CHAPTER III

TRADING CASTES AND COMMUNITIES

During British period the mountainous region to the north of Punjab Plains was inhabited by a great variety of people. There have been migrations of people from time to time for a number of reasons. The most important of these reasons is the location of holy places in and around the Himalaya, so that people from India and Central Asia have always felt drawn to the Himalaya.\(^1\) High caste Hindus migrated to the southern parts of western Himalaya during the troublous times that prevailed in Northern India under alien invasion\(^2\), especially during the medieval period. Other important reasons were trade and politics.\(^3\)

For ascertaining the role of these various ethnic groups in the history of trade and commerce of the region now forming Himachal Pradesh during the British time we shall have to examine the ethnological and occupational structure of the people. During those days business was in


the hands of two type of traders. The local traders and the traders from outside. There were four main cultural starta. The first two were represented by aboriginals. The Kolis who formed nearly 30 percent of the population, were regarded as low caste. They appeared under various caste names such as Koli, Hali, Sipi, Chamar, Dumna, Barwala, Megh, Darain, Rehra, Sarara, Lohar, Batwal, Dagi, Chanal, etc. It is possible that they came from the original stock of the Kolarian (Kol) race which once inhabited the whole western Himalaya. They formed the lowest socio-economic starta of the hill society. These people were mostly artisans and worked as Lohars (ironsmith) Baris (Carpenters and mason), Boonkars (weavers), Kumhars (potters). Mochi (Cobblers), Nagaloo (basket weavers) drummers and tailors etc. They were essential members of the village community. The distinction between the Kolis and other artisan classes was merely occupational. Agriculturally, all were of the same standard as Koli. Agriculture, animal husbandary and artisans work led to trade and commerce. The leather trade was in the hands of Chamars and they made their own leather.

The second and perhaps the most important element in the population of the hill region between the Yamuna and Ravi rivers was their Khasha or Khashia complex. They were originally from an Aryan tribe of central Asia which entered western Himalayas through the north west even before the hymns of Rigveda were composed. They settled in the mid Himalayan belt from Kashmir to Nepal. Later they were driven deeper into the interior hills by the advancing loaves of immigrants from the Indian plains.

Khasha people were without caste class distinction. But with the passage of time and underalien influences, they split into numerous sub-sections and clans. Kanet was one among such important sections. To the east of Yamuna river these people were called Khashas and to the west of this river they are known as Kanets. They are identified with the Kunnindas of ancient Sanskrit classics and are mentioned as peace loving agrarian and mercantile people.


13. O.C. Handa, Numismatic sources on the early history of western Himalayas.
The Kanets were divided into several sub castes of Khels. Some of the Khel names were derived from the name of the founder of the house hold, others indicated the place from which their ancestors had migrated. Kanets were generally agriculturist and owners of land and hold 40 per cent of the cultivated area. Some Kanets were nevertheless, good traders and mostly traded in agricultural produce like opium, potato, ginger, turmeric, honey, walnut, wool etc. which were generally exported to the plains.

Allied with the Kanets, were the Rathis and Thakurs. The former were mostly found in Kangra and Chamba and the later throughout the state and comprised more than one half of the total high caste population. Sir J.B. Lyall, the settlement officer of the Kangra from 1866 to 1869 said that "There is an ideal current in the hills, that of the land holding castes the Thakurs, Rathis, Kanets and Girths are either indigenous to the hill or of mixed race and indigenous by the half blood, and that the Khatris, Brahmins, Rajputs and others are the descendents of invaders and settlers from the plains."

The Thakur people were larger in number than can be satisfactorily accounted for, and it can be concluded that in later times, a large number of people were received from other higher castes, especially from the Rajputs, by inter marriages and other connections. It is possible that many Rathis may have assumed the name Thakur for in some parts of the hills the names were regarded almost synonymous. On the whole, however, the Thakurs ranked a little higher than the Rathis. The Rathis were essentially an agricultural class and were mostly found in Kangra and Chamba regions.

The Girths formed a considerable part of the population of these hills. They were concentrated in the valleys of Palampur, Kangra and Rihlu and also Haripur. They possessed the richest and the most open lands in the hills.

Like Kanets, the Rao also sprang from the Khashas, but Alexander Cunningham opined that Rao was a branch of Kanet.

The main occupation of these people was agriculture and live stock raising. The educated were


engaged in trade and industry. Their fertile lands yield double crops and they were incessently employed during the whole year in the various processes of agriculture. In addition to the cultivation of their fields, the Girth women carry wood, vegetables, mangoes, milk and other products to the markets for sale.

Rajputs and Brahmins entered very late on the racial arena of these hills. They came from the Indian plains, from time to time and for a number of reasons sometime as adventurers or at times in search of security.\(^{19}\) The other important reason of such immigration was the location of holy places in and around Himachal.

The Rajputs descended from the ruling families founded centuries ago by the adventurer princes from the Indian plains. Each class comprised numerous sub-divisions. As family size increased, individuals left the royal house to settle on some estate in the country and their descendents retained the generic appellation of the race. Another class of Rajputs, who enjoyed great distinction in the hills, came from the descendents of ancient chiefs or Ranas whose title and tenure were said to have preceded that of the Raja themselves.\(^{20}\)


The Rajputs were divided into two classes upper and lower. The former used to refrain from ploughing and their farm work was done either by hired servants or by tenants who were paid *batai* or fixed wages. The later worked in their own fields and were called *halbahu* or the ploughers. But under the compulsion of the economic strains, the majority of land owners were forced to do trade and commerce work.

The Brahmins were divided into two groups. The first group Brahmins descended from those Brahmins who accompanied the Rajput rulers from the plains. They were religious guides, astrologers, ministrants in temples of family priests. They avoided agriculture and refuse to handle the plough. Some were engaged in trade and service.

The second group comprised the agriculturist Brahmins who were looked down upon by those of the higher classes. These Brahmins were indifferent cultivators but owning to their miscellaneous earnings, say as priest of the village gods, they were generally in fair circumstances. In Sirmur the Brahmins of second grade were called Bhat.


Among the religious orders in the hills, the most remarkable are the Gosains, who were found principally in the neighbourhood of Nadaun and Jawalamukhi and some in Mandi, but were also scattered in small numbers throughout the Districts of Kangra. They were an enterprising and sagacious people. By the rule of their caste, retail negotiations are interdicted, and their dealings were exclusively whole sale. Thus they had almost a monopoly of the trade in opium which they procured up in Kulu and carried down to the plains of the Punjab. They speculated also in Charas, shawl wool and cloth. Their trade extended as far as Hyderabad in the south, and indeed over whole of India.

The high caste Hindus like Khatris, Kaisthas, Karars, Mahajans, Suds, Banyas, Aroras, and Bohras migrated to the hills during the Muslim invasions of the north India from the twelfth to seventeenth century. These were trading classes. Practically, they held whole commerce of the hill areas in their hands. Almost whole of the mercantile and commercial transactions of this part of the western Himalaya, excepting as a general rule petty hawking and peddling, were conducted by one or the other of these

26. Gazetteer of Kangra District, 1904, Lahore, 1907, p.78.
27. Gazetteer of Kangra District, 1904. Lahore, 1907, p.78.
caste. The people of these castes were divided into five groups, the first consisting of Banya, Dhunsar, Bohra, and Pahari Mahajan. The second consisting of Suds and Bhabras; the third of Khatris, Khokhas and Bhatias, the fourth of Aroras, and fifth of Khojahs and Parachas. These business classes were found throughout India. Throughout the hills and sub-mountain districts the proportion was singularly low, for these tracts include none of the commercial centres, and the needs of the people in those days were simple and easily supplied. The notable trading classes found in Kangra and other hill states are discussed here with.

Numerically the most important of these commercial classes was that of Khatris, in whose hands the petty trade of the hills was mostly confined. The territorial distribution of these people was very well marked. They mostly lived in towns and large settlements where they could easily carry out their business. Khatris were mostly concentrated in Mandi, Kangra and Chamba, whereas they were sparsely found in other parts of this hilly region. In olden times in Mandi state the Khatris entered as Merchants and shopkeepers at the invitation of

the Rajas and by their acumen and astuteness attained to a position of influence.\textsuperscript{29}

Besides, they were also found as traders in Shimla, Sirmur, Mandi\textsuperscript{30}, Suket\textsuperscript{31}, Bushahr\textsuperscript{32}, and Nalagarh\textsuperscript{33}. Trade was their main occupation but they were also involved in the business of lending money and buying and setting foodgrains.\textsuperscript{34}

There was a large subordinate class of Khatris, somewhat lower, but of equal merantile energy called Roras or Aroras. In the interior of Kangra hills and Bharmaur area of Chamba most of the shepherds called Gaddis were Khatris. Khatris had numerous clans. The most important in point of social rank were of Malhotra or Mahra, the Khanna, the Kapur and the Seth.\textsuperscript{35} These four clans belonged to Bahri section of the caste.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} \textit{Punjab Gazetteer: Mandi State}, Lahore, 1920, p.83.
\item \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Mandi State Gazetteer}, 1920, p.79.
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Shimla Hill State Gazetteer-Bashahr}, 1910. p. 18-19, 60.
\item \textsuperscript{32} \textit{Shimla Hill State Gazetteer, Nalagarh} 1910, p.16.
\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{Gazetteer of Suket State}, 1927, p.50.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Denzil, Ibbetson, \textit{The Census of Punjab}, p.247.
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 250.
\end{itemize}
The Banya group of people were spread along the north of the Eastern plains and into the Hill State. The word Banya is derived from the Sanskrit Banijya or trade; and the Banya as the names implies lives solely for and by commerce. They were mostly shopkeepers and money lenders. They played an important part in the economic life of the people of hill states.

It is sometimes said that Banya is no true caste at all, but merely an occupational term equivalent to "Shop-Keeper" and that the great division of the Banyas, the Aggarwals, Oswals and like, really occupy the position of castes; and this is in a sense true.

The Bohras too were strangers. According to one account they were originally Banyas of the plains. According to one story their progenitor came from the Daccan to Kangra with Raja Sher Chand, and became his Prime Minister. His descendents afterwords took to trade and spread themselves among the lower hills. As a traders they were less pushing and enterprising than the Suds, a tribe which according to a popular tale, was descended from a Banya and the wife of one of his debtors, a low caste man, who unable to pay the exorbitant interest (Sud) charged by the Banya, made over his wife instead. In the hill country to the north of

Punjab plains any money lender or shop-keeper was and is called a Bohra. It was interesting to note that in the Hill States, where Bohras were in great number, Banyas were hardly represented in one census returns of last century and vice-versa. In Mandi State the Bohras were the same as Mahajan of Kangra.37 They were generally shop-keepers, traders, bankers and clerks. The Bohras were mainly in Kangra, Mandi, Suket and Bilaspur but with the opening of inner-hills they tried to penetrate in the interior areas of Kulu, Bushahr, Shimla hills and Chamba in search of new venues.38

The Bohras in the hills were strictly Hindu and had intermarriage relation with Rajputs, such as Rathis and Rawats.39 They were a very quiet social group and non-influential members of society in Mandi, although the Bohras of Suket held some very important and influential posts and had a high position in society and state.40


The Mahajan or Pahari Mahajan as generally known were mostly found in Kangra, Hosiarpur and Chamba. Mahajan means 'great folk', but this term in the hills really refers to an occupation rather than to the name of any caste; and it appears that a Brahmin shopkeeper would be called a Mahajan where as in the old days, a Mahajan Munshi was called a Kayath. The Mahajan were also mentioned as bankers, traders and shopkeepers.

The Suds were and are generally found in Kangra and in the hills to the south of it. From Kangra they moved to other hills states in search of new business centres. Some of the suds trace their origin from Sarhind. It is said that Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded India seven times. Every time, the target was Sarhind, as it was an important trade centre. The invaders used to link it with Kabul regime, but on his return, it again used to be taken over by the local rulers. Disgusted with the loot, Plunder and political instability some families migrated from Sarhind to mountainous regions and 52 sub-castes came into existence, mostly after the names of the villages, they settled in, such as Bajwaria, Mohdoddia.

42. Gazetteer of Kangra District, 1883-84, Calcutta. 1884, p.76.
The Suds who migrated to the hills were almost wholly mercantile in their pursuits. During British time some preferred to serve as doctors, engineers, lawyers and high government officials. The Sud community has a high sense of service, dignity and duty. By and large the Suds are found to be hard working and industrious and wherever business, trade or professions have been taken up by them, they have earned good opinions, respect and confidence of the people with whom they have come into contact. The Suds are religious and contribute liberally for philanthropical work like schools, sarais, etc.

Kaiths and karas were two other commercial castes. The Kaiths of the hills was not the same as Kayath of the plains. They belonged to Vaisya, or commercial class and ranked with Mahajans. They were only found in the administrative or commercial centres. A chart is given below showing the number of these trading class in different Hill states during 1883.

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45. *Gazetteer of the Kangra District*, 1883-84, p.90.


The Gujars in these hills were exclusively a pastoral tribe, and scarcely cultivated at all. They kept herds of buffaloes and lived on the sale of milk, ghi, and butter. The Gujars are Hindus as well as Muslims. A muslim Gujar was a nomad, and therefore, had no settled home in the hills. The Hindu Gujars mostly lead a settled life abandoning the nomadic mode of living.

The wealth of the Gujars consisted of buffaloes and that of the Gaddis consisted chiefly of sheep and goats. They lived in the skirts of the forests and maintained their existence exclusively by selling milk, ghi and other produce of their herds. The Gujars in Chamba, who temporarily settled in the hills, carried on a brisk trade in ghi.

The Gaddis resided exclusively in Bharmaur region of Chamba and upon the snowy ranges which divides Chamba from Kangra. They were a semi-pastoral, semi-agricultural people. The greater portion of their wealth consisted of flocks of sheep and goats. Though Gaddis were not involved in trade but the wool they sheared and wool products like pattu and patti formed an important item of hill trade. In Kulu Gaddi sell their wool and woollen articles during the time of fair.

Some other people were also involved in trade were known as Kanawari traders. Like Gaddis, the Kinnauras of northern Bashahr kept large herds of sheep and goats. These Kinnauras were very enterprising people. According to Sir H. David.

49 Gazetteer of Kangra District, 1883-84, P. 92.
50 Ibid., p. 92.
51 S.C. Bose, Geography of Himalaya., p.80.
"The Kanawaris are probably of Indian race though in manners and religion they partially assimilate to the Tibetans. The people of the north are active traders proceeding to Leh for 'Charas' and to Gardok for shawl-wool, giving in exchange money clothes and spices. The mountain paths are scarcely practicable for laden mules, and merchandize is carried chiefly on the backs of sheep and goats."\(^5^2\)

In the past Kinnaura traders used to trade not only with near by Tibet and Ladakh, but used to visit far-off places like central Tibet, Yarkand, Kashmir, Lahore, Delhi, Calcutta, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal. James Baillie Fraser in his account of 1815 mentioned that "Indeed they are almost exclusively the commercial couriers between Hindustan and Tartary, and also between Tartary and Kashmir, frequenting the routes from Leh in Ladakh, to Lhasa and Degrucho and Nepal on trading speculation."\(^5^3\) Traders from Kinnaur used to visit Tibet in the month of May and June and return in the month of June and July, where as traders from Tibet came in the month of October and November and returned in the month of November and Decembe. They travelled in batches of twenty to twenty five carring provisions with

\(^5^2\) Gazetteer of the Shimla District, 1888-89, p.6.

them. Alexander Gerard remarked that "The Koonawuree take to Garoo the same things as to Leh, with the exception of goats and sheeps, which are abundant in that country. In exchange they bring back, much rock salt which is dug out of the lakes, Beangee and Shawl wool, the produce of the Tartar sheep and goats, gold dust, tea and borax Nirbissi or Zedoary, a few shawl goats and Beangee sheep and large Tartar dogs of a very ferocious breed, which guard their flocks from panther, Leopards, and other wild beasts, and are excellent watch dogs for preventing bears for committing ravages amongst the vineyards."

Besides the difficult climatic conditions the Kinnauries were engaged in trade and commerce. As it is mentioned in a Report - "Surrounded by rocks of difficult access, inimical to industry, offering little inducement to cultivation, in a climate of protracted regors, to inhabitants of Kunawur have followed that course which nature dectates, and we find them active, enterprising and industrious, occupied in extensive commercial intercourse and trade, rearing vast flocks which form their chief dependence and trafficking into remote countries under great hardships and privation to grain a comfortable subsistence for their families at home."

Trade with Ladakh was also carried out by Kinnaura traders. All travellers in the course of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like Fraser, Alexander Gerard, Thomas Thomson, A. Wilson spoke highly of this Kinnaur trade. Prosperity of the people was chiefly due to trade. Several items of trade were procured from the plains and were exported to Tibet and Ladakh.56

The Lahaules were born traders and made much money by trade every year. The trade was carried by Lahulas and the Gypsy tribes of Khampas, Baltis, Chambials and other who went to and fro between Amritsar, Kulu, Mandi, Shimla Hill states and the countries beyond the Mid Himalayan range. The Lahaulas brought wool from Tibet.57 The Lahula traders took cash into Tibet each year in summer and brought back wool. They also exported Silver, copper and gold items, ornaments etc. to Chang-tang in Tibet.58

Large number of Lahules were engaged in traffic both as traders and as carriers. They used to purchase indigo, rice, piece-goods and brass and copper vessels in Kulu and carried them on their ponies and on their sheep and goats to Ladakh and Tibet, which they exchanged them for

borax wool, **Pasham** and salt which they brought back and sold in Kulu. Less enterprising traders contended themselves with importing rice from Kulu for exchanging it with the Tibetans in Lahaul for salt and wool."""

The Zamindars of few states were also involved in trade. They used to take their agriculture produce for sale to the market or trade fairs. The Zamindars of Sirmur generally carried their produce of dried ginger, turmeric, honey, ghi, walnuts etc. to Taxsal Bilaspur, Ambala and Jagadhri. The Zamindars of Chamba were mainly involved in honey trade. The Zamindars of Kulu were also involved in sale and purchase business. A.F.P. Harchourt, the commissionery of Kulu Division in 1869-70 remarked that, """"the Kooloo Zmindar cannot be termed a trader at all; he must be regarded more in the light of a farmer, who disposes by retail and wholesale of the produce of his land......"""

The Zamindar of adjoining areas of Sabathu used to get their produce to Sabathu Bazar in order to get some money. Colonel Wace write as follows:

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"There were no traders in Bharauli area. If the Zamindar needs the money to pay his revenue he takes some ghi, wheat, maize or rice to the Sabathu bazar and obtain necessary cash by selling this produce."\(^{62}\)

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\(^{62}\) Gazetteer of Shimla District, 1888-89, p.35.