In An Opium Factory

Rudyard Kipling

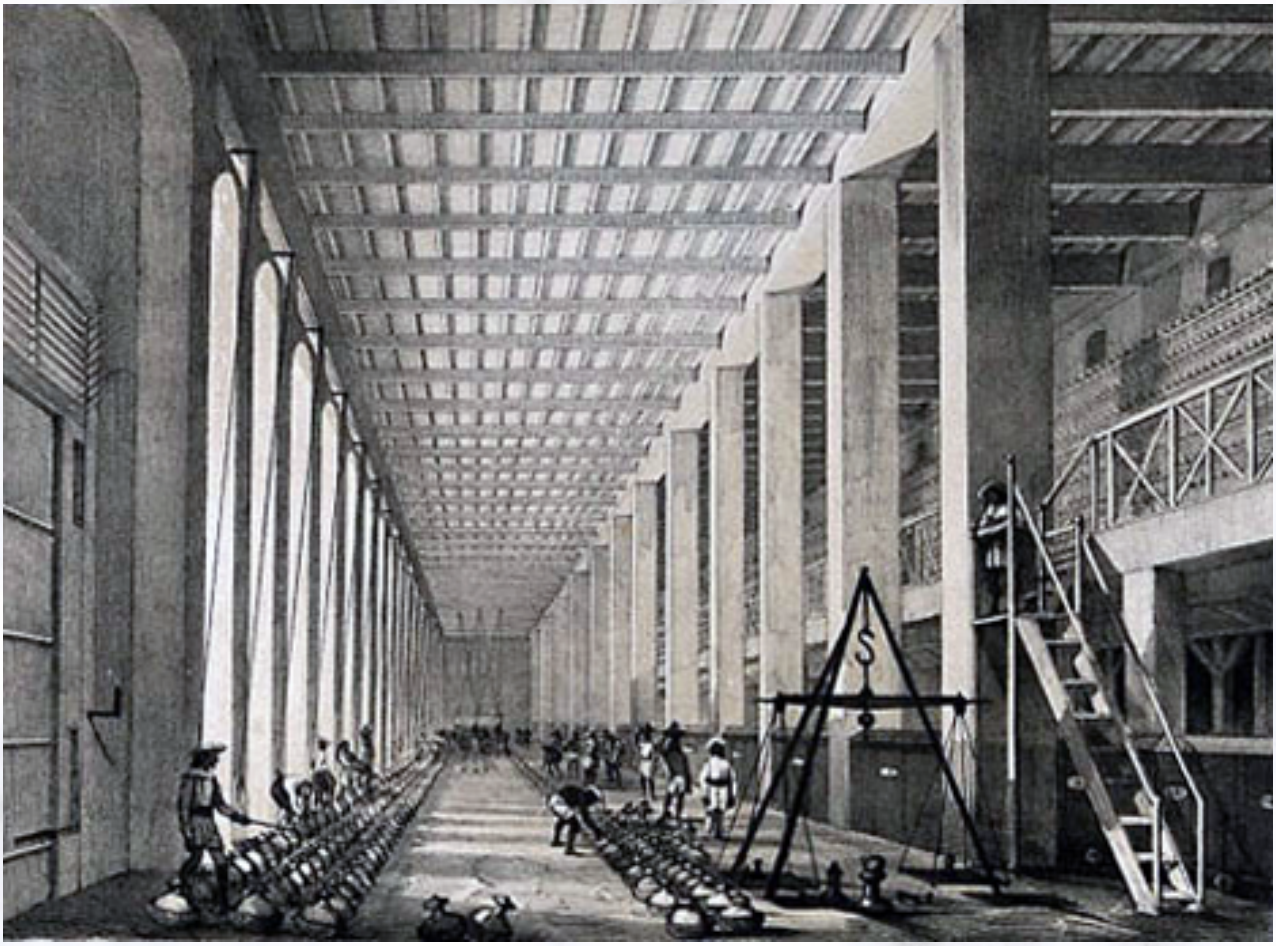
Edited and Revised 2023

Preface

In An Opium Factory appeared in print on 16th April 1888 in the Indian newspaper Pioneer and again on 17th April 1888 in the Pioneer Mail.
Kipling was 22 years old and, later, regarded some of his early work as immature. He omitted *In An Opium Factory* from his Collected Works and never reprinted it. A copy turned up in an Adelaide attic discovery almost 120 years later—in 2007. Did Kipling suppress the article or merely lose it?

It is a piece of technical journalism, which the author may have considered too didactic for the general reader. Also, he might not have wished to draw attention to an immoral trade. Opium was big business and the opium factory at Ghazipur resembled a grand mansion.
Its profits fuelled the British Empire.

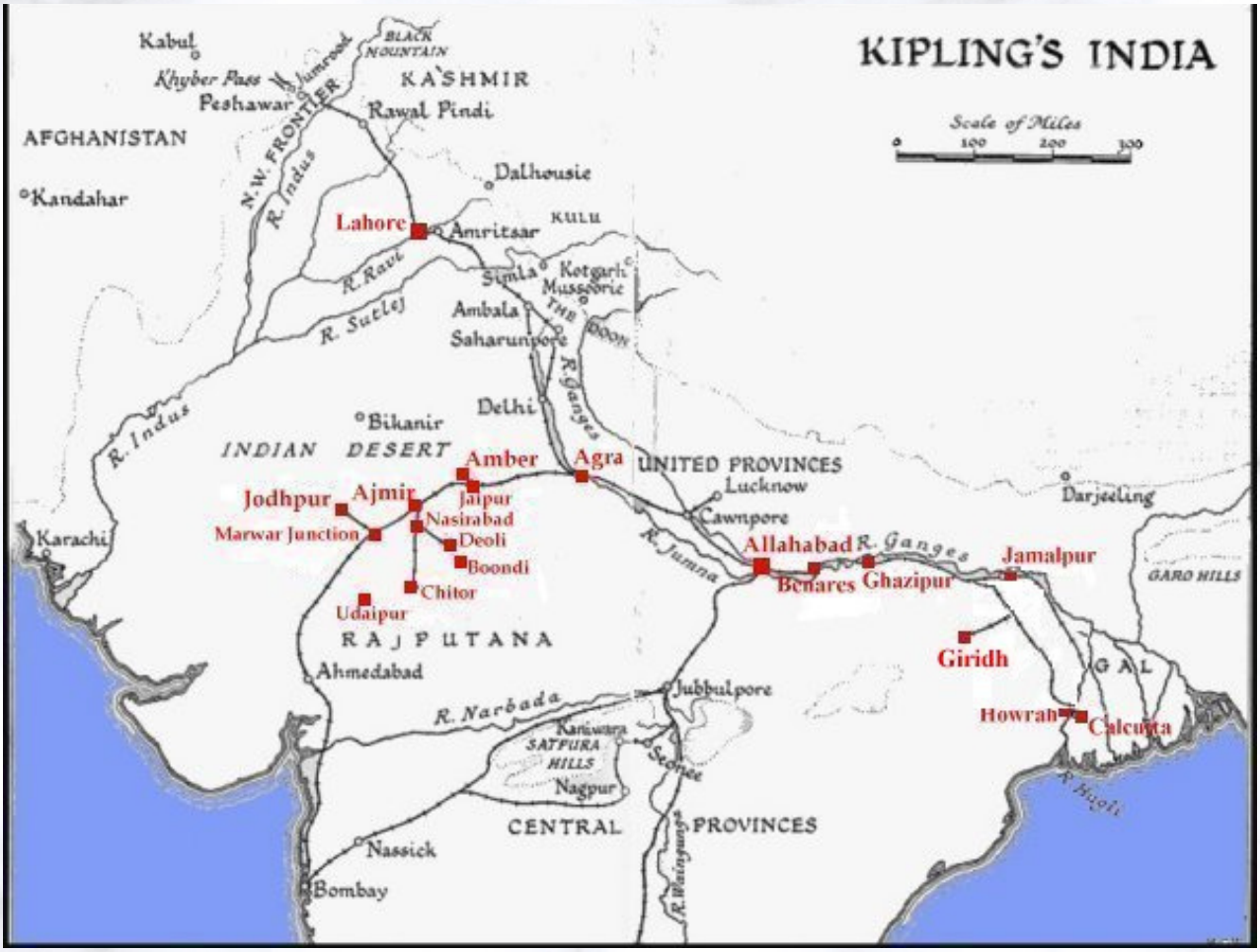
In An Opium Factory



Ghazipur

Opium Factory 1850

Kipling's India 1880



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In An Opium Factory

ON the banks of the Ganges, forty miles below Benares as the crow flies, stands the Ghazipur Factory, an opium mint as it were, whence issue the precious cakes that are to replenish the coffers of the Indian Government. The busy season is setting in, for with April the opium comes up from the districts after having run the gauntlet of the district officers of the Opium Department, who will pass it as fit for use. Then the really serious work opens, under a roasting sun. The opium arrives by challans, regiments of one hundred jars, each holding one maund, and each packed in a basket and sealed atop. The district officer submits forms—never was such a place for forms as the Ghazipur Factory—showing the quality and weight of each pot, and

with the jars comes a person responsible for the safe carriage of the string, their delivery, and their virginity. If any pots are broken or tampered with, an unfortunate individual called the import-officer, and appointed to work like a horse from dawn till dewy eve, must examine the man in charge of the challan and reduce his statement to writing. Fancy getting any native to explain how a jar has been smashed! But the Perfect Flower is about as valuable as silver.

Then all the pots have to be weighed, and the weight of each pot is recorded on the pot, in a book, and goodness knows where else, and everyone has to sign certificates that the weighing is correct. The pots have been weighed once in the district and once in the factory. None the less a certain number of them are taken at random and weighed afresh before they are opened. This is only the beginning of a long series of checks. Then the testing begins. Every single pot has to

be tested for quality. A native, called the purkhea, drives his fist into the opium, rubs and smells it, and calls out the class for the benefit of the opium examiner. A sample picked between finger and thumb is thrown into a jar, and if the opium examiner thinks the purkhea has said sooth, the class of that jar is marked in chalk, and everything is entered in a book. Every ten samples are put in a locked box with duplicate keys, and sent over to the laboratory for assay. With the tenth boxful—and this marks the end of the challan of a hundred jars—the Englishman in charge of the testing signs the test-paper, and enters the name of the native tester and sends it over to the laboratory. For convenience' sake, it may be as well to say that, unless distinctly stated to the contrary, every single thing in Ghazipur is locked, and every operation is conducted under more than police supervision.

In the laboratory each set of ten samples is

thoroughly mixed by hand: a quarter-ounce lump is then tested for starch adulteration by iodine, which turns the decoction blue, and, if necessary, for gum adulteration by alcohol, which makes the decoction filmy. If adulteration be shown, all the ten pots of that set are tested separately till the sinful pot is discovered. Over and above this test, three samples of one hundred grains each are taken from the mixed set of ten samples, dried on a steam-table, and then weighed for consistence. The result is written down in a ten-columned form in the assay register, and by the mean result are those ten pots paid for. This, after everything has been done in duplicate and countersigned, completes the test and assay. If a district officer has classed the opium in a glaringly wrong way, he is thus caught and reminded of his error. No one trusts anyone in Ghazipur. They are always weighing, testing, and assaying.

Before the opium can be used it must be ‘alligated’ in big vats. The pots are emptied into these, and special care is taken that none of the drug sticks to the hands of the coolies. Opium has a knack of doing this, and therefore coolies are searched at most inopportune moments. There are a good many Mahometans in Ghazipur, and they would all like a little opium.

The pots after emptying are smashed up and scraped, and heaved down the steep river-bank of the factory, where they help to keep the Ganges in its place, so many are they and the little earthen bowls in which the opium cakes are made. People are forbidden to wander about the river-front of the factory in search of remnants of opium on the shards. There are no remnants, but people will not credit this. After vatting, the big vats, holding from one to three thousand maunds, are probed with test-rods, and the samples are treated just like the samples of the challans,

everybody writing everything in duplicate and signing it. Having secured the mean consistence of each vat, the requisite quantity of each blend is weighed out, thrown into an alligating vat, of 250 maunds, and worked up by the feet of coolies.

This completes the working of the opium. It is now ready to be made into cakes after a final assay. Man has done nothing to improve it since it streaked the capsule of the poppy—this mysterious drug. April, May, and June are the months for receiving and manufacturing opium, and in the winter months come the packing and the despatch.

At the beginning of the cold weather Ghazipur holds, locked up, a trifle, say, of three and a half millions sterling in opium. Now, there may be only a paltry three-quarters of a million on hand, and that is going out at the rate per

diem of one Viceroy's salary for two and a half years. There are ranges and ranges of gigantic godowns, huge barns that can hold over half a million pounds' worth of opium. There are acres of bricked floor, regiments on regiments of chests; and yet more godowns and more godowns. The heart of the whole is the laboratory, which is full of the sick faint smell of an opium joint where they sell chandu. This makes Ghazipur indignant. 'That's the smell of pure opium. We don't need chandu here. You don't know what real opium smells like. Chandu-khana indeed! That's refined opium under treatment for morphia, and cocaine, and perhaps narcotine.' 'Very well, let's see some of the real opium made for the China market.' 'We shan't be making any for another six weeks at earliest; but we can show you one cake made, and you must imagine two hundred and fifty men making 'em as hard as they can—one every four minutes.'

A Sirdar of cake-makers is called, and appears with a miniature wash-board, on which he sets a little square box of dark wood, a tin cup, an earthen bowl, and a mass of poppy-petal cakes. A larger earthen bowl holds what looks like bad Cape tobacco.

‘What’s that?’

Trash—dried poppy-leaves, not petals, broken up and used for packing the cakes in. You’ll see presently.’ The cake-maker sits down and receives a lump of opium, weighed out, of one seer seven chittacks and a half, neither more nor less. ‘That’s pure opium of seventy consistence.’ Every allowance is weighed.

‘What are they weighing that brown water for?’

‘That’s lewa—thin opium at fifty consistence. It’s the paste. He gets four chittacks and a half of it.’ ‘And do they weigh the petal-cakes?’ ‘Of course.’ The Sirdar takes a brass hemispherical cup and wets it with a rag. Then he tears a petal-cake, which resembles a pancake, across so that it fits into the cup without a wrinkle, and pastes it with the thin opium, the lewa. After this his actions become incomprehensible, but there is evidently a deep method in them. Pancake after pancake is torn across, dressed with lewa, and pressed down into the cup; the fringes hanging over the edge of the bowl. He takes half-pancakes and fixes them skilfully, picking now first-class and now second--class ones, for there are three kinds of them. Everything is gummed on to everything else with the lewa, and he presses all down by twisting his wrists inside the bowl till the bowl is lined half an inch deep with them, and they all glisten with the greasy lewa. He now takes up an ungummed pancake and fits

it carefully all round. The opium is dropped tenderly upon this, and a curious washing motion of the hand follows. The mass of opium is drawn up into a cone as, one by one, the Sirdar picks up the overlapping portions of the cakes that hung outside the bowl and plasters them against the drug for an outside coat. He tucks in the top of the cone with his thumbs, brings the fringe of cake over to close the opening, and pastes fresh leaves upon all. The cone has now taken a spherical shape, and he gives it the finishing touch by gumming a large chupatti, one of the ‘moon’ kind, set aside from the first, on the top, so deftly that no wrinkle is visible. The cake is now complete, and all the Celestials of the Middle Kingdom shall not be able to disprove that it weighs two seers one and three-quarter chittacks, with a play of half a chittack for the personal equation.

The Sirdar takes it up and rubs it in the bran-

like poppy trash of the big bowl, so that two-thirds of it are powdered with the trash and one-third is fair and shiny poppy-petal. ‘That is the difference between a Ghazipur and a Patna cake. Our cakes have always an unpowdered head. The Patna ones are rolled in trash all over. You can tell them anywhere by that mark. Now we’ll cut this one open and you can see how a section looks.’ One half of an inch, as nearly as may be, is the thickness of the shell all round the cake, and even in this short time so firmly has the lewa set that any attempt at sundering the skin is followed by the rending of the poppy-petals that compose the chupatti. ‘Now you’ve seen in detail what a cake is made of—that is to say, pure opium 70 consistence, poppy-petal pancakes, lewa of 52.50 consistence, and a powdering of poppy trash.’

‘But why are you so particular about the shell?’

‘Because of the China market. The Chinaman likes every inch of the stuff we send him, and uses it. He boils the shell and gets out every grain of the lewa used to gum it together. He smokes that after he has dried it. Roughly speaking, the value of the cake we’ve just cut open is two pound ten. All the time it is in our hands we have to look after it and check it, and treat it as though it were gold. It mustn’t have too much moisture in it, or it will swell and crack, and if it is too dry John Chinaman won’t have it. He values his opium for qualities just the opposite of those in Smyrna opium. Smyrna opium gives as much as ten per cent of morphia, and if nearly solid—90 consistence. Our opium does not give more than three or three and a half per cent of morphia on the average, and, as you know, it is only 70, or in Patna 75, consistence. That is the drug the Chinaman likes. He can get the maximum extract out of it by soaking it in hot water, and he likes the flavour. He knows it

is absolutely pure too, and it comes to him in good condition.'

'But has nobody found out any patent way of making these cakes and putting skins on them by machinery?'

'Not yet. Poppy to poppy. There's nothing better. Here are a couple of cakes made in 1849, when they tried experiments in wrapping them in paper and cloth. You can see that they are beautifully wrapped and sewn like cricket balls, but it would take about half an hour to make one cake, and we could not be sure of keeping the aroma in them. There is nothing like poppy plant for poppy drug.'

And. this is the way the drug, which yields such a splendid income to the Indian Government, is prepared.

Background

Rudyard Kipling
In an Opium Factory
Printed 16th April 1888 in The Pioneer and
17th April 1888 in The Pioneer Mail.

Kipling visited an opium factory in January 1888, on his rail journey from Allahabad to Calcutta, shortly before the start of the spring opium production season. Andrew Lycett notes in his biography of Rudyard Kipling, Chapter VII, Allahabad and Home (1887-1889), that Kipling visited Harry Rivett-Carnac here. He was an old friend of the Kipling family and had secured the position of Opium Agent at Ghazipur on a salary of 3,000 rupees a month: equivalent to Pounds Sterling 2,700 per annum then, and five times as much as Kipling's salary in 1888. This reflected the highly profitable nature of the trade

Kipling had used opium, both as a recreational drug and a medicine— to ease the constant diarrhea which plagued Europeans in India; See Andrew Lycett, (above) pp. 96-7. See also *The Gate of the Hundred Sorrows* in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. The visit to Calcutta is described in *The City of Dreadful Night* .

Opium is still produced in India under careful government control as a raw material for pharmaceuticals. Ghazipur remains the world's largest Opium Factory.

Notes and Glossary

Ghazipur or Ghazipore, lies along the Ganges downstream from Benares—now Varanasi.

challans [1] — (see note immediately below) a challan is a maximum of 100 containers of opium. The term was still in use in 2001 for 100 modern plastic

HDPE (High Density Poly Ethylene) containers each holding 35 kg of opium.

challan [2] is also a word for a form such as a bank slip or paying-in slip or a parking ticket. From the amount of form-filling at Ghazipur described by Kipling in his article, there could be a linguistic link between the challan container and the forms used to record its history - meaning multifarious or manifold.

chit or **chitty** — signed note or receipt, especially for food and drink in a British club (origin: British, 1775–85; short for chitty < Hindi chiṭṭī letter or note, from Sanskrit chitra — a word with multiple senses including white or blank or the colour of moonlight)

maund — this weight varied so much in India and other parts of Asia, that it was standardised for India at 82 2/7 lbs avoirdupois, equivalent to 37.32 kg. (Hobson-Jobson)

purkhea — a native expert in assessing the purity of opium.

one hundred **grains**— a 'grain' is a measure of 'troy weight'. There were 7000 grains to one pound avoirdupois, and therefore 100 grains was equivalent to 0.0143 lbs or 6.48 grams.

chandu or **chandoo** — Opium. See also The City of Dreadful Night, and The Gate of the Hundred Sorrows.

chandu-khana —opium house or opium den, where patrons could go to smoke the drug. See The Gate of the Hundred Sorrows in Plain Tales from the Hills.

Sirdar —a commander – in this context, an overseer of workmen or foreman.

Cape tobacco — black tobacco from South Africa.

chittack — Hobson-Jobson gives the table of Indian weights as being:
one maund = 40 ser (or seer)
one ser = 16 chittacks

chupatti or **chapatti** — a thin pancake of unleavened bread. However, the reference here is to part of the opium petal cake that has the appearance of a chapatti.

Celestials of the Middle Kingdom — racist term for Chinese people, along with John or Jonnie Chinaman; note also **coolie**—a hireling

two seers one and three-quarter chittacks, with a play of half a chittack—1.968 kg plus or minus 0.029 kg.

Patna — a city on the Ganges, downstream

from Ghazipur; the second largest city in eastern India after Kolkata (formerly Calcutta).

Smyrna — a trading city in Turkey on the western Mediterranean coast – now known as Izmir – populated in Kipling's time largely by Greeks, Jews, and Armenians. Reputedly the city of Homer.

Biographical and Literary Notes

Rudyard Kipling (30 December 1865 – 18 January 1936) was born in Mumbai (Bombay).

Mother of Cities to me,
For I was born in her gate,
Between the palms and the sea,
Where the world-end steamers wait.

His father, Lockwood Kipling, a sculptor and pottery designer, was the principal and professor

of architectural sculpture at the newly-founded Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art and Industry in Bombay.

Portuguese traders acquired the islands of Bombay from the Mughal Emperor in 1535. The city and islands passed to the British, along with Tangiers, when Catherine de Braganza married King Charles II in 1661. Bombay was then leased to the British East India Company in 1668. The British were not newcomers to the city when Kipling was born.

Bombay had an intellectual life based on the Literary Society of Bombay, founded in 1804, (renamed The Asiatic Society of Mumbai in 2002). Kipling's article In an Opium Factory is a piece of journalism in the old sense of a daily record of events and experiences. Moreover, it is a form of journalism that was promoted by informal philosophical societies—a model for

which was the Lunar Society of Birmingham. In An Opium Factory is an example of study-tour journalism, which might be worthy of feature in The Society's transactions.

As such, it is a piece of technical writing in which the writer displays skilful observation coupled with a love of words and virtuosity in stringing them together. Kipling may have disavowed the article because he felt it to be too detailed and potentially dull for the general reader. However, there is a more specific reason for disowning the piece: the reason being that it is not only technically detailed but also technically subversive.

For a young author to make a name for himself and gain the attention of a readership, it is no doubt necessary to be somewhat critical of complacencies, and a little flashy in tone, and to advance opinions that might offend some readers.

When comment goes beyond constructive criticism, and becomes condemnation of the established order, then the writer risks rocking influential boats. Kipling wanted to advance in the established order, not to overthrow it.

The article *In an Opium Factory* is an attack on the privy purse of Empire and the unequal power politics of the Opium Wars—which prompted the Taiping Rebellion of 1850. The date is prefigured in the last paragraph of the article:

Here are a couple of cakes made in 1849, ... You can see that they are beautifully wrapped and sewn like cricket balls, …

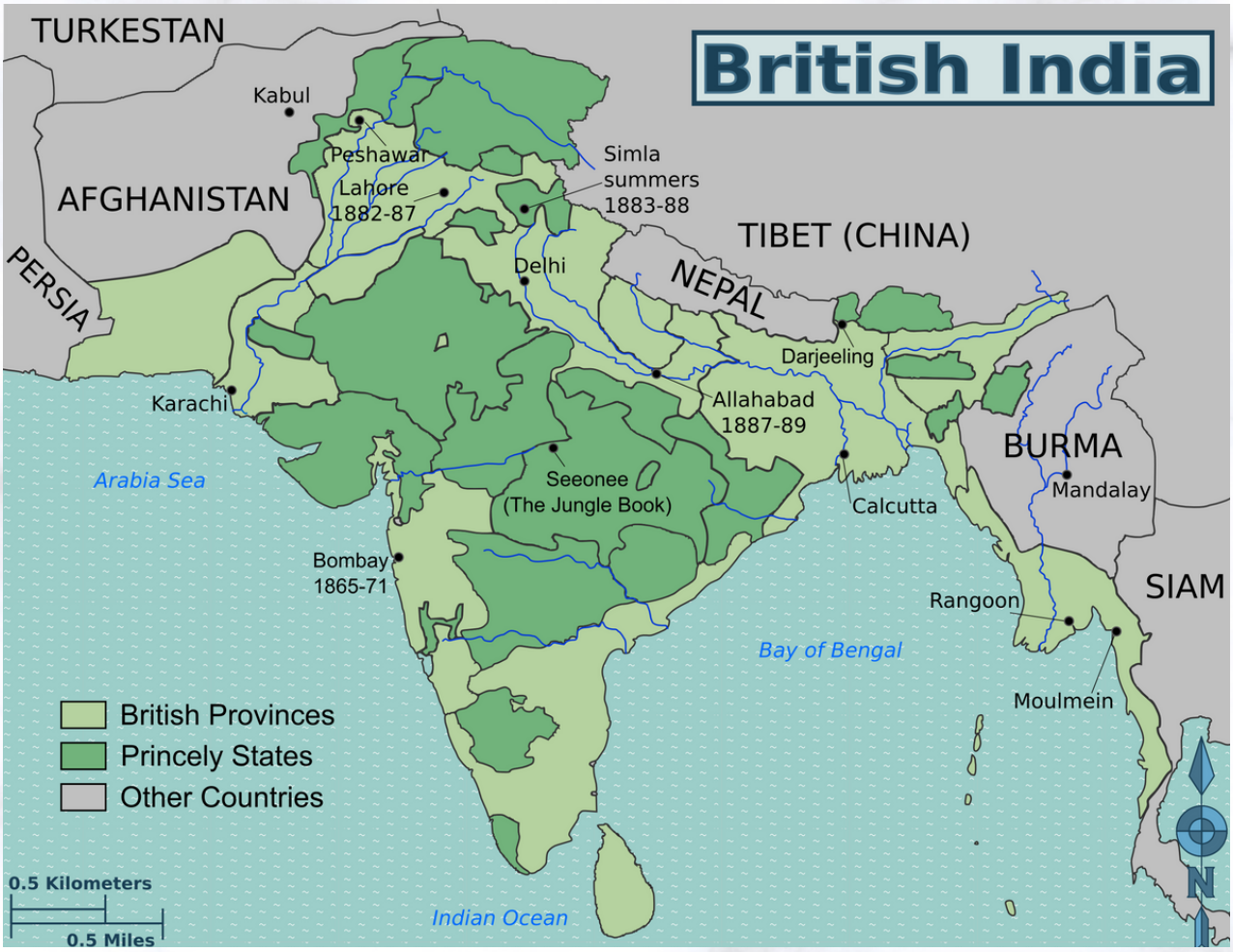
This is a young Kipling simile—worldly and knowing and wicked. He liked to suggest that he'd knocked about a bit. Cakes and decorative wrapping and cricket balls … how harmless and

affectionate and fun — and ironic. It is the Great Game of Empire, playing with friendly fire — and the fuel of the fire is money and trade.

And this is the way the drug, which yields such a splendid income to the Indian Government, is prepared.

British India

This is the world of Rudyard Kipling's India.
He published his finest novel *Kim* in 1901 and received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907.



For readers who are interested in a more detailed account of British India, Wikipedia provides a brief article here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Raj

Hobson-Jobson

A Glossary of Common Anglo-Indian Terminology

Originally published in 1886 and revised in 1903, this is the full Gutenberg text:

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/58529/58529-h/58529-h.htm

In the 20th century, it came to be regarded as a work of colonial condescension; but it is now considered as an historical curiosity.

The University of Chicago provides a ready reference

https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/hobsonjobson/

https://www.sansap.com/