

# Leather Industry of Kanpur Rise and Growth during Colonial Period

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## Abstract

In the eighteenth century not only India's political destiny take a new turn, but there were also weighty changes in various phases of her economic life. Both politically and economically, India felt the impact of highly potential movements of the west, such as the French revolution of 1789, and the Industrial Revolution. Though agriculture remained key occupation no less important was the varied and extensive manufactures of the country. Besides the large scale industries like cotton, silk, sugar, indigo and salt, there were various subsidiary industries to which the people engaged themselves. Leather making and shoe making comes under such subsidiary industries. The following article is about how the leather industry in Kanpur was initiated in modern lines in colonial era.

## Index Terms

Leather, Kanpur, Tanning, Chrome, Harness, Saddle, Tannery

## Introduction

### Beginning of Leather Industry

Kanpur is famous for its leather goods from early times. In fact, leather industry is the oldest industry in Kanpur. The consumption demand of the growing European community reshaped the nature of local production. Pre-industrial artisanal manufacture in Kanpur also developed in response to the European consumption demands. Even before the establishment of factories leather goods were manufactured by the village craftsman as cottage industry used to meet the local demand for carriage, harness, saddlers and pots.<sup>1</sup>

There were several factors which played important roles in the establishment of this industry, like – (i) Availability of local workers, (ii) Raw material, especially, buffalo hide was abundantly available.<sup>2</sup> (iii) Babul bark used as a tanning material, was also available in huge quantity. (iv) Grand trunk road and river

Ganga were the two important means of transportation and later introduction of railways accelerated growth of industry.

Baji Rao Peshwa, who lived in exile at Bithoor from 1818 to 1850 with 600 horsemen and 700 infantry, extended patronage to the industry for manufacturing saddlery, shoes and leather apparel for his army. The goods were prepared of buffalo leather and processed in indigenous technology which was quite advanced for the time. Kanpur was celebrated for the manufacturing of saddlery, harness and gloves in 1830. Montgomery conducted the census in Kanpur in 1849. Out of the total 6628 persons engaged in trades and professions, there were 558 shoemakers, 199 saddlers and 125 tanners.<sup>3</sup>

After the establishment of cantonment in Kanpur, the British government made an attempt, in 1860, to induce the tanners to make leather on the Madras system.<sup>4</sup> It was a French Eurasian of Pondicherry, Charles de Susa, who had discovered the best way of utilizing avaram bark. The Madras industry, therefore, specialized in the tanning of skins.<sup>5</sup> In Kanpur too a harness depot on an experimental basis was started, and the attempt proved quite successful. Consequently, it was decided in 1863 that a government factory would be built in which the leather was tanned by Indians, but was to be cured and worked under the supervision of skilled Europeans.

In 1867, a big factory, known as the Government Harness and Saddlery factory was established at Kanpur, which produced all the harness and saddlery for the entire army. The idea to open this factory was implemented by a young artillery officer, J. Stewart.<sup>6</sup> From the very beginning the quality of harness and saddler products was considered to be of a very high quality, even better than the English products.<sup>7</sup> The harness and saddler factory was locally referred as the 'Kila'. It was located in the area popularly known as magazine and which had served as a store for ammunition and equipment since 1780s'. The factory also had a section for brass and smithy for the production of all metal works.<sup>8</sup> The factory also had a section for brass and iron foundry and a smithy for the production of all metal work.<sup>9</sup>

After the establishment of the Harness and Saddlery factory, Cooper Allen followed in 1880.<sup>10</sup> When Sir William Earn Shaw Cooper and Sir George Allen founded the private firm of Cooper Allen and Company, Army boot and equipment factory was established in a small building little more than any ordinary residential bungalow, on the south bank of the river Ganges at Kanpur.

There in 1881, with the help of a few workmen, they began to manufacture leather, leather equipment and footwear for army purposes. The venture was successful and the factory was expanding, tanning pits and using improved methods of tanning. Thus, leather production with Western ideas was introduced in the region.<sup>11</sup>

The first Indian venture in the industry was by Sayed Munshi Raza of Agra. He opened the Shahganj boot and shoe factory, started with the modest sum of Rs.80 in 1882, which soon became a reputed name in the region.<sup>12</sup> Behman, a Thakur landlord, opened a tannery in 1896 and named it Cawnpore tannery. The tannery earned a great reputation for ammunition Boots.

In 1892, Mr. Edward Foy, in association with Mr. T.T. Bond, opened another concern the North West Tannery Company, only a few hundred yards away from the Cooper and Allen factory. With the aid of latest machines, the manufacture of civilian footwear started on mass production line in 1900. This factory was producing bags, portmanteau, hold-alls, etc of very good quality.<sup>13</sup> From the small beginnings in 1909 the two concerns, i.e. Allen Cooper and North West Tannery combined to form the greatest organization of its kind in the world during those days. In 1920, both these concerns, together with leading textile and other concerns came within the orbit of the British India Corporation Limited.<sup>14</sup>

Not only Englishmen but other Europeans and Americans also contributed in the development of leather industries at the initial stages. The contribution of A.H. Creete, an American, cannot be overlooked in this regard. He established a company in the name of A. H. Creete and Company in 1896 at Bhannapurwa locality. M/s Creete & Company had bagged many deals at various exhibitions. Creete supplied goods to *Maharajas* and other noblemen throughout India. In a short period, the firm had business connections with Europe, America and the Far East. Through banking operations Creete became owner of the part of the estate in Gwaltoli, covering a vast rectangular area, formerly the property of Nawab Aga Meer, the deposed Prime Minister of Nawab Nasiruddin of Lucknow.<sup>15</sup>

After a period of eight years Creete disposed off Cawnpore Tannery to Mr. William Stork, who continued it with Hafiz Abdul Karim and Hafiz Abdul Halim as partners. A German, G. Von Der Wense, a merchant of Agra, in partnership of two other German gentlemen opened a big tannery in 1900 in Juhi area.<sup>16</sup> Col. Stewart, ex-superintendent of the Government Harness and Saddlery Factory, had set up a tannery at Agra but it could not be successful. Wense took over and installed all the machinery of the defunct Stewart's tannery. He employed B. Shewan of the North West Tannery.

However, the proprietor made grave mistake of disagreeing with Shewan, who left the firm employment. The firm failed in 1903. The plant was then purchased by M/s Cooper Allen & Co. The building was utilized by the Kakoni extension of Cawnpore Cotton Mills.<sup>17</sup>

Mr. Shewan, after leaving the Van Der Wence Tannery, set up his own tannery at Jajmau. The reputation of his leather soon made its way throughout the district and '*Soon Sahib ka Chamra*' came to be recognized as the hallmark of the best Kanpur leather. The first tannery opened in Jajmau was the Shewan tannery. Jajmau soon became the site for all other tanneries. A number of other tanneries came into existence during this period mostly in Jajmau, prominent among them being Cawnpore Tannery by Mr. Karim Haq, United Province Tannery by Mr. M.A.Wasi, Delhi Tannery, and Indian National Tannery by Hafiz Mohd. Halim, etc.<sup>18</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were many chief centers of the native trade in artistic leather works, but of these Cawnpore stands out pre-eminently as the commercial centre of the modern trade in boots, shoes, saddlery and trunk manufacture. The other places famous for artistic leather goods were Cuttack, Patna and Saran in Bengal, Rampur, Lucknow, Agra, Jhansi in United Province, Kashmir, Punjab, Chanda in Central Province, Rajputana, Bombay, Trichurapalli, Madras and Mysore in South India.<sup>19</sup> Till 1904, there were four major Tanneries in Kanpur.<sup>20</sup> This period was a setback for the local manufacturers because the supply of leather for the industry was very limited. Country tanned leather of good quality was very expensive. The large tanneries of Kanpur had no leather to spare for the bazars.<sup>21</sup>

The number of tanneries in Cawnpore remained same in 1907-08, while the government tried to introduce chrome tanning in tanneries.<sup>22</sup> The first fully owned tannery by an anonymous Indian was opened in 1916. The United Provinces Tannery Company's foundation was laid at Jajmau. The factory was situated in a very large compound on the bank of the Ganges. The moving spirit of the company was Mr. M.A. Wasi, who in 1904 commenced business in Kanpur dealing in raw hides and skins. He, however, subsequently entered into partnership with Mr. Nabi Bak Company trading as Nabi Baksh Wasi.

In 1916-18, the number of tanneries in U.P., was 9 with the strength of 6,246 employees.<sup>23</sup> the number dropped down to mere 3 in 1920 with only 19 people as workers. This trade dislocation after the War was a decisive event for local tanning industry. In 1920-21, a large part of the tanning industry that had been created during the War was threatened by unemployment.<sup>24</sup> If 1870 was the time of hide trade and large factory enterprises, the early 1920s started the transition from intermediate to finished goods manufacturers.<sup>25</sup> Boot and shoe making became a profitable trade during this time. Even army contractors engaged many of goods' manufacturers of Gorakhpur, Kanpur, Lucknow and Calcutta to supply consignments of 'manda' shoes during the War.<sup>26</sup>

Manufacturing units were in a comparatively better position; they were 24 in numbers and were providing employment to 5,460 people. There was no rise in the number of tanneries but manufacturing unit raised up to 25 in the subsequent years.<sup>27</sup> This led to the development of a large cantonment base herein and contributed to the development of leather industry.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Supplied largely by butchers who provided meat to company troops. Many big merchants deal extensively in raw hide at Delhi, Meerut, Mathura, Etawah, Jhansi and Muradabad, Chitra Joshi, *Lost World*, Orient Blackswan, 2003, p.35.
- <sup>2</sup> R. Montgomery, *Op.cit.*
- <sup>3</sup> In Madras skin were tanned in Avaram bark which was generally acknowledged to be superior to the north Indian tannins.
- <sup>4</sup> T. Roy, *Traditional Industries in the Economy of Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1999, p.177.
- <sup>5</sup> H.G. Walton, *A Monograph on Tanning and Working with Leather in United Province of Agra and Avadh*, Govt. Press, Allahabad, 1903, pp.2-3.
- <sup>6</sup> Col.Lewis, Officer Inspector General Ordinance and Magazine, *Military Proceedings*, No.849, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1872.
- <sup>7</sup> H.R. Nevill, *Op.cit.*, p.98.
- <sup>8</sup> *Gazetteer of Kanpur*, 1976, Gazetteer Dept. of Kanpur, 1976, pp.98-99.
- <sup>9</sup> The Cooper Allen premise was known as Hazari Bangla or Military Bangla among the local people.
- <sup>10</sup> *Gazetteer of Kanpur*, *Op.cit.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Report of the first Indian Industries Conference*, 1905, Allahabad, 1906.
- <sup>12</sup> A. C. Chatterjee, *Notes on the Industries of United Province*, Govt. Press, Allahabad, 1908, p.99.
- <sup>13</sup> L.K. Tripathi and N.P. Arora, *Kanpur ka Itihas*, Kanpur Itihas Samiti, Kanpur, 1950, pp.54-55.
- <sup>14</sup> Munishwar Nigam, A City Stitched in Leather Dreams by English, *The Times of India*, Lucknow, 1991.
- <sup>15</sup> File No. 72/1909, U.P. State Archive, Lucknow.
- <sup>16</sup> Munishwar Nigam, *Op.cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *India Art at Delhi, 1903*, Official Catalogue of Delhi Exhibition, Calcutta, 1903, p.200.
- <sup>19</sup> *Annual Administrative Report of U.P.*, Calcutta, 1903-04, p.30.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.35.
- <sup>22</sup> The Afghan campaigns and the First World War encouraged the expansion of leather industry. Zoe Yalland, Boxwallas, London, p.225.
- <sup>23</sup> H. Ledguard, *The Hide, Skin and Leather Trades and Boots and Shoe Manufacturing in India*, Journals of Indian Industries and Labour, No.1-2, 1922.
- <sup>24</sup> T. Roy, *Op.cit.* P.189.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Statistical Abstract of British India, 1912-22*, Table No. 314-315, pp.566-99.
- <sup>27</sup> H.T. Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, Govt. Publication, Calcutta, 1804, p.115.