



Kanpur crackdown

Every six years, religious festivals bring millions of pilgrims to Allahabad to bathe in the sacred River Ganges. The next major festival will take place between January and March 2019 and, 200 kilometres up-river, more than 400 tanners in the Kanpur clusters have been banned from making leather for the duration of the event. The consequences for the leather industry in this part of India are likely to be severe.

Major religious festivals in India are famous the world over for the enormous numbers of pilgrims who travel to take part; images of millions of people gathering on the banks of sacred rivers, most notably the Ganges, to bathe in the waters appear in media reports everywhere.

Prominent among the festivals is the Kumbh Mela, which takes place at different times, depending on the position of the planets, the sun and the moon, at four main locations. The word 'Mela' means 'festival' and 'Kumbh' comes from a Sanskrit word meaning 'pot'. The origins of the celebration centre on the account of a journey that Vishnu, one of the principal deities of the Hindu religion, made while carrying a 'kumbha' or pot containing 'Amrita', the nectar of immortality. On the way, he sprinkled drops of the liquid in each of the four places: Haridwar in Uttarakhand, Trimbak in Maharashtra, Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh and Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. It is the last of these that is of interest to us here because Allahabad shares a position on the River Ganges with, and is 200 kilometres downstream of, one of India's major tanning centres, Kanpur.

Millions gather

The full-scale Kumbh Mela takes place at Allahabad every 12 years, the last occasion being 2013. However, in between, every six years, pilgrims gather to celebrate Ardh Kumbh Mela ('Ardh' means 'half') and the next of these will take place in the early part of 2019.

At the 2013 event, an estimated 120 million pilgrims visited Allahabad during the two months or so that the festival lasted, and, on what the religious authorities designated the most holy day of all, February 10 (when there was a new moon), more than 30 million people are reported to have taken part

in the ritual bathing ceremony at the confluence of the Ganges and the city's other river, the Yamuna.

While celebrating these high numbers of visitors, the civic authorities expressed concerns about the levels of pollution in the river and the following year, prime minister, Narendra Modi delivered an election pledge to clean up the Ganges. After winning the 2014 election, he announced a budget for this plan and, in its first two years, had spent almost \$500 million on clean-up projects.

Tanners singled out

Industrial pollution is, clearly, one of the principal concerns of those working to improve the environment in and around the holy river. But the Ganges runs for 2,500 kilometres and millions of people live and work along its banks. Tanneries such as the 400 or so that operate in the Kanpur district of Jajmau are far from being alone in facing the challenge of improving their performance in wastewater treatment, but, however they are perhaps beginning to feel singled out.

In May, a little over a year after taking over as chief minister in Uttar Pradesh, politician and Hindu priest Yogi Adityanath appeared to confirm local tanners' worst fears. When Yogi Adityanath was chosen as the state's head of government in March 2017, tanners in and around Kanpur spoke of their fear that moves against the meat industry and its by-products were likely to follow, causing concern that sourcing raw material might become a major headache for leather manufacturers. His government's immediate actions included a crackdown on slaughterhouses and meat outlets in Uttar Pradesh; there were also reports of "unregistered" tanneries being closed down. Now, in the build-up to the 2019 Ardh Kumbh Mela, the state government has gone further. The chief minister has



Hindu pilgrims in Allahabad during the Kumbh Mela festival in 2013. On the festival's busiest day, more than 30 million people attempted to bathe at the confluence of the River Ganges and the River Yamuna.
IMAGE: VLADIMIR MELNIK / SHUTTERSTOCK

confirmed that all tanneries in and around Kanpur will have to cease production on December 15, 2018, and remain closed for three months to alleviate contamination in the River Ganges at Allahabad during the festival.

Confirmation of the bad news

President of the Uttar Pradesh Leather Industry Association, Taj Alam, has told local media that, during previous Kumbh festivals, tanneries were sometimes asked to interrupt wet-end processing for a short time around particularly important dates, but he says closing down all operations for three months is unprecedented and will threaten jobs and export revenues. "This will be very damaging for the leather trade," Mr Alam says, "and for workers. On previous occasions, we have experienced interruptions, but the government would simply ask us to stop producing for three or four days before the important times for bathing and, in between those bathing times, we could carry on making leather. This time it is different. The Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board has already issued the notice ordering all of our tanneries to stop production activity from December 15 until March 15."

Exceptions unlikely

Mr Alam, who is also the managing director of Kings International, harboured hopes earlier in this saga that his company and the 14 others in the district of Unnao, along with the 25 tanneries in the district of Banthar, might be able to keep going during the Kanpur crackdown. This was based on the fact that Unnao and Banthar have their own common effluent treatment plants and are on the opposite bank of the Ganges from Kanpur, but it seems unlikely that the authorities will make any exceptions.

In Unnao, at least, full primary effluent treatment takes place on the site of each tannery, including mixing, balancing, chemical dosing and primary clarification before discharge to the district's own common effluent treatment plant. There is constant measurement of pH, chemical oxygen demand and total dissolved solids in that effluent and there is a strict restriction on how much effluent each tannery can discharge per day, 120 cubic-metres in the case of Kings International. Furthermore, this data is available to the Uttar Pradesh government in real time and the public is entitled to view the information too.

Short financial year

The Unnao and Banthar common effluent treatment plants are run independently of the tanners by a qualified engineer, Dr Subhash Awasthi, who has extensive experience of working with the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation. The sites are open to inspection and sampling by the local authorities at any time. Even so, wastewater from all the tanneries in and around Kanpur flows into the Ganges eventually and the Uttar Pradesh government seems determined to stick to its tough line.

Ironically, chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, announced in August that he wants small and medium enterprises in Uttar Pradesh to bring in export revenues of \$145 million in the current financial year (April 2018-March 2019), an increase of 12% compared to last financial year. There are manufacturing firms in Uttar Pradesh earning export revenues from textiles, glassware, carpets and other activities. But leather and finished leathergoods manufacturers are the state's star export performers and Yogi Adityanath has just shortened by three months the time these companies have available to make their crucial contribution to the total. 🌐