

# A PROFILE OF MUSLIMS IN CHINA

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## Demographic Data:

Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu and Ningxia have been considered as Muslim belt <sup>(1)</sup> in China because of the density of Muslim inhabitants in this area. Turkish Muslims are concentrated in the province of Xinjiang and Hui<sup>(2)</sup> are scattered in other three provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Ningxia. Besides these thickly populated Muslim areas, Muslims are found in every big city and province of the country i.e. Beijing, Canton, Honan etc. The Turk Muslims of the Xinjiang province demarcate their line of ethnicity from the native Han's of China on three borders; faith, race and language but Hui, who speak Han language, discriminate themselves on the basis of faith and race. They think themselves from Arab <sup>(3)</sup> origin. Although they have considerably diluted through intermarriages <sup>(4)</sup> with Hans yet they are very much conscious of their faith in Islam.

The Muslims in China are the third largest minority in the world. They are in position "to form a nation by themselves if they ever gain autonomy or civil and religious liberty."<sup>(5)</sup>

As for as the population of these Muslims in China is concerned, about 50 Millions is a commonly accepted estimate. <sup>(6)</sup> This is based on report, showing the figure of 4,81,04,240<sup>(7)</sup> Muslims in China, published by

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Republican Government of China in 1936. However, it is very strange that the Communist Government displayed the figure of 10 Million Muslims in 1949 and it never increased up to 1979<sup>(8)</sup>. Following these superficial official statistics, various scholars suggest the figures of 12 million <sup>(9)</sup> and 20 to 30 million.<sup>(10)</sup> Contrary to these estimates the Muslim scholars of China claim to be 60 to 80 Millions Muslims in China <sup>(11)</sup>.

## **Historical Perspective:**

The story of Muslims history in China is hidden in a popular saying "every ten years a small (Muslim) rebellion; every thirty years a large one"<sup>(12)</sup> From the dawn of Islam a Chain of confrontation and struggle among Muslims and native Hans is interlocked. There is not a single part of the country, where the Muslims have not tasted the bitterness of quarrel and tension. Anyhow, briefly speaking, the history of Muslims in China can be divided into four periods <sup>(13)</sup> i.e.:

1. Period of Penetration
2. Period of diffusion
3. Period of Calamity and Humiliation
4. Period of Renaissance

### **I. Period of Penetration:**

Wan Wing Kei, describing history of Islam in China <sup>(14)</sup> after analyzing different views about the advent of Islam in China, says that he would prefer and adopt the view that Islam came to China during the second year<sup>(15)</sup> of King Yung-Hui an emperor of Tang Dynasty T.W. <sup>(16)</sup> Arnold says, "though direct historical evidence is lacking, it is most probable that Islam was first introduced into China by merchants who followed the old established sea route". The second route was the land route - the fabled Silk Road -across central Asia through Bokhara and Samarkand.<sup>(17)</sup>

In the eighth century Chinese emperor sent his Ambassador on a goodwill mission to Caliph Usman (651), instead of replying the appeal for help from Persian emperor Yazdagord against the Arabs. In the reign of Walid (705-715) a Muslim~ General Qutaibah-ibn-Muslim extended his conquests up to the eastern frontier of the Chinese Empire.

## **2. Period of Diffusion:**

The period of Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties (960~1644) <sup>(18)</sup> is the period of expansion or diffusion of the Muslims in China. In this period they gained a respectable status in society as merchants and businessmen. They utilized and got hold of Silk Road trade.

In Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) they were given secondary position <sup>(19)</sup> after Mongols - the ruler, and the Hans - the sons of soil had third position. It was the period when Muslims flourished socially as well as economically. Their population expanded territorially and it also increased in number.

## **3. Period of Humiliation:**

After Ming dynasty, the Manchus conquered China and established their own Qing dynasty (1644~1912). <sup>(20)</sup> They sought help from Hans to run administration. Now the position was quite changed and the Muslims got third position after Manchu and Hans. It was the period of calamity for the Muslims and they suffered a lot during these three centuries. They had been the victims of the campaign of "de-muslimization" launched by the Government and Hans, which eventually resulted in the deaths of millions of Muslims and Hans alike.

T. M. Haji Ibraheem <sup>(21)</sup> describing the causes of this cruel treatment by the government says that first of all it was Muslims loyalty to former rulers of Ming dynasty and secondly it was the policy of new Manchu rulers to divide and rule that made Muslims and Hans to take arms

against each other.

#### **4. Period of Renaissance:**

This period began in 1912, after the defeat of Manchu emperors. Up to now this period can be divided into three eras:

- i) Pre Communist-era (Western type Republican Govt.).
- ii) Communist (Mao) - era.
- iii) Post Mao era.

##### **I) Pre Communist Era:**

It was the tyrannies of Manchu era, which provoked Muslims to ally with Chinese nationalists in the struggle against Manchu rulers who later on formed western type republic in the country. This movement against the rulers bore fruit for the Muslims. As the new Government was established, Muslim community was reasonably recognized. They were identified as one of China's 'five great people',<sup>(22)</sup> and a white strip in national flag symbolized the Muslim community in China. Although the Muslims of China heaved a sigh Of relief after the black night of 270 years but the story of struggle for existence does not end with it and "sediment of bitterness and unrest persisted among Muslims"<sup>(23)</sup>.

One of these remarkable uprisings and revolutions of Muslims occurred in Xinjiang in 1944. This revolution gave birth to an independent Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan in northern part of the Province.<sup>(24)</sup>

##### **ii) Communist (Mao)-Era:**

The revival of Muslims in China during the last days of this pre-communist era was perceived a threat to the future communist government of China, which was established in 1949

Therefore, at the advent of this new regime, the Muslims of China were deprived. of Ahmet Jan Kasimi who was constitutional ruler of Eastern Turkistan Republic (E.T.R). All hopes of the Chinese Muslims

were dashed to the ground, they lost power and became the victim of the policy of two imperialist powers (China and Russia) who "wanted only to manipulate them as the puppets in the 'big game' of international power politics".<sup>(25)</sup>

The Communist Mao era is the story of Muslim's adversities. The Muslims experienced a tolerant policy of the Government during 1949 to 1956. After harnessing the liberty of "Hundred Flower Movement" the Muslims faced the anti-rightist campaign in mid 1957 by the government. They lost all the so-called privileges and bore hardships. Their leaders, imams and Ahrones were brutally beaten and even killed.<sup>(26)</sup> This black night of harassment prevailed up to 1970.

### **iii) Post Mao Era:**

The downfall of the Gang of Four, after the death of Mao, was a happy sign for Muslims. Especially Ding Xiaoping's policies changed the dimensions of recognition in the international context. This overall change especially in economic sphere to promote the neglected and discriminated hands in the way of strengthening the national economy, with the combination of oil diplomacy and resurgence of militant Islamic sentiments in Islamic world, increased weight of Chinese Muslims in the eyes of the government. They are getting their mosque free, utilizing the government's aid for the construction of schools, running restaurants and enjoying freedom in normal religious activities. Even after 17 years China Islamic Association held its first meeting in April 1980 and now it has started working properly. They are publishing the Qur'an, periodicals and research articles etc on the history of Islam in China.<sup>(27)</sup>

### **Fortune of Muslims - Assimilation or Retention:**

What is the future of Chinese Muslims? This is the question, which arises in every mind who studies the historical experience of the Muslims

in China. Whether these 50/80 million Muslims, tasting underdog position since centuries, will vanish? How much chances of their assimilation with native Hans are there? For how long will they protect themselves against the government's policies and efforts for amalgamation? Only one example of this conscious intermixing --- after the establishment of Xingiang Uighurs Autonomous region (1955), number of Hans in the area increased from .03 million to 3 million in 1968<sup>(28)</sup> can visualize the intensity of the problem. This sort of campaign marks the sign of interrogation in the context of Muslims future in China. Barbara L K. Pillsbury in her analysis of the future of Muslims in China estimates that there is a great chance of assimilation of Hue's to Hans, who are highly acculturated, to their way living in Ningxia province and in the pockets of different big cities. She further says that Turkish Muslims of Xinjing Region, who are relatively unacculturated to Hans, are unlikely to assimilate in near future.

In the context of relaxation for Muslims at the hands of present government J.T. Dryer is very much hopeful about the future of Muslim community in China. In his words "Chinese Islam due to its newly expanded contacts with the outside world, will develop an attraction for militant Islamic nationalism or that it will try to establish links with fellow Muslims which are not sanctioned by the government. He predicts the prosperity of folk aspects of Islam, rituals symbolizing a shred sense of separateness from Hans, rather than orthodox sense of faith".

John O.Voll<sup>(29)</sup> in his scholarly deliberated analysis of Muslims in China and Russia refuted the aspects of JIHAD and HIJR Among them for their survival. He opines that "it may be possible for Islam to survive authentically as the faith of majority without HIJRA and JIHAD". He further comments that, in addition, it seems quite clear that most Muslims in

these two countries do not have a great desire to engage in JIHAD against their own government. And it seems clear from many studies that Central Asia Muslims are tied to their homelands and even with substantial material incentives, have little inclination to move from them".

While Justin Ben-Adam reveals the latest situation in these words, "since the early 1980s, China has followed a liberal and pragmatic approach to religious and cultural affairs among its over 18 million Muslim peoples in the hope of encouraging stability and undermining nationalist movements. With the fall of eastern European communism in 1989-90, however, such stability has declined in the face of escalating Muslim ethnic nationalism. In 1989, China's Muslims took to the streets of Beijing and other major cities calling for the death of Salman Rushdie and protests were conducted against the book *Xing Fengsu* (sexual customs), written by a Han author who slanders the Islamic faith. In response the government halted mosque construction and closed many Islamic schools. In April 1990, Turkic Muslim Uighurs and Kirghiz in Xinjiang rioted to protest these anti Islamic actions and over birth control policies causing the government to airlift troops to intervene for the first time since the Tiananmen protests in Beijing in 1989"<sup>(30)</sup>.

The above-cited different opinions reveal optimistic as well as pessimistic approaches about the future of Chinese Muslims. I think a realistic approach is to be discovered. In this context, it has to be searched out "what is the real understanding of Islam in them? How much they have sustained their religious practices? How much their cultural life has been influenced by their faith? What is the result of conscious efforts of the government to diminish Islam?" Answer to these and such type of questions will present the real picture. This factual data will (can) help to develop a realistic approach to the future of Muslims in China.

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