The Leather Craft had been a flourishing industry in India since the ancient times. The huge livestock population of the country aided the growth of this industry. But the religious taboo on the killing of cows made the industry dependent on the hides of cattle that had died a natural death. The establishment of the Muslim rule gave an impetus to the industry resulting from an increase in demand and availability of better quality of hides. The dietary habits of the Muslims had led to the emergence of a new class of professionals – the Qassabs or butchers, who slaughtered animals, ensuring better quality of hides for the artisans. Corresponding to increase in quantity of the raw material there was an increase in the clientele, with shoes forming an integral part of the dress of the Muslims. Equipped with better raw materials and an increasing demand the leather craft moved out of the villages to be located in the Royal karkhanas in the urban centres.

The mutiny gave the real impetus to the development of this industry, when the British army had to face several reverses due to the destruction of their arsenals. This setback forced the Government to get their saddlery and boots for the army manufactured within the country from leather locally tanned. As a result the first Government leather factory in India was setup in Kanpur in 1861. Encouraged by the success of this concern many Europeans established leather factories on similar lines in Kanpur (Chapter I). The easy availability of raw materials, good connectivity with other centres and cheap labour led to the emergence of Kanpur as a leading centre for the leather industry within the country. The Government assistance in the form of army contracts and protection in the later stages helped the industry further.

The latest technological advances introduced into the various departments of leather manufacture led to major restructuring of the craft. The leather industry was one industry that was totally transformed during the British period (Chapter II). The money economy changed the status of the Chamar in the rural areas, his right to collect the fallen cattle in the villages was questioned. The agents of the large factories and the slaughterhouses who purchased the fallen cattle from the villagers replaced the Chamar. The
slaughter houses established in the early twentieth century to meet the demands of the meat trade to Burma, also helped in the growth of the leather industry, as they became a source of good quality of hides and skins. Thus as a result of industrialisation, the agents of the factories replaced the Chamar, the fallen cattle as the only source for raw material was replaced by the slaughter houses and the village haats made way for markets world over.

The expansion of the industry provided employment opportunities to a large section of the population, the census of 1961 puts this figure at 8,09,440 in UP. A large population of Chamars, the traditional leather workers and Muslims in Kanpur helped in the growth of the industry in its formative years (Chapter III). With an increase in the money economy the caste composition of the workforce also witnessed a change, with people from the other castes taking up employment in these factories. The diversification and change in the caste composition however did not do away with the tendency towards clustering of different castes in certain departments. In the leather factory, the upper castes restricted themselves to either supervisory positions or in departments where they did not come in direct contact with raw hides. The Flaying and Tanning sections thus had only Chamars and Muslim workers. Kanpur had a large population of Chamars and Muslims which helped the industry. The leather factories also attracted a class of landless labourers belonging to the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder, who migrated from the neighboring districts due to economic hardships. The abundant supply of cheap male labour was responsible for the gender inequality in the workforce in the leather factories. The gang system, where the principal worker brought his own men to help him further restricted their entry, with the workers preferring to bring in male children, who after working as apprentices were absorbed as full time workers in the factory.

The bastis and ahatas with their overcrowding and insanitary conditions leading to high rate of mortality revealed an even worse picture (Chapter IV). For the Chamars who had peripheral existence in the villages the spatial segregation was repeated in the cities. The leather workers either
stayed in the separate *ahatas* or in case of a mixed *ahata* their blocks had separate entrances. The leather workers thus faced discrimination at the two levels, within the workplace they were all absorbed in the lowly paid occupations outside they continued to have a peripheral existence. The nature of the work in the factories and the constraints of space was such that the caste rigidity crumbled, the taboos attached to occupation and the concept of pollution by touch gradually lost significance in the new set up. The city provided anonymity enabling the workers to form new relations which did not have sanction in the villages. The social ties established in the *ahatas* were taken into the workplace. These ties helped the new immigrants in the initial adjustment. It aided in obtaining employment and financial assistance during the period of lay-off or festivities. The day-today activities and the leisure strengthened the neighbourhood bond.

The residents interacted freely during the community gatherings, the *kathas*, religious festivals, *melas*, the neighbourhood teashop, the *akhara* activities and gambling became occasions where the residents from the *ahatas* came in close contact. These community celebrations created a strong bond among the workers, bringing new confidence in them. Gradually with a rise in the economic status the Chamars began to assert themselves, efforts were made to do away with the brahmanical dominance. They discarded the Hindu religion and began to associate themselves with the adi-dharm, a religion, which according to them predated Hinduism. The period also saw the resurgence of the *bhakti* movement, new cults were developed for the worship of untouchable saints, in Kanpur Ravidas, a great *bhakti saint* who preached caste exclusion in religious worship was worshipped. Many shrines dedicated to him came up in several parts of the city, processions were taken out on the birth anniversary of the saint. As a symbol of their unity and in social retaliation, the Brahmins were excluded from many of their temples. The Chamars who existed on the periphery of the society being excluded from temple and festivals thus found a new identity. The Ravidas cult is an example of a socially organized movement clashing with caste customs. The
city thus provided opportunities to the Chamars to break away from the age old traditions of suppression.

The recruitment of the workers in the leather factories in Kanpur as in other industries was chiefly in the hands of mistries. Caste and community ties played a very important role in the recruitment process. In the later years with the establishment of labour bureau and employment exchange the employers also depended on them for recruiting. The Government Harness And Saddlery Factory setup its own labour bureau on its premises, which looked into all the recruitments in the factory. In other leather concerns the old practice of recruitment at factory gates was a common practice.

With a predominantly local workforce, or those who had permanently settled in the city, the leather factories in Kanpur had a comparatively more stable workforce compared to other industries. The contact with the villages were maintained by regular visits at the time of harvest and religious ceremonies. The population of Chamars in Kanpur affected the level of wages in the leather industry which continued to remain low during the period of study. The wage rates in these factories showed great variation; there was no uniformity of rates even for similar work in different factories. With most of the leather factories not coming under the purview of the Factories Act, the economic condition of the leather workers was worse compared to the other industries. Even among the factories which were governed by the Factories Act, it was observed that the wage rates were higher in the old firms and in the Government Harness Factory (Chapter V). Uncertainty of employment was another draw back in these industries, the factories adopted ‘lay-off’ to cut down the number of workers employed. As the leather concerns in Kanpur were set up to meet the needs of the army during the period of war all the concerns worked overtime or multiple shifts, taking in a number of hands. Once the demand reduced and the industry witnessed a slump the concerns did not generally remove the workers permanently, instead work was distributed such that they had work only for a few days in a week; with the concerns already working on piece rate system, the workers were faced
financial difficulties. This led to their dependence on the moneylenders, who as a regular practice presented themselves at the factory gates and settlements of the workers on the pay day.

After the first World War, Kanpur witnessed its first strikes followed by an increase in the trade union activities. The increased workload, strict discipline and low wages were some of the reasons for the workers protest. Though the leather workers participated in the activities of the Kanpur Mazdoor Sabha, they did not have organised unions of their own. It could be due to the shorter hours of work, compared to other factories in Kanpur, and better economic and social conditions compared to the villages. But this was true for those factories which were regulated by the Factories Act. The condition in the unregulated factories were the worst among all the industries. Another reason for the absence of trade union activities among the leather workers was the low bargaining power among them. Over generations the Chamars on the lowest rung of the society had a peripheral existence and generally worked as unskilled labourers on begar. Used to years of oppression the leather workers in the initial years accepted the condition of work in the factories. Around the Second World War the system of fines, forced leave(lay-off), humiliating abuses and beating up by mistries coupled with the increasing trade union activities in Kanpur, led to an increase in the number of strikes in the leather factories in Kanpur.

The conditions in the workplace were no better than that in the villages. The nature of the work was such the absence of proper ventilation and drainage made the working areas highly insanitary; with most of the factories escaping the Factories Act, little was done to improve the conditions. The workers continued to work in the unhygienic conditions without any sort of protective equipment.