

CHAPTER IHISTORICAL CONCIOUSNESS OF THE ANCIENT ARABS

The pagan Arabs are divided into ^{two} categories i.e. the South Arabs and the North Arabs. The South Arabs were culturally far more advanced than the North ones. They were also acquainted with the art of writing, developing their own system of writing called "Musnad or Himyarite script". But, despite this, they paid no particular attention to recording their history which might throw abundant light on their socio-political life. The only material that serves to indicate, though very little, the existence of historical conciousness among them has come down to us in the form of inscriptions which were first discovered by Carsten Niebuhr in 1772. These inscriptions may be classified as follows: (1) Votive, engraved on tablets of bronze placed in the temples and dedicated to 'Alqamah (Ilmuqah), Athtar and Shams; (2) architectural, occuring on the walls of the temples and other public edifices to commemorate the name of the builder of or the contributor to the construction; (3) historical, reporting a battle or announcing a victory; (4) police ordinances, inscribed on pillars in the entry; (5) funerary, attached to sepulchres.¹

In other words, these inscriptions help us know about the names of the rulers of Yemen such as Dhamara i Dhirrih (Glorious), Yathaamar Bayyin (Distinguished), Kariba'il Watār Yuhānim (Great, Beneficient), Samahali Yanūf (Exalted), their social and political activities

¹See Hitti, P.K.; History of the Arabs, London, 1972, p. 51.

(though very scanty and vague) and some of the wars they fought.² They also speak about mutual relations between the rulers of South Arabia, their laws, levies, works of public benefit like building of dams, irrigation system etc.³

On the contrary, the Arabs of north lived almost a primitive life, and the only form of literature which enabled them to give vent to their simple sentiments was poetry. The ancient poetry popularly called "the public register of the Arabs" (*diwān al-ʿArab*)⁴ has historical importance as it throws light on every aspect of the pre-Islamic life. In the words of Prof. Fāriq, it gives us a true and fairly clear picture of the social, moral and intellectual life of the Arabs.⁵

Among other branches of knowledge of the pre-Islamic times which have similarity with History are the battle-day narratives of the Arabs, commonly known as "*Ayyām al-ʿArab*". These narratives which were preserved by oral transmission contain the narrations of the wars between rival tribes like the War of Basūs, Dāhis, al-Ghabra, Dhi Qar etc, which describe the chivalrous deeds of the heroes who fought in the battles, magnanimity and nobility of the descent of their forefathers.⁶ Some of them comprise the tales of other deities whereas others throw light on their religious and socio-cultural

² See Nicholson, R.A.; *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge, 1979, p.10 and Fāruqī, N.A.; *Early Muslim Historiography*, p.21.

³ See *Early Muslim Historiography*, p.21.

⁴ See al-Suyūṭī; *al-Muzhir*, Vol. II, Cairo, 1282 A.H., p.235.

⁵ *A History of Arabic Literature*, Delhi, 1972, p.43. Also see Al-Fākhūrī, Hannā; *Tārīkh Adab al-ʿArabī*, 6th edition, Beirut, p.65.

⁶ See *Early Muslim Historiography*, p.4.

activities. Besides, they do reveal to some extent socio-political relations between the Arabs and the neighbouring countries like Persia and Rome. They also tell us about their intercommunal behaviour of Qahtanis and 'Adnanis or list the names of their tribes, clans, families, their pre-eminent personalities, dwellings, achievements, activities etc.⁷

Geneology is yet another form of the pre-Islamic literature which serves as the indicative of the existence of the historical sense of the ancient Arabs of the northern region. There was an age-old practice among the Arabs of preserving their geneological data as a proof of their purity of blood. Even a child was fully acquainted with the geneological tables of his progenitors. This branch of knowledge constitutes an essential part of the pre-Islamic poetry and battle-day narratives, which are often rich in geneological information.

Historical elements are also found in the prose narratives used by the rhapsodists to introduce and set forth plainly the matter of their songs, and in the orally transmitted legends and stories like the story of the advent of Ismā'īl (A.S.) to Makka, the construction of the Kāba, the history of the Kāba upto the time of Qusayy b-Kitāb, the story of 'Amr b-Luhayy and the deities of the northern Arabs, the narration of "Hilf al-Fudūl" etc.⁸

Besides, inscriptions are also one of the sources of historical material about the northerners. One of the inscriptions, found in

⁷Ibid p. 39.

⁸See A Literary History of the Arabs, 1979, p.31 and Zaidān, *Tarikh Adab al-Lughāt al-Arabiyya*, ed. Shauqi Daif, Cairo, p.171.

Hawran, is that of Imru al-Qais, the king of Hira, which dates from 328 A.D. The other, that of Sharahil, dates from 568 A.D. and refers to a destruction of Khaybar which had taken place a year before. Both the inscriptions belong to the north western fringe of Arabia.

The custom of counting the year like the calendar system of the Qurayshites in pre-Islamic times may also be regarded as an indicative of the historical consciousness of the north Arabs.