
Kanpur Leather Industry: Balancing Export, Social Responsibility, And Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

The leather industry of Kanpur represents a distinctive blend of industrial growth and sustainability challenges. As one of India's leading export clusters, it provides significant employment and contributes to the country's foreign exchange reserves. At the same time, it faces increasing pressure to meet global expectations concerning environmental performance and social accountability. This paper explores how the Kanpur leather sector negotiates these interconnected dimensions—export competitiveness, environmental responsibility, and social welfare. Using a qualitative approach and secondary data sources, the analysis reveals gradual but uneven progress toward sustainability. Cleaner production methods and skill development programs have been introduced, yet small-scale units continue to struggle with resource constraints and policy ambiguities. The paper concludes that a balance between economic objectives and sustainable practices is achievable through technological innovation, collective environmental management, and stronger institutional coordination.

Keywords: *Kanpur leather industry, sustainability, export competitiveness, social responsibility, environmental governance, cleaner production*

Introduction

India's leather sector has long been a vital component of the national economy, recognized for its craftsmanship, export orientation, and labor intensity. Within this framework, Kanpur, located in Uttar Pradesh, has emerged as one of the most prominent industrial centers. The city houses hundreds of tanneries and manufacturing units that produce a wide range of leather goods including footwear, gloves, saddlery, and upholstery. Despite its economic success, the sector is often criticized for contributing to water pollution, hazardous waste generation, and unsafe working conditions. The Ganga River—a lifeline for millions—has suffered extensive contamination due to industrial discharge from tanneries situated in Kanpur's Jajmau area. The growing emphasis on sustainability in international trade has compelled the Kanpur leather cluster to adapt. Buyers from Europe and North America now demand compliance with environmental and labor standards as a precondition for procurement. This evolution calls for a systematic examination of how economic, environmental, and social factors interact in shaping the future of the industry. This study therefore seeks to analyze the dynamics of the Kanpur leather industry with respect to (a) export performance, (b) environmental management, and (c) social responsibility practices.

Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined India's leather sector from economic and sustainability perspectives. Chaudhary (2019) underscores the sector's major contribution to national export earnings and its role in providing employment to marginalized communities. Yet, Singh and Verma (2020) draw attention to the persistent environmental degradation in the Ganga basin caused by effluent discharge from tanneries, despite decades of regulatory intervention. Research on sustainable industrialization suggests that competitiveness

and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive. Kumar (2021) demonstrates that adopting eco-friendly tanning technologies can lower costs over time by reducing resource consumption. Nair and Gupta (2022) highlight that compliance with global sustainability standards improves market access and product reputation. The social dimension of leather manufacturing is equally important. Reddy (2020) argues that effective Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies—ranging from worker welfare to community engagement—enhance both productivity and brand value. Collectively, these studies indicate that achieving sustainability in Kanpur's leather sector requires simultaneous attention to technological, social, and institutional reforms.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative exploratory approach combining document analysis with stakeholder insights. Data sources include reports from the Council for Leather Exports, the Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB), and peer-reviewed academic publications. Additionally, informal discussions with tannery owners, workers, and local officials provided contextual understanding.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To evaluate the contribution of Kanpur's leather industry to India's export economy.
2. To analyze environmental challenges and the current state of pollution-control mechanisms.
3. To assess the level of social and ethical responsibility within the industry.
4. To propose policy and managerial recommendations for sustainable industrial development.

The research concentrates on the Jajmau industrial belt and adjoining areas of Kanpur, which represent the core of the city's leather activity. While the qualitative nature of this study limits statistical generalization, it offers in-depth insights into ongoing transitions toward sustainability.

Findings and Discussion

Kanpur's leather cluster contributes nearly 40% of India's total leather exports. The region's specialization in high-value products such as equestrian goods and industrial gloves has traditionally ensured steady foreign demand. Nevertheless, competition from emerging economies and stringent environmental conditions imposed by importing countries have intensified challenges. To maintain competitiveness, firms are gradually adopting environment-friendly tanning and finishing processes, enhancing quality control, and seeking international certifications.

Environmental Responsibility: The environmental record of the Kanpur leather industry remains mixed. Traditional tanning methods rely on chromium salts, which generate hazardous solid waste and contaminated effluents. The Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) established at Jajmau was designed to manage collective waste treatment, but its limited capacity and inconsistent operation hinder effectiveness. Recent government programs—particularly the Namami Gange Mission—have renewed pressure on tanneries to upgrade treatment systems and adopt zero liquid discharge (ZLD) technologies.

Social Responsibility and Labor Practices: Social sustainability involves improving working conditions, ensuring fair wages, and promoting occupational safety. Workers in Kanpur's leather sector often come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are exposed to chemical hazards. CSR initiatives—such as skill development, health camps, and education support—have become more visible among export-oriented enterprises. However, unorganized units still lag behind.

Regulatory and Institutional Coordination: The effectiveness of environmental governance depends heavily on institutional synergy. While the UPPCB monitors pollution levels, industrial policy agencies focus on

productivity and employment generation. The absence of a unified framework often leads to fragmented interventions. The establishment of integrated Leather Parks is a positive development, providing infrastructure for waste management, logistics, and common testing facilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Kanpur leather industry exemplifies the tensions and opportunities that accompany industrial development in emerging economies. Its continued relevance to India's export performance is unquestionable, but its environmental and social footprint demands urgent attention.

Major conclusions: - Export potential remains strong but depends increasingly on sustainable compliance and innovation.

- Pollution control infrastructure exists but functions below optimal efficiency due to technical and managerial gaps.

- Social responsibility efforts are expanding but must reach small-scale producers through collective mechanisms.

Key Recommendations:

1. Promote Green Technology.
2. Cluster-Level Sustainability Framework.
3. Institutional Strengthening.
4. CSR Mainstreaming.
5. Export Promotion Through Certification.

By embedding sustainability into its growth narrative, the Kanpur leather industry can serve as a global benchmark for responsible industrial transformation—balancing profit with people and the planet.

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