

Opium Consumption in Sri Lanka during the European Era

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“Opium”: which grew widely in Pakistan and Afghanistan was first discovered by Greeks due to its narcotic properties. Arab traders introduced it to the East and Indians knew it through Mohommedan conquerors after china gained knowledge of it. Thus, in the present study, the objective is to analyse the evidences of Opium consumption during the European era. As for the research methodology, primary and secondary historical sources were referred for analysing. In Sri Lanka, Opium has been used in Ayurvedic medicine during the last few centuries. There is no evidence that opium was ever grown successfully in Sri Lanka. Even though Portuguese imported opium, Dutch took various attempts to grow it in Sri Lanka which were never successful. The Dutch did not discourage local inhabitants regarding the opium usage, yet continued the Portuguese monopoly and it is mentioned that it was imported from Surati and Bengal. In the latter part of the seventeenth century, moors carried out the opium trade. Moreover, Malay community popularized the opium habit in Sri Lanka. When British took over the Maritime Provinces in Sri Lanka, all the import duties were prohibited except that of arrack and opium. Along with tobacco and curry powder, travelling merchants freely traded opium during the British period. Sir Thomas Maitland enacted a regulation prohibiting the smoking of opium, without permission from the constable of the division, in Colombo after sunset. After the ordinance of 1867 No.19, the opium shops were licensed and this resulted in providing a huge revenue. It is also noted that there were around 19847 of habitual users of opium by this time. During the 1890s, people of all races gathered into Colombo in protest of the legalization of opium in Sri Lanka and they gave a signed petition addressed to the legislative council regarding this matter. To address the matter then governor appointed a committee and finally the committee recommend all opium shops to be closed. Hence, it can be concluded that all these resulted in opium solely becoming a government monopoly during the British Period.

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