



# INDIA'S TWO-SLAB GST ARCHITECTURE: POLICY DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEATHER SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

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The 56th GST Council meeting of September 2025 announced a structural simplification of India's Goods and Services Tax architecture — reducing the operative rate landscape to primarily two slabs (5% and 18%) by eliminating the contested 12% middle ground. This reform, signalled by the Prime Minister's Independence Day address in August 2025, represents the most significant structural change to GST since its implementation in 2017. For the leather sector -a strategically important industry generating US\$5.26 billion in annual exports and employing 4.4 million workers -the transition to a two-slab structure creates a distinctive combination of opportunities and new risks. This paper analyses the policy rationale for the two-slab reform, evaluates its design features against international experience with simplified VAT systems, and examines the specific implications for the leather sector's compliance landscape, export competitiveness, and business performance. Key findings indicate that the reform delivers genuine simplification benefits for mainstream leather producers but introduces a new and potentially disruptive boundary between standard (5%) and premium (18%) leather products that lacks the administrative precision needed to prevent classification disputes. The paper further argues that the reform's success depends on three implementation prerequisites that policy alone cannot deliver: clear product classification guidance, sustained refund processing improvements, and rate stability commitments. Drawing on comparative analysis of GST/VAT simplification experiences in Canada, Australia, and Singapore, the paper develops a set of design recommendations for maximising the two-slab structure's effectiveness in the Indian context. Keywords: Two-Slab GST; GST Rationalisation; Leather Industry; GST 2.0; Product Classification; Export Competitive- ness; Tax Policy Design; VAT Simplification; Standard-Premium Distinction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tax policy design involves a fundamental trade-off between simplicity and differentiation. A uniform tax rate is maximally simple — it eliminates classification disputes, minimises compliance costs, and is easy for consumers and businesses to understand. But a uniform rate also treats all goods and services as equivalent, forgoing the redistributive or incentive effects that differentiated rates can achieve: lower rates on necessities to reduce their burden on low-income households; higher rates on luxuries to capture a greater share of consumer surplus; reduced rates on intermediate goods to avoid cascading effects; and zero rates on exports to maintain international price competitiveness.

India's original GST design opted firmly for differentiation. The five-slab structure (0%, 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28%) was explicitly designed to map different product categories to different rate levels reflecting their economic and social character. This differentiation served the redistributive objective but came at a cost in compliance complexity: the more

slabs, the more boundary disputes about which slab applies to any given product, and the greater the incentive for tax planning that exploits rate differences at supply chain boundaries.

The September 2025 two-slab announcement reflects a recognition that India's GST has accumulated too many boundary disputes, too much litigation, and too much classification uncertainty to function as the 'ease of doing business' improvement it was intended to be. By collapsing the 12% slab into either 5% or 18%, the reform reduces the number of dispute boundaries while preserving a meaningful rate differential between necessities and standard/luxury goods.

For the leather industry, the practical consequences of this reform are significant and not entirely predictable. This paper examines what the two-slab structure means for the sector in terms of rate incidence, classification complexity, export economics, and the distribution of compliance burdens between large organised manufacturers and the MSME-dominated cluster economy.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: GST SIMPLIFICATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The economic case for simplifying multi-rate indirect tax structures is well established in the public finance literature. Slemrod and Bakija (2017) demonstrate that the administrative and compliance costs of tax systems rise nonlinearly with the number of rate brackets, because each bracket boundary generates a zone of ambiguity where taxpayers have both classification uncertainty and tax planning incentives. In VAT-based systems, these boundary effects are amplified by the multi-stage nature of the tax, because a classification error at one supply chain stage propagates through downstream ITC claims.

International experience with VAT rate simplification provides relevant precedents. Canada's GST/HST system, which operates primarily with a single federal rate supplemented by provincial components, has generated significantly lower classification litigation rates than India's multi-slab GST, though this reflects not only rate simplicity but also the greater specificity of product definitions in the Canadian system's schedules (Rao, 2023). Australia's GST, implemented in 2000 with a single 10% rate and a zero-rate for fresh food and financial services, reduced compliance costs for businesses by an estimated 0.3% of GDP in its first decade — though the food exemption itself generated the classification disputes that a zero/single-rate boundary inevitably creates (Tremblay, 2023).

Singapore's GST provides perhaps the cleanest international comparison for a developing economy: a single standard rate applied broadly with minimal exemptions, generating a compliance infrastructure that is genuinely simple but which relies on Singapore's specific political economy of administration that is difficult to replicate in a federal system of India's complexity (Ananda, 2024).

The Indian literature on GST rate rationalisation has been largely anticipatory rather than evaluative, given that the two-slab announcement is recent. Mukherjee (2023) provides the most rigorous pre-reform analysis, noting that India's multi-slab structure had generated significant ITC chain distortions in manufacturing sectors where input and output rates diverged — the inverted duty problem. His stocktaking found that simplifying to two slabs would reduce most inverted duty cases but would create a new 'boundary problem' at the 5%/18% interface. The present paper is among the first to evaluate this prediction specifically in the leather sector context.

Gouveia (2019), examining India's GST from a Brazilian VAT comparison perspective, observed that the principal benefit of rate consolidation in consumption tax systems is not the administrative savings from fewer brackets per se, but the reduction in economically distortive classification behaviour — the tendency of firms to restructure transactions to exploit rate differentials. In the leather sector, the 5%/12% boundary had created this behaviour during Phase II; the 5%/18% boundary under the two-slab structure creates a wider differential and thus potentially stronger distortive incentives.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a comparative policy analysis approach, drawing on three sources of evidence. First, documentary analysis of GST Council deliberations, Ministry of Finance notifications, CBIC circulars, and advance rulings from State Authority for Advance Rulings benches from 2017 to 2025 provides a systematic account of how the rate structure has evolved and how administrative guidance has addressed emerging classification issues.

Second, comparative analysis of VAT/GST simplification experiences in Canada, Australia, and Singapore offers an international benchmark against which to evaluate India's two-slab design choices. This comparison is necessarily contextual — India's GST operates in a federal system with concurrent central and state taxation, a characteristic absent in the comparator economies — but yields useful lessons about the administrative prerequisites for successful rate simplification.

Third, primary data from the structured survey of 75 leather industry participants and depth interviews with manufacturers and tax practitioners (described in the companion MSME paper) provide a sector-specific empirical foundation for the policy analysis. Survey data relevant to this paper include respondent assessments of the two-slab structure's expected impact on their businesses, classification confidence under the new framework, and views on the adequacy of administrative guidance received since the September 2025 announcement.

The analytical framework evaluates the two-slab reform across four dimensions: rate incidence and sector-level fiscal impact; classification boundary management; export competitiveness implications; and implementation readiness assessment. These dimensions correspond to the primary policy concerns identified in both the documentary record and stakeholder consultations.

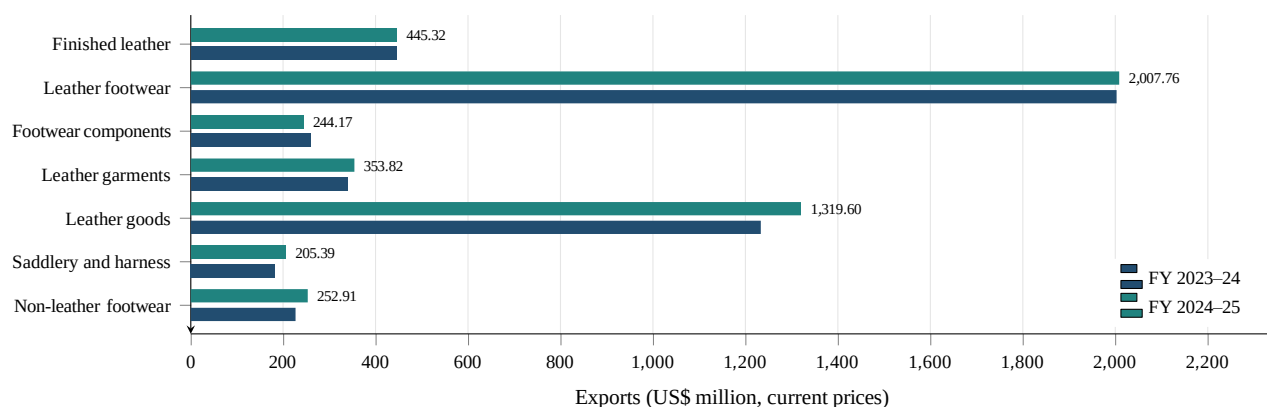


**Figure 1:** Web-data redraw of leather, leather-product and footwear exports by product, FY 2023–24 and FY 2024–25. Source: Council for Leather Exports, industry overview (2025), pp. 2–3, based on DGCI&S. Values are nominal US\$ million; labels identify FY 2024–25. The basket includes non-leather footwear. Both years precede the September 2025 reform and do not measure its effects.

#### 4. THE TWO-SLAB REFORM: DESIGN FEATURES AND POLICY RATIONALE

The Prime Minister's Independence Day address on 15 August 2025 signalled that India was committed to simplifying its GST structure 'so that honest taxpayers do not have to navigate a maze of rates and classifications.' The 56th GST Council meeting followed on 3 September 2025, providing the operational details of how the 12% slab would be phased out across different product categories.

For the leather sector, the Council's decisions were: Prepared leather (HS 4107–4115) and job work on leather: Rate reduced from 12% to 5%, effective 22 September 2025. Leather handicrafts and affordable footwear: Rate maintained at or reduced to 5%.

Premium and luxury leather goods: Rate maintained at 18%, as these fall into the 'standard rate' category in the

two-slab framework.

Composite leather goods with synthetic components: Classification to be determined by predominant material content, with guidance circular pending.

The policy rationale for these decisions follows a clear logic. Prepared leather and affordable footwear are inputs into or finished goods serving mass market consumers; keeping them at 5% maintains affordability and prevents downstream price increases. Premium leather goods — high-value handbags, designer footwear, luxury accessories — are consumption goods for higher-income consumers and can reasonably attract an 18% rate without material welfare impact. The 12% rate on job work was a specific rationalisation measure in 2022 that the 2025 reform reverses, restoring the original sub-contracting economics.

This logic is economically sound. The implementation challenge is in the boundary: where exactly does 'affordable' footwear end and 'premium' begin? At what price point, material specification, or manufacturing standard does a leather bag transition from 5% to 18%? The Council's September 2025 announcement specified the directional decision but deferred the operational specifics to a subsequent CBIC classification circular that had not been issued at the time of this study.

#### 5. TWO-SLAB STRUCTURE: LEATHER SECTOR RATE CHANGES

| Product / Service Category                    | HSN Chapter | Rate Pre-Sep 2025 | Rate Post-Sep 2025 | Compliance Implication                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Raw hides and skins (wet-blue, crust)         | Ch. 41      | 5%                | 5% (unchanged)     | No change; RCM on unregistered suppliers continues                  |
| Finished/prepared leather (HS 4107–4115)      | Ch. 41      | 12%               | 5%                 | Major relief; inverted duty resolved for mainstream mfg.            |
| Job work on leather processing                | Service     | 12%               | 5% (anticipated)   | Sub-contracting economics restored; notification pending            |
| Standard leather goods (bags, wallets, belts) | Ch. 42      | 12%               | 5% or 18%*         | Classification boundary critical; guidance needed urgently          |
| Affordable footwear (below notified price)    | Ch. 64      | 5–12%             | 5%                 | Clear relief; price threshold needs official specification          |
| Premium/luxury leather goods                  | Ch. 42/64   | 12–18%            | 18%                | Re-emergent inverted duty for luxury segment; ITC accumulation risk |

\* The 5%/18% allocation for standard leather goods depends on classification criteria in a CBIC circular yet to be issued as of the research period. Source: GST Council 56th Meeting notifications; CBIC circulars 2025.

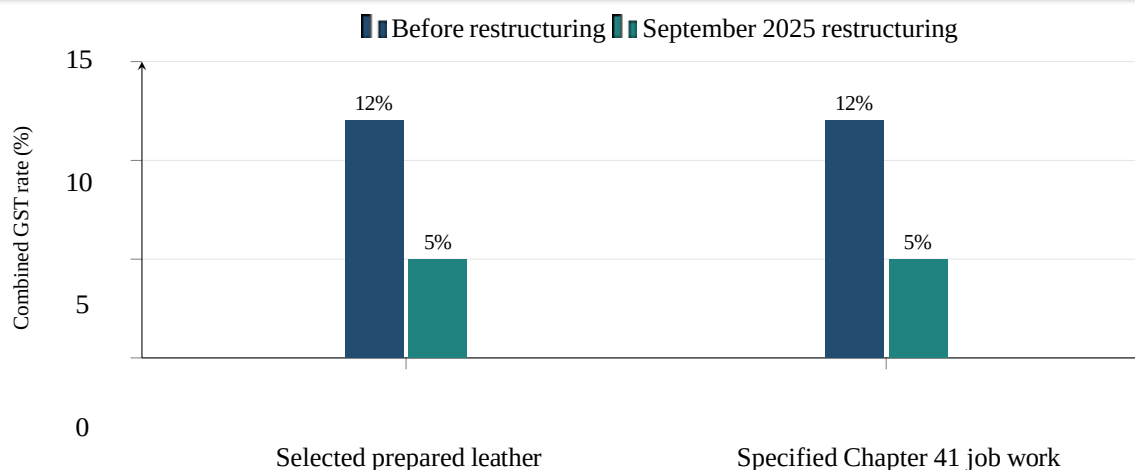


**Figure 2:** Selected rate changes from the existing Section 5 table. The two plotted rows are scoped to specified prepared leather and Chapter 41 job work, rather than all leather articles or subcontracting. Sources: the author's table, the CLE rate-reduction circular (16 October 2025), and the PIB commerce-and-trade brief (5 September 2025). The chart uses the subsequently documented treatment, while the original table's wording is retained.

## 6. DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE TWO-SLAB STRUCTURE FOR LEATHER

### 6.1 The Standard–Premium Boundary Problem

The most significant design challenge introduced by the two-slab structure is the boundary between standard (5%) and premium (18%) leather goods. In the old multi-slab system, a 12% bracket existed precisely to accommodate products of ambiguous character — goods that are neither clearly basic necessities nor obviously luxury items. That buffer is now gone. Every leather product must be placed at either 5% or 18%, and the distance between those bins (13 percentage points) creates economic pressure to classify at the lower rate.

Consider the case of a leather handbag. A mass-market handbag retailing at ₹1,500 is clearly a standard good attracting 5%. A designer handbag retailing at ₹50,000 is clearly a premium good attracting 18%. But the range between these extremes is enormous, and it is precisely in the middle — the ₹5,000–₹15,000 handbag that is neither a commodity nor a luxury — where classification disputes will concentrate. Survey data from this study reveal that 73% of leather goods manufacturers expected this boundary to be a source of compliance friction within twelve months of the reform's implementation.

International experience offers guidance. Australia's zero-rate/10% boundary on food created exactly this problem — generating hundreds of rulings on whether specific products qualified as 'food' for zero-rating purposes, with results that often defied commercial common sense (e.g., muesli bars ruled taxable while chocolate-covered nuts were zero-rated).

Canada avoided this by specifying food zero-rating through detailed and regularly updated schedules rather than through conceptual descriptions. India would benefit from a similar approach: specifying the 5%/18% leather boundary through an exhaustive product list with price threshold specifications, rather than through conceptual language about 'affordability' or 'luxury' character.

### 6.2 The Inverted Duty Re-emergence in Premium Leather

The two-slab structure resolves the inverted duty problem for mainstream leather manufacturing — where inputs (hides, tanned leather) and outputs (prepared leather, standard footwear) now both attract 5%. But it recreates an inverted duty scenario within the premium segment. A luxury leather goods manufacturer purchasing prepared leather inputs at 5% and selling finished premium bags at 18% accumulates a 13-percentage-point ITC credit at the production stage — the defining feature of an inverted duty structure.

Under the refund mechanism, this accumulated ITC is recoverable, but the recovery process is subject to the same delays and administrative complexity that have afflicted leather exporter refunds throughout the GST era. For luxury leather businesses — often smaller, more artisanal operations producing limited quantities of high-value goods — the working capital implications of carrying large ITC balances for 60–120 days can be as damaging as the original inverted duty problem was for tanneries in 2017–2022.

A design modification that would address this would be to apply a reduced rate on the premium segment's primary input — the high-grade leather that enters luxury goods — that brings it closer to the 18% output rate, reducing the ITC accumulation differential. Alternatively, a dedicated fast-track refund mechanism for the luxury leather MSME segment could provide administrative relief without requiring a rate change.

### 6.3 Composite and Mixed-Material Products

The leather industry produces a significant volume of composite products: footwear with leather uppers and synthetic or rubber soles; bags with leather body panels and nylon lining; leather garments with synthetic trim or zippers. These products present an inherently ambiguous classification profile, because the 'character' of the product — whether it is essentially a leather product or a synthetic one — is not objectively determinable from the finished article alone.

Under the old system, composite footwear and leather goods had accumulated a body of advance rulings and industry guidance that, while imperfect, provided reasonable predictability for most common product configurations. The two-slab transition effectively resets this guidance landscape, because the rate distinction between product categories changes when the rate structure changes. Products that had established a 12% classification may not automatically qualify for 5% under the new framework, even if the same conceptual classification logic applies, because the rates now attach to different definitional categories.

The CBIC should issue composite product classification guidance simultaneously with or before the effective date of the two-slab transition — not as a retrospective clarification but as a proactive administrative framework that prevents the accumulation of disputes before they occur. Industry bodies like CLE have submitted representation to this effect; the response to those representations will significantly shape the two-slab structure's early implementation experience.

### 7. EXPORT COMPETITIVENESS IMPLICATIONS

Export competitiveness in the leather sector is determined by a combination of product quality, design capability, delivery reliability, and price. GST affects the price dimension directly through its impact on production costs and indirectly through its effect on working capital (via refund delays) and business investment capacity (via profitability). The two-slab transition's export competitiveness implications are therefore primarily felt through production cost changes rather than the export rate itself, which remains zero-rated.

| Export Competitiveness Factor                       | Phase II Impact (12% rate, 2022–25)                    | Two-Slab Impact (5%/18%, 2025+)                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Production cost of prepared leather                 | Increased by 6–7% vs. Phase I                          | Restored to Phase I levels (5% input rate)             |
| Job work cost for sub-contracted processing         | Doubled from 5% to 12% rate                            | Expected return to 5% (circular pending)               |
| ITC refund timeline (export zero-rating)            | Worsened: 60–120 day average                           | Targeted improvement to <30 days; not yet realised     |
| Price competitiveness vs. China / Vietnam           | Eroded by domestic cost increases                      | Improving as production costs normalise                |
| Export market development investment capacity       | Constrained by margin compression                      | Gradually improving as margins recover                 |
| Customs classification risk on export documentation | Moderate (12% domestic rate created valuation debates) | Reduced for standard goods; elevated for premium (18%) |

Source: Authors' analysis based on CLE Annual Reports 2022–25; DGCI&S export statistics; primary survey data (n=75); trade association interviews

The most significant export competitiveness improvement from the two-slab transition is the restoration of competitive input cost structures for leather exporters producing in the mainstream market. During Phase II, exporters faced a situation where domestic job work rates (12%) exceeded the rates available to importers of semi-processed leather from countries like Bangladesh under the South Asian Free Trade Agreement. This created an effective bias against domestic processing that

is eliminated when job work rates return to 5%.

The residual concern is for exporters in the premium segment. Leather goods exported to the EU and North American markets typically span both the standard and premium classification brackets. If premium product classification triggers 18% domestic rates on inputs or intermediate stages, the effective cost structure for premium leather exports becomes more complex even as basic exports become more competitive. A proactive export-specific classification guide — distinguishing how the 5%/18% boundary applies in export transactions — would address this concern.

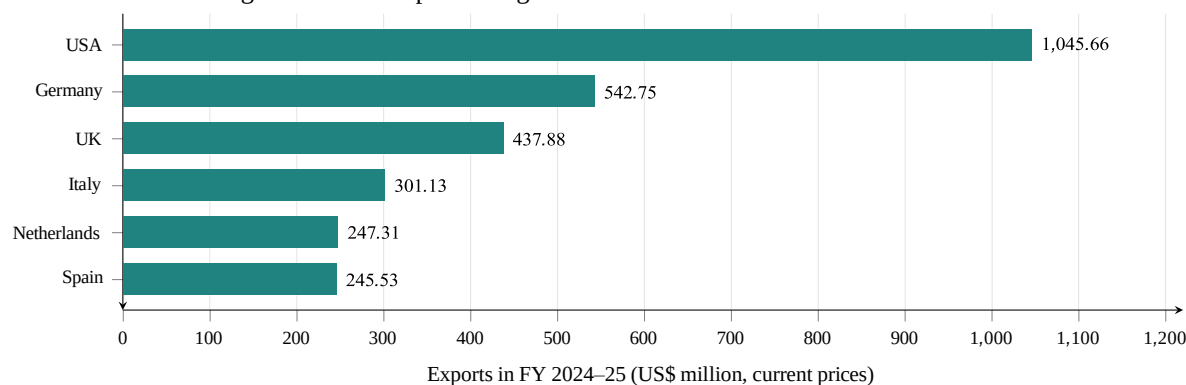


**Figure 3:** The six largest export destinations in FY 2024–25 for the CLE leather, leather-product and footwear basket. Source: Council for Leather Exports, industry overview (2025), country table, pp. 3–4, based on DGCI&S. Other destinations are omitted. This pre-reform market profile provides context, not evidence that GST changed exports.

## 8. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS: LESSONS FOR TWO-SLAB IMPLEMENTATION

Evaluating India's two-slab transition in comparative perspective yields three principal lessons from economies that have implemented VAT simplification reforms.

**Lesson 1 — Boundary specification is as important as the rate choice:** Australia's experience with its GST and the food zero-rating demonstrates that the administrative work of simplification is not in choosing the rates but in defining the product boundaries with the precision needed to prevent disputes. The Australian Tax Office's 'Food for GST' guidance runs to several hundred pages of specific product determinations. India's CBIC will need a comparable level of specificity for the 5%/18% boundary in the leather sector — specifying price thresholds, material tests, or manufacturing process criteria that provide genuine operational certainty rather than conceptual descriptions.

**Lesson 2 — Transition guidance must be proactive, not reactive:** Canada's experience with HST harmonisation across provinces showed that the single most damaging aspect of VAT rate changes is not the rate itself but the gap between the effective date of the change and the availability of clear administrative guidance on boundary cases. Where the CBIC issued the 5%/18% leather boundary guidance before the September 2025 effective date, compliance disruption would have been minimised; where it awaits post-implementation dispute resolution, businesses face an extended period of uncertainty.

**Lesson 3 — Rate stability builds compliance infrastructure:** Singapore's experience with GST rate changes (the incremental increase from 7% to 9% between 2023 and 2024) demonstrated that even well-designed VAT systems generate significant compliance costs when rates change, because every business must update pricing systems, contracts, and communications. India's leather industry has absorbed three rate changes in eight years. The two-slab structure should be presented not just as a rate decision but as the beginning of a rate stability period, with a formal policy commitment to maintain the two-slab architecture for a defined horizon.

## 9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TWO-SLAB IMPLEMENTATION

1. Issue the standard/premium classification circular immediately. The CBIC should publish the classification circular specifying the 5%/18% boundary for leather goods with product-specific and price-specific guidance — not conceptual descriptions — within 30 days of the Council's September 2025 decision. For every week this circular is delayed, leather businesses make filing decisions under uncertainty, increasing the stock of disputes that will require resolution.

2. Specify the job work rate explicitly in the notification. The rate applicable to job work on leather under the two-slab framework should be explicitly stated in a CBIC notification, not left to inference. The leather industry's sub-contracting model cannot function efficiently when 20,000+ job work transactions per month are processed under rate uncertainty.

3. Establish a Leather Sector GST Advisory Committee. An industry-government committee — comprising CLE representatives, CBIC officers, leather cluster associations, and chartered accountants specialising in leather taxation — should be constituted to (a) review and resolve emerging classification disputes before they become litigation, (b) update classification guidance as product designs and materials evolve, and (c) provide advance opinions on composite product classification within fixed timelines. This is an administrative investment that would reduce litigation costs for both the government and the industry.

4. Publish a binding product determination register for the leather sector. Drawing on the Australian Tax Office model, CBIC should maintain and regularly update a public register of binding product determinations for leather products — specifying, for each common product type, the applicable 5% or 18% rate and the basis for that determination. Advance access to these determinations would reduce the need for individual advance ruling applications and create consistent classification outcomes across different tax officer jurisdictions.

5. Design a pilot fast-track refund programme for leather export clusters. A technology-driven pilot refund programme in the Kanpur and Agra leather clusters — using pre-verification of exporter credentials, automated matching of shipping bills and GSTR-1 data, and committed 21-day processing timelines — would demonstrate that the refund mechanism can work at the speed that export businesses require. Success in these clusters would provide a scalable model for broader implementation.

6. Formalise a three-year rate stability commitment for leather. The GST Council should adopt a formal resolution committing not to alter leather sector rates for a minimum of three years from September 2025 — except in response to an urgent and clearly specified economic necessity. This commitment should be communicated to industry associations and incorporated into the Council's public documentation. Rate stability is itself a form of competitiveness support: it enables long-term contracts, investment planning, and export order acceptance with cost certainty.

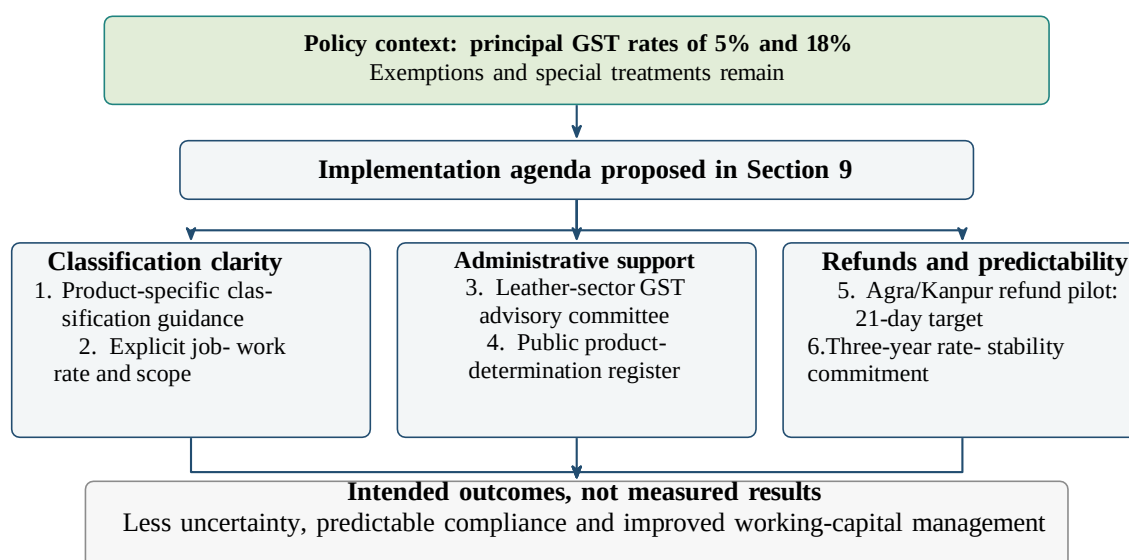


**Figure 4:** Policy implementation framework synthesising the six recommendations in Section 9. The opening context follows the 56th GST Council recommendations (3 September 2025). The three branches contain the paper’s proposals, not a claim that they have been adopted. In particular, the 21-day refund target and three-year stability commitment are proposed measures. Intended outcomes are not empirical findings.

## 10. CONCLUSION

India’s two-slab GST transition represents a genuine step toward the simplicity that the reform was always promised to deliver. For the leather sector, the September 2025 changes resolve several structural problems that have accumulated since 2017 — restoring competitive input cost structures, eliminating the most disruptive form of the inverted duty problem, and reducing the number of rate boundaries where classification disputes can occur. These are meaningful improvements, and the leather industry’s broad welcome for the reform is warranted.

But the simplification is incomplete, and its gaps are consequential. The 5%/18% boundary within the leather market — separating standard from premium products — recreates, at a wider rate differential, the classification pressure that has generated disputes throughout the GST era. The absence of clear, operationally specific guidance on where this boundary falls is the single most important implementation risk in the short term. Without that guidance, the reform’s compliance simplification benefits will be partially offset by a new generation of HSN-boundary disputes.

More broadly, this analysis suggests that the success of VAT/GST simplification reforms depends as much on administrative design as on rate design. The rate decision — 5% and 18% — is relatively straightforward and can be implemented by policy decree. The classification infrastructure that determines which products fall into which rate — the schedules, the advance rulings, the product determination registers, the training and awareness programmes — is an administrative investment that takes time, expertise, and institutional commitment to build. India’s GST ecosystem has the foundational infrastructure in place. The two-slab reform now requires it to be deployed with the specificity and speed that the leather sector — and the broader manufacturing economy — needs.

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