

SUSTAINABLE FOOTWEAR

Opportunities for Indian Manufacturers in the Global Plant-Based Leather Market

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The global footwear industry is undergoing a significant transition as sustainability becomes a core business imperative rather than a niche positioning. International brands are increasingly adopting plant-based and bio-derived materials in response to regulatory pressure, evolving consumer preferences, and environmental commitments. In this context, Indian footwear manufacturers are well positioned to capitalise on the expanding global

market for sustainable and organic leather alternatives, as highlighted by Exim Bank.

Over the past decade, leading global brands have demonstrated the commercial viability of sustainable footwear. Marks & Spencer was among the early movers, launching its Footglove Earth range nearly ten years ago. The product line incorporated innovative materials such as fabric linings made from yarn derived from ground coffee beans, along with soles produced using natural rubber and rice husks. This marked an early example of integrating agricultural by-products into commercial footwear manufacturing.

Luxury brands have since accelerated adoption.

Stella McCartney has committed to transitioning entirely to plant-based materials across its product portfolio, including footwear. Its S-Wave 1 and S-Wave 2 sneakers, made using grape-based alternatives, are positioned as the brand's most sustainable trainers to date, underscoring growing consumer acceptance of non-animal materials even in premium segments.

Similarly, Gucci launched its vegan footwear range in 2021, manufactured in-house using its proprietary vegan leather, Demetra.

The material combines viscose, wood pulp compounds, and recycled steel, reflecting a broader industry shift towards circularity, material innovation, and reduced dependence on animal-based inputs.

In mature markets such as Europe and North America, sustainability is now a mainstream purchasing criterion, supported by tightening environmental regulations and heightened awareness of carbon footprints and supply-chain transparency.

This structural shift presents a significant export opportunity for manufacturing economies capable of supplying high-quality, sustainable footwear at scale.

India holds a strategic advantage in this evolving landscape. The country benefits from a strong and diversified footwear manufacturing base, a large pool of skilled labour, competitive production costs, and an expanding ecosystem of green startups focused on material innovation. These strengths position India to emerge as a global manufacturing and export hub for sustainable footwear.

Crucially, India has abundant access to agricultural by-products such as banana fibre, coconut husk, hemp, jute, and sugarcane bagasse.

These materials can serve as cost-effective and environmentally friendly raw inputs for plant-based leathers, biodegradable soles, and other footwear components. Leveraging these resources can enable Indian manufacturers to enhance value addition, reduce environmental impact, and align with global sustainability standards.

To fully realise this potential, coordinated efforts will be required across industry, government, and research institutions. Investments in material R&D, scaling of bio-based production technologies, certification and compliance with international sustainability standards, and integration into global supply chains will be critical for positioning India as a preferred sourcing destination for sustainable footwear.

Leather players flag tariffs issues in meeting with Parliamentary Panel.

On January 7, 2026, a delegation from the leather sector met the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce in Chennai.

The delegation included PR Aqeel Ahmed, former Chairman of the Council for Leather Exports (CLE), Abdul Wahab, Regional Chairman of CLE, and R Selvam, Executive Director of the Council.

According to the officials, higher US tariff measures have affected the competitiveness of Indian leather products in the US market, one of the sector's major export destinations.

"The leather sector is labour-intensive and supports a large workforce, including women and marginalised communities," the delegation noted. They warned that prolonged trade disruptions could have serious socio-economic consequences and urged the committee to take up the matter at policy and diplomatic levels, extend support measures to exporters, and promote market diversification.