

Re-examining Kanpur Leather Goods Export in Colonial India: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

This study examines the emergence and expansion of leather goods export from Kanpur during colonial the colonial period. Known as the “Manchester of the East” Kanpur developed into a major center of leather production by the late nineteenth century, largely driven by colonial military demands, global market linkages, and imperial economic policies. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of colonial industrialization, regional economic history, and the dynamics of export-led growth in north India.

Keywords:

Colonial India, Kanpur, Leather Industry, Leather Goods Export, Hide and Skin, Military Supply.

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After industrial revolution, Britain became especially interested in India because the Indian economy was facilitating a vast market for the British manufactured goods, and was a lucrative source of food and raw materials for the Western countries. In India, England had mainly two tasks to perform: development of India in a manner which would make it complementary to British economy and the maintenance of political control. Turning to industry, one can find that, before 1850, there was no factory industry in India. Since then, a small modern industrial sector slowly emerged in the Indian economy out of sheer necessity, arising from the First and Second World wars. Despite the discriminating policies of British some industries like cotton, textile, sugar, paper, matches, leather and to some extent iron and steel made considerable progress.

The leather industry during the British period constituted as an important industry. The development of this industry received a momentum, particularly after the outbreak of the First World War. However, the inter war period, 1919-1937, brought depression to the industry due to the elimination of abnormal war time demand and increased foreign competition. The industry developed considerably, after the outbreak of the Second World War. 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.

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. (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.

This began in the 1830s' with the first export of India to Europe. The fact that India had a surplus to sell to the world was well known. A civil servant Colebrooke in his Monograph on Bengal argued the possibility of England replacing her supply of hides from Brazil by those available in Bengal.¹ But it was not until 1870 that the leather trade accelerated. Several factors combined to facilitate this boom. The growth owed much to the repeal of a 3% excise duty on hides in 1875. Public auction

in hides began in London about this time. The trade in hide was immensely stimulated during and after devastating famines of 1876-78 and 1896-98.²

Before 1880, boots required by the British army in India were imported from England. Huge amount of hide and skin exported to England in the second half of the 19th century and British government were consistently generating rich return. The following table corroborates this fact.

Table-1. Export of Indian Hide and Skins during 1859-1877.³

S.No.	Year	Income from Skins and Hide (in £)
1	1859	544,680
2	1860	444,537
3	1861	661,725
4	1862	794,137
5	1863	904,289
6	1864	897,575
7	1865	725,236
8	1866	609,803
9	1867	659,342
10	1868	988,282
11	1869	1,252,898
12	1870	1,691,330
13	1871	2,020,819
14	1872	2,525,925
15	1873	2,921,910
16	1874	2,618,358
17	1875	2,677,767
18	1876	2,944,933
19	1877	3,000,552

In 1883, however, Cooper Allen & Co. secured their first contract of 25000 boots⁴ from the Government and began the organized manufacturing of British army boots in real earnest.

As the business continued to expand, another building was gradually added to the pre-existing one which was a residential bungalow, and in 1911 the concern became a limited company.

Table-2. Production of Army footwear during different campaigns (1891-1918).⁵

S.No.	Year	Campaign	Footwear Production	
1.	1891	Manipur	175,807	Pairs
2.	1895	Chitral	242,000	Pairs
3.	1897	Tirah	336,426	Pairs
4.	1900-01	S. Africa	944, 713	Pairs
5.	1904	Tibet	456, 330	Pairs
6.	1914-18	World War I	6,143,322	Pairs

The demand of safety shoes by the British army during their various campaigns in India and outside India was ever increasing; the figures illustrate the company's ability to adapt it to supply whatever might be required.

Art industries in leather were conspicuous by their absence from the province. If the supply of proper leather could be secured, a great variety of effective and handsome articles could be turned out by the workmen who at one time found employment in manufacturing ornamental shoes.⁶ The local leather industry had suffered considerably, by the large demand in Europe and America, for Indian hide and skins.⁷

The demand of leather was indeed very high. The hides and skins were not only imported from India but also from the other countries to the United Province. The imports of dressed and raw hides were mostly from the Rajputana and Punjab. The neighbouring countries like Nepal and Tibet were also exporting hides and skins to India.⁸ One can get an idea of the rapid changes that were occurring in the export field, from the following comparative figure of traffic return during 1901-1907.⁹

Table-3. Imports and exports of raw hides during 1901-1907.

Types of Raw material	Imports in thousands of Rs.			Exports in thousands of Rs.		
	1901-2	1905-6	1906-7	1901-2	1905-6	1906-7
Dressed Hides	1,31	48	142	7.83	31	1
Raw Hides	15,42	19,49	2905	29,76	82,42	1,17,80
Dressed Skins	9	14	9	4,20	85	1,41
Raw Skins	598	15,95	14,89	14,75	52,20	41,11
TOTAL	22,80	36,06	4545	56,54	1,35,78	1,6033
Leather unwrought	272	178	4403	2,35	2,01	2,76
Leather wrought (except boots & shoes)	7,18	5,24	11,29	23,85	26,53	21,32
TOTAL	9,90	13,02	15,70	26,20	28,54	24,08

One can see that there was major increase in almost all the fields except in the export of wrought and unwrought leather, which slightly declined during 1901-1907.

The demand of boots and shoes was very high in British army. As the local manufacturing units were unable to produce such a huge amount of boots and shoes, the Government had decided to import them from other countries and was spending a huge amount of money on it.

Table-4. Figures of import of boots and shoes.¹⁰

Year	Value in Rupees
1901 – 2	20,29,000
1902 – 3	21,80,000
1903 – 4	27,43,000
1904 – 5	24,59,000
1905 – 6	34,43,000

Germany, Italy, Hungary, Spain, France, U.K. and America were the major consumer countries of Indian Leather. Leather worth of ¼ crore was exported to these countries. Under inland trade Calcutta and Bombay imported from the U.P. while 3½ lakhs of mounds of skin and hides were sent out abroad.¹¹

There was no appreciable change in the condition of the leather industry in the subsequent years. The imports of boots and shoes maintained its downwards tendency and the market was full of Japanese rubber soled canvas shoes. The leather tanning industry in the district remained active in manufacturing chrome leather for export to England. The district did not yet produce a considerable quality of its requirements of leather, obtained from Madras and the United States of America. Prices remained firm, especially of hides and skins. The demands for raw hides were very strong both for export as well as for indigenous tanning.¹²

The demands of manufactured goods were still very high in 1909, but the companies were not in a position to cater to their demands for want of hides. The price of bark which was used for vegetable tanning had also increased considerably in 1909. The dressing of skin was thus difficult in the Province because the more suitable bark, *Cassia auriculata*, was not locally available. There were also certain technological drawbacks, affecting the processing of leather, like-

- Over liming on the part of the country tanners.
- Obsolete tools for fleshing and removing the hair.
- Insufficient attention given to bating.
- Short span of the tanning period and the process was also not graduated
- Very insufficient currying¹³

During 1914-15, seven tanneries were functioning giving employment. Kanpur's rise as a major center of leather production was not a spontaneous outcome of indigenous enterprise alone, but a product a product of colonial military requirements, imperial trade networks, and infrastructural investment such as railways and cantonments. The city's leather industry became closely integrated with global markets, particularly through the export of boots, harness, and saddler for the British army and overseas consumers, reinforcing Kanpur's position within the colonial economy.

In conclusion, while leather goods exports contributed to Kanpur's urban expansion and economic significance, they simultaneously entrenched colonial dependency and social inequality. The legacy of this colonial industrial structure continued to influence the post-colonial leather industry, shaping patterns of labour, production, and trade well beyond the end of British rule. The case of Kanpur thus offers important insights into the dynamics of colonial industrialization and its enduring economic and social consequences.

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