Labour Controls, Unfreedom and Perpetuation of Slavery on a Tea Plantation

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Abstract

This article examines labour controls in traditional tea plantations in Bangladesh. This study finds how social and economic exclusion through discriminatory labour laws and labour–manager relations rooted in the 'coolie' system have built a captive workforce separated from the mainstream workforce. This ultimately produces and reproduces slavery–laden labour controls. An opaque but punitive incentive system, sunset-sunrise working hours, maximum engagement, and the restrictions of promotion to managerial posts are constant reminders of the historically rooted indentured labour system. This article contributes to understanding modern slavery in an organisational context and the obstacles that prevent 'free' labourers from walking away from exploitative conditions. Organisational sites such as tea plantations present clear examples of how specific types of labour control restrict freedom of choice and produce 'willing slaves'.

Keywords

Bangladesh, labour control, slavery, tea plantation, unfreedom

Introduction

The Global Slavery Index (Walk Free Foundation, 2016) indicates that 45.8 million people are suffering in some form of slavery. However, since the abolition of chattel slavery, what actually constitutes slavery has been debated by academics, anti-slavery activists and regulators (Brace and Davidson, 2018). Research on modern slavery and

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anti-slavery movements seems to have become bogged down in institutional and legal definitions of modern slavery, neglecting 'the decisive role of circumstantial necessities and perspectives culminating in multiple forms of slavery' (Brace and Davidson, 2018; Mishra, 2010: 229). The Walk Free Foundation (2016:7) broadens the definition of 'slavery' to 'situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, abuse of power or deception'. As noted by Brace and Davidson (2018), this raises questions about what obstacles prevent supposedly free labourers from walking away from exploitative conditions, and how these obstacles transpire in an organisational context.

Davidson (2015: 30–31) argues that viewing modern slavery in its current legal form allows modern slavery to be morally acceptable, in the form of miserable wages and working conditions and extensive use of punishments that restrict freedom of choice and produce 'willing slaves'. Furthermore, any rigid distinction between free, unfree and slave makes dynamic understandings of labour relations more challenging (Barrientos et al., 2013). In this vein, Barrientos et al. (2013: 1038) suggest exploring 'varieties of unfreedom' to understand labour relations. Responding to this call, this article focuses on how business practices may perpetuate the 'unfree conditions' that lead to slavery-driven labour controls at the organisational level. In this regard, scrutinising labour controls may be useful in explaining why slavery persists, despite the rules, norms and practices established to prevent it.

Questions have been raised about whether abolishing chattel slavery brought an end to features akin to slavery. Traditional slavery was replaced by the indentured labour of the coolie (a derogatory title ascribed to tea labourers) system, and racially charged migration measures have continued to restrict freedom of labour, with serious consequences for labourers (Brace and Davidson, 2018; Sharma, 2009). Davidson (2015) argues that modern slavery is framed as an evil external to corporations, rather than as something produced by deliberate corporate strategy driven by the economic system in which these firms operate. This framing of slavery has not been useful for identifying the underlying reasons for slavery-like conditions in contemporary organisations.

This article investigates labour controls on tea plantations. These controls were built on the coolie system, a context of restricted freedom, and show how specific types of labour control and labour relations on tea plantations are perpetuating slavery 180 years after the abolition of traditional slavery. The choice of research site lies in the unique context of tea plantations (ILO, 2016; Islam and Al-Amin, 2019). LeBaron (2018) finds that tea planters systematically under-pay wages and under-provide legally mandated essential services for labourers. Historically, plantations were breeding grounds for slavery (Mohanta, 2008).

The remainder of this article begins by reviewing the literature on slavery and labour controls to develop the research question further. The research methods are then outlined, including the data collection and analysis processes. The historical development of indentured labour is presented next, followed by discussions of labour control practices that bear the hallmarks of modern slavery practices on tea plantations. The final section summarises the findings and contributions of this research.

Slavery, labour control and perpetuity

Research on slavery in organisational contexts is limited. The few existing studies argue that emerging businesses' employment of 'coercion' and 'cost minimisation' are two crucial strategies that allow modern slavery to be embedded in business practices (Crane et al., 2018). Some studies of slavery practices in labour controls focus on underlying structural issues, such as inequality, gender and power imbalances, bonded workforces (Prasad, 2015), trafficking and ethnicity-based discrimination (Kara, 2012; LeBaron and Gore, 2019; Samonova, 2019). 'Varieties of unfreedom' have also been explored, demonstrating how migrant labourers are subjected to differential treatment regarding wages and working conditions, revealing a form of forced labour (Chantavanich et al., 2016; Peng, 2011; Potter and Hamilton, 2014; Yea and Chok, 2018). Studies of tea plantations have produced similar stories of extreme exploitation and captive workforces, especially in South Asia (Bhowmik, 2011; Kara, 2012; Sharma, 2009); yet little attention has been given to how labour controls are implicated in unfree labour conditions on tea plantations.

The perpetuation of slavery has been linked with wider structural conditions that provide companies and their managers with the necessary power over labour processes, especially in the informal sector in Europe (Chesney et al., 2019; Crane, 2013). Studies of economically deprived contexts (Morgan and Olsen, 2015; Samonova, 2019) suggest that extreme poverty, social isolation, and lack of access to land, credit and legal protection, driven by the neoliberal capitalist system, create conditions under which workers are treated as slaves. However, this cycle may differ in organisational sites built on the 'coolie' system of indentured labour (Sharma, 2009). Scholars have studied labourers' unfree conditions on various tea plantations (Islam and Al-Amin, 2019; Kara, 2012). Kara (2012) attributes these slave-like conditions to the workers' ethnic background and religion, and their family history of being trafficked from various parts of India. Secrecy and lack of educational and economic opportunities exacerbate these conditions. Sharma (2009) argues that how the 'coolie' workforce is perceived by various local groups, as well as the tea planters, contributes to their isolation and coercion.

Bhowmik (1980) characterises tea plantations as unique social systems that give rise to specific social and production relations, and calls for examination of the plantation system as more than just an economic entity. Similarly, Alawattage and Wickramasinghe (2008) characterise tea plantations as 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1969) where work, living and recreation are integrated in the labour process. Plantations are not only places of work, but also 'home', and the workers' existential security is structured around the plantations' spatial and economic base, and ethnic and political identities. Using security measures to keep the tea labourers in enclaves, offering them no opportunities to work outside and deploying wages as bondage exacerbate their social and economic exclusion (Bhowmik, 2011). This is also enabled by local elites' continued racialisation of the workers as a labouring class, even after the departure of the colonial tea planters (Sharma, 2009).

Building on these studies, this article empirically demonstrates how these 'unfree conditions' give rise to specific means of labour control, which in turn perpetuate slavery on tea plantations. Inspired by previous research, this study further explores the

circumstances that contribute to the 'unfree conditions' of tea plantations in Bangladesh (Brace and Davidson, 2018; Mishra, 2010: 229).

Research methods

The first author collected data by visiting a selected tea plantation (also known as tea garden) on three or four days a week for 12 to 13 weeks. The field work began in September 2011. Data collection continued until the article submitted in 2020. The later part of data collection was mainly to update the evidence on working conditions such as minimum wages, trade union rights and general overview of the plantation. Like most South Asian tea plantations (Kara, 2012), this site was geographically isolated, and was built on the indentured labour system. The workers' sons and daughters succeeded them as coolies on the plantation, and management kept the workforce apart from the mainstream population, restricting access to outsiders. Out of 167 tea plantations, 135 (established during the colonial period) tea plantations were built on the indentured labour system located in the eastern region of Bangladesh (BTB, 2021). The research site studied is one of the several plantations across this region owned by the same company with similar histories of the indentured labour system.

Access to conduct this study was denied by many private, public and multinational tea companies, but the first author's personal network helped win the trust of the senior management of this local tea company. Full anonymity of the interviewees and the company was demanded and assured. A key part of the data collection was observation. A typical day of observation usually began with attendance at the morning meeting, in which the field officers and supervisors had detailed conversations about labour management and task allocations. After the morning meeting, the first author was allowed to hang around with the labourers in their workplaces (nursery, plucking sections and factory), homes, worship areas and marketplaces. The labourers were initially suspicious, but gradually grew to trust the author, and shared their experiences and engaged in regular conversation.

Conversations with the labourers were not always instigated by the author. When one or two of them approached the author to introduce themselves, others clustered around to share their experiences. The author often found somewhere close to the labourers so that they were not too distracted but were able to speak. Conversations with the labourers never took place in front of the field officers or higher managers. The labourers knew they were allowed to talk to the author, yet they felt that 'speaking' in front of the officers was disrespectful. In the interviews, participants were asked general questions about their family and work experiences and their attachment to the plantation, and specific questions about labour controls. The labourers were fearful when notes were taken in front of them, so the author recorded notes on the interviews, along with observational data, on returning from the field, usually in the evening. In addition to the individual interviews, interviews were conducted with five groups of between three and six labourers. Details of the participants are provided in Table 1.

The next step was to analyse the data collected from primary and secondary sources (observations, interviews and documentary evidence). The first author gathered the field

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Interviewees	Number	Age (approx.)	Tasks/responsibilities
Male labourers	8	19–60	Ground preparations, nursery jobs and tea processing plant
Female labourers	6	30–50	Plucking and cleaning, nursery jobs
Managers	3	45–70	Head of the plantation, report to head office
Assistant managers	4	25–40	Head of the field and factory, allocate daily resources, report to manager
Field officers	5	30–60	Record and assess daily tasks, such as weight of leaves; assess and develop new plantation areas; supervise section supervisors; report to assistant manager
Supervisors	4	30–70	Execute orders of field officers and managers in the field and factory by getting the labourers into work
Physician	1	45–48	Offer surgery once or twice a week
NGO worker	1	32–35	Specialist in childbirth and post-birth care
Labour union leaders and coordinators	3	40–60	Represent labourers in various disputes on tea plantations in north-east Bangladesh
Head of Accounts and Senior Accounts Manager	2	40–60	Prepare budget and performance reports; conduct internal audit; report to senior management
Senior manager of a research institution	1	50–55	Train prospective field officers and assistant managers

notes, interview data and notes from secondary sources into a single document, and this was then organised and rewritten empirically. The empirical notes were read, and 'meta-themes' in the texts, including statements, conversations and commentaries from interviews, observations and printed materials, were contrasted, elaborated and substituted with alternative meanings in order to surface themes relating to 'unfreedom' gathered from the secondary sources. The data analysis involved continuous assessment and comparison of the extent to which the conduct reflected in narratives and observations was 'sensible and justifiable'. Two core themes emerged: 'maximum engagement' and 'incentives – wage determination' underlined by unfreedom of labourers. Unfree conditions of labourers are especially reflected in minor themes: 'routine', 'task-work design' and 'no work no pay'. Inspired by previous studies, this article focuses on the unique social and production relations (Alawattage and Wickramasinghe, 2008; Bhowmik, 1980, 2011) of tea plantations. The analytical process helped to identify historical, economic, social and political contexts that have given rise to master–slave relationships and an institutionally disconnected labour force, leading to further conceptualisation of the continuation of unfree conditions and slavery.

Indentured labour recruitment and master–slave relationships

The British, who were mainly officers of the East India Company, paved the way for the tea industry in Bangladesh. Initially, these officers gathered groups of people and selected managers and assistant managers (AMs) from among them. However, they needed many labourers to prepare the tea gardens. A particular challenge was that suitable plantation lands around hilly areas were full of wild animals, so clearing and preparing them cost the lives of many managers, officers and labourers.

In the early days, experienced Chinese labourers were scarce and expensive to hire. The local people were unused to working in the 'jungle', as they referred to the planta- tions, and preferred to remain self-employed as farmers and fishermen – 'noble but poor' (Bhadra and Bhadra, 1997:248). The imposition of higher taxes on agricultural lands in 1834 did not drive the local workforce to the tea plantations, as intended. Therefore, independently or through their agents, the managers brought labourers from Indian states where drought, hunger and unemployment were more prevalent. Agents signed up peo- ple from Uttar Pradesh, Madras and West Bengal. Illiterate and poor villagers trusted the agents, but the agents clearly deployed deceptive tactics to lure labourers. Sometimes the garden managers sent female agents, wearing nice ornaments and expensive clothes, to spend several days in the villages. They socialised with the local women and told them: 'Look, I have earned lots of money by working in X tea garden. The job is nothing. Come with me. I will lead you to a prosperous life' (Mohanta, 2008: 32).

Once the coolies were in the garden, they had to work from sunrise to sunset. In the morning, all working males and females had to line up for attendance checking, and anyone who had fled was reported by the managers to the police. Because of the way in which coolies' debt bondage/contracts were drafted, all civil rights as independent mem- bers of society were taken away when they registered as tea labourers. In addition, the miserly wages were only sufficient to pay for bread, so they could not save enough to flee or buy a return ticket home. Managers often introduced coinage specifically for trading in plantation areas, and even banned public transport from the tea plantations. The state- sponsored socio-economic conditions enabled greater retention of labourers and survival of the tea plantation industry.

This history has outlined how current labourers' ancestors were forced to work through coercion and mental or physical threat, and how managers retained labourers by restricting their movement. The imported labourers had nothing, so depended entirely on the managers for their earthly needs in both personal and working lives. Their sons and daughters succeeded them as coolies in the garden. The British managers quickly became like gods or masters to them, as providers of everything (Mohanta, 2008). The manager– labourer relationship was quickly replaced by a master–slave relationship, which largely continues on contemporary plantations.

Unfree conditions and labour control

This section elaborates on the specific means of labour control deployed by managers, which, it is argued, enable the constitution and perpetuation of unfree conditions and

slavery on tea plantations. Similar to many other traditional plantations, almost all labourers had been born and bred in the case study plantations, creating a homogeneous group of people speaking the same dialect and of the same caste. Their ancestors had been brought there from north-eastern India under the indentured labour system 150 years previously. Male labourers were employed to carry out field and factory tasks, whereas female labourers were employed in plucking and managerial household jobs. The tea plantation is headed by a manager, supported by AMs, senior field officers (SFOs), field officers (FOs) and other employees include the accounts clerk, head accounts clerk, physicians and administrators. The manager and AMs appear as gods of the plantation and maintain a very clear social distance from the labourers. The FOs, on the other hand, bridge these two key groups of actors by explaining the context of any event, statement or demand from the labourers and managers. This study finds two major means of labour controls reflecting the unfree conditions of labour: maximum engagement and opaque incentives. They are discussed below.

Unfreedom and maximum engagement of labour

Unfreedom in South Asian plantations including Bangladesh is characterised by the captive and migrant 'coolie' workforce without education and unemployability, giving rise to a unique social system (Bhowmik, 2011; Kara, 2012; Sharma, 2009). Thus, it is not surprising to find these conditions underlined the specific means of labour controls. Whatever their gender and tasks, labour controls on the tea plantation were motivated by a single factor: maximum engagement of labour. This might not be efficient or effective in raising productivity, but was eerily consistent with how planters treated slaves in North America. Aufhauser (1973) argued that this desire to achieve maximum usage of labour came from an understanding that the slaves were inherently stupid, lazy and machine-like. This was clearly the view of the tea garden managers, as reflected in a manager's comment: 'These labourers are illiterate, and if you don't pay attention for even one second, you will find them doing something stupid. Like the "donkey", you have to use your stick to keep them on track.' The labourers were also specifically recognised as a lower class in the community, heavily dependent on the managers and the company for their livelihoods, as also noted in previous studies of South Asian tea plantations and Bangladesh (Gain, 2009; Kara, 2012; Sharma, 2009). Their dependence on the plantation shaped their working hours, task allocations and incentive systems. These are elaborated below.

Working hours. The start time was usually half an hour to an hour after sunrise, following the colonial system which was designed to account for all plantation labourers and arrange manhunts for any fleeing labourers as soon as the sun rose. Regular working hours (40 hours a week) did not apply to the tea labourers. This ensured that labourers' 'unfreedom' was maintained, a vital element of slavery-laden controls. Every morning, in the presence of the manager and/or AM, the SFO commenced the morning meeting with an attendance register of supervisors and guards, followed by an announcement of the daily activity plan from the work ledger book. This was mainly a detailed list of jobs to be carried out, along with the source and distribution of resources in accordance with

the tasks, and the supervisors responsible. Besides plucking (an exclusively female task) during the growing season, tea estates require maintenance of the physical properties and plants, and processing of the tea leaves. The AM set out detailed processes for each job, and explained his expectations and what constituted good and sub-standard practices.

Unique management–labour relationships played out in the day-to-day activities of the tea garden, as illustrated by a typical day in the tea processing plant (factory). In the factory, the mainly male labourers arrived around 6.30 a.m. but did not immediately enter the plant. They waited outside the main gate for another hour or more for others to join them, and stepped into the factory as a group around 7.30 or 8.00 a.m., although working hours did not begin until 9.00 a.m. The factory officers entered around 8.30 a.m., and assigned tasks with full instructions after a short meeting with the factory supervisor. Unlike the field labourers, the factory labourers made a slow start until the first supply of leaves entered the factory gate from the garden. An officer said:

> This [slow start] is not an issue really. When they start working at the beginning of the day, they think that it is going to be a long day and they will be able to cover things up. After getting the first supply of leaves, they speed up their tasks. Other than that, you will see they are working very efficiently [with a smile] when the manager pays a visit or the assistant manager walks around in the factory.

Timekeeping would have ensured some freedom of labourers but there was no such thing as timekeeping in the factory. The factory labourers were asked to do particular jobs, without being given specific time limits or other measures. The labourers, who usually sat on one side of the factory to chat, kept an eye on the entrance, and only jumped to work when the manager or AM came on site. The factory was very close to the Tila office (administrative building), so the labourers maintained their pace of work whenever they saw that the manager was in the office. Managers' reluctance to establish time limits and other measures arose from the unfree conditions of workers (available from sunrise to sunset). Thus, they opted for constant supervision by supervisors and/or senior managers.

Task allocation – Unstructured and structured. Task allocations rely on the unfree conditions of labourers. In the field section of the garden, tasks were somewhat unstructured, and employed only male and often casual labourers. Each supervisor took account of the workload assigned to him for his group. Supervisors usually did not question the task, target and allocated number of labourers, although a few gathered, if they dared, in the SFO's office or outside the office window for informal negotiations in front of the manager or AM. During the whole process, the labourers remained absolutely silent, even though they had huge experience of doing the same tasks. Ordinary labourers always talked to the SFO through the office windows, and only supervisors entered the administrator's office. This spatial boundary between labour and management was a clear reminder of the historical master–slave relationship. In order to make maximum use of labourers' working hours, the supervisor needed a basic understanding of their individual skills in order to estimate the time required to complete the tasks. The supervisor was

usually given fewer labourers than required to maintain labourers' maximum engagement.

In the case of more structured tasks (in the tea leaf processing plant and plucking), the same theme of maximum engagement was at play. Thus, to extract maximum labour, the managers ensured constant monitoring. They often threatened the labourers with punishments, such as wage cuts or reporting them to the top management (AMs and manager) if they underperformed. The managers were so focused on full usage of the labourers that they often failed to take rational steps such as machine repairs in the factory to ensure smooth long-term production. They would rather run the risk of machinery failure than stop the machine and see labourers sitting idle.

Unfreedom (bondage) and incentives

Unfree conditions borne out of the indentured labour system continue to shape labour controls long after its abolition. Previous studies of tea plantations in South Asia have found tea labourers often take out loans, which require them to work two or three extra shifts with no extra payment (see Bhowmik, 1980, 2011; Kara, 2012). In this case, for full pay, day labourers (male only) had to work from sunrise to sunset. They had no written employment contracts. The managers constantly referred to natural resources used by the labourers as being part of the pay package, such as water from the stream and firewood for heating. With reference to housing facilities, one tea labourer said:

> We are living in a house with one single room. We have to do everything in that room. Husband, wife and kids share the same room. In this rainy season, there is no difference between being in the house or outside the house, because the water pours through the roof, and you know what happens when water drains into the muddy land of the house. What can we do? We are labourers; that is why we have to stay in this way.

The management had a deliberate strategy of maintaining lower wages and deploying systematic wage cuts and penalties, as illustrated by how tea pluckers' wages were determined. Plucking was carried out mainly by the female labourers, although male labourers were often engaged during the peak season. The weight of tea leaves determined the pluckers' wages, with at least 22 kg required to receive a full day's payment. However, the pluckers never saw the exact weight of their tea leaves displayed on the weighing machine. Only the FO checked the quantity, without revealing the display to the labourers. He loudly announced the labourer's name and the weight of the sack. The author observed that the announced weight might be more than a kilo less than the weight displayed on the machine. There was no question of the labourers checking the weight, and they consented even though it related to their payment. Throughout the tea plantation's history, this weight adjustment has rarely been protested, as labourers dare not question FOs' judgements. Sometimes the FO only gave half a day's wages to labourers who had failed to reach the target, even if it was only short by a few kilos.

In the field section (mainly male and casual labourers), wages were more often cut for being 'late' and 'lazy', and were entirely determined by the FO. They were never allowed to raise any issues with the senior managers. Thus, all complaints, including those

relating to wage cuts, had to be made through the supervisors. Complaints were usually dismissed. Apart from a very few occasions, the labourers had never been known to protest these apparently serious injustices. The senior managers also felt that heeding labourers' complaints was not necessarily a good managerial skill. Keeping labourers under the cosh was a sign of the best managers, and was a widely accepted norm in the tea gardens. Rarely making additional payments for work overloads and frequently cutting wages were strategies deployed on plantations to keep the labourers bonded to the garden. Gaining permanency or securing a supervisory post were the only promotional opportunities allowed for labourers, but these only went to male labourers. The fieldwork revealed that the labourers did not really compete for permanency, as it brought no significant change to their lives.

No work, no pay. Tea gardens are allowed, legally, to pay no wages, even to their 'permanent' labourers if no works are available. This usually occurred on rainy days. Unlike the labourers, the FOs and managers received their full pay even if no works were planned for rainy days. The male labourers usually sat outside the main gate or wandered around the plantation looking for unplanned jobs. An officer explained:

> You will find that at least three to four from each family work in the labour line, including female labourers who are plucking even on rainy days. Therefore, it does not have much impact on them if one or two do not have any work for a day or two. Besides, even if you want to pay, then what would be the basis of that payment? It is a normal circumstance, and labourers are well aware of this practice.

A tea labourer commented on this practice:

> Unofficially, we are not given any task on the rainy days. Even if you report for work, the officer will say 'come back later!' or something. Every month, we have at least two to three days without any earnings.

Wage payments were also frozen for other reasons, such as unavailability of materials. Incidents were observed where permanent labourers had to stop work owing to lack of materials, and yet received pay cuts. The manager transferred the risk of job unavailability onto the labourers' shoulders.

Two mutually exclusive logics made labour engagement irrational and exhibited the extent of marginality in the relationship. First, the plantation managers were supposed to be responsible for engaging permanent labourers, and the company should have covered the consequences of their inability to do so by paying the labourers full wages. However, it was their practice to make labourers bear the loss entirely out of their already miserly wages. Second, this non-manageability was recorded as 'absence' from work, and the company's policy on absenteeism was then implemented. These two actions were contradictory, in that the managers both blocked labourers from attending work and punished them for non-attendance. This had implications for restricting the labourers' freedom. Wage cuts were easy and routinely deployed throughout the garden, irrespective of tasks or gender. Rarely making additional payments for work overloads and

frequent wage cuts were deployed on plantations to keep the labourers bonded to the garden, as observed in previous studies of tea plantations including Bangladesh (Bhowmik, 2011; Kara, 2012; Rozario, 2015).

Perpetuation of 'unfree' labour conditions

The nature of the labour controls presented above kept the workforce captive on the plantations, as low wages were deployed as a form of bondage and maximum engagement was maintained. Critically, tea labourers were kept separate from the mainstream workforce, politically, legally, culturally and geographically. This is particularly prevalent in traditional and rural plantations as the fieldwork revealed. In colonial times, planters used their influence over the colonial government to prevent the Forest Department from hiring plantation labour, allowing them to retain a captive labour force (Bhowmik, 2011). This continued during the post-colonial period, albeit in different forms. Uddin and Hopper (2001) found that in a non-plantation context in Bangladesh, toothless labour laws and weak state protection provided the necessary conditions for a coercive style of management. In the case of the tea garden, this was not only due to weak trade unions and state protection, but also because of the unique labour laws applicable to plantations and the precarious position of labourers, constituted by social and economic relations rooted in the history and politics of tea plantations (Bhowmik, 1980; Sharma, 2009). These are elaborated below.

Labour unions and labourers. Historically, tea labourers were kept separate from the mainstream workforce in the country, and trade unions were strictly prohibited from entering tea plantations (Mohanta, 2008). Labourers' wages remained stagnant, even during the super profit period of the First World War. In 1920, the 'Non-Cooperation Movement' in India spilled into the 'Mulluke Cholo' (Go Back Home) movement, in which around 30,000 labourers left their gardens and marched toward nearby rail and steamer stations. The British government mobilised the military to stop them going home. Following the British departure from India, national labour unions managed to open branches in the tea gardens. Local committees for labourers were set up, known as panchayats. However, both remain largely ineffective, as labour laws applicable to the wage structure and working conditions of tea gardens are still kept separate from those applying to the mainstream workforce. Thus, low wages, poor accommodation, long working hours and unhealthy conditions remain unaddressed generally in traditional tea plantations (Gain, 2009; Rozario, 2015).

Conversations with the labourers in this case clearly revealed the distance between them and the trade union representative. One tea labourer described the union's representation as being the exact opposite of what it should have been. Trade unions were not to be trusted. In 2010, the labourers on this tea plantation had stopped paying membership fees and had eventually ousted the trade union representative. The union understood that a confrontation was needed to make the labourers more reliant on it. However, it appreciated the difficulty of any labour confrontation in the tea gardens because the labourers' very significant dependence on managers for food and shelter would leave them in jeopardy if they were to take any action, as revealed in other studies (Kara, 2012). Interestingly,

in the absence of effective union, the labourers found alternative representatives, such as FOs or AMs. They might also speak to a manager directly without any representative if mutual understanding could be established between manager and labourers, since the managers preferred direct representation to avoid 'issues' with the labour union leader. Such opportunities were available mainly to male labourers. On one occasion, a female labourer was accompanied by a male member of the family and a supervisor, and the men did most of the talking while she just nodded and bowed her head. According to the tea labourers, 'our manager knows our needs'. The notion that managers would look after labourers' welfare was deeply rooted in the labourers' construction of their own identity in relation to managers, and also had a bearing on the labour controls described above.

In Bangladesh, tea labourers' precarious position is further worsened by regulatory discrimination and loopholes in labour legislation, as managers may threaten to hand labourers over to the law enforcement authority for even minor misconduct, and the tea companies make labourers' rights and entitlements deliberately opaque (Gain, 2009). Differential treatment (less protection) for labourers is often evident even in the legislation. Tea gardens have managed to preserve their historical character by maintaining labourers' wages and facilities at minimal levels. More recent data show that in 2020, permanent labourers received 120 Tk per day (115 Tk are equivalent to £1), which was approximately a third of the wages paid to garment labourers in Bangladesh. The increment of 18 taka is a reflection of more than 21 months' negotiation. Tea labourers receive less annual paid leave than any other sector in Bangladesh.

In the absence of unions, tea gardens flout the legislation. According to the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006), tea plantation labourers and their families are entitled to housing facilities. However, the company in this case only provided one-room housing facilities for all members of the family, irrespective of the number of employees in that family. Tea companies are legally bound to provide educational facilities for labourers' children aged between six and 12 years, but these were almost non-existent. There were no childcare facilities. Most labourers worked in bare feet, which caused most of their illnesses, including skin diseases. Spraying pesticides without masks, as some labourers had to do, was also hazardous to health. Many were suffering from chronic leg and hand pain. Pregnant labourers are entitled to receive 16 weeks of paid maternity leave for their first two children, and the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) prevents women working in any sector from returning to work during the first eight weeks after childbirth. According to the NGO worker (childbirth carer), pregnant women rarely receive any paid maternity leaves. Instead, skilled young female labourers are often at work within a week of childbirth, especially during peak seasons, on the basis of a fitness certificate issued by the plantation medical officer.

Bondage and master–slave relationship. The labourers in this case were still coolies, utterly dependent on the company. They were legally free to take jobs outside the tea plantations, but very few expressed any intention of moving permanently off the plantation. They could not imagine lives beyond the garden, and felt obligated to the company to remain there. In several discussions, the labourers repeatedly referred to the labour line as their home, as in one group discussion:

> This is our home. We have grown up here and made new families here. Whatever we do, we come back. It does not matter how far a bird flies; it must return home at the end of the day.

One commented: 'This is our birthplace. We don't know people outside the plantations and with not enough money in our pocket, where to go? What if something happened to us while outside the plantation?'

The managers, on the other hand, were very much aware of how labourers saw themselves in the garden, and took advantage of their social and cultural bondage to the plantation. A manager commented:

> Will these labourers move out of the labour line? You won't believe it, but these labourers are so bound to the plantation that they keep coming back. Where will they get a licensed liquor shop and their buddies to talk?

The recreation of tea gardens includes permission to drink alcohol, which is not allowed elsewhere in Bangladesh apart from in the top tourist hotels. This 'extra privilege' is known to be a glue that maintains the labourers' adherence to the tea gardens (Islam and Al-Amin, 2019; Kara, 2012).

The captivity of the workforce can also be understood in the context of the unique manager–labourer relationship. The managers were trained to exhibit certain attitudes towards the labourers. They were treated as 'super-human' by the labourers, and were required to act accordingly. For instance, despite the labourers' long experience in the field, and their ability to express their opinions on the quality of the work done by managers and AMs, they were observed to be confused, nodding their heads and avoiding looking directly at the managerial personnel.

The labourers' identity was so dehumanised that the managers took even less care of workplace safety than of the labourers' health. In this case, the managers had crippled the labourers to such an extent that the latter sought permission for even the smallest aspects of their lives, and the managers felt that this should be so. A manager commented: 'Why should they not? They have to discuss everything because all their possessions somehow belong to the company.' In other words, intervening in their daily lives was so natural that the labourers were not bothered about violations of their personal boundaries and left managers to sort out every aspect. The labourers actively sought protection from the plantation authority. Although the managers knew very well that they had no power to do so, this did not stop them from pretending that they could protect the labourers from everything.

Continued violence was observed, in the form of oral abuse, threats to hand labourers over to law enforcement agencies, maintenance of constant fear within the garden and keeping a social distance between managers and labourers. These mental (ideological) abuses closely resembled the training of circus animals, where rapid use of the whip causes so much pain and fear during the training period that a slight rattling of it at show time delivers the expected outcome. For early-generation labourers, the lessons learnt from history were like a whip, the nature of which was transmitted to later generations in such a manner that, rather than recognising the practice as slavery and thus illegitimate, their offspring merely raised weak challenges and engaged in minimal revolt. The

labourers still trusted the judgement of the literate and elite members, such as FOs and managers, who made decisions on their very livelihoods and were responsible for the conditions they endured.

Concluding remarks

This study prompts reflection on how 'unfree conditions' in tea plantations give rise to specific means of labour control, which in turn perpetuate slavery on tea plantations. Building on Bhowmik's (1980) observation that tea plantations embody a unique social system that gives rise to specific social and production relations, this study demonstrates that unique production relations on tea plantations create rationalities in labour control practices. For instance, the wage and payment structure, the working hours and the restrictions of promotion to managerial posts are constant reminders of the historically rooted indentured labour system. The study also reveals that a weak trade union and opaque regulations, coupled with a labour–management relationship rooted in the indentured labour system, results in labourers blindly trusting their managers and perpetuating unfree conditions on tea plantations. Labourers are not constrained to stay, but viewing the plantation as 'home' binds them to it (Alawattage and Wickramasinghe, 2008; Bhowmik, 1980).

It is well established in the literature that weak trade unions and lack of state protection for workers lead to coercive labour controls (Burawoy, 1985). However, in some organisational contexts, unique labour–management relations are fundamental to weakening trade unions and allowing managers to use legislative loopholes. Historically, colonial lords barred unions from physically entering plantations. Unionisation is allowed in tea plantations, yet labourers' overt dependence on managers for both employment and homes, and their deep trust in their managers (masters) cultivated by a centuries-long tradition, thwart the effectiveness of any wider labour union movement. Replacement of the manager–labour relationship with the master–slave relationship is critical to trade unions' ineffectiveness.

Under these conditions, managers find it normal to treat labourers as slaves, and embed slavery in labour controls. In this study, two threads are identified that sum up the nature of controls: maximum engagement and determination of wages (incentives). Tasks are designed to treat labourers as stupid, lazy and sub-human. Working hours are dictated by slave-like conditions, as the labourers must be available from sunrise to sunset. The labourers are perceived as stupid and machine-like, and outcomes are improved through routine jobs. However, tea plantations demand non-routine and uncertain tasks from apparently stupid and machine-like labourers, who are managed through relentless and detailed instructions, as well as constant monitoring.

This study demonstrates that the incentive system plays a significant role in keeping the labourers at bay. For instance, the labourers are assured of good remuneration since their package includes housing and food benefits. However, loopholes and lack of clarity in existing regulations and employment contracts allow the company to force female labourers to come to work. Similarly, obscure regulations on accommodation cause entire families to squeeze into one-room houses, no matter their number. Wage cuts are routinely deployed throughout the garden, irrespective of employment contracts, tasks

and gender. For instance, permanent labourers receive pay cuts or no pay, either because they have to stop work owing to unavailable materials, or because no work is allocated to them. It is the garden's practice to make labourers bear the loss entirely out of their already miserly wages.

Poor wages and maximum engagement lead the workers into rampant monetary debts to support their daily expenses. These can only be repaid through physical labour, which is extended to their family members. Tea labourers are allowed to work outside the tea garden, but are unable to do so because they are seen as unemployable. Access to education for their children outside the tea plantation was impossible owing to social and physical isolation. They found themselves in a never-ending cycle of bondage long after the abolition of the indentured system. Labour shortages do not allow managers sufficient latitude to fire employees, but they exert control over labourers' behaviour by invoking fear of law enforcement agencies' involvement, threats of underpayment and possible confrontations with managers, thereby maintaining conditions of 'unfreedom', as also noted by Kara (2012).

This article contributes to understanding modern slavery in an organisational context and the obstacles that prevent 'free' labourers from walking away from exploitative conditions. Organisational sites such as tea plantations clearly show how specific types of labour control restrict freedom of choice and produce 'willing slaves' (Davidson, 2015). This study responds to Barrientos et al.'s (2013) call to explore 'varieties of unfreedom' to understand how social and economic exclusion through discriminatory labour laws and labour–manager relations rooted in the 'coolie' system have built a captive workforce separated from the mainstream workforce. This ultimately produces and reproduces slavery-laden labour controls. As Brace and Davidson (2018) note, understanding underlying reasons for the persistence of slavery helps move the focus back to the economic and social system in which contemporary organisations operate. This article not only invokes the past to frame the present slavery-like conditions in tea gardens, but also highlights how specific types of labour control, aided by regulatory mechanisms, reproduce slave-like conditions in organisations.

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