The New Muslim Generation in Japan: Challenges and Future

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Abstract

"As Muslim immigration trends continue to make Japan a religiously diverse country, Japan's global claim of peace policy multicultural society has been facing various challenges. The new non-indigenous Muslim generation is being nurtured to compete with an array of identity dimensions in their lives and various others including Islamic faith, ethnic culture heritage of their parents, their exposure to the standards and practices of Japanese culture through school, politics and the media.

Thus, they seem as a matter of fact, to be "caught between two worlds," in between the religious and cultural identities and experiences of their parents and those of the mainstream Japanese culture, on the other.

This paper aims to examine the problems and challenges faced by the new Muslim generation in Japan, finding some measures and suggestions based on realistic experiences for the better future of Muslims in Japan."

Keywords: Religion, Japan, Muslims, Problems, New Generation

1.1 Conspicuous features of Muslims in Japan

In order to better understand and examine the contemporary problems faced by the new Muslim generation in Japan, it is necessary first to study the circumstances under which the Muslims are living in Japan and investigate the integration and acculturation experiences of the first Muslim generation within the Japanese context. The salient features of Muslims in Japan are as follows:

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- Provoked principally by financial, cultural and economic reasons, a bulk of Muslims populace in Japan have migrated from different Asian countries for instance India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Iran and Middle East.[1]

- Roughly eighty percent of the Muslims in Japan belong to the working class. They endure many problems starting from being deficient for the employment opportunities largely due to the reality that they are not well educated or qualified to properly adjustment to the situation of Japan, which enjoys a rich traditional heritage and different religious traditions.

- A huge number of overseas Muslims are living in Japan beyond their visa periods.

- Muslim population in Japan is scattered, living far away from one another, perhaps not even hundred in one place all within a walking distance of half an hour.

- There are the Japanese and the foreign Muslims, with a variety of "brands" of Islam: Saudi, Egyptian, Iranian, Southeast Asian, Indo Pakistani, etc.

- The local Muslim population is far less in number than those from abroad. Moreover, there is no close communication between them and there is something like a cultural gap.[2]

- The Japanese people in general Japanize everything before adopting it. Christmas is commercialized and made a Japanese festival although the Christians constitute not even one percent of the Japanese population. This goes for language, foods, western dress and fashion, and even inventions from abroad. Many would like to do the same with Islam.[3]

- Muslims living in Japan can be categorized into the following five groups: The first group includes of trainees who stay in the country for a short term (three months). The second category is of people who live in Japan and do unskilled jobs. Admitting the fact that some of these have higher educational degrees or qualifications colleges or universities in their home country. The third group is composed of businessmen such as traders. They are mainly engrossed in exporting second-hand cars and importing halal foods or commodities from Islamic countries for the local Muslim communities in Japan.

Commonly they speak fluent native language, become easily familiar with Japanese traditions, marry Japanese women, and even become naturalized Japanese citizens in many cases. The fourth group is characterized by their professional knowledge, qualifications, and higher degrees in Japanese or Western universities. They are the elite Muslims or students in Japan. The last group is made up of indigenous people who have converted to Islam, personally, by international marriage or by invitation.

- A great number of Muslims in Japan are married to indigenous Japanese women.
- Learning and then mastering the native language to a fluent degree is quite hard as compare to mastering Western languages such as English and French.
- Japanese speaking Muslim Dawah workers, teachers and scholars are very limited in number as well as on the other hand the vast majority of second generation of Muslims in Japan is not adequately proficient in their mother tongue so that they could understand sophisticated religious literature.[4]

1.2 The Contribution of Muslim Community to Japanese society

This is, no doubt, unfair not to mention the contribution of Muslim community, more or less to the civil society of Japan. This aspect, in general, is not given much attention in the books and the articles by scholars working on Islam and Muslims in Japan.

There are many elements of Muslim community in Japan which can be studied such as their role in dynamic process of democratization and Islamic teachings to follow the authority and law and order etc.

For example, the khutbaat and the sermons delivered in the mosques and various other religious ceremonies mainly address the Islamic principles, which are strongly related to ethics and values in order to become a good citizen, similar to Buddhism and Shintoism. Indeed, these are also the principles of civil society. Fulfilling the spiritual requirements of people, facing challenges in family life on social or economic levels, can also be helpful to reduce the number of suicides, which has been

an increasing problem of post modern industrialized Japanese society.

Although, other religions like Buddhism and Shinto are also providing their services in tackling this social problem. However, well balanced Muslim approach having strong family system, certainly a distinct feature of Muslim community needs to be shown up. Moreover, humanitarian aid provided to the victims by Muslim community on different catastrophic incidents like earthquake and tsunami in Japan is also admirable.

Bakti mentions the links between Muslim religious learning and study group and potential businessmen or wealthy Japanese people in order to encourage the channeling of their prosperity and affluence while encouraging piety among their employees as well as a strong work ethos to expand their new business networks.[5]

The Muslims in Japan commonly own used car export businesses, trade Islamic food, own restaurants and staple stores. Thus, they can also provide employment to new immigrants. As Japan is a Centre of the automobile industry and since cars are abundant and need to be exported, the Muslims of Southern Asia in particular have started exporting these cars to their countries, a business which has led hundreds of car dealers including devoted Muslims to prosper.

Consequently, they are able to sponsor the building of mosques and other activities, and can accommodate new immigrants. Many Muslims also open food businesses, in particular *halal* food and restaurants, which also employ Muslim immigrants.[6]

In short, it is vital to examine the relevance of Islam with civic values as well as the importance of Muslim associational life style for post-modern Japanese society.

1.3 Main Problems Encountered by New Generation of Muslims in Japan

Muslims living in Muslim minority countries all over the world are facing almost similar problems. However, the intensity rose when these encountered by next generations of Muslims. The case of Japan for second generations is too similar some ways but different in many others. These challenges are same on the subject of racism, discrimination, misconceptions, stereotyped image of Islam and prejudice in workplaces, public

transit, and shopping centers and in their neighborhood etc. Nonetheless, the problems are diverse in terms of educational, intellectual and social levels.

For example, as mentioned above that the greater part of Muslim migrants in Japan are married to indigenous Japanese, while Muslim migrants in the West have a tendency to marry from amongst themselves rather than natives.

Learning and mastering the local language to a fluent level is another obvious problem in Japan as Japanese language is not an easy language to master in it as compare to Western languages including English, French and German. Therefore, the scholars and the teachers who can speak in fluent Japanese are not many in numbers. Moreover, the mainstream second generation of Muslims in Japan is not satisfactorily proficient in their mother language to read and understand the religious texts which is most of time found in more sophisticated form. On the contrary, English or other occidental language speaking scholars are numerous and therefore it seems to have good links between second and third generations of migrants and scholars in their countries of origin.[7] Keeping these differences in mind, we are now able to examine the main challenges faced by the new Muslim generation in a better way.

1.3.1 Islamic Education

It is an admitted fact that providing an adequate Islamic education to Muslim children has been one of the major problems. Although, in order to resolve the issue, numerous individual efforts without official assistance on various levels have been made such as Sunday classes and Arabic language classes but there is no school with Islamic teaching under Muslim control.

In addition, unsurprisingly the content about the Islam and Muslim world taught in Japanese educational schools and institutions from elementary level to university level is traditionally very little.[8] To make the picture clearer it should be noted here that the official education policies have the tendency to endorse assimilation into Japanese norms keeping this in mind that official Japanese attitude is that Muslims should be grateful for being able to attend Japanese public schools. It is due to the reality that the Japanese recognition of Islam is tremendously low at the education ministry and in local governments. [9]

Indeed, in terms of building constructive relations with Muslim world some serious initiatives have been taken in university programs but one might reasonably expect more to expand the relevant content about Islam in school textbooks as well for a stronger and long-term Japanese interest. This will certainly increase on one hand, Japanese capacity to deal with cultural differences on grass root level and make on the others side, foreign Muslims send their children to Japanese school comfortably. Due to the fear of receiving influence, contemporary Japanese youth culture and many other problems like clothing and school meals many parents do not wish to send their children to Japanese schools.

To reduce the cultural influence on their children as much as possible is one of the major wishes of parents during the educational process of their children. They are much concerned about receiving the ideas and bad influence from contemporary Japanese youth culture. In order to educate their children as Muslims the parents can take full advantage of the support from the mosques located in their local community. Children can learn for example, about fundamental beliefs, values, and teachings pertaining daily life affairs such as the doctrine of oneness of Allah, Prophethood, life after death, heaven and hell etc. There is a fear of experiencing a psychological conflict in case of contradictions and inconsistency in what they are learning at home, what they are learning from school and what they are learning through daily contact with friends. Therefore, Muslim parents in Japan feel that it is essential to establish Muslim schools many in numbers where they can maintain consistency among their home, their education and their community.[10]

Moreover, the concerns of Muslims in terms of Islamic education are not confined to only above mentioned but this list further goes to many others including clothing, physical education, language, school meals, and non-Japanese teachers. Among these, the unique problems which are very much linked with essentials of their religions such as school uniforms, school lunches, co-education for physical education activities like swimming, and the lack of teachers from Muslim countries.[11]

However, when a non-Japanese Muslim mother discuss about problems for Muslims, such as school meals and sex education with a class teacher or school management and asks

the school to realize religious needs of their children, the school authorities tend to accept their requests as special cases.

Furthermore, it is much more difficult to receive special consideration for a Japanese Muslim mother.[12] Generally, a teacher would ask to the requesting mother "what nationality are you?" and she would have a dilemma deciding between her Muslim identities and traditional Japanese. Often their requests are ignored because of the perceived norms of being "Japanese" in society.

To resolve the problems, the dispatch of teachers from Islamic countries and their acceptance into Japanese public schools should be considered by the government. It is also required to identify that contact with "unknown" Islam has just started, and there is no reason to stop the creation of Muslim private schools when all required legal conditions are fulfilled.

Another positive point, which needs to be highlighted, is that keeping order in the classroom for Muslim students is much easier to handle than to other foreign students. Because Muslim children, as they are taught to respect and not question elders and those in authority, are willing to accept teachers' orders in school. This quality is largely admired in Japanese culture.[13]

1.3.2 Familial Problem

While it is generally true that Muslim families are stronger by many measures than their non-Muslim counterparts, nevertheless there are problems that Muslims face in their family lives.

The Multidimensional familial problems are intensified in the cases where spouses are from different cultures. We know that a large number of Muslims married Japanese women converting them to Islam. It is also notable here that the percentage of foreigners with a spouse/child visa increased rapidly through the early 1990s and was the highest at 18.5% in 1997 before declining to 13.0% in 2004.[14]

As most foreign Muslim husbands are not well-educated and probably come to Japan for economic opportunity and the peaceful stability of Japanese society, this consequently resulted in forming numerous issues like domestic violence, weak relationship between husband and wife, unwillingness of accepting spouse's culture and life style, etc.

The familial problems are not confined to husband and wife but the real victims are their teenager children especially in terms of their Islamic education as mentioned above.

In order to provide an Islamic education to their children they relocate to an Islamic country. Most of the time non-Japanese father remains in Japan to work.

However, the most trendy third-country location for Japanese wives and children to relocate for education to Muslim countries is UAE and Sharjah.[15] Although in the beginning, many of the husbands want to nurture their children in their original countries such as Pakistan, India or Bangladesh, but their wives disagree with the idea and as a compromise eventually relocation to UAE come about. The wives consider hard to live in the countries of their husbands and thus resist relocating to such counties. Admitting the fact that in most case, living with the husband's kin, many wives who returned to Japan after relocating the countries of their husbands are noted to have an inability to adapt to the local lifestyle.

There are many factors in these results. For example sometimes the family refuses to respect Japanese culture and customs with regard to question of how to raise child. This happens often even in the cases when it is allowed by Islam teachings or sometimes excessive interference from the husband's kin. As a woman and because of their position as a foreigner they have to face significant intervention from the husband's family members with regard to the ways they raise their children and thus they are expected to bear the major burden of childcare. Consequently, as a result of being a complex minority with the twofold factors of ethnicity and gender these women experience many issues and conflicts in the countries of their husbands. However, in the case of a nuclear family living in UAE this problem is reduced to a great extent.[16]

In addition to that, towards explaining the details of the various requirements of Islam some Japanese wives complain about the reticence and silence of their husbands. As Muslims should be concerned about the need to elucidate Islam but perhaps these husbands just neglect their duty and responsibility in this regard or on the contrary perhaps their wives do not listen well to their explanations. In spite of all this, the other side of the picture should not be neglected that without any doubt there are many Japanese converts ladies who

are proud of their husbands who treat them as well as their parents better than Japanese men.

In short, the problems can be overcome or at least minimized through education, mutual assistance, counseling, liaison and supportive services. Families can only be successful and flourished on the base of Islamic teachings. This will pave the way to up bring second generation in the peaceful, healthy and stable environment of a Muslim house.

1.3.3 Acculturation Issues and Transnational Identities

Comparison between the situation of acculturation in Japan and West may appear easy for some people on the base that nations like Italy and Germany also for a long time had an image of themselves as more or less ethnically "homogeneous".

Nevertheless one major difference is as Eskil O. Vestre mentions, that Japan has not processed its former role as an Axis power in the same way, possibly indicating historical and regional differences between European and East Asian nations that cannot be ignored.[17]

This is why issues regarding acculturation faced by the new Muslim generation in Japan are not the same as in other countries where Muslims are in minority, particularly Europe.

As a matter of fact adolescence is a tumultuous time for second generation as they are trying to discover a sense of their real self. It is crucial for them to establish their sense of identity. The process of development of identity becomes more complicated for second generation because, on one hand they are often in their daily life matters, educational institutions or in society in general and feel pressured to suppress or discard their original culture and assimilate to Japanese culture and on the other hand their parents especially fathers do not allow them to do so for religious concerns. Thus they feel lost between two cultures and two countries.

In her qualitative research on Muslim immigrant workers in Japan, Onishi found that many of them developed a stronger Muslim identity or faith after having stayed in Japan for some time. She argues that they did this to regain some sense of control over their lives and to relieve stress by leaving their destiny in the hands of God while just doing their best in an everyday life filled with challenges such as prejudice and discrimination. She argues that when faced with discrimination and when failing to make Japanese friends, Muslim immigrants

give up on becoming integrated and turn to religion and/or stronger ties to their original country or culture.[18] As a result of failure in being accepted in mono cultural society, their ties are increasing to their home country.

Exploring the reasons behind this Shipper says that the lack of "structural assimilation" of foreigners in Japan can potentially lead to seclusion from society and long-distance nationalism. Foreigners face problems participating in Japan's political life and reasons include lack of policies to actively integrate them into society and institutional hindrances. As foreigners cannot vote or run for public office and are unable to become members in local welfare or human rights commissions and more, the political focus of most immigrants and their associations turns to long-distance nationalism.[19]

Arguments of Sakurai perhaps seems more practical as he says that because the second generation of Muslim immigrants in Japan - who are yet to become adults for quite a few more years - are unlikely to take collective action, being too ethnically and geographically divided.[20] Growing up spread across Japan, and being part of a very weakly organized minority, issues of Long-Distance nationalism and radicalization among young Muslims in Japan is not likely to become a problem. Onishi, employing Berry's concept of four strategies for acculturation, in her qualitative study of Iranian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani foreign workers found that they chose assimilation, separation or marginalization, but never integration.

1.4 A Better Future of Islam in Japan

Indeed, Muslim community over all is much concerned about these problems faced by second generation and are trying their best to meet the challenges. However, the most important aspect of their efforts is that they are not yet doing so in one integrated and unified effort. Until they must endeavor to overcome the challenges on collective level, the situation is not going to change easily. To solve the problems ensuring a bright future particularly for the new Muslim generation in Japan and the Muslims in general, the following measures and suggestions based on realistic experiences may also be considered:

- Muslims must be moderate and sensible in propagation of Islam and should never be rushed, aggressive, and

sentimental. They also must be law-abiding people in Japan and never over react even when instigated.

- The Japanese and foreign Muslims should invite one another`s families to their functions when possible.
- Successful Dawah in Japan needs a radical change in strategy and methodology which, indeed, requires a wise, charismatic and visionary leadership.
- As a matter of fact modern advancement in the communication technologies, from the phone to Internet, has changed the landscape of youth learning, culture, sociability and political engagement. This "e" or "internet generation" in a more interactive and less hierarchical way, and there is a greater scope for mutual influence. Muslims in Japan need to strap up efficiently the influence of mass media TV and Radio channels to present the information about Islam.
- By cheering up Muslims to shift near to the surrounding area of a Mosque, it is necessary for Muslim to deepen their efforts in creating a real Muslim community around a Mosque.
- To establish an educational system to cater the needs of the native Japanese converts. New members of the Muslim community should be supported and nurtured ensuring that they are taking the responsibility of front line Dawah activities, and eventually culminating in a wealth of Japanese Muslim Dawah worker as well as prominent Scholars. This would help certainly to counter and defeat the wide-ranging notion spread amongst indigenous Japanese citizens that Islam although beautiful, but for them and is only for foreigners who came to Japan.
- To secure as many living examples among Japanese speaking Muslims as possible for both growing generations and new Muslim reverts.
- Because Japanese belong to one of the world's most literate and well educated societies. They are very receptive as well as sensitive to superficial connotations, and for propagation of Islam only old fashioned Dawah is not appropriate for them. They lose interest in Islam when they view that the Muslims themselves are not applying in their live what they propagate. This is why; Muslims have to demonstrate an ideal image by their conduct rather than only routine Dawah work.

- Islam could be better appreciated by the Japanese better only if they are approached in an intellectual and logical manner with accurate Islamic literature. No doubt that recently, valuable works on Islam including Seerah of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and Tafsir of the Holy Qur'an by some highly educated Islamic scholars have produced

- The roots of Japanese religiosity, culture and lifestyle of Japanese people must be taken into consideration in order to form ways of the propagation of Islam in Japan. For example Muslims should elaborate and highlight not only the universal Islamic principles like equality, justice and ethical values but also fashion and designing, natural phenomenon and social networking.

- I would like to suggest here that, in order to draw the attention of Japanese populace towards the true message of Islam, Muslim communities can organize several memorial ceremonies in their own style on different Japanese festivals or days like "the Day of Mourning for the War Dead on 15 August. This will certainly give a sense of solidarity and unity to Japanese people.

- Last but not least, a real and good image of Islam can also be presented by taking part in works of charity and relief. After the tragedy of the earthquake and tsunami last year, the Muslim community proved that Muslims in Japan genuinely share the joys and sorrows of Japanese society. Members of the Muslim community contributed immensely to the relief efforts and they continue to help the affected communities in the *Tohoku* region. Islam teaches its followers to generously offer humanitarian aid wherever the need may arise. Muslims have gone on supporting relief efforts in Japan along with Japanese and foreign relief agencies.

In short, with the efforts of the vivacious community devoted and enthusiastic Muslims will soon be able to lead in Japan towards an era where its Muslim minority community will provide a model and an inspiration for the other Muslim minorities worldwide. Just like Japan as a country, which has performed exceptionally well in cultural, economic and technological areas for the rest of the world to admire and emulate.

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