

**Addicts, Peddlers, Reformers:
A Social History of Opium in Assam, 1826–1947**

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SCHOOL OF HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND RELIGION

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The thesis offers a social history of opium in colonial Assam by tracing the evolution of representations, perceptions and ideological positions on opium from local, national and transnational perspectives which enables a new mode of reading the province's specific encounter with colonialism and nationalism. It studies Assam's history through the prism of opium, particularly the interplay between state and society during the period 1828–1947, and focusses on three groups—addicts, peddlers and reformers—whose interaction defined the terrain of the opium question in order to challenge the economic and nationalist bias in the historiography. It interprets opium as a cultural commodity and social practice and reorients the framework of opium in India from export trade to domestic consumption, using opium addiction in Assam and the global prohibition campaign as the vantage point to explore the interplay between colonial policy, local dissent, nationalism and transnational factors in order to understand the role that opium played in shaping social, cultural and political discourses. The thesis highlights that the opium discourse epitomised the juncture where local phenomenon, national processes and transnational developments overlapped and produced a complex narrative of the intersection of notions of indolence, improvement and industry with modernities, resistance and localisms. As a social biography of opium in colonial Assam, the thesis addresses deficiencies in our understanding of opium in India as well as the wider historiography of opium and enables modes of interpreting Assam's unique encounter with colonialism and nationalism while also providing a framework to understand the influence of transnational factors in determining local facts. The thesis signals the centrality of transnational perspectives to drug history and is, therefore, both an attempt at recovery of local perspectives and regional specificities in the context of Assam as well as the insertion of locality into the global history of opium.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i>	vi
<i>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</i>	viii
<i>LIST OF TABLES</i>	x
<i>GLOSSARY</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION	xiii
I Approaches to Historicising Opium: Global Trade, Revenue and the Indian Consumer	xix
II Locating, Knowing and Writing Assam: Opium and the Transnational Framework	xxiv
III Plan of the Thesis	xxxii
IV A Note on Sources and Conventions	xxxiv
CHAPTER 1	
THE ‘MAKING’ OF AN ADDICTION: COLONIAL SUBJECTIVITIES, INDIGENOUS RESPONSES AND THE ANTI-OPIMUM CAMPAIGN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ASSAM	1
1.1 Creating the ‘Lazy Native’: Opium Consumption, ‘Improvement’ and the Plantation Economy	2
1.2 The <i>Kania</i> Speaks Back: Assamese Literature, Linguistic Nationalism and Liminality	16
1.3 The Emergence of the Anti-Opium Campaign: Middle-class Activism, Social Reform and Peasant Protests	27
1.4 Conclusion	37
CHAPTER 2	
FROM MEDICINE TO REGULATED DRUG: THE OPIUM QUESTION, OFFICIAL ENQUIRIES AND TRANSNATIONAL TREATIES, 1860S–1910S	39
2.1 Shifting Contexts of Opium: Emergence of Prohibition in the West and the Anglo-Indian Medical Discourse	41
2.2 The Royal Commission’s Assam Enquiries: ‘Witness Management’, Official Testimonies and the Unravelling of Inconvenient Truths	49
2.3 International Pressure, Domestic Policy and the Provincial Opium Revenue: The Botham Committee’s Findings in an Era of Transnational Treaties	63
2.4 Conclusion	75
CHAPTER 3	
THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL: ASSAM, THE CONGRESS AND TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE PROHIBITION DEBATE	77
3.1 Inserting Assam into India: Politicisation of Opium Prohibition and Gandhi’s Influence on the Nationalist Movement in Assam, 1919–1925	79
3.2 The Transnational Turn, Indian Consumption and the Nationalist Press	92
3.3 ‘Vindicating the People of India’: The Assam Congress Opium Enquiry and Its Impact on the Prohibition Debate	98
3.4 Conclusion	119

CHAPTER 4	
STRATEGISTS AND SMUGGLERS: LOCAL LEGISLATIVE POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF TOTAL PROHIBITION, 1925–1941	122
4.1 Local Prohibition Legislations, Transnational Policy Determinations and the Communal Turn in Nationalist Politics	124
4.2 New Policy Directions: The Assam Opium Enquiry of 1933, Conflicting Views on Opium Use and Emerging Political Realities	138
4.3 Swindlers and Smugglers: Prohibition, Pressure Groups and ‘Public Good’ in an Era of Revenue Deficits and Treaty Compulsions	151
4.4 Shifting the Goalposts: An ‘Experimental’ Scheme, Medical Deaddiction and Total Prohibition	168
4.5 Conclusion	177
CONCLUSION	179
APPENDICES	190
APPENDIX 1: POLITICAL MAPS OF ASSAM	190
Appendix 1(a): Map of Assam and Bengal, 1874	190
Appendix 1(b): Map of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1905–1912	191
Appendix 1(c): Map of Assam (and frontier tracts), 1931	192
Appendix 1(d): Map of Assam with Districts, 1912–1947	193
Appendix 1(e): Map of Northeast India, 2016	193
APPENDIX 2: NOTE ON POLITICAL HISTORY OF ASSAM, 1826–1947	194
APPENDIX 3: <i>THE OPIUM SMOKERS</i> (1926)	195
APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONNAIRES OF ASSAM OPIUM ENQUIRY 1925 AND 1933	196
Appendix 4(a): Questionnaire of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1925	196
Appendix 4(b): Questionnaire of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933	197
Appendix 4(c): Draft Questionnaire of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry, 1925	198
APPENDIX 5: REPORTS ON OPIUM SMUGGLING CASES	199
Appendix 5(a): Seizure of Excise Opium	199
Appendix 5(b): Seizure of Non-Excise Opium	199
Appendix 5(c): Detection of Illegal Cultivation of Opium Poppy in Prohibition Area	200
Appendix 5(d): Transportation Using Railways Parcels	201
APPENDIX 6: PAMPHLET—“OPIUM PROHIBITION IN ASSAM”	203
BIBLIOGRAPHY	204
A. MANUSCRIPT SOURCES	204
B. PUBLISHED AND UNPUBLISHED REPORTS	206
C. PUBLISHED CONTEMPORARY SOURCES	208
D. SECONDARY SOURCES	215

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACOEC	Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee, 1924–25
ACOER	<i>Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report</i>
AICC	All India Congress Committee
ALC	Assam Legislative Council
ALCP	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
APAI	Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence
APCC	Assam Provincial Congress Committee
AOE	Assam Opium Enquiry, 1933
APMLC	Assam Provincial Muslim League Council
ASA	Assam State Archives
ASP	Assam Secretariat Proceedings
BEC	Botham Enquiry Committee
CBI	Central Bureau of Investigation
CLA	Central Legislative Assembly
CSM	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>
ED	Education Department
EPW	<i>Economic and Political Weekly</i>
EIC	East India Company
F&C	Finance and Commerce Department
FD	Finance Department
G&J	General and Judicial Department
GoI	Government of India
IESHR	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
INC	Indian National Congress
IOR	India Office Records, British Library

LoN	League of Nations
LSG	Local Self-Government Department
<i>MAS</i>	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MD	Municipal Department
MSC	Medical Society of Calcutta
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
OAC	Opium Advisory Council
RCO	Royal Commission on Opium
SR	Separate Revenue
SSOT	(Anglo-Oriental) Society for the Suppression on the Opium Trade
TNA	The National Archives
UN	United Nations
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Average Retail Price of Excise Opium in the Districts of Assam, 1890–91 to 1904–05	69
Table 2.2	Annual Consumption (in <i>seers</i>) per 10,000 people in Assam, 1881–1921	70
Table 3.1	Consumption of Opium in Assam (in <i>seers</i>) per 10,000 people, 1922–23	110
Table 3.2	Consumption of Opium in British India (in <i>seers</i>) per 10,000 people, 1922–23	111
Table 4.1	Annual Seizures of Opium (in <i>maunds</i> and <i>seers</i>), 1925–28	163
Table 4.2	Detected Opium Offences in Assam, 1928–33	166
Table 4.3	Smuggling Cases and Quantities Seized in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, July 1939–December 1940	175

GLOSSARY

<i>abkari</i>	excise (or internal revenue tax on the manufacture or sale of intoxicating substances)
<i>anna</i>	pre-decimal Indian unit of currency (equivalent to one-sixteenth of a Rupee)
<i>bhadralok</i>	‘gentlefolk’ (denoting a new class, usually upper caste, that emerged in colonial India)
<i>bhagor</i>	fatigue
<i>bhang</i>	narcotic derived <i>cannabis indica</i>
<i>buranji</i>	(official) chronicle
<i>chandu</i>	opium preparation used for smoking
<i>charas</i>	smoking preparation made from cannabis resin (also called hashish)
<i>dhawa</i>	battle
<i>Diwani</i>	(legal) right to collect revenues and decide civil cases
<i>ganja</i>	Indian hemp (<i>cannabis indica</i>)
<i>gaonbura</i>	village headman
<i>jati</i>	community (and/or caste)
<i>jungly</i>	wild, uncivilised
<i>kala azar</i>	black fever or Dumdum fever (an infectious tropical disease)
<i>kanee</i>	opium
<i>kani kholas</i>	opium dens
<i>kani nibaroni sabha</i>	opium prohibition assembly
<i>kania</i>	Assamese opium-eater/smoker
<i>kanipan seva</i>	ritualised/ceremonial consumption of opium
<i>madak</i>	opium preparation used for smoking
<i>mahila sabha</i>	women’s association
<i>maund</i>	traditional unit of mass (equivalent to 37.324 kg)
<i>mauza</i>	revenue district
<i>mauzadars</i>	revenue collectors (member of the rural gentry)
<i>mohaldar</i>	stockist and wholesaler (of excisable goods)

<i>namghars</i>	prayer/assembly hall for congregational worship (commonly the epicentre of an Assamese village)
<i>raij mel</i>	people's assembly
<i>ryot sabha</i>	peasant association
<i>satradhikar</i>	abbot (of a Vaishnavite monastery)
<i>seer</i>	traditional unit of mass (equivalent to 933.10 g)
<i>sudershan charka</i>	mythical weapon (associated with Krishna)
<i>swadeshi</i>	literally, of one's own country; nationalist movement centred on self-sufficiency and boycott of foreign goods
<i>swaraj</i>	self-rule
<i>tola</i>	traditional unit of measurement (equivalent to 11.66 g)
<i>trishul</i>	trident (associated with Shiva)

INTRODUCTION

The thesis traces the history of opium consumption and the evolution of the prohibition debate in Assam during the colonial period from local, national and transnational perspectives. It focuses on the actions of three different groups involved in the interplay—addicts, peddlers and reformers—and the networks that they generated, operated in and fostered. The thesis builds on two foundational aims: first, reorienting the frame of reference of opium in colonial India from the export trade dimension to domestic consumption. This counters the historiographical predilection to posit opium addiction as a Chinese problem, with the subcontinent serving merely as the production and distribution hub for the global market. The second aim is to situate opium at the heart of colonial polity in Assam, not only due to its revenue dimension, but also because of the role that opium played in shaping social and political discourses in the province.¹ It emphasises the significance of the ‘construction’ of the *kania* (the Assamese opium-eater/smoker) within the imperial ‘lazy native’ paradigm in shaping the region’s social imagination of itself as well as its difference with others, and highlights the need to trace colonial Assam’s history using opium as an organising principle. This, the thesis argues, is the pivot on which the province’s encounter with colonialism and nationalism, as well as the upshots of the interplay of local and national dynamics with transnational forces, are orchestrated. Using these two foundational aims, the thesis challenges the simplistic action–response idea of opium addiction as an imperial project with prohibition acting as the nationalist reaction and explores the intersection of notions of indolence, improvement and industry with modernities, resistance and localisms.

The thesis charts the trajectory of developments of opium policy and the wider discourse on opium at multiple levels during the period 1820s–1940s: the local, provincial context in Assam where consolidation of imperial authority and rule dominate; the wider Indian, national context where economics takes centre stage; and the global context where ideas of imperialism, international co-operation and the nation-state are accentuated. The counterpoint to these developments can be plotted by tracing the history of the anti-opium campaign in Assam, the anti-colonial Indian nationalist movement and the transnational treaties and diplomatic assemblies that signal the end of the European

¹ This evokes Arjun Appadurai’s theorisation of ‘social lives’ of commodities in his seminal essay, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 3–63.

imperial order. The thesis proposes four interconnected themes to studying opium during the period under study, each emphasising a particular facet of its multiple significations: i. opium's materiality as commodity (including medicine); ii. its use as 'practice' (social, religious, cultural and literary); iii. the trade in terms of global connections; and, iv. local, national and transnational policy ensuing in multilateral treaties and worldwide proscription.

Using opium consumption and prohibition as the contested ground on which colonial policy, local dissent, nationalist sentiment and transnational forces are actuated, the thesis provides an important frame for analysis of locality and regionalism in the nationalist movement in Assam and explores the dilemmas that arise in this unique region between tradition and modernity as well as territorial margin and connected space. It looks beyond the category of the nation and employs a transnational approach which suggests the need to determine the spatial and chronological extent as well as the impact of circulations and connections. The thesis recognises the importance of regarding space as multidimensional, discontinuous and transient and emphasises the interaction of the 'global' and the 'local', not as discrete entities but as objects where the 'local' is replete with elements of 'global' origins and vice-versa. It draws attention to the deficiencies of cause-and-effect analogies which suggest that the global and local are simply linked through the paradigm of global processes influencing local outcomes and argues that local determinants always have a significant role in producing multiplicity of responses and influence global developments, thus, invoking the need for area-specific studies of global phenomena like drug prohibition. The thesis emphasises that while the category of the transnational is intimately connected with global developments, it also interrogates notions of territoriality and culture, aspects that emphasise the ways in which the people of Assam construed their identity and location within the region and the Indian nation.

Through a study of opium in Assam, the thesis highlights the significant gaps that exist in our understanding of opium's role in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, especially with regard to two interconnected aspects of the prohibition movement, namely, anti-drug discourse and anti-drug practices.² The former revolves around issues of nationalism and the historical narrative of the drug's proliferation and opposition though anti-drug propaganda (which hints at a cultural history of opium), while the latter

² This framework draws from Zhou Yongming, *Anti-Drug Crusades in Twentieth Century China: Nationalism, History and State-Building* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 3–8.

examines the relationship between state and society, the debates in the public sphere and the use of these assessments for political purposes.³ These two facets of the discourse on opium intersect in multiple ways during the colonial period in Assam as cultural specificities of opium use and popular anti-opium sentiment were conflated with the political objectives of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the goals of the global prohibition movement effected through transnational drug regulation treaties. Moving away from arguments about the efficacy of the regime of prohibition and criminalisation of drug use(rs), which is at the centre of current debates on drug policy, this thesis offers a focused historical account of the intersection of cultural, economic and political aspects of the opium trade in a colonial setting with the user–addict at the centre of this interplay.

The thesis is influenced by a number of theoretical approaches; it draws its political and economic lenses from transnational history and emphasises “connected histories” as the most opportune way to understand opium,⁴ while discussion of the cultural aspects, especially the opium eater, draws from postcolonial theory and is influenced by subalternity.⁵ As a trade commodity and consumer good, opium was part of a network of practices and discourses that evolved spatially as well as teleologically, becoming part of the evolving vocabulary of imperial domination and difference with distinct forms taking root in the European and Asian context. From medicinal substance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opium use in nineteenth-century Europe evolved into a practice which foregrounded creative and noetic potential. In Asia, a stark counterpoint was accentuated; the transition was marked by a downward spiral into degeneracy and decay as opium addiction became commonplace in China, Southeast Asia and parts of India, including Assam.

Early travelogues written by European visitors to India fostered the image of the ‘Oriental opium addict’ as they highlighted the drug’s differential impact on Europeans and Orientals, a process of ‘othering’ that was assimilated into the Oriental discourse and

³ For an exploration of ‘public sphere’ see *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Special issue: Aspects of the ‘Public’ in Colonial South Asia, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1991).

⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories—Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia”, *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter, *MAS*), Vol. 31, No. 3 (July 1997), pp. 735–62.

⁵ Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies No. 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 1–7; Rosalind O’ Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and the Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia”, *MAS*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1988), pp. 189–224.

formed the basis of colonial perceptions of opium addiction in the East.⁶ The ‘othering’ principle was further complicated by the colonial encounter which resulted in the breakdown of traditional controls and the colonial state apparatus undermined social, religious, cultural mechanisms for preventing abuse of drug substances leading to conditions of widespread ‘drug epidemics’ in many parts of Asia. The thesis counters this unilinear, unproblematic argument and locates Assam’s encounter with opium during the colonial period within the evolving terrain of colonial governmentality⁷ and imperial rule alongside the contested space between subjectivity, modernity and nationalism—incorporating both the anticolonial movement and nation-building project.⁸

The nature and specificity of use of intoxicants is culturally determined and the line between the ‘normative’ and the ‘forbidden’ is often dictated by assimilation of these substances into social practices—everyday use as well as ceremonial. Additionally, the experience of opium as both a drug and trade commodity during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has moulded our current understanding of drugs to a large extent and perceptions of the drug have been coloured by the twin lens of profit and plague. This has led to the erasure of the multiple meanings of drug cultures through history and the overlapping notions of non-normative practices and criminality has taken precedence in our collective understanding of drug use/rs. This thesis emphasises that the abuse or addiction aspect of drug consumption is fluid and a varying set of codes and practices govern use and act as the gatekeepers of normativity in all societies. It draws attention to the colonial state’s emphasis on the idea of customary use and familiarity of Indians with opium in its defence of the domestic trade and consumption in order to buttress the argument that opium use in India was regulated through social rituals of consumption, mores and taboos.

The framing of the ‘opium question’ in Assam evolved as imperial power took root—from the British ‘discovery’ of opium consumption in the 1790s to the development of the discourse of the ‘lazy native’ through the narrative of addiction by the

⁶ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire, A.D. 1656–1668*, trans. Irving Brock (New Delhi, 1968); Fray Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique, 1629–1643, Vol. 1*, trans. C. Eckford Luard (Oxford, 1927).

⁷ My reading of the Foucauldian concept draws from David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, *Social Text* 43 (Autumn 1995), pp. 191–220. Chapter 1 will engage with the idea in some detail.

⁸ This approach is influenced by Prasannan Parthasarathi’s exploratory arguments about the function of the state in social history, especially the emphasis on “cultural dimensions of the state” and its connection with “history from below”. Prasannan Parthasarathi, “The State and Social History”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Spring 2006), pp. 771–78.

1830s. The unwillingness of the Assamese to join the colonial tea enterprise was translated through a process of ‘othering’ that emphasised notions of indolence, moral degeneracy and physical decrepitude. The colonial state’s twin concerns of ‘improvement’ and ‘industry’ were conflated with its revenue-oriented focus in the province’s opium policy as monopoly opium was introduced and local opium production was outlawed in the mid-nineteenth century. The profit-oriented sale of excise opium fostered addiction as Assam held the distinction of being the highest per capita consumer of opium in India throughout the period 1870s–1920s. Widespread addiction and its societal effects fuelled a strong anti-opium sentiment among the middle-class intelligentsia as well as the rural masses and local anti-opium campaigns developed as a social movement that was aimed at ‘reforming’ the addict. The thesis focuses on Assam’s experience of opium and its addiction and explores the transformations in opium’s moral, social and cultural meanings in the nineteenth century, the veritable British ‘age of reform’, as a consequence of the evolving relationship between revenue and rule that was configured and re-configured to meet political imperatives and imperial objectives.

This thesis explores the subjectivity of the opium user as the discourse on addiction was adapted and transformed in the wake of the nationalist turn which altered the political landscape of Assam and inserted it into the Indian mainstream in the 1920s. The resistance of opium users to measures taken to regulate opium, especially in the late 1920s and 1930s, demonstrates the fact that despite the social reform rhetoric and the avowed success of the prohibition agenda, the opium user–addict was an unwilling participant in the ideal of ‘improvement’. The unwillingness of the user–addict to co-operate with native reformers and the colonial state had notable implications in the post-1927 era, when the Assam government executed a policy of regulation and restriction of opium resulting in subversive actions including smuggling, illegal cultivation and social unrest (discussed in Chapter 4).

This thesis also highlights the erasure of the role of Indian anti-opium campaigners in the global prohibition movement which has an overwhelming bias towards Western efforts and has been narrated as an encounter between Western activists, missionaries and civil society bodies with governments. The lack of historical attention is singular given the social reform and moral purity agenda of the Indian nationalists and their keen criticism of the British government’s policy on opium, alcohol and other intoxicants, typified by M.K. Gandhi’s metaphor which compared the relationship of the

Indian people with the colonial regime to that of a drug addict to his dealer.⁹ The thesis emphasises the need to re-evaluate the role of Indian social reformers and nationalist leaders in the prohibition campaign, especially players in peripheries like Assam.

The international opium trade grew unchecked till the 1890s resulting in widespread addiction across Asia, particularly China, which triggered localised anti-opium campaigns in areas affected by the societal consequences of addiction as well as in metropolitan centres like London and Chicago where missionary organisations spearheaded the prohibition agenda. By the turn of the century, the prohibition movement took a transnational turn and the British opium trade came under the scrutiny of international prohibitionists, foreign government and pressure groups. The Shanghai Opium Conference, 1909, signalled the beginning of the end of opium's role as an imperial drug commodity and prohibition become the focal point of drug debate, especially in the 1920s and 1930s when international drug regulation was organised and directed by the League of Nations.

Historians of South Asia initiated the study of the colonial opium economy and its organisation in the 1960s as part of the wider political and economic framework of British colonial polity, but their focus on India was solely as a centre of production as well as its location within the global trade.¹⁰ Although the topic has received some renewed interest due to David Washbrook's argument about the East India Company being the world's first "narco-military" enterprise, India has rarely been perceived as a consumption centre and there are virtually no references to the existence of an opium addiction problem in India.¹¹ The lacunae in historical understanding of opium in India is remarkable given opium's centrality to the British Empire as well as the fact that India served not merely as the hub for production and distribution of opium but also served as an important market for the commodity. Recent scholarship on South Asia has advanced recognition of connections, networks and circulations and advanced our understanding of imperial projects and the matrices of power, dominance, control and other contingent processes that operate through them, but explorations of opium in colonial India have been limited

⁹ Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or India Self-Rule* (1909), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. X (Ahmedabad, 1983), p. 22.

¹⁰ Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800–1842* (Cambridge, 1969); Amales Tripathi, *Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency, 1793–1833* (Calcutta, 1979); Asiya Siddiqui, *Agrarian Change in a Northern Indian State, Uttar Pradesh, 1819–1833* (Oxford, 1973).

¹¹ David Washbrook, "India 1818–1860: The Two Faces of Colonialism", in A. Porter (ed.), *Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. III: *The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p. 404.

to economic dimensions and social and cultural approaches have been completely overlooked. This thesis argues that the ‘opium question’ in India merits study as a consumption centre with its own unique practices and discourses related to opium and a tradition of resistance and prohibition and emphasises the need for localised studies that focus on state and society from a transnational perspective.

I Approaches to Historicising Opium: Global Trade, Revenue and the Indian Consumer

In the 1770s, opium transitioned into a global commodity as the English, French, Dutch and Portuguese traders integrated it into imperial trade networks and commodity flows.¹² The East India Company (EIC) under Warren Hastings, the Viceroy of India, initiated an opium monopoly system in 1773 which allowed it to control opium production and auction while leaving the shipment and sale of the drug outside India to free traders. This system enabled the EIC “to disassociate itself from the drug and disclaim all responsibility for the manner and place where it was marketed”, especially any accountability for the addiction that it fuelled in China and other parts of Asia, and by the end of the eighteenth century the EIC consolidated its hold over the global trade.¹³

Opium’s centrality to the British Empire has been highlighted by Washbrook who has termed it the keystone of a “narco-military” imperial age,¹⁴ while Trocki has made the extraordinary claim that there “would have been no British Empire” at all without profits from the opium trade.¹⁵ While these positions are subject to debate, as a lucrative commodity grown in the Gangetic belt, sold through auctions at Calcutta and traded across the world, opium was, undeniably, a “transformed, transformational and global commodity”.¹⁶ Trocki has proposed that the opium trade was crucial to the British Empire and “super-profits” from opium allowed it to endure the administrative and military costs required for imperial expansion in India and other parts of Asia, while also playing a crucial role in the industrialisation and commercialisation in Britain as well as capitalist transformation of colonial economies.¹⁷

¹² Benoy Chowdhury, *Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal, 1757–1900* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 1–6.

¹³ Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy* (London, 1999), pp. 46–51.

¹⁴ Washbrook, “The Two Faces of Colonialism”, p. 404.

¹⁵ Trocki, *Opium Empire*, p. xiii.

¹⁶ George Bryan Souza, “Opium and the Company: Maritime Trade and Imperial Finances on Java”, in Richard M. Eaton et al. (eds), *Expanding Frontiers in South Asian and World History: Essays in Honour of John F. Richards* (New Delhi, 2013), p. 107.

¹⁷ Trocki, *Opium, Empire*, pp. 7–10.

The nature of opium use in the modern world highlights aspects of connections between different parts of the world and sheds light on the social and cultural dimensions of imperialism. Opium was the last in a series of imperial commodity trades and through its encounter with European imperialism, on the one hand, opium transitioned from “exotic chemical to fully capitalist commodity”,¹⁸ and on the other, the inter-regional trade characterised the transitional phase in the emergence of the modern world order.¹⁹ Opium was, however, distinct from all other imperial commodities given it was an ‘Asian’ commodity that was meant for Asian consumption, while the market for other imperial goods were primarily European. Another important factor regarding opium in a purely material sense was that it had its own history and generated multiple meanings as consumers produced their own interpretations of the products that they appropriated.²⁰ To elaborate, opium signified a range of products from raw paste to morphine that were either eaten, drunk, smoked and injected for palliative and medicinal to spiritual, recreational and noetic purposes in different geographical spaces. This meant that opium’s cultural currency was not fixed and changed not just according to space but with time as one method of use outmoded another, resulting in a fluidity of meaning about the drug. Although the trade and social aspects of opium subsume material, metaphysical and cultural facets of human existence and its role in the British Empire was more significant than other commodities, it had not been accorded the same prominence as sugar or cotton that are frequently highlighted as vanguards of the global transformation that created the modern world.²¹ This thesis explores the creation of meaning by opium users and the ways in which these meanings and the specific discourses that they engendered were used and appropriated by the colonial state as well as Indian social reformers and nationalists.

Opium in the age of European imperialism has been the subject of historical scholarship ranging from the economics of the trade to the social histories of the drug. These works have produced contentious statements ranging from John Fairbank’s judgement on the British opium trade as “[t]he most long continued and systematic international crime of modern times” to Trocki’s assertion about the non-existence of a

¹⁸ Trocki, *Opium, Empire*, p. 58.

¹⁹ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2004), p. 44.

²⁰ Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York, 2007).

²¹ The vibrancy is reflected in the literature from Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985) to Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013).

British Empire without opium.²² From the overwhelmingly Marxist positions which depict drugs and empire as an unholy nexus to the unfettered optimism of impassioned vindication of Britain's tryst with the drug, opium has been a popular ideological battleground.²³ It is noteworthy, however, that one only finds the (non)ideological or (non)legitimising historiography of the opium trade and its consequences in marginal scholarship due to the overwhelming presence of the culpability of the "narco-military empire" in mainstream academic literature on the British Empire.²⁴

The historiography on opium has emphasised the role that it played in remedying the 'trade imbalance' compounded by European demand for luxuries of the East and its exotic chemicals in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.²⁵ The lack of scholarship on opium is profound given that it played an important part in the British Empire in India, both in terms of its economic role as well as its political and social function. The emphasis on global trade has resulted in the neglect of the complicated terrain of opium in India given that the colonial state's interests included the monopoly on poppy cultivation and opium production and export as well as excise returns from domestic sales of opium through licensed shops across India.²⁶ It is the aspect of domestic consumption that this thesis is particularly interested in because unlike China and other countries where Britain had opium interests, the trade within India was an 'internal' and the consumers were 'Empire subjects', the site of colonialism's manifold projects, including improvement and modernity.

The emphasis on Chinese (and wider Asian) trade has occasioned the dearth of academic scholarship on opium in India and there is a palpable silence on the issue of internal trade and consumption and the Indian consumer, especially the opium smoker,

²² John. K. Fairbank, "The Creation of the Treaty System", in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 10 Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 213–63; Trocki, *Opium, Empire*.

²³ See, for instance, Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2003).

²⁴ For instance, the Robin Winks edited 5-volume *History of the British Empire* does not engage with opium at all; or, indeed, neither does the first 5-volume *Cambridge History of India* (1922–1937) or the ongoing 23-volume *New Cambridge History of India* (1991–present).

²⁵ David Edward Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and India* (New Haven, 1934); Maurice Collis, *Foreign Mud: Being an Account of the Opium Imbroglio at Canton in the 1830s and the Anglo-Chinese War that Followed* (London, 1946); Hunt Janin, *The Indian–China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Jefferson NC, 1999); Glenn Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis. Balancing Drugs, Violence and National Honour, 1833–1840* (Aldershot, 2003); Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London, 2012).

²⁶ The production was handled through the Bihar and Benares agencies, with factories at Ghazipur and Benares and opium auctions were conducted at Calcutta through the state controlled auction house. The government also collected customs duties on Malwa opium produced in the princely states of western India (when sold in British India) and generated revenue from the export of Malwa opium from Bombay.

has been virtually written out of history. The lack of emphasis on the domestic trade and the Indian consumer is palpable even in the global histories of opium which have placed it at the heart of the dynamics of the rise and successes of European imperialism and engaged with opium addiction in China and Southeast Asia.²⁷ This approach is typified by John F. Richards who has interpreted opium's importance as a "high profit margin product ... [that] stimulated the Indian economy", but maintained that the subcontinent "did not suffer the ravages of addiction to opium smoking ... [as] British colonial rulers were never eager to develop the Indian market".²⁸ Amar Farooqui's pioneering work on Malwa opium has also emphasised that "the British had little interest in developing a large market for opium in India ... [and] concentrated its energies on the export of the drug to China".²⁹ Farooqui has also argued that the colonial state's opium policy was aimed at restricting domestic consumption "making the drug someone else's problem rather than one that concerned a society that was so deeply involved in producing and distributing it".³⁰ The position that Richards and Farooqui have underscored is highly problematic and the sweeping generalisations are symptomatic of the lack of understanding or engagement with British domestic opium policy in India. This thesis emphasises that opium was not merely "someone else's problem", but intimately connected with the concerns of the people of India as consumers of the drug commodity through which the colonial state earned a substantial part of its revenue.

From the 1830s to the 1890s, the sale of Indian opium in China and Southeast Asia grew dramatically and policy was geared towards maximising export receipts; between 1845 and 1885, opium contributed around 15 to 20 per cent of the total revenue and accounted for 25 to 35 per cent of Indian exports.³¹ From the late 1880s onwards, however, the Indian opium trade witnessed a paradigm shift: from an export-oriented commodity, opium transitioned gradually into a product intended primarily for domestic consumption. The fall in exports was dramatic and the revenue generated declined sharply and by 1910, it dropped below the 7 per cent mark and stagnated at around 2 per

²⁷ Hans Derks, *History of the Opium Problem: The Assault on the East, ca. 1600–1950* (Leiden, 2012).

²⁸ John F. Richards, "The Opium Industry in British India", in S. Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Land, Politics and Trade in South Asia* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 47, 49.

²⁹ *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants, and the Politics of Opium, 1790–1843* (Oxford, 2005), p. 3.

³⁰ Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion*, p. 3.

³¹ V.D. Divekar, *Historical Statistical Monographs on Commercial Crops in India: Poppy (Opium)* (Pune, 1981), Tables 25 and 37, pp. 90–92, 107–108.

cent by the 1920s.³² This decline resulted in increased pressure on domestic consumption to preserve revenue and provincial governments had the tacit approval of the central administration to increase opium sales and thus protect the opium enterprise, which included huge tracts of poppy cultivation, large factories and a substantial administrative machinery.

The decline in exports was precipitated by a combination of increased global competition and a manifold growth in domestic opium production in China and maturing public opinion in Britain about the effects of opium in China that resulted in increased pressure on the British government by the transnational anti-opium lobby.³³ This trend was exacerbated by the transnational opium regulation treaties that Britain entered into in the early twentieth century and from 1909 onwards, the British government had to scale down the export trade due to international pressure and opposition from influential players, especially America which took a strong prohibitionist stance.

Imperial historians have also consistently downplayed the revenue oriented nature of the EIC domestic opium trade and while some have highlighted that “officials continued to see little harm, and possibly much good, in allowing this [the domestic trade] to continue”,³⁴ others have even argued that the revenue derived from domestic sale was “only a small percentage” of the government’s opium receipts.³⁵ The fallacy of these positions as well as the intimate connection between domestic consumption and the export trade can be gauged from an analysis of the statistics between the years 1900 and 1920. During this period, the export trade in opium fell from 45,300 chests (approx. 2,876,700 kg) to 3,600 chests (approx. 228,600 kg) and the revenue was reduced to one-seventh, domestic consumption remained unchanged at around 1,000,000 lbs (approx. 455,000 kgs), while profits nearly doubled.³⁶

The fact that the domestic market for opium compensated for the loss of the export trade meant that the government was keen to protect this source of revenue and this is evident in the manner in which representatives of the Indian government

³² Divekar, *Commercial Crops: Poppy*, Tables 25 and 37, pp. 91–92, 108.

³³ China produced nine times more opium domestically than it imported from India in the 1890s. Edward R. Slack, *Opium, State and Society: China’s Narco-Economy and the Guomindang, 1924–1937* (Honolulu, 2000), pp. 3–5.

³⁴ Newman, “Early British Encounters”; John F. Richards, “The Indian Empire and the Peasant Production of Opium in the Nineteenth Century”, *MAS*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1981), p. 69.

³⁵ Richards, “Opium Industry”, p. 49.

³⁶ Rushbrook Williams, *The Truth about the Indian Opium Trade* (London, 1921), Tables 5–7, pp. 47–49.

deliberately misrepresented domestic policy at international opium regulation forums. The defence of the domestic trade invoked the sovereign rights of the Indian government to frame internal policy without intervention from foreign nations as well as the protection of the customary habits of the Indian population on the pretext of cultural sensitivity. This argument was further bolstered by the assertion about the absence of widespread addiction in India, despite substantial evidence that suggested high levels of opium use. In provinces with widespread addiction like Assam, opium sales accounted for more than a quarter of the provincial revenue in the 1920s and early 1930s.³⁷ Therefore, while the export trade was subjected to strict regulations and international scrutiny leading to a virtual collapse in terms of revenue and profits, the internal trade not merely remained stable but actually led to higher year-on-year profits till the early 1930s.

The untold story of domestic addiction together with the image of the Chinese opium addict as distant and different from the Indian experience has ensured that the story of opium in India has often been narrated without moral dilemmas, typified by the celebration of the involvement of the Parsis and the Marwaris in the opium trade and their influence on India's capitalistic transformation. The problem of non-engagement with opium extended to the Indian nationalist leadership who, as Bipan Chandra has highlighted, actually extended tacit support to the opium trade, and, "a large majority adopted an approach that very neatly coincided with that of the Government of India".³⁸ The thesis emphasises that the process of legitimising the opium trade through underrepresentation of domestic consumption and distancing addiction from the Indian context is significant and represents a popular position that has been fostered in nationalist histories.

II Locating, Knowing and Writing Assam: Opium and the Transnational Framework

Assam's geographical location is significant and determines the historical approach to the region (see Appendix 1). It is not merely South Asia's frontier with Southeast and East Asia but also located between the 'golden triangle' (Myanmar, Thailand and Laos—a major opium production region, especially post-1950s) and the 'golden wedge' (a

³⁷ Suresh K. Sharma and U. Sharma (eds), *Documents on North-East India: Assam, 1664–1935* (Delhi, 2006), p. 183.

³⁸ Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880–1905* (Delhi, 1969), p. 565.

traditionally isolated region comprising Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan).³⁹ Moreover, Assam had never been part of major Indian empires from the Guptas to the Mughals and its integration into the Indian subcontinent in the 1830s was primarily as the eastern borderland.⁴⁰ David Ludden has proposed a move away from locating Assam within the “national systems of spatial order” and has highlighted the need to explore alternative frames of conceptualising the region using geographical categories such as river flows and hill contours as well as factors like ancient migration routes, ethnic and linguistic similarities.⁴¹ Locating Assam as a borderland and integrating the region with Southeast Asian borderlands offers unique possibilities as it enables the recovery of subjectivities and minoritarian perspectives that have been obscured in narratives of national cultures and state-making projects.⁴² Willem van Schendel’s concept of “zomia” and James Scott’s framework of studying the “ungoverned” also serve as useful tools to understand the cultural and linguistic affinities within the northeast Indian region as well as the variance from the Indian mainstream.⁴³

Assam’s isolation during the early modern period, c.1650–1830, was fostered by the colonial archive which emphasised the backwardness of the region and the *jungly*—wild, uncivilised and primitive—conditions of the people, and this mode of representation has persisted in contemporary studies.⁴⁴ The region was, in fact, pluralistic, and multiple forces shaped it before the formal annexation of Assam by the British in 1826: Assam’s western frontier with Bengal saw contact with the Mughals and later the British; Vaishnavism percolated through the teachings of saints from the Gangetic plains; the Ahoms moved down the Brahmaputra valley into lower Assam extending the settlement of the Tai people with roots in southeast Asia; the eastern frontier was active with

³⁹ The fact that India is flanked on the west by the ‘golden crescent’ (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) would also factor in a contemporary study of opium.

⁴⁰ Under the British, Assam had strategic significance as an imperial borderland with imperial China (until 1911), imperial Japan (1939–1945), and with the Chinese state in the post-1949 period.

⁴¹ David Ludden, “Where is Assam? Using Geographical History to Locate Current Social Realities”, CENISEAS Paper No. 1 (Guwahati, 2003), p. 3; David Ludden, “Spatial Inequity and National Territory: Remapping 1905 in Bengal and Assam”, *MAS*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 1–43.

⁴² Christoph Antons, “Asian Borderlands and the Legal Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions”, *MAS*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (July 2013), pp. 1403–33.

⁴³ Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 20, No. 6 (2002), pp. 647–68; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (London, 2009).

⁴⁴ A notable example is Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics, 1915–1922* (Cambridge, 1972), which used the phrase “jungly Assam” in the discussion of the province’s brush with nationalism in an uncritical manner. Gandhi’s description of the province in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) also emphasised on the province’s uncivilised, ‘jungly’ natives.

Burmese military raids; and trans-Himalayan trade connected it with Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and China. Additionally, Assam was also connected with the Indian Ocean world through inland waterways, especially the well-navigated mighty Brahmaputra that linked up the hinterland with the wider world. And finally, India's Northeast also forms part of 'Inner Asia' or 'Asian space' defined by mountains, slopes and valleys, a space that has historically acted as an "ethnoscape", to borrow from Arjun Appadurai.⁴⁵

Despite the presence of these networks and the connectedness of the region with the wider world, colonial depictions of the region have systematically positioned India's Northeast as a 'frontier' to the subcontinental mainstream in terms of social, cultural and political norms and practices as well as production and commercial networks. This distancing principle was also extended to administrative practices as the colonial state left vast tracts of the region un-administered or loosely integrated into the political system.⁴⁶ Postcolonial representations of the region echo the colonial discourse of liminality and 'othering' and the spectre of 'frontier' appears in many configurations; on one hand, Assam (as part of northeast India) represents the political border between South Asia and East Asia as well as Southeast Asia with Bengal as the "marcher region",⁴⁷ and, on the other, it symbolises the border between "the settled agrarian society of the Gangetic plains and the nomadic cultivators, hunters and gatherers of India's northeast".⁴⁸

The shifting political boundaries of Assam during the colonial and postcolonial period as well as the multiple and fluid location of subjectivities of its inhabitants has been sustained by the ambivalent attitude of the Indian state reinforcing its isolation.⁴⁹ Contrasted to the lack of a fixed position for Assam within Indian political imagination is the sense of location in popular imagination in Assam and the strong identification with

⁴⁵ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", *Public Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 1–23.

⁴⁶ Colonial cartographic practices extended the technology of territoriality into the traditional frontiers through a series of lines denoted by an exclusivist template of abstractions—'inner lines', 'excluded areas' and 'partially excluded areas'—which solidified into national boundaries in the post-colonial era. The cartographic endeavours of the colonial administration as a crucial imperial practice of state-making in the region is discussed in David Vumallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, "Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the GeoBody of India's Northeast", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (February 2011), pp. 141–70. See also, Edney, Mathew H., *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago IL, 1997).

⁴⁷ A marcher region is defined as a "borderland that separates the region from other world regions". van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing", pp. 650–51.

⁴⁸ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 6.

⁴⁹ See Appendix 2 for a note on the political history of colonial Assam, especially the aspect of administrative reconfigurations that fostered linguistic (later, communal) antagonism between the Assamese and the Bengali communities.

the “permanent agrarian culture created by the unquestionable presence of the Brahmaputra river which dominates life and the economy”.⁵⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s concept of “connected histories” as a way of studying the larger processes of historical change and continuity in order to elucidate on convergences and disruptions is a useful tool to study the early twentieth century history of Assam.⁵¹ During the 1920s, changes in the political landscape, especially the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, forged the nation and the state, often as inter-connected projects with similar goals. Although the nation preoccupied the imagination of the provincial political leadership of the period, territoriality was interpreted in cultural and social, rather than geographical terms. The thesis explores the intersection of regionalism and nationalism in the 1920s from this vantage point—the sense of (geographical and cultural) identification in the backdrop of the insertion of Assam into the Indian mainstream through anti-colonial nationalist political activity.⁵²

To turn now to the question of opium in Assam and its position in historical writings on Assam. Despite the fact that the province had the ignoble distinction of being British India’s highest per capita consumer of opium throughout the period 1860s–1920s and the drug contributed more than a fifth of the total provincial revenue, historical scholarship on opium in Assam is virtually non-existent.⁵³ Opium also had a significant societal aspect in Assam given that from the 1830s onwards the colonial state emphasised opium addiction amongst the Assamese as a racial trait and the Assamese identity was ‘constructed’ through the ‘lazy native’ stereotype (discussed in Chapter 1). This typecasting not only underlined the backwardness and uncivilised nature of the Assamese but was also used by the colonial state as the single most important marker of difference, an ‘othering’ with mainstream Indians, particularly Bengalis. This ‘othering’ fostered an inimical relationship between these communities that has far-reaching implications throughout the colonial period and had a considerable impact on the local opium

⁵⁰ Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai Ahom Struggle* (New Delhi, 2002), p. 9.

⁵¹ Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”, pp. 760–62.

⁵² See Sudhir Chandra, “Regional Consciousness in 19th Century India: A Preliminary Note”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter, *EPW*), Vol. 17, No. 32 (7 August 1982), pp. 1278–85 for a discussion of the manifestations of regionalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

⁵³ The per capita consumption of opium in Assam was almost thrice of the next biggest consumer, Bihar, and almost ten times of the all India figure, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century—a trend that continued well into the 1930s. See Amalendu Guha, “Colonisation of Assam: Second Phase 1840–1859”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter, *IESHR*), Vol. 4, No. 1 (1967), pp. 289–317; see also John F. Richards, “Opium and the British Indian Empire: The Royal Commission of 1895”, *MAS*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (May 2002), pp. 412–13n92.

prohibition movement (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). Another significant aspect of opium in relation to Assam was the fact that the eighty-year-long local anti-opium campaign was the forebear of opium prohibition in India. The strategies and activism of the Assamese anti-opium lobby and the successes they achieved in influencing government policy decisions acted as a guide for similar actions in other Indian provinces. This campaign was also unique in the Indian context because of the transnational nature of the debate and the international support that the provincial campaign received as well as the fact that the local campaigners were acutely aware of the global prohibition debates and borrowed their vocabulary while also contributing to the larger debate.

Despite the singular aspects of Assam's tryst with opium, as discussed earlier, historical writing on Assam have been marginalised by the predominance of tea and the 'plantation culture' that it fuelled which is embedded into the province's colonial heritage.⁵⁴ While historical writing on opium in India is challenged by the lack of appreciation of the local dimensions of consumption as well as the domestic trade and government policy as discussed earlier, an attempt to approach opium in Assam comes with its own attendant problems. Historians of Assam have had to contend with a two-pronged challenge: first, of opium being regarded within the pathways of Indian history as an export commodity yoked to the China trade and the Chinese experience of addiction, and, second, opium's understanding in terms of the Benares-Bihar belt as a production hub, with Calcutta acting as the auctioning centre. The lack in the historical understanding of domestic consumption in India has meant that despite pervasive opium addiction in Assam as well as the region's experience with opium possessing considerable economic, social and political significance, scholarship has been negligible. The existing literature completely overlooks the impact on British India's opium exports from the 1870s onwards which prompted the need for alternate markets leading to the evolution of a more aggressive domestic policy, especially in provinces like Assam where opium use was virtually universal.

The lack of engagement can also be attributed to the fact that pervasive opium (ab)use was confined to the Brahmaputra valley districts (or, Assam proper), and, generally assumed to be a problem limited to the Assamese community in an ethnically

⁵⁴ Tea is the framing element of a recent history of Assam, Jayeeta Sharma. *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham NC, 2011).

and linguistically diverse province. This distortion was also magnified by the fluidity of Assam's territorial boundaries under British rule (see Appendices 1[a], 1[b] and 1[c]), especially during periods when Assam was administered as parts of larger administrative units and merged with densely populated districts of Bengal which rendered Assam's population a numerical minority—as part of Bengal Presidency (1826–1874) and the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A; 1905–1912).⁵⁵ The redrawing of boundaries as well as the administration's policy that accorded Bengali official language status in the province also played a part as it resulted in a long-drawn linguistic tussle between the Assamese and Bengali communities which fostered mutual distrust and occasioned the lack of a unified approach on the opium issue.⁵⁶ Opium has also been written out of Assam's history because standard nationalist historiographies privileged the linguistic tussle between Assamese and Bengali which evoked a sense of pride whereas opium addiction was seen as an opprobrious undertaking.⁵⁷ Despite the recent popularity of material and global histories, work on opium in Assam is scant and the literature lacks awareness of the global drug trade as well as contemporary theoretical approaches and paradigms.⁵⁸ The problem that confronts a historian attempting to narrate a history of opium in colonial Assam, therefore, is not one of choosing paradigms as the historiography matures or methods evolve but the absence of scholarship on which to build upon, a facet the thesis strives to address.⁵⁹

The thesis employs a transnational framework as a means to situate the evolving terrain of meanings that opium assumes in the nineteenth and twentieth century—from medicinal substance to trade commodity to social practice and eventually internationally

⁵⁵ The composition of the Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A) demonstrates this facet. In a 40-member house Assam had 5 seats, and of these only 3 were coincident to the Brahmaputra valley districts. Amalendu Guha, *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Reform in Assam* (New Delhi, 1977), Appendix 8, pp. 346–47.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the wider implications of the colonial state's language policy, see Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeast India* (New Delhi, 2011).

⁵⁷ A prominent example is the pioneering work, Guha, *Planter Raj*.

⁵⁸ Amalendu Guha, "Imperialism of Opium in Assam, 1773–1921", *Calcutta Historical Journal*, Vol. I, No. 1 (January–June 1977), pp. 226–45; Shrutidev Goswami, "The Opium Evil in Nineteenth Century Assam", *IESHR*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1982), pp. 365–76; Bodhisattva Kar, "Energizing Tea, Enervating Opium: Culture of Commodities", in Manas Ray (ed.), *Space, Sexuality and Postcolonial Cultures* (Calcutta, 2002), pp. 353–90; Kawal Deep Kour, "The Opium Question in Colonial Assam", in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Jana Tschurennev (eds), *A History of Alcohol and Drugs in Modern South Asia: Intoxicating Affairs* (Abingdon, 2014), pp. 139–54.

⁵⁹ The region's liminality in mainstream academic scholarship is also accentuated by the fact that the vehicles of their circulation—the journals and books—are delimited to the geographical centres of production. Although beyond the scope of this thesis, the most immediate of these problems is the politics of knowledge transference within Indian academic discourse and the regional/partisan biases that dominate them.

restricted, illegal drug. It draws from Pierre-Yves Saunier's assertion about the three themes that transnational history engages with: "reconstruction and contextualisation of historical interconnections between units of historical understanding", "assessment of the blurred line between the foreign and the domestic within these units", and "capture and record ... processes, actors and events that lived through and between these units".⁶⁰ This enables the transnational to be thought "with and through" the nation and addresses the various concerns pertaining to the nation/nation-state narrative.⁶¹

This study uses a 'network model' as a tool to trace the history of opium in colonial Assam where government policy was influenced, in equal measure, by the local anti-opium campaign as well as metropolitan ideologies in a connected web of interactions the included other sites of contact such as China, Southeast Asia, America and, of course, Britain.⁶² In order to recognise the relationship between colonial government policy with local (cultural) discourses of consumption and the rise of political nationalism in Assam, one needs to appreciate changes in other sites of exchange as well as the effects of transnational developments. Additionally, this multi-sited approach is crucial because opium was an important component of global circulatory networks that were developed "by colonial interests in tension with one another as well as with indigenous peoples" in a process that created webs of power, profit and prestige.⁶³

Rather than emphasising a global history of opium or historicising the drug-commodity as part of the attendant processes of internationalisation and globalisation, the thesis offers a localised study of opium through focused study of connections with colonial Assam as the site of enquiry in this web of interconnectedness. It interprets the practice of transnational history not as an admixture of several local, regional or national accounts about a topic but rather as a representation of connections, circulations and relations that transcend boundaries—political, geographical and cultural—and enable an analytical framework which links the local and the global into a mutually dependant network of associations. By focusing on global forces and factors which act within the locality, the thesis emphasises the intimate relationship between the global and the local;

⁶⁰ Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 137

⁶¹ Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: On the Inadequacy and Indispensability of the Nation", in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham NC, 2003), pp. 1–23.

⁶² Daniel J.P. Wertz, "Idealism, Imperialism, and Internationalism: Opium Politics in the Colonial Philippines, 1898–1925", *MAS*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (March 2013), pp 467–99

⁶³ Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire", *History Compass*, Vol. 4, No.1 (2006), p. 133.

it construes the ways in which local events are influenced by global factors and also looks at how the global, in turn, is shaped by events that take place in the locality. To achieve this synthesis, the thesis foregrounds the idea of “symmetrical sourcing”, a concept which can be used to define research which looks at circulation through spatial and relational aspects without emphasis on one proponent, protagonist or player, but rather construct a web of understanding shaped by attitudes and worldviews of all the different agents involved.⁶⁴ To elaborate, the campaign for opium prohibition in Assam acts as the core around which other aspects of the opium question are woven; these include opium policy, global trade, opium enquiries, transnational treaties, the Indian nationalist movement in India as well as the role of native legislators in the era of electoral politics.

The thesis emphasises the importance of primary source material in the writing of transnational histories, delineates a distinction with global history (‘big history’) projects and challenges the generalisations of ‘grand narratives’.⁶⁵ Frederick Cooper’s argument about the necessity to engage with primary sources in order to precisely reconstruct specific ties and flows that have straddled across the world, and the mechanisms that shape them, is central to this formulation.⁶⁶ The use of primary sources, especially government records and reports, which are at the centre of the analytical framework of the thesis, is also informed by tools drawn from microhistory and ‘history from below’ perspectives. Rather than approach the archive as inherently lacking ‘objectivity’ (and thereby ‘biased’), the thesis interrogates the conditions through which this body of evidence is produced and is interested in the inner logic of this narrative of domination.⁶⁷ This is not to emphasise, however, that my reading of the colonial archive is informed by ‘alternative history’ methods, and, as such, the attempt is not to re-write Assam’s opium

⁶⁴ Saunier, *Transnational History*, pp. 117–34.

⁶⁵ Within the historiography on opium, one such ambitious project that is expansive in both geographical and chronological scope is, Derks, *Opium Problem*. A work that extends the study of opium to contemporary times and is also expansive in scale is Emdad-ul Haq, *Drugs in South Asia: From the Opium Trade to the Present Day* (New York, 2000).

⁶⁶ Frederick Cooper, “What is the Concept of Globalisation Good for? An African Historian’s Perspective”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 399 (2001), p. 211.

⁶⁷ This approach draws from Premesh Lalu, “The Grammar of Domination and the Subjection of Agency: Colonial Texts and Modes of Evidence”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (December 2000), pp. 45–68. It is also influenced by the range of possibilities for postcolonial critiques (especially ‘post-foundational’ approaches), highlighted in Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 1990), pp. 383–408.

history but highlight the plenitude of slippages, contradictions and inconsistencies that populates it, or, to use Ranajit Guha's language, where it stutters in its articulation.⁶⁸

III Plan of the Thesis

Chapter 1 discusses early colonial policy in Assam following its annexation into British India in 1826 and locates the province within the larger dynamics of opium as a market commodity that is intimately connected with the tea plantation enterprise. It focuses on the colonial 'construction' of the Assamese opium eater, the *kania*, and proposes that the colonial archive is the point of entry into a complex web of techniques and processes through which the logic of governmentality, domination and difference was produced. The discussion emphasises that the 'othering' of the Assamese through the 'lazy native' paradigm, which was a product of the exigencies of colonial rule, provides the raw material for an indigenous response to the state apparatus. It looks at Assamese literary texts centred on the figure of the *kania* that foregrounded a social reform agenda and celebrated the aberrant, irrational and subversive potential of opium addicts in order to trace the emergence of a distinct anti-colonial subjectivity. The final section of the chapter provides a narrative of the formative years of the prohibition movement in Assam from the perspective of local and regional sociocultural and political factors and charts the role of the middle class intelligentsia and the rural masses in early debates on opium and resistance to state policy.

Chapter 2 shifts the lens from the local to the global and traces connections between the global opium prohibition campaign and the anti-opium movement in Assam. The first section charts the trajectory of the evolution of the prohibition movement in the West that emerged, in classic Victorian mode, from a conflict between science and religion—the medical justification for opium use pitted against the moral and ethical arguments of Christian evangelists. This is followed by a discussion of the Royal Commission on Opium (RCO, 1893–95) that was set up owing to pressure from the prohibition lobby to investigate the Anglo-Asian opium trade and consumption. Using official archival records, the section elucidates the role of the Indian government in regulating the evidence presented to the RCO through 'witness management' as part of a strategy to repudiate the existence of opium abuse in India. The final section discusses the

⁶⁸ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter Insurgency", in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies No. 2: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, 1983), p. 9.

role of transnational organisations and forums in promulgating international opium policy in the early twentieth century and highlights connections between the global and the local. It examines the Botham Committee Enquiry, 1912, a provincial enquiry that investigated opium consumption in Assam that was prompted by the 1912 Hague Convention, the first transnational drug regulation treaty in the world, which mandated the Indian government to end opium smoking. Despite the findings of the enquiry endorsing widespread opium smoking in Assam, the government persisted with its denial of the existence of the practice in India in transnational forums till the mid-1920s in order to disengage itself from the treaty obligations and protect the opium revenue.

Chapter 3 focalises on the intersection of the Indian nationalist movement with local political and anti-opium activity and begins with a discussion on the emergence of the INC in the province from the perspective of its stance, policy and activities relative to opium. This is followed by a discussion of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (ACOE; 1924–25) that was set up by the provincial Congress leadership but owed its origins to factors outside the locality. With a focus on the evidence presented by officials, politicians, doctors, professionals, peasants, and, most significantly, opium users and addicts, the discussion emphasises the precarious and fractious intersection of local, regional, national and international politics and its effects on the prohibition movement in Assam. The publicity and reception received by the enquiry report in India and abroad resulted in increased pressure on the government forcing a shift in policy. The discussion emphasises the role of prominent activists like C.F. Andrews (1871–1940) who played a crucial yet overlooked role in the enquiry and the subsequent internationalisation of Assam opium problem, both through active campaigning as well as extensive contributions to the national and foreign press.

Chapter 4 focuses on the mature nationalist phase marked by participatory politics and increased political role for Indians and charts the trajectory of the opium prohibition campaign through key legislations and policy changes that were introduced in the period, 1925–1941. The chapter suggests that during the 1930s and 1940s, the push-and-pull of the internationalisation of Assam's opium issue and the insularity of the political leadership in the backdrop of rising communalisation of the nationalist movement, determined the trajectory of provincial opium policy. The chapter is divided into four sections; the first discusses two key opium legislations that were passed in 1926 along with transnational developments in the opium prohibition movement; the second section

focuses on the opium enquiry conducted by the Assam government in 1933 which acted as the basis for future policy decisions on opium, while the third section focuses on the upshots of these policy decisions and addresses the phenomena of smuggling which is intimately linked with administrative measures to impose prohibition and brings in a cross-border flows and circulations. The chapter ends with a case-study of India's first experiment with total prohibition, a scheme that the Assam government introduced in two sub-divisions in Upper Assam with extremely high incidence of opium use in 1939, which paved the way for the implementation of prohibition across the province on 1 April 1941.

IV A Note on Sources and Conventions

Assam is marked by its absence in historical scholarship and a significant part of the material consulted, especially records from regional archives, have not been used before in any historical study. The thesis makes extensive use of archival material sourced in India and the United Kingdom, principally Assam State Archives (Guwahati), National Archives of India (New Delhi), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), and, India Office Records at the British Library (London). Along with government records, semi-official documents and correspondences, the above named repositories and others—including the National Library (Kolkata), Directorate of Antiquarian and Historical Studies (Guwahati), and Wellcome Library (London)—have yielded a rich mine of rare books on the opium prohibition movement and private papers of prominent local nationalist leaders and social reform activists, in addition to newspapers, journals and Assamese-language literary manuscripts. Records of the provincial and central revenue departments have been used widely throughout the thesis, and Chapters 2, 3 and 4 engage with reports and volumes of evidence generated by various opium enquiries conducted by government and non-government bodies—the Royal Commission on Opium (1894–95), the Botham Committee (1912), the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (1924–25) and the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee (1933). Archival records of the INC have enabled an assessment of the political dimensions of the opium prohibition movement and documents from the History of the Freedom Movement and the Political History of Assam projects have provided supplementary material on the nationalist movement. Non-English words have been used without phonetic symbols and the thesis preserves the colonial spellings of names of places in historical references but contemporary spellings have been used elsewhere. Also, the terms Brahmaputra valley and Assam valley have

been used interchangeably; the former is now more commonly used but the latter was standard during the colonial era. Finally, no attempt has been made to standardise the filing system of the various archives cited in the thesis and the original format followed by a particular repository has been retained.

CHAPTER 1

THE 'MAKING' OF AN ADDICTION: COLONIAL SUBJECTIVITIES, INDIGENOUS RESPONSES AND THE ANTI-OPIMUM CAMPAIGN IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ASSAM

This chapter looks at the formative years of British rule in Assam and focuses on the creation of colonial subjectivities in the province from the perspective of native opium consumption and British opium policy and explores the relationship between the social and economic dimensions of opium. In tracing the emergence of the anti-opium movement in Assam, the chapter moves away from a simplistic action–reaction model, which foregrounds the aspect of response to state policy, and suggests a holistic approach that privileges internal differences and multiplicity of positions within the government and wider society.

The chapter is divided into three sections and begins with an assessment of the plantation economy and colonial state presence in Assam following the annexation in 1826. It highlights the evolution of the 'opium question' in the province and the creation of the 'lazy native', the *kania* (the Assamese opium eater/smoker), as a process that was intimately tied to tea capitalism and the demand for labour. It argues that from the mid-nineteenth century a distinct vocabulary of moral degeneracy and physical indolence substituted the early-colonial as well as indigenous understanding of opium use, particularly the notion of 'pleasure', which the colonial state employed as an 'othering' tool.

The second section explores the trajectory of writings centred on the *kania* and opium and emphasises a distinction between mid- and late-nineteenth century literary production in Assam. While early writing on opium and opium use, including satirical works, focused on the 'evils' of addiction and were tied up with ideas of moral decadence and indolence, in the 1880s and 1890s representations evolved a distinct radicalism that used a new mode of satire for social commentary and as a means to critique the colonial state. This experiment was the product of a middle-class intelligentsia that was influenced by Western ideas of individuality and subjectivity and promoted European Romanticism's lofty ideals as they interpreted the *kania* as a precursor of modernity. The final section provides a narrative of the genesis of the opium prohibition movement in Assam which developed as a local campaign that challenged the government's policy of monopoly sale of excise opium at the highest price in order to generate the maximum possible revenue. The movement was largely a social reform project spearheaded by middle class

campaigners but also had a distinct political character and enjoyed popular support of the rural masses which resulted in instances of rebellions against the colonial state.

1.1 Creating the ‘Lazy Native’: Opium Consumption, ‘Improvement’ and the Plantation Economy

Scholarship on colonial processes has emphasised the state’s ‘attitude’ towards the colonised subject and has highlighted the question of exclusionary practices ranging from the denial of humanity (and other liberal post-Enlightenment principles) to the lack of sovereignty (political, intellectual and cultural). Historical scholarship has contested the enduring binaries that typified the relationship between the East and the West and a more nuanced understanding of the “difference between the polemical dismissal of Europe and its conceptual repositioning” has led to interrogations of links between tradition and modernity, ritual and rationality, or, myth and history.¹ These critiques of reason and rationality in “critical discussions of cultures and pasts have also challenged the analytical binaries of modern disciplines, interrogating essentialised representations of otherness and questioning abiding representations of progress”.² It is within this matrix of possibilities that we need to situate the Assamese opium eater, the *kania*.

The concept of governmentality, to borrow Michel Foucault’s coinage, is central to understanding the apparatuses through which the colonial state moulded the citizenry in its quest for shaping normativity and deviance.³ Rational principles were employed to “construct the normative regularities of civil society” and the citizen–subject was drawn into the process of “improvement” by the colonial state.⁴ Employing this in the context of the plantation economy and endemic labour shortage in Assam offers perceptive insights into the creation of the ideal colonial subject in the 1830s and 1840s. We need to also note that utilitarian philosophy and Ricardian economic theories were mainstream in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, and ‘improvement’ was the central tenet of instruments

¹ David Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, *Social Text*, Vol. 43 (Autumn 1995), p. 192.

² Saurabh Dube, “Introduction: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2002), p. 198.

³ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality”, in Michel Foucault, *Power: Volume 3: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, trans. R Hurley (London, 2002), pp. 201–22. For a discussion of Foucault’s concept in the domain of colonial power, see Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, pp. 191–220. See also, for a social history position, Simon Gunn, “From Hegemony to Governmentality: Changing Conceptions of Power in Social History”, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2006), pp. 705–20.

⁴ Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 8.

like the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834.⁵ By introducing the principles of ‘improvement’⁶ and initiating the process of modernisation with the Assamese opium addict as focal point of the colonial enterprise, the cultural roots of the practice of opium consumption were delegitimised and embedded into the social reform narrative. Cast as an aberrant and deviant social practice, opium consumption under the colonial state was distanced from its pre-colonial configurations and a new vocabulary of ‘racialised indolence’ was inserted into the socio-political space.

The colonial state’s efforts in extending control over culture and cultural practices while maintaining “the rule of colonial difference” played a crucial role in mandating (and mediating) the relationship between the state and its subjects in India.⁷ This difference was also manifest in terms of the relationship between the ability of the colonial subject to demonstrate an ethical capacity—rationality, self-control and morality—in exchange for political and civil rights and liberties. The *kania* inhabited a contested space; on the one hand, were the demands of the state apparatus and its role in creating the ‘model subject’, and on the other, the denial of the redemptive promise of modernity through the discourse of traditional (read un-changeable) nature of Indian society. The ‘bodies’ of opium addicts became the site where contrarian impulses of the colonial project were manifested; the opium addict’s ‘improvement’ was either driven by the goal of creating labour for the economic enterprise of the colonial state (the tea plantations in Assam, for instance) or reduced to pitiable, debauched beings in need of moral uplift. The latter impulse was co-opted into the indigenous social reform project in mid-nineteenth century Assam which incorporated political activism with literary projects that were saturated with the vocabulary of ‘improvement’ and the developmental urge motivated to create normativity.

Scholarship on emergence of governmental power in colonial India contends that the projects of modernisation initiated by the British were appropriated by the indigenous social reform movements and the need to ‘purify’ or ‘strengthen’ Indian society was

⁵ For a discussion of the insertion of utilitarianism into imperialism, see the enduring classic, Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (London, 1959).

⁶ The discussion will not engage with the debate on ‘improvement’ centred on the stagnation of Indian economy during British rule that nationalist and imperial economic historians have engaged with interminably. Peter Robb, “British Rule and Indian Improvement”, *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, Vol. 34, No. 4 (November 1981), pp. 507–23.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton NJ, 1993), p. 10.

transformed into a project of self-determination by the political leadership.⁸ The discussion below challenges this theorisation and suggests that in provinces like Assam, the modernising impulse came from within Assamese society, was determined by local circumstances and developed independently of the state-sponsored modernising project. Assam's encounter with opium, especially the colonial state's opium policy which resulted in widespread addiction, highlights an altered facet of governmentality in play and we suggest that it represented an attempt by the state to deny modernity. The insertion of the Assamese opium user into the framework of the 'lazy native'⁹ was not just a strategy of repression and creating 'difference' but an epistemological attempt at defining non-normativity in a frontier province.¹⁰ It was this formulation that was appropriated by the Assamese intellectual class during the 1880s and 1890s in their efforts as a means to challenge the project of singular modernity¹¹ and 'reclaim' the subject—an undertaking exemplified in the literary representations of opium eaters (explored in a later section).¹²

In the 1880s and 1890s, this social reform agenda was challenged by writers in an intellectual climate that provided the right conditions for experimentation with genre and form leading to the emergence of the satirical mode of expression, partly incisive social critique and partly literary imitation of Western models and subjectivities. As the site of contestations between the government's incompatible attempts to justify rule and maintain hierarchies, the opium addict in literary production enabled the emergence of the unfettered voice of the nascent Assamese middle class. The literary 'renaissance' in Assam was dominated by the 'cultural dualism'—limited modernity for the upper and middle classes and traditional practices for the underclasses—that defined similar

⁸ Heath, *Purifying Empire*, p. 9.

⁹ The discourse on the "lazy native" in the Asian (and African) context has a powerful influence on the relationship between the imperial/colonial state and subject from the sixteenth century onwards in various colonial settings. Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London, 1977); Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* (Seattle WA, 2009), pp. 40–43.

¹⁰ "To govern ... is to control the possible field of action of others." Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in Foucault, *Power*, p. 341.

¹¹ The challenge of this endeavour informs the core of Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis MN, 1996).

¹² "Is it possible to work through terms of discourse in which power is not construed as totalized terrain and where difference does not constitute a ready antidote to power—whether as insurgent identity, ecstatic hybridity, or preconfigured plurality?", Dube, "Colonialism, Modernity", p. 200.

movements in other parts of India, a development that can be called an ‘enclaved’ modernity.

Partha Chatterjee’s argument about the essentialisms in revisionist historiography, especially the emphasis on stereotypes which are deeply embedded in the Indian colonial discourse, for instance, Indian effeminateness or the unchangingness of Indian society, provides a framework to locate the *kania*.¹³ The discussion underlines the need to locate British constructions of the ‘lazy native’ as well as indigenous appropriations of this figure in literary production as the “terrain available for the colonized to produce their responses”.¹⁴ Using Chatterjee’s argument about “outer” and “inner” domains of the colonial state and his explorations of “colonial difference”, the discussion below emphasises that the literature on the opium eater becomes the site where encounters between these two domains—of state intervention and native resistance—take place: while the “outer” material domain of colonial power persisted in creating “cultural difference”, the colonial subject’s resistance to this statist approach was played out in the “inner” aspects of culture.¹⁵ The Assamese literature centred on the *kania* can be read from this perspective. While non-elite traditions continued with portrayals of opium eater within a social reform agenda, as disenfranchised addicts, the elite vernacular tradition co-opted the opium eater within the modern literary framework of satire and the opium eater was endowed with the authority of perceptive criticism of colonialism. The opium eater emerged as an anti-colonial figure in literary worlds but only through accommodation by the elite and the project failed to address the fact that the opium eater was often a subaltern, devoid of any real agency.

These literary explorations (discussed in the next section) were designed to empower the ‘mute’ underclass that the opium addict symbolised, but the subject of this ‘improvement’ was neither offered an independent voice nor included in the discussion centred on the dialogic aspects of identity and nation-building. Representations of opium addicts as autonomous subjects contradicts the substance of modernisation theory that emphasises the idea that a set of political and economic developments replaced traditional systems. The opium user, part degenerate addict, part creative genius (as the discussion in

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986), pp. 34–51.

¹⁴ Scott, “Colonial Governmentality”, p. 197.

¹⁵ In Chatterjee’s understanding, the “inner” domain is the “spiritual” domain which bears the “essential” marks of cultural identity and therefore attempts to assert its “sovereignty” from the “outer” or “material” domain of the state’s hegemonic operations. Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, pp. 6–8.

section 1.2 highlights), straddled the twin worlds of tradition and modernity and represented an ambivalent, hybrid modernity within the colonial framework. It is in the literary space that the opium addict demonstrated an independent subjectivity and embodied an anti-colonial impulse with notes of dissent, disruption and distinction. Bernard Cohn's concept of "objectification of culture"¹⁶ by the Western-educated intelligentsia in late nineteenth century India provides a starting point for interrogating the historical experience of colonialism alongside the process of cultural change and development of new cultural identities, which is often translated as modernisation resulting from the impact of the West. The discussion suggests that the opium eater in literary representation exemplifies the objectification that Cohn refers to—the recovery and reformulation of symbols that were embedded in a matrix of custom, ritual and religion to draw out the power of the lived experience of colonialism.

But we need to begin with a brief history of opium use in Assam before the colonial encounter to appreciate indigenous perceptions of opium as well as its representation in the colonial archive. There are contradictory theories on the roots of opium eating in Assam. The origins of the practice has been traced to Assam's historic trading links with China as well as the province's contact with the Mughal army among whom opium use was common during the incursions into western Assam in the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁷ Local histories suggest that opium was known to the Assamese and used primarily in rituals and quasi-religious rites as well as for its medicinal properties during the Ahom period, but use was limited to the upper classes.¹⁸ Evidence from the *buranjis* (official chronicles) which are rich in historical information and present an accurate account of social life in the province during the medieval period suggest that Ahom ruler Gadadhar Singha (r.1681–1696) stigmatised and penalised opium users but during the reign of Gaurinath Singha (r.1780–1795), an opium addict himself, the social stigma of opium use faded and Gaurinath is credited with popularising opium smoking as a leisure and social activity.¹⁹

¹⁶ Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", in Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 228–30.

¹⁷ The Mughals were known to have used opium for "recreational purposes" and "narcotics in the Mughal state induced acculturation, negotiations, social interactions and entertainment". Meena Bhargava, "Narcotics and Drugs: Pleasure, Intoxication or Simply Therapeutic—North India, Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries", *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2012), p. 104.

¹⁸ H.K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, 1826–1858* (Guwahati, 1980 [1963]), pp. 42–65.

¹⁹ Benudhar Kalita, *The Uprising of Phulaguri* (Nagaon, 2006), pp. 48–50.

Despite evidence of use by the late eighteenth century, nationalist historians have underplayed the existence of opium use in pre-colonial Assam and have posited that opium use was negligible and confined only to the royal court and the nobility.²⁰ These accounts maintain that widespread opium addiction was the consequence of the colonial state's calculated policy to inflict the 'vice' on the general population as an important device of colonial rule which suggest that a conspiracy to drug the masses in order to make them willing participants of rule was at play.²¹ This narrative also connected opium addiction neatly with the argument about the loss of "self-respect and self-realisation" amongst the Assamese which was resolved by the intervention of Gandhi and the Congress during the nationalist struggle.²²

The narrative of addict as a victim of colonial polity flattens the richness of the opium discourse in nineteenth century Assam that was defined by "complex connections between the conditions of pleasure, labor and fatigue".²³ It is therefore crucial to focus on the 'interplay' between these features and recognise that the evolution of the opium question involved the redrawing and readjustment of the boundaries between these facets of opium use by different players at different times. Kaushik Ghosh's critique of colonial capitalism's stake on the civilisational principle highlights that "the rationality of opium and the opium of rationality interplayed ceaselessly to define the wildness and indolence of the Assamese" and this offers an effective paradigm to approach the issue of opium addiction in Assam.²⁴

The colonial archive, on the other hand, is also guilty of fostering an exaggerated version of dependence on opium as well as encouraging the narrative of 'improvement' till the mid nineteenth century. It needs to be highlighted that the narrative changed dramatically in the late nineteenth century and the official position upheld the view that abuse of opium was virtually absent in the province (as well as the rest of India) as the

²⁰ Shrutidev Goswami, "The Opium Evil in Nineteenth Century Assam", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter, *IESHR*), Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1982), p. 366.

²¹ Amalendu Guha's ecumenical *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Reform in Assam* (New Delhi, 1977), also exhibits this predilection.

²² This narrative informs Sonaram Thaosen, "Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi's Contribution to Hills Autonomy", in Lily Mazindar Baruah (ed.), *Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi: An Architect of Modern India* (New Delhi, 1992), p. 199.

²³ Bodhisatva Kar, "Energizing Tea, Enervating Opium: Culture of Commodities", in Manas Ray (ed.), *Space, Sexuality and Postcolonial Cultures* (Calcutta, 2002), p. 356.

²⁴ Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India", in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds), *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1999), p. 15.

British government faced pressure from the local and transnational anti-opium lobby to impose prohibition. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, accounts of colonial administrators, planters, missionaries as well as doctors routinely attributed the lassitude and indifference to work on the part of the local people to opium and the memoir of Major John Butler typified the British view about opium addiction in Assam.

There is no article of commerce sought after with such intense avidity in Assam as kanee or opium; and its baneful effects can only be appreciated by those who witness the degeneracy of the people. It is consumed by all classes, high and low, rich and poor, old and young, men, woman and even children; and its consumption is only limited by the purse or means of the opium eater.²⁵

Butler also highlighted that “two-thirds of the population are addicted” and addiction was also associated with “nine out of ten crimes”, especially “larceny and burglary”.²⁶ We need to exercise caution in accepting the ‘authenticity’ of these accounts given that they were produced at a time when efforts to encourage tea plantations in the region were at their peak. Although the official position on the origins of opium cultivation and consumption posited that opium was originally cultivated at Beltola, near Guwahati, and was believed to have been used as a medicinal drug, by the time the annexation in 1826, opium cultivation and consumption was widespread.²⁷ The view that opium was grown in the province was corroborated in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century accounts like Captain Thomas Welsh’s 1794 report which indicated that poppy grew “in luxuriance” in most of western Assam.²⁸ However, Welsh’s report also highlighted that although opium was consumed by the natives, they were “as yet unacquainted with the manufacture of merchantable opium, which might be procured in considerable quantity” indicating that use might not have been as pervasive in the late eighteenth century.²⁹

There is, however, greater agreement about the fact that opium use in the province spread and grew in the aftermath of the British annexation in 1826. Widespread addiction in the region was corroborated in official documents³⁰ and the general impoverishment of

²⁵ John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam, During a Residence of Fourteen Years* (London, 1855), p. 244.

²⁶ Butler, pp. 244–45.

²⁷ B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers: Vol. VI, Nowgong* (Calcutta, 1905), p. 196.

²⁸ “Welsh’s Report on Assam, 1794”, in A. Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of North-East Frontier of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1884), p. 388.

²⁹ “Welsh’s Report on Assam, 1794”, in A. Mackenzie, *History of Hill-Tribes*, p. 388.

³⁰ A.W. Davis, *Census of India, 1891, Vol. 1, Assam* (Simla, 1893), pp. 245–46.

the indigenous population was widely consigned to the pervasive use of the drug.³¹ The abolition of the EIC's commercial monopoly in 1833 opened up prospects for private capital and the tea plantation enterprise resulted in the transition from a traditional rice growing, sustenance economy to a cash economy which induced peasants to cultivate cash crops such as mustard, jute and opium.³² Links between the growth of a cash economy and opium addiction has been suggested by Jayeeta Sharma who has argued that the "absence of a rice market" limited the cash-earning potential of the peasants and opium emerged as the viable option due to "a readily expanding demand" and high profitability triggering opium use.³³ Another factor that promoted opium use in the province in the 1840s onwards was the introduction of cheap Company opium (or excise opium) in 1843 which was sold through licensed shops, which made the drug available in standardised ball form that could be readily made into a smoking preparation.

The *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB)* published some of the earliest essays or articles on Assam and these pieces provide insights into opium use in Assam during formative years of British rule in Assam and William Griffith's article published in 1836 established that the opium poppy grew extensively in the Assam valley (also Brahmaputra valley).³⁴ The first record of opium consumption in Assam in the pages of the *JASB* dated back to 7 August 1844 when J. Owen, tea planter and resident of Assam, presented the Society with a gift of "two balls of the opium-rags as prepared by the ryots of Assam [for] sale and common consumption", or *kane* in the vernacular.³⁵ Although the report highlighted that opium was the most profitable crop for farmers and was widely available and sold in all the markets, no reference was made to the addiction aspect, especially the pervasive depravity of the *kania* that populated the colonial documents in the period beginning with the late 1850s.³⁶ Another contemporary journal, *The Calcutta*

³¹ "[O]pium eaters spend nearly one half or even as much as two-third of his earning upon opium. They often went without a meal to supply themselves with opium". C. J. Simons, *Notes on the Baneful Effects on the Natives of Assam, from the Excessive Use of Opium* (Calcutta, 1860), p. 3.

³² The debate among political economists on the development of capitalism in India does not affect this discussion on opium's impact in Assam; for, whatever their analysis of the impact of colonialism on India's transition from feudalism to capitalism, there is wide agreement that colonialism held the promise of modernity and inspired a critical self-examination of indigenous society and culture. See A.K. Bagchi, "De-industrialization in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications", *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 12 (1975–76), pp. 135–64.

³³ Jayeeta Sharma, "'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry", *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter, *MAS*), Vol. 43, No. 6 (November, 2009), p. 1295.

³⁴ William Griffith, "Remarks on a Collection of Plants Made at Sadiya, Upper Assam", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (hereafter, *JASB*), Vol. 5 (1836), pp. 806–13.

³⁵ "Proceedings of the Asiatic Society", *JASB*, Vol. 13 (August 1844), p. lxxxi.

³⁶ "Proceedings of the Asiatic Society", *JASB*, Vol. 13 (August 1844) pp. lxxxi–lxxxii.

Review, also published observations of military men and administrators who visited the region, but they were mostly mundane administrative reports. An article written by William Robinson, an English missionary working in upper Assam, stood out as it provided a historical narrative of the province that drew attention to the social life of the people for the first time.³⁷ Despite multiple references to the depravity of Assamese ways and the profligacy of its society that emphasised the need for the spread of Christianity, the account was oddly silent on the issue of opium use among the Assamese. These articles suggest that the process of creating ‘difference’ had not solidified in the mid-nineteenth century and the colonial project of ‘knowing’ the *kania* was still in process as the economic potential of the tea industry developed.

The earliest demands for ban on poppy cultivation came from the British planters in the 1840s, not because they saw it as a social or a moral issue but because of labour scarcity; the planters believed that the ban on poppy cultivation would compel the Assamese peasant to flock to the tea gardens to work as labourers in order to earn money to buy imported opium.³⁸ This idea is reinforced by the earliest recorded British parliamentary discussion of opium consumption in India, where, incidentally, Assam’s encounter with the drug was also highlighted. In a speech delivered in the House of Commons on 4 April 1843, Lord Ashley (1801–1885)³⁹ called for a suppression of the opium in Assam due to the potential damage that opium addiction would have on the nascent tea industry.⁴⁰ The opposition to the opium trade was uncharacteristic at the time owing to the widespread optimism about the British opium trade following the signing of the Treaty of Nanking (1842) but the adverse effect on the emerging tea plantation economy in Assam dictated government intervention. The speech foregrounded the impact of opium on Assam as a “dreadful plague which has depopulated this beautiful country [and] turned it into a land of wild beasts” and warned that the immigrant labour to

³⁷ “Assamese Matters, Past and Present: Article II—Robinson’s History of Assam”, *Calcutta Review* (hereafter, *CR*), Vol. 23, No. 45 (July–December 1854), pp. 38–65. The inscription on Robinson’s gravestone immortalises him as ‘The Historian of Assam’.

³⁸ E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta, 1906), p. 213.

³⁹ Antony Ashley-Cooper, later the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, was one of the most vocal of the anti-opiumists in London and served as president (1874–1885) of the [Anglo-Oriental] Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade. John Wolfe, “Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (1801–1885)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6210>, accessed 27 March 2015.

⁴⁰ Lord Bentinck had formed a committee on June, 1834 to study the feasibility of commercial tea cultivation in India which provided a favourable report but the overall response from European capitalists was poor owing to the acute scarcity of labour in the province leading to policy changes in land settlement which boosted the tea enterprise but labour shortage hampered the industry till as late as 1859.

the province's emerging plantation economy would "be infected with the opium mania" if measures to counter opium addiction are not taken.⁴¹

Significantly, the speech also highlighted the impact of opium on Assam in a manner that would become characteristic in British representations of the *kania* in subsequent decades. Ashley's speech invested addiction with a moral and racial dimension as he declared that opium "has degenerated the Assamese from a fine race of people, to the most abject, servile, crafty, and demoralized race in India", lending a racialised, moral dimension to opium use and addiction.⁴² The emphasis on the wretchedness of the 'lazy native' needs to be viewed within the framework of nineteenth century scientific typology of human beings that Michel Foucault has underlined as "a whole series of functional discriminations (the good poor and the bad poor, the wilfully idle and the involuntary unemployed)", a concept that can be extended to the opium addict who can be inserted comfortably into the category of the "wilfully idle".⁴³

"[T]hree-fourths of the population are opium-eaters, and men, women, and children alike use the drug", is how Moffatt Mills, a senior Calcutta judge, described the people of Assam in an official report on the general conditions of the province following a visit in 1853.⁴⁴ The perception that opium "destroys the constitution, enfeebles the mind, and paralyzes industry" was shared by Mills' contemporaries in government as well as the European planters and was understood as the main impediment to the growth of the tea enterprise.⁴⁵ The indolence of the Assamese was noted by one planter in these words, "he works nowhere, but sits down at his ease in the village and eats his rice and smokes his opium", and the recalcitrance to engage in wage labour has been interpreted by Piya Chatterjee as "as an almost subversive agency, an idea of 'conscious' laziness aimed at undermining the planter's enterprise".⁴⁶ The administration's solution of this habitual laziness was a ban on local opium cultivation and production and its replacement

⁴¹ M.R. Ashley, 'Suppression of the Opium Trade': *The Speech of the Right Hon. Lord Ashley, M.P., in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, 4 April 1843* (London, 1843), pp. 24–25. See also Charles Alexander Bruce, *An Account of the Manufacture of the Black Tea as Now Practised at Suddeya in Upper Assam, by the Chinamen Sent Thither for that Purpose with Some Observations on the Culture of the Plant in China, and its Growth in Assam* (Calcutta, 1838).

⁴² Ashley, *Suppression of the Opium Trade*, pp. 24–25.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century", in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984), p. 276.

⁴⁴ A.J. Moffatt Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Calcutta, 1854), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham NC, 2001), p. 70.

with government excise opium, a policy that fit Mills' dictum that "[o]pium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it".⁴⁷

The policy was clearly aimed at the Assamese with their extensive addiction to opium and had two main objectives that initiated Assam's transition to a modern capitalistic economy. The first objective was the consequence of opium's transformation from domestic produce to a market commodity that could only be bought using money, a move that was intended to induce the Assamese to join the tea garden labour workforce where the principal wage earning opportunities existed in a sparsely populated, deficit province with an underdeveloped industrial and commercial sector. The second objective was also intimately tied up with the tea enterprise and calculated to benefit the colonial state—its revenue collections if the Assamese persisted with the habit and entered the wage economy of the tea gardens in order to buy government opium, or, indeed, if they gave up opium and became 'laborious' and productive subjects contributing to the capitalist enterprise, which would reaffirm the idea of 'improvement'.

Assamese middle class individuals like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,⁴⁸ also highlighted the issue of opium addiction in the province in language that bore a striking resemblance with the colonial vocabulary of 'difference' but towards a singularly different purpose. In a petition submitted to Mills during his visit to Assam, Phukan highlighted that opium use had "converted the Assamese, once a hardy, industrious and enterprising race into an effeminate, weak, indolent and a degraded people", but the target of his criticism for the current state of the Assamese was government policy and his petition called for a complete prohibition on opium production and sale.⁴⁹

Reference to the 'idleness' of opium users saturate the colonial archive in the 1830s and 1840s as labour shortages in the tea plantations was inhibiting growth and colonial administrators such as Francis Jenkins writing in 1839 interpreted regular use of

⁴⁷ Mills, *Report*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829–1859) was born in a liberal, western educated family and is regarded as one of the foremost political thinkers in early colonial Assam and regarded as the 'Father of Assamese Prose'. Anandaram was educated at Hindu College, Calcutta (1841–44), and entered government service in 1845 and is best remembered for his role in promoting the Assamese language through his 2-volume *Asomiya Lorar Mitra (Friend of Assamese Children, 1849)* and *A Few Remarks on Assamese Language* (1855). Anjali Sarma, *Among the Luminaries in Assam: A Study of Assamese Biography* (Delhi, 1990), pp. 108–111.

⁴⁹ Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, p. 110. Phukan was one of the earliest proponents of prohibition in Assam and played a significant role in initiating a public debate on opium which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

opium as the causal agent behind the “idle, dissolute and timid” nature of the Assamese.⁵⁰ The ‘lazy native’ featured in all modern European empires and was critical to the capitalist ideology of ‘industriousness’ in a number of contexts and the reluctance of the Malays, Indonesians and Filipinos to participate in the colonial economy has been interpreted through the typecasting of the native’s inherent ‘laziness’.⁵¹ From the early 1830s, the theory that the Mongoloid race was particularly susceptible to opium abuse was well established among British administrators in the region as well as metropolitan thought, as was the fact that the people of Assam, especially the indigenous tribes and communities, were racially closer to the Chinese than Indians.⁵² This enabled the development of two different discourses on opium use in India; on one hand, it enabled administrators to use the well-established image of the Chinese opium addict’s moral and physical depravity and transfer it onto the *kania*, while at same time it allowed the perpetuation of the idea about customary, moderate use of opium by Indians without any physical and moral consequences.⁵³ This duality of opium use in India persisted well into the twentieth century, when the racial difference was used to draw a distinction between opium smoking and opium eating, which formed the basis of the government’s defence of the opium consumption in India in transnational forums (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3).

The racialised ‘othering’ was lent medical credence by Dr C.J. Simons, the Assam Company’s senior most doctor, who argued that “opium varies in its effects on different nations”.⁵⁴ Simons underlined that this difference was partly determined by constitutions, manner of consumption and food habits but emphasised that European minds became elevated through opium use but “in other nations, like the Malayas, a raving frenzy is excited, while in the Assamese it invariably has the effect of reducing them to the pitiful, abject objects”.⁵⁵ The work also challenged the idea of opium as a medicinal substance and even argued that it was the root cause behind the physical, mental and moral degeneracy as well as the indolence of the general population.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ [Francis Jenkins to Board of Revenue, Calcutta], No. 149, Foreign Department (Political), 6 March 1839, National Archives of India (hereafter, NAI).

⁵¹ Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*, p. 19.

⁵² Kar, “Enervating Opium”, pp. 375–76.

⁵³ The image of the Indian opium eater was linked with opium use amongst the Rajputs and associated with the martial race theory.

⁵⁴ Simons, *Effects of Opium*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Simons, *Effects of Opium*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Simons, *Effects of Opium*, pp. 10–11.

An interesting facet of ‘othering’ within indigenous society emerges from *Rasik Puran*, composed by Dutiram ‘Swarnakar’ Hazarika in the vernacular Puranic style, which narrated the story of the divine origins and worldly lives of four intoxicants with an emphasis on opium.⁵⁷ Apart from emphasising opium’s medicinal value and its capacity to rejuvenate the fatigued body, the verse-poem also made a sharp distinction between opium use by “rich men” and “ordinary men”, and attributed well-being and happiness to the former but physical decay and ruination on the latter.

The point about opium’s differential action on individuals was well established in popular understanding of the drug in Assam and Dutiram’s views echo that of wider middle-class sentiment. In fact, Maniram Dewan’s⁵⁸ memorial to Mills maintained that opium use was limited to the gentry during the Ahom period and only during the late eighteenth century, which was marked by social unrest due to the Burmese incursions, that the “lower orders” took up the habit and became “inveterate opium-eaters and ... have spread the practice universally”.⁵⁹ The use of opium for pleasure or recreational purposes was highlighted by government bureaucrats who traced the origins of this habit to the practices of the Ahom royalty and gentry.⁶⁰ Bodhisattva Kar has suggested that the democratisation of opium use that took place through emulation of the practice by the wider population in its quest of “symbolic capital”, led to a dramatic change in the indigenous discourse on opium—from aristocratic pleasure inducing commodity to an immoral practice denoting debasement.⁶¹

The predisposition of the Assamese to opium addiction based on their racial attributes was also reflected in the work of nationalist leaders, including M.K. Gandhi,⁶²

⁵⁷ The manuscript is not dated but from events described in the narrative poem, it was most likely composed in the late-1870s. Dutiram ‘Swarnakar’ Hazarika, *Rasik Puran (Ba Dhapat, Aphu Gut, Bhang, Dhuturar Utpatti)*, No. 111, Vol. 21, pp. 348–62, Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (hereafter, DHAS). Dutiram was also the author of *Kalibharat Assam Buranji*, a historical work that was used by E.A. Gait as source material in *A History of Assam* (1906).

⁵⁸ Maniram Dutta Baruah Dewan (1806–1858) was a member of the traditional Assamese nobility. He joined the East India Company and quickly rose within the ranks from *tehsildar* to *dewan*. During the 1857 Rebellion, he led a conspiracy to restore Ahom rule in Assam, following which he was publicly hanged at Jorhat Jail in 1858. See Sarma, *Luminaries*, pp. 190–196.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Kar, “Enervating Opium”, pp. 355–56.

⁶⁰ [Statement of Madhab Chandra Bardalai], *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium, Vol. II: Evidence* (London, 1894), p. 302.

⁶¹ Kar, “Enervating Opium”, pp. 362–63.

⁶² Gandhi had dismissed Assam as backward and uncivilized (“jungly”) in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and during his 1921 tour to the province the provincial administration used this reference to attack Gandhi which prompted him to use his first public address to apologise to the people of Assam. M.K. Gandhi, “Experiences in Assam—I” (translated from Gujarati), *Navajivan* (4 September 1921), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXI (August 1921–December 1921)* (Ahmedabad, 1966), pp. 53–58.

and prominent prohibitionists. C.F. Andrews,⁶³ who played a crucial role in the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry, 1924–1925 (discussed in Chapter 3), and had an intimate knowledge of opium use in Assam, also attributed a “recognized racial weakness” among people with “Mongolian blood” as a cause behind Assam’s opium addiction problem.⁶⁴ Jayeeta Sharma has noted the tea industry’s role in the creation of the “lazy native”, specifically its need for “regular, disciplined labour force” which found medical credence in the theory about the “innate indolence, perhaps a climatic or racial trait which made labouring work unpopular” amongst the Assamese, justifying the substitution of the local workforce with immigrant labour from central India.⁶⁵ The narrative that conflated opium use with laziness among the Assamese persisted in official reports well into the 1920s and 1930s. A government enquiry into the credit and finance system in the province attributed the poor economic conditions of the province as well as widespread indebtedness amongst the Assamese peasantry to opium. The report also made a distinction between the “lazy”, “thriftless” and “ambitionless” Assamese peasant and settlers from other provinces—particularly the Bengali and ex-tea garden worker engaged in cultivation—on the basis that they were not opium users which made them “laborious” and successful.⁶⁶

The issue of opium consumption in tea gardens in Assam, however, remained outside mainstream public debate, despite widespread addiction in the gardens as well as distribution of opium by the garden management in lieu of cash wages.⁶⁷ This was due to the fact that the gardens remained outside the purview of provincial politics and the workers, referred to as ‘coolies’, were non-native immigrants who were linguistically and culturally distinct from Assamese society.⁶⁸ The lack of integration of the tea workforce with local communities also distanced the ‘coolie’ from mainstream political and social movements and the tea garden existed virtually as an extra-territorial entity outside the

⁶³ Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940) was a prominent author and campaigner for Indian independence and popularly known as ‘Deenbandhu’ (friend of the poor). Influenced by G.K. Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore and M.K. Gandhi, Andrews played an important role in the campaign for labour rights, especially on the issue of indentured labour. Andrews acted as an advisor and representative of Indian delegations at a number of international forums as well as negotiations with the British government. Hugh Tinker, “Andrews, Charles Freer (1871–1940)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38830>, accessed 17 April 2015.

⁶⁴ C.F. Andrews, *Opium Evil in India: Britain’s Responsibility* (London, 1926), p. 20.

⁶⁵ Sharma, “‘Lazy’ Natives”, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Government of Assam, *Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Report of 1929–30* (Shillong, 1930), pp. 21, 18.

⁶⁷ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta, 1991), p. 285.

⁶⁸ See, for a discussion of the socio-economic dimensions Assam tea gardens, Rana P. Behal, “The Emergence of a Plantation Economy: Assam Tea Industry in the Nineteenth Century”, NMML Occasional Paper Number XXI (1985).

geo-body of Assam. Significantly, the ‘coolie’ was seen as racially different from the Assamese and this meant that a distinct set of discourses shaped the colonial imaginary of the garden and opium use by the garden labour workforce. Administrators, planters and medical practitioners made a distinction between opium use by the ‘coolie’ and the native Assamese and opium policy incorporated special provisions for tea gardens to enable easy access to the drug even in the 1930s when the province entered the prohibition phase.

The next section looks at the literary response to this ‘construction’ and the creation of the *kania* as a vehicle for self-reflexive social and political commentary. It focuses on late nineteenth century Assamese satire and emphasises the literary project explored the subversive potential of the *kania* that signalled a post-linguistic, anti-colonial sentiment. The experiment, however, was destined to failure given that it was negligent of the ground realities of opium use—its appeal as an antidote to *bhagor* (fatigue) for the uneducated rural masses. Additionally, these creative explorations of the *kania* were forestalled by political changes following the Bengal Partition of 1905 which resulted in the creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A). The perceived threat of a Bengali-speaking majority by the Assamese intelligentsia reignited the mid-nineteenth century language debate and ushered in a phase of insularity marked by linguistic nationalism and parochialism and the *kania* withdrew into its ‘Assamese’ mould.

1.2 The *Kania* Speaks Back: Assamese Literature, Linguistic Nationalism and Liminality

The labelling and compartmentalisation of identities within an Indic past as well as the incorporation of minority cultures and practices into the mainstream was an integral part of the colonial discourse that homogenised localised, fragmented and subversive forms as an organisational principle.⁶⁹ The creation of the ‘Assamese’ identity—as a territorial being constituted by its own memory and history—should be understood as a significant legacy of the colonial period in the province of Assam. With the advent of British rule, Assam was integrated into the geographical boundaries of India and “permanently de-linked from Burma and the rest of Southeast Asia, areas which Assam has shared historic

⁶⁹ See Gyanendra Pandey, “In Defence of the Fragment”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986–1995* (Delhi, 1997), pp. 1–33.

and cultural connections for centuries”.⁷⁰ This started the “Indianisation” of the Assam valley and a “new decontextualized and ahistorical ... target community”, the Assamese, emerged as a community whose memory was connected to the Indic cultural heritage.⁷¹ In this process, local identities and cultures were transformed and the colonial encounter resulted in a process of history-making whose contextual background was part of the wider ‘design’ of the imperial enterprise, which K.N. Panikkar has suggested was “not merely an exercise in ‘knowing’, it was an effort in *constructing it anew* as well”.⁷²

The ‘project’ of identity formation promoted group identification and privileging of certain sections of society, especially traditional elite groups, at the cost of marginal communities and tribes including the newly settled tea garden workers. Under British rule and in British imagination, therefore, the Assamese existed as an ‘integrated’ community, not through language but through a shared cultural heritage with Indic civilisation and all tribal groups and marginal communities were virtually omitted from the body politic. With the demarcation of Assam from the province of Bengal in 1874 and the recognition of Assamese as the official language of the province, awareness of an Assamese identity and its Ahom (and tribal) past began to egress out of its shell. This process of identity formation was induced by the middle class intelligentsia whose efforts were directed at recovering Assam’s pre-colonial history in order to create a sense of pride in the past. This identity was not “reactive, stemming from and consisting of only resistance to Bengali and to its cultural concomitants” but rooted in commonality of history, language, domicile, cultural practices and religion, especially the opposition to Sanskritised (read upper caste) orthodoxy and celebration of Vaishnavism.⁷³ In the late nineteenth century, Assamese nationality, with an emphasis on the commonly used word *jati* (community),⁷⁴ was imagined in terms of a common language and a common culture operating within the geographical space called Assam, and endeavoured to homogenise many ethnic, religious and linguistic communities of the region.

⁷⁰ Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai Ahom Struggle* (New Delhi, 2002), p. 94.

⁷¹ Saikia, *Assam and India*, p. 94.

⁷² K.N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 108, emphasis added.

⁷³ Sudhir Chandra, “Regional Consciousness in 19th Century India: A Preliminary Note”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter, *EPW*), Vol. 17, No. 32 (August 1982), p. 1280.

⁷⁴ In the 1890s the word possessed a fluidity of meaning but indicated an awareness of an “Assamese” identity that was inclusive, rather than an insular communitarian marker of identity.

The discussion below will signal the transition from social reform to the emergence of a post-linguistic Indian nationalism through a study of satirical works centred on opium—Hemchandra Barua’s *Kaniar Kirtan* (Glories of the Opium Addict, 1861) and Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s⁷⁵ sketches of the opium-addict Kripabar Barua during the period 1890–1904, especially *Kripabar Baruar Kakotor Topola* (Kripabar Barua’s Bundle of Papers, 1904).⁷⁶ It needs to be highlighted that the *kania* played a central role in the genesis of an anti-colonial sentiment in Assam. The social reform movement and middle class activism needed a target for its agenda and the *kania* was identified as the most appropriate candidate given that opium addiction was not divided along class, caste or religious lines. Moreover, for writers the *kania*’s position in society as a marginal, non-normative figure enabled it to be moulded for different purposes as well as exploration of autonomy that could be used to challenge dominant social discourses. The focus will be on literary production between 1846 and 1904—the publication of the first issue of the *Orunodoi* (New Dawn) and the last issue of *Jonaki* (Moonlight).⁷⁷ The discussion emphasises the existence of two distinct phases of satirical writing which is marked by the development of a distinctly colloquial, less-Sanskritized linguistic register which enabled an adept expression of satire. This transition took place in the mid-1870s following the recognition of Assamese as a full-fledged language by the British government in 1873 and the publication of Gunabhiram Barua’s *Asom Buranji* (Assam History, 1875) which ushered in a new historical sensibility.

The early-nineteenth century movement for social reform that is definitive of the Indian intellectual sphere is virtually absent in Assam and it is only in the mid-nineteenth century that the growth of education enabled the emergence of literature aimed at social reform in a yet-to-be standardised Assamese, Bengali, as well as, English.⁷⁸ Although this was largely the effect of the province’s contact with Calcutta serving as the metropolitan

⁷⁵ Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864–1938) was a celebrated pioneer of modern Assamese literature and one of the literary stalwarts of the Jonaki Era (the age of romanticism in Assam). Through numerous essays, plays, fiction, poetry, commentary and satires, he gave new impetus to the stagnating Assamese literary culture and the period between 1880 and 1930 is often referred to as the “Bezbaroa Era”. Amaresh Datta (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Vol. 1* (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 416–17.

⁷⁶ The Kripabar oeuvre includes “Kripabar Baruar Kakotor Topola”, “Kripabar Baruar Obhatani”, “Barbaruar Bulani”, “Barbaruar Bhavar Burburani”, “Barbaruar Chintar Silguti”, “Barbaruar Sahityic Bahashya” and “Kripabar Baruar Samarani”. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali* [The Collected Works of Bezbaroa], ed. Atul Hazarika, 2 Vols, (Gauhati, 1968).

⁷⁷ Uddipan Dutta, “The Growth of Print Nationalism, Politics of Language and Dialect, Fear of the Outsiders and the Formation of Assamese Identity in the Pages of Two Early Assamese Magazines—*Arunodoi* and *Jonaki*”, Unpublished paper, CSDS (New Delhi, 2005).

⁷⁸ Nilmoni Phookan, “The Social Scene that was Changing during Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Times”, in Maheswar Neog (ed.), *Lakshminath Bezbaroa: The Sahityarathi of Assam* (Gauhati, 1972), pp. 36–42.

centre, a general survey of the histories of Assamese literature and of works of literary criticism reveal a tendency to play down the role of the Bengali intelligentsia in transmitting Western ideological currents and ideas.⁷⁹ A distinct feature of the literary efflorescence in Assam was that it was a middle-class movement that was driven by the struggle to get recognition for Assamese as a language and replace Bengali as the official language.⁸⁰

During the early years of what has now been called the modern period in Assamese literature, new literary trends precipitated through the influence of Western education, journalism and art. The role played by the missionaries, especially the American Baptist missionaries who set up the region's first printing press in March 1836, was crucial in this regard and the publication of the journal *Orunodoi* (1846–1880) at the Sadiya Mission Press marked a landmark.⁸¹ The role of the missionaries was not entirely evangelical and their efforts were intimately tied to the tea industry as they received patronage of the state—the location of the Mission Press at Sadiya, also the centre of the early Assam tea industry, was therefore not a coincidence.⁸² *Orunodoi* was credited with ushering in a new secular trend and establishing the tradition of Western liberal thought in Assam; the journal's role in the 'downward filtration' of European thought as well as initiating and nurturing a class of Assamese intellectuals who acted as torchbearers of this modernity is widely recognised.⁸³

⁷⁹ B.K. Barua, *History of Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1964); Hem Barua, *Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1965); Tilottoma Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam: A Study in Assam Renaissance, 1826–1926* (Guwahati, 1987). See also Amalendu Guha "Impact of the Bengal Renaissance in Assam: 1825–1875", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter, *IESHR*), Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1972), pp. 288–304, for an analysis of the implications of this sudden and distinctive break from the past from an economic and political perspective.

⁸⁰ In a resolution of the General Department (Education) dated 12 April 1873 the government decided to use Assamese in place of Bengali in all primary, middle and high schools in Assam and this was followed by orders issued by the Lieutenant Governor on 25 July 1873 which permitted the use of Assamese in Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts for all government work. See Bodhisattva Kar "'Tongue has No Bone': Fixing the Assamese Language c.1800–c.1930", *Studies in History*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2008), pp. 27–76.

⁸¹ Although most commentators recognise 1880 as the year when the journal ceased to exist, it was published intermittently till as late as 1892. *Orunodoi*, modelled on *Samachar Darpan*, was published by Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter. B.K. Bhattacharya, *Humour and Satire in Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 142–43. See also, H.K. Barpujari, *American Missionaries and North-East India, 1836–1900: A Documentary Study* (Guwahati, 1986), pp. 314–17.

⁸² Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam*, p. 66. See also, Farina Mir "Imperial Policy, Provincial Practices: Colonial Language Policy in Nineteenth-Century India", *IESHR*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (December 2006), especially pp. 402–05, for an analysis of the influence of financial concerns on language policy as an extension of the colonial state's policy of encouraging native intermediaries.

⁸³ Thomas Macaulay's model for Indian education was in practice from 1833 to 1853, and in Assam, like other parts of India, English education was reserved to a select few who were expected to pass on the

The journal played a crucial role in commencing the wider public debate on opium addiction in Assam and its very first issue carried a piece titled “*Kanir Bibaran*” (“Evils of Opium”) which highlighted the negative effects of opium use on Assamese society.⁸⁴ The article reaffirmed the colonial discourse on opium and highlighted how it had stripped the Assamese people of reason and good-sense and rendered them habitually indolent and irreverent, and in its role as an evangelical periodical, it encouraged users to quit opium for both moral and physical gains. Significantly, the first issue also published a report of the proceedings of a meeting of Sibsagar Gyan Sabha (Sibsagar Learned Society) which passed a unanimous resolution on the evils of the drug and its tenacious hold on Assamese society signifying that the opium question was part of debates in the public sphere.⁸⁵ As part of its social reform programme, *Orunodoi* regularly carried articles devoted to opium or opium-related issues and discussion of opium addiction also featured in wider debates on issues like education, health and social well-being. An article titled “China and Opium” published in February 1853 highlighted the issue of Chinese opium addiction and drew parallels with Assam and its opium problem, lending the local debate an international aspect, and, in the process, introducing a connection that had significant bearing in subsequent decades.⁸⁶

Opium was intimately tied with the social reform agenda of writers and Hemchandra Barua’s *Kaniar Kirtan* (Glories of the Opium Addict, 1861), performed and published the same year as the Phulaguri rebellion,⁸⁷ marked a significant development. The propaganda-play, in the form of verse-drama that used satire and humour, was not only one of the earliest social dramas in the Assamese language but also the first literary work that had opium use in Assam at its heart. A recent assessment of the play has suggested that it demonstrated that “opium penetrated into the heart of the society and made it weak, poor, degenerate, immoral and mean” and, as such, its social message was

benefits to society at large. See Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam*, pp. 58–91, for an impact of this policy in Assam.

⁸⁴ *Orunodoi*, January 1846. Maheswar Neog (comp. and ed.), *Orunodoi, 1846–1854* (Gauhati, 1983), pp. 6–8.

⁸⁵ *Orunodoi*, January 1846. Neog, *Orunodoi*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ *Orunodoi*, February 1853. Neog, *Orunodoi*, p. 899.

⁸⁷ In mid-October 1861 a *raij mel* (people’s assembly) was organised in Phulaguri, a small hamlet in Nowgong district, to discuss the grievances of the local peasants following a ban on poppy cultivation and the introduction of a new agricultural tax as well as rumours about enhancement of land revenue rates. The event, attended by more than 4,000 people, marked the first organised peasant protest in the region and on 18 October, a regiment of the Assam Light Infantry and the local police clashed with the peaceful protesters, resulting in the death of the British commanding officer and around 40 peasants.

clearly a reaffirmation of the colonial discourse on the *kania*.⁸⁸ However, the play reveals a self-reflexive criticism of Assamese society as the target of the satire was upper class orthodoxy, especially Vaishnavite religious hypocrisy, and opium addicts who claimed moral superiority on the basis of their social standing.⁸⁹ The play revolves around Kritikanta, the son of a *mauzadar* (member of rural gentry), who joins the local ‘opium den’ and neglects his familial and social duties. The social message of the play materialises from Kritikanta’s debauchery and downfall due to a tryst with a promiscuous woman named Pān, a play on words which literally refers to the act of opium use but the punning is implied since Kritikanta not only consumes opium but the lure of Pān eventually consumes him. Within the world of the play, the ‘opium den’ is the microcosm of society and the act of opium consumption signifies moral debasement of society at various levels; using the downfall of Kritikanta, Barua, therefore, comments on the societal aspects of addiction amongst the Assamese.

Although the social reform literature on opium highlighted the issue of addiction to the wider public, it did little to challenge the rhetoric and power of the discourse of the ‘lazy native’ centred on moral, spiritual and physical degeneracy. Instead, as the discussion of Barua’s play above shows, it emphasised and internalised this mode of representation and promoted the conflation of opium addiction and ‘Assamese’ identity. Although addiction affected ethnic tribes and tea garden workers across the province, the popular understanding of the opium problem by the 1880s was as an issue that pertained only to the population that spoke and identified themselves as Assamese. This had significant ramifications in the opium prohibition campaign in the late nineteenth century as the period was marked by the politics of Assamese communal insularity and linguistic nationalism which meant that the anti-opium movement lacked a wider support base.

During this period, a section of the middle class strongly advocated the need to assimilate and integrate the immigrant Bengali peasants and plantation workers into the provincial mainstream. One of them was Gunabhiram Barua (1837–1894), an important social reform advocate, writer and editor of *Assam Bandhu* (Friend of Assam, 1885–86), whose journalistic pieces espoused his liberal stance and interpreted the social realities of Assam in a pluralist manner and advocated the economic, social and cultural benefits of

⁸⁸ Nagen Saikia, *Background of Modern Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1988), p. 218.

⁸⁹ Bhattacharya, *Humour and Satire*, p. 149.

immigration.⁹⁰ Individuals like Barua played an important role in bridging the gap between the aspirations of the Assamese petit bourgeoisie, distinguished by parochial linguistic nationalism, and the cosmopolitan ideas of a section of Presidency elites.

Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha (Association for Development of Assamese Language; hereafter, ABUSS), a cultural organization formed in Calcutta on 25 August 1888 by a group of students, typified the trend of Assamese linguistic nationalism.⁹¹ The organisation was the ideological forebear of the literary journal, *Jonaki* (Moonlight, 1889–1904), which catered to “all sections of the people of Assam”, especially “young Assam”.⁹² The journal distinguished itself through articles that used satire as an instrument for exposing social iniquities and these pieces lent the social reform movement in Assam a fresh breath of life.⁹³ The most significant of these were the humorous skits and satirical writings of Bezbaroa, under the *nom de plume* of the aforementioned Kripabar Barua, an opium addict, which first appeared in the *Jonaki*.⁹⁴ Literary critics like Tilottoma Misra have labelled Bezbaroa’s writings as the “most militant expressions” of Assamese linguistic nationalism and have associated his writings with the agenda of linguistic nationalism promoted by ABUSS.⁹⁵ The discussion below challenges this assessment and argues that Bezbaroa’s satirical pieces with opium addicts as protagonists signalled Assam’s entry into the Indian nationalistic framework rather than promote parochial regionalisms. Misra’s primary contention about Bezbaroa’s linguistic nationalist sentiment is premised on the argument that his “characteristic levity” was a device to mask his “sincere and passionate attachment to his homeland”, a facet that moulded his insular political convictions.⁹⁶ Bezbaroa’s opium addict characters, we argue, suggests the exact opposite; it is through levity that he masked his radical outlook and in a climate where expression of ambivalence towards Assamese nationalism invited

⁹⁰ “Editorial: Bangali [Bengali]”, *Assam Bandhu*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1885), pp. 95–100; “Amar Manuh [Our People]”, *Assam Bandhu*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1885), pp. 133–35.

⁹¹ Saikia, *Assamese Literature*, pp. 301.

⁹² Quoted in S.K. Bhuyan (comp. and ed.), *Jonaki*. 2nd edn (Gauhati, 1938), p. 2, original translation.

⁹³ Bhabaprasad Chaliha, “The Jonaki and Asamiya Bhasha-Unnati-Sadhini Sabha” [translation of Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s, “Mor Jivan-Suvaron”], in Neog (ed.), *Sahityarathi*, pp. 67–73.

⁹⁴ Opium addicts also featured in Bezbaroa’s farce, *Litikai*, which was published in the same journal during 1889–1890.

⁹⁵ Misra, *Literature and Society*, p. 199.

⁹⁶ Misra, *Literature and Society*, p. 199.

censure, writers had to use satire in order to express views that went against popular sentiment.⁹⁷

In order to understand Bezbaroa's radical position, we need to appreciate the emergence of a new 'Assamese spirit' in literature in the 1890s (commonly referred to as the 'Jonaki period' after the journal) that was a manifestation of the recognition of Assamese as an autonomous language by the government in 1873. Satyanath Bara, in his review of *Bhramaranga* (1888),⁹⁸ a translation of William Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors*, which appeared in the first issue of *Jonaki* in 1890, hailed the work as a landmark in Assamese satire and proposed that the confident use of everyday speech patterns in the play marked the beginning of a new era of consciousness in Assamese literature.⁹⁹ Bara distinguished this new comic consciousness from satirical writing in the 1860s and 1870s, for instance Hemchandra Barua's works, which were centred on the use and mastery of *hasya rasa*,¹⁰⁰ while the new satirical literature was distinct in its use of "manner of speech [and] style" as well as political outlook.¹⁰¹ This new era was the product of a trend in which indigenous writers were influenced by and borrowed from Western intellectual and literary models and used them as frames of reference to develop an original literary idiom and language.

The development of the public sphere¹⁰² in India has been interpreted as signalling modernity, but with regard to the opium discourse, especially the 'construction' of the *kania*, the feature of colonial modernity is problematical.¹⁰³ Ranajit Guha's argument about the ineffectiveness of the nineteenth century Indian bourgeoisie in nurturing wider social change and its failure to emerge as a potential anti-colonial force enables an analysis of the literature on the *kania*. Guha's argument emphasised that the Indian bourgeoisie was unsuccessful in "measuring up to the heroism of the European bourgeoisie in its period of ascendancy" and emerged as a "caricature"—an imitative,

⁹⁷ See Lakshminath Bezbaroa, "Editorial: On Satirical Literature", *Banhi*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (1912), p. 391, for a discussion about the role of satire in Assam.

⁹⁸ He wrote this piece in appreciation of the first Assamese translation of Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* (c.1590), titled *Bhramaranga* (1888), translated by four Assamese youths studying in Calcutta.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Bhattacharya, *Humour and Satire*, p. 185, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ *Hasya Rasa* is one of the nine *rasas* (or flavours) of Indian classical arts and aesthetics. *Hasya* refers to laughter or humour and was frequently used during the nineteenth century literary revivals in India to critique colonialism.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Bhattacharya, *Humour and Satire*, p. 185.

¹⁰² Jürgen Habermas defined the public sphere as a space where private individuals came together as a public to make use of their reason as the ground of critical authority and judgment. Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge MA, 1992), pp. 12–16.

¹⁰³ This argument draws from Scott, "Colonial Governmentality", p. 201.

surrogate formation—that was restricted by imperial domination.¹⁰⁴ The discussion below contends that literary representations of opium addicts in Indian literatures—Bengali and Assamese—occupied a wholly different arena of possibilities, challenging the ‘ascendency’ of Europe as the imaginary worlds of the opium addicts offered potential for subversion in a colonial public sphere.¹⁰⁵ This subversive potential was recognised by writers who used satire in their representation of opium addicts and their illusory, dream-like worlds in order to challenge the hegemonic tendencies of indigenous structures of power as well as ‘caricaturise’ the seriousness of colonial formations as a means to challenge the rationality of Empire. Operating within the limitations of colonial power structures, satirical works with opium addicts as authorial vehicles offered writers the possibility of presenting an ‘alternative’ reality which enabled them to critique the indigenous social reform movement and also offer a subversive indictment of the enterprise of colonialism.

The trajectory of representations of opium and opium users in nineteenth century Assamese literature was different from that of Bengal; while Bengali literary works explored the ‘madness’ and ‘genius’ of opium addicts—a literary descendent of European Romanticism—the ‘opium evil’ narrative dominated Assamese writing and the opium-eater ‘figure’ was the formulaic site of personification of all evils, especially the degeneracy of the Assamese, till the late 1880s. This trend changed with the arrival of Bezbaroa, whose literary opium addicts were modelled as ‘creative geniuses’ and acted as vehicles of self-reflective social critique and commentary. The aforementioned Kripabar Barua, the first opium eater in Bezbaroa’s literary oeuvre,¹⁰⁶ appeared in a cartoon that was published in *Jonaki* in 1890 and he identified himself as a great warrior holding a *sudershan chakra* (mythical weapon) in one hand and a *trishul* (trident) in the other. This description indicated that Kripabar was an embodiment of Krishna and Shiva and, by extension, the representative of the two most prominent Hindu cults of Assam—the

¹⁰⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge MA, 1997), p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ For an exploration of Habermas’ theorisation of sovereignty, see David Gilmartin “Rethinking the Public through the Lens of Sovereignty”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2015), pp. 371–86.

¹⁰⁶ Opium eaters were a recurring motif in his later writings, especially in the period beginning in 1905 and ending in the early 1920s with the publications of short story collections. The most memorable opium addict in Bezbaroa’s literary career is Milaram. In all, he wrote five short stories as satires of opium eaters: “Milaramar Atmajivani”, “Arji”, “Keko Kaka”, “Chenichampa” and “Amar Kaniya Sabhar Ek Adhiveshan”. See Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Bezbaroa Granthavali* [The Collected Works of Bezbaroa], ed. Atul Hazarika, Vol. II (Gauhati, 1968).

Vaisnavites and the Shaivites. Bezbaroa used opium addicts as alter egos and employed satire to showcase the subversive potential of subjects who refused to exist in spaces circumscribed by the colonial state as well as challenge notions of normativity and the politics of identity.

Sudipta Kaviraj's reading of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's¹⁰⁷ *Kamalakanta* (1885)¹⁰⁸ offers a paradigm to assess the role of opium eaters as authorial vehicles in Bezbaroa's satirical works. Kaviraj suggested that the novel was Bankim's "secret autobiography" that criticised normativity and the worldview of Bengali society through humour and argued that the main protagonist, the half conformist, half rebel, opium addict Kamalakanta Chaudhuri, was Bankim's anti-thesis.¹⁰⁹ Groups of artists and intellectuals who used opium for noetic purposes was a common feature in nineteenth century Calcutta intellectual circuits, and satirical representations of opium addicts also featured in mainstream literature, most prominently Bankim's *Kamalakanta*.¹¹⁰ The liminality of the irrational opium-induced world of "idle, disorderly, unmarried, unkempt, socially indescribable" fringe-dwellers like Kamalakanta and Kripabar had subversive potential as the irrationality of the worlds of opium addicts offered indigenous writers a space for rebellion against society as well as the colonial state apparatus.¹¹¹ Writers like Bankim and Bezbaroa created autonomous authorial characters—Kamalakanta and Kripabar—as 'symbolic disjunctions' of their own selves in order to articulate views and thoughts that they could not through their own voice due to subjective location within society and the roles that they were expected to perform as writers representing their own communities. Bezbaroa's short stories with Kripabar as the protagonist was his secret

¹⁰⁷ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), was a Bengali writer, poet and journalist, best known as the composer of the revolutionary anthem, "Vande Mataram" and regarded as a key figure on the literary renaissance in nineteenth century Bengal.

¹⁰⁸ Kamalakanta first appeared in *Kamalakantar Daptar* (From the Desk of Kamalakanta) in 1875. This was expanded into a novel that was published in 1885.

¹⁰⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 28.

¹¹⁰ A group of young men called 'Paksi' (birds) used opium for creative explorations and they featured in one of the satirical pieces written by 'Hootum', a popular Calcutta satirist noted for his *naksas* (sketches). The capacity to enjoy ganja (cannabis) and gooli (opium balls for smoking) gave each member of the 'Paksi' group his name, usually the name of a particular bird. Amit Basu, "Cannabis and Madness: Evidence from the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, Bengal 1894", *Studies in History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2000), p. 131.

¹¹¹ Kaviraj, *Unhappy Consciousness*, p. 29.

autobiography and Kripabar personified the ambitions of the society and demonstrated the will to resist being co-opted into the social reform rhetoric.¹¹²

In an atmosphere where debates about the ‘proper sphere’ of Assamese literature were being fashioned, Kripabar’s incisive wit and commentary challenged the very ways in which society looked at itself and the satire was not directed at the social evils themselves but at exploring the limits of its ‘caricaturing’ possibilities. As such, opium eaters were portrayed not as individuals who needed help and redemption but rather as fiercely independent characters who are able to render their own failings and imbibe a sense of self-deprecation. The focus of the satire was on the superfluity of the evils themselves and helped redirect the focus of society on the policies and functioning of the colonial state, bringing attention to the government’s opium policy, for instance.

Kripabar, as Bezbaroa’s authorial alter ego, challenged the very ways in which society looked at itself and epitomised a new kind of Assamese identity that was not defined by language but its opposition to social orthodoxies and upper class domination as well as the colonial state and its policies. The critical commentary of the inwardness of linguistic and social structures of belonging offered a post-linguistic possibility that encompassed anti-colonial Assamese nationalism as well as the wider discourse of Indian nationalism. This represented a crucial moment in the history of the Assamese community at the turn of the twentieth century as it contended with parochialism and regionalism on the one hand, and the emergence of the national and the anti-colonial, on the other.

The new modes of self-identification, emphasised by the likes of Bezbaroa, challenged limiting strategies like linguistic nationalism but failed to gain widespread support as parochialism and regionalism dominated provincial politics in the wake of the Bengal Partition of 1905 and ensured the effacement of post-linguistic possibilities. Another reason for the failure of the literary project of empowering the opium addict was that it was premature and negligent of the social realities of opium use in Assam given that the illiterate lower classes were the worst affected and their response to the state was through more direct means (discussed in the next section). A direct consequence of the Partition was the proposal for the creation of a province that was to be called ‘North Eastern Province’, a move which united Assamese nationalists in opposing what they saw

¹¹² This potential is only fully realised with another (inverted) alter-ego Milaram, especially with *Milaramar Atmajivani*.

as an attempt to “obliterate the very name of Assam”.¹¹³ The Partition resulted in the amalgamation of the densely populated eastern districts of the Bengal Presidency with Assam and its relatively modest population into the newly created province of EB&A (see Appendix 1[b]). This move had two immediate effects; first, the Bengali-speaking majority status of the new province renewed the linguistic debate centred on the position of the Assamese language that was dormant for about three decades; and, second, the immigration of Muslim peasants from the densely populated districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh into the Assam valley fostered the rise of communal politics in Assam.¹¹⁴

The self-assuredness of the literary elites’ use of satire centred on opium addicts as a device for social critique and commentary failed to create an impact on the prohibition movement or precipitate the rise of an inclusive pan-Indian nationalism but offered a critique that was both bold and self-reflexive. These explorations of a post-linguistic sentiment presented writers with the potential for subversive literature but as opium use lost its appeal among the upper class in late nineteenth century, the critical edge of satirical representations for social critique also disappeared. Opium addiction with a strong social reform and prohibition agenda re-emerged in theatre in the 1920s as part of the local anti-opium propaganda as well as when the administration enacted total prohibition in 1939–41.¹¹⁵

1.3 The Emergence of the Anti-Opium Campaign: Middle-class Activism, Social Reform and Peasant Protests

From a survey of the anti-opium campaign in Assam two critical elements can be isolated; first, the opium debate relied on the formation of public opinion that was shaped in the public sphere, and second, its success depended on public protests and agitations that had definite social and political goals. This section emphasises that the prohibition debate in Assam developed primarily due to local factors but from the very beginning it was influenced by events that took place outside the locality. The anti-opium campaign in Assam featured a range of attitudes to government policy as well as addiction amongst

¹¹³ S.K. Barpujari and A.C. Bhuyan (eds), *Political History of Assam, Volume One 1826–1919*, 3rd edn (Guwahati, 2008), p. 182.

¹¹⁴ Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 58–60.

¹¹⁵ Examples include, *Kaniya Kadam*, a social play, written by Mitradev Mahanta in 1922 as part of the anti-opium campaign and staged by the Jorhat Theatre Agency. Harichandra Bhattacharyya, *Origin and Development of the Assamese Drama and the Stage: From the Earliest Times up to [sic] 1940* (Gauhati, 1964), p. 215. The government also sponsored the publication of Guneswar Nath’s anti-opium propaganda play, *Udhadhon*, in 1941. Local-Self Government (hereafter, LSG), Separate Revenue, B (hereafter, SRB), September 1941, Nos. 208–10, Assam State Archives (hereafter, ASA).

the populace and these differences were not simply between the government and civil society but a range of positions existed within these groups. While the position of the government was primarily dictated by economic reasons, given that opium accounted for a substantial part of the provincial revenue, the stance of tea planters was more complex, as was the attitude of the Assamese towards the drug.

Some facets of these ambiguities have been explored above and this section will focus specifically on the prohibition effort in the period 1840s–1890s, which can be designated as the ‘first wave’ and was marked by an emphasis on opium addiction as a social evil. This period was punctuated by two important events, the Phulaguri Rebellion of 1861 and the bifurcation of Assam from Bengal Presidency in 1874. The ‘first wave’ of the opium prohibition campaign was successful in raising awareness against addiction and made modest gains in reducing opium consumption in the province, especially in the post-1874 period, but failed to make any substantial impact on the government policy which resulted in sustained growth in excise collections.

The earliest demand for opium prohibition in Assam came from the tea lobby in the form of an appeal for banning poppy cultivation in 1841. The annual report of the Assam Company¹¹⁶ stated that

Prohibition will be as much the interest as the duty of the company strictly to observe; and it is to be hoped that the government itself will take active measures to put down the cultivation of opium throughout the province, for the very general use of this drug may be mainly attributed the scantiness of the population, the wretched condition of the Assamese and the difficulty of obtaining labour from a race enfeebled by its effects.¹¹⁷

The Assam Company’s demand was motivated primarily by concerns about labour shortages in Assam which was the major factor inhibiting rapid growth of the emerging plantation economy. However, the call also echoed the familiar refrain of “wretchedness and enfeeblement” of the Assamese race,¹¹⁸ and also implicitly justified the drive for

¹¹⁶ The Assam Company (now the Assam Company India Limited) is the oldest tea company in the world and was formed by amalgamating six separate British-owned tea companies in 1839. Throughout the nineteenth century it remained the most prominent tea enterprise in Assam. See H.A Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company, 1839–1953* (Edinburgh, 1957).

¹¹⁷ Assam Company, *Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopsgate Street, on the 7th May, 1841, with an Appendix* (London, 1841), pp. 1–4.

¹¹⁸ The overall response to the government’s policy of encouraging tea cultivation in Assam, which started in the 1830s was poor due to the acute scarcity of labour; amendments on land settlement policy were carried out to make the proposition more attractive but labour shortage hampered the industry till 1859. See

‘improvement’, aspects that were already part of the evolving colonial state project in Assam. However, in the wake of the successful recruitment of emigrant labour from outside the province, primarily central India, the planters became avowed defenders of the provincial government’s policy on opium.¹¹⁹ Their singular contribution to the opium debate was therefore limited to lexical signifiers that became embedded in the colonial discourse on the Assamese opium eater and its representation as an immutable (as well as mute) figure of pitiable fortune.

In 1853, two Assamese middle class intellectuals, both of whom were also government officials, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829–1859) and Maniram Dewan (1806–58), made a significant contribution to the opium debate in the form of memorandums highlighting the untenable nature of the government’s opium policy.¹²⁰ At a time when the Assamese elites were yet to emerge as representatives of the wider population, with the American Baptist missionaries holding the mantle of forging public opinion, the memorandums were extremely mature in content and outlook.¹²¹ Their petitions were among a number of other such missives that were presented to a senior Calcutta judge who was on tour to review the provincial administration but were the only ones that embodied dissent and demanded change in British policy.

Although the two individuals were not collaborators, their recommendations were similar not only in their anti-British persuasion which had a strong tinge of a proto-nationalist sentiment but also united by their prohibitionist stance on opium, which they perceived as the logical remedy to Assam’s addiction problem. Phukan’s memorandum highlighted the deplorable conditions of the people of Assam and drew attention to the unsoundness of the government’s policy and its failure “to improve in any material degree the conditions and prosperity of the country”.¹²² He was critical of the “extensive introduction of Government opium” and emphasised that the policy would lead to an

Amalendu Guha, “Colonisation of Assam: Second Phase 1840–1859”, *IESHR*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1967), pp. 289–317.

¹¹⁹ There was, however, the odd instance which bucked the trend. In a memorial, dated 1 May, 1857, the Assam Company urged upon the Government to prohibit the cultivation of opium altogether or to restrict its production and consumption. The shift of opinion became more concrete in the 1860s when the labour problem was adequately addressed and opium became a viable ‘work drug’ that could be used to not only persuade permanent settlement of the migrants but also quell unrest and dissatisfaction.

¹²⁰ In 1853, the Judge of the Sadar Dewani Adalat (Calcutta Municipal Court) at Calcutta, A.J. Moffatt Mills, visited Assam to take an account of the administration of the province.

¹²¹ For an assessment of the role of the American Baptist missionaries in the region, see M.S. Sangma, *History of the American Baptist Mission in North-East India* (New Delhi, 1987).

¹²² Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, “Observations on the Administration of the Province of Assam”, in Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, p. xliii.

increase in addiction and demanded the implementation of a policy of prohibition in a graduated manner.¹²³ Recognising the major fault lines in opium policy, Dewan, who was also the first Assamese tea planter, called for an “immediate stop in the sale of monopoly opium” as well as “a phased program of gradual prohibition of poppy cultivation”.¹²⁴

These native voices were not the only prohibitionist voices in circulation; support was lent by doctors as well as administrators.¹²⁵ Francis Jenkins (1793–1866),¹²⁶ in a letter to the EIC Board of Revenue in October 1852, highlighted the consequence of the introduction of cheap government opium in Assam and argued that the “fall in price” had resulted in “a greater indulgence in the use of this drug than ever [before]”.¹²⁷ The pressure for a ban on opium cultivation (or a restriction on cultivation and production) came from the tea industry and the Assam Company urged upon the government in a memorial dated 1 May 1857. The proposal received the support of the local administration, which supported the policy decision on prohibition of opium cultivation not because of the ill-effects of the drug on the native population but because opium production engaged the local population in an activity that could be put to better use in the tea industry.

The administration’s policy involved a ban on poppy cultivation and the replacement of locally produced opium with EIC monopoly opium which was grown in the Gangetic plains and meant (primarily) for the export markets. This move addressed both public opinion which was sympathetic to the addiction aspect while at the same time addressed the revenue deficit. In 1860, poppy cultivation was formally banned and *abkari* (excise) opium was introduced ostensibly to save the future generations from the ill-effects through a policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’, which was aimed at pricing the drug out of the reach of the masses.¹²⁸ This scheme was welcomed by the

¹²³ Phukan, “Observations”, in Mills, *Report*, Appendix J, p. xlv.

¹²⁴ Mills, *Report*, p. 17.

¹²⁵ Mills’ report also included a note written by the Dr John Maclean, the Assistant Surgeon of Guwahati, which drew attention to the excessive and injurious use of opium by both men and women in Kamrup district. See Assam Provincial Congress Committee, *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (hereafter, *ACOER*) (Jorhat, 1925), pp. 10–11.

¹²⁶ Francis Jenkins was an East India Company (EIC) commissioner and agent for Assam. He joined the Bengal Army in 1810 and in 1828 was appointed as the fifth Chief Commissioner of Assam. He played an important role in the development of tea cultivation in Assam and was a keen botanist. In 1834, he was appointed as the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General for Assam and retired in the same post in 1861 with the rank of Major General. Francis Jenkins Papers, Mss Eur F257, India Office Records (hereafter, IOR).

¹²⁷ No. 36, “Jenkins to Board of Revenue, 18 August 1852”, Bengal Revenue Proceedings (Customs), 15 October 1852, IOR/P/110/54, IOR.

¹²⁸ Government of Assam, *Opium Prohibition in Assam, 1941* (Shillong, 1941), p. 2.

planter lobby who viewed this policy decision as an answer to their perennial labour scarcity issues which was magnified by the unwillingness of the local Assamese population to join the plantation workforce. The policy decision to ban local production and introduce monopoly opium also needs to be regarded as a dimension of the Indian government's domestic opium policy which was pursued aggressively in subsequent decades as the export market declined in the face of pressure from the transnational opium lobby (discussed in Chapter 2).

The government opium policy was articulated through the provision of the pricing mechanism, its avowed strategy of 'maximum price, minimum consumption', as a means to facilitate the gradual elimination of the drug. The government's defence of its opium policy relied on this approach which informed the government's position till as late as the mid-1920s. In practice, however, the policy was employed to maximise the revenue potential of the monopoly commodity which the administration masked through a deft insertion of the vocabulary of temperance, thrift and industry into the opium discourse and posited them as virtues that were absent among the Assamese.¹²⁹ The outcome of this move resulted in a three-fold growth in opium consumption from 625 *maunds* to 1,837 between 1860–61 and 1874–75, while the revenue grew from Rs 214,857 to Rs 1,194,564, a six fold increase during the same period.¹³⁰ The local prohibitionists expended their energy on opposing the monopoly sale and pricing policy and throughout the course of the campaign, despite dissensions on a number of issues, campaigners were united on their opposition to the pricing mechanism.

The ban on opium cultivation in 1860 also created a ripple effect that was felt throughout the Assam valley districts and resulted in the eruption of the first post-1857 insurrection in the province.¹³¹ The ban on poppy cultivation was introduced concurrently with a new agricultural tax and rumours about an enhancement of land revenue rates were in circulation and a *raij mel* (people's assembly) was organised in Phulaguri, a small hamlet in Nowgong district, in mid-October 1861, to discuss the grievances of the local peasants.¹³² On 18 October, a regiment of the Assam Light Infantry and the local police fired upon the gathering of more than 4,000 peasants and the clash resulted in the death of

¹²⁹ Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham NC, 2011), pp. 155–56.

¹³⁰ Amalendu Guha, "Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends", *IESHR*, Vol. 17, No.1 (January 1980), pp. 52–54.

¹³¹ Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 5–7.

¹³² Goswami, "Opium Evil, pp. 374–75.

Lieutenant Singer, the British commanding officer, and around 40 peasants.¹³³ In official as well as local histories, the incident, which was essentially a peasant protest, has regularly been interpreted as an expression of nationalist sentiment and words like *dhawa* (battle), uprising and rebellion have been associated with the incident and historians have highlighted the role of the traditional elites and the middle class intelligentsia in stimulating the peasants to take part in the protests.¹³⁴ The nascent local periodical press sympathised with the administration and chose to represent the peasants as “mutineers” and interpreted the violence as part of the justification for a social reform agenda.¹³⁵ The administration construed the events at Phulaguri as a riot by opium addicts and interpreted the incident as a local response to the administration’s policy of regulating opium consumption.¹³⁶ This position was emphasised by the Assam government delegation that presented evidence to the Royal Commission on Opium (RCO; 1893–1895) as symptomatic of the response that would erupt across India if prohibition were to be imposed and a similar line of argument was also taken by the Indian government in its defence of the domestic opium trade as well as the demand for its unrestrained continuation (discussed in Chapter 2). The incident enjoyed a long shelf life and acted as the point of reference for all future opium-related campaigns in Assam and the memory of the deaths of the peasants was invoked to highlight the heavy handedness of the administration, an approach that found traction among the masses during the nationalist phase.

From the very beginning, the anti-opium movement in Assam featured two (often oppositional) forces; at the very centre of the local movements, the leaders spoke to and stood for parochial interests, often extending to the village or group-of-villages level—the *raij mels*. However, with formalised politics becoming the norm by the 1890s, these were replaced by occupational interest groups, the *ryot sabhas* (peasant assemblies), for instance, which had already lost their radical/revolutionary leanings and became rural

¹³³ In the trial of Lt. Singer’s death, the accused, Nursing Lalung, was handed a death sentence and eight others received sentences of varying degrees, with at least two others receiving the death penalty.

¹³⁴ As representative cases of official and local histories, respectively, see Barpujari and Bhuyan, *Political History of Assam*, pp. 88–94; and Kalita, *Phulaguri*.

¹³⁵ Nidhi Levi Farrell, “Nogoya Druhilokor Charitra Bornon” (The Character Sketch of the Nowgong Mutineers), *Orunodoi*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (November 1861), pp. 130–31.

¹³⁶ See E.A. Gait, *Census of Assam 1891, Vol. I: Report* (Shillong, 1892), p. 231. For the official report based on the court proceedings in the trial of Nursing Lalung and eight others for the murder of Lieutenant Singer, see Government of Bengal, “No 891, E.H. Lushington, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to Major W. Agnew, Officiating Commissioner of Assam”, 31 May 1862, West Bengal State Archives (hereafter, WBSA).

replications of urban association politics. A lot of the historical (and quasi historical) literature about the growth of the middle class in the Brahmaputra valley during the period 1860s–1890s, especially following the restoration of Assamese as a recognised language in 1873 in the province, suggests that a substantial intelligentsia emerged and exhibited a modern consciousness that mirrored the advanced Presidency centres in literary and political outlook.¹³⁷ The basis of this claim, however, is largely a manifestation of Assamese cultural pride rather than fact that is supported by statistical evidence. In the absence of higher educational institutions in the province and general apathy of the administration in promoting educational infrastructure, the number of matriculates remained abysmally low and only rose from 4 in 1872 to 32 in 1898 and the total number of graduates during the period 1887–1899 stood at 29.¹³⁸ During the same period only one native Assamese made it to the Indian Civil Service, another was part of the Engineering Service, while two others joined the Indian Medical Service.¹³⁹

The figures suggest that little structural change from a traditional hereditary to a meritocracy ensued and older forms of social organisation stayed intact till the beginning of the twentieth century. Another palpable lack was the absence of a significant Assamese mercantile bourgeoisie, apart from a handful of tea planters with modest plantations, which meant that the traditional land-owning classes wielded substantial power and influence. The relatively modest Western educated Assamese intellectuals commanded over the formation of informed public opinion in the Brahmaputra valley, but their reach was limited to only a small sub section of the urbanised elites.¹⁴⁰ It was the traditional elites who formed the core of the ‘enlightened’ section of society and had both cultural and social affinities with the peasant community and possessed a keen understanding of local and everyday grievances of the population at large. However, both the middle class intelligentsia and the traditional elites identified themselves as distinct from the rural masses.

In the mid-1880s, Assam entered a phase of ‘association politics’ and the *sabhas* (assemblies) organised to promote the Assamese language and literature in the preceding

¹³⁷ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *Assamese Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1976); Misra, *Literature and Society in Assam*; Nagen Saikia, *Background of Modern Assamese Literature* (New Delhi, 1988); Rajen Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam, 1853–1921* (New Delhi, 2000).

¹³⁸ Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 47.

¹³⁹ Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁰ Misra, *Literature and Society*; Saikia, *Assamese Literature*; Guha, “Renaissance in Assam”, pp. 288–304.

decades evolved into *ryot sabhas* and community groups which were organised under the stewardship of these elites.¹⁴¹ These bodies served as key institutions and represented the core aspirations of society and a few of them also contained the vestiges of anti-British sentiment, especially in areas where government policy has resulted in local grievances. In the 1880s, Assam had three local offices of the Indian Association, and this was the only palpable link with national political activity at the time. A number of Assamese students, entrepreneurs and professionals based in Calcutta were, however, active in Calcutta social circles since the 1860s and their numbers were substantial by the 1880s. These individuals formed a number of social and cultural organisations that represented Assamese interests but espoused a spectrum of positions and ideologies with little other than a linguistic nationalism acting as the cementing force. Organisations such as the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha (Jorhat Community Association, hereafter JSS)¹⁴² and literary associations in the lineage of ABUSS had by the 1890s wrested control over the Assamese political landscape through an assertion of an Assamese identity which amalgamated localised differences and contestations and were recognised by the administration as representative bodies.

The disconnect between these organisations and popular public opinion is evident in the petition that JSS submitted to the RCO in 1893. Advocating an anti-prohibition stance, the JSS, which was primarily made up of Assamese tea planters and businessmen and other social elites, espoused an extremely conservative stance that was typical of these moderate, even apologist, bodies. The petition reiterated arguments about the customary nature of opium use in the province, highlighted the medicinal uses of the drug and made a strong case for continuation of the government's opium policy as the "soundest imaginable".¹⁴³ Through a justification based on opium as a "necessity of life for the working classes" argument, the JSS even defended the opium revenue by highlighting that the loss of excise revenue in the wake of a ban would lead to an unjust

¹⁴¹ Between 1875 and 1886, Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha, Tezpur Ryot Sabha, Shillong Association, Nowgong Ryot Sabha, Upper Assam Association (in the same order) were the prominent bodies that came into being. A chapter of the Indian Association was established in Goalpara in 1878 but was short-lived.

¹⁴² Founded in 1884 at Jorhat, Assam, the JSS was the first political association in the province. It was an initiative of Jagannath Barua, a prominent Assamese tea-planter and industrialist, and although the express purpose of the society was to represent the wishes and aspirations of the people to the British Government, it was largely ineffective as it functioned primarily as a lobby to represent the business interests of the Assamese merchant class. See Anil Kumar Sharma, *Quit India Movement in Assam* (Delhi, 2007), p. 12.

¹⁴³ "Appendix XXXVI: The Humble Memorial of the Jorhat Sorbojonik Sabha", *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium, Vol. VI* (London, 1895), p. 462.

taxation system in the province.¹⁴⁴ Although not keyed out in the memorial, this “unjust taxation system” was clearly the planters’ fears of an increase in the plantation land revenue rates and hence the representation from the body was in fact a decision mandated by business rather than social interests that the JSS represented. This was in sharp contrast with the activities in the rural hinterland where the period corresponding to the RCO’s enquiry demonstrated grassroots level anti-opium activity in the form of *kani nibaroni sabhas* (opium prohibition assemblies), with leadership and skills drawn from the locality, being established in several districts.¹⁴⁵

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the growth of the capitalist enterprises including tea, coal, oil and timber failed to contribute to the welfare of large sections of the population, especially the peasantry. In fact, statistics related to the growth of private moneylending as well as land transfer records suggest the gradual impoverishment and indebtedness of the farmer.¹⁴⁶ The need for generating additional revenue cropped up with renewed zeal after the first census of Assam in 1871 revealed that the province’s population density was less than 50 inhabitants to a square mile and the province had the lowest land revenue collections among all Indian provinces.¹⁴⁷ The aggressive opium policy followed by the government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that resulted in a continued spurt in opium consumption in the province needs to be understood from this aspect.

The extension of the cash economy during the period was limited to the entrepreneurial and urban classes and a government survey conducted in the Assam valley in 1888 revealed that half of the agricultural households were indebted and had to sell labour, both in the organised and unorganised sector, to make ends meet.¹⁴⁸ The rise in land revenue rates, ranging between 50 to 100 per cent, consequent to the completion of the cadastral survey of the Brahmaputra valley in 1893 also contributed to the largescale disaffection among the peasantry and both sporadic and organised outbreaks of

¹⁴⁴ *Final Report*, Vol. VI, p. 462.

¹⁴⁵ See Padmanath Gohain Borua, *Mur Suaroni* (My Reminiscences, Gauhati, 1971), pp. 47, 50.

¹⁴⁶ Aditya Mukherjee, “Agrarian Conditions in Assam, 1880–1890: A Case Study of Five Districts of the Brahmaputra Valley”, *IESHR*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1979), pp. 207–32; Amalendu Guha, “A Big Push Without a Take-off: A Case Study of Assam, 1871–1901”, *IESHR*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 1968), pp. 202–04. See also, Shahid Amin, “Small Peasant Commodity Production and Rural Indebtedness: The Culture of Sugarcane in Eastern UP, c. 1881–1920”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies No. 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 39–87, for an assessment of the conditions of the peasantry in the Gangetic belt.

¹⁴⁷ H. Beverly, *Report: Census of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta, 1873), p. 45.

¹⁴⁸ Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 39–41.

rebellion was experienced in the valley. The representation of grievances in *raij mels* and *sabhas* put pressure on the government which reviewed the rates and settled for enhancement at an average of 37 per cent but the move ostensibly failed to appease the peasantry. Opposition to the revenue rates continued through the winter of 1893 and early 1894 and political groups invoked the collective memory of the peasant-led Phulaguri uprising of 1861.¹⁴⁹

In December 1893, armed police and military forces were deployed on three separate occasions in different parts of the province and the movement reached a crescendo on 28 January 1894 when clashes between peasants and the police at a *raij mel* held at Patharughat in Darrang district resulted in more than 200 arrests.¹⁵⁰ J.C. Arbuthnot, the district commissioner of Darrang, ordered the police to open fire on a gathering of around 5,000 peaceful protesters made up of Hindu and Muslim *ryots* (peasants) and artisans, leaving 15 dead and 37 injured,¹⁵¹ while unofficial reports put the figure at 140 and 500, respectively.¹⁵² The incident marked the end of formal protests against the government (which responded with a further 5 per cent cut in the revenue demand) in the immediate aftermath. The public memory of the incident however was consigned in posterity in the form of the ballad *Dalipuran* and acted as a powerful point of reference for future political movements and was invoked time and again as call to arms as well as an emotive reminder of the brutal nature of British imperial rule.¹⁵³

The mass movements in Assam during the latter half of the nineteenth century were characterised by two kinds of organised political activity. First, the *raij mels* which were peasant-led protests and evolved from traditional social modes of resistance, and, second, ‘association politics’ that was characterised by *ryot sabhas* and town/village associations which addressed local grievances but were organised primarily as pressure groups and functioned within the legal framework. A satirical piece in the pro-government periodical *Mau* (1886–87),¹⁵⁴ captured the importance of *ryot sabhas* by

¹⁴⁹ See K. Deka, *Itihase Garaka Patharughat* (Patharughat, 2004); Sajal Nag, “Peasant and the Raj: Study of a Subaltern Movement in Assam (1893–1894)”, *North-East Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1984), pp. 24–36.

¹⁵⁰ Peasant protests were recorded in Rangiya and Lachima (in Kamrup district) in the winter of 1893–94.

¹⁵¹ For the official account see B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers: Vol. V, Darrang* (Allahabad, 1905).

¹⁵² The memorial plaque at the site of the incident lists the names of 140 individuals who lost their lives on the day. See Arup Kumar Dutta, *Pothorughat* (Mangaldai, 2010).

¹⁵³ Arupjyoti Saikia, “Landlords, Tenants and Agrarian Relations: Revisiting a Peasant Uprising in Colonial Assam”, *Studies in History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2010), p. 176.

¹⁵⁴ Edited the *Bolinararya Bora* (1852–1927), an engineer, edited this periodical published from Calcutta espoused a pro-government stance on most issues and is credited with, whatever its shortcomings, igniting political discussion on local matters.

highlighting that the net gain for the peasant in attending these meetings was “the loss of four ploughing days ... and annas two paid towards the sending the petition”.¹⁵⁵ The lack of belligerent mobilisation in areas where associations and *ryot sabhas* were predominantly active was in sharp contrast with the activities of peasant-led *raij mels* typified by the Phulaguri and Patharughat uprisings in the provincial hinterland. Although *ryot sabhas* in Assam had a political orientation and enjoyed the patronage of local associations, as in Bengal, their moderate outlook was typified by the reliance on petitions and memorials rather than direct action. The peasant protests marked two significant developments in the political landscape of Assam, which would shape the course of future mobilisations during the mature nationalist phase. First, the efforts of the *ryots* (and artisans) established the strengths of protest and mass mobilisation, and, second, the participation of the non-cultivating rural elites—Brahmins, Mahantas and Dolois—in the peasant protests demonstrated collective purpose against colonial rule. The evolution of political activity in Assam in the 1910s and 1920s, which was marked by the participation of student, youth and women’s organisations, will be explored in subsequent chapters through the lens of the opium prohibition movement to assess the impact of mass mobilisation on government opium policy during the nationalist phase.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the development of oppositional discourses on opium use and addiction in nineteenth century Assam. On one hand, the colonial state typecast the Assamese as the archetypal ‘lazy native’, and, on the other, the indigenous middle class used this stereotype to explore the potential of resistance through literature. As the tea enterprise contended with chronic labour shortages and the unwillingness of the indigene to join the wage economy, the narrative of addiction emerged as an ‘othering’ device that was reinforced through the impulses of governmentality. The government’s opium policy was ostensibly driven by the principle of ‘improvement’ but in effect was a disguise for a strategy aimed at maximising government income in a revenue-deficit province. The counterpoint to the colonial ‘project’ was the literary response which explored modernity and situated the *kania* as a unique self-reflexive subject coalescing subversive, anticolonial sentiment with incisive social commentary. The literary endeavour failed due to the premature empowering of the addict which demonstrated the disconnect between

¹⁵⁵ *Mau*, Issue 1 (February 1887). Quoted in Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 51.

the social realities of opium use in Assam and the elevated and inchoate goals of the intelligentsia. The opposition to the government's opium policy developed through the latter half of the nineteenth century as opium addiction became the focal point of the local social reform movement that was marked by the difference between middle class activism typified by 'association politics' and peasant protests and resistance. The next chapter traces the transition of opium from medicine to regulated drug and looks at the intersection of the Western prohibition movement with the indigenous anti-opium campaign in Assam. It focuses on two official opium enquiries and key international drug regulation treaties that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth century landscape of the prohibition debate in order to explore the local dimensions of global developments as well as their wider social and political implications.

CHAPTER 2

FROM MEDICINE TO REGULATED DRUG: THE OPIUM QUESTION, OFFICIAL ENQUIRIES AND TRANSNATIONAL TREATIES, 1860S–1910S

The drive against the British opium trade in the West was initiated by missionaries and social reformers in the mid-nineteenth century and the opposition was based around moral and ethical debates about the revenue for the British Empire and its role in fostering addiction. In the late nineteenth century, the formation of anti-opium organisations resulted in opium prohibition transitioning from a moral debate to a reform-oriented agenda with political undertones and the government's defence of the trade also shifted from economic aspects to a medical distinction between opium eating and opium smoking—the former being an effective medicinal substance with proven pharmacological properties, while the latter was construed as an aberrant practice. This theory enabled the separation of opium use in India, where eating was the more prevalent practice, and China, where smoking was the most common form of opium use; it also allowed the continuation of the domestic trade in India in the wake of international pressure. The addiction/abuse discourse that was woven around racial traits in the early nineteenth century (as discussed in Chapter 1) entered the pharmacological domain in the latter and the authoritativeness of science and medicine was employed to counter the anti-opium campaign which interpreted addiction as a societal problem. By the late nineteenth century, localised prohibition campaigns took on an organised form as activists in the West and India became part of a transnational effort and anti-opium drives in remote corners of the empire like Assam were drawn into the mainstream. This precipitated the formation of multilateral forums that merged drug regulation and international diplomacy into a global effort and resulted in the world's first drug treaty in 1912.

This chapter has two interconnected aims: first, an analysis of the transition of opium from a widely prescribed medicine in the nineteenth century to internationally regulated drug substance in the early twentieth, and, second, to offer an insight into the changing public discourse on opium in India and the evolution of government policy due to the role of local and transnational anti-opium activities with a specific focus on Assam. The chapter will be woven around two opium enquiries, the Royal Commission on Opium, 1893–94 (RCO)¹ set up by the British parliament with a pan India remit, and the

¹ Records of the Royal Commission on Opium: Proceedings, 1893–94, HO 73/102, The National Archives (hereafter, TNA).

Botham Enquiry Committee, 1912–13 (BEC) instituted by the Assam government with a provincial charge.² Both enquiries were upshots of the transnational anti-opium campaign; the RCO was largely instituted due to pressure from the prohibition lobby in Britain and the provincial enquiry in Assam was induced by two transnational treaties, the Shanghai Opium Conference 1909 and the 1912 Hague Convention. Although both enquiries investigated opium consumption, they arrived at vastly different conclusions; the RCO declared that opium abuse was absent in India and also attested the non-existence of opium smoking,³ whereas the BEC recognised that opium “addiction was extremely prevalent in Assam [and] almost every consumer smoked”.⁴

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the evolution of the medical discourse on opium in Britain and India and the rise of the anti-opium lobby and developments in the prohibition movement. It highlights the tensions between British and Anglo-Indian medical opinion about opium’s efficacy as well as conflicting attitudes towards opium eating and opium smoking and its impact on the prohibition debate. The second section looks at the RCO’s investigations and emphasises the role of the government in ‘witness management’ to present a favourable picture of opium policy. The discussion challenges the government’s claim that prohibition was a risk to social stability and would result in violence directed at the colonial state and foregrounds the systematic manner in which the Indian government acted, often misrepresenting facts and fabricating evidence, in order to protect the opium revenue. The third section looks at the role of transnational forums and the evolution of transnational opium policy in the early twentieth century which aimed at ending opium smoking and restricting general opium use to non-recreational purposes. It examines the BEC report, which confirmed widespread opium smoking in Assam, in light of the evolving terrain of the local and international anti-opium campaign. The chapter ends with a discussion on the development of the anti-opium campaign in Assam in the early twentieth century and evolution of political activity in the pre-nationalist phase.

² Resolution No 5229M, “Resolution appointing a Committee to report regarding certain questions relating to the Consumption of Opium and *Ganja*”, 10 December 1912, Finance and Commerce (hereafter, F&C), File No. E–1 M of 1912, Assam State Archives (hereafter, ASA).

³ “General Conclusions”, Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium, TNA. See also, Records of the Royal Commission on Opium: Minutes of Evidence, 1893–94, HO 73/101, TNA.

⁴ Resolution No. 8047 M, 5 December 1913, IOR/V/26/625/6, India Office Records (hereafter, IOR).

2.1 Shifting Contexts of Opium: Emergence of Prohibition in the West and the Anglo-Indian Medical Discourse

Opium use underwent two crucial changes in the medieval world: first, the opium poppy mutated from an agricultural product into a substance for personal use through its association with marginal religious cults, and, second, it also entered the secular realm of *materia medica*.⁵ Opium's medicinal properties popularised the use of the drug in the Indian subcontinent and China⁶ but until the arrival of Islam (given its injunctions against cannabis and alcohol), the drug was not generally used for recreational purposes.⁷ As argued previously, the nature of opium use in India changed during the colonial period and the authoritativeness of medical and scientific discourse, especially the propagation of opium's use in the febrile regions like Assam, played a significant role in promoting its use as well as defending the colonial state's involvement in the trade. As the ill effects of opium addiction became increasingly apparent, the colonial state challenged the anti-opium opposition by emphasising that opium was more useful than quinine in treating malaria.⁸ Although medical discoveries in the late nineteenth century Britain had debunked theories of the medicinal efficacy of opium, the defence of opium's therapeutic value dominated official accounts till the 1930s.

The section looks at the spill over of the Western concept of 'moderation' into the terrain of 'customary' nature of opium use in India which gets conflated with the medical discourse championing the palliative powers of the drug during the colonial period. In the fault line between the metropolitan and the oppositional discourse lay the terrain of British and Anglo-Indian medical opinion and the section discusses how these two discourses, drifting wider apart from the mid-1860s, were appropriated by the government in pursing, defending and even promoting the opium trade at different periods of time according to demands of the situation. This brings into sharp focus the striking parallels between medical opinion and moral propaganda on the addiction issue and the ways in which the prohibition movement initiated the move away from the 'vice'

⁵ Brian Inglis, *The Forbidden Game: A Social History of Drugs* (New York, 1975), Chapters 1 and 2; See Mark D. Merlin, *On the Trail of the Ancient Opium Poppy* (New Jersey, 1984), pp. 206–23 for a survey of the use of opium in the Classical world.

⁶ Eighth century Chinese medical treatises such as *Pen Tsao Kang Mu* and *Thang Pen Tsao* mention opium's use in Chinese medicine. Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy* (London, 1999), p. 20.

⁷ Trocki, *Opium Empire*, pp. 19–20.

⁸ See Paul C. Winther, *Anglo-European Science and the Rhetoric of Empire: Malaria, Opium, and British Rule in India, 1756–1895* (Oxford, 2005), especially Chapter 7, "Sir William Roberts' Evaluation of the Opium and 'Malaria' Evidence", pp. 231–72.

and ‘necessity’ argument and formulated a distinction between ‘medicinal’ and ‘non-medicinal’ use of opium and other drugs in general which would forge the contours of drug policy in the twentieth century.

A treatise titled *The Mysteries of Opium Reveal’d* (1701) written by a cleric and physician, John Jones (1644/45–1709), changed perceptions about opium in the West and was a foundational work from a medical perspective.⁹ As a proto text in its genre, Jones’ treatise laid the foundations of recurring themes in the opium debate, including moderation, morality, ‘addiction’, medicinal value as well as opium’s dissimilar effects on different individuals. This distinction evolved a vocabulary of racialised dimension of use in the nineteenth century and was one of the triggers for the ‘construction’ of the *kania* (the Assamese opium eater/smoker; discussed in Chapter 1). Jones introduced the drug to a British audience in a familiar idiom and developed the terminology that had an enduring presence in all opium-related literature till the early twentieth century. The volume demonstrated opium’s pharmacological properties and highlighted the dangers of abuse to a Western audience which had been cognisant only of magical, moral and spiritual dimensions and Jones also placed the responsibility of “intemperance” and “immoderation” entirely on the user’s moral constitution without distinguishing on the mode of use.¹⁰ The neglect of opium’s pharmacological properties was sustained in the medical literature for more than two hundred years, and insistence on the depravity of the individual promoted the incorporation of moral values into the disease theory of addiction as well as the process of ‘othering’ in the nineteenth century.

The distinction between opium eating in India and opium smoking in China that was brought into the fold of the medical discourse in the latter half of the nineteenth century formed the core of the government’s defence of the opium trade in India. The official stance on opium use in India was that it was not detrimental to the population because it was a regulated commodity that was used in moderation, chiefly for medicinal and quasi-medicinal purposes. Although medical understanding of the drug had changed considerably since the mid-1860s and greater understanding of the addictive nature of opium meant that the theory about ‘moderation’ was challenged by doctors and scientists in Britain and India, till the early twentieth century the official stance on opium use underwent virtually no change. The government contended that the Opium Act of 1878

⁹ John Jones, *Mysteries of Opium Reveal’d* (London, 1701).

¹⁰ Jones, *Mysteries*, pp. 221–27.

contained all the measures needed to ensure that opium was a commodity whose production, sale and consumption was closely monitored and regulated.¹¹ The 1878 Act, however, only ensured that the government had complete monopoly over opium—its production, distribution and sale—and also prohibited the import of opium from other countries.

Although the first anti-opium debates in the West were initially centred on abuse in the colonies, especially the impact of the India–China opium trade, there was a subtle shift in the rhetoric when opium addiction in the industrial towns of Manchester and London became recognisable in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, medical understanding of the drug underwent a transformation as the ‘moderation argument’, which commanded authority throughout the nineteenth century, was largely discredited and the medical debate centred on the ‘disease theory of addiction’ became an important part of the public debate.¹²

Parliamentary debates on the nature of the British opium revenue were initiated by prominent temperance campaigners like Sir Wilfrid Lawson (1829–1906)¹³ in the House of Commons in the late 1860s and in 1870 he put forward a motion condemning “the system by which a large proportion of the India revenue is raised from opium” but the motion was dismissed by a huge majority.¹⁴ Parliamentary motions and debates as well as the press raised public awareness about the opium trade and addiction in Britain but the nature of the contestation remained tied to revenue and morality without emphasis on medical arguments as well as the effects of the drugs on the individual. The British press had followed topical debates on opium since the late eighteenth century and covered parliamentary debates on opium through the mid nineteenth century and a specialist press developed as evangelical societies launched a public debate on opium in the 1870s. Specialist publications like *Abkari*, the mouthpiece of the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association of London,¹⁵ were crucial in the development of the prohibition debate in

¹¹ Krishna Mohan Bhattacharyya, *The Opium Act: Act No. 1 of 1878* (Calcutta, 1931), pp. 7–12.

¹² Terry M. Parssinen and Karen Kerner, “Development of the Disease Model of Drug Addiction in Britain, 1870–1926”, *Medical History*, Vol. 24 (1980), pp. 278–81.

¹³ Wilfrid Lawson, was a temperance campaigner and radical and a prominent member of the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade. He was a Liberal Party MP who championed the anti-opium cause, women’s rights and Irish disestablishment. G.W.E. Russell (rev. David M. Fahey), “Lawson, Sir Wilfrid, second baronet (1829–1906)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34447>, accessed 27 March 2015.

¹⁴ Quoted in F.S. Turner, *British Opium Policy and Its Results to India and China* (London, 1876), p. 100.

¹⁵ The association was formed in 1888 by two Liberal Party MPs, W.S. Caine and Samuel Smith, to bring together British and Indian temperance activists to pressurise the British as well as Indian government to

England and also promoted temperance reform in India, but their readership was largely limited to the anti-opium lobby and activists. The publication that reached out to a wider reading public was *The Manchester Guardian*, which followed both the alcohol and opium prohibition campaigns in England closely but emphasised the trade and moral dimensions of the issue rather than social consequences in Britain as well as Asia.¹⁶ Both the specialist and the mainstream press demonstrated awareness of the issue of Indo-China trade and Chinese addiction but failed to cover the issue of opium consumption in India as well as the domestic trade.

The opium prohibition question took on an organised form with the formation of the (Anglo-Oriental) Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade (SSOT) in 1874. Formed by a Birmingham-based group of Quaker anti-opium campaigners, the SSOT shifted base to Westminster in London and with support of the radical wing of the Liberal Party MPs, prominent non-conformists and evangelical groups, it became a national organisation. The SSOT's campaign in the early years was directed by the moral aspects of addiction and medical and scientific perspectives were missing from its agenda and its main demand was eliminating the sale of Indian opium in China. The early agenda of the SSOT is best captured in its publication, *British Opium Policy and its Results to India and China* (1876), which advocated for British economic interests in China and highlighted opium as the major impediment to free trade in other commodities due to the uncondusive political climate that it fostered.¹⁷ Interestingly, the organisation distanced itself from the British Indian government's monopoly over opium production and sale within India till the mid-1880s when awareness about India's opium problem, especially addiction in Assam, started garnering publicity.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the Indian press, especially moderate, pro-government publications like the *Calcutta Review*, supported the British opium trade both at home and abroad but denounced the liquor trade in India. Significantly, although a majority of Indian critics were concerned about the government monopoly on alcohol which was seen

introduce prohibition. Frederick Grubb, "The Temperance Movement in India", in Guy Hayler (ed.), *The Prohibition Movement* (London, 1897), pp. 129–31.

¹⁶ Under C.P. Scott (1846–1932), the broadsheet took a liberal–radical editorial line and opposed imperialism. It supported William Gladstone and his faction when the Liberal Party split in 1886, and the coverage reflected its support to the ending of the British opium trade. Trevor Wilson, "Scott, Charles Prestwich", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35980>, accessed 4 Oct 2015.

¹⁷ J.B. Brown, "Politics of the Poppy: The Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, 1874–1916", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 1973), p. 102.

as “alien and deleterious to Indian society”, opium was regarded as an opportunity for merchants and bankers and a majority of Indian nationalist leaders acquiesced with this position.¹⁸ This distinction was intimately tied to the idea of ‘customary use’ which was an important part of the official position on opium use in India which emphasised that Indians were familiar with the drug and its effects due to centuries of use and their experience with the drug ensured that it was used as a medicinal substance and not abused. In “The Opium Question”, Robert Cust,¹⁹ a retired civil servant, lent firm support to the British opium trade and in a review of a selection of contemporary literature of both pro- and anti-opium persuasion on the subject, vindicated the trade and attacked the prohibitionists, particularly the SSOT.²⁰ Cust also wrote a caustic critique of the liquor prohibition activities of the Church of England Temperance Society across the British empire, especially India, and claimed that the temperance workers were misrepresenting facts about alcohol consumption in India and claimed that the increase in alcohol use was “independent of any European or British contact or influence” and was a result of the prosperity of the Indian population under British rule.²¹ Incidentally, Cust used the example of opium in Assam to substantiate the claim and highlighted that the ban on poppy cultivation in the province and introduction of excise opium at an enhanced price was directly responsible for huge reduction in opium consumption to emphasise the beneficial role played by the British government.²² This unsubstantiated analogy indicated the vacuousness of the claims made by Cust with regard to the use of alcohol in India.

In 1882, the SSOT presented a memorial advocating the end of Britain’s involvement in the opium trade to Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809–1898) which demanded the cessation of opium production in India “except for strictly medicinal purposes” as well as support the suppression of the opium trade.²³ On 10 April 1891,

¹⁸ Lucy Carroll, “The Temperance Movement in India: Politics and Social Reform”, *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter, *MAS*), Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 1976), pp. 417–47.

¹⁹ Robert Needham Cust (1821–1909) retired from the Indian Civil Service in 1867, when he took early retirement and returned to England. A prolific writer on a range of topics, Cust, in his role as missionary strategist, voiced his disapproval of some activities undertaken in the colonies and his liberal attitudes were regularly criticised by Church leaders. Peter Williams, “Cust, Robert Needham,” in Gerald H. Anderson (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York, 1998), pp. 162–63.

²⁰ Robert Cust, “The Opium Question”, *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 80, No. 160 (July–December 1885), pp. 168–88.

²¹ Robert Cust, “The Liquor Traffic in British India”, *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 86, No 172 (July–December 1888), pp. 329–72.

²² Cust, “Liquor Traffic”, p. 366.

²³ Joseph Gundry Alexander, *India’s Opium Revenue: What It Is, and How It Should Be Dealt with* (London, 1890), p. 32.

Arthur Pease's motion which called for a ban on the cultivation of opium for non-medical purposes in India was passed in the House of Commons. The anti-opium lobby had called for an enquiry into the "re-structuring of the Indian revenue when the suppression of the opium trade *had been carried out*",²⁴ which resulted in the setting up of the RCO in 1893, but the government fine-tuned the remit of the Commission and it was tasked to investigate whether opium prohibition should be imposed, rather than the actual enforcement of regulations. The RCO's endorsement of the benefits of opium to the Indian population resulted in the unchallenged continuation of the trade for the next two decades and this feature as well as its implications will be discussed in a subsequent section.

An interesting facet of the medical discourse on opium from the 1860s was the variance between medical practitioners based in Europe and India on its therapeutic value, especially in light of the fact that the government promoted the use of cheaper pharmaceuticals and the easy availability and price of opium made it a drug of choice for a host of ailments, including malaria. For instance, a Bengal government circular from 1871 encouraged the use of opium over quinine due to its cost effectiveness rather than a medical argument about the relative efficacy of the two substances.²⁵ Historians of medicine in British India agree that European doctors in India were increasingly at odds with the metropolitan profession on issues relating to the causation and treatment of tropical diseases like cholera and malarial fevers.²⁶ Moreover, Anglo-Indian medical opinion was often used to justify the government's policy measures, especially on contentious issues, and the internal opium trade in India was one prominent illustration.

Medical opinion on the nature of the effects of opium on the user was another area where European and Anglo-Indian medical opinion differed. In the 1840s the 'moderation theory' as well as the contrast between medical and non-medical uses of opium were cited by anti-opium activists. In a speech delivered to the British Parliament in 1843, Lord Shaftesbury used testimonials of prominent British doctors to highlight the addictive nature of opium and the "pernicious consequences" of habitual use which led to

²⁴ Virginia Berridge, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use and Drug Control Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England*, revised edn (London, 1999), p. 164, emphasis added.

²⁵ No. 172, Home (Medical), 9 March 1871, National Archives of India (NAI).

²⁶ Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison, "Introduction", in Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison (eds), *Health, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India* (Hyderabad, 2001), pp. 1–36; Ihtesham Kazi, "Environmental Factors Contributing to Malaria in Colonial Bengal", in Deepak Kumar (ed.), *Disease and Medicine in India: A Historical Overview* (New Delhi, 2001), pp. 123–31; Dhrub Kumar Singh, "'Clouds of Cholera' and Clouds around Cholera, 1817–70", in Kumar (ed.), *Disease and Medicine*, pp. 144–65.

“destroying the healthy action of digestive organs, weakening the powers of the mind, as well as those of the body” leaving the individual “a worse than useless member of society”.²⁷ This moral interpretation of opium addiction mirrored the mid-nineteenth century colonial discourse on opium eating and the discourse on the *kania* as discussed in Chapter 1.

Although the association between moral opposition and medical justification transformed in Britain, especially after the 1868 Pharmacy Act which classified opium as a ‘poison’, in India, doctors advocated not merely medical but even recreational use of opium till the turn of the twentieth century and the medical use argument persisted until the mid 1930s. In the early 1880s, medical practitioners in Britain rejected the ‘moderation’ argument and this gave the anti-opium movement’s goal of regulation a boost as it emphasised opium’s addictive nature and challenged official defence of the trade by the Indian government which relied on the notion of customary and moderate use.²⁸ Despite this development, official medical opinion in India regarded moderate use as especially beneficial in sub-montane and tropical climates like Assam till as late as the 1930s,²⁹ and featured prominently in the 1933 Assam Opium Enquiry as government and tea garden doctors sustained the debate on opium’s value while other physicians contradicted this assertion.³⁰

The Medical Society of Calcutta (MSC), an influential body of prominent doctors lent support to the government’s defence of the drug by justifying both the medicinal properties of opium as well as its socially-mandated, customary use. Led by Dr William Simpson (1855–1931),³¹ the MSC held several discussions on the effects of the habitual use of opium, the results of which were published in an August 1892 article in preparation for the RCO’s enquiries. The article reasserted the official position that habitual and

²⁷ Quoted in Berridge, *Opium and the People*, p. 175.

²⁸ Berridge, “Chapter 7: ‘Britain’s Opium Harvest’, The Anti-Opium Movement”, *Opium and the People*.

²⁹ Several Indian doctors, for instance Kailas Chunder Bose, a private practitioner and president of the Calcutta Medical Society, supported opium use in India when they appeared before the RCO. See “Dr. Kailas Chunder Bose’ Evidence”, *Final Report*, Vol. II, pp. 87–91.

³⁰ Government of Assam, *The Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933: Oral Evidence, Vol. I—Jorhat and Dibrugarh* (Shillong, 1933), pp. 34–37, 151–55, ASA.

³¹ Dr William John Ritchie Simpson was well-known for his work on cholera and public sanitation and his opinion was widely regarded. He was also an active member of the Calcutta Microscopical Society, editor of the *Indian Medical Gazette* and a founding editor of the *Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*. A close associate of Ronald Ross, Dr Simpson was one of the practitioners who pioneered the establishment of tropical diseases as a specialist branch of study. For more on his life, see R.A. Baker and R.A. Bayliss, “William John Ritchie Simpson (1855–1931): Public Health and Tropical Medicine”, *Medical History*, 31.4 (October 1987), pp. 450–65.

moderate consumption of opium was not detrimental to the health or morals of the local populace and emphasised that Indians had been using it for more than three centuries and was an accepted social custom.³² Simpson justified opium as an important medical substance “to the rich and poor, a prophylactic against malarial fever, and a comfort and mainstay to people advancing in years” by asserting the legitimacy drawn from the personal experience of physicians who practiced medicine in the tropics.³³ This article, therefore, directly challenged the reform agenda of the anti-opium campaigners as it argued prohibition went against the customs and culture of Indians while also challenging the British medical fraternity’s portrayal of the negative effects of opium. While Dr Simpson’s article did not differentiate between opium smoking and opium eating, an anonymous May 1869 article that appeared in the *The Medical Gazette* compared two reports from 1861 and 1867, which offered different interpretation of the smoking habit. While the 1861 piece contended that the evil effects of the smoking habit were arguably less than they were usually assumed to be, the latter report concluded that confirmed opium smokers were not the best subjects for progress.³⁴ The anonymous article challenged the negative portrayal of opium smokers and emphasised that the harm done by the drug was not ‘universal’ and put the blame on the addict, in the same manner as Jones had done more than 250 years back.³⁵

The distinction between opium eating and opium smoking formed the core of the opium prohibition argument in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Despite evidence of widespread smoking in parts of India like Assam, the Indian government denied its existence in official documents as well as international forums like the Geneva Opium Conferences (1924–25) and used the medical interpretation of the difference between eating and smoking of opium to justify its opium policy.³⁶ In order to defend the domestic opium trade and present its argument to the British and international audiences,

³² For a similar argument, see, MSS EUR F.111/252, Curzon Collection, “In Praise of Opium-Eating”, p. 7, IOR.

³³ William Simpson, “The Effects of the Habitual Use of Opium on the Human Constitution”, *Indian Medical Gazette: A Monthly Record of Medicine, Surgery, Obstetrics, Jurisprudence, and the Collateral Sciences; and of General Medical Intelligence, Indian and European*, Vol. 27 (August 1892), n.p.

³⁴ [Untitled article], *Indian Medical Gazette: A Monthly Record of Medicine, Surgery, Obstetrics, Jurisprudence, and the Collateral Sciences; and of General Medical Intelligence, Indian and European*, Vol. 4 (1 May 1869), p. 94.

³⁵ [Untitled article], *Indian Medical Gazette*, p. 94.

³⁶ “The official representative of the British Indian government stated “1. that outside of Burma, there was no opium smoking in India; 2. that the opium eaten in India under the government monopoly was used for semi-medicinal purposes and not in excess”. IOR/L/E/7/1404, File No. 4496/25, “India Copes with Assam’s Opium Habit”, *Christian Science Monitor* (5 Jan 1926), n.p., IOR.

the Indian government published volumes like Graham Dixon's *The Truth about Indian Opium* (1922) whose opening lines asserted that opium smoking was a "a practice foreign to the country ... [and] regarded as a vicious habit".³⁷ Dixon argued that "government restrictions which are little short of prohibition" have ensured that the practice of opium smoking is restricted completely and also asserted that the international "condemnation of the Indian policy" was unfounded and lacked understanding of the nature of opium use in India.³⁸ Additionally, the volume reiterated the moderation and customary use arguments and declared in the most emphatic fashion that "centuries of inherited experience have taught the people of India discretion in the use of the drug, and its misuse is a negligible feature in Indian life."³⁹ Dixon's commentary also directly challenged the anti-opiumists in India who were campaigning for an introduction of a law similar to the Opium Act that was introduced in Britain in 1908 and accentuated that "to prevent the sale of opium ... would be a mockery; to many millions it would be *sheer inhumanity*".⁴⁰ To turn now to the RCO and look at the manner in which the narrative of this distinction was generated and employed by the Indian government at the turn of the century to foster what can be called an 'opium myth'.

2.2 The Royal Commission's Assam Enquiries: 'Witness Management', Official Testimonies and the Unravelling of Inconvenient Truths

The RCO's final report had concluded that the demand for opium prohibition in India was the result of "exaggerated impression [and] the gloomy descriptions ... of extensive moral and physical degradation by opium, have not been accepted by the witnesses representing the people of India, nor by ... the government of the country".⁴¹ Given that the enquiry's findings depended on the evidence presented by official and non-official witnesses it would be informative to examine the manner in which the hearings were conducted and the testimonials that the RCO recorded. By focussing on the Assam witnesses who appeared before the RCO, this section will highlight the manner in which the government controlled evidence and selected witnesses in order to present an uncritical (and often delusive) account of its opium policy in India.

³⁷ G. Graham Dixon, *The Truth about Indian Opium* (London, 1922), p. 1.

³⁸ Dixon, *Indian Opium*, p.1, fn1.

³⁹ Dixon, *Indian Opium*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Dixon, *Indian Opium*, p. 9, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Royal Commission on Opium, *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Opium, Vol. VI* (London, 1895), p. 94. The section titled "General Conclusions" provides a summative account of the major findings of the report.

The nine-member RCO was appointed on 2 September 1893 with the official remit to “report on the effects of prohibition of the growth and sale of opium, except for medical purposes, in British India”.⁴² Apart from examining witnesses in London, the RCO toured India for 83 days and examined 723 witnesses (a third of them Europeans) and asked more than 29,000 questions at 16 different locations apart from collecting written statements of those who could not attend in person.⁴³ The RCO’s working and findings have been examined by some historians but these studies have neglected not merely the transnational nature of the politics of opium but also the role of the Indian government in inhibiting a thorough investigation.⁴⁴ The other gap in the understanding of the RCO’s report is that historians have suggested that its endorsement for continuation of the opium trade in India was dictated by the “desire to avoid violent resistance and maintain stable rule”, an argument that plays into the rhetoric of the colonial state raising the spectre of violence by invoking the 1857 Mutiny.⁴⁵ This facet is best demonstrated in the portrayal of the 1861 Phulaguri incident by witnesses fielded by the government as a purely anti-opium demonstration, a point which the non-official witnesses strongly contested.

The formation of the RCO was largely the result of effective campaigning by anti-opium organisations led by the SSOT and the Indian government’s position was dictated by the need to defend its policy and safeguard the continuation of the trade. Paul Winther has argued that the scientific or medical justification for opium was constructed to cloak the economic interests of the opium trade and has underlined the fact that opium was seen by organisations like the SSOT as an impediment to the wider evangelical and civilising mission. He highlighted that by ensuring that the RCO delivered a favourable report on the Indian opium policy, the British government “had succeeded in eliminating the SSOT in the battle over whose version of imperialism would be the future of India”.⁴⁶ This view

⁴² “List of Commissions and Officials: 1890–1899 (Nos. 73–102)”, in Elaine Harrison (ed.), *Office-Holders in Modern Britain: Volume 10, Officials of Royal Commissions of Inquiry 1870–1939* (London, 1995), pp. 27–42.

⁴³ No. 5023-Ex, 20 November 1893, “Enclosure: Programme, Royal Commission on Opium”, J.F. Finlay to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, F&C, July 1894, ASA; *Final Report*, Vol. I, p. 5.

⁴⁴ See John F. Richards, “Opium and the British Indian Empire: The Royal Commission of 1895”, *MAS*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (May, 2002), pp. 375–420, for a synoptic assessment of the political aspect of the Commission labours and the nature of its functioning. Another significant work is Winther, *Anglo-European Science*, which analysed the testimonies of the “medical witnesses” who appeared before the Commission to provide an authoritative assessment of the vacuity of the British Indian Government’s argument that suggested opium as a proven cure for malarial fevers.

⁴⁵ Ashley Wright, *Opium and Empire in Southeast Asia: Regulating Consumption in British Burma* (Basingstoke, 2014), p. 81.

⁴⁶ Winther, *Anglo-European Science*, p. 13.

is supported by John F. Richards who claimed that the RCO's recommendations protected Indians from "cultural imperialism" of the British and American protestant missionaries leading the anti-opium movement and therefore should be interpreted as a culturally sensitive intervention of the British state.⁴⁷ Richard K. Newman has argued that although "the whole affair had been ruthlessly stage managed", due to the pressures of public opinion in Britain and the rise of international opinion against the trade, "in the long term the Royal Commission proved to be a pyrrhic victory from which the Government of India never recovered".⁴⁸ This is a significant assertion as it foregrounded the importance of the enquiry for both the government and the prohibition movement.

Historians have labelled the RCO's report as "ingenious in manipulating facts" and argued that the RCO's endorsement of the British opium trade is "an attempt by the British Imperial Government to suppress anti-opium opinion in Britain, India, Burma and Sri Lanka".⁴⁹ Others have criticised the Secretary of State for India, the Earl of Kimberley (1826–1902), for appointing people who supported the British government's status quo on the opium trade and have also highlighted the partisan manner in which the enquiries were conducted along with complicity of witnesses who tacitly justified the opium trade and endorsed its continuation.⁵⁰ This facet is emphasised by Martin Booth who stated that "bar one, the commission members were all pro-opium government supporters", while others like Richard Davenport-Hines defended the appointments as a balanced representation of opinions by stressing on the moral character of the commissioners, especially Earl Brassey (1836–1918), the RCO chair, who was instrumental in pushing the government line.⁵¹ Another commissioner, James B. Lyall, even attempted to draw Indian witnesses into declaring (with limited success) that the suppression of the opium trade would result in a full-scale revolt across the country, a point that formed the core of the government's argument against regulation and prohibition.⁵²

⁴⁷ Richards, "Royal Commission", p. 418. See, for instance, Jeffrey Cox, "Religion and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century Britain", in R.W. Davis and R.J. Helmstadler (eds), *Freedom and Religion in the Nineteenth Century* (Palo Alto CA, 1997), for a synoptic discussion of the role of missionaries in the imperialism.

⁴⁸ Richard K. Newman, "India and the Anglo-Chinese Opium Agreements, 1907–14", *MAS*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 530.

⁴⁹ Emdad-ul Haq, *Drugs in South Asia: From the Opium Trade to the Present Day* (New York, 2000), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Richards, "Royal Commission", pp. 389–95.

⁵¹ Richard Davenport-Hines, *The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Social History of Drugs* (London, 2001), p. 137.

⁵² James Broadwood Lyall (1838–1916), was born in Kent, England and educated at Eton and Haileybury College before joining service in Bengal in 1857. He served as Resident in Mysore, Chief Commissioner of Coorg, 1883–87, and Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, 1887–92. C. Hayavadana Rao, *The Indian Biographical Dictionary* (Madras, 1915), p. 254.

It is noteworthy that a number of the RCO members as well as government officials who assisted the Indian government and many of those who provided positive testimonials of the official policy were promoted and a couple of them even received the knighthood shortly after the publication of the findings. The incongruities of the investigation are wonderfully summed up by W.T. Stead (1849–1912), a pioneer of investigative journalism, who remarked that the report “assert[ed] that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and that it is impossible to prohibit the use of opium in India, even if it was desirable, and it is not desirable”.⁵³ Despite the opposition, the RCO’s report was widely welcomed in India by the moderate, English press and the *Calcutta Review* published an article which strongly defended British opium policy and reaffirmed the findings. The piece also made two significant assertions which have since been debunked; first, that the policy of monopoly in India was in the best interests of the farmers growing poppy, and, second, that British opium export was not the primary cause widespread of opium addiction in China.⁵⁴

The discussion challenges the claim made by John F. Richard that official witnesses “entertained few doubts about opium and needed no prompting in their testimony” and demonstrates the fallacy in the argument that the government “had little trouble in recruiting and encouraging private, unofficial witnesses to support its case”.⁵⁵ It uses records pertaining to the Assam government’s official delegation of witnesses presented to the RCO to reveal facets of manufactured consent as well as careful selection and vetting of witnesses and also reveals that the administration faced difficulties in recruiting unofficial witnesses whose opinions matched the government position as well as highlighting the strategies it had to devise in order to ensure that the evidence presented was consistent. The discussion examines the role of two commissioners who espoused an anti-opium stance, Arthur Pease (1837–98), a Liberal MP and member of the SSOT Council, and Henry Wilson (1833–1914), another Liberal MP and temperance campaigner, who keenly cross examined official witnesses using factual evidence that often controverted the statements of official witnesses. It is noteworthy that the conclusions arrived at by the Committee were not unanimously accepted by all the commissioners and while Wilson refused to sign the final report and wrote a minute of

⁵³ Quoted in Davenport-Hines, *Pursuit of Oblivion*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ E.H. Walsh, “The Historical Aspects of the Opium Question”, *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 102, No. 204 (July–December 1896), pp. 258–72.

⁵⁵ Richards, “Royal Commission”, pp. 380–81.

dissent, the two Indian members of the commission signed it with qualifying memorandums.⁵⁶

A bureaucrat who played an important role in managing witnesses and protecting the Indian government's interests was R.M. Dane,⁵⁷ a finance and commerce department (hereafter, F&C) official who was deputed to oversee "work arising out of the appointment of the Royal Commission on Opium".⁵⁸ Private correspondence indicated a more precise aspect of Dane's role who was assigned "on special duty, to assist Local Governments in *selecting their witnesses* and *marshalling the evidence* to be given before the Commission".⁵⁹ Apart from 'managing' witnesses, Dane was also expected to procure "rebutting evidence", both oral and documentary, to counter anti-opium arguments and present the government's case to the RCO.⁶⁰ Significantly, the instructions also hint on secrecy and recommend that Dane "should endeavour to transact as much business as possible in *personal* interviews", thus keeping much of the deliberations and activities outside the ambit of the record keeping obligations of the government.⁶¹

The first serious shortcoming of the enquiry was the fact that the encumbrance of arranging for witnesses representing the anti-opium line was put on organisations like the SSOT and the other civil society forums.⁶² Another perturbing aspect was the fact that witnesses were required to present a written abstract detailing their stance and the nature of evidence prior to examination and witnesses whose accounts deviated from the official line were excluded from the nominated list, at times even after it had been publicised.⁶³ This clause was championed by Earl Brassey and resulted in the omission of witnesses who expressed dissent.⁶⁴

The fact that there was a divergence in the opinions of the commissioners with regard to the opium question and prohibition would be an understatement. Earl Brassey

⁵⁶ "Minute of Dissent", 18 March 1895. See Appendix IV, *Final Report*, Vol. I.

⁵⁷ Richard Morris Dane (1854–1940), was born in Dublin and entered government service in 1872. He served as Officiating Commissioner and Inspector-General of Registration with the excise department and retired in 1909 as Inspector General of Excise and Salt. Rao, *Biographical Dictionary*, pp. 112–13.

⁵⁸ No. 4380-Ex, [Letter from E.N. Barker to R.M. Dane], F&C, Government of India (hereafter, GoI), 16 October 1893, ASA.

⁵⁹ Demi-official letter No. 3980-Ex, E.N. Baker, Deputy Secretary to GoI, F&C to F.C. Daukes, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, F&C, GoI, 11 September 1893, ASA, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ No. 4380-Ex, Barker to Dane, F&C, GoI, 16 October 1893, ASA.

⁶¹ No. 4380-Ex, Barker to Dane, F&C, GoI, 16 October 1893, ASA.

⁶² *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 275.

⁶³ No. 5023-Ex, 20 November 1893, J.F. Finlay, Secretary, GoI, to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, F&C, July 1894, ASA.

⁶⁴ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 275.

reiterated the Government of India's (GoI) stance on witnesses and contended that they included "not only official witnesses but also non-official witnesses who would give independent evidence [to enable] the Commissioners to make as full an enquiry as possible".⁶⁵ The GoI also declined to accept the charge that it acted as the 'defendant' against SSOT's representations, and sought to discredit the body of evidence presented by the non-official witnesses, especially those representing the anti-opium interests, by highlighting that they "overlook the mass and weight of the evidence ... [and] construe some unimportant part of the subject as proof of the general unsoundness of the [opium] policy".⁶⁶

As per the original itinerary drawn in London, the RCO was scheduled to visit Assam and tour the districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar—the two highest opium consuming districts in India.⁶⁷ Assam was considered an important province by the anti-opiumists and they had emphasised the significance of a visit to the province even if it added a fortnight to the RCO's time in India.⁶⁸ This was however dropped from the final itinerary drawn by the Indian government and representatives from Assam were expected to appear before the RCO in Calcutta.⁶⁹ The explanation provided was one of time constraint but the unwillingness of the Indian government to allow the RCO to visit the worst affected areas was the first among a series of attempts at limiting access to factual evidence.⁷⁰ This change met with some objection and the importance of a thorough enquiry in Assam due to its high opium-consumption figures was emphasised along with the fact that time and costs involved in the travel would inconvenience non-official witnesses from Assam.⁷¹

The differences between the avowed official line and the behind-the-scenes working of realpolitik becomes clearer in the manner in which the Assam administration selected the witnesses. The Indian government's official directive to provincial governments was to gather evidence of officials and medical practitioners who were well

⁶⁵ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 274.

⁶⁶ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 274.

⁶⁷ No. 3910-Ex, "Appendix [to Resolution of the GoI]", F&C (Sep. Rev.), 8 September 1893, ASA.

⁶⁸ Letter from Westland to Brassey, 9 December 1893, Papers Related to the Royal Commission, TNA.

⁶⁹ Demi-Official, J.B. Lyall to Secretary, GoI, F&C, 29 September 1893, ASA.

⁷⁰ "The original itinerary ... was of an extended character, which it would have been quite impossible for the Commission to have completed in the course of one winter. We were, therefore compelled to contract its scope, and to omit from our tour tracts in which, as, for instance, in Assam, an investigation on the spot had been specially recommended." *Final Report*, Vol. VI, p. 3.

⁷¹ No. 4779-Ex, [J.F. Finlay to Secretary, Royal Commission], F&C (Sep. Rev.), 1 November 1893, ASA.

acquainted with local conditions and could provide facts on opium consumption and comment on the effects of opium on moral and physical conditions of users as well as highlight “their willingness to bear in whole or in part the cost of prohibitive measures”.⁷² However, with regard to evidence from “independent, non-official gentlemen, *especially natives of India*”, the directive was more circumspect and stated that the “[the] selection of these witnesses will require careful consideration”.⁷³

It is interesting to read this alongside the role that Dane was expected to play in the event that the evidence laid out before the Commission by witnesses who “are in favour of the prohibition or greater restriction of the consumption of opium”.⁷⁴ This eventuality was virtually eliminated from the government-nominated contingent, both official and non-official due to careful vetting by the provincial and central government. In fact, provincial governments were originally expected to send their nominations directly to the RCO but a 20 November 1893 order introduced a further layer of checks by the F&C, which in effect meant Dane’s intervention.⁷⁵ A further order was passed the same day which entrusted Dane with more responsibilities as he was instructed to be present in all the meetings of the RCO “in order that he may be in a position to advise the Government and the several Local Governments regarding the evidence to be placed before the Commission”.⁷⁶ Along with this, Dane was also given the final say in the matter of arranging and “production of the witnesses at the various places where evidence will be taken”.⁷⁷ It needs to be noted here that both the above orders were passed on the second day of the Commission’s proceedings in India, held at the Writers’ Building in Calcutta, and only four witnesses, all official, had been examined by that point. As such, virtually the entire India-leg of the Commission’s transactions had Dane’s sentinel presence and influence impressed upon it.⁷⁸

Although he never visited Assam,⁷⁹ Dane’s influence on the entire witness selection process, including the witnesses who eventually deposed before the RCO as

⁷² No. 3912-Ex, [J.F. Finlay to Chief Commissioner], F&C, 8 September 1893, ASA.

⁷³ No. 3912-Ex, [J.F. Finlay to Chief Commissioner], F&C, 8 September 1893, ASA, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ No. 4380-Ex, E.N. Barker to R.M. Dane, F&C, 16 October 1893, ASA.

⁷⁵ No. 5023-Ex, J.F. Finlay, Secretary, GoI, to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, F&C, 20 November 1893, ASA.

⁷⁶ No. 5026-Ex, “J.F. Finlay to the Secretary to the Royal Commission on Opium”, F&C, 20 November 1893, ASA.

⁷⁷ No. 5026-Ex, “J.F. Finlay to the Secretary to the Royal Commission on Opium”, F&C, 20 November 1893, ASA.

⁷⁸ The Commission initiated proceedings on Saturday, 18 November 1893.

⁷⁹ Demi-official, 2 October 1893, K.W. No. 2, F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 27, ASA.

well as the written statements and the documentary evidence that was presented, was clear.⁸⁰ One document, “Historical Account on Opium in Assam”, was flagged by the Assam government as “useful to have as ready reference in case questions may be asked by members of the Commission ... [but] not *necessary or advisable* to put such ... in evidence”.⁸¹ This was a crucial intervention as the said document was based on official as well as confidential reports and accounts that revealed unfavourable aspects of the government policy resulting in widespread addiction.

The Assam government nominated its official and medical witnesses without any significant problems but the selection of the non-official witnesses was made by the Chief Commissioner of Assam through confidential letters to all district commissioners.⁸² The administration highlighted Jagannath Barua, a prominent tea planter and president of the Jorhat Sorbojonik Sabha (Jorhat Public Society) who was known to support the government’s opium policy, as representative of Indians who would be suitable witnesses.⁸³ However, the government’s attempts to ‘manage witnesses’ was impeded by temperance activists, and Thomas Evans, a Welsh missionary and prohibitionist who acted as a scout for SSOT and visited Assam to gather anti-opium evidence and recruit witnesses to depose before the RCO, played a significant role.⁸⁴ The provincial administration viewed Evans as a “notorious” activist and considered possible means to block temperance activities after evidence of him organising anti-opium meetings and reports of his endeavours to get witnesses in the province emerged but decided against taking any steps to stop him from canvassing for support.⁸⁵ This had ramifications for the government during the proceedings at Calcutta as Evans and other temperance activists were able to persuade a few prominent Assamese middle class individuals to appear before the RCO and present anti-opium evidence. Given that a number of prominent

⁸⁰ Dane instructed Daukes to furnish the RCO with three reports which were published as appendices to the *Final Report*. No. 438F&C—8295R, F.C. Daukes to Secretary, GoI, F&C, 30 November 1893, ASA.

⁸¹ Demi-official, [Dane to Daukes], 22 October 1893, K.W. No. 2, F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 29, ASA, emphasis added.

⁸² “Notes”, Daukes to Driberg, 16 September 1893, K.W., F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 1, ASA.

⁸³ Ramesh Chandra Kalita, “Opium Prohibition and Raibahadur Jagannath Baruah”, *Proceedings of the North East India History Association* (1995), pp. 182–91.

⁸⁴ Thomas Evans (1826–1902) who was recruited by J.G. Alexander, Secretary, SSOT, led a group of Western temperance workers working in India in the 19th century associated with the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association (AITA). This association played an important role in the Indian temperance movement and was supported by liberal, temperance-crusading MPs like W.S. Caine and Samuel Smith. Gordon A. Catherall, “Evans, Thomas”, in D. Ben Rees (ed.), *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India, 1800–1970* (Liverpool, 2003), p. 47.

⁸⁵ K.W., F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 14, ASA.

missionaries from across India appeared before the RCO, the absence of witness statements from missionaries from Assam is noteworthy.

The sole record of any connection of an Assam-based missionary organisation with the RCO was a letter sent by The American Baptist Mission at Gauhati, Assam, to the RCO. The note was a copy of the resolution that was adopted by the missionary body in their annual conference on 9 December 1893, which called for the abolition of the opium trade and highlighted ethical dimensions of the opium question emphasising the lack of “veracity, honesty, ambition and thrift” of opium addicts, while also underlining that abuse of the drug led to rapid physical degradation and death in a number of cases.⁸⁶ The absence of a missionary voice in the opium prohibition debate in Assam throughout the period of study in this thesis, barring cursory remarks in official meetings and conferences, is a remarkable feature that raises a number of questions about the Assam government’s suppression of the missionary activity centred on opium use.⁸⁷ Moreover, in India there was an absence of dedicated missionary bodies that took the lead in the prohibition campaign as in other countries, most notably, the The Anti-Opium League, a nationwide missionary-led body that was formed in 1906 in China or the SSOT in Britain.⁸⁸

The ‘selection process’ of Assam representatives lasted more than two months and the official list underwent alterations as the final contingent of witnesses was shaped to meet the demands of presenting the Assam government’s opium policy in good light. By late November, a list of 10 officials⁸⁹ and 13 non-officials⁹⁰ was drawn up and written statements of all the proposed witnesses were sent to the GoI. Although there was some variance in approach, content, tone and opinion, all the statements were categorically consistent on four counts: (i) the current policy of the Assam government was effective and aimed at reducing the number of opium consumers; (ii) opium users were diligent,

⁸⁶ Assam Mission of the American Baptist Mission Union Records, Council of Baptist Churches of Northeast India (hereafter, CBCNEI).

⁸⁷ The archival collections of the CBCNEI, including the annual reports of the various Church organisations across Assam and publications, did not offer any substantial information on the topic. Even private correspondence of American and British missionaries stationed in northeast India does not present any noteworthy account of anti-opium opinion or activities and is a subject that is worthy of further research as an independent topic in its own right.

⁸⁸ The role of missionaries in prohibition movement has been highlighted by John F. Richards who noted that “British, American and Canadian missionaries from Protestant denominations living and working in India were the strongest advocates for complete prohibition”. Richards, “Royal Commission”, p. 404.

⁸⁹ No. 8766R, F.C. Daukes to Secretary, GoI, F&C, 22 November 1893, ASA.

⁹⁰ No. 8750R, F.C. Daukes to the Comptroller, Assam, F&C, 21 November 1893, ASA.

morally-strong, able-bodied hard-working men and women; (iii) opium was a valuable article in Assam, given its climatic conditions, and used primarily as a medicinal substance with proven palliative and curative properties; and (iv) introduction of prohibitory measures goes not only against common wisdom and popular sentiment but will lead to discontent and, possibly, violent, mass protests.⁹¹

As far as the Assam government was concerned, the selection process was well-executed and the evidence to be presented before the Commission was wholly favourable to its opium policy. However, despite the Assam administration's efforts to harmonise information in line with government opium policy, the eventual outcome was a travesty. At least three of its carefully selected non-official Indian witnesses presented evidence that was critical of the government policy and they were joined by a number of witnesses who were assembled independently by SSOT and other prohibition organisations. The evidence presented by these witnesses, along with intensive questions posed by anti-opium members of the RCO, Pease and Wilson, disputed the four main contentions highlighted above that the government was keen to uphold. Moreover, the central contention of the government against regulation and prohibition was based on the spectre of violent rebellion instanced by the Phulaguri 'opium revolt' of 1861 was upturned by Wilson who forced J.J.S. Driberg, the Assam excise commissioner and official representative of the administration at the hearings, to submit the official report on the incident. Written in 1862 by the panel which investigated the episode (submitted to the court during the judicial trial of the "rioters"), the report depicted the Phulaguri rebellion in unequivocal terms not as an "opium revolt" but as the error of an inexperienced British administrator in handling a peaceful protest, which resulted in the government's position on prohibition becoming untenable.⁹²

Eighteen witnesses from Assam, all from the Brahmaputra valley districts, gave evidence to the RCO in late December 1893. The government's original plan of presenting 10 official and eight non-official witnesses (later revised to 13) was upset, in equal measure by local and international anti-opiumists and administrative compulsions and eventually, only four official witnesses gave evidence.⁹³ The provincial excise

⁹¹ [Statements of 15 witnesses, 8 official and 7 non-official], F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–186, pp. 31–62, ASA.

⁹² "Appendix XXXII [Official Report on the Phulaguri Incident]", *Final Report*, Vol. IV, pp. 459–60.

⁹³ Written statements of all the official witnesses except Arbuthnott and Gait were submitted to the RCO. F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–186, pp. 31–62, ASA.

commissioner was subjected to extended cross-examination on all four days, and although his evidence—along with the three other official witnesses—made up the bulk of time given to Assam’s representatives by the RCO, there is little in these accounts that is remarkable. Instead, it was the six nominated tea planters—three British and three Indians—who held the fort and defended all criticism against government policy as well as substantiated opium’s role as a medicinal substance.⁹⁴ The Assam government also submitted a number of appendices to demonstrate its policy and position on opium in order to lend weight to the statements presented by the bureaucrats and planters.⁹⁵ The statements presented by the Assam administration nominated witnesses were disputed by Wilson and Pease and the government assumed a cautious approach in its defence against the evidence presented by the anti-opium lobby.⁹⁶ The discussion below will engage with evidence presented by three Indian non-official witnesses (two of whom were initially part of the government delegation but switched sides) who presented anti-opium evidence as well as the absence of two government nominated witnesses from the hearings in Calcutta to highlight facets of witness management and the government’s attempts to harmonise information.

The anti-opiumists lobby fired the opening salvo by presenting Ram Durlabh Mazumdar, a senior lawyer from Nowgong district who gave evidence on 24 November, a month before the Assam government put up its first witness. Mazumdar’s evidence countered all four facets of the government’s argument highlighted above and supported a ban on opium except for medical purposes. He not only drew attention to the widespread prevalence of opium smoking but also disputed the medical argument about opium’s efficacy against fevers and its use by the Assamese as a cure or prophylactic against malarial fevers. The feature pertaining to opium’s anti-pyretic properties has significant bearing and is the most substantial point on which official and non-official representation differed most pointedly. Mazumdar emphasised the smoking aspect by highlighting the

⁹⁴ All six, R.C. Haviland, E.P.R. Gilman, Ernest Bridge, Mahendra Nath Phukan, Rahamat Ali and Jagannath Barua, are unwavering in their defence of the government’s policy and unfaltering in their responses.

⁹⁵ Of the seven appendices, six of them clearly express the government’s line. They were statements written by the administration-nominated official and semi-official witnesses who could attend the hearings; detailed account of the excise administration of Assam which presented the opium revenue in favourable light; statement by an independent medical practitioner who stated that “[w]ithout opium I have little doubt the Assamese *as a race* would long ago have become extinct”; a memorial on the Jorhat Sorbojonik Sabha which defended the government’s opium policy. See Appendices XXX–XXXVI, *Final Report*, Vol. II, pp. 454–62.

⁹⁶ *Final Report*, Vol. II, pp. 274–75.

existence of a *chandu*⁹⁷ shop in Nowgong where people smoked opium, which countered the Assam government's official stance dating back to December 1890 stating that "that there were no 'opium dens' in the province".⁹⁸ Mazumdar's statement was corroborated by Pease who cited Luttman-Johnson's, commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, official acknowledgment that "there were a number of opium dens in existence in Assam" in 1890.⁹⁹ This is crucial given that even in the 1920s the GoI maintained the complete absence of opium smoking in India in international forums and formed the basis of its defence of the domestic opium trade. Another important detail highlighted by Mazumdar was the flaw in the government's position on the Phulaguri incident of 1861 where a group of protesting *ryots* (peasants) clashed with the police resulting in the death of Lieutenant Singer, assistant district commissioner at Nowgong. Mazumdar attributed the riot an opposition to increased taxation and challenged the government's stance that the 'riot' was a clear instance of public disaffection arising from opium prohibition, an argument that formed the core of the government's opposition to regulation and prohibition. During the RCO's proceedings, this incident was used time and again by the official witnesses from Assam to argue against the imposing of a ban on opium in Assam, endorsing the GoI's argument about full-scale revolt in the wake of opium prohibition.

Two nominated non-official witnesses, Radha Nath Changkakoti (1853–1923), the proprietor of Radhanath Press and Secretary of the Upper Assam Association, and Haribilas Agarwala, a respected merchant from Tezpur (and an opium seller and user), were dropped from the official list and presented evidence independently. Changkakoti, who did not submit a written statement, presented evidence which was distinctly anti-opium and categorical in criticising the government's opium policy.¹⁰⁰ Changkakoti also offered prescriptive opinion and suggested "curtailing civil and military expenditure and Home charges" as measures to remedy the loss of revenue.¹⁰¹ Agarwala's exclusion from the government delegation, however, is remarkable given that his position on the evils of opium-eating stemmed from personal experience and his views on prohibition were

⁹⁷ An opium preparation used for smoking.

⁹⁸ [Evidence of Ram Durlabh Mazumdar], *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 61.

⁹⁹ Luttman-Johnson to Secretary, Chief Commissioner of Assam, 30 December 1890. Wilson refers to this letter.

¹⁰⁰ He was part of the list circulated on 7 December, a copy of which was sent to the GoI as well as the RCO.

¹⁰¹ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 306. This was a significant early nationalist sentiment espoused by an influential public figure who later took on the editorship of *The Times of Assam*, an English newspaper that played a crucial role in forming public opinion amongst the Assamese intelligentsia in the twentieth century.

clearly neutral.¹⁰² The records suggest that he was dropped after the government received a copy of his statement, a fact that illustrates a crucial aspect of ‘witness management’: the government only fielded witnesses who held views that were in complete tandem with the official stance and there was no room for ‘individual’ opinion, however inoffensive.¹⁰³

The absence of two nominated witnesses, E.A. Gait,¹⁰⁴ director, land records and agriculture department and census commissioner, on account of public duty and, Hem Chandra Barua, a retired bureaucrat, because of illness, needs to be examined in the context of the Assam government’s failure to present a homogenous body of evidence supporting its policy and position on opium.¹⁰⁵ It is noteworthy that despite elaborate preparations to appear before the RCO, Gait excused himself by highlighting that he could not “go to Calcutta without seriously interfering with his tour”.¹⁰⁶ His absence was noted by Wilson who informed the other commissioners that Gait had written about the “‘vice’ of opium” in the *Census Report on Assam* (1891) and that he “had been *very willing* to call him” to give evidence.¹⁰⁷ Wilson also pointed out Barua’s absence and asked Driberg if he was aware that Barua was “the author of a play in Assamese against opium?”—the play in question being *Kaniar Kirtan* (Glories of the Opium Addict, 1861) published the same year as the Phulaguri rebellion (discussed in Chapter 1). Driberg responded by stating that he had read it “about 25 years ago ... [but] did not know that it was against opium” and contended that one should “not judge a man from what he writes in a play”.¹⁰⁸ It is worth mentioning that a non-official witness from Assam, Upendranath Barua, had, in fact, translated the play into English for the RCO, which meant that the exchange between Wilson and Driberg exemplified the farcicalities of the defence offered by government officials in the face of objective cross questioning.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² *Final Report*, Vol. II, pp. 266–67.

¹⁰³ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 279.

¹⁰⁴ Sir Edward Albert Gait (1863–1950) was a distinguished administrator and served in the Assam excise department and retired as the Lieutenant-Governor of the province of Bihar and Orissa. He was better known for the enduring classic, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta, 1906), which is regarded as the first “rational–positivist” history of the region. He was also a census commissioner and the author of the *Census of Assam 1891, Vol. I: Report* (Shillong, 1892).

¹⁰⁵ Illness was attributed to Hem Chandra Barua and Benu Dhar Barua, both of whom issued written statements but did not appear before the Commission. Their written statements appeared as “Appendix XXXV”, *Final Report*, Vol., II, p. 461.

¹⁰⁶ Demi-official, Gait to Corkery, 16 December 1893, K.W. 2, F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 30, ASA.

¹⁰⁷ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 279.

¹⁰⁸ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 279.

¹⁰⁹ Harichandra Bhattacharya, *Origin and Development of Assam Drama and the Stage: From the Earliest Times upto [sic] 1940* (Gauhati, 1964), p. 78fn1.

To turn now to the matter of medical evidence on opium use in Assam which was considered by the Assam government as a crucial part of its defence and all attempts were made to ensure that at least two experienced official medical witnesses attended the proceedings at Calcutta. The government, however, failed to present a compelling defence of the medical use of opium in Assam despite measures taken to field medical officers who espoused a pro-opium stance. One of the original nominees, W.P. Warburton, refused to appear before the RCO,¹¹⁰ and was replaced by Surgeon-General E.F. Dobson of Shillong who had no experience of the febrile Brahmaputra valley districts but was suited to present evidence on immigrant tea garden labour.¹¹¹ The other nominee was Surgeon-General J. Mullane, Civil Surgeon, Lakhimpur, an experienced doctor who served in the highest opium consuming districts in Assam. In order to achieve parity in their accounts, the Assam government decided to “get Dr. Dobson’s statement based on the lines of Dr. Mullane’s” before it was presented to the RCO.¹¹² Despite the fact that Dr Mullane and Dr Dobson served in different parts of Assam, with vastly different conditions of opium use and climate, a study of their statements reveals that they concur on all points, whether on the absence of excessive use of opium in Assam or the dangers and injustices of prohibition as well as medical opinion on opium’s effectiveness against fevers and stomach illnesses.¹¹³

However, political developments in Assam which necessitated an armed expedition to Abor country (a frontier region) resulted in the absence of Dr Mullane from the witnesses who appeared before the RCO at Calcutta.¹¹⁴ Driberg led the Assam delegation at Calcutta and recognised the importance of presenting at least one official medical witness before the RCO and persisted in his efforts to get Dr Dobson, whose regiment was scheduled to join the expedition as well. Driberg enlisted the help of William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to enable Dr Dobson to join the Assam witnesses at Calcutta and succeeded in his efforts.¹¹⁵ Wilson remarked that the

¹¹⁰ Warburton was categorical in his refusal to attend. Demi-official, W.P. Warburton to J.H. Corkery, 20 November 1893, K.W. No. 2, F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 30, ASA.

¹¹¹ Telegram No. 9435R, Shillong, 15 December 1893. Copy of Driberg’s telegram from Dhubri, dated 14 December 1893, sent to the Chief Commissioner of Assam.

¹¹² Telegram, Driberg to Daukes, 12 December 1893, K.W., F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 16, ASA.

¹¹³ [Statements of Dobson and Mullane], K.W. 2, F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, pp 39–45, ASA.

¹¹⁴ Telegram No. 5T [from Principal Medical Officer and Sanitary Commissioner, Assam] and No. 16T, [Exchange between Ward and Warburton], 9 December 1893, K.W., F&C, A, July 1894, Nos. 12–126, p. 16, ASA.

¹¹⁵ Telegram No. 9167R, Shillong, 13 December 1893 and Telegram No. 9435R, Shillong, 15 December 1893 [Exchange between Driberg and Ward], F&C, ASA.

official witnesses from Assam were “speaking from the same point of view” and Driberg was asked to reduce the number of witnesses, and the commissioners reiterated the importance of medical opinion on more than one occasion.¹¹⁶ Driberg’s efforts in getting Dobson to Calcutta were vindicated as the overwhelming affirmation of opium’s palliative powers provided by the doctor who had no experience of its use in fevers, remained the sole medical opinion on the opium question in Assam that was presented to the RCO and the authoritativeness of his views remained unchallenged.

Despite the shortcomings and obvious discrepancies in its functioning as well as the selective representation of the facts about opium consumption in India by the government which have been discussed above and also noted by some contemporary commentators, the RCO’s report was the most authoritative dossier on the subject and stalled debate and reform of Indian opium policy. The emergence of transnational organisations put opium at the heart of international diplomatic negotiations in the early twentieth century and opium policy became the site of contestations between local administrative measures designed to protect the opium revenue and global treaty obligations and commitments aimed at worldwide prohibition. Additionally, the opium debate became the focal point of the difference between the British Empire which dominated the international opium trade and America as it emerged as the preeminent world power fashioning a new imperial norm. The next section will highlight that the British sustained their involvement in the opium trade till the mid-1920s by winding down the export trade but defending the domestic trade in India as it faced opposition at home as well as the transnational forums to end the opium trade. This will be done through an examination of the connections between opium policy developments in Assam and transnational drug regulation in an era of emerging provincial legislative politics.

2.3 International Pressure, Domestic Policy and the Provincial Opium Revenue: The Botham Committee’s Findings in an Era of Transnational Treaties

The Liberal Party landslide in the 1906 British Parliamentary election provided the SSOT a sizeable political lobby and 250 Liberal MPs pledged to seek an early abolition of the trade and the new Secretary of State for India, John Morley, also espoused an anti-opium position. In May 1906 a resolution calling for “the speedy close of Indo-Chinese opium trade” was passed in the House of Commons and was followed by the government’s

¹¹⁶ *Final Report*, Vol. II, p. 262.

pledge in 1907 to terminate the opium trade with China by 1917. The passage of Bill 205 on 10 July 1908, also known as the Opium Act, banned the “the importation, manufacture and sale of opium for other than medicinal purposes” within Britain.¹¹⁷ Developments in Britain as well as the international controls that came into effect in 1909 virtually ended the export trade and by 1914 the opium revenue had dropped to less than a sixth of its pre-1909 receipts.¹¹⁸ The domestic trade grew consistently since the 1890s as the RCO report enabled the government to defend it along with the fact that internal opium was shielded from transnational treaties and international scrutiny. Additionally, the internal trade in opium also grew as there was pressure on the provincial governments to increase revenue, especially income from excisable commodities, due to fiscal strains in the early twentieth century. In fact, between 1905 and 1915, excise receipts grew by 47 per cent and the increase was attributed to the “expansion of consumption ... the imposition of progressively higher rates of duty and the increasingly extensive control of the excise administration”.¹¹⁹

The rise of American influence in the Asia Pacific and its opposition to opium and other narcotics, however, contributed to developments which induced policy changes that affected India. It is noteworthy that American involvement in the international drug debate was guided by its own experience of the drug problem at home and in its colony of Philippines,¹²⁰ as well as the fact that opium addiction was a key impediment to the programme of reform and development that it sought to initiate in China to open it to Western commerce and investment.¹²¹ As part of the initiative, the American government organised a meeting of all opium producing and consuming countries to discuss opium use in Asia, which resulted in the Shanghai Opium Commission in 1909.¹²² The agreements drawn up at Shanghai paved the way for future negotiations on opium and created the diplomatic apparatus for transnational drug regulation that was initiated by the 1912 Hague Convention.

¹¹⁷ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, Vol. 192 (10 July 1908), p. 12550, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1908/jul/13/business-of-the-house>, accessed 12 July 2014.

¹¹⁸ John F. Richards, “Fiscal Strains in British India, 1860–1914”, XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki (July 2006), p. 20.

¹¹⁹ “Revenue”, *Statistics of British India: Financial Statistics, Volume II* (London, 1918), p. 218.

¹²⁰ Daniel J.P. Wertz, “Idealism, Imperialism, and Internationalism: Opium Politics in the Colonial Philippines, 1898–1925”, *MAS*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (March 2013), pp 467–99.

¹²¹ Newman, “Opium Agreements”, p. 530.

¹²² International Opium Commission, *Report of the International Opium Commission, Shanghai, China, February 1 to February 26, 1909*, 2 Vols (Shanghai, 1909).

The threat that American ascendancy posed to British interests can be ascertained from a confidential memorandum that was submitted by the British delegation which attended that opium meetings at The Hague in 1912.¹²³ The document highlighted the tensions in international diplomacy and drew attention to the collapse of the European imperial ‘opium bloc’ while emphasising the need for Britain to examine its role in the global opium trade which America categorised as immoral and the root of widespread addiction in order to limit damage to Britain’s standing in the world.¹²⁴ Additionally, the memo argued that the America-sponsored resolution on suppression of the opium production and complete end of the trade in raw opium by 1920 was aimed at the British revenue, rather than a serious attempt to address opium addiction in China and parts of Southeast Asia.¹²⁵

Developments in the form of resolution signed at the 1909 Shanghai Conference,¹²⁶ followed soon after by the first transnational drug treaty, the 1912 Hague Convention, resulted in a change in GoI policy direction. The fine line between the policy of gradual prohibition of opium-smoking on the one hand, and (regulated) sale of opium under the guise of ‘medicinal use’ argument becomes clearer in reading of the substance of the 1909 Shanghai conference resolutions.¹²⁷ A significant feature of the transnational conferences was that although they addressed many issues connected with the opium trade, they did not seek to address the question of internal consumption in India at any point.¹²⁸ This was partly due to the spirited defence of Indian consumption by the British delegation as well as the inclusion of a resolution which emphasised the RCO’s findings that opium was “a household remedy for many ills ... [and] centuries of inherited experience have taught the people of India discretion in the use of the drug, and its misuse is a negligible feature in Indian life”.¹²⁹ This clause effectively defended the Indian

¹²³ “Confidential Memorandum Containing Remarks Supplementary to the Main Report”, Finance Department (hereafter, FD), Separate Revenue, C (hereafter, SRC), December 1912, No. 273, NAI.

¹²⁴ “Confidential Memorandum Containing Remarks Supplementary to the Main Report”, FD, SRC, December 1912, No. 273, pp. 4–6, NAI.

¹²⁵ “Confidential Memorandum Containing Remarks Supplementary to the Main Report”, FD, SRC, December 1912, No. 273, pp. 4–6, NAI.

¹²⁶ “[T]he Resolutions were finally adopted by the Commission on the 26th February 1909.” Revenue, No. 88, Morley of Blackburn to Governor General of India in Council, India Office, London, 6 August 1909, IOR.

¹²⁷ International Opium Commission, *Report of the International Opium Commission, Shanghai, China, February 1 to February 26, 1909. Vol. I. – Report of the Proceedings* (Shanghai, 1909), pp. 6–15.

¹²⁸ Charles I. Bevans (comp.), “International Opium Convention”, *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776–1949* (Washington, 1968), pp. 858–65.

¹²⁹ Quoted in a paper by Sir William Meyer, which was originally put before the 1912 Conference as a speech at the third session with reference to the resolution which formed the basis of Article 1 of the

government's domestic trade and enabled its continuation without international proscription given that it underscored India's relative backwardness in medical infrastructure and treatment.¹³⁰

In 1910, Sir Fleetwood Wilson, the Indian finance minister, in the annual budget speech observed that, "the reduction of our exports of opium to China will cause a serious fall in our opium revenue", while highlighting the need to raise revenue from domestic excise receipts.¹³¹ The fact that the domestic market for opium compensated for the loss of the export trade meant that the government was keen to protect the revenue and this is evident in the manner in which representatives of the Indian government at international forums (mis)represented domestic policy. The major line of defence of domestic policy invoked the sovereign rights of the Indian government to frame domestic policy without external intervention. This argument was further bolstered by the assertion about the absence of any degree of widespread addiction in India as well as the protection of the customary habits of the Indian population on the pretext of cultural sensitivity. Additionally, the Indian government positioned opium consumption in India as a 'domestic question', one in which other countries in the transnational forums did not have a legitimate say.¹³² The British government's determination to protect its revenues from Indian opium exports to China has been highlighted by historians who have looked at America's role in the drug diplomacy.¹³³ These studies have emphasised that the British position at Shanghai was determined by both the Indian government's defence and dependence on opium as well as the British commissioners at Shanghai who shielded their opium exports to China.

It needs to be noted here that the Indian government was aware of the facts about opium smoking in Assam and the British delegation was briefed about this facet of opium use in India. Excise department records reveal that the central government was informed

Convention of 1912. "Appendix 1: Report of the British Delegates to the International Opium Conference held at The Hague, December 1911–January 1912", NAI.

¹³⁰ "[The Opium Conference at Shanghai] Report of Dr. Hamilton Wright of Washington, D.C.", *Proceedings of the American Society of International Law at Its Third Annual Meeting* (New York, 1909), pp. 91–92.

¹³¹ Quoted in D.E. Wacha, "Mr Montagu's India Budget Speech", *Recent Indian Finance* (Madras, 1910), p. ii.

¹³² This aspect was emphasised by Raymond Buell (1896–1946) in his discussion of the Geneva Opium Conferences where he criticised the British government's dual stance on opium—situating export opium as a matter "of international concern" while arguing for independence in policy on the internal production and trade. Raymond Leslie Buell, "The Opium Conferences", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (July 1925), p. 568.

¹³³ A.H. Taylor, *American Diplomacy and the Narcotics Traffic, 1900–1939* (Durham NC, 1969); S.D. Stein, *International Diplomacy: State Administrators and Narcotics Control* (Aldershot, 1985).

by the Assam administration about the fact “that the practice of opium smoking is not confined to the Assam frontier districts but is common throughout the valley and is especially popular with the rising generation”.¹³⁴ The central government had used this information to build a defence on the basis of a proposal to increase duties on opium, a measure it had taken to fend off any allegations from the American delegation.¹³⁵ The adoption of the transnational convention meant that the GoI had the legal obligation to review its internal opium administration and it responded by passing an essential resolution to meet these requirements which directed provincial administrations to “take measures for the gradual suppression of the practice of opium smoking”.¹³⁶

Despite ample evidence of opium smoking in India as well as widespread addiction in provinces like Assam, the GoI was unequivocal about its stance on the separation of opium smoking and opium eating as distinct issues, a historical distinction that the British government had employed to justify the opium trade in India. Moreover, the GoI’s internal resolution affirmed a clear stance in disassociating the ‘opium habit’—the general understanding of opium use in the proceedings of the Shanghai conference as a habit-forming, dangerous drug—from the case of opium eating in India and invoked the RCO’s stance that “opium eating as a vice scarcely exists in India” as a defence of its policy on opium in India.¹³⁷

Following the 1905 Bengal Partition, which resulted in the creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A) (see Appendix 1 [b]), the issue of opium was relegated to the backburner given that widespread addiction was largely confined to the five Brahmaputra valley districts. During this period, the notable development in the opium debate in Assam was the developing political identity of the anti-opium movement. The first provincial Anti-Opium Conference, held in Dibrugarh in 1907, brought together government legislators, social workers and cultural organisations and resulted in a memorial that demanded the administration’s support in regulating opium consumption. The memorial proposed the formation of an Assam Temperance

¹³⁴ Demi-official letter from R.M. Dane, Inspector-General of Excise and Salt for India, to the Honourable P.G. Melitus, Member, Board of Revenue, Eastern Bengal and Assam (hereafter, EB&A), No. 153 C, FD, 11 December 1908, NAI.

¹³⁵ Demi-official letter from R.M. Dane to P.G. Melitus, 24 December 1908, FD, NAI.

¹³⁶ Resolution No. 533 F.E., H.F. Howard, Officiating Secretary, GoI to All Provincial Governments, 19 August 1912, Municipal Department (hereafter, MD), Separate Revenue, A (hereafter, SRA), March 1913, Nos. 1–31, ASA.

¹³⁷ Resolution No. 533 F.E., H.F. Howard, Officiating Secretary, GoI to All Provincial Governments, 19 August 1912, MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, ASA.

Association with permanent committees in all the sub-divisional towns of the Brahmaputra valley with opium prohibition as the core agenda, and this resulted in the establishment of a number of temperance societies across the province by 1912.¹³⁸ These organisations played a significant role in the prohibition campaign as they provided a platform that brought rural and urban elites together in a public debate which also received the support and endorsement of religious and traditional leaders.

The annulment of the Bengal Partition in 1912 coincided with the international developments highlighted above and changed the political landscape of the region (see Appendix 1[c]).¹³⁹ Assam regained its status as an independent province under a chief commissioner as well as its own legislative council,¹⁴⁰ and interest in the opium question received renewed vigour with the appointment of A. Earle¹⁴¹ as the chief commissioner. In the legislative council debates during this period, the opium question was highlighted by two Assamese representatives, Ghanashyam Barua (1867–1923) and Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871–1946), who challenged government policy and advocated prohibition.¹⁴² Earle took a personal interest in the “opium vice in Assam ... [and the] state of affairs as regards the use of opium”¹⁴³ and the provincial excise commissioner, A.W. Botham, was instructed to prepare a note on opium consumption in the province.¹⁴⁴ Botham’s assessment of opium policy in Assam from 1888–89 to 1911 was comprehensive and his account highlighted that the policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’ (the cornerstone of official policy since the 1870s) had resulted in increased excise receipts but also led to a disproportionate rise in actual consumption in the Brahmaputra valley districts.¹⁴⁵ Local anti-opiumists challenged the government’s policy, especially its effectiveness as a deterrent to addiction, and countered the government’s

¹³⁸ Amalendu Guha, *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Reforms in Assam* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 88.

¹³⁹ The Eastern Bengal districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh were coupled with pre-1905 Assam. This inclusion of the Bengali-speaking, Muslim districts had significant reverberation on provincial opium policy as communal politics dominated regional politics.

¹⁴⁰ Iftekhar Iqbal, “The Space between Nation and Empire: The Making and Unmaking of Eastern Bengal and Assam Province, 1905–1911”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (February 2015), pp. 69–84, explores the contestations between the Indian nation and the British empire in an experiment that was expected to facilitate the empire’s eastward transregional engagement.

¹⁴¹ Sir Archdale Earle (1861–1934), C.I.E. (1909), K.C.I.E. (1911), son of H.E. Earle, educated at Uppingham School and Oxford; joined colonial service in 1882. Rao, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 136.

¹⁴² Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (hereafter, ALCP), 10 April 1913, No. 5, ASA.

¹⁴³ MD, File No. E–1—M of 1912, p. 1, ASA.

¹⁴⁴ [W.M. Kennedy, Second Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam to Botham], 21 May 1912, MD, File No. E–8—M of 1913, ASA.

¹⁴⁵ “The Opium Consumption in Assam”, Enclosure A to Proceedings No. 6, No. 1209E, Shillong, 17 September 1912, MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, ASA.

hypothesis that restrictions on opium would result in its substitution with *ganja* (cannabis) and alcohol.¹⁴⁶

Throughout the period, 1890–91 to 1908–09, the wholesale price was fixed at the rate of Rs 37 per seer (about 7.5 *annas* per *tola*),¹⁴⁷ but the retail price was tweaked to cater to the market logic of demand and supply and meet the challenge of smuggling, rather than adhere to the policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’. Table 2.1 highlights the contradictions in the government’s policy which formed the cornerstone of its defence of the internal trade in Assam since the 1860s.

Price per <i>tola</i> (in <i>annas</i>)	1890–91	1891–92	1894–95	1897–98	1904–05
Kamrup	8–10	8–10	8–12	8–10	8–10
Darrang	7.5–10	8–12	8–10	8–10	8–10
Nowgong	8–10	8–10	8–10	8–10	8–12
Sibsagar	8–9	8–10	8–10	8–10	8–12
Lakhimpur	8–10	8–10	8–10	8–10	8–10
Cachar	10–12	10	11	11	8–12
Sylhet	11.5	14	13.6	12.5	10–Re1
Goalpara	10–14	10–14	8–10	9–12	10–12
Naga Hills	10–14	14	11	11	14
Khasi Hills	8–14	8–12	14	Re1–2anna	Re 1
Garro Hills	10	8–10	9–9.6	10	10

Table 2.1 Average Retail Price of Excise Opium in the Districts of Assam, 1890–91 to 1904–05¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ No. 3 “Extract from the Address presented at Dibrugarh by the citizens of Dibrugarh on the 20th August 1912”, MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, pp. 9–11, ASA.

¹⁴⁷ A *maund* is a traditional unit of mass used in India and was standardised at 100 Troy pounds or 37.324 kilograms in 1833. A *seer*, another traditional unit of mass, equals 933.10 grams in the metric system and 40 *seer* make up a *maund*. *Tola* is yet another traditional unit of measurement and is equivalent to 11.66 grams in the metric system; 80 *tolas* make up a *seer*. An *anna* is the pre-decimal Indian unit of currency equivalent to one-sixteenth of a rupee. Government of India, *The Standards of Weights and Measures Act, 1976* (Delhi, 2011), p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ The table has been compiled from British Library, IOR/V/21/1162, *Report on the Administration of the Excise Department in Assam* for the corresponding years (1890–91, 1891–92, 1894–95, 1897–98 and 1904–

The average retail price statistics reveal that prices remained constant in the five Brahmaputra valley districts—Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Kamrup—over a 15 year period. These districts consistently recorded the highest levels of consumption in India but the retail prices were kept lower than the hill districts as well as the Surma (or Barak) valley districts where consumption figures were modest.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, in the Brahmaputra valley districts the difference between the wholesale and retail price (both fixed by the government) was minimal and this directly contradicts the official policy line about a pricing mechanism that was designed to inhibit consumption.

Another set of statistics draws out further contradictions in the government policy. Table 2.2 illustrates the extent of the addiction among the indigenous Assamese-speaking population during a 50-year period when the government followed its policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’. The table shows the annual consumption per 10,000 people in *seers* and the data is revelatory when pitted against the League of Nations’ mandated level of consumption at 6 *seers* per 10,000 people (when used in a strictly medical sense).

Year	Assam Province	Brahmaputra Valley	Indigenous Assamese Population	Total Revenue (in Rupees)
1881	123.4	255.9	313.4	15,53,600
1891	95.5	188.7	267.2	18,11,610
1901	84.3	177.7	274.9	18,04,382
1911	85.5	172.7	277.1	29,90,828
1921	81.1	151.9	286.9	44,12,308

Table 2.2 Annual Consumption (in *seers*) per 10,000 people in Assam, 1881–1921¹⁵⁰

05), IOR. Retail price data is available only for the said years and no data is available for the Lushai Hills district.

¹⁴⁹ Opium addiction was historically regarded as a problem among the Assamese-speaking population of the Brahmaputra valley and not of the Bengali-speaking Surma (Barak) valley population as well as the region’s many hill tribes. Ranjit Kumar De, “Some Documents on Opium Revenue of Cachar and the Barak Valley: 1860–1870, *Proceeding of the North East India History Association* (1998), pp. 194–99.

¹⁵⁰ Compiled from “Appendix XIII”, *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (Jorhat, 1925), p. 97.

It needs to be noted that available records suggest that from 1871–1921, the Brahmaputra valley districts made up less than half of Assam’s population but accounted for roughly 92–93 per cent of the total opium sold in Assam.¹⁵¹ When compared with the League of Nations’ figure of 6 *seers* per 10,000 people, Assam’s consumption level of 81.1 *seers* was alarmingly high, but the figure of 286.9 for the native Assamese was clearly extraordinary. It needs to be noted that revenue doubled during the preceding decade and consumption was evidently higher than 1874–75 levels when official controls were first put in place and revealed the failures of the government policy.

The crucial fact about the opium question in Assam was that there was no consensus of opinion on most aspects of consumption and contradictory evidence saturated both official records as well as popular perception. Significantly, official Assam government reports maintained the GoI’s position about the absence of opium smoking in British India, but unofficially, government officials acknowledged that it was a widespread phenomenon in the province, and local anti-opiumists had highlighted the universality of the smoking habit across all age groups in the province (as discussed in Chapter 1). Given the lack of consensus, Earle stressed that the proposed committee would deal with the issue of opium consumption from a broad perspective and would personally examine official and non-official witnesses, including Assamese and other Indians, unlike existing reports which were drawn up by government officials and medical practitioners.¹⁵² The appointment of a committee, however, met with resistance within the government due to the risks of an adverse report on the excise revenue and officials highlighted that existing studies and reports, including medical evidence, on the subject of opium consumption and its effects negated the need for a fresh enquiry.¹⁵³ When the Committee was eventually appointed, Earle emphasised the “*confidential advisory*” nature of the committee and assured government officials that committee members would either be government officials or consenting non-official Indians as a precautionary measure to deal with any adverse findings.¹⁵⁴

The BEC visited all major provincial towns in the five Brahmaputra valley districts and examined close to 500 witnesses which provided first-hand accounts on

¹⁵¹ More than 1,557 *maunds* out of the total of 1,686 *maunds* sold in the province in 1880–81 and 1,201 *maunds* out of 1,291 *maunds* sold in 1900–1901 was consumed in the five valley districts. See Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 55. See also, Guha, *Planter Raj*, Appendix 6, p. 339 for population data.

¹⁵² MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, p. 7, ASA.

¹⁵³ MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, pp. 3–6, ASA.

¹⁵⁴ “Note [by A.E. Earle]”, 29 October 1912, MD, SRA, March 1913, Nos. 1–31, p. 7, ASA, original italics.

various aspects of the social life of opium in Assam.¹⁵⁵ The document was not only the most comprehensive survey on opium conducted in Assam, but the testimonials recorded by the BEC also represented the first body of evidence on opium consumption in Assam that included the views and opinions of ordinary individuals. Unlike the narrow strata of society—the official witnesses were high-ranking European officers or Indians of the highest possible ranks, and the non-officials mostly members of the native gentry or educated professionals—represented in the RCO’s hearings that were conducted in English, the individuals who appeared before the BEC included peasants, wage labourers, petty traders, shopkeepers and opium vendors, including a few with experience of opium ab/use, along with officials, medical practitioners, professionals and village headmen.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, unlike the RCO, government functionaries were not forced to represent the official policy line, and this meant that many bureaucrats expressed opinions that were critical of the Assam administration’s opium policy. These statements provided anti-opium campaigners a valuable historical record when the report was finally released to the public in the mid-1920s and enabled them to challenge the government’s position on opium use in Assam.

The BEC report sticks out as an anomaly when seen alongside other government reports on opium in Assam because it was the first official account that categorically recognised excessive opium use in Assam, primarily in the form of opium-smoking as well as other non-medical, recreational practices. It noted that opium smoking accounted for half of the opium consumed in Assam and “opium smoking in the form known as *madak*¹⁵⁷ is extremely prevalent in Assam, and ... almost every consumer smokes it if he can afford to do so”.¹⁵⁸ However, despite official findings that conclusively confirmed the existence of the opium smoking in a province of British India, till the early 1930s, the GoI denied the existence of such evidence and misrepresented the realities of opium consumption in India in international conferences and forums.¹⁵⁹ The BEC’s

¹⁵⁵ “Evidence given before the Committee appointed to enquire into certain aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption”, Confidential File No. 87/C, 1913, ASA.

¹⁵⁶ The one major lack that is apparent in the list of witness is the absence of women respondents. It was a well-known fact that a huge percentage of the women of Assam took opium. Although most either ate or drank it, some were confirmed smokers. It needs to be highlighted that women usually smoked, not in the company of other women, but privately with their husbands.

¹⁵⁷ An opium preparation used for smoking.

¹⁵⁸ “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption” [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, Nos. 1–6, February 1914, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ See, for instance, League of Nations, “Records of the Second Opium Conference, Vol. 1: Plenary Meetings, Text of the Debates” (Geneva, 1925).

recommendations were not directed at controlling opium consumption, especially suppressing opium smoking that the government was obligated to by an international accord, but were trivial modifications to present policy.¹⁶⁰ Significantly, the committee also concluded that restrictions on opium would only lead to a rise in the consumption of other drugs like *ganja* and alcoholic spirits.¹⁶¹ Seen in light of the extent of opium abuse in the province that the oral evidence underlined, the measures fell woefully short of the avowed remit of the BEC which proposed radical interventions to prohibit opium smoking as well as gradually suppression of all other modes of opium use.¹⁶²

Despite its inadequacies, the BEC hinted at the need to introduce measures for registration of opium consumers, a measure that was introduced in Burma in the 1880s,¹⁶³ a long standing demand of the local anti-opium campaigners that was echoed in the statements of a number of witnesses. Local anti-opium campaigners had discussed registration of opium addicts as a prescriptive measure towards prohibition in the Second Anti-Opium Conference held in Dibrugarh in 1912.¹⁶⁴ During the BEC hearings the proposal of registration was raised by a number of anti-opium witnesses who also called for a complete ban on opium smoking but these interventions were disregarded by the Committee in its final report.¹⁶⁵ The evidence provided abundant illustrations of the fact that registration of opium addicts was widely supported by a majority of respondents, including a number of government and middle class Indian witnesses. Although the BEC deemed registration “not necessary or practicable”, in the mid-1920s Assamese legislators pushed for registration and rationing and these measures became the keystone of official

¹⁶⁰ The changes included an increase to the minimum retail piece of opium, a limit to possession and the revision of the minimum age for purchase from 14 years to 20 years as well as the reduction of number of hours of sale in opium and other excise shops (which included liquor, *madak* and *chandu*) and general measures to check the *consumption* in tea gardens. “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption” [Confidential], MD, SRA, Nos. 1–6, February 1914, pp. 2–6.

¹⁶¹ The report was not made public until 1933. However, in 1924 the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee’s request for a copy was accepted and the report by the enquiry committee made some of BEC findings public. Chapter 3 discusses the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry and its findings.

¹⁶² “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption” [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 3, ASA.

¹⁶³ After Lower Burma was annexed in 1852, Burmese opium policy was distinct from other parts of British India. Only foreigners (Indians and Chinese) were allowed legal access to opium and a system of registration and rationing was followed. Ethnic Burmese were banned from legally purchasing or consuming opium. Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: Uncovering the Politics of the Poppy* (Cambridge MA, 2009), p. 9.

¹⁶⁴ No. 3 “Extract from the Address presented at Dibrugarh by the citizens of Dibrugarh on the 20th August 1912” [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 11, ASA.

¹⁶⁵ “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption”, [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 9, ASA.

policy in the ensuing period.¹⁶⁶ The reluctance of the Assam administration was largely due to revenue considerations given that the British government had successfully executed a system of registration of consumers and prohibition of opium smoking in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) following the 1909 Shanghai discussions.¹⁶⁷

A closer look at the committee's recommendations pertaining to *ganja* shed light on the motivations behind the reluctance of the BEC to suggest radical changes in Assam's opium policy. It becomes apparent that the tangible purpose of the enquiry was to assess the threat of *ganja* (and other narcotics) replacing opium, a trend that Bengal had witnessed due to the government's opium pricing and monopoly policy.¹⁶⁸ The BEC report indicated the germane connection between opium and *ganja* and contended that restriction on opium needed to be mirrored with similar restriction on *ganja* to ensure that the consumption was not transferred from one drug to another.¹⁶⁹ The BEC also recommended the formation of a "Temperance Association ... to educated public opinion in Assam in connection with the use of intoxicants" as a means to counter the menace of illicit supply of opium-substitutes, primarily *ganja* and alcohol.¹⁷⁰ The complications and problems related to the control of wild *bhang* (a *ganja* substitute) that grew abundantly in the province was highlighted by a number of reliable official and non-official witnesses and the BEC's recommendations were directed primarily at reforming the government's *ganja* strategy to counter wild *bhang*, which was a non-excisable good, rather than reorganising its opium policy.¹⁷¹ The burial of the report and the evidence compiled by the BEC meant the revelatory facts and figures related to opium consumption in Assam remained inaccessible until 1925 when pressure from the Congress and transnational

¹⁶⁶ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption", [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 7, ASA.

¹⁶⁷ On 1 October 1910, an ordinance was passed to regulate the general opium traffic which controlled the import and sale of opium and the sale and distribution was limited to medical use. Hamilton Wright, "The International Opium Conference", *The American Journal of International Law*, 6.4 (October 1912), p. 869.

¹⁶⁸ See *Report of the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, Vol. IV: Evidence of Witnesses from Bengal and Assam taken before the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission* (Calcutta, 1894), especially the evidence of official witnesses.

¹⁶⁹ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption", [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 10, ASA.

¹⁷⁰ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption", [Confidential], 18 April 1913, MD, SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, p. 8, ASA.

¹⁷¹ Witness no. 54 (a *mauzadar* from Kamrup); Witness no. 16 (D.P. Copeland, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Kamrup); Witness No. 140 (a shop-keeper in Darrang); Witness No. 248 (a *gaonbura* from Lakhimpur); Witness No. 311 (representative of the *Jhanji Proja Hitasadhini Sabha* [Jhanji People's Progressive Society], Sibsagar), "Evidence given before the Committee appointed to enquire into certain aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption", Confidential File No. 87/C, 1913, ASA.

prohibition organisations forced the government to release the report; the witness statements, however, remained confidential until Indian independence.

On 5 April 1919, after six years of a virtual stalemate on the opium issue, Phanidhar Chaliha (1855–1923), a councillor from Sibsagar, in a speech labelled the government's excise revenue "tainted money" and called for a complete ban of the drug to "save the Assamese race from extinction".¹⁷² The councillor's speech had emphasised the need for change in policy due to the rise in opium consumption as latest figures indicated the highest historic levels which initiated a public debate. The government responded by introducing an experimental registration scheme of opium consumers in the sparsely populated and largely un-administered Sadiya Frontier Tracts (along the Burmese border) later that year and this step marked the beginning of a new phase of anti-opium activity.¹⁷³ This will be studied in the next chapter.

2.4 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the transition of opium from an important medicine in the nineteenth century to a regulated drug substance in the twentieth century. This was a result of changes in the scientific understanding of opium, the transformation of its moral and ethical currency, the activities of the anti-opium lobby as well as the role of transnational forums that initiated international drug regulation. These facets were explored through a study of two official opium enquiries which highlighted strategies and manoeuvres used by the government to hide inconvenient truths about opium use in India in order to defend its policy as well as the sizeable opium revenue. The chapter also looked at the role of transnational forums and the evolution of international opium regulation in the early twentieth century in which the distinction between opium smoking and opium eating was used by the Indian government to defend the domestic opium trade. The development of opium policy in Assam in the pre-nationalist phase was studied through the activities of local campaigners.

Following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the transnational anti-drug campaign was united under the League of Nations Opium Advisory Council and drug regulation

¹⁷² ALCP, 5 April 1919, No. 2, pp. 64–66, ASA.

¹⁷³ E.H. Pakyntein, "Opium Prohibition Campaign in Assam I", *Bulletin on Narcotics*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1958), pp. 12–14.

was driven by the need for common international policy.¹⁷⁴ In the post-First World War period, the India Office, the Indian government and the Assam administration were publicly committed to prioritise opium prohibition but government records reveal a determination to continue opium sales and protect the revenue, necessitating new strategies to overcome regulatory hurdles. The next chapter will discuss the nationalist phase of political activity in Assam in early 1920 with the emergence of the Congress from the vantage point of its role in the provincial opium prohibition campaign as political mobilisation brought together students, youths, men and women across rural and urban Assam in anti-colonial activities. The chapter will focus on the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (1924–25) to demonstrate that during the 1920s, Assam’s opium addiction problem was widely recognised by the international fraternity and local efforts were boosted by the support received from the transnational prohibition lobby.

¹⁷⁴ Harumi Goto-Shitaba, “The League of Nations, Washington and Internationalism in East Asia: With Special Reference to the League’s Attempt to Control Opium”, in Anthony Best (ed.), *The International History of East Asia, 1900–1968: Trade, Ideology and the Quest for Order* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 57–68.

CHAPTER 3

THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL: ASSAM, THE CONGRESS AND TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE PROHIBITION DEBATE

The body of work on the Indian national movement has progressed from the study of the great to the little traditions and the shifting viewpoints, positions and purposes that accompany them have broadened our understanding of many of the specificities of this multifaceted campaign. Anil Seal in his now classic assessment of this phenomena expressed this shift explicitly as “[w]hat held true in one part of India was not true in another”, thus calling into question the cogency of the master narratives.¹

Notwithstanding the significant body of work on the subject of Indian nationalism in the past decades, there are substantial gaps in our understanding of both the impulses as well as trajectories of the self-determination movement in the peripheries of the subcontinent. A good illustration of this is in regions like Assam where specificities of the local are often subordinated to the dominant narratives of the movement (and its major players) in the Indian heartland.

In the case of Assam, a number of inter-connected factors, most significantly the impulse of grand narratives of the nationalist historiography projects sponsored by the state in the 1970s and 1980s, have fostered narratives that exhibit a palpable lack of understanding of the internal processes, fissures and complexities of political mobilisation in the province. In this mode of historicising, the argument that nationalist impulse spread from the Western-educated elites to the masses has been canonised and the realities of grass roots movements (often lacking long-term goals or convenient outlines for the future) being appropriated by regional and national leaders, often for opportunistic ends, have either been neglected or written into the nationalist narrative. Moreover, a rather simplistic teleological narrative that tied up the maturation of political activity in Assam with the pan-India processes under the stewardship of the exalted cast of Congress elites

¹ Seal captured the essence of this shift eloquently in his seminal essay “Imperialism and Nationalism in India” (1973): “Historians have switched their attention from imperial fiats to Indian facts, from the rambling generalizations of the Raj to the concreteness of local studies, from large imprecision to minute exactitude. ... As its provincial, and then its local roots have been laid bare, what looked like an all-India movement appears as nothing of the sort. Programmes proclaimed from above were at odds with the way politicians worked lower down. What held true in one part of India was not true in another.” Anil Seal, “Imperialism and Nationalism in India”, *Modern Asian Studies* [hereafter, *MAS*], Vol. 7, No. 3 (May 1973), p. 322

and their coalescing-focused designs, have been offered in official (and most non-official) histories.²

This has resulted in the obscuration and erasure of both local and regional actualities at the expense of others which have been more pliant to the lure of the national; the history of opium prohibition in Assam has been one such victim. Historians have been keen to conflate the temperance movement and the opium prohibition campaign and interpret it from the vantage point of Gandhi's championing of abstinence from alcohol, which we argue is a factitious line of argument.³ This chapter addresses the lacunae in Assam's history through a case study of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (1924–25) that exposes a fallacy that is symptomatic of the wider historiographical vacuity with regard to Assam's colonial past and the legacy of the nationalist movement. The first section will discuss the emergence of the Congress and examine its role in the province from the perspective of its stance, policy and activities relative to opium. The second section examines the internationalisation of opium consumption in India and coverage of the prohibition debate in the nationalist press. The final section offers a narrative which highlights the precarious (and fractious) intersection of local, regional, national and international politics and its impact on the prohibition movement in Assam through a discussion of the Congress enquiry report.

A discussion of the said enquiry is crucial to understand the history of prohibition in Assam as it was the pivot on which the local debate took on an international aspect. The current historical understanding of the enquiry is not merely virtually non-existent but even the little that is known is factually delusive and demands a focused reinterpretation. The discussion proposes that the enquiry was a product of its times and was moulded by factors through which the regional political elites and the national leadership sought to further a political goal and played a pivotal role for the provincial Congress as well as the Congress' future prospects in Assam. For the local leadership, the

² *The Political History of Assam*, 3 Vols, General editor H.K. Barpujari (Guwahati, 1978, 1980, 1981); Amalendu Guha, *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Reform in Assam* (New Delhi, 1977).

³ Commenting on Gandhi's temperance movement, Sumit Sarkar argued that "there can be little doubt that much of its appeal lay in its purificatory 'Sanskritizing' role" in which the lower castes emulated higher caste manners. This facet, however, was virtually absent in Assam although the opium consumers were primarily poor peasants and, by virtue of their occupation, members of the Hindu lower castes. This was further complicated because a majority were tribals and ethnic minorities and therefore outside the purview of the caste system and, by extension, the process of "Sanskritisation". See Sumit Sarkar, "The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c.1905–1922", in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies 3: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1989), p. 313.

enquiry and the opium question that they pursued tirelessly in the legislative council and social/cultural forums was one of the crucial means through which the Assamese representatives postured to the Assamese masses. In doing so, they managed to create a niche appeal which reverberated well with the central leadership who understood the relevance of opium in the province's part in nationalist politics, while allowing the Congress a strong foothold in the Brahmaputra valley.

3.1 Inserting Assam into India: Politicisation of Opium Prohibition and Gandhi's Influence on the Nationalist Movement in Assam, 1919–1925

The anti-opium movement in Assam was in its mature phase when the province formally entered the domain of nationalist politics with the bourgeois provincial political associations aligning themselves with the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1919. The town- and district-level Congress chapters were populated by individuals who had their political roots in *sabha* or association politics, rather than grassroots (primarily peasant) movements which the 1861 Phulaguri uprising or the 1894 Patharughat revolt typified. Also, the leadership was drawn primarily from the urban elite bodies and, in fact, the impetus to the creation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) came directly from the Assam Association and was the result of a merger of a number of interest groups which shared the common moderate platform.⁴

The successes of opium prohibition in Assam in the post-1919 period, especially during the non-cooperation movement, has been regarded by contemporary commentators as well as historians of colonial Assam as a direct outcome of Congress' mass mobilisation strategy and the popular appeal of national leaders, especially Gandhi. Local historians and writers have also interpreted the events and outcomes from a similar vantage point and hence in popular memory and literature as well as local histories, the opium prohibition campaign has been regarded as synonymous with the nationalist struggle.⁵ This has led to the embedding of two fundamental flaws in the historicising of the prohibition campaign; first, the tendency to downplay the efforts and gains from the

⁴ A group of four delegates representing the Upper Assam Association, Shillong Association and the Tezpur Ryot Sabha attended the Congress session held in 1886 at Calcutta. Indian National Congress, *Report of the Second Session of the Indian National Congress* (Calcutta, 1886).

⁵ Hemchandra Barua, *Congressor Buranji* (A Chronicle of the Congress Party) (Guwahati, 1933); Omeo Kumar Das and Liladhar Baruah, *Asamat Mahatma* (Mahatma Gandhi in Assam) (Guwahati, 1963); Benudhar Sarmah, *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot* (Under the Bright Congress Sun) (Guwahati, 1971); Harrendranath Baruah (ed.), *Bharotor Mukti Jugot Asam* (Assam in the Indian Freedom Struggle) (Guwahati, 1972).

pre-Congress years or interpret it as an uncoordinated and spasmodic phenomena, and secondly, the fallacy of attributing the widespread anti-opium agitations during 1920–21 as the basis of all future prohibition efforts. The attempt to ascribe linearity as well as causality to the Congress-led efforts has led to absences in the understanding of the complected terrain of prohibition and the vital roles played by nonpartisan organisations and individuals.

The anti-opium movement was, initially, used by local political leaders as a springboard to establish Congress presence in the province but the effort to present the localised movement as one that would unite the two valleys failed and the APCC cemented its role as the legitimate representative political voice of the Assamese-speaking population of the province. This chapter proposes that a study of the anti-opium debate in Assam enables an analysis of the politics of the nationalist period because of the unique position of the opium addiction issue in provincial politics and public imagination. Opium, as discussed in previous chapters, was seen largely as a Brahmaputra valley problem which meant that it was regarded as an Assamese, or, non-Bengali, concern. During the era of nationalist politics, this denotation of opium use mutated and took on a communal meaning and became a Hindu, as opposed, to a Muslim issue and Brahmaputra valley and Surma valley political differences were often articulated in the arena of opium policy debates. The discussion below will highlight the inchoate ideas in current circulation and suggest that in the face of the communal rift in the political landscape in the province, a symbiotic relationship between Assam Congress and the central leadership was maintained on the basis of the common ground that opium prohibition provided.

This division also manifested in a more pernicious manner and it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the Bengali intelligentsia in Assam interpreted the anti-opium campaign both as a Congress-backed, Hindu dominated movement and an attempt by the Assamese intelligentsia to nudge them out of regional politics. This difference manifested as an expression of linguistic and communal difference (that was nascent in the Legislative Council debates as discussed in the previous chapter) and created a rift in provincial politics that was never bridged. The Assamese upper class Hindu political leadership alienated the Surma valley and Assamese Muslim leaders as they focused their energies on the prohibition campaign and the gap between the political aspirations of the population of the two valleys mutated into communal politics. As a consequence, during the early years of this phase (corresponding to the non-cooperation period, September

1920–February 1922) the reach as well as the success of the anti-opium campaign remained tied up to the efforts of a small section of Assam’s population. This facet becomes significant during the mature political phase when the prohibition debate and Assam’s opium policy became a contested space in the provincial legislature and Muslim legislators routinely cut cross linguistic and ethnic lines to block opium regulation measures initiated by the Assamese representatives.

The attempt on the part of the Assamese anti-opiumists was to reconfigure the language used to discuss the problem. They cast it in the form of an ‘evil’ which resonated well with the masses as well as mainstream Congress rhetoric, especially of the temperance mould. Moreover, the idea of customary use was not fixed and mutated to fill the rhetorical vacuum in order to foster the idea of difference. In lay understanding, and even official discourse, the theoretical argument against intoxicants was mostly directed against perceived ‘foreign’ intoxicants, whether alcohol, opium or other drug substances, depending on the location where the debate was taking place.⁶ For instance, in the early nineteenth century, opium was regarded as customary practice for the plains- and hills-people of Assam but by mid-century, the ‘evil’ as a manifestation of moral and constitutional abasement saturated the discourse.⁷ By the early decades of the twentieth century, the discourse had mutated to a more direct defence of the revenue aspect and the government underplayed the ill effects and actively promoted a complex set of co-existing norms and practices to contest the opium prohibition space and to allow the contestations to intersect with struggles along the lines of caste, class and gender. There is also an abundance of references to religious, almost ritualised, use of opium in Assam in the official canon which remained unchallenged by the Assamese anti-opiumists; in fact,

⁶ See David Hardiman, “From Custom to Crime: The Politics of Drinking in Colonial South Gujarat”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies No. 4: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1985), pp. 165–228. The terrain was further complicated by the drinking behaviour of Europeans in South Asia, a discourse that constructed sobriety as a racial trait to drive home the idea of British civilisational superiority. This has been challenged by current research which suggests that drunkenness amongst soldiers and the “vice economy” that it supported was seen a threat by policy makers. See Douglas M. Peers, “Imperial Vice: Sex, Drink and the Health of British Troops in North Indian Cantonments, 1800–1858”, in D. Killingray (ed.), *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700–1964* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 25–52.

⁷ The shift is best captured in Hemchandra Barua’s, *Kaniyar Kirtan* (Glories of the Opium Addict) (1861), a satirical social reform play, and Dutiram Hazarika’s, *Rasika Puran* (1877), a satirical historical treatise on opium. Articles with a plainer social reform agenda appeared in the *Orunodoi*, for instance “Evils of Opium” (January, 1846) and “Kani Erabor Katha” (Instructions for Opium Deaddiction) (June, 1861). Chapter 1 of this work discusses these in some detail.

they even consecrated this facet to fit the social reform agenda which provided inclusivity to religious reform as well.⁸

Whether it was an effective strategy to counter the official line which harked on abstracts such as ‘customary’ and ‘traditional’, and the rational ‘medical’ use aspects is contestable. What is clear is that the anti-opiumists’ ‘opium as evil’ narrative lacked the power of statistical evidence as well as the veneer of professionalism. The incessant appeals and demands made in local bodies calling for prohibition were denied their legitimacy by the administration and the official stance about the success of the government’s policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’ in reducing opium consumption in Assam remained undisputed on paper. Also, till the mid-1920s there was the virtual absence of fuller appreciation of opium consumption in India as a whole, and especially as an issue which plagued a number of pockets across the country, wider public opinion in India as well as internationally remained incognisant about the ground realities of ‘internal opium’. As highlighted earlier, one of the prime differences with China (and much of Southeast Asia) on the issue of opium was that Assam was a directly administered province and the opium trade here is a legitimate government enterprise unlike the Chinese, which in private hands was largely illegal in nature.⁹ Another facet that instanced Assam’s opium problem was its status as the highest per capita consumer of opium in India¹⁰ as well as the province’s major source of revenue for the British government; it is this facet of the opium debate that was foregrounded in the next phase of the prohibition campaign which culminated with the Congress enquiry of 1924–25.

Judith Brown’s analysis of Gandhi’s rise to power from “sub-political” activities that appealed to humanitarian impulses of righting wrongs that had latent political potential provides an estimable springboard to analyse his appeal in Assam.¹¹ The power of peaceful, passive resistance enjoyed great traction in a province like Assam where anti-colonial consciousness was nascent and the non-cooperation movement enjoyed

⁸ The idea of *kanipan seva*, a ritualized, almost religious, ceremony centred on opium eating/smoking was part of mainstream public imagination in the province. Barua’s *Kaniar Kirtan* dramatises this ceremony.

⁹ See Amar Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants, and the Politics of Opium, 1790–1843* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 16–28, for yet another aspect of the East India Company’s involvement in the opium trade—in this case, the trade in Malwa opium.

¹⁰ The per capita consumption of opium in Assam is almost thrice of the next biggest consumer, Bihar, and almost ten times of the all India figure, throughout the period, 1845–1895. See John F. Richards, “Opium and the British Indian Empire: The Royal Commission of 1895”, *MAS*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2002), pp. 412–13 n92.

¹¹ Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915–1922* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 352.

significant success. Assam formally entered the nationalist phase in 1921 during the non-cooperation campaign and opposition to opium, a vice and a humanitarian problem, was one of the crucial planks on which the public debate against colonial rule was framed.

Gandhi's emergence as a national leader in this period was closely linked with a twin phenomenon: his peripheral status within Congress political circles in the Presidencies and his unquestioned acceptance as the preeminent leader by newer chapters of the party. In this instance the Assam provincial chapter, which was unexampled in nationalist politics, was part of the pattern that bolstered Gandhi's emergence as a national leader and the face of the INC.¹² Assam was always outside (or periphery of) the 'political nation' and the call for non-cooperation appealed to its masses in the same manner as it did to those groups who existed outside the formal domain of institutionalised politics. A significant feature, however, was that the Assamese intelligentsia and professional class was unanimous in their support of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and by extension to the Congress party.

Another facet of the argument is the appeal of popular resistance that Gandhi offered that resonated with sections of society that were not remotely motivated by issues of a non-local or regional nature but the rhetoric of the national was inserted in uncommon ways, through a refashioning of the pre-1920 constructive work agenda into a social reform and regeneration movement. The limited appeal of non-cooperation in provinces where political activity was relatively mature—for instance, in Bombay and Madras, where it was already a feature of public life and caste and religious differences were part of the fabric of political organisation—meant that the appeal had to be garnered in provinces that were outside the ambit of Indian politics.¹³

A number of local political leaders, social reformers and intellectuals from Assam, both independently and as part of regional associations, attended Congress annual sessions from as early as 1886, although there was no formal Congress presence in the province till 5 June 1921 when the Assam Association, the most prominent provincial

¹² B.P. Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress, Volume One (1885–1935)* (Bombay, 1946), especially pp. 210–241, for a chronological account of Gandhi's rise to power. Charuchandra Guha, *Seven Months with Mahatma Gandhi: Being an Inside View of the Non-Co-operation Movement of 1921–22* (Ahmedabad, 1951)

¹³ Brown, *Gandhi's Rise*, pp. 251–262, for a thorough analysis of Congress party deliberations on the question of aligning with Gandhi's call for non-cooperation in a climate of widespread acceptance of the Montague–Chelmsford reforms.

political body split, and one of the factions emerged as the APCC.¹⁴ Assam Association members had adopted a number of Congress resolutions in their agenda, and Gandhi's call for non-cooperation was one of them; non-cooperation was accepted in principle by the Assam Association in October 1920 at Jorhat with an overwhelming 91 to 4 majority paving the way for mass politics in the province.¹⁵

Commentators have remarked upon the fact that the Assam Association's move, which predated the formal passing of the resolution at INC's Nagpur session in December 1920, indicated an agreement on Gandhi's vision for the future as well as general readiness of the province for mass politics.¹⁶ This is, however, an oversimplification of the political climate in the province which was undergoing a change since early 1920. It is noteworthy that the agenda of non-cooperation was initially criticised by senior leaders of the association, including Nabinchandra Bardaloi (1875–1936) and Tarunram Phookan (1877–1939) who, incidentally, were the senior-most provincial Congress leaders after the formation of the APCC.¹⁷ Both Bardaloi and Phookan lent support to the non-cooperation resolution at the Nagpur Congress but it was a compromise in order to pressurise the AICC to allow party organisation on linguistic lines, thus enabling Assam to form its own Congress committee. However, the uptake of mass politics in the province was tardy and despite the best efforts of Congress leaders to engage with the masses to promote the Khilafat Movement, the Rowlatt Bill and the non-cooperation agenda,¹⁸ there was a palpable lack of mass support in the absence of a local subject that could resonate amongst the population at large.¹⁹ Illustrative of this was the lack of public support to the observance of Non-Cooperation Day on 1 August 1920.²⁰ Although Bardaloi and Phukan met with some success in the campaign to boycott the visit of Lord

¹⁴ Ramesh Chandra Kalita, *Assam Association: A Study in Regionalism* (Guwahati, 2008), pp. 134–49, for a discussion of the relationship between the Assam Association and the Congress. See also, A.C. Bhuyan and Sibopada De (eds), *Political History of Assam: Volume Two, 1920–1939* (Guwahati, 2008), Chapter 1, for an account of the development of the APCC from within the ranks of the Assam Association.

¹⁵ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 9–14. See also "Papers Relating to the Assam Association", Political History of Assam Records, File No. 71 (1943), ASA.

¹⁶ S.K. Barpujari, "History of the Assam Association, 1903–1921", in N.R. Ray (ed.), *Public Associations in India* (Calcutta, 1984), pp. 125–135; Sheila Bora, *Student Revolution in Assam, 1917–1947* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 26–47; Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 89–99.

¹⁷ Bora, *Student Revolution*, pp. 26–32. See also Kalita, *Assam Association*, pp. 134–149.

¹⁸ See Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence (hereafter, APAI), No. 97 (1919) and No. 98 (1920), ASA.

¹⁹ Bora, *Student Revolution*, pp. 26–32.

²⁰ "Bengal reported that Hindus were little effected by plans for non-cooperation and Muslims only partially ... To the north Assam reported slight observance of *hartal* but no instances of non-cooperation. On this occasion there was little to choose between the secluded, 'backward' and the oldest Presidency with its long political tradition!" Home Political, B, August 1920, Nos. 338–67 & K.W., National Archives of India (hereafter, NAI).

Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, to Assam in November 1920, support was limited to urban areas and only among the middle and professional classes.²¹

At this juncture, the involvement of student bodies that were active in the province since the late-1880s in social and cultural activity assumed significance. These organisations were primarily engaged in issues related to education, student and social welfare as well as promotion of Assamese language and literature and other parochial concerns and were rooted in local level activity, especially in rural areas where association politics had not made any inroads.²² By the early 1920s, students and youths increasingly turned towards Gandhian as well as radical political activities but were not part of mainstream political activity; the first All-India College Students' Conference held in Nagpur in 1920 was to change that forever. Formed in 1916, representatives of Assam Chatra Sanmilan (Assam Student's Conference), the province's most prominent student organisation, attended the conference and lent their support to the non-cooperation resolution.²³ A new crop of young leaders, mostly from poor, rural backgrounds, emerged in the political landscape and it was these student leaders who were able to bridge the gap between the urban elites and the rural masses.²⁴ It also needs to be highlighted that demands to include opium prohibition (as well as temperance) within the framework of political activity in the province came from the student bodies that were cognisant of social realities and had a good grasp of public sentiment. The recognition of local grievances by these leaders, as well as their immediacy with the rural population, enabled the youth leaders to act as intermediaries between grass roots campaigns and organised politics as well as stimulate the masses to engage in participatory political activity under the banner of the Congress.

Prominent among this new crop of leaders was the newly-qualified lawyer Chandranath Sarma (?–1923) who was born in a poor, rural family in Tezpur and represented the non-elite, non-moderate faction of the Congress when non-cooperation started in Assam.²⁵ In response to the developments in early 1921, even moderate

²¹ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 11.

²² Bora, *Student Revolution*, pp. 27–30.

²³ Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 98

²⁴ "Statement by Shri Gaurishankar Bhattacharya", 11 November 1980, pp. 2–4, Shiela Bora Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter, NMML).

²⁵ Chandranath Sharma (d. 1923) was responsible for setting up district Congress committees (DCCs) at Dibrugarh (12 February 1921), Jorhat (16 February) and Darrang (11 April 1921). These committees became the focal point of the non-cooperation campaign and their organizational efforts made Gandhi's maiden 10-day long visit to Assam in August 1921 possible.

association politicians increasingly aligned their roles with that of youth leaders like Debeswar Sarmah (1896–1993) and Omeo Kumar Das (1895–1975) who pursued an agenda of active involvement at the grassroots. In the October 1919 session of the Assam Chatra Sanmilan held in Tezpur, Das had proposed a resolution calling for opium prohibition that was unanimously adopted.²⁶ It needs to be noted that the Assam Association had also stated that the opium and *ganja* trade was “prejudicial to the interests of the Assamese people” and had called for the abolition of the trade within a ten-year period in its annual conference held in Barpeta in December 1919.²⁷ However, the senior leadership of the Association had failed to appreciate the potential of the anti-opium campaigns in the era of mass mobilisation and this resolution was given little publicity and was not acted up by its members.²⁸ These instances demonstrate that although prohibition was part of provincial political consciousness it was never envisaged in terms of political activity that would involve wider public debate let alone mass mobilisation, both of which were novel phenomena in the subsequent period of Congress activity.

Another important element that contributed to mass mobilisation during the non-cooperation movement was the role played by *mahila sabhas* (women’s associations) in fostering a political consciousness among women. Although the history of women’s involvement in local social life in the region dated back to the latter half of the nineteenth century and issues concerning women’s education and widow remarriage dominated public debate on women’s role in society, the proactive participation of women in such activities, however, as in other parts of India, was limited to a handful of upper- and middle-class women who were often wives, sisters or daughters of men of letters.²⁹ A number of them were also involved in association politics and were represented in literary and cultural organisations. The first organised women’s group in Assam was the Mahila Sevak Samiti (Women’s Service Association) that was formed in 1915 in Dibrugarh and was followed in quick succession by the Sivasagar Mahila Samiti (1916), Nagaon Mahila

²⁶ Chandraprava Saikiani, *Mahila Samiti Ittibriti* (History of the Mahila Samiti) (Guwahati, 1961), p. 2.

²⁷ “That the Association is emphatically of the opinion that the trade of opium and *ganja* by the Government is prejudicial to the interests of the Assamese people and strongly presses on the Government the abolition of the trade within a period of ten years” “Extracts from notes and orders in File No. 1A–7A of 1920”, Financial Department (hereafter, FD), Separate Revenue, A (hereafter, SRA), June 1920, Nos. 1–20, p. 1, ASA.

²⁸ On 23 February 1923, Councillor Dalim Chandra Bora, a member of the Assam Association who had passed the resolution at Barpeta, asked the government’s view on the resolution passed by the Association. FD, SRA, July 1921, Nos. 5–9, p. 1, ASA.

²⁹ Aparna Mahanta, *Journey of Assamese Women, 1836–1937* (Guwahati, 2008), Chapter 2, pp. 8–35.

Samiti (1917) and Tezpur Mahila Samiti (1919).³⁰ Chandraprava Saikiani (1901–1972),³¹ who formed the Assam Mahila Samiti in 1926 which had chapters across the province and actively participated in Congress activities, emerged as the most prominent women's leader in Assam. During the non-cooperation movement Gandhi's message to the Assamese women was one of spinning and weaving and limited to *swadeshi*,³² but nevertheless leaders like Saikiani³³ played an important role in anti-opium activities, especially in spreading awareness among rural women.³⁴ The death of Malati Mem, a rural temperance worker, during an opium prohibition drive in Darrang in 1921 led by Congress volunteers evidences the active participation of women in the campaign.³⁵

During his maiden tour of Assam in 1921, Gandhi championed the virtuous women of Assam on account of their spinning and weaving skills which resonated throughout the province;³⁶ the *swadeshi* message was accepted wholeheartedly by the youth and women who participated in anti-government activities like picketing and boycotts. It is interesting to note that Gandhi had dismissed Assam as backward and uncivilized in *Hind Swaraj* (1909),³⁷ and during his 1921 tour to the province the provincial administration used this reference to attack Gandhi and in turn he used the first public address to apologise to the people of Assam.³⁸ But read in the context of the non-

³⁰ Mahanta, *Assamese Women*, pp. 98–99.

³¹ A schoolteacher by profession, Saikiani, an unwed mother, is commonly referred to as the first Assamese feminist. She subsequently formed the (Asom Pradeshik) Mahila Samiti in 1926, the first state-level women's organisation in northeast India, which worked closely with the All India Women's Conference that was formed in 1927. Chandraprabha played an active role in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932 and the Quit India Movement in 1942. The Chandraprava Saikiani Centre for Women's Studies (CSCWS) was established in 2009 at Tezpur University to honour her contribution.

³² "I feel that Assam's capacity to help the swadeshi movement is even greater than that of Punjab. If the women here take up spinning and weaving, they will do so out of love for the country and not for love of money." M.K. Gandhi, "Experiences in Assam-II" (translated from Gujarati), *Navajivan* (11 September 1921), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXI (August 1921–December 1921)* (Ahmedabad, 1966), pp. 84–91.

³³ Saikiani was present in the 1919 Assam Chatra Sanmilan Conference and gave a speech in support of Omeo Kumar Das' opium prohibition resolution. See Mahanta, *Assamese Women*, p. 94.

³⁴ Pushpa Lata Das, "The Role of Assamese Women in the Freedom Movement", pp. 1–4, Pushpa Lata Das Papers, NMML.

³⁵ Dipti Sharma, *Assamese Women in the Freedom Movement* (Calcutta, 1993), p. 345.

³⁶ M.K. Gandhi, "Lovely Assam", *Young India* (1 September 1921), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXI (August 1921–December 1921)* (Ahmedabad, 1966), pp. 29–30, for an account of his tour to Assam in 1921.

³⁷ "I must remind you who desire Home Rule that, after all, the Bhils, the Pindaris, the Assameae and the Thugs are our own countrymen. To conquer them is your and my work. So long as we fear our own brethren, we are unfit to reach the goal". M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or India Self-Rule* (1909), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. X* (Ahmedabad, 1983), pp. 32–33.

³⁸ M.K. Gandhi, "Experiences in Assam-I" (translated from Gujarati), *Navajivan* (4 September 1921), in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXI (August 1921–December 1921)* (Ahmedabad, 1966), pp. 53–58.

cooperation movement and need for new areas for success, the impact of the movement in changing local political equations is crucial. Although communal harmony was one of the objectives of the non-cooperation movement, a significant long-term consequence of the movement in Assam was the creation of an immediate rift between the Brahmaputra and the Surma valley. The championing of opium prohibition by Gandhi and the provincial Congress fuelled the distrust of Congress politics amongst the Bengali-speaking population who interpreted this as clear support of an 'Assamese' problem.³⁹ A distinction needs to be made between the opium prohibition campaign and the temperance movement at all times as the impulses and trajectories of these two campaigns were vastly different from one another.⁴⁰

It needs to be noted, however, that within the Brahmaputra valley itself the anti-opium movement did not create a rift between the different groups, tribes and communities; rather, the new-fangled umbrella provided a unity of purpose and the commonality of goals such as boycott of foreign cloth, temperance and opium prohibition. One of the factors that helped this was the virtual absence of a dichotomy based on 'moderate' or 'extremist' views within the provincial Congress. The involvement of youths and women in the volunteer programme meant that the activities carried out under the non-cooperation banner had broad support and the decision of the government to clamp down on the movement garnered support for Gandhi even from his fiercest critics.⁴¹

The Assamese political leaders' wide support of the Congress-led movement should also be seen in light of the fact that Bengal, especially Calcutta elites, were among Gandhi's most vocal critics at the time; for the Assamese political leaders to swear allegiance to Gandhi's call for non-cooperation, therefore, served a dual purpose. Along

³⁹ Saiyid Abdul Majid, a prominent minister from the Surma valley, for instance, launched a vituperative against Gandhi as he voiced a collective threat of the Congress party on regional politics through reconfiguration of local ascendancies and elites: "All were unanimous in thinking that Gandhi unseen was a far greater personage than Gandhi seen and that his visit to Sylhet has done more harm to their cause than good, and the common people's observation was that he was only a Kaya [a derogatory term for a trader]". "Fortnightly report from Assam", 16 September 1921, Home Political, 1921, No. 18, NAI.

⁴⁰ For an assessment of Gandhi's involvement in prohibition of liquor, see David M. Fahey and Padma Manian, "Poverty and Purification: The Politics of Gandhi's Campaign for Prohibition", *The Historian*, Vol. 67, Issue 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 489–506. See also Lucy Carroll, "The Temperance Movement in India: Politics and Social Reform", *MAS*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1976), pp. 417–47, which identified the English roots of the Indian temperance movement; and Lucy Carroll, "Origins of the Kayastha Temperance Movement", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter, *IESHR*), Vol. 11, No. 4 (October 1974), pp. 432–47, for a case study of the temperance movement in western India.

⁴¹ See Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 70–79; Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 140–45.

with the credibility that the nationwide campaign lent to the local Assamese leadership, it contained the element of opposition to Bengali bureaucratic hold (and numerical majoritarian status) in provincial political circles.⁴² The Bengali ‘moderates’ saw non-cooperation as akin to revolution and threatened at the most basic level the political strategies of the Western-educated elites and the idea was vehemently opposed and its uptake was left to the more unworldly provincials.⁴³ The lack of a caste-oriented politics in Assam was a feature that marked it from other parts of the country but the geographical divide, mostly along the Assamese and Bengali language as well as Hindu and Muslim divide along Brahmaputra and Surma valley lines, was an important feature of provincial politics and one in which the opium issue created a permanent rift.⁴⁴

The main success of the non-cooperation movement in Assam was the significant reduction of opium consumption during the period 1920–21 to 1923–24 when consumption levels dropped by almost 50 per cent.⁴⁵ This fact has been reiterated in every conceivable form in the historiography to highlight the effectiveness of Gandhi’s message and reach as well as the extraordinary successes of the Brahmaputra valley’s participation in the non-cooperation movement. A linear trajectory, starting with Gandhi’s call for opium prohibition in August 1921 till complete prohibition in 1947, is proposed in a majority of historical literature on Assam and statements like “[o]nce the campaign was launched against the traffic [by Gandhi], it never ceased till complete prohibition was achieved”⁴⁶ and “[i]t was on Gandhiji’s advice that the agitation in the Brahmaputra Valley was given primarily an anti-opium orientation”⁴⁷ saturate even the most authoritative works.

What is, however, often overlooked,⁴⁸ is the fact that the contribution of opium revenue to the total excise receipts during the same period, 1920–21 to 1923–24, actually

⁴² According to the 1921 Census, the total population of Assam was 7,606,230, with 1,725,689 speaking Assamese (about 22.70 per cent) and 3,525,220 speaking Bengali (about 46.40 per cent). J.T. Marten, *Census of India 1921*, Vol. I, Part II–Tables (Calcutta, 1923), Table X, Part III, p. 98.

⁴³ “Calcutta [was] the cradle of elitist politics and the home of some of Gandhi’s most obdurate opponents”. Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise*, p. 262.

⁴⁴ “... the line of division in Assam politics is primarily not between Hindi and Muhammadan or on caste lines, but between the inhabitants of the Assam Valley and those of the Surma Valley”. *Report of the Delimitation Committee*, qtd. in Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 204.

⁴⁵ Opium consumption in 1920–21 was 1,615 *maunds* and dropped to 884 *maunds* in 1923–24. Guha, *Planter Raj*, Appendix 4, p. 280.

⁴⁶ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 205.

⁴⁷ Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 126.

⁴⁸ The official political history volume presented the reduction in total excise collections as indicative of a drop in the opium revenue as well. “The revenue collection of Rupees 4,412,308 in 1920–1 was reduced to

rose from 58 to 62 per cent,⁴⁹ although overall excise collections dropped by about one-sixth, a gain ostensibly on account of a drop in liquor and foreign-made cigarette sales.⁵⁰ Moreover, the gains in terms of reduction in opium consumption were in danger of being quickly reversed without affirmative policy changes; a case in point is the fact that the number of shops selling opium had remained virtually stagnant since 1919–20 and illicit supplies of opium substantially eroded the reduction in official consumption figures (see Chapter 4).⁵¹ Another important statistic that the historiography tends to gloss over is that the actual consumption of opium, according to official statistics, recorded a rise of more than 2 per cent between 1923–24 to 1924–25.⁵² This marginal rise pointed towards a trend that could have potentially led to significant increases in consumption had the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry not have been instituted and the consolidation of local, national and international prohibition voices not have taken place.

The picketing of opium shops across the valley gained momentum through the summer of 1921 and Gandhi's visit to Assam in August gave a boost to the activities of the volunteers who were primarily youths and students, with a sizeable number of women participants. The local press lent support to Gandhi's interest in the prohibition campaign and the weekly *Asamiya* published from Dibrugarh advanced strong editorial support to the Congress and its campaigns in Assam.⁵³ During this period, however, a singular development took place and the anti-opium campaign became tied to and synonymous with Gandhi's message, especially in the rural hinterland, and lost its essential characteristic—the localised, community-led reform agenda which dated back to the 1860s.⁵⁴ Although Gandhi backed the anti-opium activities in the valley to spread the non-cooperation message, it is reasonable to suggest that this change in perception was owing to the efforts of the local leaders whose aspirations for legitimacy in rural areas

Rupees 3,916,570 in 1921–2 and Rupees 3,586,027 in 1922–3", Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 208.

⁴⁹ *Assam Excise Reports 1920–21, 1921–22, 1922–23, 1923–24* (Shillong, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925), ASA.

⁵⁰ In fact the *swadeshi* agenda reduced cigarette use substantially. See APAI, No. 170 (1921), 12 February 1921, ASA.

⁵¹ From 324 shops in 1919–20 to 307 in 1924–25. Guha, *Planter Raj*, Appendix 4, p. 340.

⁵² "Chapter X—Assam", *Opium Revenue for the Year 1924–25: Opium Supplied to the Indian States and Foreign Settlements*, Table I, p. 53, NAI.

⁵³ This Assamese weekly, established in 1918, with a circulation of more than 2,000 copies was the most prominent newspaper in the Brahmaputra valley and voiced a strong anti-colonial message. See, for instance, the 30 September 1922 article which suggested that the government monopoly on opium was an organised effort on part of the colonial administration to spread the drug among the Assamese people.

⁵⁴ Gandhi is believed to have told the local Congress leaders to "[m]ake Assam free from opium and have Swaraj from me" as narrated in a prominent Congress leader's autobiography. Quoted in Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 205.

needed Gandhi's endorsement. In the short term this produced significant results and the volunteers were able to persuade opium users to give up the habit, as well as deal with (at times through force) the resistance the opium addicts offered, especially in *kanikholas* (opium dens) and tea gardens where the management banned Congress activity.⁵⁵ However, the most significant fall out of anti-opium crusades during the period was that a vast majority of local prohibition organisations were dissolved and their members assimilated into the Congress-led campaign.

In November 1921, the administration imposed the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908, which deemed the picketing of opium shops and depots illegal. Although around 1,500 arrests were made in the ensuing weeks, public support for the campaigners was strong and the prohibition movement retained its grip despite the government's intervention. However, when Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement in February 1922, the anti-opium drive dissipated quickly and followed the breakdown of locality-oriented efforts. It is significant that the campaign remained a Brahmaputra valley phenomenon and failed to generate interest in other parts of India which had high opium use; for instance Presidency towns like Calcutta and Bombay and hinterland areas like the Godavari District in Madras Presidency. Although Gandhi himself wrote about Assam's opium problem a number of times in the national press, the issue received very little attention.

These elements are indicative of the fact that the successes in Brahmaputra valley were due to factors unique to the locality and Gandhi's endorsement of opium prohibition was not part of a sustained national programme or agenda. It supports the argument that the centrality of Gandhi's role in the Assam opium prohibition campaign as evoked by local historians was erroneous and largely driven by the twin factors of memorialising the man himself as well as mainstreaming Assam's role in the non-cooperation movement to showcase the allegiance of the provincials to the nationalist movement. We suggest that there is a need to move away from this reductive exercise and simplistic teleology to fully understand and appreciate the dynamic factors that provided the local prohibition campaign its effectiveness in the period to follow. This requires an examination of the international opium prohibition movement as well as the role played by anti-opiumists

⁵⁵ "A Sketch of our Organisation in 1921" (in Assamese), pp. 1–21. Debeswar Sarmah Papers, NMML.

like C.F. Andrews in putting the spotlight on Assam and its opium problem which was virtually unknown outside the region.

3.2 The Transnational Turn, Indian Consumption and the Nationalist Press

The Opium Advisory Council (OAC), was established by the General Council of the League of Nations (LoN) in 1920. This body, entrusted with the responsibility of shaping international opium policy, was initially made up of eight countries which had a direct role in the worldwide trade and consumption of opium.⁵⁶ Significantly, India was accorded the status of a member and represented by a delegation headed by John Campbell, ostensibly to represent its own interests but its position was in consonance with Britain's on virtually every debate and decision. In the OAC meetings, the Indian government's representatives—John Campbell (1874–1944), Lord Hardinge (1858–1944) and V.S. Srinivas Sastri (1869–1946)—consistently argued that its policy of monopoly over production and sale of opium in India was not the result of the government's advocacy of its continuance but rather the people of India and their desire for the drug.⁵⁷ The 'blame' for lack of reform, therefore, was apportioned to the people of India who "demanded" the drug and the government was only responding to the "will of the people".⁵⁸ The facile argument that there would be widespread unrest in India (as well as an influx of illegal opium from other sources) if opium prohibition was imposed was a bogey that had been employed ever since the commencement of the opium monopoly in 1773, which Warren Hastings, the Viceroy of India, had famously defended as testament of the East India Company's (EIC) compassionate role in India in a letter to the Company directors.⁵⁹ Moreover, since the very beginning of the EIC's involvement in the international opium trade, the idea of monopoly pricing by adjusting demand and supply was part of official policy and the provision of the 1878 Opium Act reinforced this strategy and extended it into the domain of domestic opium.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ The members were Britain, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Japan, China, Siam (Thailand) and India.

⁵⁷ Julia Ellsworth Ford, *The Coming International Opium Conference* (New York, 1924), p. 25.

⁵⁸ Ford, *Opium Conference*, p. 2. See also, Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to the members of the working committee of the AICC, 2 June 1924, No. 808/77, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

⁵⁹ Letters from the Court of Directors to the Governor-General in Council, 24 October 1817, Separate Revenue, C (hereafter, SRC), NAI. In their reply to Hastings, the EIC directors in London approved the proposal but added that restricting supply would be acceptable only so long as it meant higher profits; otherwise, "the expediency of proportionately increasing the annual provision will naturally engage your attention". Quoted in Brian Inglis, *The Opium Wars* (London, 1979), Chapter 6, n.p.

⁶⁰ Krishna Mohan Bhattacharyya, *The Opium Act: Act No. 1 of 1878* (Calcutta, 1931).

Accordingly, this tilt had formed the basis of the Assam government's representation before the Royal Commission in 1893, which presented popular anti-British movements like the Phulaguri uprising of 1861 as a purely anti-opium prohibition rebellion (discussed in Chapter 2), endorsing the continuation of monopoly over opium. A similar line of reasoning was used right from the beginning of the internationalisation of the opium issue in the early twentieth century by the Indian government as the internal trade in India assumed added significance after the 1909 Shanghai convention on opium (later ratified as law in the 1912 Hague Convention) which led to the loss of the Chinese and other markets where Indian opium was exported.⁶¹ As a consequence, this fallacy has embedded itself in the historiography and literature on the evolution of international drug conventions, or, indeed, works that explore opium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which are unusually silent on the issue of internal consumption in India and position the country only as a major source—producer and exporter—of the drug.⁶²

Given that the nature of the debate was framed in this manner, it was crucial for an Indian view to be presented on the international stage to balance the government line; the lack of an Indian response in international forums, as it were, was the crucial factor that enabled the Indian administration to counter mounting international pressure. In the absence of fuller understanding of opium as a major social, moral and economic problem for the people of India, especially in places like Assam, Godavari district and some Rajputana princely states, the attention of most international prohibitionists was centred on consumption in China and parts of Southeast Asia, and India was regarded as an exporter, a tilt that was promoted by the Royal Commission on Opium (RCO).

During the 1924 Belgaum Congress session a resolution titled “Drink and Opium Traffic” was passed and it represented the first agreement by the Congress on the need to tackle the issue of opium consumption in a concerted manner. The resolution challenged the government's opium production and export policy and called for restricting trade to legitimate medical and scientific uses, in line with decisions taken in the OAC meetings. It also condemned the opium policy of the government and declared that the drink and

⁶¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *A Century of International Drug Control* (Vienna, 2008).

⁶² See for instance Harumi Goto-Shitaba, “The League of Nations, Washington and Internationalism in East Asia: With Special Reference to the League's Attempt to Control Opium”, in Anthony Best (ed.), *The International History of East Asia, 1900–1968: Trade, Ideology and the Quest for Order* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 57–68. See also, William B. McAllister, *Drug Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century: An International History* (London, 2000), a captivating account of the genesis of the “war on drugs”, but suffers from the complete erasure of the internal opium trade in India.

drug excise revenue was an immoral source of income that needed to be abolished, thus signalling the beginning of a national public debate on an issue that was the preserve of missionary bodies and local prohibitionists. In common understanding, this resolution is seen as the precursor to the report of the APCC enquiry and the larger prohibition debate that had Gandhi's endorsement but the fact that the Assam Congress Enquiry was already well underway and covered in the national press problematises this convenient timeline. We argue that the resolution represents the recognition of the Congress of a common platform that would resonate across India and strengthen the Congress' appeal in the era of electoral politics.

The formation of informed opinion through the press was viewed as an important activity by the prohibitionists and recognised as the most effective strategy to counter government propaganda on opium as well as the lack of clarity on the issue of use in India as well as the economic significance of the trade for Britain. Although the mainstream Indian newspaper press—the pro-government *The Statesman* (Calcutta) as well as the nationalist dailies *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* (Calcutta) and *The Hindu* (Madras)—carried news on the opium issue, it was the periodical press, most prominently *The Calcutta Review* (Calcutta),⁶³ *The Modern Review* (Calcutta)⁶⁴ and *The Indian Review* (Madras),⁶⁵ that ran articles highlighting the problem of domestic opium as well as the wider trade. The Calcutta-based press lent support to the prohibition debate in India in the 1920s and Indian government's defence of the trade and domestic consumption at the International Opium Conferences was attacked, even though the Assam question was not directly addressed. The missionary press, including international publications such as

⁶³ Founded in May 1844 by John Kaye, who served in the Bengal Artillery and also edited the *Bengal Hurkaru*, with the belief that publishing “truthful expositions on some of the principal questions affecting the interests of the people of British India” was a much needed endeavour. See Krishna Sen and Debapriya Paul, “Archival Press Project: *The Calcutta Review*”, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 233–47.

⁶⁴ Founded in January 1907 by Ramananda Chatterjee, the journal served as a platform for Indian nationalist voices cutting across party lines thereby distinguishing itself from the party journals run by the Indian political parties. The magazine was largely moderate in tone and content that catered to an all-India readership. Chatterjee was arrested in 1929 for his book, *India in Bondage*. J.T. Sunderland, “Ramananda Chatterjee and *The Modern Review*”, *Modern Review* (hereafter, *MR*), Vol. 74, No. 5 (1943), p. 353.

⁶⁵ Started by G.A. Natesan in 1900, *The Indian Review* was a nationalist monthly published in English from Madras. The publication advertised itself as being “devoted to the discussion of all topics of interest” and played a prominent role in the shaping of a modern, nationalist consciousness in India. Although, Natesan himself was active in party politics (the Congress and later the Liberal Party), the publication was non-partisan in its editorial policy. See C. Hayavadana Rao, *The Indian Biographical Dictionary* (Madras, 1915), p. 302.

Christian Science Monitor (Boston), followed the conferences with interest and a few news reports on opium in Assam and the Congress enquiry were carried in the 1920s.

Articles that highlighted the failings of British policy on opium (both the Indian administration and the imperial government) were regularly published in *The Modern Review* and the most prominent anti-opium voice was Andrews. The magazine featured pieces by liberal British and American voices that denounced the trade as well as mass addiction in India and keenly followed a number of foreign periodicals whose extracts it published in a separate section in every issue. The journal also carried articles on issues pertaining to the province in its early numbers—tea garden labour, malaria, social customs, festivals—and from the mid-1920s a number for pieces written by prominent Assamese prohibitionists and political leaders appeared in its pages. Given the province's overall insularity from mainstream public opinion and relative backwardness, these articles constituted a rarity in the mainstream Indian press enabling an assessment of the mood of the Assamese intelligentsia as well as the 'image' of the province that it projected on to the pan-Indian readership.

Frederick Grubb, a member of the American Temperance Association (ATA), and prominent temperance activist who worked for more than 50 years in India contributed a number of articles on the topic to the *Modern Review*.⁶⁶ The second issue of the journal carried an article by Grubb which pointed out the role of the temperance societies in India and the challenges they faced with the problem of alcohol abuse in India and the government's policy that was oriented to maximise profits role.⁶⁷ Grubb listed a number of suggestions that an inquiry carried out by temperance activists across India had compiled and implored the government to make necessary "legislative and administrative reform".⁶⁸ This piece set the tone for future prohibition-related articles in the journal, mostly during the 1920s when the local temperance movement received a boost with the involvement of Gandhi and other nationalist leaders.

Written by various British and Indian contributors, more than 70 articles, including historical accounts of opium in India and other parts of the world, appeared in

⁶⁶ From 1907 onwards Grubb wrote more than a dozen articles in the journal besides a number of book-length works including *Fifty Years Work in India: My Temperance Jubilee* (1942) and *India Adopts Prohibition* (1946). The most prominent contributions include "Indian and the Liquor Traffic", *MR*, Vol. 29, No. 169 (January 1921), pp. 63–66, and "Prohibition for India", *MR*, Vol. 66, No. 391 (July 1939), pp. 33–39.

⁶⁷ Frederick Grubb, "The Drink Problem in India", *MR*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (February 1907), pp. 145–48.

⁶⁸ Grubb, "Drink Problem", pp. 147–148.

the journal.⁶⁹ These pieces not only attacked the government's excise policy and made policy recommendations, but also reported on important events like the International Opium Conferences held at Geneva. C.F. Andrews's was single-handedly responsible for much of the opium-related material that appeared in the journal in the 1920s, both in a writing capacity as well as a contributing editor, when the opium prohibition question dominated public debate. Like Grubb, who mostly wrote on the issue of temperance, Andrews initially contributed solely on the topic but in time became directly involved in the crusade against opium. In a 1910 article, Andrews had presented an account of the dangers of intemperance among the Indian masses, especially the urban working class, which he argued both impoverished them and disrupted social cohesion.⁷⁰ In the opening paragraph of the article, ironically, he had declared that "India has no opium curse like China", a statement that revealed his inexperience of the subcontinent given that a decade later he led the prohibition campaign in India and became the fiercest critic of the government's opium policy.

Andrews' earliest pieces were directed at the British Indian government's opium export policy and the addiction that it engendered in Japan, China and other parts of Southeast Asia.⁷¹ Among these, the most substantial contribution was a pamphlet titled *The Drink and Opium Evil* (1920/21) which referred to the "vice" economy of liquor and opium which were important "financial foundations" of the British empire.⁷² The publication contained the germ of most of the essential arguments that Andrews pursued over the next decade, among them the idea of the large-scale poisoning—moral and physical—of Indians and Chinese by the British through opium.⁷³ Andrews also drew on Gandhian thought and he equated temperance and prohibition as moral precepts that were connected with the idea of Gandhian *swaraj* (or self-rule)—which, in turn, was implicitly based on the attainment of higher ideals of righteousness and self-purification.⁷⁴ Andrews concluded his essay with a telling quote from Ellen La Motte which labelled the British opium trade a "cold blooded atrocity" and the British "a nation that can subjugate

⁶⁹ The articles ranged from K.S. Anhyankar, "Akbari under the Marathas", *MR*, Vol. 34, No. 260 (August 1923), pp. 168–70, to, Anonymous, "USA and the Opium Traffic", *MR*, Vol. 32, No. 192 (December 1922), p. 783.

⁷⁰ C.F. Andrews, "A Grave Moral Danger", *MR*, Vol. 8, No. 34 (October 1910), pp. 355–58.

⁷¹ C.F. Andrews, "The Opium Crime of Great Britain in India and Japan", *MR*, Vol. 29, No. 171 (March 1921), pp. 367–69.

⁷² C.F. Andrews, *The Drink and Opium Evil* (Madras, 1920/21), p. 2.

⁷³ Andrews, *Drink and Opium*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Andrews, *Drink and Opium*, pp. 7–8.

300,000,000 helpless Indian people, and turn them into drug addicts, for the sake of revenue”.⁷⁵

Andrews received the editorial support of the Indian nationalist press, and in a rejoinder published in the wake of Andrews’ assertion that the “‘drug’ evil is more insidious ... than the ‘drink’ evil”, the *Modern Review* declared that “[t]he time had come for the whole of the Indian people to rise up together against this hateful traffic, whether inside British India, or for the purpose of export abroad”.⁷⁶ This call for arms, at a time when the non-cooperation movement was at its peak, was a calculated move on part of the journal to promote active measures to effect prohibition in India and virtually every issue during the next decade contained at least one article or editorial comment on the topic.

In October 1923, Andrews was invited by the Assam Students’ Conference to chair its annual conference held in Nowgong.⁷⁷ During the visit, Andrews encountered widespread opium addiction in the Assam valley and in his presidential address highlighted the need to tackle the problem and suggested that the student organisations should collect statistical data about opium consumption, especially in rural areas.⁷⁸ It was this event, we argue, that was the direct trigger to the events that led to the formation of the 1924 opium enquiry. In an article published in the *Modern Review* the following month, Andrews bore on his visit and drew attention to the high incidence of opium use in Assam. He explicitly outlined the plan to conduct an independent enquiry and stated that

it would be necessary for me ... to get these facts sifted and verified and canvasses and put before the public not only in India but in the civilised world outside India, where the opium question has now become acute.⁷⁹

Andrews also made a clear reference to his plan to present the enquiry’s findings “verified very carefully by figures and statistics” before the International Opium Convention as well as the American public. Another significant point made in the piece was the fact that Andrews had advised the local political leaders to “get every fact and all statistics available” as well as “have on record an accurate historical account of the

⁷⁵ Andrews, *Drink and Opium*, pp. 17–18.

⁷⁶ “India’s Opium Traffic” [Editorial], *MR*, Vol. 30, No. 179 (November 1921), pp. 596–97.

⁷⁷ Sheila Bora, *Student Revolution*, p. 50.

⁷⁸ *The Servant*, 27 October 1923, History of the Freedom Movement Records, ASA.

⁷⁹ C.F.A[ndrews], “Opium in Assam”, *MR*, Vol. 34, No. 203 (November 1923), p. 623.

growth of the opium habit in Assam” during a meeting that took place when he visited the province in October 1923.⁸⁰ From the above it is quite clear that the enquiry conducted the following year under the imprimatur of the Assam Congress was in fact Andrews’ brainchild and he envisioned furnishing the professional acuity in preparing the report as well as diffusing its findings to the wider world from the very beginning.

As argued above, the process of politicisation of the local social reform movement centred on opium in Assam by the Congress from 1921 onwards did not stop merely with the arrogation of the event (that the anti-opium movement in Assam constituted) but also in the formulation of its ‘memories’ in independent India. The historicisation of the anti-opium movement in Assam, therefore, should be interpreted as being part of the project contrived to fit the *lesser* narratives neatly within the grand design of centralised nationalist political activity that paid homage to the legacy of the core leadership. The following section will discuss the formation of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry and its report, as well as address these fallacies highlighted above.

3.3 ‘Vindicating the People of India’: The Assam Congress Opium Enquiry and Its Impact on the Prohibition Debate

The formation of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee (ACOEC) in 1924 and the publication of its report in 1925 was the culmination of the objective of performing an independent enquiry to address governmental biases and present an assessment of Assam’s opium problem to the wider world. The origins of the debate on instituting an enquiry on opium consumption in Assam had been on the regional political agenda since 1920–21, during the height of the non-cooperation campaign, but no affirmative action was taken due to organisational issues, lack of funds, as well as expertise.⁸¹

In the mid-1920s, largely as a result of international legislation and the work of the American prohibitionists, international attention shifted gradually from Southeast Asia (and China) to India, and the Indian government came under increasing pressure to tackle opium consumption, especially opium smoking, across the country and enact legislation in many provinces that were proactively aimed at opium prohibition. The *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (1925; *ACOER*) was a unique document in a

⁸⁰ Andrews, “Opium in Assam”, p. 624.

⁸¹ The formation of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (1921–22) to investigate tea-worker unrest would have acted as a significant point of reference for an opium enquiry, although no concrete evidence suggesting this exists within the APCC archive.

number of ways. The report was the only substantial non-official enquiry on opium consumption in India during the colonial period as well as the sole report of its kind to be presented at the International Opium Conferences held in Geneva. The report was instrumental in persuading the international body to consider the issue of India's internal opium consumption in a serious manner. Not only was the enquiry conducted in a professional manner involving standardised questionnaires, public hearings and testimonials, the *Report* also contained a comprehensive historical account of opium policy in Assam and was meant to serve as a *vade mecum* on opium. Moreover, the report coalesced factual evidence on opium consumption incorporating statements from opium eaters/smokers and thus presented both a 'lived experience' aspect as well as a societal perspective on the drug and its effects, a crucial yet understated function. By inserting the consumer-addict's opinion into the prohibition argument, the report foregrounded the public health aspect, which was intricately connected with governmental responsibility, and this found resonance in the LoN's deliberations.

The potential of the framing of the prohibition argument from this aspect becomes clear through a comparison of the *ACOER* with a contemporary anti-opium propaganda publication titled *Opium in India* (1924),⁸² published by the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon.⁸³ This publication collected written evidence from a range of respondents including missionaries, doctors and social workers and focused its attention on four facets of the question—the uses of opium, the effects of its use, the legitimacy of medical use and hardships caused by a ban. The report strongly countered the government's policy of controls through the pricing mechanism, and focused on Assam as an example of the failure of this policy and demanded that the government should introduce registration of consumers and restrict internal consumption to legitimate medical use.⁸⁴

Like the *ACOER*, it also highlighted that often the term "semi-medical" was used by the government as a means to justify the habit, especially in official literature where the idea of opium as a prophylactic against fatigue and tropical climatic ailments was advanced.⁸⁵ However, the report chose to present the view that opium smoking was a

⁸² William Paton, *Opium in India* (Calcutta, 1924).

⁸³ Formed in 1914 as the Missionary Council of India, Burma and Ceylon, following the World Missionary Conference of 1910 (also known as the Edinburgh Missionary Conference), the Council was the most important ecumenical body in British India.

⁸⁴ *Opium in India*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ Paton, *Opium*, pp. 10–11.

rarity in India and a “problem [that] hardly needs to be considered”. The conclusion was, in fact, at variance with J.J.M. Nichols-Roy’s testimony that clearly identified the universality of opium smoking in Assam.⁸⁶ This was a significant omission as the issue of opium smoking constituted an essential legal argument against the government’s role in the manufacture and sale of opium, since the 1912 Hague Convention made it mandatory for the British government to ban opium smoking within its territorial bounds (discussed in Chapter 2). This lapse was partly on account of the common perception, re-enforced by colonial writing, that only aristocratic men, the Chinese community in Calcutta, religious mendicants, lower castes and poor Muslim workers smoked opium. Hence, although considered an ‘inconceivable vice’, the reach and extent of opium smoking was regarded as modest and thus not significant enough to warrant opposition to government policy.

Given the outlook and scope of the enquiry, especially due to the links of the International Missionary Council⁸⁷ with the LoN, the report also addressed the subject of public opinion in India both about domestic consumption as well as the export of opium to other countries. The enquiry made two crucial interventions: firstly, it highlighted the “international aspects of the Indian opium problem” and, secondly, demanded that the government should attend to public health and social well-being of the people of India through strict regulation and limiting opium use.⁸⁸ But the most important demand that the enquiry raised was on the issue of “legitimate use” (or use strictly for ‘medical and scientific purposes’) a crucial point of contention that formed the basis of the Indian government’s argument in the international conferences.⁸⁹ It needs to be highlighted that as per The Hague Convention of 1912, the Indian government had accepted the medical legitimacy argument with regard to opium exports to China, the Straits Settlements and other territories. The Council’s demand was therefore persuasive as it sought alignment of domestic policy with the existing international framework of the opium trade.

In its perfunctory discussion of the events leading up to the opium enquiry, the official political history of Assam, a project commissioned by the government in the mid-1970s that is currently in its third edition, made a number of debatable claims that are factually incoherent and unsubstantiated by evidence.⁹⁰ These errors are unsurprisingly

⁸⁶ Paton, *Opium*, pp. 67–68.

⁸⁷ The International Missionary Council was established in 1921. It grew out of the efforts to organise the Protestant churches under a single body with the 1910 World Missionary Conference.

⁸⁸ *Opium in India*, p. 6.

⁸⁹ *Opium in India*, pp. 3–5.

⁹⁰ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 208–10.

characteristic of such endeavours that have a decidedly nationalist bias and exhibit a strong, predetermined motivation to celebrate the Congress leadership, and, are, inarguably a product of its times.⁹¹ This section will focus on the events leading up to the formation of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry of 1924 and review the documentary evidence to counterbalance the official account and flesh out the narrative. Given the publication's status as the authoritative historical account of the period, and often the point of entry into the subject for scholars and general readers, errors such as the ones we discuss below have fostered others to creep into the (scant) existing literature.

The official account made an explicit connection between the Congress-led anti-opium activities conducted in 1921 as part of the non-cooperation movement and the events connected to the enquiry, ostensibly to provide an unbroken history of involvement of the national leadership of the INC in the province's long, successful history of anti-opium activities. The account suffers from two errors, both factually unsubstantiated and testimony to the larger nationalist historiographical project. The first pertains to the formation of the enquiry and the other to Andrews' involvement in it, both of which, we argue, had a rich history independent of the Congress. This rendition of events not only does disservice to the sustained efforts of the local Assamese anti-opium activists but also erases the role of dedicated activists like Andrews as well as lobbyists who represented international pressure groups and contributed substantially to rousing public opinion internationally.

On the first point, the official history suggested that "[a]fter the non-cooperation movement, the AICC renewed its interest regarding the problem and decided to make a detailed investigation and present the findings before the Geneva Conference in 1924–25".⁹² The second contention was even more polemical; it posited that "the AICC (1923–4) at the personal interest of Gandhiji directed C.F. Andrews to visit Assam to have a first-hand knowledge of the situation and form an enquiry committee".⁹³ In fact, from the available evidence it is clear that Gandhi was not directly involved in the Assam opium enquiry at any stage—he was not consulted either by Andrews or other Congress office

⁹¹ The project to bring out a comprehensive history of the freedom movement in Assam was started in 1950 and a dedicated department was instituted for the purpose. The first project, covering the period 1826–1947, was considerably delayed and the first volume was published in 1977 under the general editorship of H.K. Barpujari, followed by two volumes that were published within the next two years.

⁹² Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 208.

⁹³ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, p. 208.

bearers.⁹⁴ The opium enquiry committee was formally appointed on 20 June 1924 and the AICC working committee sanctioned funds for the enquiry on 9 July.⁹⁵

Given that Andrews' involvement and substantial role in the enquiry was instrumental to the opium prohibition campaign in Assam, the emphasis on Gandhi's role needs to be scrutinised in light of the larger political argument centred on the national leaders. Andrews' role was not limited merely to the shaping of the enquiry and its report—in his role as the author of the final draft—but also in rousing public opinion in India and abroad about Assam's opium problem through the dissemination of its findings in the press, prohibitionists and interested parties. By presenting the findings of the report to the LoN through his personal acquaintances, Andrews' role was of great significance but has been obliterated from historical accounts.⁹⁶ Furthermore, it is worth stating that the narrative of events in the official history volume referred to above was not evidenced by any source material and in the absence of references, at best, it epitomised the general consensus of the editors of the volume on the aims of the Political History of Assam project.

The telling evidence that puts to rest the claims about Gandhi's role in starting the anti-opium agitation are to be found in the official archive. Andrews' opposition to the government's opium policy in his contributions to Indian press in the period 1920–21, including *The Statesman*, *The Bombay Chronicle*, *The Modern Review*, *Young India* and other publications, was noted by central administration. The finance ministry noted that Andrews was responsible for encouraging the Congress to take active interest in anti-opium measures and alluded to the dangers of anti-opium agitations to provincial and imperial revenues, especially if public opinion in India as well as Britain is aroused by such publications.⁹⁷ It commissioned a counter-propaganda volume⁹⁸ in response to

⁹⁴ C.F. Andrews, "Opium in Assam", *MR*, Vol. 38, No. 227 (November 1925), pp. 511–15; C.F. Andrews, "Introduction", *Assam Opium Enquiry Committee Report* (Jorhat, 1925), pp. 1–4.

⁹⁵ Rohini Kanta Hatibara, Secretary, APCC to General Secretary, AICC, 23 June 1924, No. 15C, AICC Paper, 1st instalment, NMML; J. Nehru to Secretary, APCC, 9 July 1924, No. 1054/77, AICC Paper, 1st instalment, NMML.

⁹⁶ Very little work of any note exists but the errors reverberate across the available literature. See, for instance, Kawal Deep Kour, "The Opium Question in Colonial Assam", in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Jana Tschurennev (eds), *A History of Alcohol and Drugs in Modern South Asia: Intoxicating Affairs* (Abingdon, 2014), pp. 139–54; Kamal Chandra Pathak, *Peasantry: Their Problem and Protest in Assam* (Delhi, 2014).

⁹⁷ "Notes [to Compilation by Mr. Rushbrook Williams of a pamphlet on the opium question], 21 May 1921", FD, SRC, June 1921, No. 233, NAI.

⁹⁸ Rushbrook Williams, *The Truth about the Indian Opium Trade* (Bombay, 1921); "Notes [to Compilation by Mr. Rushbrook Williams of a pamphlet on the opium question], 17 May 1921", FD, SRC, June 1921, No. 233, NAI.

Andrews' attack of the Indian government's opium policy and the author, Rushbrook Williams,⁹⁹ warned the government not to draw public attention to the domestic argument given that there was no indication that Andrews could "spare sufficient time from his labour work to start a campaign against the opium traffic".¹⁰⁰ Williams was right in his judgement and it was not until mid-1924 that Andrews became involved in anti-opium activities as a result of his personal experience of widespread opium addiction among the rural classes in Assam during his work with plantation labour in the province.

To get back to the genesis of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry. In 1924, the Congress headquarters received a number of petitions in quick succession from America highlighting the need for a non-official Indian delegation to attend the International Opium Conferences to be held in Geneva.¹⁰¹ The appeals were signed by several prominent American prohibitionists and apart from proposing the need for the said delegation, they were unanimous in their championing of Andrews as an essential member of the unit with unique expertise on the topic and the Indian periodical press also lent its support.¹⁰²

The first of these appeals came from Rev. J.T. Sunderland (1842–1936),¹⁰³ a New York-based Unitarian leader and reformer with considerable experience and interest in

⁹⁹ Laurence Frederic Rushbrook Williams (1890–1978) was professor of modern Indian history at the University of Allahabad. He later joined the Home Department and served at the Bureau of Public Information, where he was responsible for representing the government during the preparation of reports on Jalianwala Bagh massacre, Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms, among others. He was close to the Nehrus and leading politicians such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Mohamed Ali Jinnah, and the government enlisted his help to act as a conduit between the government and nationalist opinion. Thomas G. Fraser, "Williams, (Laurence Frederic) Rushbrook", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edn, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31836>, accessed 11 Nov 2015.

¹⁰⁰ "Rushbrook Williams to the Head of the Finance Department, 26 May 1921", FD, SRC, June 1921, No. 233, NAI.

¹⁰¹ Back-to-back conferences were held between November 1924 and February 1925. The first conference was devoted to control of opium smoking in Asia and was attended by eight nations, while the second conference comprised of delegates from more than thirty countries and addressed the issue of narcotics in general. Two separate treaties were signed; the first convention focused on opium-producing nations and required them to end the trade within 15 years, while the second convention was intended to impose global controls over a wide range of drugs, including coca, heroin, morphine and cocaine as well as the setting up of an international opium and narcotics supervisory body called the Permanent Central Board. John M. Jennings, *The Opium Empire: Japanese Imperialism and Drug Trafficking in Asia, 1895–1945* (Westport CT, 1997), pp. 71–72.

¹⁰² "Notes: The Opium Conference and the League of Nations", *MR*, Vol. 35, No. 210 (June 1924), p. 743.

¹⁰³ J.T. Sunderland (1842–1936), was a prominent Unitarian leader and reformer who promoted internationalism, the League of Nations, and opposition to British rule in India. He was associated with the liberal religious movements in India, especially the Brahmo Samaj, and lent support for the Indian freedom movement. He made two lengthy trips to India, the first to Assam in 1896 to further the Unitarian cause in the Khasi hills. During this trip he met Pandita Ramabai, M.G. Ranade, and S.N. Banerji and became the first American to attend an annual meeting of INC. During his second visit to India in 1913–14, he was closely involved with *Modern Review*, a journal to which C.F. Andrews was a regular contributor.

Indian affairs. Sunderland's open appeal addressed to Mahatma Gandhi and other political leaders drew attention of the Congress (with the intent of wider pan-India circulation) to fact that the 1925 Conference had reserved a whole day to hear "petitions from individuals and societies who are opposed to a continuation of the opium trade".¹⁰⁴ Sunderland proposed that the Indian delegation could play a vital role in solving the world's opium problem and in doing so attract the attention of the world to its own subject status under colonial rule and help shape its future destiny.¹⁰⁵ In his appeal, Sunderland suggested that the delegation should comprise of a mix of political leaders, social reform activists, economists, doctors and women's rights workers and endorsed by written testimonies and appeals by distinguished men such as Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

Sunderland also enclosed an article titled "Will India lose the Chance of Vindicating Her Position in the Coming International Opium Conference" written by Tarakanath Das (1884–1958),¹⁰⁶ which provided details about the importance of a nationalist Indian delegation to represent the opium question at the Geneva conference. In the article, Das called upon Indian nationalist leaders to regard the opium issue as an "international moral issue" in which India's position as the world's largest producer shone an unfavourable light on it, and highlighted that there would be considerable international support if the Congress were to effect change in the Indian opium policy.¹⁰⁷ Das proposed that Andrews should lead a delegation that would present a compilation of anti-opium Indian opinion at Geneva that would provide nationalist leaders the opportunity to have the Indian government "convicted of misrepresentation, wilful destruction of health and well-being of the people of India" before the transnational body

Sunderland collected many of his articles and essays in the book, *India in Bondage* (1929), which was banned by the Government of India. "Jabez T. Sunderland", <http://uudb.org/articles/jabezsunderland.html>, Accessed 4 September 2015.

¹⁰⁴ J.T. Sunderland, "An Open Letter to Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress Leaders", 24 April 1924, File No. 39, p. 25, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

¹⁰⁵ Sunderland, "Open Letter", p. 29, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

¹⁰⁶ Dr Tarakanath Das (1885–1958) was an Indian revolutionary and internationalist scholar who taught in several American universities, including Columbia University. He organised Indian immigrants in the United States to muster support for the Indian cause and was active in the India political self-determination movement. Associated with the Ghadar Party, Das served a two-year prison sentence (1919–1920) for his involvement in the infamous Hindu–German Conspiracy. He established the Tarakanath Das Foundation in 1935 for furthering Indian studies in American universities and promoting internationalism. "Obituary: Tarakanath Das", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (April 1959), p. 831; S.P. Sen (ed.), "Das, Tarakanath (Dr.)", *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1972), pp. 363–64.

¹⁰⁷ Tarakanath Das, "Will India lose the Chance of Vindicating Her Position in the Coming International Opium Conference", 13 April 1924, File No. 39, p. 19, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

and shape international public opinion.¹⁰⁸ Like Das, Sunderland also suggested that Andrews should play a leading role in the delegation as he would not merely add “great weight” through his experience on the drug debate but also carry the support of the church organisations that were involved in the prohibition movement. India’s membership to the LoN, paid for by the Indian tax payer, was interpreted by Das as signifying that Indians were ready to represent themselves in the world body independently of the British Indian government.¹⁰⁹ He called upon the Congress to present Indian concerns, including the opium problem, directly in the LoN in order to represent the “will of the people”.¹¹⁰

The view that the Indian delegation needed experienced and well recognised members to challenge widely held misconceptions about the view of Indians on the opium traffic was also noted in another memorial that was received by the Congress around the same time. This appeal, led by Julia Ellsworth Ford (1859–1950), a noted American author and opium prohibitionist, was endorsed by a number of influential people including editors of publications such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, office bearers of the White Cross Anti-Opium Society, and noted writers and journalists. Primarily New York-based, this group of individuals were part of the American movement that was instrumental in pressurising the British and other governments involved in the international opium trade. The appeal to the Congress leadership pointed out the political gains that the party could achieve on an international platform and highlighted the fact that the Indian government’s representative, John Campbell, in a May 1923 press conference had defended its opium policy by declaring that “from the beginning India had handled the opium question with perfect honesty, and not even Mr. Gandhi had ever made any reproach in that respect”.¹¹¹ Ford counselled that the Indian delegation should be armed with “a message from Gandhi ... [to] effectively neutralize the allegations” of his pro-opium stance and also “dispose of the notion that India is satisfied with the British Indian Government’s handling of the opium question”.¹¹² Both entreaties—the proposal to send a non-official delegation to the Geneva conference and a

¹⁰⁸ Das, “Will India Lose”, p. 19, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

¹⁰⁹ Tarakanath Das, “India and the League of Nations”, *MR*, Vol. 35, No. 206 (February 1924), pp. 163–167.

¹¹⁰ Das, “India and League”, p. 166.

¹¹¹ Julia Ellsworth Ford, “India and the Opium Question”, (Undated), File No. 39/1924, p. 41, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

¹¹² Ford, “Opium Question”, p. 43, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

pro-prohibition statement from Gandhi—however failed to generate a response from the Congress. The common element that tied up this appeal with the other two (by Das and Sunderland) was the nomination of Andrews as part of the Indian delegation.

The proposal for an Indian delegation consisting of experts from different walks of life remained unrealised, as did the appeals for statements from Gandhi and other prominent Congress leaders. However, the appeal made an important contribution to the opium debate in India in another way; all three missives (most pointedly Ford's) contended that public opinion in the West was unsympathetic to India and its people were viewed as being "responsible for this iniquitous soul-and-body-destroying traffic", thus putting the onus of launching a challenge to the government contention squarely on the shoulders of the Congress leadership.¹¹³ The appeals also obliquely broached the issue of the legitimacy of the government delegation acting as "spokesmen for India", a tactic designed to provoke the Congress leadership into action. The most immediate impact of the appeals was the response from the Congress leaders, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, the general secretary of the Congress at the time, which recognised that a well-prepared attack on the Indian government at an international forum would provide effective political mileage to the Indian nationalist cause.

Given the scant documentary evidence, it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the role Andrews played in the process that led to the appeals from long standing American associates reaching the INC headquarters. However, in light of the sequence of events that unfolded immediately afterwards, with Andrews persuading the Congress to sanction and fund the Assam opium enquiry as well as the role that he went on to play in the 1925 Geneva Conference as an impassioned advocate for prohibition in India, it is safe to presume that he was instrumental in formulating the pressure tactic involving the appeals. In a letter to Muhammad Ali, Nehru had noted that appeals of the kind were common and he summarily dismissed Das' proposal of an Indian delegation to Geneva to represent the Indian side of the opium argument as impracticable.¹¹⁴

On 27 May 1924, around the same time that the appeals were received at the Congress headquarters, Andrews sent a telegram (followed by a letter dated the same day) informing Nehru, with whom he shared a personal rapport, about the institution of an

¹¹³ Ford, "Opium Question", p. 43, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, NMML.

¹¹⁴ "Tarakanath Das writes to me on average once a fortnight suggesting an agitation in India against opium." J. Nehru to Muhammad Ali, 28 May 1925, No. 750/25, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

Assam opium enquiry and requesting funds for the same.¹¹⁵ Andrews' letter belied the fact that no concrete decision had been taken by APCC and the enquiry was, at best, in proposal stage. Andrews' proposal mirrored the appeals from the American lobby in all but one aspect. He explicitly highlighted the political gains that the Congress could achieve both in Assam and the LoN from the enquiry and stated that it was "a golden opportunity to rouse once more the whole of Assam".¹¹⁶ A note detailing the work to be done in Assam under his direct supervision highlighted two important objectives besides the business of collecting information for the report: the conducting of prohibition meetings in every village in the five Brahmaputra valley districts and a centralised information office to disseminate news and seek active support of the press. The following day, in a letter to Muhammad Ali, the then Congress president, Nehru extended wholehearted support to Andrews' proposal and declared his intention to convince the party to release funds for the enquiry but admitted, curiously enough, that he was unaware of any decision by the Congress to institute an enquiry but emphasised the need for an enquiry.¹¹⁷

Given this background, it is remarkable that a single letter from Andrews prompted Nehru and the Congress Working Committee (CWC) to take affirmative decisions to ensure that the Assam enquiry materialised. Andrews' proposal set into motion the process which resulted in the appointment of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee (ACOEC) in the extraordinarily short space of four days involving a considerable number of telegrams, letters and communiques between Congress officeholders. This turn of events, especially given the outright dismissal of the Indian representation at the Geneva conference, which represented the larger, more significant goal, we argue, was precipitated not by the benefits to be accrued from the enquiry. Rather, calculated political gains for the Congress in the province of Assam, especially in the scenario of increasing communal divide and divisive politics beginning with the Legislative Council elections held in November 1923 and the internal differences among the Swarajists in the period before the Calcutta Pact, played a crucial role in the support that the enquiry received from the AICC.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ C.F. Andrews to J. Nehru, 27 May 1924, File no. 39/1924, p. 73, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹¹⁶ Andrews to Nehru, 27 May 1924, File no. 39/1924, p. 73, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹¹⁷ Nehru to Muhammad Ali, 28 May 1925, No. 750/25, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹¹⁸ The Swarajists were moderates who supported the constitutional reforms and participated in the electoral process that rolled out self-government bodies across the British Indian provinces. Bipan Chandra *et. al.*,

By 2 June 1924, Nehru communicated the proposal to all members of the CWC soliciting their support in allocating funds for the Assam enquiry and highlighted two points which would have struck home with the members: first, the “revival of interest in [the] Congress”, and, second, “diverting people’s attention from the communal troubles”.¹¹⁹ It was only more than a week later after he had received positive responses from the CWC, that Nehru initiated communications with the APCC on the matter concerning the enquiry and directed the provincial committee to make a formal request for funds to conduct the enquiry.¹²⁰ Rohini Kanta Hatibara’s reply conceded that the provincial Congress had not passed any resolution to that effect but stressed on the need for an enquiry given that nearly 40 per cent of the province’s excise revenue came from opium sales. He made an impassioned argument about opium consumption in Assam and admitted that the APCC did not possess the resources to conduct an enquiry and implored for help from the AICC to “combat the opium evil which has been eating into the lifeblood of the Assamese people”.¹²¹ This exchange set the tone for the mode and manner in which the enquiry was conducted; the fact that opium consumption was regarded as an ‘Assamese’ problem and definite political goals were in the offing was clear, as was the point that the central Congress was merely the external funder relying on Andrews to rally support for the cause of opium in India and the provincial body on his professional expertise to guide the enquiry.

On 27 June, a week after the APCC formally passed the resolution to institute the enquiry and a couple of days before the AICC deliberated over the resolution to fund the enquiry, the seven committee members met at Jorhat to start the enquiry. At this stage, the committee drew up a questionnaire which was circulated amongst government officials, professionals, missionaries and local prohibitionists and published in the local press. Between 5 July and 27 September the committee members supported by Congress volunteers did the groundwork; the committee visited the five Brahmaputra valley districts (or Assam proper) which had high incidence of opium consumption and their itinerary included inspection of a number of villages across the province and collection of

India’s Struggle for Independence: 1857–1947 (New Delhi, 2000), Chapter 19 for a synoptic discussion of the political climate during this period.

¹¹⁹ J. Nehru to All Members of the AICC, 2 June 1924, No. 808/77, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹²⁰ J. Nehru to Secretary, APCC, 10 June 1924, No. 875/77, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹²¹ Assistant Secretary, APCC to J. Nehru, 16 June 1924, No. 11C, APCC Papers, NMML.

data on opium addiction from these villages which was an unique facet of the Congress enquiry.¹²²

Apart from collating factual and documentary evidence, the committee also interviewed a total of 325 official and non-official witnesses, including 75 opium eaters/smokers, while another 20 witnesses—including 10 medical practitioners—submitted written statements. Remarkably, for the first time women respondents were included in the enquiry and 6 women, 3 of them opium-eater/smokers, were examined.¹²³ A series of drafts were prepared by the committee members independently (but under the general guidance of Andrews) and a copy was forwarded to the AICC on 15 December 1924 and the final draft was drawn up by Andrews at Shantiniketan with assistance from Hatibarua in May 1925.¹²⁴ In the discussion below, both the December 1924 draft and the final report will be examined to highlight Andrews' editorial hand and the implications of these changes in light of the internationalisation of the enquiry's findings.

Andrews spent the months of March and April 1925 in Assam as a co-opted member of the opium enquiry committee and was part of the closing sessions of the committee's meetings during April and May 1925. Significantly, Andrews also wrote the introduction to the report and the opening lines clearly identified the international conference at Geneva as the major factor behind the enquiry and that it was intended for a global audience given that the thrust was not merely to present Assam as having "the blackest records in India ... both in opium smoking and opium eating", but also exceeding the LoN mandated consumption levels by almost 40 times.

The enquiry report provided a redoubtable account of the extent of opium addiction in Assam and the widespread societal damage that it had caused through a thorough assessment of statistical data and documentary evidence from a host of official and non-official sources buttressed by extracts from witness statements. This conventional approach of challenging the government enquiries and official reports using facts and figures was supplemented by a persuasive case about authenticity and

¹²² "Introduction: Draft of Assam Opium Enquiry Committee Report", 15 December 1924, No. 1041/77, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹²³ The witnesses included 26 retired government officials, 6 Rai Bahadurs, 3 Rai Sahibs, 1 Khan Sahib, 11 chairmen of municipal and local boards, 12 jailors, 22 medical men (7 of whom were Ayurveda practitioners), 6 *mauzadars*, 2 editors of local papers and 41 lawyers/pleaders. Twelve 'hill men' also appeared before the committee.

¹²⁴ Hatibarua to General Secretary, AICC, 15 December 1924, No. 447/C, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

immediacy.¹²⁵ The members went to lengths to highlight the significance of local knowledge that they possessed on account of “being Assamese by birth and widely acquainted with the conditions of Assam”, which distinguished the Congress enquiry from the official ones.¹²⁶ Such gambits were clearly aimed at the nationalist press as well as the international audience, and, as discussed above, directed at influencing wider public opinion.

The need for an enquiry was justified through statistical data and the report explicitly highlighted the fact that average consumption of opium across Assam was many times higher (see Table 3.1) than the LoN mandated level to meet scientific and medical needs of 6 *seers* (about 5.45 kg) per 10,000 people. It is worth noting that consumption in Assam was significantly higher than other Indian provinces (see Table 3.2). On the fact that an enquiry needed to be conducted given high levels of opium (ab)use there was unanimity among all the players involved in the enquiry, but on the several others factors, especially the tone, emphasis and intended audience of the report, Andrews’ judgement held sway.

District	Population	Opium issue (in <i>seers</i>)	Consumption (per 10,000 people)
Kamrup	762,671	3,472	45.52
Darrang	477,935	5,101	106.73
Nowgong	397,921	6,939	173.63
Sibsagar	823,197	9,133	110.95
Lakhimpur	588,195	11,176	189.97
Sadiya Frontier Tract	39,531	937	237.03
Balipara Frontier Tract	3,819	52	136.16

Table 3.1 Consumption of Opium in Assam (in *seers*) per 10,000 people, 1922–23¹²⁷

Province	Total Population	Consumption in <i>seers</i> (per 10,000 people)
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¹²⁵ Officials as well as the general public were invited to respond to a questionnaire (see Appendix 4[a]) that was designed to facilitate the collection of public opinion on various facets of the opium question.

¹²⁶ *ACOER*, p. 141.

¹²⁷ Rounded-off to two decimal points for clarity. *ACOER*, p. 1.

Punjab	20,685,024	11.99
United Provinces	45,373,787	6.64
Bengal	46,522,293	8.14
Bombay Presidency and Sind	19,348,319	22.17
Madras	42,313,067	8.50
Central Provinces and Berar	13,912,760	16.14
Bihar and Orissa	34,490,084	8.30
North West Frontier	3,736,922	10.18
Baluchistan	748,929	5.99
Coorg	163,838	2.29
Burma	11,457,325	28.73

Table 3.2 Consumption of Opium in British India (in *seers*) per 10,000 people, 1922–23¹²⁸

The first major difference between the draft version and the final report was on the issue of medical use of opium and opinion of practitioners of traditional and western medicine. In addition to the general list of questions, the enquiry committee had circulated a questionnaire amongst medical men in order to collect specialist medical opinion on the effects of opium consumption as well as gather their views on future opium policy in the province, but the published report omitted this completely (see Appendix 4[c]). The committee had envisaged that the statements and opinions of the medical practitioners would supplement the documentary evidence which dated back to the early nineteenth century when the colonial military and administrative ingress into the region had started and would make for a persuasive case for prohibition. But Andrews' intervention resulted in a crucial change of the pitch of the report; rather than engaging in the prohibition demand from a medical perspective, the argument was remodelled to foreground a societal aspect. This modification was a crucial intervention since the Indian government's argument in the Geneva Opium Conferences was based on the idea of the

¹²⁸ Figures for Delhi and the Rajputana States are not available. Opium Research Committee of the Foreign Policy Association, *The Opium Situation in India: Recent Developments* (New York, 1926), pp. 35–42.

“will of the people” and their “demand” for the drug. Andrews recognised that instead of engaging with the administration in an arena that they were better prepared to deal with (and in the past had successfully managed to), it was necessary to intensify the exoteric aspect in order to draw the attention of the international body. Calling for voluntary efforts and public propaganda, the final recommendation of the enquiry made this counterbalancing act apparent in the broad-based entreaty which read

We, therefore, appeal to all those who desire the welfare of Assam to organise themselves ... to advocate opium prohibition amongst the people in general. This will lead to the education of public opinion against the opium evil and create a moral atmosphere without which no great success can be achieved.¹²⁹

The *ACOER* localised the issue of opium consumption and policy at every opportunity and each of its arguments was depicted from the perspective of the people of Assam to highlight the unsoundness of the Indian government’s position on opium. For instance, it pointed out that the government delegation at the LoN did not represent the province or its people and lacked knowledge about ground conditions in Assam and were therefore unqualified to make statements about opium in Assam.¹³⁰ To counter the ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’ argument, the report used official opinion from various sources that highlighted the benefits of opium as medicine and prophylactic to make the argument that opium should be distributed cheaply and as widely as possible given its multiple uses for the poor. The report quoted choice statements from government records which extolled the benefits of opium;¹³¹ for instance, the British delegate’s representation at the 1912 Hague Conference which claimed that “the prevention of its [opium] sale would be sheer inhumanity to many millions of Indian village people”.¹³² These were clearly aimed at invoking the incongruity of historic statements such as Hastings’ “compassion to mankind” analogy from the 1810s, when the original British opium policy in India was formulated.¹³³

¹²⁹ *ACOER*, pp. 50–51.

¹³⁰ “Report”, 15 December 1924, No. 1041/77, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML, pp 367, 371.

¹³¹ “Report”, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML, p. 373.

¹³² Sir William Meyer’s speech at the third session of the 1912 Conference, with reference to the resolution which formed the basis of Article 1 of the Convention of 1912. See Appendix 1, “Report of the British Delegates to the International Opium Conference held at The Hague, December 1911–January 1912”, Miscellaneous No. 11 (1912), NAI.

¹³³ Warren Hastings, “Letters from the Court of Directors to the Governor-General in Council”, 24 October 1817, Paragraph 85, SRC, 1817, NAI.

The *ACOER* was specific in expounding on the difference between opium smoking and opium eating and highlighting the fact that virtually every opium user in Assam smoked the drug. By wrong footing the government on its claims that opium smoking in India does not exist, the *ACOER* used statistical and documentary evidence to demonstrate widespread opium smoking across the province. This aspect was deliberately aimed at catering to the LoN, which in light of the international ban on opium smoking, was sure to take heed of the claims. The fact that the Botham Enquiry Committee (BEC) report was made public in early 1925 through pressure from the councillors as well as the missionary and intellectual prohibition lobby was a considerable victory and the government was left without a plausible defence. This marked the beginning of the end and all future gains in policy can be retraced to the BEC's findings which rendered the official position and its claims about the absence of opium smoking in Assam indefensible (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this confidential report).¹³⁴

The social evil driven narrative element is evident in the report's summary of the three-fold effects of opium—physical/mental, moral and material—following the classic model used in colonial reports. However, these impacts under each of these categories were expressed from a personal, immediate rather than scientific/logical viewpoint commonly seen in the administrative documents. The language used carefully replicated the tone of the colonial archive but endowed the user-addict with empathy and although the user-addict was depicted variously as a “physical wreck”, “mentally despondent”, “moral wreck” as well as “unreliable, untrustworthy and irresponsible”, the sketch was aimed at evoking an emotional response from the reader on the effects of opium rather than making value-based judgements about the individual.¹³⁵ This facet becomes evident when the report elucidated on the material effects of addiction, especially poverty, neglect and apathy. For instance, the neglected homestead of the addict was described using the common Assamese aphorism, “*kaniar ghor dhakuar ber*” (the walls of the opium eaters' house are made of areca palm leaves) before the narrative moved on to the fact of the progressive privation, which had close parallels to a moral allegory.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ At least 80 per cent of users were initiated into opium through smoking and more than half only smoked and the rest consumed opium by both smoked and eating (or drinking) it. See “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire Into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption”, Education Department (hereafter, ED), SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, ASA.

¹³⁵ “Report”, pp. 401–05, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹³⁶ “Report”, pp. 405–07, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

The *ACOER* countered the argument made by the administration that the “leaving off” of opium had dire health implications and could even result in the death of habituated users. Using statements of 19 addicts (one of whom was a 70 year old who had been addicted for more than 50 years) who had given up the drug during the non-cooperation campaign, the report demonstrated that addicts of all ages could safely stop using the drug. The *Report* also contended that not a single instance of death as a result of giving up opium had come up during the exhaustive enquiry carried out by the provincial Congress; rather, the survey had presented examples within the colonial archive of opium addicts who were imprisoned and could not access the drug in jail having made excellent improvements in health and well-being.¹³⁷

The *ACOER* took on the government’s twin contention of ‘moderate’ (read customary) and ‘legitimate’ (read medical) use of opium in Assam to defend the continuation and support of opium sale in the province. The first contention was challenged squarely and the enquiry’s primary objective to unearth “evidence to show that opium in Assam is always indulged to excess” to counter the government’s line of reasoning.¹³⁸ This argument was driven home through documentary evidence that made up the bulk of the appendices to the report as well as witness statements from respondents representing each segment and strata of society.

As argued above, the *Report* challenged the medical (and semi-medical) argument about opium’s curative and palliative uses across India, especially in the rural hinterland and remote areas primarily through a deft recasting of the medical debate within a social agenda platform which focused on the addict rather than the drug as such. Moreover, the *ACOER* contested the argument about the medicinal value of opium and declared that the medical and semi-medical use argument was “a concealed form of addiction cloaked under the excuse” of pharmacological value.¹³⁹ The *Report* also highlighted that more than three-quarters of them took it for pleasure and not a single one used opium as a remedy for cold and damp conditions which formed the backbone of the official argument.¹⁴⁰ This was a crucial intervention as in all previous reports and accounts, the views of the user was given by a third party and represented an external view. On the contrary, the *ACOER* suggested, opium use predisposed the user to a variety of diseases

¹³⁷ “Report”, pp. 407–409, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹³⁸ “Report”, p. 409, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹³⁹ “Report”, p. 411, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹⁴⁰ “Report”, p. 393, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

and ailments especially *kala azar* (black fever) and malaria and mortality rates are higher among them, thus affecting the general well-being of the entire population. This argument refuted not merely the ‘legitimacy’ argument but also accused it of deliberately “poisoning the people of Assam” for revenue gains.¹⁴¹ Another important deliberation pertained to the higher incidence of use in rural areas and the *Report* contended that this was a direct consequence of the lack of education and awareness.¹⁴²

The final section of the *Report* was expressly directed at national and international audiences and presented Assam’s anti-opium campaign that dated back to the mid-nineteenth century as irrefutable evidence of the will of the people to enforce opium prohibition. The argument was driven by the fact that the Indian government’s position on opium was contrary to popular public opinion in India and the representation made by the Indian delegates were not supported by the people of the country. It suggested that the opium policy of monopoly production, distribution and sale was a purely revenue-driven exercise which lacked both public support as well as evidence to suggest any other motive.

But the most radical suggestions came in the form of a revenue related proposal. The committee sought the views of the witnesses on the feasibility of compensating the loss of the opium excise revenue, amounting to 15 per cent of the province’s total tax receipts, with higher taxation on commercial crops like tea and jute.¹⁴³ It needs to be noted here that the revenue shortfall argument was used by the Assam administration as one of the means of justifying the receipts from opium and this often led to stalemates in the legislative council debates in the preceding decade. The suggestion to impose a higher tax on tea was novel, and one that found the support of a number of witnesses. Also, given the growth of the plantation industry and the trend of rise in tea prices it was a feasible option but one that had a politically motivated angle to it and was aimed at creating a storm at the legislative council as well as rousing public opinion. The nominated and official members in the Council were closely allied to tea plantation interests and any proposals to tax tea at a higher rate would naturally create a huge debate in political circles and was guaranteed to afford the Congress political gains.

¹⁴¹ “Report”, p. 399, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹⁴² “Report”, p. 397, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹⁴³ “Report”, p. 421, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

The report also made a number of recommendations; for instance the enactment of a nationwide law that paralleled the Dangerous Drugs Act (in England) and Jones–Miller Act (in the United States), which would restrict the use of opium to medical/scientific needs, and the enforcement of measures to impose total prohibition.¹⁴⁴ More pertinently, though, the committee recognised the fact that enacting laws would require the cooperation and active support of the administration and stressed on the need for organised temperance activities with the intention of educating the masses about the ill-effects of opium as well as the government’s policy. This demand also neatly dovetailed into the national agenda of the Congress, especially the Gandhi-led temperance campaign in other parts of India.

One of the major failures of the report was the selective presentation of evidence, especially with regard to the witness statements of opium consumers, both current and former, as well as people with direct interest in the opium trade like shop owners, an overwhelming majority of whom were Marwari and Bengali traders. This would have enabled a wider spectrum of views on opium use and abuse as well as the economic dimension of the trade to emerge, rather than a unilineal, monolithic social and reform perspective that was primarily of middle-class orientation. Although the *ACOER* included a few witness statements of opium users, the purpose was not the presentation of multiple viewpoints but a device to reinforce the successes of the non-cooperation movement as well as the pro-prohibition stance of the consumers themselves.¹⁴⁵ In all, extracts from the statements of eight former and five current opium addicts were published in the *Report* along with similar extracts from other witnesses. The witnesses, all of whom were men, had different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds and represented a spectrum of age groups but their statements were unanimous in their support of prohibition and presented self-deprecating accounts of their experience with addiction. From the ease with which one could give up the habit—“suffered for 3 or 4 days and then diverted my mind to some religious work”—to the extent of physical and financial damage caused by the habit—“I have become weak and emaciated”, “I have spent more than forty thousand rupees and I have ruined myself”—the statements provide merely one-sided account of addiction, a

¹⁴⁴ “Report”, pp. 427–29, AICC Papers, 1st instalment, NMML.

¹⁴⁵ *ACOER*, pp. 98–99.

facet that becomes clear in the discussion of the Assam Opium Enquiry of 1933 in Chapter 4.¹⁴⁶

The ACOER's findings were keenly followed by Indian newspapers and the publications highlighted that the "strength of educated public feeling against the habit" was the single most important factor in reducing consumption and also noted that "public opinion must take that there is no departure from this policy".¹⁴⁷ While the nationalist press saw rationing and reduced consumption as a clear victory, the international press interpreted the report's findings as ample evidence to push for complete prohibition. One publication declared Assam's opium consumption "a national disaster" and asserted the fact that since all witnesses called for prohibition, a complete ban on the drug was the only logical solution.¹⁴⁸

During the period 1924–25, when Andrews was involved with the Assam Congress enquiry, a number of articles on opium appeared in the *Modern Review*¹⁴⁹ as well as other national and international publications such as *Servant of India*,¹⁵⁰ *Welfare*, *Young India* and *Contemporary Review*. The gravity of Assam's opium problem and the province's mature prohibition climate reached a wider readership for the first time and the fact that the involvement of the national leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and others played a crucial role in the enquiry getting wide publicity cannot be overlooked. However, through substantive articles on the province as well as dissemination of the enquiry's findings in Europe and America, Andrews played the most significant part in internationalising the issue. In doing so, he put the spotlight squarely on Assam and succeeded in influencing public opinion in India and abroad as well as forcing the administration to engage with the local political leadership to modify policy and legislation to actuate prohibition.¹⁵¹

In an article that called for the introduction of legislation in India that was in line with the Dangerous Drugs Act in United States, Britain, Japan and Philippines, he challenged the Indian government's 'legitimate use' argument. By highlighting Assam's experience of widespread addiction, Andrews disputed the government's twin contentions

¹⁴⁶ ACOER, pp. 98–99.

¹⁴⁷ "The Opium Curse in India", *Bombay Chronicle*, 6 November 1925

¹⁴⁸ "Opium in Assam", *The Christian World*, 15 October 1925 and 22 October 1925.

¹⁴⁹ The total number of articles on opium-related topics from January 1924–December 1925 numbered around 35, or more than an article per issue.

¹⁵⁰ C.F. Andrews, "Opium Policy", *Servant of India*, Vol. 7 (11 September 1924; 18 September 1924; 25 September 1924; 13 November 1924), pp. 376–78, 389–91, 403–04, 485–86.

¹⁵¹ The aspect of legislative and policy changes that occurred in the period beginning with the mid 1920s will be discussed in the Chapter 4.

that moderate use typified the Indian experience of opium and that the primary use of the drug was medical in nature.¹⁵² These twin facets were the core on which the prohibition question would unfold over the next decade and therefore represented a crucial juncture in the shaping of the debate. In June 1925, Andrews wrote a well-considered article on the outcomes of the Geneva Opium Conferences which attacked the Indian government's delegation for being the "sole obstructionist of full, frank and complete discussion" for their refusal to discuss the issue of opium cultivation in India.¹⁵³ Andrews was highly critical of the inaction of the Indian government on the issue of reforms,¹⁵⁴ most prominently of the failure to transfer the excise department to the provincial ministry in Assam, to address domestic consumption, and challenged it to accept the recommendations of local governments. He also implored the government to conduct its own enquiries in all the "black spots" in British India identified by the LoN.

The article most relevant to the Assam Congress enquiry was published in November 1925, soon after the report had been made public. Titled "Opium in Assam", the piece provided a detailed account of his involvement in the enquiry while summing up the historical and factual evidence presented in the report.¹⁵⁵ Andrews was keen to put the spotlight on the issue of widespread opium smoking in the province and the article carried photographs of opium smokers along with their smoking paraphernalia.¹⁵⁶ The article should be regarded as propaganda aimed at drawing the attention of the international audience, especially the delegates of the Geneva Conferences, to expose the false claims of the Indian government on the absence of opium smoking in British India. The report also got coverage in the missionary press and the prominent American daily, *The*

¹⁵² C.F.A[ndrews], "Notes: A Dangerous Drugs Act", *MR*, Vol. 35, No. 205 (January 1924), pp. 107–08. Andrews alluded to the fact that the local administration was forced to accept the factual evidence presented by local councillors and initiate a debate on opium prohibition policy. Andrews was, in fact, misled on the point of the local administration initiating a policy of prohibition following the passing of a resolution proposed by J.J.M. Nichols-Roy in March 1921. The proposal, which called for total prohibition in a time bound manner, was abandoned by the Assam government soon after the vote. See Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (hereafter, ALCP), 29 March 1921, p. 122, ASA.

¹⁵³ C.F. Andrews, "The Geneva Opium Conferences: The Practical Results", *MR*, Vol. 37, No. 222 (June 1925), p. 648.

¹⁵⁴ Under the Government of India Act 1919, a system of dyarchy was introduced through which the government retained control over "reserved subjects" while "transferred subjects", such as excise, were placed under the stewardship of the councillors. Assam was the only Indian province where control of the excise department was retained by the administration till as late as 1926–27. See Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 84–92, 103.

¹⁵⁵ C.F. Andrews, "Opium in Assam", *MR*, Vol. 38, No. 227 (November 1925), pp. 511–15.

¹⁵⁶ The interest in opium smokers was part of the local anti-opium landscape and formed the substance of one of the earliest pieces of Assamese modern art, Muktanath Bordoloi's, *The Opium Smokers* (1926). The work was part of the wider Assamese middle class prohibition campaign and was produced in the wake of the publication of the *ACOER* that put Assam's addiction issue in the spotlight. See Appendix 3.

Christian Science Monitor, carried a news article which highlighted the findings of the Assam Congress enquiry and Andrews' role.¹⁵⁷ An editorial the following day highlighted the factual evidence and recommendations of the enquiry and repugned the government's policy of maximising profit at the expense of the people.¹⁵⁸

Another important publication was the collection of articles written by Andrews for *The Manchester Guardian*. Published in 1926 with the aim of maintaining the momentum of the opium debate in Britain, *The Opium Evil in India: Britain's Responsibility* carried an introduction written by members of a prohibitionist body called the British Committee on India and Opium.¹⁵⁹ Horace Alexander, one of the authors, served as the representative at the Geneva Conferences and was responsible for transmitting Gandhi's telegram, which read "Please tell convention all India wants complete stoppage opium traffic save for medical purposes" to the conference delegates.¹⁶⁰ The telegram was Andrews' brainchild and was intended to challenge the British government's claim that ordinary Indians and Gandhi did not oppose the opium trade, thus pulling the weight of the people of India, represented by the widely recognised leader of its nationalist campaign, behind the opium prohibition cause.¹⁶¹

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the prohibition campaign in Assam, which grew out of grievances in the locality and was based on parochial concerns and designs, got drawn into mainstream politics in the era of nationalism. The opium campaign was appropriated by local and national leaders for distinct political purposes. The local leadership composed of the urban elites interpreted opium prohibition as an expression of Assamese interests as well as nationalist sensibility of the Brahmaputra valley districts in opposition to Bengali majority Surma valley where the local politics which was driven by issues such as the communal divide and the tussle between moderate and radical nationalism. The national leadership also saw the opium debate as an opportunity to further the Congress party agenda and were keen to connect the local campaign with the national

¹⁵⁷ "India Copes with Assam's Opium Habit", *Christian Science Monitor* (hereafter, *CSM*), 5 January 1926, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵⁸ "Editorial: The Opium Menace in Assam", *CSM*, 6 January 1926, p. 14.

¹⁵⁹ Geoffrey Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter: A Life of Horace Alexander* (Edinburgh, 2010), p. 71.

¹⁶⁰ Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 71.

¹⁶¹ The correspondence between C.F. Andrews and Horace Alexander highlighting this event was reprinted in "What Happened in Geneva?", *MR*, Vol. 37, No. 218 (February 1925), pp. 193–95.

temperance movement led by Gandhi. At the same time, the international prohibition lobby, especially C.F. Andrews, realised the importance of creating a viable opposition to the Indian government's claim that domestic opium use was highly regulated and there was no abuse of the drug in the country. Assam offered the perfect conditions for carrying out an enquiry that would debunk the official stance because of its high opium abuse incidence and more importantly, the widespread prevalence of opium smoking which the Indian administration was legally bound to check and curtail. Moreover, Andrews and other prominent prohibitionists realised that the strength of the local campaign and mature local public opinion in Assam would enable a successful public enquiry that depended largely on witness statements from a cross-section of society.

The prohibition efforts which led to a transnational initiative and championed joint efforts incorporated the idealism of the "union of East and West ... along moral and humanitarian lines"¹⁶² as well as the hope that the movement would instil belief in the people of India that "a campaign of purification is a greater help towards Self-Government than any purely political agitation".¹⁶³ Such views necessarily call into question the spectre of 'imperial sensibility' lurking behind the transnational mask; or, in other words the insight that it provided an acceptable face of imperialism in the attitudes of individual like Andrews. Is it, therefore, essential to view the activities of transnational bodies like the LoN, the chief focus of which was the idea of development, which closely mirrored the principle that was at the heart of the 'imperial project'.

Nevertheless, the publication of the enquiry's report marked a turning point in the opium prohibition campaign in Assam and the findings of the enquiry reached a large international audience and put the spotlight squarely on Assam. In the ensuing years, the policy stalemate was resolved and the Assam administration was forced to introduce crucial policy changes like opium consumer registration, annual reduction in opium quota to individuals and deaddiction-related public health measures, which signalled the way for total prohibition in the 1930s. A number of legislations were enacted as the local Assamese councillors worked with renewed enthusiasm in the period which should be regarded as the endgame of the campaign that started in the mid-nineteenth century.

The next chapter focuses on the period 1925–1941 and traces the impact of the *ACOER* in determining the change in policy trajectory in Assam as well as the role of

¹⁶² *The Friend of India*, 16 October 1925, p. 926.

¹⁶³ *The Times of Assam*, 12 September 1925.

transnational organisations and the international prohibition lobby in ushering in international regulation of opium. In an era dominated the communally polarised politics, local political leaders and civil society activists spearheaded the opium prohibition drive and Assam took the lead among Indian provinces in bringing in total prohibition. Despite challenges posed by smuggling, opposition from opium addicts and the lack of support from the national political leadership, the provincial government initiated an ‘experiment’ with total prohibition in 1939 and Assam became the first Indian province to ban opium.

CHAPTER 4

STRATEGISTS AND SMUGGLERS: LOCAL LEGISLATIVE POLITICS AND THE CHALLENGE OF TOTAL PROHIBITION, 1925–1941

This chapter focuses on the period 1925–1941, and charts the trajectory of the opium prohibition campaign during the mature nationalist phase when key legislations were passed until total prohibition was enforced across the province from 1 March 1941. During this period the British Indian government introduced a number of reforms that paved the way for participatory politics and increased political role for Indians, but the political landscape was dominated by the rise of ideological and religious demands as the ‘two nation theory’ took root. The chapter begins with the period after the *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (ACOER)* was published, which was characterised by the push-and-pull of the internationalisation of Assam’s opium issue on the one hand and the increasing insularity of the regional leaders in the backdrop of the communalisation of politics on the other. The chapter highlights that the period between 1925 and 1933 represented one of the most crucial phases in the province’s political history that divided Assam valley and Surma valley politics irreconcilably along communal lines, a feature in which opium (and ‘opium politics’) played a significant yet virtually unexplored role. This development mirrored changes taking place in other provinces in India, especially under the combined pressures of devolution and factionalism in the run up to the Communal Award and the Government of India Act, 1935.¹

This chapter focalises on the intersection between local and transnational politics through an assessment of legislation and policy decisions centred on opium prohibition in Assam. The transition in government policy should be interpreted within the dynamics of the shifting nature of consensus that the government had to deal with in the era of electoral politics. The political nature of the Raj itself was forever evolving and opium policy decisions were influenced by the need for development of consensus between the government and the Indian nationalist leaders and political parties of various hues.² The

¹ In August 1932, the government introduced the Communal Award under which “the Depressed Classes were granted separate seats in the Provincial Assemblies and the right of double vote under which they were to elect their own representatives and to vote also in the general constituencies ... It gave separate electorates to the Muslims, Sikhs, Europeans and Christians”. Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Bombay, 1954), p. 204.

² J. Gallagher, G. Johnson and A. Seal (eds), *Locality Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1873–1940* (Cambridge, 1973); Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia and Bipan Chandra, *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* (New Delhi, 1987); Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Colonialism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 1990); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* (Cambridge, 1994).

passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, introduced a number of changes that had a direct impact on provincial politics, including extending the franchise to around 8 per cent of the population.³ In the elections held in 1937, the Congress emerged as the single largest party and consolidated its position in provincial politics ushering in a new era of legislative actions. Curiously, however, the accounts on this period in Assam's history are virtually silent on the issue of communalism and the rift in electoral politics is often interpreted as a manifestation of the bitter Assamese–Bengali linguistic debate dating back to the 1840s and 1850s, thereby obscuring the role that the realpolitik of opium prohibition played as an important factor in stimulating this dissonance. This chapter seeks to remedy this lacunae and situate the opium prohibition campaign within the political landscape of Assam during the mature phase of the nationalist movement, and, by doing so, enable a more nuanced mode of understanding regional politics.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses two key opium legislations that were passed in 1926 along with transnational developments in the opium prohibition movement and political developments in India during the period 1925–1935. The second section discusses the Assam Opium Enquiry (AOE), 1933, conducted by the provincial government which should be regarded as the definite point which marks the culmination of the campaign for opium prohibition that started in the 1860s. The enquiry acted as a cross-platform effort which saw co-operation between the government and opium prohibition campaigners; significantly, the outcomes of the enquiry acted as the basis for future policy decisions on opium until Indian independence in 1947. The third section focuses on the upshots of these policy decisions and addresses the phenomena of smuggling which was intimately linked with administrative measures to impose prohibition. The final section of the chapter is a case-study of India's first experiment with total prohibition in 1939, a scheme that the Assam government attempted in two sub-divisions in upper Assam with very high incidence of opium use. The discussion contests the official position that highlighted univocal support and success of the scheme and argues that the prohibition experiment was only partly effective with smuggling and resistance from users acting as deterrents to successful implementation.

³ The 1935 Act, however, kept a large part of the province, including all the hill areas, outside the realm of provincial autonomy and a substantial part of the budget was not open to vote in the Assembly. Also, the upper chamber, the 22-member Legislative Council, was composed of members elected through restrictive franchise or were nominated and acted as “brake on the popular will”. Amalendu Guha, *From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Reform in Assam* (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 216–19.

4.1 Local Prohibition Legislations, Transnational Policy Determinations and the Communal Turn in Nationalist Politics

The demand for reduction in opium consumption and regulation of excise opium featured regularly in the Assam Legislative Council (ALC) debates since 1912—the year the Partition of Bengal was annulled and Assam reinstated its pre-1905 status as a province.⁴ In the 1910s, the government's stance on its opium policy as well as its defence was virtually immutable, even as Assamese members of the ALC highlighted widespread addiction and impoverishment of opium users—mostly peasantry and working classes—in the province and local prohibition campaigners persevered in their efforts. The growing tide of international pressure on Britain to end its involvement in the opium trade also failed to have an effect on domestic consumption as the movement was primarily directed at the export trade and the monopoly trade within India remained an internal issue.

In the 1920s, however, there was a marked shift in the government's response to the opium question given the changing nature of political activity in the province and the rise of anti-colonial nationalism. On 13 March 1920, an Assamese councillor, Raibahadur Krishna Kumar Barua, introduced the aspect of public opinion (or “public feeling”, as he put it) against the opium trade into the equation thus signalling a new strategy from the local anti-opium campaigners.⁵ The administration's reply was in step with the ground realities in the era of mass political activity in the country and signalled a departure from its previous stance. Beatson Bell, the chief commissioner of Assam, stated that he “will most gladly welcome any practical suggestion for checking consumption and for stopping the spread of the habit” thus indicating a conciliatory stance.⁶ Although limited in actual outcome, the change in official position marked the beginning of the final phase of the prohibition campaign—one that would be played out increasingly in the sphere of provincial politics rather than social reform institutions. This section will focus on the domain of legislative politics coinciding with the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry, which resulted in a number of interventions in the ALC.

⁴ See Appendix 1(c) for a map of Assam during the period 1912–1947. The district of Sylhet, which was a part of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A), was incorporated into Assam and remained so till 1947 when it became a formal part of the newly created state of East Bengal.

⁵ “Notes”, Financial Department (hereafter, FD), Separate Revenue, A (hereafter, SRA), June 1920, Nos. 1–20, p. 11, Assam State Archives (hereafter, ASA).

⁶ “Notes”, FD, SRA, June 1920, Nos. 1–20, p. 11, ASA.

While the *ACOER* was being prepared for wider circulation, J.J.M. Nichols-Roy⁷ promoted a bill in the ALC titled Assam Opium Prohibition Bill 1925 which demanded the prohibition of opium smoking and opium eating. This bill included the principles of registration and rationing of opium consumers and the events surrounding this landmark anti-opium legislation provide vital insights into local politics, group interests and the government's position. By early 1925, the publicity generated by the *ACOER* in the national and international press and transnational forums provided a conducive environment for a wider public debate on opium prohibition in Assam. In March 1925, the Assam administration acknowledged that it was “not responsible for pre-1921 policy in any capacity”, thus opening the space for negotiations.⁸

Although the Assam administration was prepared to re-evaluate its position on opium following the publication of the enquiry report, the stance of the Indian government had remained virtually unchanged from previous decades in the absence of a nationwide campaign demanding change in opium policy. As argued in Chapters 2 and 3, the overall opium policy of the Indian government in the 1910s and 1920s was determined not by local demands or conditions, but driven by the legal obligations of the British empire under binding transnational treaties which were primarily limited to opium exports rather than domestic consumption. A debate at the Central Legislative Assembly (CLC), the lower house of the highest law making body in India at the time, illustrates this feature of Indian policy. On 2 September 1925, Sarfaraz Hussain Khan, the elected non-official member for Bihar and Orissa, interrogated the government on its opium policy and raised a question about the main causes behind Assam's disproportionate share of the Indian opium consumption—the highest among all Indian provinces despite its relatively small population. In his response, Sir Basil Blackett, the finance secretary, defended the government's policy and attributed heavy opium consumption in Assam solely to “the physical conditions of the province and the tradition, habits and customs of the people”—a reassertion of a familiar view that dated back to the mid-nineteenth century as well as being contrary to the position of the Assam administration.⁹ In later

⁷ James Joy Mohan Nichols-Roy (1884–1959), a native Khasi from Shillong and Christian pastor by training, was educated in Calcutta and represented the Shillong (Urban) constituency throughout his long political career. Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 161n12.

⁸ W.J. Reid, Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (hereafter, ALCP), 3 March 1925, p. 49, E&O 4496/25, India Office Records (hereafter, IOR).

⁹ Government of India, *Official Report of the Legislative Assembly Debates* (Simla, 1926), p. 598, National Archives of India (hereafter, NAI).

years, especially the mid-1930s, this divergence of views between the two governments would, however, be reconciled as a direct consequence of transnational legislations which forced the British Indian government to regulate export opium as well as introduce measures to control domestic opium.¹⁰

To focus now on the bill floated by Nichols-Roy in 1925. Despite its revised stance, the provincial government was unwilling to dispense with the opium revenue and made a crucial intervention to the proposed legislation to safeguard its interests. The administration split the original draft bill into two separate instruments—The Assam Opium Prohibition Bill 1926 and the Assam Opium Smoking Bill 1926, pertaining to opium eating and opium smoking, respectively.¹¹ This early division was crucial as it ensured that the administration made concessions only on aspects related to opium smoking that had a direct bearing on the provisions of the 1925 Geneva Convention, while leaving the issue of sale of opium and the provincial revenue intact. Nichols-Roy's original draft included the provision on prohibiting opium eating, a clause that the administration deemed "entirely unnecessary and premature" and the Assam Opium Prohibition Bill 1926 was withdrawn from the proceedings.¹² It needs to be noted here that Nichols-Roy's bill called for total prohibition except for medicinal reasons, a demand that mirrored the American position at the Geneva Opium Conferences, which had also failed to generate consensus in the said forum.¹³

The excise revenue from opium was crucial to the provincial exchequer and the Assam government had jealously guarded it as a 'reserved subject', or, in other words, a department that was controlled directly by the administration and not accountable to the provincial legislature—a facet that was unique to Assam.¹⁴ The Assam Opium Prohibition Bill 1925, which proposed registration of opium consumers and rationing of the drug, was opposed by the government from the beginning and virtually each of the eleven clauses of the bill were modified or rejected by the government. While the bill was being drafted,

¹⁰ The key treaties were Geneva Narcotics Manufacturing and Distribution Limitation Convention, 1931; Bangkok Opium Smoking Agreement, 1931; and Geneva Trafficking Convention, 1936.

¹¹ B.N. Rau, 10 December 1925, General and Judicial Department (hereafter, G&J), SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84–97, pp. 13–14, ASA.

¹² G.T. Lloyd, Excise Commissioner, 20 May 1925, G&J, SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84–97, p. 2, ASA.

¹³ It was this demand that had caused the stalemate between America and other negotiating countries, notably Britain and India, that refused to accept provisions regulating domestic/internal opium and prohibition. Tarakanath Das, "Opium", *Modern Review*, Vol. 43, No. 254 (February 1928), pp. 157–59.

¹⁴ Under the self-government scheme launched in 1919, excise was part of the transferred list under the direct control of the provincial government in every Indian province except Assam. In 1926, this department is formally handed over to an Indian minister and Nichols-Roy was appointed to the position.

debates in the ALC were covered in the nationalist press and articles supporting complete prohibition appeared in estimable publications.¹⁵

The government's opposition to the bill is perceptible in official correspondence. H.C. Barnes, the finance minister, highlighted that the bill would be widely debated in the ALC and proposed that the government should use this as a political tool to create divisions between the Swarajists (who represented the Assam valley and supported the bill) and other parties in the Council by playing up the loss of revenue argument which would potentially destabilise the province's finances.¹⁶ This sentiment was mirrored by W.J. Reid, the law minister, who declared that he would "gladly block the Bill", a stance that was further reinforced by the recommendations made by the finance and revenue departments.¹⁷ The bill was eventually blocked by the government which drew sharp criticism in the nationalist press; one report even challenged the establishment papers for supporting the move and presented the government's use of "overriding powers" as a treat to legislative politics.¹⁸

The second bill, the Assam Opium Smoking Bill 1926, was handled more seriously by the Assam administration as the central government was, in principle, bound by the 1912 Hague Convention (and instruments signed during the 1925 Geneva Conferences) to ensure that smoking of opium was regulated and prohibited. The government, however, did its best to dilute the proposed legislation by challenging the provisions under which punitive action could be taken against opium smokers (and, by extension, opium eaters), thus denying any real effect in the event the bill was passed. The provincial administration received the support of the legislative arm of the Indian government, which maintained that current legislation was adequate to address the issue of opium consumption in Assam. The bill was referred to a select committee that comprised mostly of nominated members and Surma valley councillors and was tabled in the Council despite Nichols-Roy's opposition and "Note of Dissent". Rather than the proposed blanket ban on opium smoking across the province, the bill prescribed a ban on

¹⁵ "Extract: *Servant of India*, 21 October 1926", E&O 4389/26, IOR/L/E/7/1458, IOR.

¹⁶ "It will be interesting to watch the action of the Council and we might reduce official intervention merely to advice". "Notes", 30 August 1925, "The Assam Opium Prohibition Bill", G&J, SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84-97, p. 7, ASA.

¹⁷ 21 May 1925, "The Assam Opium Prohibition Bill", G&J, SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84-97, p. 2, ASA.

¹⁸ *Servant of India*, 4 November 1926. The 21 October 1926 issue had a report about gains made in reducing consumption as a result of the policy of annual 10 per cent cuts that was implemented on 1 April 1925.

“smoking in the company of others”, a clause that had little relevance in Assam given that opium dens were a rarity in the province and consumption usually took place in private spaces.¹⁹ Moreover, the legislation contained an important caveat, described by one district commissioner as “the domestic felicity which arises from a pipe of peace”, which allowed opium smoking by a married couple in the domestic space, which was among the most common ways in which the drug was consumed across rural Assam.²⁰

The local opium prohibition bill(s) emerged out of the local movement but the demands closely echoed issues raised in transnational forums like the Geneva Opium Conferences. The Indian government’s position was dictated by transnational treaties which kept domestic consumption outside their remit and thus freed it from international obligations to make effective changes on opium consumption in provinces like Assam. In fact, an Assam government bureaucrat noted that Nichols-Roy’s bill “goes far ahead of the recommendations of the first Geneva conference”, indicating that the provincial administration’s willingness to make concessions was colligated to the Indian government’s international obligations.²¹ The administrative climate, therefore, did not allow scope for radical shift in provincial opium policy and the impetus for change had to come from an extraneous source.

At the level of local political activity, the major event during this period was the forty-first annual session of the Congress which took place at Pandu, a suburb of Guwahati, from 26–28 December 1926.²² The major issue highlighted by the provincial leadership was opium prohibition and they called for support of the party leadership but failed to generate a resolution on the issue, despite the Congress president S. Srinivasa Aiyengar’s (1874–1941) speech in support.²³ Although a number of Congress leaders expressed solidarity with the people of Assam on the issue of opium consumption, the failure to prepare any concrete plan to either pressurise the government or generate mass appeal for prohibition meant that the Gauhati Congress session failed to generate the

¹⁹ “Report of the Select Committee on the Assam Opium Smoking Bill 1926”, G&J, SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84–97, pp. 13–16, ASA.

²⁰ J.A. Dawson, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, No. 407-Ex, 29 June 1926, G&J, SRA, December 1926, Nos. 1–34, p. 12, ASA.

²¹ “Notes: 19 May 1925”, G&J, SRA, September 1926, Nos. 84–97, p. 1, ASA.

²² The Gauhati Congress was attended by a number of prominent Congress leaders, including Gandhi, Maulana Azad, Vallabhbhai Patel, Motilal Nehru, and local leaders like Tarunram Phookun and Gopinath Bardoloi. A.M. Zaidi and S.G. Zaidi (eds), *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress, Volume Nine: 1925–1929—India Demands Independence* (New Delhi, 1980), pp. 89–94.

²³ “Welcome Address by Mr. T.R. Phookun”, in Zaidi and Zaidi (eds), pp. 95–103; *Congress Presidential Addresses, Second Series: 1911–1935* (Madras, 1935), pp. 803–08.

momentum that the local leadership had anticipated. It is noteworthy that the period was a particularly turbulent one for the Congress party and various factions were involved in internal quibbles, especially on the issue of participation in legislative politics.²⁴

While prohibition activity at the local level in Assam was halted by nationalist politics, transnational developments, especially the role played by America, contributed to a renewal in anti-opium activity in India and other parts of Asia. The formation of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in 1930 and prohibitionist zeal of Harry J. Anslinger,²⁵ the first commissioner of the organisation, ushered in a strong and decisive policy against narcotics. From the late 1920s, international drug legislation was hugely influenced by America and Anslinger's strong prohibitionist stance kick-started the era of strict regulation of narcotics within America, including criminalisation of drug users and suppliers.²⁶ This facet of drug policymaking became increasingly evident under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a staunch prohibitionist, as the government pursued a hardliner approach on controlling production, distribution and smuggling of narcotics as well as pharmaceuticals.²⁷

America had initiated the first transnational conference on narcotics, the 1909 Shanghai Opium Conference, and participated in all major conferences on drugs, but had followed an independent line with regard to domestic legislation.²⁸ By the mid-1920s, it had some of the most stringent policies on narcotics. At Geneva in February 1925, the American delegation staged a walkout as its proposal to manufacturing countries to impose strict restriction on raw opium and domestic trade was refused by the opium producing countries led by Britain and, by extension, India. This was a definitive moment in the history of opium diplomacy and one that had a significant impact on opium policy in the years to come. Britain (and India) as well as Germany—which had a big stake in

²⁴ For a wider discussion see D.A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917–1947* (New Delhi, 2006). See also, Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (New Delhi, 1983).

²⁵ Harry Jacob Anslinger (1892–1975) was a staunch prohibitionist and supporter of the criminalization of drugs. From 1930 to 1962, Anslinger headed the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (now known as the Drug Enforcement Administration) and under his direction, America launched the so-called “war on drugs” and banned opium, cocaine, morphine as well as cannabis. Albin Krebs, “Harry J. Anslinger Dies at 83; Hard-Hitting Foe of Narcotics; U.S. Commissioner 32 Years Advocated Harsh Laws to Abolish Pushers, Users”, *The New York Times*, 18 November 1975, p. 40.

²⁶ Martin Jelsma, “The Development of International Drug Control: Lessons Learned and Strategic Challenges for the Future”, Working Paper Prepared for the First Meeting of the Global Commission on Drug Policies, Geneva, 24–25 January 2011, pp. 2–3.

²⁷ David R. Bewley-Taylor, *United States and International Drug Control, 1909–1997* (New York, 1999), pp. 41–43.

²⁸ Bewley-Taylor, *Drug Control*, pp. 37–39.

the pharmaceutical industry—strongly opposed any restrictions in the manufacture of raw opium and this led to a crisis in the multilateral negotiations. Another major stakeholder in the negotiations, China, followed the Americans soon afterwards leading to a breakdown of talks. This event was one in a series of moves in an era that marked the beginning of American expansionism. Drug policy was part of a series of regulatory mechanisms that evolved during this period under the influence of American diplomatic, military and financial ascendancy as institutions of global governance developed and a plural and polycentric world order supplanted European imperialism.²⁹

Between 1925 and 1931, the country followed a unilateral path on drug policy but from 1931 onwards—when the Opium Advisory Council (OAC) convened at Bangkok to control opium smoking in Asia—the American government became the single most important driver of global policy.³⁰ And by the time the 1936 Geneva Convention banning international smuggling of narcotics was signed, American influence on global narcotics policy was so pre-eminent that its policy initiatives were de-facto international legislation. Despite the cleavage of interests between America and Britain on the question of opium prohibition, Britain took some effective steps to decrease its reliance on opium revenues across many of its colonial possessions. The most substantial ones were in the Straits Settlements and the Malay States, whose governments were directed to “create alternative sources of revenue and make their finance independent of the opium revenue” by the Colonial Office within a month after the Geneva Conference.³¹ Indeed, an independent government committee was set up to conduct an enquiry in British Malaya in 1924 because of international pressure and the report provided a detailed account of opium consumption and made important recommendations on opium policy, including the need for effective propaganda against the drug.³² Moreover, following the breakdown of talks at the 1925 Geneva Conference, the Indian government resolved to reduce its opium exports progressively and maintain supplies solely for medical and scientific needs and this was enshrined as part of official policy in January 1926.³³ The most opportune way of interpreting the trajectory of domestic policy on opium in India from the mid-

²⁹ Philip S. Golub, *Power, Profit and Prestige: A History of American Imperial Expansion* (London, 2010), pp. 41–62.

³⁰ Bewley-Taylor, *International Drug Control*, pp. 30–34, 39–40.

³¹ Harumi Goto-Shitaba, “The International Opium Conference of 1924–25 and Japan”, *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter, *MAS*), Vol. 36, No. 4 (October 2002), p. 989.

³² For the list of recommendations made by the committee, see British Malaya Opium Committee, *Proceedings of the Committee* (Singapore, 1924), pp. 63–65.

³³ *The Opium Trade, 1910–1941* (Wilmington DE, 1974), Vol. 5, Part XXII, Nos. 1, 4, 5.

1920, therefore, is through the twin lens of transnational pressure and growing American hegemony.

At the central Indian government level as well, there was a change in policy trajectory after the 1925 International Opium Conference in Geneva which was disrupted by the dramatic walkout of the American and Chinese delegations, primarily due to differences on domestic prohibition policy with the British and Indian governments. C.F. Andrews highlighted that the walkout was a turning point in the British and Indian government's position on opium in a speech delivered at the New York-based Foreign Policy Association in 1929.³⁴ Andrews suggested that in government circles, including Viceroy Lord Irwin and his predecessor Lord Reading, the event was regarded as a "gesture [that] gave Britain a shaking", which signalled a new direction in domestic opium policy in India.³⁵ Andrews welcomed the marginal drop in production due to changes in Indian opium policy, but was critical of the inordinate delays in the government's promise to conduct enquiries in the opium 'black spots' like Assam where opium smoking, like other parts of India, was still legal.³⁶

Given the limited provisions of the local legislations and the lack of a common political ground against opium in the provincial legislature which was divided along 'valley lines'—Brahmaputra and Surma—the impetus for change came not from local quarters but from the transnational prohibition movement. In 1928, in the run up to its implementation of the 1925 International Opium Convention which came into effect from September 1928, the Assam administration came under local and international pressure to review its opium policy and was forced to introduce substantial changes as a direct consequence of this transnational legal instrument.³⁷ Of the changes considered, the proposal of the Congress enquiry which adverted rationing of consumers older than 40 years and medical treatment of younger addicts were given due consideration by the Assam government.³⁸ The other major question that was discussed during the period was

³⁴ Founded in 1918 as the League of Free Nations Association to support President Woodrow Wilson's efforts which resulted in the Treaty of Versailles and the formation of the League of Nations (LoN). The organisation's primary goal is "a commitment to the careful study of all sides of international questions affecting the U.S.". Donald Philips Dennis, *Foreign Policy in a Democracy: The Role of the Foreign Policy Association* (New York, 2003), pp. 1–2.

³⁵ C.F. Andrews, "The Opium Evil in India", *Modern Review*, Vol. 46, No. 275 (November 1929), p. 593.

³⁶ Andrews, "Opium Evil", p. 594.

³⁷ Jay Sinha, "The History and Development of International Drug Control Conventions" (2001), www.parl.gc.ca/content/sen/committee/371/ille/library/history-e.htm, accessed 16 July 2015.

³⁸ "Notes", 4 July 1927, Education Department (hereafter, ED), SRA, March 1928, Nos. 159–219, p. 1, ASA.

that of total prohibition within a specified period of time. This facet of the argument had been part of local and international discussions from the early 1920s but the provincial governments, including Assam, were not prepared to set targets in the absence of binding clauses under international law, primarily due to revenue considerations.

In fact, the first demand for a time-bound, total prohibition of opium smoking dated back to two (unsuccessful) resolutions moved by Nilmoni Phukan in September 1921 and March 1922 in the ALC.³⁹ Moreover, Kuladhar Chaliha, the president of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee, had successfully moved a resolution in the Council on 2 March 1925, coinciding with the publication of the final report of the *ACOER*, which called for total prohibition of sale and consumption of opium in the province within a five-year period.⁴⁰ In response to Chaliha's resolution, the government had highlighted that its policy was aimed to "prevent the younger generation taking to opium", rather than prohibition.⁴¹ The government had also defended the opium revenue by suggesting that the official opium policy was "kind" and "practical" and directed at ensuring that the "opium-eater will not be thrown into the arms of the smuggler".⁴² In the years to follow, especially in the mid-1930s, when the government was forced to regulate opium and introduce measures to prohibit the drug, the smuggling argument (used to defend the opium revenue) would be asserted with greater intensity as a means to deny the successes of prohibition in Assam.

The government's opposition to a policy of regulation and reduction in the sale of opium, which informed the core of the demands of the prohibitionists, rested on the argument about easy access to illicit supplies across the province due to unchecked smuggling.⁴³ In fact, Nichols-Roy, the most prominent non-Assamese prohibitionist, was appointed as the excise minister in 1926 and in his new capacity became one of the strongest proponents of the smuggling argument. As excise minister, Nichols-Roy argued that rationing fostered a lucrative illicit market for opium and highlighted that the solution to limiting opium consumption was "allowing the consumers to get a reasonable dose so that they may not be tempted to go to smugglers for their supply". This position, in effect,

³⁹ These resolutions called for a ban within a period of 10 years. *ALCP*, Vol.1, 22 September 1921, pp. 662–64; Vol. 2, 17 March 1922, pp. 306–14, ASA.

⁴⁰ *ALCP*, 3 March 1925, pp. 32–64, ASA.

⁴¹ "Speech by H.C. Barnes, 3 March 1925", E&O 4496/25, p. 48, IOR.

⁴² "Speech by H.C. Barnes, 3 March 1925", E&O 4496/25, pp. 48–49, IOR.

⁴³ The stated position of the administration was its inability to control such activities due to lack of expertise and resources will be scrutinised in the subsequent section.

entailed a continuation of the government's time-tested policy guaranteeing excise revenues.⁴⁴ This argument was challenged in the ALC by N.C. Bordoloi and Rohini Kanta Chaudhury who highlighted that the government was “bolster[ing] up this bogey of smuggling of opium” in order to protect its excise revenue; they also contested the government's position about its inability to crack down on smugglers given its track record of quelling political movements using the paraphernalia of law and order, a reference to the mass arrests during the non-cooperation movement.⁴⁵

We can gain interesting insights into the relationship between the government, the nationalists and Nichols-Roy (and other non-Assamese councillors) from the journals of Horace Alexander, a prominent Quaker activist, historian and writer, who visited Assam in December 1927.⁴⁶ The journals record Alexander's experiences during a two-week long travels across Assam as part of the British Trades Union Congress (BTUC) in his capacity as a mediator. By 1927, Assam opium problem was drifting from public consciousness in India and abroad, and Alexander's intimate experience of high levels of opium consumption in the many towns and villages of Assam, which he wrote and campaigned about subsequently, rekindled the interest of a number of fellow activists and acquaintances, which included C.F. Andrews and the prohibition lobby in Britain and America.

Alexander described Laurie Hammond, the Governor of Assam, as a “sympathetic and liberal-minded man” who understood the province's opium problem and was willing “to cooperate with the nationalists to suppress it”.⁴⁷ He even noted, perhaps misguidedly, that there was “real goodwill on both sides between the Governor and the Swarajist [mostly Assamese] leaders”.⁴⁸ More interesting is the account of his conversation with Nichols-Roy who admitted the importance of the opium revenue for the provincial government. Given his access to government and the local political elite, Alexander assumed the role of mediator and assured the administration that the Assamese

⁴⁴ “Note”, 12 July 1927, ED, SRA, March 1928, Nos. 159–219, pp. 2–3, ASA.

⁴⁵ Suresh K. Sharma and U. Sharma (eds), “The Assam Legislative Council—1927”, *Documents on Northeast India: Vol. 3—Assam, 1664–1935* (Delhi, 2006), p. 316.

⁴⁶ Horace Gundry Alexander (1889–1989) was a British Quaker activist and writer. A close acquaintance of C.F. Andrews, Alexander was one of the leading figures in the negotiations between the British government and Indian nationalists. In his role as mediator, Alexander founded the India Conciliation Group and in the subsequent period became a close friend of Gandhi and wrote a book titled *Gandhi through Western Eyes* (1969). Geoffrey Carnall, “Alexander, Horace Gundry (1889–1989)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38403>, accessed 20 August 2015.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter: A Life of Horace Alexander* (Edinburgh, 2010), p. 76.

⁴⁸ Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 76.

councillors were agreeable to higher taxation to offset the loss of the opium revenue, a fact that they were unwilling to admit in public due to political consequences.⁴⁹ When read in light of the fact that as a government minister appointed by nominated members (read European tea planters) of the Council, Nichols-Roy was expected to protect the interests of the tea lobby, the higher taxation argument assumes a critical aspect. There was general understanding that the loss of the opium revenue was to be balanced through higher taxation on tea and jute—a measure that the Congress (and the Swarajists) tacitly supported but was opposed by the business lobby. However, despite the common ground hinted at by Alexander, a consensus on the opium issue was not reached, and Alexander later admitted his naïve judgement of Indian politics.⁵⁰

Although the transnational lobby continued to play an active role in pressurising the Indian government most of its successes came in the form of reform of the export trade. Locally, Council debates on opium during this period widened the rift between the government and the Assamese councillors and the administration raised not just the issue of uncontrolled smuggling but also asserted the unsubstantiated claim that curtailment of opium would lead to a dramatic increase in alcohol and *ganja* (cannabis) consumption in the province.⁵¹ Both these arguments were directed at diluting the debate on prohibition and aimed at moulding the perception that a ban on opium would prove to be counterproductive; this resulted in the stagnation of reform in opium policy in Assam until 1933, when two factors, a provincial enquiry and a transnational agreement induced critical changes.

The government's overall stance on opium policy during this period should also be interpreted within the dynamics of the shifting nature of consensus that the government had to deal with in the era of electoral politics.⁵² The Raj itself was forever evolving and the opium policy decisions were influenced by the need for development of consensus, especially in key issues that tended to be divisive in nature, which in the case of Assam was occupied by opium—a manifestation of both religious and linguistic

⁴⁹ Quoted in Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ H.G. Alexander, *Indian Ferment* (London, 1929), pp. 36, 102.

⁵¹ Government of Assam, *Resolution on the Excise Administration in Assam for the Year 1927–28* (Shillong, 1929), p. 29. This argument was dismissed by the Botham Committee in 1913 and therefore lacked credibility. See “Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire Into Certain Aspects of Opium and *Ganja* Consumption”, Municipal Department (hereafter, MD), SRA, February 1914, Nos. 1–6, pp. 10–11, ASA.

⁵² A. Seal, “Imperialism and Nationalism in India”, in J. Gallagher et al. (eds), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870–1940* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 1–28, especially Section III.

divide. This facet becomes apparent in the 1930s, especially in the manner in which the Civil Disobedience Movement developed in the province, with the divergence of group interests of the political leadership of the two valleys being laid bare.

A sequence of events that took place in mid-1927 highlights the increasing tensions between the political parties in Assam. In July, the Assamese prohibitionists secured a small victory with the passing of a resolution, proposed by Rohini Kanta Hatibarua who represented the Swaraj Party⁵³ in the ALC, which aimed at eradication of opium consumption in the province within a period of ten years.⁵⁴ The government proposed the formation of an enquiry committee with members drawn from across the political spectrum to assess the implications of the ban, a proposal that the Swarajists boycotted.⁵⁵ The resolution is denoted in the official political history of Assam as the formal starting point of the final phase of the prohibition movement in the province.⁵⁶ Rather than representing the final phase of the prohibition movement, the Swarajists' boycott actually marked the formal beginning of communal politics in Assam in which opium prohibition was employed for narrow political objectives instead of any advancement of opium prohibition.

An indication of the larger political implications of the boycott can be gleaned from internal government correspondence which highlighted the administration's perceptive assessment of the political reverberations of a boycott. In internal correspondence, R. Friel, secretary of the transferred departments, noted that the Surma valley Muslims were "not greatly interested in opium" and the boycott implied that the committee's findings would not be "acceptable to the Upper Assam Valley Hindus [who were] really interested" in the opium question.⁵⁷ Friel's assessment recognised the fact that the anti-opium movement laid bare the differences between the provincial political factions and gave the government negotiating room.⁵⁸

⁵³ Swaraj Party, or Self-Rule Party, was founded on 1 January 1923 by C.R. Das and other Congressmen to challenge the Government of India Act, 1919. The goal of the party was to participate in provincial electoral politics in order to obstruct and challenge the government in the legislative councils. The party disbanded in 1927. S.R. Bakshi, *Swaraj Party and the Indian National Congress* (New Delhi, 1985), pp. 2–5.

⁵⁴ *ALCP*, Vol. 7, 18 July 1927, pp. 741–66.

⁵⁵ "Notes", 25 July 1927, ED, SRA, March 1928, Nos. 159–219, pp. 2–3, ASA.

⁵⁶ A.C. Bhuyan and S. De, *Political History of Assam, Vol. 2: 1920–1939*, 3rd edition (Guwahati, 2008), pp. 210–11.

⁵⁷ ED, SRA, March 1928, Nos. 159–219, pp. 4–5, ASA.

⁵⁸ "Notes", 17 September 1927, ED, SRA, March 1928, Nos. 159–219, p. 5, ASA.

The politicisation of opium was not a new phenomenon, but from the late 1920s, opium and prohibition became the polemic which divided Assamese Hindu and Bengali Muslim politicians and political interests. The government positions and its implications need to be examined in light of two developments; the first, at the level of nationalist politics, and, the other, as part of the transnational prohibition movement. In Assam, as in other parts of India, a major political shift had taken place as the Congress–Swarajists combine took part in legislative council politics for the first time in 1926 and won a sizeable share of the elected representation.⁵⁹ Between 1927 and 1929, informally known as the ‘Third Reformed Council’, the Congress councillors refused to accept ministerial berths and foiled attempts at ministry formation by other parties as part of its official agenda.⁶⁰ It was during this period that the linguistic divide between the two valleys assumed a firm communal posture; the Congress–Swarajist combine became a de facto Assamese/Hindu body as the Muslim representatives from the Surma valley (with one Brahmaputra valley member) formed the Nationalist Party.⁶¹ In January 1928, a few weeks before the Simon Commission’s arrival in India, the Muslim councillors of the province cut across (erstwhile) valley allegiances and formed the Assam Provincial Muslim League Council (APMLC).⁶² The APMLC presented the Simon Commission with a proposal in support of separate electorates, while other political parties across the province boycotted it.⁶³ The following year, the Assam government’s decision to extend the principle of separate electorates to minority groups including the Ahoms and Marwaris led to further fragmentation and the opium prohibition movement suffered another setback.⁶⁴

As the Civil Disobedience movement broke out in Assam in 1930, prohibition activities such as picketing and propaganda campaigns returned to the grassroots level. Congress workers and volunteers staged protests in urban and rural areas and *ryot sabhas*

⁵⁹ Congressmen had been elected to the Legislative Council under the banner of Swaraj Party in 1924, but at the time there were differences between the parties on the issue of electoral representation and those who chose to contest elections had defied the Congress party’s program. The decision to challenge the reforms proposed by the Montague–Chelmsford Committee, whilst taking part in electoral politics, was taken during the 1926 annual session of the Congress held in Guwahati. Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 112–13.

⁶⁰ Guha, *Planter Raj*, p. 161.

⁶¹ Home Political, No. 17/29–Political, Fortnightly Reports, September 1929, NAI.

⁶² In a meeting held on 27 and 28 January 1928 in Sylhet, the Shafi faction of the Muslim League took the decision to form the provincial arm of the Muslim League. Political (Confidential), B, File No. 6C/1928, September 1928, ASA.

⁶³ Bhuyan and De (eds), *Political History*, pp. 122–26.

⁶⁴ Guha, *Planter Raj*, pp. 164–165.

(peasant assemblies) were organised across the state and the government imposed legal measures—including an anti-picketing ordinance—to clampdown on the protestors resulting in a number of arrests.⁶⁵ This period of protests was marked by religious tension in the Surma valley as the arrests of Congress leaders and volunteers was applauded by political organisations such as the Surma Valley Moslem Conference, prompting one deputy commissioner to note in a confidential dispatch that “in this province Muhammandan feeling ... is definitely anti-Congress”.⁶⁶ By the early 1930s, therefore, political allegiance along religious lines had solidified and the anti-opium campaign came to be identified solely as a Congress-led campaign that was supported by the Assamese Hindu population. It is noteworthy that in the lead up to Indian independence, well-known prohibitionists like Chaliha emerged as prominent advocates of a separate Assamese republic comprised of the Brahmaputra valley districts with an Assamese-speaking majority.

By June 1930, under the stewardship of youth leaders like Hem Chandra Barua, student protestors in the Brahmaputra valley picketed opium and other excise shops and a number of them enlisted as Congress volunteers to carry out boycott of foreign goods and excise items.⁶⁷ The anti-opium activities of the Congress volunteers were criticised by the government which reported on picketers resorting to seizing and burning opium passes issued by the government to opium consumers.⁶⁸ The use of coercive measures against opium users is significant as it demonstrates the fact that despite the social reform rhetoric and the avowed success of the prohibition agenda, the opium user–addict was still an unwilling participant in the ideal of ‘improvement’. This facet assumed prominence in 1939 when total prohibition was enforced in an experimental basis in two subdivisions of the Brahmaputra valley, which will be discussed subsequently.

Two developments in the Brahmaputra valley directed the trajectory of the anti-opium campaign in the mid-1930s. The first was the rise of the multilateral association, the Assam Political and Economic Conference headed by Omeo Kumar Das, which incorporated the provincial Congress, the Assam Youth Conference, the Labour Conference and other groups, and put propaganda work and medical intervention to

⁶⁵ Benudhar Sharma, “Freedom Movement in Assam, 1930–1947— Handwritten Draft”, p. 5, Shiela Bora Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter, NMML).

⁶⁶ Memo by W.A. Cosgrave, Home Political (Confidential), No. 18/XI of 1930, NAI.

⁶⁷ S. Bora, *Student Revolution in Assam, 1917–1947: A Historical Survey* (New Delhi, 1992), pp. 82–83.

⁶⁸ Memo by W.A. Cosgrave, Home Political (Confidential), No. 18/XI of 1930, NAI.

eradicate opium at the heart of its activities.⁶⁹ The second factor was the reinvigoration of grassroots politics with an upsurge in the activities of *ryot sabhas* and peasant mobilisation across the province, stemming from a disenchantment with provincial politics and growing tensions between communities. The Assam Ryot Sabha's (an umbrella association which was later affiliated to the All-India Peasants Congress) second annual session held at Dergaon in March 1936 resulted in the passing of the twenty-point "Magna Carta of the Ryots of Assam", which put opium prohibition and total eradication of opium use back on the local political agenda.⁷⁰

4.2 New Policy Directions: The Assam Opium Enquiry of 1933, Conflicting Views on Opium Use and Emerging Political Realities

The consensus on prohibition in Assam was not universal and the difference of opinion was not merely manifest across communitarian/valley lines, as discussed above, but also among residents of the Brahmaputra valley districts. Two facts that counter the argument that a majority of the Assamese people, including opium consumers, supported opium prohibition, which formed the basis of the prohibition movement right from its conception in the 1860s, are worth noting. The first pertained to the existence of strong public opinion against opium in the Brahmaputra valley and the second whether the level of co-operation from the general public in support of prohibition, an argument alluded to by political leaders since the early 1920s, was a ground reality. The government challenged both these claims right from the beginning, most vociferously during the non-cooperation period when the campaign took on an organised form, and maintained its position in the 1930s as measures aimed at regulation and prohibition were implemented. It disputed the claim of both activists as well as community and political leaders about widespread public opinion against opium and contested that support for the prohibition agenda was limited to the Council chamber and the local elites. Although it is apparent that the major drive behind the government's role in continuing opium sale was the sizeable revenue associated with the sale of the drug and the profitable auction of opium vends, facts unearthed during the AOE reveal the existence of anti-prohibition voices amongst the Assamese (Brahmaputra valley) population. In the discussion below, we will analyse the enquiry and its report using statements of witnesses, including opium consumers and opium shop lessees/owners, who opposed the policy of prohibition to

⁶⁹ "Political Conference: Eradication of Opium Evil Urged", *Forward*, 28 April 1935, p. 6.

⁷⁰ "Demand of Assam Ryots—Total Prohibition of Opium", *Forward*, 1 April 1936, p. 7.

assess if these voices were indicative of the lack of widespread public opinion supporting prohibition or merely aberrant representations.

In 1931, the LoN convened a conference to tackle the increase in narcotics smuggling and a convention limiting the manufacture as well as supply of narcotics was adopted. One of the provisions of the convention was the setting out of the “manufacturing limitation system” which directed the manufacturing nations to provide annual estimates of various drugs solely for medical and scientific purposes. Under this new regulation, the LoN prescribed medical and scientific need of opium per 10,000 people of 6 *seers* (or about 5.5 kilograms) dating back to the 1925 Geneva Convention was codified. In areas where consumption was more than 30 *seers* per 10,000 people, the term ‘black spots’ that was already in common currency to denote where opium use beyond legitimate (or medical and scientific) purpose, was given legal standing.⁷¹ The transnational consensus on concerted efforts to tackle addiction in these ‘black spots’ brought Assam under the scanner once more as consumption levels in all the Brahmaputra valley districts were many times higher than the mandated levels, with North Lakhimpur averaging eight times the LoN mandated level of 30 *seers* per 10,000 people.⁷²

In May 1933, coinciding with the investigations carried out by the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, the central government had also taken the initiative to bring together the provincial excise commissioners of all the Indian provinces to discuss the ‘black spots’ question in Shimla. The Opium Black Spots Conference was the first pan-Indian initiative on the part of the government to bring together the various provincial governments to tackle high levels of addiction.⁷³ The conference was prompted by the fact that the OAC of the LoN had been actively campaigning all signatories to ensure that the mandated level of opium consumption for legitimate medical and scientific needs, was followed globally. Freeman-Thomas Willingdon, the Viceroy of India, in his speech at the conference welcomed measures to curb opium consumption across India and

⁷¹ Anirudh Deshpande, “An Historical Overview of Opium Cultivation and Changing State Attitudes towards the Crop in India, 1878–2000 A.D.”, *Studies in History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2009), pp. 112–13.

⁷² R.N. Chopra, “The Problem of Opium Addiction in India and its Treatment”, *Current Science*, No. 11 (November 1939), p. 503.

⁷³ In 1927, the Indian government had organised the Indian States Opium Conference which brought together a number of princely/native states to discuss the opium issue, primarily to address the issue of smuggling into British Indian provinces. L/E/9/710, 1927, IOR.

declared the Indian government's support to "clean up the 'Black Spots'", thus laying out the revised official position of the Indian government on opium prohibition.⁷⁴

The ALC passed a resolution on 6 March 1933 to appoint an enquiry committee to review the "present opium policy and advise [on] future policy to be adopted".⁷⁵ The resolution highlighted the need for a review of opium consumption in Assam based on the recommendations of the LoN—a reference to the 1931 Geneva Convention—in order to meet the legal obligations of the international treaty.⁷⁶ Headed by J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, the then education minister, this seven-member enquiry committee (assisted by the provincial excise commissioner in a secretarial capacity) comprised of three Assamese councillors, two representatives from the Surma valley and one nominated British council member. The committee used a 15-point questionnaire that was sent out to important government officials, medical practitioners and prominent members of the public, and published in major newspapers in the Assam and Surma valley inviting responses from the wider community, as the starting point of its investigations (see Appendix 4[b]).⁷⁷ Interestingly, the committee members held a range of position on the opium question; the provincial excise commissioner, J.A. Dawson, and Nichols-Roy occupied polar ends on the question of total prohibition, with other members balancing out the two persuasions. The final report was presented to the government on 8 September 1933 along with three volumes of evidence consisting of witness statements and another that contained written replies to the initial questionnaire. The report maintained the efficacy of the policy of 10 per cent annual reduction (and rationing) of opium supplies to pass holders (enforced since 1927–28) and recommended the continuation of the policy, with some important changes, till the eventual goal of total prohibition was achieved.⁷⁸

The recommendations of the enquiry committee were criticised by the government as being negligent of the spurt in smuggling and supply of illicit opium across Assam, which the administration believed was "filling the pockets of swindlers and smugglers" of

⁷⁴ "Indian Government's Opium Policy: Viceroy's Speech", *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 22 May 1930, p. 12.

⁷⁵ "No. 4: Resolution [Extract from No. 4355, Local Self Government Department, 3 December 1934]", Local Self-Government Department (hereafter, LSG), SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, p. 3, ASA.

⁷⁶ This was the second official enquiry conducted by the Assam government, and although it had a few affinities with the 1912 Botham Committee, the 1933 Committee's composition as well as its conclusions and recommendations were consummately different (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of the Botham Enquiry Committee).

⁷⁷ "Assam Opium Enquiry Committee Resolution", Government of Assam, *Replies to the Questionnaire of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933* (Shillong, 1933), pp. i–ii, ASA.

⁷⁸ "Resolution: Assam Opium Enquiry", E&O 633/1935, p. 1, IOR.

revenue that was the ‘rightful’ share of the government treasury.⁷⁹ From amongst the criticisms raised, two principal objections by the government need to be scrutinised in order to understand the basis of the difference between the opinions of the members of the enquiry committee and the government. The three Assamese councillors supported total prohibition while the government defence was centred on the idea that total prohibition would harm not merely the opium user who was habituated to the drug but also the development and well-being of the wider citizenry due to the sizeable impact that the ban would have on government revenue. The Assam government’s defence of the opium revenue was crucial given that the economic depression of the 1930s had significantly impacted treasury receipts.⁸⁰

The government also highlighted that the committee failed to investigate both the “effect of the reduction [in rations] on the consumer”, as well as the effectiveness of treatment modalities practised by doctors in the province.⁸¹ This was in a perverse way, a re-enactment of the ‘medical argument’ which was employed in the 1890s during the Royal Commission’s investigations to argue against prohibition. The issue of medical treatment of addicts once total prohibition was introduced became a point of contention between the prohibitionist and the government, which used the public health argument to defer the introduction of a total ban on opium. In the period between 1933 and 1939—when the first ‘experiment’ with total prohibition was conducted—these two questions assumed significance as the Assam experience raised questions about the effectiveness and sagacity of transnational drugs policy which was driven by the prohibitory urge as well as criminalisation of drug users.

The enquiry report provided a thorough account of opium smuggling activities in the province and its impact on the policy of graduated reduction of rations to pass-holding user-addicts, two questions that the government was most interested in. While the report itself engaged with aspects of opium policy, the supporting volumes of evidence act as a mine of source material that represented a cross-section of public opinion on opium addiction and prohibition, the most crucial facet being the inclusion of a number of statements of opium addicts (and ex-addicts) as well as people involved in (and profited

⁷⁹ “Governor’s Speech, 6 March 1933”, quoted in *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933*, p. 2, ASA.

⁸⁰ “Memo by H.G. Dennehy, Secretary, Transferred Departments”, LSG, SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, p. 10, ASA.

⁸¹ “Memo by H.G. Dennehy, Secretary, Transferred Departments”, LSG, SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, pp. 2–3, ASA.

from) the trade which was absent in other official documentation. The witnesses who appeared before the enquiry committee can be categorised into seven different groups, each representing its own interests; namely, i. officials, ii. tea planters, iii. local elites and professionals, iv. government (and private) medical practitioners, v. political leaders and anti-opium activists, vi. opium eaters/addicts, and vii. opium shop owners and licensees. The discussion below will engage with the major themes that emerge from the witness statements that were not given due emphasis in the mainstream opium debates. This will be followed by an analysis of two statements; the first by Bolonath Gogoi (alias Nur Muhammad), an opium addict and president of the Jorhat Conference of Opium-eaters, and the other being Kuladhar Chaliha, a prominent Congress leader and anti-opium activist.

Among the themes that emerge from an analysis of the witness statements, two require careful analysis; the first is the view that contradicts the government's claim about reduction in opium consumption as a direct result of policy changes, and, the second being the local anti-opium lobby's declarations about widespread support for the prohibition campaign and activism amongst the masses, including all opium user/addicts in the province. While some official and non-official witnesses claimed that the government's opium policy was hugely successful and resulted in reduced consumption and improvement of public health, a substantial number of witnesses from across the spectrum disputed this claim and commented on the link between economic depression in the province since the late 1920s and the decrease in opium consumption. High-ranking government officials highlighted the fact that lower price of tea and other cash commodities, along with a slump in trade and industry as well as agricultural production, had resulted in the impoverishment of the people of Assam and contributed to reduction in opium consumption reflected in the official statistics. G.D. Walker, the Jorhat deputy commissioner, made an observation that there had been a decrease in the consumption of all excisable articles in every subdivision "whether it is restricted or not" and hence the fall in opium figures should not be interpreted as a success on account of the policy of regulation.⁸² This view was reaffirmed by others who suggested that without the

⁸² "Statement of G.D. Walker, Deputy Commissioner, Jorhat", Government of Assam, *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933: Oral Evidence, Vol. I—Jorhat and Dibrugarh*, p. 7, ASA.

depression, and with more disposable income among the consumers, especially peasants and labourers, the market for smuggled opium would have been substantially bigger.⁸³

The other facet that divided the witnesses was public support and the effectiveness of anti-opium propaganda. The Assamese prohibitionists, especially the political leaders and rural elites, drew a large part of their legitimacy from mass support of the anti-opium agenda that was cast as part of Gandhi's temperance crusade. As such, the propaganda campaign and activism was part of the anti-colonial, nationalist movement and owing to the importance of the anti-opium campaign in provincial politics, it was crucial for the Congress to offer a depiction of uniformity of opinion about opium across the social spectrum. The views of opium users and those who were part of the trade or benefitted from it—licensees, shop owners and tea plantation owners—on the policy of prohibition was absent from the debate. Significantly, when the policy of gradual prohibition through 10 per cent annual cuts was introduced in 1929–30, there were a number of instances of looting of opium vends and stores by opium-eaters providing clear indication that the policy was not welcomed by the opium users as claimed by the Congress.⁸⁴ In fact, many Assamese witnesses who supported prohibition raised objections to the manner in which the policy was being rolled-out and the measures used to implement it, which, they suggested, caused distress to consumers who were turning to smugglers to obtain opium.⁸⁵

The fact that the *ACOER* chose to obliterate the voices of the opium eaters from its report, even though evidence was collected from that section of society was typical of the manner in which this aspect was handled. The *ACOER* was highly selective in its representation of the views of opium users/addicts and presented only those that fit neatly into the social reform narrative. Moreover, the *ACOER* also overlooked the fact that most official witnesses were sceptical about the methods used by the Congress volunteers and had strong views against the efficacy of picketing and regarded it as having no long term impact in reducing opium consumption in the province. Although highlighting the government position, high ranking officials pointed out that picketing was a “wrong method of doing it [prohibition] as you never get to the root of the problem”, thus

⁸³ “Statement of A.G. Patton, Deputy Commissioner, Dibrugarh”, *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 246, ASA.

⁸⁴ “Statement of Rai Bahadur Sadananda Dowerah”, *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 208, ASA.

⁸⁵ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 235–36, ASA.

recognising the drug's addictive nature as an issue that needed to be tackled.⁸⁶ This position was, however, challenged by respondents who viewed picketing as an effective way of dissuading opium users and argued that it should be made part of official policy, an argument that was built on the premise that opium shops were the best locations for propaganda work given that other public places, like social gatherings and *namghars* (prayer/assembly hall for congregational worship), were not frequented by opium addicts.⁸⁷

The AOE report took a more sanguine view on these matters and expressed a liberal position on addicts and contended that informed public opinion, rather than punitive action, was the only way to address the issue of opium prohibition. A number of non-official witnesses proposed the formation of local temperance committees in every subdivision across the province with financial support of the government and the participation of senior officials as the way forward.⁸⁸ The non-official witnesses also argued that prominent public figures, including *gaonburas* (village headmen), *mauzadars* (a member of the rural gentry), and members of local bodies should be given powers to aid the excise staff in their duties, thus enabling a wider body of individuals to contribute to the anti-opium efforts.⁸⁹ The committee's suggestion that propaganda activities should be conducted by the public health department was supported by a number of non-official witnesses, but faced resistance from the provincial administration.⁹⁰ Illustrative of this was the opinion of two important government administrators, A.G. Patton and G.D. Walker, deputy commissioners of Dibrugarh and Jorhat, respectively, who argued against government involvement in any propaganda campaign on the basis that a small minority of the population was affected by the issue and suggested that temperance activities did not have a role in policy making.⁹¹ Given the divergence of opinion, despite the successful trial of government-sponsored anti-opium propaganda in a couple of subdivisions in 1927, when the policy of registration and rationing was formally introduced, the support of the administrative machinery was absent from the propaganda campaign.⁹² From the mid-1930s, opium also featured in the activities of prominent women's

⁸⁶ "Statement of G.D. Walker", *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 17, ASA.

⁸⁷ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 21–23, ASA.

⁸⁸ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 96–97, ASA.

⁸⁹ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 21, 28, ASA.

⁹⁰ "Statement of Dr C.H.P. Allen", *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 121, ASA.

⁹¹ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 8, 61–62, ASA.

⁹² "Publication of Certain Pamphlets Concerning Opium and its Effects", ED, SRA, Nos. 64–68, June 1928, ASA.

organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), which carried out anti-opium work under the prohibition agenda that included alcohol and other narcotics through public meetings and propaganda specifically targeted at women and children as well as rural agricultural and labouring communities.⁹³ It is noteworthy that although the Royal Commission on Opium's (RCO) report had suggested that propaganda and welfare activities were key elements in combating opium use, the central and provincial governments in India, had done little to include them as part of policy. This position changed after the first coalition government led by the Assam Congress party leader, Gopinath Bordoloi, assumed power in September 1938. In the ensuing period, the anti-opium campaign received the full support of the government and propaganda work became a key element of the state-sponsored scheme for total prohibition in which non-official prohibition committees formed by members of civil society played a vital role.

Additionally, the Congress party's strategy needs to be placed within the goal-oriented reform agenda of the anti-opium campaign as well as unilineal purpose of the report which ignored the ground realities about opium use and addiction in Assam. The most crucial was the lack of empathy with the user-addict, whose needs were deemed subservient to the greater causes of nationalism and the program designed to impair colonial revenue collections. This resulted in the underplaying of the addictive nature of opium with an emphasis on the moral strength—the opium user's will and virtue became part of the matrix of qualities that equipped the addict to give up the habit. By the late-1930s, however, this facet of the argument shifted from the moral to the medical dimension and the treatment and rehabilitation of the addict-user became an important part of the prohibition policy. In 1939, the Bordoloi government made medically-supervised deaddiction an important part of the prohibition scheme that was introduced across the province (this will be discussed in a subsequent section).

To turn now to a discussion of the statements given to the Assam Opium Enquiry, 1933, by Bolonath Gogoi (alias Nur Muhammad) and Kuladhar Chaliha. Gogoi, an opium addict, was the president of the Jorhat Conference of Opium-eaters, a *sanmilian* (association) which worked on an annual subscription model and had more than 400 members. The association's activities were spread across Jorhat district and offered as a platform for opium users from a diverse range of occupations—including lawyers and

⁹³ All India Women's Conference, *Report of the Thirteenth Session* (1939), pp. 73–74, Microfilm, NMML.

other professionals—to protect their interests in the face of government policy to ban supply of the drug and criminalise opium consumption.⁹⁴ His statement provides an insight into the lives of opium users that differed vastly from the narrative that much of the Congress-led reform movement depicted—of the addict in need of help and improvement.

Gogoi's contentions were premised on the fact that the members of the association were respectable, hard-working and conscientious individuals whose experiences of opium use/addiction were contrary to the arguments of the prohibition lobby which were centred on the narrative of financial deprivation, physical degradation and moral deficiency. He suggested that the government needed to recognise that opium was used primarily for three reasons—illness, pleasure and as work drug—and prohibition affected all users irrespective of their needs as well as the effects of the drug. The *sanmilan*'s objectives included defending the interests of all classes of users, and especially those who used opium in order to undertake work, including manual labour, and contributed to society through their daily activities. Advocating a liberal position, Gogoi stated that the picketing activities undertaken by the Congress volunteers were ineffective as opium consumers “do not like to be advised” and would not give up the habit through coercion.⁹⁵ The statement also highlighted that the policy of registration and rationing was flawed as opium from three sources—foreign opium (including Malwa), short-weight sale and locally grown poppy—was readily available across the province and demanded that the policy of prohibition should be reversed.⁹⁶

Kuladhar Chaliha's statement, on the other hand, provided a compelling argument in support of the policy of prohibition and extolled the activities of the Congress, especially the strategy of picketing and propaganda, as viable means to eradicate opium. He argued that the government policy of criminalising these activities was based on the political threat it posed to the administration, rather than an objection to the means used to eradicate opium consumption. Chaliha criticised the administration's handling of opium propaganda work in the early 1920s and requested its assistance in propaganda activities for better implementation of prohibition. Chaliha suggested that senior government officials, including deputy commissioners, should hold public meetings where they

⁹⁴ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 59, ASA.

⁹⁵ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 58, ASA.

⁹⁶ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 58–59, ASA.

espouse on the ill effects of the opium habit both as a means to dispel the idea amongst the masses that the government was not concerned about public well-being as well as the fact that the government opium policy was determined solely by revenue considerations.⁹⁷ The most significant recommendation made was the proposal to introduce a deaddiction drive that was centred on medical help and treatment of user-addicts using government resources to provide assistance, especially in rural areas, to those who are willing to stop using the drug.⁹⁸ This became a cornerstone of official policy from 1939 onwards when a Congress-led government with Chaliha as a minister took administrative control over the province. Chaliha also made an interesting observation on the question of revenue shortfall as a result of the loss of the excise collections from opium sales. Although the government had the tacit approval of Congress on the proposed increase in land revenue rates, given the economic depression in the early 1930s calls for a remission in land revenue assessments dominated public debates. Chaliha's argument was based on the fact that a short-term deficit in excise collections should not determine long-term policy and observed that the deficit would be made good by the "prospects of the hundred thousand people"—the government estimate of the number of opium addicts in Assam—and their contributions to the provincial economy.⁹⁹

The Assamese middle class respondents were keen to highlight that the prohibition campaign was successful among the Assamese masses, who both understood the message of opium as a social evil and even addicts were willing to adopt prohibition. Campaigners like Lakheswar Barua narrated that the successes of prohibition campaigns since 1921 was universal amongst the Assamese and almost all user-addicts were happy with current policy and ready for total prohibition.¹⁰⁰ The lack of education was remarked by many as the major factor behind widespread addiction and many respondents noted that *satras* and public bodies held meetings to educate the masses about the effects of opium which reduced opium consumption dramatically.¹⁰¹ A careful analysis of the

⁹⁷ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 111–12, ASA.

⁹⁸ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 115, ASA.

⁹⁹ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 117, ASA.

¹⁰⁰ Barua claimed that policy has been a success in the Dibrugarh subdivision and provided examples of addicts leaving the habit without any harmful effects—one of them, a respectable 70 year old *satradhikar* (abbot) called Dingoi Goswami, who "used to distribute opium by way of Prasad to all the disciples assembled before him", gave up the habit 5 years back on his appeal to set an example and was in good health. "Statement of Lakheswar Barua", *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 194–95, 198–99, ASA.

¹⁰¹ "Statement of Baisnabananda Chandra Goswami [of Dingoi Satra], *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 245, ASA.

statements reveal that the claims made about the success of anti-opium propaganda was intimately tied with the efforts of the Assamese middle class to position the Congress party as their representative electorate, and employed difference and distance as an effective political plank. The respondents, therefore, were keen to highlight that tea garden labourers and indigenous tribal communities were “foolhardy enough” to refuse to move with the times and embrace the spirit of prohibition and employ this as a distancing tool.¹⁰²

The issue of identity politics also featured prominently in the accounts of the Assamese respondents who translated opposition to prohibition and especially smuggling activities as anti-Assamese phenomenon. The fact that most of the legal and illegal trade in opium was controlled by Marwaris and Bengalis gave credence to the distrust of ‘foreigners’ and this sentiment ties in with the Assamese nationalist sentiment that interpreted the opium issue with a racialised view.¹⁰³ As discussed above, in the 1930s most minority groups and communities sought independent representation by members from within their own numbers, whether organised under party banners or as independent candidates, and the Congress was forced to define its constituency. The anti-opium campaign, which was an important agenda for the Assam Congress in the 1920s, became an indispensable political plank which enabled the party to mould its niche within the provincial political sphere in the 1930s when religion and ethnicity became markers of political affiliation.

Another issue that was remarked upon by a number of witnesses was that of corruption amongst the excise staff, who both indulged in corrupt practices and were not vigilant about smuggling and short weight sale.¹⁰⁴ Government officials like G.D. Walker, deputy commissioner, Jorhat, nonchalantly noted that officials “have temptations and ... there is so much money in this business that it is difficult to keep one’s hand clean”¹⁰⁵ and non-official witnesses like Rabi Chandra Hazarika and Kesab Ram Dutta of North Lakhimpur suggested that the policy “would have been very much more successful if the Excise staff had been more honest in their dealings and kept a strict eye in the

¹⁰² “Statement of Lakheswar Barua”, *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 197, ASA.

¹⁰³ Loboram Kanwar of Chabua stated that the government’s policy of granting opium shop licenses to non-Assamese “who have no sympathy for the people of the land” as the cause behind widespread abuse of the system where lessees indulge in illegal sales. “The Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933: Oral Evidence, Vol. II—Nowgong, Tezpur, Gauhati”, p. 204, ASA.

¹⁰⁴ “Statement of Lakheswar Barua”, *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 200–01, ASA.

¹⁰⁵ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 12, ASA.

Mahaldars [warehouses/stockists]”.¹⁰⁶ Chandradhar Barooah, a prominent political figure and member of the Council of State as well as a representative at the two London Round Table Conferences, of Jorhat also highlighted the issue of corruption and suggested a cycle of corruption that involved opium shop owners and excise officials and called for the introduction of rigorous measures for punishing them.¹⁰⁷

The statements of opium eaters reveal facets related to opium use from the perspective of the consumers and provide an insight into the effects of prohibition on opium users along with their perception about government policy. Interestingly, all opium eaters who appeared before the enquiry committee were united in their stance against the policy of prohibition but they evaded the issue of availability of illicit opium in the province. This silence was ostensible because of the fear of prosecution before an official enquiry committee, and, contrasted with the detailed accounts of the modes and means in which opium smuggling and illegal supply operated in the province that other respondents keenly highlighted. The opium users who appeared before the enquiry committee can be categorised into three groups: illiterate manual labourers and peasants (both indigenous tribes and Assamese Hindus); small landowning cultivators and petty merchant-traders; and rural gentry and individuals with business interests in the opium trade. It is significant that before the AOE, no first-hand accounts of illiterate opium user-addicts about opium consumption were considered in official dossiers and reports. In their statements we discover facets of the opium debate that were either overlooked or suppressed both by the government as well as social reform organisations and political parties.

The accounts of a group of ten Mikir peasants (an indigenous tribal community also known as Karbis) provides this counter narrative. Like many other witnesses, they complained about the economic depression that was depriving them of the basic necessities of life as well as opium, but they also pointed out that they had resorted to illegal opium cultivation to sustain their habit. The witnesses stated that unlike in the past when they bartered local goods for treasury opium, in the last few years they had resorted to bartering their own illegal opium in the market towns to sustain themselves and their opium habit.¹⁰⁸ Although most of them conceded that opium was an evil habit, they stated that force or an official ban would not make them give up the drug but extended their co-

¹⁰⁶ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 21, ASA.

¹⁰⁷ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 138, ASA.

¹⁰⁸ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol II*, p. 98, ASA.

operation with the government to ensure that future generations do not take to opium.¹⁰⁹ Some members of the contingent agreed that the policy of gradual reduction in rations was a sensible one but admitted that not all addicts would be able to give up the habit even if they wanted to. One witness even suggested that the government should reduce the price of opium as the high treasury price was affecting the livelihoods of people in his *mauza* (a revenue district) and made no difference to consumption levels.¹¹⁰

The account above is remarkably different from the statement of Golap Chandra Chaudhury, a *mauzadar*, and Rup Dhar Chaudhury, an opium shop owner. Although like the witnesses above they were both opium addicts, they represented a very different group—the rural elite. Golap Chaudhury led a group of opium addicts from his *mauza*, and, in his capacity as their spokesman, testified that all opium eaters in his *mauza* had given up the habit “on account of economic depression” and confirmed that no illicit opium supplies were used “in his mauza on account of its high price”.¹¹¹ Chaudhury not only defended his own habit but also argued that he carried out his official responsibilities well and ensured that land revenue collections in his *mauza* were precise even during the economic downturn to build a case against the government policy.¹¹² Rup Chaudhury’s statement revealed a different facet of the opium question, that of a licensed opium seller. Despite being an opium shop owner, he confessed that he was unaware of a ban on opium smoking in the province (a law passed in 1927) and stated that the common interpretation of the opium pass given to registered users was that the opium supplied could be used for any purpose. He stated that the official consumption figures were falling only because consumers were unable to buy their rationed quotas due to the economic depression and suggested, with remarkable sapience, that opium should either be sold cheaply or totally prohibited as all other measures were bound to fail.¹¹³

The tea lobby criticised the policy of prohibition and forwarded the same arguments as the government: an increase in smuggling and suffering amongst the inhabitants of the province.¹¹⁴ However, as discussed above, the real motivation behind their opposition to prohibition was the Congress proposal to impose higher levies on the tea industry to make up the shortfall in excise collections. The smuggling argument was

¹⁰⁹ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol II*, p. 99, ASA.

¹¹⁰ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. II*, p. 99, ASA.

¹¹¹ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. II*, p. 275, ASA.

¹¹² *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. II*, pp. 275–76, ASA.

¹¹³ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. II*, pp. 301–02, ASA.

¹¹⁴ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, p. 173, ASA.

echoed by a number of native respondents who attributed the failure of the policy on the fact that the rationing was arbitrary and left consumers at the mercy of smugglers.¹¹⁵ Non-official witnesses also argued that the official opium consumption figures were misleading given the availability of illicit supplies and proposed that official policy should be aimed at reduction of retail price, scrapping of rations and resumption of supply to meet actual demand.¹¹⁶ Given the persistence of the smuggling debate in the statements of all classes of respondents, it is important to study the impact of smuggling on prohibition as well as construe the effectiveness of measures taken by the administration to tackle it.

4.3 Swindlers and Smugglers: Prohibition, Pressure Groups and ‘Public Good’ in an Era of Revenue Deficits and Treaty Compulsions

Globally, the narratives of opium prohibition and its resistance—through smuggling and other illegal modes of defiance—are intrinsically intertwined, a feature that is evident even in the contemporary ‘war on drugs’, an international campaign involving governments, multilateral organisations and other strategic partners. In colonial Assam, especially in the twentieth century, opium smuggling acted as a fundamental counterpoint to prohibition as the province entered a phase of regulation and proscription of the drug. With persistent international pressure on the British government, both at home and its colonial appendages from the late nineteenth century, especially in the period following the 1909 Shanghai Convention which initiated legally-binding transnational treaties, regulations and prohibitory measures became the byword in many Indian provinces which saw Assam leading the political and legal effort.

By 1939, as Assam entered the phase of gradual implementation of total prohibition, smuggling emerged as the biggest challenge for the local administration in imposing the ban on opium sale and use. This challenge, however, was not a new development. Since the beginning of the opium monopoly in India, the East India Company (EIC) had to contend with the illicit trade in opium—both in the export trade as well as domestic supply. The EIC’s (and later, British Indian government’s) strategy to maximise the sale of excise opium was a ‘pricing mechanism’ that was designed to undercut the price of the illicit supply, while maintaining the highest retail value

¹¹⁵ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 33–34, ASA.

¹¹⁶ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. I*, pp. 184–89, ASA.

depending on local demand and consumption patterns. In accordance with this policy, in areas with excessive demand like Assam, the price was set at an inflated level, while in other provinces like Berar, the price was kept really low as contraband Malwa opium was readily available and the illicit market negated the pricing mechanism. More importantly, the pricing mechanism was not designed to deal with direct restrictions on the sale of excise opium, and, therefore, when Assam introduced total prohibition, newer strategies to deal with the proliferation of smuggling had to be devised. Studies on opium smuggling in India have highlighted corruption and high profit margins as major factors behind the illicit trade but they suffer from generalisations.¹¹⁷ Given this tendency,¹¹⁸ they lack appreciation of regional and local differences within India and the nature of smuggling activities in Assam is often viewed as being similar to other provinces, especially Bengal. The discussion below challenges this and expatiates the finer nuances of the connection between prohibition and smuggling which is unique to Assam through a study of local specificities in the 1930s and 1940s.

The success of transnational conventions in limiting global opium use through legal instruments has often been celebrated but the narrative suffers from three omissions that have not adequately addressed. The first is the omission of the prevarications that the central and provincial Indian governments resorted to in order to safeguard the opium revenue, which included misrepresentation of facts at international conferences as well as selective presentation of evidence and statistics of opium consumption in India, which accounted for approximately one-fifth of the Indian government's revenue collection.¹¹⁹ Second, the narrative does not satisfactorily capture the element of local anti-opium sentiment and overemphasises the role of international forums and transnational treaties.¹²⁰ Thirdly, and most significantly, the challenges faced by government agencies

¹¹⁷ Franklin Bakhala, "Indian Opium and Sino-Indian Trade Relations: 1801–1858", Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (1985), p. 167.

¹¹⁸ The exceptions are Amar Farooqui's *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants, and the Politics of Opium, 1790–1843* (Oxford, 2005), which offers a comprehensive account the smuggling of Malwa opium in the eighteenth century; and Claude Markovits, "The Political Economy of Opium Smuggling in Early Nineteenth Century India: Leakage or Resistance", in Richard M. Eaton et.al. (eds), *Expanding Frontiers in South Asian and World History: Essays in Honour of John F. Richards* (New Delhi, 2012), pp. 81–103, which looks at the export of Malwa opium to China and Sind as well as the role of Indian merchants and officials in the illicit trade.

¹¹⁹ This figure takes into account the combined revenue from excise duties and land revenue collections for the period 1900s–1920s.

¹²⁰ In the case of opium smoking in Assam, the provisions of local legislation such as the Assam Opium Smoking Act 1927 were more rigorous than those of the transnational treaties. For instance, the British government had successfully defended its position that opium smoking was of a far lesser magnitude than opium eating and the 1925 Geneva Convention upheld this contention as factually correct. It, thus, failed to

and local administrations in imposing restrictions on opium has rarely caught the attention of historians. This aspect assumes significance given that opium was a highly addictive substance with a large number of users and high profit margins which contributed towards a conducive environment for illicit trade.¹²¹ The aim of this section is, therefore, to study the implications of smuggling on opium policy decisions as well as on the relationship between the various players—the provincial administration, prohibitionists and opium consumers—involved with the formulation of opium policy. It needs to be highlighted that a substantial part of the population wanted access to opium, especially those addicted to the drug and/or involved in the trade in opium; the anti-opiumists were determined to ensure total prohibition of opium; and the government was ready and willing to supply the largest quantities of opium at the highest prices it could, within limits of its international treaty obligations and endorsement of the anti-opiumists at home and abroad.

From 1860 onwards, following the ban of poppy cultivation and its successful enforcement by the British administration, a monopoly opium market was created in Assam (see Chapter 1). The monopoly opium sales system with its high price strategy created conditions that were conducive to the growth of illicit activities. The government's argument against prohibition relied on the fact that high price of excise opium in Assam and the availability of cheaper alternatives given the province's proximity to poppy-growing regions like the Arakan region in Burma and Yunnan in China created an environment that was particularly suited to the illicit trade in opium.

It needs to be noted that a large part of the opium that was smuggled into Assam from other parts of India was excise opium on which the government has already earned its share of the revenue, although the difference in retail prices across India made smuggling into a province like Assam a profitable exercise. Although smuggling of opium from other parts of India to Assam intensified after the 1860 ban on poppy cultivation, documentation is scant given that quantities of smuggled opium were not large enough to warrant investigations and counter-measures by the administration. Till the early 1880s, the retail price of opium in Assam was fixed at rates that were only

recognise the fact that opium smoking was a common practice in places like Assam and where reform was initiated by local anti-opium activists.

¹²¹ Farooqui has studied smuggling of opium in the Malwa region but solely from the perspective of the export trade in the eighteenth century; in the Malwa region, the inward smuggling of excise opium would have been absent due to the lower price of local (Malwa) opium. See Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion*, pp. 141–60.

marginally higher than other parts of India but gradual increases in the retail price had opened up the market for illicit supplies. From the late 1870s, the Assam administration enhanced the retail price of opium periodically as part of the overall policy of ‘maximum price, minimum consumption’.¹²² This created a lucrative market for adulteration and smuggling which directly impacted provincial revenue collections, prompting the government to introduce measures to check the loss of revenue. However, it was only after the sharp increases in the 1910s and 1920s, along with the introduction of a system of registration and rationing, that large-scale smuggling of opium became a significant concern for the provincial administration.¹²³

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Assam administration started to act on smuggling; in 1903, A.W. Davis, the excise commissioner of Assam, declared opium smuggling a “growing evil [that] defraud[s] Government of revenue” and made a case for Assam to follow an independent course in opium policy.¹²⁴ Davis also highlighted two major differences between Assam and other provinces—the difference in the retail price of opium and the province’s “large ignorant population”—in his bid to convince the central government to allow the provincial administration to prosecute opium vendors who indulged in illegal activity.¹²⁵ The first conviction achieved under the new law was the discovery of the large amount of adulterated opium in February 1904 by an excise inspector in Lakhimpur district of Assam, Raj Mohan Das.¹²⁶ Although seizures were common in the past, this case was the first in which a criminal prosecution against the opium vendor was initiated and led to the first successful conviction.¹²⁷

The initial anti-smuggling activities were limited to opium shops and licensed premises, and targeted illegal sale of excise opium rather than Malwa/foreign opium as the enforcement agencies lacked resources and legal authority to tackle cross-border smuggling. This state of affairs changed with the Partition of Bengal in 1905 that resulted in the creation of a new province called Eastern Bengal and Assam (EB&A)—a consolidation of the densely populated Bengal divisions of Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi

¹²² Deshpande, “Historical Overview of Opium”, p. 122.

¹²³ *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (Jorhat, 1925), p. 24.

¹²⁴ Memo No. 375, A.W. Davis to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, 7 April 1903, Finance and Commerce (hereafter, F&C), July 1903, Nos. 375–378, pp. 1–2, ASA.

¹²⁵ Memo No. 378, July 1903, F&C, Nos. 375–378, pp. 4, 24, ASA.

¹²⁶ No. 3031-R., from Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to P.G. Melitus, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, 10 February 1904, F&C, ASA.

¹²⁷ Case No. 394/92, Emperor versus Sukdeasing. No 1118-E., P.G. Melitus, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 23 March 1904, F&C, ASA.

and Surma valley, with historically low incidence of opium addiction, with the erstwhile province of Assam, where opium use was virtually universal (see Appendix 1[b]). In 1907, the provincial government launched an investigation into opium smuggling in the province which highlighted that lower retail prices in the Bengal districts acted as an inducement to smugglers.¹²⁸

Around the same time, international developments also bore upon the Indian government to review opium smuggling across the country in order to meet the provisions of the 1909 Shanghai Opium Conference, accorded legal status following the signing of the 1912 Hague Convention.¹²⁹ All provincial governments were directed to investigate the nature and extent of the illegal trade and the review undertaken by the Assam government highlighted the existence of significant smuggling of excise opium from the Bengal division districts to Burma and the Assam valley. Crucial changes such as uniformity in prices across all opium shops in Assam and stricter controls on the quotas allocated to the opium vends in the Bengal division were subsequently introduced, ostensibly to check the illicit trade though the Chittagong port to Burma.¹³⁰ These measures also disrupted the flow of cheaper Bengal opium into the Assam valley districts¹³¹ which contributed to four-fifths of the total excise collections, despite accounting for less than a quarter of the province's population.¹³² From the beginning, the provincial administration's main concern regarding smuggling was the loss of excise revenue in the Assam valley districts to opium smugglers and this facet is perceptible in every anti-smuggling decision taken by the government in subsequent years. The government's policy of maximising revenue is best illustrated by the difference in the handling of opium smuggling to Burma. The 1912 Hague Convention imposed a binding obligation on the Indian government to check illegal opium export to Burma and measures were introduced in and around Chittagong port, most significantly the imposition of strict quotas to opium vends and the appointment of excise inspectors to

¹²⁸ No 4141-Ex, From Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Eastern Bengal and Assam (hereafter, EB&A) to the Secretary to the Government of EB&A, Financial Department (hereafter, FD), 29 July 1907, ASA.

¹²⁹ Paragraph No. 7, Resolution No 3615-Exc, 17 July 1909, FD, SR–Opium, Government of India (hereafter, GoI), NAI.

¹³⁰ Letter No 4141-Ex, From Secretary to the Board of Revenue, EB&A, to the Secretary to the Government of EB&A, FD, 29 July 1907, MD, ASA.

¹³¹ The difference in price was almost than 25 per cent. It was set at a uniform rate of Rs 37 per seer in the Assam districts whereas the average price in the Eastern Bengal districts was around Rs 29 per seer in 1909–10.

¹³² J.T. Rankin, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, EB&A, to Secretary, Government of EB&A, 3 September 1909, MD, ASA.

detect illicit opium to ensure compliance with international law. No such measures, however, were introduced in the Assam valley districts, exemplifying the fact that the differences in anti-smuggling policy in the case of Chittagong and the Assam valley districts was predicated on two inducements—excise revenue and international pressure—which shaped domestic opium policy.¹³³

An analysis of a 1926 report authored by Captain J.H. Green, the first British official who visited the previously unexplored and un-administered area on the Irrawaddy known as the ‘Triangle’, raises questions about the extent of the illicit trade emphasised time and again by the government. The confidential report noted that “opium is cultivated extensively in and near the Triangle” and opium use almost universal.¹³⁴ However, Green made no observations about the trade in opium to other parts, including neighbouring Assam, which challenges the Assam government’s position on the illicit trans-frontier trade. Another significant point made in the report was Green’s comment on the native Kachin population’s opium consumption habits. The report stated unequivocally that the valley dwellers consumed substantial amounts of opium without apparent ill effects on their health.¹³⁵ This account challenged the mainstream discourse that portrayed the Oriental opium user as an indolent and degenerate individual, which was based on a racialised perception of opium’s effect on Asiatic peoples of Mongoloid origin, including the *kania* (the Assamese opium addict). The fact that some illicit frontier trade in opium existed is evident; there were historic trade ties with neighbouring regions and the presence of the colonial administrative machinery was negligible. Moreover, the geography of the loosely administered hill states that garlanded the Brahmaputra valley, with their numerous mountain passes and waterways, meant that smuggling was a profitable activity for the frontier tribes. Furthermore, the need for friendly relations with the ungoverned (or partially-governed) outlying frontier tracts as well as a policy of non-interference meant that the Assam administration had to contend with loss of revenue in some border areas.¹³⁶

¹³³ Note by W.M. Kennedy, Commissioner of Excise and Salt, EB&A. Enclosure to No 1663Ex-T, from J.T. Rankin, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, EB&A, to the Secretary to the Government of EB&A, FD, 24 September 1908, MD, ASA.

¹³⁴ J.H. Green, “Account of a Tour in the ‘Triangle’ [Confidential]”, ASA.

¹³⁵ Green, “Tour in the ‘Triangle’”, pp. 1–2, ASA.

¹³⁶ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India’s Northeast* (New Delhi, 1994); Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (New Delhi, 2005); Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland* (Shimla, 2000).

Apart from the opium produced by the government in the Gangetic plains of northern India, sizeable quantities of opium was produced in all the princely states in the Rajputana–Malwa region. Although subject to import tariffs and restrictions on sale by private individuals within British India, the lower price of Malwa opium acted as an incentive to smugglers who were willing to take the risks associated with the illicit trade. A part of this opium was consumed within the producing states, a share ended up in China and parts of Southeast Asia, but a sizeable portion found its way across markets in British India, including places like Assam, given the province's high excise opium prices as well as ready demand for the commodity.¹³⁷

The decision to impose prohibition of opium was seen as a victory by a majority of legislators, social activists as well as local and international anti-opiumists, and the post-prohibition phase marked a definite shift in the Assam government's revenue-oriented imperative with regard to opium. However, prohibition policy constituted new challenges for provincial excise officials as contraband and foreign opium flowed into Assam. A major flaw in official policy was the fact that it failed to introduce any measures for the treatment or deaddiction of opium addicts, and it took more than a decade for the administration to formulate a policy centred on medical treatment and rehabilitation of the addict–user. As the excise minister, A.W. Botham put it, from 1926 onwards, the official opium policy of the Assam government was only “to prevent so far as possible any person who is now not a consumer of opium from acquiring the habit in the future”.¹³⁸

Chief among the hurdles the excise administration in Assam faced was the lack of endorsement of its policy by the neighbouring provinces—Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The lack of cooperation was a historic issue and had been a contentious subject since 1912, when the Indian government had taken measures to regulate the export trade under legal obligations of the treaty signed at The Hague, but prohibition gave rise to increased smuggling activity which these provinces were both ill-equipped and unwilling to tackle. In a conference of the excise ministers of all the provincial governments held in Shimla in 1926, the Assam delegation had highlighted the question of opium smuggling into Assam and requested the support of other provincial governments but without success.¹³⁹ The

¹³⁷ Markovits, “Opium Smuggling”, pp. 89–96.

¹³⁸ Legislative Council Proceedings, *Assam Gazette*, 31 March 1926, ASA.

¹³⁹ “No. 35, Brief Note by Mr. Hezlett”, ED, SRA, March 1929, Nos. 34–72, ASA.

availability of cheap excise (as well as illicit) opium in the princely state of Cooch Behar on Assam's western frontier, combined with the ineffective measures of the Bengal and Orissa governments to tackle smuggling, resulted in widespread smuggling into Assam.¹⁴⁰ Unlike the Assam government which followed a policy of high pricing to check consumption, the Bihar and Orissa governments adopted a more sanguine approach and worked on a 'sliding scale system' whereby opium prices were fluid and adjusted according to increase or decrease in the supply of smuggled opium. Moreover, both Bihar and Orissa governments opposed "any restrictive policy" on opium unless the central government implemented measures to end the illicit exportation of Malwa and other non-excise opium across India.¹⁴¹ Lacking the cooperation of its neighbours also contributed to the alarming rise in smuggling in the mid-1930s that threatened to derail Assam's prohibition programme.

The anti-opium campaigns that were a prominent feature during the non-cooperation movement (1920–21) in Assam had helped in reducing opium consumption (discussed in Chapter 3). These gains, however, were short lived and by 1923–24, consumption figures crept back to pre-1921 levels and showed a growing trend. In fact, in 1924–25, the total consumption of excise opium in Assam was 927 *maunds* 39 *seers*, or about 20 per cent higher than the figures for 1921–22. The annual statistical dossier for that year highlighted that

the cause of the increase, which was mainly in the Assam Valley, was that consumers who had given up the habit of taking opium during the *Non-cooperation* movement resumed the habit, and those who had reduced the daily dose increased it again.¹⁴²

For the anti-opiumists, this reversal of the gains prompted a re-orientation of prohibition activities and this was epitomised by the 1924 Assam Opium Enquiry which gave the movement a new direction. Moreover, in the post-1925 phase, there was a greater degree contact and exchange between the local prohibitionist and the transnational lobby groups.

¹⁴⁰ Memo No. 98–99E.C.—(Confidential), H.C. Barnes, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, to the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, 15 January 1927, ED, SRA, March 1929, Nos. 34–72, p. 1, ASA. Also, "Note by L. Hammond", 27 February 1929, ED, SRA, March 1929, Nos. 34–72, p. 12, ASA, which provided the particulars of the influx of opium from Bengal and Orissa.

¹⁴¹ F.A.S. Thomas, "Note on Opium Smuggling from Bengal and Cooch Behar into Assam", ED, SRA, March 1929, Nos. 34–72, p. 6, ASA.

¹⁴² GoI, *Opium Revenue for the Year 1924–25: Opium Supplied to the Indian States and Foreign Settlements*, p. 36, NAI, original italics.

One of the first steps that the Assam government took in order to frame a definite policy on opium and gradual prohibition was the enumeration of opium consumers in the province. The administration relied on three sources to calculate the number of opium users—official estimates drawn up by the deputy commissioners (including tea garden figures provided by managers), non-official estimates provided by *mauzadars* and records from the sale registers maintained by opium vendors—but all three estimates presented disparate figures, both in the number of consumers as well as the consumption. J.T. Higgins, the Nowgong deputy commissioner, attributed four reasons for “the incorrectness of the results”, (i) the *bhadraloks*’ reluctance to confess to addiction due to the pressure imposed by the local temperance movement, (ii) the lack of records of female opium consumers, (iii) the suspicion of the census among the hill people, and (iv) the unsatisfactory work of the *mauzadars* as well as the unsympathetic attitude of the general public towards the exercise.¹⁴³ To add to this, Higgins also highlighted the underreporting of consumption figures in the tea gardens as “actual requirements undoubtedly exceed the estimated amounts recorded by Managers”.¹⁴⁴ W.A. Cosgrave, the Lakhimpur district commissioner, highlighted an additional factor and suggested that the registers maintained by opium vendors were prone to over report consumption figures given that they were involved in the illicit trade which involved siphoning off a portion of the excise supply.¹⁴⁵

Further evidence of unreported use can be gleaned from a note in which Cosgrave observed that “young men who are new to the habit do not like to be exposed, much less to get their names registered”, a statement that countered the general perception of local opium prohibitionists, including legislators, that opium addiction was virtually non-existent among the youth and primarily an issue only among the older demographic.¹⁴⁶ Several other district commissioners also reported discrepancies in the estimates as well as the disorganised manner in which the enumeration process was carried in the reports pertaining to their respective districts while also highlighting the tactics employed by the

¹⁴³ No. 1-T, J.C. Higgins, Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, 27 November 1922, G&J, SRA, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, pp. 13–15, ASA.

¹⁴⁴ No. 1-T, Higgins to Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, 27 November 1922, G&J, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, pp. 13–15, ASA.

¹⁴⁵ No. 569-Ex R., W.A. Cosgrave, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 8 November 1922, G&J, SRA, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, p. 19, ASA.

¹⁴⁶ No. 26, W.A. Cosgrave, “Note on the Mauza Census and Shop Registration of opium-eaters in the Dibrugarh Subdivision carried out during 1922–23”, G&J, SRA, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, p. 20, ASA.

opium shopkeepers to cheat the largely uneducated and ignorant consumers through short weight sale, double entry and adulteration.¹⁴⁷

Although all the reports took stock of the ways and means by which excise opium was diverted towards the illicit trade, except the report on Assam's westernmost district, Goalpara, they are somewhat oddly silent about illicit opium from outside the province finding its way into Assam. S.N. Mackenzie, the Goalpara district commissioner, drew attention to the smuggling of opium from the princely state of Cooch Behar that was sandwiched between Bengal and Assam where the price of excise opium was half of the Assam retail price.¹⁴⁸ The question of immigrant labour, both Chinese railway workers and migrants from other parts of India to work in the tea gardens and their opium habits was the question that necessitated the Assam government to adopt a policy that was different from neighbouring provinces. Opinion regarding issue of passes to the "new foreigners entering the province" was divided but the fact that the opium addicts/users would turn to illicit sources if denied access to the drug through legal means swayed the government to agree to issue passes. There was pressure from the two important business lobbies, the tea lobby represented by the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association and the mining lobby by the Assam Railway and Trading Company to issue opium passes to new recruits. They highlighted that non-availability of opium would effectively serve as a deterrence to labour immigration and harm business.¹⁴⁹ In order to protect the interest of the Chinese miners working for the Assam Railway and Trading Company, its representative prompted the government to ensure a balance between its populist agenda and responsibility towards commercial entities.¹⁵⁰

The introduction of a system of registration and rationing based on the Burma model was demanded by the local anti-opiumists from the mid-1910s and in March 1922, Nilmoni Phukan moved a resolution in the ALC that proposed the introduction of a pass system in the Brahmaputra valley, a move that was endorsed by other Assam valley

¹⁴⁷ The reports submitted by W.A. Cosgrave, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, R. Friel, Deputy Commissioner, Cachar, and N.E. Parry, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, mirrored Higgins' sentiments about unreliability of the figures. G&J, SRA, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, ASA.

¹⁴⁸ No. 2038 R., S.N. Mackenzie, Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara, to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, 29 November 1922, G&J, SRA, March 1923, Nos. 1–39, p. 27, ASA.

¹⁴⁹ No. 415, From the Secretary to the Assam Branch, Indian Tea Association, Dibrugarh, to the Commissioner. Assam Valley Division, 29 March 1926, ED, ASA.

¹⁵⁰ No. 708 G.M., From the Agent and General Manager, Assam Railway and Trading Company, Margherita, to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, 2 April 1929, ED, ASA.

members.¹⁵¹ Opposition from the government and the Surma valley representatives highlighted practical difficulties and revenue implications, respectively. The resolution was withdrawn from the floor as prominent Bengali members cut across party and religious lines to support the government and oppose Phukan's proposal.¹⁵² The ALC proceedings also featured discussion of the implication of the LoN's opium policy decisions and in July 1924, Phukan floated a resolution recommending the appointment of a committee made up of both official and non-official members to discuss the opium issue in Assam (as well as other parts of India) in order to submit a comprehensive report to the LoN.¹⁵³ The proposal was subsequently denied by the government but the move demonstrated that local councillors were keen to put pressure on the government by highlighting that Assam's opium problem featured in international forums and the local anti-opiumists were willing to look to the transnational lobby for support.

Given this, the political climate of the mid-1920s meant that, on the one hand, the government was under pressure from local legislators to introduce and maintain a regulated system as a means to tackle widespread opium addiction, and, on the other, it had to deal with the obligations imposed by transnational treaties to reduce overall consumption, while preserving an important source of provincial revenue. The Assam government took measures to register opium consumers and ration opium supplies as a means to meet both demands. On paper, the system worked well and reflected reductions, both in terms of numbers of opium consumers as well as overall annual consumption figures but the sense of a growing urgency in the administration's inability to tackle smuggling is palpable in the official records.

The methods used by opium smugglers evolved in tandem with the measures introduced by the provincial administration, such as increased deployment of excise enforcement personnel, improved intelligence and as well as monitoring and photographing of smugglers to build a consolidated database.¹⁵⁴ Besides targeting individual smugglers by close monitoring of passenger manifests in public transport, the administration also took steps to check operators of buses and ferries who were involved

¹⁵¹ "No.1: Pass Book system for rationing the opium-eaters", G&J, SRA, June 1922, Nos 1–6, pp. 2–4, ASA.

¹⁵² Promode Chandra Dutta, Lohit Chandra Nayak and Maulavi Munawar Ali opposed the resolution and were supported by the government members who pressed for the withdrawal of the resolution without a vote. "No.1: Pass Book system for rationing the opium-eaters", G&J, SRA, June 1922, Nos 1–6, pp. 4–7, ASA.

¹⁵³ GoI, *Opium Revenue for the Year 1924–25*, p. 38, NAI.

¹⁵⁴ "Instruction No. 14", *Assam Excise Manual, 1926* (Shillong, 1926), p. 199, ASA.

in smuggling activities by initiating tighter background checks as well as random inspection of cargoes.¹⁵⁵ The administration's major concerns in the late 1920s and 1930s were tackling organised gangs operating from Calcutta and Delhi as well as monitoring Marwari opium shop licensees in Assam who had business (and family) contacts in the Rajputana states with easy access to Malwa opium and were responsible for the majority of the volume of the illicit trade.¹⁵⁶ The intelligence gathered by the provincial excise officials indicated that significant quantities of illicit excise opium were transported through railway and postal parcels from the United Provinces and a reward system was put in place to incentivise railway and postal officials to assist detection which met with some success.¹⁵⁷

However, these measures only met with limited success as the major obstacle in tackling organised smuggling rackets proved to be the lack of co-ordinated efforts between different provincial excise officials as well as the absence of co-operation from enforcement agencies of other provinces. It is noteworthy that excise officials from Assam were denied assistance when they visited other provinces to carry out investigations in cases involving large-scale organised smuggling. A notable instance occurred in December 1936, when the excise commissioner of Darrang district, P.C. Roy, faced resistance from local policemen in Hyderabad (Sind) during an investigation involving illicit excise opium smuggling from Sind to Assam, which resulted in an official complaint which highlighted corruption among the ranks of the enforcement agencies in the province.¹⁵⁸

The lack of reliable figures on opium smuggling in Assam was a major problem that plagued policy makers. Government estimates, when made public, were deliberately conservative and this was necessary, in part, to endorse the success of the policy of gradual prohibition. But some insight on the scale of the trade is necessary for us to recognise the impact of smuggling activities on official policy. The *Burma Excise Report, 1925–26* comes handy in our assessment for being the most comprehensive statistical assessment for any part of British India. Additionally, since Burma was the only other British Indian province with a policy of registration and rationing, these statistics were the

¹⁵⁵ "Considerations of Certain Measures to Stop the Illicit Traffic of Opium Carried through Buses and Ferry Lessees", LSG, Separate Revenue, B (hereafter, SRB), March 1942, Nos. 96–103, pp. 11–16, ASA.

¹⁵⁶ No. 162 Ex., Commissioner of Excise, Assam to the Secretary, Transferred Departments, 23 November 1935, LSG, SRB, September 1937, Nos. 325–351, pp. 11–12, ASA.

¹⁵⁷ LSG, SRA, June 1929, Nos. 13–221, pp. 2–4, ASA.

¹⁵⁸ LSG, SRB, September 1937, Nos. 325–351, pp. 67–72, ASA.

only estimable reference through which we can gauge the extent of smuggling in Assam. In Burma, the reported opium seizures for 1925–26 was “well over a quarter of the consumption of licit opium”, but even this high proportion of confiscated goods was viewed by A.W. Botham, the Assam finance minister, with a degree of caution.¹⁵⁹ Botham observed that the seizures represented only a “small proportion” of the total smuggled opium in Burma and even contended that the “consumption of contraband opium exceeded that of licit opium”.¹⁶⁰

Botham’s analysis is significant given that the Assam government implemented in 1927 a system that shared many affinities with the Burma system, despite the fact that Assam historically had one of the lowest levels of opium seizures in India. Moreover, it was ill quipped in terms of infrastructure and preventive staff to deal with large scale opium smuggling.¹⁶¹ When compared with its neighbouring provinces, Burma and Bengal, Assam’s position on tackling smuggling is stark with seizures of less than 0.1 per cent of total consumption as compared to 25 per cent in the case of Burma and about 15 per cent in Bengal (see Table 4.1). The most serious problem was the absence of an excise intelligence bureau in Assam, a feature common to all Indian provinces since as early as 1912 and one that functioned very effectively and efficiently in Burma.¹⁶²

	1925	1926	1927	1928
Burma	119-18	125-24	110-30	113-15
Assam	0-7	0-23	0-30	1-32
Bengal	22-1	60-3	37-1	43-38

Table 4.1 Annual Seizures of Opium (in *maunds* and *seers*), 1925–28¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Government of Burma, *Excise Report for the Year Ending 31 March 1926* (Rangoon, 1926), NAI.

¹⁶⁰ No. 5718 E., Md Chaudhuri, Commissioner of Excise, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Education and Local-Self Government Departments, 11 January 1939, LSG ASA.

¹⁶¹ In Assam, however, general investigation and intelligence work was carried out by a 19-member team of excise officials, most of whom had other responsibilities. J. Slattery, *The Formation and Organisation of a Central Intelligence Bureau for Compilation and Dissemination of Information relating to the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs* (Simla, 1930) [Confidential Report], p. 22.

¹⁶² Following the 1912 Hague Convention and the concerns raised by the international body on opium consumption in British Burma, the excise administration’s decision to institute a dedicated intelligence wing acted as a model that was replicated (with changes) by all Indian provinces. See Slattery, *Report*, pp. 22–25.

¹⁶³ Compiled from *Reports on the Administration of the Excise Department in Assam* for the corresponding years.

As the policy of prohibition was being put into effect in phases starting in 1927, it was increasingly felt in both official and non-official quarters that the policy of high pricing, which was the cornerstone of opium policy since the 1870s, had outlived its function and was contributing to an increase in smuggling. Also pertinent was the fact that with the introduction of the pass system and opium rations, the high price policy was self-defeating and acted as an inducement to smuggling.¹⁶⁴ In fact, with increased detection of contraband Malwa opium in Dibrugarh district, the local Councillor, Nilmoni Phukan, had moved a resolution in the ALC which stressed on the need to achieve price parity with neighbouring provinces as means to counter smuggling.¹⁶⁵ The proposal to rationalise prices drew sharp reactions over the course of the next few years, including objections citing loss of revenue from government quarters and the fear of increased taxation on tea and other industries amongst the nominated members of the ALC. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, a keen anti-opiumist and the education minister, even made an artless admission about the impossibility of out-pricing contraband opium as Chinese opium could be bought at a quarter of the Assam excise price and Malwa opium cost less than a twentieth of the average retail price in the province.¹⁶⁶ There also existed various localised problems; for instance, special concessions had to be made with respect to formulation of policy in the frontier tracts, Sadiya and Balipara, which bordered Burma as well as non-British administered territories. The political officer of Sadiya, T.E. Furzes, highlighted that the high levels of addiction and undetected cultivation of poppy in the district not only made prohibition virtually impossible to enforce but also posed a risk to the success of the policy in other parts of Assam.¹⁶⁷

A number of provinces, including Assam, had demanded the formation of a centralised intelligence agency to tackle smuggling since the early 1910s and in September 1926, at a conference of all provincial excise ministers held at Shimla, the establishment of such an organisation was agreed upon.¹⁶⁸ This move was actuated by factors such as loss of excise revenue and public health considerations as well as the

¹⁶⁴ Demi-official correspondence between the officials in the department of excise and the excise minister. Demi-official No. 398E, 17 June 1927 and accompanying notes. ED, SRA, Nos. 92–96, March 1929, pp. 1–5, ASA.

¹⁶⁵ *Asamiya*, 8 March 1925.

¹⁶⁶ Marginal note by J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, 23 December 1927. ED, SRA, Nos. 92–96, March 1928, p. 9, ASA.

¹⁶⁷ No. 552G. XXVII/27, T.E. Furzes, Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, 16 June 1928, ED, ASA.

¹⁶⁸ “Indian Government’s Opium Policy: Viceroy’s Speech”, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 22 May 1930, p. 12.

obligation to ensure that effective measures were taken to check the international traffic in narcotics.¹⁶⁹ The Assam government welcomed the move as an indication of the central government's commitment to check the illicit trade and support its prohibition policy.¹⁷⁰

J. Slattery, an officer on special duty with the Central Board of Revenue, was appointed on 5 May 1929 to prepare a confidential dossier on smuggling in British India, which provided insights into smuggling of opium and other old-world narcotics such as *ganja* (cannabis) and *charas* (hashish) as well as newer narcotics like cocaine. The report suggested that Assam was uniquely affected by smuggling as it was the only Indian province where illicit opium was smuggled into in large quantities due to restrictions in sale.¹⁷¹ However, the primary emphasis of the investigation was not on domestic opium but rather “the checking of opium exports” and the two-way international trade involving opium and cocaine. Slattery's report provided a comprehensive account of all aspects of the illicit trade in dangerous drugs, especially the *modus operandi* of organised smuggling groups and major centres of the illicit trade, as well as the challenges to enforcement including details of preventive measures and suggestions for improvement through better co-ordination and organisation.¹⁷² However, the thrust of the report as well as the proposed central agency was targeted at “master smugglers”—the big players and organised rings—whose operations were mostly international in nature, rather than the kind of smuggling that the Assam government had to contend with.¹⁷³ The lack of emphasis on domestic opium, we argue, was hinged on two important considerations: the absence of international commitments and the fact, somewhat wryly put, that “preventive measures are generally subordinate to revenue considerations”.¹⁷⁴ Thus, domestic opium policy implicitly encouraged provincial governments to prioritise revenue interests over narcotic control, a fact that partly answers for the lack of support from other provinces to Assam's call against smuggling.

¹⁶⁹ Britain was one of the signatories of the international treaties drawn up by the League of Nations' Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous *Drugs*. Following the 1925 *International Opium Convention*, the international control system was formally institutionalised. UNODC, “*A Century of International Drug Control*”, *World Drug Report 2008* (Vienna, 2008).

¹⁷⁰ J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, the excise minister, at the Assam Legislative Council's proceedings in October 1927. ED, SRA, Nos. 159–219, March 1928, p. 9, ASA.

¹⁷¹ Slattery, *Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs*, p. i.

¹⁷² Slattery, *Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs*, pp. 20–32.

¹⁷³ Slattery, *Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs*, p. 43.

¹⁷⁴ Slattery, *Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs*, p. ii.

The seriousness of the issue of smuggling is evident from the figures relating to detection of opium-related offences after the policy of gradual reduction was introduced across the province of Assam in 1927–28. During the period between 1927–28 and 1932–33, consumption of opium in Assam fell from 28,800 *tolas* to 14,160 *tolas*, a reduction of more than 50 per cent.¹⁷⁵ However, detection of opium-related offences remained more or less stagnant with some annual variations (see Table 4.2). Moreover, figures related to offences pertaining to contraband opium which should have ideally increased following the limiting of licit supply also did not show any remarkable change. The government continued its policy of annual cuts to the rations of pass holders despite warnings from the provincial excise department about the rise in smuggling due to lack of enforcement staff and infrastructural support.¹⁷⁶ The magnitude of the problem can be gauged if we borrow the analogy from the Burmese example, where, as the Assam excise minister claimed, the supply of contraband opium equalled the sale of excise opium. It needs to be highlighted here that the policy in Assam was even more exacting than Burma as the latter did not impose annual cuts to the rations of the opium users.

Year	Unlicensed sale of excise opium	Illicit possession of excise opium	Illicit sale of contraband opium	Illicit possession of contraband	Illicit cultivation of poppy	Total offences (contraband opium)
1928–29	57	230	29	37	8	361 (74)
1929–30	65	180	4	122	20	391 (146)
1930–31	122	100	35	49	23	329 (107)
1931–32	82	108	31	56	21	298 (108)
1932–33	15	180	3	96	16	310 (115)

Table 4.2 Detected Opium Offences in Assam, 1928–1933¹⁷⁷

Moreover, until the publication of the AOE report, the official position of the problem of smuggling in Assam was always consistent and there was substantial

¹⁷⁵ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 14, ASA.

¹⁷⁶ ED, SRA, March 1929, Nos. 73–94, p. 17, ASA.

¹⁷⁷ Compiled from unpublished reports on smuggling in Assam for the corresponding years, SRB.

difference of opinion between the administration and the legislature. The enquiry committee was candid in its recognition of smuggling as the major impediment to the success of the policy of opium prohibition and the introductory chapter of the report raised the pertinent question about the veracity of the official statistics on opium consumption in Assam which indicated a 73 per cent reduction following the implementation of the policy of prohibition.¹⁷⁸ The committee was sceptical in its assessment of the actual success of the policy and called for a consolidated plan to tackle smuggling rather than, “*filling the pockets of swindlers and smugglers*”.¹⁷⁹

Among other things, the report provided a broad assessment of smuggling in Assam and the challenges faced by the excise staff in dealing with the illicit trade. The committee noted that “opium comes into Assam from every direction, by carriers who travel on foot or by rail or by steamer [boat], by railway and steamer parcels and through the post office” as well as opium grown within the province, much of which evades detection by excise staff due to remoteness of some of these poppy-growing areas.¹⁸⁰ The enquiry committee was categorical that there was “no question of Government revenue” in the policy course correction that it suggested.¹⁸¹ The recommendations of the committee were welcomed by the government and a large proportion of them were implemented with a sense of urgency, but with due regard to the revenue implications that any change in policy afforded.¹⁸² In its internal communications, however, the excise department officials were sceptical about the “existence of a strong public feeling” in favour of prohibition and temperance propaganda.¹⁸³

The report made two recommendations to facilitate the detection of opium smuggling cases; the first involved increasing the number of excise staff and organising them into special preventive units, while the second called for measures to reduce corruption among the ranks of the excise staff through better pay and proportionate reward system.¹⁸⁴ Despite divergence of opinion about the effectiveness of the policy of prohibition, the Assam government introduced a number of changes in the organisation of the excise department to tackle smuggling, which was, according to reliable estimates, at

¹⁷⁸ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 2, ASA.

¹⁷⁹ “Governor’s Speech”, *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 2, ASA, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁰ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 19, ASA.

¹⁸¹ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 2, ASA.

¹⁸² No. 4355 L.S.G, 3 December 1934, LSG, SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, pp. 3–6, ASA.

¹⁸³ LSG, SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, p. 2, ASA.

¹⁸⁴ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 48, ASA.

least twenty times of the amounts seized by the administration.¹⁸⁵ The report also highlighted accounts of arrests of smugglers—foreigners like Chinese, Bhutanese, Nepalese, and others from the Rajputana states and Central India—as well as problems faced by the authorities in tracking smuggling activities.¹⁸⁶

The witness statements of excise officials and other respondents also reveal a number of facets related to opium smuggling in the province. Excise officials highlighted cases of opium smuggling undertaken by organised gangs operating from both British and non-British territory as well as pointing out that smugglers were getting better organised and networks were becoming more sophisticated.¹⁸⁷ Anti-opiumists like Kuladhar Chaliha, on the other hand, noted the existence of high levels of corruption within the ranks of the excise department and suggested that the nexus between officials and smugglers was responsible for ineffectiveness of the prohibition-oriented policy of the government.¹⁸⁸

4.4 Shifting the Goalposts: An ‘Experimental’ Scheme, Medical Deaddiction and Total Prohibition

While total prohibition was at the heart of the demands of the anti-opiumists in Assam, the issue of de-addiction was virtually absent from the mainstream debate. In the 1870s and 1880s, physicians such as Edward Levingston and Norman Kerr developed the “disease model of drug addiction” which advocated medical treatment of drug abuse with addiction being seen as a physical and psychological condition, resulting in the evolution of the “addict-as-patient” discourse.¹⁸⁹ Despite better understanding of the drug and its addictive nature, throughout the nineteenth century, opium alkaloids were a component in a majority of pharmaceutical drugs and until the 1920s, its use was widespread across the world.¹⁹⁰ In India, the Dangerous Drugs Act 1930, introduced regulations on opium

¹⁸⁵ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, p. 32, ASA.

¹⁸⁶ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee 1933*, pp. 64–67, ASA.

¹⁸⁷ Statements by Janakinath Saikia, senior excise inspector, Sadiya frontier; Dharendra Nath Sarkar, Lakhimpur excise superintendent; Rajani Kanta Bora, excise superintendent of Jorhat. *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. 1*, pp. 70–71, 262–63, 270–71, ASA.

¹⁸⁸ “Statement of Kuladhar Chaliha”, *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol. 1*, p. 106, ASA.

¹⁸⁹ Terry M. Parssinen and Karen Kerner, “Development of the Disease Model of Drug Addiction in Britain, 1870–1926”, *Medical History*, Vol. 24 (1980), pp. 278–81.

¹⁹⁰ Stuart Anderson and Virginia Berridge, “Opium in 20th-century Britain: Pharmacists, Regulation and the People”, *Addiction*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2000), pp. 27–30.

intended for medical use but due to low penetration of Western medicine, the actual effects of the legislation was limited.¹⁹¹

A number of methods of deaddiction (or ‘denarcotisation’) were used by doctors in the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially in jails and mental institutions, usually without the consent of the user–addict.¹⁹² In America and Britain, although public opinion was polarised by the debate between criminalisation and rehabilitation of drug users, deaddiction became an important element of public health policy.¹⁹³ In India, although a number of medical practitioners experimented with opium deaddiction with varying degrees of success, there was no definite public health policy on the subject.¹⁹⁴ As discussed above, in Assam, the debate on medically supervised de-addiction of opium users gained momentum in the late 1920s as research conducted by Dr R.N. Chopra at the School of Tropical Medicine, Calcutta disproved the drug’s efficacy in the treatment of malaria, a key point of debate that had allowed doctors to prescribe opium in medical dispensaries across Assam since the 1840s.¹⁹⁵

However, despite the growing body of work about the negative effects of opium addiction, opinion on opium use within the medical fraternity in Assam was far from unanimous. A majority of tea garden doctors as well as government medical practitioners held the view that although young addicts could be cured, older addicts faced health risks, even death, when forced to quit. As a consequence, the government’s opium prohibition policy excluded addicts above the age of 50 years from rationing (and eventual deaddiction) as a humanitarian gesture. The statements offered by medical practitioners before the AOE provide an insight into the various arguments and experiences of doctors with opium addiction. While some doctors, including Dr David Manson of Jorehaut Tea Company, suggested that all addicts, including those above the age of 50 years could be cured without any risk though gradual reduction in rations,¹⁹⁶ others like Dr D.P.

¹⁹¹ Government of India, Finance Department (Revenue Division), *The Dangerous Drugs Act, 1930 (II of 1930)* (Simla, 1947), pp. 3–9.

¹⁹² David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America* (Cambridge MA, 2001), pp. 123–33.

¹⁹³ Virginia Berridge and Gareth Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use and Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England*, revised edn (London, 1999), pp. 12–15; Courtwright, *Dark Paradise*, pp. 137–42.

¹⁹⁴ R.N. Chopra and I.C. Chopra, “Treatment of Drug Addiction: Experience in India”, *Bulletin on Narcotics*, Vol. 7, Nos. 3–4 (January 1957), pp. 24–28.

¹⁹⁵ R.N. Chopra and R. Knowles, “The Action of Opium and Narcotine in Malaria”, *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, Vol. 18 (1930), pp. 5–13.

¹⁹⁶ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol.1*, p. 46, ASA.

Williams, a tea garden doctor, contended that he had personal experience that deaddiction was fatal for those above the age of 45 years.¹⁹⁷ It was, however, the evidence given by experienced practitioners like Dr C.H.P. Allen, Civil Surgeon, Jorhat, that held sway and he was unequivocal in his support of medical treatment of addicts. Allen based his statement on his experience of the deaddiction protocols that were followed in the provincial prisons and he suggested that apart from some physical pain and withdrawal symptoms, the physical effects on addicts when they were denied their regular quota of opium was minimal.¹⁹⁸ The prison policy of depriving opium addicts of the drug provided the administration with a firm basis to trial medically-supervised deaddiction as part of the prohibition programme, a feature that became the mainstay of official policy from 1939 onwards.

Assam was the first province in British India to trial complete prohibition of opium and the measure was introduced by the administration on an experimental basis in the subdivisions of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar in 1939 before it was extended to the entire province.¹⁹⁹ The scheme received coverage in the Indian and British press and the efforts of the Assam administration were noted as a step in the right direction.²⁰⁰ In the local legislature, however, opinion about the government's proposal was divided and F.W. Hocknhull, the leader of the European group, maintained that de-addiction was "doomed to failure" and emphasised that the loss of revenue and the costs involved in the campaign were too high for the administration to bear.²⁰¹

The launch of the prohibition scheme was preceded by a propaganda campaign by the government to rally support of all government officials, missionary societies and prominent members of the community to take an active interest in prohibition activities, especially assisting excise officials in tackling smuggling.²⁰² In fact, in 1927, the education department headed by J.J.M. Nichols-Roy had trialled an anti-opium campaign across the province which aimed at educating the masses about the ill-effects of the drug

¹⁹⁷ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol.1*, pp. 156–58, ASA.

¹⁹⁸ *Assam Opium Enquiry 1933: Evidence, Vol.1*, pp. 118–19, ASA.

¹⁹⁹ No. 7025 L.S.G., H.G. Dennehy, Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Joint Secretary to the Government of India, Finance Department (Central Revenue), 23 December 1938, LSG, ASA.

²⁰⁰ "Prohibition in Assam", *The Statesman* (3 February 1938); "Prohibition in India: The Opium Problem", *The Manchester Guardian* (5 Nov 1938).

²⁰¹ "Control of Opium: Assam Assembly Approve Government's Plan", *The Statesman* (23 March 1939).

²⁰² No. 2138-50, From H.G. Dennehy, Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Commission, Assam Valley Division and all Heads of Departments. 31 March 1939, LSG, ASA.

on the physical and mental health of users through posters and pamphlets.²⁰³ The literature was developed by the Department of Public Health and contained medical advice on the addictive nature of the drug including warnings about potential dangers of its casual use as well as symptoms and long term effects of opium. As part of the campaign, leaflets titled “What Boys and Girls Should Know About Opium” were distributed to school children and advertisements with headings like “Don’t Use Opium” and “Evils of Opium” were published in prominent English and vernacular newspapers.²⁰⁴ The 1927 scheme was, however, discontinued as the government decided to exclude propaganda activities from official policy as it disassociated itself from the anti-opium campaign and adopted a neutral policy as the drive came to be associated with the Congress party.

The treatment of opium addicts was a key component of the prohibition scheme and the administration invited Dr Chopra to lead the medical aspects of the scheme.²⁰⁵ Public meetings were organised to educate the masses on the ill effects of opium use and the effectiveness of the treatment scheme was widely publicised. The roots of the scheme introduced in 1939 can be traced back to the AOE report which discussed the issue of voluntary medical treatment. The issue of Modinos’ treatment, a serum-based regimen developed in 1908 and trialled in many parts of the world, had been deliberated upon by the committee but the lack of infrastructural support and costs involved resulted in exclusion of this provision from the final resolution.²⁰⁶ The treatment scheme was a landmark in public health initiatives on deaddiction in India as it was completely voluntary and focused on treatment and care, which marked a departure from the institutionalised approach to deaddiction, often requiring lengthy confinement in hospitals and treatment centres.²⁰⁷ Treatments centres were set up across the two subdivisions and a total of 189 centres (including 100 in tea gardens) offered opium addicts a treatment regimen known as “Glucose–Lecithin Therapy” which was developed by Dr Chopra to

²⁰³ “Notes”, ED, SRA, Nos. 64–68, June 1928, p. 6, ASA.

²⁰⁴ “[Pamphlets on Opium]”, ED, SRA, Nos. 64–68, June 1928, pp. 1–2, ASA.

²⁰⁵ “A brief report on the progress of the scheme for prohibition of opium in the Sibsagar and the Dibrugarh subdivisions, Assam from 15 April to 30 June 1939”, LSG, SRA, Nos. 11–100, 1939, ASA.

²⁰⁶ “Notes: H.G. Dennehy, Secretary, Transferred Departments”, LSG, SRA, June 1935, Nos. 3–12, p. 17, ASA.

²⁰⁷ This was in sharp contrast to the way in which deaddiction was trialled in Philippines in 1908. See Daniel J. P. Wertz, “Idealism, Imperialism, and Internationalism: Opium Politics in the Colonial Philippines, 1898–1925”, *MAS*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (March 2013), p. 488.

suit local conditions, available infrastructure and budgeted expenditure.²⁰⁸ The therapy was a “gradual withdrawal method” and aimed at amelioration and treatment of withdrawal symptoms rather than complete rehabilitation.²⁰⁹ In all, out of the 12,460 individuals who held opium passes (representing almost 5 per cent of the population of the two subdivisions), more than 10,200 received treatment, of whom 40 per cent gave up the habit while another 50 per cent managed to reduce their doses.²¹⁰ Medical experts concluded that the scheme was a success—given that the amelioration of withdrawal symptoms had a 90 per cent success rate—and the provincial administration gradually extended it to other parts of the province.²¹¹

The prohibition scheme was supported by a propaganda campaign and the help of local social organisations and political parties was enlisted, given that popular support was crucial to the success of the scheme. Omeo Kumar Das, a young Congress leader, was appointed by the government as the honorary prohibition commissioner on 15 April 1939 and he was entrusted with the responsibility of organising a volunteer force to carry out the groundwork related to prohibition. Local prohibition committees were organised under a Central Opium Prohibition Committee which assisted the government and collected information on things like localised smuggling activity and intelligence on addicts who refused to seek treatment. The local prohibition committees, however, faced resistance from various quarters, especially from village officials, who spread false propaganda that claimed that the government would roll back the scheme and reopen the opium shops in due course.²¹² The lack of assistance from the government, especially excise officials in tackling smuggling, was highlighted by Omeo Das and Lakheswar Barua, member of the Assam Legislative Council for Dibrugarh.²¹³ Resistance to prohibition also came in the form of anti-prohibition meetings organised by *gaonburas*, *mauzadars* and other prominent individuals; demands of the Central Prohibition Committee for strict action against them failed to encourage the district administration to

²⁰⁸ R.N. Chopra, “The Problem of Opium Addiction in India and its Treatment”, *Current Science*, No. 11 (November 1939), pp. 505–06.

²⁰⁹ Complete rehabilitation included “vocational [training] and diversional post-withdrawal treatment” and was offered to only a small number of addicts. Chopra and Chopra, “Treatment of Drug Addiction”, p. 31.

²¹⁰ Chopra and Chopra, “Treatment of Drug Addiction”, pp. 30, 32.

²¹¹ A.M.V. Hesterlow, “Note on instructions for the treatment of opium addiction”, Memo No. 476 P, 1 August 1939, LSG, ASA.

²¹² No. 93, Omeo Kumar Das, Honorary Prohibition Commissioner, to S. Gohain, Secretary to the Government of Assam, Education and Local Self Government Department, 22 May 1939, LSG, ASA.

²¹³ Lakheswar Barua to G.S. Gunning, 2 June 1939, LSG, ASA.

take punitive action against them.²¹⁴ The local Councillor urged the intervention of G.S. Gunning, the Lakhimpur district commissioner, to order village officials to encourage addicts to seek treatment and promote the prohibition message but his proposal was dismissed.²¹⁵ Gunning maintained that anti-prohibition activities were not illegal and clarified that the government would not “attempt to suppress public opinion” on the prohibition policy.²¹⁶ The invocation of individual freedom of expression was misplaced given that *gaonburas* were figures of considerable local authority and were regarded as representatives of government by the rural people. Gunning’s position also contradicted the official stance which guaranteed cooperation of all arms of government and in the face of rising political pressure the government directed district and sub-divisional officers to convince *gaonburas* to conform to the government’s prohibition policy and warn them in case they failed to adhere to the official dictum.²¹⁷

However, owing to these differences the rift between government and the non-official prohibition leaders had become unbridgeable and Das relinquished the office of honorary prohibition commissioner on 12 June 1939 and provided a list of reasons for his disillusionment with the implementation of the prohibition policy in a letter to the Premier (chief minister) of Assam. The missive questioned the government’s sincerity in implementation of the policy and faulted it on four major counts: (i) non-deployment of agreed upon enforcement staff; (ii) delays in legal proceedings pertaining to smuggling cases; (iii) failure to provide promised financial assistance; and (iv) curb anti-prohibition propaganda.²¹⁸ He put the spotlight firmly on smuggling and suggested that the policy of acquittal of smugglers who confessed to addiction, under the overall policy of amnesty and voluntary de-addiction, was a major obstacle to prohibition.

Contradictions in the government’s policy were rife and there was a serious discord between the executive and the administration on the issue of prohibition. The Premier of Assam in his 1938 budget speech had declared that the province would

²¹⁴ B.C. Gogoi, Secretary, Central Opium Prohibition Committee, Dibrugarh, to Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, 9 June 1939, LSG, ASA.

²¹⁵ No. 2583 Ex., from G.S. Gunning, to Laksheswar Sarma, 12 June 1939, LSG, ASA.

²¹⁶ No. 2584 Ex., from G.S. Gunning to B.C. Gogoi, 12 June 1939 [copy of No. 2583 Ex.], LSG, ASA, emphasis added.

²¹⁷ No. 3292 R, S.P. Desai, Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Commissioner of Divisions, 12 June 1939, LSG, ASA.

²¹⁸ No. 100, From Omeo Kumar Das, Honorary Prohibition Commissioner, to the Hon’ble Premier, Assam, 12 June 1939, LSG, ASA.

formally become a total prohibition state on 31 March 1939.²¹⁹ The only exception to the rule was the exclusion of addicts above 50 years of who were deemed medically to be at risk of death or great harm. Despite opposition from a number of high-ranking officials, the resolution to cancel all passes issued to those under the age of 50 with effect from 31 March 1939 was passed by the government, along with the decision to not issue new passes.²²⁰ With this, Assam entered the era of total prohibition that altered the terrain of smuggling substantially and posed new challenges for the government to tackle illicit opium arose.

An analysis of the detection of cases of smuggling following the implementation of the policy of total prohibition in the two sub-divisions in 1939 provides interesting insights into smuggling activities and the ways in which the administration dealt with the challenge of curbing the illicit trade. The excise department prepared detailed quarterly reports on smuggling activities in the two sub-divisions over an 18-month period between July 1939 and December 1940. These reports constitute the most comprehensive official documentation on opium smuggling maintained by the Assam government during the colonial period. Besides providing useful statistical facts and figures about smuggling activities and administrative steps to tackle them, these reports also contain detailed accounts of cases involving major seizures and the legal action initiated against them. The narrative accounts of case reports filed by the police and excise officials provide an overview into the challenges that the provincial administration faced while tackling the spurt in smuggling due to the prohibitory orders. The reports provide interesting insights into the *modus operandi* of smugglers who used various modes of transport, both public and private, concealed contraband and excise opium in railway parcels and personal baggage, and notably the rackets that involved the cooperation of government officials in illicit activities. They also outline the strategies devised by the preventive staff to counter the spurt in smuggling as well as the rise in illegal poppy cultivation in the prohibition areas (see Appendix 5 for copies of official reports of opium smuggling cases).

Contrary to the claims of the government about the success of the experiment with total prohibition in the subdivisions of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar which put de-addiction

²¹⁹ On 1 April 1937 there were a total of 39,987 opium pass holders, out of whom 9,662 were held by persons below the age of 50, and it was these consumers who were to lose their access to opium with the enforcement of total prohibition. "Statement Showing the Number of Opium Consumers", 19 June 1938, LSG, SRB, September 1939, No. 341, p. 35, ASA.

²²⁰ No. 5718 E, from Md Chaudhuri, Commissioner of Excise, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Education and Local Self Government Departments, 11 January 1939, LSG, ASA.

figures at over 70 per cent within the first six months, the quarterly reports indicate a different picture. The reports suggest that although there was substantial decrease in consumption, the ban on opium had created a lucrative market for illicit opium and the high price of contraband opium had led to a marked increase in the sale of country spirits and *ganja* as opium addicts were turning to cheaper alternatives.²²¹ As far as the enforcement aspect of the prohibition scheme was concerned, the successes were considerable. An increase in staffing levels of the excise department and support from the local community in gathering information as well as active co-operation with the administration in anti-smuggling activities, the number of detections and seizures from the two sub-divisions was remarkable (see Table 4.3). In the case of Lakhimpur sub-division alone, the quarterly seizures in two instances were higher than the annual figures for the whole province of Assam in previous years.

	Lakhimpur		Sibsagar	
	Cases detected	Quantity seized (<i>seers-tolas-annas</i>)	Cases detected	Quantity seized (<i>seers-tolas-annas</i>)
Jul–Sep 1939	193	34–49–0	92	11–34–0
Oct–Dec 1939	123	39–56–5½	22	0–43–5
Jan–Mar 1940	93	22–41–11	26	0–60–12
Apr–Jun 1940	137	16–79–2	38	0–62–15
Jul–Sep 1940	189	26–8–7	41	1–6–13
Oct–Dec 1940	87	23–31–9	32	0–34–4

Table 4.3 Smuggling Cases and Quantities Seized in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, July 1939–December 1940²²²

²²¹ “Report on the Progress of the Scheme of Total Prohibition of Opium in the Sibsagar and Dibrugarh Subdivisions for the Quarter Ending 31st March 1940”, by Md Chaudhuri, Commissioner of Excise, 24 June 1940, LSG, SRB, Nos. 141–239, June 1941, ASA.

²²² Compiled from quarterly reports on the “Progress of the Scheme of Total Prohibition of Opium in the Sibsagar and Dibrugarh Subdivisions” for the corresponding periods. LSG, SRB, Nos. 141–239, June 1941, ASA.

The excise commissioner, Muhammad Chaudhuri, noted in the report published at the end of the first year of total prohibition that the department's success in the detection of "big smuggling cases" was directly responsible for the skyrocketing of the price of illicit opium which acted as a deterrent against new users from taking up the habit. Given that the administration was unable to make much headway in tackling small-scale opium smuggling, which resulted in a significant proportion of confirmed addicts continuing with their habit, it asserted a long-term strategy on prohibition which relied on ensuring that the "younger generation will not be initiated to opium-taking".²²³ The administration proclaimed the 'experiment' in the two subdivisions a success and the scheme was extended to other plains districts of the province on 1 March 1941, and Assam became the first Indian province to impose total prohibition (see Appendix 6).

With the dawn of Indian independence, the Gopinath Bardoloi-led Congress government passed the Assam Opium Prohibition Bill, 1947, a landmark legal instrument to control the sale and possession of opium in the province.²²⁴ With this legislation, which came into effect from 1 April 1948, Assam became the first Indian state to prohibit opium as well as provide compulsory penal sentences to all smugglers along with enhanced sentences for habitual offenders including the restriction of movement and formal bans on known smugglers from entering the province.²²⁵ The provincial act rekindled the national debate on opium prohibition and a local MP, B.C. Bhagabati, initiated a resolution in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament), which sought the co-operation of the central government in limiting the production and sale of opium across India. On 3 August 1949, at the All-India Opium Conference held in New Delhi, all provincial governments and the central government agreed to impose a total ban on opium in India, except for medical and scientific uses, within 10 years and the complete ban became effective from 1 April 1959, thus putting a formal end to the century-long prohibition campaign.²²⁶

Although the actual success of the 'experiment' as well as total prohibition across the province in limiting opium consumption is debatable given the existence of

²²³ "Report on the Progress of the Scheme of Total Prohibition of Opium in the Sibsagar and Dibrugarh Subdivisions for the Quarter Ending 31st March 1940", by Md. Chaudhuri, Commissioner of Excise, 24 June 1940, LSG, SRB, Nos. 141–239, June 1941, ASA.

²²⁴ Government of Assam, *Assam Opium Prohibition Act, 1947 (Act XXIII of 1947)* (Shillong, 1947), ASA.

²²⁵ E.H. Pakyntien, "Opium Prohibition Campaign in Assam I", *Bulletin on Narcotics*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1958), pp. 13–14.

²²⁶ Lachman Dev, "The All-India Narcotics Conference, 1956", *Bulletin on Narcotics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1957), pp. 1–3.

widespread smuggling as well as lack of co-operation from the user-addicts, the Assam government's initiative was taken up as the model by other Indian provinces. The experience of the Assam administration in tackling the availability of illicit opium in the two subdivisions is also significant in light of the fact that despite the proactive stance and will of the Assam government in the post-1939 era to prohibit opium across the province, it took a further couple of decades before total prohibition was introduced across India.²²⁷

4.5 Conclusion

During the period, 1925–1941, Assam's anti-opium campaign was driven equally by local efforts, especially in the arena of legislative politics, as well as global developments in opium policy trajectory under the LoN. On one hand, local differences and contradictions in the era of nationalist politics, especially the spectre of communalism that haunted the 1930s, thwarted a united effort towards total prohibition as the political leadership in the two valleys failed to reach a consensus on the opium question, while on the other, transnational treaties provided the impulse for affirmative action and radical policy change at the global level as opium became a proscribed drug across the world. The chapter foregrounded the contradictory impulses of the government in the late 1920s and early 1930s with respect to the revenue implications of its opium policy and the ways in which it sought to maximise its revenue under the guise of a policy of 'greater good'. By 1933, however, the passage of the Bangkok opium treaty and other international instruments had a direct impact on provincial matters as they motivated the passage of key local anti-opium legislations and also induced the Assam administration to launch an official enquiry into opium consumption in 1933. The enquiry highlighted the extent of opium addiction in the province and provided a comprehensive assessment of public opinion on opium use and prohibition from economic, social and medical perspectives. The international climate as well as the findings of the provincial enquiry directed the trajectory of Assam's move towards total prohibition but the policy had to contend with the unwillingness of the central government to limit opium production and impose stricter controls on the issue of illicit opium as revenue considerations determined the status quo in Indian policy. Despite opposition from certain sections of society, the provincial government followed a unilateral path to prohibition and struggled with the challenge of

²²⁷ Pakyntien, "Opium Prohibition", pp. 13–14.

increased smuggling compounded by the lack of support from the central government as well as neighbouring provinces. In the move towards total prohibition the Assam government in 1939, led by a coalition of nationalist parties, initiated the first state sponsored opium deaddiction 'experiment' in India in two subdivisions. This paved the way for the introduction of a complete ban on opium and its derivatives from 1 April 1941, thus making Assam the first Indian province to impose total prohibition.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to provide a social history of opium in colonial Assam from the perspective of the intersection of state and society with a focus on the user–addict. It sought to address the lacunae in our understanding of opium in India and was centred on the proposition that the literature on the subject suffered from an economic history bias that has overemphasised the Indo–China trade dimension at the expense of other complex narratives and experiences, especially social, cultural and political dimensions of use and abuse. In order to address this neglect, the thesis explored the ‘opium question’ in India from the standpoint of consumption with a localised focus on Assam and highlighted the centrality of practices and discourses related to opium in the province as well as its unique experience of prohibition, both in terms of policy as well as public participation and response. It employed a transnational framework to trace the history of opium consumption, addiction and prohibition in Assam which was predicated on strategies of ‘colonial difference’ to highlight the tradition of indigenous resistance articulated through social, literary, cultural and political reactions. The thesis studied the evolution of the opium debate in Assam from local, national and transnational perspectives by focussing on the actions of three different groups involved in the interplay—addicts, peddlers and reformers. The discussion located opium at the heart of colonial polity in Assam and foregrounded the aspect of domestic consumption through an analysis of the networks that these three groups generated, operated in and fostered, in order to chart the role that the ‘drug–commodity’ played in shaping social and political discourses.

The thesis emphasised that the trajectory of the British opium trade, from its roots as a monopoly commodity to an internationally regulated narcotic, was determined through contestations in the sphere of private liberties, societal responsibilities, governmental obligations and international negotiations. Alongside (and in opposition to) the persuasive power of Eurocentric scientific and medical theories as well as ethical debates on opium, including the redemptive promise of prohibition, a unique set of social and political responses emerged in India. These responses challenged not just the dominant discourse of ‘Asiatic addiction’ but also the legitimacy of imperial rule in which opium, as a prize trade commodity, symbolised the colonial enterprise. Concomitantly, the thesis also traced the trajectory of developments of opium policy determinants (and the wider discourse) at different levels during the same period. The local context in Assam was dominated by ideas of colonial rule, the national context was

determined by trade dimensions and connected with revenue, and the global context was informed by notions of imperial ascendancy, and, subsequently, international co-operation. The thesis emphasised four interconnected approaches to the opium question in India: i. opium's materiality as commodity; ii. its use as 'practice' (social, religious, cultural and literary); iii. the trade in terms of global connections; and, iv. local, national and transnational policy ensuing in multilateral treaties and worldwide proscription.

Chapter 1 examined British and indigenous discourses on opium eaters and opium eating and highlighted the 'othering' of the Assamese through the paradigm of the 'lazy native'—a distinction between the creative genius of European Romantic heritage and the indolent, degenerate and profligate native promoted through a narrative of moral, physical and spiritual inferiority. It explored how a trade commodity, operating within the dynamics of profit and loss, was appropriated as a socio-cultural and political discourse for the purpose of colonial rule within a plantation economy. The discussion interpreted the discourse centred on the *kania* (the Assamese opium eater) as an expression of 'colonial difference' to highlight how this 'othering' signified wider colonial processes and practices. It signalled that the archetype represented an apposite vantage point for exploring Victorian notions of morality and inequity (the good human), industry and idleness (the good worker), indigene and alien (the good subject). The chapter proposed that the colonial archive was the point of entry into a complex web of techniques and processes through which the logic of governmentality, domination and difference was produced and it discussed the counter narrative generated through Assamese satire in the late nineteenth century which modelled opium addicts as authorial selves and explored autonomous subjectivities. It emphasised that the cultural sphere epitomised the contested space between subjectivity, modernity and nationalism—incorporating both the anticolonial movement and nation-building project through expressions of post-linguistic sentiments. In addition to the cultural reaction, the chapter also highlighted the political response in Assam that emerged as an anti-opium campaign directed at the government's opium policy which exhibited two distinct tendencies: middle class activism typified by petition politics and peasant protest instanced by defiance and challenge to the state.

Chapter 2 underlined the global dimension of the opium prohibition movement, which brought together missionaries, social reformers, liberal thinkers, medical practitioners and politicians and evolved from localised campaigns in the West to international organisations that fostered a transnational dialogue on drug regulation.

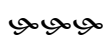
During the late nineteenth century, the anti-opium debate revolved around the question of medical justification for opium use pitted against moral arguments along with the ethical mire of the revenue derived from opium by the British Empire. The other major dimension of the opium debate was the distinction between opium eating and opium smoking—the former being associated with the medical ‘necessity’ argument while the latter was construed as through the prism of ‘vice’. The chapter discussed these two facets of the opium question through a study of the report of the Royal Commission on Opium (RCO; 1893–1895) that was entrusted with the remit to investigate opium consumption in India. The report justified the Indian government’s position about the absence of both opium smoking and widespread addiction in India which had a profound effect on the prohibition debate in India and diverted the attention of the transnational prohibition lobby to China, which was widely known to have an opium smoking problem. Through a case study of the Assam witnesses who appeared before the RCO (as well as those whose testimonials were stymied) the discussion highlighted the role of the Indian government in misrepresenting the evidence presented to the RCO through ‘witness management’ as part of a strategy to repudiate the existence of opium abuse in India as well as stress on the medicinal and customary use arguments. The chapter also highlighted the role of transnational organisations and forums in promulgating international opium policy in the early twentieth century and emphasised connections between the global and the local through an examination of an opium enquiry conducted by the Assam government in 1912 which endorsed the existence of widespread opium smoking in Assam. This enquiry was prompted by the provisions of the 1912 Hague Convention which mandated the Indian government to end opium smoking, but despite the compelling evidence of widespread opium smoking and addiction in Assam, the provincial as well as central governments persisted with its denial of the existence of the practice in India in transnational forums till the mid-1920s in order to disengage itself from the treaty obligations and protect the opium revenue. Through a discussion of the two enquiries within the larger framework of international drug regulation, the chapter accentuated the centrality of opium in the early twentieth century reconfigurations of the global order as the British opium trade was caught between the revenue imperative and the complicated terrain of international diplomacy and co-operation.

Chapter 3 focused on the nationalist period in Assam and highlighted the gaps in our understanding of both the impulses as well as the trajectories of the self-determination

movement in Assam from the vantage point of the opium prohibition movement. The chapter challenged the grand narratives of the nationalist historiography projects which reveal a palpable lack of understanding of the internal processes, fissures and complexities of political mobilisation in the province and demonstrate that specificities of the local were subordinated to the dominant narratives of the pan-Indian movement. The discussion traced the emergence of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the provincial political space in the 1920s and highlighted how the INC appropriated the local anti-opium campaign to gain a footing in Assam. This involved uprooting the indigenous movement from its broad-based local roots and initiated a process that mobilised only the Assamese-speaking section of society while failing to assimilate minority groups, communities and tribes in participatory politics. The chapter also disputed the strategy employed by nationalist historians who have conflated the temperance movement with the opium prohibition campaign and interpreted it from the perspective of Gandhi's championing of alcohol abstinence. This was done through a study of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (1924–1925) using hitherto unused source material which highlighted that the enquiry marked the turning point of the local anti-opium campaign and inserted Assam into the transnational prohibition movement, thus challenging the position exhibited in the existing historiography that has situated the enquiry within the nationalist framework of the Gandhian temperance crusade. The enquiry not only provided a comprehensive historical account of opium policy in Assam that was free of official bias but was also instrumental in persuading the international prohibition lobby to campaign against domestic opium consumption in India. The chapter underscored the impact of the enquiry report on the prohibition movement in Assam from the perspective of the intersection of local, regional, national and international politics and fleshed out the critical role played by C.F. Andrews and other transnational prohibition activists. Additionally, the chapter also indicated the need to re-evaluate the role of regional social reformers and political leaders in the prohibition campaign, as their contributions have been written out of the historiography that is dominated by both influential Indian national leaders as well as the prominent Western activists.

Chapter 4 discussed the final phase of the anti-opium campaign in Assam and highlighted the intersection of provincial politics and the nationalist campaign with the transnational drug regulation programme. It emphasised the links between global developments in the wake of the League of Nations' (LoN) drug-regulation agenda from

the mid 1920s onwards with the efforts of Assamese legislators which resulted in the introduction of measures like registration and rationing of opium consumers and public health measures related to opium deaddiction. The chapter also suggested that during the 1930s and 1940s, the push-and-pull of the internationalisation of Assam's opium issue and the insularity of the political leadership determined the trajectory of provincial opium policy. This phase of mature political activity was marked by the dominant narrative of the 'two nation theory' and featured the rise of parochialism and communalism that was typified by the rift between the political leadership in the Brahmaputra and Surma valley. This had a direct impact on the prohibition debate as opium addiction was interpreted as a Hindu, Assamese issue which thwarted a united effort towards total prohibition and the impulse for change was provided by transnational treaties at the provincial as well as pan-India level and the political interests of Assamese legislators. The chapter explored this process through a discussion of an official opium enquiry conducted in 1933 that was motivated by local demands as well as international treaty obligations and represented the first cross-platform effort that featured co-operation between the government and Assamese prohibition campaigners. The enquiry's findings provided redoubtable evidence of addiction as well as the widespread support of a ban on opium among the provincial population which signalled the way for the introduction of total prohibition in the late 1930s. The chapter also highlighted the challenges that the government faced in pursuing a prohibition policy both from official and non-official quarters, especially the substantial loss of excise revenue, as well as administrative complications associated with the rise in opium smuggling that was amplified by the lack of support of the Indian government as well as neighbouring provinces to Assam's opium policy. The chapter ended with a case-study of India's first 'experiment' with a ban on opium and medical deaddiction that was introduced in two subdivisions in Upper Assam with extremely high incidence of addiction in 1939, which was subsequently extend in a phased manner to other parts of the province after Assam formally introduced total opium prohibition on 1 April 1941.



One of the major hurdles to historicising opium and the prohibition movement in Assam was both the lack of existing historical scholarship on the topic as well as the absence of studies on Assam that employ a framework that looks beyond the category of the nation. The transnational perspective that this thesis offers is novel, both with regard to histories

of Assam as well as literature on opium in India. This enabled the exploration of perspectives that have been overlooked within the historiography, for instance, the role played by transnational prohibition activists in the anti-opium campaign in Assam or the intertwining narratives of transnational drug regulation treaties and local anti-opium legislation as well as the prohibition debate in Assam. The other problem was the dominance of the ‘master narratives’ of contemporary South Asian or Southeast Asian historiography and their emphasis on periodisation based on political order poses problems for understanding the connected histories of regions whose inhabitants revel in multiple identities, both insular and cosmopolitan/ecumenical. Ranging from ethnic/tribal, regional, social, political, anti-statist or religion-based identities including Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, these operate through a shared cultural heritage that remained unchanged through periods of political changes: from pre-modern through imperial, national and global periods. One of these cultural affinities have to do with consumption of licit and illicit products, including opium, *ganja* and *bhang*, whose legality is often at odds with social practices and they often have a resilience that the state cannot alter despite administrative measures, lending drug histories unique problems.

The transnational framework comes with its attendant problems, especially the emphasis on the redemptive promises of the process of globalisation and its avowed goal of globality and the lack of precise methods has made the field a frontline for contradictory impulses. The thesis has foregrounded that methods of regional history have many parallels with the transnational and highlighted that questions of connection and comparison offer new ways of interpretation. Our understanding of transnationalism and its relevance to historical study of colonial processes demonstrates awareness of these hurdles but recognises the benefits of pursuing concepts of connectedness and of cosmopolitanism within social theory and we believe that the transnational approach enables a reformulation of drug history. The thesis recognises the shift from national boundaries of significations (and the connexion of parts of the world that were studied in isolation) as a significant development that has a constructive influence that not only extends the reach of comparative histories but also offers scope for interdisciplinary studies.



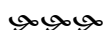
We believe that the findings of the thesis, especially the trajectories of circulation of ideas and historical processes, offer the possibility of further work in two areas. Both these

projects employ transnational approaches that focus on social and cultural modes of living where local factors and global processes are involved in dynamic relationships that shape subjectivities and responses in the locality and influence global developments. The first is the potential for further explorations of opium, especially cultural and social aspects of use and abuse and the generation of meaning by users in different contexts, both within India as well as the wider intra-Asian and Indian Ocean world and their mutual and wider interactions. The project indicates the importance of ‘decentering Europe’ and emphasises that the study of intra-regional connections and mutual influences enable the emergence of aspects of social, cultural, economic and political bearing that have been neglected. This project is both an attempt at recovery of local and regional specificities and perspectives as well as insertion of locality into the global history of opium. The most opportune framing element, we suggest, would be transnational opium regulation forums in the early twentieth century that brought together Western and Eastern nations into dialogue, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, with the Opium Advisory Council (later the Permanent Opium Control Board) of the LoN. These conferences and forums offer crucial insights into the sphere of cooperation, exchange and diplomacy between Asia and the West as well as dialogue amongst these entities and highlight the reconfiguration of the imperial order, even signalling the emergence of the narrative of decolonisation and postcolonial subjectivities.

The second strand of exploration is a wider project that interrogates the ways in which one thinks and writes about transnational organisations, for instance the LoN (and its successor body, the United Nations [UN]), which we propose has been dominated by an implicit Eurocentric bias—historicised solely through the perspective of the ‘Great Powers’ and demonstrated by a writing-out of the experiences of the ‘non-West’. We are particularly interested in the shift from the political, security-related aspect of the LoN’s role to the non-political or technical roles that has stirred fruitful academic debate and produced a growing body of scholarship. We propose to develop the research questions and findings of this thesis in the context of the role of the LoN’s Health and Social Sections, two important global departments which focused on developmental issues, including diseases like malaria and subjects like education and sanitation.¹ We emphasise

¹ This project can also be broadened to study the developmental agenda of the United Nations during the decolonisation era (the 1950s and 1960s), especially through study of bodies like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

that such a study would provide perceptive insights into the LoN's relationship with interest groups and governments as well as the complex connections with 'mobilised publics', especially in the non-West, and enable an understanding of international diplomacy in the subsequent era of decolonisation. This project, we indicate, would provide a preparatory framework to study the development of mid twentieth century decolonisation from the perspective of subjective experiences rather than processes, both from a political as well as social and cultural dimension. One of the ways, we believe, in which this strand can be developed is through a social history of drug regulation and deaddiction in South and Southeast Asia during the 1930s and 1940s, a narrative that was intimately connected with the developmental agenda marked by standardisation of medical deaddiction regimes as well as a shift in public perception. This study would focus on the contestations between education, public health and sociocultural aspects of drug use with the dominant narrative of criminalisation and the anti-narcotic drive based on moral and ethical dimensions of drug use which efface individual subjectivities.



It is evident that the thesis did not engage with a history of opium from the perspective of its trade dynamics or offer a narrative of its (ab)use and moved away from the debate about the dichotomy of 'Western' (read alcohol) and 'Eastern' (read opium/cannabis) substances within the South Asian socio-cultural context that has dominated drug history. The thesis was, instead, interested in representations, perceptions and ideological positions on the drug-commodity in relation to the prohibition campaign which had deep roots within rural and urban colonial Assamese society whilst at the same time being a global effort involving international forums and organisations that brought activists, bureaucrats and politicians from across the world into dialogue. Employing an archive oriented study, the main objective of the thesis was to historicise Assam's experience of opium by reconstructing the narrative of consumption and prohibition during the period 1826–1947 from a transnational vantage point. This was achieved not by tracing it through narrow area studies or drug history perspectives, or by using the metanarratives of world history projects, but, rather, tracing it through a precise reconstruction of specific sets of events, people and policy. The thesis has suggested that the transmission of ideas, cultures and peoples affect economic and cultural developments which offer us a vista to study interactions that could enable modes to read not just the narrative of imperial domination but also how the West itself was affected by the 'contact'. This invokes the

fertile ground that the phenomenon of cultural diffusion and transformation offers in the study of drug cultures from a transnational perspective; for instance, in the case of opium, the intra-Asian circulation of ideas and the interconnectedness of networks and formations like the LoN.

The thesis has stressed on the potential of the transnational framework in the study of Assam and demonstrated that interdisciplinary approaches, especially literary explorations, which weave in social and cultural modes of living with political history, enable the study of practices that are otherwise neglected as aberrant and marginal. The thesis has also emphasised the absence of new approaches and methodologies in regional historical scholarship and the failure of historians in understanding Assam's unique location and status that has been dominated by the frame of the national. The mainstreaming of Assam into the Indian subcontinent through nationalist paradigms that foreground the power of a Sanskritised majority in shaping the consciousness of Assamese society has led to the erasure of the histories of peripheral groups and communities like the Assamese opium addict.

The thesis has indicated the richness of source material on opium—as commodity, social practice, cultural artefact, policy determinant as well as political and diplomatic tool. From literary imaginings of the Assamese middle class discussed in Chapter 1 to official government and non-official enquiries that inform Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, along with the vibrant medical and scientific discourses highlighted in Chapters 1 and 5, opium generated and fostered a multiplicity of meanings, representations and experiences which shed light on debates in the public sphere, the administrative machinery and state apparatus. Among these multiple impulses, the manner in which provincial politicians and the nationalist leadership employed it in framing the anti-colonial narrative emerged as the most insightful, given that the opium question brought a set of disparate actors together while disbanding others (Chapters 3 and 4). This regional and national narrative was complemented by a wider, transnational set of factors which materialised as prohibition organisations with a distinct moral emphasis transformed into a multilateral drug regulation programme in the early twentieth century that featured international conferences with its fair share of impasse, negotiations and diplomatic disputes (Chapters 3 and 4). The local featured prominently in this structure of significations and this was best demonstrated in the discussion of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry (Chapter 3), where a diverse range of ideas and people came together in the locality but the action was

driven by a complex amalgamation of regional political purposes, nationalist objectives and international goals, with opium acting as the catalyst.

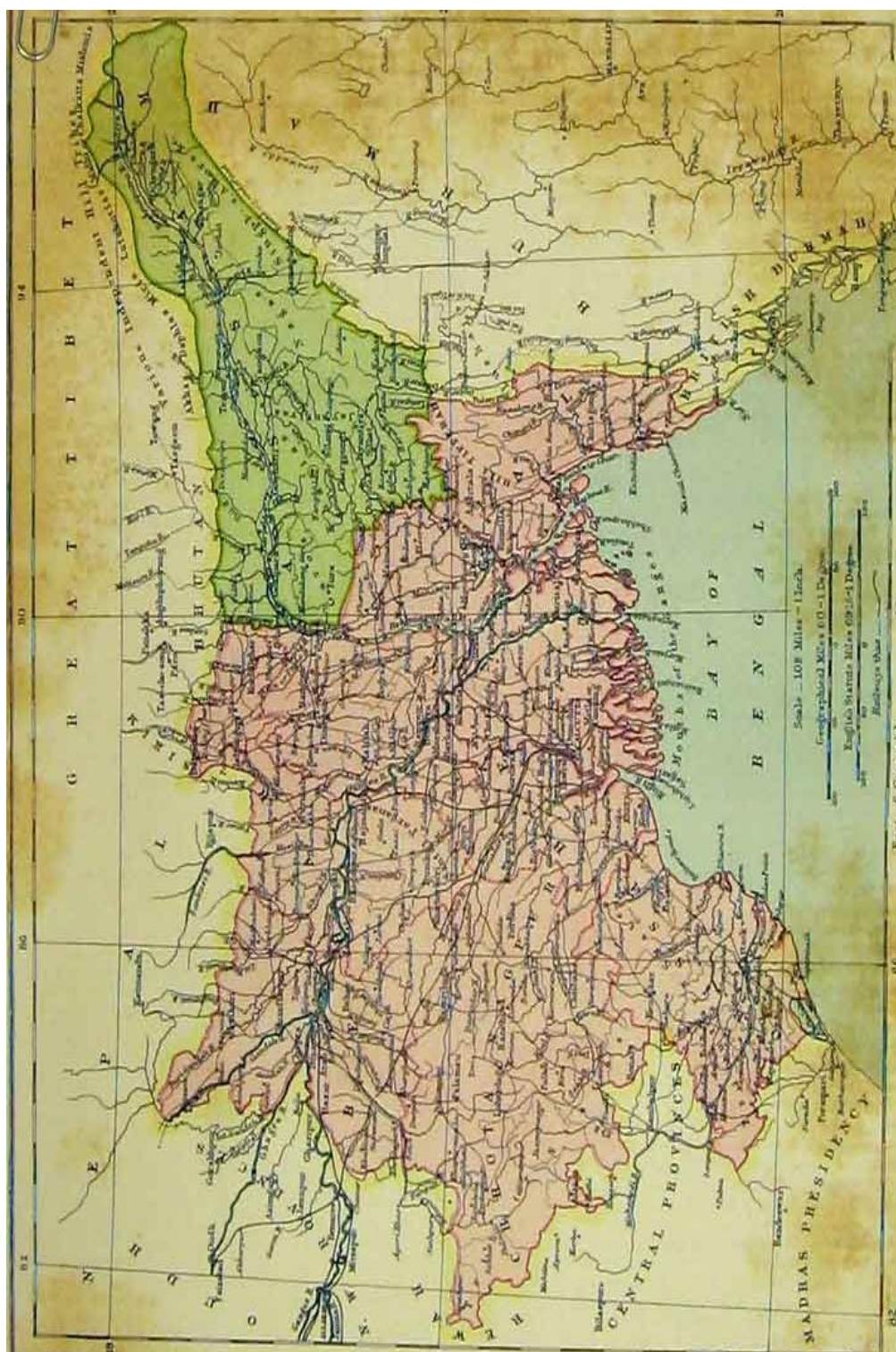
This thesis challenged the literature on opium at different levels and emphasised that the lack of a social perspective has hampered our understanding of the cultural and political aspects of opium use in India. The focused study of opium in Assam has provided a new framework to understand the history of the province's colonial encounter that has been dominated by nationalist histories and narratives of subjection. The transnational framework has underlined a narrative of overlapping group interests and provided a holistic picture of the nationalist movement in the province. In addition to the contributions to our knowledge of opium in Assam and India, the thesis also advances new ways of understanding key elements that pertain to the wider historiography of opium, especially the arena of anti-drug discourses and practices, and signals the centrality of transnational perspectives to drug history. In its broadest scope, the thesis contributes to the field of social and political history of colonial India, especially its margins. In addition, the findings of the thesis would benefit researchers working on drug history, material culture as well as nineteenth century British history. Finally, the transnational framework employed in this thesis signals approaches that would be of interest to historians of international organisations and diplomatic history during the inter-war period.

The thesis has highlighted the role of transnational organisations in the prohibition campaign, and we believe that the frame of the transnational invigorates the domain of social history by offering possibilities of both micro and macro studies of social phenomena demonstrated through opium consumption and prohibition in this work. A transnational method with a multisite archive oriented focus enabled us to address the issue of permeability of ideas of drug use as well as the problems associated with periodisation owing to the non-contemporaneous nature of the evolution of consumption practices as well as its counterpoint, prohibition. The thesis has accentuated the centrality of the archive to transnational histories and demonstrated that new material enables unique circulations and connections to emerge which offer insights often overlooked in the 'synthetic' histories dominated by meta-narratives of postcoloniality and globality. It challenged the common fallacy that transnational histories are a collage of connected histories and asserted that they are intensive, micro narratives that enable and influence larger frames of reference. This aspect was demonstrated by highlighting that although

the existing historiography on opium provides some understanding of relevant trends and flows—for instance, the British opium trade, addiction in China as well as transnational drug diplomacy—it fails to address what the disparate bodies of knowledge signify in a context-specific environment owing to the persistence of the nation as the frame of reference. This deficiency is typified in the existing literature on opium; the scholarship on Assam (and India) lacks awareness of the broader historiography as well as contemporary approaches, while the comprehensive histories of opium and the opium trade that have appeared in the last couple of decades, in turn, are unacquainted with the nature of the effects of global flows and connections on the locality. This thesis, through a focused study of Assam, has proposed that the most appropriate way to read the history of opium is by conjoining the supranational and the sub-national and construing the transnational as translocal—an approach that does not privilege either the local or the global but situates them within a modality of exchange, influence and evolution.

APPENDICES

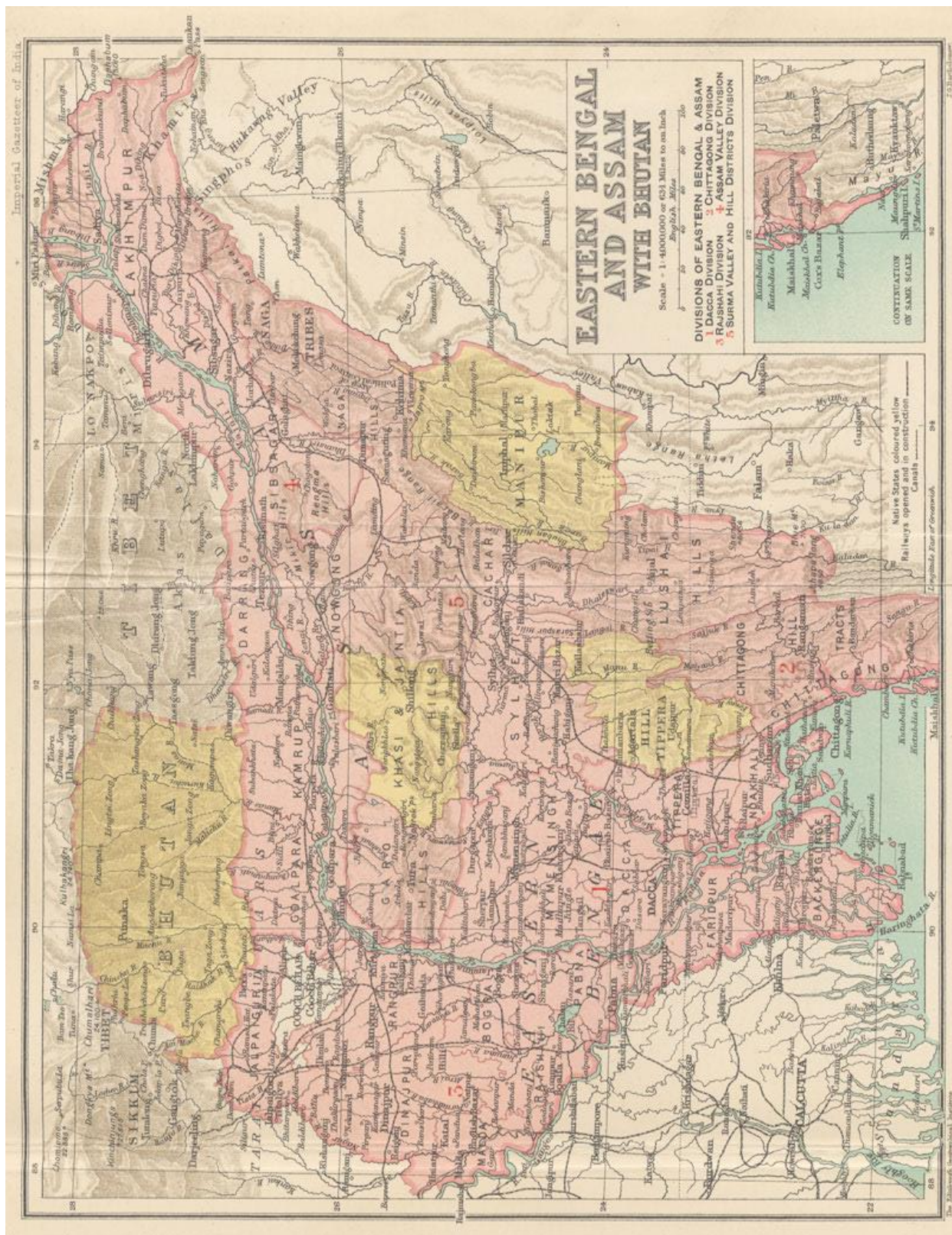
APPENDIX 1: POLITICAL MAPS OF ASSAM



Appendix 1(a): Map of Assam and Bengal, 1874

Assam (in green) following the division from Bengal Presidency (in pink). Assam was administered as part of Bengal after British annexation in 1826 till 1874.

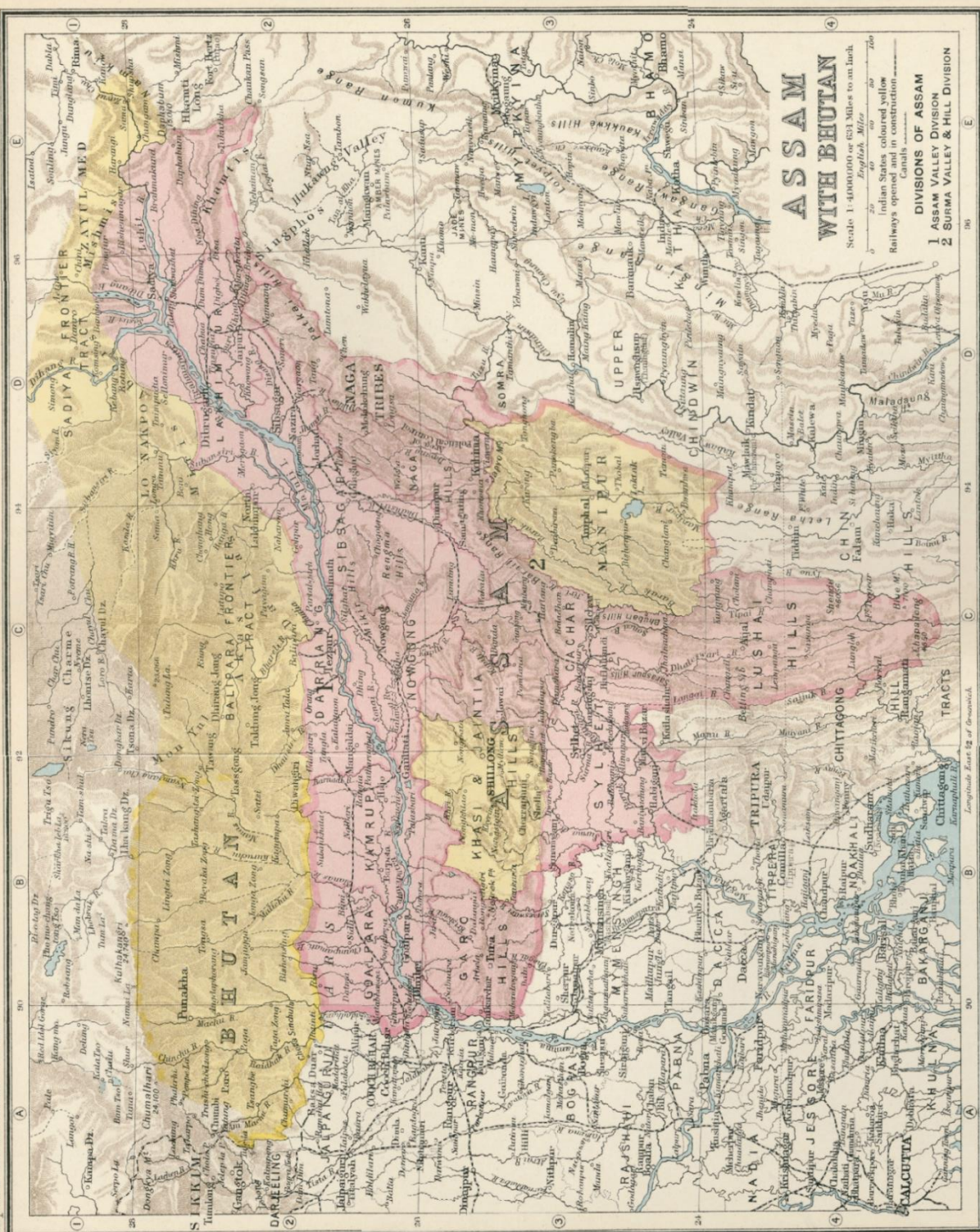
(Source: "Plate IV: Bengal and Assam", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. III, 9th edn [London, 1889])



Appendix 1(b): Map of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1905–1912

The province was created following the partition of Bengal in 1905. This province unified Assam with the eastern, Muslim majority, districts of Bengal (in pink; the native states of Bhutan, Khasi Hills, Hill Tippera and Manipur in yellow; and Cooch Behar unshaded), with a Lieutenant Governor administering from Dhaka. This arrangement ended in 1912.

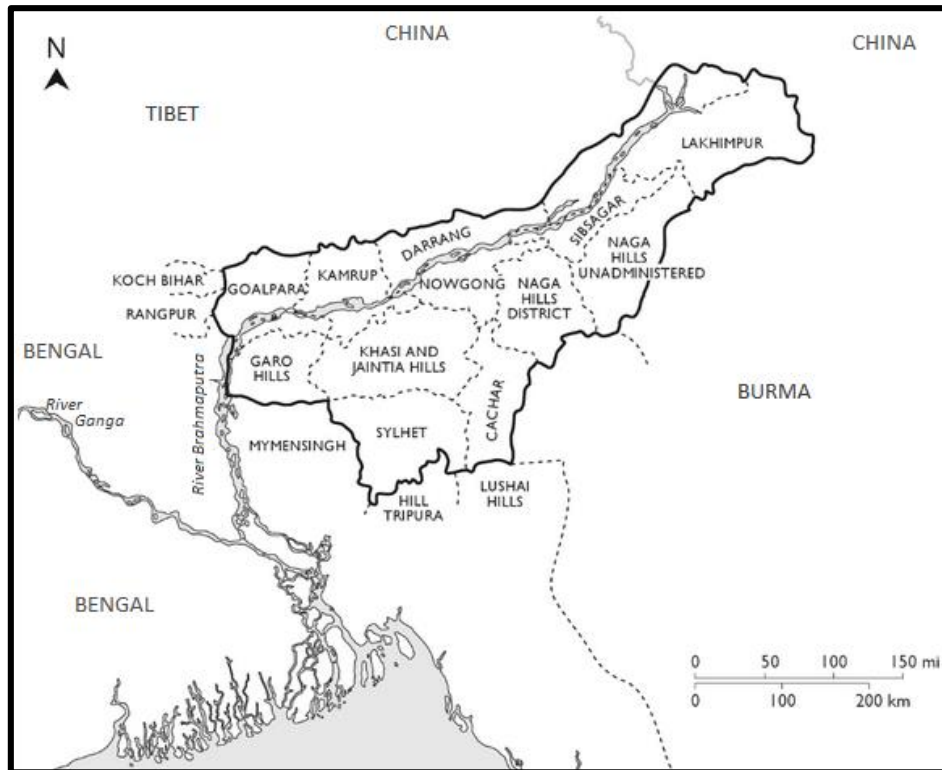
(Source: William Stevenson Meyer, et al., “Eastern Bengal and Assam with Bhutan”, *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. 26: Atlas 1909* [Oxford, 1909], Plate 30)



Appendix 1(c): Map of Assam (and frontier tracts), 1931

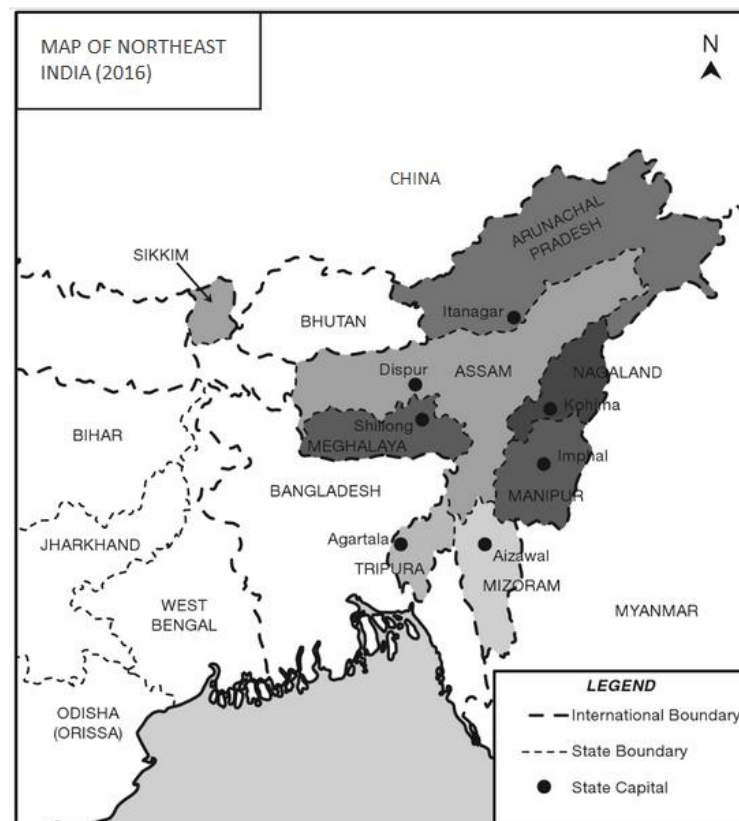
The province of Assam from 1912–1947 comprising of the six Brahmaputra valley districts, the hills districts of Garo, Jaintia and Lushai as well as the Surma valley districts of Cachar and Sylhet (in pink). Bhutan and the native states of Manipur, Khasi Hills and the frontier tracts of Sadiya and Balipara (in yellow). In 1921, a Governor replaced the Chief Commissioner as the province’s administrative head.

(Source: William Stevenson Meyer, et al., “Assam with Bhutan”, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 26: Atlas 1931 [Oxford, 1931], Plate 32)



Appendix 1(d): Map of Assam with Districts, 1912–1947

The districts Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong and Darrang were denoted as upper Assam, while Goalpara and Kamrup were designated as lower Assam. The four hills districts and parts of Cachar were referred to as hill tracts—and along with the excluded and partially excluded areas of Balipara and Sadiya were separated through ‘inner lines’.



Appendix 1(e): Map of Northeast India, 2016

APPENDIX 2: NOTE ON POLITICAL HISTORY OF ASSAM, 1826–1947

Assam became a formal part of British India on 24 February 1826 through the Treaty of Yandaboo which ended the First Anglo-Burmese War. This brought the whole of the Brahmaputra valley region as well the hill tracts surrounding it under the direct administrative control of the East India Company. Until 1833, when the Charter Act ended all Company monopolies, the administration of Assam was undetermined and there was no attempt at formal control. Instead, the policy was to place dissident Ahom royals (the traditional dynasts) as puppet rulers and the accent was on extending indirect rule. Following the 1833 Charter, Francis Jenkins promoted the colonisation of Assam by private enterprise and imported capital and the administration took steps to encourage Europeans to invest capital in the region to produce cash crops like indigo and tea.

Although administered at the local level by separate Commissioners, the entire Assam region was part of the Bengal Presidency until 1874 when it was separated from the Presidency and accorded the status of a Chief Commissioner's province with the addition of the Sylhet district. In 1905, Bengal was partitioned and East Bengal was added to the province of Assam. The new region, now ruled by a Lieutenant Governor, had its capital at Dhaka and the region's 15-member legislative council had only two seats for the whole of the erstwhile Assam province. The partition was protested in Bengal and in Assam leading to its annulment by an imperial decree announced in the 1911 Delhi Durbar by George V.

Assam (including Sylhet district) was declared a Chief Commissioner's Province and provided with its own Legislative Council with local representation but nominated members formed the majority and Indian councillors had limited decision-making powers. Changes were made to this system under the Government of India Act of 1919, including an increase in the number of members and expansion of powers; however, the official group—consisting of the Europeans and nominated members—continued to dominate proceedings. The last phase of political development was ushered in by the Government of India Act of 1935, which replaced the council with a Legislative Assembly that was more representative of local demographics. This development led to the formation of the first provincial election where franchise was extended to a wider section of the population, resulting in the formation of Assam's first indigenous government in 1939, a development which signalled the beginning of self-determination which culminated with Indian independence in 1947.

APPENDIX 3: *THE OPIUM SMOKERS* (1926)



Muktanath Bordoloi, *The Opium Smokers* (1926)
(Courtesy: Assam State Museum, Guwahati)

APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONNAIRES OF ASSAM OPIUM ENQUIRY 1925 AND 1933

Appendix 4(a): Questionnaire of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1925²

1. Can you give any historical synopsis as to how and when opium or poppy cultivation was first introduced in Assam and the effects of the opium habit in the people up to the advent of the British in 1926?
2. What was the attitude of the Ahom kings towards the opium habit and poppy cultivation? Was the habit prevalent amongst the common populace or was it confined to the higher classes as is generally believed?
3. What was the policy of the British Government from—
 - (1) 1826 to 1860 when the poppy cultivation was prohibited,
 - (2) 1860 to 1874 when license-fee was first levied,
 - (3) 1874 to 1894 when the Royal Commission on opium submitted its report,
 - (4) 1894 to 1912 when the Botham Committee sat and
 - (5) 1912 to 1921 when the Non-co-operation movement was started?
4. Can you support your statement by any statistics? If so, please give them in detail.
5. What was the effect of the Non-co-operation movement on this habit?
6. Do you think that Government have ever had any policy of systematically reducing the opium consumption in Assam? Do you know the Botham Committee's recommendations?
7. Will you please state how the Government Policy has affected the Assamese people and neighbouring hill-tribes?
 - If the effects are baneful and disastrous on the people, are you in favour of total prohibition of sale and consumption except for medicinal purposes?
 - If so, how will it effect (sic) you? Please give your suggestions.
8. (a) Can you trace any moral, physical and economic effects of the consumption of opium by the purely Assamese population and by the hill and other tribes? What, in your opinion will be the percentage of opium-eaters amongst the Assamese and other tribes?
(b) Have you got any personal experience of the people who are addicted to opium habit and under what circumstances do they generally contract the habit first?
9. Do you advocate any legislation in favour of total prohibition of opium? If so, please give your outlines if any?

² "Draft of Assam Opium Enquiry Committee: Questionnaire (sic)", File no. 39 (1924), All India Congress Committee Papers (1st instalment), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

10. What acts of repression were committed by the Government against the temperance workers in the great movement of 1921? What was the object of the opposition (sic) by Government?

JORHAT,
The 28th June, 1924

Kuladhar Chaliha, *President,*
Assam Opium Enquiry Committee
Rohini Kanta Hati Barua, *Secretary,*
Assam Opium Enquiry Committee

Appendix 4(b): Questionnaire of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933

1. Has the present opium policy of making an annual 10 per cent cut in the rations of consumers who were under the age of 50 years of age in 1928–29 proved a success or a failure by affecting a reduction in the consumption of opium from licit and illicit sources? If it has proved a failure, what are the reasons for failure?
2. If the policy has up to date proved a success, is it likely to be endangered by continuing the cut for the next five years? If it is likely to be endangered, please give reasons?
3. Does the smuggling of opium into Assam exist? If so, to what extent and does it endanger the success of the present policy? Please give reasons for your reply.
4. Does the practice of giving short weight to registered consumers exist? If so, to what extent and does it endanger the success of the present policy? Please give reasons. Is the surplus saved by short weight sale sold to registered consumers to supplement their rations or for sale or is it given or sold to unregistered persons for their own consumption or for sale?
5. What is the usual price of (a) smuggled opium, and (b) surplus opium saved by short weight? What is the source of your information? Is the price high or low? If the price is high compared with the retail price of Rs. 2 per tola, fixed for legal sale, what is the reason for this high price?
6. What approximately is the number of unregistered consumers in your district or subdivision? On what data do you base your figures?
7. Is it necessary to re-open the registers for the registration of opium addicts who are at present unregistered? If so, should the fact be widely published so that all unregistered consumers may know to apply?
8. If the registers are re-opened, should the applicant for a pass be required to prove by the production of a medical certificate that he is a confirmed addict? What medical certificate should be recognised as valid? Do you approve of the formation of a local Committee to consider such applications, and, if so, what should be the personnel? Should such passes be temporary or permanent?
9. In areas such as those of the hill districts where competent medical authorities are few should it be left to the district authorities to decide whether a person is an addict?

10. Are there any persons who are not real consumers but who have registered as such simply for the purpose of giving or selling opium to others? What is the source of your information?
11. Should effect be given to the principle that a confirmed addict should be given a ration which is not liable to annual reduction? If the answer is in the affirmative, is any action necessary to increase the rations of present registered consumers whose rations have already been subject to annual reduction?
12. Should passes be refused to all persons below a certain age? If so, what age do you recommend?
13. How far would an increase in the treasury price of opium which is at present probably considerably below the price of smuggled opium serve to check excessive consumption if a halt is called to the annual reduction of rations?
14. What steps should be taken to create effective public opinion to check the opium habit?
15. If the cause of smuggling and of the practice of short weight is to supply the demand of unregistered consumers who find their reduced rations too small, does the remedy lie in strengthening the preventive staff or in opening the registers to unregistered consumers or in calling a halt meantime to the policy of annual reduction of rations or in a combination of these? Can you suggest any other practical remedy?

The 25th March 1933

J.A. Dawson, Secretary,
Assam Opium Enquiry Committee

Appendix 4(c): Draft Questionnaire of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry, 1925³

1. Do you consider it desirable to have a “Dangerous Drugs Act” enacted for Assam, specially with regard to opium? [It would be understood that facilities will be provided for buying such simple remedies (Eg. Dover’s Powder, Pulv, Creta Aromat Cum Opic etc.) and no hardship will be experienced by poor people in obtaining them.]
2. What are the medical effects on the health of particular patients addicted to the drug whom you have treated?
3. Does habitual moderate use of opium retard recovery in illness in any case? If so, to what extent and in what cases?
4. Does opium possess any prophylactic action against Malaria or Kala-Azar?
5. What medical experience have you with regard to the evil effects of opium consumption in your District taken as a whole? Do you consider that the drug has any effect of depressing the population and leading people to economic and moral evils?
6. Do you recommend registered habitual opium eaters being treated medically as patients at the state (sic) expense?

³ The questionnaire was part of draft report but excluded from the published version of the *Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report* (1925).

APPENDIX 5: REPORTS ON OPIUM SMUGGLING CASES

Appendix 5(a): Seizure of Excise Opium

Copy of Memo. No. 5083-Ex., dated the 7th September 1939, from the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur.

In the month of June information was received that one Amir Ahmed—a Chittagonian and a previous convict in an opium case – has been residing at Nagakhelia village since January 1939 and has been importing opium from Chittagong. The S[uperintendent of] E[xcise] asked me to arrange for an informant with whose help 3 sample purchases were made by S.E. from time to time. On the 3rd last, information was received that Half a maund of opium arrived Dibrugarh by steamer and may be brought by boat up-stream to Kayanpatty, Dibrugarh, and then by motor to the house of the accused at Nagakhelai. Myself with S.E. kept watch near the steamerghat the whole night on that day but the opium was not taken down from the steamer that night. The opium was however taken down on the 5th September 1939. Definite information was received on the 6th September 1939 and in consultation with the informant, S.E., myself and the Addl E[xcise] I[n]spector surrounded the house of the accused this morning and recovered in a Kerosene Oil tin concealed under earth within the compound, fenced all around, 15 seers and 30 tolas, in two other small tins 4 seers and 8 tolas and in two cigarette tins 45 tolas—total opium seized 20 seers and 3 tolas. The places of recovery were shown immediately to Srijut H. Deka, E.A.C., who was taken to the village after the search. In the house of the accused—4 other persons, all of Chittagong were found—one of them Sultan Muhammed is an accused in the 38½ seers Lahowal Opium Case. These 4 have also been arrested pending further enquiry and remanded to Hajat. A photo of all the five accused was taken on the spot. For favour of information. C[entral] E[xcise] will be informed.

Sd/- B.C. Medhi,
I.E. Sadar Circle
7.9.39

Appendix 5(b): Seizure of Non-Excise Opium⁴

Copy of Memo. No.6327 Ex., dated the 11th December 1939 from the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, with enclosure.⁵

I beg to report that on the 10.12.39 at night, on receipt of an information, myself and Excise Inspector Srijut B.C. Medhi, kept watch at Tengaghat and arrested Aziz Khan – an Afridi – coming from beyond the North West Frontier Province and two Marwaris of Joypore State with 13 seers and 35 tolas opium. They carried the opium in thin layers in 3 packets inside triangular bags which with ribbons attached to the ends of the bags were used as “lengutts” [loin cloth] wrapped round the waist and thighs. The quantity carried by each is as below:—

1. Aziz Khan – 5 seers 10 tolas.
 2. Gopiram Brahmin – 4 seers 5 tolas.
 3. Durjan Sing – 3 seers 40 tolas
- Total – 13 seers 35 tolas.

⁴ Case Nos. 3123, 3124 and 3125C of 1939 (Emperor versus Gopi Brahmin, Durjaon Singh and Aziz Khan, 2 January 1940) were registered against the three smugglers and they were handed 2 years' R.I. (rigorous imprisonment) under section 9 (c) of the Opium Act (amendment) of 1878. Memo No. 815-17 Ex., 6 March 1940, Local Self-Government Department (hereafter, LSG), Assam State Archives (hereafter, ASA).

⁵ Memo No. 817P, From the Commissioner of Excise, Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, 18 December 1939, LSG, ASA.

They stated that they made several hours journey from Peshawar by Motor Bus and then walked into the Afridi land where they purchased their opium at the rate of Rd. 15/- per 105 tolas i.e. at the rate of Rs. 11/7 annas per seer.

They wanted to sell the opium to an (sic) well known smuggler of Dibrugarh, as they did in several previous occasions.

For favour of information.

C[entral] E[xcise] will be informed.

Sd/- R.K. Bora,
Superintendent of Excise, Lakhimpur.
11.12.39

Appendix 5(c): Detection of Illegal Cultivation of Opium Poppy in Prohibition Area

Preliminary Report to Collector of Arrest, Seizure or Search, (Lakhimpur) Circle⁶

1. Name of the accused with father's name – Piyali Miri s/o. Pegu Miri
2. Caste, residence and occupation – Gugamukh – Panma – Cultivation
3. Personal Description –
Age – 70; Eyes – Small; Ears – Pierced; Height – 5'2"; Nose – Blunt; Forehead – Flat; Build – Medium; Mouth – Small; Mustache (sic) – Long; Hair – Grey; Teeth – Regular; Beard – Absent; Complexion – Fair; Chin – Sunken; Marks or scars – One black scar on the right side of the nose. He cannot stand erect.
4. Name of locality and PS, where offence was committed – Gogamukh, Pamnagaon
5. Date and time of occurrence – 27.3.40. 10 A.M.
6. Description, place of origin and quantity of articles seized –
 - (i) Cultivation of poppy plants. Plants 5,260 when counted liberally.
 - (ii) Two pieces of rags where juice of the heads were collected.
 - (iii) Some opium (a few ratis) collected from rags where the poppy juice was received.

(History of case and particulars of arrest, seizure or search and previous conviction, in any.)

Information of this poppy cultivation was received by me about 4 months back and strict eye was kept on the cultivation. The land was without lease (suspected) and the mandal [local authority] could not be consulted. From time to time plants were brought or my inspection by the informer as well as excise peon Adarali. Plants were shown to the Hon'ble Minister of Excise and S.D.O. [sub-divisional officer].

When Supdt. of Excise came here the matter was reported to him and necessary advice taken.

When the accused began to lench (sic) the heads, I was informed. I proceeded to Gogamukh via Dhokuakhana and Ghilamora. From Bordaibam T.E. we walked to the spot arriving there at about 1 A.M. on 27.3.40. Direct route was averted to avoid notice of the miris [the local tribe]. Under heavy rain, we began to keep watch on the cultivation keeping ourselves hidden in the "Dolopani" [a drainage trench]. We suspected Piyali to be the owner of the cultivation but there was no definite proof so we had to keep watch till somebody came to lench (sic) the heads. At about 9.30 A.M. a minor boy Komision by name entered the field. We at once went in and detained the boy. He being questioned told me that he was the grand son of Piyali Miri. Keeping a constable to guard the field, I with one peon, and one constable and two witnesses proceeded to the house of Piyali Miri which was at a distance of about three furlongs. In arrival inmates were brought out.

⁶ Memo. No. 1259-60 EX., From R.K. Bora, Superintendent of Excise, Lakhimpur, to the Commissioner of Excise, Assam 5 April 1940, LSG, ASA.

Piyali first attempted to deny but when I gave him to understand that his house would be searched, he produced two rags where spontaneously coagulated juice of the heads were collected and some locally made opium. He then guided us to the place of cultivation through a jungly (sic) path which was not known to us. We arrived at the back side of the plot by that patch. This was why the informer could not meet him while coming to the filed (sic) when he kept watch.

The plants were uprooted which number 6260 counted liberally (5260). The plants were of luxuriant growth and majority of the heads were lenched (sic). I then seized the plants and arrested the accused. He was escorted to Pathalipam by me and other men went back to Bordaibam to bring the cycle. All persons suffered much from rains after 11 P.M. to 5 A.M. and was without food.

The accused is an old man of about 70 years and has an opium pass of 1 tola 4 annas valid for Pathalipam O[pium] S[hop]. He told me that he was a poor man and could not buy contraband opium. As his ration was very inadequate he was compelled to take this course to get relief of the illness he had been suffering.

He admitted his guilt and was convicted to one year R[igorous] I[imprisonment].

Sd/ L.D. Bora,
I[nspector of] E[xcise], N[orth] L[akhimpur].
28.3.40

Appendix 5(d): Transportation Using Railways Parcels⁷

Special Report, Case No. 2/41, Report 1 dt. 21.1.41

- (1) Name or complainant or informant — Babu P.C. Gupta, C.I.D. Inspector
- (2) Name and residence of the accused — Abdul Wahid and 2 others of Dibrugarh
- (3) Crime with section — Importing and being in illegal possession of opium u/s 9(c) of Opium Act of 1878.
- (4) Place of occurrence, P.S. and distance and direction from the P.S. — Dikom Ry. Station , 11½ miles, East
- (5) Date and hour of occurrence — 24.12.40 at night
- (6) Date and hour of information reaching the Police — 25.12.40 at 12:35 A.M. (Standard)
- (7) Date and hour of arrival of police on the spot — 24.12.40 at night
- (8) Name and designation of I.O. — C.I.D. Inspector Babu P.C. Das
- (9) Form of final report and its date — XXX
- (10) Number of persons — Concerned – 3; Arrested – 3

Sd./ D.C. Dutt,
Superintendent of Police, Assam

(Ref:– D.I.G.'s Memo No. 190/C.I.D., dt. 11.1.41 to the S.P.)

On 24/12/40 on receipt of the following report from the C[riminal] I[nvestigation] D[epartment], Inspector Babu P.C. Das Gupta, case no. 3(12)40 u/s 9(c) Opium Act was registered at Dibrugarh G.P.R.S. :-

“I beg to state that on receipt of some confidential information that an opium parcel has reached Dikom Railway Stations, I kept watch from 23.12.40 and also informed the Railway authorities not to deliver the parcel without our knowledge. This night, I with sub-inspector D.C. Mitra and constables Bhogeswar Kalita, Rudreswar Phukan and outsider Menna Lal Kishan (Agarwala) went to Dikom station and were lying in wait in the house of Ashutosh Ghosh, Booking clerk. At about 8 P.M. (standard) Ashu Banu was called out

⁷ Memo No. 272-74, From the Superintendent of Railway Police, Assam, to the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Assam, 24 January 1941, LSG, ASA.

by some body A little after Ashu Babu returned and told that a man had come for the parcel, detailed below. I asked to deliver the parcel after observing the usual formalities. He went away and again shortly after and informed us that he had taken finger print of the man in the parcel delivery book and had also taken Rs. 15/4/- being the freight of the parcel. He would now go to the godown to deliver the parcel as it was locked up there. There was another man with that man. Then I with constable Bhogeswar went near the godown and Sub-Inspector D.C. Mitra went to watch on the road side. I then saw accused Nod Ali going into the station godown with a booking clerk who had a lantern in hand. As soon as accused Nod Ali was coming out of the godown with one gunny curved basket (sic) on his shoulder I arrested him and was informed by him that the real owner of the parcel Abdul Wahid was waiting with a car on the A.T. Road near Nahartoli Road junction. I then told Sub-Inspector D.C. Mitra to capture accused Abdul Wahid. Some time after the Sub-Inspector brought Abdul Wahid and Kohiram Datta, driver of motor car No. ASL-728 in which accused Abdul Wahid had hurriedly loaded and was attempting to run away to Dibrugarh.

On opening the above seized basket and another of the same parcel twenty seers and thirty-five tolas of opium (including the weight of paper and string with which the cakes were wrapped up and other articles as per seizure list were found and seized.

These two baskets were booked from Delhi Chandni Chowk to Dikom under R/R No. 287383 in the name of Ramsarup Kashilal by Md. Isak.

Accused Abdul Wahid was identified by Ashu Babu and Nod Ali as being the man who paid the money and gave thumb impression on the parcel delivery book and the real owner respectively in the presence of all the witnesses.

I now make over to you the opium parcel in a gunny bag sealed with the seal of Dikom P.O. The Railway receipt Rs. 15/4/- being the freight paid by the accused Abdul Wahid, two fired off revolver cartridges, bore No. 38 and other articles as per seizure list.”

Name of P.S.s

1. Inspector P.C. Das Gupta. 2. Sub-Inspector D.C. Mitra. 3. Constable Bhogeswar Kalita. 4. Sjt. Ashutosh Ghosh. 5. Sjt. B. Bhattacharjee. 6. Sjt. Mannalal Keshan. 7. Munshi Abdul Latif., for necessary action.

C.I.D. Sub-Inspector D.C. Mitra noted in his weekly diary dated 21/12/40 as follows:—

“I received information that R/R of the suspected parcel of opium which reached Dikom Railway Station is received today by the party and arrangement will be made to take delivery of the same tonight. I reported these facts to C.I.D. Inspector P.C. Das Gupta. I paid my respect to the Dy. Superintendent of Police and the Superintendent of Police and discussed with them about the suspected opium parcel. I also submitted a report to the Superintendent of Police through the Dy. Superintendent and C.I.D. Inspector in this respect. I with the C.I.D. Inspector and party left Dibrugarh at 2 P.M., reached Dikom Railway station and arrested the three accused persons Nod Ali, Abdul Wahid and Hali Ram Dutta and seized opium etc. I had to fire two revolver shots in arresting accused Abdul Wahid and Hali Ram with care.”

The investigation has been taken [over] by the C.I.D. Inspector P.C. Das Gupta.

Further report will follow.

Sd/- Illegible,
Superintendent of Railway Police, Assam, Halflong.

APPENDIX 6: PAMPHLET—“OPIUM PROHIBITION IN ASSAM”⁸

NOTICE

Shillong, the 17th February 1941

It is notified for general information that with effect from the 1st March 1941, Government will cancel all passes of the addicts for the purchase and consumption of raw opium, which are held by persons, now resident in the included areas of the Province. Every one (sic) knows well what baneful effects this opium evil has caused on the mind and health of the Assamese people for a very long time. It is a problem which is at least 150 years old if not older, and which primarily and vitally concerns the Assamese people in general. With a view to bring about complete amelioration of various miseries and sufferings of the people which are attributable to this evil habit, Government of Assam have from time to time adopted certain restrictive policies to put an end to this evil which has also seriously told upon the moral, social and economic side of the people. It is worth mentioning here that the most important landmark in the opium policy dated from 1928. Since then the policy of complete eradication of the opium evil by a planned scheme of reduction of opium rations, has been pursued by the Government and with that object in view steps were taken to effect 10 per cent. reduction annually in the consumption of opium, which continued for 10 years up to 31st March 1939. This, it appears, effected the reduction of consumption from 626 maunds 18 seers in 1928–29 to 183 maunds 6 seers in 1938–39 with a corresponding decrease in income from this source from rupees thirty-three lakhs and odd in 1928–29 to five lakhs and odd in 1938–39.

The present Ministry, confident of the support of the public consider that the time has now come for more vigorous and effective measures, and have therefore decided to introduce prohibition. They believe that, public opinion being so strong as it is against opium, which is believed on all hands to have done the gravest injury to a large section of the Assamese people in their uplift, their efforts will be crowned with success, if this feeling is translated into action.

Government will employ an additional preventive staff to check the smuggling activities and will provide medical facilities in co-operation with the local bodies and the authorities of the tea gardens for the treatment of the opium addicts who may fall sick due to stoppage of opium, Government hope that the public will render wholehearted enthusiastic assistance in this matter in all possible ways.

To organise non-political activities, local committees are being formed which will enlist honorary workers to do propaganda work and keep vigilance. It is of course necessary that the temperance workers and the committees should do nothing which may cause apprehension among the opium consumers of any sort of ill-treatment, but should do their best to convince them that the whole object is to render friendly help. Government are also issuing instructions that mauzadars, tahsildars and others should co-operate.

In conclusion it is worthwhile to mention here that Government in their effort to uproot the opium evil are not only sacrificing a large amount of revenue on this account, but also incurring heavy expenditure in pursuing this Prohibition Policy. They therefore earnestly appeal that the public of Assam will cordially lend their hearty co-operation to achieve the intended object.

Abdul Hye Chaudhuri,
*Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam,
Education and Local Self-Government Department*

⁸ Government of Assam, *Opium Prohibition in Assam, 1941* (Shillong, 1941), D.Dis No. 112-E.O/41, E&O. 3100/41, India Office Records (IOR).

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