

CONDITIONS DURING PRE- ISLAMIC AGE

INTRODUCTION

To understand the religion that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) conveyed and the effects that this religion had on society it is necessary to understand in part the ethnic, geographic, social, cultural, economic and religious features of the environment in which Prophet Muhammad lived.

Revealing this process, which directly affected the existence of Islamic society, will not only help us to understand the position of Prophet Muhammad in the society in which he lived for 40 years before his prophethood, but also will provide an opportunity to learn to what extent that society changed and transformed with the conveyance of Islam.

The period before the revelations, which has always been recognized by Muslims throughout history as “The Age of Ignorance”.

In writing the history of Islam, it is customary to begin with a survey of the political, economic, social and religious conditions of Arabia on the eve of the Proclamation by Muhammad (pbuh) of his mission as Messenger of God.

It is the second convention of the historians. I shall also abide by this convention, and will review briefly, the general conditions in Arabia in the late sixth and early seventh century A.D.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Arabia was a male-dominated society. Women had no status of any kind other than as sex objects. The number of women a man could marry was not fixed. When a man died, his son “inherited” all his wives except his own mother.

A savage custom of the Arabs was to bury their female infants alive. Even if an Arab did not wish to bury his daughter alive, he still had to uphold this “honorable” tradition, being unable to resist social pressures.

Drunkenness was a common vice of the Arabs. With drunkenness went their gambling. They were compulsive drinkers and compulsive gamblers. The relations of the sexes were extremely loose. Many women sold sex to make their living since there was little else they could do. These women flew flags on their houses, and were called “ladies of the flags” (dhat-er-rayyat)

ECONOMICS CONDITIONS

Economically, the Jews were the leaders of Arabia. They were the owners of the best arable lands in Hijaz, and they were the best farmers in the country. They were also the entrepreneurs of such industries as existed in Arabia in those days, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the armaments industry.

Slavery was an economic institution of the Arabs. Male and female slaves were sold and bought like animals, and they formed the most depressed class of the Arabian society.

The most powerful class of the Arabs was made up by the capitalists and money-lenders. The rates of interest which they charged on loans were exorbitant, and were especially designed to make them richer and richer, and the borrowers poorer and poorer.

The most important urban centers of Arabia were Makkah and Yathrib, both in Hijaz. The citizens of Makkah were mostly merchants, traders and money-lenders. Their caravans traveled in summer to Syria and in winter to Yemen.

They also traveled to Bahrain in the east and to Iraq in the northeast. The caravan trade was basic to the economy of Makkah, and its organization called for considerable skill, experience and ability.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

The most remarkable feature of the political life of Arabia before Islam was the total absence of political organization in any form. With the exception of Yemen in the south-west, no part of the Arabian Peninsula had any government at any time, and the Arabs never acknowledged any authority other than the authority of the chiefs of their tribes.

The authority of the tribal chiefs, however, rested, in most cases, on their character and personality, and was moral rather than political.

The modern student of history finds it incredible that the Arabs lived, generation after generation, century after century, without a government of any kind. Since there was no government, there was no law and no order.

The only law of the land was lawlessness. In the event a crime was committed, the injured party took law in its own hands, and tried to administer “justice” to the offender. This system led very frequently to acts of horrendous cruelty.

Since there were no such things as police, courts or judges, the only protection a man could find from his enemies, was in his own tribe. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or ‘asabiyya (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A

tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies, exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt. Ethics, of course, did not enter the picture anywhere.

Since Arabia did not have a government, and since the Arabs were anarchists by instinct, they were locked up in ceaseless warfare. War was a permanent institution of the Arabian society. The desert could support only a limited number of people, and the state of intertribal war maintained a rigid control over the growth of population. But the Arabs themselves did not see war in this light.

To them, war was a pastime or rather a dangerous sport, or a species of tribal drama, waged by professionals, according to old and gallant codes, while the “audience” cheered. Eternal peace held no appeal for them, and war provided an escape from drudgery and from the monotony of life in the desert.

RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS

The period in the Arabian history which preceded the birth of Islam is known as the Times of Ignorance. Judging by the beliefs and the practices of the pagan Arabs, it appears that it was a most appropriate name.

The Arabs were the devotees of a variety of “religions” which can be classified into the following categories.

- 1. Idol-worshippers or polytheists:** Most of the Arabs were idolaters. They worshipped numerous idols and each tribe had its own idol or idols and fetishes. They had turned the Kaaba in Makkah, which according to tradition, had been built by the Prophet Abraham and his son, Ismael, and was dedicated by them to the service of One God, into a heathen pantheon housing 360 idols of stone and wood.
- 2. Atheists:** This group was composed of the materialists and believed that the world was eternal.
- 3. Zindiqs:** They were influenced by the Persian doctrine of dualism in nature. They believed that there were two gods representing the twin forces of good and evil or light and darkness, and both were locked up in an unending struggle for supremacy.
- 4. Sabines:** They worshipped the stars.
- 5. Jews:** When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and drove the Jews out of Palestine and Syria, many of them found new homes in Hijaz in Arabia. Under their influence, many Arabs also became converts to Judaism. Their strong centers were the towns of Yathrib, Khayber, Fadak and Umm-ul-Qura.
- 6. Christians:** The Romans had converted the north Arabian tribe of Ghassan to Christianity. Some clans of Ghassan had migrated to and had settled in Hijaz. In the south, there were many

Christians in Yemen where the creed was originally brought by the Ethiopian invaders. Their strong center was the town of Najran.

7. Monotheists: There was a small group of monotheists present in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam. Its members did not worship idols, and they were the followers of the Prophet Abraham.

The members of the families of Muhammad, the future prophet, and Ali ibn Abi Talib, the future caliph, and most members of their clan – the Banu Hashim – belonged to this group.

CULTURAL CONDITIONS

In the desert life, where people experienced harsh conditions in vast lands, Arabian society found itself in a very different field, composed of poetry and oration.

This was their way of resisting the hardships of life and became very significant in uniting a society that was continuously on the move from one place to another.

Arabic poetry had many themes, like love, wine, battle, victory, bravery, hatred against the enemy, hunting, nature, tribal virtues.

It came in some way to mirror Bedouin life.

The two-way trade between southern Arabia and the Middle East, and between Mediterranean countries and the Far East, a number of markets and fairs opened in pre-Islamic Arabia.

These fairs had an important effect not only on the regeneration of the Arabian social structure, but also on shaping a certain cultural environment in the region.

The literacy rate was very low in the Arabian Peninsula. The oral poems were written down only at a very late period. For many centuries the poems were memorized and were passed from one generation to another, bringing them down to the Islamic period.

Although the literacy rate was low, it can be said that the Arabs had a strong verbal accumulation in certain fields to which they had transferred their knowledge and experiences. Genealogy, a historical tradition mixed with legends, predictions based on the water and climatic conditions about personal health or the health of their animals, and tracking skills can be counted among the “Sciences of the Age of Ignorance.”