

Pre-Islamic Arabia

Known as the age of Jaahiliyyah, Ayyam ul Jaahiliyyah, the darkest period of history, pre Islamic Arabia is the period ranging after the elevation of prophet Isa (as) to the heaven till the spreading of Islam by the prophet Muhammad (s) at the age of 40. It is reported that it was considered as an evil time.¹ It was a period where the people were deeply rooted in all kinds of sins and immoralities as they were not interested to follow the divine books revealed centuries back. It was a period where there was the need of the coming a messenger.

Social conditions of the Arabs during the Age of Ignorance.

1. The **first** point is that the social structure within the nomadic life of the Arabs in the desert placed great importance to loyalty within the clan or the tribe. Loyalty was very important to the extent that when they would set a slave free, the slave should be loyal to them or the one who set him / her free as the prophet said that loyalty belongs to the one who pays the silver (money).² Now loyalty for the leader is more important to them. The leader was respected. The individuals could not survive in the desert and as such the well-being of group and tribe was paramount. There were the acceptable social norms which revolved around what was acceptable to the group. Something may be accepted in a group and the same thing may not in another group.
2. **Moreover**, due to these differences there was constant warfare between tribes for revenge and superiority and that went on for generations. There was no sense of national identity and there was inter-tribal feuds and vendetta. It is said that for the conquest of Makkah, the tribe of Khuza'a killed a man from the tribe of Bani Laith in revenge for a killed person during the time of Jahiliyyah.³ It is said that those who claimed revenge began with the oaths and swear.⁴ Hazrat Aisha (r) said that there was the day of Bu'ith where there was fighting between the tribes of Aws and Khazraj.⁵
3. **Another point** is that the leader, the chief or Shaikh was chosen on the egalitarian system. The shaikh took care of the weaker members of the tribe. His social standing depended on his justice and on raids to capture camels, cattle or goods of neighbouring tribes. The prophet said that Allah has removed the pride of the Jahiliyyah people from you and boasting about lineage.⁶ There were also the settlers in towns like in Makkah and Ta'if. They followed commercial ethos to survive, though they still maintained the tribal allegiances. The main chiefs were the city dwellers.
4. **Added to the above**, the nomadic Arabs evolved a chivalric code (known as Muruwah) giving meaning to their lives within the clan or tribe. This would mean glorifying courage, patience, endurance, hospitality and generosity. They would be being generous with the little they had and that was very important. It is said that Hakim bin Hizam said that he used to keep good relations with his kith and kin, manumit (free) slaves and give alms.⁷ When there would be a funeral procession, they would stand up in sign of respect.⁸ It is also reported that there were those who were good and excellent at that time.⁹

¹ Muslim 1847

² Nasa'i 4642

³ Swahih Al Bukhari 112, 6880

⁴ Muwatta Book 44 Hadith 2

⁵ Swahih Al Bukhari 3777

⁶ Jami' Tirmidhi Vol 1 Book 46 Hadith 3956

⁷ Swahih Al Bukhari 2220

⁸ Swahih Al Bukhari 3837

⁹ Muslim 2526, 2638

5. **Fifthly**, there were 4 types of marriage. There would be a man who would ask for the hand of a girl through her father or guardian and would give her dowry. There would be the wife who would be sent to another man to have intercourse. The first husband would not touch her as long as she was not pregnant. There would be another type of marriage where a group of less than 10 men would live with a woman and when she would be pregnant, she would choose her husband. Next there would be the prostitute who would fix flags at her doors as a sign and anyone could come to her. After the birth of the child, the woman would choose the man that the child has chosen.¹⁰ It is said that Dailami married 2 sisters during Jahiliyyah period before he converted to Islam.¹¹
6. **Besides**, there were common vices of drinking and gambling more prevalent here and that led to debt. There are the names of Hantam, Muzaffat, Naqir and Muqaiyar reserved for the pots used to prepare and keep alcoholic drinks.¹² In this way usury was common. The prophet (s) said concerning the Jahiliyyah period that they were in a country where the practice of Riba / Usury is prevalent.¹³ It is said that part of gambling of the Jahiliyyah people was bartering live animals for slaughtered meat for instance one live sheep for two slaughtered sheep.¹⁴ It is also mentioned that there was a state of immorality and disrespect.¹⁵
7. **Furthermore**, men were considered as the supreme leaders. They could decide on whatever they wanted as long as women didn't interfere. Men treated their women as commodities known as chattels to pay debts and Umar said that we didn't pay attention to women in Jahiliyyah period.¹⁶ There were unchecked polygamy and polyandry and they were rampant. It is said that before Salamah Thaqafi converted to Islam, he had 10 wives during Jahiliyyah.¹⁷ When the husband died, the wife would enter a small room and wear the worst clothes, and would not put on perfume or anything until a year. Then an animal would be brought, a donkey or a sheep or a bird, and she would end her 'iddah with it (clean herself with it). She would come out and would be given a piece of dung and would throw it and then she could perfume herself.¹⁸
8. **In addition**, women and girls had no status and no human or legal right in their family lives and in the society. They had no say and were not allowed to give their opinions.¹⁹ It was the men who would decide. The men would prefer to have male offspring as the latter would grow to be fighters and would have the chance to become a leader. As such there was female infanticide. It is said that daughters were buried alive during pre-Islamic Arabia.²⁰ It is mentioned in the Qur'an that they are at lost those who killed their daughters. It is also said that they would slap their cheeks and tear their cloth during times of hardship.²¹
9. **Ninthly**, there were many sins like prostitution, adultery, fornication, theft, highway robbery and kidnapping among others. However, the settlers in towns of Makkah followed commercial ethos to survive and made agreements with the Bedouins not to attack the trade caravans especially during season of fairs. It is said that when a woman would give birth to a child, two men would come and would claim the child.²² It is also said that most women of that time were dressed indecently as Allah mentioned and ordered Muslim women to cover themselves and not to imitate pre Islamic women.²³

¹⁰ Swahih Al Bukhariy 5127

¹¹ Ibn Majah Vol 3 Book 9 Hadith 1950

¹² Swahih Al Bukhariy 87

¹³ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3814

¹⁴ Al Muwatta Book 31 Hadith 65

¹⁵ Qur'an 48: 26

¹⁶ Swahih Al Bukhariy Vol 6 Book 60 Hadith 435

¹⁷ Jami' Tirmidhi 1128

¹⁸ An Nasa'i 3533

¹⁹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3834

²⁰ 'Adab ul Mufrad 747

²¹ Swahih Al Bukhariy 1294

²² Muwatta Book 36 Hadith 22

²³ Qur'an 33: 33

10. **Last but not least**, there was the relation of slaves and masters. The lives of the slaves depended on the masters. They were ill-treated by the bad masters. They had no right in the society and were bought and sold at will. It is said that Abu Dhar had the same cloth as his slave had and they would wear without hesitation.²⁴

Changes Brought By Islam

After the coming of the prophet (s) among the Arabs and the Ashab, there was a slow but inevitable change in the acceptance of Islam in all aspects of life.

1. **Firstly**, the Arabs were used to tribal equality in many spheres of their life and this equality characterised the life of the Prophet and the spirit of early Muslims. This led to the idea of brotherhood in Madinah and towards the whole Muslim community and hence there was more cohesion. The prophet (s) said that the Islamic brotherhood and friendship is superior.²⁵ He also established a bond of brotherhood between the Ansar and the Muhaajiroun.²⁶
2. **Furthermore**, the Prophet Muhammad (s) gave importance to all individuals regardless of who they were or in which tribes they are or which lineage. What was important is to be a Muslim in the Ummah of the prophet (s). This went to such an extent that the prophet sais that there is a part of the night when no Muslim individual will ask Allah for good in this world and the next without His giving it to him and that is for every night.²⁷ This shows individualism in Islam.
3. **In addition**, the religion of Islam incorporated the ideals of courage, patience, endurance which became universal loyalties to Allah and other Muslims. It is said that the prophet (s) forbade selling loyalty and giving it away.²⁸ It should be for Allah, the prophet (s) and the religion of Islam alongside with the rights of human beings. Allah ordered us to seek help through patience.²⁹ We are ordered also not to lose courage else our strength will depart from us.³⁰ Allah said that he will reward those who have endurance.³¹
4. **Moreover**, in cases of retribution individualism was fostered and the relatives of a dead man could punish only his murderer not any member of tribe which had previously resulted in prolonged inter-tribal warfare. The prophet (s) encouraged them to let the decision be in the hands of Allah. It is said when the Quraish Uqba bin Abi Mu'ait placed the dung, blood and abdominal contents of a she-camel on the shoulders of the prophet during prostration at the Ka'bah, the prophet (s) invoked Allah to take revenge on the Quraish, Amr bin Hashim, Utba, Shaiba, Walid bin Utbah among others.³² It is narrated that the prophet (s) never took revenge for his own sake but only when it was outside the limit of Islam.³³
5. **Fifthly**, the institution of marriage was taken seriously. The consent of the woman was vital. The prophet introduced the marriage contract when Allah says not to determine to undertake a marriage contract until the decreed period reaches its end.³⁴ There was also the dowry was to be given. The prophet (s) said that whatever is given as a dowry, or gift, or is promised to her before the marriage

²⁴ Swahih Al Bukhariy 30

²⁵ Swahih Al Bukhariy 466

²⁶ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2292

²⁷ Muslim 757

²⁸ Nasa'i 4659

²⁹ Qur'an 2: 45

³⁰ Qur'an 8: 46

³¹ Qur'an 23: 111

³² Swahih Al Bukhariy 520

³³ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3560

³⁴ Qur'an 2: 235

belongs to her.³⁵ Men were limited to only four wives in marriage as Allah has given the choice to two, three or four wives.³⁶

6. **Besides**, thus women in general and wives in particular got status. They were respected and had a voice. They were free to voice out their opinions and they had a say in the society. Hazrat Umar said that before Islam they didn't give women their rights but with the coming of Islam, Allah mentioned their rights and we gave them their rights.³⁷ Allah says in the Qur'an that both men and women have rights over each other.³⁸
7. **More to the point**, women were allowed to ask for divorce and were given rights of inheritance from their fathers and their husbands. There was the possibility of divorce from the side of the wife as the case of Jamilah who sought divorce from her husband Thabit bin Qais and the prophet (s) accepted.³⁹ Concerning inheritance, Ibn Mas'ud said (as an example for a daughter, a son's daughter and a sister) that the daughter will have $\frac{1}{2}$, the son's daughter will have $\frac{1}{6}$ and the sister will take $\frac{1}{3}$ of the property.⁴⁰
8. **Added to the above**, Education became obligatory on everyone and educating girls was commended by the Prophet as a way to Paradise. Allah ordered us in the Qur'an to study by saying 'Read'.⁴¹ The prophet (s) said that seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim male and female.⁴² Again the prophet (s) encouraged us to ask for beneficial knowledge.⁴³ Education is important for progress in both worlds.
9. **Ninthly**, the system of usury was forbidden to prevent monetary exploitation of the weak. It was a tool of oppression and a means to unjustly take others' money. Allah addresses to the believers not to consume usury, doubled and multiplied but fear Him.⁴⁴ As such the institution of Zakaat was made a pillar of Islam. It was obligatory and the prophet encouraged giving charity as Allah says that this is better for us.⁴⁵
10. **Last but not least**, vices of drinking, gambling and prostitution were banned. It is said in the Qur'an that the prophet (s) was asked about wine and gambling. Allah revealed that there is a great sin in them.⁴⁶ The prophet (s) forbade the earnings of slave girls through prostitution.⁴⁷ Many thieves became custodians of money through the prophet (s). The long prevalent slavery was discouraged and there was reward for freeing of slaves. Many slaves were freed by the ashab like Hazrat Abu Bakr. The prophet (s) said that if someone manumits a Muslim slave, Allah will save him from the fire.⁴⁸

³⁵ Nasa'i 3353

³⁶ Qur'an 4: 3

³⁷ Swahih Al Bukhariy 5843

³⁸ Qur'an 2: 228

³⁹ Nasa'i 3497, Ibn Majah Vol 3 Book 10 Hadith 2056

⁴⁰ Swahih Al Bukhariy 6736

⁴¹ Qur'an 96: 1

⁴² Ibn Majah Vol 1 Book 1 Hadith 224

⁴³ Ibn Majah 3843

⁴⁴ Qur'an 3: 130

⁴⁵ Qur'an 2: 280

⁴⁶ Qur'an 2: 219

⁴⁷ Swahih Al Bukhariy 2283

⁴⁸ Swahih Al Bukhariy 6715