Chapter Seven

Energizing Tea, Enervating Opium
Culture of Commodities

“The romance of Assam is a romance of commerce, the history of a savage country brought under civilised rule through the cultivation, by alien labour, of a single product,” wrote a European traveler in 1906.¹ Beneath the dispensable arrogance of such imperial poetics flickers an interesting signal of enframing: the truth of a territory can be expressed as the fact of a commodity. In a certain sense, it is with this narrative style of a bourgeois empire that the present chapter concerns itself. Tracing the discursive trajectories of tea and opium — the two most-discussed commodities in the context of British Assam — we try to understand the nature of investments in commodities. For instance, a tea planter himself recognized in the late nineteenth century, “Although tea has the reputation of furnishing a beverage that cheers but does not inebriate, yet its cultivation in new districts exercises the most strangely intoxicating influences on those engaged in it, equaled only by the sanguine dreams of gold explorers.”² As Marx points out, in the capitalist order of production and exchange, the

² Dr. Berry White, quoted in Crole, Tea, 37
objects are necessarily condemned to an “enigmatical” excess: they can never be things of value by standing for themselves; they have to ceaselessly represent some quality beyond themselves.³

 Bliss became Ignorance

The manuscript of Rasik Purān has not yet been published.⁴ Its author, Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika, a low-grade Company employee in the mid-nineteenth century, is better known for his compilation of old chronicles (Kalikhānat Asam Buraqi) which was, in part, printed at the government press in the nineteen thirties amidst the great buraqi epidemic. The Purān, apparently, never received a comparable treatment — and, given its content, that is not quite inexplicable. Deliberately written in the style of the vernacular purānas, this long narrative poem in Assamese was an interesting commentary on the changing regimes of commodity and pleasure in the nineteenth century. While describing the celestial origins and earthly careers of four different intoxicants — tobacco, opium, bhūng and datura — it focused largely on opium, the prestige commodity.

Opium, said the Purān, was actually the blessed froth dropped from the mouths of the legendary serpents girdling Śiva’s neck. Having collected it from Śiva’s abode, Indra, the king of the heaven, began to use it during his protracted battles with the demonic asuras. As he discovered the power of opium to cure “poison, [excess of] phlegm and arthritis” — in fact, “every disease” — and its particular capacity to restore energy to the fatigued body, the plant came to be seen as a prized possession in the heaven. Indra prescribed it to his adored son Arjuna, the famous Mahābhāratac hero, who used it after winning the arduous battle against the Kauravas to divest himself of fatigue and tiredness. In fact, except Yudhisthira, the eldest and most religious brother of Arjuna, all the Pāndava heroes made good use of opium, and

³ Marx, Capital, vol. I, 76
⁴ A transcript is available in the library of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam, Guwahati as Dutiram Swarnakar Hazarika, rasik purān bā dhapāt, kāñi, bhūng, dhuturār upattā, Transcription No. 111, Vol. No. 21, pp. 348-362. [DHAS]. All subsequent quotations from the narrative are taken from this transcript (made by Bhubanchandra Phukan in 1933).
thus the heavenly poppy plant became popular among the mortals, notwithstanding Indra’s warning that the ordinary people must refrain from its use.  

Rest of the Purāṇ is dedicated to the distinction between the “rich people” and the “ordinary people.” Opium brings happiness to the former and sorrow to the latter. It is the talking figure of poppy in the text that unrelentingly insists on this distinction. “Only the rich people are worthy of eating me.” “It only causes my laughter/ When I see the state of the ordinary opium-eaters.” “There is no problem if the rich people eat me/ I feel terrible when the thieves eat me.” The elaborate comparisons between the treatment of opium in the wealthy households and that among the “loafers” characteristically contrast “containers made of gold and silver” with “broken utensils”, “well-cooked good food” with the lack of it, a happy family life with a ruined one. As a convinced reader will conclude after reading the text, although opium is a great antidote to fatigue and illnesses, its actions on the poor bodies are reverse. 

Most probably Dutiram improved on an oral tradition common in the country. In some of the scattered early and mid-nineteenth-century Assamese bhadrakali representations, one notices the flickers of similar conceptions. In his Buraṇjī Vivekraṭau, Moneeraṃ Borwah cited Sanskrit verses from a now-extinct version of the Brahmāṇḍaparāṇ to recount a very similar origin-story of opium. In a petition to Moffatt Mills, Moneeraṃ maintained that poppy was first introduced in Assam by the Rajput burkandazes at Beltola during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-80), and pointed out that “during his time opium was used only by a few respectable persons and not by the lower orders.”

During the great calamities of 1704 A.S. (Moamoreea invasion) some burkandazes introduced the practice of eating muddut (lha) in paun. The practice afterwards became so common that the Boorah Gohain adopted severe measures to put a stop to it and partly succeeded. During the Burmese rule the old penalties against opium-eaters having been removed, the practice became universal, and now when the fresh opium comes in, (during the months of Phagoon and Choy) thousands of new opium-eaters from the lower orders are added to the previous number. Moreover by the facilities afforded now-a-days, such low people as Doomnees, Gorionees and Meereonees (wives of Dooms, Mahomedans and

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5 Indra says in the Purāṇ, “This opium is only for the consumption of the kings/ If the ordinary people use it without knowing/ they will lose their blood, flesh and fortune.”
6 Moneeraṃ, buraṇjī vivekraṭau, 195-201
Meerees have become inveterate opium-eaters, and by their allurements have spread the practice universally.7

"Opium-eaters from the lower orders" was also a concern for Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan who suggestively emphasized the fact that opium was popularized in Assam only during the last years of the eighteenth century when the royal control became substantially undermined.8 Even in the subsequent "popular accounts", the Rājput-Mughal origin of opium consumption was quite consistently stressed, which tended to create an original association of wealthy grandeur, warrior ethic and regal respectability with opium.9 The Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (1925) testified that a tradition was current in the province that the Mughal Court "sometimes sent 'affing' (opium) as a present to the Assam Royal Court, and that from about this time the habit came to be known in Assam."10 It makes more sense to be interested in the implications of the popular insistence on opium-eating's aristocratic origin than in the historical veracity of the widespread belief. Madhab Chandra Bardalai, the Extra Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta, told the Royal Commission of Opium in 1893 that "a large number of people [had] indulged in the use of opium for the sake of pleasure, following the example of the Ahom kings and the nobles."11

The complex connections between the conditions of pleasure, labor and fatigue occupy the topology of the so-called opium question in nineteenth and twentieth-century Assam. In

7 "Translation of a Petition presented in person by Moneeram Dutt Borwah Dewan, on account of Ghunnokanth Sing Joobaraj and others", (1853), in Moffatt Mills, Report, 619
9 It has been noted how opium came to acquire a symbolic centrality in the rituals of birthdays, marriages and oath-taking among the eighteenth-century Rājputs. Particularly, the ritual distribution of opium before the commencement of a battle by the Rājput chiefs among their clansmen (signifying a renewal of the pledge of loyalty as well as an increase of their valor and enduring power), strikingly relates to Rasik Purān's description of Indra's use of opium. Cf. Jagat Vir Singh Agre, "Use of Intoxicants in Medieval Rajasthan" in K. A. Nizami (ed.), Medieval India: A Miscellany, vol. 1 (Aligarh: Centre for Advanced Studies in History /Aligarh Muslim University, 1969), 263-71. The extensive use of amala (solid opium) and kusumbhā (opiate water) by the Rājputs in the marriage rituals of emperor Farrukhsiyar, whose sagāi with the Rāthors hoped to ensure the flow of allegiance between the Timurid throne and the Rājput lordly lineages, suggests that opium came to be inextricably linked with the growing assertion of the Rājput honor by the eighteenth century. William Irvine, Later Mughals, ed. Jadunath Sarkar (rep. Delhi: Oriental Books, 1971), 206. Several texts from eighteenth-century Rajputānā such as Dholāmāri-ru-Vāt, Gunasāra and, more pertinently, Amala-ro-Gītā explicitly deal with the affects of opium which "taken in the morning after bath was supposed to produce exhilarating effect, in the noon it caused giddiness, and in the evening it produced pleasing effect for all the twenty-four hours." Quoted in G. N. Sharma, Social Life in Medieval Rajasthan [1500-1800]: with special reference to the impact of Mughal influence (Agra: Lakshmi Narayan Agarwal Educational Publishers, 1968), 164.
10 Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (Jorhat: R. K. Hatbarua, 1925), 18. [henceforth ACOER]

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addressing the relationship between commodities and their consumers, we must try to understand the associations through which the commodities moved across consumption circuits. The conventional association of opium with originally superior social prestige is important in that respect. The growth and intensification of opium consumption did not happen in a semantic vacuum, as the standard accounts of “economic history” usually leave us to imagine. Amalendu Guha’s well-researched piece on “Imperialism of Opium in Assam” is the best example. Insisting that “the genesis of the opium evil in Assam” must be traced back into the habit of “Welsh’s several hundred sepoys”, Guha appears to argue that a monologic colonial state calculatedly inflicted the “vice” of opium consumption upon a pristine populace which remained locked within the colonial conspiracy until the messianic intervention of the Mahatma freed them once and for all.12 This uncritical reproduction of an early twentieth-century nationalist fable does a terrible disservice both to the cause of popular agency which Guha wishes to uphold and that of a nuanced conceptualization of the imperial rule.13 The issue of widespread opium consumption in British Assam is in need of a much more radical problematization than what the impact-response paradigm offers today. However, by no means we intend to suggest that the nineteenth century witnessed a simple semantic reversal – pejorative meanings overtaking positive meanings. The lines between pleasure, labor and fatigue were continuously redrawn and readjusted in different situations by different actors. Taxonomic operations of the scientific disciplines, revenue calculations of the government officials and the popular negotiations with the norms of the new work regime became entangled in the production of a complicated object in opium.

Let us start, once again, with Thomas Welsh, this time as Guha’s original sinner. While Welsh did bring a number of Rajput soldiers to the country, and while it seems plausible that many of them were veteran opium users, it requires too much of imagination to believe that the Company had a plan to infect the local people with “the opium evil.” In fact, in much of

12 It was originally published as Amalendu Guha, “Imperialism of Opium in Assam: 1773-1921”, Calcutta Historical Journal, 1: 2 (1977), 226-45. It has been reprinted in Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 280-96.

13 Almost all histories treat the opium issue in nineteenth-century Assam in the same manner. We must acknowledge the force of Kaushik Ghosh’s incisive comment, “In that peculiar world of colonial capitalism, the basis of all that passes as civilization today, the rationality of opium and the opium of rationality interplayed ceaselessly to define the wildness and indolence of the Assamese”. But Ghosh’s focus does not permit him to attend to the complexities of this ‘interplay’. See 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: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.
the Captain's correspondences, opium emerges as an organizing trope for describing the "anarchy" and "chaos." Welsh repeatedly argued in favor of a sustained British military presence in the country since "[t]he Assam Raja was a very weak man on whom no dependence could be placed, he being generally intoxicated with opium, and, when sober, totally incapable of all business." That "poor, debilitated man, incapable of transacting business, always either washing or praying, and when seen, intoxicated with opium" symbolized "the ignorance, imbecility, caprice, execrable cruelty, and oppression of Government." For Welsh, opium was the most sinister symbol of "the Rajah's extreme indolence and impotence, both of body and mind." In the final report, too, Welsh referred to the "luxuriant" growth of poppy "in most of the Lower Provinces", and while he briefly mentioned that "[t]he natives ... are as yet unacquainted with the manufacture of merchantable opium, which might be produced in considerable quantity," he did not divulge any ulterior motive in this regard.

We have already seen that Moneeram did not hold the Welsh Mission responsible for the expansion of "opium habits" even after he turned sour towards the British administration following thirty years of honeymoon. Elsewhere, he offered a little more elaborate account:

Opium was current in other countries, but not here. Langi Barphukan was the first person to order opium from the lower countries [hbatis]. The rich people became acquainted [with it] only since then. Occasionally one or two old rich men used to eat it. From the days of Sib Singha [c. 1714-44], a few city Muslims would eat it once in a while, but they would always mix it into water. The custom of eating [opium with] pāt came into fashion only with the upcountry bankandazes [brought by Purnananda Buragohain]. Since opium is very bitter, nobody used to take it directly. Subsequently people began to put it on a hookah and inhaled the smoke.

The rapid expansion of opium cultivation and consumption between the seventeen nineties and the eighteen twenties — a time which was otherwise reported as a period of agricultural recession — appears somewhat inexplicable in the official documents and the stock histories.

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14 Foreign Department (Miscellaneous Records), 1794. No. 8, Memoranda, vol. 1, no. 7. [NAI]
15 Quoted in Gait, History of Assam, 220.
16 Foreign Department (Political), 24 Feb 1794, 13A. [NAI]
17 Moneeram, buranjī vivekratna, 201
18 The notes scribbled on the margins of Welsh’s report by David Scott after a gap of about forty years indirectly confirm this proposition. "Poppy grows in luxuriance in most of the Lower Provinces," wrote Welsh. Scott improved on him suggesting a more active role for the local population, "A great quantity of opium is produced and used by the inhabitants." Scott's Notes, along with the original text of Welsh's Report, are printed as Appendix-A in Mackenzie, History of Relations of Government with Hill Tribes, 388.
"Poppy is unfortunately very extensively cultivated in Assam, opium being now one of the finest necessaries of life to every individual in the province," observed Jenkins in 1833. "For the procurement of it they will pledge all but the barest sustenance of life and undergo any labours or pains."19 In Assam, "the people will work for opium when they will work for nothing else," grudgingly noted a late nineteenth-century officer.20 How could a people who were unvaryingly represented as idle and indolent mobilize so much labor for an unnecessary, even harmful, article like opium when they were unmindful of staple crops? "[I]n lieu of 1 poorah of Kanee [opium]," exclaimed Butler, "the same amount of labor would cultivate ten of Sursoo [mustard], Maskalai [legume] or Aahoo Dhan [early-maturing rice]."21 It is at this frontier of productionist logic that one needs to rethink the connections between pleasure, labor and fatigue.

Before we do that, let us clarify that the East India Company did not begin a planned commercialization of poppy cultivation in Assam (as it had done in certain other parts of its territory since the inception of opium monopoly in 1773).22 In 1830, three years after he proposed a tax of Rs. 20/ poora upon poppy cultivation,23 David Scott seriously considered the possibility of furnishing "a part of the opium investment ... from Assam, should the drug prepared in that district appear upon trial to be of good quality." However, "the opium might be forwarded in that form at the rate of almost 4½ sicca rupees per Calcutta seer," which was certainly higher than "the price paid in Behar." Scott, desperate to "improve" the newly acquired province, still urged the authorities "to afford some extra encouragement to the cultivators, sufficient to render the price really remunerative, independent of those clandestine advantages which it is possible may be derived from this crop where a monopoly is established." The Agent also informed the Government that a certain Mr. Leslie had already "expressed his willingness to undertake the superintendence of the experiment, for

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19 F. Jenkins, Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to Government of India, Political Department, dated Calcutta, 22 July 1833, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 11 February 1835, Nos. 82-106 [NAI]
20 Cooper, Mishmee Hills, 103.
22 As the balance of the Anglo-Chinese trade remained consistently unfavorable for Britain in the early years of the new century, the East India Company came to be increasingly dependent on Indian opium revenue. Against massive import of Chinese tea into Britain, says Benoy Chowdhury, all exports except raw cotton and opium "were insignificant and were generally sold at a loss in the China market". This dictated the increasing rate of commercialization of poppy cultivation through Government monopoly in the Indian empire. Benoy Chowdhury, "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal (1757-1900)", ch. 1, Indian Studies: Past and Present, 4: 3 (1963), 230-1.
23 Foreign Department (Political), 9 March 1827, No. 18 [NAI]
the provisions during the next season of Assam opium to the extent of 50 or 100 maunds.”

He was confident that

no additional injury to the akbarry revenue in the adjoining districts need be apprehended from the provision of opium on account of Government in Assam, since the cultivation of the poppy is at present unrestrained; and the most likely means to prevent the illicit disposal of the surplus produce appears to be to provide a certain market for it on the spot.24

But Scott’s opium plan, like his mulberry plan, did not appear commercially viable to the Calcutta authorities. Scott blamed the failure on the uncharacteristic, un-merchantable form in which kāmi was prepared in Assam.25

The seed is sown in November and in March. When the poppy heads have grown to a proper size, diagonal incisions are made on the pod, and the juice is collected on strips of coarse cloth, about a couple of inches in breadth, and when fully saturated and dried, the cloth is rolled up in little bundles and kept for use.26

“The raising of opium is a business of much delicacy, the poppy being a very tender plant, and liable to injury from various causes,” wrote William Robinson in 1841.

The produce seldom agrees with what might be stated as the average amount, but generally runs in extremes: while one cultivator is disappointed, another is an immense gainer, and while one season will not pay the expenses of culture, another enriches all the cultivators. This circumstance renders the pursuit in the highest degree alluring, from the excitement, uncertainty, and hope connected with it. Probably the uncertainties of this cultivation depend in a great measure on the natural falls of rain, and the qualities and elevation of the soil. The Assamese never have recourse to effectual irrigation, or it is likely their crops of poppy would be equal to those in the western provinces.

In a footnote Robinson further clarified that “[o]wing to the bad managements of natives, the opium is much dearer in Assam than in the western provinces, even inclusive of the Company’s tax, which the drug is not yet subjected to here.”27 It becomes clear from these excerpts that the reason for the growing cultivation and consumption of opium among the

24 D. Scott, Agent to the Governor General on the North-Eastern Frontier, to G. Swinton, Secretary to the Government of India, dated 17 April 1830, in Foreign Department (P. C.), 7 May 1830, Nos. 51-3 [NAI]
26 Robinson, Descriptive Account of Assam, 71. According to Anderson, a similar method was in vogue among the Singphos. “The opium is cultivated in enclosures around the houses, and the juice is obtained by slitting the capsules with a small knife, and carefully scarping it of, and collecting it on tough Chinese paper, or on a hard large leaf.” John Anderson, A Report on the Expedition to Western Yunan via Bhmō (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1871), 133
27 Robinson, Descriptive Account of Assam, 71-2.
Assamese जात during the early years of the nineteenth century cannot be located in the policy decisions of the Company, rather, the officials wanted the Company to benefit from an already “unrestrained” cultivation. As the alleged inconsistency and inferiority of the Assam opium held back the officials from a large-scale commercialized cultivation of poppy in Assam, the कैंदी-chewing जात grew opium mostly in their garden-lands as a regular item of consumption. The expansion of commercialized opium cultivation under Government supervision in the western parts of the Bengal Presidency of course needed a market at hand and since the early eighteen forties arrangements were indeed made to sell surplus Bengal opium in Assam. Jenkins even admitted that “the anxiety of the government vendors to increase their profits has no doubt considerably contributed to the increased consumption of the drug.” But to insist on these facts without trying to engage the facts of massive spate of opium cultivation among the जात of early nineteenth-century Assam for self-consumption is to imagine the consumers as a passive receptacle of calculated Government policy which does little more than adding to the tiring nationalist narrative of victimhood. Matthie, in fact, contended that contrary to Jenkins’s apprehension, the sale of surplus Bengal opium “met with little success, as nearly all the Collectors report the cultivation has not decreased.”

Moreover, the students of imperial history cannot sidestep the sustained tension between ideological commitments and revenue considerations of the empire. “It is our wish not to encourage the consumption of opium, but rather to lessen its use, or more properly speaking, the abuse of the drug,” insisted the Court of Directors, “and for this end, as well as for the purpose of revenue, to make the price to the public both in our own and foreign dominions, as high as possible.” The directors also stated that had it been “possible to prevent the drug

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28 Chowdhury, *Commercial Agriculture*, 293-4. It is relevant to note that the early years of the decade saw the first ‘Opium War’ with China.

29 Foreign Department (Political), 4 May 1844, No. 127 [NAI]

30 There are scattered references in the documents of the early eighteen thirties that opium produced in the Brahmaputra valley formed a distinct article of circulation to the northern hills. For example, Robertson reported in 1832 that “[t]hough fond of opium, [the Khamts] cannot exert themselves to cultivate it but procure what they require at an exorbitant price from Assam.” Extract Fort William Political Consultations of 7 January 1833, From T. C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General on the North Eastern Frontier to G. Swinton, Chief Secretary, Dated 14 December 1832. F/4/1505, File No. 59025 [OIOC]. Pemberton’s *Report* contains similar references to Matak opium. Matthie reported in 1835 that the “Cucharrees of Chooteah Division” in Darrang “carry on a small traffic with the Booteahs” in opium and that it was a major produce in “the Chardoar Division.” Matthie, *Report on Darrang*, 15. And Jenkins noted in 1833 that “this drug was selling at 4 or 5 Rs a seer only whilst I was at Suddiya.” Jenkins, *Report on the North-East Frontier*, 20

31 “Memorandum by Lieut.-Colonel Matthie”, Appendix D in Moffatt Mills, *Report*, 75
except strictly for the purpose of medicine", they would have "gladly" done it "in compassion to the mankind", but this was "absolutely impracticable" at the present situation. The final article of the treaty of 2 March 1833 between the Company and Purandar Singha specified

It being notorious that the quantity of opium produced in Assam is the cause of many miseries to the inhabitants, the Rajah binds himself that, whatever measures may be determined on with a view to checking this source of mischief in the territory of the Honourable Company, corresponding measures shall be adopted in the territory made over to him. In 1840, the Governor General in Council, while sanctioning land grants to the Assam Company "strongly recommend[ed] that it be made a strict condition with the Company or other grantees that ... they shall abstain form growing poppy on their lands." It is easier to read these ambiguities as instances of hypocrisy than to understand the endless negotiations with competing self-images through which the empire comes to define itself. To quote Nicholas Thomas, "even what would seem its purest moment of profit and violence have been mediated by and enframed by structures of meaning." The declared official opium policy in Assam was indeed one of "maximum revenue with minimum consumption."

The horizon of pleasure begins to suggest itself in this context. We are far from prescribing an instinctivist perspective in place of the explicitly manipulationist explanation. We cannot say that the desire to consume opium was innate and universal but just went unfulfilled until the nineteenth century. Nor can we ascertain that it was simply the mechanical pursuit of status – the rational effort to maximize "symbolic capital" – which necessitated this little consumption revolution of the early nineteenth century, although indirect evidences survive...

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32 Quoted in Chowdhury, Commercial Agriculture, 233. Emphasis added
33 Foreign Department (Political), 30 Nov 1833, No. 91 [NAI] Emphasis added.
34 Revenue Department Proceedings, Government of Bengal, 7 April 1840, No. 93 [WBSA]
35 Indeed, in 1813 the collectors had been told to keep the sale of excise opium in Bengal confined to one or two of the provincial towns and not to encourage its consumption among the local population. Joshua Rowntree, The Imperial Drug Trade: A Restatement of the Opium Question, in the light of recent evidence and new developments in the East (London: Methuen, 1905), 17. In 1817 the Court of Directors explicitly asked its officials “not to introduce the culture of the poppy into any district where it was not hitherto obtained.” Quoted in Chowdhury, Commercial Agriculture, 230-2.
37 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 285
to suggest that emulative behaviors were at work. The causes of pleasure, thankfully, escape history. For us, the very staging of opium in terms of superfluity and luxury remains important: how its fame as an antidote to fatigue (धोगन) was consistently erased from the dominant registers of representation; how the scientific explanations, in marked contrast with the puranic tales, chose to understand the qualities of opium as its innate, object-ive properties, beyond the variable distinction between the “rich people” and the “ordinary people;” how the world of goods was presented, ordered and policed.

As several historians point out, with the phenomenal increase in the scale of consumption in western Europe by the end of the eighteenth century emerged a strong defense of the new consumer culture which aggressively challenged the orthodox conception of “the world of goods as a two-part hierarchy composed of an extremely thin layer of subsistence at the bottom and, looming above that, a vast universe of luxury.” The age-old clerical valorization of austerity was attacked for being ridiculously harsh and even unscientific. Private pursuit of convenience, pleasure and ease now came to be appreciated as a “natural” instinct of the individuals. However, as Stoler and Cooper suggest, it is precisely the tension “between the exclusionary practices and universalizing claims of bourgeois culture” that is of enduring interest to us. In the complex unity of the logics of production and pleasure that we have

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39 Dutiram Hazarika’s Puran does encourage one to think along these lines. As we have been discussing in the first chapters, the post-revolt Ahom polity was obliged to redefine its nobility lines in the early years of the nineteenth century. The strictly aristocratic privileges of riding palanquins, carrying umbrellas and wearing shoes came to be substantially relaxed in these years [Gait, History, 242]. Maybe we have lost a very similar history for opium consumption – how a share in the prohibited pleasure was wrested through extensive popular use. The early British officials, who frowningly recorded the increasing use of opium among the inferior castes such as “the Dooms”, did not forget to mention that such popular consumption of the article “used to be interdicted under the former native princes.” “Assam – Since the Expulsion of the Burmese”, Calcutta Review (XIX) January – June 1853. Printed as Appendix B in White, Memoir of David Scott, 240. One can also read the only pre-British instance of imposing tax on poppy by Purnananda Buragohain in the early 1790s in this perspective. See Foreign Department (Political), 4 May 1844, No. 27. NAI] An adventurous historian can argue that despite the explicit interdictions of the puranas and the princes, the “ordinary people” now laid claim to the heavenly pleasure. But there is very little direct evidence to endorse or dispute such proposition.


41 Stoler and Cooper, Between Metropole and Colony, 37

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come to abbreviate as modernity, the stories of seduction of commodities are inseparable from the histories of commodity racism.  

Defense of pleasure in the post-Enlightenment bourgeois Europe, we must remember, was predominantly a defense of self-constitution and self-enhancement which in turn was perceived as contributing to an increase in production and thus to the general health of the "economy." The critique of feudal luxuries as decadence ensued from a concomitant perception of their allegedly wasteful and self-destructive nature. Indeed, nineteenth-century science was increasingly entrusted with the task of measuring the comparative benignity and injuriousness of objects in explicit terms of productionist utility. The readers of Foucault will remember that it was around the same time, "as the upshot of a general re-examination of modes of investment and capitalization", the bourgeois Europe experienced a "progressive dislocation" of the preceding "mixed and polyvalent procedures of assistance." Medicine – the new general technique of health – was expected to ensure "a complete utilitarian decomposition of poverty" in scientifically working out "a whole series of functional discriminations (the good poor and the bad poor, the willfully idle and the involuntary unemployed)."  

The privilege of pleasure without the corresponding obligations of labor was considered absurd, harmful and anachronistic. In approaching the ambivalence of the imperial state regarding the consumption of opium, we have to keep in mind the structural necessity of ambiguities in a bourgeois empire.

The dilemma among the medical professionals in nineteenth-century Britain about the objective properties of opium is well-documented. While a wide range of cheap and easily available opiate preparations continued to flood the middle-class British homes, energizing the three hundred years old panacean image of opium, a number of professional physicians came to challenge the dominant identification of opium as a principal "diffusible.

42 "Commodity racism" occurs in Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34. However, in our usage the term does not signify a temporally subsequent stage of "scientific racism," but as one of its dimensions which simultaneously acts as an incitement and a constraint to the science of racism.

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

44 Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards, Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England (London: Allen Lane, 1981), 31 points out that "ailments were dealt with on the basis of community knowledge; and there was often positive opposition to the encroachment of trained doctors." See also Geoffrey Harding, Opiate Addiction, Morality and Medicine: From Moral Illness to Pathological Disease (London: MacMillan, 1988), 7.

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The protracted professional debate whether opium was a stimulant ("hot") or a sedative ("cold") drug was seized by an overeager Government sensing the multiple tremors of industrialization. Increasingly encouraged to identify the "hot" or violent drugs which transmitted exciting properties to their consumers, the contending physicians continued to present conflicting arguments and examples. While in the beginning of the eighteenth century the physician John Jone could include both "pleasant dreams" and "alacrity and expediteness in dispatching business" as consequences of opium consumption, by the middle of the nineteenth century such ubiquities became uncontainable within the specialized medical discourse. With the intense but incomplete medicalization of the opium question (indeed, it became a "question" only within the creases of the medical discipline!), the promise of pleasure had to pass through the ordeal of health, the standing-reserve of production.

In the dark corners of the enlightened empire, the ambivalence of science left considerable leeway for administration. Jenkins, for example, could refer to the effects of "the habitual use of opium" as rendering the productive classes "idle, dissolute and timid" when he gave a clarion call for enhanced productivity. On the other hand, when he opposed the proposal to prohibit opium cultivation in Assam proper suspecting it "would create a degree of unpopularity which is certainly not to be risked," he referred to opium as a benign "luxury, which there is no reason to suppose, is to any considerable extent deleterious." In fact, in the same letter Jenkins argued that the only effective means to restrict opium consumption might be to force the consumers into working for more hours on their fields through an increase in land revenue demand. Although Jenkins was not ready to enforce this measure, subsequent officials actually justified two drastic increases in land revenue in nineteenth century Assam as "an effective disincentive to opium consumption." Hopkinson, the major advocate of land revenue increase in the post-Jenkins administration, strongly and successfully argued against the proposal of returning to the "Bhutias" "any of the rich

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46 Berridge and Edwards, Opium and the People, 64.
47 Quoted in Alethea Hayter, Opium and the Romantic Imagination (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 24
48 Foreign Department (Political), 6 March 1839, No. 149 [NAI]
49 Foreign Department (Political), 4 May 1844, No. 127 [NAI]
50 Guha, Imperialism of Opium, 234.
cultivable valley land within the hills that they may grow opium on it, as there is too much reason to fear that the Nagas are now trying to do in the valleys within their hills.\textsuperscript{51}

"[T]hree-fourths of the population are opium-eaters, and men, women, and children alike use the drug."\textsuperscript{52} Moffatt Mills was in agreement with most of his contemporary European colleagues that "[s]omething should be done to check the immoderate use of the drug, and rescue at least the rising generation from indulgence in a luxury which destroys the constitution, enfeebles the mind, and paralyzes industry." But he seemed to see Jenkins's point: prohibition might lead to insurgency. Trying to find some relief in the contemporary medical dilemma, Moffatt Mills surmised that "in a damp country like Assam it is perhaps beneficial if taken with consideration." His final judgment was characteristically simple: "Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it."\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the Assamese should be stopped from cultivating opium in the garden-lands adjacent to their homes, but they could purchase their "drug" from licensed shops, as "a sufficient quantity of Government opium" (grown in other parts of Bengal Presidency) would be "poured into the stations and into the Mofussil."\textsuperscript{54} It was hoped that in being compelled to purchase their luxuries from the market, the would attempt either to increase the general agricultural production or release themselves into the wage economy of tea gardens. As a planter reformulated the logic in 1859:

The great and only drawback to the cultivation of Tea in this [Sibsagar] District is the want of labour, and I beg to state the measures which it seems to me the Government might adopt to assist us if so inclined — ... by raising the land rent on Rice and other lands 3½ or 4½ per acre, and to much more for Opium lands, so as to decrease the cultivation of that drug in Assam, while Government Opium could be supplied to be purchased by those who could not do without it. This would cause more laborers to work in the Tea plantations for ready cash.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{51} H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General on the North Eastern Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Political Department, No. 114, dated 17 April 1872, in "Demarcation of British Frontier between Assam and Bhootan", Foreign Department, Political-A, June 1872, Nos. 633-664 [NAI]
\textsuperscript{52} Moffatt Mills, \textit{Report}, 19
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid}, 68.
\textsuperscript{55} H. (?] S. Partridge, to J. W. Masters, Sub-Assistant Commissioner, Gola Ghat, Assam, dated 7 December 1859, in \textit{Selections from the Records of the Government of India}.
Confessions of the Opium-Haters

A colonial solution to the metropolitan ambivalence came from Dr. C. J. Simons, the medical in-charge of the Assam Company's plantations during the middle of the nineteenth century. In *Notes Describing the Baneful Effects on the Natives of Assam, from the Excessive Use of Opium*, Simons argued that "it has been proved by experiments that Opium varies in its effects on different nations." Reasoning that food habits, constitutions and manners of consumption had much to do with the effects of opium, he maintained that

[...]he mind, in some races, by its use, becomes elevated, as in the European, for instance, De Quincy, Coleridge, &c. 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 they become, in course of time. 56

Claiming that it was opium which subjected the Assamese to colic pains, dysentery, dyspepsia, gangrenous ulcers, phthisis, lung and heart diseases and a general loss of immunity, Simons argued that it also led them "to a state of irresolution, timidity, and incapacity, bordering on imbecility" in general and to mental derangement in particular cases. 57 In opium, again, Simons found the key to explain issues as varied as low population growth, broken families, larceny and burglary, and absence of morality in Assam. He insisted that although opium-eaters, when asked what first led them to consume opium, referred to its soothing and sedative qualities, "from my own professional experience, the first use has been generally for immoral purposes – as an excitant." 58

In 1860, the year when Simons published his tract, Moffatt Mills' suggestions were put into action and Assam was brought under the general operation of the opium monopoly rules. The ban on poppy cultivation provoked widespread discontent in the province. In Nagaon (which was specially mentioned by Matthie along with the localities of Sibsagar and Mataki for its high opium consumption rate 59) almost fifteen hundred Lalung cultivators gathered at the courthouse of the Deputy Commissioner in Phalaguri in 1861 to protest against the

57 Ibid, 9. B. C. Allen et. al., *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India* (rep. Delhi: Mittal, 1979) similarly reported that excessive use of opium forced nine persons to be admitted to Tezpur Lunatic Asylum between 1891 and 1901.
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order. Rumors of an imminent tax on pān (beetel leaf) cultivation made them particularly furious. After the Deputy Commissioner Singer refused to meet the petitioners, the agitators reportedly convened a public gathering. Having gone to forcibly disperse the mīl, Singer lost his life in the hands of the agitators. The Phalaguri uprising came to be continually cited in the later official documents as an exemplary illustration of the stimulant properties of opium. Numerous statements before the Royal Commission on Opium (1893) made it clear that the insurgency had been inscribed in the administrative memory as an “opium riot”, as a pointer to the “fact” that opium-eaters were necessarily prone to violence and disruptive activities. Referring to the uprising, the Chief Commissioner William Ward insisted that any hasty measure for restraining opium consumption in Assam might lead to similar incidents. And yet, the alleged connection between opium consumption and crime could not be established as an unvarying rule on the basis of a single event. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang testified before the Commission that “the people of Assam are a singularly law-abiding people; rioting and affray, a crime very common in the adjacent districts of Eastern Bengal, is almost unknown.” The Commissioner of Police, an Assamese magistrate highly critical of opium use, a British Civil Surgeon at Shillong – all denied that opium was the cause of any “crime of a serious nature” “Opium never leads to crime of any kind”, declared a member of the Board of Revenue. “It does not make a man quarrelsome or violent, but calms and soothes him, and in this respect its effects differ entirely from those of alcohol and ganja.” Although some officials believed that the opium-eaters were often led to acts of petty theft owing to shortage of money, many more argued that curbing opium consumption might push the Assamese to excessive consumption of alcohol and ganja involving far more disturbing consequences for the administration. A number of

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60 Foreign Department (Political), 31 May 1862, No. 891[NAI]. RRCO, Vol. 2, 300-1
61 RRCO, Vol. 2, 262
62 Ibid, 281
63 Ibid, 131, 265, 283.
64 Ibid, 64.
65 According to Moffatt Mills, “[t]here has been a great decrease in the number of petty thefts, which is attributed to the introduction of the Government opium, by which the price of the drug, which was before very high and drove the poorer classes to commit crime solely for the purpose of purchasing it, was equalized.” Moffatt Mills, Report, 35.
66 The 1913 Botham Committee felt the same. “Mr. H. A. C. Colquhoun, Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, presents an aspect of the question which deserves consideration. He points out that in Kamrup opium is steadily giving way to ganja; he doubts whether the conditions there are such as to call for any restrictive measure against opium, and he thinks that the object of legislation (so far as Kamrup is concerned) should be to discourage ganja rather than opium. The Committee is inclined to agree with him.”

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officials and tea-planters explicitly referred to contemporary Britain, where “working class alcoholism” was consistently blamed for the increasing crime rate.

That opium was used by the Assamese both “as a stimulant and sedative, never producing injurious results at all comparable to the use of spirits among the European working classes” was the contention of S. E. Peal, a tea-planter at Sibsagar, who claimed to have “an exhaustive experience” of the London working classes for seven years. As we shall see in the next chapter, the extraordinarily high mortality rate among the imported tea-garden coolies was often ascribed to the “naturally malarial climate” of Assam. The local European doctors, like their European colleagues, were divided on the issue. E. G. Russell, a Kamrup doctor, thought that there was some truth in the popular belief that opium prevented malaria, while W. J. Long, a physician based in Sibsagar contended that opium consumption in fact contributed to malarial infection. The planters too were pulled in different directions. On the one hand, as we have already mentioned, there was an unmistakable anxiety about the unknown connections between indolence and opium addiction. In its 1841 Annual Report, the Assam Company had expressed hope that “active measures” would be taken by the Government to put down the cultivation of opium throughout the province, for to 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.

Similarly the Public Works Department often complained that “the stupefactive effects of opium” induced “a want of taste for heavy work” in the villagers of Assam. “The planters are of opinion that the prohibition of Opium is the indispensable condition on which the prospective welfare and progress of the province depends,” reported the Collector of Nagaon in 1859. The Ainslie Committee explicitly said that

Report of the Committee Appointed to enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption (The Assam Gazette, December 10, 1913. Part II), 1580 [Henceforth, RCOGC]

69 See the statement of W. Johnston Long, in Moffatt Mills, Report, Appendix L, Seebsagur section.
70 Assam Company, Report of the Directors and Auditors made to the shareholders at the General Annual Meeting, held at the London Tavern, Bishopgate Street, on the 7th May, 1841, with an Appendix (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1841), 17
71 Executive Engineer, Lower Assam Division to the Superintending Engineer, Assam, No. 1172, dated Gauhati, 26 May 1875, “Annual Report of the Lower Assam Division for the year 1874-75”, in Public Works Department Progress Report for 1874-75 and 1775-76 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press, 1877), 12
72 K. P. Llyod, Officiating Collector of Nowgong to the Commissioner of Assam, dated 28 October 1854, No. 163, in Selections from the Records of the Government of India.
any measures which might tend to the diminished consumption of opium in the Tea Districts, (especially in Assam,) would benefit planters by removing one great cause of demoralization of the people and the perpetuation of their indolent habits, and would thus act in the direction of bringing more local labor into the market.73

On the other hand, particularly after the institution of the monopoly rules (which almost exactly coincided with the import of indentured workers from the western parts of the Bengal Presidency),74 the planters had reasons to go soft on the opium-eaters. E. P. R. Gilman, a tea-planter from Sonapur, told the Royal Commission that “for many years” he and his brother had been holding the right of selling opium in various mubals.75 Similarly, Peal testified that he had been issuing opium among the coolies of his garden for the last ten or twelve years76 and Ernest Berridge, another planter from Darrang, admitted to have been a licensee of the opium shop near his garden.77

In 1873 licenses for the retail vend of opium were granted free of charge to “all respectable persons applying for them,” and opium was issued to them from the treasury, for retail sale, on payment of a fixed price. Rules were changed next year when any person could open any number of shops for the retail sale of opium on the payment of a fixed sum for each shop. Within three years this arrangement was substituted by a “mubal system,” where, like rubber trade, the right to retail opium in each revenue mazā was sold by auction, and the purchaser was given the exclusive right to sell opium at a determined number of places within the area “purchased” by him (although the exact sites of opium selling could be decided and changed by the mubaldar). Subject to the control of the Deputy Commissioner, he was allowed to sublet the right of selling at each of these places. Citing instances of an increasing tendency of smuggling, the Government chose to revert to the licensing system in 1893 when the number of shops was specified district-wise and the right to sell at each was sold by auction. This was paralleled by a gradual rise in the treasury price of opium and a decrease in the number of shops.78 It is easily understandable that the planters in their capacity of “respectable persons” often outbid other contenders at the auctions and sublet some of

73 RCSPTC, 24
74 Cf. the statement of A. T. Campbell (Assistant Commissioner, Assam), 14 December 1867, in Appendix A, ibid, xviii. The formal “indenture system” begins in 1863.
75 RRCO, Vol. 2, 293.
76 Ibid, 153.
77 Ibid, 296.
78 Ibid, 261.
them to the garden kanyas. The excise Report of 1906-7, for example, records the closure of ninety-nine such shops near tea gardens. Over the last three decades of the century the treasury price had been gradually but considerably increased (from Rs. 14 in 1860 to Rs. 37 in 1890). Selling opium was not a simple charity affair, although the planters interviewed by the Royal Commission tended to portray it as such. More importantly, some planters used to pay the larger part of wage to the workers in the form of opium. As Guha rightly emphasizes, Peal himself

used to issue every month about 40 lbs of opium to his labour force. For about 12 years since 1863, this constituted half of his total wage bill and served as circulating media reportedly over a rural area of 200 square miles wherefrom his labour was recruited. But what prevents us from accepting Guha’s larger thesis – that the planters, in collusion with the government officials, forced opium use on the Assamese population – is a simple recognition of the fact that both the medical and the plantocratic discursive worlds were much more plural and self-contradictory than Guha allows them to be. Instead of imagining the plantocracy as an unchanging and undivided interest group, we suggest that much can be learned from Gilman’s quip that if opium consumption “is stopped, one might as well shut up all the tea gardens in Assam enjoying local labour.” We particularly need to differentiate between the tea gardens which were mostly dependent on the imported workers and the ones which were not. There is reason to suspect that the owners of the former gardens were harsher on opium selling (as we shall soon see, the fear that this “evil of Assam” would corrupt the imported and costlier labor from Chota Nagpur was a matter of widespread concern even among the nationalist agitators) while many employers of Assamese labor found it to their interest to under-monetize their wage bill. Further and intensive (ideally,

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79 As early as 1835 Pemberton noticed the role of the Marwari traders in importing opium for the troops and the local communities. Pemberton, Report on the Eastern Frontier, 74. We have already mentioned in Chapter Two that Mahasingha Kothari’s initial stock came from selling opium at exorbitantly high prices in the early eighteen twenties.

80 Quoted in ACOER, 145.

81 Each and every tea planter in Assam interviewed by the Commission in 1893 unfailingly expressed the belief that opium at least prevented, if not cured, malaria of the coolies. Cf. RRCO, Vol. 2, 153-3, 291, 294-6, 300. Subsequently, the nationalist agitators pointed out the increasing scale of the profit of the opium mahaldars. “A total of 1200-1300 maunds of opium was sold in Assam in 1921. The revenue from opium was approximately 4, 000, 000 rupees. In reality we can calculate the revenue as twice as much, because the opium-eaters pay a lot more to each mahaldar.” Krishnanath Sharma, krisna shardar diary (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1972), 88

82 Ibid, 153-4.

83 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 285

garden-wise) research in this direction might effectively modify our suggestions. But in all probability we are not on an unsafe ground when we insist that the increasing popular demand for opium was not as much a function of administrative/plantocratic calculation as an effect of other semantic sets which the order of the imperial archive makes almost invisible to us. It was reported in 1893 that in Assam “[t]here is a common pujah connected with opium among Hindus. They burn it and get opium-eaters to pray for their good health while the opium is still burning. This takes place yearly. It is called Bhakat Khawat.”

Twenty years later, the Botham Committee reported:

> Of recent years… a ceremony purporting to be of a semi-religious nature — the Kaniya Sew — has been introduced among the more ignorant classes at which opium consumers are assembled and opium is distributed with the object of averting sickness or other impending trouble. The distribution and consumption of opium is also common at ‘samagra’ or religious services.

The Committee’s insistence on the “recent” origins of “the Kaniya Seba” is intriguing, because the sew was not as recent as they wished it to be. A detailed description of Kāniyā Sew is in fact available in Hemchandra Barua’s Kāniyā Kirttan (1861), a text to which we shall shortly return. But it is important to appreciate the Committee’s endeavor to underscore the “inauthentic” nature of this practice.

> The semi-religious uses of the drug appear to be purely the invention of interested opium consumers, and have no authority in the Sastras. They are reprobated even when acquiesced in by the better classes and they undoubtedly set the bad example to the young and tend to spread the opium habit.

Indeed, admitted the Committee,

> The habit is very commonly practised in company. There is nothing of the nature of regular “Opium dens”, but smokers frequently meet in the house of one or other of their number, and smoke together. There is a good deal of evidence that these smoking parties are looked on with disfavour. One reason is that at such meetings young men commonly acquire the opium habit; and another is that these parties of smokers are not infrequently suspected of being responsible for organizing petty thefts in the village in order to get the means for indulging in the luxury. The habit is increasingly common at such social gatherings as

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85 *Ibid*, 291
86 *Report of the Committee Appointed to enquire into Certain Aspects of Opium and Ganja Consumption* (The Assam Gazette, December 10, 1913. Part II), 1580 [Henceforth, *RCOGC*]
87 Cf. H. C. Barua, *kāniyā kīrttan* (1861; Gauhati: Hemkosha, 1996), 31
marriages and funerals, at which fashion requires opium to be distributed for the use of opium consumers.\textsuperscript{88} It is no wonder that anti-opium campaign became the most crucial form of nationalist mobilization in Assam in the early twentieth century. The possibility of monitoring the social emerged in the precise targeting of a "habit very commonly practised in company." Radhanath Changkakoti, the Secretary of the Upper Assam Association and the founding editor of the \textit{Times of Assam}, insisted that no less a religious leader than the Adhikār or head of the Auniati Satra – whom he called "the Pope of Assam" – had condemned opium consumption.\textsuperscript{89} To remember our earlier discussion in Chapter Three, in the face of reinforced high caste and landlord domination, the Kālā Samhati Gosain orders attracted a huge number of disciples (bhakats) and developed a distinctive set of practices and rituals most of which were dismissed in the enlightened discourse of the nineteenth century as "esoteric" and "obscene." According to the Calcutta-educated Panindra Nath Gagai, it was in these satras that opium eating became somewhat linked to "the honor of a bhakat."\textsuperscript{90} The Adhikārs of the big satras, on the other hand, were often successfully lobbied by their middle-class clientele to issue ordinances against opium consumption.\textsuperscript{91} Elsewhere, Gagai offered a quick classification: "Alcoholic liquors are drunk by the non-superstitious, educated Assamese or the half-baked babus, hemp is for the middle echelon, and the serpent-spewed opium for the great saints and mahants and the inferior ranks."\textsuperscript{92} The connection between "semi-religious" rituals of the "more ignorant classes" and opium consumption was more clearly made by Hem Chandra Barua in \textit{Kāniyār Kirttan} (1861) – "a play in Assamese on the evils of opium eating." The play shows how a middle class household is impelled to a tragic ruin owing to the introduction of opium consumption by a Gosain. Even the family women learn to perform kāniyā seua from a mendicant woman quack, Mangalati.\textsuperscript{93} Although of an unenviable literary quality, Barua’s story of a nāzādār family sandwiched between the cultural demands of Padmapani Gosain and Mangalati Buri

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  \item \textsuperscript{88} RCOGC, 1580
  \item \textsuperscript{89} RRCO, Vol. 2, 306.
  \item \textsuperscript{90} Panindra Nath Gagai, “tente nā āmār upāy ki?”, \textit{Jonākī}, 3: 3 (1891), 88.
  \item \textsuperscript{91} The Adhikār of the Dinjay Satra, for instance, chaired the 1912 Anti-Opium Conference in Assam. Nath (ed.), \textit{dibrugarar buranjī}, 146.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} Panindra Nath Gagai, “āmār unnati ne avanati?”, \textit{Jonākī} 2: 6-7 (1890), 142. The specific adjective used for opium is “anantamukhasambhuta” (literally, \textit{born in the mouth of Anantanāg}, a mythological serpent associated usually with Viṣṇu who holds the earth on its thousand heads). It invites a comparison with Dutiram Hazarika’s description.
  \item \textsuperscript{93} Barua, \textit{Kāniyār Kirttan}, 29-31.
\end{itemize}
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marvelously captures the mid-nineteenth century Assamese middle class's drive towards a new idiom of selfhood defined in terms of modernity, masculinity and productivity. The idiom became gradually sharpened as increasing numbers of middle-class Assamese youth began to form a more direct link with the intelligentsia of Calcutta, the colonial epicentre. It is of interest to note that almost all the middle class Assamese witnesses of the Royal Commission who argued in favor of prohibition of opium sale in Assam admitted to have some kind of personal connections with the dominant metropolitan culture of contemporary Calcutta.

Dinnonath Mazumdar, who came from Calcutta to preach the reformed Brahmo religion in Assam, was disgusted to find that opium had robbed the Assamese of their "manly qualities:" "Their females do every work for them, even attend courts of justice when necessary." Ramkumar Vidyaratna, another Brahmo missionary in Assam, had also argued on the same line in 1881. For some, opium became the key to explain the public visibility of Assamese women. "Everyone must have heard that it is opium that has gone to make man woman, and woman man, in Assam", thundered one Upendra Nath. The fear of domestic role reversal was evidently linked with the question of productivity. "I understand by manhood", said Satyanath Borah, a famous pleader from Gauhati, "the sum total of energy, mental and bodily strength, and that is all taken away by the long use of opium; the use of opium makes men very indolent. The user of opium loses his energy, his bodily strength as well as his mental strength." Consequently, Borah reasoned, the Assam-Bengal Railway authorities did not employ the Assamese labor in Assam.

An unsigned article in the reformist periodical Jorukti typically complained that the indolent Assamese peasant "can be barely seen in the field" for four months and that "for the most of the remaining months he

94 It encouraged similar literary productions. Cf. Scene II Act I of "vivaharahaasya nātak", āśāṁbandhu, 2: 1-2 (1886), 37-42. The poet Bholanath Das compared opium to beef, the most untouchable of all objects for a true Hindu. Bholanath Das, "āśāṁbandhu", 1: 1 (1885), 12-16

95 Well into the early twentieth century, most of the leading middle class Assamese intellectuals continued to receive their formal education in Calcutta. Bengali newspapers, journals, and books – carrying a sense of the sanitized urban culture – found an expanding market in the middle-class households of Assam during the period. See Chapter Ten. See also Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 206-18; H. K. Barpujari, "The Press and Political Organisations", in H. K. Barpujari (ed.), Comprehensive History of Assam, vol. 5 (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1993), 256.

96 RRCO, Vol. 2, 33. It might be relevant to note here that the Brahmo Samaj of Assam decided to keep out the opium consumers from the Samaj. Ibid, 260.


denies daylight to his eyes, sits close to fire, swallows his opium pill and gives in to reveries." The social is unthinkable outside the grids of utility.

The 1893 Royal Commission on Opium, which had been asked by the London authorities to give special attention to Assam, hoped to ensure an easy acquittal for the Government from its foundational tension by concluding that in India "medical and quasi-medical uses of the drug are so intermixed that it is impossible to draw a line between them." But such ambiguities could neither appeal to the growing self-assertion of organized medicine nor secure a more economic technique of managing coolie health. With the flow of the medical missionaries into Assam, science and evangelism combined to offer the planters, excited by the war demand of the Indian tea, a new technology of health. "It is perfectly possible to restrict the use of opium to medical and scientific needs," screamed the National Christian council of India, Burma and Ceylon, and insisted, "let the medical mean be the judge of the necessities." It was soon cheerfully recorded that "[h]ealth in the 'bastis' is now seen to be not merely a matter of humanity, or a matter of Government interest as trustees of the labourers, but also an integral part of the management of a good estate."

This managerial aspect of Indian nationalism is conveniently overlooked in the stock histories, and the self-congratulating middle-class histories continue to narrate how the educated youths organized two all-Assam anti-opium conferences in 1907 and 1912 and what good nationalist press Raybahadur Phaniadhar Chaliha received by calling the opium revenue "tainted money" in a council debate. A closer look at the nationalist logic, however, brings more embarrassing elements into play. The question of race, for example. Right from the early eighteen thirties, there was an implicit understanding among the British officials that "all the Indo Chinese nations" were particularly predisposed to opium.

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100 "asamiyār kheti", Jonāki (2:1), 1890, 6.
102 RRCO, vol. 1, 93.
103 Tracts like W. H. Park (ed.), Opinions of One Hundred Physicians on the Use of Opium in China (1889) were frequently produced by the missionaries. Rowntree, Imperial drug Trade, 119. The Chinese experience of the missionaries decisively shaped their increasingly anti-opium stand. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in 1881, "It is a common thing that when the missionary has concluded his address the people say, 'Who introduced opium into China?'" Hartmann Henry Sultzberger (ed.), All About Opium (London: Author, 1884), 5.
106 Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, 5 April 1919.
addiction, and that the Assamese people, situated as they were somewhere in between the Chinese proper and the Indians proper in the racial landscape, were “natural” opium addicts. For C. F. Andrews, the chief advisor (“Guide”) to the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee and Mohandas Gandhi’s special emissary to the “jangli [wild] province,” the “opium evil in Assam” was in a great part attributable to this “racial weakness.”

The Assamese race has a large admixture of Mongolian blood in its veins. Though it is by no means wholly true that only the Mongolians become opium-addicts, yet there is a recognized racial weakness among them which makes it exceptionally necessary to take every precaution against addiction.

Thus taking Britain to task for failing to guard the “race” against its own genetic program, Andrews further confirmed that although the planters were “almost reckless at the first”, the “vice” had been “inherited in the Assamese people”. At the same time, the conventional tragic plot of “a people fallen into deep ruin” made his narrative strategy swing between the natural and the historical, and a theme of decline was evoked: “what a much stronger and more virile race the Assamese people had been, before the fatal infection of opium smoking and eating had been introduced.” Gandhi himself linked the Bengali “occupation” of the Surma Valley to the “terrible opium curse” upon the Assamese saying that opium had robbed the “race” of its vitality and left it to fester under Bengali domination.

108 See also George Watt, A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India, Vol. VI, Part 1 (1892; Delhi: Cosmo, 1972), 29 for an interesting argument of a certain Dr. Bretschneider who argued that “the Chinese took the practice of opium-smoking from the people of Assam ‘where the custom had long existed.’” For Watt, “[t]his is very probably a mistake.”
109 That is how Gandhi had described Assam in his Hind Swaraj before strong criticisms from the intellectuals of Assam proper forced him to retract the statement. For Gandhi’s own comment on how he had retained an idea that all Assamese were “jangali” opium-eaters after reading a British General’s justification of the Manipur expedition, see M. K. Gandhi, “Lovely Assam”, in Satis Chandra Kakoti (ed.), Discovery of Assam (Calcutta: A. Guha, 1964), 7
110 Andrews, Opium Evil in India, 20. Emphasis added
111 Ibid, 36-7. Cf. Cooper, Mishmee Hills, 102: “The laxity of morals amongst the people is conspicuous, and this, coupled with the vice of an inordinate use of opium, constitutes one of the greatest drawbacks to industry and progress. Indeed, it is painful to contrast the active industry of the former population, as evidenced by the gigantic ruins to be met with in this country, with the listless apathy of their descendants, who spend most of their time under the influence of opium, caring little for anything else after they have satisfied the cravings of hunger.”
112 M. K. Gandhi, “Conditions in Assam”, in Kakoti (ed.), Discovery of Assam, 8
The “findings” of the report of the Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Committee (1925), which carefully deleted the voices of the “addicts,” were published as excerpts in different newspapers and periodicals. Massive mobilization of “volunteers” from the schools and colleges were undertaken. Picketing of shops and “social boycott” of the “addicts” were enforced through the block-level Congress committees. Propaganda songs were composed and sung in festivals and gatherings. Defense of opium was invariably dubbed as a conspiracy of the “the English doctors,” and the dissenting voices from the middle class were self-consciously suspended. Spelling out the “duties of the countrymen” in a brief article in the popular periodical *Avahan*, Omiyo Kumar Das, an influential Congress leader, laid down detailed instructions for organizing propaganda, medical help and Vigilance Committees. The volunteers were specifically encouraged to “inspire” the villagers to help them identify the local opium-eaters who, according to Das, were the “secret enemies of the national freedom struggle.” The volunteers were in fact advised to act in coordination with the planters when the shops outside tea gardens were to be targeted for picketing. If the opium-eaters were the secret enemies, the planters were certainly not-so-secret friends. Resistance did come from the opium consumers. Volunteers were shouted at, pushed around and even stabbed in some cases. The nationalist archive, of course, chooses to minimize these embarrassing facts. But one sentence from the autobiography of an Assam Provincial Congress Committee member is perhaps worth remembering. “We started non-cooperation with the Government to seek the cooperation of the people,” writes Benudhar Sharma in referring to the enormous degree of opposition which the volunteers had to face.

113 The ventriloquism of the nationalist agitation certainly deserves more detailed analysis. We wish we could discuss Surendranath Barua’s short story published in *Avahan* in the nineteen thirties, “kānir garāhāt”, where a Cachari peasant recounts his own “downfall” owing to the “addiction.”
114 Benudhar Sharma, *congressar kāciyali rodat* (Guwahati: Assam Jyoti, undated) provides the most vivid descriptions.
115 mo-lung punārām mohan phukan: ejan tāi-ahom panditar jivāndālekhyā (Sibsagar: Mohan-Deodhai-Bailung Sanmilani, Assam, 1994), 3-4
116 Cf. Sharma, *krishna sarmār diary*, 88
117 For an interesting account of how the prohibitionist Lakshminta Phukan refused to publish an anti-prohibitionist editorial by Bashambad Mitra in *The Times of Assam*, see Lakshminta Phukan, “rādhānāth cāṅghākāti”, in Chandraprasad Saikia (ed), *rādhānāth cāṅghākāti* (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1971), 8-9
118 Omiyo Kumar Das, “kānī barjānata deśābāṣṭi karttabhya”, *āvāhan*, 10: 2 (1938), 525
119 It may be of help to remember here that it was around this time that the American government increased pressure on Britain to prohibit opium production in its colonies. Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (London: Simon & Schuster, Ltd., 1996)
120 Punaram Phukan, the “Captain” of the Kānī Nībāran Samiti in Mahamara mauza of Sibsagar in 1939, provides an interesting account in his memoirs. *mo-lung punārām mohan phukan*, 8.
during the anti-opium campaigns in the nineteen twenties and thirties, "and now we saw that the same people were non-cooperating with us!" Guha perhaps makes too much concession to his nationalist sensibilities when he writes that "Gandhiji ... was hailed overnight as an autar by the Assamese people." References to a long, bitter and cruel battle between the nation and its "secret enemies" are scattered in several autobiographies and newspaper reports. But we have a slightly different point to make. The point is not as much about the increasing invasion of a pre-existent social world as about the process in which the measures of the social were themselves formulated in the course of the encounter. And it is at this point that we need to readdress the questions of pleasure and labor, of fetishism and commodities. The debates between the English and the Assamese members of the Legislative Council were all confined to the ethicalness of opium revenue. The ethicalness of the new work regime was not a matter of disagreement.

In the object of opium was found the objectivity of indolence. The bounded site of commodity was a condition of possibility of the social. Indolence was otherwise too intangible, too incalculable, and too ethereal to be reformed. In the staging of an etiology in the commodity, indolence could finally become a disease and labor the normality. By the end of the nineteen twenties, the planter and the non-cooperator were more in agreement than ever before that in order to combat the much-lamented low productivity of Assam opium consumption had to be stopped by all means. "It would be a terrible thing", wrote Andrews in his chapter on "Effects of Opium on Plantation Labourers," "if the tea-garden population, as it settles down on the land, becomes infected."

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121 Sharma, congressar kāciyali rodat, 32
122 Guha, Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, 287
123 "The moment the opium-addicts see a volunteer, they come to attack him with a weapon." Sharma, congressar kāciyali rodat, 32. See also mo-lung punārām mohan phukan, 3-4; Harin Chandra Kalita (ed.), dharmaratna satrādikār śrī śrī gahancandra goswāmī (Tezpur: Gahancandra Goswami Jivani Sankalan Samiti, 1993), 12.
124 The British liberal leader Horace Alexander even invited the anti-opium activist Rohinikanta Hatibarua to Birmingham for delivering a public lecture on the Opium Evil in Assam. Hatibarua, however, passed away before he could make the trip. Sharma, krishna tarmār diary, 170
125 Andrews, Opium Evil in India, 35.
Tea Culture

That was exactly what C. A. Bruce, the first Superintendent of Tea Culture in Assam, had feared a century ago. “Labourers must be introduced”, he opined, “to give a tone to the Assam Opium-eaters, but the great fear is, that these latter would corrupt the newcomers.”

Urging the government to impose a total ban on opium consumption — “that dreadful plague, which … has degenerated the Assamese, from a fine race of people, to the most abject, servile, crafty, and demoralized race in India” — Bruce continued:

Would it not be the highest of blessings, if our humane and enlightened Government would stop these evils by a single dash of the pen, and save Assam, all those who are about to emigrate into it as tea cultivators, from the dreadful results attendant on the habitual use of opium? We should in the end be richly rewarded, by having a fine, healthy race growing up for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild Beasts, and to plant and cultivate the luxury of the world. This can never be effected by the enfeebled Opium-eaters of Assam, who are more effeminate than women.

This report, a foundational text of tea imperialism in Assam, brilliantly crafts commodities into races. Displacement of opium for tea becomes figural of the act of dispossession. “If the cultivation of tea were encouraged, and the poppy put a stop to in Assam, the Assamese would make a splendid set of tea manufacturers and tea cultivators.” Capitalism believes in its potency to offer an opportunity to graduate through commodities to superior identities.

The point becomes clearer from the proposal of the Assam authorities following Captain Hannay’s report confirming the unsupervised growth of tea in the Naga Hills in 1838. On his arrival in the Naga Hills, the American Baptist Missionary Miles Bronson felt that “nothing is more needful than to correct their indolent habit and to introduce among them some knowledge of the arts. I have thought of introducing among them the manufacture of tea … to get them all engaged in the cultivation of the product and in the manufacture of Green Tea.” Contending that “[t]he profit would all be theirs, and tend to get industrious habits introduced,” Bronson was particularly excited by the cultural authority of tea: “It

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would also help to civilize the people. Besides it would enrich and improve the country and bind the Nagas to the Company by another strong line."

Jenkins emphatically recommended Bronson's plan to the higher authorities saying that through the encouragement of the Nagas to cultivate the products of their hills and the tea in particular, we may hope ere long to see civilization greatly advanced among these Nagas, and our supremacy gradually extended over the hills, without which, and the consequent suppression of the constant feuds among the tribes, there seems to be little hope of effecting any great change in the habits of the people, or of our being able to avail ourselves of the great natural resources of this fine tract of this mountainous country.

Bruce, Vetch and other local officials were equally thrilled by the plan. But the plan had to be temporarily shelved as the authorities thought that "it would not be consistent with the principles upon which the Government has hitherto acted and might give rise to inconvenient afflictions in other quarters." It was 1838, and there was no Assam Company. In less than six years' time, John Owen reported that the Nagas are beginning to look on tea, manufactured according to Chinese style, as a grateful beverage; notwithstanding they still entertain the impression that our wandering over their forests in search of the plant is a mere pretext to see their country, and if found to be plentifully supplied with valuable productions that appropriation will follow. The idea may be indulged, that year hence both Assamees [sic] and hill-rangers will leave off the use of the opium and other intoxicating drugs for the better substitute of an indigenous, and easily manufactured article.

It is interesting to see that the contrast between opium and tea was rather consistently emphasized right from the eighteen thirties. Tea, which continued to be a relatively expensive import in England until the early decades of the eighteenth century, had acquired a certain metropolitan respectability in London which the coffeehouse popularization and the rapidly falling prices did not greatly alter. The metropolitan faith in its exceptional "medicinal" qualities was gradually supplemented by the increasing allusions to its "non-

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129 See the correspondences in Foreign Department (Political), 4 April 1838, Nos. 112-3 and Foreign Department (Political) 11 May 1840, Nos. 128-9. [NAI]
130 John Owen, *Notes on the Naga Tribes, in communication with Assam* (Calcutta: W. H. Carey & Co., 1844), 50
131 Emphasizing "medicinal" qualities of exotic commodities seems to have been a frequent characteristic of the sixteenth and seventeenth century European urban cultures. See Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and
intoxicating” character in the early nineteenth century. Individual protestors like John Wesley and Jonas Hanway could not match the governmental endorsement of tea drinking (as an alternative to consumption of alcohol). Sidney Mintz identifies “a ‘tea complex’ [which] gradually came to characterize British society top to bottom – though intricately and profoundly differentiated at each level.” But compared to opium, tea never carried as much dissension within its representational economy as to prevent it from becoming a profitable source of revenue, a marker of cultural sophistication and a symbol of imperial pride. The Edinburg Review honestly exclaimed in the eighteen thirties, “How is it that in England, being a tea-drinking country, so much crime, depravity and brutality still exist?”

This uncanny British-ness of tea was primarily foregrounded in Assam through a subtle derecognition of the preceding cultures of tea consumption in the area. Tea as the modern drink *par excellence* had to be – if we could employ one of Guha’s favorite phrases in his unintended context – “detribalized.” “Tea grows wild southeast of Nowgong”, certain “Shan Phookuns” reportedly informed Jenkins, “… but its [sic] very strong coarse and bitter in its wild state. Its [sic] cultivated by the Pollang (subjects of the Burmese king) race in these hills… The inhabitants cultivate it to a great extent as they have no other kind of cultivation and their livelihood chiefly depends on this. There is a great demand for it as the Chinese merchants come and buy it up at 7/8 per mound in its moist state and is carried off by them on the backs of mules and bullocks. The average carried off yearly amounts to about 40000 mounds.” This statement of the “Shan Phookuns,” collected and translated by Jenkins to be forwarded to the Secretary of the Government of India in 1836, not only provides a rough account of the

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133 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 121. According to Mintz, while tea with sugar became a major item in the working class diet for its “nutritional” value, it came to symbolize the “national vigour” of a leading industrial nation-state in the upper echelons of the British society where its earlier stigma of “a feminine drink” was gradually replaced by new associations of refinement, sophistication and energization. For an interesting documentation of the latter point, see P. Morton Shand, *A Book of Food* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), 39-40. Mintz uses the term “extensification of meaning” to explain the process. See Sidney W. Mintz “The Changing Role of Food in the Study of Consumption”, in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993), 265. We may also mention in this connection that in rural England, many old herb drinks were being rechristened as “teas” in the nineteenth century; Dorothy Hartley, *Food in England* (London: Macdonald, 1954), 573.


135 Foreign Department (Political) 8 July 1836, No. 84 [NAI]. Emphasis added
physical extent and commercial magnitude of the current tea economy in the region, but also
tries to locate the commodity on the map of local culture:

A little of its [sic] used by the natives by making a salad of the green leaves with a little salt-
pepper and oil. Its [sic] also paid in lieu of revenue to the Burmese government and also as
fees to priests on all occasions such as deaths marriages divorcements etc. and also to all the
state officers in the settling of disputes or administrating justices of any kind to the
inhabitants of these hills.136

The textbook histories are of course silent about this tea complex. A couple of years later
Bruce, as he was touring through Assam to spot tea tracts, was perplexed to find that “[t]he
Singphos have known and drank the tea for many years, but they make it in a very different
way from what the Chinese do.”

[The Singphos] roasted or rather semi-roasted the leaves in a large iron vessel, which must
be quite clean, stirring them up and rolling them in the hands during the roasting. When duly
roasted, they expose them to the sun for three days; some to the dew alternately with the
sun. It is then finally packed into bamboo dzoigs into which it is tightly rammed.137

Indeed the Singphos loved their tea. In one of his letters that he wrote to the British
authorities before joining the 1843 insurgency, to which we have referred in the previous
chapter, the Gaum of Bisa mentioned,

As far as Ningroo, and that below is Assam, now it is said that where tea grows that is yours,
but when we make sacrifice we require tea, for our funerals; we therefore perceive you have
taken all the country, and if we, the old and respectable, cannot get tea to drink we are not
well satisfied.138

For savage sacrifices and primitive funerals, however, the British could not care less. In their
turn to come to terms with the extant procedures, the European officers were puzzled not
only by the difficulties of determining the truer methods of preparation but also by the

on the Irawadi – they bring it in large baskets to Amarapura whence it is dispersed all over the kingdom – it
is said to be pickled, but the mode in which tea leaves are used as a pickle is unhappily not specified, so
that it is not yet ascertainable, at least not from this journal, of what quality it may be.” “Extracts and
observations respecting the Dominions of Ava chiefly from a journal kept by Dr. Francis Buchanan (now
Hamilton) accompanying Col. Symes in his embassy to the Court of Amarapura in 1795”, in Private Papers
of Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, IOR/ Mss Eur K389 [OIOC]

137 William Griffith, *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bhootan, Afghanistan and the Neighbouring
Countries*, arranged by John M’Clelland (1848; Delhi: Mittal, 1982), 15. Allusions to similar preparations
by other communities are also available. See Owen, *Notes on the Naga Tribes*, 52-3.

138 “A Translation of Beesa Gaum’s Letter,” c. June 1843, Appendix-F, in Foreign Department (F. C.), 12
August 1843, 90-106 [NAI]
unwillingness of the tea-growers to be subsumed under a European market form: “The Singpho country is a fine one, but as long as that nation can get the tea leaves from the jungles, they never will cultivate the plants”, remarked Bruce. It was only a semicolon that separated this recognition from the suggestive observation that “the country is thinly inhabited by a set of men, who are always fighting among themselves.” However, rather than repeating the story of tea-territorialization, we are here tempted to note how in the imperial trope of cultivation [or culture] “refinement” and “production” unite in a series of interplays that inscribes a crucial subtext of labor: refinement is not only achieved through production, production itself becomes a marker of refinement.

“[C]ultivation is everything with tea”, Jenkins vigorously asserted. The undue “strength”, “coarseness” and “bitterness” of “Assam tea”, its defenders in the officialdom argued, could be overcome and refined through continued cultivation so as to compete with the well-known “China tea.” It is difficult to miss the cross-mapping of the produce and the producers. Cultivating tea became at the same time a metaphor for and a mechanism of the civilizing mission. It was widely believed that employing the savage chiefs in the production of tea would also tend to domesticate their allegedly wild nature. As a communication from the metropole notified in 1842, “The Hon’ble the President in Council approves generally of the views of the local authorities, and considers that the money now expended on the Government tea establishments ... would be much more advantageously applied to the object of engaging the Singpho Chiefs in peaceful pursuits and habits, such as the cultivation of the tea plant where it can be productively and beneficially carried on.”

The purging of the savage traces from tea was a necessary condition for effectively coding it as a culturally advanced commodity. Educating the middle class in new courses of refinement required a fiction of tradition in which the “barbarous tribes” had little role to

139 C. A. Bruce, An Account of the manufacture of the Black Tea, 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: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1838), 15-7.
140 Foreign Department (Political) 8 July 1836, No. 84 [NAI].
141 Foreign Department (Political) 3 August 1842, Nos. 363-4. [NAI]. Similarly on the receiving of “15 chests of very fair tea” from the Singpho chief on the 29th of June 1840, it was referred “as a first experiment of turning the Singpho Chiefs to some useful employment” Foreign Department (Political) 13 July 1840, No. 120. [NAI]
play. As an article in the very first issue of the *Journal of the Assam Research Society* bluntly stated,

some of the hill men beyond Sadiya were long habituated to tea and might have discovered its virtues independently of China but their influence on civilised India was nil. It was therefore left to the Anglo-Indian merchants not merely to introduce tea through Calcutta but to develop and extend its culture in this land. A more sympathetic McLelland, who conjectured “that these tea tracts may at one time have been cultivated gardens, into which the plant was introduced artificially”, was surprised to think that in its “antiquities”, Assam reached “such a state of society in regard to refinement”. Articles in *Jorukhi* concerned with Assam’s improvement testify that the new intelligentsia of Assam proper faithfully shared this interconstitutive relation between the discourses of civilization and tea – aptly caught in the nomenclature of the imperial institution of “tea culture.” Without the *detribalization* of tea, it cannot be invested with an improving impulse. This does not, however, amount to say that the semantics of tea remained exempt from all fissures. Science had its own boundaries to erect and efface.

*Our Tea, Their Tea*

The issue of tea classification appears significant in this context. The Tea Committee was set up in 1834 on the assumption “that there must be amongst all the varieties and combinations of soil and climate betwixt Cape Comorin and the Himalayas some places congenial to the Plant” It was understood from the very beginning that after selecting the best probable spot for the experiment, G. I. Gordon, the Secretary of the Committee, would visit China “for obtaining the *genuine Plant*.”

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142 The situation is certainly in contrast to what A. R. Venkatachalapathy describes in “In Those Days There Was No Coffee”: Coffee-Drinking and Middle-Class Culture in Colonial Tamilnadu”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (39: 2 & 3), April-September 2002.

143 Dines Chandra Datta, ‘Early History of Tea’, *Journal of the Assam Research Society* (1: 1), April 1933, 16.


Chapter Seven

We have for some time been in possession of the knowledge that the tea shrub is indigenous in the Assam territory and it appears now to have been discovered in great abundance and in the latitude wherein the principal tea plantations of China are situated, the line of country passing, in fact, direct into the Chinese tea countries of Sechum and Yunnan; and the [Tea] Committee report that having obtained the first of the Suddeya plant they are enabled to state “with authority that not only is it a genuine tea but that no doubt can be entertained of its being the identical tea of China”, and they express a perfect confidence that “the tea plant which has been brought to light will be found capable under proper management, of being cultivated with complete success for commercial purposes.

Although “[o]n the receipt of this information, Mr. Gordon was recalled from China,” the Scientific Deputation of Wallich, M’Clelland, and Griffiths failed to corroborate the Tea Committee’s initial observation concerning the Assam plant, that is, the claim of “its being the identical tea of China.”147 William Griffiths dismissed the Assam plant as “a wild, or (to use our Indian notions) a more expressive term, jungly stock,” and advocated “the importation of Chinese seeds of unexceptionable quality.”148 Hints of a bitter and protracted controversy among the botanists regarding the true status of the “discovered” plants in Assam (inviting, at one point of time, direct and abrupt intervention of the Governor General)149 are scattered in the documents of the time. In the final report, however, the Deputation remarked “that the Assam plant beyond any doubt sprung from the same stock as the China variety, although it had degenerated on account of having grown wild over a long period of time.”150 Naturally, “Mr. Gordon was sent a second time to Canton.”151 With the

147 India. Revenue Department. 23 August, No. 11 of 1837, E/4/752, File No. XIII [OIOC]
148 Quoted in Sharma, British Science, Chinese Skill and Assam Tea, 440-1.
149 “Lord Bentinck ... very properly regarded the Assamese discovery as one that could not be allowed to incubate with the obscure problem of the separation of the tea plant into the genus Thea from the other species of Camellia. Whether a Camellia or a Thea, the Assam plant yielded excellent tea.” George Watt, A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India, vol. 6, part 3 (London; W. H. Allen, 1892), 433-4

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seeds which Gordon managed to smuggle out of China, a small nursery was established in the "Tea Barree at Deenjay in the Muttock country."\[^{152}\]

The idea of an *original* China and a *degenerated* Assam was at the heart of the reigning familial model of the early nineteenth-century botanical imagination. The official choice was, quite predictably, the *original* variety, which however failed to produce successful results in the Assam gardens. The authorities anxiously interrogated their hired Chinese tea makers about the similarities and differences between the "China" and the "Assam" plants.\[^{153}\] Letters were exchanged among the men of science and additional information was sought from different parts of the empire. But nothing could stop the phenomenal decrease in production. The Assam Company's shares became unsaleable in the London market. By 1847, in fact, it was virtually bankrupt and the London Board of Directors expressed desire to abandon the entire project, while the Calcutta directorate pleaded them to hold on for one more year.\[^{154}\]

Indeed, the Company registered a remarkable commercial success in the very next year. As the business folklore has it, this was largely due to the decision of two employees, Morney and Williamson, to use "the indigenous jātē" rather than the much-prized *Thea sinensis* or "the China plant."\[^{155}\]

What is not usually recognized in the standard accounts is the concomitant reversal of the botanical doxa.\[^{156}\] In 1868, the Ainslie Committee observed,

> A very large proportion of Tea in all three districts is of the China variety, which is now generally considered inferior to the Assam and Cachar indigenous and the hybrid varieties for the purposes for which Assam Tea is purchased, namely, for mixing with China Teas deficient in strength. The indigenous and hybrid varieties are superior, not only in strength, but also in productive power and facility of manufacture. Even if the superiority of these had been as well understood formerly as now, the difficulty of obtaining seed would have forced the planters to use the inferior China plant.\[^{157}\]

In 1869, the Secretary to the Indian Tea Planters' Association said,

> The variety most advisable to cultivate is from *indigenous* or true Assam seed; that called the *China* ... not yielding at, and after full growth is attained, so much leaf per acre, nor is the

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\[^{152}\] Bengal. Revenue Department. 21 June No. 7 of 1842, E/4/770, File No. XXXI [OIOC]
\[^{155}\] Ukers, *All About Tea*, vol. 1, 151.
\[^{156}\] Sharma, *British Science, Chinese Skill and Assam Tea*, is of course a delightful exception.
\[^{157}\] RCSPTC, 15
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strength and flavour equal to the Assam. A variety called the *hybrid* was in great favour for some time, but it has been found to relapse more into the "China" character some years' growth, and more especially in the seed obtained therefrom. In 1882 Samuel Baldon actually claimed that "the China plant is but a deteriorated specimen of the pure ['Assam'] plant." A simple racial allegory was put forward for the metropolitan readers:

[S]uppose that as European was cast upon the world, and travelling gradually farther and farther from his native land, eventually settled down in a climate altogether unsuitable for his successful development. After the lapse of a great number of years, he would nominally remain a European, but virtually affected by habits of life, climatic influences, and intimate associations with things and people around him. His nationality would have been abandoned for the adoption of that of an inferior country, and have resulted in his decline. In the course of time we see him — or his progeny — stunted, changed, coarse, in every way degenerated; in fact, changed physically from original state. So with China tea; originally part of the one Indian family, now a distinct and separate family.

As Jayeeta Sharma seems to suggest, the very term *jāt* (a common term for caste or race in the period) points at the overriding presence of a larger imperial politics. In our judgment, however, Sharma does not explore the implications of this specific entwinement of the processes which we now separate as commoditization and ethnicization. In trying to address a history of commodity racism is British Assam, we must first clarify that the *jāt* issue — which in fact remains a riddle for the botanical discipline till today — was not developing in a culturally impermeable, abstract academic chamber of botanical expertise. It had to accommodate both market necessities and imperial anxieties within the botanical protocols in order to warrant a control of consumption through an elaborate hierarchy of "taste."

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159 Baldon, *Tea Industry in India*, 12-3

160 Sharma, *British Science, Chinese Skill and Assam Tea*, 442-3

161 As "a cross-pollinated heterogeneous plant" with many "overlapping morphological, biochemical and physiological attributes" and a high degree of "plasticity and variation in its vegetative characteristics," tea continues to pose considerable challenge to the taxonomical schema of botany. B. Banerjee, "Botanical Classification of Tea", in K. C. Wilson and M. N. Clifford (eds.), *Tea: Cultivation to Consumption* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1992), 26. Today "the larger, broader, and lighter green leaf" of "the Assam *jāt*" is classed by most botanists as a planophile (leaf angle less than 70 degrees) while the leaf of "the China *jāt*" is categorized as an erectophile (leaf angle less than 50 degrees).
Edward Money, an ex-officer of the British Indian army who had considerable investment in a few Assam tea gardens, consistently criticized "the short-sighted policy of the Indian Government" to have introduced China Tea in Assam.

It makes me ... almost wild to think what a chance the Indian Government in 1830, and for fifteen years later, let slip. The said quality of [Assam] Tea plant or tree existed nowhere else in the world! The Tea produced by it was as superior to China Tea as gold is to silver. What a mine of wealth was there! India has benefitted by it, but how much more would she have done so had she not been inundated with China Tea seed.\textsuperscript{162}

"Grown on large estates, the cultivation and manufacture being superintended by educated and skilled Englishmen" and "[m]anufactured in a clean way by machinery, as opposed to hand manufacture, which is the reverse of cleanly," the Assam tea was the most unadulterated tea in the world, claimed Money. But most importantly, it had a "superior strength and body", completely missing in its "rival", China tea. This unparalleled strength came from "a superior class of plant" as well as "a hotter and therefore more suitable climate."\textsuperscript{163} In his tirade against "the pest of Assam – the miserable China variety", David Crole, like Baldon before him, went one step further.\textsuperscript{164} In proposing to "read between the lines" of some old Chinese texts, he claimed to have proved beyond doubt that tea was originally introduced to China from Assam.\textsuperscript{165} Like Money, Crole also believed that hybridization was "the great curse" of Assam tea industry which considerably compromised the laudable strength of "the Assam teas."\textsuperscript{166}

As Money put it very candidly, "stronger" teas were "in consequence more economical."\textsuperscript{167} It is important to remember that what primarily structured the most important market for the "strong Assam tea" since the middle of the nineteenth century was the so-called "low-priced tea mania" in the suburbs of London.\textsuperscript{168} Catering mostly to the growing working class in the British capital, the Assam tea was somewhat looked down upon in the sophisticated circles.

\textsuperscript{162} Edward Money, The Tea Controversy. (A Momentous Indian Question.) Indian versus Chinese Teas. Which are Adulterated? Which are Better? With many facts about both and the secrets of the trade (London: W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1884), 6n, 7n
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{164} Crole, Tea, 26
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, 14-8
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, 19. It will not be irrelevant in this context to mention that Money was initially less aggressive against the hybrid variety. Cf. Edward Money, The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea (Fourth edition; London: W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1883), 174-82
\textsuperscript{167} Money, Tea Controversy, 16
\textsuperscript{168} Baldon, Tea Industry in India, 119-20.
Chapter Seven

The perceived drawbacks of "strength, coarseness and bitterness" now came to be aggressively defended by the marketers of the Assam tea. "Strength and astringency are more important qualities in tea than flavor, and the Assam tea seems to possess these in an eminent degree," said Samuel Ball in the mid-seventies. But, as we have already noted, the meanings of the commodity were differently constituted in the British tea-complex, and for the upper classes, tea was predominantly a marker of refinement. "No Assam planter could reasonably expect people to drink his Pekoe. With a few exceptions, Indian teas are far too pungent to be drunk alone," admitted Ball, himself a staunch defender of the Assam tea.

At present it is not universally settled what the actual properties are which required in a tea plant. Then, again, matters are unfortunately influenced by the arbitrary decision of home brokers, &c., who deal with tea from a merely commercial point of view, and decide on the goodness or otherwise of tea with reference to the particular use that can be made of it for the necessities of the market as it at present exists, making no account of the inherent goodness of any particular sort of plant as such. They principally desire the strength of the Assam tea to give body to the weaker description of China produce.

The utopia of a "universally settled" hierarchy of "inherent goodness" is always already displaced by the disruptive, local "necessities of the market," and yet, without the market the utopia has no attraction, no meaning, no function. "[T]he classification of tea is not to be relied on," warned a Government official, "for there is much uncertainty as to the meaning attached to the different terms. Tea that one planter would class as Pekoe Souchong, would be sorted as Souchong by another, and might be classed as Pekoe by some one else." Even the science of chemistry could not restrain this semantic flux. In 1900 a distinct Scientific Department was created by the said Association, with H. H. Mann as the Chief Scientific Officer. Apart from dealing with the mundane problems of blight, soil quality, and fermentation, the highest aim of the Department was to disentangle the specific factors causing "flavour" in tea. "The Chief Commissioner sanctioned an annual grant of Rs 2500

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169 Quoted in Baldon, Tea Industry in India, 32. It is however important to mention here that most of the Darjeeling gardens cultivated "the China plant." Cf. Notes on Tea in Darjeeling by a Planter (Darjeeling: N. L. Roy, 1888), 56-9

170 Quoted in Baldon, Tea Industry in India, 116.

171 Statement of W. J. Lance, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, in Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1873), Ibid, 31-2

172 Statement of the Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, in Ibid, v
for three years as a contribution towards his salary.” In 1904, Mann even claimed that he had discovered a “method of measuring chemically certain of the more important elements in the quality of tea.” When the eager London authorities asked him if this “discovery” could be used in devising a test for the exclusion by the customs of “undesirable teas”, Mann however retracted his earlier statement clarifying that he did not yet have “sufficient data” to recommend his “method” for being made the basis of a Customs Test.

“So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond,” wrote Marx. (He could have easily written tea!) He blasted the “economic discoverers of this chemical element, who by-the-by lay special claim to critical acumen,” for believing “that the use-value of objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects.” For him, on the contrary, “all commodities are non-use-values for their owners, and use-values for their non-owners.”

In this intriguing formulation, Marx once more fools his subsequent critiques and admirers who would find nothing but an ontological affirmation of the primitive character of use-value in his analysis. Like each thing primitive, use-value can occur only after the absolute origin that it is supposed to embody has been opened to representations, derivations, and distortions of exchange. The frantic pursuits of the “genuine” plant or the restless desires for a “universally settled” hierarchy of “inherent goodness” or the endless attempts to chemically disentangle the flavor-causing elements are not as much suggestive of the technical limits of nineteenth-century science as of the anxious desire for the ontological warranty; because in a bourgeois empire commodities are always already races.

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173 Report on Tea Culture in Assam for 1899 (Shillong: Printed at the Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1900), 7
174 Indian Tea Association Report for the year 1905 (Calcutta: Indian Tea Association, 1905), 18
175 Marx, Capital, vol. I, 87, 89
176 “[C]ommodities must be realised as values before they can be realised as use-values.” Ibid, 89
Part III

The Metropolitan Imaginary

Why is it that the very name which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the originary freedom of the human being— the name of 'subject'— is precisely the name which historically meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e., subjection?

Etienne Balibar