Introduction
Industrialisation was a worldwide phenomenon that transformed societies everywhere. The gradual conversion from an agrarian to an industrial society meant in terms of labour a transition from field to factory, a sectoral shift that could have no other result than a massive displacement of people.\(^1\) The movement from rural to urban locations brought along with it far reaching changes in the social structure. In India two most important caste influences on occupation in rural areas viz., the taboo attached with certain jobs that prevented caste Hindus from pursuing them and the tendency to keep low castes in the capacity of field labourers gradually crumbled in the new set up. An industrial worker in the early phases of industrialisation was generally from an agricultural background. After migrating to the city he assimilated the industrial system of values. Within the factory and outside, there was thus a much greater mixture of people of diverse faiths, regions and social values. The employer – employee relationship in the factories, replaced the traditional patron – client relationship, commonly known as the jajmani system. Industrialisation further resulted in the evolution of a more complex division of labour, finer job specialisation and the interdependence of separate economic roles. Family was no longer the basic unit of production. The factory employment makes a more violent break between the family and the work in that the factory walls prevent interaction between the earner and his family throughout the shift period and there is no carryover of work activity into the family life.\(^2\) The period of this study is that of the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society. The variables of caste, marital status, kinship status and occupational structure have been dealt with at length.

**Historiography of Labour**

Most historical studies on industrialisation and labour have been primarily concerned with the large-scale industry and the factory worker. The eruption of strikes and trade union activities after the First World War

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widened the scope, resulting in a number of studies on the Indian working class which chronicled the activities of trade unions and enumerated the numerous strikes all over the country. V.B. Karnik, Sukomal Sen, S.D. Punekar etc. are some of the most important scholars who conducted studies of this kind.

Immediately after Independence, the focus of labour shifted to the questions of supply of labour, commitment to factory work, method of recruitment and organisation of labour in the modern industrial setting. Some of the scholars who engaged in this kind of study are Morris D. Morris, C. A. Myers and Oscar Ornati. They focussed on the formation and problems of the industrial labour force in India. But many of these studies remain silent on the caste relations, class actions and forms of class consciousness, the crucial factors which play an important role in the formation of workers identities.

The research of E. P. Thompson in his study of the English working class, caught the imagination of the Indian scholars and the scope of the labour history was widened. Now the focus shifted from the economic aspect to the question of culture. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his path breaking work opened up new debates. He gave primacy to the pre – capitalist culture of the Indian working class marked by divisions of caste, religion, language and region. These ties of culture according to him influenced different aspects of the workers’ lives. The primordial ties of religion and community, defined the identities of the workers. A number of similar studies have been taken up in

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3 V.B.Karnik, * Strikes In India*, (Bombay, Manaktalas, 1967).


5 S.D.Punekar, *Trade Unionism In India A Study In Industrial Democracy*, (Bombay, 1948).


the past few decades in which question of culture, community, family and gender have taken the central place. These studies go beyond the workplace. Raj Chandavarkar in his work\textsuperscript{11} investigates the social processes underlying the economy of labour and its social formation in Bombay in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. He takes up among other things the question of social relationships of the workplace and the urban neighbourhoods, to show how culture was actively constituted through everyday relationships and networks forged within the \textit{mohalla} (neighbourhood) and the factory. Caste, kinship and village connections formed the most convenient basis for social organisation in the industrial cities. The migrants in the city thus sought the help of their caste fellows, co–villagers and relatives to find work, credit and housing. He asserts that the associations forged in the neighbourhood provided an important base for wider socio – political organisation among the workers.\textsuperscript{12} The associations formed in the neighbourhoods were strengthened in the leisure activities of the workers, the organisation of religious festivals, the activities of \textit{akharas} or gymnasia, the opium clubs and liquor shops brought together social groups which otherwise refused to intermarry or interdine.\textsuperscript{13} Efforts were thus made to reconstruct the identities of workers by studying their leisure activities. Nita Kumar shows how the formal and informal associations and clubs are old, continuous and multifarious and that the ties and parallelisms based on everyday activities cut across lines of caste and religion.\textsuperscript{14} Lynch Owen also studied the neighbourhoods and the leisure activities of the working class and their contribution in forming new caste associations among the lower castes.\textsuperscript{15} Recently, Nandini Gooptu and Chitra Joshi have taken up the study of these caste associations and the formation of

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.,p.238
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.,pp.237-239
\textsuperscript{15} Lynch Owen, M, \textit{The Politics Of Untouchability: Social Mobility And Social Change In A City of India}, (Delhi, National Publishing House, 1969).
new caste identities among the lower castes. Nandini Gooptu discusses the changing experience of caste distinctions in the towns and the roles they played in the genesis of the untouchable caste movements and in shaping their ideologies. She states the migration of lower caste workers did not improve their economic and social conditions. Within the cities the occupational distinctions were coupled with spatial segregation of the untouchables in terms of residential settlement patterns. Samita Sen extends the argument further to study the gender question and specially the ingenuities of gender discrimination in the jute mills and their neighbourhoods.

These studies over a period of time have critically re-examined our understanding of various aspects of the labour problems in India. But these studies are biased towards the study of large scale cotton, jute and coal mining industries, in centres like Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad. The leather industry and leather workers have so far not formed part of any extensive study.

Sources and Objectives of this Study

In the absence of any such study, this work is based on the primary sources in the form of archival material and reports from institutions like the Council for Leather Exports, Kanpur, the Central Leather Research Institute, Kanpur, the Directorate of Industries Kanpur, the Labour Commissioner’s Office Library Kanpur, the Kanpur Development Authority and the Municipal Corporation, record rooms, Gaya Prasad and, the J.K. Tower Library, Kanpur, the Employers Association of Northern India, the Merchants Chamber, Kanpur and the Vidhan Sabha Library Lucknow. Visits to various leather concerns in Kanpur proved fruitful. The archival material was collected from the National Archives, New Delhi and the State Archives Lucknow. The various reports and documents of the Industries department, Labour department, General Administration Department, Home Police and

16 Chitra Joshi, Lost Worlds, Indian Labour And Its Forgotten Histories, (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003).
18 Samita Sen, Women And Labour In Late Colonial India, (Cambridge University Press, 1999)
the Municipal department for the period under consideration are generally restricted to the cotton and sugar industry in the United Provinces. There are only passing references to the progress of the leather industry. The series Monographs on Tanning and Working In Leather in the different provinces, published around the turn of the twentieth century, give valuable information regarding the leather. The annual report on the working of Factories Act, the various Commissions set up by the Government of India and the United Provinces to study the different aspects of industrial development and the labour problems, make passing reference to the leather industry. The report of Ahmed Mukhtar, a member of the Labour Investigation Committee, 1946, on the working and living conditions of the workers in the Tanning and Leather industry, is a valuable source of information. In 1949, for the first time the Government of India took initiative and constituted wage board, which took up the question of wages in the leather industry. We have thus tried to construct this study on the basis of the few sources available.

The aim of this study is to portray the development of the leather industry, one of the oldest crafts in human history, in Kanpur. And to locate the traditional leather workers in the urban settings, and the adjustments made by them, to meet the challenges in the new way of life which were associated with industrialisation. Efforts have been made to study the social restructuring which resulted from the locational shift to the industry. The study becomes more relevant considering the fact that inspite of being an important contributor to the economy it has been overlooked both by the Government and the researchers. Moreover, it remains one industry in which the caste association with industrial work is observed even to date. In the light of the above mentioned debates in the labour history, this study focuses on the emergence of the large scale Leather Industry in Kanpur, which during the period of study emerged as big industrial centre in the country. The workers in this industry coming from the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder of traditional Indian society were introduced to a new way of life in the city. Their experience in a society where the shackles of the caste were
gradually crumbling have been dealt with in the following pages. In this context their experiences in the workplace, the mode of recruitment, hours of work, wages have been studied. The social relations of the workers formed in the ahatas and in their leisure activities had a bearing on the relations within the factory. The associations formed in the above activities helped in formulating new caste identities among the Chamars, leading to the emergence of a number of caste movements. These caste movements among the Chamars have also been discussed at length to analyse the impact of industrialisation on workers associated with this traditional craft.

**Chapterisation Outlined**

This study has been divided into five chapters, the first chapter is introductory in nature, it sketches the growth of Kanpur from obscurity to an important trading and industrial centre of North India. It also examines the emergence of the leather industry in the Kanpur. The reasons for the establishment of the large leather factories the impact of the two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Government aid provided to this industry to overcome these hurdles have been analysed here.

The second chapter discusses the progress made in the leather industry and the technological developments that helped in the transition of this industry. The impact of these technological advances on the restructuring of the craft has been analysed. Traditionally, all the activities related to the leather were integrated and performed within a single village often by the same family. The leather industry at this stage was essentially a decentralized cottage industry, the establishment of the factories on the other hand led to the centralization as a result of which large tanning centres like Kanpur, Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay emerged. This centralization led to three changes, first, it led to the decline of tanning at the primary village level. Secondly it enhanced the movement of the leather workers to the urban centres and finally it led to an increasing role of capital in the whole process. The carcass collection, tanning and manufacture of leather goods, the three sectors of the leather industry, vertically linked with each other were all transformed with
the introduction of the factory system. These changes have been analysed in this chapter.

Caste segmentation has been a characteristic feature of the Indian Industries. With the occupational skills being passed on from one generation to another, certain castes came to be associated with their hereditary occupations. The occupational caste that came to be associated with the leather craft in the northern parts of the country was the Chamar. In the Leather Factories which in case of Kanpur were set-up by Europeans such castes distinctions were overlooked. The people from different castes and religions worked within the same enclosures. The low caste workers thus had an opportunity to move up the economic as well as the social ladder.

In the third chapter the dynamic changes and internal group mobility among the leather workers is studied. The process of sanskritisation adopted by the Chamars of Kanpur as a means to enhance their status, and the consequent resurgence of the Bhakti movement and emergence of other caste movements has been analysed.

The fourth chapter explores the experiences of the migrants in the city, with respect to their living conditions, relations with their neighbors in the ahatas and mill settlements and the utilization of their leisure time. These associations assume more importance considering the fact that here we are dealing with a class of people who had always remained at the periphery of the society. The increase in the urban population, which characterized the industrial revolution, led to a great pressure on the space within Kanpur, the increased pressure was met to a large extent by crowding together buildings and piling one storey over another. Within the United Provinces, Kanpur was one of the most congested city, facing acute shortage of housing. The mill settlements and the privately owned ahatas were established during the period to meet the presence of the huge working class population. The first mill settlements was established by the Copper Allen & Co. in 1900 for the leather workers, on the foot steps which a number of other settlements were established. Significantly the early settlements came up at the time when
Kanpur was hit by the plague epidemics. These settlements were provided not only as safeguards against future epidemics but also to prevent the workers from leaving. These mill settlements could provide shelter to a small section of the labour force, while majority of them lived in the private bastis and ahatas, which accounted for three quarters of the city. The drainage, ventilation and sanitation were entirely wanting in these ahatas that were similar to concentration camps with common entrance, common compound and common latrines, wells and taps. A significant aspect of the residential pattern of the workforce was the caste segregation prevalent in these ahatas. Placing in the ahatas was done according to the social hierarchy in which the castes were broadly divided into the upper castes, the intermediate castes low castes and untouchables. Much of the economic activities, social attitudes and group psychology were governed by this dominant social trend.

The final chapter takes into account specific aspects of the structures and composition of the workforce, the nature of ties with the village, and the process of recruitment. The conditions at the workplace, wage trends and wage structure, the hazards of work and provision of basic amenities have also been analysed. Coming from lowest strata, the workers associated with leather craft in the villages were in no position to bargain. Supported by the various legislation and awareness in the urban setting the leather workers gradually started participating in the trade union activities demanding among other things a rise in their wages. An effort is also made to compare the wages of the migrants in the city with those villages to see how far factory employment enhanced their economic status.