

Pre Islamic Arabia

Economic Conditions Of Pre Islamic Arabia

Economic system in Arabia before Islam.

Pre Islamic Arabia also known as the Jaahiliyyah period lasted for approximately 6 centuries from the elevation of prophet Isa till the spreading of Islam by the last prophet Muhammad (s). During that time the Arabs were divided into the city and the desert dwellers. The following will elaborate on the economy of the Arabs of that time.

During that period the economy was divided into different aspects like agriculture, industries, markets, trade and different ways of funds.

1. **At the outset**, on the agricultural sector, the land of Makkah was not fertile and only dates were able to be cultivated. They were thus used locally by the local people. These dates were sold on the local markets available for the people of Makkah. However, the land of Madinah and Ta'if was so much fertile that products like dates, grapes, barley, wheat, rice as such were cultivated. The produce was so beneficial that they were used both locally and for export. They were sold in the local markets as well as exported to different parts of the world such as Africa, India and china. It is worth noted that the people of Ta'if were experts in transplantation. It is narrated that there were those who were engaged in agriculture and livestock.¹ It is said that if their livestock are destroyed, they would return to palm-trees and agriculture.²
2. **Secondly**, the city of Ta'if was known as the industrial city where skins of dead animals like oxen, sheep, goats, camels and many others were transported there for treatment in various tanneries and then in industries for the production of bags, shoes, belts, luxuries and fantasies. They were thus sent to the different parts of the country and to different other countries as exported goods. There were those experts in other domains. Their expertise was not limited to the industrial city. It is said that the prophet (s) and Abu Bakr (r) hired Abdullah bin Uraiqit (a non-muslim) as a guide to leave Makkah for Madinah.³ There was a Persian who was the neighbour of the prophet (s) and he was an expert in preparation of soup.⁴ There were those who were experts in horse riding and being an archer.⁵ There were those experts in tracing relationship (child and parent etc) from physical features.⁶ There were those who were experts in tracking people.⁷ It is said that Khabbab (r) was an expert blacksmith during Jaahiliyyah period.⁸
3. **Furthermore**, there were three kinds of markets in the main cities of HIjaz. It is said that Majanna, Dhul Majaz and 'Ukaz were the markets of the people of Jaahiliyyah.⁹ The "common" market was used by each and every one. All Arabs had access therein and there was no discrimination. The "slave" market was meant for the buying and selling of slaves and was occupied by the middle class and rich people. Access to such market was possible only if one was able to buy or sell slaves. The poor people were excluded. The "aristocrat" market was meant only for the rich where only luxuries were sold.

¹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3324

² Muwatta Book 60 Hadith 1

³ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2263

⁴ Muslim 2037

⁵ Muslim 2448

⁶ Abu Dawood 2272

⁷ Abu Dawood 4366

⁸ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2425

⁹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 1770, 2050

Goods and services of high qualities were sold and offered there. All these markets were owned by the rich people of Makkah but their employees or workers were from the middle or low class. They would work hard for only a little share of the profit. During that time they would practice the Manabadhah (it is when one says I will throw my garment and you will throw yours, then they will buy each other's clothes) and Mulamasah (it is when one will sell his garment against another's garment like a barter system). They prophet (s) forbade that practice.¹⁰

4. **Moreover**, the rich Arabs would engage in business with different countries. They would trade with China for luxuries, Africa for crafts, Syria for carpet and India for spices. The prophet (s) also encouraged us to treat with the Indian incense for it has healing for seven diseases.¹¹ In return they would sell their dates, leather products, agricultural products and slaves to these countries. They would either engage in barter and monetary systems. The Bedouins would follow the same track if ever they had the means to do so. All these business trades would take place in caravans. The Arabs would also engage in the business of idols. They knew that during the month of Dhul Hijjah there would be many pilgrims who would come for the pilgrimage. They would carve different models of the 360 idols present in and around the sanctuary of the Ka'bah.¹² They would deal in such business. It is said that there were merchants doing business in Shaam that is Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan at that time.¹³
5. **Fifthly**, there were different ways the Arabs would fund their business and become richer and richer. Levies were imposed on anyone, such as travellers, foreigners and caravans for entering, staying and leaving the city of Makkah. Another levy would be paid for catering for their animals and belongings. Bribes were common among them for "progress". Any desire for favouritism would lead to bribes. High rate of interest was imposed on the borrowers. The lenders were mainly the chiefs of Makkah or the Jews. Each year it would increase by one hundred per cent and at the end of the third year, beginning the fourth year, the properties of the borrower would become the properties of the lender, including wife and children. It is said that Usury in the Jaahiliyyah was that a man would give a loan to a man for a set term after which either it will be paid or increased.¹⁴

Changes brought by Islam.

With the coming of Islam, many aspects from the economic field changed. The prophet (s) with the help of the Book of Allah changed the economic system and introduced Islamic concepts into it.

1. The **first point** is that the prophet introduced the concept of Halaal and Haraam business. Profit made by the Muslims should be reasonable not to burden the clients and also not to incur loss. It is said that the prophet (s) bought a calf, sold it, made some profit and gave the profit in charity to the poor and widows of Buna Abdul Muttalib.¹⁵ It is said that he (s) made a profit of one Dinar.¹⁶ The percentage of profit should be regularly checked. At the same time, he emphasised on controlled consumption with moderation. The prophet had a committee for to control the price of traders to avoid injustice and high price.
2. A **second point** was concerning the quality, weight and price of products where the pre Islamic Arabs would indulge in plundering the clients with no good service. Cheating and dishonesty were discouraged. Allah through the Qur'an encourages us to 'establish weight in justice and do not make

¹⁰ An Nasa'i 4516, 4517

¹¹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 5692, 5693

¹² Swahih Al Bukhariy 4287

¹³ Swahih Al Bukhariy 7

¹⁴ Muwatta Book 31 Hadith 84

¹⁵ Abu Dawood 3344

¹⁶ Tirmidhi 1257

deficient the balance'.¹⁷ It is also said in the Qur'an to 'fulfil the measure and weight and do not deprive people of their due and not to cause corruption upon the earth after its reformation'.¹⁸ There would be the introduction of regular check or surprised check by chosen members from the people. The prophet (s) ordered to 'check the weight of food before selling it'.¹⁹

3. **Another point** was that the prophet crushed down all kinds of bribes, interest and illicit gains to bring income to the country. Interest was declared haram to both the takers and the givers. It is said in the Qur'an that 'Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest'.²⁰ Thus 'Allah destroys interest and gives increase for charities'.²¹ As such there was the introduction of Zakaat, Fitr, Ushr and Swadaqah among others as means to fund the Bait ul Maal (the public treasury) which would be used for the development of the city and the welfare of the people. The standard of living of the people was important for the prophet. Allah says that 'if you give charity, then it is better for you, if you only knew'.²² The prophet (s) appointed Ibn Lutbiya to collect Zakaat and thus the prophet (s) checked the account with him.²³
4. **Added to the above**, it may be that the prophet encouraged the cultivation of different products by all members of his community. In that way, the Muslims would not be subjected to monopolies of any product. That was done to the Muslim individual's ability. The prophet (s) said that 'if anyone brings barren land into cultivation, it will belong to him'.²⁴ It is also narrated that the prophet (s) said that 'if anyone has land, he should cultivate it'.²⁵ That was why many Muslims were farmers or cultivators. Money was not spent for any useless purposes. In that the prophet introduced the system of wise spending as the Quran advised us to spend in His way but at to have a control over it. Allah orders us to 'spend in the way of Allah and not to throw yourselves with your own hands into destruction'.²⁶
5. **Moreover**, it is said was that the prophet would allow tract of land to be cultivated like the one given to Wail bin Hajr. It can be done either by the owner or by another one on the basis of crop sharing. This encouraged people to become autonomous and launching their own business and trade. It can be also through lending of money without interest. It is said that it is permissible to rent the land for cultivation as the prophet did not forbid it but it is better to give the land to a brother gratis rather than charging a certain amount.²⁷ It is also said that the land of Ibn Umar was rented during the time of the prophet (s) but after the latter's death, Ibn Umar gave up renting his land.²⁸ The Ansar would give their land to the Muhaajiroun on the condition that half of their yearly yield would come to them (Ansar).²⁹
6. **Next** is that the prophet introduced a system of social security. The Islamic concept of social security originates from verses of the Qur'an and the Hadith which enjoin upon the believers of Islam to help their poor and needy brothers-in-faith who are unable to fulfil their basic human needs. It is found in the Qur'an that 'and from their properties was the right of the (needy) petitioner and'.³⁰ Allah orders us to 'give the relative his right, as well as the needy and the traveller'.³¹ Every person living in the

¹⁷ Qur'an 55: 9

¹⁸ Qur'an 7: 85

¹⁹ Nasa'i 4597

²⁰ Qur'an 2: 275

²¹ Qur'an 2: 276

²² Qur'an 2: 280

²³ Swahih Al Bukhariy 1500

²⁴ Abu Dawood 3074, 3076

²⁵ Abu Dawood 3395

²⁶ Qur'an 2: 195

²⁷ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2342

²⁸ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2345

²⁹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2630

³⁰ Qur'an 51: 19

³¹ Qur'an 30: 38

Islamic state is entitled to these basic needs. The poor would be helped by the state on monthly basis with the basic needs. As such there would be lesser lower classes and a reduction of thieves with an increase in the standard of living.

7. A **last point** would be that the Islamic system of economics set by the prophet restricted the accumulation and keeping of luxury items and advised the Muslims to lead a simple life, not an extravagant one. The prophet has forbidden us to indulge much in luxury.³² Muslims should not be tempted with this luxuries world leaving aside Aakhirah which is better than this world.³³ The prophet said that he was not afraid about our poverty but that we will lead a life of luxury as past nations did'.³⁴ It is based on the concept that every human being has the right to equal financial and social needs and these rights were protected by the prophet.

³² Abu Dawood 4160

³³ Qur'an 93: 4

³⁴ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3158