

## The Toxic Price of Leather

2014 • Running time 9 minutes • Directed and produced by Sean Gallagher  
• Funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

On the banks of the Ganges River in northern India lies the city of Kanpur. It has become one of the most important cities in India as its leather industry has grown, and Kanpur is now the biggest producer of leather products in the whole country. First established in the mid-19th century, the city's leather industry exports its products across the world, with 95% of its leather destined for Western markets, including those in the U.S., U.K., and Germany. However, this success comes at great environmental and social cost: the destruction of the local Ganges River ecology and the scarring of the local people in the form of life-threatening illnesses.

### TEACHER'S GUIDE



Guides may be copied  
and shared but not sold.  
Face to Face Media 2019



# The Toxic Price of Leather



*Rosemary Carbine  
Associate Professor  
of Religious Studies,  
Whittier College*

**The Toxic Price of Leather presents a very human story about the ramifications of widespread consumerism and those wounded in its never-ending appetite.**

**—Jenna Garrett,  
FeatureShoot.com**

## WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

Although this film has little religious studies content (except for a brief reference to the Hindu caste system and to the Muslim minority in India), I chose it because it explores an unregulated industry's effects on ecological and public health as well as on Hindu sacred sites and activities. It also offers religious studies students an opportunity to do independent research into how both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders, primarily in marginalized communities, are responding to this industry's effects.

## SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Activism	Health and Health Care
Agriculture	Hinduism
Consumerism	Human Rights
Development	Occupational Health and Safety
Ethics	Public Health
Geography	Toxic Chemicals

## SYNOPSIS

This film showcases some of the ecological, social, and public health crises resulting from the thriving leather industry in the leading leather-producing city of Kanpur, located on the Ganges River in Uttar Pradesh in northern India. Although revered as sacred waters and used for performing religious rituals as well as for meeting daily drinking water and washing needs, the Ganges River, along with its connected waterways and the ecology in this region, is now highly polluted with toxic wastewater from the tanneries. Chromium, lead, and arsenic have polluted the waters and thus poisoned the surrounding farmlands, causing public health crises such as cancers, mental health and child development issues, and skin diseases—with no government regulation or response.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

"The leather industry's success comes at great environmental and social cost. Pollution from the tanneries is destroying the ecology of the local Ganges River and scarring residents in the form of life-threatening illnesses. Polluted water is channeled onto local farmland, poisoning the soil, entering the food chain, and accumulating in local ecosystems. At greatest risk are the people who work in the tanneries and the farmers who work daily with the toxic and highly acidic water. Local residents suffer an array of health troubles as a result of the bioaccumulation of dangerous toxins over decades."

—Excerpted from the website of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting



# The Toxic Price of Leather



Sean Gallagher

## REVIEWS

"I absolutely love handcrafted leather goods, and up until now it's been that same admiration for the end product that has, quite frankly, kept me from even considering as a whole what the process of turning raw skin into leather looks like...Sean Gallagher sheds light on the extreme effects that the tanneries' pollution has had on Kanpur's citizens. Such an eye-opener."  
—Jorge Quinteros, jorgeq.com

"*The Toxic Price of Leather* presents a very human story about the ramifications of widespread consumerism and those wounded in its never-ending appetite." —Jenna Garrett, FeatureShoot.com

## BACKGROUND

"First established in the mid-19th century, the leather industry in Kanpur is now the country's biggest producer of leather products. Its leather is exported across the world, with 95% of its output destined for Western markets, including those in the U.S., U.K., and Germany. The city is now notorious for having some of the country's worst water pollution problems."  
—Excerpted from the website of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

## KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Saida** – tannery worker

**Rakesh Jaiswal** – environmentalist with Eco Friends, a Kanpur NGO

**Sonalal Yadav** – president of the local farmers' cooperative

**Javad Akhter** – local Kanpur politician, Muslim

*Only 20% of the water is treated before being released onto local farmland and into the Ganges River.*



All that water goes into the Ganges.  
That is the water that we drink.

# The Toxic Price of Leather



## FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

In the **first segment**, this brief documentary opens with Saida, a Kanpur tannery worker, describing how her skin disease is a result of her job. Saida explains how the tannery's wastewater is contaminated with toxic chemicals and is dumped into the city's water system as well as the Ganges. Everyday activities, such as people drinking and bathing, men boating, and children playing, are shown in or near the polluted waters.



The **second segment** depicts multiple scenes from a Kanpur factory, while Rakesh Jaiswal of Eco Friends discusses the chemical-based methods of tanning leather, which garment workers then make into clothing or shoes for export to the West. Fifty million liters of toxic tannery wastewater are dumped daily into the Ganges and its waterways, with only 20% properly treated. These statistics are shared while images show this wastewater, which contains chromium, arsenic, and lead, flowing into the Ganges and its waterways. Sonalal Yadav of the farmers' cooperative summarizes the destructive effects of this water on the region's agriculture (with scenes of flooded and depleted farms) and on public health.



The **third segment** focuses on the public health crises resulting from long-term industrial pollution by showing photo stills of children, workers, and farmers with mental disabilities, tuberculosis, vision problems, and skin diseases.

The **fourth segment** showcases scenes of industrial factories and everyday city life. Meanwhile, passionate local politician Javad Akhter recounts the environmental and health consequences that the air and water pollution caused by the non-governmentally regulated tannery industry have inflicted on the mainly Muslim minority community. These impacts include deaths—even the death of his own wife—from such medical problems as asthma and heart attacks.

The **final segment** returns to scenes of a Kanpur factory's wastewater and the polluted Ganges River shoreline, interspersed with statistics about the increased trade that leads to a lack of government regulation of this lucrative industry.

# The Toxic Price of Leather



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

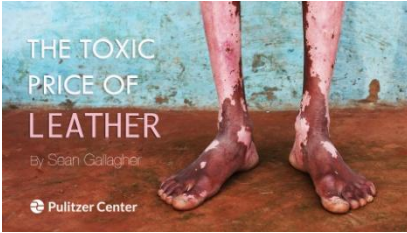
Ask students to take notes while they are viewing this 9-minute film. The notes should relate to the following questions, which are based on the film and on their reading (see below). They will then serve as the basis for subsequent class discussion. Please note that the film contains graphic content that may be disturbing to some viewers.

1. Describe Kanpur's leather industry, i.e., its global exports, its use of chemicals in tanning leather, and its wastewater treatment methods.
2. How do farmers, politicians (especially leaders in the minority Muslim community), and the government respond to Kanpur's air and water pollution from the tanneries? Pay attention to personal, social, and economic structures that influence their different responses.
3. Explain India's caste system. Apply the caste system to interpret tannery worker Saida's description of the agricultural and public health crises in Kanpur as "untouchable diseases."



The tanneries are here but the government doesn't care about us. For that reason, more pollution is also here.

# The Toxic Price of Leather



## ACTIVITIES

To help students understand the Hindu caste system, ask students to read relevant sections of the following texts before viewing the film.

Flood, Gavin D. 1996. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Knott, Kim. 2016. *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*. Second edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Rodrigues, Hillary P. 2016. *Introducing Hinduism*. Second edition. New York: Routledge.

To enhance students' understanding of religious approaches to environmental and social justice issues in Kanpur, ask students to read one or more of these news articles before viewing the film:

"How an Indian Guru Aims to Clean the World's Most Polluted Rivers,"  
<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/03/rally-for-rivers-un-world-water-day-spd/?beta=true>

"Why Kanpur's Tanneries Are at the Centre of a Fight to Save the Ganga,"  
[www.bloombergquint.com/business/2017/12/05/why-kanpurs-tanneries-are-at-the-centre-of-a-fight-to-save-the-ganga](http://www.bloombergquint.com/business/2017/12/05/why-kanpurs-tanneries-are-at-the-centre-of-a-fight-to-save-the-ganga)

"A Crackdown on the Slaughter of Sacred Cows Is Hurting India's Leather Industry,"  
<http://fortune.com/2017/06/14/india-cattle-leather-industry/>

Finally, ask students to take an independent inventory of the leather in their clothing, shoes, and accessories. Then ask them to work in groups to answer this question: How might they determine where this leather comes from?



# The Toxic Price of Leather



Additional lesson plans about this topic are provided by the Pulitzer Center, especially regarding India's pollution crisis due to rapid and unregulated development and the increasingly global challenge of access to clean water and sanitation. The lesson plans include activities such as researching local water and sanitation infrastructure, engaging in letter-writing campaigns to elected officials to promote clean water in local communities, and reflecting on the responsibilities of Western consumers and companies to workers in producing countries.

[www.pulitzercenter.org/projects/asia-india-pollution-toxic-ecosystem-waste-population-ganges](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/projects/asia-india-pollution-toxic-ecosystem-waste-population-ganges)

[www.pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/toxic-business-pollution-industry-and-health-india-23450](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/toxic-business-pollution-industry-and-health-india-23450)

[www.pulitzercenter.org/nepal-clean-water-after-quake](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/nepal-clean-water-after-quake)

Also, a four-part series of photographs and stories on the leather industry in India and Bangladesh was completed by Larry Price for *Undark Magazine*:  
<https://undark.org/article/leather-tanning-bangladesh-india/>

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

This film and other projects supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting can be found online at  
<http://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/india-toxic-price-leather>

Interviews with British environmental photographer and filmmaker Sean Gallagher are available at:  
[www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/india-city-toxic-leather-qa-sean-gallagher](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/india-city-toxic-leather-qa-sean-gallagher)

<https://pulitzercenter.org/people/sean-gallagher>

Sean Gallagher's biography can be found at:  
[www.gallagher-photo.com/about-contact/](http://www.gallagher-photo.com/about-contact/)