CHAPTER - 1

Pre-Islamic Arabia: Social, Political and Economic Conditions

Land of Arabia had two groups of people namely Bedouin or Nomadic tribe and the second group being classified as settled people. While the Bedouin travelled from place to place with their family and possessions, the settled people were involved in trade and commerce between their own people and neighbouring countries. The city or settled people were agriculturists who knew about land cultivation and grew corn and other products. Professor Philip Hitti writes in his book titled, The History of the Arabs that:

“The Bedouin is no gypsy roaming aimlessly for the sake of roaming. He represents the best adaptation of human life to desert conditions.”¹

The Nomads did not have permanent homes like settled residents as they lived in tents and their belongings comprised of livestock like goats, camels and horses. Their mind set was completely different from the city people as they did not approve of trade and agriculture-based occupation. Therefore, they engaged in economic activities which involved their movement and raising and breeding of animals like horses, camels and goats. Any other occupation was considered below their dignity. The Bedouin lived in makeshift tents placed whenever they halted at any place during search of pastures. While the settled people of the city preferred freedom, peace and prosperity the Bedouin preferred complete freedom for the individual and their individual tribes.

It is said that when a Persian King asked his Prince about Arabs, he said:

“What nation could be put before the Arabs for strength or beauty or piety, courage, munificence, wisdom, pride, or fidelity? He said that their fortresses were the backs of their horses, their beds the ground, their roof the sky; when other people entrenched themselves with stone and brick, the Arab’s defence was his sword and his hardihood”.

Such was the fame of the ordinary Arab among the neighbouring nations. Every Arab knew his Lineage up to the first man and the tribe did not entertain any other

member of the tribe. Each of the Arab was like a king in himself with no central rule like other nations. He could protect himself well and did not believe in acknowledging other tribes man in this regard. The protection given by an Arab to his patron was important to the point of his life and if by chance any harm was caused to the patron then the Arab would not rest until he has avenged the injury. Such was the strong character of an Arab.\textsuperscript{2}

Climate wise, Arabia is sometimes considered as the great arid zone because of Hot Saharan air from the south and cold Siberian air from the north. It is the major peninsula in the world and the Arabians call it Jazirat al-Arab.\textsuperscript{3} The Island of the Arabs was bounded by water from three sides and fourth side was encircled by sand. It is the meeting place of the three continents namely Asia, Europe and Africa. Professor Philip Hitti says that because of being a tract-less desert no foreign power tried to expand its territories into Arabia. Before Islam came the age was classified as Jahiliyah Age or the Age of Ignorance, because the social and political conditions were not only oppressive but also very inhuman. It has several references in Quran (3:148; 5:55; 33:33; 48:26) and religion was marred by superstition and ungodly ways. Tribalism constituted the chief feature of the society of Arabia, where people thought of their self-interest or their tribe's interest, but cared little for others. Many ills such as superstition, slavery, polyandry, polygamy, barbarism, female infanticide and degradation of women marked the environment of the tribal life of Arabia. The political structure was very delicate and the history of the Bedouins was mainly a record of guerilla wars called Ayyam Al- Arab (the days of the Arabians).\textsuperscript{4} Thus, Muhammad was born in 570 AD in Mecca and was sent as a blessing to the Arabs. When he reached to the age of forty years in 610 A.D he was given Prophet hood. Thus, Arabia changed permanently since then and to this date the Prophet Muhammad serves as a role model to not only Muslims of the Arab world, but to that of the whole world.

**Geography and Environment:**

Arabian Peninsula is mainly divided into three regions i.e. Yemen, Hijaz and Najd. Hijaz is the birth place of Islam with seasons of drought which could extend for three

or more than three years, also it has rainstorms of short durations. About more than eighty percent of the population of Hijaz was nomadic. Most of the fertile areas were cultivated by Jews at that time. The temperature at the lowland areas neared 90 degrees Fahrenheit while Al Medina had a mean temperature of over 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Yemen was important as it was the main trade centre of Arabia. Najd included the interior and the eastern coast. The animal kingdom was represented by panthers, leopards, hyenas, wolves, foxes and lizards. Monkeys were found in Yemen and the most common bird was the hoopoe, lark nightingale, pigeon. The domesticated animals were the camel, donkey, greyhound, cat, sheep, goat and ordinary watchdog.

The Arabian Peninsula occupies a central position on the map of the world and is in the form of an irregular rectangle. To its north is Palestine and Syria, to its North-East is Iraq and Iran, Persian Gulf on the east; Arabian sea and Gulf of Aden in the south and red sea and the African continent in the west of the peninsula.\textsuperscript{5}

It is about 1500 miles long and 600 miles in breadth, the total area being 1,20,000 square miles and considered four times the size of France and Germany.\textsuperscript{6} Taqwim al Buldan which is an old geography book measures it by the walk of a fully loaded camel that takes approximately seven months and eleven days. The Arabian Peninsula is a combination of Sand desert and vast fertile land. It is uniquely positioned with respect to three continents. It is situated in Asia but divided from Africa by Red sea and one can pass through Suez Canal into Mediterranean Sea and then enter Europe.\textsuperscript{7}

Arabian land even though is surrounded with water from all three sides but is very hot and dry and does not have its own rivers. It has small strip of land in North and small rivulets which often dry up as the desert is very hot.\textsuperscript{8}

The macro climate of the Arabian Isthmus was very tough and not friendly. There was no proper transportation which could help developing of the trade yet the

\textsuperscript{7} Jan, T. (1998).\textit{The Life and Times of Muhammad Rasul Allah.} London & Islamabad, Islamic Foundation (U.K) and Institute of Policy Studies (Islamabad).(P.76).
nomads and the settled class managed to earn their livelihood. The maritime activities were made tough by Red Sea and the Persian Gulf due to extreme currents, high wind conditions and presence of coral reefs. Despite all this the nomads and the settled people carried on with their lives.  

The desert did not have fertile lands as there was no predictable rainy season. Water was scarce and rain water which came down in abundance would get absorbed in sand. As a result, cultivation of land was not possible as there was no fertile land far and wide. There were barren valleys and due to no vegetation, life of the desert was not easy. When the pastures would turn dry then the tribes would move to another place in search of greener pastures and would come back when the land becomes lush again in spring time. Dates were the only produce since there was no agriculture as lands were mainly infertile.

The only place which was fertile and received rainy season was Yemen which was inhabited by the Sebaeans of the semitic race. The monsoon in the Yemen area was fed by the Indian ocean and the sabeans had built the famous dam of Maarib which saved rain water that was then channelized into the plains so that irrigation could be carried out smoothly. As a result, agriculture was well developed albeit artificially and through many streams which were created with the help of the Maarib dam. The land cultivation was the main economic activity and the economy was agriculture based which was the reason for high prosperity of the Yemen population.

**Kaaba**

When Prophet Abraham praised the God as one God he was put into fire for his belief of Monotheism and the people did not support or accepted the religion he brought. He eventually came to desert of Hijaz which was free from any blemish of civilization. It was an ideal location to start a new civilization like a blank slate with no corruption or traces of human selfish motives. Here he settled his wife Hajira and

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his son Ishmael. Later when the son grew a little older, they both raised the foundation of the house which is known as Kaaba today.\textsuperscript{12}

This has been mentioned in the Quran in chapter two and verse no. one hundred and twenty-seven as below:

“And when Abraham and Ishmael were laying the foundation of the house, [They Prayed], ‘Our lord accept this from us’; for You are All Hearing, All Knowing.”

We assigned the place of worship Kaaba to Prophet Abraham, saying, “Do not associate with Me anything and purify My House for those who circumambulate (the Kaaba) and those who stand upright, and those who bow and prostrate themselves. Call mankind to the pilgrimage. They will come to you, on foot, and on every kind of lean camel, by every distant track.” (22:26-27).

After construction was complete, Abraham instructed Ishmael to bring a block of stone, which was to be placed at a point that may become a starting point for circumambulation of Kaaba. The Kaaba was a simple construction with no doors or frames. The sanctity of Kaaba drew large number of people and the first to settle was tribe of Jurhum. Madad ibn Amr was the leader of this tribe to whose daughter Ishmael was married. Post the death of Ishmael, the custodianship of Kaaba went to his older son Nabit. When Nabit died the custodianship passed onto his maternal grandfather Madad of the Jurhum tribe. This tribe was ousted by Khuja who got the subsequent custodianship of the Kaaba. Later Qusayy retrieved his ancestral heritage and became the custodian of the Kaaba.\textsuperscript{13}

The Kaaba continued to be sanctified by the Arabs even at the height of their polytheism and Arabs who lived far from Mecca used to journey to pay their visit to Kaaba. God had instructed Abraham to announce to mankind to make pilgrimage to the house of God. When Abraham asked God that how far can his voice reach? God replied that it was his task to make the announcement and God himself would do the rest and ensure that it reaches entire humanity. God told Abraham that it was His will that Mecca should be consecrated city where fighting was forbidden. Its animals were to move freely without fear of being hunted down and no trees to be cut and people were safe and secure at Mecca. So, Abraham complied and God made


Abraham’s call heard. This can be seen from the fact that since the day he gave the call, increasing no. of people have started to visit Kaaba for pilgrimage. Abraham taught people about the rituals of pilgrimage as he was taught by the Angel and so people from all corners of the world go for pilgrimage to Kaaba to keep the tradition of Abraham alive.\(^\text{14}\)

Another important and pious aspect of the Kaaba was the presence of Zamzam which is the holy water considered by entire Muslim population. It was the well of Ishmael, son of Abraham who had left him with his mother Hajira in the desert on the instruction of the God. When Ishmael had become thirsty and started crying, his mother Hajira went up to two mountains Al Marwa and Al Safa to search for help seven times. It was then that Zamzam started to flow at the place where the heel of Ishmael rested. This well was later hidden by Jurhum tribe who before leaving Mecca had closed it. The Zamzam well was later discovered by Abdul Mutalib son of Hashim who had become the Quraysh leader. Finding Zamzam enhanced the status and respectability of Abdul Mutalib who was credited to have found the well of Zamzam.\(^\text{15}\)

**Mecca**

The story of how Mecca came into existence begins when Hajira, wife of Prophet Abraham was left in the desert along with her infant son Ishmael. So out of thirst of the little one, Zamzam came gushing out from the ground and it was at this very place that Mecca was founded.\(^\text{16}\)

Mecca which is one of the oldest places of the world was part of the desert without any agriculture as entire settlement covered desert. Medina was also a desert area with settlements of nomads coming down from their ancestors. There were of course some exceptions like oasis which were fertile areas and inhabited by clans. Mecca was an important city as it housed Kaaba which had 360 idols each representing a different tribe. As a result, it attracted many travellers and it became a trading centre with high commercial traffic.

\(^{14}\text{Salahi,A.}(2002).\textit{Muhammad – Man and Prophet}.London:The Islamic Foundation.(P.6).\)

\(^{15}\text{Guillaume,A.}(1996).\textit{The Life of Muhammad-A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s “Sirat Rasul Allah”}.Karachi,Karachi: Oxford University Press.(P.45).\)

\(^{16}\text{Salahi,A.}(2002).\textit{Muhammad – Man and Prophet}.London:The Islamic Foundation.(P.4).\)
Many caravans travelled from far areas and brought with them gold, spices, precious stones. This merchandise eventually reached the markets of Egypt and Syria but the merchants were always under threat of plunder so they travelled in caravans as that gave them safety from being attacked easily. Mecca also was a strategic location as it was easier to reach Yemen and Syria and to Arabia from Abyssinia. The Arab traders grew in influence and by the turn of 6th century they became regulators of trade from Yemen to Syria, this could also be attributed to Kaaba’s presence.

As a result, Mecca besides being a commercial and trade centre also became a place of high religious significance. When Mecca was conquered by the Prophet and his companions there were many merchants who were not only experienced but well connected to outside world due to their business links. So, Mecca enjoyed greater influence in Arabia despite Yemen being more resourceful in terms of water and advanced people but due to Kaaba’s presence Mecca became the meeting place for pilgrims who would visit the Kaaba to mark their ancestral customs and religion.17

**Social**

The two classes which sort of classified the Arabian population were Bedouin Nomads who resided in the rural areas and the settled people who resided near the oasis. Much of the greater influence that played on the social life of these two classes could also be attributed to climate and the geography of the place. So, there were two dominant life styles of which the northern and central Arabia was a Bedouin who represented a life style of a person always on the move, who had limited resources and was constantly challenged by the climate and geography of his habitat. The southern Arabian Peninsula reflected the settled people life style which was much better in terms of opportunities and resources and hence the differentiation in terminology of these two classes. The settled people were called Arabs and the Nomad as Arab Bedouin.18

The camel is the most important belonging of an Arab without which desert cannot be considered to be habitual. The camel was a domesticated animal and an integral

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part to Arab’s life. If there was a blood feud and blood money was to be paid then it would be camel which would be compensated as blood money. Camel denoted the wealth of the Sheikh. It was everything for a nomad, his nourisher his mode of transport. Camel can carry on in the desert without drinking water for seventeen days. Having herd of camel symbolized wealth of a tribes-man. Camel can store food for a week, its nose had a special membrane which protected it from the sandstorm and eyes had a double lining of eyelashes, digestive system that can help in even if it eats thorny plants. A camel has the amazing capacity to drink up to 60 litres of water and then distribute it across its body. It can go without water for twenty-five days in winter and about five days in summer. Camel also has a very good memory that helps camel traverse a desert even if the sand dunes change over a period of time caused by continuous sand storms. Camel also formed part of Bedouin poetry. For him a camel gives numerous benefits which included its skin to cover himself, he would make tent out of his hair and use his dung for the fuel and his urine as hair tonic or medicine. The Bedouins take delight in calling themselves as ahl al-bair meaning people of the camel. There would be hardly anadherent of the Ruwalah tribe who would not have drunk water from the paunch of the camel. Camel is so much important in the Arabian life which could be understood from the fact that Arabic language has about thousand names for the camel’s breed and different stages of growth, the same number that is used as synonym for a sword. The caliphs Umar had said that that “The Arab prospers only where the camel Prospers.” The peninsula remains the biggest centre for breeding of the camels in the world.

Earlier period of Arabia before the advent of Islam was marked with three things namely Camel, desert and Bedouins. The nomads or Bedouins lived in tents which were made of camel hair and could survive the tough conditions of the desert. Similarly the Arab horse was well known and Najd was famous for its horses. In Arabia the horse was an animal of Luxury as its feeding and care in desert was not easy and possession of horse was a sign of wealth and prosperity. Its importance was in terms of its speed which it could gain in a battle or hunting or a sport.19

Tribal solidarity was the key essential to the survival in desert conditions which was linked to the high level of respect for personality and appreciation of human worth.

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The solidarity was enhanced by desert conditions as there was natural selection process. The larger group was perceived more powerful and successful however there were always breakaways happening, so in a way one large group did not maintain its uniqueness for long. For example, Banu Abd Manaf was once the most prosperous but split up among sons namely Banu Abd Shams, Banu Hashim. However, there was unity among the Arabs which was based on common poetical traditions, common descent language being the distinctive factor. Any person who would be the trouble maker was disowned and was known as Khali.20 There were sacred months followed by Arabs for example during the three months of autumn and one month of spring no fighting or bloodshed was done as these months were considered as months of truce of God. This gave safety to travelers coming from distant locations and time to people who were located closer to recover from the ravages of earlier warfare. There were fairs organized for example fair of Ukaz at the neighborhood of the sanctuary which was visited by tribes. Many matters were resolved in this fair including those pertaining to rivalry and it also gave ideas of common nationality to the Arabian people, secondly women were also wooed in these fairs.21

We can say that the social conditions of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic age were akin to living in darkness and ignorance. It was highly immersed in superstitions with no intellectual trigger and this made the life of society like that of animal-like life. The women were not given the equal status like men and were considered as mere commodities and the equation between different tribes was very delicate. The policies centred more on Greed and futile wars which lasted generations without any positive outcome.22

**Blood Feud & Revenge**

The blood feud even though was primitive but was a kind of check that crime was not committed in jest as tribe would be held responsible with the penalty being ‘life for life’. There was no rule for taking of revenge as there were no restrictions and revenge could be taken even while the target was asleep or not prepared. The

murderer could kill him by stealth or by a trick. The artificial solidarity was instilled through hilf meaning alliance or Jiwar known as the formal arrangement of protection.

As stated, that the people of Arabia were basically divided into two main groups namely Bedouins and Settled folks. Bedouins would not needlessly roam around but settle wherever they would find verdant land while some were moving towards the settled class and therefore re-energizing the blood of the settled class. The desert besides serving as the natural line of defense against foreign encroachment also was like a custodian to the sacred tradition of Bedouin which preserved his speech and blood. However the inhospitable climate made Arabs fierce and individualistic in approach and attitude devoid of any interdependence which was much needed for civilization. The focus was on endurance rather than getting involved like one would in a civilized set up. Wars were fought for ego, to show one’s superiority or for vengeance and hence were common and went on for years like a chain reaction. Cruelty was inherent as they would slit the pregnant woman’s womb and kill the unborn child.

**Condition of women**

The plight of women can be understood from the fact that during pre-Islamic days women had no inheritance rights. If the husband were dead then women would have no rights over their children. A girl child as stated earlier was considered a burden and a source of embarrassment for the family and lead to female infanticide. Her main responsibility was to produce mail child. The Bedouin women had to face many hardships since much of the household work was put into her domain without any support from the male member of the tribe. Considering desert life not being very easy the life of a woman was no less than a burden. She had to prepare food for the family, milk the animals, do all other household work like weaving, setting of the tent, washing of clothes, making of butter.

Women were commoditised as object of sex and society was steeped in debauchery with men having no problem in giving their wife’s to other men of high lineage. This

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they did so they could produce sons like them. Women undressed themselves in the house of God (Kaaba) and men could marry their sisters and widowed mothers could become wife of their sons.26

According to Aisha who was the wife of Prophet Muhammad, the conditions of women was so bad which could be understood from the four types of marriages conducted in the pre-Islamic period. In the first situation marriage is same as we see today that is a father marrying his daughter after agreeing upon dowry. The second kind of marriage involves a husband sending his wife to another person for the intercourse after her menstrual cycle so she could conceive. He would after she conceives then decide whether he would want to maintain the physical relations with his wife or not. In the third scenario the women would have intercourse with less than ten men and after conceiving she would call all those men and then chose the person, she thinks is the father of the child. In the fourth case similarly, many people would have physical intercourse with the women who after conceiving would then call an oracle who would declare whose child it is and then the selected man would announce himself as the child’s father. After the coming of Islam, Prophet Muhammad prohibited such types of practices except that which is practiced in the present times. In the Pre-Islamic period, there was no restraint on how many wives an Arab could have. Also, the relationships were so complex that a person could marry two sisters or wives of his father if they were divorced or on death of his father, and for divorce the decision rested more with the men than with the women. The parent child relationship was dismally paradoxical in society of Arabia. This is because some Arabs loved their children with all their heart and protected them but shockingly they could bury the female children as they feared they would bring them shame and poverty.27 Maid-servant were pushed into prostitution and income was earned out of this immoral practice.28 This was later forbidden in Islam and verse came down which is mentioned in the chapter twenty four and verse no. thirty three of the Quran where it was said not to force the maids into prostitution for a gain while they desire chastity.

Such was the deplorable condition of the women in general that a widow was considered as part of husband property and passed to use for son.\textsuperscript{29} If a daughter was born into a tribal family then her fate would lead to her burial alive as a female gender was construed as misfortune. In many cases the girls were married at a very early age of seven or eight years as father feared dishonour from the girl side. If the women happened to be a poetess then she could be an instrument to flare up the rivalry with her charm or if she was an oracle or Prophetesses then she could influence the movement of the tribes. Women also at times followed the men into battle field and increase the morale of the fighters with their savage music or help in healing the wounded. Interestingly, it is important to note that a woman of insight and courage was not disadvantaged due to her special qualities which were not commonly found.\textsuperscript{30}

**Female Infanticide**

One of the most heartless custom of Pre-Islamic period was burying and killing of female infant. If a new born was a girl, Arabs would bury her alive to save them self from prevalent social humiliation attributed to a girl child. Such was the deplorable condition of a girl child.

**No Inheritance for women**

Pre-Islamic Arabia was a men centric society with no legal status for women. They had no rights on inheritance of property.

**Slavery**

Slavery was integrated into trade and economic activity of the Arabs in the Pre-Islamic Period. Slaves were considered lowest in the chain of society and were bought and sold like cattle. The conditions of slaves were bad with no human rights. Female slaves were pushed many a times into prostitution by their masters for benefit of money.


Moral Strength of Tribals

However, despite these ills one of the moral ideals of a desert Arab was muruwah or manliness along with generosity and hospitality despite facing odds in the desert conditions. If one notices a high mound of ashes outside a tent then that would indicate a mark of high excellence of a chief as it showed him having entertained many guests. Generosity could even go to the extent of a poor woman killing her camel to give meal to the passing strangers. The other virtues were fidelity and loyalty as an individual would go to any extent in keeping of the trust. This can be understood from one of the celebrated examples of As Samawál b. Adiya who allowed his son being killed rather than surrender weapons which were entrusted to him by Imru’al-Qays.31 These virtues reflected that the honour of the tribe was before the individual and individual would abstain from any action which brings disrepute to the tribe. A large part of the poems attributes this aspect as it eulogizes the merits of one tribe and faults of the other one. Authority depended on the degree of muruwah (manliness) of an individual and it was not hereditary and as a result if the tribal chief died then the succession was not in the family but to the one who possessed wisdom and commanded respect in the tribe.

The raiding or Ghazw was like a national sport where raids would be done on enemy like a normal business however weaker tribe could buy protection by paying Khuwah.32 This practice was carried later in the Islamic conquests as well. The hospitality of Bedouin lessened the evils of Ghazw as he would go extra mile and consider it as sacred duty to well treat his guests. Violating it was like going against their honour. The desert Arabs were mainly living in non-belief and hypocrisy, this is stated in the Quran (9:9-98). The society was divided into clans (qawm) and a number of clans who grouped together were like a tribe (qabalah). The battle cry of each clan was different and they prefixed Banu (children of) title from joint name and submitted to the senior member who was the chief of the clan and called sheikh. The biggest calamity for any Bedouin was to lose affiliation to his tribe. The woman had to adjust in a polygamous family with man of the house as her master. The spirit which bounded the clan was Asabiyah which implied unconditional loyalty towards fellow clansmen. The motto of the revenge was blood and would be taken up by the

nearest of the kin without any other remedy and this led to wars raging to forty years or more like banu-bakr and banu-taghlib.

The Bedouin’s deep-rooted emotional connection was with his clan and tribal-pride constituted as one of the strong passions in his scheme of things. Their motto was to save their member irrespective whether he was an oppressor or oppressed. There was no sense of right of wrong and that support was given to transgressor if he happens to be the brother or from the clan. This resulted in bloody conflicts which went on for decades.

However, the religious superstition and Arabs penchant for sticking to their revered customs sometimes helped in curbing their hasty behaviour towards blood-shed. Their respect for allegiance, coalition and dependence maintained a spirit of camaraderie which prevented baseless dispute and fights among one another. They honoured the custom of not waging battles or fights during the sacred months of Rajab, Thul Hijjah and Muharram which gave them additionally an opportunity to earn a living and maintain peace.

Types of Arabs

There was diversity and tribes were not homogenous and this was due to their origin. The Arabs were divided into three sub-divisions that is, Arab ul-baidah, Arab ul-Ariba and Arab ul-Mustariba.

**Arab ul-Baidah**- These were extinct Arabs which included the Hamitic colonies that preceded the Semites and the Armaean population of Syria, Phoenicia and other parts.

**Arab ul-Ariba or Mutariba**- They were the original Arabs and true Semites also known asdescendants from Kahtan or Joktan. As they progressed, they destroyed the aboriginal settlers. The Joktanite Arabs who were nomads by nature prevailed upon the primitive inhabitants the Hamitic astral worshippers. The Joktanite original cradle was Abrahamites and their direct ancestors were Arphaxadn order of the Chaldean and Eber the man from beyond(the river) in reference to Babylon or the district now called Irak-Araby on the right bank of the Euphrates.
**Arab ul- Mustariba** or Naturalised Arabs were Abrahamic Semites who intermarried Joktanite Arabs and settled among them either through peaceful means or as military colonists.

Among the Arab ul Ariba were the races like Bani Ad, the Amalika, the Bani Tahmud and Bani Jadis. 33

The Bani Ad with Hamitic in their origin was the first settlers and colonist in the peninsula and they were established in the region called by historians and geographers as Ahsafur-ramal neighbouring to Yemen, Hazramaut and Oman. One of the sovereigns of this race, Shaddad has a mention in the Quran who had extended his powers beyond the confines of the Arabian headland by conquering Iraq and reached to the borders of India. The tribe of Bani Amalika from which many Pharaohs emerged after their penetration in Egypt also spread gradually in Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Hijaz. They were wrecked by the Bani Jurhum also from the same Arab ul-Ariba. The Bani Thamud were Kushite or Hamitic like Bani Ad inhabited between Hijaz and Syria and lived in the houses carved in the side of rocks. They were ultimately in great part destroyed by Chedorlaomer who was great Elamite conqueror and thereafter were destroyed and have been mentioned in the Quran as a warning to Qurashites. The descendants of Kahtan were absorbed by their successors Babylonians who not only checked the progress of Mustariba Arabs but also made inroads in the deserts of Iraq and Mesopotamia and expanded to Najd and Hijaz. From the Kahtan descendants emerged the tribe Arab ul Mutariba, son of Eberwho were concentrated in Yemen. The Arab historians’ states that the two sons of Eber, Kahtan and Yaktan created the dynasties which became hugely victorious over the period. Yareb who was the son of Khatan gave his name to all his descendants and was later succeeded by his son Yeshad father of Abdus Shams and founder of Mareb. Abdus Shams was so victorious in his adventures that his surname became Saba which meant capturer and title was given due to no. of victories he obtained in many battles.

The ancestors of the Kahtanite tribe were famous in Arab traditions, two of the sons of Saba known as Kuhlan and Himayar. The Himayarte dynasty comes from the son Himayar who took over the dynasty after his father. This continued and the rule of

Yemen went on until the century that preceded Prophet of Islam. The dynasty also included Zulkarnain and the well-known Bilkis dynasty that went to Jerusalem at the time of King Solomon.\(^{34}\)

**Quraysh**

The man who gave the name of Quraysh was Nadir ibn Kinana although many books and historians say it was Fihir and his descendants were known as Quraysh. But Shibli Numani cites Al Hafiz al Iraqi’s seerat al-Manzuma who says that Quraysh were offspring of Fihir but majority consider Nadir to be their ancestor. So, after Nadir it was Fihr and next came Qusayy. During the time of Qusayy Kaaba’s custodian was Hulail Khuza’i whose daughter was married to Qusayy. It was willed by Hulail that after his death Qusayy be made the custodian of the Kaaba who eventually succeeded him. Qusayy got a council room constructed within the Holy house known as Dar-al-Nadwa. So, whenever war preparation, caravan’s departure or nuptial and other ceremonies were to be initiated it was done from Dar-al-Nadwa.\(^{35}\)

Qusayy got the title of first Quraysh as he did many notable things that made him honorable among his people. For example, he instituted the important offices of Rifada and Siqaya which were meant for making arrangements of boarding and lodging for the pilgrims and offering them water from the well of Zamzam. He brought together all the members of the Quraysh and settled them around Kaaba and told them that it was their moral duty to show hospitality to people who come from far off places to visit Kaaba. He said to them:

“People of Quraysh, you are God’s neighbors and the custodians of His house who live in this consecrated city. God has selected you for this honor. In the pilgrimage season you welcome those pilgrims who have come to visit God’s house, reversing its sanctity and performing its rituals. They are God’s guests in His House. The guests most worthy of hospitality are God’s guests. You must be hospitable to them. Let us, then, provide them with food and drink during their pilgrimage until they have left our city to return to their home and families.”


The Quraysh responded well to Qusayy’s appeal and approved his suggestion. This increased his prestige and his honor. He symbolized leadership and no one could enter Kaaba unless Qusayy opened the door himself. During pilgrimage people ate and drank only that which was provided by him. His honor became the honor of the Quraysh and they loved him as their leader.36

Votive lamps which were lighted up during the Hajj days and construction of Leathern tank to store water for the pilgrims were other laudable things done by him. Before his death he entrusted the various offices of the Kaaba to his son Abd al Dar who was the elder among his siblings. He was incompetent and as a result it later led to the conflict between the family of Abd al Dar and Hashim. It was then decided to give the responsibility of Rifada and Siqaya to Hashim who was the son of Abd Manafand successor to leadership after demise of Qusayy. Hashim soon became important enough and managed his duties excellently. He kept the leathern tanks full of water for the pilgrims. He developed the trade relations with the king of eastern Europe known as Heraclius to such an extent that not only they received warm welcome by their kings but the Byzantine empire also excused them from being taxed. Similarly, with another king of Abyssinia name Negus he worked upon a similar order. The Arabs began to visit Yemen in winter and Syria and Asia minor in summer. The Arabs caravan was safe and was not looted as Hashim had worked peace treaties with other tribes.37

The Kaaba was the venerated and held the most honourable status in entire Arabia. This also was a great blessing for the Meccan people since it created business opportunities as many people visited Kaaba for pilgrimage. In the process the clans who enjoyed superior status were the Quraysh, were able to create wealth and status for themselves and were respected as they were considered descendants of Prophet Ismail. Prophet Muhammad belonged to one of the Banu Hashim Clan of Quraysh. The city of Mecca had emerged as a power hub due to presence of Kaaba and created business opportunity for its clans which lived around it.38

Kaaba was saved from the army of Abraha which has been mentioned as the year of the elephant. Abraha was the vice-regent of Abyssinia and who had marched to Mecca to destroy Kaaba. His main intention was to divert the pilgrims to the cathedral Sana which he had built for the king Negus. It was his pledge that made him march to Mecca to raze down the Kaaba but soon as he reached Mecca his army was miraculously destroyed by the birds. This incident and his earlier interactions with Abdul Muttalib who went to deter the attack and then prayed for Kaaba’s safety further exalted the status of Quraysh. People after that incident started calling them as ‘The people of God’ as God had answered their prayers and saved the Kaaba from destruction.39

**Tribal Life**

The importance of tribe was in the masculinity of the family and therefore the family structure was patriarchal. Men assumed most of the importance and women were not on equal status of shared prestige. This was also due to fighting nature of the tribes and harsh desert conditions that required physical strength which only men in the family could provide, this gave men the sense of absolute superiority over women. There was no social status of women.

The traditions established in the tribe by the forefathers over generations governed the family system of the tribe. Any other person could not enter the tribe but a person from a blood relation. So, it kind of created its own rules and gave a protective order to the tribe with regard to rights, safety etc. No one would risk opposing the tribe as that would mean removing the protection of the tribe from that person. The tribesmen understood their rights as part of their collective understanding.

In the pre-Islamic age, every individual of the tribe was sensitive to one another irrespective of the lineage. The feeling of being united gave strength and power to the tribe who felt great amount of cohesiveness. The tribe developed their own idea of morality and protecting the weak and standing up to the strong was considered as virtues. If one had to be truthful even if that risked the life of a member then also the member would not hesitate. In battles, bravery and in adversity patience was displayed by the members of the tribe which got the tribe praise and higher

acceptance. The tribe displayed great amount of camaraderie to handle the severe conditions of the desert.

This feeling of togetherness instilled high responsibility and duty in a person which was non-negotiable. If a person was killed then entire tribe would come forward to avenge the killing as failing to do so would bring dishonour to the tribe. So killing a person who was protected had very high ramifications and starting of any battle could go for years without any resolution. There was also cost involved for blood money which was paid to the victim’s family by the murderer else that would straight away result in violent conflict.

The tribal system and tribal rights were so rigid that no one wanted to go against it even though the nature of a tribal member was of non-submission but they still bowed to the customs, beliefs, practices and laws of the tribal system. This was in a way good for all the members as it protected both life and property of every person in the tribe.

The strong bond which was crystallised as a result of blood relations reinforced the feeling of unity. If a person leaves his tribe and after being expelled comes under the protection is termed (djar) and if he becomes an ally then is termed ashalif. When either a slave was captured in a battle or when he was bought from someone, it was called wala. In this way new people came into the tribe.40

One important characteristic of tribal life was equality and freedom for all the members. This was influenced due to the desert life and if for any reason the tribe felt being treated unjustly then it would leave the place and move on. The tribe would not bear the injustice as for them freedom, equality and justice were very important. So, the tribe would leave its pastures to find a place where there would find justice and equality. It was the above qualities that cultivated in them virtues of hospitality, bravery, mutual assistance, neighbor protection and magnanimity; this could not be found in the inhabitants of the city. The Byzantine and Persia for the very same reason did not entertain any ideas of conquering the Arabian Peninsula. This was not in the case of Yemen since they knew that the people would prefer

migration to subjugation and that they would never surrender to any foreign authority.  

Whenever there was any hostility the Arab would trust his sword, also it was expected of him to defend his tribe and its people. The inter-tribal hostilities arose from conflicts pertaining to their cattle, grazing-lands or springs. This did check on the over population of Bedouins for whom vendetta was order of life and who lived in a state of mind which was fighting in nature. This could be gauged by the fact that the war between Banu Bakr and Banu Taghlib in north east Arabia was over wounding of She camel of an elderly woman from Banu Bakr tribe by a Taghlib chief. The war continued for forty years with raids and plundering and the poets fanned it with their exhortations. Similarly another war broke out on account of unfair conduct of dhubyanites in a horse race between Chiefs of Abs and Dhubyan. The reason of the long conflict was due to a race between a horse of Abs chief called Dahis and mare of Dhubyan chief called Al- Ghabra and lasted for many decades.

Poetry

Arabian Desert even with its harsh conditions provided creative ground to all Arabs as was seen in their expression of poetry. It in a way compensated for the hardships which the desert Bedouin faced and brought in a common spirit to unite all the constituents of the society. The themes of the poetry varied in love, battles, vengeance, wine, victory, hunting of animals, and tribal folklore or legends. It comprehensively covered entire gamut of a Bedouin life which was expressed in poetry. The poets were spokesperson and were like journalists of today’s times. They were great orators who enjoyed immense status in the society. The Arab life was interwoven in his camels, horses, trade, raids, wine, wives, concubines so they all found mention in the poetry of an Arab. Since the poets were regarded in high esteem and were regarded as people of higher intellect so it was believed that poets were helped by the divine power. It was believed that the help came only to them and was beyond common man. The poems reflected two extremes, that is, praise on one hand and satire or extreme criticism on the other hand.

Pre-Islamic Arabia witnessed no. of market fairs which also provided a kind of cultural platform. These faires were frequented by all tribes and transactions took place which accepted currencies both from the Iranian drachma and Byzantine dinar. Pilgrims who visited from neighbouring and far regions witnessed the fairs at Mina, Macanna, Zulmacra and Uqaz while they were on pilgrimage. This also allowed them to experience the oratory and cultural extravaganza of Arabian environment in its full form. The literacy rate was abysmally small in the Arabian Peninsula and even in Mecca which was a prominent cultural centre had very few literate people. Bedouin society did not have any literate people particularly the nomads. The poems were orally memorized and transmitted from one age to another.\textsuperscript{43}

Another important aspect of Social life in Jahiliyah period was the poetic way used for means of communication as no system of writing had then been fully developed. It was the closest to academic parallel. Pre-Islamic Arabia excelled in the poetical expression and Bedouin’s love of poetry served like a cultural asset. The earlier period of a poet’s composition is regarded as excellent and unparalleled. They were conveyed orally and were only recorded in the second and third period of Hijrah. The prose’s first development was said to be through oracles and soothsayers who expressed poetically and the second stage of development is said to be when it was sung by the camel rider who would sing as per the rhythm of the camel’s movement.\textsuperscript{44}

Few of the Arabs could read but every Arab parent wanted their children to have eloquence of speech and the crown of eloquence was poetry. So, every Arab parent desired their children to possess the art of poetry as it was considered to be an honour. This could be more actualized in a desert where spoken language was nearest to poetry. Many of the Quraysh kept their sons in the desert for as long as eight years so that the relation with the desert does not fade away with the passing of the generations.\textsuperscript{45}

The qasidah (ode) is one of the poetical compositions and Muhalil who was hailed as the Taghlib hero of the basus war was credited as the first one to compose these

poems. Among the odes “Seven Muallaqat” (suspended) was held at first place. It is believed that they were hung from the walls of the Kaaba and inscribed in golden letters. The legend goes that each of these qasidah was bestowed the once a year prize at the fair of ukaz. These are still honoured in the Arabic speaking world as poetical masterpieces.\(^{46}\)

These fairs of Arabia were akin to annual literary congress where poets made name for themselves. There were trade and exchange of commodities as well. Imru'ul-Qays (ca.540) first ode got the judges in his favour. Poetry was the public register of the Arabians and poet was well versed with genealogy and folklore. Bedouins measured intelligence by poetry and were like the journalist and would work to raise the passion of people during war. Then there were above the ordinary like Arabian poet Shair who was believed to receive knowledge from demon and his tongue worked like demagogue and mobilized public opinion and his work was sought by princely office. His poems worked like a tirade against opposition and it was said that the only way to tackle him was by way of Qat’al-lisan (cutting off the tongue). Another example of a celebrated poet was Antarah ibn Shahhad al-Absi (525-615 AD) who epitomized heroism, chivalry. He immortalized the love for his lady Ablah in his Muallqah which has become part of the literary heritage of the Arabic speaking world. So, a poet was like an oracle, guide, orator and spokesman of his community. He was like a historian well proficient in the genealogy and folklore. Since he was aware of the past achievements of its members, pasture lands their rights his job was to expose the weaknesses and failures of the rival tribes to ridicule on their shortcomings. Therefore, poetry aids as a good source of historical study about that period as it was like and public register of the Arabians.\(^{47}\) The poetry in general due to its evocative nature and rhythmic stringing of the words was thought to have satanic influence.\(^{48}\) The poems which became popular were the ones which glorified the present life and talked about the immortality of people.\(^{49}\)

**Arabic Language**


If we study the pre-Islamic odes/qasidah, the muallaqat to the contemporary novel, literature written in Arabic has travelled time and geographies. Arabic literature began in Jahiliyah period which was part of Bedouin society and dominated more by poetry. The qasidah or ode have been codified in the Arabic language. The Arabic literature is today a major cultural force in the Middle East. It now participates among other literatures in world literary culture. 

Arabic language was the linguistic of the Quraysh and it is preserved till date with style remaining the same. This is considered as yet another miracle as Quran was revealed in Arabic. When we study other languages, we find that they have undergone changes over generations. For example, Chaucer (1343-1400) altered a dialect into a language which was followed for two centuries by English writers and poets. William Shakespeare (1558-1625) set new standards for English and after that prose became popular with writers and poets like Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) and T.S Eliot (1885-1965). They represented the modern age and with scientific mind-sets language changed during the course of history and the earlier language could only be understood when help of dictionary or commentaries is taken. Other languages also changed in a similar fashion but we see that the language Arabic spoken in the pre-Islamic days by Quraysh is the only exception. There were over twelve dozen non-Arabic words which were used in the Quran which were taken from languages like Persian, Latin, Nabataean, Hebrew, Syrian, Coptic and others. This was basically to set a standard of literary excellence which only showed later period the excellence of Quran. Due to Quran the Arabic language has got preserved because interests in Islamic Theology and traditions led to the development of faculties dealing in Arabic Grammar, Syntax and Etymology.

**Religion in Pre-Arabia**

The Bedouin were not deeply religious or spiritual as they had no ideological scriptures or tenets that they could base their practices or age-old customs. The Idolatry was simply introduced by external influence brought by outsiders. The Arabs were not uniform in their ideology and were superstitious so their belief

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system was on the surface and was not deep rooted. This could be understood from the fact their idols were made of food ingredients like dates etc and whenever there were famines the Arabs would eat their idols to satisfy their hunger. The offering made to the idols was simply an age-old tradition without any proper base or rationality as the society was tribal in mindset.  

According to tradition the idolatry was started by Amr b. Luhayy as Prophet had once said that I saw Amr b. Luhayy dragging his intestines in hell as he was the first to change the religion of Ishmael to set up idols. He was the one to set up the customs of the bahira, saiba, wasila and hami. The bahira is the filly of the Saiba: the Saiba is the sheep camel which gives birth to ten fillies without an intervening colt. She is set free, is never ridden, her hair is not shorn, and only a guest is allowed to drink her milk. If she gives birth to a filly after that its ears split and it is allowed to go its way with its mother, not ridden, hair unshorn, and only a guest may drink her milk as in the case of a mother, she is the bahira, the filly of the saiba. The Wasila is an ewe which has ten twins’ ewes in successive births without a lamb intervening. She is made a wasila and they used the expression wasalat. Any ewes which gives birth to after that belongs to the males, except that if one of them dies all share in eating it, both males and females. The Hami is a stallion who is the sire of ten successive fillies without any intervening colt. His back is a taboo and he is not ridden, his hair is not shorn and he is left to run among the camels to mount them. Beyond that, there is no use made of him. When God sent Prophet Muhammad, he revealed to him that: God has ordained no sanctity about animals described as bahirah, or saibah or wasilah or ham. Those who deny the truth invent falsehoods about God. Most of them do not use their reason as was stated in chapter five and verse no. three of the Quran. Amr b. Luhayy had put the idol al Uzza in Nakhla which was venerated by the Quraysh and when people use to finish their Hajj and the walking around of the Kaaba, it was believed that their taboo was not removed until they spent a day at the place of al Uzza and had gone around it and only after this it was taken as abandonment of the taboo. Then Amr b. Luayy set up Manat on the sea shore near Qudayd. Azd and Ghassan went on pilgrimage to it and worshipped it. So after completing of the rituals at Mina they would go to Manat and shave their hair and

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cry Labbayki. Such was the superstition that when a man was under a taboo as a pilgrim then he would not enter his house from the front but would climb the wall and enter from behind. So, the practice of stone worship began with the sons of Ishmael when people after visiting Kaaba carried with them a stone as an honor and set it up wherever they lived. They then walked around it in the symbolic sense as one does for Kaaba. So as time passed this ritual became prevalent over generations and stones and idols started getting worshipped. The practice of stone worship began with the sons of Ishmael when people after visiting Kaaba carried with them a stone as an honor and set it up wherever they lived. They then walked around it in the symbolic sense as one does for Kaaba. So as time passed this ritual became prevalent over generations and stones and idols started getting worshipped. Every household had an idol in their house which was meant for worship so whenever a man was about to travel on a journey, he would rub himself with it and do likewise on return from the journey.

The religious affinity which is embodied in a multi religious society was non-existent among the Arab society. This could be understood best from one of the stories of Imru-al Qays when he took a break at the temple of dhu-al-khalasah while he ventured to avenge the murder of his father. When he drew the arrows and got the same result each time suggesting that he abandon his vengeance, he got very enraged. He then exclaimed in anger addressing the idol that had it been the Idol’s father then it would have certainly not prohibited avenging of the murder.

There is another example where an Arab’s camels ran away after it saw Idol Sad covered in blood. The camels by the mere sight of the tall idol smeared in blood got so scared that they ran away leaving the Arab stranded behind. The Arab, instead of being overwhelmed with the feeling of reverence cursed the Idol Sad for frightening his camels. All this shows how superficial the religions undercurrents were prevalent in the Arab society.

The temples of south Arabian cults had astral features with ornate temples and emphasis was on sun worship. Bedouin’s astral belief was based on the moon worship which implies pastoral society as they grazed their flocks in moonlight while sun worship represented agricultural stage of society. They worshipped these astral bodies like Moon as they thought it influences the earthly affairs. Trees, wells, caves, stones remained sacred objects for the society. Hubal was considered the

topmost deity of Al-Kaaba and was made in human form and the ritual followed by Arabians was drawing of arrows by the soothsayer.\(^{57}\) Idols were also made of all kinds of material like stones, edibles and wood for example Banu Hanifa had a god made of dates, butter and barley flour.\(^ {58}\) There were 360 idols which represented one for every day. There were three daughters of God namely Al Lat, AL Manat and Al Uzza. Al Lat was the moon god and Al Manat was a rock enroute when one had to travel between Mecca and Syria.\(^ {59}\) Various animals like horses and camels, plants, trees pieces of stones etc formed the principal objects of adoration. The society was so irrational that after a person expired, a camel would be sacrificed with the superstitious belief that it would serve as a mode of transport to the deceased. The society believed that a deceased person soul would take form of Hama or Sada, a bird which would hover over the grave if the victim was murdered. It would not settle down till the murder is avenged. The Arabs believed in Jin’s, spirits and prophecies and would consult idols using arrows as a medium. The priests of the temples enjoyed the lavish offerings of devotees and there would be different temples for different tribes. Among all the temples the Kaaba had the most respectable and honorable status and was the envy of outsiders.\(^ {60}\)

There were many religions in Arabia, some believed in Time or the Laws of Nature and that there was no God. It was for such people that Quran states: “They Say, there is nothing but our life in this world: we die, we live, nothing but time destroys us. They have no knowledge of this; they only follow conjecture”. (45:24).

Basically, there was no holiness aspect considered and, in their hearts, they awaited a liberator. Essentially, they were seekers who lived a secluded life and would often say that if they knew how to pray or worship then they would have done it in that manner.

Among the above ones were two kinds, first who believed in God but not on the hereafter or day of accountability, Quran mentions about them in chapter thirty-six and verse seventy-nine that God who has given them life will bring them to life again and that he has knowledge of every type of creation. Then there is the second kind

who did not believe in the Prophet as they expected a super natural person like an
Angel to have come as a messenger. They were surprised that the Prophet was like a
mortal soul who eats and walks like them (25:7). So, they thought that Prophet hood
could only be given to an angel and it was hard for them to believe that a mortal
could be a messenger of truth. So, majority of people were idol worippers. For
them the idol was an intermediary that could take them near to God.61

They would pray to God when they landed in adverse situations and take oath in his
name. They knew that it was God who created everything and is the power behind
everything but whenever the problem or situation passed, they forgot Him. They
sacrificed for the Idols but also worshipped God. In dangerous situations they
supplicated for help of God but after the issue was resolved they forgot Him. This
demonstrated that their faith in God was very confusing and there was conflict in
faith. The words Wathan and Sanam were used for the Idols. The meaning of Sanam
was statue which referred to a thing besides God. Obelisk (nasb) was used to make
Idols carved out of stone.

In the Jahiliyah period or Age of Ignorance the objective of worship was done to
achieve worldly aims. Worship was ritualistically practiced by bowing down and
circumambulation of the temples. Animals were sacrificed and in prayers people
asked for victory in battles to be fought, male children wealth and good health. There
was no concept of hereafter hence the focus of worship pertained to this time which
meant all supplication was done to gain worldly favours from the Idols. People
buried the dead with food and clothing and often left animals on the belief that they
would serve as transport for the departed soul. This indicated some kind of hereafter
conception although it was not prominent in their conscious mind. The polytheist
Arabs used divine arrows and make divinationsgrounded on the direction of flight of
birds or the course taken by animals. Various charms like amulets and talismans
were used by the Arabs with the hope that they would protect them from the evil
eye.62

There were few who were ready to perish for their deities when told to reject them. It
could be seen that their belief was not deep as when they were presented with sound

from http://www.lastprophet.info/arabia-in-the-pre-islamic-period
logic, they inferred that their god was impotent and that they had worshipped them in vain.63

The chief idols worshipped by tribes were:

1. Lat was revered by the Thaqifites at Taif.
2. Uzza was revered by the Quraysh and the Kananites at Mecca
3. Manat was revered at Medina by Khazraj, Aws and Ghassan.
4. Wudd was the deity of Banu Kalb at Dumat al-Jandal.
5. Suwa was revered by the BnaiHudhail.
6. Yaghuth was revered by the tribe of Madhhij and by some Yemenite tribes.
7. Yauq was revered by the tribe of Hamdan.

Another interesting aspect of the deities worshipped by Arabs was that several of them were goddesses which showed that their worship was not out of piety as it showed the sentiments that emanates for a women deity as compared to a male one.64

The Arabs were people on true nature but they had become conditioned due to environment around them which prevented them from understanding the message of Prophet initially. However, they later realized that his message was for their well-wishing and their own good so they not only accepted him but also embraced Islam. It appears from the turn of events that all this was as per the scheme of God so that Arabs could create history and Prophet could fulfill the divine mission for which he was selected.65

Christianity, Judaism and Magism

Tribes of Rabia and Ghassan were Christians and tribe of Khuzaa was also influenced. Waraqa ibn Naufal who predicted the Prophet to be the chosen one was also a Christian and in Mecca many people could read bible. The tribes of Himyar, Banu Kanan, Banu Harith and Banu Kinda were the followers of Judaism. They were called Bait al Madaris and had good control in Medina. All the inhabitants in Khaibar were Jews and the tribe of Tamim was Magian. But there was no positive result of

the religion as human sacrifices were offered to the idols, real sisters could be co-wives to the same husband and a man practiced polygamy without no restriction. They were no sense of shame which could be understood from the fact that the famous Poet & Prince Imruul-Qais in his Qasida narrates his illicit sexual intercourse with his own cousin and hung the Qasida on the wall of the Kaaba.66

The characteristics of the Arab People and their Ethics

Since Arab people had access to limited resources due to desert life, everything was scarce. They were depended on livestock, grassland and oases and they were compulsively on a simple life because of the resource constraints.

This often led to war and rivalry brewed up at the slightest provocation but despite this the Bedouins had noble human qualities as they were on nature and untouched by the materialistic society like of which we see in present modern civilisation. It brought in them Al-Muruuwah meaning manliness which brought in them a circle of virtues to make them a stronger personality who would honour his promises at any cost. It meant that they would stand on truth and also acknowledge it. Inbuilt in it was their nature to stand for oppressed and display hospitality and generosity. These virtues brought out a strong character among the Arabs when they discovered and accepted Islam.67. The new ideological foundation gave them an insurmountable strength which inspired them to perform greater feats and got them an entry into recorded history in later periods. One of the Hadith that explains the trait of Arabs to accept the truth stated that people who be good in the days of Islam were good in the days of Jahiliya period as well.

So, the character of Arabs despite their rough and tough life of conflicts, rivalry and revenge mentality, preserved in them a readiness to acknowledge the reason when it was presented before them. This was beautifully illustrated in one of the incidents in Mecca wherein two fighting groups locked their horns against one another. At this juncture Abu Sufyan who was one of the senior Quraysh leader intervened and reasoned with the groups stating that the battle would only lead to loss of many lives and therefore a better idea would be to let bygone be bygone and that the group should make peace. This advice was heeded by the two groups and battle was

averted. This was despite the fact that people were used to fighting for generations to take revenge for the murder or insult. The Arabs were people of high character and would never behave lowly as can be understood from one of the incidents of a Bedouin. He wanted to steal a woman’s jewellery and finding her alone in a tent did not enter even though he could have easily got hold of the woman by entering the tent and stealing all the jewellery of the woman. So, the Bedouin simply threatened the woman from outside her home to surrender her jewellery and left the place after taking it and without even looking at the Bedouin lady.⁶⁸

**Ethics of Arabs in Pre-Islamic Arabia:**

1. **Hospitality:** The hospitality of the Arab was also a matter of Pride for him which made him feel elevated in status among his fellows in the society. One can know from the fact that much of the gathering of the ancient poetry extolls on the stories revolving around how the Arabs entertained their guests and to an extreme extent. The name of Hatim al Tai is an example which personifies the ideal hospitality of a Bedouin. He once slaughtered three of his animals to feed the passing strangers and distributed the rest among them which led to his father expelling him.⁶⁹ They would sacrifice their own food to feed a hungry guest and unexpected guest. But this was could also be construed as hollow gesture because this was to get praise and appreciation in the society. The hospitality would also involve serving of wine which was looked at as a gesture of generosity.

2. **Keeping a Treaty or Pledge:** An Arab would go to any extent to keep his pledge and it was akin to taking a debt. He would involve himself wholly irrespective of the hardships that he may have to face in fulfilling his promise. The covenant maintained by Arab finds it mention in many stories in the literature of Arabs.

3. **Honour and injustice:** Because of the false sense of courage and so-called high self-esteem and Arab would not accept dishonour or injustice done to any member of his affinity. This made an Arab hot headed and trigger happy when it came to retaliation for any humiliation. For an Arab his self-respect was non-negotiable and for which he could even bet his life on it.

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4. **Patience, persistence and gentleness:** This was something which lacked in the Arabs because of their recklessness and always ready for battle like attitude.

5. **Simple Bedouin life:** The Bedouin life of an Arab was without the corruption of urban life. Their simple life had no traces of urban life which developed in them a nature of honesty, straightforwardness and without any deceit for anyone. They not only had strong determination but high self-esteem. Traits like these built Arabs personalities who would accept reason without hesitation when it was presented before them. It was this essential quality that when there were presented with Truth by Prophet Muhammad, they not only accepted it but also became an instrument to convey the message of Islam in the entire Arabia. The same group of people who were steeped in immorality and evil customs became the proponents of strong morals and high virtues.70

**Economic Conditons**

The economic life of the Arabian Peninsula was largely depended on Agriculture, trade and Animal farming which changed according to the climatic conditions and the social structure. The Bedouins involved themselves more in the area of hunting, husbandry and trade while settled people were engaged in the field of art and craftsmanship. Even though Arabia was encircled by seas on three sides, fishing was done on a limited scale.

In addition to animal husbandry and agriculture, Bedouins also attacked passing caravans of trade for loot and plunder. With passage of time they became skilled in their attacks and it integrated into their economic life. Besides looting they also demanded ransom for kidnapped women and children who were captured in their raids of caravan. Their basic requirements of grains, dates, clothing, oil, wool, earthen pots, ropes, camel and goat hair were available and sold at the fair of Arabian Peninsula. They also provided Camels which was also traded in countries outside Arabian Peninsula like China, Egypt, India and Yemen. They also offered protection to caravans and acted as guides for travellers and to convoys who passed through their territories and they made significant income out of this protection service.

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The Meccan people who were of the settled category made substantial revenue during the period of pilgrimage when people travelled for Hajj. They would also go to Taif for commercial activities and participate in trade campaigns during winter time in Yemen and summer time in Damascus. So, Mecca developed an important connection to Yemen and Damascus due to the trade activities.\textsuperscript{71}

The trade was done with Byzantine and land of Persia which became markets for products of Yemen and they brought silk and other products from Syria. Mecca therefore became the capital of the trade and commercial activity. But the caravans that came back also brought with them distractions which corrupted the morals of people and degenerated the society with distraction of slave women from Persia and Greece. These slave girls were sourced from Iraq for the audience of rich men who would listen to their songs and waste time in watching them dance. Thus, society increasingly became morally poor over the period of time.

The socially degenerated atmosphere influenced the economic conditions accordingly and the Arabian society demonstrated this phenomenon quite clearly. While trade being the most common means of livelihood, Mecca got them addicted to the evils mentioned above and got steeped in gambling and drinking.\textsuperscript{72}

The Quraysh clan had become good merchants and due to Mecca being the hub of trade activities, they had developed good negotiation skills over the period. The nomads contributed in the economy through stockbreeding mainly of camels. They fed them in low lying areas during winter which would be abundant in pasture but during summers would move to other areas as pastures would become low. They provided water to their camels from the wells. Medina on the contrary was high on oases and was good for date production. Grapes were found in fertile land of Taif which was meant for rich people and not for simple nomads for whom grapes were unaffordable and they mainly relied on dates and milk from their camel livestock. Only the rich could afford grapes, similarly cereals were luxury reserved for the rich and great. The economy was bonded to slaves and interest transactions were paid


against lien of borrower’s wife or children.\textsuperscript{73} If the loan was not paid then the principal was increased. Robbery or highway mugging was the way of life with tribes like Aslam, Ghifan, Muzayna and Juhaynabeing totally dependent on it. The justice system was also biased towards the rich who could get away at will. People who traded had clients in merchandise in Persia and Eastern Rome.

There were several Jewish colonies engaged in agricultural activities which were located at Khaybar. Mecca was not an agricultural place but rather a commercial city among mountains. The commercial nature was because of the existence of the Kaaba which attracted people from all over without any fear of molestation. It was geographically situated at the interface of routes from the Yemen to Syria and from Abyssinia to Iraq. As a result, nomads came from the corners in caravan to Mecca. The Meccans by the end of sixth century had expanded their control of the trade from Yemen to Syria. At-Taif was a rival but Mecca clearly emerged stronger in trade matters. The financial skills were shrewd in nature and manipulative in approach which capitalized on all potential possibilities which caught not only the Meccans but also the surrounding tribes.\textsuperscript{74}

Superstition was another source of economic activity for the pre-Islamic Arabs. Being pagans, there was no strong belief in god as fear of unknown was the chief factor of ill practices. Soothsayers and star gazers had set up superstition clinics as Arabs believed the soothsayers to possess evil spirits which could predict future and treat the sick.\textsuperscript{75} So god was virtually substituted by these so-called soothsayers and there was no concept of hereafter or accountability. This further gave credence to these superstition-based clinics which were set up around the idols of worship and were run like business shops.

Most importantly Kaaba as a Sanctuary ensured good amount of revenue from visitors as tax which comprised of fees paid to Oracle (at that time 100 dirhams and a camel for each consultation) and partly towards food and clothes. These were to be used by the pilgrims as part of their ceremonies. There were other economic activities which flourished because of the existence of Kaaba which provided


avenues such as carpenter, smith, sword maker, wine merchant, oil merchant, leather merchant, tailor, weaver, arrow maker, stationer, money lender. On the merchandise which was imported from Byzantine Empire there was a transaction levy of ten percent by the Meccans. If a Bedouin wanted to purchase the Idol then he would come to Mecca. The Meccans wore specific badges which identified them as people of the sanctuary and gave protection to their trade and they could move around in many places. The revenue from the export exceeded revenue earned from all other sources. Some of the tradeable values like a house in Mecca was for four hundred dinars, fifty dinars was the antique robe, three hundred dinars for a very good war horse. A ransom would cost around four thousand dinars. There were gifts offered to the Kaaba which was covered in fabrics of fine cloth and silk brought from Iraq and Yemen. Wealthy members possessed estates or villas in neighboring oasis of Taif. There were no formal banks in those times and the house of wealthy and respected people like Prophet served the role of banks. Even though coins were hoarded Meccans preferred to have their wealth in livestock or goods. Some of the Prophet’s contemporary’s profession included like Abdallah son of Judan a leading man dealt in Slaves. Abu Sufyan who was the arch enemy of Prophet was in the business of oil and leather. The keeper of the Kaaba’s key was a tailor. Then there were sibyls who played the role of priest, physician, lawyer for issues of conflict however they still enjoyed little respect. The social distinction did not necessarily match with the occupation due to historic traditions and hinged on the numbers and fighting power of the clans. People whose traditions were not from known ancestors were not respected enough and were given lowly occupations. Inter marriage to inferior clan was considered disgraceful.76

**Political**

As there was no central government so politically speaking, Arabs had no influence and their tribes lived a nomadic life. Even though the Persians and Romans never occupied the Arab land but they treated them as their subjects77.

There was no formal institutional body like of present time during Pre-Islamic days in Mecca. The administrative set up at that time was an assembly which was known

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as Mela with no executive authority but comprised of important people of various tribes. The decisions were taken in the Mela and independence of the tribe was upheld in decision making. Each tribe had a leader who was the authority for that tribe and had the titles of shaikh, Reis, Emir, Rab, or Sayyid. The leader of each tribe enjoyed equal status in the tribal gatherings even though they served as judge but without any power to sanction. So, their main role was to manage the disputes within the tribe and represent the tribe while dealing with other tribes. He served as the person who would be authorized to sign treaties, welcome the guests and be involved in situations of blood money. The leader being the arbitrator had his decisions binding on every member otherwise the member would be expelled for non-compliance. If a certain tribe was to be dealt then the assembly would talk to the leader.

For people who were living in Mecca in settled life the administration was more organized than the Bedouins set up. This was mainly due to presence of Kaaba which was visited by Pilgrims from all over Arabia which was the biggest source of earning for the Meccan people. Since the no. of people visiting Kaaba was in greater number hence it demanded better organizational skills and systems. So, the administration did everything from managing the affairs of Kaaba to religious, cultural understanding and activities of people. There were many duties assigned like caretaking administration and protection of Kaaba which was called sidana, then there was the duty of finding and providing water for pilgrims which was called siqaya. The Pilgrims were provided with food which was called rifada, uqab was carrying of Banner in war and commanding the war was qiyada. The debt and payment of fines department was called ishnaq, qubba was where the war ammunition and other equipment were kept. Battle horses which formed important part of the war had to be bridled, dispatcher and controller which was another duty and classified as ainna. Serving of an emissary was safarat, isar was the method of clairvoyance practiced for administrative purpose and particularly in matters related to journeys and battles and cases of government dealing. Mahcara was the administration of money and other donations like jewelry to idols kept inside the Kaaba. Then there was the duty of Imara which was the upkeep of peace and harmony around the Kaaba. The consultancy assembly was nadwa and mashwarat. There were many duties which were not of higher status but nevertheless distributed.
among the Quraysh tribe so that there was no resentment among the members. Also, this helped in orderly management of things and better administration around Kaaba in Mecca.78

So, the Meccan society was on the pattern of city-state where elders over the age of forty managed affairs in a collective fashion. However, there were not much of writing agreements and dealings depended on oral contracts. The constitution of elders was called dar al nadwa and the system was mainly run by the elite drawn from the tribal chieftains; the poor and slaves were totally marginalized.79 The Arabs had a tribal system and were often involved in tribal disputes with one another. Thus, politically they had no influence. The minority in opposition were dealt with boycott of their clans which created economic and social pressures. The influence of an individual in the political matters of Mecca hinged on his clan and personal qualification. In the end it was influence based on his commercial shrewdness, his relations with other clans and likes of his in other tribes or clans to follow him. The example could be seen in Abu Sufyan during Mohammad’s time when he was the one who commanded authority due to his clan’s (umayyah) position and its wealth. The other top clan at that time was Makhzum with prominent members like Al Walid, Al Mughirah and Abu Jahl who also held prominent positions when it came to city affairs.80 The parallel in terms of position could be seen would be of Abu Sufyan at Mecca with that of Pericles at Athens. Every member of a Meccan clan mattered but only the notable ones were known indicating that it was less egalitarian than the Athenian who would approve of a man based on his honesty and uprightness. The Meccans were more fixated with the practicality and the leadership aspect of a person.

Among the Arab tribes, Quraysh were considered as the foremost as supremacy was linked to prestige, nobility and Military power which could be demonstrated in times of protection or vengeance against enemies. The military strength here refers to the strength of whole confederacy built on their mercantile enterprises. For example, the caravans to Yemen, Syria and elsewhere required the services of nomads, escorts and

guides for which they would pay the chief for safe passage. Therefore, the nomadic tribes shared in the trade and Meccan prosperity meant their prosperity as well. All the people who fought for the Quraysh were free Arabs and entered into alliance with them like their equals. For the confederacy to be wise, patient statesmanship was critical besides money power.

Mecca’s trade interest attracted the two great powers, the Byzantine and Persian empires and lesser known power such as Kingdom of Abyssinia or Ethiopia. The Romans in the north west and the Persians in the north east treated the Arabs as their subjects, although they never thought of occupying their land, as the larger area was desert, and they were totally ignorant of the liquid gold hidden inside the tractless sand. The Byzantines wanted all luxury articles from east but Persia controlled the trade routes from China and India and the sea route from India and Ceylon through Persian Gulf. This costed a lot to the Byzantines who wanted to maintain peace with Persians and even paid annual subsidy to buy peace. The romans used Christianity as a propagating tool to unify their position and extend control wherever possible. Justinian the emperor maintained great relations with Abyssinia. This changed with his death as Persians drove the Abyssinians from Arabia to set up their administration. The conquest of Yemen by the Abyssinians made things easier for Meccans as Abyssinians had friendly relations with the Byzantines and Meccans scaled up their trade. The four sons of Abd Manaf developed good relations for example Abd Shams developed relations with Abyssinia, Hashim with Syria, Nawfal with Iraq and Al- Muttalib with Yemen. However, relations with Abyssinia deteriorated as their Viceroy Abrahah attacked Kaaba to shift the commercial interest to his new temple. He knew that the Kaaba attracted people and due to this Mecca had become huge commercial center. However, he failed as army was destroyed apparently by plague.81

The Arabs are the progenies of Noah and they have been divided by the historians into three categories, of Banu Qahtan or Banu Ismail. Ismail, the eldest son of Prophet Abraham by Hajira the Egyptian lady, the Prophet Abraham belonged to city of Ur, the capital of the Babylonian king. He left his place of birth, Iraq, because of the atheistic beliefs of his parents and of his people. He was accompanied in this

journey by his nephew Lut who was a believer. This incident has been described at several places in the Quran. 82

Neighbouring regions in the Pre-Islamic Period

Ethiopia:

Ethiopia was ruled by the Christian king in the fifth century. It was one of the oldest settlement regions of the world, and was founded by the Saba, of Semitic origin, who came from south-eastern Arabia; they soon became one of the central authorities in the region. With gaining control of ports in the Red Sea, Ethiopia became an important connection for international trade between the Mediterranean and the Far East. 83

The influence of Judaism in Yemen around sixth century was uncompromising and there were strong intermittent efforts of conversion done at that time. 84 As the ruling Himyar king in Yemen, DhuNuwus was a fanatical follower of Judaism and started oppressing Christians in the region and burnt them alive. The people went to Constantinople and appealed for help from the Byzantine emperor Justin I who then wrote to the Christian emperor of Abyssinia to avenge the killings of Christians. The Ethiopia then invaded Yemen killed DhuNuwus and as a result Himyarite dynasty came to an end. Ethiopia then began to transform Yemen as important centre of Christianity. At that time Abraha was the viceroy of Abyssinia who ruled Yemen from 537 to 570 A.D and was one of the prominent viceroy. He had built a marvellous cathedral in Sana called Al-Qalis which he wanted as a centre of Pilgrimage for all Arabs. 85 He therefore decided to destroy Mecca through a military campaign and take control of entire Hijaz. Abraha failed in his campaign and died along with many of his army men. This led to the weakening of the dominance of Ethiopia in Yemen and the Yemenites started to rebel. It was then on the insistence of deposed Prince SaifDhu Al Yazan of Himyar royal family that Sassanid army of Chosroes Anushirwan invaded Yemen and expelled Ethiopians from the region. For many years there was anarchy as Persia, Abyssinia and Arabs continued to fight

wars. There were three religions in the country and majority of them practiced idolatry. It was finally in 597 A.D Chosroes sent another army and Persian rule was fully established with Ethiopians; Himyarten royal family disappeared from the scene. Later the Sassanid declared war on Byzantine Empire and invaded Syria and their interest in Yemen weakened. The country remained in this state till it was captured by the Muslims in 633 A.D.  

BYZANTINE (EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE)

The belief of the Byzantine state was orthodox Christianity and the empire of Byzantine was very powerful with its control spanning over three continents. Its rule extended to Balkan Peninsula, Anatolia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. The period of Heraclius (610-641) corresponded with the period of Islam in Arabia and it was also the period of decline for the Byzantines as Islam gained ground. The Arabs victory were attributed to three reasons, firstly both the Sassanid and the Byzantine empires fought and exhausted each other. Secondly, they stopped to support those client states which had restrained the Bedouins of the desert from getting aggressive and thirdly religious angles that emerged weakened the loyalties towards Constantinople from the Syrians and Egyptians.

The Byzantines faced the threats from the Avars and the Slavs which brought the Byzantine to their edge of decline. The Avars almost apprehended the emperor in 617 A.D outside the long walls protecting the capital while a conference was in progress. There was corruption in the entire system from civil to military and in 611 the Sassanid won the control of Antioch, Damascus, Jerusalem and Egypt. The Persians gained superiority on the trade routes from China, India and the routes from India and Ceylon through the Persian Gulf. It gave them economic superiority over Byzantine. Defending their political state from Persia, the Byzantines made attempts to recoup them and gained Anatolia in the Battle of Ninova.

Heraclius was able to turn defeat into victory due to three reasons. The first was the pattern of military government granting his generals both civil and military authority over those lands that they occupied. Secondly since the treasury had not much

money but had abundance of land so it granted land to soldiers for exchange of cash. The third he used religion as a source of strength and made it almost like a holy war which was partly financed by the treasury of the church and the soldiers were charged to seek divine help for the battle and carried image of Christ in their battle line to get strength. But the internal problems of Byzantine on account of dissatisfaction from the religious sects made things difficult for Byzantines. Later the situation was to change with rise of Muhammad in the post Pre-Islamic era. Prophet Muhammad made his ummah which became an unstoppable energy and later post his death the caliphate planned conquests which was hugely successful. The result was that Byzantine army was defeated at the Battle of the Yarmuk River in 636 and Muslims grew their control over Palestine and Syria. Alexandria was taken in 642 which took away Egypt from the Byzantine forever. The Arabs later marched into Mesopotamia and captured Ctesiphon and the long history of Byzantine was to decline with the rise of Islam.  

THE SASSANID EMPIRE

The Sassanid Dynasty (224-651) was an Iranian dynasty which believed in Zoroastrianism. The dynasty got its name from Sasan who was an ancestor of Ardashir- I. In the rites of the fire temple at Istakhr, known as Ādur-Anahid, the Anahid Fire, the principal players were the ancestors of Ardashir.

The empire had boundaries that stretched from Afghanistan to Amu Darya. The centre of the state was situated at the rich Iraqi lands. The revival of Iranian nationalism took place under Sasanian leadership. Followers of other faiths suffered oppression. The power of the government was consolidated centrally and responsible for roads, city planning, and agriculture.

The official language of the Sasanian state was Pahlavi and because of state’s focus on scholarship lot of translation brought from east and west was done in the Pahlavi language. The Sassanid's frequently clashed with the Byzantine power and later shifted its attention to Arabia. Constant wars between Iran and Byzantine reduced their powers and weakened them over a period of time. Much later after the coming

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of Islam, history changed when Arabs emerged as rising power and the destiny of the Sasanian rule was conclusively decided in the battle of Al-Qadisiyyah (636 or 637 A.D) when its chief commander Rustam was killed. The Battle of Nahavand (642 A.D.) in the south of Hamadan dashed their hopes for a final showdown.

After the downfall of the kingdom the religion also began to decline rapidly despite Muslims not persecuting Zoroastrian faith or objecting to their faith, still slowly and slowly it disappeared from Iran. Zoroastrians later migrated to India and are presently more concentrated in Mumbai. These Persians known as Parsi’s in India have preserved relatively a smaller part of their scriptural writings.

So, to summarize, we can say that the Jahiliyia was the period that preceded the period of Islam. Arabia was located in such a way that no other nation desired to conquer it due to its harsh deserts and mountains. There was no formal political system in Arabia and the Arabs would never accept any authority over them other than that of the chief of the respective tribe. Lack of Law and order was due to absence of any political system. There was lawlessness and whenever a crime was perpetrated, the victim for justice would take law in his own hands. This led to a brutal circle of violence which would continue for generations. The only protection in the absence of police or judicial court was his own tribe which would protect even if the member of the tribe was at wrong. The spirit of the clan or Asabiyya kept the tribe united in the face of danger.

Literacy was very low among the Arabs with very few individuals being able to read and write. The Jews and Christians were the guardians of knowledge and people were not keen to learn education. Poetry was the only intellectual achievement of the Pagan Arabs and poets were held in high esteem.

So, the Pre-Islamic time was steeped in moral degradation and there was no sense of purpose for Arabs who lived in an anarchic system. Socially, politically and economically the Arab society was like a bankrupt society.

Looking at the social conditions of the Arabia with all the moral degradation and sub level humanity, the Arabian society would not have given birth to Islam on its own as the society was completely conditioned. So, to attribute the change to coincidence or a natural outcome would be a colossal mistake. Rather one is compelled to believe
that there was clearly a divine hand involved which gave birth to a universal movement started by the Prophet.

The Age of Ignorance was separated by two thousand and five hundred years between Prophet Abraham and Muhammad. So, a grand stage was to be set up for the final Prophet to give a message to entire humanity and the Arabia was to transform permanently.