CHAPTER - II

ARABIA DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Arabia, which falls between Asia and Africa, truly justifies itself being categorised as a sub-continent due to its enormous size and individuality of character. More often it is said to be an appendage of Asia but through the Sinai it joins Africa. Though Sinai is politically a part of Egypt, nevertheless, both in physical environment and the nature of its human life, it is much closer to Arabia. Naturally, the Arabs themselves have, since time immemorial, known much more about the land, but their individual knowledge has remained confined to a definite region. Their cognizance has always been detailed and particularistic instead of being general and comprehensive.

The Arabian Peninsula is in the shape of a rough quadrilateral which has a length of about 2200 kilometres from north-west to south-east and a breadth of about 1200 kilometres. Towards the west the peninsula extends till the Red Sea, to the south uptill the Gulf of

---

1. The best account in Arabic is given by al-Hamadani in his work Sifat Jazirat al-Arab; see also, Amin Rihani, Mulul al-‘Arab (Beirut, 1929), Hafi: Wahba, Jazirat al-‘Arab (Cairo, 1935), and Muhammad Shukrî al-Alusi, Tarîh Najd (Cairo, 1347 A.H.).
Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, and in the east up till the Persian Gulf. Controversy shrouds the limits of the peninsula in the north as to where Arabia ends and Syria begins. An enormous steppe spreads itself towards the north from the Great Nafud and leaves no distinctive marks to point as a limit for the peninsula. A summary approach to the study of the Arabian peninsula can be made on the basis of physiographical units (ignoring political boundaries) defined as follows:

1. The Western highlands extending from the Gulf of Aqaba to the hinterland of the straits of Bab al-Mandab in the region of Aden. This includes the districts and territories of the Hijaz, Tihama, A‘ir, the Yemen and an extension as far as the region of Aden.

2. The southern coastlands from the last region as far as the lowland east of Sanqira Bay.

3. The Oman region including the Jabal Al-Hdhar as its main physical element.

4. The eastern coastlands from the Musandum peninsula as far as Kuwait, mainly, but by no means entirely, the Trucial coast and al-Hasa.
5. The southern interior, mainly the Rub‘al-‘Hali.

6. The northern interior: Najd, the Nafud and the far northern Steppelands.

Geomorphologically, Arabia is mainly divided into two provinces: the Arabian shield in the west which contains igneous and metamorphic rocks, and the sedimentary areas to the north-east, and south-east of the shield till the colossal basin containing Mesopotamia, Persian Gulf, and the eastern part of al-Rub‘al-‘Hali (the Empty Quarter). From the west the peninsula slopes away to the Persian Gulf and the Mesopotamian depression. At its back are mountain ranges that run parallel to the western coast and rise to a height of 9,000 feet in Midian and 14,000 feet in South Yemen. From these ranges the declivity to the east is gradual and long; to the west, towards the Red Sea, it is steep and short. Between Jordan and Saudi Arabia lies the mountain range of al-Tuwayq. To the south of the Nafud are two parallel ranges called Aja‘ and Salma. Together these two are known as Jabal Shammar. In the central bulge of the Arabian shield towards its eastern edge lie the hills of al-Naf. To the east of the shield parallel ranges curve around from the north to the south following the contour of the crystalline bulge. Remarkable among these is al-Tuwayq.

---

with a length of about 1000 kilometres and encircled towards its southern end by the sands of al-Rub' al-Hali.

From the north-east to the south-east of the Tuwayq ranges is located the renowned territory of North Central Arabia called the Najd. It has a mean elevation of 2500 feet. In fact Najd has been formed through a long process of the denudation of a plateau. Najd is actually, the escar[iment of the plateau thus formed and Tuwayq forms its backbone. Within Najd a number of valleys cut through Tuwayq between al-Rumah and Wadi al-Dawasir, the northern most of these is al-‘Ata’. Wadi Hanifa rises on the top of Tuwayq and twists down to the basin of al-‘Harj, meeting a number of important valleys in al-‘Sabha’.

Leaving aside the mountains and highlands mentioned above, the land in Arabia consists mostly of desert and steppe. From antiquity the northern and central portion of the peninsula has been traditionally divided by the Arabs in three regions: the first is Tihama, meaning ‘lowland’, which signifies the wavy slants of the Red Sea coasts; the second, to the east, is the Hijaz or "barrier" originally denoting the mountain ranges which separated the

3. See Mahmud Shu'ri al-Alusi, op. cit., p.7
4. Ibid., p.8
coastal plain from the plateau of Najd, it later included much of the coastal plain itself; and the third, the portion east of the Hijaz which is the plateau of Najd and consists of most of the Nafud desert. Within Najd, apart from infrequent stretches of sand, the limestone has for long been generally laid bare. Najd is so situated that it has no specific frontiers (boundary lines). The eastern foothills of the Hijaz mountain ranges from its western limits. On the east its boundaries extend till the river Dahna. On the north, the Nafud, and, on the south, al-\textsuperscript{5} Rub'\textsuperscript{5} al-Khal\textsuperscript{i} forms its boundaries. Wherefore, it has been rightly remarked about Najd, that it is an 'island within the island of the Arabs'.

Population wise the main concentrations are in some places of Hijaz, plains of al-'Asir and its Tihama, the eastern oases of al-Hasa' and al-Qatif and some of the valleys of Najd. There are many towns and Bedouin tribes in Hadramawt and Oman. Najd has always contained a fairly large population within the various districts that fall within its bounds, namely: al-'Arid, more famous by the name

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 9

Wadi Hanifa and al-Yamama, it includes the important districts of Manfuna and al-Dar’iyya, the centres of activities in Najd; al-Mahmal, the biggest district of Najd and also containing the largest population due to its more arable land; Sudayr, containing the district of al-Majma’a as its capital; al-Washm, containing numerous towns and villages and has Shagra’ as its capital; al-I’harayn, situated at about eight hours’ journey to the south of al-‘Arid, it is famous for its oases and dry fruits; al-Aflaj, which is the starting point of the habitat of the Dawasir tribe; Wadi al-Dawasir, it is situated at the southern most border of Najd, al-Qasim, the best district of Najd it boasts too of being the abode of Najd’s bravest of warriors; Ha’il, the northern part of Najd and also to the north of Khaybar, it was for a long time under the authority of the Al Rashid, famous for its gardens and oases it also is the producer of one of the best varieties of dates. Many poems have been composed in the praise of Najd (Najdiyyat).

The geographical layout of Arabia is such that up to the beginning of the twentieth century they were almost completely overlooked by the rest of the world, and thence they were able to maintain their own separate culture.

and civilization which was quite unique from that of the rest of the world and in any way it was not at all affected by any of the other civilizations of the world. The natural boundaries of Arabia in general, and of Najd and its surrounding areas in particular, formed such inaccessible obstacles that it was almost impossible to cross over from one side to the other or vice versa. A small portion of its southern part did of course remain in touch with Europe and some other parts of the world by virtue of its strategic position of acting as the connecting link between Europe and parts of south Asia and Africa. Even in ancient Europe southern Arabia was known. Herodotus has mentioned the western coast of Arabia. As new and easier trade routes were discovered by the world the notability of even that small portion of Arabia known to some of the world wavered, till at last it was forgotten altogether in the medieval and early modern period. In the modern period Europe had to rediscover Arabia and the European scholars who contributed to this effect number to about a dozen only. The first of these scholars was, Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), a member of a scientific expedition sent by the king of Denmark in 1761.

---


In 1812, a Swiss, Johann Lewis Burckhardt rediscovered Petra and also visited Mecca and Medina under the name of Ibrahim Ibn Abdullah. In 1845 George Augustos Wallin, a Finno-Swedish visited Najd for linguistic study. In 1853 Sir Richard F. Burton visited the holy cities as a pilgrim—al-Hajj 'Abdullah. He was followed in 1861 by William Gifford Falgrave, a jew who travelled to southern Najd. In 1875 an Englishman Charles M. Doughty toured northern Arabia and his travelogue is a classic of English literature. Wilfrid S. Blunt and Lady Anne Blunt reached Najd around 1870’s on several missions. Prof. Snouck Hurgronje of Leiden was, till 1925, the only European after Burckhardt to visit Mecca in its normal life. He went there in 1885-6. Among the recent travellers may be mentioned a

11. His works included Notes on the Bedouins and the Wahabys (London, 1830), and Travels in Syria and the Holy Land (London, 1822).


14. One of the classic accounts of Arabian life is his Travels in Arabia Deserta (Cambridge, 1888)


17. Bilder aus Mella (Leiden, 1889), and Mella (The Hague, 1888-89).
Czechoslovak, Alois Musil, the Lebanese—American Amin Rihan, and Eldon Rutter who visited Mecca and Medina in 1925-6. Bertram Thomas, the young English orientalist crossed the Rub' al-Hali in January 1931 and his feat was matched by H. St. J.B. Philby, al-Hajj 'Abdullah who crossed the Rub' al-Hali from east to west in ninety days starting on January 7, 1932.

The only instance in history when western and central Arabia had made its existence known to the world was during the seventh century, when it gave rise to the youngest of the monotheistic religions—Islam. Prophet Muhammad, the last messenger of Allah, took only a decade to bring together all the mutually separate and warring tribes of Arabia within the fold of Islam.


19. His main works included Ta'rih Najd al-Hadith wa Mulhagatih (Beirut, 1928); and Ibn Sa'oud of Arabia, his People and his Land (London, 1928); for his other works see bibliography of this thesis.


22. He has numerous books to his credit. The more important ones are: Arabia (London, 1930); Arabia of the Wahhabis (London, 1928); and Sa'udi Arabia (London, 1955); for other works see bibliography below.
Islam infused fresh courage in its adherents—the Muslims; they, for the first time, became aware of their separate identity, that of *ummah*. Within a hundred years of its revelation Islam and its followers became a force to be reckoned with. The Arabs, infused with a new zeal, Islam, came spilling out of Arabia and went in all directions.

The centre of the empire was shifted from Madina first to Damascus during the Umayyad caliphate and then to Baghdad during the ‘Abbasid caliphate. There were political and religious differences within the Muslim empire. Since all these activities were taking place at places other than Arabia, therefore the Caliphs paid more attention towards those places. Arabia which remained quiet after the advent of Islam was no trouble spot for the Caliphs and so the least importance was given to this birthplace of Islam. Centres of Islamic culture were shifted away from the Peninsula. Islamic theology too had taken root outside this cradle of Islam. The two Holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, which had once been the fountains of Islam, were relegated to become merely places of pilgrimage for Muslims from all over the world. Thus the political and cultural importance of Arabia had gone with the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus. Arab unity, the basic force behind the Arab power created by
Islam, started to disintegrate rapidly. Religious strife and tribal warfare once removed by Islam, began to take root in Arabia again and the Arabs, slowly but steadily, started to drift back to their conditions of the pre-Islamic era. Some tribes even adopted the heathen practices of the past.

The founding of the Ottoman Caliphate in Constantinople proved to be the last straw and the corrosion which took place within the next few centuries was such that in the eighteenth century the peninsula was the most intolerant and forbidden province of the Ottoman Empire, a turbulent which the Turks found hard to control. By that time Arabia had lost its identity and once again it had drifted into oblivion. As Philby writes: It had converted itself as it was to linger on for centuries as:

"... an important province of the empire it had created; and its people, neglected by the distant central government, tended to relapse into their old pagan ways, with the merest veneer of Islamic formalism to grace them ... the old nationalism with its glorious literature was lost in tribal chaos. Arabia had fallen from grace, and for all practical purposes it disappeared from the purview of history..."


Thus the whole Peninsula, especially the province of Najd, kept on degenerating politically, socially, and culturally till about the middle of the eighteenth century when Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab launched his reform movement in Najd which shortly afterwards spread to other parts of Arabia.

Hijaz, the province of Arabia containing the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, was, since the medieval period, generally accepted as a part of Egypt. Therefore, when Sultan Selim I (1517-20) annexed Egypt in 1517, he automatically assumed the title of Ḳhadim al-Haramayn al-Shari'ayn (Servitor of the Two Holy Cities). The control of the Ottomans was extended further into Arabia by Selim I’s successor Sulayman the Magnificent (1520-1566) who had his governor in Ḳhasa’. During the prime of Sulayman’s successes even Yemen was added to his domains. Eastern Arabia remained outside the Ottoman authority for a considerable time but central Arabia was never claimed by them. The Ottomans had a tough time in actively exercising their authority over this land since they knew not but little about it. Thus if there was a revolt in this part then it became not only difficult but practically impossible.

26. Ibid.
for the Ottoman army to quell it. As Benoist – Mechin remarks:

"... they knew nothing whatever of the country into which they were venturing. They knew neither the paths nor the direction of the winds. They had to put themselves in the hands of Arab guides who purposely led them astray into a region which was completely arid and where there was no well nor trace of water. Gazzed by thirst, overcome by sunstroke, the Janssaries scattered in the dunes in search of shade and water. Fever struck down a certain number. Others wandered in circles, under a burning sky which had the pale colour of molten metal. Some of the soldiers, in a fit of madness, turned their weapons against their leaders and then killed themselves. The remainder dispersed and died in horrible suffering, without having seen a trace of their enemy. Not one escaped. It was always the same story, from the beginning of the ages: foreign armies marched into the desert and there disappeared without trace, like a river swallowed in the sand."

Consequently, the control of the Ottomans over this region of Arabia was but for a negligible time. The Ottoman government had such difficulty in keeping it under their control that they felt relieved in accepting a formal acknowledgement of its suzerainty and in return they offered a guarantee to abstain from actively controlling and administrating the

country. But the Arabs were not to be content with even a nominal alien rule; therefore gradually by the middle of the seventeenth century the authority of the Turks was openly defied, more so in the Yemen and to a lesser degree in the Hijaz. In Hijaz the main opponents seem to have been the Sharifs of Mecca who were traditionally regarded as being the highest authority in the province, but the Ottomans adopted the practice of appointing Turks to such high offices thus giving the Sharifs the pretext of opposing them. As a result the claim of the Ottomans to Yemen ceased completely by 1642 A.D., but Hijaz remained within their jurisdiction, although nominally, until the start of the eighteenth century when it became impossible for them to control the land so they resigned their claims to Hijaz as well in favour of the local chiefs. This transformation is well described by Stoddard as follows:

"... with the transformation of the caliphate from a theocratic democracy to an Oriental despotism, the free spirited Arabs had returned scornfully to their deserts. Here they had

---

28. Philby, op. cit., p. 3
29. Ibid.
maintained their wild freedom. Neither caliph nor Sultan dared venture far into those vast solitudes of burning sand and choking thirst, where the rash invader was lured to sudden death in a whirl of stabbing spears."

At the beginning of the eighteenth century nomadic cattle breeding and oasis irrigatory farming were the basis of Arab economy. The Arabian steppes were, although, vast but the vegetation not being sufficient enough could not satisfy the needs of all its inhabitants. A number of times there were pasture crises which led to the emigration of a large population and consequently the bedouins were compelled to settle at one place and cultivate date-palms and other fruit trees. At that time a single state organisation was unknown within the Arabian peninsula. The population was divided into a number of tribes which were disunited. They had differences among themselves and fought each other continuously, their bones of contention being pastures, flocks, booty and the rights to the possession of wells. Their political set up was that every village and town had its own separate hereditary ruler, consequently, the settled part of Arabia presented the picture of a mass of small feudal principalities.

32. V. Lutsi y, Modern History of the Arab Countries (Moscow, 1965), pp. 77-8.
The central and eastern parts of the Arabian peninsula had never felt the weight of foreign tutelage and thus the chiefs of the clans of Ha'il, Hasa', Najd, and Hijaz had now begun to consider themselves the aristocracy of Arabia. Tribal wars were now gradually beginning to be accepted as not an uncommon happening. In the absence of any law whatever judgements the respective chiefs announced were considered by all to be the final word. The settlements in Arabia, too, like the tribes, had their respective rulers and they also fought with each other. The decay had started to settle in Arabia since the end of the tenth century when Arabia had virtually disappeared from history. From whatever abstract and scattered accounts which deal with the succeeding centuries, it can be easily concluded that the nomad movements which had finally given rise to the modern tribal distribution of the interior kept on proceeding unchecked throughout this period. This gave rise to wars and disturbances which were the natural accompaniments of these movements, and there appears to be very little doubt that wars and disturbances constituted the history of central Arabia during this time. The state of affairs that must have followed are explicit in the


34. Philby, op. cit., p. 6
following account:

"By dint of fighting and killing one another, the tribes began to feel the stirrings of a fresh wave of exaltation. As always their strength manifested itself in a double aspiration towards unity and transcendence. Through the ordeals they inflicted upon each other they strove to attain an absolute renunciation and to 'rediscover Paradise in the depths of their own hell'."

Politically, Najd was divided into many small kingdoms. In the northern part of Najd, now known as Jabal Shammar, the hold was that of the tribe Tay. The Banu Khalid tribe ruled in Hasa' and 'Uyayna was under the sway of the Mu'ammars which most probably accepted the authority of the ruler of 'Uyayna. Dar'iyya was ruled by the Sa'uds who belonged to the 'Anays tribe. Al-Manfuha, which fell to the south of Dar'iyya, was at the time ruled by the Banu Dawwas. The whole of the province of Hijaz which included the two Holy cities was in the hands of the Sharifs of Mecca. The Sa'uds of Dar'iyya had established themselves there towards the end of the seventeenth century and at that time even they were considered to be a tough opposition by the Tay which ruled Jabal Shammar and the Banu Khalid who ruled over Hasa'. These two states were

35. J. Benoist-Mechin, op. cit., p. 47
36. Hafiz Wahba, op. cit., p. 337
supposed to be the most powerful ones at that time and under
the prevailing circumstances peace could not be thought of.
Moreover, there was no demarcation of their boundaries,
therefore they were both constantly at war with each other
and at the same time they were also on the look out for a
state weaker than themselves in order that they may extend
their domains or, if not, then, at least to keep them under
their influence. Consequently both of these states either
expanded or contracted at different periods accordingly as
they had an aggressive or an able ruler. Even if there had
been lines of geographical demarcation they would have
proved to have been meaningless as all these lands along with
the people who lived there and pastured their flocks there,
were like the sands, shifting from place to place, settling
for a while, and then moving on again. The ruhhal changed
fealty as often as they migrated, in small groups or en
masse, seeking pastures.

In brief, the situation had not changed appreciably during the thousand years since the period of
Prophet Muhammad. During his time peace had replaced war,
and inter-tribal feuds had changed places with inter-tribal
alliances. But during the eighteenth century the situation
was quite different, it was such that no one tribe in

Central Arabia had been able to prove its leadership. They would alternately demand the support and taxes of other tribes, accordingly as their leader was capable of asserting his authority over a larger area.

From the above discussions it is evident that the central and eastern parts of the Arabian peninsula were least effected by the foreign domination and therefore it can easily be assumed that they were unaffected by alien culture. Their outlook of the pre-Islamic era was completely reshaped by the coming of Islam and they were knitted together to form a social, political, and religious unit. But the political degeneration of the later centuries also brought upon the people their social decadence. Raiding, one of the virtues of pre-Islamic Arabia, was gradually re-introduced and continued to flourish in the same way as it flourished before the Prophet Muhammad and the sword retained its glory as the supreme criterion of social justice. The main cause of most of the discords among the various tribes was for most of the times concentrated over the water holes and the pastures. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the devastation of the desert oases of 'Urayna and Manfuha mainly due to the fighting of the different groups which inhabited them.

Their aim was to control the country single handedly. The result was that no one was sure of getting his flocks away from the waterholes, for he was almost sure to have to fight for his rights and the rights of his flock whenever he tried to water them. The common supply of water was so meagre and therefore so precious that all had to struggle to obtain some share of it.

The structure of the society in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth century was more or less on similar pattern as that during the pre-Islamic period. The society could be divided into two main categories i.e. the nomads, who were always on the move from place to place accordingly as their needs were satisfied, and the settled folk, who were devoted towards agriculture, they tilled the land and cultivated different fruits and date palms. Their favourite food was locust. As in the pre-Islamic society the shayhis were now again the heads of their respective tribes the only minor distinction being that in some tribes the shayhis were elected but in most of the tribes the...

40. According to a hadith people have equal rights over three things: water, salt and pasture 
أولئك الذين يحكمون في شؤون البلاد والمياه والمعاب


42. Shulri al-Alusi, op. cit., pp. 41 ff.
office of the shaykh was hereditary. There also existed vassal tribes and the dependent settled and semi-nomadic population. The society was patriarchal and importance was given to clan relationship. Slavery too existed and was widespread among the nomads as well as the settled population. Apart from other miscellaneous functions the slaves were used as domestic helps as well as labourers. Although they had their leaders but the free spirited Arabs recognised no master. Usually they were wandering at will along with their flocks and camels and at times settled here and there in green cases which were hidden in the desert’s heart. Usually the settled dwellers acknowledged the authority of some leading family but the authority which these rulers exercised was a slender one this being narrowly circumscribed by well-established custom and a jealous public opinion which they transgressed at their peril. The moral teachings of Islam as laid down in the Qur’an were ignored and affronted. Wine-drinking and opium eating was a common practice throughout and ‘the basest form of lechery flourished openly and remorselessly’. ‘The whole world of thought’, writes Zwemer, ‘was honey combed with superstitions, and the old time simplicity of morals and

43. V. Lutsky, op. cit., p. 78.
44. L. Stoddard, op. cit., pp. 21-2.
45. Ibid., p. 21
life had given way to luxury and sensuality, debauchery was fearfully common, and that harlotry and even unnatural vices were perpetrated openly in the sacred city (Mecca). Almsgiving had grown obsolete; justice was neither swift nor impartial; effeminacy had displaced the martial spirit, and the conduct of the pilgrim caravans was scandalous in the extreme.

The regression of the social and political system was bound to impress the religious sphere too and thus religion also capsized against the onslaught of the continuous degradation. The eighth and ninth centuries witnessed the introduction of foreign elements which necessitated the origin and development of Muslim theology. This new development resulted in Islam acquiring a philosophical speculative character -- something which was completely different from the true Semitic spirit. This further resulted in giving rise to mysticism and saint-worship in the World of Islam. Consequently, numerous shrines and tombs of saints had become centres of pagan practices, where miracle performers and swindlers at large preyed on the naiveness of the believers. In their day


47. M.J. Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 25
day lives the Muslims all over Arabia had begun to acquire the superstitions and practices of the different religions. Everywhere it could be marred that the Muslims were living carelessly with luxury, ease, and above all, irreligion. Islam, which had its character of the desert, was fast loosening it and becoming a religion of the cities and of carelessness. The practices of the people of Arabia were in no way different from those of the pre-Islamic Arabs, the very practices from which Prophet Muhammad had rid them off, the only distinguishing factor being that now they called themselves Muslims. In the words of Amin Rihani, "Melioratory and Sabianism were resuscitated among certain of the Bedouins; a form of Carmathian Communism still existed in al-Hasa', and necrolatory, a practice of the Shi'a of Persia and Najaf had spread all over Central Arabia'. The simplistic concept of monotheism that the Prophet Muhammad had given to his followers received a setback and was overlaid with a mass of superstition and puerile mysticism taking root all around. Its effects could be felt all around. The people had become so ignorant that mosques bore a deserted look, they remained unfrequented and stood ruinous. The belief of the multitude now concentrated around amulets, charms, and rosaries to ward off evil.

Faqirs and dervishes in addition to oracles, soothsayers, fortune-tellers and astrologers flourished during that time due to the credibility of the masses. For pilgrimages they now frequented the tombs of holy men who were worshipped as saints and intercessors with Allah who had, as their practices indicated, now become too remote a being to be directly approached by these misguided souls. Amin Rihani gives a vivid description of the prevailing conditions in the following words:

"They worshipped tombs, and rocks, and trees, making vows to them, supplicating them for favours; they raised walis (saints) above Allah in their prayers; they no longer could or would read the Koran; they ceased to pay the Zakat-money; and they cared not about the pilgrimage to Mecca. They did not even know the direction of the `A’ha when they prayed."

All this does not go to show that learned men were in want in those days. There were the followers of the well-known fundamentalist theologian Ahmad Ibn Hanbal but the knowledge of even these people centred around and was full of the dogmatism of the mullas and the mysticism of the sufis.

49. L. Stoddard, op. cit., pp. 20-1

50. A. Rihani, op. cit., p. 237; also George Iheirallah, op. cit., p. 56.

51. A. Rihani, op. cit., p. 238
A first hand information about this period is supplied by 'Uthman Ibn 'Abd Allah Ibn Bishr who is considered to be the greatest chronicler of the period. His account is accepted as the primary source for the study of this period by almost all the scholars and their study is largely based on the account given by him. Ibn Bishr has provided a clear picture of the religious observances of the people during that time. According to him at that time polytheism had become widespread in Najd and elsewhere. The belief in trees, stones, tombs and the buildings over them, and in the blessings to be had from tombs and in sacrificing to them had increased. Also belief in seeking the help of the jinn, and in sacrificing to them, and in placing food before them and putting it in the corners of the houses to cure the sick, and belief in the good or evil power of the jinn had increased. Finally, belief in oaths to other than God, and other polytheistic actions, both major and minor, had increased.

And the cause that brought about the situation in Najd, God knows, was that the bedouins when they stopped in the town at the time of harvesting fruits, had with them men and women treating the sick and prescribing medicine. And if one of the people of the town was sick internally, or in one of his members, its people would come to the practitioners of that group of bedouins,
asking for medicine for his disease. And they would answer, 'sacrifice for him in such and such a place either a completely black lamb or a small-eared goat,' thus speaking as if with authority before those ignorant people. Then the practitioners would say to them; 'Do not mention God's name when you sacrifice it, and give to the patient such and such from it, and eat from it such and such, and leave that part.' And perhaps God would cure the sick person in order to lead them on and to deceive them; or perhaps the time had come for him to be cured. Anyway those practices increased among the people, and much time passed. For this reason they fell into serious things; nor was there among them anyone to forbid those practices or to proclaim to them the approved and the disapproved things. And the chiefs, and oppressors, of the towns now only how to oppress their people and tyrannize them, and to fight among each other.

According to M. Shulri al-Alusi, the population of Najd was divided into two groups: 
ahl al-hadar (settled ones) and al-badawiyyun (nomads). But as compared to the nomadic population the settled people were in a minority. The bedouins were chiefly camel-breeders. About the beliefs of the people Alois Musil says that they all


believed in the one, personal, invisible, omnipresent Allah. He further points out that the difference between the beliefs of the bedouins and the settlers was that whereas the bedouins knew no holy places, no sacred objects, no intermediaries between man and Allah and no form of prayer, they were Muslims but only in name without having any respect for the precepts of Islam, the settlers, on the other hand, worshipped different patron saints along with Allah. They had holy trees, rocks, springs, sacred groves, fixed places of worship, and, consequently, as a necessity they also had to have caretakers of these places and intermediaries between the inhabitants and their holy patrons. Musil sums up briefly that Islam prevailed but without its orthodox purity and with peculiar variations. Their granaries of the settlers were irresistible to the nomads therefore for its safety the settlers paid regular levies to some clans of the nomads and placed themselves under their protection. Since the townsfolk relied more upon the bedouins for their own protection therefore, the beliefs of the later was bound to influence the beliefs of the former. This is evident from the belief of most of the townsfolk that the one Allah of the nomads is after all stronger than their own numerous saints and therefore the religion of the former must be the truer.

55. Ibid.
The great reformer Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in his book entitled *al-Masa’il al-Jahiliyya* has listed the many pagan practices as were prevalent in the pre-Islamic Arab society. He has based his work primarily upon what mention he could find in the Qur’an and the Hadith about the prevalent practices. Observing minutely the beliefs and practices of the people in his own time in different parts of Arabia and, especially in his own province Najd, he set about the task of acquainting to the misguided people about the practices of the pre-Islamic Arabs disapproved by the Qur’an and the Sunna. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s intentions in compiling this work may have had been that the fact that their own practices were similar to the condemned practices of their ancestors is brought home to the masses, they would quit them and return to the true fold of Islam. But Ibn al-Wahhab’s dreams were not going to come true so easily as is discussed below in a later chapter. But anyway Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s work is important in the sense that it enumerates all the corrupt practices of his time that could be compared with those during the pre-Islamic period. About these practices Ahmad b. Hujr writes that there were certain tombs in Najd which were supposed to be of the Companions of the Prophet. People went there in large numbers and asked for their requirements from the occupant of the tomb and sought help to rid them of their miseries. For instance, at Jubayla in Wadi Hanifa, a
practice had developed of visiting and worshipping the grave of Zayd Ibn al-Hattab. Likewise in Dar‘iyya some tombs were attributed to certain Companions and had become the focus of corrupt practices.

There is also mentioned a tomb related to Dharrar Ibn al-Azwar at Wadi Ghubaira which also served the same purpose. Another place was Bulaydat al-Fida in Maufuha where a palm tree was situated and it was named as "Stallion". Here young men and maidens indulged in shocking practices venerate to the tree god.

Another of their practices was that rags were fastened to tamarisk trees whenever a male child was born and the belief attached to it was that by this practice the child would survive. Then there is found mention of a cave in Dar‘iyya about which it is said that the people


57. Philby, op. cit., p. 5. About this practice Hafiz Wahba adds that the people believed that those maidens who visited the male palm tree were married soon and the maidens who circumambulated it used to say: ‘O’ male of the males I want my husband before the year ends’ op. cit., p. 336.

58. Philby, loc. cit.
believed that it was holy and visited it frequently. It was believed that a princess had taken refuge in this cave to escape the extortions of a tyrant. Another interpretation about the same cave is that it was created by God especially for a woman known as the Amir's daughter, who had shrieked for help under threat of outrage by some low fellows; the rock had split to receive her in a secure dungeon, and the superstitious tribes folk made a practice of taking meat and bread to deposit in the cave. In Hasa' there was a stream named 'Ayn Najm. It was commonly believed that one who takes bath in this stream is cured of his disease. The Ottomans had built domes and structures all around it. Similar practices were also adopted in the Hijaz where the tombs of the Prophet and his Companions are situated. It is said that at these places people indulged in such shocking practices and venerations as are due to the Almighty alone. Najd and Hijaz were no exception to these practices as traces of similar practices could also be found all around Arabia. Ahmad b. Hujr further writes that in similar fashion in Basra, Zubayr, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Yemen too the practices of the jahiliyya and idol worship was common. A number of such practices were also prevalent in Aden.

60. Ibid., pp. 336-7; Philby, loc. cit.
63. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
Thus at the beginning of the eighteenth century the people of Arabia lived in ignorance, the same way as the pre-Islamic Arabs had lived, and that the term *jahiliyya* (ignorance of the true religion) is used to describe both of these periods. In this regard Philby comments that:

"When writing or speaking of 'The Ignorance', Wahhabis generally refer to this period before the mission of Muhammad Ibn 'Abdul Wahhab rather than to the heydey of Arab chivalry to which that label was attached by the early Islamic writers. An essential difference between the two periods is that, while before Islam the Arabs had a primitive though well-organised civilization, with a literature of outstanding merit, the decadence of Arabian Islam was, or appears to have been accompanied by unrelieved moral and intellectual stagnation".

************
