CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Arabs’ has referred to different peoples at different times. In the modern sense, the term refers to the people who speak Arabic as their native language. Ethnically, the term denotes the nomadic peoples of Arabian peninsula who use Arabic as their mother tongue. In pre-Islamic times the term was used to designate the inhabitants of Arabian peninsula. On the advent of Islam, when believers of the new faith were unified in to one ‘Ummah’ or community irrespective of their nationality or ethnic affiliation the term Arab got a wider meaning and began to be used to denote any one who professed Islam and used Arabic as his ‘language’\(^1\). In this study the term ‘Arab trade’ is used in the wider sense to denote the commercial activities of a people with diverse ethnic origin, whether it be Persian, Syrian, Egyptian, Turkish, Arabian or any other one, but united by a common bond of the medieval Arab culture.

The period of history covered in this study is long spanning over seven centuries, chronologically from the ninth to the fifteenth, century AD. Categorically this was the heyday of Arab

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\(^1\) Kenneth Mc Pherson, *The Indian Ocean, A History of People and the Sea*, Oxford University Press, (1993), P.95
By virtue of their high standards of commercial morality, greatness of their Caliphs and enormous economic prosperity they brought in, the Arab merchants found a warm welcome in the imperial courts and ports of Mediterranean, Africa, Middle East, India and China.

The medieval Arab merchants were able to make Ptolemy’s Alexandria the richest port in the world. Long before Columbus set sail from Europe, Arab merchants were making regular voyages that were in greater distance than what Columbus sailed. Arab merchants were the means by which inventions and thoughts were transmitted from the Far East to Europe causing western world to develop in to great and sophisticated society. No people in the Middle Ages had contributed to human progress so much as did the Arabs and the Arabic speaking people. They kept alive higher intellectual life and the study of Sciences during the period when the West was passing through the ‘Dark Ages’.

Political expansion of Arab empire reshaped the political boundaries of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. When Spain and Sind were conquered lands from Tagus to the Indus came under the political control of Arabs, giving rise to the biggest

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empire and largest collection of economies under one political system that the world had ever seen. It is said that during the palmy days of Abbasids, Baghdad was the central empire of the period, not China though it was calling itself the middle kingdom⁴.

From the seventh century to the time of Vasco da Gama maritime routes to India and China through the Spice Islands were under the control of Arabs. This monopoly allowed them to control much of the trade in silk and spices and made them the total masters of Indian Ocean trade.

Trade income or in modern sense, mercantile capital, is the surplus generated through commercial activities with others. It is the most sustainable source of income of an economy. Trade became possible when men learned to exploit nature and to produce beyond his immediate needs. Trade is considered as one of the indications for the existence or formation of state. Trade had an important role in territorial expansion during the early historic period. Through trade, along with the exchange of tangible goods, invisible cargoes of ideas, knowledge, culture, language, faith, technology etc. were also exchanged. Hence a study of ‘trade’ becomes exhaustive, when it focuses not only on the visible facet of exchange of wealth and wares but also on the other

aspects like the socio-economic, political interactions of the buyers and the sellers. In this study an attempt is made to analyze the social, economic and political interactions that took place during 9th to 15th century AD. on account of the Arab trade with East-West countries.

**Sources of the Study**

The primary sources utilized for this work consist mainly of the accounts of the medieval Arab travellers and geographers. Travelogues of explorers, adventurers, mariners and earlier Greeco-Roman accounts, European and Chinese accounts are also utilized. As medieval Arab travellers were co-travellers of Arab merchants their accounts contain a detailed narration of the itinerary of a merchant, giving meticulous details of various ports and towns en-route and the distance between them and major items of merchandise exchanged between far off lands. They also provide information on the economic, political, social and cultural conditions of different peoples of different regions.

The political superiority and economic prosperity of the medieval Arab empire and the Arab domination of the maritime routes encouraged the Arab travellers to undertake long journeys to far off lands and to produce voluminous travel accounts. The information provided in these accounts on the basis of their
personal experiences and direct contacts with informants has helped historians to reconstruct the history of the medieval period. One notable feature of these accounts is the exhaustive and interesting way of presentation of the information incorporating reports and narratives of sailors and merchants. As these accounts deal with several problems connected with trade, commerce and taxes of different countries, they are the most reliable source for the study of trade and mercantile activities of different peoples of the medieval period. Hence Arab travellers’ and geographers’ accounts are used as the major source of information for this study.

Many Non-Arab travellers’ accounts for the period from the tenth to sixteenth centuries have also been used as major source of primary information. In order to compare historical facts and identify modern names of ports and markets, many connected early European works are found to be very useful.

The secondary sources of information that have been utilized consist of many published and unpublished materials from different archives and libraries.

A brief survey of the primary sources is furnished below. The primary sources of this study can be classified in to three groups as:
a) Arab travellers’ accounts
b) Arab Geographers’ accounts and
c) Non-Arab travellers’ accounts

a) Arab travellers’ accounts:

The first known Arab traveller, Sulayman al Tajir was a merchant. He started his voyages as a maritime trader in the first half of the ninth century. He travelled several times from Siraf to China rounding the coast line of Indian Peninsula. Tracking the route of Sulayman, M. Reinaud remarks, “he started for India from the Persian Gulf, sailing with monsoon. The first country caught his attention was the Gulf of Cambay, which the Arab ships accustomed to pass for the coast of Malabar and on the direction of the Island of Ceylon”\(^5\). His travel account, Akhbar as Sin wal Hind (Tales of China and India) is the earliest known Arab description of China and the coast lands of India\(^6\). As a merchant Sulayman gives more information about the major sea routes, trade centres, merchandise and conditions of trade and traders. Scholars are of the opinion that the original work of Sulayman was lost and after twenty seven years when it was rediscovered by Abu Zayd he supplemented the Akbar with information which he

\(^5\) R.H. Major (ed), *India in the fifteenth century*, Delhi, (1974), P.XXV
gathered from merchants and seamen of Siraf\textsuperscript{7}. Akbar has been translated in to English and French\textsuperscript{8}.

Al Masudi was a great traveller, geographer, historian and encyclopaedist of the early tenth century. He travelled widely for more than twenty five years and wrote the history of Islamic World in 30 volumes. When he got settled at Busra he wrote Muruj al Dhahab (Golden Medows) describing the sects, customs, regions and condition of nations\textsuperscript{9}, and Mirat al Zaman (Mirror of the times) describing the history and geography of the countries he visited\textsuperscript{10}.

Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik written by Ibn Hauqal in the tenth century is a narrative of his travels and explains the major routes, ports and trade centres.

Ajaib al Hind (Marvels of India), a travel account written by Buzurg bn Shahryar, a merchant and captain of a ship, who sailed from Iraq to China includes a comprehensive picture of India.

Kitab-an-Nuzuhat al Mushtaq fikhtiraq al Afaq (The Book of Pleasure for those who desire to travel around the world) written by Al-Idrisi under the patronage of the Norman King, Roger II is a great source of information about Malabar and pepper trade. He

\textsuperscript{7} G.F. Hourani, \textit{Arab Seafaring}, New York, (1975), P.68
\textsuperscript{8} French (Tr.) T. Sauget, Akbar Sin wal Hind, Paris, (1948), English (Tr.) Renaud, \textit{Ancient Account of India and China}, London, (1733)
\textsuperscript{9} Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddima (Tr.) F. Rosenthal, London, (1967), P.29
called Malabar as Malai and gives valuable information about the ports and trade centres of the period. But S.M.H. Nainar says that Idrisi only repeated the works of Khurshadbeh in many respects\(^{11}\). It can be seen that information regarding the political and social conditions included in his description is a repetition of the previous reports.

Rehla, the famous travelogue of the great traveller Ibn Battuta published under the title Tuhfat Un-Nazzar fi Gharib il Amsar Wa Ajaib ul Asfar is a major source of information on trade and commerce of the middle ages. It contains important information on the political, economic, social and cultural life of the different parts of the medieval world. A good part of this travel diary is used for recording his travels and experiences in South India. His description of Malabar is more accurate and exhaustive than any of his predecessors.

Masalik ul Absar fi Mamalik ul Amsar of al Umari, a traveller of the fourteenth century from Damascus contains vast information on the social, political, religious and economic conditions of Arab lands and India. Subh ul Asha written in the fourteenth century by Shihabuddin Abul Abbas Ahmad (Al-Qalqashandi) is a mine of information on medieval West Asia and India.

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\(^{11}\) S.M.H. Nainar, *Arab geographers knowledge of Southern India*, Madras, (1942), P.18
Matlaussaadain, the travel account of Abdur Razzak who visited India and China as an Ambassador of Shah Rukh provides valuable information of the fifteenth century India and China. His account contains more information about Calicut and pepper trade.

b) Arab Geographers’ Accounts:

The medieval period produced many Arab geographers whose geographical works were characterized by accuracy and scientific interpretation. The great Arab geographers like Ibn Khurdadhbih, Ibn Faqih, Al Masudi, Istakhri, Yaqubi and Ibn Rustah provide us not only geographical and topographical description but also valuable information on trade, social and economic conditions of many medieval countries.

The principal works of Arab geographers have been collected and edited under the title Bibliothecae Geographorum Arabicorum by M.J. de Goeje in eight volumes as under

I. Istakhri, Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik.
II. Ibn Hawqal, Kitab Surat al Ard.
III. Index and Glossary to Vol. I-III.
IV. Index and Glossary to Vol. I-III.
V. Ibn al Faqih, Muktasar Kitab al Buldan.
VI. Ibn Khurdadhbih, Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik.
VII. Ibn Rustah, Kitab al A’laq al Nafisah, Yaqubi, Kitab al Buldan.

VIII. Masudi, Kitab Tanbih wal Ishraf, Index and glossary to Vols. VII and VIII\textsuperscript{12}.

The well known Arab geographer, Ibn Khurdadhbih wrote his Book of Routes in the middle of the ninth century. This great work, Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik\textsuperscript{13} contains an elaborate description of the stages of voyage from Persia to China. Al-Yaqubi, an officer in the Diwan-i-insha (Department of Correspondence) under the Abbasids, visited Armenia, Khurasan and travelled widely in the Islamic countries in the later half of ninth century. He produced his kitab-al Buldan (Book of countries) with emphasis on the topographical, geographical and economic details of the countries he visited and routes he traversed.

Abdullah Ahmad Ibn Muhammad popularly known as Ibn al Faqih was a great geographer of the early tenth century. He produced a great work on geography, ‘Kitab al Buldan’ in five volumes giving detailed description of Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Rum, Jazira, Nabia, Abyssinia, the Maghrib, Spain (Andalusia),


\textsuperscript{13} Ibn Khurdadhbih, \textit{Kitab al Masalik wal Mamalik}, (ed.) De Goeje, Leiden, (1889)
Sudan and India. This work also provides information about the social and economic conditions of these countries.

Ibn Rusta another great geographer of the early tenth century who lived in Persia produced an encyclopaediac work on geography, al-Alaq al Nafisah (Precious Bags of Traveling Provisions). This work gives much information on the topographical and geographical features of the medieval Arab empire. Al Maqdisi, the Palestinian geographer who travelled widely and collected materials for his work, Ahsanat-Taqsim fi Marifat al Aqalim, completed it in 985/986 AD. This work gives a detailed account of products, trade and industry and of cults and coinage of many countries. In the last chapter of this work, Al Maqdisi gives much information on the social and economic conditions of India. Another celebrated geographer, Istakhri of Baghdad visited many countries including India in 951 AD. He wrote two books on geography. They are Kitab al Aqalim and Masalik wal Mamalik. These books contain valuable information about many aspects of the Arab trading activities. His Masalik wal

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14 Ibn Faqih al Hamdasi, Muktasar Kitab al Buldan, (ed.) De Goeje, Leiden, (1885)
17 Istakhri, Kitab ul Masalik wal Mamalik, (ed.) Mohammed Jabir, Cairo, (1961)
Mamalik was the first book on human geography in the world\(^\text{18}\). It contained maps of each country including Sind.

**C) Accounts of Non-Arab travellers**

The works of non-Arab travellers like Al-Biruni, Marco Polo, Benjamin Tudela, Ma Huan, Athanasius Nikitin, Ludovico Varthema and Duarte Barbosa have been helpful in supplementing and confirming the information gathered from the Arab travellers’ and geographers’ accounts.

Al-Biruni who came to India from Ghazna with Mahmud of Ghazna had spent 40 years in India. On the basis of his 40 years experience, he gives first hand information and eye witness reports of the social, economic and religious conditions of medieval India. His great work *Kitab al Hind*\(^\text{19}\) is sufficient to understand the social and political conditions of medieval India.

Benjamin Tudela, a Jewish traveller from Spain travelled widely from 1159 AD. to 1170 AD. His work contains valuable information on people, ports and cities of many countries, commodities and conditions of markets.

Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller of the thirteenth century was undoubtedly the prince of great travellers of the western

\(^{18}\) Masudul Hassan, *History of Islam*, P.640

\(^{19}\) E. Sachau (ed. & tr.), *Kitab al Hind*, London, (1887)
He started his journey at the age of fifteen. He was the earliest merchant ambassador to Eastern world. He visited China and passed through India twice. He gives clear firsthand information on the social and economic conditions of the countries from his personal knowledge and experience. His account contains information about the conditions of merchants, imports and exports of India and China.

Friar John of Monte Carvino was a contemporary of Marco Polo. He started his journey to Far East in 1291 AD. He halted in India for thirteen months during his journey to China. His reports particularly about India and China are very useful.

Ma Huan, the Chinese traveller gives important information about fifteenth century India. He was the first traveller who described Cochin as a major port of South India. His descriptions give more information on the social, political and economic conditions of Calicut and Cochin. Details of weights and measures used during the fifteenth century are also available in his work. His work, Ying-yai Shenolan (Description of the coast of the Ocean) written in 1451, describes the social and economic conditions of many countries he visited. More important among them are Java,
Palembang, Malacca, Aru, Sumatra, Lambiri, Ceylon, Quilon, Cochin, Calicut and Maldives Islands.

Abdurazak’s accounts help us to have an insight into the warm cordial welcome accorded to foreign merchants in Calicut. He tells us that he was assigned a house, servants and provisions befitting his stature.

Athanasius Nikitin, the fifteenth century Russian traveller provides information on Central Asia. Major part of his work is devoted for the description of India, Egypt, Khurasan, Arabia and Turkistan. This work gives more information on the famous Persian Port Ormuz and trade routes from Persia to India, Ceylon and Burma.

Ludovico Varthema and Duarte Barbosa the two great travellers of the early sixteenth century give us valuable accounts of Arab trade. Varthema who travelled widely in Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Persia, India and Ethiopia from 1503 AD to 1508 AD gives us a first hand description of the life and people of these countries.

Barbosa, Portuguese traveller, who travelled to India during the period from 1500 to 1516 AD, gives us a detailed account of the lands, agricultural products, commodities of exchange, ports and major trade centres of medieval South India like Calicut, Quilon, Cochin and Cannanore.
Secondary Sources

The Secondary sources that have been utilized for this study consist of many published and unpublished materials obtained from various libraries and Archives. A short description of the major sources which come under the purview of previous studies connected with the present topic is given below.

Arab Geographers’ knowledge of Southern India written by S.M.H. Nainar is a valuable reference book in this study. This work has been used to identify names of medieval ports and sources of Arab merchandise, and products of South India.

Arab O Hind Key Ta ‘lluqat (Indo-Arab Relations) by Maulana Syed Sulayman Nadvi, is an extensive and critical study of Indo-Arab relations in Urdu. This work was helpful in tracing out the background and nature of Arabs’ relation with India during the medieval period. Another work of the same author Arabon Key Jahazarani (Arab Navigation)\textsuperscript{22} was useful for the study of the history of Arab navigation during Abbasid period, the role of Arabs in foreign trade and the important ports of the period. Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi’s series of articles in “Islamic culture’ (1930’s) about Arab navigation have also been utilized for the study of Arab navigation.

\textsuperscript{22} Translated by Syed Shahabuddin Abdi Rahman and edited by Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, (1966)
R.H. Major’s work, India in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century is a compilation of travellers accounts connected with fifteenth century India. In this work he has given translation of four works of great travellers namely Abdu-Ur-Razzak, Nicolo Conti, Athanasius Nikitin and Hieronimo di Santo Stefano of the same century. This works contains information on the political, social, economic and religious conditions of 15\textsuperscript{th} century India.

S. Maqbul Ahmad’s work on Indo-Arab Relations, is a worthy contribution to this study. This work is a historical survey of India’s relations with the Arab world from ancient to modern times. In this work he analyses the political, commercial and cultural relations that existed between Arabia and India throughout the ages emphasizing more the cultural relations.

Arab Accounts of India by Muhammad Zaki is a valuable reference book used for this work. It contains a detailed introduction about the Arab accounts of India from 8\textsuperscript{th} century to 14\textsuperscript{th} century. It also gives a complete translation of Masalik-ul-Absar Fi Mamalik ul Amsar of al-Umari and Subh ul Asha of al-Qalqashandi. These translations provide significant information to the present study especially on the Arab relations with India.

Arab Seafaring by G.F. Hourani is another important source of information for this study. This book gives a detailed history of
Arab seafaring from pre-Islamic era to the period of Caliphate. He specially mentions the trade routes of medieval Indian Ocean and presents a comparative analysis of medieval Arab and Mediterranean maritime activities. He provides a detailed description of navigational history of Arabs with special reference to their ship building and maritime technology.

Al-Hind, The making of Indo-Islamic world written by Andre Wink is an exhaustive work on Arab trade with India, Indian Ocean Islands and Africa. The first volume contains a detailed description of the growth and development of the medieval Indian Ocean economy. This book gives a clear picture of the role of Arab trade in shaping and sustaining the economic system of medieval Indian Ocean world.

Sales and Contracts in Early Islamic Commercial Law of Abdullah Alwi Haji Hassan is a mine of information on Arab commercial law, techniques and practices. This work contains an analysis of commercial conventions of Arabs in pre-Islamic times and a detailed discussion of Islamic commercial law on the basis of Quran and Hadith.

Trade and Traders in Western India by V.K. Jain is a detailed study on the history of trade of Western India. The fourth chapter of this book provides a detailed account of Arab settlements in
Western India. The author discusses the attitude of kings towards Arabs, Arabs’ role in India trade, trade routes and ports and major imports and exports of the period.

Rahul Sankaratyayana’s work Bharat Aur Arab Ka Sambandh is an important work connected with Arab trade. This work discusses the social, economic and cultural relations of India with Arabia.

H.C. Verma’s Medieval routes to India: Baghdad to Delhi is an exhaustive work on the medieval trade routes between the Middle East and India but no specific reference about trade relation with Eastern countries is made. This book was useful to identify the location of many medieval trade centres.

The Traditional Trade of Asia by C.G.F. Simkin is a comprehensive historical survey of Asian trade from remote antiquity to the enlightened nineteenth century. The author explains the richness of the Asian countries citing their international trade relations. This work discusses in detail the economic history of many Asian countries. This work was useful in analyzing the impacts of medieval Arab trade.

The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires, written in the early sixteenth century gives an account of the Eastern trade23, at the

time of Portuguese exploration of the East. This work discusses the causes of the decline of Arab trade in the Ocean region.

The Legacy of Islam by the editors Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume which gives a detailed account of the Arab contribution in various fields of knowledge was used as a reference book for this study as it has articles giving direct evidence to the impacts of Arab trade.

‘Maritime India’ which contains three separate studies of Indian Ocean world by eminent scholars, Holden Furber, Sinnappah Arasaratnam and Kenneth Mc Pherson provides an exhaustive history of the Indian ocean world, the main arena of medieval Arab trade. The first part of the book, Holden Furber’s Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800, tells the story of European expansion in Asia through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the eve of the French Revolution. This part provides the history of decline of Asian trade. Second part Sinnappah Arasaratnam’s Maritime India in the seventeenth century, describes the geographical features of Indian ocean its climate and ports. ‘The legacy of the immediate past’ presented in the second chapter gives an account of the Indian Ocean world prior to the arrival of Europeans. Kenneth Mc Pherson in his study, The Indian Ocean, A history of People and The Sea establishes the existence of a distinct Indian ocean economy constituted by the trade links
and commercial networks of the medieval period. The information provided by the author has helped in assessing the relationship between different merchant communities of the medieval period.

In addition to the above, many literary works dealing with the Middle East, like the History of the Arabs by Philip K. Hitti, History of Saracens by Ameer Ali and The Middle East by S.N. Fisher have also been used for the study. With the help of data gathered from the primary and secondary sources an attempt is made in this study to analyze East West trade of Arabs.

**Aim and significance of the study**

History has recorded that the medieval intercontinental trade of the Arabs was very lucrative and the main catalytic agent of European exploration of the East.

The present study is not a quantitative analysis of the Arab trade in commercial terms, but an attempt to analyze the commercial activities of medieval Arabs in a wider perspective of human interactions.

Many studies have been made on topics related to Arabs, Arab trade, Arab relation with other countries and Arab political, religious and commercial expansion. But no specific study is seen made focusing the attention on the impacts of Arab trade on different economies, societies and countries of the medieval
period. The main objective of this study is to bring out the major long standing changes that the medieval world witnessed as a result of the commercial expansion of the Arabs.

The space and time covered in this study is vast and long. Geographically it covers all the known world of the medieval period and chronologically it coincides with the golden period of Arab trade and civilization spanning over seven centuries from the ninth to the fifteenth AD. As the period of this study is historically enlightened one there are abundant sources of primary and secondary data connected with the topic. By utilizing the primary and secondary sources of information, an attempt is made in this study to assess the impacts of medieval Arab trade grouping them in to four as political, social, economic and cultural impacts.

It is a fact that the main limitation of this study is the vastness of the area and the length of the period. Segmentation of the area or the period or both will be helpful for a further micro level study of the topic.

**Chapter Plan**

This study is arranged in six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the topic of study with a brief review of the sources and explains the aims, significance and limitations of
the study. This chapter also contains a brief history of Arab people.

The second chapter, History of Arab trade traces the background of Arab trade network from the hoary antiquity to the beginning of the period of this study. The chapter contains a detailed analysis of the factors that helped the Arabs to dominate medieval world trade. A brief description of the commercial practices and techniques of medieval Arab merchants forms the concluding part of this chapter.

The third chapter, the Arab merchandise, its social, political, economic and cultural values contain a detailed discussion of major commodities of medieval Arab trade. This chapter discusses the social, political, economic and cultural conventions attached to each item of trade. Source of production and course of supply of each item of merchandise is also included in this chapter.

The fourth chapter shows the structure of East-West trade of Arabs, grouping them geographically in to three as trade within the empire, trade with the East and trade with the West. Trade with the East is discussed in this chapter grouping them in to seven sections as trade with Sind and Hind, Trade with Malabar, Trade with Coromandel Coast, Trade with Bengal, Trade with Ceylon, Trade with Indonesia and Trade with China. Trade contacts with
Africa and European countries are discussed separately in the last part of this chapter. The concluding part of this chapter contains a brief discussion of the causes of decline of medieval Arab trade.

The fifth chapter, impact of Arab trade, examines the significance of Arab trade in facilitating the exchange of cultural, social and religious values between the major civilization of Europe, Africa and Asia. The impacts of Arab trade are assessed in this chapter under four subsections as Social impacts, Cultural impacts, Economic impacts and Political impacts.

The sixth chapter which is the concluding part of this study discusses the major findings of the Study.

**The Arabs, An Historical Perspective**

Ethnically, the term ‘Arabs’ refers to the nomadic people of Arabian Peninsula, who use Arabic as their mother tongue. The nomadic tribes of ancient desert Arabia were called in Akkadian “Aribi”. Reference to Arabs as nomads and camel herders of north Arabia appear in Assyrian inscription of the ninth century BC. The term ‘Aribi’ is used in the ninth century BC as a cognomen of a rebellious chieftain, ‘Gindibu the Aribi’ who was defeated by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III\(^\text{24}\) in 853 BC. From this time onwards the people of Babylonia and Assyria are mentioned in the Assyrian

inscriptions as Aribi or Arabs. In the Biblical book Genesis reference to the Arabs can be found as merchants who buy and sell Jacob’s son Joseph.

Literally, ‘Arab’ means a ‘homeless child’, a clear reference to the nomadic trait of the ancient Arabs. Linguistically, the word Arab is derived from the term, ‘Abhar’ which means ‘to move’ or ‘to pass’ the main feature of the Bedouins. Hence it can be seen that the term was originally used to designate the nomadic tribes of Arabia and indeed is still used in that sense as a secondary meaning.

As no invader had succeeded in penetrating the sandy barriers of Arabia, the Arabs were able to maintain their ethnic purity through out the ages. The aridity and hostility of their desert habitat was their best defence against encroachment from the outside world. Even the masters of the ancient world, Romans, had ignominiously failed in their attempt to fasten the yoke of dependence up on the Arab necks. Arabs, who were born democrats, never accepted social hierarchy or racial superiority. History has recorded that the Arabs were the only people who did

25 *Ibid*. P. 14
27 *Ibid*. P. 28
not send their ambassador to Alexander the great, who had planned to make Arabia the seat of his empire.\textsuperscript{28}

Tribalism and ‘Asabiya’, the clan spirit, was the basis of Arab society, especially among the Bedouins, until the advent of Islam. The inhabitants of ancient Arabia were of two groups, the nomadic Bedouins and settled folk. South Arabians were domiciled in the more habitable regions of al-Yaman, Hadramaut and neighbouring coasts while the north Arabians were mostly nomads, living in the desert regions of Hijaz and Najd known to the Romans as ‘Arabia Deserta’. North Arabians depended mainly on caravan trade for their livelihood. South Arabians who were dominant in maritime trade built rich kingdoms of their own like the Sabaean and the Minaean. The prosperity of south Arabia encouraged the Romans to call it ‘Arabia Felix’ or ‘Happy Arabia’.

Saba or Sheba with its capital at Marib is the earliest and the most prominent kingdom in the south Arabian history. The story of the visit of the legendary Queen of Sheba to king Solomon (C.970-930 BC) suggests that trade relations were maintained between these two kingdoms.\textsuperscript{29} The Sabaeans occupied all the southern regions of the peninsula under their control and were the masters of the southern seas. As the Sabaean kingdoms developed they

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. P. 46
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Old Testament I Kings}, 10:1 - 13
\end{footnote}
built a huge earth filled dam, the Ma’rib dam, in the second half of the sixth century BC and developed a magnificent irrigation system. The main inland caravan route known as the ‘Frankincense road’ that connected the areas which produced frankincense with the Mediterranean passed through this capital city.

Between the fifth century BC and first century AD powerful South Arabian littoral kingdoms had extended their reach to Egypt, East Africa, Persian Gulf and India. The Periplus informs that the South Arabian port of Eudamon Arabia (Modern Aden) which flourished during third-second century BC. functioned as the primary transhipment point for goods exchanged between the Mediterranean lands and India.\(^{30}\)

Ma-in, a Sabean (Sabean) territory which controlled most of the incense trade gradually severed its ties with Saba by the end of the fifth century BC. Likewise Qatoban and Hadramaut, allies of the Sabean Empire up to the fourth century BC also broke free and became independent kingdoms. These four kingdoms of more or less equal strength rivaled one another for the control of incense rich Southern Arabia and in C 250 BC. the Saba conquered the Minaean Empire and some parts of the west Qatoban.

In 115 BC, a new kingdom, the Himyarite Kingdom, came into existence at Bab-al-Mandeb and flourished by the lucrative business of frankincense and myrrh. This empire conquered the other three Kingdoms and became the dominant state of Arabia by the early years of first century AD and lasted till the advent of Islam, though the Kingdom witnessed political subjugation by non-Arab powers like the Abyssinians and Persians during the sixth century AD\textsuperscript{31}.

Al Kindah was the only settled society in the central Arabia. They were migrants from Southern Arabia. Rulers of the banu-kindah were the first to receive the title ‘malik’\textsuperscript{32} in Arab political history. The great pre-Islamic poet Imrul-Quayse and Arab philosopher Yaqub Ibn Ishaq al Kindi were prominent kindites of the period. In pre-Islamic times kindites had attempted in vain, to unite the numerous tribes of Arabia around a central authority of one chief, which was later accomplished by the prophet of Islam.

The earliest North Arabian state was the Nabataean Kingdom founded by the nomadic tribe who came to the region from Trans Jordan area during the sixth century BC. This kingdom became rich by the caravan trade and was in no sense militaristic either in its inception or in its development\textsuperscript{33}. The capital of the

\textsuperscript{31} G.F. Hourani, \textit{Arab Seafaring}, P.16
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}. P. 67
Nabataeans, Petra, meaning ‘rock’ in Greek, was a vast city carved out of solid rock on the caravan route between Saba and the Mediterranean. This city was an important stop over of the South Arabian caravans as it was the only spot between Jordan and central Arabia where fresh water was abundant. Petra was the converging ground of trade routes from all parts of Arabia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Levantine ports. The Nabataean culture was synthetic, superficially Hellenic but basically Arabian and so it remained. As the sea routes to India became more familiar to the Roman sailors from the first century AD, Petra lost its advantageous position and the Nabataean kingdom began to decline. Then the east-west caravan route moved further to the north and Palmyra, a city on the route began to flourish. Palmyra reached its height between 130 AD and 270 AD when its international trade extended as far east as China. The Arab story tellers were so impressed by the magnificent ruins of this city that they narrated the city as the city of King Solomon, built for him by the Jinns. As the Palmyrene Kingdom began to decline, the Ghassanid Kingdom founded by Jafnah of an ancient south Arabian tribe, became prominent. The Ghassanids were the first christianized society in Arabia and lasted until the advent of Islam. Jabalah ibn al-Ayham, who adopted Islam for a short period

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and returned to Constantinople after renouncing his new religion is the last king of the Ghassan dynasty.

About the beginning of the third century AD a number of tribes of Yemanite origin migrated in to the fertile region west of the Euphrates and settled at al-Hirah which later became the capital of the Lakhmid dynasty of the Persian Arabia\textsuperscript{35}. The Lakhmids were fire worshippers and were well advanced in the art of writing which they transformed to the whole Arabia. This dynasty reached its zenith during the sixth century and came to end with al-Numan III (580-602 AD) who was the first and only Christian King in the dynasty\textsuperscript{36}.

Advent of Islam completely reoriented the life of Arabs. It changed not only the Bedouin polity but also the outlook of each and every member of the society. The Hajjathul Vidah (Farewell Pilgrimage) proclamation of the holy prophet, which is unique in the constitutional history of the world, denounced all kinds of tribalism and racialism and united the stratified society in to a mighty community. Missionary urge of the new religion brought large numbers of Persians, Syrians, Copts, Berbers and others in to the fold of Islam. By the early decades of Islam, Muslim community had become a single ‘Ummah’, so much so that

\textsuperscript{35} Philip K. Hitti, \textit{Op. cit.}, P. 81
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, P. 84
marriages between members of different ethnic origin were not only common but also not considered as intermarriage. In the Umayyad Spain intermarriage with the fair skinned Galicians was considered highly desirable that the ethnic purity of the Arab race was diminished frequently in each successive generation. As the Arabs had very much assimilated to the local population, nationality and racial affiliation became a matter of least importance and an Arab henceforth became one who professed Islam and used Arabic as his language.

In the medieval history, there were two great dynasties of Arab origin, the Umayyads (661-750) and the Abbasids (750-1258). The Umayyads were centered at Damascus while the Abbasids founded their capital at Baghdad. During the caliphate period the Arab empire, known to the Arab writers as ‘Mamlakkathul Islam’, that is the Kingdom of Islam, was so vast that H.C. Verma narrates, “there was a time when the travellers and merchants could pass from the confines of China to the Pillars of Hercules, from the banks of the Sindh to the Sicilian Gates, from the Oxus to the shores of the Atlantic, without stepping outside the boundaries of the vast territory ruled over by the Caliph from Damascus or

By the beginning of the period of our study, that is the ninth century, the Abbasid Caliphate had become extraordinarily wealthy and the Arab traders had established monopoly over several trade routes and items of trade. Though the Arab culture flourished during the Abbasid period the political unity of the Caliphate had declined by the tenth century and the empire had began to disintegrate into rival dynasties, like the Fatimids, Seljuks, Ayyubids, Mamluks, Safarids, Samanids and Buwayhids. Finally, the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, which ended in the destruction of Baghdad, in 1258 AD, put an end to the Abbasid Caliphate. But this paved the way for the eventual foundation of another great Caliphate known as the Ottoman which reigned the Middle East and most of the North Africa from 1300 to 1922 AD.  

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