'Black Mail':

Networks of Opium and Postal Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India[1]

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'A pipe of old Patna, that soother of all sorrows, the manna of the mind.'[2]

Introduction

The tragedy associated with the poppy plant has a deep global prehistory rooted in the rise of perhaps the most exploitative regime of imperialist expansion, which was unleashed by imperial Britain on China and India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The historical destiny of the humble black poppy seed would irreversibly alter the character of local agrarian economy and social relations in the Indian subcontinent. Dried resin from the poppy seedpod, manufactured into opium balls under the watchful monopoly of the English East India Company (EIC) and placed within illicit networks of inter-Asian trade, linked-up with expanding networks of overland and overseas communication, setting off a chain of cataclysmic gratefully events which transformed all aspects of global political economy across the Indian Ocean region.[3]

This paper follows the trajectory of nineteenth-century circulatory networks and argues that networks of opium trade and smuggling were intertwined with developments in postal communication under the expanding (and insidiously penetrating) imperialist agenda of the colonial state in India. Biographies of networks of communication, information transmission and

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[2] Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800–42* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 104.
[3] John Richards, 'The opium industry in British India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39:2&3 (2002), 149–180; —do— 'Indian Empire and Peasant Production of Opium in the Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15:1 (1981), 59–82; Amar Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversions: Colonialism, Indian Merchants and the Politics of Opium* (Delhi, 1998); —do— 'Opium Enterprise and Colonial Intervention in Malwa and Western India, 1800-1824', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 32:4 (1995), 443–7; Hunt Janin, *The India-China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (North Carolina, 1999); Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750-1950* (London, 1999).

commodity exchange help reframe the nineteenth century as a period of interconnected world systems and globalisation.[4] This approach prioritises a historical milieu constructed not in specific regions or localities but along channels of communication, which were not only the means for enabling mobility but were themselves alive and living agents and catalysts of political change.

Consequently, this paper locates the political, extraordinarily, within the physical networks of interaction and exchange. By ascertaining the differing agendas and motivations of the colonial state in shaping local and imperial practices of rule and governance, and their negotiation with the inherent leakages built into local and trans-regional communication systems, this paper highlights how networks lent shape and substance to processes of empire building in nineteenth century India.[5]

Networks of Indian opium, c. 19th century: An overview

Commodity trade was a crucial aspect of imperialist expansion and enabled the inter-linking of colonial networks of communication. Britain's involvement in opium transmission, which emerged from its desire to balance tea trade with China, benefitted immeasurably from advances made by the English East India Company in gaining control over the revenue administration of the Bengal Presidency in 1764.[6] By the early nineteenth century, revenue from opium ranked third only to returns from land revenue and salt monopoly.[7] British trade in Indian opium involved three heads: profits accruing from illicit export of opium produced under state monopoly in Bengal; revenue gathered from the collection of a 'pass fee' from opium-producing regions in Malwa, and returns from excise duties on the domestic transport and sale of opium.[8]

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[4] Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith (eds.) *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks and Mobility* (Cambridge, 2014); Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, 2007); Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy (eds.) *Decentring empire: Britain, India, and the transcolonial world* (London, 2006); Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004).

[5] Gunnel Cederlöf, 'Poor Man's Crop: Evading opium monopoly', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53, 2 (2019), 633–659; Kate Boehme, 'Smuggling India: Deconstructing Western India's Illicit Export Trade, 1818–1870', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 25, 4 (2015), 685–704; Claude Markovits, 'The Political Economy of Opium Smuggling in Early Nineteenth Century India: Leakage or Resistance?', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 1 (2009), 89–111.

[6] Cederlof, 'Poor Man's Crop', 633–4.

[7] Richards, 'The opium industry', 149–80, 153.

[8] The local consumption of opium in colonial India is an under-researched topic. See, James Mills and Patricia Barton (eds.) *Drugs and Empire: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c. 1500–1930* (New York, 2007); Benjamin Broomhall, *The truth about opium smoking: with illustrations of the manufacture of opium, etc.* (London, 1882).

The opium enterprise of the Bengal Presidency in eastern India was the main source of colonial revenue and opium was manufactured under British supervision exclusively. Opium was produced through a forced monopolistic system, whereby advances were paid to state-licensed poppy cultivators inhabiting a relatively small area of the eastern Gangetic plains, who, in turn, sold their produce at fixed rates to government-appointed opium agents of the Opium Department. This resin was processed in the two state-run factories at Ghazipur and Benares in Bihar and Bengal, respectively. The opium thus produced was carefully checked and weighed, packed in wooden chests and auctioned off to private merchants and agency houses in Calcutta.[9] **(Image 1.)**[10] Malwa, in Central India, was the second significant opium-producing region. However, the region lay outside direct British control and its many principalities supported a flourishing network of cultivators, merchants and freebooters engaged in the production and transport of local opium.[11] The colonial state tried to criminalise opium production in the princely states of central and western India because it threatened the monopolistic profits earned from Bengal opium. However, the British authorities did not have the structural capability to impose complete surveillance over the Malwa region. Instead, the British endeavoured to profit from local trade by collecting a pass-fee from private merchants engaged in production and sale of local opium. Unlike Bengal opium which was traded with East Asia through Calcutta under British watch, traffic in Malwa opium was directed via Bombay and involved many sections of India's mercantile community.[12]

While Calcutta had been a historically significant port for British commerce in India, it was only in the nineteenth century that Bombay rose to prominence as a port city on account of its export of opium and raw cotton to China.[13] The Bombay trade in Malwa opium took off with the pass-fee system in 1831. Indian Parsis such as Bombay's Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy set up agency houses to trade with global commercial enterprises such as Jardine Matheson in Canton. The Parsi and European traders collaborated to make trade in opium more lucrative, establishing fleets of opium clippers that could sail against the monsoon winds and make multiple trips between Bombay and Canton within just one season.[14] **(Image 2.)**[15]

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[9] Richards, 'The Opium Industry', 153.

[10] Shiva Lal, *Gate check*, 1857. Gouache on mica. V&A 07361:15(IS), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[11] Amar Farooqui, 'The Global Career of Indian Opium and Local Destinies', *Almanack*, 14 (2016), 52–73.

[12] Amar Farooqui, *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (Gurgaon, 2006), xi–xii.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Richards, 'Opium Industry*',* 179. It has been estimated that nearly 40 Indian-owned ships were engaged in the transport of opium in the 1830s. See, Farooqui, *Smuggling as Subversion*, 162.

[15] Walter S. Sherwill, *The Opium Fleet, Opium Factory at Patna, India*, ca. 1850. Lithograph 6 of 6. Wellcome Library, London.

Overlapping networks of shipping, mail movement and opium transmission: The inter-Asian context

Trade among Asian territories was historically carried out through a complex network of overland and sea routes and fed British imperial interests in opium as well. With the establishment of Company monopoly over poppy cultivation in eastern India as early as the eighteenth century, large native ships from Madras and later Bengal would carry valuable cargo from Calcutta to the Straits of Malacca, ports in Malaya and Indonesia, Manila in the Philippine Islands and Canton in China.[16] But the subsequent breathtaking growth in India's opium exports to the East in the nineteenth century has been attributed to advances in British shipping, which provided a large volume of cargo space not only to European but native merchants as well and contributed to the overall growth of the global opium enterprise.[17] A decisive moment in the history of opium was the establishment of commercial shipping lines such as the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) in the 1840s. As inter-Asian 'country trade' came to rely on advanced steamships, Indian shipping was increasingly sidelined from the larger networks of opium circulation.[18] Also, while both Calcutta and Bombay remained key players, by the mid-nineteenth century, the focus of trade was shifting from Bengal to Malwa opium, which would be sent to the East on monthly steamers of the P&O.[19]

EIC's ability to dominate the high seas had been one of the key factors behind its global successes at the dawn of the imperialist age and advances in communication technology would supplement these achievements and help safeguard British commercial interests in the nineteenth century too. Development in steamship technology and the drive for economy combined to create a context wherein the extra-legal commercial enterprise of the colonial state, i.e. illicit trade in opium, got tied-up with its civil administration through the medium of postal dispatches.

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[16] Richards, 'Opium Industry*', 76.
[17] *Ibid*, 264.
[18] Freda Harcourt, 'Black Gold: P&O and the Opium Trade, 1847-1914', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 6:1 (1994), 1–83. The term 'country trade' is used by Siddiqi to describe inter-Asian maritime trade, in 'Introduction: Trade and Finance 1750-1860', in Asiya Siddiqi (ed.), *Trade and Finance in Colonial India, 1750- 1860* (New Delhi, 1995). The term is used to distinguish colonial involvement in 'home trade', which was carried out by the EIC within the subcontinent.
[19] Siddiqi, 'Business World', 217.

Up until the first half of the nineteenth century, regular mail steamers would sail from Calcutta to East Asia via Galle, taking nearly a month to reach their destination. Outgoing and incoming correspondence was charged Indian postage rates, which also defined arrangements with other colonial post offices in port cities such as Hong Kong and the Strait Settlements. These communication networks were revolutionary because they linked-up communication lines, economic systems and administrative structures across Britain's greater eastern empire. Nevertheless, the system proved to be expensive for the colonial government. Therefore, by the second half of the nineteenth century, postal communication between India and the Straits, as well as between India and China became almost exclusively dependent on the services provided by private Armenian and European commercial enterprises such as Jardine Matheson and Company, Jardine, Skinner and Company, and Apcar and Company.[20]

In 1869, the postal department concluded contracts with Jardine and Apcar Companies, whereby opium steamers would convey mail between Calcutta, the Strait Settlements and China free of charge for a period of three years. In return, the colonial government pledged to not subsidise competitive lines of mail steamers on direct routes between Calcutta and China via the Straits. They were, however, allowed the freedom to conclude contracts on any other routes including those going via Galle, Port Blair or other ports in India or British Burma. [21] This arrangement suited colonial interests extremely well. The possibility of the government establishing an alternative contract mail service was unlikely, given the expenses this would entail. Also, the colonial government did not look favourably upon the partial subsidy that it was required to defray, on the insistence of the British Government, towards the running of P&O's fortnightly mail steamers to China.[22] Unsurprisingly, a reduction in the expenses of the colonial exchequer and convenience of transmission made the proposed linkage a grand success.

A steamer each of the Jardine and Apcar Companies sailed separately from Calcutta every month and took a fortnight to arrive at Hong Kong, travelling via Penang and Singapore, and returning by the same route. These steamers were known as 'Opium Steamers'; they carried opium between South and East Asia, departing from Calcutta a few days after the monthly opium sales. Looking to 'make opium steamers generally useful for the conveyance of correspondence', the Post Office

[20] Proceedings of the Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, dated November 1868, Part 'A', Consultation Nos. 31-2, National Archives of India (NAI).
[21] NAI, Nos. 5–8, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, June 1869, Part 'A'.
[22] NAI, Nos. 31–2, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, November 1868, Part 'A'.

of India expressed its strong desire to make the sale of opium fortnightly, so as to allow opium steamers to depart bi-monthly and serve as a more attractive alternative to regular mail steamers.[23] Under agreements concluded between the Government of India and the owner-proprietors of the steamer companies, the time of travel, departure and arrival of vessels, the description of vessels to be used, the ports of call, etc. were at the discretion of the steamer companies. But it was agreed upon that the departure of steam vessels from Calcutta during the period of contract would be regulated by the monthly sale of opium by the colonial state.[24]

Consequently, these 'Opium Steamers' came to be classified as 'Indian Mail Packets', which would transmit letters, newspapers and books from Calcutta to the Straits and Hong Kong, under the same terms and rates as were paid to British mail packets like the P&O in the preceding period.[25] This was extremely significant—once private opium steamers were transformed into contracted mail steamers of the colonial state, government mail was subsidised by the illegal profits earned by private shipping concerns through participation in the illicit opium trade.[26] As opium came to be transported by semi-official government ships, one can only imagine the benefits that accrued to the British imperialist interests as a consequence. Profits that previously had to be shared with Britain by the Post Office of India, on account of the subsidies it had to offer to P&O for carrying mail, could now be rightfully retained by the colonial state itself.[27] Additional advantages of the arrangement included simplification of postage rates across Britain's Asian empire, making the transmission of mail cheaper and quicker, and offering the possibility of sending correspondence further afield to America via Hong Kong.[28] Consequently, as steamships transferred mails on the routes used to transport opium, cotton, labour, etc., there was a comprehensive linking up of various networks of colonial exchange.

Opium smuggling along postal networks: The South Asian context

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Each steamer was to leave Calcutta within 12 days, more or less, of each monthly sale of Government opium. The 'Notification by the Director General of the Post Office of India, dated 9th April 1869', advertised monthly opium sales in Calcutta on 8 April, 6 May, 7 June and July, 9 August and September, 4 October, 5 November and 6 December. See, NAI, Nos. 5–8, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, June 1869, Part 'A'.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] NAI, Nos. 31–2, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, November 1868, Part 'A'.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] NAI, Nos. 5–8, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, June 1869, Part 'A'.

These inter-Asian networks that supported the movement of opium within a global imperialist context also highlight the important developments taking place within the local political economy and administrative structures of nineteenth century India. The infrastructural revolution, evident in the development of railroads, post and telegraph, shipping and administrative superstructures resulted in growing mobility for indigenous merchants and traders and a consequent expansion in domestic movement of opium.[29] In supporting the growth of an international sphere of economic exchange which wasn't subservient solely to the EIC and its global networks, Indian opium (as opposed to British Indian opium) benefitted from improvements in communication structures, which were standardised and deployed to serve the needs of local political economy.[30] In the nineteenth century, overland trade received a boost as the practice of transmitting parcels and packages through *banghy*, at economical rates, was introduced by the Post Office of India.[31] And by enhancing facilities for transport and exchange to make overland trade in commodities more effective and extensive, official policies ended up advancing the dispatch of overland mails between Bombay and other parts of the British Empire as well.[32]

Malwa

Opium cultivation in Malwa, which came to threaten British opium monopoly in the subcontinent, involved a complex hierarchy of peasant cultivators, village moneylenders and headmen, Indian bankers and commission agents, etc. Despite British prohibition on poppy cultivation in Indian-administered states, by the end of the nineteenth century, nearly 90 princely states of Rajputana, Bombay Presidency and Malwa-Central India Agency, ranging in size from Indore, Bhopal and Jaipur to Sitamau, were engaged in opium trade.[33] The Company mounted pressure on these princely states to sell specified quantities of produce to the EIC alone. It also attempted to keep a strict vigil on the export of the commodity, which took place mainly through the port city of Bombay and to a lesser extent, through Madras and Calcutta.[34] Nevertheless, Malwa opium found networks to evade the pass-fee system and was channeled easily into domestic and global networks of transmission. Domestically, Malwa opium found consumers in British-administered districts, where state-

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[29] Thomas A. Timberg, 'Hiatus and Incubator: Indigenous Trade and Traders, 1837- 1857', in Siddiqi (ed.) *Trade and Finance*, 236.

[30] Farooqui, *Opium City*, xi–xii.

[31] A shoulder yoke for carrying loads; 'parcel post'. Also, the manner of transmitting parcel post in colonial India.

[32] S. R. Bakshi, *British Diplomacy and Administration in India* (New Delhi, 1971), 174. See also, NAI, Nos. 30–3, Home Department, Public Proceedings (Post Office) Branch, 19 March 1858.

[33] Richards, 'Opium Industry in India', 174.

[34] Farooqui, *Opium City*, 30.

licensed shops charged extortionately high prices from local consumers.[35] The colonial government was cautious in keeping the pass-fee low to prevent the smuggling of Malwa opium through alternative routes passing through Portuguese Daman, Diu and Goa, or even Karachi before the conquest of Sind.[36] From here, elaborate overseas networks would be used to ship this opium illegally into Burma, Macau, Canton and the Straits.[37] However, large quantities of the produce remained outside state control and circulated within indigenously-controlled networks of exchange.[38]

Consequently, the colonial government sought to monitor the transmission and export of Malwa opium by establishing a system of commercial surveillance.[39] The transmission of all opium by post, except on the government's account was declared contraband.[40] The British state sought to wrest back control over its information and trade networks by transforming them into networks of surveillance and control. In addition to the Postal Department, the Land and Sea Customs Department too would assist the colonial state in its vigilance and revenue-collection activities. Regular *chowkies* or customs' posts were established on principal trade routes and could detain goods passing through their jurisdiction without payment of duty. The establishment itself was placed under surveillance, as rules and rates came to be printed in the form of manuals supplied to all custom houses to prevent corruption amongst local officials.[41] This arrangement enabled the colonial state to throw a yoke of surveillance over the western coast of the Indian subcontinent.[42]

Indian traders nonetheless found alternate routes to carry opium from Malwa to the western coast of the Bombay Presidency and these networks continued to flourish into the late nineteenth century.[43] One of these routes, which avoided British-administered territories by navigating through locations in Rajputana (Pali and Jaisalmer) and the Bombay Presidency (Karachi) to reach the Portuguese-administered port of Daman, was critical for the emergence of what has been described as the 'golden era for Daman opium market'.[44] The Customs Department was largely ineffective in preventing opium smuggling into and out of British territory. It has been estimated

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[35] Richards, 'Opium Industry in India', 174.
[36] *Ibid*, 154.
[37] Farooqui, 'Global Career', 52–73.
[38] Farooqui, *Opium City*, 30.
[39] Siddiqi, 'Introduction', in Siddiqi (ed.) *Trade and Finance*, 14-15.
[40] NAI, Nos. 38–45, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, August 1869, Part 'A'.
[41] *Regulation IX of 1810*, quoted in Bakshi, *British Diplomacy*, 174.
[42] NAI, Nos. 28–30, Home Department, Separate Revenue Branch, 27 July 1860, Part 'A'.
[43] NAI, Nos. 37–40, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Opium) Branch, December 1875, Part 'A'.
[44] Farooqui, *Opium City*, 31.

that despite surveillance, nearly 90% of the seizures carried out by Customs in this period consisted of petty items such as coarse blankets only![45]

But the illicit transmission and export of opium often benefitted the government, without its knowledge, in terms of revenue earnings on postage and railway. Overland customs duties and the pass-fee system often exceeded postal charges. Local traders came to exploit the postal system to move contraband opium secretively and escape higher payments to the colonial exchequer.[46] The colonial government was thus confronted with a peculiar conflict of interest—the loss of duty on Malwa opium was being squared-off by earnings made on the public (mis)use of colonial networks of postal communication![47]

The smuggling of Malwa opium into the Deccan and to southern ports such as Madras was another source for concern. Colonial officials argued that early nineteenth century military-cum-postal routes, which had been laid by the Company State to expedite the movement of troops and information, were being used to transmit opium to Mysore and Hyderabad, through routes crisscrossing the region of Berar, and Bombay and Madras Presidencies.[48] Though the British Collectors of Poona, Ahmednagar, Belgaum and Sholapur were adamant that their territories weren't directly used for these smuggling routes, they were forced to concede that Malwa opium was transferred on the state railways or through overland routes skirting British territories.[49]

These conflicting narratives would be the cause for institutional mistrust within colonial structures of governance. The Madras Government, much to the displeasure of the Post Office of India, adopted the practice of examining postal parcels suspected of conveying contraband goods through its territories. This was in direct violation of postal regulations, whereby officers suspecting the contents of parcels could examine them only in the presence of the addressed party. The postal authorities were concerned about the loss of prestige and revenue for their department; they were against adopting surveillance measures and conducted only occasional examination of packets in the interest of public revenue. The Madras Government in turn was convinced that it was losing its

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[45] J. G. Borpujari, 'The Impact of the Transit Duty System in British India', in Siddiqi (ed.) *Trade and Finance*, (New Delhi: 1995), 326.
[46] NAI, Nos. 38–45, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, August 1869, Part 'A'.
[47] NAI, Nos. 11–22, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Opium) Branch, July 1875, Part 'A'.
[48] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Story of the Indian Post Office* (Delhi, 1987), 14.
[49] NAI, Nos. 37–40, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Opium) Branch, December 1875, Part 'A'.

reputation and revenue, as the public took recourse to postal smuggling in order to evade customs duties.[50]

The rise in opium smuggling through the post was in fact preceded by the official deployment of the post for conveying state-controlled opium in the wake of standardisation under the Postal Act of 1837. But as the postal service was made available to a greater section of the paying public, there was an attendant rise in postal usage for transmitting contraband articles by general members of the public. As a result, under the Postal Act of 1866, the transmission of opium by the post office, except on government account, was prohibited. Informers who notified the authorities of any transgression could claim a reward, while those convicted had to pay penalties under the state's excise laws.[51] Nevertheless, opium came to be discovered increasingly in postal parcels entering the Madras Presidency and forced colonial authorities to consider penal laws for regulating the transport, possession and sale of opium within British territories.[52]

Burma

Smuggling of opium was not confined to Malwa opium alone. In the eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent, smuggling of Bengal opium into British Burma was fed by domestic demand. Domestic consumption of opium in India and Burma had a long history. The practice was tied to factors such as climate, difficult living conditions and strenuous labour regimes; opium also had medicinal and health usages.[53] But perhaps most significantly, opium use was integrated into the socio-cultural fabric of local community life on the Indian subcontinent, and had implications for leisure activities, hospitality and ritualistic norms, child nurture, etc.[54] Some of the opium grown in Burma was also sent to China.[55] As with British India, the colonial state in Burma too sought to regulate the production and transmission of opium for both local consumption and international trade. The drug could only be sold through a limited number of licensed vendors in Burma, while its cultivation and transport were outlawed completely.[56]

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[50] NAI, Nos. 38–45, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, August 1869, Part 'A'.
[51] NAI, No. 10, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Post Office) Branch, September 1869, Part 'B'.
[52] NAI, Nos. 81–7, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Opium) Branch, December 1875, Part 'A'.
[53] Ashley Wright, *Opium and Empire in Southeast Asia: Regulating Consumption in British Burma* (Basingstoke: 2014), 1, 152–5; Roy Anderson, *Drug Smuggling and Taking in India and Burma* (Calcutta; Simla: 1922), 35.
[54] K. K. Ganguly, H. K. Sharma, K. A. V. R. Krishnamachari, 'An Ethnographic Account of Opium Consumers of Rajasthan (India): Socio-medical Perspective', *Addiction: Journal of the Society for the Study of Addiction*, 90: 1(1995), 9–12.
[55] NAI, Nos. 70–1, Finance Department, Separate Revenue Branch, February 1901, Part 'B'.
[56] NAI, Nos. 1–3, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Excise) Branch, September 1874, Part 'A'.

The district of Burma was connected to India through three avenues—Rangoon, Akyab and Moulmein. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was believed that most of the opium smuggled into Burma came from the Calcutta Post Office.[57] Under the Opium Act of 1878, the import of opium into Burma was prohibited. However, the Act failed to provide provisions for postal surveillance. Parcels suspected of containing contraband opium could not be opened without the presence of the addressee; the latter invariably failed to turn up when summoned for inspection.[58]

The authorities in Burma laid the blame on postal authorities in Calcutta, Chittagong and other Indian towns, and demanded the examination of postal packets at the point of origin.[59] The Director General of the Post Office of India objected to this accusation that the post office might actually be facilitating the smuggling of opium. The arguments between the two sides focused on issues of legal access to postal surveillance and the question of responsibility. While the postmaster on the receiving side could summon the addressee of the suspected article, post offices on the dispatch side could only mark articles as suspect to draw the attention of the receiving post office. Nevertheless, the Postal Department agreed to issue special instructions to the Calcutta and Madras post offices and the Railway Mail Service with regard to the preparation of postal bags for Burma, while emphasising that special vigil would have to be maintained within Burma itself.[60]

The acceptance of only limited responsibility over the issue of postal smuggling of opium reflects colonial preoccupation with maintaining public confidence in the functioning of its communication system. The Director General clearly stated, 'The object of the Government is not so much to ensure the detection of offenders, as to prevent the use of the Post Office for the purpose of smuggling opium…'[61] Departmental disagreement and lack of clarity with regard to policies of administration and governance created a situation wherein leakages within institutional structures undermined the very networks which were established to strengthen British control over India. Consequently, inter-regional smuggling of opium through the post office could not be checked effectively. In order to escape detection, the addresses on such packages tended to be

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[57] *Ibid.*
[58] NAI, Nos. 447–51, Finance Department, Separate Revenue Branch, November 1901, Part 'A'.
[59] NAI, Nos. 409–415, Finance Department, Post Office Branch. 'Letter from the Secretary to the Financial Commissioner, Burma, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Burma, dated 4th May 1891', June 1891, Part 'A'.
[60] 'D. O. by A. U. Fanshawe, dated 3rd June 1891', *Ibid.*
[61] NAI, Nos. 447–51, Finance Department, Separate Revenue Branch. 'D. O. by A. U. Fanshawe, dated 26th August 1901', November 1901, Part 'A'.

bogus in many circumstances.[62] The postal authorities of Burma were often left without a culprit, even though the crime was committed frequently.

The method of addressing packets containing contraband articles was complicated by the apparent complicity of postal officials. Contraband parcels were sometimes addressed to European or Eurasian clerks of the local post office. When asked to take delivery, they would claim that the parcels were not intended for them. In one instance, the head clerk of Rangoon Post Office was implicated in the transmission, if not smuggling, of six parcels containing 3,000 *tolas* of opium.[63] As an increasing number of postal personnel came under suspicion, examination of parcels was undertaken by deputy and assistant post masters, generally in the presence of the post master himself. More often than not, smaller post offices in Burma would receive contraband parcels, where it was difficult to ensure proper examination and disposal of smuggled opium. This is significant because Burma had been annexed as recently as 1885 and colonial authorities did not have access to sophisticated administrative structures to assist in matters of rule and governance, especially in the interiors.[64] Given such limitations, the prosecution of postal officials proved to be extremely difficult under the Excise Act, and while they were usually convicted for forgery, they would escape punishment on technical grounds.[65]

Opium trafficking through postal channels continued well into the twentieth century, especially as the transport and possession of opium did not qualify as an offence. Only the act of export could be prosecuted.[66] The problem was compounded by loopholes in postal conventions, but also by the peculiar conundrum faced by colonial postal authorities. Any measure to stamp out opium smuggling through postal networks would involve the admission of structural weakness in the state apparatus, which would lead to the loss of public confidence and forfeiture of earnings made from postal transmissions, even if illegal. Thus, while trafficking in opium benefitted the postal system, postal networks facilitated the growth of opium trade.

Conclusion

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[62] NAI, Nos. 409–15, Finance Department, Post Office Branch. 'D. O. by A. U. Fanshawe, dated 3rd June 1891', June 1891, Part 'A'.

[63] This was the base unit of mass in the British Indian system of weights and measures introduced in 1833, although it had been in use for much longer. It was also used in Aden and Zanzibar: in the latter, one *tola* was equivalent to 175.90 troy grains (0.97722222 British *tolas*, or 11.33980925 grams).

[64] E. Chew, 'The Withdrawal of the Last British Residency from Upper Burma in 1879', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10:2 (1969), 253–278.

[65] NAI, Nos. 70–1, Finance Department, Separate Revenue Branch, February 1901, Part 'B'.

[66] NAI, Nos. 81–7, Finance Department, Separate Revenue (Opium) Branch, December 1875, Part 'A'.

The colonial authorities were ineffective in stamping out the smuggling of opium completely. An entrenched characteristic of British presence in India was the unshakable anxiety over the security and stability of their Empire. Unsurprisingly, this insecurity found expression in the fiction of intrigue and the perceived untrustworthiness of the native collaborator.[67] The consequent preoccupation with achieving comprehensive imperial mastery over the subcontinent would lead the colonial state to undertake one of the largest and most penetrative exercises of knowledge production in the history of empires.[68] The networks of the British Empire—its communication lines and channels of commodity exchange came to refashion the meaning of distance and space, as well as control and intervention to such an extent that colonial presence became an increasingly encompassing and intrusive feature of everyday life in nineteenth-century India.[69]

This intrusiveness and supposed completeness of control may highlight the surveillance capabilities and ambitions of an expanding empire. But the surveillance aspect of colonial authority was undermined by the avowed liberalising principles of communication. Often, the colonial state struggled to safeguard the privacy of its subjects through the very structures that were set up to police them. This reveals seepages within the intertwined structures of modern governance, which provided a space for the upending of hard-fought colonial order.[70]

The significance of trade in opium, and the consequent linking-up of networks of economic transfer, information exchange and surveillance, is of immense historical significance. But this characteristic of inter-imperial state formation is very specific to an imperial context, which was shaped by India's centrality to the global British Empire and its expansion. Colonial experience in India allowed for contradicting realities, wherein state control over means of exchange was inching

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[67] 'Re-arrangement of Civil Offices, Bengal', dated Nov. 17, 1873, in *Allen's Indian Mail and Official Gazette. Published on the Arrival of Each Overland Mail.* Vol. XXXI.—No. 1084 (London: 1851), 1072. This position was contrary to the early colonial attitudes towards domestic consumption of opium in India, which were couched in paternalistic, moral tones, but were in reality aimed at safeguarding British global economic interests. See, R. Newman, 'Early British Encounters with the Indian Opium Eater', in J. H. Mills and P. Barton (ed.) *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication 1500-1930* (New York: 2007), 66–68. Also see, Richards, 'The Indian Empire', 78.

[68] Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: 1996); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996); Nicholas Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1992).

[69] D. Gupta, 'Stamping Empire: Postal Standardization in Nineteenth Century India', in Patrick Manning and Daniel Rood (eds.) *Global Scientific Practice in an Age of Revolutions, 1750-1850* (Pittsburgh: 2016), 216–236.

[70] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: 1997).

towards absolutism, but multiple spheres of local insurgence against colonial authority were also made available by the expanding scope of postal networks in a nineteenth-century context. The Empire itself was de-territorialised, as the physical networks of the Empire came to embody not just movement but also historical change. The story that emerges from the spread of these networks is one of connected histories linking South Asia and the greater British Empire. The historical journey of Indian opium needs to be considered not just to chart these networks, but to destabilise ideas of 'centre' and 'periphery', in order to locate historical processes within trans-regional networks of transmission and exchange.[71]

This paper highlights the institutional cooption of the state structure in officially subsidising and mounting an illegal, global enterprise, which would have exploitative and destructive consequences which remain largely unparalleled in history. Smuggling is generally understood to describe trading activity that is carried out without the sanction of the ruling political entity or prevalent legal norms. In the context of the present study on opium, the ability of the British Empire to institute a distinction between *licit* and *illicit* smuggling is of immense significance. Through its own involvement with global shipping firms, agency houses, trading enterprises and the colonial state in India, British imperial interests not only oppressed the local peasantry, trading classes and economic institutions, but also tied India's political economy inextricably with the ruinous import of opium into China. This is proof of the immense ideological impact of imperialist expansion on structures and networks of rule and governance in the nineteenth century, and its ability to manipulate public discourse and historical memory. In the words of Roy Anderson, Superintendent, Burma Excise Department, 'Everybody is a smuggler at heart!'[72] This was especially true for the political economy of opium which took shape around British India and its imperial outposts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Reflections

The literary corpus on eighteenth and nineteenth century opium has engaged with aspects of the opium sensorium, and the subject of consumption and its impact on social and individual identity, morality, etc., with a preferred focus on the experiences of the metropole.[73] However, these

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[71] Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, 2007; Ghosh and Kennedy (eds.), *Decentering Empire*, 2006; Bayly, *Birth of the Modern World*, 2004; Christopher Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780–1830* (London; New York: 1989).
[72] Anderson, *Drug Smuggling*, 1.
[73] Refer to the 'Introduction' to this volume, by Josephine McDonagh and Briony Wickes.

experiences derived from a particular socio-cultural milieu, which was shaped by the political and financial ambitions of a globalising imperialist project. The colonial monopolisation of opium production in India and its smuggling into East and Southeast Asia to balance Britain's addiction to tea; the demonisation of local Asian cultures of medicinal or social opium consumption; the subsequent spread of the 'nefarious' opium dens in London; these are some themes which are common to historical and literary enquiry, and they all highlight the importance of practices of production, transmission and intent.[74] It is the historical discipline which seeks to establish the socio-economic context and provenance of practices of opium cultivation and transmission. It is incumbent upon historians to reconstruct the institutional, infrastructural, and political bulwark supporting networks of conquest and communication, which are integral to stories of empire-building, extraction and management. These histories also highlight the experiences and motivations of local-level collaborators and contenders to this seemingly ruthless march of imperialist 'free trade', which was unleased upon the colonial world in the guise of modern, liberal politico-fiscal structures. By highlighting the hitherto unexplored inter-linkages between histories of shipping, postal and opium transmission, this paper constructs a new geography of imperialism shaped by the localised roots and inter-imperial expanse of the physical networks of Britain's Indian Empire.

Colonial histories of mobility, focused on themes such as cartography, shipping, mail movement, commodity trade and smuggling; migration, slavery and indenture, etc., underscore the importance of formal and informal circulatory networks, which emerged out of the Indian subcontinent and linked-up the colonial world into one historical entity. The standardisation and reinvention of the colonial networks of communication over the long nineteenth century illustrates the intertwined destinies of people, nations and technologies, as is evident in the story of the famous East Indiaman, Ibis, which transported slaves, opium and indentured labour through its long career as

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[74] Adam Colman, *Drugs and the Addiction Aesthetic in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Basingstoke, 2019); Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, 2019); Markman Ellis, Matthew Mauger and Richard Coulton (eds.) *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf That Conquered the World* (London, 2015); Ashley Wright, 'Not Just a "Place for the Smoking of Opium"': The Indian opium den and imperial anxieties in the 1890s, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 18:2 (2017); Hans Derks, *History of the Opium Problem* (Leiden, 2013); Alessandra Contenti, Ruddy's 'Indian' smile: Unknown portraits of Rudyard Kipling', *The British Art Journal*, 11;3 (2011), 57–68; Jay Hammond, 'Speaking of Opium: Ownership and (Settler) Colonial Dispossession', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1:2 (2011), 103–26; Louise Foxcroft, *The Making of Addiction: The 'Use and Abuse' of Opium in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2006); Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge, 2005); Virginia Berridge, Opium Eating: Responses to Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England, Victorian Studies, 21:4 (978), 437–61; Rudyard Kipling, 'Mr. Rudyard Kipling On The Opium Question', *The British Medical Journal*, 2:2084 (1900), 1656–57.

a vehicle of inter-Asian imperialism.[75] Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, for e.g., is an important contribution from within the field of literary studies, to the study of a historical period shaped by globally crisscrossing networks of trade, migration and communication—a theme which is the focus of this paper.[76] In exploring the changing destinies of both people and technology under imperialism—evident in the fate of individual actors with complex histories, who were collaborating with and contesting against colonial authority at different junctures and forging new and ever-changing alliances and identities, but also in the transformative materiality of the physical networks and their agents, such as the schooner Ibis in the *Sea of Poppies*, we discover the very deep rootedness of this story in the historical archives of the colonial state in India.[77]

This paper is based almost exclusively on colonial records from nineteenth century India. The colonial state's obsessive preoccupation with collecting and collating information about India's territories and its people, and their subsequent colonisation reflect British imperial anxiety with physical and ideological domination of the subcontinent from their position as outsiders. Consequently, colonial rulers left behind one of the most extensive and well-documented archives.[78] Undoubtedly, much colonial knowledge was based on methods of enquiry, collection and classification that have been rendered suspect by postcolonial enquiry.[79] But it is this qualification which also encourages the view that archives ought to be regarded not just as 'sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography'.[80]

The colonial archive is thus not just a historical repository, but also a textual and/or literary archive. Its content and materiality highlight the forms and languages of expression, silences and

[75] Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York, 2008).

[76] The three books in this trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) look at the nineteenth century story of trade in opium between India and China, and the trafficking of indentured labour from India to Mauritius.

[77] Binayak Roy, 'Reading affective communities in a transnational space in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*', *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 15:1 (2016), 47–70; Anupama Arora, '"The Sea is History": Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 42:3–4 (2012), 21–42; K. M. Chander, 'Journey to the Antique Land of Poppies: Voyage as Discovery in Amitav Ghosh's "Sea of Poppies"', *Indian Literature*, 54:4 (2010), 181–92; Curtis Marez, 'The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen", *ELH*, 64:1 (1997), 257–87.

[78] Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago, 2012).

[79] Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of India* (Princeton, 2001); Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington, 2000).

[80] Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 87.

recollections, that were adopted by the colonial rulers and allowed to survive in time, historically.[81] Archival collections are a 'digest' of records, produced by officials and therefore, they are the first step of the historiographical exercise.[82] As a consequence, the process of 'mining and undermining of the colonial archives' ought to be one of the primary concerns of a historian seeking to reconstruct any aspect of the colonial past. This is because history writing needs evidence for its articulation and as a 'colonial policeman marching outwards from the archives', the historian must have a thorough knowledge of the archives they are seeking to destabilise.[83]

The historical narrative is constructed from the analysis of archival documents. Interface with governmental primary sources serves the obvious end of elucidating the official position of the colonial state, but more significantly, it allows the historian to unearth the nuanced and often contradictory relationship that existed between the state and its subjects. Constant engagement and re-engagement with the colonial archive provides a platform for the emergence of more creative forms of colonial encounters. This helps complicate and enliven the simplistic political history of regulations and policies that are usually regarded as the hallmark of colonial archives. As a result, the colonial archives become the site of inscription of power relations, as well as tricky technologies of rule. This underscores the existence of politics of knowledge, which underlay processes of state- and empire-building in the nineteenth century.

In fact, the subject of knowledge-making and transmission of information, both ideological but also material, is one of the central themes of this paper and unexpectedly throws light on everyday practices of governance, the varied and complex extractive gestures of imperialism and social encounters, and the intrusions of a political philosophy which found itself unsettled and insecure in a new, unfamiliar surroundings. Perhaps most significantly, the colonial archive implicitly reveals the scale of global allusion to the story of localised colonial encounters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This research therefore offers a fresh perspective to the study of global and transregional histories, by situating the locality within the unassailable discipline of area-studies.

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[81] Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, 'Postcolonialism's Archive Fever', *Diacritics*, 30:1 (2000), 25–48.

[82] A conversation between Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Kant and Shahid Amin about 'history and the archives', dated 17 November 2005, Cubbon Park, Bangalore, http://pad.ma/BG/info, last accessed on 10 January 2016.

[83] Avinash, 'Itihas banam smriti: itihaskar Shahid Amin se baatcheet', *Bahuvachan*, 8, 72–94.