



# "ARABS BEFORE THE ADVENT OF THE HOLY PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH)"

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## **The Condition of the Arabs before the Advent of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) and the Transformation He Wrought in Them**

### 1. Arab Poetry:

As to Arabia itself, it is true that Arab poetry was at its zenith, and pre-Islamic poetry displays a high degree of ability and skill. It is also true that the art of writing was not unknown to the Arabs; but they seldom turned it to useful purpose. Even their poetry was not preserved in writing. Poetical compositions of the Dark Age have all come down to us through oral tradition with the solitary exception of the pieces known as the Mu'allaqat which were committed to writing and hung on the walls of the Ka'bah. As regards Arab development of the art of poetry, it is enough to say that mere poetry, as such, affords no sure criterion of a people's stage of civilisation. Interest in poetry is observed in almost every stage of society, however crude and primitive. And the reason is not far to seek. Primitive people have very few interests, which multiply only with the growth of civilisation, and hence their exclusive devotion to the only available form of fine art – poetry. But Arab poetry is devoid of the breadth of vision and loftiness of thought which come only with culture. Beauty of language is all it can boast of.

### 2. The Arab Character:

There were, no doubt, certain noble traits in the Arab character. Hospitality, love of freedom, daring, manliness, tribal fidelity and generosity were some of the qualities in which the Arab had no equal. But a few virtues, by themselves, especially when overbalanced by the weight of barbarity and brutality can hardly be taken to constitute civilisation. Side by side with the most hospitable treatment accorded to a guest, it was common practice to rob a wayfarer. The sentiment of tribal patriotism, though highly commendable in itself, had also been abused and carried to excess. Trifling disputes between individuals would lead to terrible conflagrations of war and blood-feuds extended from generation to generation.

### 3. The Arab Idolatry:

No doubt, the Arabs professed faith in the unity of God, but their belief was shallow. Their practical life belied their profession. They were given to idolatry, thinking that the Almighty had entrusted the discharge of the various functions of the universe to different gods, goddesses and idols. They therefore turned to these, invoking their blessings in all their undertakings. Thus their belief in the Unity of God was an empty dogma, finding no place in the system of their practical life. Besides, idols,

they looked upon the air, the sun, the moon and the stars as the controllers of their destinies, and worshipped them as such. They had fallen as low as to worship pieces of stone, trees and sand-heaps. They prostrated before any fine piece of stone they might come across. Should they fail to find a piece of stone, they would worship a sand hill, after having milked their she-camel thereon. They looked upon angels as the daughters of God! Even men of fame were worshipped, images being carved out in their names. It was not necessary to have the stones properly carved or shaped; even rough, unhewn ones served the purpose.

Going out on a journey, they would carry four stones along with them, three to make a hearth, and the fourth to serve as an object of worship. Sometimes no separate one for purposes of worship would be carried. The cooking done, any of the three would be pulled out and worshipped. Besides the three hundred and sixty idols set up in the Ka'bah, every tribe had an idol of its own. In fact, one was kept in each and every household. Idol-worship had, in short, become second nature with them and it influenced their everyday life in all its detail. The central idea of their faith was that God had made over the control and administration of the universe to others in whom He had vested all powers, such as healing the sick, granting children and removing famine and epidemic. Divine favour could not be obtained, but through the intercession of these idols. They would prostrate before them, circumambulate them, offer sacrifices to them, and set apart some of the produce of their fields and their animals as offerings to them.

From such debasing idolatry, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) uplifted the whole of Arabia in the brief span of twenty years. Not only was idolatry extirpated root and branch from the soil of Arabia, but such enthusiasm for the Unity of God was kindled in the hearts of the self-same Arabs that it carried them far and wide over the length and breadth of the then known world to uphold the name of 'The One God'. The weaning of a whole country extending over a vast area of twelve hundred thousand square miles from the curse of idol-worship, to which it was hopelessly wedded by long-established traditions and heredity, in no more time than a fifth of a century, so far as to win for it the title of iconoclast – is not this the mightiest miracle that the world has ever witnessed?

#### 4. Religion a Mockery:

In addition to idol-worship, which was the order of the day, star-worship had taken as firm a root in the soil of Arabia. Human destiny was associated with the movements of various stars and the phenomena of nature affecting the fortunes of man for good or evil were attributed to their influence. Whereas on the one hand, the worst form of idolatry had its hold on the Arab mind in general, there were also some who had no faith in the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul and the day of retribution. To them all religion was mockery. They held up to ridicule the very idols they professed to adore. It is said of the famous poet, Imra' al-Qais, that on the murder of his father he consulted an oracle in accordance with the traditional practice

among the Arabs, to decide whether or not he should avenge the murder. The process consisted in marking two arrows, one with the word na'am (yes), the other with la (no), to indicate respectively whether the undertaking should be entered upon or not. A blank one was also put in, which if drawn, advised the lot to be drawn afresh. Imra' al-Qais drew the arrows three times and each time the negative one came out. In a fit of rage he flung the arrow in the face of the idol, saying: "O Wretch! Had it been the murder of thy own father thou wouldst not have forbidden me to avenge it."

#### 5. Social Life:

Such was the state of irreligion and idol worship in Arabia! Social life presented no better a picture. The Arabs were ignorant of the very rudiments of social virtues. Their manner of life made the evolution of any social virtue impossible. Tribal feuds engaged their whole attention. A settled and peaceful mode of life, indispensable to the cultivation of social qualities, was unknown to them. The prospect of hostilities with another clan that might break out at any time was ever present before their minds. They led a nomadic life, wandering with their cattle from place to place. They would set up their tents of camel-skins wherever they found water to drink and forage for their cattle. Only a small minority of them had settled in villages and still fewer in towns. How was it possible, under such circumstances, that the blessings of an ordered and settled society should accrue to them?

#### 6. No Law and Order:

There was no central government to enforce law and order in the country, which was rent into innumerable petty states, each clan forming a separate and independent political unit. They were too weak to enforce justice; to wrench one's rights from another, one had to depend upon one's strength of arm. Each tribe had a chief of its own, its leader in battle, but there was no law whatsoever binding the tribe to the nation. Each was independent, owing no allegiance to any central authority until Islam came with its unifying force. William Muir says that "The first peculiarity, then, which attracts our attention is the subdivision of the Arabs into innumerable bodies, governed by the same code of honour and morals, and exhibiting the same manners, speaking for the most part the same language, but each independent of the others; restless and often at war amongst themselves; and even where united by blood or by interest, ever ready on some insignificant cause to separate and give way to an implacable hostility. Thus at the era of Islam, the retrospect of Arabian history exhibits, as in the kaleidoscope, an ever-varying state of combination and repulsion, such as had hitherto rendered abortive any attempt at a general union ... The problem had yet to be solved, by what force these tribes could be subdued, or drawn to one common centre; and it was solved by Muhammad (pbuh)."

The Qur'an sums up succinctly this utter deterioration that embraced every phase of life in a single sentence: "You were on the brink of a pit of fire..." [The Qur'an, 3:103.] Hostilities once breaking out continued for generations. Trifles, such as a word of contempt, or a slight mischief in a horse race, led to the slaughter of

thousands and the eternal bondage of the vanquished. It was this fallen humanity whom the Holy Prophet (pbuh) raised to the highest level of moral rectitude. He welded these discordant elements into a brotherhood, unique in the history of the world. A mighty transformation! A miracle, as a modern writer calls it in his *Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia*: "A more disunited people it would be hard to find, till, suddenly, the miracle took place. A man arose who, by his personality and by his claim to direct Divine guidance, actually brought about the impossible, namely the union of all these warring factions."

#### 7. Position of Woman:

Woman occupied a very low position in the Arab society. Despite love-songs in praise of the beloved, which were the outcome of carnal lust, woman was accorded no better treatment than the lower animals. Polyandry, which is a characteristic of the very primitive stages of human society, was also in vogue; yet neither was there a limit to the number of wives a man could take. Besides a plurality of wives, he could have illicit relations with any number of other women. Prostitution was a recognised profession. Captive women, kept as handmaids, were forced to make money for their masters in this debasing manner. Married women were allowed by their husbands to conjugate with others for the sake of offspring. [Note: This practice was called *Istibdza*; and was similar to the practice of *Niyoga* still prevalent among Hindus.]

Moreover, woman was looked upon as a mere chattel. She was entitled to no share of the legacy of her deceased husband, father or other relations. On the contrary, she was herself inherited as part of the property of the deceased. The heir was at liberty to dispose off her as he would. He could even marry her himself, or give her in marriage to anybody he chose. On the death of his father, a son would even marry his step-mother, she being a part of the inheritance. The practice of divorce in vogue among them was no less barbarous. A thousand times could a man divorce his wife and take her back within a prescribed period (known as *'iddah*). Sometimes he would swear he would not go near her, sometimes he would announce that he would look upon her as his mother, thus leaving her in a state of suspension, being neither wife nor yet divorced. These methods were adopted simply to harass her. She had no way out of her sad plight.

The most obscene language was used in expressing sex-relations. Stories of love and illicit relationships were narrated proudly and with utter absence of shame in verses of the most indecent kind. Women of high families were openly addressed in love-songs. Considering the state of things obtaining among the Arabs with regard to the status of woman, it is not difficult to judge what a heavy debt of gratitude woman owes to Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, who lifted her up from the depths of lowliness to a position of respect and dignity. [Note: Even modern European civilisation, which has a superficial respect for the gentle sex, fails to grant those rights to women which Islam has given them. Genuine respect for the female

sex lies in having proper regard for its chastity and the equality of its rights with man, neither of which is, unfortunately, met with anywhere in Western society.]

Let us turn to the amelioration wrought in the condition of woman by Islam. The Quranic injunction, "Women shall have the same rights over men as men have over them," [The Qur'an, 2:228.] was the Magna Carta, so to speak, of women's franchise. In the same strain observed the Holy Prophet (pbuh): "The best of you is he who treats his wife best." To implant veneration for woman in a soil where it was regarded as a mark of nobility to bury female offspring alive is surely no mean service to humanity. On hearing of the birth of a daughter, the father's face would turn black with grief and rage. He had either to bury her alive or put up with social disgrace. [The Qur'an, 16 : 58 and 59.] He would take his daughter to the desert, throw her into a pit dug there beforehand and bury alive the screaming child with his own hands underneath a heap of earth! The Prophet (pbuh) when informed of one such incident burst into tears of pity. Sometimes an explicit agreement was made at the nuptial ceremony that female offspring was to be killed, in which case it was the duty of the mother herself to commit the barbarous deed. She had to do it in the presence of all the female members of the family, especially invited to attend the grim function. All these cold-blooded brutalities were ended, at a single stroke, by the Quranic words: "And when the one buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed ..." [The Qur'an, 81 : 8 and 9.] Never thereafter, even in a single instance, was the horrible cruelty repeated. In this respect, Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, stands unrivalled in the history of the world for his service to mankind.

#### 8. Standing Evils:

Drinking was another vice to which the whole of Arabia was hopelessly wedded. Intoxicating liquors were served several times daily. There was not a household but had a number of wine pitchers in store. No sooner, however, was the Quranic prohibition proclaimed [The Qur'an, 5 : 90.] than the very pots used for storing liquor were broken to pieces and thrown away; and, it is related, wine flowed like rain-water in the streets of Madinah. The centuries-old habit of drinking was thus rooted out in no time, and utter abstinence became the order of the day.

Gambling was another curse which had a firm hold on the Arab society. It was indulged in as a common daily pastime. Those who abstained were looked down upon as miserly. The Holy Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) spiritual force made short the work of this as well, and relieved Arabia of another longstanding evil.

There was no education worthy of mention among the Arabs. Those able to decipher a script could be counted. Ignorance bred superstition, and they were given to all sorts of queer beliefs. They had faith in the existence of genii and evil spirits, whom they would conjure up in solitary places. To these they attributed certain diseases, to escape which they would make use of charms and incantations. In times of drought, they would fasten dry blades of grass and undergrowth to a cow's tail, set fire thereto

and drive the animal to the mountains. They thought the flame of fire resembled a flash of lightning and would, by reason of similarity, attract rainfall. In case a calamity befell them, they would enter the house by the back door. From the flight of birds they took good or evil omens. If a bird crossed their way from left to right, it was regarded as a good omen; from right to left it was a bad omen. Those who believed in a life after death would tie a camel to a tomb and starve it to death, thinking the deceased would mount it on the day of resurrection. They held the human soul to be a tiny creature which entered a man's body at the time of his birth and went on growing. At his death it assumed the form of an owl and kept hovering over his tomb. In the event of violent death, the owl would keep droning "Give me water, Give me water," until the murder had been avenged. They believed in soothsayers and fortune tellers, and had implicit faith in whatever they told them. In short, these and a hundred and one other superstitions were believed in by the Arabs of the pre-Islamic days. In the course of a few years, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) emancipated them from all these shackles of hereditary bondage and elevated them to the pinnacle of morality, learning and culture. History will vainly turn its pages to point to a parallel of the wholesale reformation and elevation of a fallen people such as the Arabs were. A mighty achievement indeed!