

Study Material

History Honours Semester II

CC 4 Group C

The Rise of Islam

Arabia is a peninsula of large dimensions. It is surrounded by the Red Sea in the west, The Arabian Sea in the south and the Persian Gulf in the east. (the region includes modern day Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain). Most of the peninsula is either desert or dry grassland. Rainfall is scarce and periods of drought can extend up to three years. There are no permanent rivers in Arabia, but there are numerous oases.

For centuries, the inhabitants of this region led a nomadic existence. The **Beduins** (from bdu or nomad) who were camel pastoralists were the most prominent inhabitants of the region. Their social organization was based on the independent tribe(qabila), each tribe recognising a common ancestor. They combined pastoralism with raids against neighbouring tribes and settled communities. The Beduin tribes and the people of the peninsula as a whole referred to themselves generally as **Arab**. The language spoken by them was a form of **Semitic**.

For a very long time, the Arabs mostly lived an isolated existence, away from the settled societies of West Asia. However, there gradually emerged certain points of contact in the north (with Syria and Palestine), in the north east (with Iraq) and across the Red Sea (with Ethiopia). The Byzantine and Sassanid empires were engaged in a long drawn out conflict for the control of Syria and Palestine during the second half of the sixth century C.E. During the course of their struggles, they extended their control over parts of the Arabian Peninsula as well.

During the sixth century, a slow and gradual change took place within Arabia as some of the tribes began taking up **trade** as their main occupation. The shift to trade was prominent in the region known as Hijaz (Mecca and Medina are situated in Hijaz). Arabian trade received an impetus with the dislocation of the international route passing through the Persian Gulf and Iraq as a result of the Sassanid- Byzantine conflict. Caravans passed through Hijaz where a number of oases could be found on the way. It

was against this historical background, that **Mecca**, a settlement of traders in Hijaz, rose to prominence. Mecca was strategically placed at the junction of two trade routes, the route running from north to south linking Palestine with Yemen and the comparatively less important route connecting Ethiopia and the Red Sea in the west with the Persian Gulf in the east. Mecca also derived some of its importance from being a place of pilgrimage. The main shrine at Mecca was a rectangular structure called **Kaba**. The Kaba contained idols and other objects venerated by various tribes and clans. By the end of the fifth century, Mecca came under the control of the Quaraysh tribe.

Trading activities formed the mainstay of the Meccan economy. The surplus from trade gradually began to undermine tribal solidarity. Some families became prosperous through trade and this process led to social differentiation. Class differentiation began to appear among the Quraysh. It was against this historical background that **Muhammad** started preaching his religious message in the early decades of the seventh century.

There is scanty information about the early life of Muhammad. The earliest accounts of his life were written more than a century after his death. The earliest **sira/sirat** (biography) of Muhammad was written by Ibn Ishaq who died in 767 C.E., 135 years after the death of Muhammad. Muhammad was born in 570 C.E. in Mecca. He belonged to the Quraysh tribe. Orphaned by the age of six, he was brought up by his grandfather and uncle. As a young man, he entered the service of Khadija, who was a successful businesswoman who traded with Syria and Palestine. She was so impressed by him that she married him. When he was about the age of forty, he had an experience that changed his life. In a mountain cave to which he had gone for devotional purposes he was surprised by an apparition saying, ‘Muhammad, you are **God’s messenger**’. The speaker identified himself as Gabriel. A series of revelations, believed to be divinely inspired were made to him. These became the basis of Muhammad’s religious mission. He said that he was the messenger or Prophet of the Supreme Being – **Allah**. Allah’s message was being communicated to human beings through Muhammad. These revelations form the **Quran**, the religious book of the Muslims. The book includes 114 suras or chapters. Besides the Quran, the speeches of Muhammad which form the **hadith/hadis** literature are a major source of guidance for the Muslims. Khadija was among the first to believe in Muhammad’s Prophethood. Within a few years, Muhammad had a small group of Meccan followers who had accepted his religious

ideas. They came to be known as **Muslim** (plural muslimun) i.e. those who had submitted (to Allah). The religion was known as **Islam**, implying submission.

The overriding principle of Muhammad's religion was uncompromising monotheism. He taught that there was only one God, namely Allah. All other deities were rejected. The worship of idols was strictly prohibited. Muhammad sought to replace the diverse religious practices of Arab tribes by a single belief, making it the ideological basis of tribal unity. There was a strong emphasis on the unity and equality of all those who had accepted Allah and the Prophet. Muhammad gained some converts but antagonized most of the pagan Meccans with his monotheistic message. The situation became so difficult that in 622 Muhammad and his followers emigrated to Yathrib (Medina). The emigration from Mecca to Medina is known as **Hijrat** and marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

Muhammad laid the foundations of a new political structure in Medina. He was not only a religious leader but also the head of a nascent state centred on Medina. He was looked upon as lawgiver and began to lay down rules for governance. Muhammad drew up a document, commonly known as the **Constitution of Medina**, which sought to regulate relations between the component parts of the new community (**umma**) and its relations with outsiders. According to Patricia Crone, born in a stateless environment, Islam could not simply organise the believers in community for worship: it had to protect them as well. The umma had to be both a congregation and a state; and an embryonic state was what Muhammad created in Medina. His followers (the male adults among them) constituted his armed forces. Alliances were made with some of the tribes of the adjacent areas. Several tribes embraced the new faith, thereby becoming part of the umma. Raids were an indispensable source of income for this state. A formula for the distribution of property was worked out. One fifth of the booty went directly to the Prophet, so that the state was provided with independent finances. In addition, regular voluntary contributions were levied on tribes which had accepted Muhammad's leadership. This later developed into a tax called **zakat** which all Muslims had to pay to the state. Initially, Muhammad's relations with the Jews of Medina were close, and the Jews formed an umma 'together with' or 'alongside' that of the believers in the Constitution of Medina. But gradually, relations between Muhammad and the Jews deteriorated.

Once the framework for an administrative system and an army had been created, and ties had been established with Beduin tribes, Muhammad was in a position to carry on an armed struggle against the Quraysh of Mecca. The successful raids against Quraysh caravans disrupted the Meccan trade and the Meccans had to sue for peace. Ultimately, in 630 Muhammad was able to occupy Mecca and the inhabitants of Mecca accepted Islam. Muhammad ‘purified’ the pagan Kaba and inaugurated it as a monotheistic sanctuary. All tribal idols and other objects were removed from Kaba. The Islamic symbol located at Kaba was a black stone traditionally associated with Abraham. Abraham was regarded as the common ancestor of all the Arabs. Muslims had to pray in the direction of Kaba and **Haj** or pilgrimage to Kaba was established as an important religious ritual of the Muslims. With the help of the Quraysh and their allies, Muhammad rapidly consolidated his authority in Arabia.

By the time Muhammad died in Medina in 632, most of the Arab tribes had accepted membership of the umma. He had succeeded in replacing the traditional tribal organization with a state structure. Medina, and to a lesser extent Mecca, were the focal points of the government. Initially, this state was not territorially well defined. The extensive military potential of the state can be understood from the fact that when Muhammad led an expedition towards Syria shortly before his death, his army consisted of thirty thousand troops. In the fifty years following Muhammad’s death, the Arab state was given a concrete shape by his followers.

W. M. Watt has said that the wide acceptance of Islam among the Arab tribes within a very short span of time was a result of the growth of trade and the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle by the Arabs. The wealth from the profits of trade did not benefit everybody and a social ferment was created. The simple tribal organization could not cope with the new situation. Muhammad’s message of unity was an answer to this social ferment and Islam provided the tribes with a scheme for state formation. Scholars like Rodinson and Marshall Hodgson have accepted Watt’s views. However, some other historians like Patricia Crone consider Watt’s **Meccan trade hypothesis** as unsatisfactory. She has argued that trade was not conducted on a scale large enough to undermine the traditional tribal society. The people of Mecca initially opposed Islam because they preferred their traditional way of life. Moreover, the Beduin tribes had always carried out raids and plundering expeditions. The new faith appealed to them as it helped them to **legitimize conquest**. Crone characterized Islam as a **nativist**

movement i.e. a movement born out of a deep attachment to the Arabian way of life in opposition to the inroads made by foreign influences (Byzantine and Sassanid). However, Crone does agree with Watt's view that the spread of the sedentary way of life made the replacement of tribal society by a state system imperative.

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