



Labour Casualization and Income Insecurity among Tea Workers in the Dooars

Hasibur Rahaman Molla

Assistant Professor,
Sivanath Sastri College
23/49 Gariahat Road,
Kolkata-700029, INDIA

Abstract

The tea industry in the Dooars region of West Bengal represents one of the most labour intensive sectors in India, employing a significant proportion of marginalized people. In recent decades, structural changes within the industry have led to an increasing shift from permanent employment towards casual, contractual, and seasonal labour arrangements. This research examines the implications of labour casualization on income security, livelihood sustainability, and social protection among tea workers in selected Dooars estates. Drawing on household surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews with trade union representatives and estate management, the study analyses patterns of wage volatility, access to statutory benefits, and the broader socio-economic consequences of insecure employment. The findings reveal a widening gap between statutory wage entitlements and actual earnings, coupled with reduced access to healthcare, housing, and educational facilities once guaranteed under permanent contracts. Women workers, who constitute the majority of the workforce, are disproportionately affected due to their concentration in casual employment categories. The paper argues that labour casualization increases poverty and also increases the structural vulnerabilities in plantation communities. Policy recommendations emphasize the need for stronger enforcement of labour laws, revision of wage structures to reflect living costs, and the extension of social security benefits to non-permanent workers. The study contributes to the broader discourse on precarious labour in agrarian economies and highlights the urgency of addressing inequalities in the plantation sector.

Key-words: Dooars, tea industry, labour casualization, social protection, plantation communities, agrarian economies, inequalities.

1. Introduction

The tea industry becomes the foundation of the plantation economy in India, providing both foreign exchange and large scale employment opportunities. West Bengal, alongside Assam, remains one of the leading producers of tea, with the Dooars region contributing substantially to India's total output (Bhowmik, 2011). Historically, the plantation sector has relied on a permanent labour force that was tied to estates through a system of paternalistic management, where wages were supplemented with in-kind provisions such as housing, healthcare, and rations (Besky, 2014). However, over the past three decades, the global restructuring of agricultural commodity markets, coupled with rising production costs and volatile tea prices, has triggered significant changes in the organisation of labour within plantations (Bhowmik & Sarkar, 2012). One of the most notable shifts has been the casualization of labour, characterized by an increasing reliance on temporary, contractual, and seasonal workers (De Neve, 2020). Labour casualization, while offering estate owners greater flexibility and cost reduction, has profound implications for the socio-economic security of workers. Casual workers often face unstable employment, lower wages, and limited or no access to statutory entitlements such

as provident fund, gratuity, medical facilities, and maternity benefits (Lieten & Breman, 2019). This has not only eroded the livelihood base of plantation households but also increased income insecurity, deepened poverty, and weakened the social fabric of tea garden communities. In the Dooars, where tribal and marginalized communities form the backbone of the plantation workforce, these developments have reinforced cycles of vulnerability and economic exclusion (Chakraborty, 2021).

The issue of casualization is further compounded by gendered labour dynamics. Women workers, who constitute the majority of the tea workforce, are disproportionately concentrated in plucking and other casualized tasks, leaving them more vulnerable to wage discrimination, work overload, and lack of social protection (Besky, 2020). The consequences are also significant, as declining household income and erosion of welfare provisions reduce children's access to education and healthcare, perpetuating long term poverty traps (Roy, 2019). Despite the scale and significance of this transformation, systematic research on labour casualization in the Dooars remains limited. Existing scholarship has largely focused on wage disputes, union politics, and the general decline of the plantation economy, while the realities of casualized labour and its impact on household income security have received less empirical attention (Bhowmik, 2011; Dasgupta, 2018). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the nature, drivers, and consequences of labour casualization among tea workers in the Dooars region of West Bengal. Specifically, it investigates how casualization reshapes employment relations, alters household income stability, and influences access to welfare and social security measures. By emphasizing the voices of workers through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on insecure labour in agrarian economies. It argues that casualization, while embedded in the economic logic of cost efficiency, highlights the long-term sustainability of plantation communities and raises important questions about labour rights, social justice, and inclusive development in the Indian tea sector.

2. Methods and Materials

The study was conducted in the Dooars region of West Bengal, which encompasses the foothill districts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar. This region is a major tea-producing belt, with over 150 estates employing a large proportion of tribal and marginalized communities. The estates selected for this study represent a cross section of operational status (functioning, sick, and closed gardens), ownership patterns, and geographical spread. This ensured a representative understanding of labour dynamics across different plantation contexts.

A mixed methods approach was adopted to capture both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of labour casualization and income insecurity. Quantitative data were collected to assess the prevalence of casual labour, wage structures, and access to benefits, while qualitative insights were used to understand workers' lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select six tea estates across the Dooars. Within each estate, households were stratified by employment category (permanent, casual, and contractual). A total of 300 worker households were surveyed using structured questionnaires. This sample size ensured adequate representation of both genders, employment types, and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, 15 focus group discussions were conducted to gather collective perspectives, particularly from women and casual workers. Structured questionnaires were administered to collect data on employment status, income levels, household expenditure, access to welfare provisions, education, and healthcare. Wage and benefit entitlements were cross-checked with estate records wherever possible. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with estate management, trade union leaders, and local labour activists to understand institutional perspectives on casualization and labour relations. FGDs with groups of 8-10 workers were conducted to explore shared experiences of income insecurity, gendered labour divisions, and coping strategies under precarious employment. Secondary data sources, including Tea Board of India reports, Labour Bureau statistics, and government notifications, were reviewed to provide contextual grounding and policy frameworks. Quantitative data from surveys were coded and analysed using MS Excel. Descriptive statistics were employed to find out labour categories, income patterns, and benefit access. Graphical representation of the data was made to visualize labour statistics.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Extent and Patterns of Labour Casualization in the Dooars

The field survey and estate level records confirm that labour casualization has emerged as the dominant employment trend across the tea plantations of the Dooars. In 2024, among the 300 households surveyed, 53.7% reported being employed as casual or contractual labourers, while only 46.3% retained permanent status (Table-1). Estate data further revealed that, since the early 2000s, the ratio of permanent to casual workers has steadily inverted. For example, in one estate in Jalpaiguri district, the permanent workforce declined from 1,400 in 2005 to fewer than 600 in 2022, while the number of casual workers nearly doubled during the same period. This pattern reflects a strategic response by estate management to rising input costs and fluctuating international tea prices. Casualization allows employers to reduce long-term obligations, as casual workers are not entitled to benefits such as provident fund, gratuity, or subsidised rations. While this strategy may ensure cost efficiency, it systematically undermines the social security of workers. Similar trends have been observed in other tea growing regions such as Assam and Nilgiris, pointing to a sector wide restructuring of plantation labour regimes.

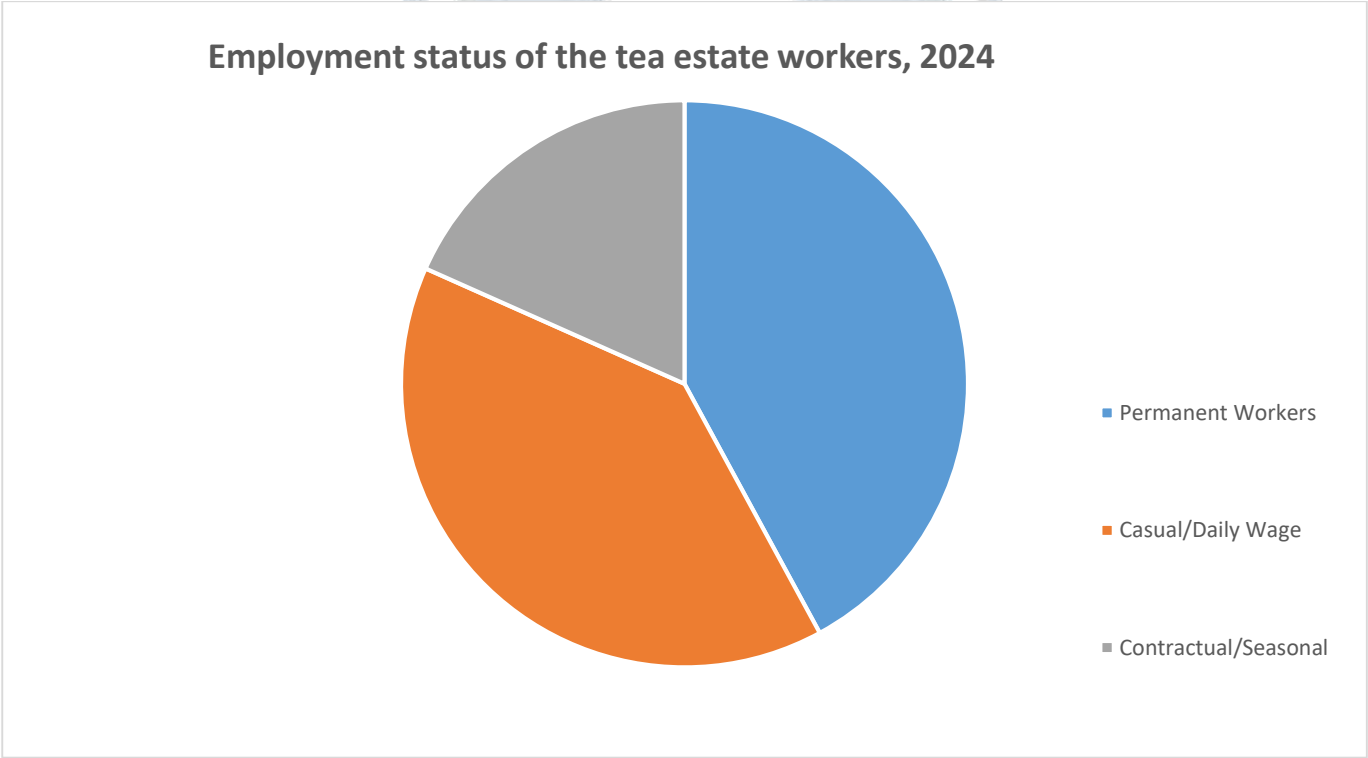


Figure-1

Table 1: Trends of Employment Categories in Dooars Tea Plantations (2000–2024)

Year	Permanent Workers (%)	Casual Workers (%)	Contractual/Seasonal Workers (%)
2000	78.6	18.2	3.2
2002	77.4	19	3.6
2004	75.8	20.4	3.8
2006	74.1	21.3	4.6
2008	73	22.1	4.9
2010	72.4	22.5	5.1
2012	70.2	24	5.8
2014	66.8	27.3	5.9
2016	63.1	30.1	6.8

2018	59.5	33.2	7.3
2020	55.4	36.7	7.9
2022	51.7	39.8	8.5
2023	49.1	43.6	7.3
2024	46.3	44.8	8.9

Source: Government of West Bengal. (2000–2022). Tea Plantation Wage Agreements and Notifications. Kolkata: Labour Department.

Casual labour is not uniform; it includes a variety of categories such as daily wage pluckers, task based labourers employed during peak seasons, and short term contract workers engaged through labour contractors. Seasonal fluctuations further intensify insecurity. During the lean season the demand for plucking declines, leaving casual workers without employment for several weeks. In such cases, the households which are solely dependent on casual earnings face extreme livelihood stress, often lead to borrowing or migrating temporarily to nearby urban centres for alternative work.

3.2. Wage Structures and the Living Wage Gap

Wages represent the most tangible dimension of income insecurity. Permanent workers in the surveyed estates earned an average daily wage of rupees 232, while casual workers earned slightly less at rupees 212. However, this modest difference in wage rates masks a much wider gap in overall livelihood security. Permanent workers continue to receive partial in-kind benefits such as subsidised rice, basic healthcare services, and housing facilities, although the quality and consistency of these provisions have deteriorated significantly. Casual workers, in contrast, lack access to most of these benefits and must rely entirely on cash wages. When benchmarked estimated against the living wage at rupees 350 - 375 per day for a family of four in the Dooars region, both categories of workers fall substantially short. The average monthly income of a casual worker's household was calculated at rupees 5,700, while that of a permanent worker's household stood at rupees 6,200 (Table-2). However, once adjustments were made for the value of in-kind benefits, the effective wage gap between the two categories widened further. More critically, both groups experienced chronic underpayment relative to the cost of living.

Table-2. Household Monthly Income Composition (rupees) by Worker Category

Income Source	Permanent Worker Households (₹)	Casual Worker Households (₹)	Contractual Worker Households (₹)
Estate Wages	6,200	5,700	3960
In-kind Benefits (ration, etc.)	1050	210	120
Secondary Income (migration, petty trade, etc.)	1230	1890	2050
Total Household Income	8320	7185	6130

Source: Household Survey - 2024

Approximately 71% of casual worker households reported that they are being unable to consistently purchase adequate food, with rice and potatoes forming the bulk of their diet. Protein rich items such as fish, meat, and pulses were consumed less than once per week by 63% of households. Expenditure on education was often curtailed, with 42% of families reporting that at least one child had been withdrawn from school during peak plucking season to supplement household income. The inadequacy of wages, therefore, influences directly into multidimensional poverty, encompassing food insecurity, educational deprivation, and health vulnerabilities.

3.3. Welfare Erosion and Social Security Exclusion

A key distinction between permanent and casual employment lies in access to welfare and social security. Permanent workers, under the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, are legally entitled to housing, healthcare, and maternity benefits. In practice, however, these provisions have been steadily eroded due to managerial cost cutting and weak enforcement. Even among permanent workers, healthcare services were often rudimentary, with estate hospitals lacking doctors, medicines, and basic diagnostic facilities. Table -3 shows that for casual workers, welfare exclusion was near total. Only 18% reported occasional access to estate-run medical facilities, usually in emergency situations. Fewer than 10% were enrolled in provident fund schemes, despite years of continuous service in the same estate. Women workers noted that maternity benefits were systematically denied to casual employees, leaving them vulnerable during critical periods of reproductive health. This erosion of welfare represents not merely an economic adjustment but a dismantling of the plantation paternalism that historically legitimised the estate labour system. The reduction of plantation welfare shifts the responsibility of social reproduction to the households and women, who must stretch inadequate incomes to cover education, health, and nutrition. The result is an intensification of socio-economic vulnerability, as children's education and health outcomes are directly compromised.

Table-3: Access to Welfare and Social Security Benefits

Benefit Type	Permanent Workers (%)	Casual Workers (%)
Provident Fund	72.3	8.7
Healthcare (Estate Hospital)	64.1	17.9
Maternity Benefits (Women)	58.2	4.6
Subsidized Rations	69.8	12.4
Housing Facilities	82.5	15.3

Source: Field Survey and Estate Records, 2024

3.4. Gender Dimensions of Casualization

One of the most striking findings of the study is the gendered nature of casualization. Women constituted 63% of the casual workforce, particularly in plucking tasks that require dexterity and stamina. Focus group discussions revealed that women workers often faced wage discrimination, earning at lower rates than men for similar tasks. Additionally, women bore a “double burden,” balancing plantation work with extensive unpaid domestic labour, including child care, cooking, and water collection.

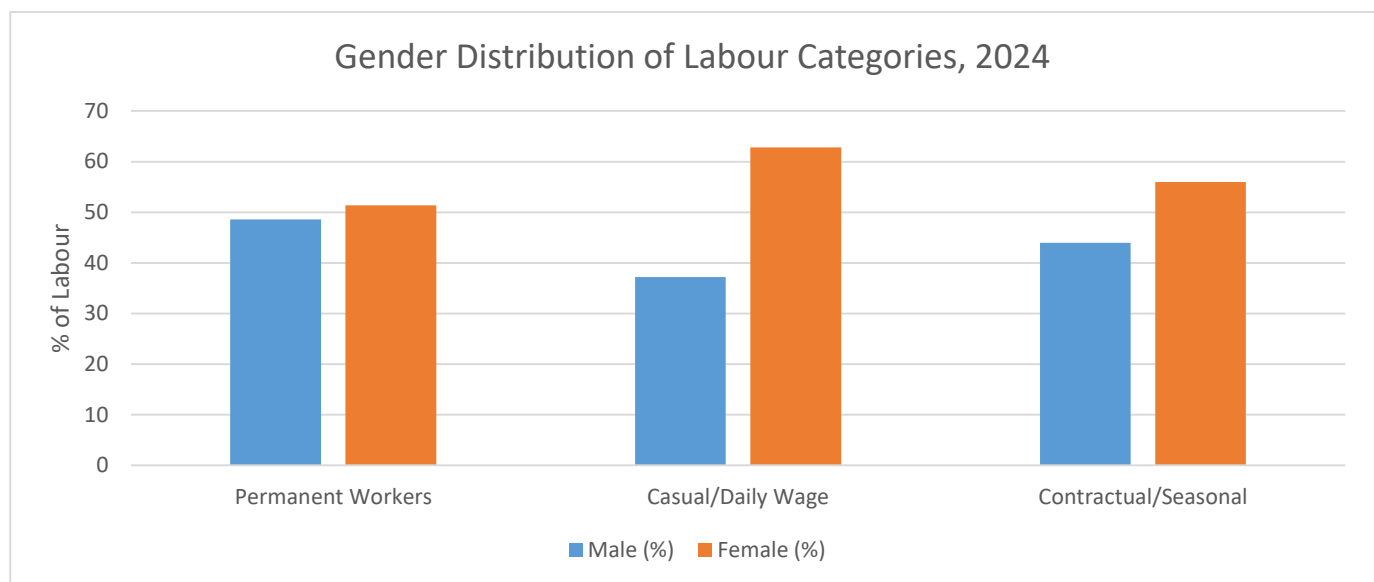


Figure-2

The exclusion of casual women workers from maternity benefits was a recurring theme. One worker in Alipurduar noted: *“When I gave birth, the estate hospital refused to help because I am not on the permanent roll. I had to borrow money and go to a private clinic. After that, I could not work for two months, and we had no income.”* Such narratives highlight how casualization is associated with gender to intensify the economic distress. Women also reported limited participation in union activities, as meetings were dominated by men and rarely addressed the issues specific to casual female workers. These findings show that the feminisation of plantation labour is accompanied by high insecurity and structural exclusion.

3.5. Household Coping Strategies under Income Insecurity

In response to wage inadequacy and welfare exclusion, households adopted a variety of coping mechanisms. Figure-3 shows that the seasonal migration emerged as a common strategy, with younger male members seeking temporary employment in construction, brick kilns, and roadwork in nearby towns. Remittances from such migration were modest but often critical for meeting household expenses during the lean season. Borrowing from informal moneylenders was another widespread strategy, reported by 56% of households. Interest rates ranged from 5% to 10% per month, creating debt traps that further deepened financial insecurity. Women frequently joined informal savings groups (Self Help Groups), pooling small contributions to access rotating credit. However, the amounts mobilized were insufficient to offset major shocks such as medical expenses or wage loss due to illness. Coping strategies also included reducing consumption of essential goods. Households reported cutting back on healthcare visits, delaying the purchase of medicines, and substituting cheaper food items for nutritious ones. In some cases, children were withdrawn from school during peak agricultural periods to assist with plucking, which shows the long term trade-offs between survival and future mobility. Such strategies, while enabling short term survival, reinforce cycles of poverty and limit intergenerational upward mobility.

Household Coping Strategies under Income Insecurity, 2024

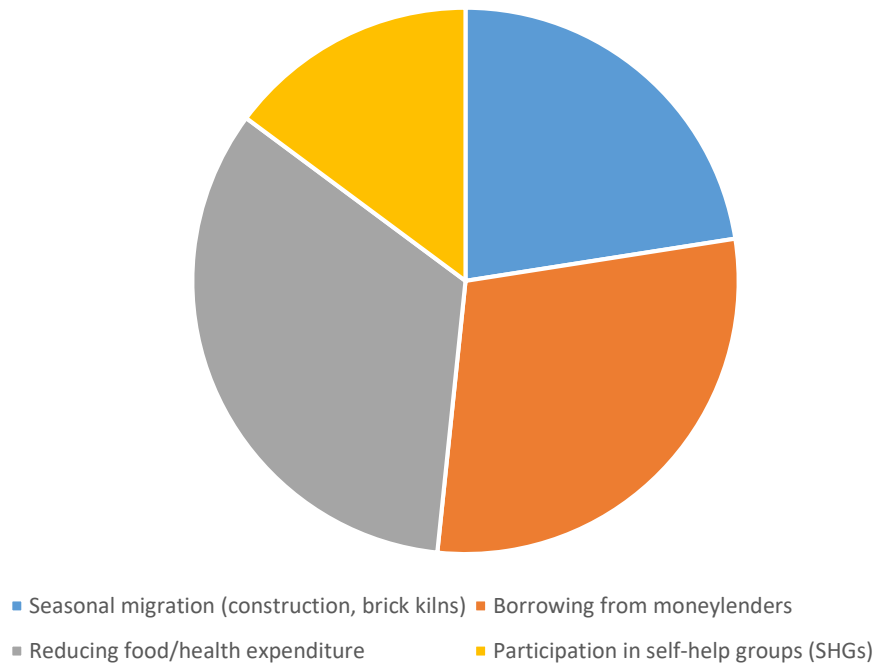


Figure-3

3.6. Labour Unions and Representation Gaps

Labour unions in the Dooars continue to play a visible role in wage negotiations and dispute resolution. However, the study found that their influence is increasingly restricted to the permanent workforce (Table - 4). Casual workers expressed frustration that unions did not adequately represent their concerns, particularly regarding wage parity, welfare access, and job security.

Table -4 Union Membership and Participation

Worker Category	Union Membership (%)	Active Participation in Meetings (%)	Satisfaction with Union Representation (%)
Permanent Workers	84.5	62.7	58.1
Casual Workers	27.8	12.5	14.2
Contractual Workers	9.6	4.4	5.1

Source: Interviews with Workers and Union Representatives, 2024

Interviews with union leaders revealed a structural bias: unions rely on permanent workers for membership and political mobilization, creating limited incentive to extend full representation to casual employees. As a result, casual workers are largely excluded from collective bargaining mechanisms. This exclusion weakens their bargaining capacity and leaves them vulnerable to unilateral decisions by estate management. The situation reflects a broader fragmentation of labour politics in India, where unionisation has struggled to adapt

to the rise of informal and precarious work. Without structural reforms to union strategies, casual workers are likely to remain marginalised from institutional mechanisms of representation.

3.7. Casualization as Structural Insecurity

The findings from the Dooars tea plantations highlight that the labour casualization is not merely an employment category but a structural condition shaping livelihoods, rights, and social reproduction. The steady replacement of permanent labour with casual workers has eroded statutory protections, undermined wage stability, and disproportionately marginalised women workers. From a theoretical perspective, casualization exemplifies the broader phenomenon of precarious labour in agrarian economies. The precarious employment is characterised not only by insecurity of tenure but also by the absence of social protection and collective representation. The labour casualization in Dooars tea plantation aligns with this framework, demonstrating how casualization undermines the social contract historically embedded in the plantation system. The implications extend beyond individual households to the sustainability of plantation communities. Income insecurity drives outmigration, erodes community solidarity, and weakens the intergenerational transmission of education and health. Over time, this undermines the long term viability of the tea industry itself, as a malnourished and undereducated workforce cannot sustain productivity. Policy responses must therefore go beyond wage adjustments to address the structural exclusion inherent in casualization. Extending social security benefits to all categories of workers, revising minimum wage frameworks to reflect living costs, and ensuring union inclusivity are essential steps toward restoring livelihood security. Without such interventions, the tea industry risks perpetuating cycles of inequality and deepening the marginalisation of plantation communities in the Dooars.

4. Policy Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for labour policy, social protection frameworks, and plantation governance in the Dooars and similar tea growing regions. Labour casualization has transformed the plantation workforce into a fragmented and precarious category, making it necessary to reframe policy interventions in ways that move beyond the outdated distinction between permanent and casual labour.

4.1. Extension of Statutory Benefits

Welfare provisions such as provident funds, maternity leave, healthcare, housing, and subsidized rations must be extended to all categories of workers, irrespective of their employment status. Casual workers should be legally entitled to the same protections as permanent employees under the Plantation Labour Act and related social security legislations.

4.2. Revision of Wage Structures

Current wage levels in the Dooars tea estates remain below the living wage threshold. State governments, in consultation with labour unions and estate owners, must revise wage setting mechanisms to ensure alignment with regional cost of living indices. A uniform “floor wage” applicable to both permanent and casual workers would reduce existing disparities.

4.3. Gender Sensitive Policy Measures

Given the feminization of casual labour, plantation policies must incorporate gender sensitive provisions, including access to maternity benefits, childcare facilities, and protection against workplace discrimination. Empowering women workers through Self Help Groups and microcredit schemes could mitigate income insecurity.

4.4. Strengthening Trade Union Representation

Trade unions must expand their organizational reach to include casual workers, ensuring their participation in collective bargaining and grievance redressal forums. Policies that encourage union inclusivity and promote collective agreements covering all categories of workers would enhance bargaining capacity and reduce fragmentation.

4.5.Social Protection and Safety Nets

Governmental schemes such as the Public Distribution System, health insurance, and educational subsidies must be more effectively integrated with plantation communities. Special provisions could be designed for casual workers, who are systematically excluded from estate based welfare systems.

4.6.Regulatory Oversight and Accountability

Strengthening the monitoring capacity of labour departments is essential to ensure compliance with statutory obligations. Independent audits of wage disbursement, welfare delivery, and housing standards should be institutionalized to hold estate management accountable.

4.7.Alternative Livelihood Opportunities

To address chronic income insecurity, policies should also promote skill development, vocational training, and alternative livelihoods in non-plantation sectors. Diversification of household incomes can reduce dependence on casual tea labour and build resilience against labour market shocks.

5. Conclusion

The study of labour casualization and income insecurity among tea workers in the Dooars highlights the structural vulnerabilities faced by plantation labour in an era of market liberalization and managerial restructuring. Evidences from household surveys, estate records, and field interviews highlights the steady decline of permanent employment and the rapid expansion of casual labour, a process that has eroded statutory protections and welfare provisions historically associated with the plantation system. Casual workers, who now constitute the majority of the workforce in many estates, remain excluded from provident funds, healthcare facilities, and maternity benefits, while simultaneously earning wages below the living wage threshold. This has intensified household level income insecurity, compelling workers to adopt precarious coping mechanisms such as seasonal migration, borrowing from informal lenders, and reducing investment in children's education and healthcare. The gendered nature of casualization further aggravates these challenges, as women workers, constituting the majority of casual pluckers, face systemic exclusion from welfare entitlements, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality.

The findings also reveal significant gaps in trade union representation, with unions primarily focused on the interests of permanent workers and failing to adequately incorporate casual labourers into collective bargaining frameworks. This fragmentation weakens labour's bargaining capacity and perpetuates conditions of exploitation. These dynamics show that casualization is not an isolated employment trend but rather a structural transformation that undermines the social and economic security of tea plantation workers. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged policy response such as extending statutory benefits and social security coverage to all categories of workers, revising wage structures to align with regional living costs, strengthening gender sensitive welfare provisions, and promoting inclusive trade union strategies. Without such interventions, the casualization of labour will continue to degenerate, threatening not only the livelihoods of tea workers but also the long term sustainability of the plantation economy in the Dooars. In this way the research contributes to the broader discourse on casualization of labour by situating tea plantation workers within the global dynamics and it highlights the urgent need for reforms that prioritize labour rights, social justice, and economic sustainability in India's plantation sector.

References

1. Besky, S. (2014). *The Darjeeling distinction: Labor and justice on fair-trade tea plantations in India*. University of California Press.
2. Besky, S. (2020). Colonial plantations, postcolonial projects: Gendered labor and agrarian change in South Asia. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 40(1), 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-8185921>
3. Bhowmik, S. K. (2011). Industry, labour and society: The tea plantations of India. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 54(2), 167–184.

4. Bhowmik, S. K., & Sarkar, S. (2012). Globalisation and labour in the tea plantations of India. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 55(2), 173–189.
5. Chakraborty, S. (2021). Labour precarity and socio-economic vulnerability in tea plantations: A case from North Bengal. *Journal of Rural Development*, 40(3), 452–470.
6. Dasgupta, S. (2018). Plantation labour and the crisis of subsistence: Insights from North Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(12), 37–45.
7. De Neve, G. (2020). Precarious labour and flexible capital: Class, gender and labour market transformations in South Asia. *Modern Asian Studies*, 54(4), 1125–1154. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X18000302>
8. Lieten, G. K., & Breman, J. (2019). *A new sociology of labour in India: Runaway world*. Routledge.
9. Roy, A. (2019). Tea plantations, labour regimes and social reproduction: Women workers in West Bengal. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (20). <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.6134>

