

WHAT THE PAPERS SAY

A WEEKLY ROUND UP OF ARTICLES ABOUT EMPLOYMENT, THE LABOUR MARKET, SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

THIS WEEK IN THE BANGLADESH ENGLISH PRESS...

... discussions around Bangladesh's suspension from the Generalised System of Preference continued. The apparel and leather sectors featured as usual. But uniquely skilled workers in other industries also made the news: tea pickers and saree weavers. And Qatar announced labour reforms that will benefit migrant workers from South Asia.

LEATHER NOW SECOND ONLY TO GARMENTS

The Daily Start began the week noting that Bangladesh exported over one billion dollars of leather and leather goods last year. Leather products including shoes, bags, wallets, belts and finished leather now stand ahead of jute products in terms of export earnings.

The potential of the sector has been highlighted in the Bangladesh news in recent years. At the last count there were 130,000 employed in the footwear sector alone.

The managing director of Apex Footwear, Bangladesh's largest footwear exporter is upbeat about leather. But he felt exports could have been higher but for the economic crisis in Europe and environmental problems with tanneries. Relocating these older plants from Hazaribagh to a dedicated estate in Savar has been slow. International buyers remain concerned about pollution and environmental management.

On the other hand The Independent on Thursday was downbeat on the future of tanneries in Chittagong. Only two of 21 businesses now survive and both of these are on the brink of failure putting around 2,000 jobs at risk. One business owner cites poor investment in managerial capacity and no effluent treatment plant among many reasons for the decline.

THE BENARES SAREE WEAVERS: VICTIMS OF FASHION?

According to Sunday's special report in The Independent several thousand jobs have been lost from this traditional highly skilled industry. And those remaining in the trade are earning less.

Weaving of Benares sarees dates back to the sixteenth century and has continued using traditional methods and materials to this day. These days the weavers can be found in the Mirpur area of Dhaka.

But modern fashions mean that women no longer think of these elegant sarees as a must-have. Changes in trade terms and other market conditions have also undermined a craft that was at its peak in the 1980s. A steady decline in buyers means that a once flourishing tradition could die out.

POLITICS DAMPENS EXPORTS

Three months of political dead lock at the beginning of 2015 virtually shut down the country says The Daily Star. Exports have taken a hit. Apparels, the number one export earner, took the worst hit. Leather jute, home textile, frozen food and live fish were also impacted.

GSP: WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

Last week we discussed the USA's 2013 decision to suspend Bangladesh from a favourable trading agreement known as the Generalised System of Preference (the "GSP"). In a more in-depth analysis this week, the Financial Express says that the suspension has not really had a negative effect on trade.

For a start only a small number of products were included in the agreement anyway. Trade in these items has increased despite the suspension. Bangladesh has just found other markets.

When we look at apparels, these never came under the agreements and Bangladesh continues to be one of the main exporters to the USA. In fact the only beneficiaries of the GSP for apparels are USA's neighbours: Mexico, Honduras and Nicaragua.

So the Financial Express concludes that Bangladesh should not see improving employment conditions as means to regain GSP but an end in itself.

BUT THE DEBATE CONTINUES...

Later in the week the Express began a two-part article on health and safety in the work place. It warns that safety is being compromised in pursuit of profit. Sadly, although there are good health and safety regulations in place, the government seems unable to enforce them.

AND THE MINISTER HITS THE FINAL POINT

The Minister for Commerce says that Bangladesh has now met the last of sixteen conditions for re-entry to the GSP. The final action was to write the rules governing factory conditions. These rules are required to enact the Labour Law amended in 2013.

The US Government set these conditions following the Rana Plaza building collapse and the Tazreen Fashions fire. These disasters led to Bangladesh's suspension from the GSP in 2013.

And finally at the end of the week the Minister continued his mission of growing Bangladesh's industry. The Independent reported a range of

viewpoints expressed at the opening of the Bangladesh Apparel and Safety Expo 2015 in Chittagong.

Inaugurating the Expo the Commerce Minister talked about China's plans to invest over two billion dollars building 5,000 factories in a Munshiganj Industrial Zone and creating up to half a million jobs.

The President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said that the Government must ensure power and infrastructure for manufacturing.

But despite concerns about power supply, Chinese investment continues. One hundred and fifty thousand jobs might be created around Chittagong. Bangladesh has earmarked nearly 300 acres for a special economic zone for Chinese investors.

GOOD CHEMISTRY

Once an importer of textile chemicals, from 2010 Bangladesh has been an exporter, says industry player. Bangladesh sends hydrogen peroxide to India, Nepal, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Bangladesh Export Promotion Bureau puts exports in 2014/2015 at over US \$7 million. Most of this was earned from India and Pakistan.

VISION 2021: TIME FOR TEA

There are over 20,000 people employed on Bangladesh's 166 tea estates. About three quarters are labourers. Under vision 2021 the Government is considering an investment of around US\$ 100 million to increase tea production. Part of this money will be spent on developing the skills of people employed in the sector and improving welfare arrangements for labourers.

QATAR PLAYS FAIR

According to the Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriates and Overseas Employment, Qatar will take on 200,000 workers from Bangladesh this year. No worker will have to pay for visas.

Many will work on projects for World Cup 2022. An online system for women will allow job applications for housekeepers, caregivers, babysitters, gardeners, guards, cleaners, drivers and cooks.

But Qatar has been heavily criticised following a press investigation and academic study into the conditions of migrant labourers. The Guardian reported on deaths that may have been caused by working conditions. A study, funded by Qatar National Research Fund, found workers made large payments for visas and were rarely paid on time.

The Independent on Tuesday carried an agency report on Qatar's labour reforms for migrant workers. The Wage Protection Scheme makes employers pay salaries on time. Many hope that this reform will lead to a change in the "khalafa" system that allows employers to retain workers' passports and prevents them from changing jobs.