CHAPTER II

ARABIA: THE CRADLE OF ISLAM

Arabia is the south-western peninsula of the Asian Continent, known as Jazirath-ul-Arab. It is the largest peninsula in the world. It is covered in the east by the Persian Gulf, south by the Indian Ocean, west by the Red Sea and north by the Syrian Desert and Fertile Crescent area of the Mediterranean coastal line. Arabia is generally the land of a vast desert and barren soil.

Arabia
- Hottest Peninsula
- Largest Petroleum producing area

Fig. 2.1: Map showing the location of Arabia
Geologists hold a hypothesis that the land of Arabia was the natural continuation of the Sahara extending to the Gobi desert in China. As the result of the tectonic force the Arabian region might have detached from the Pangaea and the peninsula was formed.

The Arabian Peninsula was crisscrossed with caravan routes. Of these two were important. The first ran alongside the Persian gulf, then alongside the Tigris and then crossed the Syrian desert towards Palestine. It was properly called, ‘the eastern route’. The other route ran along the shore of the Red Sea and was properly called, ‘the western route’. *The life of Muhammed*, M.H. Hykal.

“Geologists tell us that the land once formed the natural continuation of the Sahara now separated from it by the rift of river Nile valley and great chasm of the Red sea and of the sandy belt which traverses Asia through central Persia and Gobi desert” *History of the Arabs*, P.K. Hitti
Geographical features of Arabia

The land of Arabia comprises of mountains, plateaus, deserts, low lands and steppe land. The Arabian Peninsula is welded with the long range of mountains passing through the coastal area of the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The peak of these mountain range is situated at Madain. The coastal area of the Red Sea is called Tihama. Najd is the central plateau of the northern Arabia. Apart from the coastal mountain range, a mountain region called al-Hijas (the barren) lies separating Tihama from Najd. Yemen, Hadramawth and Oman are some important geographical divisions blessed with vegetation. In addition to these there are some volcanic tracts called Al-Harrat in western and central regions of Arabia.

With the help of the political map of the world, identify the countries that form the Arabian Peninsula.

Fig. 2.3: Map showing the volcanic tracts of Al-Harrat
Desert divisions of Arabia

Arabia stands at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa. It is one of the driest and hottest regions in the world. As the land of desert the Arabian Peninsula is divided into three

1. Al-Nufud: It is a stretch of land in northern Arabia covered by white or reddish sand. It is one of the driest deserts in Arabia. It receives occasional rainfall and it helps the growth of meadows and oases. The rain also helps the formation of oases in the southern valleys. Thus it turns into the paradise for camels and sheep. When an oasis becomes dry the Bedouins, the nomadic people of Arabia will be forced to lead their cattle to the next one. The desert with scattered oasis makes the Arab cattlemen nomadic.

2. Al-Dahna: It is a chain of red sand extended from the Great Nufud in the north to the Rub-al-Khali in the south. Like an area it stretches to the south-east of Arabia by a distance of 600 miles.
Al-Dahna receives seasonal rainfall. It abounds with pastures attracting the nomadic people and their cattle. But in the summer season its surface structure is always changing due to the formation of sand dunes.

3. Rub-al-Khali: From the Al-Dahna in the north to Hadramouth in the south lies the desert land named Rub-al-Khali. As its name indicates it is vacant in nature and it does not receive seasonal or occasional rain. Its climate is very hot and dry; it is unfit for human habitation.

The highest peak in the Hijas mountain region is Sarah. The most important cities like Makkah, Madina (Yathrib), the port city of Jiddah and Thaif lie in the coastal area of the Red Sea. The volume and the density of population are higher than the desert region.

**Climatic Condition of Arabia**

Even though the Arabian Peninsula is surrounded with seas and water resources, it remains the hottest region of the world. These water bodies are not sufficient to break the hot nature of Arabia. The south-western and north-eastern monsoons evade the Arabian Peninsula, so Arabia does not have monsoon rain. Though coastal area receives occasional rain, it leaves very little moisture for the interior.
Flora of Arabia

The dryness of the atmosphere and the soil salinity prevent luxuriant growth of plants and vegetation in Arabia. Plants that are seen in the deserts are often seen in Arabia. Frankincense had been traded on the Arabian Peninsula and in North Africa for more than 5000 years. P.K Hitti says: ‘The chief attraction for the Egyptians in South Arabia lay in the frankincense, which they priced highly for the mummification and in which that part of Arabia was particularly rich.’

Frankincense which is used in centres of worship is grown in South Arabia. The South Arabsians are an agricultural community. Many species of Acacia are found in South Arabia. Syria is the native place of olive trees. Fruits like pomegranate, apple, apricot, almond, orange, lemon, water melon and banana are also cultivated in certain parts of Arabia. Thaif is famous for grape cultivation and vine production.

Dates

The climate and temperature of Arabia is very suitable for the growth and harvesting of dry fruits. Date palm is known as 'the queen of the Arabian flora'. It is the chief food of the Arabian people. To possess 'the two black gold' (aswadain) was the dream of the Arabian nomadic people. The two blacks stands for 'water' and 'dates'. Today, Arabia is the second largest producer of dates in the world.

Prophet Mohammed encouraged Muslims to break their fast by dates and water. He once said that if a person has some dates in his house he is not poor.
Fauna of Arabia

The animal kingdom of Arabia includes panthers, leopards, hyenas, wolves, foxes and lizards. In the pre-Islamic poems there are descriptions of lions. Monkeys are found in the southern part of Arabia. Birds like prey-eagle, bustards, falcons, hawks and owls are seen in Arabia. Crows are abundant in the southern part of Arabia. Hud-Hud (hoop) is the common bird seen in the length and breadth of the Arabian Peninsula. Birds like lark, nightingale and pigeon occasionally appear in Arabia. The domestic animals of Arabia are mainly camel, horse, mules, cat, sheep and goat.

To the Arabs, horse was the symbol of wealth and social status. Its feeding and care created many problems to the nomadic people of Arabia. Its value lies in its speed and performance. It was used for the purpose of racing and hunting.

To the Arabs, camel, ‘the ship of the desert’ is the most useful animal. It is used as vehicle and important means of transportation. Without this animal the desert could not be conceived of as a habitable place. Camel was the constant companion of the Bedouin and his foster-father. He drinks its milk, eats its flesh, covers himself with its skin, lives in tents made of its hair, and uses its dung as fuel. The Arab life in ancient time totally depended on the camel. They used to refer themselves ‘the people of camel’.

“Among the Arabian flora the date-palm tree is queen. It bears the most common and esteemed fruit (tamr) par excellence……. the prophet is reported to have enjoyed, ‘Honour your aunt, the palm, which was made of the same clan as Adam’” P.K.Hitti P.19

Camel of Arabia

'Ship of the desert'
'Foster father of the Arabs'.

'Arabs-the parasite of the camel'.
'Arabs- the people of the camel'.
Arabia: The Cradle of Islam

“The Arab prospers only where the camel prospers”
Khalifa Umar

Discussion: Different desert divisions of Arabian Penninsula.
Seminar: The ‘Importance of Dates and Camel in Bedouin Life and Culture’.

Arabia: the Socio-Political Condition
The inhabitants of Arabia belong to the Semitic race. The Semitic is a collective name denoting the ancestors of the ancient Babylonians, Chaldeans, Amorites, Aramaeans, Phoenicians, Hebrews and the Arabs. The term Semitic is derived from the Latin term of 'Semitic' in the Old Testament. Semite is the Latin version of the proper name Shem, son of the Noah, the Prophet referred to in the Old Testament. The descendants of Shem are called the Semitics or the people of Shem.

Fig. 2.8: Semitic migration
Arabia - The Cradle of the Semitics

Which was the home land of the Semitics? From where did the Semitic people migrate? Different opinions have been expressed regarding the home land of the Semitics, i.e. from Africa, Iraq and Arabia.

Historians have difference of opinion regarding the origin of the Semitics whether they were from east Africa, Mesopotamia or the Arabian Peninsula. Comparatively the third argument, Arabia, the cradle of the Semitic people, is more credible than the other two. The physical and geographical condition of Arabia might have compelled the people for migration to different regions.

Arabia is basically the land of desert. The surface of Arabia is barren. Only the narrow margin of the coastal lines is habitable. When the population increased beyond the capacity of the habitable coastal line, the surplus might have migrated to the habitable places.

The Bedouins

The inhabitants of Arabia fall into two main groups: the nomadic Bedouins of the Northern Arabia and the settled people of Southern Arabia. The northern Arabs were called Moderates or Qaisites and the southern Arabs were called Himyarites and Yemanites. The north-Arabians led a nomadic way of life on account of the geographic condition of this region. It represents the best adaptation of desert life. The scarcity of water and proper food, scorching heat and trackless roads reflected in the Bedouin’s mental and physical make-up. The Bedouins generally led the tribal form of life. All the Bedouins belonged to any one of the tribes. Tribe was the basic unit of their social structure. The members of the
tribe were bound together by a patriotic feeling known as Asabiyah. It is the unconditional loyalty to the tribe.

If any member of one tribe was ousted from the parent tribe, he would seek shelter in another tribe. This refugee member would be 'Mawali' of the tribe in which he was sheltered. The members of the tribe are collectively called 'Banu' or children of the tribe. Banu-Quraish means the members belonging to the Quraish.

Each tribe had its own code of conduct. No member of the tribe dared to violate it. Every tent represents a family. A number of families constituted a clan. A number of clan grouped together to form a tribe. Every tribe had a leader called 'Sheikh'. He was the senior member of the tribe. He was elected in a democratic manner.

The principles of hospitality, enthusiasm and manliness were considered the supreme virtues of the nomadic Arab people. The tribal people of Arabia thought that it was their divine duty to treat the guest, even if he was from the enemy tribe and would be welcomed and treated gently for three days. The inter-tribal war was the order of the day. After each war, blood money (Fidyah) is collected by the winner tribe from the tribe who faced more casualties. They believed in the purity of blood.
Debate on 'Influence of geography on the character formation of the people'.

**Hijaz on the eve of Islam - Period of Jahiliyah**

The period prior to the Prophethood in 610 AD is known as the period of Jahiliyah (the period of ignorance). It was a period in which Arabs had no dispensation, no inspired prophets and no revealed book to guide them. Though they had faith in a supreme power they worshipped many gods and goddesses. So the religion was polytheistic in nature and idolatry was widespread. Morality was at its lowest ebb. Besides war and brigandage, wine and women were their favourite pastime.

**Ayyamul Arabs**

Unlike South Arabia, the vast area of the Northern Arabia was populated by the nomadic Arabs. The history of the Bedouins is the history of their intertribal wars generally called 'Ayyamul Arabs' - the days of the Arabs. These wars mainly focused on conquering the water resources and pastoral lands.

Brigandage (Ghazw) often led to intertribal war. The causes of their war were generally very silly and finally, when the rival tribes got exhausted they would come to terms with each other on the mediation of a third party. In Arabia wars did not beget kings but begot heroes. Arabian poets never got tired of singing their glorious deeds.

**Basus War**

It is the renowned war of the Ayyamul Arabs fought between the Christian tribes of Banu Bakr and Banu Thaglib for long 40 years. The war between two rival tribes
was because of a dispute over a camel named 'Basus' which belonged to an old woman of Banu-Bakr. Basus was wounded by the Thaglib chief and the war continued by reciprocal raiding and plundering.

**Dahis Ghabrah:** The war fought between the central Arabian tribes of Abs and Dubyan. It was on the dispute over the two horses named Dahis and Ghabrah.

**Days of Bu'ath:** A long war fought between the Aws and Khazraj, the two leading tribes of Yathrib.

**Harbul Fijar:** Harb ul Fijar is called ‘fijar war’ (transgression) because it was fought in the holy months (Muharram, Rajb, Dul-Ka'd, Dul Hajj). According to the tribal law, intertribal war was prohibited in these months throughout Arabia. Harb ul Fijar was fought between the tribes of Kinanah and Hawasin. The tribe Quraish was the ally of the Kinanah. So the Quraish also participated in the war helping the Kinanah. As the member of the Quraish, Muhammad, the young boy of 15 years participated in the war. The war ended with the peace committee named 'Hilful Fuzul' in which Muhammad was a member.

**Socio-Political condition**
Social condition of Arabia was very pitiable. The tribal wars, absence of a central political authority and lack of common code of conduct caused social degradation during Jahiliyyah period. Slavery was the order of the day. Women were considered as chattels according to the whims and fancies of man. They had no right of inheritance. Birth of a girl-baby was regarded as disgrace. Female infanticide was common in the time of Jahiliyah. All the activities of the Jahiliyya people are summed up in three Ws- War, Wine and...
Women. Polyandry and polygamy were the common practice of the nomadic Arabs. There was no formal system of education. A few could read and write among the pagan Arabs. However, they kept the purity of Arabic language.

Religious Beliefs
The religious beliefs of Bedouins represented the earliest and primitive form of Semitic religion. Pagan Arabs followed superstitious beliefs and practices. Like other primitive people, the Bedouin worshipped natural forces. Amr bin Luhayy introduced the idol of Hubul from Mesopotamia. Following this, each tribe brought their idols and installed them in their shrines. They believed in the Almighty God, Allah, but they followed polytheistic activities by the influence of the Syrians and the Persians.

Apart from the Almighty and the chief deity, natural objects like trees, wells, caves and stones were sacred to the Pagans. They worshipped these forces out of love or fear. The agricultural community worshipped the sun and the pastoral community worshipped the moon. They believed that the angels were the daughters of God. Allata, Uzza and Manata were the chief deities of the pagan Arabs.

Economic Conditions
Arabia was a desert land situated between two great empires, the Sassanid Empire in the west and the Byzantine Empire in the north. The north Arabs were mainly traders. The south Arabs were mostly an agrarian community. Slavery was not only
a social practice but also the backbone of the economic life of the Arabs. Like
cattle, slave was a form of wealth to them and slave trade was widespread. They
brought the slaves from the African countries for trade. Usury (interest) was a
common economic practice. The upper and middle classes of the society exploited
the poor and the needy. There was a wide gap between the rich and the poor.
Makkah held an important position as the centre of the trade route and maintained
trade contact with the Sassanid and Byzantine empires.

Pre-Islamic Poetry: the Register of the Arabs
The poetical expressions of the pre-Islamic Arabian people are remarkable. Arabic
literature sprang into existence with an outburst of poetry. The Arabs were gifted
with a wonderful memory. They had a great passion for poetry. In the time of the
Jahiliyah, they conducted poetical contests throughout Arabia. These pre-Islamic
poems were committed to memory and transmitted by oral tradition and finally
recorded in writing during the third century C.E.

The pre-Islamic poetry is treated as the 'Register of the life of the Arab:'. It is an
authentic record of the Pre-Islamic life. It was through poetry that
the Arabs transferred their ideas and messages to others.

Seminar on the socio-religious condition of Hijaz on the eve
of the emergence of the Prophet
Qasida and Mu’allaqat

**Qasida (Ode):** It is a form of Arabic poem, usually in mono-rhyme, that may be satirical or elegiac. This poetic form developed in pre-Islamic Arabia and perpetuated throughout the Islamic literary history.

The classic Qasida is an elaborately structured ode of 60 to 100 lines, maintaining a single end rhyme that runs through the entire piece.

**Mu’allaqat:** Among the pre-Islamic Qasida ‘seven-suspended’ poems hold the first place. It is honoured throughout the Arab-speaking world as the masterpiece of the poetical composition of the Arabic language. Poetry contests were held annually in the Jahiliyya period at Ukaz during the month of pilgrimage (Dhul Hajj). The winning poems in the Ukaz fair were written on silk in golden letters and were hung on the wall of the Ka’ba. The word Mu’allaqat means something that is hung or suspended.

There were the seven suspended poems (‘Sab’ul- Mu’allaqat’) and the main poets are:

1. Imrul Qays
2. Labeeb bin Rabia
3. Tharafa bin al-Abad
4. Zuhair bin Abi Salma
5. Anthara bin Shaddad
6. Amr bin Kulthum
7. Harith bin Hillizah
Besides being an oracle, guide, orator and spokesman of his tribe, the poet was also the historian and the scientist of the tribe. The touchstones of the superiority of the tribe were the military power, intelligence of the poet, the size of the tribe. The Pre-Islamic poet was well versed in the genealogy and folklore of the tribe. His poem was the record of the achievements of his tribe, its battles, the right of its tribes-men, pastures and border lands. The chief duty of the poet in the time of inter-tribal war was to ridicule the rival tribe by exposing their shortcomings and thereby to destroy their morale.

Discussion on poetry as the public register of the Arabs in Jahiliyya period.

**Makkah and Ka’ba**

Makkah is a city in the Hijaz area of the Arabian Peninsula. The city is located 70 KM inland at a height of 277 M above sea level. The ancient name for the site of Makkah was ‘Bakkah’. It is said to be more specifically the early name for the valley located therein. The Muslim scholars generally use the term to refer to the Ka’ba and its holy surroundings.

![Fig. 2.17: Ka’ba](image_url)
Assessment Questions

1. How did the Bedouins maintain the purity of their tongue and the purity of their blood?

2. The influence of the geographical and climatic features of Arabia reflects in the life of its inhabitants—Explain

Further Activities

Collect the pictures of deserts, coastal areas, plateaus, valleys, volcanic places, mountain ranges, flora and fauna etc. of Jazirath-ul-Arab and prepare an album.