

Beyond vice: opium cultivation in Sirmour, c. 1860-c.1950

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ABSTRACT

Opium poppy cultivation played a significant role in the agrarian economy and social life of the erstwhile princely state of Sirmour during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was primarily cultivated in the first agricultural cycle alongside cereals and oilseeds, thriving in the region's hilly ecology despite being a labour-intensive and uncertain crop. This study examines how the Sirmour state institutionalised poppy cultivation through regulated procurement and pricing, making opium a key source of revenue. However, official control coexisted with informal smuggling networks that connected Sirmour to neighbouring hill states and the plains, illustrating the limits of state authority. Beyond its economic impact, poppy cultivation influenced agricultural calendars, labour relations, and daily livelihoods, while also sparking moral and legal debates about intoxication and regulation. Overall, poppy was not just a cash crop; it was intricately linked to the political economy and social fabric of Sirmour, reflecting broader governance and livelihood dynamics in the western Himalayas.

Keywords: *Opium, Sirmour, state policy, revenue, smuggling.*

Introduction

Reliable evidence from the prehistoric and classical periods attests to the use of substances such as opium, cannabis, alcohol, tobacco, and various fungi for religious, medicinal, and, at times, recreational purposes. Archaeological discoveries have further revealed the presence of psychoactive – or mind-altering – substances in material records dating back long before the advent of written documentation. Over time, the use of these substances has evolved in response to shifting cultural, social, and technological contexts. From traditional plant-based intoxicants to synthetic drugs and modern pharmaceuticals, humans have continually experimented with new substances to serve diverse ends. Today, we stand at a critical juncture, informed by centuries of accumulated knowledge and experience. By analysing historical patterns of drug use,

addiction, regulation, and treatment, it becomes possible to develop more nuanced, compassionate, and effective approaches to contemporary drug-related challenges. Recent scholarship increasingly recognises the inherently ambiguous role these substances occupy within societies. As James H. Mill (2009) observes in relation to cannabis, such substances “elude simple location in any cultural system,” owing both to their complex and often unpredictable effects on human physiology and to the unstable relationships they maintain with moral norms, state authority, and social organisation. Scholars such as James K. and Withington P. (2022, p.10) further argue that intoxicants operate simultaneously as spaces, practices, and material objects, embedded within intersecting temporalities and invested with divergent meanings by different social actors.

This research is grounded in archival exploration and folkloric investigation in the Sirmaur region of Himachal Pradesh, located in the outer Himalayan belt of the Shivalik ranges (erstwhile princely state). The study uncovers the complex social roles of intoxicants and offers insights into the everyday lives of people in relation to these substances. Departing from scholarship that places intoxicants at the analytical centre, this paper deliberately positions them in a supporting or background role. Within this framework, it asks: *How do these substances shape society? How have they shaped the lives of ordinary people?* Framing the inquiry in this manner attributes agency to seemingly inanimate commodities in structuring everyday life—or, more precisely, recognises their inherent social power. Fragmentary evidence and anecdotal records offer valuable insights into the social lives of ordinary people when examined through the lens of intoxicants. This approach is particularly useful in the study of a hill region such as Sirmaur, where the writing of regional history confronts a central challenge of modern historiography: the scarcity of written sources. The methodology, therefore, relies on a careful rereading of available textual materials to recover traces of everyday life related to intoxicants, complemented by an analysis of written folk narratives. This strategy is especially significant because the lives of ordinary people often remain marginal in historical accounts. The broader aim is to demonstrate that practices surrounding intoxicants and their associated objects actively shape social life—structuring routines, expressions, political demands, hierarchies, and celebrations—while society, in turn, continuously reshapes these substances and practices.

Opium culture

The opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*) was entrenched in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Sirmaur region. M. A. Nicolson, posted at Nahan in 1894, records that the opium was used in Sirmaur as a substitute for alcohol or *ganja*, and was beneficial both morally and physically: “It was used medicinally by many natives who live miles from any dispensary as a preventive of fever and a cure for dysentery. It is largely used by mothers nursing children as an application to the breast under the belief that it prevents diarrhoea, dysentery, catarrh, & etc. from attacking their infants” (1894, p. 126). It was traditionally cultivated during the first agricultural cycle alongside other grains and oilseeds. Tobacco was sown in the second crop cycle during late summer and autumn, coinciding with rice cultivation (Fraser, 1820, p. 116). Opium harvesting also occurred within this broader seasonal window. As Fraser observed in 1820, “it grows easily and luxuriantly, but was found in larger quantities as we advanced into the interior: it is said to be an expensive crop, requiring much manure and great attention, whilst the produce is not always very sure. It is an article of considerable traffic with the plains, whither the chief part is carried by the petty merchants who come to the hills for trade” (Ibid., pp. 116-117). A letter from the Raja of Sirmaur (3 January 1894), addressed to the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, furnishes a revealing account of the organisation and fiscal significance of opium cultivation in Sirmaur State. Written in the formal idiom of princely-colonial correspondence, the communication seeks to clarify the rationale for its continuance:

Experience has shown that opium in moderation is not pernicious in any way and that it produces no ill effect either on the health or wealth of the people. It never impoverishes a man; it is preventive of many diseases; the rich and the poor consume it with equal safety. It is much more economical than intoxicating liquors or *ganja*. The greatest opium-eater can consume no more than one or two rupees’ worth of opium a month, while an ordinary drinker will easily waste the same amount in a day on alcoholic liquors. Morally considered, no man is ever led under its influence to the commission of any criminal or immoral act; its moderate use never maddens, nor causes any of its consumers to lose their senses, but, on the contrary, encourages, and enables them to work hard (p. 125).

According to Saudagar Lal (Mir Munshi of the Nahan State), the state’s annual opium production in 1893 amounted to approximately 200 *maunds*. Of this total, around 70 *maunds* were officially collected and

deposited into the state treasury, while 130 maunds were illicitly smuggled into neighbouring regions (p. 125). This distribution highlights not only the extent of direct state involvement in opium-related revenue but also the presence of a substantial parallel economy operating beyond official regulation. The Sirmaur State had institutionalised opium cultivation as part of its revenue system. Zamindars were permitted to cultivate opium without restriction and were required to sell their produce to the state at a fixed rate of ₹8 per seer. The state, in turn, sold the opium to licensed retail dealers at ₹15 per seer. This price differential generated a stable and substantial revenue stream, yielding an estimated net annual profit of approximately ₹15,000 (1894, Vol. III, p.175). The state's total revenue in 1894 was ₹ 6 lakhs, and the population was 1,24,134. Nearly all opium produced in Sirmaur was exported to Patiala and Nabha. The Pajhota *ilaqa* of the Pachhad tehsil was renowned for its fine quality of opium (Minhas, 1998, p. 126). Such an arrangement underscores the extent to which opium production was embedded within both agrarian practice and the fiscal apparatus of the state, reflecting a deep mutual investment by cultivators and the ruling administration. The ballad of Sohira presents a compelling narrative providing insights into an opium trader's or smuggler's journey (Sharma, 2022, p. 109):

फीमाणी जुब्बलो दी ताके चाँउकी पोडी पोडी सोहीरामा
तेरे बे जाणी हाथों दी हुली सुने री गुठी गुठी सोहीरामा
फीम आनी जुब्बलो दी तेरी चचपाडो लुटी लुटी सोहीरामा
Phīmōāṇī Jubīlō dī tākē chānūkī pōṛī pōṛī Sohīrāmā
Tērē bē jāṇī hāthō dī hulī sunē rī guṭhī guṭhī Sohīrāmā
Phīmō āṇī Jubīlō dī tērī chipārō luṭī luṭī Sohīrāmā

This ballad narrates the perilous journey of Sohiram, a rich opium trader travelling from Jubbal to Sirmaur while being pursued by the authorities. Notably described as wearing gold rings on his fingers, Sohiram's appearance itself signals the considerable profits in the opium trade. Upon reaching Sirmaur, his consignment was seized by local villagers, prompting an episode of extraordinary resistance: the ballad recounts that Sohiram confronted as many as 140 villagers single-handedly, continuing the struggle until his weapon finally broke. This narrative encapsulates both the vulnerability of itinerant traders operating beyond formal protection and the intense collective eagerness to capture a highly valued commodity. The imagery of violence, pursuit, and conspicuous wealth together underscores the deep social and economic significance of

opium during this period, while also portraying the trade as a potentially lucrative—yet profoundly precarious—enterprise.

Beyond vice

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, opium was the second most significant source of revenue in Sirmour, surpassed only by land taxes. Consumption patterns varied significantly by caste, occupation, and geography. According to the Raja's account from 1894, the hill-dwelling population (*pahari*) was largely resistant to opium consumption, with cases of intoxication reported infrequently among them. This observation stands in stark contrast to trends in other regions of British India, where opium eating was more widely documented across various social groups. Certain occupational communities within Sirmour exhibited a comparatively higher incidence of opium consumption. Official observations highlighted that elderly men from castes such as the *Kahars*, who were traditionally employed as water carriers and dooly-bearers, were habitual users. Among these individuals, opium was not primarily regarded as a source of indulgence or pleasure. Instead, its use was functional and utilitarian, closely linked to the demands of their labour. Engaged in strenuous, itinerant, and predominantly outdoor occupations, often in cold conditions that led to physical exhaustion, these men used opium as a means to alleviate fatigue, combat exposure, and mitigate bodily ailments. In this context, opium acted as a substitute for alcoholic beverages, providing warmth and temporary relief without the social or financial implications typically associated with alcohol consumption. Its use, therefore, can be understood more as an adaptive response to the challenges of manual labour in a demanding hill environment rather than a moral or recreational practice. Dr M. A. Nicolson, a doctor at Nahan in 1894, recorded four main reasons for the consumption of opium by *Kahars* (1894, p.175): (i) As a substitute for alcohol or ganja, (ii) To enable them to withstand the effects of cold and exposure, (iii) For ill health, especially dysentery, rheumatism, and catarrh, (iv) To enable them to endure fatigue and perform their work.

Dr Nicolson further records that, “physically, opium appears to do very little, if any, harm. Alcohol and ganja are much more harmful than opium. Opium-eating never causes violent crime, as both alcohol and ganja are well known to do.” (3 January 1894, p. 126). The moral evaluation of opium use encompassed complex dimensions. Records indicated that moderate opium consumption did not impair physical or moral health. A survey conducted in jail found that only one out of forty-

seven prisoners was a local hillman who consumed opium; the rest were outsiders, suggesting that opium consumption was not typically linked to criminal behaviour in the region. The Raja also warned the British authorities against attempts to ban or heavily tax opium, arguing that such measures would result in financial losses for both the state and cultivators, while potentially pushing users toward more harmful substances like alcohol or ganja. These observations illustrate opium's deep integration into the economic and social fabric of the state and suggest that reform or prohibition efforts would have likely faced significant resistance. Archival and folkloric investigations have established Sirmaur as a significant centre for opium production and trade, with its economic structure closely tied to this commodity.

Additional insight into Sirmaur's role in the regional opium economy is provided by a 1893 report submitted by Mr T. Gordon Walker, the Commissioner of Excise in the Punjab, to the Royal Commission on Opium (Walker 1894, p. 101). This report includes data from several native hill states, including Sirmaur, and sheds light on the scale and characteristics of the opium trade in the region during the late nineteenth century. Import and export records cited in the Commission's proceedings affirm Sirmaur's economic significance within the broader opium trade network, particularly through its capital, Nahan. Between 1885 and 1890, Sirmaur exported fluctuating but noteworthy amounts of opium. The highest recorded export occurred in 1885–86 with 105 maunds, followed by a sharp decline to 33 maunds in 1886–87. No data is available for 1887–88, suggesting either a reporting gap or a temporary disruption in trade. In subsequent years, exports remained modest, 31 maunds in 1888–89 and 38 maunds in 1889–90. Despite these lower figures, Sirmaur's opium held a market advantage due to the absence of acreage tax and import duties, making it more competitive than opium grown in Punjab, though still not as voluminous as Kashmir's output. According to reports submitted to the Political Agent of the Punjab Hill States in Shimla by the Sirmaur Durbar in compliance with the Hague Opium Convention, no drug traffickers were found in 1937, 1939, 1940, or 1944.

Smuggling

Even as official structures controlled and taxed the trade, recurring smuggling cases into the mid-twentieth century indicate the persistence of a shadow opium economy in Sirmaur. Legal proceedings from the 1950s document a series of such incidents. In one case, the Government appealed the acquittal of a man named Kali, accused under Section 9(c)

of the Opium Act (1950). A significant quantity, one maund and twenty-nine seers of opium, was recovered from a hillock approximately four furlongs from his residence. The recovery followed a statement attributed to Kali, in which he allegedly confessed to burying the opium alongside three accomplices. While the defence claimed that Kali had merely informed police after observing others concealing the opium, the prosecution maintained that his statement directly led to the recovery. Although discrepancies in witness testimonies were raised, they were dismissed as insubstantial. In another case from the same decade, a man named Dasondhi was convicted under Section 9(b) of the Opium Act for transporting contraband opium (23 October 1952). He was found guilty of giving a ride in his jeep to Tika Ram, who was later apprehended with a bag containing nine seers of opium. Although questions arose regarding whether Dasondhi knew the contents of the bag and whether proper procedure under Section 342 of the Criminal Procedure Code was followed, the court ultimately ruled that the procedural lapse did not constitute a miscarriage of justice. The petitioner's denial that Tika Ram had even been in his jeep was determined to be false, weakening his defence. In a third case, Nilam Das and Atma Ram were accused of jointly possessing 9 seers and 1 chatak of crude hill opium in Khashdhar village (9 June 1952). When opium officers raided Nilam Das's house, he produced the stash from a room occupied by Atma Ram and claimed it belonged to his guest. Atma Ram reportedly did not object. The opium was seized, and both men were arrested and later convicted by a Magistrate who ruled that joint possession had been established. However, the Sessions Judge subsequently set aside the convictions on appeal, reflecting the challenges in securing convictions despite the presence of material evidence.

In a related case highlighting the social and political implications of opium smuggling, documents from 1952 reveal how past involvement with the opium trade could affect an individual's civic participation. When Hira Singh from Zail Shillai sought representation on the District Board, his candidacy was contested on the grounds that he was a former convict (1953). Confidential correspondence shows the District Commissioner of Nahan being asked to verify whether Hira Singh had been previously sentenced on charges of smuggling opium. This case illustrates how association with the opium trade could stigmatise individuals and potentially exclude them from political participation, demonstrating another dimension of how intoxicants shaped social and political hierarchies in the region. The scrutiny Hira Singh faced reflects the tension between the persistent informal opium economy and

increasingly formalised civic institutions in post-independence Sirmaur. These cases highlight how opium smuggling remained active well beyond the colonial period and into independent India. The persistence of such cases into the 1950s demonstrates the endurance of both economic incentives and local knowledge regarding opium trade routes, concealment techniques, and community networks of production and transport. They also reveal the difficulty in distinguishing casual involvement from criminal intent, especially in regions where opium had long been embedded in the socio-economic fabric.

Conclusion

Labour, state policy, and everyday social practices intertwine significantly in the context of poppy cultivation. Rather than being a marginal or illicit activity, poppy cultivation was officially institutionalised by the state through regulated production, fixed procurement prices, and controlled retail distribution. This administrative framework integrated opium into the agrarian calendar and fiscal structure of Sirmaur, transforming a risky and labour-intensive crop into a reliable source of state revenue. The willingness of cultivators to engage in poppy farming, despite its uncertainties, reflects both the suitability of the hill environment and the incentives created by state monopoly arrangements. Moreover, opium's significance extended beyond revenue and agriculture into the social fabric of Sirmaur society. Consumption patterns—especially among occupational groups engaged in strenuous physical labour—indicate that opium served as a practical substitute for alcohol and medicine, integrated into routines of work, endurance, and survival rather than being used purely for recreation. Folk narratives and archival correspondence further underscore its value as a contested commodity, capable of provoking both communal conflict and state intervention. In summary, these findings suggest that opium in Sirmaur should be understood not just as a narcotic or colonial commodity, but as a historically situated institution—shaped by local ecology, administrative rationality, and social necessity. Its regulation illustrates how princely states negotiated economic autonomy under colonial oversight, while its consumption sheds light on the lived experiences of labouring communities in the western Himalayas. Therefore, the study of opium provides insight into broader processes of agrarian management, state formation, and social adaptation in the hill polities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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