**Lecture:21**

**PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY**

They saw the rise and incipient decline of a poetry which most Arabic-speaking Moslems have always regarded as a model of unapproachable excellence ; a poetry rooted in the life of the people, that insensibly moulded their minds and fixed their character and made them morally and spiritually a nation long before Muhammad welded the various conflicting groups into a single organism, animated, for some time at least, by a common purpose. In those days poetry was no luxury for the cultured few, but the sole medium of literary expression.

Every tribe had its poets, who freely uttered what they felt and thought. Their unwritten words " flew across the desert faster than arrows," and came home to the hearts and bosoms of all who heard them. Thus in the midst of outward strife and disintegration a unifying principle was at work. Poetry gave life and currency to an ideal of Arabian virtue {muruwwa), which, though based on tribal community of blood and insisting that only ties of blood were sacred, nevertheless became an invisible bond between diverse clans, and formed, whether consciously or not, the basis of a national community of sentiment.

In the following pages I propose to trace, to describe its form, contents, and general features, to give some account of the most celebrated Pre-Islamic poets and collections of Pre-Islamic verse, and finally to show in what manner it was preserved and handed down. By the ancient Arabs the poet {sha’ir, plural shu'ara), as his name implies, was held to be a person endowed with supernatural knowledge, a wizard in league with spirits (jinn) or satans (shayatin) and dependent on them for the magical powers which he displayed.

This view of his personality, as well as the influential position which he occupied, are curiously indicated by the story of a certain youth who was refused the hand of his beloved on the ground that he was neither a poet nor a soothsayer nor a water-diviner.' The idea of poetry as an art was developed afterwards; the pagan sMHr is the oracle of his tribe, their guide in peace and their champion in war. It was to him they turned for counsel when they sought new pastures, only at his word would they pitch or strike their ' houses of hair,' and when the tired and thirsty wanderers found a well and drank of its water and washed themselves, led by him they may have raised their voices together and sung