

These symbolic gestures do little to improve labour rights or build goodwill between the countries: Dr Sanchita Banerjee Saxena

Dr Sanchita Banerjee Saxena shares with Amitava Kar of THE DAILY STAR some views on the impact of US trade policy on Bangladesh and the role of interest groups in policymaking. Dr Saxena is the executive director of the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California at Berkeley, USA and the director of the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies. She is the author of Made in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka: The Labor Behind the Global Garment and Textiles Industries (2014, Cambria Press).

Amitava Kar

Please give us the background of the establishment of Bangladesh Studies Center at Berkeley. What are some of the objectives? What research projects are being undertaken currently?

The Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies was established through the kindness and generosity of Mr. Subir and Mrs. Malini Chowdhury. They recognised the importance of establishing the first centre of its kind in North America that focuses on innovative research, and training the next generation of scholars on Bangladesh. In just a short time, the Chowdhury Center has already taken a lead in supporting critical scholarship in such diverse areas as increasing the knowledge of antibiotic resistance in multidrug resistant bacteria, safe water and safe water technologies, studying the use of violence as political campaign strategies, technologies applied to improve the safety of garment sector workers, and the role of women in enterprise development.



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We are able to offer vital support to students every year through fellowships awarded through the Chowdhury Center. This allows us to build a strong group of young scholars not only focused on Bangladesh as a part of their study, but support scholars from Bangladesh as well. One of the key objectives of the Center is an emphasis on collaborative research between University of California, Berkeley and top universities in Bangladesh, designed not only to simply impart knowledge or build capacity but to generate new research ideas, projects, and programmes based on mutual understanding. To this end, we are pleased to be actively pursuing collaborations with BRAC University and Independent University, Bangladesh in several areas.

The US exclusion of Bangladesh from GSP has been demoralising for Bangladeshi business communities who have taken some important steps toward improving labour conditions. What can the US and Bangladesh do to build closer trade relations?

The US GSP scheme does not even include garments and textiles, which constitute the majority of Bangladesh's exports. To truly be able to use trade policy as an incentive to improve labour conditions, GSP must first include garments and textiles, otherwise, having the scheme in place and then revoking it, is truly meaningless. These symbolic gestures do little to improve labour rights or build goodwill between the countries. Actually being able to use GSP as a real incentive to improve labour rights would be much more effective.

Could you please elaborate on your argument that high US tariffs on imports from Bangladesh and other Asian countries put pressure on contractors to scrimp on labour standards in order to stay competitive?

While garment owners themselves in Bangladesh or other exporting countries do not pay tariffs directly to the US, brands and international buyers do. These high tariffs are a part of their cost calculations and play an important role in further squeezing garment factories in Bangladesh and elsewhere by demanding the lowest price for the garments they produce. When owners have to produce garments at an extremely low cost (otherwise they fear that the buyer will go elsewhere), they have less incentive and are financially unable to improve conditions in the factories and provide higher wages and better benefits to workers.

What are the real challenges ahead for international organisations and NGOs working in Bangladesh?

I see two main challenges for NGOs working in Bangladesh. First, there are so many NGOs, they often duplicate efforts and there is limited coordination among those working on similar issues. The bigger challenge is the tension between NGOs that focus on longer-term societal change versus those that focus on projects that are data driven that demonstrate measurable results. The perfect example is, many NGOs focusing on girls' education concentrate on building more schools (this is quantifiable - you can count the number of schools built), rather than on understanding the real barriers to girls' education (this is not quantifiable and takes much longer to see change and results). Many NGOs are moving away from trying to impact social change to engaging in activities that produce short-term results due to the demands placed on them by international donor agencies.

What roles do interest groups play in policymaking in a democracy?

Interest groups are important in a democracy to influence the policy agenda. They influence the State to enact certain policies and also prevent the State from unilaterally making decisions without taking into account the priorities of other groups in society. When groups that have been previously excluded begin to have a voice in policy-making, the agenda changes. To truly have a vibrant democracy, the policy network must open up to include all relevant groups in the decision making process.

[Prior to joining ISAS, Dr Saxena was the assistant director of economic programmes at the Asia Foundation. She was a Public Policy Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 2010 and 2014.]