CONCLUSION

The history of the formation of the working class in Kanpur reflects in many ways the characteristics of the working class in its formative years, in an industrializing underdeveloped country. Industrialization did not lead to a total dissolution of 'traditional' social institutions, ties and codes of consciousness, but a retention and an integration of these within the structure of the emerging working class. What appeared as characteristic of the early years of industrialization in the West, survived much more as an integral part of the working class in India.

With the expansion of the cotton textile industry in Kanpur in the twentieth century, the work-force expanded from 7,781 in 1906 to 35,108 in 1940. Over the years the caste composition of the work force changed. Workers from an artisanal background - Koria and Jutehars were preponderant in the early years, while later (and especially during the Depression), there was an increased influx of workers from agricultural castes - Chamar, Rajput, Brahman, Sayyade. This diversification and change in the caste composition did not do away with the tendency towards clusterings of different castes in different departments - a phenomenon which reflected the continued retention of caste and community ties within the work force.¹

The recruitment of workers and their supervision within mill departments, remained in the hands of "mistres" whose mode of selection

¹ See Chapter I, Sec. III.
and whose relationship with workers were conditioned by caste and community ties. In a labour market where the skill requirements were minimal and jobs were scarce, the system, in some ways, provided a sense of job security for those who had such ties with "sati" or "sati raj". While the caste and community bonds nurtured a sense of loyalty, the workers, contrary to Newman's suggestion, were not passive objects of domination. Complaints against "sati raj" and arbitrary deductions by "sati" were common, whenever the accepted limits of domination were transcended.2

Unlike England, where the rural linkages of the peasants who took to factory work disintegrated more rapidly, in India, the slow rate of industrialization checked such a process. The argument about the stability of the workforce has been overstretched by Morris in his study on Bombay. He suggests that in India, as in other countries, the growth of industries led to the emergence of a permanent, stable labour force.3

Our study shows that insecurity of employment, the existence of a large surplus population of unemployed and a regular reserve of "ludin" were characteristic features of the labour market, which exerted a negative pressure on wage levels and the capacity of workers to struggle.4 It is within this context that the continued links with the villages and high rates of absenteeism can be understood. A large proportion of the workers had their family members staying in the villages.

2 See Chapter I, Sec. V.

3 N.D. Morris studies the working class in the Bombay Cotton Mills. No generalized view about the characteristics of the working class in India can be built up on the basis of only a regional study. Even in his analysis of the evidence relating to Bombay, as I have noted earlier, there are various contradictory arguments in Morris' book.

4 See Chapter I, Sec. VI.
cultivating small plots or supplementing the family income through agricultural labour. The rates of absenteeism were specially high during harvest months. The phenomenon of absenteeism — the visit back home was not only economically necessary for his survival (with the low wages and spells of unemployment), it was the only relief from the drudgery of work and unhealthy conditions of life; an occasion for family reunion, enjoyment and participation in festivities. Contrary to Morris' arguments, the institution of caste, rural links and absenteeism were not only retained, but had both an economic and social significance in the lives of workers. However, it was not these features which inhibited industrialization, but it was the retarded level of industrialization which sustained the basis for their survival.

The large relative surplus population and the stunted development of industries did have a depressing effect on the level of wages. But contrary to Morris' argument about Bombay, wage levels — nominal or real, did not remain stable. They fluctuated sharply over the period, and between 1895 to 1938-39 nominal wages of different categories had increased by 200 to over 300 per cent; and real wages by 100 to over 200 per cent. Clearly such a rise cannot be understood merely in terms of an absolute shortage of labour, since the industry, as we mentioned, was rarely faced by a situation of labour scarcity. We have emphasized the need to relate the fluctuations in wages to the rhythms of expansion and contraction of the industry and the condition of agriculture, and the strength of the working class movement — the bargaining

5 See Chapter I, Sec. VII.
6 See Chapter II, Sec. I.
capacity of the workers to press for higher wages. While wages do show an upward trend, this alone is no evidence of an optimistic picture of the conditions of workers. The real wage figures do not reflect the actual income of the workers who were often out of work for long spells, and when at work suffered loss of income through various deductions.  

Furthermore, to the peasant or artisan who was becoming a worker, life in the city and work in the factory was a harrowing experience. It meant a subjection to a new rhythm of life - the drudgery of long hours of work and the tyranny of factory discipline; an experience which was especially oppressive for the fresh recruit from the village.  

Holidays for religious festivals were often denied, and leave, even otherwise, was difficult to obtain. His movements within the mill were restricted; special passes had to be obtained even for going to the lavatory; and the afternoon recess was often too brief for him to finish his meal. The system of fines, forced leave and dismissal, deductions from wages, in addition to the humiliating abuses and beating up by Mistrein and European mill officials were a part of the bitter discipline within the factory. In periods of increased production, such as during the First World War and in the post-Depression expansion of industry, labour discipline was tightened and the intensity of work increased. In addition to all this was the constant risk of accidents within the mill. An investigation into the levels of consumption and conditions of life in the bastia and hataa reveals the familiar tale of misery and overcrowding within the small huts, and high rates of mortality and disease.

7 See ibid.
8 See Chapter II, Sec. III.
9 See Chapter II, Sec. V.
10 See Chapter II, Sec. VI and Sec. VII.
The rhythms of working class activity cannot be linked exclusively to fluctuations in the level of well being of the working class. Rather, they have to be seen in terms of the worker's perception of his own conditions in relation to the prosperity of the industry and the state of the labour market - a phenomenon which is reflected in the generalized surge of working class activity in 1919, 1937 and in 1946. The cumulative grievances of the war years, the increased work-load, tighter discipline and the fall in real wages, led to generalized collective protest only in 1919. 11 Apart from the removal of war curbs (Defence of India rules) on strikes, what was important was the workers' awareness of their plight in a situation where the prosperity of mills was becoming obvious. When the profits of the mills increased phenomenally (with a sharp rise in the prices of cotton products), low wages and work conditions appeared to the workers as intolerable and unjustified. Similarly the generalized strikes of 1937-1938, against wage cuts and retrenchment occurred within the context of a revival of industry and increase in profits. 12 In contrast, during the Depression, generalized strikes could not occur : the workers were aware of the state of the industry with the accumulating stocks in the mills, and the state of the labour market with the large floating population of rural immigrants.

Most of the demands on which the workers protested and struck work were around issues of wage increase, bonus, working conditions, hours of work, holidays, adequate recess time, victimization, retrenchment and intensification of labour. Rarely were there any strikes in support of the nationalist agitation. In analysing these demands the conventional

11 See Chapter III, Sec. II.
12 See Chapter IV, Sec. I and Sec. II.
separation between the 'political' and 'economic' demands does not appear to be analytically useful. It is true that the workers' struggles were not always overtly directed against the state, but politics is not merely a realm of the state; it relates to structures and symbols of power and authority. And power and authority are not merely embodied within the state but reside in various institutions in the society. They are experienced by the workers in their day to day relationship on the shopfloor. The attempt by the capitalists to control their lives, by defining the limits of their work time and leisure time, the tempo of work and work-load. A protest against over-work or long hours, a refusal to work overlapping shifts, or a demand for a longer lunch interval and a holiday, represent attempts by workers to re-define the existing pattern of work and leisure imposed on them. The defiance of mill rules, the opposition to misrule and protest against victimization and maltreatment by misrule and European officials express a defiance of existing structures of power, authority and discipline, and are thus intrinsically political acts. When workers' struggles within particular mills lead to changes in mill rules, it constitutes a challenge to the prerogatives

13 The distinction between "trade union consciousness" and "class consciousness" (as what Foster characterizes "labour consciousness" and "class consciousness") is also based on a similar assumption. It is true that trade unions are organizations which function within and represent industrial legalism in contrast to independent organizations of workers such as workers' councils, which as Gramsci points out, are a negation of industrial legalism. Yet trade unions do embody the refusal of the working class to become integrated into capitalism on its own terms (P. Anderson, p. 344). They help in the constitution of the separate identity of the proletariat as a social force with its own interests and its specific form is determined by the nature of the working class movement in a region and epoch. For an extended discussion on these issues see A. Gramsci, "Unions and Councils", "Syndicalism and the Council" in Quintin Morris ed., Antonio Gramsci: Selections from Political Writings (1910-1926) (London 1977). Perry Anderson, "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action" in T. Clarke and L. Clements ed., Trade Unions Under Capitalism (Glasgow 1977).

14 See Chapter III, Sec. I and Sec. IV.
of the management to lay down rules. Such struggles on a wider scale (1937-38 or 1946) may be followed by Enquiry Commissioners, and may force wide ranging changes in regulations affecting a large section of workers within a region. 15 Such demands cannot be dismissed merely as economic demands, representing the backwardness of the working class movement. A demand for shorter hours or higher wages, as is clear from the history of the workers' movement in nineteenth century England, may have profound social significance: it may affect the existing basis of profits (for example through wage revision and reduction in working hours); force a change in the specific form of capitalist organization of labour; and lead to the introduction of new technology. Though having profoundly political implications, such struggles are not revolu-

The arbitrariness of the division between the economic and political in discussing workers' actions around such issues becomes clear when one considers the attitude of the state and capitalist class to-

15 The various legislative enactments restricting the hours of work or the payment of wages Act of 1937, for instance, were after all a result of workers' struggles.

16 What remains significant however, is that these struggles formed a part of the process of the creation of liberal democracy in England.
of the state or local authorities. At times, the latter mediates to 
effect a compromise and arrive at a settlement; on other occasions, 
as in the Campora Cotton Mills strike of 1924 or the general strike 
of 1937, the local government attempts a violent repression of the 
strikers.17

Individualized protests whether expressed in a return to the 
village, a shift to another mill, or an individual non-acceptance of 
factory discipline (by "loitering" and "lozing"), which we have dis- 
cussed, implied a passive withdrawal from work which did not pose as 
much of a threat to existing modes of domination and control as a 
mass protest in defiance of mill rules. This process of transition 
from individualized protest to collective protest as a generalized 
form, reflect an increasing awareness amongst workers, of the strength 
of collective solidarity and action.18

The K.M.S., which was formed in 1919, on the initiative of some 
workers of the Elgin Mills, had by 1936, come to dominate working class 
politics in Kanpur. The growth and consolidation of the strength of 
the K.M.S. reflected two simultaneous processes. On the one hand, 
there was a growing awareness amongst the workers of their collective 
identity, their strength and weaknesses; on the other hand, this very 
process also meant an increasing control of the spontaneous and inde- 
pendent activity of the workers. The change in the constitution of 
the K.M.S. in 1936, was symbolic of this process. There were to be

17 See Chapter III and IV.
18 See Chapter III.
no strikes without the prior sanction of the Sabha. Only the general council had the power to declare strikes. The mill committees which had often taken independent initiative in the strikes of 1937, were given a constitutional status, but they were now to function under the discipline of the general council and obey its rules and regulations. The conjunctures of militant struggle threw up worker leaders like ShivBalak and Ramzan Ali in the twenties, and the mill committee leaders in 1937-1938. While certain individual worker leaders were integrated into the higher rungs of the K.M.S., no strong or stable shop-floor leadership could crystallize.

This growing awareness of their collective identity existed along with other forms of consciousness. We have argued that the working class in the process of its formation expresses overlapping and interpenetrating levels of consciousness (the consciousness of a unity within the class, within the community and within the nation), which manifest themselves with varying force in different conjunctures. Ties of religion and bonds of community persisted and were important in the day to day relationships of workers.19 These were evident within the mill and outside: in the caste clustering within mill departments, in the refusal of workers of upper castes to dine with lower castes and Hindus with Muslims, in the community nexus within the mohallas and bazaars, in the popular idiom and language used, and the slogans raised on various occasions. At times a violation of community feelings could lead to the participation of workers in riotous mob action. The link with the village, the state of the labour market with the

19 See Chapter V.
large floating population, the competition for jobs, the fear of dismissals, the feeling of insecurity and the system of recruitment through matrika, all helped to reproduce the basis for the continued existence of primordial ties and loyalties.

The attempts by the Congress and the Communists to mobilize the workers did not always lead to the long term subordination of such community feelings. The Congress with its predominantly 'Hindu' leadership, many of whom were involved in the Arya Samaj and revivalist activities, alienated the Muslim workers. The Communists though more successful in mobilizing Muslim workers in 1937-38, in unity with other sections, do not appear to have been successful in countering the conscious and sub-conscious levels of community feelings. The erosion of such identities could possibly occur only through a prolonged experience of united struggles of the workers and persistent efforts by the Communists not only to oppose the existing modes of thought and feeling, but to help in the creation of a counter ideology - a process which in the existing social context could only be a difficult and protracted one.

The rhythms of the working class movement, as we have seen, did not correspond with the rhythms of nationalist activity. In the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement or the Quit India Movement there was no general participation of the working class as a class. In 1936-37, there was a hope among the workers that their demands would be redressed since Congress rule was coming. Despite all this the Congress failed to integrate the working class within the...

20 See Chapter 4.
national movement. Apart from the difficulties in mobilizing the workers in the early thirties (Depression) and in the early forties (the war period) what seems to have been important was the fact that the workers could not identify directly with the issues around which the Congress attempted to mobilize the masses. The Congress could not successfully relate the demands of the workers to the wider national struggle. The Communists were not involved consistently in the anti-imperialist movement to be able to integrate the workers with nationalist activity. However, within the consciousness of the workers there seems to have been a shift from an implicit faith in the colonial state and the expectation of state intervention to pressurize capitalists to concede some of these demands, to a generalization of certain anti-imperialist sentiments by the thirties.21

21 See Chapter IV and Sec. VI.