



TANNING, RUBBER, AND FOOTWEAR INDUSTRIES

TANNING, RUBBER, AND FOOTWEAR INDUSTRIES IN IRAN. Tanning was an economic activity traditionally practiced all over Iran, not only in the large towns, but also in small towns and large villages, and practiced on a small scale by the nomads as well. There was, of course, a difference in the scale of operation between these various production centers. Whereas in most rural towns and villages tanning was mainly for local consumption, in many of the large towns leather was a major supply product to markets both inside Iran and for export. Of the large towns, Hamadan in particular was famed for its manufacture of leather due to the abundant supply of water. Iran exported raw skins and imported treated high-quality leather (see Floor, 2003, pp. 376-407, also on the technology used). The industry was characterized by the large number of small artisan workshops employing only a few persons per shop, as is clear from the situation in Tehran in 1925 (see [TABLE 1](#)).

It was only in 1928 that the first modern (although small) industrial tannery and leather factory, K̄vosravi, was established in Tabriz. Later, other similar industrial tanneries were established in Hamadan (1933), which had been the center of the tanning industry in earlier times, as well as in Tehran (Amin Monazzam, in 1932), Mashad (1935), Tabriz (Omid, Vahabzadeh [Wahābzāda] Bros., in 1936), Qazvin (1939), and Bābol (1939) (Floor, 1984, Annexes I and II; Gupta, p. 77). In 1962, there were 19 leather factories and 12 tanneries, employing more than 2,000 workers (Echo of Iran, 1963, p. 242). In the 1970s,



six light leather plants were established with a combined annual capacity of 4,180,636.8 m². These were partly privately owned, but after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 they were all nationalized. In 2000, there were approximately 170 firms engaged in light leather tanning and 80 firms in heavy leather tanning, producing 12,077,395.2 m² and 8,361,273.6 m² of light and heavy skins, respectively. The heavy leather industry started in 1946 with the Zouk Company, and was joined by the larger state-owned Azar Company (984,772.224 m² capacity) in 1956. These firms, which are mostly privately owned, are mainly concentrated in the provinces of East Azarbaijan, Tehran, Khorasan, and Hamadan. Many traditional tanneries are still in operation. All of them, the traditional tanneries in particular, are a major source of pollution, as they contaminate the waterways with their residues (blood, effluents, wastes from splitting of hides) as well as the air by improper preservation of skins and the burning of horns and hoofs. Although Iranian hides and skins are still mainly exported in pickled form, leather production is gaining ground in Iran because of the added value it creates (see [TABLE 2](#)).

Although Iran produces many goat and sheepskins, and exports much of the latter, it still imports many hides for its footwear industry. As in previous centuries, many of the hides are exported, mainly in pickled form, while the clean, high value-added processing is carried out in the importing countries. If Iran would process the skins into high quality products for export, rather than exporting raw skins, it may be able to triple her export earnings. Iran is already producing high-quality leather goods, such as shoes and handbags, much of it in small artisan shops. The local industry producing leather bags, belts, shoes, briefcases and jackets, though still small and mostly manually operated, is growing. From [TABLE 3](#) it is clear that there are many more small firms in the industry, but that the large companies employ most of the workforce.

Iran produces about 40 million pairs of shoes per year, half of which are made by 15 firms using machinery. The remainder is handmade in about 25,000 small handicraft establishments and by individuals. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the quality of machine-made shoes suffered after the factories were put under government control. However, nationalized companies such as Bata, Melli and Wien have reemerged to make better quality shoes recently. The modern plants are dependent on import for all non-leather materials (rubber, canvas, polyethurane, etc.). They produce about 125 million pairs of shoes per year; estimated capacity is 20 million pairs of



machine-made leather shoes per year, but they produce also sport (25 million pairs), rubber (10 million pairs), and plastic shoes (70 million pairs). The artisan shoemakers have a capacity of 40 million pairs of shoes per year, which include 2-3 million pairs of traditional footwear such as *givas*. The modern plants have not only made inferior products, but they also have worked below capacity due to heavy government subsidies. The light leather industry was promoted by the government to valorize domestic goat and sheepskins, but the expected growth has failed to materialize. In 1995, the modern footwear industry employed 13,599 workers, and in 2000, only 10,432, which represented a drop in the share in total manufacturing employment from 1.7 percent to 1.2 percent (UNIDO, 1999).

The export of footwear increased in the 1970s, in particular to the U.S.S.R., but almost stopped after 1979. After 1991, exports resumed through barter trade, this time mostly with former Central Asian Soviet republics. However, it is not an important export item, representing only 0.4 percent of total exports in 1998 and 0.2 percent in 1999 (UNIDO, 1999). The first synthetic leather factory was established in 1988 by the Piruzi Company with a capacity of 2.5 million pairs of shoes (*Iran Yearbook*, pp. 14-28). Since then, others have also become active in this field such as Azar Abadegan Plastic Co. (Tehran), Bushire Charm Industrial Co., Bushire Polymer Industrial Group, and Derakhshan Tehran Industrial Manufacturing Company. The rubber industry was established in the 1950s, and by 1962 there were three factories producing retreated tires (110,000) and canvas and rubber shoes, as well as other rubber products (*Echo of Iran*, 1963, p. 243). By the mid-1970s, production had increased enormously in capacity (1.6 million tires), with a variety of products (car, motor and bicycle tires, tubes). Import of foreign tires and tubes continued (*Echo of Iran*, 1976, p. 206). By the mid-1990s, the tire industry's capacity was 270,000 tons per year, which was still not sufficient to satisfy domestic needs. Iran continues to import tires, but there also has been some export of tires (see [TABLE 4](#)). The imports of other rubber products remain at around 10-15 million tons per year.

See also [DABBĀĠI](#) on the tanning procedures.



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