

Paragraph title	Ralf Bauer, <i>The Peasant Production of Opium in Nineteenth-Century India</i> , 2019	Key points
	<p>At the time when the novel is set, poppy was harvested by around 1.3 million peasant households in northern India. The cash crop occupied between a quarter and half of a peasant's holding.</p> <p>The cultivation, harvest, processing and transportation in Bengal and Bihar were managed directly by the East India Company.</p> <p>The EIC installed an Opium Department which administered and controlled the monopoly. The Department – or Opium Agency – was among the most visible colonial institutions in rural India with about one hundred offices spread over an area reaching from the north-eastern corner of today's Uttar Pradesh to the south-western corner of Bihar. Its ca. 2,500 clerks monitored the poppy cultivators closely, enforced contracts and ensured that quality standards were met.</p> <p>Ghosh's protagonist was one of many North Indian peasants producing crude opium for the British Indian government. At the height of the colonial opium industry almost 1.5 million small peasant households cultivated the highly labour intensive poppy plant on their fields and they then delivered the harvested raw opium to the nearest government opium office. A few thousand workers – men, women and children– manufactured the peasants' produce in two large opium factories on the river Ganges. They dried and mixed the semi-liquid substance, formed it into cakes the size of a melon and then packed the opium balls into chests made of mango wood. The government's opium industry was one of the largest enterprises on the subcontinent, producing a few thousand tons of the drug every year – a similar output to Afghanistan's notorious opium industry today, which supplies</p>	

	<p>the global market for heroin. However, unlike the illicit trade in Afghanistan, India's colonial opium economy was a legal business that was not only sanctioned but organised and actively promoted by the state. The profits yielded by the sales of the drug to private traders at auctions in Calcutta were categorised as public revenue. Opium was, for the largest part of the nineteenth century, the second most important source of revenue for the colonial state and it was only outmatched by the taxes that the government collected on land.</p>	
	<p>By the start of the 19th century, trade in Chinese goods – such as tea, silks and porcelain – was extremely lucrative for British merchants. However, the Chinese wouldn't take British products in return; they would only sell their goods in exchange for silver. As a result, Britain's silver reserves were being gradually depleted.</p> <p>To rectify this trade imbalance, the East India Company and other British merchants began to import Indian opium into China illegally, demanding payment in silver. This was then used to buy tea and other goods. By 1839, opium sales to China paid for the entire British tea trade.</p> <p>The English had been obsessed with tea since the 1650s when they were first introduced to it. Author Thomas Manuel in his book <i>Opium Inc</i> (2021) notes that 'at its peak, at the beginning of the 19th century, the duty on tea accounted for 10 per cent of Britain's total revenue', which was an extraordinary situation. The increasing appetite for tea in Britain caused a challenging situation for its balance of payment situation. The Chinese were only interested in trading silver in return for their tea, and by the close of the 18th century, the British treasury was fast running out of the precious metal.</p>	

	<p>The British were in desperate need to find a product that would be irresistible to the Chinese. It was during this time that they looked towards the jewel of the empire, India, to find a product that the Chinese would be forced to buy even if they did not want to. The heady opium, carefully harvested from the poppy plant, came to their rescue. It could be chewed, smoked or drunk, and caused such addiction that once one started using it, there was no going back. As Manuel explains, over the course of the 18th century, the British transformed the entire farming economies of Bengal and Bihar into opium-producing machines. Their agents smuggled the opium into China illegally in return for tea, and all of a sudden the British found their treasuries filling up again. The great opium triangle had been established. 'The British were enabling the longest running drug deal in the history of the world,' writes Manuel. They were knowingly getting millions of people addicted both in China and India, even as they passed laws against opium use in their own country.</p>	
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