

Does Indian Leather Smell Because It's Urine-Tanned?



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No. Urine does not tan leather, and the smell some buyers notice on Indian leather has ordinary causes: tannery residue left by poor washing and finishing, solvent finishes and bag-making glues, and moisture in packing and transit. Each smells different and has its own fix. Odour has no legal limit, so it has to go into the spec, with a closed-box check on bulk before you accept a shipment.

The Short Version

- Urine is not a tanning agent. The myth explains nothing and hides the real causes.
- A sharp tannery smell points to residue and poor finishing, a solvent smell to finishes and glue, a musty smell to damp.
- Origin gets blamed loosely. One "Pakistan leather" smell complaint in our log came from a seller in another country.
- Odour has no legal limit, so write an odour check on bulk into the order alongside rub-fastness and chromium VI.
- Air a smelly shipment before judging it, and never mask it with spray before a claim.

No. Urine doesn't tan leather, and India's export tanneries use the same chrome and vegetable tanning as tanneries everywhere else. The smell some buyers notice on Indian leather is real, but leather workers blame poor finishing, chemical residue and damp storage, and at least one smelly-leather complaint blamed on the subcontinent turned out to come from a seller in another country. You prevent it the same way you'd prevent it from any source: a finish specification and an odour check on bulk before you accept the shipment.

The myth turns up whenever someone opens a bag that smells. A leatherworker answered it in one line in 2024: "Urine doesn't tan leather" ([r/Leathercraft, July 2024](#)). We couldn't find a source that traces where the story started, so we won't guess. What we can do is explain what does make leather smell, because the myth is worse than wrong. It tells a buyer the smell is a national trait to put up with, when it's a process fault to specify against. The chemical tests every leather order needs are on [leather and footwear](#), and the bag spec is on [leather bags](#). This page goes into the one question those pages give a line to.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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- 01 **Practitioners blame the finishing, not the country.** "The smell is normally poor finishing on the tanning process so it ends up smelling like a tannery," one leatherworker wrote after a buyer's haul from an Indian leather shop. ([r/Leathercraft, March 2020](#))
- 02 **Origin gets blamed wrongly.** A buyer who posted about smelly "Pakistan leather" later found the seller was "an online seller in china". ([r/Leathercraft, July 2024](#))
- 03 **Smell and dye bleed come together in buyer complaints.** Across our forum log, foreign craft buyers raise strong odour and dye rubbing off as the two Indian leather complaints, and others report good leather. Most of these voices bought retail-grade leather, not from export tanneries. (*Our forum signals log, 2020 to 2026, four or more voices*)
- 04 **Odour has no legal limit.** EU rules cap chromium VI in skin-contact leather at 3 mg/kg, but nothing caps smell. ([Regulation \(EU\) No 301/2014](#))

What we don't know yet

- How often bulk shipments from Indian export tanneries fail an odour check. We found no data.

1. What Actually Makes a Leather Bag Smell?

Four things, and each smells a little different. Telling them apart is most of the fix.

Tannery residue. Turning a raw hide into leather takes a long chain of wet steps: soaking, liming to remove hair, deliming, tanning, then dyeing and oiling. Each leaves chemicals that are meant to be washed out. If the washing is cut short, or the oils used to soften the leather go off, the leather carries a sharp, sour or ammonia-like "tannery" smell. A buyer in one thread said bluntly of leather on sale in India, "If they smell like a litter box, I wouldn't get them" ([r/Leathercraft, September 2024](#)). That's the smell practitioners mean by poor finishing.

Finishes. The coatings sprayed or rolled onto the grain to give colour and shine can smell of solvent, especially if they weren't given time to dry before packing.

Bag making. Bags are glued as well as stitched. Contact adhesives and edge paints give off a solvent smell that's strongest in a closed bag fresh off the line.

Damp. Leather absorbs moisture. A bag packed in a sealed polybag in a humid season, then shipped for weeks in a warm container, can go musty or grow mould. Look for white or green spots on the leather and inside the lining.

2. Does the Smell Mean the Leather Is Unsafe?

Not on its own. A strong smell isn't a test result, and a leather that smells fine can still fail one. The tests that carry legal weight for leather are chromium VI and azo dyes, and they apply whatever your nose says. The EU and UK limits

and the Indian leather alerts are on leather and footwear, and the test plan by destination is on quality control in India.

A smell is still a good warning. Leather that wasn't washed or finished properly is also more likely to have loose dye. A buyer of Indian leather wrote that "the dye kept coming off on my hands" (Leatherworker.net, April 2025). If a delivery smells, run the rub-fastness test as well.

3. What Goes in the Spec?

Odour has no legal limit, so it only exists in your order if you put it there.

- **Name the tannery and the finish.** Ask the tannery, or your bag maker, which tannery made the leather and what finish is on it. A maker who can't say where the leather came from can't fix its smell.
- **An odour check on bulk.** Agree a simple, repeatable check. Seal a finished bag from bulk in a clean, closed container at room temperature overnight, then have two people open it and rate the smell against the approved sample. It isn't a lab method, but it's the same check you'd make in a stockroom, done before shipment.
- **A formal test if you need one.** Car makers grade the odour of interior trim materials, leather included, with panel tests, and the German industry's VDA 270 (05/2022 edition) is the one most labs offer. If your customer wants a number, ask your lab whether it runs an odour test and what it reports.
- **Drying and packing.** Bags are packed only when finishes and glues are dry. Breathable inner bags or tissue, a desiccant in each carton, and no sealed plastic around damp goods. Ask the maker how long bags rest after finishing.
- **Rub-fastness and chromium VI**, as on the bag checklist, tested on bulk leather, colour by colour.

4. What Do You Do With a Shipment That Smells?

Open a few cartons from different parts of the shipment, take bags out of their packing, and leave them in a ventilated room for several days. Solvent from glue and finishes often fades with airing. A tannery smell from residue usually doesn't. One buyer wrote of a leather piece, "I've had mine for a few years and still smells like that" ([r/Leathercraft, July 2025](#)).

Note which kind of smell it is, and check for mould. Then write to the supplier with photos, the carton numbers and what you did. Don't spray the bags with fragrance or leather conditioner before you've agreed a remedy, because that destroys the evidence and can mark the leather.

If it's damp, the conversation is about packing and transit. If it's a tannery smell, it's about the leather, and the remedy is a different tannery or a different leather article on the next order. Be fair about it. A bag maker buys leather the way you buy bags, and may not have known.

5. Is the Smell an India Problem?

It's a process problem that India gets blamed for. India produces about 3 billion square feet of leather a year, by the leather council's own count, ([Council for Leather Exports, 2026](#)), and the trade sells about twice as much to Europe as to the US, as our [Tamil Nadu leather belt](#) page shows from the council's figures. The complaints in our log come almost entirely from craft buyers who bought small lots of retail leather, not from importers buying from export tanneries, and on leather workers' own account that is where the stock left after bulk export tends to end up. Small orders getting the leftover grades is its own problem, covered in [what Grade A, full grain and genuine leather mean](#).

The way to separate a good tannery from a careless one is its process control, and an environmental audit such as the one described in our [Leather](#)

Working Group guide is one sign of it. If you want someone to visit the tannery, check the finishing and pull bulk bags for the odour and chemical tests before they ship, SourcingSync does that.

Questions Buyers Ask

Is any leather tanned with urine? ^

No modern tannery uses it to tan leather, and practitioners say flatly that urine doesn't tan. Chrome, vegetable tannins and a few other agents do.

Will the smell go away? v

Is vegetable-tanned leather less smelly? v

Can I mask the smell with a spray? v

6. Back to "Urine Doesn't Tan Leather"

Five words that clear a lot of ground. Once the myth is gone, what's left is ordinary: washing, finishing, glue and damp, all of which can be named in an order and checked on bulk. Specify the tannery, the finish and the packing, sniff a sealed bag before it ships, and you'll know whether your leather smells long before your customers do.