

# Gendering The Opium Economy: Women's Labour and Agrarian Extraction in Colonial Bihar 1770-1910

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## Abstract

The paper explores the hitherto unacknowledged contribution of women in the opium plantations of colonial Bihar. It aims to highlight the contribution of women in terms of their labour and experiences in the context of colonial agrarian policies and the opium trade and thus counter the dominant narratives of colonial labour history, which are male dominated. The study uses a historical and gender-informed approach, contextualizing women's labour in the political economy of colonialism. It integrates a study of colonial economy with a deep dive into domestic and plantation society in Bihar from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The research uses qualitative analysis of archival documents, revenue reports, settlement documents, administrative correspondence, missionary accounts, and other contemporary sources. It also uses feminist historiography and subaltern studies to be read existing data in a gendered way. And adopts an intersectional approach to understand the role of gender, caste, class, and rural hierarchies in women's involvement in opium cultivation. The study shows that women were crucial but undervalued in the production of opium, from sowing to lancing and processing to subsistence work. The colonial records made their contribution invisible despite their importance in the production of opium. The study contends that women's agency and subsistence work change our understanding of colonial agrarian economies in Bihar.

**Keywords:** Colonial Bihar; Women's Labour; Opium Economy; Agrarian Political Economy; Gender History; Subaltern Studies.

## Introduction

The expansion of colonial commercial agriculture in nineteenth-century India led to the transformation of agrarian society, the structure of labor, and rural production. Among the various cash crop economies developed under colonial rule, the role of the opium economy is particularly noteworthy in the context of the imperial politics of the British colonial era. With the monopoly of the East India Company and later under the colonial regime, the cultivation of opium crops in eastern India, particularly in Bihar and the Gangetic plains, came to play a significant role in the imperial politics of the British colonial regime. In particular, the export of opium to China helped the colonial regime to receive huge revenues and balance the trade deficit with China. Thus, the agrarian society of Bihar came to be integrated into the vast cultivation of poppy crops under the close supervision of the colonial regime.

The opium economy has been an area of interest for historians as an instrument of colonial revenue extraction and global commercial expansion. A significant part of the existing body of research has

centered on the administrative machinery of the opium monopoly, the coercive contractual regime imposed on cultivators, and the geopolitics of the opium trade. The existing research has underscored the manner in which the colonial regime transformed land use patterns and incorporated the rural economy into the imperial trade network. However, the manner in which the opium was actually produced, particularly the labor regime involved in the cultivation of opium, has been relatively less explored.

In rural households where poppy cultivation occurred, the concept of labour did not remain limited to the male cultivator as conceptualized in colonial agreements and documents. Rather, agricultural practices in these rural areas heavily relied on family-based labour systems, in which women and children were found to play an indispensable role. However, colonial documents often recognized male household heads as the primary economic actors, thus negating the role of women in the opium cultivation process.

The invisibility of women's labor in colonial records may also be understood in terms of the larger patriarchal ideologies that were part of the colonial administrative framework as well as the rural social structure. Colonial administrators, in general, conceptualized agricultural production in terms of the male cultivator, with women's labor being subsumed under the rubric of household or family labor.

This paper attempts to re-understand the colonial opium economy in Bihar with special reference to the importance of women's work in maintaining the agrarian extraction process. Instead of viewing the peasant household as an entity in the context of the economy, this study attempts to understand the process of labor organization in the household and how women's work contributed to the opium economy. This study attempts to understand how the colonial economic process relies on patriarchal labour relations. In doing so, the study also aims to recover the often overlooked contributions of rural women whose work underpinned the functioning of colonial commercial agriculture.

### **The Study Area**

The present study deals with the historical region of Bihar located in eastern India, which constituted one of the most important centers for the cultivation of opium. Under the monopoly system, rule of the East India Company and later the British government, number of districts within the region of Bihar were brought under a system of regulated cultivation of opium and production of opium. The Ganga River and its tributaries created the fertile alluvial plains which create an environment for the cultivation of opium in this region.

During the nineteenth century, regions like Patna, Saran, Champaran, and Ghazipur appeared as significant opium-growing regions. Cultivators in these regions had entered contracts with the colonial government, who provided them with the advances for cultivation of opium and supplied raw opium for processing in the government factories. The centers for opium processing were mainly at the opium factories in Patna and Ghazipur, which served as important administrative and commercial centers in the colonial opium monopoly system.

The rural society in Bihar during this period had a complex agrarian system influenced by caste systems, landlord-tenant relations, and family-based agricultural systems. The labour pattern in these agrarian families was also gender-based, with women playing a vital role in contributing to agricultural and domestic labour. The choice of Bihar as a study area is important because it offers an opportunity to examine how colonial commercial agriculture functioned in a local setting and how women's labour contributed to maintaining the opium economy.

### **Data Sources**

The basis of this research is mainly qualitative in nature, based on the historical information available in various primary and secondary sources. Using various types of historical materials helps in an in-depth understanding of the gendered labor process in opium cultivation.

### **Primary Sources**

The primary sources for this research are based on various administrative records, reports, and archival materials related to opium cultivation in Bihar. These records may include the proceedings of the colonial opium department, revenue records, and reports related to agrarian administration in colonial India. Archives from various institutions such as the National Archives of India and the Bihar State Archives provide valuable information related to the administrative process in opium cultivation and the economic condition of the cultivators.

The important sources for this research may include opium department proceedings, board of revenue consultations, district settlement reports, and reports from opium factories in Patna and Ghazipur. These records contain valuable information related to the process of opium cultivation. Even though there is little information related to women's labor in these records, it helps in understanding the labor process in the context.

### **Secondary Sources**

The secondary sources include books, research papers, and historical documents regarding the colonial agrarian economy, the opium trade, and about the gender relationships in rural India. Sources from historians and economic experts such as Amar Farooqui, Carl A. Trocki, Bina Agarwal, and Ranajit Guha are also used. These sources would assist the present study in locating research within the broader historiography on the colonial capitalism, the agrarian economy, and as well as gender relationships.

Thus, the primary sources would be used in conjunction with the secondary sources to create a more comprehensive understanding of the gender relationships that characterized the colonial opium economy.

### **Research Methodology**

The research uses a qualitative historical methodology to examine the gender aspects of the colonial opium economy. As a qualitative research methodology, the research uses the interpretive approach, which is based on the idea of reconstructing the social structures from the historical records. In the context of the colonial records, which do not explicitly discuss the role of women's labor, the research methodology is based on the critical reading of the historical records and the identification of the indirect evidence of the role of women's labor in the cultivation of the crops.

The research is based on the theoretical perspectives of the feminist agrarian studies and the feminist political economy, which discuss the importance of analyzing the gender aspects of the division of labor at the household level. As a qualitative research methodology, the research uses the gender-sensitive approach to analyze the role of women's labor in the cultivation of the crops, which were not formally acknowledged.

Furthermore, the present study also benefits from the methodologies and approaches developed by the subaltern studies group, which emphasize the importance of interpreting archival materials from the point of view of subaltern social groups. This involves, for instance, looking for the silences and gaps in the colonial archives and exploring how these gaps might reflect the wider power relations of the colonial

social order. By using this methodology, the present study hopes to shed light on the labor processes at the base of the colonial opium economy.

On the whole, the methodology of the present study combines archival, historiographic, and gender-based approaches to explore the way in which the colonial systems of agrarian extraction were embedded in the labor processes of the household.

### **Reframing the Opium Economy**

The opium monopoly in eastern India is one of the most profitable businesses of the British Empire. Administered first by the East India Company and later by the Government of India, the system bound districts of Bihar into a global commodity chain that stretched from the rural poppy fields to the ports of Canton, China. It was the profits of this opium trade that helped to balance the finances of the empire and offset the British trade deficit with China.

However, the historiography on the opium economy has so far privileged macro-level narratives on the opium trade, its impact on revenue flows, and the politics of imperial diplomacy and peasant coercion. While necessary, these accounts tend to treat agrarian households as undifferentiated economic agents in their analysis of the opium economy. The “cultivator” emerges as a contracting male subject, and the household as a functional economic unit. The gender composition of the labor force in this unit is marginal to the analysis. However, what this historiography misses that the colonial opium monopoly was predicated on the systematic use of women’s labor in peasant households. Without this unpaid, unrecorded, and unrecognized labor, the opium enterprise could not have functioned on the scale that it did.

This paper makes two main arguments. Firstly, the colonial opium economy was structurally dependent on gender divisions of labor that exacerbated women’s productive and reproductive burdens. Secondly, the invisibility of women in colonial records was not merely epistemological but constitutive of the colonial political economy. By drawing on the work of Subaltern Studies and feminist political economy, the article theorizes the peasant household as a site in which the colonial economy was mediated through patriarchy and caste hierarchy.

### **Theoretical Framework of Subalternity and Feminist Political Economy**

Ranjit Guha’s work on the peasant insurgency highlighted the autonomy of subaltern political consciousness and the limits of elite historiography. However, the subalternity itself is gendered in nature and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also argued that the subaltern woman occupies a doubly silenced position within colonial and nationalist discourse.

Feminist political economy has shown that the capitalist development is predicated on the unpaid reproductive labor. In fact, Silvia Federici’s analysis of primitive accumulation highlights how women’s bodies and labor are incorporated into systems of exploitation without recognition. Similarly, in the context of South Asia, Bina Agarwal has shown that agrarian structures systematically undervalue women’s labor while at the same time relying on it to increase productivity.

In fact, by using all these perspectives together, we can see that the opium economy was not merely about revenue extraction in terms of land use, but about the appropriation of gendered labor that was embedded in patriarchal households.

### **Institutionalizing the Opium Monopoly**

Once the Diwani rights had been acquired in 1765, the East India Company consolidated their control over revenue in Bengal and Bihar. Under Warren Hastings, private traders were eliminated, and a centralized monopoly in opium was established in 1773. Cultivators entered into contracts, receiving advances (dadni), and committed to growing a specific area in poppy cultivation. The opium thus grown was sold exclusively to the agents of the Company at a predetermined price.

Archival records from the Opium Department Proceedings reveal the close supervision in the sowing, lancing, and delivery schedules. The fixation of prices ensured a low procurement price and high profitability in exports. The correspondence between the district collectors and the Board of Revenue shows the pressure put on the cultivators to meet the quota in terms of area.

The coercive character of this regime has been extensively documented. What is perhaps more important is to look at this coercion in terms of the household, and the way in which labor is drawn beyond the male contractual subject.

### **Labour Intensification and Gendered Production**

The cultivation of poppies needed meticulous and persistent labor. Reports of settlements under Patna Division describe poppies as a crop demanding “unceasing attention.” These activities included ploughing, weeding, irrigation management, lancing of capsules, and harvesting latex. Such labor demands could not have been fulfilled by males alone.

Labor allocation among peasant households was done according to gender roles. Males were responsible for ploughing and other preparatory work for the field, work related to animal traction. Women were responsible for the weeding, thinning, irrigation, guarding against animals, and most importantly lancing the opium capsules for latex harvesting. The process of lancing poppies needed extra care and patience, as too-deep incisions would destroy the latex, and too-shallow incisions would mean less latex yield. Women’s dexterity was often cited as advantageous for labor, especially for work related to plants.

Once the latex had exuded, it had to be carefully scraped and dried, usually in the home courtyard. There was a blurring of the line between the field and the home, and this led to the home being a site of commodity production. Women’s work crossed the divide between productive and reproductive work.

Yet contractual agreements were signed by male heads of households. They were the economic agents in the eyes of the state. The work done by women was classified as “family assistance.” It was therefore not recorded in the revenue accounts, and this led to the extraction of surplus value at the level of the household as a whole.

### **Reproductive Labour and the Double Extraction**

The opium system was to intensify not just productive labour, but reproductive labour as well. Reproductive work still mainly fell on women shoulders, who were also responsible for the cooking, childcare, and maintaining the livestock and the household. The increase in opium cultivation led to a decrease in the land under other crops, and people had to buy their foodstuffs from market. During the years of poor harvest or when price went up, women had to deal with the shortages.

The revenue correspondence from the 1830s and 1860s mentions the instances of trouble and debts among cultivators. However, there is no recognition of the gender dimensions of this. Feminist political economy argues that this was a subsidy that was never acknowledged: the unpaid reproductive work that went on to support the laboring population under intensified extraction.

In this sense, the opium monopoly was a “double extraction.” On the one hand, there was the extraction of surplus from the land and the crops by the state, and on the other hand, there was the unpaid labor extracted by patriarchy to fulfill the demands of the state.

### **Archival Silence and Epistemic Erasure**

The archives are conspicuous by their absence of women. The Opium Department Proceedings note quantities, rates, and quality assessments but fail to note any measurement of women’s labour participation. This cannot be explained as a failure of information but as part of the epistemological framework of colonial administration that understood economic activity in masculine terms.

The subaltern approach to history has underscored the importance of a critical approach to archives. In the case of opium history, the absence of women in archives is itself a form of evidence of epistemic violence perpetrated on them. The presence of women is only alluded to as “families” and “domestic labour.” The absence of women naturalized the assumption of masculine economic agency in terms of family as economic units.

To recover women’s presence in archives is to read “against the grain” of available texts and note “family labour” and “domestic assistance.” These are signs of a “hidden history” of gendered labour that sustained imperial wealth.

### **Caste, Gender, and Hierarchies of Agrarian Labour**

The opium districts in Bihar had complex caste stratification. The Koeris and Kurmis, who traditionally practiced horticulture, were major poppy cultivators. Women from these castes directly worked in the fields. The people who belong from upper castes who rent out the land to the cultivating castes and supervised the cultivation but did not directly work in the fields.

The gender-based division of labour and the hierarchy between the laborers was very much linked to the complex system of caste norms. The women from the lower castes mostly did the most labor-intensive work such as transplanting, weeding, and processing the poppy crop. The subalternity of these women was multi-layered, namely, colonial, patriarchal, and caste based.

This complex stratification points to the fact that the opium economy not only perpetuated social inequality but also integrated Bihar into the world capitalism. The extraction of surplus value is thus linked to the perpetuation of the caste and gender hierarchy.

### **Global Circuits and Embodied Labour**

The opium harvested in Bihar found its way to China, which contributed to imperial trade balances, leading to the Opium Wars. While the geopolitical implications are discussed, the commodity’s creation involved local, embodied labor. The women who scraped the latex in the village courtyards were connected to the imperial trade balances. The empire was inscribed on the women’s bodies.

The difference between the commodity’s circulation and its local embodiment points to the gendered nature of imperial capitalism, with the women’s bodies acting as the site to materialize the empire.

### **Resistance, Negotiation, and Subaltern Agency**

Resistance from peasants in the cultivation of opium, although not as dramatic as in the case of indigo, is also seen. The records from the Board of Revenue mention the reluctance, delay, and attempts at evasion from meeting the commitments in terms of area. The role of women in resistance is not mentioned in the

archival records. Women played a crucial part in managing the workforce so they would have been involved in this process.

The agency of the subaltern in this scenario would have found ways to manage the workforce, prioritizing their needs, and negotiating advances, although not by fighting but by doing small things to resist the men and colonial powers that were, in control of them, women have done this to deal with the patriarchy and colonialism.

### **Challenges and Limitations of the Study**

The studies on the gender dimensions of the colonial opium economy face several methodological and conceptual limitations. One of the important limitations of the studies on the opium economy of Bihar during the colonial period is the nature of the historical evidence. Most of the historical evidence, such as the revenue and settlement reports, and the proceedings of the Opium Department, were prepared by the colonial officials acting in their capacity as servants of the East India Company and the British Indian government. These reports were more concerned with the issues of administrative efficiency, production statistics, and revenue extraction. They did not capture the labor practices of the people and the role of women in production.

The lack of any mention of women's labor in colonial records is one of the biggest challenges that this study faces. In the records, agricultural production was largely attributed to male cultivators, who were recognized as the head of the families and signatories to the contracts for cultivation. While women's involvement in various activities such as sowing, weeding, irrigation management, lancing capsules, and collection of latex was included under the broader category of "family labor," the study of the involvement of women in opium cultivation would require careful interpretation of indirect information.

Another challenge relates to the general epistemological bias inherent in the colonial documentation. In this respect, it should be noted that the colonial documentation was conducted in an epistemology that reflected the interests of the colonial state rather than those of the rural communities that took part in cultivation activities. In this context, the lives of peasant women, who were an integral part of the rural labor force, were not well documented. Therefore, it should be noted that the study will have to make use of interpretive analysis to capture aspects related to women's work that were not well documented.

The geographical extent of the study would also put some limitations. While Bihar did form a significant opium-producing centre during the colonial period, the nature of the agrarian system and social formations varied significantly. There might have been differences in the nature of landholdings, caste systems, and agricultural systems, and these might have affected the nature of the labour system, though these details are not available. However, the results of the present study must be taken as a general indication rather than universally applicable to all opium-producing regions of colonial India.

Despite these limitations, the research aims to fill in the gaps in the literature by using archival research and drawing on the insights of gender history and agrarian studies. The research aims to fill in the gaps in the literature by using archival research and drawing on the insights of gender history and agrarian studies, and by critically engaging with colonial records and their social and historical contexts, in an attempt to uncover the overlooked role of women's labor in the colonial opium economy. Although the available records are not sufficient to fully reconstruct women's experiences, the research aims to draw attention to the need to acknowledge the gender base of agrarian production and colonial extraction.

## Recommendations

The findings of the present study underscore the need to incorporate gender perspectives in the historical analysis of colonial agrarian economies. On the basis of the limitations faced and the insights gained, certain recommendations can be put forward for future research and scholarship on the opium economy and colonial agrarian economies.

First, future historical studies of the colonial economic structures would place greater emphasis on the role of gender as a key analytical category. Most of the literature on the opium economy has emphasized the role of the state, revenue systems, and the international flow of opium related to the colonial monopoly of the East India Company and, later, the British colonial state. While these perspectives have significantly advanced the understanding of the imperial political economy, they have often neglected the gendered nature of the labor systems underlying agricultural production at the local level.

Secondly, there is a need for further research based on archival records focusing on examining the role of rural women in agricultural production. Rural women are often overlooked in colonial records and need to be studied with critical attention through archival records to locate indirect references to their role in agricultural production. The researcher can also pursue other avenues of research by exploring archival records like vernacular, missionary, travelogues, and judicial records, which refer to women's involvement in agricultural production.

Third, interdisciplinary methods can provide significant contributions to the existing research on gendered labour in colonial agrarian economies. Interdisciplinary methods can allow historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and gender scholars to develop new interpretative frameworks for studying historical data. For example, the contribution of feminist agrarian studies and rural sociology can help develop an understanding of the labour process within peasant households and productive/reproductive labour division. Fourth, a comparative study on other regions of colonial India is likely to offer more perspectives on the dynamics of the opium production process. Indigo, cotton, and tea were some of the products that involved labor within households, and analyzing their growth dynamics is likely to yield more information regarding the gender issues that were faced in opium cultivation. Through a comprehensive study, researchers will be able to establish the uniqueness or otherwise of the invisibility of the female labor force to the dynamics in the opium production process.

Finally, future studies can be attempted to help bridge the divide between historical studies and contemporary discussions surrounding gender and labour in agriculture. Learning from the historical origins of gender divisions of labor in agriculture could inform wider discussions surrounding the development of the rural sector, labor rights, and women's labor participation in the region and by examining the impact of the colonial system of the economy the researcher could offer useful historical insights to the contemporary discussions.

## Conclusion

The present study has attempted to examine the colonial opium economy in Bihar from a gender perspective, with particular emphasis on the role of women's labor, which has traditionally remained an invisible aspect of colonial agrarian extraction. Although the monopoly over the opium trade by the East India Company and later by the colonial government has been acknowledged as an integral part of colonial revenue and international trade, the labor system that supported this economy has not been examined from a gender perspective. The present study has attempted to highlight the invisible role of women's labor in the production and preparation of poppy and opium.

The analysis shows that the opium cultivation in colonial Bihar heavily relied on the system of family-based agricultural labour, where women were at the core of the system. Weeding, irrigation, lancing capsules, and collecting latex are some of the processes that required consistent and painstaking labour during the cultivation of opium. These processes were often carried out by women in peasant families, but the colonial records only identified male farmers as the main economic actors in the system. Therefore, women's labour did not find any mention in the colonial records, although it was essential for the smooth operation of the opium cultivation system.

The study also reveals how the invisibility of women's work was not just an effect of poor historical documentation, but was part of the larger patriarchal attitudes that colonialism and rural societies followed. The colonial system of administration, in its conceptualization of agriculture and rural work, centered on the idea of the male cultivator, thus marginalizing women's role in the economy. On the other hand, rural societies followed a system of work that divided tasks between men and women, where women did multiple tasks in agriculture and the household that were part of their responsibility, but not seen as work. By locating this opium economy within colonial political economy and gender relations, this research also contributes to broader historiographical debates about colonial agrarian transformation. This research suggests that colonial systems of extraction were reproduced not only through state policies, commercial relations, and coercive contracts but also through labour relations in rural households. Women's labour was an important but invisible base for colonial opium economy development to produce a product essential to international imperial trade.

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