H.U. Varanasi.