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## In Assam, lethal liquor in tea country

Spurious 'sulai,' or country spirit, has often taken lives in Assam. But the cheap liquor was seldom a large-scale killer until more than a week ago when it felled 157 people in and around two tea estates in eastern Assam's Golaghat and Jorhat districts. The disaster forced the State to crack down on illicit breweries that allegedly thrive on a nexus between bootleggers and excise and police officials.

### Where did the tragedy happen?

On February 21, death struck at the Halmira Tea Estate in Golaghat when plantation workers gathered to celebrate a birth. Local hospitals soon began to fill with patients from villages around Halmira and Borhola Tea Estate in Jorhat district. Preliminary investigations pointed to the 'sulai' having come from the same source. The tragedy happened within a certain radius of the two estates not far from each other, but social activists involved with the health of plantation workers said it could have been anywhere across Assam's tea-growing areas comprising 65,000 major and small gardens.

### What caused the deaths?

Excise Minister Parimal Suklabaidya said a lethal combination of methanol and liquid molasses claimed the lives of plantation workers. The National Human Rights Commission took note of the methanol content and issued notice to the State government, asking it for a report on the cause of death and the action taken. Excise officials said 'sulai' traditionally involved fermenting molasses and breaking it down to ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, and carbon dioxide at a controlled temperature. A process of distillation over firewood yielded the clear, pungent liquor with alcohol content of up to 45%. But high demand and commercialisation saw illegal manufacturers using the cheaper methanol, an alcohol that provides the same kick as ethanol and occurs naturally at low levels in fermented



drinks, but is far more toxic. If not produced by standardised factories, a higher dose of methanol can cause multiple organ failure.

### Why are gardens affected?

A survey done a decade ago by an NGO in 64 tea estates of Sonitpur district revealed 87% of plantation workers aged above 40 were addicted to alcohol. This addiction, activists say, is a colonial hangover; the British planters made rectified spirit easily and cheaply available to the earliest plantation workers to let them forget the trauma of being uprooted from their central Indian homes 170 years ago. Alcoholism coincided with another habit the British introduced – salted tea – to counter dehydration.

### What are corrective measures?

In 2017, the BJP government amended the Excise Rules for "scientific brewing" and to end the control of the country liquor market by a few barons. Companies were offered licences, expected to fetch ₹200 crore in annual revenue, to bottle hygienic country spirit. A firm in Jorhat set up an automated plant to produce 'sulai' with 12% alcohol. But illicit brewers have been cashing in on the demand with cheaper stuff that sells higher on weekly pay day or during a social occasion, as was the case in Halmira.

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