Rise of Prophet Muhammad and the Islam

It is rather difficult to sketch the real history of ancient Arabia. We derive our knowledge about ancient Arabia mainly from the Holy Quran. But Quran itself contains much of the old folk-lore of the country. (1) Prof. R.A. Nicholson also admitted the fact that "... the Koran, which was first collected soon after the battle of Yamama (633 AD) is the oldest Arabic book," (2) and that "the Koran, however, exercised a unique influence on the history of the Arabic language and literature". (3) However, we have the tradition also as the source material, which were usually handed down from father to son. However, the Arab "Muhaddis" (plural of Muhaddin collected carefully, those traditions of the eighth and the succeeding centuries of the Christian era.

To quote Professor Nicholson again - "... the history of the Arabs, so far as our knowledge of it is derived from the Arabic sources, may be divided into the following periods :

I The Sabean and Himyarite period - from 800 BC, the date of the oldest South Arabic inscriptions, to 500 A.D. 

II The Pre-Islamic period (500-622 AD)

1) Syed Amir Ali - writes in "History of the Saracens" - "The inscriptions which have been discovered in the South of Yemen, so far as they have been deciphered, largely verify our knowledge of the past as derived from the Koran and the traditions - (P-5)."


3) Ibid - Page XXII
III The Muhammadan period, beginning with the Migration (Hijra or Hegira, as the word is generally written) of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. and extending to the present day.

For the first period, which is confined to the history of Yemen or South Arabia, we have no contemporary Arabic sources except the inscriptions. The valuable but the imperfect information which these supply is appreciably increased by the tradition preserved in the Pre-Islamic poems, in the Koran, and particularly in the later Muhammadan literature. It is true that most of this material is legendary ....

The second period is called by the Muhammadan writers the "Jahiliyya" i.e. the age of Ignorance or Barbarism. Its characteristics are faithfully and vividly reflected in the songs and odes of the heathen poets which have come down to us. There was no prose literature at that time: it was the poets privilege to sing the history of his own people, to record their genealogies, to celebrate their feats of arms, and to extol their virtues."

"The last and by far the most important of the three periods comprises the history of the Arabs under Islam." (4)

However, among the people of Arabia who mainly attracts our interest are the Arab of Hijaz and Yemen.

4) Ibid
were the most famous people of the Middle ages. Again among the Hijaz people the most noted tribe was the "Quraish". They were the descendents of Fihr, surnamed Quraish. In ancient Arabic the term Quraish meant merchants. It is learnt the Fihr lived in the 3rd century A.D. and was the descendant of Maad, the son of Adnan, a descendant of Isma'il. Naturally the Quraish enjoyed special prestige and respect among the other tribes and they were proud of it. However sometimes in the 5th century A.D. a descendant of Fihr, named Kossayj, made himself master of Mecca. Gradually he became the ruler of the whole of Hijaz. It is also relevant to note here that upon the name of 'Quraish' or 'Koraish' the opinion is divided. "According to some Quraish ibn Badr or Quraish ibn Yakhbad was the leader of the caravan of Kinanah on their commercial journey, and people used to say: 'there comes the camels of Quraish' so that the whole tribe is said to have been, accordingly, called after him. According to others the tribe received the name because he used to collect the wares for sale from all sides known as 'Taqarrasha'. There is yet another opinion that Quraish was first called "Quraish" (along with his other titles Al. Mujammi, "the Collector", since he collected his tribesmen in order to strengthen his rule over Mecca which he had wrung from the Yamenite tribes, so that the name Quraish is even applied to Fihr, for among
the Quraish* are reckoned all the Arab tribes tracing their descent from Fihr.” (5)

Still that period Mecca was merely a scattered village containing chiefly of huts and tents. Qusai rebuilt the Kaaba and made a palace for himself. The main room of the palace was used as the Council Hall or Dar-un-Nedwa for transaction of public business. The Quraish also began to live in the stone built houses round the temple. He for the first time made rules for the proper Government of the people, raised taxes and supplied foods and water to the pilgrims.

Qusai died in 480 A.D. and his son Abd-ud-Dar succeeded him. But after Abd-ud-Dar's death a dispute broke out among his grandsons and the sons of his brother, Abd Mana'f about the succession to the rulership of Mecca. A division of authority scattered the relation and settled the dispute also. The administration of the water supply of Mecca and the raising of taxes were entrusted to Abd-Ush-Chams, a son of Abd Manaf. But the guardianship of the Kaaba, of the Council Chamber and of the military service was guided by the grandsons of Abd-ud-Dar.

But Abd-ush-Shams handed over his authority to his brother Hashim, who died in 510 A.D. and was succeeded by his brother Muttalib - popularly known as the "generous."

Muttalib died in the end of 520 A.D. and was succeeded by his nephew Shayba, better known by his surname - Abdul Muttalib, a son of Hashim. Meanwhile the grandsons of Abd-ud-Dar were growing rich, but were quite jealous of the growing power and prestige of the Hashim's family. Quite naturally they became eager to grasp the ruling authority of Mecca. On the other hand, Ommeya, the ambitions son of Abd-ush-Shams was not also lagging behind. Inspite of all these antagonism the high character of Abdul Muttalib and the lofty respect he received from his followers, enabled him to rule Mecca for a long time. During his time the Abyssinian army under the leadership of Abraha invaded Hijaz and entered Mecca on an elephant - an animal never seen before in Arabia. The Arab historians marked that year, A.C. 570, as an "year of elephant."

Abdul Muttalib had a number of sons and daughters. Amidst of them four sons had earned names in the history of Arabia - they were Abd Manaf or Abu Talib, Abbas or the Progenitor of the Abbaside Caliphs, Hamza and Abdullah. His other son Abu Lahab had been referred in the Quran as a persuator of Islam. Abdullah the youngest son of Abdul Muttalib was married to Amina, a lady from Yathrib. But soon after his marriage Abdullah died and a few days after his death Amina gave birth to a child who was named by Abdul
Muttalib as "Muhammad" or "the Praised one". Muhammad was born on 29th August 570 A.D. and with him the history of Arabia opened a new page to record the best known civilisation of the hitherto existing human race. It was this baby Muhammad who became the Arabian Prophet in the later days.

We know very little about Muhammad's childhood. In fact the Quran told us very little about his formative years. Of course the early Muslim writers and saints have added some further informations about him. Inspite of being an orphan and without property in a materialistic society Muhammad grew up under the kind eyes of his uncle Abu Taleb and soon became an honest and capable merchant. When he was a young man, a merchant woman, Khadija Begam entrusted him with the care of her caravan and finding him trust worthy propose to marry him. Muhammed got wedded with Khadija Begam. They were leading a happy life. From his childhood Muhammad was fond of God and on many evenings he went to nearby cave, namely Hira, to meditate. Muhammad was not wholly contented with his ease going life and from the very beginning he had a confrontation with Pagan Arab values. However, "one night in 610, during the Arabic month of Ramzan, Muhammad was visited by an angel, who exhorted him to read aloud. In awe and terror, Muhammed, cried out "I can not read" .... Embracing him the angel again ordered -
"Read: in the name of thy Lord who created
Created mankind from a blood-clot.
Read: For thy Lord the most generous;
He has taught by the pen.
Taught men what he knew not (Qur'an, 96:1-5)" (6)

The angel told him - "Oh Muhammad, thou art the
messenger of God and I am Gabriel." Afraid Muhammad hurried
back to his home, shivering, and Khadija Begam covered him
with a warm coat. But the angel again appeared and told him

"O thou who art shrouded in thy mantle,
rise and warn !
Thy Lord magnify,
Thy robes purify,
And from iniquity flee:" (Qur'an, 74:1-5) (7)

Seeing the condition of Muhammad afraid Khadija went to her
cousin who was a Hanif, (who also embraced Christianity)
assured her that Muhammad was not mad, but was God's long
awaited messenger to the Arabs. She returned to her husband
and reassured him.

"Ever ready in the service of God, thou art he
of whom I bear witness: there is no God but He,
And thou art His chosen Apostle" - (8)

Muhammad realised that he had heard God's Exhortation to
proclaim His existence to the Arabs and also to warn them of
a judgement day when all would be called to account.

6) A concise history of the Middle East = Arthur Goldschmidt -
ed - 3, West view Press - Page 31•
Macmillan.- 1955.
8) The Holy Quran - Tr. and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali -
C-33 / Page 10.
Now Muhammed decided to preach his views of monothesism and his experience to the Pagan Meccans. His first converts were "Ali," son of Abu Talib, but brought up in Muhammads home, who later married Pohet's daughter Fatimah and played a major role in early Islamic history; "Abu Bakr," Muhammed's best friend and a man of wealth and social standing; "khadiji Begam," his own wife; "Arkam," a very young member of the prestigious clan, Uman, an imposing figure from a weak clan; "Uthman," an elegant but quite youth of the powerful Umayyad family; "Bilal" an Eithiopian slave and "Zayd ibn Harithah," a captured christian Arab. Surprisingly Abu Talib, Muhammed's protector and uncle had not embraced his teachings or Islam.

The first believers, though they came from every class and many of the Meccan clans, were mainly young men from upper-middle stratum. Some converts were sons or younger brothers of the leading merchants, other were important men who had either lost the status or failed to attain what they wanted in Pagan Mecca. A few were 'weak' or outsiders of the system who had no political clout of the Umayyads or the Hashimites.

W. Motogomery Watt summarised the early message of Prophet Muhammed in five main points — viz.,

a) God is good and all powerful.

b) God will call all men and women back to Himself on the last day and will judge and reward or punish them in accordance with their activities on earth.
c) People should thank God and worship Him for his blessings and that he created this beautiful world.

d) God expect people to share their worldly goods with others who are needier than themselves.

And

e) Muhammad has been designated as God's messenger to his own people, the Arabs of Arabia.

Muhammad's message had disrupted the families and threatened the established order of the Pagan Mecca. The Meccans rejected his message and feared that Muhammed might try to take away their wealth and power. It should be remembered here that the Arab's polytheistic animism and ancestor worship, which was a major source of Mecca's income, were no longer a living faith, though pilgrimage to 'Kaba' and other shrines still continued. The money making activities as merchants or the shrine keepers of the Meccan leaders had, invariably made them acquisitive and self-centered. Instead of cherishing the noble ideals of bravery in the battle field and generosity to the poor, these Arabs of Mecca admired the ability to bargain in the market place.

Their disowning of goddesses by Muhammed enraged the Meccan leaders "for the keepers of their nearby shrines were Mecca's allies'. But they could not inflict any personal injury to Muhammad since the later was under
the protection of Abu Talib, who at the death of Abdul Muttalib was then the chief of the Quraish clan. Yet the Meccan tried a boycott of the whole Hashimite clan which failed. They now took the recourse of torchering the followers of Muhammad the Muslims some of whom had to flee to the Christian Ethiopia. Muhammad was tired of the constant antagonism of these Pagan Meccan. Meanwhile he faced his bad days. In 619 A.D. he lost his two most trusted personalities. Both Khadiji Begam and Abu Talib died. Excepting Abu Talib Muhammad had no protector within the Hashimite clan, and so the persecution by the Meccan grew worse. Finding Mecca untenable for himself Muhammad decided to leave Mecca. During the pagan pilgrimage in 620 A.D. a group of Arabs from Yathrib, now known as Madina, met Muhammad and told him that the rift between two pagan tribes of Yathrib had grown so worst that they were unable to protect themselves from the local Jewish tribes. They invited Muhammad to come to Yathrib and assume the ruling-reign there. The next year some more pilgrims from Yathrib met Muhammad and some of them converted to Islam. They agreed to give sanctuary to the Meccan Muslims provided Muhammad render them service as arbitrator. Muhammad quickly grabbed the opportunity. As was said earlier Mecca was becoming inhabitable for Muhammad and his followers - the Muslims. He asked his
followers to immigrate from Mecca to Madina (Yathrib) and himself finally departed from Mecca with his closest companions in September 622 A.D. This immigration, called the "Hijrah" in Arabic, was indeed a major turning event of Islamic history. He became the sole arbitrator in Yathrib where he now united his followers as a community, as a nation or as the Arabs called it "Ummah". So long Muhammed was a Prophet at Mecca, he now became a statesman at Madina. Islam became both a faith on one God as well as a socio-political system.

It is needed to tell in short what the terms "Islam" and "Muslim" stand for before we go into the study of further activities of Muhammed and his successors at Yathrib. Those who believed in Muhammed as God's messenger to them became known as Muslims. "The Arabic word " Muslim " means "one who submits" - to God's will. This act of submission is Islam which became the name of the religion. (9) Thus, in its narrow sense the act of submission to the will of God or "Allah" is Islam. "But in the broadest sense, every object in the universe has its own 'Islam'. It must conform to God's rules; or to what a theists might call nature's law...... any one who submits to God's will, worships Him, and expects his reward or punishment in the world to come, is broadly speaking, a "muslim. (10) Prof. Nicholson also writes - "Islam" is a verbal noun formed from

West View Press/London - Page 33.

10) Ibid - Page 43.
from 'Aslama' which means 'to surrender' and in a religious sense, to surrender one's self to the Will of "God". The participle Muslim (Moslem) devotes one who thus surrenders himself." (11) "God is eternal and Islam is His eternal discipline. Its function is to give light or to guide the universe as a whole to the right path of enlightenment leading to eternity and eternal peace with all its benefits ... As God is from eternity to eternity, His ever bright countenance or its effulgence which we call "Islam", is also from eternity to eternity. Islam existed, before anything including the universe as a whole was given existence. God is perpetual good and Islam is His perpetual goodness." (12)

In common usage a Muslim is anyone who strongly believes that God revealed his message for the last time to Muhammed on behalf of all humanity through the sacred book - Quran. The Muslim also believes that "God is all powerful and all knowing, the creator of all that was and is and will be, the righteous judge of good and evil, and the generous guide to men and women through His messengers and His scriptures. He has no peer, no partner, no offspring, and no human attributes that might limit Him." (13) Hence the Muslims say - "La Ilaha ill-Allah, Muhammad-Ur-resul-Allah" which means "There is no other God but Allah, the One God and Muhammed is the messenger of God." The muslims believed that God make his existence known to humanity through the words he

13) A concise History of the Middle East - A Goldschmidt Jr. Page 44.
put into the mouth of the Prophets and these words have been turned into books like the "Taurit" of the Jews (or the first five books of the Bible), the Gospel of the Christians and the Quran of the Muslims. These prophets were the messengers of God and the Muslims believe in the existence of a number of Prophets like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jab, Jessus though Islam stresses that Muhammad was the last of the Prophets. As regards the manner a believer or Muslim, by which may obey God—the Islamic rule mainly talks about five pillars—witness or "Shahadat", worship or "Salat", fasting or "Saum", alms or "Zakat" (which means 40th part) and Pilgrimage or "Hajj". Thus Islam is not only a faith on God, it also corresponds with some duties which make men pure and confident to the existence and all pervasiveness of God.

What Prophet Muhammad did was actually that he infused this sense of duty to a supreme power, God, within the heart of a band of Pagan Arabs hitherto accustomed to look for their own sinister interest. These sense of duties is both individualistic as well as community based in nature for the performance of these duties, though required individual dedication can only be made through an urdent desire for achieving good for the whole community at large, rather for the whole of mankind. Here sinister interest plays only the role of personal clinliness in the judgement day, but
that personal cleanliness can only be achieved through cleanliness of the people of whole community since man is a social being. Thus Muhammed converted a whole community, having no bondage between themselves till his appearance, into a group of united men, a group of believers who not only believe on God but also on their own commonness, homogeneity and purposes. This group of believers became known as Muslims. Muhammed achieved this unique task by way of his preachings.

Yathrib became Ummah and renamed Madina or Madinat-al-Nabi or city of the Prophet. All Arabs of Madina did not become Muslims and those who converted to Islam were called the 'ansar' or helpers. The non Muslim Arabs of the land paid no heed to Muhammed's advice and continued their former rifts amongst themselves. Neither the jews were agreeable to accept Muhammed's revelations. It, obviously, became hard for Muhammed to win the allegiance of the city as a whole. Moreover as the Meccan imigrants showed no desire for farming, the economic basis of the Oasis, "they were soon cut off from commerce, which they did not know how to conduct, so long as Pagan Mecca controlled the caravan routes and paid protection money to the nearby bedouin tribes. After a few fiascoes they hit the Meccan hard to hurt. In the second year after Hijrat - on March 624 Mecca sent a retaliatory army to crush Muhammad which met the later's force,
at a village called Badr, south-west of Madina. Muhammad and his Muslims won decisively. The victory at Badr enhanced the prestige of Islam and of Madina in the eyes of the tribal Arabs. Though in 625 the Meccans defeated Muhammad in the battle of Uhud, they could not take Madina and thus the Ummat survived. Now Islam was taking deep root. In 627 A.D. the Muslims defeated the Meccans again. Gradually the Arab tribes were breaking with Mecca and began to side with Muhammad. As his powers grew Muhammad was consolidating his position within Mecca. He soon crushed the hostile Jews and non-Muslims of Madina. Thus securing his position from within he led a band of pilgrims to Mecca in 628 A.D. wherein he encountered with the Meccan troops at the field of Hudaybiyah, north of Mecca, where the two sides worked out a truce that ended their state of war. The Muslims were permitted to enter Mecca and the later accepted them as equals. Shortly afterwards two of the best Arab fighters heroes, "Khattab" and "Amr" embraced Islam. In 630 Muhammad again marched to Mecca with a huge army and the Muslims occupied the city peacefully. Thus Mecca became Muslim. Soon the Muslims also defeated a large coalition of Arab tribes from around Taif and the Hijaz was now united under the Islam. Other Arab clans soon recognised his superiority. Madina became the capital of a newly born Muslim State. By 632 nearly the whole of Arabia became Muslim. On 8th June 632 Muhammad, the Prophet, breathed his last.