

The Opium Economy in Malwa: Labor Exploitation, Political Domination, and the Human Costs of British Colonialism

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Abstract

British East India Company (EIC) monopolized opium production through coercive mechanisms such as debt bondage, advance payments, and punitive enforcement, forcing peasants to prioritize opium cultivation over subsistence farming. These exploitative practices led to widespread poverty, food insecurity, and the destabilization of rural communities. Situated within the broader framework of British imperialism, the opium trade served as both an economic driver and a tool for political domination. Local elites acted as intermediaries, extracting rents and imposing high-interest loans, thereby reinforcing caste hierarchies and systemic exploitation while consolidating British control. The paper also investigates resistance through smuggling, illicit cultivation, and subversion by local rulers, which challenged the EIC's monopoly and forced adaptations in colonial strategies. By adopting a labor-centered framework, the study reframes the historiography of the opium trade, moving beyond economic analyses to highlight its human and environmental costs. It examines how monoculture farming disrupted traditional agriculture, exacerbated poverty, and caused significant ecological degradation, such as soil depletion and water resource strain. Additionally, it critiques existing literature for neglecting the lived experiences of labourers and the socio-cultural impacts of colonial policies. By integrating perspectives on labour, caste, and environmental sustainability, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the opium trade as a mechanism of systemic exploitation and its lasting socio-economic and ecological legacies in India.

Keywords: Cultural Disruption, Economic Dependency, Indigenous Agency, Land Degradation, Smuggling Networks