INTRODUCTION

The Himalayan states of Himachal adjoining the plains of Punjab have for long been considered economically backward and based primarily upon a subsistence economy. The belief has been that it was with the coming of the British that they were first exposed to the outside world economy. The limited amount of source material has; so far, discouraged scholars from investigating the trade and commerce of Himachal of the pre-colonial period in any great detail. Even the present endeavour confines itself to the colonial period. There is nevertheless, the possibility that in the process a rough idea of the earlier period may also be formed.

The appearance of the colonial government on the scene, however, must necessarily have changed the economic scene. There seems to have taken place an improvement in the means of communication and the establishment of trade centres. This would logically have led to the exploitation of the economy and territorial subjugation. The British could thereby make inroads into many important spheres of life in the region.
An account of these processes can be found in the accounts of European travellers who passed through the region. Some interesting and detailed information is also available in the administrative records of the period. Though the available sources are not as rich as one would have liked them to be. They may be considered adequate to arrive at a fairly clear understanding of the trade and commerce of the region. It must be conceded, nevertheless, that the erratic and inconsistent nature of these sources leaves some gaps in our information. Yet this does not detract seriously from the broad picture that emerges about the economic situation in Himachal Pradesh in the 19th and 20th century.

The elevational diversity of the hills and unpredictable weather conditions; the hardship associated with agriculture pursuits, the lack of wealth all made for a difficult economic situation. The geographical diversity that existed even between different parts of Himachal and the subsequent divergence in economic development resulted in the need for independence. This interdependence existed not only between the region and some rather distant parts of Central Asia and the adjoining plains of India. There was thus a significant exchange of articles produced at the respective ends of the trade connections. The country side trade fairs and festivals, where local inhabitants and
outside traders brought their products for sale, became buzzing centres of commercial transaction. Food grains, cereals, cash crops and wealth generated by herbs, forests, minerals, animals, weaving, village craftsmanship etc. were important elements of local production that could, did, become part of the trade and commerce of the area.

It is possible that the period under study represents a transitional phase from a relatively closed or limited economy based upon self dependence to one that become increasingly connected with developments in the other parts of the world and its rapidly integrating economy. An attempt has been made here to examine the communities dealing in trade and commerce, the tracts and routes along which this trade was carried; the species of beasts of burden engaged and the trade extensions beyond Indian borders. The commodities involved in the trade of the hill states of Himachal Pradesh may not constitute a very important or substantial parts of the economic activity of south Asia, but for the region itself, they were of immense importance. It would be relevant to emphasis that the trade and commerce of the region is to be seen as a matter of significant concern to the people and area concerned - that is, they must be viewed in their own terms and not necessarily as constituting only a small percentage of the much larger transactions of colonial India taken as a whole.