

History of Intoxication: Opium in Assam 1800-1959

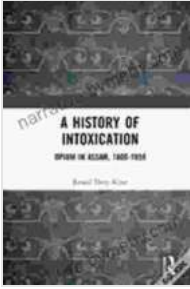


A History of Intoxication: Opium in Assam, 1800–1959

by Scott Alan Johnston

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

Language : English



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Nestled in the northeastern corner of India, Assam has a rich and complex history intertwined with the cultivation and consumption of opium. From the early 19th century to the mid-20th century, opium played a significant role in the region's economy, society, and politics. This article delves into the captivating history of opium in Assam, exploring its origins, the rise and fall of its cultivation, government control measures, social impact, and enduring legacy.

Origins and Early Cultivation

Opium, derived from the seed pods of the opium poppy, has been known to humankind for centuries. In Assam, opium cultivation began around 1800, introduced by British traders in the wake of their colonial conquest. The fertile soil and favorable climate of the Brahmaputra Valley proved ideal for the growth of opium poppies.

Rise of the Opium Trade

As the demand for opium grew in Europe and China, Assam became a major supplier. British traders established a monopoly over the cultivation, sale, and distribution of opium. By the mid-19th century, opium revenue

constituted nearly half of Assam's state income, enriching the British and local elites involved in the trade.

Addiction and Social Impact

The widespread availability of opium led to widespread addiction, primarily among the indigenous population. The effects of opium use were devastating. It caused physical and mental health problems, ruined lives and families, and created a cycle of poverty and dependency.

Government Control Measures

Recognizing the detrimental effects of opium addiction, the British government took steps to establish control over its cultivation and distribution. In 1873, the Opium Prohibition Acts were enacted, restricting the production and sale of opium except for medicinal purposes. However, the implementation of these acts proved challenging due to corruption and smuggling.

Decline of Cultivation

After India gained independence in 1947, the new government continued to implement measures to curb opium cultivation. The area under opium cultivation gradually declined, reaching its lowest point in the 1950s. By the late 1950s, opium prohibition had become a major policy objective.

Medicinal and Recreational Use

Despite the government's prohibition efforts, opium continued to be used in Assam for medicinal and recreational purposes. Opium was widely used as a pain reliever and sedative, particularly in rural areas where access to

modern medical care was limited. It also played a role in traditional rituals and festivals.

Historical Significance

The history of opium in Assam provides valuable insights into the region's economic, social, and political development. It highlights the complexities of colonialism



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