Lecture #17

**Arabia: The Cradle of Islam**

**Geography of Arabia**

* **Overview**:
  + Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is the largest peninsula globally.
  + Known as "Jazirat-ul-Arab" (Island of Arabia), it is geographically bounded by:
    - **East**: Persian Gulf
    - **South**: Arabian Sea
    - **West**: Red Sea
    - **North**: Syrian Desert (referred to as the "sand sea").
  + Features include:
    - Deserts with broiling sand.
    - Mauve mountains and jagged peaks.
    - Rocky and barren landscapes interspersed with circular crags and mirages.
  + A vast plateau that rises gradually from east to west, with fertile valleys in western mountain ranges and parts of Yemen.

**Political Divisions (as of 1992)**

1. **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**
2. **Republic of Yemen**
3. **Sultanate of Oman**
4. **United Arab Emirates**
5. **State of Qatar**
6. **State of Bahrain**
7. **State of Kuwait**

**Vegetation**

* Sparse vegetation due to extreme aridity and saline soils.
* Prominent plants:
  + **Date-palms**: Thrive near water; provide staple food, wood, and by-products.
  + **Cereals**: Wheat, barley, oats, maize, and millet.
  + **Other crops**:
    - Coffee (Yemen).
    - Cotton (Yemen and Oman).
    - Mangoes (Al-Hasa, Saudi Arabia).
    - Coconut palms (Oman).
  + Forests are limited to juniper clusters in Yemeni highlands.

**Ecology**

* **Water**:
  + A critical factor shaping Arabian history.
  + Settlements like Makkah formed due to springs such as Zamzam.
* **Oil reservoirs**:
  + Discovered in the 20th century, oil transformed the region from a desolate area to a hub of geopolitical significance.
* **Camels**:
  + The Arabian camel (dromedary) was vital for transport, sustenance (milk), and shelter (camel hair for tents).

**Political Conditions in Pre-Islamic Arabia**

* **Tribal Society**:
  + Absence of centralized governance except in Yemen.
  + Authority rested with tribal chiefs, based on personal character and moral influence rather than political power.
* **Justice System**:
  + No formal police or judiciary existed.
  + Justice was tribal; crimes led to personal revenge or collective tribal action.
* **Tribalism (Asabiyya)**:
  + Tribal loyalty took precedence over ethics.
  + Tribes protected members even if they were offenders.
* **War**:
  + A constant feature of society.
  + Reasons included resource scarcity and inter-tribal animosity.
  + Seen as a sport to demonstrate heroism and gain tribal honor.

**Economic Conditions**

1. **Jewish Dominance**:
   * Controlled agriculture, best lands, and industries.
   * Monopoly over weapons manufacturing.
2. **Slavery**:
   * Slaves were traded and considered property.
   * Slavery formed the lowest and most oppressed social class.
3. **Capitalism**:
   * Wealth concentrated among merchants and moneylenders.
   * High-interest rates on loans led to exploitation and widening wealth gaps.
4. **Urban Centers**:
   * **Makkah**:
     + A hub for trade, with caravans traveling to Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Iraq.
     + Economy depended on caravan trade requiring skill and organization.

**Social Conditions**

* **Patriarchal Society**:
  + Women were objectified; practices included:
    - Unlimited polygamy.
    - Inheriting wives (except mothers) after a man's death.
    - Female infanticide, upheld due to societal pressures.
* **Vices**:
  + Common practices included:
    - Alcohol consumption.
    - Gambling, often compulsive.

**Religious Beliefs in Pre-Islamic Arabia**

Known as the "Times of Ignorance" (Jahiliyyah), Arabian society followed diverse religious practices:

1. **Idol-Worshippers (Polytheists)**:
   * Majority of Arabs worshipped idols.
   * Each tribe had its own idol.
   * Kaaba in Makkah housed 360 idols, though it was originally built by Prophet Abraham and his son Ismael for the worship of one God.
2. **Atheists**:
   * Believed in the eternity of the material world, denying divine existence.
3. **Zindiqs**:
   * Influenced by Persian dualism.
   * Believed in two forces (good and evil/light and darkness) locked in eternal conflict.
4. **Sabines**:
   * Worshipped stars and celestial objects.
5. **Jews**:
   * Migrated to Hijaz after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.
   * Established strong centers in towns like Yathrib, Khayber, Fadak, and Umm-ul-Qura.
   * Converted some Arabs to Judaism.
6. **Christians**:
   * North Arabian Ghassan tribe was converted by Romans.
   * Some clans later migrated to Hijaz.
7. **Monotheists**:
   * A small group following Prophet Abraham's teachings.
   * Refused idol worship.
   * Included members of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) family and clan (Banu Hashim), including future Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA).