

The Origin of Opium in Myanmar

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Abstract

Opium has been grown first in Mesopotemia and later in eleventh century it was cultivated in India and spread to Myanmar in sixteen century. Opium came to appear to the world of human to use as medicine. But evil consequences later prevailed, as it has the nature of addiction and misuse of it. Nevertheless, Myanmar Indigenous medical texts describe the benefit of opium and the good use of it. To counter and check the misuse of opium, Myanmar kings had issued a series of edicts, in which King Badon had once issued to punish the ones who consumed opium more than once, by death sentence.

Key words: Royal Order with Opium

Introduction

The original meaning of the word "opium" was "the one and single remedy given by God". The term "Bein" in Myanmar derived from "Ahiphena", which changed into Aphe-na, Aphein and Bein. Many medical treatises in Myanmar contain the term "Bein" in the prescriptions. So it could serve as an effective remedy for the user with a good purpose. It was from Arab that opium was introduction to Myanmar. But according to the saying, "The use of opium, liquor and intoxicants would lead to one's rain of life," Myanmar kings did not support the abuse of opium. Myanmar Kings had tried to stop the abuse of opium by giving death sentence, the threat of opium was avoided.

Opium in Myanmar

Opium, in Myanmar "Bein" is not a Myanmar word but it comes from Asia minor and arrives Myanmar by sea across India. It is known as Infuan in Asia minor and in Pali,¹ aphenā in Samskrit ahiphena, and in Handi aphinh, from which it corrupted into the Mon-Myanmar word of "Bein" Copium.² The Botanical name of poppy tree is "papaver somniferum". The word "papaver" is Latin means the tree that makes sleepy or drowsy.³ Opium is got by boiling the gum collected from poppy fruit. The word "opium" is a Latin. In AD 1600, the English Thomas Sydenum called the opium as the God given drug.⁴ to human. Monks in Srilanka call the opium" ahiphena⁵ which is a Magada word.⁶

The opium is found very useful, if it is used wisely. U Po Hlaing in his U-du-baw-zana text described about the property of opium as follow:

"The oil, got by grinding poppy seeds, has a rich taste, gives strength and power, and seldom to digest. It makes semen grow and can control the ailment caused by flatus. But some medical text-explained that the poppy-seed-oil is rich in taste, piquant, and can cause dizziness and intoxication. It is hot and can control the gas in the body. It is indigestible and can cause constipation. It can intoxicate and destroy the expectorate and bile."⁷

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¹ Bo Hlaing, U, Yawmangyi; U-du-baw-zana Thingaha began, Hanthawaddy, Yangon, 1961, pp-138-9 (Henceforth: Bo Hlaing, 1961)

² U Po Latt; Myanmar saga ahpwint kyan (Explanatory text to Myanmar language), Vol.II, Pyinnya Nanda Press, Yangon, 1963, pp.172-174 (Henceforth: Po Latt, 1963)

³ Encyclopaedia Birmanica; Vol VII, Yangon, Sarpay Beikman, 1963, 382

⁴ Kyaw Than Tun (Sethmau-sewa); Mu-yit-se hntint Taing-yin-se, Narcotics and Indigenous Medicine), Sarpay Beikman, Yangon, 1987, p.24

⁵ Maha Zeya Theonkhaya, Waw-ha-ra Li-nithta Dipani, Yangon, Hanthawady, 1963, p.147 (Henceforth: Thinkhaya, 1965)

⁶ Myanmar Dictionary, p.266; a language spoken by the ancient people of Magada, synonymous with Pali

⁷ Bo Hlaing (1961), 189

Opium is not only used in Oriental medicine, but also in the modern scientific medicine of the world. In Europe, it was used in the treatment of psychosis, in renaissance period. For the first time, it became known as an cure for the treatment of mental disorder. In 18th century, physicians used opium in heir treatment of mental illness in American colonies. Beginning from the late 18th century, recommendations came American colonies openly to use opium in treatment of gall stone, cancer, dysentery, and pain. Opium was primarily used in cure of diarrhoea, vomiting, menstrual disorder and for easy delivery.⁸ But soon, the medicinal opium became dangerous to human, as it was misused.

Being protector and supporter of Buddha's Teaching, pious Buddhist Myanmar kings strictly enforced the ban on the use of opium, ganja, intoxicating brew, intoxicating preparation of fermented glutinous rice and alcohol.

Since about-5000 BC, sumerians had known about the opium. Babylonians knew about the medicinal value of opium and that knowledge had been bequeathed to Egyptians. According to ancient Egyptian records, Egyptian had known about the use of opium as an opiate or sleeping medicine well before 2000 BC.⁹ The great Greek poet Homer metaphorically said the opium in his Odyssey as anxiety-droving-remedy. In the first century A.D. Dioscoride Dipetaxius said how to collect and prepare the opium. In the 9th century AD, Arab physicians came to known well about the medicinal use of opium and their traders caused to spread the use of opium in the Eastern countries.¹⁰ The spread of opium at that time, could not destroy a race or a country, not as additive but medicinal drug. In 47 AD, a Roman pharmacologist, pharmacist, reported about the medicinal use of opium and how to make them. In 1500 AD, a Swiss Paracelsus wrote in praise of Laudanum, a medicine made with some ingredient of opium, In India, poppy had grown since 11th century and the use of opium became widespread in 16th century which went on spread through the ages of Mughal Kings.¹¹

The habit of opium smoking and the practise of poppy cultivation began only after the arrival of foreigners in Myanmar. According to the travelogue of John Pinkerton, the selling of opium started in ports towns of Passim and Syriam by Arab traders who took it from India. It was said that Arab traders brought the velvet along with the opium.¹² Besides, according to the record of Caesar Fredrick, he himself took the opium from the Indian ports of Cambay, Chaw and resold it in Bago, Myanmar, where he could sell it with huge profit, by using this ports he could bring almost up to the sixty packages of opium into Myanmar next time.¹³

The record of Dutch East India Co. showed that once it had sold the opium of 200 Lb at Malacca, and these opium were brought to Siam and Bago where they resold them with huge profit.¹⁴ In this way, the opium arrived to Myanmar by means of maritime trade along with Arab and foreigners. In about the middle of 16th century, Dutch and British entered the opium trade.¹⁵ Therefore, with the arrival of Dutch into Myanmar, there might have opium trade in the lower part of Myanmar.

It seems that, after the advent of alcohol, beer, opium and marijuana carried by Arabs and foreign traders, the homily, said that" the one who took opium, ganja, intoxicating brew, intoxicating preparation of fermented glutenous rice and alcohol, should know the fact that his fortune will be destroyed", came to appear in the Myanmar milieu. It is thought that opium

⁸ Thaik Htun; Education of Narcotics, Yangon, Pyinnya Beikman Press, 1980, 77-9

⁹ Kyaw Than Htun, 1987, 24

¹⁰ The Encyclopedia Americana, Vol XX, Landon, Williarm Benton, 1974, 764

¹¹ Kyaw Than Htun, 1987, 24

¹² Aung Than Hun, U; Anti-narcotics Campaign, Sarpay Beikman Press, Yangon, 1980, p.103
(Henceforth: Aung Than Htun, 1980)

¹³ Ludu U Hla; Bein-pyu-tha-ma Ahmargaba (Heroinite and a world of wrong), Vol II, Kyibwaye Press, Mandalay, 1974, p.9,10

¹⁴ Thaik Htun, 1980, 97-98

¹⁵ D.G.E Hall, Europe and Burma, Oxford University Press, London, 1945, 161(Henceforth: Hall 1945)

arrived Myanmar in about-1581, through India, and set about opium taking in Myanmar society, but the opium use might be not much. The opium addiction could be found not in the common people only, but in the royalty also. According to the legend of Thirty seven lords, Prince Minye Aung Din, son of Anaukphetlun and Aung Min Phyu, son of Ava King, instantaneously became the Lords or Nats after their demise due to over dose of opium. They became members of Myanmar traditional Nats of the Thirty seven lords.¹⁶

Minye Aung Din was one of the thirty seven lords, compiled and written by the Minister Padethayaza. He was son of King Anaukphetlun and son-in-law of king Thalun. It seems that Padethayaza, seizing the opportunity to admonish the youths, not to become the narcotic addicts, had composed of a Nat song on Aung Din, who was in the song, preached the youth not to emulate him in taking narcotics of opium, marijuana and so on. The Nat song on Aung Din run as follow:

In monarchical days, the king and the people alike kept the five Garudhamma, which was pronounced on every 1st waxing day to remind all the denizen of the country, by issuing the royal order of Garudhamma,¹⁷ which was meant that everyone in the realm should obey and observe the five precepts or the eight precepts and the Three Gems, indirectly exhorting to abstain from taking or eating of opium, marijuana, intoxicating brew, intoxicating preparation of fermented glutenous rice and alcohol.

Altaungmintaya in this reign (1752-60) passed a royal order concerning the use of toddy, intoxicating brew, intoxicating preparation of fermented glutenous rice and alcohol, in that the monarch dictated that everyone shall obtain from taking intoxicants, otherwise, would be punished severely.¹⁸ The order in 1 January 1960 read as follow:¹⁹

Prohibit strictly the consumption of any intoxicant drinks. Stop all practices of animism. Proclaim the order by displaying the execution blade and solemnly announcing the fact that the punishment for disobedience would be an execution with that blade.

As there was no mention of opium in the royal order, it might be safe to assume that at that time in the part of Upper Myanmar, there was no tradition of smoking or eating opium. This assumption was further attested by the teat of Kavilaknana orthography, in which we could not find the mention of the word-opium. It is should be there in Myanmar, opium could be found only in the coastal regions of Rakhine and Taninthayi.²⁰

The unmistakable existence of opium was found in Myanmar beginning from the reign of King Badon, who, just after the accession to the throne, issued the following royal order on 20 February 1782, that run:²¹

There shall be no making, selling and consumption of any kind of intoxicant drink or inhaling a stimulant drug in the entire Kingdom. There shall be no big game hunting in the entire Kingdom. There shall be no glambing of any kind in the entire kingdom.

¹⁶ (a) Mg Htin Aung; *The Thirty Seven Lords*, J.B.R.S, Vol.XXXIX, Pt, 1956, 95

(b) U Htwe Han and U Ba Nyunt (trs); *History of Myanmar Traditional Nat Culture*, Sarpay Meitswe Sonpay, Yangon, 1981, p.92

¹⁷ U Maung Maung Tin; *Shwenanthnon Wawhara Abeikdam*, Vol.I, Religious Affairs Department, Buddhist Society Press, 1975, pp.61,65, 71 (Henceforth: *Maung Maung Tin, 1975*)

¹⁸ B.R Pearn; *A History of Rangoon*, American Baptist Mission Press, Rangoon, 1939, 61 (Henceforth: Pearn, 1939)

¹⁹ (a) Khin Khin Sein (ed); *The Royal Orders of Alaungmintaya*, Myanmar Historical Commission, Yangon, 1904, 137

(b) Than Tun; *Dr.The Royal Orders of Burma. AD. 1598-1885; Part III, AD, 1751-1781*, 63 (Henceforth: ROB)

²⁰ Toe Hla; *Luchmu-Toe-tet-ya phyt-sin-go phyet-si-ne-thaw Bein* (The opium that destroys the social progress), *Tekkatho Pyinnya Padetha*, Vol XIII, Part 3, 1979, 88-89

²¹ (a) *Royal Orders of King Badon*, Mandalay University, History Department collection (b) ROB, part IV, 5, 220

By the examining the order, it can be understood that only after the thirty years of Alaungmitaya's accession to the throne, the opium spread down to the grassroots level during the people reign, as this king was particularly fond of collecting medical teats and cultivation of herbal plants. The text-Wawhara Linaththa Dipani might be stood as evidence, where the teat described as follow:

In the reign of the founder king of Amarapura, the king asked what were these? by showing plants of poppy and marijuana to the monk Varana bandhe and so on who came from Ceylon. As the Monk replied that poppy plant was called ahiphena and that of marijuana as banga, both were of Mogada language.²²

In the first place, opium was used as medicine, which should be known by the royal order of King Badon issued on 10 May 1810 that dictated that every soldiers shall texts with them the opium of one pè each, to prevent the diseases.²³ Therefore, it can be understood that some became addicted to opium through the use of it as medicine. When foreigners arrived in Myanmar, the habit of taking intoxicants of opium, ganja, and alcohol became widespread. Concerning the spread of opium, king Badon issued in 16 December 1817a royal edict²⁴, that stated as follows:

Any from of Opium consumption (Whether smoking it or eating it) has never been habitually done by people living in Burma; the order to arrest anyone who has been found indulging in this practice is confined only to Burmese nationals; foreigners are exempted from this order, Myo Wun-Town officer, shall get all opium addicts among the Burmese arrested, opium confiscated shall be sent to palace stores; and the other applies to opium found in the hands of Chinese

By the order, it came to know that the royal orders against opium “eating” was only for the natives. Foreigners had the right to buy, sell and consume it. It also knew that opium cases fall within the purview of Treasury Minister. So Many royal edicts issued notwithstanding, the opium trade did not subside, instead, became spread not only in the royal capital Amarapura but also especially in the coastal sea ports.

After two days of the issuance of first order concerning the opium, King Badon again passed the following royal edict²⁵, on 18 December 1817, that stated as:

Ship calling at the ports of Dhannawati, Hanthawaddy, Meghawati and Rammawati would bring opium and other allied drugs; it is forbidden to buy and use these drugs; any Burma who Consume opium, etc, shall be arrested, notify this to all Town officers and Regimental Officers concerned: Myo Won-Town officer of Hkan But shall check the opium traffic in Hkan But brought there by Kathe Cassays.

By the order, it was evident that the king had taken strong action against the opium, arresting everyone who ate, and smoked, and sellers and buyers of opium, and thrown them into jail. Apparently, so many prisoners of opium seemed filled the prison, because the king issued another royal order²⁶ just after two weeks of the second one, which read thus:

In consideration of long term effects, the consumption of opium has been forbidden, opium addicts now under arrest shall go free if they promise not to fall back on that bad habit; execute anyone who are found later either selling or consumption opium.

If we study king Badon's royal orders, it comes to know that the opium had already been spread in the royal capital. The spread of opium was found pervasive enough not only among the people, but it even encroached the royal palace also. According to the report of British President in Burma, even Queen MaiNu of King Thayawady was found complicated

²² Thinkhaya, 1963, 160

²³ Dr. Than Tun; Burma and Medical Science, Tekkatho Pyinnya Padetha, Vol VI, part 3, 1970, 322

²⁴ (a) ROB, vol VII, 156 (b) Thaik Htun, 1980, 99

²⁵ (a) ROB vol VII, 156 (b) Thaik Htun, 1980, 99-100

²⁶ (a) ROB, vol VII, 157 (b) Thaik Htun, 1980, 100

with opium, which said “She uses opium freely”(sic)²⁷. Well before the British annexation of lower Burma, Myanmar kings had totally prohibited the opium trade and poppy cultivation by taking strong action against the disobedience of the order. During the second Anglo-Burmese war, in 18 March 1852, King Bagan issued the following order²⁸,

Gambling, drugs and intoxicant drink are not allowed. When the men are safely encamped after aday's mared, all leaders. From ten head to Commander shall go with Pah Hha Chot-Sword.

In précis, poppy has been grown first in Mesopotemia and later in 11th century it was cultivated in Indian and spread to Myanmar in 16th century. Opium came to appear to the world of human to use as medicine. But evil consequences later prevailed, as it has the nature of addiction and misuse of it.



Photo (1) Beautiful Poppy Flowers

²⁷ VII.S. Desai, The British Residency in Burma, 73

²⁸ (a) Royal Order of King Bagan, Mandalay University, History Dept, collection
(b) ROB, vol VII, 300



Photo (2) Opium Seeds

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Photo (4) Cultivating and Producing Opium Crop in India
Since 11th Century

Excerpted From;

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Photo (5) Self-consumption of Opium by Rich Arabs and Trading it throughout the World

Excerpted From:

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Photo (6) An Arab Smoking Opium and a Woman in the Same Way

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Photo (8) An Arab Teaching How to Use Opium and Sell it in Myanmar Po-win-taung Mural Painting (17th Century)

Excerpted from,

Dr Ba Maung, *Thai Settlements & Arts in Myanmar*, presented paper in 25 October 2007, Yangon, Historical Research Centre, 2007, p 18



Photo (9) A Native being Taught How to Smoke Opium by a Foreigner Po-win-taung Mural Painting (17th Century)

Excerpted from,

Dr Ba Maung, *Thai Settlements & Arts in Myanmar*, presented paper , 25 October 2007, Yangon, Historical Research Centre, 2007, p 18



Photo (10) Foreigners Using Opium in Myanmar Po-win-taung Mural Painting (17th)

Excerpted from,

Dr Ba Maung, *Thai Settlements & Arts in Myanmar*, presented paper, 25 October 2007, Yangon, Historical Research Centre, 2007, p 18

Conclusion

Nevertheless, Myanmar Indigenous medical texts describe the benefit of opium and the good use of it. To counter and check the misuse of opium, Myanmar kings had issued a series of edict, in which King Badon had once issued to punish the ones who consumed opium more than once, by capital punishment.

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