

Buffalo, Goat or Cow: Which Leather Is Your Indian Bag Made Of?



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A quote that says "leather" tells you nothing about the animal, and in India the answer is often goat, sheep or buffalo rather than cowhide. Each behaves differently in a bag: goat is tough and small, sheep is soft and delicate, buffalo is thick, coarse and variable. Ask for the species, the tannage and the tannery in writing, check the grain yourself, and sample buffalo from the actual lot.

The Short Version

- India holds about 20% of the world's cattle and buffalo and 11% of its goats and sheep, by the leather council's count.
- Visiting buyers find mostly goat, sheep and buffalo in Indian leather markets, often unlabelled.
- Goat skins are small, so large bag panels may need joins or a different hide.
- Buffalo varies in thickness, firmness and stretch, and its edges burnish poorly, so sample the lot and name the tannery.
- Customs groups buffalo with cattle leather, which can matter for the EU deforestation rules. Check your line with your customs adviser.

You often can't tell from the quote, because "leather" names no animal and many suppliers won't say unless you ask. In India the answer is frequently goat, sheep or buffalo rather than cowhide. India has a vast herd of all of them, and buyers who visit its leather markets say not to expect much cowhide. Ask for the species, the tannage and the tannery in writing, check the grain yourself when the sample arrives, and if it's buffalo, sample the actual lot, because buffalo varies more than any of the others.

A visiting buyer summed up the expectation before a trip to India's leather markets in 2024: "I know to watch out for quality and smells, and not to expect any cowhide" ([r/Leathercraft, September 2024](#)). Another reply, on an earlier haul, pushed back fairly: "This is probably goat, but India does produce cow leather as well" ([r/Leathercraft, March 2021](#)). Both are true, and the gap between them is your spec. Our [leather and footwear](#) and [leather bags](#) pages tell you to name the species. This page explains what each species means for a bag and how to check what you were sent.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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- 01 **India's raw material is split between two big herds.** The leather council says India has 20% of the world's cattle and buffalo and 11% of its goat and sheep population, produces about 3 billion square feet of leather a year, and that "some varieties of goat / calf / sheep skins command premium position". (*[Council for Leather Exports, Indian Leather Industry 2026, read 18 Oct 2026](#) · the council's own figures*)
- 02 **Species often goes unlabelled in Indian leather markets.** Visiting foreign buyers mostly find goat, sheep and buffalo, and one wasn't "even sure what half of this is because of language barrier". (*Our review of buyer forum threads, 2020 to 2024, four voices*)
- 03 **Buffalo is the one to sample.** Practitioners who handled hides in India say buffalo "quality can vary significantly", and that its edges "do not burnish well and it can be a little too stretchy" even when thick. Others report "really good water buffalo" from named tanneries. (*[r/Leathercraft, June 2026](#)*)
- 04 **Customs treats buffalo as bovine.** The tariff heading for finished bovine leather reads "of bovine (including buffalo) or equine animals", while goat and sheep

leather sit on separate headings. (*UK Trade Tariff, heading 4107, read 18 Oct 2026*)

What we don't know yet

- The species mix of leather going into Indian export bags. The council publishes herd shares, not a breakdown of finished leather by animal.

1. Why Doesn't "Leather" Tell You the Animal?

Because nothing on the paperwork makes the supplier say it. Bags are classified by their outer surface, so a cowhide tote and a goatskin tote sit on the same customs line. A merchant exporter may buy finished leather from several tanneries and simply call it leather. And at the market end, as the buyers above found, hides are often sold without a species label at all.

None of that is deception. Goat, sheep and buffalo are all real leathers, and some of India's goat and calf leathers are highly regarded. The problem is only that each behaves differently in a bag, and if you designed around cowhide, a different animal can change how the bag looks, holds its shape and wears. If you sell in the US, the FTC also treats misrepresenting the "kind" of leather as deceptive (16 CFR 24.1), so you need to know the animal before you describe it.

2. How Does Each Hide Behave in a Bag?

A short comparison, because this is the one place a side-by-side helps.

Hide	Grain and feel	Good for	Watch for
Cow	Fine, even grain, large hides, consistent thickness	Structured bags, large panels, burnished edges	Less common in Indian leather markets, by visiting buyers' accounts, so ask for it by name
Buffalo	Coarser, more open grain, thick and firm	Rugged and heavy bags, work and saddlery-style goods	Wide variation in thickness, firmness and stretch, edges that burnish poorly
Goat	Pebbled grain, tough for its weight	Small leather goods, soft bags, linings	Small skins, so large panels need joins
Sheep	Very soft and smooth	Soft bags, linings, garments	Weaker, scuffs and stretches more easily

The skin size point catches designers out. A goatskin is a fraction of the size of a cowhide, so a large one-piece front panel may not fit, and the maker will either add a seam or switch hide. Ask how many pieces your pattern needs in the leather you're quoted.

3. How Can You Tell Which Hide You've Got?

Look closely at the grain with a magnifier, on an unembossed sample. These are the rules of thumb leather workers use. They're a screen, not proof.

- **Cow** shows small, evenly spread pores and a fine surface.
- **Buffalo** shows larger pores and a coarser, more pronounced grain, often with visible creases.
- **Goat** shows pores in small rows or arcs, giving its pebbly look.
- **Sheep** has a very fine, smooth surface and feels much softer and looser in the hand.

Two cautions. First, embossing hides all of this. A buffalo leather can be pressed with a pattern that looks like anything, and US guidance says leather processed to imitate another kind should say what it really is ([16 CFR 24.2](#)). Second, corrected or heavily coated grain hides the pores too. If you can't see the grain, ask for a piece of the crust leather, before finishing, and photos of whole hides or skins. Their size and shape tell you a lot. If it really matters, some labs can identify species from leather, so ask yours.

4. Why Does Buffalo Need Its Own Spec?

Because the same name covers a wide range. The buyer who had handled hides in India gave the plain advice: "Make sure to get a sample first, the quality can vary significantly" ([r/Leathercraft](#), June 2026). Buffalo from one tannery can be excellent, and practitioners name tanneries they trust. Buffalo from an unnamed lot can be patchy in thickness across one hide, softer in some areas than others, and stretchier than a cowhide of the same weight.

So for buffalo, add four things to the order. A thickness range with a tolerance, measured at several points. A firmness, or temper, matched to the approved sample. An edge finish chosen for buffalo, usually painted or folded rather than burnished. And a sample cut from the lot that will go into your bags, not from a swatch book. For heavy and saddlery-style bags, Kanpur's makers work heavier leathers every day, as our [Kanpur leather cluster](#) page shows.

5. Does the Species Matter at the Border?

For duty on a finished bag, not usually, because the bag line follows the outer surface. Exotic species are the exception, and a quote for python or crocodile is a different matter, covered on [leather bags from India](#).

For the EU deforestation rules, it can matter. They cover cattle leather, and our [EUDR guide](#) explains that goat and sheep fall outside. Whether buffalo falls inside depends on how your line is read, and the customs nomenclature groups buffalo with bovine leather. So don't assume buffalo is out. Record the species of every hide on the order and check your line with your customs adviser before the rules apply to you.

6. What Should the Order Say?

One line per bag style, covering:

- Species, and part of the hide if it matters (back and shoulder are firmer than belly).
- Tannage: chrome, vegetable or combination.
- Thickness range in millimetres, by panel.
- Finish and grain type. The words "full grain" and "Grade A" need their own definitions, set out in [what Grade A, full grain and genuine leather mean](#).
- The tannery's name, and the country the hide came from if your market or customer asks. Many Indian makers use imported leather alongside Indian.
- A retained approved sample, with bulk judged against it.

If you'd like someone to visit the tannery, confirm the species and check the lot before cutting starts, [SourcingSync](#) does that work.

Questions Buyers Ask

Is buffalo leather worse than cowhide?



No, it's different. It's thick and tough, but more variable. Good buffalo from a named tannery makes excellent rugged bags.

Is goat leather a cheap substitute? 

Can I ask for cowhide only? 

Does the species need to be on my product label? 

7. Back to "Not to Expect Any Cowhide"

The buyer heading to India's leather markets wasn't being unfair, just realistic. Indian leather is a mix of animals, and each one can make a good bag if the design suits it. Name the animal, the tannage and the tannery, look at the grain, sample buffalo from the lot, and the bag you sell will be made of the leather you meant.