Vaibhav Raaj, Shashi Kant Prasad

WALK A MILE IN THEIR SHOES

Workers‘ Rights Violations in the Indian Leather and Footwear Industry

“We have to stand all day in the cutting section, where we are prone to get arthritis and other joint related pains. We have to deal with leather, and the smell it emits as well as the glue we use to stick the shoe and other material in the process of shoe making, make us go dizzy sometimes… we don’t have appetite and want to sleep the moment we get home.”

This statement was made by a worker from an Indian leathershoe factory in Ambur, Tamil Nadu. Labour law violations are still a common phenomenon in the Indian leather and footwear industry. The people who work at factories that supply European brands such as Deichmann, Bata and Rieker told us, among other infringements, about salaries that are far below a living wage, involuntary overtime, insufficient protection from health and safety risks, absence of workers’ unions and discrimination and exploitation based on traditional gender and caste norms.

This factsheet takes a closer look at labour rights in the Indian leather and footwear industry and the current situation of workers in the leather and footwear sector.

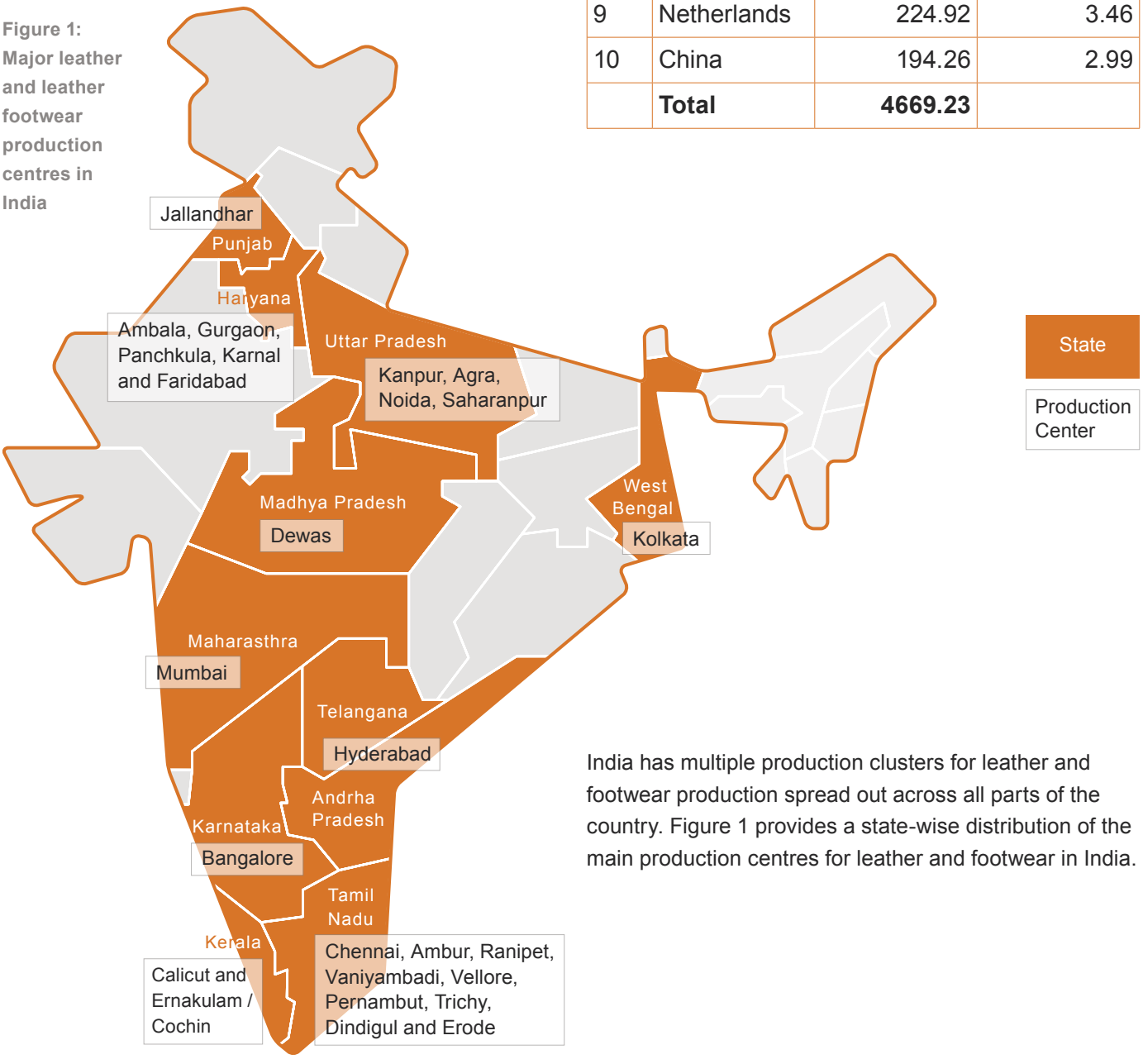
INDIAN LEATHER AND FOOTWEAR PRODUCTION

India has been the second largest producer of footwear after China for many years. In 2014, India produced 2,065 million pairs of shoes equivalent to 8.5% of the total world production. There are more than 1 million people engaged in the Indian footwear industry. Leather footwear is by far the most important product for the Indian footwear industry, both in terms of production and export. The major importers are Germany the USA and the UK, as well as Italy, Hong Kong and France (see Table 1). So anyone who wants to know about the social and environmental conditions under which leather footwear sold in these countries is produced must look at India.

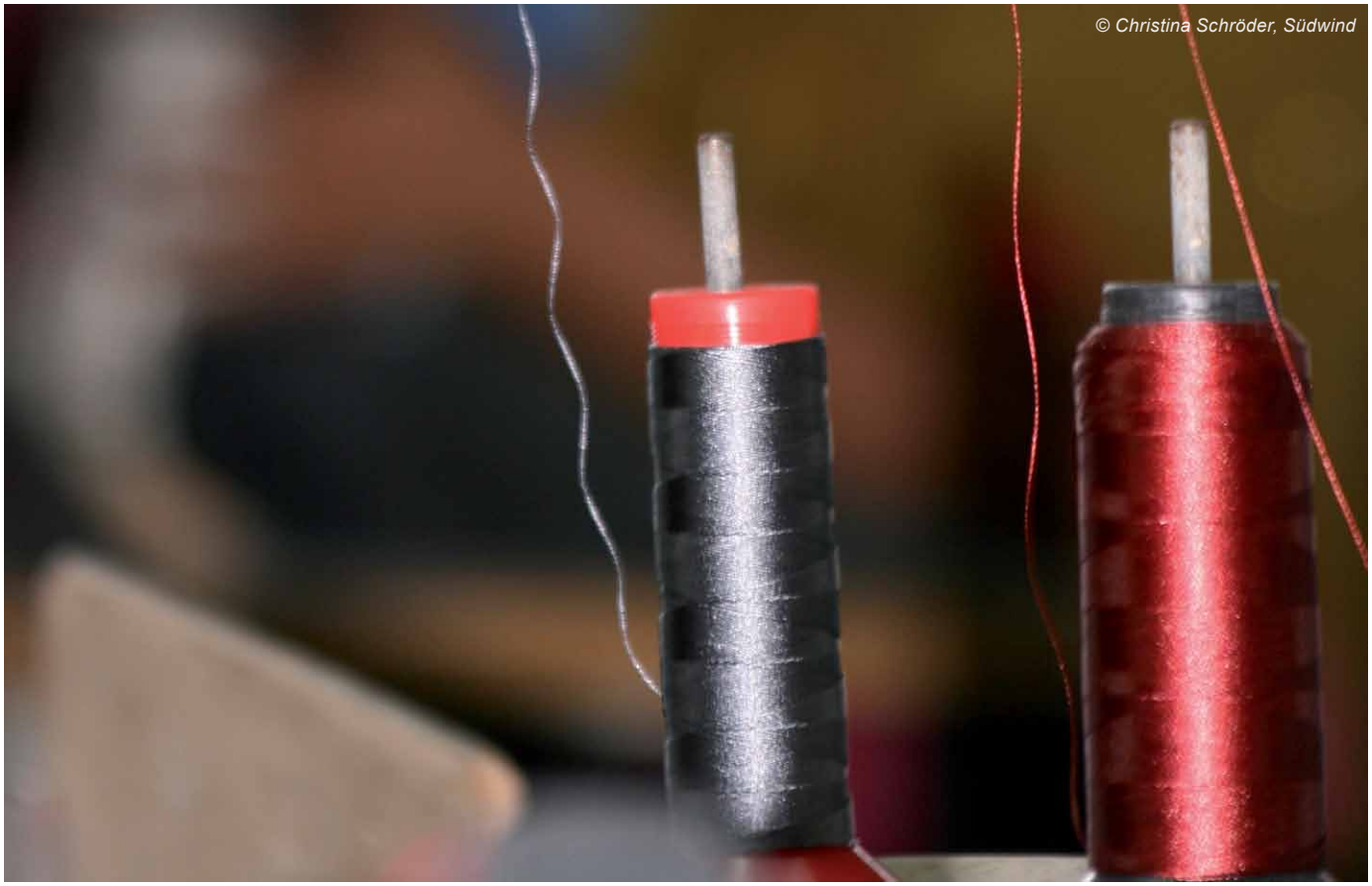
Table 1: Major export market countries for Indian leather and leather products

Rank	COUNTRY	2014–15 (Value in mio. USD)	% Share 2014–15
1	Germany	800.2	12.32
2	USA	768.06	11.83
3	UK	751.33	11.57
4	Italy	504.26	7.76
5	Hong Kong	422.11	6.5
6	France	371.75	5.72
7	Spain	351.27	5.41
8	U.A.E.	281.07	4.3
9	Netherlands	224.92	3.46
10	China	194.26	2.99
	Total	**4669.23**	

Figure 1: Major leather and leather footwear production centres in India

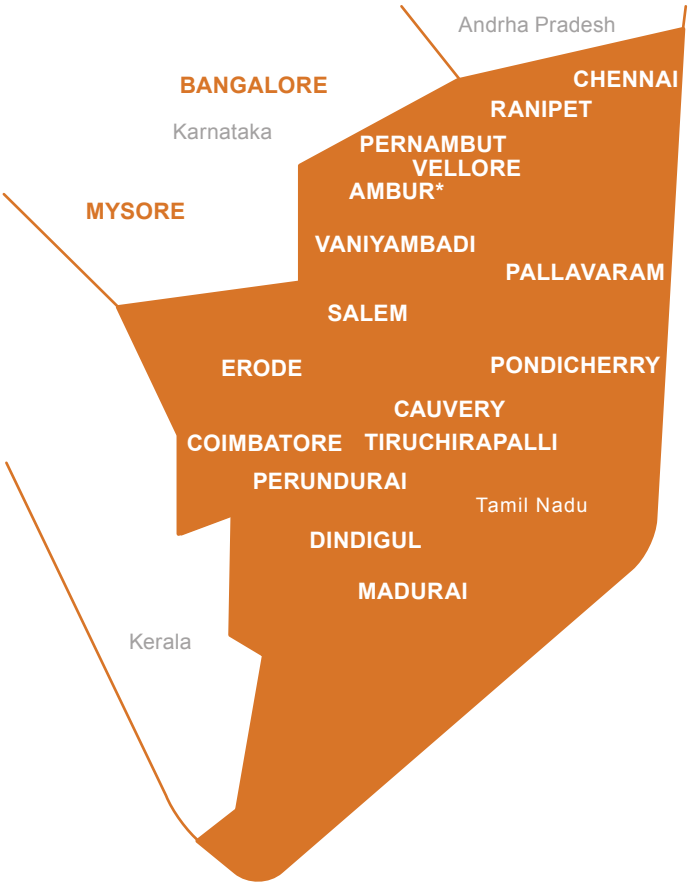


India has multiple production clusters for leather and footwear production spread out across all parts of the country. Figure 1 provides a state-wise distribution of the main production centres for leather and footwear in India.



The Tamil Nadu clusters have historically led the Indian leather industry in both technological advancements and export-orientation, since the colonial period. In the contemporary period too, Tamil Nadu remains a leading producer of leather and footwear among the Indian states. The industry in Tamil Nadu developed mainly in response to the high availability of raw material from Southern parts of India. The contemporary industrial clusters in the region are dominated by Muslim community owners, who historically took over the entrepreneurial reins from the pioneering Eurasians. Besides the Chennai cluster mainly situated in and around the Chromepet-Pallavaram areas, the Tamil Nadu region's main clusters are located in Palar Valley in Vellore district, consisting of the clusters of Vaniyambadi, Ambur, Pernambut, Melvisharam and Ranipet and the clusters of Erode, Trichy and Dindigul in the other parts of Tamil Nadu.

Figure 2: Leather production clusters in Tamil Nadu



LABOUR RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE INDIAN LEATHER AND FOOTWEAR INDUSTRY

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Workers of the leather and footwear industry in India face widespread and systematic violations of their labour rights. In order to investigate the nature and extent of these rights violations primary research was conducted in two prominent production clusters of India- Ambur, Tamil Nadu and Agra, Uttar Pradesh. The investigations in Ambur engaged with workers in both footwear production factories and leather tanneries. However, in Agra the research focussed on footwear factory workers exclusively.

The type of work done by our respondents in footwear factories included pasting, cutting, stitching, finishing, lasting, packaging, etc. Tannery workers were involved in works like buffing and skinning, auto-spray, vacuum, crusting, colouring, cleaning, dyeing, finishing, stretching the skin, packing, and spiriting.

Main forms of employment

Most of the respondents were paid either daily wages or by piece-rates, whereas some were employed through contractors. These are the dominant forms of employment in the researched factories.

Labour contracts and social security

Many workers reported not receiving any formal letter of appointment or job contracts.

Verbal agreements between labour contractors and the workers are widespread use, especially in Agra. In the absence of any other proof of employment such as identity cards, workers reported blanket exclusion from any social security benefits like Provident Fund (PF) and Employees' State Insurance (ESI).

Discrimination based on traditional gender and caste norms

The caste composition of the workforce in the leather and shoe industries in India unmistakably testifies to the persistence of the oppressive caste system. Almost all the workers belonged to the Scheduled Castes and other socially marginalized groups. Further, gender-based discrimination in the industry denies equal recognition to women's work and skills. Women remain confined to relatively unskilled and low paying positions of helpers and hand-stitching. Women are generally paid lower than men in the same work. Support systems for women like crèche facilities for their children or a legally required internal complaints committee to address issues of sexual harassment are oftentimes missing.

Wages

Minumum wage for Agra for semi-skilled workers between October, 2014 and February, 2015 was Rs 271,43 (EUR 3,65) per day. That makes it Rs 6514,32 (EUR 87,5) per month (6 days a week, 4 weeks a month). Lowest minimum wage rate prevailing for Ambur for workers between April 2014 and March 2015 was Rs 121,91 (EUR 1,64) per day. That makes it Rs 2925,84 (EUR 39) per month (6 days a week, 4 weeks a month). Most incomes of the interviewed workers are above legal minimum wage. This is due to the fact that most workers put in considerable overtime and workdays every month to make up for their low incomes.

According to 2015 Asia Floor Wage Alliance wage figures, a living wage sufficient for workers in India amounts to Rs 18727 (EUR 251) per month. This rate includes support for all family members, basic nutritional needs of a worker and other basic needs, including housing, healthcare, education and some basic savings. The incomes of all interviewees (Rs 1500 – 12000, EUR 20 – 161) are far below the levels advocated as living wages.

Working hours, overtime and forced labour

Given the abysmally low incomes of the workers, a large number of them choose to work on the piece-rate system where their income becomes directly proportional to their daily productivity. In this system, in order to earn more every day, workers put in 8 to 12 hours a day. The piece-rate system as observed i. e. in Agra precludes the notion of overtime work and the rates of payment do not increase for overtime hours. Moreover, this employment system also does not provide weekly, sick, casual or any other form of leaves. Within this context it can be fairly argued that the overtime work amounts to forced labour thrust upon extremely poor workers by the inadequacy of prevailing wage rates.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining

In Agra, only few workers reported awareness about the significance and functions of a workers' union. The surveyed factories themselves do not have any workers' union. Workers' issues are dealt with by them individually approaching their supervisor or contractor.

In Ambur, on an average 55 out of the 113 workers interviewed were either unable to or refused to answer questions pertaining to the freedom of association in their workplaces. However, 101 of the respondents said that they were aware of the significance and functions of a workers' union in general.

Occupational health and safety

Many respondents reported nonavailability of any first-aid kits in their workplaces. Many are not provided any safety equipment or made aware of possible work-related hazardous situations and rescue systems that might be needed. Burns and cuts are common injuries suffered frequently by the workers. Given the systematic exclusion of many workers from the ESI services, they have to bear entire medical costs for their own treatment.

In Ambur, the safety equipment provided by the companies does not sit comfortably with strictly supervised daily targets for production in leather and footwear production units, as it slows down workers significantly. High productivity of the worker is critical to the protection of their subsistence wages. In Agra similar pressure makes workers take up long hours of work without much care for their own health or rights, in order to make the maximum in wages under the piece-rate system of payment.

Kamakshi,
footwear factory worker, Ambur, 38 year old.

Kamakshi (name changed on interviewee's request) is a woman from the Other Backward Classes category working in Ambur's footwear industry for the last 22 years. Right after completing her school education and not yet an adult, she joined work in a shoe factory to supplement the income of her poor father. She has continued to work after marriage to supplement the income of her husband. With decades of experience in the cutting department (considered skilled), she is entitled to a basic pay of Rs 4500 (EUR 60), and her gross monthly salary varies between Rs 7000 to Rs 9000 (EUR 94 – 120) a month.

Her long days begin with tending to domestic chores and her children before leaving for work. In the cutting department at work, she stands all day working under the close watch of her supervisor who is there to ensure that she meets her daily cutting targets with high quality work and minimum wastage of leather. The supervisors' watch is tightly aligned with the foreign buyer's specifications. While unlike the shoe factories of Agra, Kamakshi's factory has facilities like canteen, dining hall, a nurse for first aid services in case of accidents, and even a crèche, the taxing conditions of the work do take their toll on the workers' health. Kamakshi tells that working all day, standing up, causes arthritis and joint pains for many. She also tells that working in the stench of leather and chemicals in the factory causes occasional dizziness and kill her appetite even after a hard day of work. Besides, work-related injuries are also common, particularly for the workers in the stitching department. Kamakshi does acknowledge that the management appears to be lenient with high-performing workers, allowing them small breaks in addition to the half-an-hour lunch break. However, she also feels dissatisfied with the absence of any effective grievance redressal mechanisms. Aware of her labour rights, she suspects a collusion between the government's labour department officials and the management. Labour inspections, which are few and far between, make no effort to reach out to workers to address their issues. Kamakshi feels that even the workers' union in her factory has been co-opted by the management, leaving the workers to fend for their individual issues. With more than two decades of work experience and no alternative avenues of livelihood in sight, Kamakshi wishes the management cared a little more for their workers.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the analysis of the Indian leather and footwear industry points to rampant violations of labour rights, aggravated by exclusionary social structures of caste and gender. The workers in Ambur do appear to have relatively better access to social security compared to the workers in Agra. In this context, as the aforementioned labour law reforms materialize to supply a flexible labour force for global finance capital, it would become increasingly difficult for workers to remember themselves as bearers of human rights. Such a condition is already presenting itself in the case of the workers in Agra. Therefore, having supplied the numbers of rights violations, this study would do justice to the working people of the Indian leather and footwear industry in foregrounding their voices to narrate their own stories.

Workers in India's leather and footwear industry cope with international market volatility under the liberalized regime, a gradual dilution of labour laws, decline in the trade union movement and a glaring dearth of alternative employment opportunities. International brands procuring from Indian suppliers must take urgent measures to ensure that their profits do not come at the cost of the lives of those who are furthest down in the footwear supply chain.

All sources are taken from the full report Walk a Mile in Their Shoes – Workers' Rights Violations in the Indian Leather and Footwear Industry

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Authors: Vaibhav Raaj, Shashi Kant Prasad

Editor: Anton Pieper

Layout: Julia Löw, www.weiderand.net

Publisher: SÜDWIND e.V.– Institut für Ökonomie und Ökumene, Kaiserstraße 201, 53113 Bonn, Germany

www.suedwind-institut.de, info@suedwind-institut.de,

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