

# **Child Labour among the Tea Workers of Alipurduar District of West Bengal: Causes, Consequences and Policy Implications**

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## **Abstract**

Child labour continues to remain embedded within India's plantation economy despite constitutional guarantees and statutory prohibitions. This study investigates the causes, consequences and policy implications of child labour in the tea plantations of Alipurduar district in West Bengal. Employing a mixed-method research design, the study draws upon primary data collected through field surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation involving child workers, their families, plantation management authorities and institutional stakeholders. The findings indicate that the persistence of child labour in Alipurduar's tea plantations is primarily driven by chronic household poverty, low and irregular adult wages, limited access to quality education and the socio-economic marginalization of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities. Children are commonly engaged in tea plucking and auxiliary plantation-related activities, exposing them to physical exhaustion, health risks and long-term educational deprivation. The research further identifies a significant gap between existing legal provisions, including child labour prohibition laws and welfare schemes and their implementation at the grassroots level. Weak monitoring systems, poor institutional coordination and limited community awareness continue to exacerbate the problem.

The paper argues that policy responses must move beyond legal prohibition and directly address the structural economic vulnerabilities faced by tea worker households. Strengthening livelihood security, expanding education-based rehabilitation measures, increasing NGO involvement and ensuring greater accountability of plantation management are critical to eliminating child labour and protecting children's rights within the tea plantation sector.

**Keywords:** Child labour, Tea plantations, Poverty and informal economy, Trafficking and migration, Policy implementation

## **Introduction**

Alipurduar district, located in the Dooars region of West Bengal, is one of the most important tea-producing areas in India. Tea estates here cover a large area of land and engage thousands of workers. The majority belong to historically marginalized communities (Santhal, Oraon, Munda etc.), many of whom were brought as bonded labourers during the colonial period. Over the decades, their lives have remained tied to the tea gardens, often with limited access to education, healthcare and alternative employment.

A typical tea estate in this region, such as Aryaman Tea Estate, spans more than 200 hectares. It employs permanent, temporary and casual workers. The work is physically demanding and

wages have traditionally been low. This socio-economic environment has created conditions where child labour is both a symptom and a driver of poverty.

The problem of child labour in tea gardens is not new. Various studies and NGO reports show that children in these areas are often involved in plucking tea leaves, carrying loads or assisting in nursery work. These activities, though contributing to family income, deprive children of schooling, rest and healthy development.

Two important laws govern child labour in India:

- The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 – mandates provisions for housing, healthcare, and schooling for plantation workers.
- The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 – prohibits employment of children below 14 years in hazardous occupations, including tea plantations.

Despite these laws, enforcement in remote tea garden areas remains inconsistent. Inspections are infrequent and violations often go unreported. Many children are engaged as “helpers” or “family workers,” which allows employers to bypass formal contracts and avoid scrutiny.

While exact numbers are hard to determine due to underreporting, field studies and NGO surveys indicate significant child involvement in tea garden labour. A 2019 situational analysis by Bal Raksha Bharat in nearby Assam tea gardens revealed that around 63% of surveyed children had dropped out of school to work. Given the socio-economic similarities, the situation in Alipurduar mirrors these patterns. In Alipurduar, many gardens lack functioning schools. Out of 276 tea gardens in North Bengal, only 231 have some form of educational facility. Even where schools exist, quality is often poor and distances to higher classes (especially secondary schools) discourage attendance.

Health data paints a stark picture. A 2022 study in Alipurduar tea gardens found:

- 69.8% of adult workers reported some illness.
- 87.9% were suffering from anemia
- 24.2% were hypertensive; 57.8% pre-hypertensive.

Children in these communities are similarly affected. Malnutrition, anemia, and worm infestations are common. Poor health reduces school attendance and forces families to depend on all members including children for income-generating work.

Daily wages in the Dooars tea gardens were around Rs.176 in 2019, far below the earnings in other unskilled labour sectors. With inflation and rising living costs, families struggle to meet basic needs. When gardens close or are declared “sick,” the problem intensifies. For example, the Dhekpara Tea Garden closure in 2002 left hundreds without regular wages. Some workers resorted to selling tea leaves directly to local traders for Rs.35 a day, about one-fifth of a regular day's wage. The combination of poverty, low wages and lack of education makes children in tea gardens vulnerable to trafficking. The district's proximity to Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh increases the risk. In 2018, a 13-year-old girl from Chuapara Tea Estate was trafficked to Srinagar and sold, later rescued through NGO intervention. Public hearings have

documented dozens of missing children from single estates, highlighting systemic vulnerabilities.

### **Discussion:**

#### **Agitation**

The problem of child labour among tea workers in Alipurduar is not just a statistic but it is a burning reality for thousands of children and their families. Understanding its urgency requires stepping into their daily lives.

It begins before around 5:00 AM, the sound of tin containers and hand pumps, the rows of cramped housing where tea workers live. A child wakes, not to prepare for school, but to help the family fetch water from a shared source that may be far and often contaminated with iron. Breakfast is minimal, sometimes just black tea and a piece of bread.

By 6:30 AM, the family walks to the plantation fields. The child's task is to follow the elders, pluck leaves, carry baskets or tend to seedlings in the nursery. The work stretches for hours under the sun or in drizzling rain. In peak season, a child might carry loads of 15–20 kg, affecting posture and physical growth.

At midday, lunch is a handful of rice and watery dal, eaten sitting on the ground. There is no time for rest. The shift continues until late afternoon. By the time the child returns home, energy is gone and school if attended at all becomes an afterthought.

This pattern repeats for weeks and months. The result: interrupted education, stunted physical development and a cycle of dependency on low-paid manual labour.

#### **Health Hazards and Risks**

Children engaged in tea garden labour in Alipurduar are routinely exposed to conditions that compromise their physical and mental health. The work involves long hours under direct sunlight, often without protective gear, leading to dehydration, heat exhaustion and in some cases, heatstroke during peak summer months. The uneven terrain and repetitive physical strain of plucking tea leaves for extended periods can cause musculoskeletal issues such as back pain, joint stiffness and strain injuries conditions usually associated with older workers but now increasingly seen among adolescents.

Another significant hazard is exposure to chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Spraying operations in tea gardens are rarely accompanied by adequate safety protocols for child workers. Many reported cases involve children carrying chemical containers, washing pesticide equipment or working in recently sprayed areas. Prolonged exposure can lead to respiratory irritation, skin rashes, eye problems, and in severe cases, chronic illnesses. A 2023 health survey by a local NGO in Alipurduar revealed that 37% of children working in tea gardens had symptoms consistent with pesticide exposure.

Malnutrition remains a silent but powerful risk factor. Families dependent on low and irregular wages often cannot afford balanced diets, leading to undernourished children with weaker immune systems. This vulnerability is compounded by poor sanitation and limited access to

clean drinking water in many plantation quarters, which increases the incidence of diarrhea diseases and worm infestations.

Mental health risks are often overlooked but equally pressing. The combination of academic discontinuation, heavy workloads and social stigma can cause stress, low self-esteem and even symptoms of depression. Without support systems or counselling services, these issues remain untreated, affecting both current well-being and future prospects.

The cumulative impact of these health hazards ensures that child labourers in the tea sector face lifelong disadvantages. They grow into adults with reduced physical capacity, limited education and chronic health issues perpetuating the very cycle of poverty that drives child labour in the first place.

### **Emotional and Social Impact**

The emotional toll of child labour among tea workers in Alipurduar is profound. Children working long hours in the fields are often deprived of normal childhood experiences such as playing with peers, pursuing hobbies or attending school regularly. This early assumption of adult responsibilities can create feelings of frustration, helplessness and alienation.

Many child labourers report experiencing discrimination both inside and outside the workplace. Within tea gardens, they may face verbal abuse from supervisors if their work pace is considered slow. Outside, they sometimes endure social stigma from peers who remain in school, leading to isolation and reduced self-confidence.

The absence of structured educational and recreational opportunities further limits their emotional growth. Over time, these children may internalize the belief that their economic status is unchangeable, reducing aspirations and motivation. This internalized hopelessness often transfers into adulthood, reinforcing cycles of generational poverty and limiting community development in the region.

### **Economic Traps and Estate Closures**

The economic structure of tea plantations in Alipurduar often creates a self-perpetuating cycle of dependency and poverty. Workers are typically paid low daily wages and earnings are further eroded by irregular payment schedules. For many families, this means they rely on credit from local moneylenders or small shops within the estate often at interest rates of 5–10% per month. This informal debt cycle forces children into the workforce to supplement family income, as repayment obligations take priority over schooling.

Estate closures have become a severe disruptor in the region. When a tea garden shuts down whether due to poor management, falling international prices, or disputes between owners and labour unions, the immediate consequence is sudden unemployment. Without severance pay or alternative income sources, entire families are left with no means of survival. In such situations, child labour rates spike as families sent children to work in nearby estates, construction sites or informal agricultural jobs.

Data from the Tea Board of India (2024) shows that in the past decade, at least 12 tea estates in North Bengal, including some in Alipurduar, have been abandoned or temporarily closed.

Affected families often receive minimal state relief, sometimes just a meagre monthly ration and partial healthcare support under welfare schemes. While these steps are essential, they are rarely sufficient to sustain households.

The economic trap is reinforced by a lack of skill diversification. Most tea garden workers, including children, possess only plantation-related skills. When gardens close, these skills have little value in alternative labour markets, making migration to urban areas one of the few options.

Thus, estate closures are not just business failures; they are catalysts for generational poverty and increased vulnerability among the most marginalized communities in Alipurduar's tea sector.

### **Trafficking and Migration**

In Alipurduar's tea-growing belt, economic instability has not only increased child labour but also heightened the risks of trafficking and unsafe migration. When wages are irregular or estates close down, labour contractors often operating in legal grey zones, approach desperate families with promises of better-paying jobs in cities like Delhi, Mumbai or Bengaluru. For poor households, these offers seem like opportunities; in reality, they often lead to exploitation.

Local NGOs and district police records indicate a troubling pattern during periods of prolonged estate closures, reported cases of child trafficking spike by 20–30%. Children, particularly adolescent girls are seduced into domestic work in urban homes, where they are isolated, underpaid and often face abuse. Boys are more commonly trafficked into construction work, roadside Restaurants or small factories, where safety regulations are ignored.

Migration risks are compounded by the lack of official documentation among many tea garden families. Without proper identity papers, migrants cannot access formal job markets, making them dependent on informal networks that are more prone to abuse. Parents may agree to send their children away without knowing the actual working conditions or even the exact location of the employer.

A case study from 2022 illustrates the danger following the closure of Birpara Tea Estate; over 50 minors from surrounding villages were taken to work in brick kilns in Bihar. Many returned months later in poor health, with no wages paid and, in some cases, signs of physical mistreatment.

Seasonal migration creates risks. Families that travel for harvest work in other states often take children along, who then drop out of school for extended periods. Once disconnected from the education system, these children rarely return to formal schooling, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

The trafficking and unsafe migration problem in Alipurduar is thus directly tied to the economic fragility of tea garden life. Breaking this cycle requires both economic security for families and stronger enforcement against traffickers.

**Last 5 years' child trafficking data in a clear table format for both Alipurduar and West Bengal:**

Year	Alipurduar – Documented Cases / Rescues*	West Bengal – Victims Rescued (Below 18)**
2021	38 (local NGO & police reports)	409 (NCRB)
2022	41 (police records & district news)	428 (NCRB)
2023	34 (incident-based media reporting)	Data not yet officially published
2024	29 (documented rescues via NGOs)	Data not yet officially published
2025†	56 (rescue of girls from tea garden belt)	Data not yet officially published

**Notes:**

\*Alipurduar figures are based on verified district police reports, NGO documentation, and reliable media coverage due to absence of official NCRB district-wise yearly data.

\*\*West Bengal state-level figures are from NCRB Crime in India reports (latest available up to 2022).

†2025 Alipurduar figure is from a single major rescue operation, not total annual count.

The agitation is not simply to highlight the problem, but to underline the cost of inaction. Every year lost to child labour erodes the potential of an entire generation. The urgency is to act before these patterns solidify further.

**Solution**

Breaking the cycle of child labour among tea workers in Alipurduar requires a multi-pronged approach combining enforcement, welfare, education and community empowerment.

**Enforcement of Laws and Child-Labour-Free Declarations**

In June 2025, Alipurduar district authorities moved to declare all 63 tea gardens in the area child-labour free. Managements are required to sign formal declarations, and any violations can lead to penalties of Rs.50,000 along with legal prosecution. This is a positive step, but declarations alone are insufficient without regular inspections and anonymous reporting channels to protect whistleblowers.

**Strengthening Education Access**

To keep children in school:

- Build secondary schools within accessible distance from tea estates.
- Provide free transport where distances exceed 3-4 km.
- Ensure all schools in tea garden areas are equipped with trained teachers, functional toilets, clean water and midday meals.

Midday meal programs are particularly effective in incentivizing attendance. In gardens where these meals are irregular or absent, dropout rates rise.

### **NGO and Institutional Initiatives**

- **ITA and UNICEF** have been running awareness and protection programs in North Bengal tea estates since 2021, covering over 50,000 children. These include home visits, registration for government welfare schemes and anti-trafficking campaigns.
- **Action Aid India** has worked since 2012 in Alipurduar's closed and sick gardens, directly benefiting over 25,000 children by improving school access, advocating for wage payments and providing health and nutrition support.

Although several NGOs are currently active in the tea garden regions of Alipurduar, their efforts remain limited in scale, coverage and long-term impact. The persistence of child labour clearly indicates that existing interventions are insufficient to address the structural roots of the problem. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more proactive, sustained and community-oriented NGO initiatives. The fight against child labour in Alipurduar's tea gardens cannot rely on token interventions. NGOs must move from charity-based models to empowerment-based strategies. This requires, Long-term commitment, Structural economic interventions, Stronger advocacy, Child-centered care etc.

### **Improving Wages and Social Security**

Raising daily wages to a fair level, aligned with the Supreme Court and ILO recommendations can reduce the economic pressure to send children to work. Regularising temporary workers, extending FAWLOI benefits to all and ensuring provident fund and gratuity payments are critical.

### **Health and Nutrition Programs**

Regular health camps, deworming drives, anemia screenings and nutrition supplementation should be integrated into tea garden welfare schemes. Mobile medical units can bridge access gaps in remote estates.

### **Community Monitoring and Empowerment**

Empowering self-help groups, youth clubs and mothers' committees to monitor child attendance in school and report violations builds a local safety net. Community volunteers can track at-risk families and link them to welfare programs.

### **Conclusion**

The continued existence of child labour among tea workers in Alipurduar district cannot be understood as an isolated social anomaly; rather, it reflects a deeply entrenched economic and

institutional imbalance that has characterised India's plantation economy for decades. Tea gardens in this region have historically operated on a model of low wages, employment insecurity and reliance on entire households, including children, to meet production demands. This structural dependence, rooted in colonial labour practices and perpetuated through limited post-independence reform has confined successive generations of workers to conditions of chronic vulnerability. Breaking this cycle requires acknowledging that child labour is not merely a violation of labour laws but a profound developmental crisis. When children spend their formative years in plantation fields instead of classrooms, the long-term consequences extend beyond individual families. The region loses future skilled workers, informed citizens and economic innovators. At a broader level, the plantation economy remains locked into a low-productivity, low-skill equilibrium, leaving it increasingly vulnerable to market volatility, mechanisation and global competition.

Recent administrative initiatives, such as the declaration of tea gardens in Alipurduar as "child-labour free," represent an important institutional acknowledgement of the problem. However, such measures will remain limited in impact unless supported by systematic monitoring, independent inspections and strong accountability mechanisms. Without continuous oversight and meaningful consequences for violations, these declarations risk becoming symbolic commitments rather than instruments of structural change.

Education emerges as the most effective and sustainable pathway for disrupting the intergenerational transmission of child labour. Yet access to education alone is insufficient. For schooling to serve as a genuine alternative to labour, it must be physically accessible, socially inclusive and supported by adequate infrastructure. The presence of trained teachers, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities and reliable transportation is essential for sustained attendance. Incentive-based measures such as midday meals, scholarships and school supplies play a critical role in easing the economic burden on families and reinforcing the value of education.

Equally important is the need for economic reform within the tea plantation sector. As long as adult wages remain inadequate to meet basic household needs, families will continue to rely on children's labour as a coping strategy. Fair wage revisions, timely payment of dues, and the extension of social security benefits such as provident fund, gratuity and health insurance to all categories of workers including permanent, casual and seasonal employees are indispensable. In cases of estate closure, rapid activation of social protection mechanisms, including food security measures, cash assistance and alternative livelihood programs, is crucial to prevent distress-driven child labour and migration.

Health interventions form another critical pillar in addressing child labour. High levels of malnutrition, anemia and preventable illnesses significantly reduce children's capacity to attend school and engage in learning. Regular health camps, nutrition supplementation, deworming initiatives and preventive care services must be systematically integrated into plantation welfare frameworks. Partnerships between local health departments, NGOs and estate management can help bridge service gaps in remote and underserved areas.

Perhaps the most decisive element in ensuring sustainable change lies in community

empowerment. External interventions alone cannot eliminate child labour unless they are reinforced by local ownership and collective responsibility. Mothers' groups, youth clubs and self-help groups within tea garden communities can act as frontline protectors of children's rights. By monitoring school attendance, identifying at-risk households and reporting violations, community institutions can create a locally grounded system of accountability. As awareness grows regarding the long-term benefits of education, the social acceptance of child labour gradually erodes.

In the final analysis, eliminating child labour from Alipurduar's tea plantations is both a moral obligation and an economic necessity. Protecting children's rights today is essential for building a healthier, more skilled and resilient workforce in the future. Achieving this goal requires more than isolated government directives; it demands coordinated and sustained action involving plantation management, state authorities, civil society organisations and the workers themselves. Only through such collective commitment can Alipurduar move towards a future in which every child has the opportunity to learn, develop and aspire beyond the narrow confines of plantation labour.

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