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Between necessity and compulsion: opium poppy cultivation and the exigencies of survival in Badakhshan, Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on long-term fieldwork in Badakhshan, a borderland province in the northeast of Afghanistan, the paper explores the role that opium poppy cultivation has played in a marginal high-altitude economy. Framed by the analytic of ‘narco-frontiers’ and the puzzle of the persistence of small farmers in uneven agrarian transitions, the paper investigates the diversity of market and non-market institutions that operate across the means of production of opium. Rather than seeing opium poppy production as the vanguard of an agrarian transition, it is suggested that it is more of a rearguard action to ensure survival.

KEYWORDS

opium; agrarian change; institutional diversity; mountain economies

1. Introduction

Contentious state-making processes (Rasmussen and Lund 2018) and global commodity regimes (Beckert et al. 2021) have been instrumental in the formation and recreation of territories, frontiers and borderlands. The role that illicit drug economies driven by global markets have played in these liminal zones has led to their characterisation as ‘narco-frontiers’ (Ballve 2018). As Ballve argues with respect to Colombia, uneven development, political marginalisation and violence allow drug-economies to land in fertile territory, driving turbulent processes of agrarian change. As a narrative, the notion of a narco-frontier, its determining features and its consequences captures a broad tendency and speaks well to many coca economies of Latin America and those of opium in Myanmar (Meehan 2011) and Afghanistan (Goodhand 2005).

However, pathways of agrarian change are framed by locational specificities, drivers of drug economies do not land on uniform territories and each context has its own story to tell (Ballve 2018, 213), with respect to how drugs shape development trajectories and agrarian change processes. The sub-tropical lowlands of Colombia and the monsoonal uplands of Myanmar (Meehan 2021) with their unsettled histories have offered diverse crop repertoires and frontiers to be expanded into and fought over. This is also the case for many if not all of Afghanistan’s semi-arid opium growing environments. In the provinces that have been central to Afghanistan’s opium economy such as Helmand

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with its entrenched land inequalities, the analytic of the narco-frontier holds good and processes of violent agrarian change can be evidenced. Here, displaced opium growers, locked compulsively into the drug economy, have expanded into communal semi-arid pastureland using tubewell irrigation to grow the crop and in so doing pushed the cultivation frontier (Mansfield 2016).

But as this paper will argue with respect to the province of Badakhshan in the northeast of the country, opium poppy cultivation here has not had the transformative effects on market relations that have been found in Helmand nor has it driven a fully blown narco-economy. Badakhshan has certainly played a key historical role in Afghanistan's opium economy and has many of the attributes of an ideal narco-frontier, as a political periphery in the northeast corner of the country with borders and conduits for drug flows to Tajikistan, Pakistan and China (Goodhand and Pain 2021). But only briefly has it been a significant opium-growing province.

What distinguishes the province is its marginal mixed crop and livestock high-altitude economy. Mountain specificities (Johda 1992) have contributed to the persistence of an economy where any form of accumulation is perched on an enduring subsistence base and use-value logic. It is a context where there are severe constraints on accumulation from agriculture. In this it shares commonalities with the mountain economies of Nepal (Sugden, Seddon, and Raut 2018) and Northern Arunachal Pradesh (Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009). These mountain specificities can be characterised in terms of the limiting effects of altitude and temperature, severe restrictions to cultivation expansion, agro-ecological diversity and remoteness, all of which produce physical and technological limits to expanded crop production and resistance to intensification. As this paper will argue, these factors have contributed to the role that opium has played in this setting and the limits of its ability to drive an agrarian transformation.

Of course, the growing of opium poppy at any scale has had consequences in terms of monetising an economy, drawing it into global commodity networks. Indeed, Afghanistan has long been part of transnational trading networks (Marsden and Hopkins 2019) that combined transit goods with Afghan agricultural products, especially dried fruit and nuts. Since the nineteenth century it has been integrated through cash and credit relations into regional markets (Hanifi 2011) but despite the best efforts of external interventions since 2001, a market-driven agricultural transformation has failed to emerge or drive economic growth (World Bank 2014). Equally, opium poppy cultivation has not fuelled a capitalist transition in Badakhshan and nor has agriculture necessarily been the primary means by which the province has been incorporated into global capitalist systems.

As has been argued with respect to coca (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021) and is true of opium poppy, the illegality of drug crops makes them smallholder friendly in that they absorb family labour for production, provide access to land and generate a high-value, durable product. But the persistence of non-market institutions across the means of production in Badakhshan in parallel to and intertwined with more market-based institutions driven by the opium economy points to constraints on the ability of opium poppy cultivation to drive a capitalist agriculture.

This invites engagement with the broader problematic of the agrarian question (Bernstein 1996) and the challenge that the persistence of peasant-like agriculture alongside capitalist production relations poses to the analytical lens that can be brought to bear

on understanding processes of agrarian change. These considerations frame the next section. The context of Badakhshan and the historical evolution of its opium economy is then outlined. Through an exploration of land and labour, credit and exchange relations and the persistence of non-market institutions, the paper then examines the critical role that opium poppy has provided in securing survival in a marginal mountain economy. The case is made that at best opium poppy production in Badakhshan, like that of matsutake mushroom (Tsing 2015), operates on the precarious edge of the logic of a commodity chain, serving subsistence interests and contributing to global markets.

The core of the evidence this paper draws from is research in 2007 undertaken by the author with a key research associate in six study villages in the Baharak and Jurm districts, three located in the main valleys and three in upland valleys (Pain 2008). These districts and two of the opium study villages have been central to a household panel study of Afghan livelihood trajectories, the findings from which have informed this paper. The panel study was carried out in various provinces and was established in 2003, with two further rounds of study in 2009/10 and 2014/16 (Pain and Huot 2018). Detailed interviews of a subset of households in the 2010 round in Badakhshan were undertaken by an Afghan male and female interview team collecting qualitative data on household and livelihood changes since 2003. The team was supervised and debriefed by the author in Badakhshan (Pain 2010a), who collected wider data on village and district contexts and dynamics of change, updating information on the opium study villages and exploring the role of social relationships and village context in livelihood security (Kantor and Pain 2012; Pain and Kantor 2012).

The 2007 opium study villages were purposively selected to provide contrasts of location with respect to mountain ecology and the history of opium poppy cultivation, providing a level of detail essential to understanding the diverse trajectories of change. The opium study investigated the history and role of opium poppy in the lives of 32 informants (four to seven per village) from rich, middle-income and effectively landless poor households. Household interviews focused on building household life histories and the changing demand for, access to and terms of securing informal credit and the specific role of opium poppy in that. This was part of a wider study on informal credit practices (Klijn and Pain 2007).

Findings from these studies have been complemented by additional data collected since 2012. Given rising levels of insecurity this was primarily collected by the Afghan research teams, and Badakhshan could not be included in the third round of the panel study. This material includes a study on the variability of collective action at the village level (Pain and Sturge 2015) in Badakhshan, research on rural commodity markets (Minoia, Mumtaz, and Pain 2015; Minoia and Pain 2017) and research on the effects of an alternative development project concerned with commercialising potato production in the upland valleys (Pain et al. 2022) where two of the 2008 study villages were located.

2. Uneven agrarian transitions

The agrarian question (Bernstein 1996), not least in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh (Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009) and elsewhere in South Asia (Rigg 2020) remains relevant as a theoretical point of entry as well as an empirically useful approach to address the uneven nature of agrarian transitions. For well-settled areas, long

incorporated into global agricultural markets, there has been an enduring puzzle concerning the persistence of small farmers. While peasants as an analytical category may have less traction, the continuing presence of smallholders from Nepal (Sugden, Seddon, and Raut 2018) to Thailand and Indonesia (Rigg 2020) points to processes of accumulation taking place but without driving the anticipated dispossession (Harvey 2004).

For McCarthy (2019), the tenacity with which smallholders hang on in Indonesia is explicable in terms of the co-existence of both non-market forms of self-provision and exchange in agriculture, while at the same time being subject to market discipline as framed by price rules of key commodity markets. As White (2018) has also observed with respect to the enduring presence of smallholder farmers alongside the emergence of a capitalist class of farmers in Java, this persistence requires a bifocal analytical lens: one that draws on understanding processes of class differentiation through commodification as well as one that recognises the rationale of 'peasant-like' production that does not focus on profit maximisation but simply the result of family labour. The latter speaks more to a Chayanovian approach to the logic of peasant-like production (van der Ploeg 2013). As Rigg has put it, the co-existence of subsistence and market logics can be characterised as 'farmers being at the same time market aware and subsistence inclined' (Rigg 2020, 30).

For Bernstein (2010, 103), while acknowledging the wide variation in processes of commodification of small-scale farming, 'once farming households are integrated into capitalist commodity relations, they are subject to the dynamics and compulsions of commodification which are *internalized* in their relations and practices', (original emphasis) even if they only farm to meet consumption needs. That is, 'household reproduction cannot take place outside commodity relations' (102). In that sense farmers as petty commodity producers, as Bernstein would see it, even if they are subsistence inclined, are still locked into market imperatives.

But how complete is that incorporation and what evidences 'internalisation'? As Wood (2008) reminds us, trading or simple acts of exchange and engagement in markets does not necessarily evidence the imperatives of price competition. Indeed the pervasive presence of barter in market relations in Badakhshan (an exchange relation also found by Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay (2009) in Arunachal Pradesh), as the paper will discuss for both opium and other commodities, indicates the limits of penetration of globalised, let alone national markets (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992) in the province and resistance to 'internalisation'. Barter is not evidence of pre-capitalist relations or a precursor to monetised economies. Rather, it can emerge out of capitalist ruins, in marginal economies, and operates to principles of an agreed exchange of things either simultaneously or separated over time. Of course, it is not a necessarily an exchange of equal value or between equals, but nor – as Strathearn (1992) emphasises – is it driven by compulsion, although it can be entangled in debt relations. But as we shall see, it is a mode of exchange that plays a core role in credit relations in Badakhshan and needs to be judged on its own merits.

Moreover, as we will see, there is little evidence in Afghanistan's legal and illegal commodity markets that price formation is driven simply by competitive pressures of supply and demand. While there are claims based on correlation analyses that regional markets for opium (Byrd and Jonglez 2006) are relatively well integrated and allocatively efficient, there are deep methodological problems associated with these analyses (Ali-Jan and Harriss-White 2012, 41). Evidence on both the lack of price transparency and daily price

volatility in a range of commodity markets, legal and illegal, in Afghanistan (Lister and Pain 2004) point more to non-market forms of price control than to competitive pressures.

Equally, farmer involvement in commodity markets does not necessarily imply a compulsive engagement requiring a focus on efficiency or improving labour productivity. Murray Li (2014), in her account of the agrarian transformation in Sulawesi from collective land ownership to private property, characterises the earlier involvement in regional tobacco markets as a discretionary one from which farmers could retreat when prices were not attractive. However, the notion of discretion implies a degree of choice. Given, as this paper will show, most households in the Badakhshan study sites have insufficient land to meet basic food needs, it has been a necessity and not a choice for them to either engage in petty commodity production or undertake off-farm work for the household to meet basic reproduction needs (Bernstein et al. 2018). This is not, therefore, a simple subsistence economy but a life that requires engagement in either crop or labour markets.

But there is a subtle distinction to be made between necessity and compulsion, with perhaps 'internalisation' lying on the cusp of it. Necessity, derived from the Latin *nesse* ('unavoidable, indispensable') is a state of something being required or essential. In late fourteenth-century Britain, it was defined as 'a condition of being in need, want of the means of living'. In contrast compulsion derives from the Latin *compulsio* – 'to drive or force' or the action of being forced to do something – often with negative consequences. This paper draws on the tension between the necessity of poor rural households to obtain non-farm income or income from cash crops such as opium poppy to meet simple reproduction needs and the compulsion of being locked into the competitive pressures of commodity markets. A striking feature of commodity production in Badakhshan, with respect to both opium poppy and other crops such as potato, is the absence of competition based on price and productivity that might expect if the full weight of market pressures were experienced. As will be argued for the present, the continued existence of opium poppy growers in the province can be accounted for more by a Chayanovian perspective on the persistence of smallholder petty producers drawing on family labour (White 2018) and simple reproduction objectives and the critical role of opium poppy in meeting that necessity. It is striking that a capitalist group of large farmers has not emerged in Badakhshan.

While evidence of competitive pressures in Afghanistan's commodity markets is limited, there is a further set of relations that are central to the rural economy, and these revolve around credit and debt. The debt relations surrounding opium poppy have been taken as evidence of usurious practices surrounding the crop and particular to it (UNODC 2003) as well as showing a demand for credit in relation to commodity production (Zia et al. 2005). The wider evidence on informal credit (Klijn and Pain 2007) in Afghanistan supported Hill's (1986) more general observation that in many rural societies, credit and debt is pervasive and, in a sense, normal.

Does, then, the evidence of cost-bearing credit in relation to opium poppy herald a signal change and a critical role of rural indebtedness in driving capitalist relations (Gerber 2014) in agriculture in Afghanistan? Gerber makes the case that credit, and debt relations, can be a major cause of social differentiation with respect to ownership of land, labour and capital and contains within it the seeds of market discipline forcing debtors to intensify production to meet debt impositions. The practice of trader advances

against a future crop, known as the *salam* system, is certainly widespread in Afghanistan and is not specific to opium, being given for wheat, barley, sesame, flax and other crops as well (Pain 2008). Commodities are bought by the lender as an advance sale but delivered by the borrower as a deferred delivery. The sale (or borrowing) is usually at a sub-market rate and can be up to 40 percent less, and while it may be used for inputs, the cash for the advance sale is often used to meet consumption needs. Food requirements can also be obtained on credit from shopkeepers and repaid in kind or in cash, and the repayment usually contains a markup of 20 percent or more.

Muldrew (1998), writing on credit and social relations in England in the sixteenth century, noted how in a strongly commercial economy that bears comparison with Afghanistan in the twenty-first century, there was a culture of credit based on trust, reputation and mutual obligation, a feature of *hawala* money markets in Afghanistan today (Thompson 2011). It arose in conditions of limited money supply and an expanding commercial economy, which at the same time was both localised and international. Gerber (2014) is inclined to position Muldrew's argument as a 'culturalist' perspective, reflecting a moral and non-commercial economy that would decline as larger, impersonal scale systems of credit emerged. But informal credit remains pervasive in Afghanistan (Klijn and Pain 2007). The question remains, though, as to whether, and if so to what degree, interest-bearing informal credit around the cultivation of opium poppy has been a key factor in driving social differentiation through the control of land, labour and capital, in turn leading to responding to market pressures through intensification (Gerber 2014).

As Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay (2009) observed with respect to the uneven process of capitalist transition in Arunachal Pradesh, a key aspect of that unevenness was the existence of institutional diversity and the complex interactions of non-market and market institutions, and the resulting forms of institutional hybridity required a careful reading of the evidence. Thus, the emergence in Arunachal Pradesh of the private land ownership rights (Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009), which have been long established in Badakhshan, did not clearly evidence a land market. Equally, production for the market with agricultural commercialisation did not inevitably lead to a market economy for wage labour. This institutional diversity has also been a characteristic of Badakhshan and we now turn to explore the evidence on the consequences of the growth, decline and return of opium poppy cultivation over a 70-year period on these institutional arrangements.

3. Badakhshan and its opium economy

Badakhshan is a mountainous borderland province in the northeast of Afghanistan, sharing a 1344 km border with Tajikistan, China and Pakistan. To its south, the Hindu Kush mountain range cuts it off from the rest of the country. In the past, seasonal access to Badakhshan was restricted to one pass, which connected it and a significant live-stock trade through the Panjshir Valley to Kabul. Now there is one motorable road into the province from Takhar Province, which is subject to closure during winter. Tajiks and Uzbeks, largely Sunni Muslims, account for approximately 90 percent of the population, the balance being made up by small linguistic groups, many of whom are Ismaili.

A mixed marginal economy of wheat production, tree and fruit products, and livestock has been central to survival in a landscape where settlements in valleys and high plains

stretch from 1000 to 3000 m.a.s.l., leading to a marked seasonality in production. Many of the higher settlements have historically been grain deficit, with supplies achieved through seasonal labour migration or through sale of livestock. In the lower areas, grain supplies were secured through the production opium which had long been a staple crop (Bradford 2014), livestock sales, and seasonal labour in other provinces as well as through work in the province's lapis lazuli mines. Historically the central pillar of the economy was livestock, but following a drought in 1970 and a severe winter, the livestock population was decimated and herd sizes never recovered. The province has a history of chronic food insecurity and in 2005 was assessed as having one of the highest proportions of households beneath the poverty line of any Afghan province (CSO 2006).

The trajectory of opium poppy cultivation in Badakhshan can be framed in terms of four political periods, each with distinctive features of state engagement, market regulation, extent of opium poppy cultivation, market structures and ruptures. Each has left its legacies but there has been continuity in the nature and role of non-market institutions.

The first period was from 1948 to 1978, when the province was both politically and physically marginal. By the 1950s opium poppy was an essential component of the crop repertoire along with wheat and *patak* (*Lathyrus sativus*) for livestock feed for many upland valley villages where it occupied, according to informants, an estimated 25–30 percent of annual crop area (although its total extent is unknown). The income from the sale of opium by the 3000 licensed growers (Bradford 2014), to a government monopoly that exported it, was combined with livestock sales to other provinces, and seasonal migration to work in the rice fields of Takhar and Kunduz, for payment in kind, was sufficient to ensure household survival.

There was also unregistered production, which supplied the internal trade of opium up to the Wakhan corridor where there was an established group of opium consumers and to other parts of the country. The political marginality of Badakhshan prior to 1978 is best illustrated by the government's attempt to ban opium cultivation in the province in 1958 (Bradford 2014) in a vain effort to gain international approval to legally cultivate opium. The action devastated household food security and could not be sustained, indicating the critical role that the crop played in the economy. It was also an action that the government would not have attempted in other provinces that grew opium and had Pashtun populations (Bradford 2014).

The second period, from 1978 to 2001, laid the ground for the later boom after 2001 and can be subdivided into two phases. The first was one of conflict between the government, located primarily in the main valleys, and resistance in the hills. Opium poppy cultivation expanded in response to the consequences of conflict and insecurity (Goodhand 2000). This, second, was further fuelled by the emergence of Badakhshan as a centre of resistance to the Taliban after 1994. A war economy emerged to fund that resistance and a growing opium economy of production and trade was a key element of it (Goodhand 2000). By the late 1990s Badakhshan provided an estimated 2–6 percent of national crop area (UNODC 2007). Over this period the livestock pillar of the economy that had started to recover by 1978, following the collapse in 1971, was further undermined due to looting of livestock and the seizure of the pastures by commanders. Strong price inflation due to a siege economy and rising household food insecurity resulting from a

harsh drought from 1998 to 2001 brought the rural economy to the point of collapse, leading many households into deep debt resulting in the loss of land assets.

The third period, from 2001 to 2007, saw a dramatic rise fuelled by the price hike of opium poppy area. It grew from an estimated 6342 ha in the 2000–2001 cultivation season (about 80 percent of a reduced national area) to 15,607 ha in 2004 before falling to 3642 ha in 2007 (UNODC 2007). It was a time of recovery and relative prosperity for households. During this period, trade was relatively atomised and open under ‘a system of regulated anarchy’ (Guistozi and Orsini 2009, 9), where much of the province was under the control of loose alliances of local military leaders. The jostling for power centred on the control of the opium trade and its profits.

From 2005 to 2006 there was a decline in the cultivated area of opium in Badakhshan. The reasons for this are complex and spatially specific; they relate to a combination of threats and actual eradication, combined with a decline in the relative profitability of opium poppy (Mansfield 2007). It was also a time when the opium market structures shifted from being relatively atomistic to more tightly regulated and controlled by key power holders (Goodhand and Pain 2021) as President Karzai achieved greater control. Opium production retreated to marginal districts but already by 2011/12 price rises were encouraging its expansion again. As power fractured in the province and the Taliban insurgency took root, market control loosened, and the opium area began to expand again, reaching 6395 hectares in 2020 (UNODC and NSIA 2020).

In sum, this dynamic and volatile trajectory of opium cultivation in a marginal agrarian economy has been driven by the exigencies of survival, living with conflict and drought and by evolving market structures. The opium economy has been deeply influenced by players both within and outside the state and their interests in the extraction of resource rents through control of trading networks and the capture of other mountain resources, including the valuable lapis lazuli mines (Byrd and Noorani 2017,10).

4. Land and labour relations

Control of access to land, both arable (about 12 percent of Afghanistan’s land area), and pasture (about 45 percent of the land area) has been central to conflictual rural power relations, exacerbated by the instability of the last four decades (Alden Wily 2013). Much of this conflict, often inter-ethnic, reflects the uncertain legal status of common land that has customarily been used by villages as grazing land (Alden Wily 2004). Conflict over pastureland in Badakhshan, given its importance to the livestock economy, has been particularly salient, as evidenced in the long-running disputes over the Shiwa pastures, straddling Baharak and Sheghnan Districts (Patterson 2004). Data on rural arable land ownership is largely unavailable, reflecting the Afghan state’s inability to make the rural landscape legible through cadastral survey. While land rights (*amlaki shakhsi*) are governed by more than one legal regime (Alden Wily 2003, 3), they have long been relatively secure and regulated through customary village practice or by recourse to the courts in cases of major disputes.

As the medieval Arab historian Muhummad (1969) noted, deep structural contrasts exist between geographically marginal areas of mountains and intensively irrigated densely populated plains. The latter are characterised by agricultural surplus and high levels of social inequality, based on the ownership of land and strong social hierarchies,

as typified by the Durrani living close to cities such as Kandahar (Guistoizzi and Ullah 2006). Here, conflict and land accumulation by powerful elites have created extreme social inequality and driven a transition to a commoditised economy (Akram-Lodhi 2016) in which opium poppy has had a key role.

The more marginal mountain economies have characteristically been subsistence-based economies, with relatively low population densities, and less hierarchical social structures, with strong group solidarities, as Barth (1959) observed in Pakistan. Keiser (1984) noted the ability of the mountain Pashai people in Nangarhar to come together to effectively resist the communist government, which the more unequal hierarchical villages in the valleys were unable to achieve. Badakhshan has a relatively equal land ownership structure although there are differences between the better-irrigated valleys and the uplands.

At a much-reduced scale, the contrasts between the study villages in the Badakhshan valleys and those in uplands reflect these structural contrasts. The valley villages in Baharak and Jurm (Gunbaz, Jatah and Qalazafar), and one upland village (Madaba), have irrigation, allowing double cropping, and did not cultivate opium prior to 2000. They had major inequalities in land ownership. In Madaba, for example, 10 landowners, many of whom were shopkeepers in the local town (Jurm), each held more than 50 jeribs (10 ha). The remaining 158 landless households in 2012 (Pain 2010a) either survived as sharecroppers in feudal-like relationships, worked as farm labour that was usually paid in kind rather than in cash, a common feature of Afghanistan's agrarian economy (Pain and Huot 2018) and undertook seasonal migration to work in the rice fields of Takhar. This was also often paid in kind. Gunbaz was a settlement village whereby Pashtuns (from Logar) were granted land in the 1930s by the government under its policy of colonising the territories of potentially rebellious groups in the north (Alden Wily 2003, 5) by resettling poor Pashtun populations from the south into them. One landlord here had started with three jeribs (0.6 ha) but by the mid-1970s had acquired about 40 jeribs (8 ha) of irrigated land through offering and foreclosing on mortgages. He also broke his ties with his customary sharecroppers when opium cultivation spread into the valleys, offering the land to villagers from the uplands who were skilled in opium poppy growing (Informant 7, Gunbaz).

In contrast, the two upland villages, Samati and Hezari, had limited irrigated land and a single cropping season, and livestock and opium poppy cultivation prior to 1978 provided the key to survival. Here, land holdings were less unequally distributed although there were still significant numbers of small and landless households; in the upland villages of Khash district these ranged between 10 and 50 percent (Pain and Sturge 2015).

Land inheritance practices in Afghanistan lead to the equal division of the property among all the sons, limiting the long-term possibilities to increase farm size and the potential for a class of capitalist farmers to grow. The result has been an inexorable shrinking of farm size across the generations. One rich householder in Madaba had inherited more than 100 jeribs (20 ha) from his father. By 2009 he had divided most of this land between six sons when they established separate households, and he was sharecropping out the balance of land due to a lack of household labour. Indeed, there were very few reports of households buying land, and where this was reported it primarily related to the purchase of less valuable rainfed rather than irrigated land.

However, land can be acquired through the giving of mortgages, and a landlord in Gunbaz provides one example of that. Debts taken on due to illness, meeting marriage costs or (during the 1990s) to meet household food needs often led to the mortgaging out of land to town traders. There were many reports that many finally lost their land to the lender and ending up working as sharecroppers, as Informant 6 (Gunbaz) recounted:

We faced problems during the drought in getting credit and repaying it. We borrowed wheat and other commodities on a credit basis from traders and there were delays [in repayment] as we did not produce enough wheat and crops to repay on time. There was an enormous interest charged, two to three times [the principal amount], to put you in a situation to mortgage your land and then become his sharecropper. There are about 10–15 people from our village and neighbouring villages that were small landowners; but during drought time and instability, they lost the lands through mortgaging.

The account of the division of land by the rich landowner in Madaba and his sharecropping out of the land he was left with, and by informant 6 (Gunbaz) of the consequences of land mortgaging, highlights the significance of the command of labour to cultivate land. Large joint households characterise family structures, and household division is as much about the separating of labour resources as it is of land. No examples were found in the case households of land being rented in or out, and it was exclusively sharecropping arrangements that characterised landlord–‘tenant’ relations. The terms of the sharecropping arrangement depended on who provided the inputs and this varied, but by custom a 70:30 landlord to sharecropper distribution was common.

The expansion of opium poppy area after 2001 increased the demand for labour. Opium poppy cultivation absorbs labour, with each hectare requiring 350 person days, in contrast to about 36 for wheat (Pain 2010b). More land became available for sharecropping as landlords in the Jurm valley and elsewhere sought to cash in on the boom, allowing the sharecroppers to grow not just opium poppy but also wheat, particularly benefiting sharecroppers with labour resources. But no evidence was found of larger landowners accumulating land for opium cultivation after 2001 or a land market emerging from the cash infusion into the economy. Rather, the shift to a war economy after 1992 led many of the key players to seek control over core sources of rent, primarily through the capture of the province’s mineral resources, the trade in opium and other war goods. It also led to forms of primitive accumulation through the seizure of pastures (Patterson 2004). Since 2001, control of the opium trade (Goodhand and Pain 2021) rather than opium production has been central to elite rents.

5. Credit and debt

Debt has long been a feature of Afghanistan’s rural economy, and conflict and insecurity have exacerbated this. The marked seasonality and marginality of its upland agrarian economies create distinct peaks and troughs in employment and food production activities. Borrowing is normal to meet these needs, and the evidence (Klijn and Pain 2007) highlights the widespread existence of and access to informal credit, its great diversity of forms, the fact that much of it has been on a no-interest basis, and its use primarily for consumption smoothing or social purposes such as marriage.

The question of whether opium poppy has specifically generated debt has been a matter for debate. The Taliban edict in 2000 on the banning the cultivation of opium poppy led to a sevenfold rise in opium price (UNODC 2003) that had immediate and crippling effects for opium farmers who carried opium-denominated debt. In turn the price rise fuelled a dramatic expansion in opium cultivated area as seen in Badakhshan after the Taliban were driven from power in 2001.

One immediate response to the consequential effects of the Taliban 2000 ban on the rise in opium price was to focus on the role of opium cultivation in securing access to informal credit. Two narratives emerged from this, one a 'stagnationist' narrative linking rural debt to exploitation and poverty, the other a 'formalist' stance (Gerber 2014) emphasising credit demand for entrepreneurial activity. The one driven by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2003) focused on what they saw as the excessive interest rates charged by money lenders to poor opium poppy cultivators, referring to the lenders as 'narco-usurers' (UNODC 2003, 31). Efforts by farmers to relieve themselves of opium-related debt were thus seen as a key driver behind the expansion of opium poppy cultivation after 2001. But this expansion of opium poppy cultivation was also read as evidence of unmet demand for microcredit (Zia et al. 2005) and justification for a programme to reduce the need to cultivate opium to access such credit. Neither narrative had much traction in Badakhshan.

Here, the effects of the expansion of opium poppy cultivation on credit and debt must be seen in the light of its specific trajectory of cultivation and the consequences of the conflict between 1978 and 2001. In response to specific questions about levels of debt prior to 1978, informants from these upland villages had little recollection of opium-denominated debt. There was demand for credit, collectively illustrating both the supply and use side and a demand associated primarily with the need for consumption smoothing. A great deal of this credit was reported to be in the form of *qarz-i-hasana* on a no-interest basis for close relatives or dependants and *qarz-i-nawqan* for short-term loans prior to harvest.

Landless households often survived as shepherds, dependent on wealthier households for in-kind payments and informal credit for consumption needs. Those who had a few jeribs of rainfed land secured at best enough grain for the household for two to three months. All worked as sharecroppers, particularly on opium poppy cultivation, and reported that there was sufficient food to support family consumption requirements for 12 months. Informant 17 (Hezari) specifically reported that he did not have any debt during these years. If he ran into a shortfall before the harvest (March to June), he was able to borrow under *qarz-i-nawqan* from the landowner for whom he was sharecropping.

Some loans on commodities from traders were charged at 25 percent, somewhat lower than what would later be charged in the 1990s. But it was largely a barter-based economy where commodities – and not money – were the medium of exchange, underpinned by a certain moral economy. As Informant 20 (Madaba) commented, 'There was a traditional way and pattern of deals of land which were based on equity and justice between two parties'. But household could fall into debt, and one informant reported how his father had mortgaged land to two or three people in the valley to meet marriage costs for himself and his brother but was unable to repay the loan and had to relinquish ownership of the land. They became sharecroppers to the new owners of the land.

After 1978, as Badakhshan became embroiled in conflict, many of the interviewed households experienced bombing raids and fighting during this period. But it was not remembered as a time of economic hardship, because good rainfall and reliable cropping ensured food supplies. But from 1992, with the rise of a commander economy and Badakhshan becoming a centre of resistance to the Taliban, a siege economy emerged, and the cost of living began to rise. This generated significant currency instability, with the Afghani deflating by some 253 percent against the dollar in one six-month period of 1996 (SCF 2000). This inevitably drove up the costs of borrowing.

According to our elder people, the credit and charges had a rapid change over the last 29 years in our valley and it was because of the general situation in the area: Up to 1979, 10opar a be Qeran, (1) Afs to 1.25 [old] Afs was common and acceptable; in 1979–89, it increased to 10opar a ba Ropa, 1 to 1.5 Afs; the time of instability began with the Soviet invasion and support to the mujahiddin; in 1992–2001, it increased to Ropa ba 5 Ropa (1 to 5 [old] Afs and even 1 to 10 [old] Afs); at the peak of instability with internal conflict and checkpoint charges in all districts and villages. (Inf10, Samati)

For those villages already growing opium, this provided the collateral for credit although there was always the risk of crop failure, leading to debt as borrowing costs rose.

In one extreme case, a man from our village borrowed 1 ser [7 kg] rice at the price of 20 laks [2,000,000 old Afs] equal to 20 touli¹ [the price being 100,000 old Afs per touli] of opium at harvest time from a retailer in the centre of the district in 1998. Because of the drought, he couldn't repay the opium or the money. The shopkeeper increased the debt to 40 touli of opium repayable from the next year's harvest, but again he had no good harvest and the shopkeeper doubled it again to 80 touli for the following year's harvest time. Finally, the man harvested 1 ser in 2000, which is about 350 touli, and the price for each touli was 250,000 old Afs at harvest time. And when the shopkeeper received 80 touli of opium, it was equal to 20,000,000 [old] Afs. So, the borrower consumed 1 ser of rice in difficult times for 20,000,000 [old] Afs. (Inf10, Samati)

In sum, driven by a combination of conflict, drought, economic instability and the emerging use of opium poppy as collateral in debt as its area expanded during the 1990s, households in the study villages were in deep debt by 2000. The dramatic price rise in opium following the 2000 Taliban ban led to a rapid expansion of its cultivation in Badakhshan. It spread from the lateral valleys, which were still drought affected, to the well-watered valley floors of Baharak and Jurm.

What is clear is that the cash infusion from opium production into the Badakhshan economy had enormous positive economic and social effects for many households. For a start, household were able to repay debts and increase consumption, as informant 14 (Hezari) made clear:

The peak years of producing made a significant change in the economy of this village. Most villagers [had] 10 to 15 and even 20 years of debt [in the form of wheat], but they were able to repay their loan to big landowners within the village or the shopkeepers in Jurm and Baharak, with the first opium harvest in 2000 and then in 2001. From 2000 to 2005 was an economic revolution; it was a rescue era for all of us, an extraordinary inspiration within the valleys where people experienced the freedom from stress and headaches for the first time in their lives. I would say it was the time of self-sufficiency of pockets regardless of age,

¹A measurement of weight equivalent to 18.5 g.

gender, and occupation. I did not hear the loan or credit word between 2000 and 2005 in our village.

The sharp decline in demand for informal credit was confirmed by a Mullah (Hezari):

I think the opium revolution years [2001–2005] played a major role in changing the rural economy positively. Almost all villagers for the first time enjoyed their farming and harvest because within these three to four years, rural people for the first time experienced a life without debts and without seeking credit. I noticed during the opium revolution years that no one approached them for getting credit from 2001 until spring 2006, just after the decline of the price of opium last autumn.

The production boom attracted traders from all over Afghanistan, who brought consumption goods to exchange directly for opium. Households deposited opium with shopkeepers as a reserve against future consumption needs. The cash boom also led to investment in household reproduction, and one informant (Informant 10, Samati) described how in his village the period 2001–2005 was the peak of wedding parties, a key expense to establishing a household (Pain and Huot 2018) – in one year there had been 65.

As the opium poppy boom faltered, driven by declining price, many households had kept reserves of opium (Informant 10, Samati) which stopped them from falling into debt. Others were not so lucky. Informant 7 (Gunbaz), who was already carrying consumption loans, was hit by medical expenses for his wife and was in danger of having to sell land to extricate himself from it:

I have to repay a loan to the shopkeeper at the end of October. I was anticipating a good harvest of opium this year but there was none, and I have had another unexpected expense, which was medication for my wife last spring. This has left me with a huge shortfall. I already mortgaged my 2 jerib of land [15,000 Afs per jerib] to two people in Baharak and I'll not be able to repay the mortgage price. My intention is to sell half of the land this autumn to repay the mortgage, freeing at least the half of the land for myself to cultivate next autumn.

He felt himself lucky to even secure a mortgage at the rate he got because the decline in the opium market had reduced the willingness of shopkeepers to give mortgages. But it also pointed to the effects of shocks on household economies and the remaining significance of land and opium in providing access to credit.

However, some shopkeepers found themselves in trouble because they had accepted deposits of opium against future credit, but the price of opium had fallen. One shopkeeper (Jatah) pointed to a closed shop facing his whose owner had disappeared two months ago. He had collected more than 30 kg of opium from different villagers which his partner had been unable to sell at a good price. So, the shopkeeper shut his shop because many villagers were coming to collect commodities as repayment for the opium they had delivered to him.

In sum, credit and debt have been central to survival and the evidence is consistent with Gerber's proposition (Gerber 2014) that debt can drive land mortgaging, dispossession and land differentiation, although land inheritance practices militate against long-term land accumulation. Key periods of instability, violence and drought linked to the rising costs of borrowing have been clearly associated with debt creation and land loss. But this has not led to the emergence of a growing capitalist class of farmers, and nor

can it be linked specifically to opium poppy production. Nor does it seem to be the case that opium poppy, at least in Badakhshan, has been particularly instrumental in creating debt, although some households did hold opium-denominated debt prior to 2000. Indeed after 2001 opium poppy cultivation for a short period provided a key means of clearing debts, although as price became more unstable and in poor cultivation years it was a less certain means of doing so. The pervasiveness of informal credit based on personalised relationships has endured and does not appear to have diminished yet, despite the wider penetration of a cash economy driven by opium. In that sense there is still a culture of credit (Muldrew 1998) and an economy of obligation, which opium poppy cultivation has lubricated.

6. Exchange relations: inputs and outputs

Since the 1950s two exchange systems have continued to operate in parallel both for opium and for other crops. On the one hand, commodities were exchanged on a barter basis. Informant 23 (Madaba) described how opium was traded in the upland villages during the 1950s:

My father was delivering the opium extract to his close friend in the village who was linked to one of the Jurmi shopkeepers ... and he was bringing different commodities and goods for us, in exchange for 10 or more paw² of opium. The selling or exchange of opium was a good source of income for us to pass the winter every year without difficulties. The oil of opium was good and we were never buying edible oil from the bazaar. The price paid was not in cash [but] was in exchange as it was practised for years in our village.

On the other hand, for registered growers, according to one informant, an official from the 'Opium Company' came to check the quality of the crop and paid in cash:

A finance department employee ... was coming down every May and June to our valley and had tested the opium quality by tasting and then was collecting for 1 [old] Af per touli and then we were hearing from Faizabad that the government was selling them for 10 [old] Afs per touli and I never understood who was buying it. (Inf 10, Samati)

No data exists on the barter exchange ratios in the 1950s, or comparability with market prices. However, Humphrey (1985), in her analysis of the barter exchange ratio among the Lhomi in north-east Nepal in the late 1970s, concluded that the extent to which actual exchange ratios in barter corresponded to a presumed equilibrium based on supply and demand depended largely on the volume of trade and the frequency of exchange of specific commodities. It is likely, therefore, that there would have been some correspondence when opium was the currency of exchange, between the barter exchange ratios and market price at which government bought opium.

As the account for debt relations during the 1990s and after 2000 make clear, the use of barter persisted in the primary exchange between opium growers and shop traders who exchanged the opium for commodities and goods required by the growers. The boom period even enabled growers to build reserve deposits of opium with these shopkeepers against which they could draw.

²A measurement of weight equivalent to 450 g.

This existence of both non-market and market institutions has also been a feature of the potato economy (Pain et al. 2022). A potato grower in 2021 made clear the role of potatoes in barter exchange while at the same time selling some for cash:

We are a small family with only four people at home. We keep 50 to 70 Sers of our potatoes for our domestic uses. Half of that will be for our cooking and half of that will be used for the exchanging with other commodities when the mobile shop comes in our village. I could collect some 670 Sers of potatoes this year and the market was not good and I sold them 60 AFN per Ser.

The mobile traders, who travelled from one village to the next, were used by the smaller farmers to exchange their opium and their surplus potatoes on a barter arrangement for the commodities that they wanted. However, the comment from one local trader on the mark-up in prices between Faizabad and Khash when commodities were exchanged under barter and the uneven terms of trade with mobile traders indicate an extractive trading relationship:

I buy one Ser potato for 80 AFN in cash. They [the mobile traders] exchange potato with rice for 60 AFN for one Ser of potatoes. The Khanabad's merchant get two benefits in potatoes and rice. They count the price of potatoes very less and the price of rice very high. He sells the potato for 140 AFN.

The persistence of barter arrangements between farmers and traders, found for both opium and potatoes, and the evidence of the unequal exchange embedded in this transaction might indicate that barter has become more 'economic' in content. The puzzle is why it has persisted although it could be seen to indicate the continuing marginality of the farmers engaged in it and the role of personal relationships in ensuring access to credit in the rural economy (Pain and Huot 2018).

The exchange with mobile traders may have been maintained to ensure access to other food commodities in the future. But for credit for inputs of fertiliser and potato seed for production, small farmers relied on a small group of relatively large landowners who had cold storage facilities and traded with visiting potato wholesalers. While details on the precise terms of credit on which farmers secured their inputs are not known, a second trader acknowledged that when a farmer needed a loan, they obtained it from him rather than a mobile trader. The loan was advanced against a commitment by the farmer to sell his potatoes to the trader at harvest time when prices were at their lowest. The traders were able to store potatoes until prices rose later in the season. This tying of informal credit to the requirement for the producer to sell to the credit provider is what is termed an interlocking contract (Ali-Jan and Harriss-White 2012) and has also been a characteristic of opium poppy production.

While there is a degree of monetisation of the potato trade at the farm level, it is at the point of transfer from the shopkeepers to those at the bottom end of drugs trade that opium became monetised (Goodhand and Pain 2021), in a world disconnected from most of the growers. Key traders at this point could draw on stockpiled reserves and opium grown elsewhere to keep the northern drug route through Badakhshan functioning (UNODC 2020). A key part of this was the processing of opium resin into morphine paste and then into heroin. The accounts from individual traders at this level (Goodhand and Pain 2021, 13–14), many of whom originated from outside Badakhshan, suggest that little if any of the profits generated from the opium trade are invested back in the province.

7. Conclusion

Opium poppy cultivation has had an enduring presence in the agrarian economy of Badakhshan. Its role has shifted from being an essential cash crop for farmers in the upland valleys of the province in the 1950s, to a commodity that was central to a war and coping economy in the 1990s. It then provided an unprecedented cash injection after 2001 into an impoverished rural economy, enabling recovery before the boom collapsed. Since 2007 it has been a footloose crop shifting location according to the dynamics of eradication, price and market control, but gradually recovering area over time. What footprint has this volatile trajectory of one of the most global of commodities left on Badakhshan's agrarian landscape, and has it been in the vanguard of a capitalist transition?

It was widely reported that market prices, for both opium and other commodities, are regulated by powerful traders to their advantage, and the pervasive use of the term 'mafia' (Pain et al. 2022) to characterise their behaviour suggests that price formation has little to do with competition, efficiency, or supply and demand. Observations on the volatility of daily prices in Afghanistan's agricultural commodity markets, including opium poppy (Lister and Pain 2004; Minoia, Mumtaz, and Pain 2015; and Pain et al. 2022), and the use of interlocking contracts all point to social regulation of the market and trader power. This persistence of mercantile behaviour in Afghanistan's markets may in part account for the failure of credit and debt to drive capitalist rationality and compulsive market engagement, as Gerber (2014) has proposed.

Equally, there is no evidence to indicate that growers have become locked into the competitive pressures of commodity markets, either for opium or potato for example, focusing on productivity and costs or having to produce to meet informal taxation costs as in Myanmar (Meehan 2021). When the potato project ended in Khash, farmers retreated from intensive management practices introduced by the project (Pain et al. 2022). The absence of a more generalised commercialisation of Badakhshan's rural economy positions the cultivation of opium poppy somewhat differently from elsewhere in Afghanistan or in Myanmar. Debt and credit relations may have shifted, but the persistence of non-market institutional arrangements such as costless informal credit and barter exchange in parallel to more market-driven structures (e.g. interest-bearing credit) existing for the same crop in the same village point to institutional diversity and the uneven process of any agrarian transformation (Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009). It is far from clear, therefore, that market forces have been fully internalised into household relations and practices (Bernstein 2010). Labour relations equally show a diversity of forms being paid both in kind and in cash, according to circumstances and location. Equally, large landowners have not pursued accumulation strategies through agriculture, and the persistence of sharecropping arrangements, which opium poppy expanded access to, has offered a means of survival to the landless or small landowners.

Yet, through necessity, Badakhshan growers have remained engaged in opium production even if they have not responded to competitive pressures. They have shown price sensitivity in their moves in and out of opium poppy growing but this has related more to meeting subsistence and reproduction needs. Thus, rather than seeing opium at the vanguard of an agrarian transformation, it may be more of a rearguard action. The restrictions that mountain specificities impose on technical change have been a restraint on a capitalist transition. Opium, as with potato in the upland communities of

the Alps in the sixteenth century (Viazzo 1989) or in the high Nepalese Himalayas (Steven 1993) in the twentieth century, has offered the one means of staying on the land in Badakhshan to secure a subsistence component in a remote agriculturally marginal mountain economy.

The persistence of smallholders is not unique to Badakhshan or mountain regions, as Rigg (2020) makes clear with respect to Southeast Asia. But the coming-to-scale of Afghanistan's opium economy since the 1990s has failed to overcome the resistance that mountain specificities raise for capitalist agrarian transitions or the logic of non-market institutions in ensuring household survival in a marginal location. The opium economy in Badakhshan and in the mountains of Nangarhar, where opium cultivation remains entrenched, is distinct from that of the irrigated plains in Helmand, reflecting the structural contrasts noted by Muhummad (1969). These mountain economies are likely, therefore, to follow different pathways of agrarian change. Not only does this challenge totalising narratives of the effects of drug economies on agrarian economies, it also underlines the crucial role that opium has played in Badakhshan in buffering a smallholder reproduction crisis. The agrarian question therefore remains open (Harriss-White, Mishra, and Upadhyay 2009) and relevant theoretically and empirically (Rigg 2020), as this paper has shown.

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