Kanpur has its place in the history of modern industry in India because of the establishment of machine spinning and weaving here as early as 1862 when the Elgin Cotton Spinning and Weaving Co. Ltd. built the Elgin Mills. The Muir Mills (1874), the Cawnpore Cotton Mills (1882) and the Victoria Mills (1885), all under European Control and management, followed within the same century. By 1900 the cotton textile factories gave daily employment to some 1,770 workers (as against 1,56,000 employed in such factories all over India in 1903-4). Though as yet dwarfed by Bombay and Ahmedabad, Kanpur had much potential for growth owing to its situation near a large cotton-producing area, direct railway links with sources of coal supply, and large inland market. By 1945 the daily employment had risen to nearly 45,000 (compared with 5,10,000 employed in cotton factories all over the country in 1945). In other words, one in ten out of cotton textile workers of the country was at work at Kanpur. Well might the city boast of being the "Manchester of Northern India".  

1. For the growth of textile industry at Kanpur, see Chapter I. of this thesis; an early account is in R. Nevill, Cawnpore: a Gazetteer, Allahabad, 1929, pp. 78-9. Employment data for Kanpur cotton textile industry and the corresponding figures for India will be found in Chapter II.
From the mid-1940s, Kanpur cotton textile industry entered a period of plateau, the total employment maintained at just about 40,000 slipping to less than 35,000 by 1970. This represented a considerable relative decline for the industry since the total yarn production of the country increased from 5,34,000 tonnes in 1950-51 to 9,72,000 tonnes in 1972-73; the total employment of workers in cotton mills rising from 5,10,000 in 1945 to 7,19,000 in 1971. While the 1970s saw a further increase in all India employment to 8,80,000 in 1981, employment in Kanpur continued to decline reaching the vicinity of 30,000 by 1981 and slipping to less than 23,000 in 1990.1

It is not surprising, therefore, that a crisis occurred in the Kanpur cotton textile industry by 1970; and the mills, until then under private management, incurred heavy losses and faced closure. The Governments’ National Textile Corporation took over five out of six functioning cotton textile mills, which were all declared sick, during the early 1970s, and tried to run them so as to protect the industry and prevent massive loss of employment. However, the losses have proved to be prohibitively heavy,

approaching Rs 100 crores annually, so much so that little new capital investment was possible let alone there being any possibility of capital generation. The result is that all the cotton textile factories are now being closed down, the workers receiving a "golden hand-shake" at the cost of the tax-payers. By the year 2000 it is likely, unless a miracle happens, that North India's "Manchester" would have seen the last of its textile factories.

The period (1970-1990) for which this thesis examines the conditions of the working class in the Kanpur textile industry has thus dual characteristics: First, the employer was now very largely the Public Sector; and secondly, the industry was in continuous decline, with steadily receding employment. Both these factors could be expected to have their impact on the conditions of the workers. While a Public Sector enterprise may be thought to be a more considerate employer with regard to wages and working conditions, the heavy losses in industry could be expected to preclude a more liberal wage-structure or incentive bonuses or improvement of working conditions. One may also assume that, while having a Public Sector employer ordinarily tempts trade unions to practice greater

1. See Chapter I.
militancy, the continuously declining employment would sap trade-union strength. The interplay of these factors perhaps explains most of the findings that have been presented in the present thesis.

The interplay of these factors, however, has taken place within the frame-work of a legal structure whose major elements had been in place for a long time before 1970, and within which further changes after 1970 have not been very significant. This legal structure is made up of the Factories Act, the Industrial Disputes Act, the Payment of Wages Act, the Minimum Wages Act, the Payment of Bonus Act, the Provident Fund Act, the Trade Unions Act and other Laws and Government Orders, which apply to all commercial and manufacturing enterprises, whether publicly owned or private. This legal apparatus has acted as a constraint on both the employer and the worker at Kanpur, as at other similar centres with large-scale industry.¹

If one examines the real-wage movements of the Kanpur cotton textile workers before and after 1970, one can easily see the difference that the Government take-over has made. According to Rastogi, except for 1954, the post-

¹. Chapter III gives a summary of description of this legal frame-work.
Independence period until 1961 showed a marginal decline in the real-wage each year (the real-wage index falling, for example from 99.9 in 1955 to 97.9 in 1961). In 1960's, inspite of dearness allowances sanctioned by two Wage Boards, the wage structure had remained largely static. But from 1970 to 1985, the real-wages (indexed) rose from 100.0 to 173.3, whereafter there was a marginal decline to 168.3 in 1990. This favourable trend in real-wage movement was due to, mainly, the U.P. Government's orders regarding wage-revisions based on ad-hoc increases of wages and changes in rules regarding links of D.A. with Cost of Living Index promulgated in 1972, 1974, 1979 and 1985. While they gained in wage-payments, the continuous losses incurred by the factories made it impossible for the workers to receive more than 10 percent of their annual pay in bonus.

A noteworthy feature of the wage-structure in the Kanpur industry has been the rather narrow limits within which wage-differentials are set. The lowest-basic wage per day for the most unskilled (‘SlabberTenter’) was Re 0.87, and for the most skilled (‘4-loom weaver’) was Rs 3.60, but most wage-ratges were closer to each other, the skilled

1. All data in this paragraph are from Chapter IV.

2. See Chapter VII, in regard to the strike in Elgin Mills No. 2 on the issue of bonus in 1980.
unskilled wage ratio being broadly 2:1.¹

Unfortunately, no periodic surveys exist to enable us to see how the movements of wages and prices and the changes in the infrastructure have affected the actual living conditions of Kanpur mill workers. The survey of the workers' living and working conditions that was carried out in 1992, as part of the present research, on a sample survey of 64 workers in the industry, chosen on a random basis, yields us a static rather than a dynamic picture, in the absence of earlier comparable data. The housing situation remains largely unsatisfactory. Most workers live in privately owned rented houses and can look forward to little more than a room for their family, which seldom has less than 4 or 5 members. Sometimes, the single room also includes the cooking space. For this kind of accommodation the workers have to part with anything up to 15 percent of their monthly wage in rent. The only favourable element is that Government and Government founded co-operative scheme provide 14 percent of the workers' housing; a similar proportion of housing being owned by the workers themselves. Moreover, electricity and ceiling-fans are almost universal, though water-taps within the home are not.

¹. See Table 4.2 in Chapter IV.
In the factories the hours of work and rest prescribed by law were generally followed, according to the testimony of the workers themselves. While none complained about lack of space at work, nearly half of the workers questioned complained about the atmospheric pollution and high noise-level in the sections of the factories where they worked. While the workers did not seem very anxious about protection from accidents inside the factories and stated that first-aid facilities are available, the number of accidents, resulting in minor physical injuries is large enough, as shown by the factories. In the five years (1986-90) there were as many as 8 fatal accidents in the 6 mills whose records could be examined (Elgin Mills No.1 and 2, Kanpur Textiles, Swadeshi Mills, Muir mills and New Victoria Mills). Clearly, something needed to be done in this area. On the other hand, the law has been followed in payment of compensation for injuries sustained in accidents and in cases of death due to accidents.¹

The workers' individual and collective response to the conditions in which they live and work is greatly dependent upon the kind of trade union organisation which seeks to promote their interests. Kanpur has had a long

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¹ The previous two paragraphs are based on data in Chapter V and Appendix No. I.
history of trade union movement, under both nationalist and communist inspiration; and in this movement, both before and after 1947, the textile mill workers formed the core. But after 1970, the very time that Government take-over of mills should have enabled the trade unions to recover, the fragmentation of trade union movement reached an extreme point. In 1992, 13 trade unions functioned in Muir Mills, the same number in Swadeshi Mills and 10 in Kanpur Textiles. As many as 22 trade unions were registered in and after 1969. Among unions with all-India affiliation, the B.J.P. led unions have notably enlarged their membership. This has added a communal dimension to the working class movement at Kanpur. Some of the unions, on the other hand, appear to exist on paper only, as fronts for professional, quasi-legal pleaders for individual workers in Labour Courts or Conciliation Proceedings. It is true, however, as can be seen from records of cases, that the workers' wages and jobs have received considerable protection from the Labour Courts, though individual settlements may leave something to be desired.

It is possible that the inability of the workers' unions to adopt a farsighted policy due to the competition

1. Data has been taken from Chapter VI.

2. See Chapter VII and Appendix No.2 for the specimen data.
and rivalries among themselves, made them oppose all serious efforts at modernisation, (as in the case of the Pandey Award in 1989) in the name of protection of jobs. In the event this only lessened the chances of improvement in production and profits vital for the health of the industry, and also in the long-term interest of the workers themselves.

The fragmentation of the trade union movement did not apparently affect labour militancy at Kanpur: competition among unions might, indeed, have led to radicalisation of action upon workers’ grievances in a situation where effective collective bargaining on the basis of an industry-wide vision taken by a single trade union was not possible. The total man-days lost in strikes (excluding lock-outs) in the cotton-textile mills, for the period 1973-1988, are tabulation below.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Man-days lost</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Man-days lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>10,622</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>28,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>54,974</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>6,241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>30,681</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>5,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1,773</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>19,355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>8,444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>8,902</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>58,065</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>49,901</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Derived from table 7.1 in Chapter VII.
The table shows a curious rhythm, the man-days lost peaking in 1973-74, 1980-81 and then in 1988. While the loss of man-days in 1980 was entirely from a 15 day strike in Elgin Mills No. 2, exclusively on the issue of bonus,\(^1\) strikes on other occasions were called for other demands, such as protection of jobs of fellow workers, wages for strike or lay-off periods or simply for wage increases.\(^2\) The contraction of total employment did not materially affect the intensity of industrial action, the average annual loss of man-days being 20,622 in 1973-80 and 14,751 in 1981-88. The decline reflects the smaller size of the labour-force in the latter period.

As a single great industry, which gave life and livelihood to the city of Kanpur for over hundred years is coming to its close and its massive labour faces unemployment and disperses one cannot help thinking whether this sad waste of capital and labour could have been avoided had a more imaginative textile policy been adopted and a more effective management been established by the Government; specially because there is now, again, a revival of demand for cotton textiles, in internal and foreign markets.

\(^1\) See Appendix No.3

\(^2\) See Chapter VII for detailed breakdown of immediate causes of industrial action.
markets. Both private ownership and public-sector management failed to stall the downward trend in the industry at Kanpur. The enormous running losses also ruled out any scheme of workers' co-operative management. One can only hope, that, given Kanpurs' strategic position in the transport and communication network and its labour trained for so long in factory-work, alternative employment would be found for the textile workers of Kanpur in new industries.