CHAPTER I

It may seem somewhat queer to think that the Arabian art, culture and language cast a far reaching influence on the art, culture and language of the west. A person who is not well conversant with the Arabian history, can not help but thinking that the Arabian civilisation was a subsequent phenomenon in comparison to that of the west. Of course, recorded history shows that when the west experienced the waves of Greek, Roman and Christian civilisation Arabia was then simply covered with what Prof. Hitti described as "unspeakable barbarity". Indeed, no other people of the world was more blood thirsty than these desert dwellers; no other state existed in the then world who were more superstitious, devoid of civic sense and selfish than these Arabs. They had no common religion. Only common language and group feeling were the only bondage for them.

Here lies the most striking and interesting episode of history. "How an army, almost always over-matched in numbers, collected from a congeries of warring tribes divided by mere tribal jealousies, who had never before united in common enterprise, shattered the seasoned cohorto of Chosross and the disciplined and well armed
legions of Caesar is" as Prof. Noldeka rightly remarked, "a marvel. It is the story of one of the most interesting periods in the annals of the world. In its extent and its political and culture influence, the expansion of the Arab race can be linked only to that of the Romans. But whilst the Romans took centuries to attain dominance, the Arabs won his place in as many decades. These unlettered soldiers of the desert relit the torch of knowledge and gave an impetus to civilisation which, without exaggeration has few parallels in the history of mankind. "I.

Dr. Syed Amir Ali, member of the Judicial Committee of His Majesty's Privy Council, had further written "of all the older nations that have carried their arms across vast continents, that have left ineffaceable marks of their achievements on the pages of history, and enriched the world of thought by their discoveries and speculations, the saracens stand to us the closest in time". A thorough study of their contribution "by tracing the affinity of modern civilisation to theirs, might serve to remove many prejudices and some of the bitterness engendered by the conflicts and querrels of centuries". (2)

"The story of the sudden uprise of the saracenic race and their overflow, and their extra-ordinary growth and expansion, to depict the remarkable process of evolution by which a patriarchal rule developed into one of the most civilised system of Government, their contribution, 1. History of the saracens. Justice Syed Amir Ali - Preface 1927 edition - Page V.
2. Ibid - Page VII.
like those of many other people, tells us that although each community must work out its regeneration according to its individual genius, yet none can afford to wrap itself in the mantle of a dead past without the fatal certainty of extinction. It teaches us that moral worth, scholarship and intellectual attainments, however lightly, owing to factitious causes, they may be thought of for a while, must in time exercise their legitimate influence on society; that self-restraint and steadiness of purpose are qualities which can not be overrated."

The racial pride which caused these desert dwellers to look down on the conquered nations, "his failure to recognise that mere justice never won the affection of subject peoples, that to achieve this something more was needed - the sympathy of the Māmūn, the large heartedness of a Nāsir - that neither nations nor individuals lose by generous, courteous and liberal dealings - the encouragement in later times of intrigue, sycophancy and unworthiness with such disastrous results to the Arab powers and greatness - may all be described to one cause. History which comes down to us "rich with the spoils of time" had no lesson for him. The Saracen's genius for Government was intuitive, in-born, self-taught - not acquired. With an overweening sense of pride in his race and creed, for which allowances
can easily be made, he stalked through the world freely feeling, although not proclaiming, that he was an Arab citizen, a member of a great and powerful commonwealth. There was no critical Schopenhauer to laugh him to scorn. Even the tactless treatment of the barbarian tribesmen of Northern Spain must be ascribed to the same cause. The great Hājib could weep that the lesson of conciliation came too late. "(3)

But Arab's development started after Muhammad of the Koraish clan of the desert dwellers became Prophet and promulgated the religion - Islam. What was the condition of Arabia before the advent of Prophet and his new creed - Islam is a question to be scrutinised on the basis of geographical and physical condition of Arabia along with a study on the nature of the ancient Arabian people.

The geographical picture: In the South-West of Asia lay Arabia - a vast country. While its North is bounded by the Syrian Desert, the South touches the shores of Indian ocean. On its East lay the Persian gulf and the West is guarded by the Red Sea. Thus oceans and desert formed its natural boundaries. The area of this vast region is just "twice the size of France at the height of her greatness. The land is divided into several parts and each of them differs more or less from the other in the character of their soil, their climate and the appearance of their vegetation.

3. Ibid - Page IX.
of the people." To its north, lies the hilly portion. In ancient days this was inhabited by the Edomites and the Midianites of the Hebrew Testament. The Hijaz Proper contains the famous city of Madina. In ancient time it was known as "Yathreb". Then there is Mecca, where Prophet Muhammad was born and the famous port of Jeddah, the landing place of the pilgrims of Islam. In the South a chain of mountains run down from Isthmus of Suez to the Indian ocean. Hijar stretches from north to south, between the Red sea and the chains of mountains. Yemen is in the South West corner of Arabia. Hadhramant lies to the east of Yemen. It has bordered the Indian ocean while far away in east lies the gulf of Omen. From the mountains of Hijaz there stretches the high table land east ward to the desert of Al - Ahsa and Al - Baharin on the Persian gulf. This is Hijaz - a vast plateau with deserts, mountain garages and occasional green plantations - the Oases. This vast land has no navigable river and only a few rivulets made the soil fertile. The rainfall is so scanty that the country naturally became arid and sterile. Yet wherever water exists the fertility of the land becomes remarkable. In the wide and fertile valleys of the highland of Yemen coffee and indigo plants, the date-palm, vegetables and all kinds of fruit trees are grown. There are two set seasons - one in spring, the other in autumn. Hijar, on
the contrary, is a broken country with rugged rocks, scorching sun and barren valleys. In the east of the arid country lies Tayef - a smiling land covered with vegetation and shady trees, where apples, figs, pomegranates, peaches and grapes grow in abundance.

The heritage of the early Arabs: Arabia was peopled by different races at different times. People belonging to the ancient Chaldaean group were the earliest settlers of Arabia. It was a great civilisation and possibly they had extended their influence and power even in Egypt and Mesopotamia. They seemed to have built huge palaces and temples and the famous tanks near Aden was their creation. But in course of time they were destroyed by a Semitic tribe which settled in Yemen and parts of Hadramaut. They are said to have been the descendants of Kahtan or Joktan. One of his sons "Yerele" named the country and the people as Arabia and Arabs. The kings of this dynasty were called the Sabaean after Yerab's grandson Abdul Shams (meaning servant of the sun) - surnamed Saba. These kahtanite kings were great conquerors and builders of the cities. Till late 7th century of the Christian era they dominated Yemen and other parts of Arabia.

The last of the settlers are called the Isthmaelites. "Ishmael" or as the Arabs called him Ismail, was a son of Abrahim, the great patriarch of the Jews. He settled near Mecca and his descendants peopled Hijaz. They were in fact
the founder of Arabian greatness. It is said that Abrahim had erected Kaba, the holiest place of the entire Muslim world and regarded with veneration by the Arabs from the earliest times. We find this reference in "The Holy Quran" - wherein it is said -

"Remember we made the House
A place of assembly for men
and a place of safety;
And take ye the station
of Abraham as a place
of prayer; and we covenanted
with Abraham and Ismail
That they should sanctify
My House for those who
compass it round, or use it
As a retreat, or bow, or
Prostrate themselves (therein
the prayer)." (4)

and again

"And remember Abraham
And Ismail raised
The foundations of the House
(with the prayer) "Our Lord!
Accept (this service) from us;
For thou art the All-Hearing,
The All-knowing." (5)

Abraham was a Holy man and a fully devoted soul, as true worshipper of God. The Muslim tradition says that

"Abraham and his elder son Ismail (then) built the Kaba

and established the rites and usages of the sacred city. He was thus the founder of the original Islam (which is as old as mankind) in Arabia. As becomes a devout man, he offers and dedicates the work to God in humble supplication, addressing Him as the All-Hearing and the All-Knowing (6).

The people of Arabia are always divided into two classes - the dwellers of the city and the dwellers of the desert. These latter people are known as Bedouins. They live in tents and with their family and flocks roam over the desert and table-lands for pasturage.

Northern and Central Arabia had never been under any foreign yoke. Only in Yemen, the Abyssinians had a short lived domain. Ultimately they were expelled by an Arab Chief, Saif, son of Zu'l-Yezen, with the assistance of the king of Persia. Since then for nearly a century or even more, Yemen proper was ruled by a Persian Viceroy called Marzban. The Jews and Christians also lived in Arabia in a large number and followed their own religion. But the Arabs were mostly idol worshippers and also worshipped stars. Each city and each tribe had its own separate gods and goddesses, its separate temples and form of worships. But Mecca was the centre of their national life. "There in the Holy temple of kaba" 360.

idols representing all gods and goddesses whom the Arabs worshipped were installed. Even human sacrifice was not infrequent. The Greeks and the Romans called these desert dwellers of the west of Euphrates as "Saraceni", the word which is supposed to be derived either from "Sahara" which means desert and "nashin" which stands for the dwellers or, from "Sharqi" meaning Eastern, since in Arabic "Sharq" means east. " (7)