

# Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS) crisis in tanneries of Bangladesh: Is this the violation of labor rights?

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## Abstract:

Tannery business in Bangladesh is one of the oldest manufacturing sub-sectors and it has huge growth potential. It has been remained profitable venture since its inception. However, this sector has got adverse affect both in human life and environment. Employees who work for tanneries face severe health hazards and people live in neighborhood are also affected by environmental pollutions. Toxic exposure of chemicals in tanneries of Bangladesh violates health and safety compliances. Both workers and neighborhood people of tanneries suffer from gastrointestinal, respiratory, jaundice, hypertension and skin diseases due to inefficient and improper waste management system. Tanneries in Bangladesh have failed to maintain Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS) which is also the violation of labor right. This may lead to labor unrest in near future like RMG sector in Bangladesh. This study explores the current health and safety practices at tanneries in Bangladesh. Health problems and challenges of tannery workers are also reported in this research, and some recommendations are made at the end as possible remedy.

**Key Words:** Tannery, Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS), Labor Right & Unrest.

## 1. Introduction:

Employees are the key role players on achieving firm's success. Their efforts and innovation make the business sustainable and competitive. Therefore, it has become the responsibilities of the employers to pay back their employees and work for their welfare. Maintaining worker's health and safety has become one of the crucial issues for labor rights movement at present world (Biswas and Rahman, 2013; Hossan.et al, 2012; Goldstein.et al, 2011). Lack of Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS) at work place has got adverse effect on worker's health as well as on their life span (Azom.et al, 2012; Danna and Griffin, 1999). Leather processing is such an industry where practice of OHAS is very essential, as break of OHAS will create health hazard for workers who are directly involved with production (Billah.et al, 2002; Biswas and Rahman, 2013; Goldstein.et al, 2011). In consequence, organization will face legal constraint (Human Right Watch, 2012; ILO, 2008; MOI, 2005). Tanning industry in Bangladesh is one of the oldest manufacturing sub-sector over six decades and this sector has got the possibility of 3-4% growth of total economy (Azom.et al, 2012; GTZ, 2010). However, this sector is not well managed. According to the report of Human Right Watch (2012), tanneries abuse human right in Bangladesh and tannery workers are suffering from life dangerous diseases. Skin and respiratory diseases are very common health problems among tannery workers due to the hazardous uses of chemicals (Azom.et al, 2012; BTA, 2010; GTZ, 2010; Human Right Watch, 2012). Therefore, it is important to know the level of health and safety violation, and take remedial action immediately to stop further labor unrest and legal obligation. This study explores the current health and safety practices at tanneries in Bangladesh. Health problems and challenges of tannery workers are also reported in this research, and some recommendations are made at the end as possible remedy.

## 2. Tannery in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh has long history of doing leather processing business, and the first tannery of Bangladesh was established in 1940 by the famous entrepreneur Late Mr. RP Saha in Narayanganj (Billah, et al. 2000; Biswas and Rahman, 2013). At the beginning of this industry, tanneries were mostly located in Narayanganj, but Hazaribagh area of Dhaka city is now the main location of tanneries in Bangladesh (Biswas and Rahman, 2013). However, the government of Bangladesh is trying to shift the tanneries of Hazaribagh to Savar area (MOI, 2005). Before 1971, most the tanneries of Bangladesh were owned by foreigners and these tanneries used to produce semi-process leather which was exported to Pakistan, Iran and Turkey for further processing to produce finished leather (BTA, 2010). Only few tanneries produced finish leather locally that was small in operation. However, government of Bangladesh imposed 100% export duty on wet leather in 1977, so that tanneries feel encouraged to produce crust and finish leather (Biswas and Rahman, 2013). Since then local tanneries started to produce finished leather though export of the processed leather goods consist of wet blue leather mostly until 1981 (Biswas and Rahman, 2013). In 1990, wet blue leather was banned to export which boosted up the production of crust leather (tanned leather processed from wet blue leather).

At present, tanneries in Bangladesh are fully privatized (BTA, 2010), and it is one of the oldest sectors which have significant role play in national economy. According to Bangladesh Export Promotion Bureau, EPB (2011), 3-4% export earnings are coming from leather. Bangladesh has more than 1750 big, small and medium size tanneries that employs approximately 0.5 million workers (BTA, 2010). Bangladesh exported US\$ 663 million worth of leather to 70 countries between June, 2011 and July 2012 (HRW, 2012). Therefore, tannery business has got future growth prospect in Bangladesh.

### **3. Health hazards and adverse environmental effects of tanneries in Bangladesh:**

Though tanneries are one of the emerging sectors for trade and finance, it has adverse effect to the society, environment and worker (Azom.et al, 2012; Human Right Watch, 2012). Tanneries in Bangladesh face crisis on health and safety. It also pollutes the environment. Toxic exposure of chemical in tanneries of Bangladesh is the main reason for health and safety violation (Human Right Watch, 2012; ILO, 2008). About 40 heavy metals and acids are used for processing raw hides (Azom.et al, 2012). Only the tanneries in Hazaribagh area of Dhaka city produces 75 metric tons of solid waste (mostly consist of salts, bones, leather shavings and trimmings) per day on average, but there is no safe and scientific disposal of those wastes (Human Right Watch, 2012). Aggregate scenario is worst in whole country. The wastewater of tanneries contains animal flesh, sulfuric acid, chromium and lead, but these are disposed into river or nearby places of the tannery factories in Bangladesh which pollutes environment and affect human health of both tannery workers and neighborhoods (Azom.et al, 2012; Biswas and Rahman, 2013).

According to the report of Human Right Watch (2012), 58% tannery workers suffer from gastrointestinal disease, 31% from skin diseases, 12% from hypertension and 19% from jaundice. The toxic tanneries breach health and safety of both employees and residents nearby the factory as the morbidity rate is also high for both tannery workers and the neighborhoods (DOE, 2011; Economy Watch, 2010).

### **4. Importance of Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS):**

Occupational Health and Safety (OHAS) is a specialized field that promotes and maintains physical, mental and social well-being of workers, and it prevents the adverse health effects on employees caused by hazardous work process and work environment (Goldstein,et.al, 2001; ILO, 2001). OHAS also deals with the adaptation of work to employees by considering the issues relating to work place hygiene, engineering safety, security, toxicology, occupational medicine, psychology, ergonomics, etc (ILO, 1997; 2001 and Jensen, et. al, 2001). All work exposes employees to hazards either physically or mentally, and the practice of OHAS helps the employers to ensure employee's well-being.

Whatever the job employees do, there is a possibility of accident to be faced. Hazard can be work place accident or any disease suffered due to work. Workers in factory or office face multitude of health hazards such as extreme temperature, noise, dusts, gases, vibration and chemical toxicities (HRW, 2012; ILO, 2001). Workers suffer from severe disease like cancer due to these unhealthy and unsafe working conditions. It also affects their mental health. According to the ILO constitution, workers should be protected by employers from any kind of sickness, disease and injury which arise due to work (ILO, 2001). Health and safety at work is very crucial to manage as it has adverse effect both on employees and employers. Workers often cannot recover the pain and suffering of work injury or illness, and they cannot afford the health care costs (Biswas and Rahman, 2013; Danna and Griffin, 1999; HRW, 2012; Kogi, 2002). At the same time, work place injury or illness results possible loss of income and loss of job. Consequently, families of victim workers also suffer due to OHAS crisis. Unfortunately, some employers assume little responsibility to protect workers health and safety though it is their both moral and legal duties to look after worker's well-being (Azom, et.al, 2012; Biswas and Rahman, 2013; Economy Watch, 2010; HRW, 2012). Employers are also affected by work hazard. OHAS crisis increases the cost of the organization due to the replacement of injured workers, medical compensation, replacement or repair of damaged machinery, reduction of the quality of work, reduction or short time halt in production and negative effect on employee morale (Billah, et al. 2000; HRW, 2012, ILO, 2008; ICT, 2013; Rantanen, et al. 1994). As the consequence of safety failure incurs huge cost and it affects business reputation, employers should emphasis more on the maintenance and practice of Occupational Health and Safety.

### **5. Research Methodology:**

This study has been conducted through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Observation method. FGD is a qualitative research approach to collect data from targeted respondents, and it is a semi-structured data collection method where discussion is facilitated by a researcher to get the synergy of group interaction on a specific topic (Hossan.et al, 2012; Powell and Single, 1996; Morgan and Spanish, 1984). In FGD, researcher starts the discussion on a particular topic and then respondents join the discussion where participants feel free to mention their opinion. Synergy of the group interaction is the data that is used for analysis. Data collected through FGDs are coded on each single issue and are analyzed systematically (Morgan and Spanish, 1984; Rabiee, 2004). Four FGDs have been taken place between January, 2014 and April, 2014 in four different tanneries of Bangladesh where both managerial and non-managerial employees have participated. All the FGDs in this study have been tape recorded, all the complements given by the participants were noted down for which participants have given

their full consent. Data are sorted out based on internal consistency and frequency where extensiveness of the comment is also considered. During the FGDs, several tannery plants have been visited. Data collected through observation is also included in findings part in order to support the data found through FGDs.

## **6. Findings from FGDs:**

In order to assess the health and safety issues in tanneries of Bangladesh four FGDs have been conducted with the participation of both managerial and non-managerial employees. Participants of FGDs have mentioned that workers in many tanneries both in Dhaka and Narayanganj districts become ill because of exposure to hazardous chemicals and get injured by horrific workplace accidents. An occupational health and safety crisis exist among tannery workers (both men and women) including skin diseases and respiratory illnesses caused by exposure to tanning chemicals, and limb damages caused by accidents using dangerous tannery machinery (F.1.2; F.1.3; F.1.6; F.2.1; F.2.4; F.2.6; F.3.1; F.3.5 & F.4.4). Workers suffer daily from their exposure to harmful tannery chemicals. Many tanneries did not supply appropriate or sufficient protective equipment (F.1.2; F.1.6; F.2.1; F.2.6; F.3.1; F.4.1 & F.4.4). Workers also complain that they do not get any training as precaution of avoiding the accidents and diseases (F.1.3; F.1.4; F.1.5; F.2.3; F.2.4; F.2.5; F.3.1; F.3.5; F.4.5 & F.4.6).

Most of the tannery workers are illiterate and very few of them are high school graduate (F.1.2; F.1.6; F.2.1; F.2.6; F.3.1; F.4.1 & F.4.4). So they do not have sufficient knowledge about the machine that they are using (F.1.1; F.1.2; F.2.1; F.2.2; F.3.1; F.4.1 & F.4.4). But the works are done with perfection; because of the experience they gather (F.1.3; F.1.6; F.2.6; F.3.1; F.4.1; F.4.4 & F.4.5). It is also difficult for operation team to run the factory if the workers are new or experienced workers are absent. Production managers also believe that the work force is inefficient to perform the job (F.1.1; F.1.2; F.1.6; F.2.1; F.2.2; F.2.6; F.3.1; F.3.4 & F.4.4). The workers just have the work done ignoring the "efficiency" factor. Beside that female workers are discriminated in tannery sector. Female participants of the FGDs mentioned that they are underpaid compared with male workers, and permanent job offer is rarely given to them (F.1.4; F.1.5; F.2.4; F.2.5; F.3.6; F.4.5 & F.4.7). Participants of the FGDs have mentioned that some tanneries employ under aged works, and the rate of accidents is comparatively higher among the child labors (F.3.6; F.4.6 & F.4.7).

Some managers deny sick leave or compensation to workers who fall ill or who are injured on the job and it is the violation of Bangladesh Labor Law (F.1.5 & F.1.6). Workers of the FGDs also complained of illnesses such as fevers, skin diseases, respiratory problems, and diarrhea, caused by the extreme tannery pollution of air, water, and soil (F.2.4; F.2.5; F.4.5; F.4.6 & F.4.7). The organization does not have a doctor or anyone who can actually deal with bodily damage or emergency need (F.1.2; F.2.2; F.3.1 & F.4.4).

## **7. Findings through observation of plant visits:**

During the FGDs, fifteen tannery plants were visited. Data collected through observation is also included in findings part in order to support the data found through FGDs. The followings are the observations of the plant visits:

- 7.1 Unsafe and Unhealthy Work Environment:** It has been noticed that the working environment was not satisfactory in all the tannery factories visited during the FGDs. There were bad smells in all the factory area. But this smell was not present in the office area. There was not good ventilation system in the factory which is the reason for smells in the factory. Workers do not have sufficient space for movement in work area. All the equipments were planted as congested. Workers ate food inside the operation unit as they do not have separate food zone or staff canteen. Leather processing zone was not clean both in morning and evening time.
- 7.2 Lack of Medical Facilities and Experts:** Nature of the work of the tannery demands medical attention. As many toxic chemical are used in processing the leather in tanneries, all the tanneries are supposed to have chemical experts and medical team. However, none of the tanneries in FGDs organization have chemical expert and certified doctors. They do not have even first aid box inside the operation plant.
- 7.3 Insufficient HRM Practice:** Practices of HRM is very rare in tanneries of Bangladesh, especially the medium and small size tanneries do not have HR unit to manage employees. The employees from administration department perform the activities of employee management. They do not know various HRM practices and cannot apply it properly to increase the motivation of the employees and productivity of the tanneries. Supervisors often shout and bully at workers; and children work in some factories.
- 7.4 Lack of Multi-skilling Facility:** There is no specific training for the new worker. Most of the workers learn through on the job training. There is no off the job training. The workers are not free from worries of performance of the job and cannot focus on learning. The tasks of the workers are specific and fixed. The job rotation facility is very less. Workers do not have knowledge on others job.
- 7.5 Insufficient Equipment for Labor Safety:** It is also observed that tanneries in Bangladesh use old machineries for leather processing, and most of the works are manual. Machines are not checked before it is being operated and it is not well-maintained.
- 7.6 Lack of Civil Defense Training and Safety Measures:** Employees in general are trained up on civil defense to manage any disaster caused by fire, earthquake etc. However it is observed and informed by the

operation workers that the organization do not have any precaution to manage accidents caused by firing, chemical explosion or earthquake. There was no fire exit or emergency exit in the work premise, and no fire extinguisher and fire bucket were found.

#### 8. Discussion and Conclusion:

Tannery industry in Bangladesh is a promising sector. It has huge growth prospect. Unfortunately, this sector is not well promoted and managed. This study states that tanneries in Bangladesh violate labor rights, and breaks health and safety rules. According to Bangladesh's Labour Act (2006), factories need to be cleaned and well-ventilated for dust and fume free work place. Bangladesh's Labour Act (2006) also dictates that factory should have the facility for adequate lighting, safe drinking water, separate latrines and urinals for both male and female, precaution for possible accidents to make safe workplace for workers (Paul, 2007). However, it is not well practiced in tanneries. Illness among the factory workers and neighborhood residents of tannery is very serious issue, but there is no monitoring and action taken by law enforcements in Bangladesh (Human Right Watch, 2012). Human Right Watch (2012) has also reported that hazardous child labor is practiced in tanneries of Bangladesh, and it is against the ILO convention. Tannery workers are not well-paid and there is no formal work practice due to which discrimination and abuse are increasing day by day. Therefore, it is obvious that tannery workers of Bangladesh will start unrest in near future like RMG sector (Economy Watch, 2010). In this circumstance, it is suggested for both government and tannery employers to be concerned about OHAS issue as quick as possible. Beside that tannery factories should be shifted from urban area to an industrial processing zone in order to avoid environmental pollution and health hazards.

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**List of Participant in Focus Group Discussion (FGD):**

SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation
F.1.1	Administrative Officer	F.2.1	Administrative Officer	F.3.1	Administrative Officer	F.4.1	Administrative Officer
F.1.2	General Manager	F.2.2	General Manager	F.3.2	Production Manager	F.4.2	Leather Engineer
F.1.3	Machine Operator	F.2.3	Hydrolic Machine Operator	F.3.3	Technical Manager	F.4.3	General Manager
F.1.4	Leather Cutting Worker	F.2.4	Machine Operator	F.3.4	Supervisor	F.4.4	Supervisor
F.1.5	Tanning Worker	F.2.5	Buffing and Finishing Worker	F.3.5	Machine Operator	F.4.5	Machine Operator
				F.3.6	Tanning Worker	F.4.6	Leather Preserving Worker
F.1.6	Supervisor	F.2.6	Supervisor	F.3.7	Leather Ironing Worker	F.4.7	Leather Cutting Worker

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