

Revision Notes
Chapter 4: Central Islamic Islands

Snippets From the Chapter

1. Rise of Islam

Three Phases - Faith, Community & politics

(a) Faith :

Polytheistic Arabs :

- The Arabs divided into *Qabilas*. Each tribe had its own god or goddess, who was worshipped as an idol (*sanam*) in a shrine (*masjid*).
- The polytheistic Arabs were vaguely familiar with the notion of a Supreme God, Allah (possibly under the influence of the Jewish and Christian tribes living in their midst), their attachment to idols and shrines was more immediate and stronger.

Prophet Muhammad:

- He was born in Mecca in 570.
- During 612-32, the Prophet Muhammad preached the worship of a single God, Allah, and the membership of a single community of believers (umma). This was the origin of Islam.
- Around 612, Muhammad declared himself to be the messenger (rasul) of God who had been commanded to preach that Allah alone should be worshipped.
- In 622, Muhammad was forced to migrate with his followers to Medina. Muhammad's journey from Mecca (hijra) was a turning point in the history of Islam, with the year of his arrival in Medina marking the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

Scene before - 12 AD

- Between 950 and 1200, Islamic society was held together not by a single political order or a single language of culture (Arabic) but by common economic and cultural patterns.
- The Muslim population, less than 10 per cent in the Umayyad (a prosperous clan of



the Quraysh tribe) and early Abbasid periods, increased enormously.

- The identity of Islam as a religion and a cultural system separate from other religions became much sharper, which made conversion possible and meaningful.

(b) Community

- Muhammad was to found a community of believers (*umma*) bound by a common set of religious beliefs.
- The community would bear witness (*shahada*) to the existence of the religion before God as well as before members of other religious communities. Muhammad's message particularly appealed to those Meccans who felt deprived of the gains from trade and religion and were looking for a new community identity.
- Those who accepted the doctrine were called Muslims.
- They were promised salvation on the Day of Judgment (*qiyamat*) and a share of the resources of the community while on earth.
- The Muslims soon faced considerable opposition from affluent Meccans who took offence to the rejection of their deities and found the new religion a threat to the status and prosperity of Mecca.

(c) Polity

- After Muhammad's death in 632 AD political authority was transferred to the *Umma* with no established principle of succession.
- This created opportunities for innovations but also caused deep divisions among the Muslims.
- The biggest innovation was the creation of the institution of **caliphate**, in which the leader of the community (amir al-muminin) became the deputy (*khalifa*) of the Prophet.
- The twin objectives of the caliphate were to retain control over the tribes constituting the *umma* and to raise resources for the state.
- The main duties of the Khalifas were to safeguard and spread Islam.

2. Modern Islam

- By twenty-first century there are over 1 billion Muslims living in all parts of the world.



- They are the citizens of different nations with different languages and dresses.

3. Early Islam

- United in its observance of the **sharia** in ritual and personal matters
- It was defining its religious identity.
- Islam laid special stress on the principle of equality and believed that all men are the descendants of Allah.
- Islam strongly opposed idol worship.
- Reciting *Kalma* (holy chants), *Namaz* (prayer), *Roza* (fast), *Zakat* (alms tax) and *Hajj* are five pillars of Islam.
- Even tribes outside Mecca considered the **Kaba** holy and installed their own idols at this shrine, making annual pilgrimages (**hajj**) to the shrine.

4. Social Scenario - Before Prophet Muhammad

- Before 612 AD - **Jahiliyyah** is an Islamic concept of the period of time and state of affairs in Arabia before the advent of Islam. It is often translated as the "Age of Ignorance".
- The **Jahiliyyah** age was age of the tribes.
- In the seventh century, prior to rise of Islam, Arabia was socially, economically, politically and religiously backward. Arabia was dominated by Bedouins, a nomadic tribe moving from dry to green areas.
- Institution of slavery was prevalent, trade was not developed, tribes indulged in loot and plunder.
- The principle of 'Might is Right' due to lack of central authority.

5. Change in Social scenario - After Prophet Muhammad (After 612 AD)

- In Medina, Muhammad created a political order from all three sources which gave his followers the protection they needed as well as resolved the city's ongoing civil strife.
- The umma was converted into a wider community to include polytheists and the Jews of Medina under the political leadership of Muhammad.
- Muhammad consolidated the faith for his followers by adding and refining rituals and ethical principles.
- The community survived on agriculture and trade, as well as an alms tax (zakat).



- In addition, the Muslims organised expeditionary raids (ghazw) on Meccan caravans and nearby oases. These raids provoked reactions from the Meccans and caused a breach with the Jews of Medina.
- After a series of battles, Mecca was conquered and Muhammad's reputation as a religious preacher and political leader spread far and wide.
- Muhammad now insisted on conversion as the sole criterion for membership of the community.
- Medina became the administrative capital of the emerging Islamic state with Mecca as its religious centre.
- The Kaba was cleansed of idols as Muslims were required to face the shrine when offering prayers.
- Muhammad was able to unite a large part of Arabia under a new faith, community and state.

6. Political Factors of the Caliphates

After death of Muhammad in 632 AD - The biggest innovation for creation of the institution of caliphate are as follows:

a) Umayyads and Polity

- The third caliph, Uthman (644-56) was assassinated and Ali became the fourth caliph
- The rifts among the Muslims deepened after Ali (656-61) fought two wars against those who represented the Meccan aristocracy.

Ali's supporters and enemies later came to form the two main sects of Islam: **Shias and Sunnis**.

Ali established himself at Kufa and defeated an army led by Muhammad's wife, Aisha, in the **Battle of the Camel (657)**. He was, however, not able to suppress the faction led by Muawiya, a kinsman of Uthman and the governor of Syria.

- The first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya became the next caliph in 661, and founded the **Umayyad dynasty** in 661 which lasted till 750.
- Muawiya moved his capital to Damascus and adopted the court ceremonies and administrative institutions of the Byzantine Empire.

b) Abbasid Revolution



- A well-organised movement, called *dawa*, brought down the Umayyads and replaced them with another family of Meccan origin, the Abbasids (descendants of Abbas, the Prophet's uncle) in 750.
- The Abbasids came to power in 750. The foundation Abbasids dynasty was laid by Abu-ol-Abbas.
- Under Abbasid rule, Arab influence declined, while the importance of Iranian culture increased. The Abbasids established their capital at Baghdad
- The ninth century witnessed the downfall of Abbaside empire, which created space for the emergence of several sultanates

c) Break-up of the Caliphate and the Rise of Sultanate

- The Abbasid state became weaker from the ninth century because Baghdad's control over the distant provinces declined, and because of conflict between pro-Arab and pro-Iranian factions in the army and bureaucracy.
- In 810, a civil war broke out-between Amin and Mamun, sons of the caliph Harun al-Rashid.
- From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, there was a series of conflicts between European Christians and the Arab states.

7. Economic factors -

a) Agriculture

- The economic condition of the Islamic world, during medieval period was very prosperous.
- Agriculture was the principal occupation of the settled populations in the newly conquered territories
- The lands conquered by the Arabs that remained in the hands of the owners were subject to a tax (kharaj), which varied from half to a fifth of the produce, according to the conditions of cultivation.
- When non-Muslims started to convert to Islam to pay lower taxes, this reduced the income of the state. To address the shortfall, the caliphs first discouraged conversions and later adopted a uniform policy of taxation.
- Agricultural prosperity went hand in hand with political stability
- Islamic law gave tax concessions to people who brought land under cultivation.



b) Urbanisation

- Islamic civilisation flourished as the number of cities grew phenomenally.
- Among this class of garrison-cities, called misr (the Arabic name for Egypt), were Kufa and Basra in Iraq, and Fustat and Cairo in Egypt.
- Their size and population surged, supported by an expansion in the production of foodgrains and raw materials such as cotton and sugar for urban manufactures
- A vast urban network developed, linking one town with another and forming a circuit.

c) Commerce

- Political unification and urban demand for foodstuffs and luxuries enlarged the circuit of exchange.
- Geography favoured the Muslim empire, which spread between the trading zones of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean
- For five centuries, Arab and Iranian traders monopolised the maritime trade between China, India and Europe.
- This trade passed through two major routes, namely, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.
- High-value goods suitable for long-distance trade, such as spices, textile, porcelain and gunpowder, were shipped from India and China to the Red Sea ports of Aden and Aydhab and the Gulf ports of Siraf and Basra.

8. The Legend of Learning and Culture

a) Development of various literary forms, literature & litterateurs

- For religious scholars (ulama), knowledge (ilm) derived from the Quran and the model behaviour of the Prophet (sunna) was the only way to know the will of God and provide guidance in this world. Before it took its final form, the sharia was adjusted to take into account the customary laws (urf) of the various regions as well as the laws of the state on political and social order (siyasa sharia).
- A group of religious-minded people in medieval Islam, known as **Sufis**, sought a deeper and more personal knowledge of God through **asceticism** (rahbaniya) and **mysticism**. The Sufis were liberal in their thought and they dedicated their lives for



the service of humanity and propagation of Islam.

- In the eighth and ninth centuries, ascetic inclinations were elevated to the higher stage of **mysticism** (tasawwuf) by the ideas of **pantheism** and love.

Pantheism is the idea of oneness of God and His creation which implies that the human soul must be united with its Maker. Unity with God can be achieved through an intense love for God (ishq), which the **woman-saint Rabia** of Basra (d. 891) preached in her poems.

ayazid Bistami (d. 874), an Iranian Sufi, was the first to teach the importance of submerging the self (fana) in God. Sufis used musical concerts (sama) to induce ecstasy and stimulate emotions of love and passion.

- Scholars with a theological bent of mind, such as the group known as **Mutazila**, used Greek logic and methods of reasoning (kalam) to defend Islamic beliefs. Philosophers (falasifa) posed wider questions and provided fresh answers. **Ibn Sina** (980-1037), a doctor by profession and a philosopher, did not believe in the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment.
- **Adab** (a term which implied literary and cultural refinement) forms of expressions included poetry (**nazm** or orderly arrangement) and prose (nathr or scattered words) which were meant to be memorised and used when the occasion arose. Geography and travel (**rihla**) constituted a special branch of adab.
- The Samanid court poet **Rudaki** (d. 940) was considered the father of New Persian poetry, which included new forms such as the short lyrical **poem** (ghazal) and the **quatrain** (rubai, plural **rubaiyyat**). The **rubai** is a four-line stanza in which the first two lines set the stage, the third is finely poised, and the fourth delivers the point. The rubai reached its zenith in the hands of **Umar Khayyam** (1048-1131), also an astronomer and mathematician, who lived at various times in Bukhara, Samarkand and Isfahan.
- Mahmud of **Ghazni** gathered around him a group of poets who composed anthologies (**diwans**) and epic poetry (**mathnavi**). The most outstanding was **Firdausi** (d. 1020), who took 30 years to complete the **Shahnama** (Book of Kings), an epic of 50,000 couplets which has become a masterpiece of Islamic literature. The Shahnama is a collection of traditions and legends (the most popular being that of Rustam).

b) Books of moral lessons and amusement



- The catalogue (**Kitab al-Fihrist**) of a Baghdad bookseller, **Ibn Nadim** (d. 895), describes a large number of works written in prose for the moral education and amusement of readers. The oldest of these is a collection of animal fables called **Kalila wa Dimna** (the names of the two jackals who were the leading characters) which is the Arabic translation of a Pahlavi version of the **Panchtantra**.
- The most widespread and lasting literary works are the stories of hero-adventurers such as **Alexander (al-Iskandar) and Sindbad**, or those of unhappy lovers such as **Qays** (known as Majnun or the Madman). These have developed over the centuries into oral and written traditions. The Thousand and One Nights is another collection of stories told by a single narrator, **Shahrzad**, to her husband night after night.
- In his **Kitab al-Bukhala** (Book of Misers), Jahiz of Basra (d. 868) collected amusing anecdotes about misers and also analysed greed.
- From the ninth century onwards, the scope of **adab** was expanded to include biographies, manuals of ethics (**akhlaq**), **Mirrors for Princes** (books on statecraft) and, above all, history (tarikh) and geography.

c) Developments by 10th Century

- By the tenth century, an Islamic world had emerged which was easily recognisable by travellers.
- Religious buildings were the greatest external symbols of this world. Mosques, shrines and tombs from Spain to Central Asia showed the same basic design – arches, domes, minarets and open courtyards – and expressed the spiritual and practical needs of Muslims.
- In the first Islamic century, the mosque acquired a distinct architectural form (roof supported by pillars) which transcended regional variations.

d) Desert - Palaces developed

- The Umayyads built ‘desert palaces’ in oases, such as Khirbat al-Mafjar in Palestine and Qusayr Amra in Jordan, which served as luxurious residences and retreats for hunting and pleasure.
- The palaces, modelled on Roman and Sasanian architecture, were lavishly decorated with sculptures, mosaics and paintings of people.



c) Art Forms

- The rejection of representing living beings in the religious art of Islam promoted two art forms: **calligraphy** (khattati or the art of beautiful writing) and **arabesque** (geometric and vegetal designs).

9. Development of Three aspects of human civilisation

- The history of the central Islamic lands brings together three important aspects of human civilisation: **religion, community and politics**.
- These three circles merge and appear as one in the seventh century. In the next five centuries the circles separate.
- The Muslim community was united in its observance of the sharia in rituals and personal matters. It was no more governing itself (politics was a separate circle) but it was defining its religious identity.

Timeline: refer to page 103

Key Words: Umma (community of believers), Islam, Prophet, Sufi, Bedouin, Abbasids.

