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Accepted for publication in Sociology

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https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385261450506

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Exclusion and Labour Control Regimes: A Tale of Two Tea Plantations

Abstract

This article examines labour control in residential workplaces through a comparative study of traditional (colonial-era) and new tea plantations in Bangladesh. It extends Burawoy's analysis of coercion and consent by showing how exclusion operates as a structuring condition of labour regimes. Traditional plantations rely on cumulative social, spatial, legal, and political exclusions that disconnect workers from alternative livelihoods, embed generational dependency, and sustain overtly coercive control. New plantations reconfigure exclusion through selective inclusion, combining limited mobility and negotiated consent with insecurity and continued dependence on employer-controlled resources. The analysis shows how the state, often treated as a neutral arbiter, actively reproduces exclusion through differentiated rights and weak enforcement. By conceptualising exclusion as structured disconnection from rights, resources, and exit options, the article demonstrates how differing configurations of exclusion shape the forms and intensity of labour control within dormitory labour regimes.

Keywords

Coercion and consent; dormitory labour regime; exclusion; labour control; tea plantations

1.0 Introduction

This article examines the dynamics of dormitory labour regimes and their mechanisms of labour control in Bangladeshi tea plantations by comparing two distinct residential labour regimes: traditional (colonial-era) and newer plantations. Dormitory labour regimes function as a means through which capital extracts surplus value by housing workers in employer-controlled accommodation, extending labour control beyond the workplace into everyday life. By shaping where and how workers live, these regimes regulate work schedules, social reproduction, and access to alternative economic and social relations, rendering exclusion central to labour control (Smith and Pun, 2006; Pun and Smith, 2007). Such arrangements have played a critical role in mobilising large, low-cost, and highly exploitable labour forces across Southeast Asia (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023; Pun and Smith, 2007) and Eastern Europe (Andrijasevic, 2022). Control over housing enables employers to impose unpaid overtime, suppress collective resistance, and discipline labour beyond working hours. Where workers are legally or practically restricted from residing outside employer-controlled spaces, dependence

on capital becomes existential rather than contractual, intensifying vulnerability to exploitation (Chan, 2014; Peng, 2011).

These dynamics are not confined to contemporary industries such as garments or electronics. They have clear historical antecedents in colonial-era "Company States" (Burawoy, 1985), where firms operated semi-autonomous zones of production that fused economic control with quasi-state authority. Dormitory labour regimes remain deeply entrenched in tea plantations (Shahadat and Uddin, 2022), where spatial confinement continues to sustain a captive workforce. Central to this system are exclusionary strategies, including restrictions on mobility, residence, citizenship rights, and access to political and economic resources (Aasland and Fløtten, 2010). Drawing on the social exclusion literature, exclusion is understood here as a form of structural disconnection that detaches workers from alternative labour markets, civic participation, and social mobility (Silver, 1994; 2007; Davies, 2005). Such exclusions reinforce dependence on capital and narrow the scope for resistance (Bhalla and Lapeyre, 2002).

Exclusion studies conceptualise exclusion not as a residual condition of poverty, but as a durable and relational process through which groups are systematically disconnected from labour markets, legal protections, and institutional resources (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Silver, 2007). From this perspective, exclusion operates as a structuring condition of labour regimes, shaping workers' dependence, mobility, and exit options. This article builds on this insight to examine how exclusion structures the operation of labour control within residential workplaces.

The article draws a comparison between colonial (traditional) and newer residential labour regimes in tea plantations, showing how variations in exclusion correspond to different intensities and forms of labour control. Traditional plantations rely on comprehensive and cumulative exclusions to sustain overt coercion, while newer plantations selectively integrate workers into limited socio-economic domains, encouraging consent-based mechanisms of

control. These limited freedoms, however, remain embedded within broader exclusionary architectures that continue to sustain managerial domination. Dormitory labour regimes are therefore inseparable from processes of exclusion and worker immobilisation.

Existing labour regime scholarship has shown how residential workplaces simultaneously impose freedom and restriction, particularly in relation to female garment workers, complicating simple coercion–consent binaries (Crane et al., 2022). While dormitories may offer income, safety, skill development, or communal solidarity, much of this literature treats exclusion implicitly rather than theorising it as an explanatory mechanism. As a result, the role of exclusion in shaping the intensity, durability, and form of labour control remains underdeveloped.

This article addresses this gap by analysing two residential tea plantations in Bangladesh through Burawoy's framework of coercion and consent (1979, 1985) and the social exclusion literature (Al-Amin et al., 2017; Davies, 2005; Silver, 1994). It argues that labour control is not solely determined by dormitory infrastructure or the formal presence of state and trade union protections, but is fundamentally shaped by historically sedimented social, political, economic, and geographic exclusions. Exclusionary strategies operate both as mechanisms that intensify everyday labour control and as structural means through which coercion is reproduced across generations. By comparing traditional and new tea plantations, this study demonstrates how differing degrees and configurations of exclusion shape distinct forms of labour control, conditioning whether control is exercised primarily through overt coercion or through managed consent within dormitory labour regimes.

2.0 Labour Regime, Exclusion, Coercion, and Consent

The concept of a labour regime draws on Braverman's critique of labour control and the regulation approach, which examines how capitalist stability has been sustained despite recurrent crises (Arnold and Campbell, 2017). Central to this literature is Burawoy's theorisation of factory regimes, which situates workplace control within broader political-economic relations between capital, labour, and the state (Burawoy, 1979, 1985). Burawoy (1979) shows how consent is actively produced through internal labour markets, collective bargaining, and incentive structures, while coercion becomes dominant where resistance is weak and institutional protections are limited.

Empirical research demonstrates that coercive labour regimes are sustained through state structures, segmented labour markets, and managerial strategies. Uddin and Hopper (2001) document despotic labour regimes under conditions of weak regulation, while Buckley (2022) shows how precarious wages, enforced overtime, subcontracting, and exclusion from social security produce hyper-precarity in Vietnam. Comparative studies highlight how global production networks generate dormitory labour regimes based on restricted mobility and limited legal protections (Azmeh, 2014). Even in contexts with formal labour protections, control may operate through softer mechanisms. Andrijasevic (2022) identifies labour control "through desire" in Europe, where dormitories are framed as aspirational spaces, while Frydenlund (2023) shows how access to workplace housing is unevenly distributed along gendered and familial lines. Together, these studies demonstrate that dormitory labour regimes are internally differentiated and deeply shaped by exclusion.

The state remains central to the organisation of labour regimes. A growing literature highlights state complicity in facilitating coercion and exclusion, whether through weak enforcement, colonial legal legacies, or agrarian power structures (Ahmed and Uddin, 2022; Arnold and Campbell, 2017; White and Wijaya, 2021). At the same time, some research shows that workers

may exercise limited agency through skills, labour shortages, or social networks (Choi and Peng, 2014; Pun et al., 2020), and that dormitories can function as transitional spaces enabling mutual support and learning (Ceccagno and Sacchetto, 2019). These accounts complicate simple coercion–consent binaries but often treat exclusion implicitly rather than as an organising principle.

2.1 Exclusion as a Structuring Condition of Labour Control

This article conceptualises exclusion as a structuring condition of labour control in residential workplaces. Jonas (1996) links territorialised labour control regimes to uneven development and local institutional arrangements that restrict mobility and access to alternative employment. Pun and Smith (2007) describe dormitory labour regimes as systems of containment, in which the integration of work and residence lowers reproduction costs, extends working hours, and intensifies surveillance. Kelly (2002) similarly shows how employer-controlled housing and legal barriers constrain workers' spatial and economic agency across Southeast Asia. Goodburn and Mishra (2023) argue that such regimes represent a shared capitalist strategy across India and China, frequently legitimised by the state.

To capture how these regimes operate, exclusion must be theorised beyond physical confinement. Social exclusion scholarship conceptualises exclusion as a relational and institutional process through which groups are systematically disconnected from labour markets, welfare systems, legal protections, and social participation (Silver, 1994, 2007; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004). Exclusion operates through differentiated rights, constrained access to resources, and restricted participation, producing forms of structural dependency that closely resemble unfree labour (Breman, 2007). This multidimensional understanding allows for the analysis of varying degrees of exclusion and how they condition coercion and consent within dormitory labour regimes.

Applied to plantation settings, exclusion operates through overlapping spatial, legal, political, and economic disconnections. Workers may be incorporated as wage labour while remaining excluded from land ownership, secure residence beyond plantations, political participation, and social protection. Such exclusions are cumulative and entrenched (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004), and reproduce durable inequalities through categorical closure and differential access to rights (Tilly, 1998). Labour discipline is thus sustained not only through direct managerial coercion but through the foreclosure of exit options and alternatives.

2.2 Continuity of Coercion and Exclusion

While labour regime studies have examined coercion and consent, the role of exclusion in sustaining coercive labour control over time remains underdeveloped (Goodburn and Mishra, 2023). This article argues that historically produced legal, social, and spatial exclusions are central to the persistence of coercive dormitory labour regimes.

In plantation economies, residential labour regimes have long relied on exclusion to secure labour control. Tea plantations confined generations of workers to overcrowded housing, embedding work, residence, and livelihood within a single spatial regime (Alawattage and Wickramasinghe, 2008; Ranasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2020). Shahadat and Uddin (2022) show how such spatial arrangements enable 'herd controllability', where disciplining a small group produces wider compliance. Plantation workers have also been systematically excluded from broader labour markets through political and institutional interventions, ensuring a captive workforce (Bhowmik, 2011).

Extending these insights, this study argues that exclusion is not a residual outcome of labour control but a foundational mechanism through which coercion is reproduced. By comparing traditional (colonial) and new tea plantations, it shows how exclusion across social, political, and economic domains structures divergent configurations of labour control. The continuity of

coercion, therefore, reflects historically embedded exclusionary processes that reproduce worker subordination.

3.0 Research Methods

This study forms part of a broader ethnographic research project examining labour regimes and everyday life in two tea plantations in Bangladesh, one traditional and one newly established. Traditional tea plantations in Bangladesh, as in much of South Asia, are geographically isolated and historically rooted in indentured labour systems. Of the 168 tea plantations currently operating in Bangladesh, 135 were established during the colonial period, embedding long-standing continuities in labour control and exclusionary arrangements (Bangladesh Tea Board, 2023). The traditional plantation examined in this study forms part of a wider network of estates developed under colonial land tenure arrangements, in which land titles were secured for plantation production. Although these estates now operate on leased land, the state retains ultimate ownership, reinforcing legal and institutional frameworks that continue to constrain workers' autonomy and mobility.

By contrast, the 'new plantation' selected for this study is located in northern Bangladesh and was established within village settings. Tea cultivation was not historically practised in this region; however, its flat terrain, dry climate, and soil composition proved conducive to commercial tea production, which began after 1998. Unlike traditional plantations, these newer estates did not benefit from bulk, state-supported land acquisition and were instead dispersed across multiple villages. This spatial dispersion increased production costs, as harvested tea had to be transported over considerable distances to processing factories, often located miles away. Despite this decentralised geography, new plantations reproduced key exclusionary features by restricting workers' access to alternative employment, state protections, and long-term social mobility.

The study adopts a comparative case study design to examine how different institutional histories and spatial arrangements shape labour control through varying configurations of inclusion and exclusion. Comparison enables practices that are normalised and taken for granted within a single site to become analytically visible. Juxtaposing traditional and new plantations allows identification of how exclusion operates differently across economic, social, legal, and spatial domains, and how these differences condition the balance between coercion and consent. At the same time, the comparative approach shaped field relations, occasionally heightening managerial sensitivity and constraining access during later stages of fieldwork, an effect that itself provided insight into managerial anxieties surrounding scrutiny and control.

Fieldwork was conducted over a total of 56 days across two research periods, in 2011 and 2023, spanning approximately five months. The study employed direct observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The first author adopted a 'complete observer' role (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). None of the authors had prior affiliations with tea plantations, nor did they reside within plantation accommodation, in order to minimise disruption to workers' everyday routines. Access was negotiated with senior management, who permitted observation but restricted participation in plantation work or residence. These restrictions were justified by management as necessary to prevent worker unrest and ensure safety. While such limitations constrained the scope of observation, they also revealed the extent to which control over space and visibility formed part of the labour regime itself.

Insert Table 1

Interviews were conducted with participants occupying different positions within the plantation hierarchy to capture labour control, exclusion, and consent across organisational levels (see

Table 1). In total, 53 interviews were conducted across the two plantations, comprising 18 labourers (11 male and 7 female), 24 supervisory and managerial staff (6 managers, 5 assistant managers, 7 field officers, and 6 supervisors), and 11 institutional and intermediary actors. The latter included labour union leaders, account managers, senior research managers involved in training future plantation managers, an on-site physician, and NGO workers specialising in childbirth and postnatal care. This range of participants enabled analysis of labour control from everyday production and supervision through to managerial decision-making, welfare provision, and institutional governance.

In line with ethical obligations, the first author introduced himself to participants and explained the purpose of the research, including his intention to document tea workers' lives in a forthcoming book. Transparency regarding the aims of the research was maintained throughout the fieldwork.

The initial phase of fieldwork in 2011 focused on labour conditions, minimum wages, trade union activity, and the organisation of plantation life. The decision to revisit the sites in 2023 was motivated by the opportunity to examine how labour controls and exclusionary practices had evolved over time, particularly in relation to policy changes, managerial strategies, and worker–management relations. Methodologically, the revisit enabled a reflexive reconsideration of the researcher–participant relationship and the durability of labour regimes across time (Burawoy, 2003).

A substantial component of the fieldwork involved sustained observation of daily labour processes. Each day began with early morning meetings in which field officers and supervisors allocated labour and discussed discipline. To capture workers' subjectivities, everyday

practices, and forms of consent, the first author accompanied workers across multiple sites, including nurseries, plucking areas, factories, residential quarters, religious spaces, and local markets. These observations enabled documentation of work rhythms, informal interactions, and power relations extending beyond the immediate labour process.

In the traditional plantation, workers initially displayed caution but gradually developed trust, leading to candid discussions of their experiences. Workers frequently approached the researcher voluntarily to share grievances, often forming small informal discussion groups. Interviews were conducted away from field officers and senior managers to reduce fear of reprisal. Despite these precautions, the hierarchical organisation of plantation space and the awareness of managerial surveillance may have shaped what workers felt able to disclose, a limitation that informed the interpretation of interview material.

Engagement with Santal workers in the new plantations presented linguistic challenges, as they spoke distinct Bangla dialects. In some cases, follow-up discussions with field officers or assistant managers were used to clarify contextual details. Workers were often uneasy about written documentation, leading the researcher to record notes in the evenings. Observation captured everyday interactions between workers and management, including non-verbal cues, informal conversations while waiting for wages, and attempts to lobby officers for support. Alongside individual interviews, five spontaneous group interviews were conducted, each involving three to six workers.

For safety reasons and due to unfamiliarity with the local area, most interviews were conducted during daylight hours in workplaces or residential areas. Interviewees were not pre-selected; rather, workers, supervisors, managers, and auxiliary staff were approached opportunistically

for informal conversations ranging from brief exchanges to extended discussions. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their statements at any time. Given the spontaneous nature of these encounters, interviews relied on active listening and empathetic engagement rather than structured schedules. Field notes were recorded in multiple notebooks, noting participants' approximate age ranges and occupational roles to preserve anonymity.

Secondary data included books, doctoral theses, government reports, company documents, and newspaper articles. These materials were used not as background description but as analytical resources to contextualise workers' narratives, cross-check historical claims, and trace continuities and ruptures in labour management across colonial and postcolonial periods. Data reliability was strengthened through triangulation of observations, interviews, and secondary sources, allowing divergences between reported views and observed practices to be examined analytically rather than treated as inconsistencies.

The final phase of analysis synthesised empirical material using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of deductive-thematic analysis. Repeated readings of field notes and interview accounts identified recurring patterns and interesting features related to exclusion, coercion, consent, and labour control, thus, generated initial codes. Applying initial codes systematically across the dataset, we collated data into potential themes. Themes were iteratively refined through comparison within and across the two plantations, enabling similarities and contrasts to emerge. Observational data were prioritised to anchor interpretations of interview material in everyday practices, and findings were interpreted in dialogue with secondary sources to examine how exclusionary mechanisms are reproduced, contested, or reconfigured over time.

4.0 Dormitory Labour Regimes and Exclusions: Traditional and New Tea Plantations

Traditional tea plantations in Bangladesh emerged under British colonial capitalism in the nineteenth century, when the East India Company initiated experimental plantations in the eastern region to assess the feasibility of tea cultivation. Early expansion was uneven, prompting company officials to rely on speculative land claims: imported saplings were planted across dispersed locations, and where cultivation succeeded, land titles were secured for formal plantation development. These practices laid the foundations for a plantation system characterised by spatial enclosure, labour immobilisation, and long-term capital accumulation. Today, traditional tea plantations continue to operate on leased land, with the state retaining ultimate ownership, preserving the legal and spatial arrangements that underpin workers' exclusion (Shahadat and Uddin, 2022; Al-Amin et al., 2017).

New tea plantations began proliferating in northern Bangladesh in the early 2000s. Unlike colonial plantations, where land was leased under government patronage, new plantation owners were required to purchase land outright, and processing factories were licensed to source tea leaves from independent smallholder farmers. Despite these differences in land ownership and sourcing, exclusion remains central to labour control in both traditional and new plantations, although it is organised through different configurations (Silver, 2007; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004).

Existing scholarship shows that exclusion in plantation settings extends beyond physical separation to encompass legal, economic, political, and social disempowerment (Al-Amin et al., 2017; Davies, 2005; Silver, 2007). Exclusion operates as a structured disconnection from labour markets, welfare systems, political participation, and institutional resources, shaping workers' dependence and exit options (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Levitas et al., 2007). The analysis below examines how differing degrees of exclusion are organised across traditional and new dormitory labour regimes, and how these exclusions shape workers' everyday lives. Table 2 summarises these dynamics.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Physical Exclusions

From their inception, colonial tea plantations relied on exclusionary recruitment and mobility controls to secure labour. Early attempts to draw local peasants into plantation work through agricultural taxation largely failed. By the late nineteenth century, railway expansion enabled the large-scale transportation of unskilled labour from distant regions. Recruitment agents targeted impoverished and socially marginalised populations, frequently deceiving them into contracts that bound workers to plantations under conditions of unfreedom (Mohanta, 2008; Al-Amin et al., 2017; Shahadat and Uddin, 2022). These practices reflect broader patterns of labour enclosure and structural dependency documented in South Asian labour regimes (Breman, 2007).

Field observations and interviews indicate that workers experience spatial confinement not as a temporary arrangement but as a durable feature of plantation life. Throughout interviews, workers consistently referred to plantations as *"gardens"*, a term commonly used in everyday speech. This language frames plantation life as a familiar and bounded social world rather than as a site of labour control, reflecting how enclosure and exclusion become normalised through everyday practices. Residence, work, and livelihood are closely intertwined, while mobility beyond plantation boundaries remains constrained. Even life events such as marriage historically required managerial approval. During the colonial period, a male worker was required to seek permission from his manager, alongside consent from his fiancée's family or clan. Upon granting approval, the groom's manager would write to the bride's plantation manager to request her formal transfer.

During the colonial era, registered workers were prohibited from using public transport to return to or visit their places of origin. Police actively pursued fleeing workers, subjecting them

to physical punishment before forcibly returning them to plantation authorities, often as a warning to others. To ensure immediate detection of escape, workers were required to assemble daily at sunrise and sunset in front of the *tilla* office (the administrative building) for attendance checks.

A worker from a traditional plantation described how this regime of control has softened but not disappeared in the post-colonial period:

> "We may take up jobs outside the garden if one of my family members works full-time in the garden; however, lack of financial support, education, job references, and social prejudice mean that we barely manage wages that could allow a life outside the garden. Again, we must attend tea garden work once summoned, especially during the peak season. Managers say there are no shortages of jobless and homeless people outside the garden, so why would anyone pick us? Most of us believe them."

Such restrictions have become normalised across generations, producing entrenched forms of exclusion that limit exit options and reinforce dependency (Davies, 2005). As another worker explained:

> "The labour line is our home. We do not have any other hometown, relatives, or friends outside this garden, except a handful of people who work elsewhere. We are tea workers by birth and will die here like our predecessors."

New plantations initially sought to recruit local workers into waged employment. Local workers, however, resisted permanent plantation work, treating tea labour as supplementary and prioritising their own agricultural activities during peak seasons. This resistance undermined managerial efforts to stabilise labour and illustrates how exclusion interacts with labour-market positioning and exit options (Silver, 2007).

In response, managers recruited from historically marginalised communities, particularly the Santal people, an Indigenous group living approximately 130–140 kilometres away whose

limited access to land and employment rendered them vulnerable (Sarker et al., 2016). Unlike the coercive recruitment practices of colonial plantations, new estates relied on negotiated hiring through community leaders who assessed working and living conditions prior to endorsing employment. As one permanent worker recalled, a senior community leader visited the plantation, reviewed wages, housing, and working conditions, and subsequently recommended that community members accept employment.

Traditional plantations remain physically segregated through fenced boundaries, guarded entry points, and the strategic placement of worker housing at a distance from management offices and factories. Surveillance and restricted access limit unsanctioned interaction with surrounding communities, reinforcing labour immobilisation. In contrast, new plantations integrate worker housing within village settings. While this spatial openness facilitates access to markets, hospitals, and public facilities, exclusion persists through conditional residence, insecure employment, and informalised labour arrangements, consistent with forms of selective inclusion identified in the exclusion literature (Silver, 2007).

Social and Cultural Exclusions

In traditional plantations, social exclusion is reinforced through material deprivation and stigma. Workers reside in overcrowded, single-room accommodations shared by multiple family members, with limited sanitation and food provisions. Medical facilities offer only basic care, while recreational and social infrastructures are largely absent. Schools and religious institutions are positioned near housing entrances, limiting interaction with outsiders. Plantation authorities monitor engagement with external actors, reinforcing social closure (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004).

Workers were acutely aware of the stigma attached to plantation life and described being viewed by surrounding communities as socially inferior and morally suspect. A field officer observed:

> "Very few trust these tea workers because they know tea workers' stealing habits. So, they barely get a job outside the garden."

A trade union leader offered a more qualified account:

> "People don't trust them, perhaps because they don't know the tea workers. I know a few retired officers who appointed these tea workers as guards or household helpers when they moved to Dhaka because of the workers' loyalty and hard work."

Such representations extend exclusion beyond the workplace, reinforcing separation from mainstream social and economic life and contributing to durable marginalisation (Silver, 2007). In new plantations, social exclusion is less overt. Housing within villages enables interaction with local markets and public institutions, and everyday relations between workers and non-workers are more fluid. A part-time worker commented:

> "These permanent workers earn their livelihood here, live in the villages, share our limited amenities, and pay for services. Good for local businesses. They have become new neighbours. New neighbours remain somewhat isolated at first and appear different. It gets easier when you work alongside them and begin to understand each other."

Yet this integration remains fragile. Workers continue to face exclusion from secure permanent employment, welfare provision, and long-term mobility, reflecting marginal inclusion rather than substantive social incorporation (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Silver, 2007).

Legal Exclusions

Legal exclusion represents a major point of continuity across plantation regimes. Despite Bangladesh's independence, the legal framework governing tea plantations continues to differentiate tea workers from other labouring groups. Minimum wages, leave entitlements, and maternity protections remain substantially weaker than those available in other sectors, institutionalising inequality and constraining workers' economic advancement (Tilly, 1998).

[Insert Table 3 here]

Workers consistently described legal protections as distant and ineffective. One worker from a traditional plantation remarked:

> "We are tea workers, and despite there being rules and regulations of the land, they barely protect us. What do you expect from living and working in the same place?"

A trade union leader used a local proverb to describe workers' vulnerability:

> "There is a proverb saying never insult a crocodile while your feet are still in the water. Tea garden workers' entire body is drowned in the water. We have witnessed many government and political leaders in our lives with unrealised promises."

Although trade unions are not formally prohibited, their activities are systematically constrained through surveillance, intimidation, and weak enforcement. While new plantations allow greater worker mobility, union presence remains minimal. Legal exclusion thus operates through differentiated rights and limited enforceability, reinforcing economic vulnerability across both plantation types (Silver, 2007).

The analysis demonstrates that exclusion in tea plantations is neither uniform nor static. Traditional plantations rely on comprehensive physical, social, and legal exclusion, producing an intergenerationally entrapped workforce. New plantations rework these exclusions through selective inclusion, mobility combined with insecurity, and informalised employment. These configurations of exclusion provide the conditions under which labour control is organised,

setting the context for the analysis of how coercion and consent are practically enacted in traditional and new tea plantations.

5.0 Labour Controls: New vs Traditional Plantations

Building on the comparative analysis of exclusion developed in the previous section, this section examines how differing configurations of exclusion translate into distinct yet structurally connected modes of labour control.

Burawoy's (1985) analysis of labour control within capitalist enterprises highlights the dynamic interplay between coercion and consent, showing how factory regimes generate consent through internal labour markets, collective bargaining, and ideological mechanisms. However, the balance between coercion and consent is not fixed; it is conditioned by wider political and institutional arrangements, particularly the role of the state in providing social protection and enforcing labour regulation. Where the state is closely aligned with capital and worker protections are weak or selectively enforced, coercion becomes a dominant mechanism of labour discipline and surplus extraction. Empirical studies demonstrate how such regimes are intensified in peripheral economies, where state institutions routinely prioritise capital's interests at the expense of labour (Uddin and Hopper, 2001; Ahmed and Uddin, 2022).

Building on this literature, this section advances the argument by showing how spatial, social, cultural, and legal exclusions structure the conditions under which coercion and consent are produced in tea plantations**.** We argue that exclusion operates not as a residual feature of plantation labour, but as a constitutive mechanism that narrows workers' exit options, reinforces dependency, and shapes the modalities through which labour control is exercised.

Traditional tea plantations in South Asia exemplify labour capture within systems of racialised and caste-based exclusion, in which workers are systematically segregated from mainstream society socially, geographically, and legally, producing a captive workforce subject to managerial dominance (Bhowmik, 2011; Sharma, 2009; Kara, 2012; Shahadat and Uddin, 2022). These conditions sustain a plantation mode of production characterised by intensive surveillance, arbitrary discipline, and severely limited social mobility. Exclusion here functions not simply as contextual background but as an active structuring condition, stabilising labour control by constraining alternatives and weakening both individual and collective resistance.

This section examines how these exclusionary arrangements shape labour control practices in traditional and new tea plantations. While managerial strategies differ in form, they exhibit strong structural continuities. As summarised in Table 4, both regimes rely on differentiated configurations of exclusion to secure labour discipline, though they mobilise coercion and consent in distinct ways.

Insert Table 4

Across both plantation types, labour control is organised within hierarchical structures dominated by managerial authority. In traditional plantations, managers and assistant managers exercise near-feudal power, reinforced by deep-seated social exclusion and generational dependency. In newer plantations, overt social distance is reduced and control is exercised through more corporatised and relational practices. Yet beneath these differences lies a shared objective: securing compliance, suppressing resistance, and sustaining surplus extraction through constrained choices rather than open force alone.

5.1 Labour Engagement

Field observations indicate that labour control in traditional plantations is oriented towards maximising surplus extraction through rigid supervision and authoritarian management. Workers, many of whom are born into plantation life, experience long working days extending from sunrise to sunset, with minimal autonomy over task allocation or working conditions. The hierarchical organisation of plantation management fosters a culture of submission, in which supervisors rarely challenge exploitative practices due to their own vulnerability within the managerial chain. Workers' attempts to raise concerns with senior management are cautious and indirect, reflecting pervasive fear of retaliation and limited confidence in institutional redress.

Social and spatial separation between workers and management further entrenches authoritarian control. Workers are generally prohibited from entering administrative offices unless summoned, communicating instead through office windows, a practice that symbolises their marginal position within the plantation order. Senior managers deliberately maintain this distance, delegating routine interactions to supervisors and field officers who enforce discipline on their behalf. Dehumanising narratives play a central role in legitimising control, with managers frequently portraying workers as lazy or unproductive to justify wage deductions and disciplinary action. As one assistant manager stated:

> "Any worker wasting working hours (if managers feel they are not productive enough) will receive only half a day's wage, regardless of their presence."

Such perceptions are accompanied by an explicit denial of workers' autonomy and dignity. One manager explained:

> "Workers only possess their body… They are completely dependent on the company as they do not possess any land, house, or food to survive."

Although traditional plantations benefit from substantial natural resources that reduce operating costs, managers routinely frame these conditions as evidence of benevolence. Claims that the company provides all means of livelihood are repeatedly invoked to justify low wages and disciplinary control, reinforcing dependency rather than entitlement.

Threats of criminalisation are also deployed as instruments of labour discipline, underscoring how exclusion from legal protection renders workers vulnerable to extra-economic coercion. As one assistant manager warned supervisors:

> "Just a phone call from the manager should be enough for them to raid and arrest people."

In contrast, labour engagement in new tea plantations is organised through a more consent-oriented configuration. Supervisors adopt a pedagogical and relational style, emphasising guidance rather than overt coercion. Working hours are less rigid, and casual workers report only when labour is required. As one labourer explained:

> "If there is demand for a worker, you can still make half a day's wages with a smile and nod."

Importantly, consent is shaped even before employment begins. Rather than relying on inherited immobility, managers seek to stabilise labour by presenting recruitment as a negotiated and informed process. Prospective workers are encouraged to assess working and living conditions prior to acceptance. As one permanent worker recalled:

> "The eldest leader from our community visited the managers first… and recommended that we accept the employment."

This process produces an appearance of choice and transparency, while drawing labour from economically vulnerable communities with limited alternatives. Workers commonly refer to assistant managers and field officers as "brothers", reinforcing a sense of relational proximity. Yet this familiarity functions less as equality than as a mechanism through which consent is embedded within ongoing dependency. If labour engagement reveals how authority is exercised in everyday interactions, incentive systems show how economic insecurity and selective rewards consolidate consent over time.

5.2 Incentive Systems

Incentive structures in both plantation types reinforce labour discipline through economic precarity. In traditional plantations, workers subsist on extremely low daily wages of BDT 170, supplemented by rationed flour and minimal healthcare. The ration system operates as a disciplinary tool, with access to basic provisions tied closely to compliance (Bilkis, 2022). Threats of ration withdrawal or job loss are commonly used to punish dissent and regulate behaviour. During a morning meeting, one assistant manager stated:

> "Your wages were very low in the past and we raised them. Still you're lazy. Workers in other gardens get the same wages but they are far more active… We should do (redundant) something like that."

Workers expressed frustration with these narratives, questioning managerial claims of benevolence:

> "They are doing a huge favour keeping us in the job? Monumental lie! No payment on time, no overtime but ask for our services… The wages merely keep up with the living expenses."

Gendered task allocation further structures inequality. Managers routinely justify assigning women to plucking on the grounds of cleanliness and dexterity, extracting additional unpaid labour. As one female worker explained:

> "Since female workers maintain cleanliness around their workplace, managers keep female workers for picking leaves so that the bushes around tea plants' bases remain clean free of costs."

Housing allocation is also used as an incentive and disciplinary mechanism. Access to improved accommodation is uneven and often contingent on loyalty to management. One worker described this process:

> "Our company house consists of a house with a single room shared by husband, wife and kids without any privacy… the company builds tin-shed houses at a slower rate and hand them over to those families who serve managers well."

New plantations offer higher daily wages, ranging from BDT 300 to 600, but these increases do not eliminate precarity. The 'no work, no pay' principle remains firmly in place, exposing workers to income instability during off-peak periods or adverse weather conditions. Casual workers, while earning slightly more, remain excluded from long-term security and social benefits. A casual worker explained:

> "We are tenant farmers (barga chashi)… As long as we find work here, there is no risk for drought, flood or any other risks of losing investments. Again, off-peak season comes with difficulties."

Productivity targets remain central to labour control in both systems. Traditional plantations impose a 23 kg daily plucking target, with shortfalls resulting in wage deductions. New plantations adopt a marginally lower target of 22 kg, but apply deductions proportionately. In both settings, discretionary weight deductions of up to 30 per cent reinforce economic vulnerability and discipline.

Neither plantation model offers meaningful opportunities for advancement. Supervisory roles, once associated with skill and autonomy, are now tightly controlled. As one long-serving worker observed:

> "British and Pakistani planters used to train expert supervisors… Nowadays, the supervisors are not well-trained and micro-managed by managers… the best work process may not be the best for our managers."

Overall, while new plantations deploy a more relational and less overtly coercive mode of labour control, the underlying logic of exploitation remains unchanged. Differences in managerial style do not alter the structural conditions under which labour is subordinated to capital. In both regimes, labour control is organised through constrained exit options, economic insecurity, and differentiated access to resources**.** What varies is not the objective of control, but the configuration of exclusion through which consent is secured and resistance contained, a point taken up explicitly in the concluding section.

6.0 Concluding Remarks: Exclusion and the Structuring of Labour Control

Pun and Smith's (2007) analysis of work–residence regimes shows how capitalist production relies on spatial control over workers to secure labour subordination. By restricting mobility and stabilising a long-term, low-cost labour force, the work–residence model extends managerial domination beyond the labour process into everyday life, encompassing working time, rest, and social reproduction. This conclusion draws together the analysis by situating labour control within broader debates on exclusion, demonstrating how coercion and consent are structured by historically sedimented disconnections from rights, resources, and alternatives. Building on this, we argue that the functioning of dormitory labour regimes depends not only on spatial enclosure but on the production of structured disconnection from alternative labour markets, institutional protections, and social resources (Silver, 2007; Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004). Exclusion, in this sense, is constitutive rather than incidental to labour control.

The degree and configuration of exclusion are therefore central to dormitory labour regimes. In traditional tea plantations, established under British colonial rule, labour was recruited through coercive mechanisms that entrapped impoverished populations from distant regions. Workers endured harsh living conditions, subsistence wages, and pervasive managerial authority, ensuring their separation from wider society. As emphasised in the exclusion literature, such separation operates through cumulative and entrenched processes that restrict participation across economic, social, and political domains (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Davies, 2005). In plantation settings, these overlapping exclusions bound workers to plantation life and produced durable forms of dependency on management.

By contrast, new tea plantations in northern Bangladesh, emerging in the early 2000s, initially attempted to incorporate local labour into their production systems. Local workers resisted

permanent incorporation, treating tea work as supplementary rather than primary employment. This resistance highlights the importance of exit options in shaping labour control, a central insight of social exclusion scholarship, which links exclusion to constrained alternatives rather than absolute immobility (Silver, 2007). In response, plantation managers recruited workers from the Santal community, an Indigenous group facing acute economic precarity, to establish a new residential labour regime. Compared to traditional plantations, these newer estates cultivated closer interactions between workers, managers, and surrounding communities, moderating some of the more visible exclusionary practices historically associated with plantation labour.

Managers in new plantations avoided overt forms of exclusion, relying instead on subtler disciplinary strategies. Casual employment, flexible working hours, and lighter supervision reflected capital's adjustment to a labour market in which workers retained partial access to alternative livelihoods. These arrangements align with what the exclusion literature describes as selective inclusion, whereby limited participation is permitted without granting security or enforceable rights (Silver, 2007). Competition from other agricultural opportunities compelled plantations to recalibrate recruitment and retention strategies, combining higher wages with softer managerial relations and limited skill development, while preserving workers' exposure to insecurity.

Consent was shaped even before employment began in new plantations. Prospective permanent workers were encouraged to assess working and living conditions prior to recruitment, creating an appearance of choice and negotiation. This process echoes sociological accounts that emphasise how exclusion can coexist with forms of apparent inclusion, generating consent under conditions of constrained alternatives rather than substantive autonomy (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2004; Davies, 2005). While this arrangement reduced workers' immediate dependence

on plantation managers, it did not disrupt the underlying logic of capitalist extraction. Instead, labour control was reconfigured through the narrowing of acceptable options available to workers.

In contrast, the traditional plantation system relied on entrenched social immobility to sustain exploitation. Managers drew on workers' generational confinement within plantations, where access to land, housing, and alternative livelihoods was structurally denied. Descendants of colonial-era workers were systematically distanced from mainstream society through precarious housing, stigmatising narratives, and institutionalised discrimination. Even newly recruited Bengali workers often encountered similar forms of alienation, including homelessness and social dispossession upon entering plantation employment. Over time, exclusion shifted from overt labour enclosure to more pervasive processes of social stigmatisation, consistent with accounts of exclusion as a relational and historically sedimented condition (Silver, 2007; Davies, 2005).

This study extends Burawoy's (1979) analysis of coercion and consent by demonstrating how exclusion structures labour control regimes. The state, often portrayed as a neutral arbiter in labour relations, emerges instead as an active participant in sustaining capitalist dominance through differentiated legal rights and weak enforcement. Existing studies show how state regulation legitimises coercive labour control (Arnold and Campbell, 2017; White and Wijaya, 2021), and the findings presented here align with this critique. The analysis adds that exclusionary strategies, understood as structured disconnection from rights, resources, and alternatives, remain insufficiently integrated into labour regime theory. Dormitory systems are therefore not merely spatial arrangements but institutional mechanisms through which exclusion is organised and reproduced.

The analysis demonstrates how differing configurations of exclusion shape the forms of labour control operating within dormitory labour regimes. Traditional plantations rely on comprehensive and cumulative exclusion, producing an intergenerationally entrapped workforce subject to overt coercion. New plantations rework exclusion through selective inclusion, mobility combined with insecurity, and informalised employment relations. These configurations condition whether labour control operates primarily through coercion or through managed consent.

Finally, analyses of labour control must treat exclusion as a structuring condition rather than a residual outcome. The key distinction between traditional and new tea plantations lies not simply in the balance between coercion and consent, but in how exclusion shapes workers' exit options, dependence, and vulnerability over time. Exclusion remains a foundational element of labour control, and tracing its changing forms is essential for understanding the persistence and transformation of labour exploitation within dormitory labour regimes.

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Table 1: Profile of interviewees across plantation labour hierarchies

Interviewees	Number	Age (approx.)	Tasks/Responsibilities
Male labourers	11	19-60	Ground preparation, nursery work, tea processing
Female labourers	7	30-50	Plucking, cleaning, nursery work
Managers	6	45-70	Oversee plantation operations, report to headquarters
Assistant managers	5	25-40	Allocate resources, oversee daily work, report to managers
Field officers	7	30-60	Record and assess tasks, supervise workers
Supervisors	6	30-70	Implement managerial directives in fields and factories
Physician	1	45-48	Provides medical care on-site once or twice a week
NGO workers	2	32-35	Specialists in childbirth and postnatal care
Labour union leaders	3	40-60	Represent workers in disputes
Account managers	2	40-60	Manage budgets, conduct audits, report to senior management
Senior research managers	3	50-55	Train future plantation managers

Table 2: Degree of Exclusion

Exclusion	Traditional Tea Plantation	New Tea Plantation
Physical/ Spatial	Surveillance and physical barriers; residences located in remote, inaccessible areas; movement of workers and visitors heavily monitored.	No physical isolation or surveillance; worker residences integrated within villages; unrestricted access to hospitals, markets, and community facilities.
Social and Cultural	Residential workers viewed as criminals, drunks, and uncultured by both locals and managers; absolute dependency on managers, who assume a god-like role.	Positive social relationships between locals and residential workers (Santals); no social distance between workers and managers.
Legal	No state support; exclusive yet discriminatory labour laws; trade unions exist but are heavily controlled.	Minimal state support; discriminatory labour laws, but greater worker mobility allows for marginally better wages; trade unions are formally allowed but non-existent.

Table 3: Discriminatory Labour Laws – Bangladesh Labour Act 2006

Category	Tea Plantations	Other Sectors
Minimum Wage (2018)	BDT 1,800 plus 3 kg of flour	BDT 4,850-16,000, depending on the sector.
Maternity Work Restrictions	Light work permitted but often manipulated during peak plucking season.	Heavy work prohibited in the final 10 weeks of pregnancy.
Casual Leave	Excluded	10 days annually with full pay.
Annual Leave	22 days of work for one day off	18 days of work for one day off.

Table 4: Labour Control in Traditional and New Tea Plantations

Control Perspective	Dimension	Traditional Plantation	New Plantation
Labour Engagement	Recruitment	Descendants of colonial-era indentured labourers, locked into inherited dependency.	Recruitment of Santal and local casual workers, mediated by community leaders who assess conditions.
	Task Assignment	Intensive surplus extraction through work intensification, wage threats, and no worker consultation.	Tasks allocated contractually; a more managed, consent-oriented allocation of work.
	Supervision	Close surveillance and high work intensity.	Lighter supervision, though labour extraction remains central.
	Hierarchy and Status	Managers exercise quasi-feudal authority; workers routinely devalued.	Paternalistic "teacher–trainee" relations that obscure managerial dominance.
Incentives	Remuneration	Subsistence wages (BDT 170/day), rationed food, and insecure social provisions.	Higher wages (BDT 300–600/day) combined with employment insecurity.
	Working Time	Availability expected from sunrise to sunset.	Task-based work with limited flexibility and ongoing precarity.
	Productivity Targets	23 kg daily target; shortfalls trigger discretionary wage deductions.	Slightly lower target (22 kg), with proportional deductions.
	Mobility and Promotion	No realistic prospects for advancement.	Formal promotion possible but rarely realised.