

Arisa

Hides & hardship

Caste-based discrimination in the leather industry
in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan

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Coverphoto Hides hanging to
dry in a tannery in Bangladesh.

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Arisa

Arisa – *Advocating Rights in South Asia* – works to improve working conditions in international supply chains in South Asia. In collaboration with partner organisations in countries including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, Arisa monitors working conditions in the production of garments and textiles, leather, natural stone, and vegetable seeds. Many workers in supply chains for Dutch and other European companies face challenging working conditions and social issues. Arisa prioritises the most vulnerable workers in these supply chains and works to eliminate child labour, forced labour, and discrimination based on caste or gender. For more information, see www.arisa.nl



Together for Decent Leather

Together for Decent Leather is a three-year programme carried out by a consortium of seven Asian and European civil society organisations. The goal is to improve working conditions and to reduce labour rights abuses, focusing on production hubs for leather products in South Asia – in particular in the Vellore and Chennai districts in Tamil Nadu, India; in greater Karachi in Pakistan; and in the greater Dhaka region of Bangladesh. Together for Decent Leather works to secure increased commitment from companies to fulfil their human rights due diligence obligations and with governments to put in place safeguards and regulations to improve adherence to international labour standards. For more information, see www.togetherfordecentleather.org



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Introduction

Imagine a life filled with restrictions and impossibilities. A life where you are exposed to hardships and challenges on a daily basis. Where you are constantly alert to possible dangers. Where your life, and your family's life, mainly revolves around surviving, since the chances that you will find a job that can provide for your family are very slim. This is the reality for millions of people who find themselves in such a position simply because of their caste identity.

In South Asia, the caste system and related practices are widely present, including in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Caste is also intertwined with religion and present among the different religions practised in South Asia, including among religious minorities.

The Together for Decent Leather programme focuses on the working conditions of leather workers in the three South Asian countries of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. A specific connection between caste and the leather industry can be identified, while a religious aspect is present as well, especially in India. Since religious minorities face many challenges in these three countries, the interlinkages between caste, religion, and leather work cannot be ignored when looking at discriminatory practices in the industry in these countries. This paper shows that caste and related discriminatory practices, at times specifically interlinking with religion, are high risk factors for businesses that source leather or leather products from India, Bangladesh, or Pakistan. It explains how caste-based and religious-based discrimination presents itself in these countries and how this connects to the leather industry.

While equal rights for all citizens are guaranteed in the constitutions of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, discrimination based on caste or religion is a common phenomenon in all three countries due to beliefs deeply embedded in society. Because such practices are so strongly anchored in these societies, the risk of their seeping through to working environments cannot be ignored. Historical links between caste, religion, and the leather industry in South Asia mean a high risk of related discrimination in international leather supply chains. Every internationally operating company involved in or that does business with the South Asian leather industry therefore needs to consider this risk factor. Businesses that source leather or leather products from South Asia should specifically include caste-based discrimination in the scope of their human rights due diligence.

Caste-based discrimination is not an “internal” or “cultural” issue that international actors can exempt themselves from being involved in. It is a universal human rights issue and should be regarded as such. International buyers of leather and leather goods from South Asia in fact sustain their business model through the low-wage labour of a workforce among whom many people are from so-called lower-caste communities and/or religious minorities and who usually occupy a marginalised position in their societies. From the perspective of the leather workers in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who produce for the international market, the buying businesses and associated governments have a responsibility to make sure decent working conditions exist, including the absence of any discriminatory practices.

Part 1

The caste system and caste-based discrimination

To show how caste-based discrimination, including its interlinkages with religion, relates to South Asian working environments that feature in international supply chains, Part 1 provides a short introduction to the caste system and how discrimination based on caste or religious belief manifests in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Box 1 Draft and current United Nations (UN) statements on discrimination based on caste and religion

The draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination Based on Work and Descent define caste discrimination as

“any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on inherited status such as caste, including present or ancestral occupation, family, community or social origin, name, birth place, place of residence, dialect and accent that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, or any other field of public life. This type of discrimination is typically associated with the notion of purity and pollution and practices of untouchability, and is deeply rooted in societies and cultures where this discrimination is practiced.”¹

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief states in article 2 that “No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on the grounds of religion or belief.”²

1.1 The caste system in South Asia

The caste system in South Asia divides people into unequal and hierarchical social groups through birth, with mobility from one group to another ruled out. Caste seeps through all aspects of life, determining where people live, for example, whom they can marry, and what job opportunities exist for them. Those lowest in rank, also known as Dalits, are widely considered by members of higher castes to be lesser human beings and impure. The term Dalit literally means “broken people” and is a self-designation adopted as part of the growing self-awareness and self-empowerment of the Dalit movement. The former term, now rejected by most if not all Dalits, was “untouchables”, arising from the idea that the various caste groups have different levels of “purity” and “pollution” and that Dalits are the most “impure” and will “pollute” members of higher-rank caste groups. The resulting traditional practice is that higher-caste group members avoid all physical contact with Dalits.

Dalits are assigned the dirtiest jobs, like manual scavenging and disposing of dead animals.³ They have limited access to resources, services, and opportunities for self-development, and are usually not represented in decision-making positions.⁴

In South Asia, people's surnames (family names) are often connected to their caste and/or religious background, so a person's caste background can often be determined solely based on knowing their surname.⁵

It is estimated that around 260 million people worldwide are affected by caste-based discrimination. Although the phenomenon is present in countries all over the world, the vast majority of people facing caste-based discrimination live in South Asia.⁶ Common discrimination practices include being socially and economically excluded, having restricted areas where one can live, not having ready access to land, water, or education, and having limited options in employment.⁷ Caste-based discrimination is also apparent in violent acts, such as murder and rape.⁸ Despite being illegal, practices relating to “untouchability” are still very much present in South Asia, including in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.



Niita Tank, a 35-year-old Dalit woman and manual scavenger, photographed in her house. Due to her work, Niita gets sick, her eyes get swollen, and she has had a constant headache for three or four years. When she is working, she is treated as a servant: her customers abuse her with caste names and are not polite towards her.

Photo © Jakob Carlsen/IDSN

1.2 Caste and religion in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan

India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan display many similarities in how caste-based discrimination manifests itself, although there are country specifics as well. Below, we briefly explain the overall societal structures and background in relation to caste for each country. We include the related religious context, as there are clear inter-linkages between caste background and religious affiliation. These country overviews, while not providing a complete picture of the situation, aim to identify some of the more common practices.

India

India's constitution states that all Indian citizens enjoy equal rights. The constitution includes a classification system that recognises the large variety of individual backgrounds among the population. This system is extensive and comprises many different caste groups, which also vary from state to state.

Overall, India's constitution identifies four general caste group divisions, encompassing the many individual castes. These are: Forward Caste, Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes. Forward Caste, also referred to as General Class or General Category, comprises non-“backward” classes, whose members are usually in relatively better social and economic positions. India's constitution describes Other Backward Classes as “socially and educationally backward”. Scheduled Castes are also known as Dalits. The 2011 Indian Census determined there to be at least 200 million Dalits in the country, which came to around 16.6 per cent of the country's population.⁹ The Census did not record Christian and Muslim Dalits, however, so the actual number was probably higher. India's population was slightly more than 1.4 billion in March 2023.¹⁰

India formally abolished caste-based discrimination in 1950. Certain affirmative policies are in place, such as specific reservations in public universities and government jobs assigned to people from particular caste groups or tribal communities. In 1989, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed, intended to prevent atrocities against these groups. Yet implementation of the Act remains poor. Annual reviews of the implementation of the Act in Tamil Nadu even show an increase in recorded atrocities from when comparing figures from the year 2019 with the ones of 2020.¹¹

Caste-based discrimination ranges from Dalits' not being able to drink at tea stalls or sit in a restaurant, to their not being allowed to live in certain geographical areas, or not having access to education or decent jobs due to exclusion and segregation practices. And it extends to violent acts committed solely based on people's caste identity.

It has been said that certain social characteristics based on caste and religion are the prevailing determinants of poverty in India, where Dalits, next to tribal communities and Muslims, are the worst off.¹² In an attempt to escape the hardships and discrimination that are inextricably linked with having a Scheduled Caste background, Hindu Dalits in India have been converting to other religions for years, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the Christians living in India belong to Dalit communities.¹³

The main religion in India is Hinduism. According to the 2011 Census, 79.8 per cent of the Indian population are Hindu.¹⁴ The Census also indicates that Muslims take second place numerically, accounting for 14.2 per cent of the population, with 172 million Muslims living in India. This makes India the home of the second largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia.

India has a National Commission for Minorities, established in 1992, that has the task of protecting the rights of religious minority communities. Article 25 of the Indian constitution “guarantees the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion to all citizens”.¹⁵ Although freedom of religion is a fundamental right in India, in practice, discrimination based on a person's religious affiliation is a regular phenomenon in the country. Muslims are especially known to experience such discrimination.¹⁶ Discrimination on the basis of religion has increased in recent years.¹⁷ In April 2020, India was listed as a “country of concern” by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, following the increase in religious hostility.¹⁸ Acts of discrimination include segregation practices, limited access to education and economic opportunities, violent attacks, sexual assault, rape, and murder.¹⁹

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, with 90.31 per cent of the population identifying as Muslim in 2015, predominantly Sunni Muslim.²⁰ Hindus constitute 7.75 per cent of the population, and the remaining few per cent are mostly linked to Christianity (0.63 per cent), Buddhism (0.53 per cent), and Indigenous communities (0.45 per cent). The country originated from the Pakistan province of East Bengal, which was formed after the Indian subcontinent achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, involving its subdivision into India and Pakistan. In March 2023, the total population of Bangladesh was approaching 170 million inhabitants.²¹

It is estimated that there are between 5.5 to 6.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh,²² and many of them belong to religious minorities. For example, around 70 per cent of the country's Hindu population comprise Scheduled Castes and other minority groups.²³ Even though Islam does not recognise divisions based on caste, the caste system can be seen among Muslim communities as well. Christian Dalits also live in Bangladesh, yet it is not known how many.²⁴ The most recent Bangladesh Census in 2011 gathered no information on background regarding caste.

Article 28 of the Bangladesh constitution of 1972 reads: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth."²⁵ It further elaborates on equality and non-discrimination regarding religion or ethnicity, and religious freedom for all citizens. Bangladesh has ratified the major international human rights treaties and conventions and is therefore legally required to comply with them. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination are some of these ratified agreements.²⁶

In spite of these laws and international commitments, discrimination based on caste or religion, or both, is present in Bangladeshi society. Various reports and articles highlight how lower-caste groups and religious minorities have been the target of specific discrimination. Examples include untouchability practices, limitations in economic opportunities, differential treatment of children by teachers at school, houses being burnt down, attacks on places of worship, death threats, forced eviction and land seizures, and deadly assaults.²⁷ Many of the country's Dalits cannot easily enter public places like restaurants, temples, markets, or hairdressers. The majority also experience challenges in access to education, healthcare, decent employment, and land.²⁸ As mentioned above, Dalits are often part of the Hindu community and face double discrimination as both Dalits and members of a religious minority.

Caste-based segregation in village settlements occurs in Bangladesh, with Dalits usually having to live outside the main village boundaries.²⁹ Common non-urban occupations for Dalits include working on tea plantations, fishing, and working with leather or shoemaking. Urban Dalits are usually involved in cleaning, scavenging, and sweeping.³⁰ They usually live in separate colonies, named after their hereditary occupation, such as "the sweeper colony", in far from decent living conditions.³¹ About 60,000 Dalits live in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.



Dalit sweepers contribute to Dhaka's production of public goods but get very few goods or services in return. They even struggle to hold on to these underpaid and low-regarded jobs. Photo © Jakob Carlsen/IDSN

Pakistan

Pakistan gained independence in 1947, when the Indian subcontinent was divided into two independent countries: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.³² Officially, the country is known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Islam is declared the state religion in the Pakistan constitution.³³ In 2015, 92.65 per cent of the population identified as Muslim, and 80.36 per cent as Sunni Muslim.³⁴ Hindus are the largest religious minority, with 2.19 per cent of the population identifying as Hindu, while Christians follow with 1.96 per cent. Other religious “categories”, such as Indigenous, non-religious, and Buddhist, together make up the remaining few per cent. In March 2023, the country had slightly more than 233 million inhabitants.³⁵

There are about 40 different caste groups present in Pakistan, with 32 officially listed as Scheduled Castes under a presidential ordinance.³⁶ According to the 2017 Census, around 850,000 people are registered as members of Scheduled Castes. However, it is estimated that this number should be much higher, possibly even several million.³⁷ Only Hindu Dalits are officially recognised as Scheduled Castes, and even though most Dalits identify as Hindu, caste is also present among other religious groups in Pakistan, such as Muslims and Christians. Around 70 per cent of the country's religious minorities belong to Scheduled Caste communities.³⁸

There are claims that there is much denial about caste in Pakistan due to the fact that it is a Muslim-majority country that does not officially recognise such a system.³⁹ While formally there is no caste system in Islam, in practice it exists. Descent-based occupations, segregation in housing and residence, and restrictions in social relations are widely present in Pakistan, including among Muslims.⁴⁰

Article 25A of the Pakistan constitution refers to equality before law and the right to equal protection of the law for all Pakistani citizens. The constitution also enshrines non-discrimination on the basis of sex, in access to public places, and in access to services, in articles 25, 26, and 27 respectively.⁴¹ In addition, article 20 states that “every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion”.⁴²

Since January 2014, Pakistan has had Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status with the European Union, which relieves Pakistan of paying duties on certain exports to the EU.⁴³ The GSP+ status of a country is based on the ratification and implementation of 27 international conventions on human rights and labour rights, the environment, and good governance.⁴⁴ Finished and semi-finished leather, as well as leather goods like apparel, footwear, and bags, are among the products that countries can export to the EU duty free with GSP+ status.⁴⁵

Despite the country’s commitment on paper, religious minorities in Pakistan are under constant threat of facing discrimination in different forms.⁴⁶ In 2021, the United States placed Pakistan on a list of “countries of particular concern” regarding violations of religious freedom. Forms of religious discrimination occurring in the country include limited access to decent employment, discrimination in education, members of religious minorities not being able to openly practise their religion, social exclusion, a failure to meet quotas for government jobs, houses being set on fire, attacks on places of worship, beatings and other forms of physical violence, deadly shootings, and accusations of blasphemy.⁴⁷ Teachers may discriminate against children from religious minorities, and even schoolbooks display discriminatory content.⁴⁸ For women, forced marriage and sexual violence and harassment can be added to the list.⁴⁹



Dalit women collect water in Pakistan. Discrimination against Dalits in Pakistan is witnessed in almost all aspects of life including where Dalits are allowed to collect water, education, health, political representation, access to justice and more. Photo © Jakob Carlsen/IDSN

Dalits in Pakistan face exclusion from jobs, live in separate colonies, cannot sit inside restaurants with people from so-called upper-caste groups, and are served with separate cups and plates for their food and drink compared with those used for non-Dalits.⁵⁰ This is especially the case in rural areas. Most Hindu Dalits do not own any piece of land or other assets for generating income. They work for landowners as tenants and labourers. A survey targeting Hindu Dalits in Sindh showed that almost 85 per cent of them earned less than two-thirds of the set minimum wage.⁵¹ People who belong to lower-caste groups and move from one area to another sometimes try to change their last name and their caste identity to those of a caste group that is relatively higher, as a strategy to escape some of the difficulties.⁵²

1.3 Caste and gender

Women from lower-caste groups and/or religious minorities in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan face additional discrimination, due to the patriarchal nature of South Asian society. They may face intersectional discrimination on three accounts: for being a Dalit, for being a member of a religious minority group, and for being a woman. Dalit and religious minority women often experience exclusion from economic opportunities, as well as gender-based violence and harassment. Rape is a constant fear among Dalit women in India,⁵³ and the lack of access to a decent toilet for many women and girls in India comes with clear safety and menstrual hygiene issues.⁵⁴ Early marriage and restriction in mobility are common for girls in Dalit communities in Bangladesh.⁵⁵ Most forced conversions to Islam in Pakistan involve young Dalit women and Dalit girls.

Part 2

Caste-based discrimination at work and in the leather industry in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh

So far, this paper has explained several common practices of discrimination based on caste and/or religion as present in South Asia, and particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In Part 2, the paper further focuses on risks and discrimination related to work and working environments. After describing some general risks in relation to caste and work, including connections with religion, it turns to the leather industry specifically.

2.1 Caste-based discrimination and work

There are various ways in which caste may relate to work. Some clear connections are noted below. Even though we present these as separate risks, they are strongly interconnected.

Increased vulnerability to exploitation

Social and economic exclusion and a lack of access to land and education often add up to a life of poverty for members of lower-caste communities and religious minority groups. This contributes to making them vulnerable to exploitation, including slavery, trafficking, and child labour. Research has shown that the majority of those affected by modern slavery, including child labourers, forced labourers, and people involved in hazardous work, are members of the lowest castes or Indigenous communities in caste-affected countries.⁵⁶

Informal migrant workers are often recruited based on their caste identity, alongside other variables such as ethnicity, language, sex, and region. These variables result in a labour force consisting of workers who will accept long working hours, are highly flexible, receive low wages, and perform the most dangerous tasks. Since their economic opportunities are very limited, they do not have any other choice than to accept such conditions.⁵⁷ Next to this, the jobs they are recruited for are often marked in caste-related ways by insecurity, danger, toxicity, or low status as part of the “ranking” of labour markets.⁵⁸ Industries and sectors that employ many unskilled or low-skilled workers on very low wages and without formal employment contracts include agriculture, garments, carpet weaving, natural stone, construction, and dealing with dead animals and leather.

Limited job opportunities

Lower-caste groups and religious minorities do not have access to a broad range of occupations, as explained above. Job allocation within the caste system tends to ensure that certain caste groups take up certain jobs, with lower-caste groups usually assigned lower-status jobs that pay low wages. In Bangladesh, common ways of describing Dalits, Hindus, and Muslims is through caste names that closely relate to their traditional caste-based occupations. Sweeper, washer, cobbler, weaver, tailor, drummer, and butcher are some of these traditional occupations,⁵⁹ which contribute to defining social, political, and economic relations.⁶⁰ The communities that take up such occupations often face discrimination, including segregation and untouchability.

Ethnographic studies show how caste-based exclusion and segregation relating to types of job continue to exist. For example, it has been shown how semi-skilled Dalits are not hired in textile factories in Tamil Nadu, India, leading to entire

communities of Dalits hiding their names and caste background for years so they could get such work. In a gelatine factory, Dalits were assigned to the low-paid “dirty” jobs of handling the animal bones in the more “unhygienic” part of the factory, while workers from middle-ranking castes performed the semi-skilled work, and the factory management belonged to higher-caste groups.⁶¹

No job promotion or job mobility

Dalits are not considered for promotion or seen as qualified for jobs in higher positions such as management, supervisory, or expert jobs, due to their low social status. An analysis of Indian national survey data exposed the difficulty that Dalits experience of achieving occupational mobility out of caste-typed jobs. Research among construction sites found that, even after 25 years of work, Dalit casual labourers did not have the opportunity to get skilled or better-paid work. For Dalit women, it was even harder to move out of caste-typed jobs. They were highly exploited, and a third of Dalit women workers indicated that they faced physical mistreatment, according to the national survey findings.⁶²

Poverty wages and long working hours

A labour force that consists mainly of lower-caste and other minority-status workers almost always receives extremely low wages, as these workers do not have the social status or power to negotiate.⁶³ Sometimes Dalit workers are asked to work more hours for the same wage as non-Dalits, or receive lower wages compared to higher-caste workers doing the same work. They may also be asked to do additional jobs such as cleaning.⁶⁴

Harassment (verbal, physical, and sexual)

Dalit workers face scolding and being called derogatory names linked to their caste identity. A report by the Asia Floor Wage published in June 2022 includes such an example.⁶⁵ It mentions that at a unit of Shahi, one of the largest garment suppliers in India with 50 factories across the country, workers stated in interviews that caste-based insults are frequent in the factory. Workers reported making complaints about this treatment, yet the factory management had not addressed any of them.

Denied access to workplace facilities

Dalit workers may not have access to certain facilities at a workplace, such as clean drinking water or safe shelter. A survey among garment workers found that lower-caste workers were asked to bring their own water bottles to work, and were obliged to sit at the rear of the company bus that took workers to and from the factory, whereas so-called upper-caste workers would sit at the front of the bus. There was also segregation in lunch seating arrangements.⁶⁶

No access to remedy

It is harder for Dalits than for higher-caste workers to join trade unions, while at the same time unions might not recognise the specific challenges that lower-caste workers face. Dalits are hardly represented in complaint mechanisms, such as mandated workers’ committees.

2.2 Caste and the leather sector in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan

A historical link between caste, religion, and leather work can be found in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In these South Asian countries, the prevailing traditional view is that leather work, which involves the hides of dead animals, is a dirty and undesirable occupation, and this applies both to the materials and to the people

handling them.⁶⁷ In India, work with leather has traditionally been assigned to Dalits, linked to their “untouchability status”, and also to Muslims.

In addition, many people in India consider cows to be sacred animals, related to religious views, and in most Indian states their slaughter is illegal.⁶⁸ Even after industrialisation of the leather sector, most leather workers still come from Scheduled Caste groups or Muslim communities.⁶⁹ Analysis of India’s Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) showed that 43 per cent of leather sector workers identified as belonging to Scheduled Castes and another 33 per cent identified as belonging to Other Backward Classes, which include Muslims.⁷⁰

Several studies have showed that lower-caste groups tend to take up leather work in India. In the footwear industry in Agra, for example, the Jatavs, a sub-caste of the Chamars (a Scheduled Caste),⁷¹ were found to be mostly engaged in shoe work, in line with their caste identity. The research pointed out that Jatavs are socially excluded, which limits their economic opportunities.⁷² Another study showed how, in Kanpur, each village had its own leather workers, who would skin the dead animals of their “patron” and used the leather for making goods like shoes and drums. This involved a system of higher-caste “patrons” and lower-caste Chamars working for them, including doing the leather work.⁷³

Although, with time, certain parts of the leather industry have become less stigmatised and more accepted, and people from higher-caste groups have taken jobs in the sector such as managers and agents, these latter jobs do not require handling the materials. The physical handling of hides and leather remains stigmatised and is therefore still mainly executed by members of Scheduled Castes and Muslims.⁷⁴ The analysis of the PLFS mentioned above also shows that, while the majority of the leather workforce belongs to Scheduled Caste communities, no members of such castes are listed as owners of leather workplaces. Most leather workplace owners listed in the survey database are identified as Muslim, with a small number identified as Hindu.⁷⁵

Women who participate in the workforce, including leather workers, generally have a double workload of having to take care of children and household chores as well as paid work. Women tend therefore to undertake homeworking as a way to combine all of these tasks in a somewhat less challenging way. Homeworkers engaged in the leather industry mostly stitch leather uppers for shoes.⁷⁶

In Bangladesh, caste groups involved in the processing of leather and leather products, or skinning dead cows, are Rishi and Rabidas.⁷⁷ Rishi (also known as Ruidas) are mostly shoemakers. Rabidas (also known as Ruhidas, Muchi, Chamar, or Charmakar) work with leather, such as in shoemaking and repairing, and in skinning dead cows. These caste groups came to Bangladesh to take up this work when the British colonial rulers took many Hindu Dalits from India to what is now Bangladesh to perform menial services.⁷⁸ Both Rishi and Rabidas experience stigmatisation with high levels of untouchability, and most of them identify as Hindu.⁷⁹

A staff member of the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) shared his thoughts and experiences on the connection between caste and the leather sector in Bangladesh in an interview. His views can be read below.



Hides and barrels with chemicals inside a leather tannery in Bangladesh. Photo © Together for Decent Leather

Interview with Kailash, a BDERM staff member

“There are 18 Dalit communities in Bangladesh, and two communities are working with leather, Rabidas and Rishi. I belong to Rabidas community. My great-grandfather was taken from Bihar, India, to Bangladesh, when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan. In that time, there was much agricultural land, and different live-stock. But there was no community to take care of the dead animals. Therefore, Rabidas were taken from India to Bangladesh, to take up this work – to skin the dead animals and to do the tanning work. When they were taken to Bangladesh, they had to live outside of the cities, separated from others; segregation was there. They did not receive any government support or such.

When Bangladesh was still East Pakistan, it was said: This is the community that will take care of this work. They skin the dead cow, and do the seasoning with leather. They know how to do this. They go to the local flea market and sell the leather sheets. Business people, middlemen, they buy from the Rabidas. But since they are Dalits they could not negotiate decent prices. So they did not get good prices because of their caste identity.

The Rabidas are much involved in repairing of shoes in the urban areas. They do not have shops or such. Community members sit on the pavements and have tools around them. A customer will come and then say: Fix my shoe. This job is just for survival. From one day to another.

They also do hand stitching of shoes on the factory site. There is a separate room in the factory where they do this work, a small room with bad ventilation, bad lighting, and no safe fire escape. Mostly men do this; only a few women are involved in this, family members. They mostly come from the villages. The work is outsourced by factories and brought to the workers by middlemen. Around 95 per cent of this work is done by the Rabidas community. They are paid 10 Taka or such per pair of shoes.⁸⁰ Payments are not made in time;

they are being exploited, but they do not have the agency to take up issues. This community is one of the most stigmatised communities in Bangladesh.

They do not have an organised supply chain. They take the parts from the dead animal. Then they do the seasoning with the salt and lime and such and go to the market. So they do not take part in the formal businesses. Their business depends on animals dying in different places, and where people eat meat, people who give the carcasses to the Rabidas. There is no access to continuous supply of raw material. Supply depends on when an animal dies somewhere. If there is a lot of flooding, then livestock dies. During floods, we will have the most amount of work, and we can save money. There is a saying: Flood is a season for the Rabidas community to make money. Then because of the latest medical development in animal care, livestock is better saved. So there is less material to work with. Therefore some are changing jobs to building houses, construction, and such.

Most positions in the formal tanneries are occupied by the Muslim communities. A number of Rabidas are employed in the tanneries, officially or unofficially. For tanneries to function well, the informal part of the industry comes into action, to do parts that formal tanneries do not want to do. This is taken care of by Rabidas community members. They are mainly responsible for skinning of the animal, taking the blood out, and such. Once that is done, you need to dry it up and lime it. This is also done by them. Then in the next steps, they find that their participation is blocked. The Muslim community then take over and do the next steps. Before high school, I myself collected the dead animals or skins, did the seasoning, and sold the leather in the market. There is no data on how many people are occupied in the informal part of the industry, such as who collects carcasses, processes leather, and makes shoes, bracelets, bags, and other things.

When the leather industry became more formalised, the Rabidas were excluded from this process. When they were excluded, it was surprising for everyone. The government said that those who love leather work are supported. But everybody knows that leather work is done by the Rabidas community. Now they are still part of the informal part of the industry. Working in this informal part means they do not have any form of social protection. They do not get grants to build the capacity of their skills. Grants are hardly given to them. They do not know their rights or entitlements. They are not given an opportunity to be part of the system.

Dalits in Bangladesh live in slums. There is economic exclusion. Poverty. Dalits face so many restrictions in access. For example, I got a laptop [computer] in 2020, and my first telephone in 2018 or 2019. In the past three years, the leather industry has not been in good shape. In the national budget, there is budget for the leather sector, to increase the national profit of the industry. When national profits or budgets go up, Dalits are not involved. In policy Dalits are mentioned on paper, but nothing happens on the ground. In leather policy it is even mentioned that Dalits are taken abroad, for learning skills and such, but nothing [like this] happens.

Dalits are dedicated to the leather work, and if they are given ownership and rights, they can actually contribute very much to the industry.”⁸¹

A member of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) has pointed out that in earlier times certain communities used to do the work of removing the skin of dead animals in Pakistan. This may still be done by these communities, but it is not much visible. Because of stigma associated with this work, the majority of Dalit people who are involved in the work hide themselves or work secretly. Older generations who used to do this work experienced verbal abuse (name calling) and untouchability. People did not want to sit next to them because of the nature of their work.

The PDSN member explained that he approached people who used to do this work and now have shops that collect the skins of animals for the Karachi market.⁸² They had told him that there is not much work in the leather industry for them in current times. They were also shy to talk about this and seemed ashamed. The Meghwar community was mentioned as one that used to perform leather work.⁸³ No research or documentation was found to ascertain issues and challenges faced by the people currently involved in this work in Pakistan. The PDSN member added that it is unclear who works in the formal tanneries and factories today in terms of their caste or religious background.⁸⁴

An interview with a former staff member of an international organisation working on Dalit rights in India illustrates the relationship between caste and the leather industry in India in an informal setting in West Bengal. His story can be read below.

Interview with Ritwajit, a Dalit rights organisation former staff member

“I come from a village in West Bengal, a state in eastern India, connected to the border of Bangladesh. I belong to the Rabidas community, a Dalit community that are leather workers by profession, based on their caste identity. They do tannery work and work with carcasses.

My grandfather used to do only this type of work, as he was locked into this caste-based occupation. If there was a dead animal in the village area, my grandfather would get a notification of this, and it would be his caste responsibility to go and pick up the dead animal. He never got the opportunity for education. In fact he did not even have the awareness that he could get education. It was like education was only for upper-caste or dominant-caste people.

My father did go to school. He did well in primary school, and his education acumen was picked up by a teacher, who was a Muslim person, and who always insisted that my father should not drop out. No upper-caste people assisted my father with his education, and usually the upper-caste teachers and pupils at my father’s school used to be vindictive towards him; their rationale was my father should not or rather must not have access to education.

All processes of cutting the carcasses and taking off the hides are learned from generation to generation. The hides are taken off the animals. Then there is the liming and using different substances for processing it, like calcium carbonate and salt. There is no equipment and there are no chemicals to speed up the process, because the people are too poor to buy these. The tools and equipment and even sometimes chemicals were institutionally

denied to my grandfather and father because of caste-based discrimination. People have to rely on the natural process.

Eventually, after drying, the leather is brought to the local market and sold. Here, the caste factor comes in as well. People from my caste are underconfident, because our dignity is always compromised by upper-caste people, and thus we are easily bullied. If you do hard labour and want to sell it for a good price, there is no option for that. Whatever the price they have to offer, you must accept that. Otherwise you would be having no option to sell your product and no one will buy from you because of powerful upper-caste coterie. The entire process is deliberately being hijacked by upper-caste people so that they buy products at a much cheaper rate, and later these upper-caste folk can sell these products at a much higher price.

Dalits do not raise livestock, and they do not work in the meat industry. This means they do not have access to much input material. So when a livestock epidemic is happening or such, then the input is more, but otherwise they have to rely on what is there. This is a vulnerable position to be in.

Extracting leather from the animal takes strength, so this is mostly done by men. Women do the dying. And cutting, this is done 50/50. Post-job activities, such as cleaning and sweeping, are mostly done by women.

In Kolkata there are regions where most of the leather comes from. There are people making shoes and bags in their home, and everybody in the home is working at this occupation. The neighbourhood is dominated by Muslims; around 10 per cent of the households are Dalit Hindus. There are very few households where they have machines for stitching. You can see leather hides hanging outside of the house. There are chemicals of the dyes, and no protection for this. They are being exposed to these hazardous chemicals on a day-to-day basis, risking all kinds of health issues, such as breathing problems and skin diseases. Part of it might be going to export. Companies hire middlemen, and they take the products to the households.

In my home village I still see people doing this slavery work. Now in my village there are tanneries and leather extraction units for the raw handling of the leather. All tanneries have different downstream and upstream value chains. The hazardous part, the downstream value chain, is allocated to Dalits – such as the dying, which involves chemicals, while the workers have no protection for this. They need Dalits to keep the system going. The upstream part, making the leather products, Dalits are not part of that.

Almost all owners are Muslims or dominant-caste people; around 96 per cent is owned by them. Maybe one or two small subsidiaries are owned by Dalits. Dalits do not have the same access to the industry as non-Dalits. They do not have the agency to claim their basic rights, their human rights. Dominant castes are there as middlemen and employing Dalits as bonded labourers. Dalits do not have options to start their own undertaking.

The government initiated several courses on leather design and technology. These should be given to the community that did this traditionally. But bank loans, or any other services, are not given to Dalits.

Regarding health issues, some Dalit leather workers have issues with COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease] and lung diseases, and cancer is more frequent. But the most important thing is that most of them are malnourished. They don't have the bare minimum health standard for any parameters. So their blood count is abnormal, and they have anaemia. They are not able to buy enough food. If they have some money, they need to think about the next work. Most do not have insurance. Also, going to a government hospital takes time, and then they can't use this time for work. In addition, 100 per cent of Dalit settlements are located near landfill areas or near the industry where you have direct exposure to hazardous air quality and such. So this makes them even more vulnerable. Even if they are not working, they still get sick from their living environment.”⁸⁵

The overrepresentation of Scheduled Castes and Muslim workers in the leather industry in India can be seen as systematic discrimination in itself. For Bangladesh and Pakistan, there are clear indicators of exclusion and job allocation related to caste and religion in the leather sector. There is also still much that has not been researched or documented about how caste-based discrimination displays itself in working environments, and in the leather industry specifically. In general, Dalits and religious minorities in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan face many kinds of challenge on a daily basis. Considering the long history and general presence of caste-based and religious discrimination in South Asia, it is not surprising that such practices extend to working environments, especially the leather industry, in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.



Leather workers making shoes in Pakistan. Photo © Jakob Carlsen/IDSN

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Leather work is seen in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as dirty and undesirable. Many of the people who work in the industry – and in India the overall majority – occupy marginalised places in society and often lack any other livelihood option. They are vulnerable to exploitation and have little if any possibility of moving forward in work or in life to break the cycle of poverty and discrimination for themselves or their children.

Studies on working conditions in the leather industry in South Asia show how workers are employed in indecent working environments. Findings include wages below minimum wages, long working days with forced overtime, a huge absence of formal labour contracts, health and safety issues (especially relating to working with chemicals and/or heavy machinery), and various forms of harassment.⁸⁶ Since many of these workers do not have any alternative, they have to accept these circumstances and a life of struggles and insecurities.

There are many links between the leather industry and caste-based and religious discrimination in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In all three countries, lower-caste communities and religious minority groups are involved in the industry in a range of different ways. Equally, lower-caste communities and religious minority groups occupy marginalised economic, social, and cultural positions in all three countries and face many hardships and forms of systemic discrimination. With discriminatory practices so highly prevalent in these societies, including in working environments, there are implications for in-country and international supply chains as well, especially in industries such as leather.

International recognition is needed of the salient risk of caste-based and religion-based discrimination in international supply chains in industries such as leather. Such discriminatory practices are not “internal” issues that international bodies and businesses are free to step back from and not engage with. Businesses, governments, and international organisations need to take up this issue in their human rights due diligence, trade agreements, legislation, and standards and guidelines on business and human rights. They need to acknowledge that Dalits and religious minorities are specific vulnerable groups. Caste- and religion-based discrimination involves risks that need particular attention.

Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on caste-based discrimination. However, owing to the interlinkages with religion and gender described in this report, religion and gender need to be considered while implementing any of the recommendations.

For international businesses

Businesses that source leather or leather products from South Asia face a high risk of having caste-based discrimination in their supply chains. Businesses should identify this vulnerable group of workers and specifically include caste-based discrimination in their human rights due diligence practices. Without this, they are unlikely to be able to identify and address this issue. Consultation with experts from marginalised communities, trade unions, and other relevant civil society organisations, locally and internationally, can support this effort.

Businesses should become aware of caste-affected countries' risks and trace supply chains to identify where the most vulnerable workers in the chain are located. Mapping of supply chains and transparency about the different stages of production are needed to assess the risk of caste-based discrimination at each stage of production.

Businesses should critically review their auditing practices. Mechanisms should be put in place to encourage open discussions with factory owners to bring out issues of rights violations and ways to address them. This will assist factory owners in addressing these issues within their factories. In addition, because third-party audits are currently limited when it comes to identifying social issues, including discrimination, when businesses use such audits in their due diligence processes, this needs to be supplemented. Consultations with relevant local actors, such as representatives of marginalised communities, trade unions, and other civil society organisations will increase possibilities of identifying caste-based discrimination in the working environment.

For governments of buying countries

EU governments should commit to recognising caste-based discrimination as a specific human rights risk in supply chains that needs particular attention with regard to upcoming EU human rights due diligence legislation. As a widespread phenomenon in a number of producing countries, the issue needs to be explicitly mentioned, rather than being implicitly accommodated in general references to discrimination.

Governments of buying countries should express their support for revision of the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises to mention caste-based discrimination specifically, to ensure this type of discrimination will be included in due diligence practices. The OECD Guidelines currently mention race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, or other status as indicators whereby businesses can rule out inequality in employment and discrimination in their supply chains. Caste needs to be added to this list of indicators. In the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment and Footwear Sector](#), caste is explicitly mentioned only once, on page 119, in relation to sexual harassment and sexual and gender-based violence.⁸⁷ This refers to religious and caste minorities as vulnerable to such harassment and violence due to their lower status. For other topics in the guidelines, like child labour and forced labour, caste is not explicitly mentioned and can therefore currently be ignored by businesses as a factor, despite the part it plays in these practices.

Governments of buying countries should support the inclusion of caste as a specific human rights risk factor in the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).⁸⁸ Religious minorities are recognised in the Guiding Principles for the specific challenges they may face. Similarly, caste needs to be highlighted as a risk factor in human rights violations in supply chains.

EU governments should support the development of an effective monitoring system on GSP+ status. Countries that have been granted GSP+ status have an obligation to address human rights violations based on the ratification of 27 core international conventions. Caste-based discrimination is a human rights violation. Yet the EU currently has no systematic reporting system in place to monitor and evaluate the efforts of trading partner governments to eliminate this violation.

Governments of buying countries should take up a proactive role in multi-stakeholder initiatives. Several multi-stakeholder initiatives try to address labour rights and human rights in supply chains in a collaborative manner. However, governments are largely missing from this discourse. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights clearly indicate that states have a duty to protect and promote the rule of law. Governments should be more proactive in multi-stakeholder initiatives on labour rights and human rights as part of actively adhering to this duty.

For governments of South Asian countries

Governments of producer countries in South Asia should monitor the implementation of existing laws. There are many laws in place in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan that counter caste-based discrimination and are intended to protect all inhabitants and citizens of these countries. Current implementation of these laws remains poor. South Asian governments must ensure that the relevant laws are properly implemented.

Governments of producer countries in South Asia should include a gender lens in existing relevant legislations and judicial remedy mechanisms. Considering the increased vulnerability of women from depressed social groups to sexual harassment and other forms of violence in workplaces, governments should strengthen existing legislations and judicial remedy mechanisms by making corresponding rights explicit.

The National Action Plans (NAP) that governments of producer countries have developed or are in the process of developing should pay attention to addressing identity-based discriminations such as caste. The NAP should set standards and guidance for businesses to address caste-based discrimination in workplaces.

Governments of producer countries should strengthen the national and regional human rights commissions. More capacity and resources are needed in these commissions to conduct independent enquiries into caste and other identity-based discriminations and assist victims.



Workers load hides into the back of a truck. Photo © Together for Decent Leather

Box 2 ETI Base Code Guidance for businesses on caste in global supply chains

The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) [Base Code Guidance: Caste in Global Supply Chains](#) provides tools and recommendations for businesses to address caste-based discrimination in supply chains.⁸⁹ We note some of these recommendations below and include relevant considerations for religious minority groups:

- Businesses should develop a policy on anti-discrimination and equal opportunities that specifically mentions caste and religious minorities to help start the conversation with suppliers.
- Starting a dialogue with a supplier on caste- or religion-based discrimination can be a sensitive matter. There have been examples of workers being threatened and harassed after raising caste-related issues. Yet the issue cannot be ignored because of this. A less direct approach can contribute to avoiding risks of retaliation. Questions that businesses can ask of a supplier are: How are tasks in the workplace allocated? What workers do the most dangerous or menial tasks? What is your promotion policy? What are the backgrounds of your management? Are minorities represented at supervisory or management level? Such questions give information about the presence and location of marginalised workers in the supply chain and related dynamics in the working environment. Collecting data only about the general composition of the workforce is insufficient.
- Do not rely entirely on the presence of a complaint mechanisms for minority issues. Having a complaint mechanism, mandated committees, or trade unions present in a factory or tannery is not enough. Minority workers do not automatically have access to the different mechanisms. For example, in India, trade unions are often formed by so-called upper-caste groups and exclude Dalits. Trade unions and complaint mechanisms need to recognise caste and minority issues as a factor, and create specific routes for minority workers to increase their visibility as a group, rather than seeing them as workers who should be treated the same as everybody else. There should be minority representation in trade unions and committees to ensure all workers have access to grievance mechanisms. This also applies to women workers, who face an additional risk of being forced to resign their job when joining a union. Trade unions have a strategic role to play in empowering workers and and businesses are therefore recommended to support capacity building among trade unions in their supply chains.

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