

Submission to the European Commission

Caste and forced labour in supply chains connected to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

For the EU Forced Labour Regulation Risk Database (March 2026)

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With growing evidence of labour exploitation across South Asia—this report provides an evidence-based analysis to assist the European Commission in identifying high-risk sectors connected to EU supply chains and in enforcing due diligence in line with the EU Forced Labour Regulation.

Forced labour connected to caste-based discrimination is pervasive in supply chains sourcing from India, Pakistan and Sri-Lanka across garments, textiles, leather, tea, sugar, stone, construction, mining and seafood sectors. These sectors are deeply integrated into EU trade flows and exhibit multiple International Labour Organization's (ILO) defined indicators of forced labour. For more information about caste discrimination and how it manifests in supply chains see the ETI Guidance on Caste Discrimination in Global Supply Chains (<https://tinyurl.com/ETICasteGuidance>).

In accordance with the key indicators as outlined in ILO Convention No. 29 including: abuse of vulnerability, deception, restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, intimidation, retention of identity documents, withholding of wages, debt bondage, and abusive working and living conditions, this submission identifies such indicators as found in the referenced sectors and countries and includes how these also relate to caste-based discrimination and impact Dalits and other marginalised groups disproportionately.

The EU Forced Labour Regulation adopts the ILO Convention No. 29 definition of forced labour, that is, work or service exacted under menace of any penalty and not offered voluntarily. Forced child labour therefore falls within the scope of the Regulation where a child is compelled through coercion,

Caste-based discrimination

Caste discrimination is a global human rights issue affecting over 260 million people.

Caste-systems have fostered a form of 'hidden apartheid', dividing people from birth into unequal social groups. Those at the bottom of the system, known as Dalits in South Asia, are historically considered inferior to other caste-groups. While caste discrimination has been banned in many countries, implementation of the legislation is often inadequate or inhibited by deeply rooted caste bias in law enforcement and justice systems.

Dalits face marginalisation and exploitation in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Caste discrimination continues to involve massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Those at the bottom of the system may be forced to do the most hazardous jobs and are at increased risk of forced or child labour. Dalit women are particularly exposed to severe rights violations, including violence and sexual abuse, as they face intersectional caste and gender discrimination.

threats, or other “menace of penalty”, including contexts linked to trafficking, slavery-like practices, and the worst forms of child labour. (European Union, 2024).

Discrimination based on caste and analogous inherited status systems affects over 260 million Dalits (self designation for the most marginalised castes also referred to as “scheduled castes” in India) and falls within the scope of “descent” under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), as clarified by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in General Recommendation No. 29, which explicitly recognises caste as a form of descent-based discrimination. (CERD Committee, 2002). This is relevant to forced labour risk screening because descent-based discrimination can heighten vulnerability to coercion and constraint through, for example, occupational segregation, restrictions on leaving inherited or stigmatised work, exposure to degrading or hazardous labour, and heightened risk of debt bondage, all of which are pathways associated with ILO forced labour indicators such as abuse of vulnerability, menace of penalty, and debt bondage. (CERD Committee, 2002; European Union, 2024).

The UN Women policy paper on women belonging to communities discriminated against based on work and descent documents supports treating gender and descent/caste as mutually reinforcing risk factors in forced labour risk assessment and due diligence, including in relation to vulnerability, barriers to remedy, and risks of coercion and precarious work. (UN Women, 2025).

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Garments and textiles (including cotton, cottonseeds and silk)

India: India continues to be a significant exporter of garments and textiles to the EU. Reports from the ILO (2016) and Arisa (2020) highlight prevalent issues of child labour and debt bondage in hybrid cottonseed production, particularly in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, disproportionately impacting Dalit and Adivasi children and families. The Arisa (2020) report, *Sowing Hope*, corroborates claims of unpaid minimum wages and ongoing child labour, both indicators of forced labour when coupled with coercive debt arrangements and lack of contract freedom.

The *From Field to Fabric* report by Transparentem (2024) exposes exploitation on farms linked to international suppliers including EU-based companies. The sharecropping system in Gujarat known as Bhag-kheti, investigated by Arisa and CLRA (2020), fosters an environment of unregulated labour that resembles debt bondage, predominantly affecting Dalits and Adivasis due to systemic exclusion and limited alternatives.

New documentation on migrant bonded labour in India reinforces the relevance of caste as a structural risk factor for debt bondage and coercive recruitment. A 2025 NCCEBL-linked study based on surveys of rescued bonded labourers reports strong concentration among marginalised caste groups and documents gaps in post-rescue rehabilitation and access to assistance and compensation, which can perpetuate vulnerability and cycles of re-exploitation. (NCCEBL 2025)

The textile sector in Tamil Nadu, especially spinning mills, has been consistently flagged for systemic violations of labour rights. SOMO and Arisa (2021) identified forced labour indicators across 29 spinning mills, including excessive overtime, manipulation of vulnerable workers and restrictions on movement. The Sumangali Scheme exploits young Dalit and other marginalized girls by binding them to three-year contracts characterized by exploitation. These practices align with the ILO's definition of forced labour through deception, wage withholding, exploitation of vulnerability and restrictions on freedom (ETI 2019).

Concerns regarding silk production are also significant. Reports from HRW (2003) and the US Department of Labour (USDOL, 2023) report instances of bonded child labour in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, affecting primarily Dalit and Muslim children. These practices involve debt bondage, hazardous work without choice and movement restrictions, meeting the ILO's criteria for forced labour.

When it comes to recycled textiles, Panipat in Haryana serves as a major textile recycling hub, supplying raw materials to EU brands. Arisa and Sympany (2020) highlight exploitative conditions, including child labour, wage suppression and the absence of formal contracts. These conditions align with ILO indicators such as abusive working environments and lack of contract freedom, with marginalized groups, such as Dalits, primarily engaged in exploitative work. Recycled yarns and fabrics from Panipat and other South Asian centers are integrated into the supply chains of EU fashion and home furnishing brands, often through intermediary manufacturers in Europe and Asia, connecting exploitative recycling practices to European consumer markets.

Recent analysis highlights additional due diligence blind spots in textile recycling and circularity initiatives. Arisa finds that brands' human rights due diligence frequently fails to cover working conditions in recycling processes across the value chain, potentially obscuring serious labour rights risks in facilities processing textile waste in India and Pakistan. This is relevant to forced labour risk screening where workers face hazardous conditions, weak oversight and limited avenues for organising or remedy. (Arisa, 2026).

In the home-based garment sector, women, particularly from marginalized castes, engage in tasks such as embroidery and finishing without formal contracts or social protections (Kara, 2019). The *Tainted Garments* report reveals systemic underpayment, harassment and a lack of grievance mechanisms, indicative of vulnerability exploitation and coercive dependency—key signs of forced labour, as noted by Homeworkers Worldwide (2021).

Across the leather, garment and embellishment sectors in India and Pakistan, homeworkers remain largely invisible and unprotected. The Hidden Homeworkers Toolkit (2021) and ETI (2014) confirm issues such as irregular payments, denial of rights and extreme economic dependency—fulfilling multiple ILO indicators of forced labour. The Update from Tiruppur (2021) outlines conditions including isolation, lack of grievance mechanisms and dependence on intermediaries, all of which manifest coercion and restrict choices.

New evidence further substantiates that restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining in South Asian garment supply chains are a key enabling condition for severe labour exploitation. Amnesty International's 2025 research on Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka documents legal and administrative barriers to organising, intimidation and retaliation by employers, and failures of state protection. It also highlights how intersecting discrimination, including on grounds of gender, caste/descent, and migration status, deepens workers' exclusion from trade union activity and complaint mechanisms, increasing exposure to forced labour indicators such as menace of penalty, intimidation, wage-related coercion, and inability to refuse abusive overtime. (*Amnesty International, 2025a*)

A companion Amnesty International briefing analyses how fashion companies' purchasing practices, complex subcontracting, and reliance on private auditing can diffuse responsibility and compound weak state enforcement, contributing to persistent low wages, overwork, and barriers to organising. This strengthens the rationale for treating freedom of association as a due diligence priority in forced labour screening, given the link between suppressed worker voice and the persistence of coercive practices, including wage theft, forced overtime, and retaliation against whistleblowers. (*Amnesty International, 2025b*).

Pakistan: Cotton and textile exports form the backbone of Pakistan's trade relationship with the EU. Arisa (2024) highlights exploitative conditions prevalent in textile mills, where labourers often come from marginalized caste communities. A joint study by the FAO and ILO (2023) indicates that child labour remains a persistent issue in Pakistan's cotton fields, with children engaging in hazardous tasks and enduring coercive debt arrangements—both indicators of forced labour.

As leading exporters of cotton and textiles, India and Pakistan send substantial quantities of garments to the EU market. EU trade data shows that imports of garments and textiles from India exceeded €6 billion (Eurostat, 2024a), while bilateral trade in goods between the EU and Pakistan reached €12 billion in 2024, with textiles and clothing comprising 75.8% of total EU imports from Pakistan (Eurostat 2024b).

Moreover, silk, cotton and cottonseeds produced in both India and Pakistan are exported to manufacturing hubs such as Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia, where they are processed into garments for export to EU countries and elsewhere. These interconnected supply chains mean that it is necessary to look at where cotton and cottonseeds come from – not just the finished garments.

Recent research on export-oriented garment production documents systemic excessive working hours, wage theft and poor working conditions, alongside constraints on effective worker representation. These conditions heighten forced labour risks, particularly where workers face economic coercion and retaliation for refusing overtime. In addition, evidence on the position of Scheduled Caste workers in Pakistan’s textiles and garment industry underscores the need for caste-responsive due diligence and remedy pathways in export supply chains. (Arisa, 2025b).

Leather

India: The leather industry in India is in large part based on caste-based discrimination and exploitative working conditions, rooted in the historical association of Dalits with the handling of animal remains and skins. Arisa (2023) reports that workers in Tamil Nadu's tanneries and shoe factories, often from Dalit communities, work without contracts, receive meager wages and endure hazardous working environments. These conditions reflect indicators of forced labour, including exploitation of vulnerability, wage withholding and the absence of meaningful contract freedom and lack of alternatives due to exclusion.

The Hides and Hardship report (2023) underscores caste-based discrimination as a systemic issue within leather supply chains. Workers are often trapped in informal employment without avenues for recourse or mobility—conditions that, according to the ILO framework, constitute forced labour.

India is a key supplier of leather products to the EU, with exports, including footwear, gloves and various leather goods, reaching European retailers. In 2023, the EU imported leather goods valued at over €800 million from India (Eurostat via TradingEconomics, 2024), highlighting the significant relevance of forced labour risks in this sector for EU supply chains. This figure does not account for leather that is exported from India to other manufacturing countries before reaching the EU.

Pakistan: Similar challenges are evident in Pakistan's leather sector. The Hides & Hardship report (Together for Descent Leather & Arisa, 2023) notes that Dalits in Pakistan have been historically relegated to stigmatized roles in leather work, such as skinning animals, resulting in social exclusion, verbal abuse and experiences of untouchability (a discriminatory practice within the caste system where Dalits are treated as polluting to other caste groups and there by “untouchable”). This persistent marginalization, combined with extreme economic dependency and wages below the

minimum threshold, significantly increases their vulnerability to forced labour indicators such as coercion and economic exploitation.

Pakistan is also a prominent exporter of leather goods to the EU (Eurostat via TradingEconomics, 2024), similarly supplying leather to various other manufacturing countries that produce goods for the EU market.

Construction, stone (granite, sandstone, marble) and minerals

The construction, mining and minerals sectors in South Asia are characterized by persistent informality and structural inequality, leading to heightened risks of forced labour and exploitation. In India, the informal construction industry employs millions of internal migrants or marginalized workers, many who are Dalits (also known officially as “scheduled castes” in India), who are often recruited under false pretenses, compensated irregularly and subject to coercive working conditions (Arisa, 2020a; Arisa & Centre for Labour Research and Action, 2024; Glocal Research et al., 2017).

India is a leading global exporter of natural stones and various industrial minerals, including granite, mica, raw aluminum and sandstone—materials that enter global value chains through both direct and indirect channels. A significant portion of these resources is processed or utilized in the EU construction and infrastructure sectors.

India’s natural stone sector is a known hotspot for forced and bonded labour, particularly in Rajasthan’s sandstone and Tamil Nadu’s granite regions. The *Caste in Stone* report (2024) found that caste-affected communities are systematically employed in the most dangerous and informal tasks. Workers often report advance-based recruitment, wage withholding, unsafe conditions and retention of identity documents—key ILO forced labour indicators. These natural stones—granite, sandstone and marble—are widely exported to the EU, especially for use in construction and interior design. In 2023, India was among the top suppliers of processed stone to European markets, tying exploitative labour practices directly to EU consumer goods and infrastructure.

Evidence of debt bondage is prevalent in India’s granite and sandstone quarries, where many granite workers are recruited through high-interest loans, restricting their ability to leave their jobs (Glocal Research et al., 2017). Likewise, in Rajasthan’s sandstone sector, Dalit migrant workers are frequently trapped in debt-driven labour agreements, often enforced by advance payment systems that impose low wages and extended servitude (Arisa, 2020a; Gunasekaran, 2014; Madhavan & Raj, 2005).

In Rajasthan’s natural stone quarries, findings point to 90–95% of workers belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, facing systemic marginalization, poverty and limited access to land and education—factors that elevate their risk of exploitation (Arisa & Centre for Labour Research and Action, 2024).

Children also remain part of the labour force. In home-based cobble making, children assist parents, live on quarry sites and are deprived of education and healthcare (Arisa, 2020). The *Dark Sites of*

Granite (ICN, 2017) links these conditions to EU companies via sourcing from Tamil Nadu. These practices represent a combination of debt bondage, abuse of vulnerability and lack of choice.

Mica mining in South Asia, particularly in India (Jharkhand, Bihar and potentially Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh), presents significant risks of child labour and other severe human rights violations. The prevalence of illegal mining in India's mica sector is evident, as export data often show figures that far exceed official production levels, with misreporting of mica origins from legally restricted areas like Jharkhand listed as originating from Rajasthan. This situation creates an environment conducive to exploitation and abuse due to insufficient oversight. The hazardous and unregulated conditions, coupled with practices such as debt inheritance and low wages, heighten the risk of forced labour, trapping marginalized groups like Dalits in exploitative cycles (SOMO & Terre Des Hommes, 2018; Pfeil & Sharma, 2022).

In Pakistan, informal mining operations—especially in coal, salt and stone extraction— as well as in the production of bricks, exhibit similar structural risks. While documentation is less comprehensive for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, evidence from the Global Slavery Index (Walk Free Foundation, 2023) indicates that both countries experience ongoing risks of modern slavery in construction-related activities, particularly where informal labour practices predominate and regulatory enforcement is lacking.

Tea

India: Dalits form part of the marginalised workers that make up the tea plantation labour force in regions such as Assam, West Bengal and Kerala. Raj (2022) highlights issues such as debt bondage, inadequate alternative employment opportunities and declining working conditions. Together with substandard housing and meager wages, these factors align with the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of forced labour.

The ILO (2024) affirms that safety and health standards are notably deficient, particularly concerning tea plucking and pesticide application. The prevalence of informal contracts and gender bias further aggravates the risks of forced labour by exploiting vulnerabilities and economic pressures. Additionally, a report from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2021) identifies forced labour practices in tea industries across countries affected by caste, including India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Sri Lanka: In Sri Lanka, Indian Tamil labourers, many of whom are considered of historically marginalized castes, are essential to the tea plantation sector. These workers were initially brought from South India as indentured labourers and continue to face marginalization today (American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies, 2023).

A considerable segment of this workforce is employed through informal arrangements, particularly among temporary and casual workers who lack employment contracts, job security and legal protections. The prevailing working and living conditions often entail below minimum wages, excessive workloads and restrictions on the freedom to seek alternative employment, thereby

perpetuating economic dependency and immobility (Human Rights Resource Centre, 2021, UN SR Slavery - Obokata T., 2021, The Guardian, 2023).

Bangladesh: An extensive ILO study in Bangladesh revealed serious issues within the tea sector, such as low and inconsistent wages, prolonged working hours, lack of written contracts and productivity quotas tied to debt, collectively reflecting coercive labour practices (ILO, 2016). The payment structure penalizes workers who do not meet daily leaf-plucking quotas, leading many to involve family members—including children—to prevent loss of income (GSDRC, 2018).

These systemic challenges are compounded by weak union representation and inadequate enforcement of protections under the Bangladesh Labour Act. Consequently, numerous tea workers find themselves in conditions synonymous with forced labour, particularly where economic reliance, social exclusion and limited choices prevail (Salam, 2025; GSDRC, 2018). A significant portion of these workers are Dalits, further compounding their exclusion and limited alternatives.

The European Union is a major importer of tea from both India and Sri Lanka, with a smaller quantity sourced from Bangladesh. This trade connection highlights the urgent need to address the risk of forced labour and labour abuses within tea plantations through EU due diligence mechanisms and the Forced Labour Regulation.

Sugarcane

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017) presents evidence of systemic labour abuses in sugarcane production in both India and Pakistan, including debt bondage and child labour that predominantly affect socially marginalized groups like Dalits. Workers are often recruited informally by middlemen, receiving partial or full payment in kind and are required to repay substantial cash advances under exploitative conditions. These arrangements are clear indicators of forced labour, characterized by coercion, restricted freedom to exit employment and involuntary service.

Both India and Pakistan are significant producers of raw and refined sugar, as well as molasses, for international markets. In 2023, the European Union (EU) continued to import sugarcane derivatives from these countries for food manufacturing and industrial processing, linking high-risk labour conditions in sugarcane cultivation to EU supply chains (European Commission, 2024; ILO, 2017).

Seafood (Shrimp)

Credible reports indicate a systematic prevalence of forced labour within the farmed shrimp industry in India, particularly in peeling sheds and processing facilities located in Andhra Pradesh. These establishments are crucial for preparing shrimp for both domestic consumption and export markets, including the European Union.

Labour is primarily sourced from internal migrants belonging to marginalized castes, recruited through third-party labour contractors who typically impose exorbitant placement fees. In numerous documented instances, workers are compelled to take loans—often from the recruiter—to cover

these costs, leading to conditions of debt bondage. Reports detail restrictions on worker mobility, including surveillance, confinement to employer-provided housing and wage withholding (The Seafood Social Risk Tool, July 2024). Such arrangements align with several indicators of forced labour established by the International Labour Organization (ILO), including the exploitation of vulnerability, movement restrictions and debt manipulation.

These risk elements are particularly relevant to the EU Forced Labour Regulation, given that India is a significant shrimp supplier to the EU market. The sector should be regarded as high-risk for inclusion in the EU Forced Labour Risk Database, especially in instances where due diligence has not been independently verified or where suppliers are connected to informal recruitment channels and unregulated processing facilities.

Summary and Recommendations

This report identifies multiple ILO forced labour indicators across sectors closely connected to EU supply chains, including garments and textiles (including cotton, cottonseed and silk), leather, construction, stone and minerals, tea, sugarcane, and seafood (shrimp in South Asia). It also highlights emerging risks in textile recycling.

A central finding is that caste discrimination is a structural vulnerability factor that heightens forced labour risk by shaping occupational segregation, limiting alternatives, undermining access to remedy, and increasing exposure to coercion and debt bondage. Caste is directly tied to occupation and the most marginalised castes are those most at risk of forced labour in supply chains in South Asia and at the same time have the most obstacles to accessing justice and remedy. This combination makes caste discrimination a salient risk in relation to forced labour that must be directly and explicitly addressed.

Recommendations for the risk database:

- 1) Ensure that risk assessment explicitly recognizes caste discrimination and intersecting discrimination affecting over 260 million people as cross-cutting vulnerability factors relevant to multiple ILO forced labour indicators.
- 2) Clarify evidence standards that enable triangulation and acceptance of credible information from UN mechanisms, ILO sources, reputable NGOs, trade unions and worker organisations, including evidence of restrictions on freedom of association as an enabling condition for coercion.
- 3) Provide practical guidance for mapping supply chains and indirect routes (for example, cotton/cottonseed and silk processed in third countries before export to the EU) and to include recycling and circularity processes within due diligence scope.

5) Ensure that the risk database highlights South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) as a region where companies must be especially vigilant in assessing and addressing forced labour risks and the unique vulnerabilities related to caste discrimination

4) Emphasize worker-centred, safe, non-retaliatory remediation with specific attention to caste discrimination and gendered harms within South Asian supply chains.

Finally, IDSN encourages structured consultation with affected worker organisations, including Dalit-led organisations and women worker groups, to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of risk assessment and enforcement.

The report grounds caste discrimination risk in international human rights law: discrimination based on caste and analogous inherited status systems falls within “descent” under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), as clarified by the CERD Committee in General Recommendation No. 29. In addition, the report underscores that gender and caste are mutually reinforcing risk factors, including through barriers to remedy and heightened vulnerability in informal and precarious work.

The report further clarifies that forced child labour is within scope of the EU Forced Labour Regulation where work is exacted under menace of penalty and not offered voluntarily, consistent with the Regulation’s adoption of the ILO Convention No. 29 definition.

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