

Uniting or Dividing? Digital Sermons and Sectarian Debates among Muslim Preachers on Facebook in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper examines how Facebook is transforming religious authority and amplifying sectarian discussions through digital sermons (*wa'z*) delivered by three prominent preachers in Bangladesh: Shaykh Dr. Muzaffar b. Mohsin, Mufti Rezaul Karim Abrar, and Mufti Gias Uddin Tahery. Using a netnographic approach, we analyse the discourses promoted in their sermon videos on Facebook. We demonstrate how Facebook incentivises religious leaders to intensify sectarianism in order to increase online engagement and reinforce their authority. Thus, although the Internet—specifically Facebook—is often assumed to have the potential to connect the Muslim *umma*, it simultaneously exacerbates sectarian divisions, with significant implications for both religious and social dynamics in Bangladesh.

Keywords: digital; preaching; *wa'z*; sectarian debates; Facebook; salafism; Deobandi Hanafism; shrine-based Sunnism

Introduction

This study examines the impact of the Internet and social media on religious authority and the unity of Muslim communities in Bangladesh, one of the largest Muslim-majority countries in the world. The Internet's ability to facilitate communication across geographical boundaries potentially fosters unity among people, including Muslims, with terms such as “digital umma” (a united Muslim community) (Bunt, 2009). The primary research question of this article concerns the extent to which the Internet has united Muslims in Bangladesh. We argue that, despite its unifying potential, the Internet has incentivised the fragmentation of Muslim communities, as religious leaders frequently condemn other Muslim groups to mobilise engagement and enhance their reputations.

The study of the Internet's unifying potential among the Muslim *umma* in Bangladesh is particularly significant due to the rapidly growing number of Internet users in the region. Since the early 2000s, there has been a substantial change in communication practices and the media environment (Al-Zaman & Alimi, 2021, p. 208). As of January 2024, the Internet user population in Bangladesh had reached 77.36 million, representing 44.5% of the country's total population. A survey conducted by Kepios (*n.d.*) revealed that the Internet user population in Bangladesh grew by 783,000 individuals, or 1.0%, between January 2023 and January 2024. For comparison, the data indicate that, at the start of 2024, 96.47 million people in Bangladesh—55.5% of the population—still lacked access to the Internet (Digital 2024, 2024). Data from DataReportal show that the total number of active social media user IDs in Bangladesh in January 2024 was 52.90 million (*Digital in Bangladesh, n.d.*).

A significant proportion of social media users in Bangladesh perceive social media as synonymous with the Internet, highlighting the remarkable importance and widespread influence of social media (Amit et al., 2020). According to data from StatCounter, YouTube is the second most popular social media platform, with 3.99% of users compared to Facebook (Social Media Stats Bangladesh, *n.d.*). This statistic underscores Facebook's dominant presence in relation to other social media platforms. Notably, Facebook has consistently maintained its leading position since 2009. Other social networking platforms available in Bangladesh include Instagram (0.39%), LinkedIn (1.18%), Pinterest (0.62%), and Twitter (0.54%) (Zaman, 2023, p. 8). In July 2022, Bangladesh had a total of 57.50 million Facebook users, accounting for 33.1% of the country's population (Facebook Users in Bangladesh - May 2022, 2022). However, alternative data from January 2022 indicate that the number of Facebook users stood at 44.70 million (Digital 2022: Bangladesh — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, *n.d.*). According to recent data from Statista, the number of Facebook users in Bangladesh at the beginning of April 2024 was 55.06 million (Facebook Users by Country 2024, *n.d.*).

Facebook has gained significant importance in Bangladesh, leading many people to equate it mistakenly with the Internet. Consequently, it has become the dominant social networking service (SNS) in the country (Jana & Gulshan, 2019, p. 105). Facebook accounts for a substantial proportion of the overall time users spend on social media, cap-

turing 63.5% of their time. More than 70% of individuals spend an average of over one hour daily on the Facebook platform. The most actively engaged Facebook users are those aged 18 to 34, who comprise 73% of the total user population (Facebook Users in Bangladesh - May 2022, 2022). Evidently, the age distribution of Facebook users in Bangladesh is uneven, with the majority of users being young individuals. Given Facebook's dominance in Bangladesh, it is crucial to explore the role of social media, particularly Facebook, in relation to key social, political, and religious events in the country, as it has profound effects on real-world matters (Zaman, 2023, p. 8).

An Islamic topic that requires specific examination due to its significant influence on Muslims in the digital realm in recent years is *da'wa*. The term *da'wa* is primarily used to refer to the act of Islamic preaching or *wa'z* performed by Muslim scholars ('ulamā') (Nisa, 2018, p. 71). *Wa'z* (preaching) is regarded as an Islamic sermon delivered in large assemblies known as *wa'z-mahfil* in Bangladesh (Rifat, Amin, et al., 2022, p. 6). The *wa'z-mahfil* has long been a key means of propagating Islam in Bangladesh. *Wa'z* originates from the Arabic word signifying "exhortation" or "providing guidance" on matters related to Islamic culture and traditions (Schmid, 2021, p. 318; "*Wa'z*," 2024).

On the other hand, *mahfil* (an Arabic term) refers to a gathering, assembly, or congregation ("Mehfil," 2023). The *wa'z-mahfil*, as defined by Max Stille in his book, is "a genre of oratory that has historically been linked to storytelling, piety, and admonition, and subsequently Sufism." These events are frequently held in open areas and markets, typically free of charge and didactic in nature (Stille, 2020, p. 33). Rifat, Prottoy, et al. (2022, p. 8) further define the *wa'z-mahfil* as an outdoor assembly that predominantly occurs during the winter months to avoid the monsoon season.

The *wa'z-mahfil* is often conducted in makeshift facilities set up in outdoor locations, such as rural playgrounds or paddy fields, or in urban settings like street corners and public grounds, particularly during the winter season. The event usually begins in the evening and extends until midnight. A series of orators, often known as *Mufasssīr* (an Arabic term denoting someone with authoritative expertise in interpreting the Qur'ān) or *wā'iz* (preacher), referred to as "Bokta" in Bengali, deliver their remarks in sequence. The programme concludes with the keynote speaker. The speakers are positioned on a raised platform, accompanied by distinguished guests from the socio-political elite. The male congregation assembles on the ground in front of the stage, which is covered with mats made of bamboo, cotton, or sometimes straw. The female congregation is seated in separate tents, partitioned by a curtain, from the male audience. The size of the audience varies depending on the popularity of the speakers, ranging from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands (Ahmed, 2024, pp. 2–3).

The preceding discussion suggests that Islamic *wa'z-mahfil* have garnered considerable attention across various disciplines, including anthropology, the sociology of religion, and media studies, among others (Rifat, Amin, et al., 2022, p. 6). Many individuals at the grassroots level now record and upload videos of such *wa'z-mahfil* to popular platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Since 2011, the frequency and popularity of these *wa'z-*

mahfil have steadily increased. For instance, Al-Zaman (2022) reviewed a total of 73,120 Islamic videos uploaded to YouTube between 2011 and 2020. The research highlights a significant rise in the proportion of Islamic videos on YouTube over the past eight years, with the percentage increasing from 6.04% in 2011 to 13.11% in 2019, representing a growth rate of more than double.

Our research, however, is guided by a distinct objective that differentiates it from previous scholarly studies. This paper aims to examine a selection of the most prominent Islamic preachers (*wā'iz*) in Bangladesh, all of whom are affiliated with specific ideological factions. The Muslim communities in Bangladesh exhibit a diverse range of ideologies, including liberals, *Wā'izs* (followers of the *Wā'iz* school of thought), Salafis (Ahl-al Ḥadīth or Lā Madhhabī, adherents of prophetic narrations), Sunnīs (followers of shrine-based sects), and others. Each group has its own measure of popularity and a dedicated following.

A recent trend has emerged on Facebook in which influential individuals from each category openly criticise others in their public preaching videos or posts. Additionally, their followers engage with these posts and videos by commenting and sharing them, aiming to make them go viral. Upon examining their public proselytising videos, Facebook posts, and the comments and reactions from their followers, we concluded that this trend warrants further investigation.

This study employs a qualitative netnographic approach to examine the social media behaviours of three prominent Islamic preachers, focusing specifically on their activities on Facebook. This method involves a detailed analysis of their Facebook pages and the provocative videos they have shared, which serve as central points for sectarian discussions. We analyse three videos from each preacher, carefully selected based on their content, theological arguments, and follower responses. The analysis includes user comments and interactions, providing valuable insights into how sectarian tensions are negotiated and amplified within the digital realm.

In addition to the digital analysis, this research integrates a range of scholarly academic sources to establish a theoretical framework for the study. A variety of data analysis tools and resources are also utilised to organise the interpretation of responses, examine follower engagement dynamics, identify discourse patterns, and explore the broader implications of these digital interactions on sectarianism in Bangladesh. This methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of the role of digital platforms, particularly Facebook, in serving as arenas for religious instruction and sectarian debates.

Unlike previous studies on the subject, our research exclusively incorporates data sourced from Facebook, excluding content from other social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. We argue that Facebook functions not only as a venue for Islamic discourse in Bangladesh but also as a powerful medium that intensifies sectarian debates and reshapes religious authority. By analysing the digital sermons of three notable preachers, we demonstrate how the platform's engagement-driven dynamics amplify theological debates and shift the basis of religious authority from traditional scholarship to social

media metrics, with significant consequences for sectarianism and religious dialogue.

Following the introduction, this paper is organised into six sections. The first section, *Theoretical Framework*, explores how digital media influences the Muslim *umma*, highlighting its dual potential to unite and fragment communities. The second section, *Sectarian Critique*, examines Shaykh Dr. Mohsin's *wa'z* and his strategic use of provocative rhetoric on Facebook to engage audiences. The third section, *Salafism vs. Deobandi Hanafism*, focuses on Mufti Abrar's critiques of Salafi ideologies and his defence of Deobandi perspectives. The fourth section, *Sunnism vs. Salafism*, investigates Mufti Tahery's defence of shrine-based practices and his confrontations with Salafi critics. The fifth section, *Synthesising Sectarian Dynamics*, integrates the findings from the three case studies to analyse the broader implications of Facebook on sectarianism and religious authority. Finally, the sixth section, *Conclusion*, reflects on the study's findings, discusses its limitations, and situates the research within the broader discourse on digital religion and media studies.

Theoretical Framework: The Muslim *Umma* and the Fragmentation of Muslim Communities through New Media

To understand the influence of Islamic preaching on Facebook in Bangladesh, it is essential to contextualise the discourse within existing theoretical frameworks that examine how new media unite or fragment Muslim communities. Media impact theory suggests that media not only conveys messages but also influences public behaviour and attitudes. McLuhan (1994, 2008, 2010) argued that the attributes of the medium used for communication are as significant as the content it conveys.

Campbell (2012), Campbell and Tsuria (2021), and Campbell and Bellar (2022) offer significant perspectives on digital religion, examining how religious communities engage with digital platforms not only for dissemination but also for the construction and negotiation of religious identities. Scholars argue that the Internet has the potential to connect users regardless of geographical location. For instance, McLuhan and Powers (1989) coined the term 'global village,' while Castells (2011) introduced the concept of "the network society." Historically, Muslims have had a sense of unity as a single community, or *umma* (Mandaville, 2003; Piscatori, 2019). The Internet has been assumed to strengthen this sense of unity among Muslims, enabling them to show solidarity with fellow Muslims worldwide (Anoraga & Zuhri, 2024; Bunt, 2009; el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009).

However, the Internet has also been perceived as fragmenting religious authority, as it creates a new public sphere in Muslim societies where virtually anyone can speak about and debate Islamic matters (Anderson, 2003; Eickelman, 2003). On Facebook, various Islamic factions use the platform to articulate their ideological stances, engaging in public debates that often result in sectarian polarisation (Lim, 2017). The platform's open and interactive nature facilitates the democratisation of religious authority, enabling not only established scholars but also their followers to participate in these discussions. This dynamic can blur the lines between spiritual guidance and ideological persuasion, making

Facebook a multifaceted arena for the development of religious identity (Andok, 2024; Faimau & Behrens, 2016; Schoemaker, 2016).

When applied to Islamic preaching (*wa'z*) on Facebook, the platform's features—such as sharing, commenting, and reacting—revolutionise the traditional practice of *wa'z*, rendering it more immediate, interactive, and potentially contentious. The performative aspect of preaching on Facebook, where preachers are aware that their sermons may elicit immediate responses, alters the dynamics of religious discourse. This environment not only intensifies sectarian discussions but also encourages speakers to tailor their messages for maximum online interaction, sometimes at the expense of theological depth or nuance (Hamouda et al., 2023; Suherdiana & Muhaemin, 2018). Simplistic narratives that highlight conflicts have also been found to be a key factor in making discourse go viral on social media (Lim, 2013, 2017).

Sectarian Critique: An Examination of Shaykh Dr. Mohsin's *Wa'z*

In this section, we explore the profile of a prominent Salafi (or Ahl al-Ḥadīth) Islamic scholar and preacher, Shaykh Dr. Muzaffar b. Mohsin, focusing on his Facebook page, “Shaikh Dr. Muzaffar Bin Mohsin,” which boasts an impressive following of 317,000 users.¹ His widespread recognition, combined with his propensity to provoke sectarian debates, makes his page an ideal subject for this study. Shaykh Dr. Mohsin shares his teachings across various platforms, reaching audiences both online and offline.

On his Facebook page, he primarily posts short videos or reels, often centred around Q&A sessions with his followers. However, it is frequently observed that in almost every video, he critiques other ideological Islamic preachers (*wā'iz*), particularly those affiliated with the *Wa'z*-based community. While these critiques appear theological, they also reflect a strategic effort to generate online engagement and assert religious authority. To illustrate this, we selected a brief *wa'z* video, which is included as Figure 1 for reference.

1 See his personal FB page *Shaikh Dr. Muzaffar Bin Mohsin*, n.d.

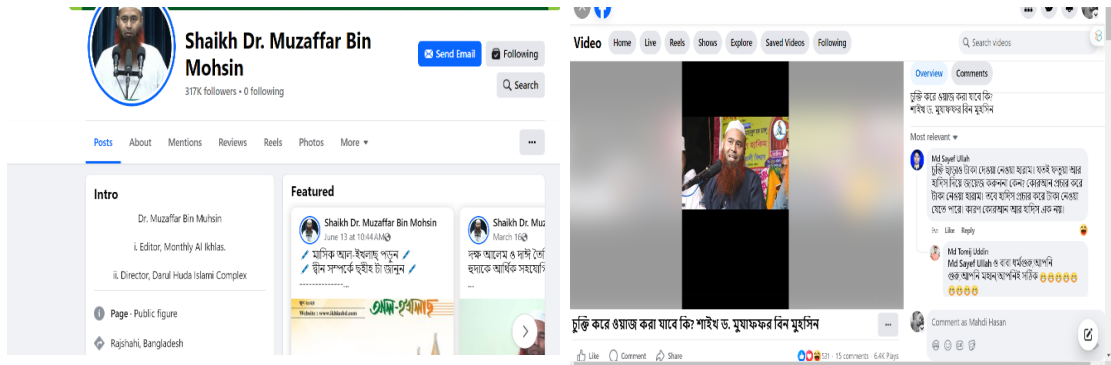


Figure 1: From left to right: (i) A screenshot of Mohsin’s FB page. (ii) A screenshot of his video titled *Chukti Kore Wa’z Kora Jabe Ki?* [“Can preaching be done or *ja’iz* with contractual prerequisites?”]

Posted on 28 April 2024, the video in question garnered 412 likes, 73 “love” reactions, 33 “haha” or amusing reactions, 9 “care” reactions, 3 “angry” reactions, 1 “sad” reaction, 15 comments, and a total of 6.4k views as of 5 July 2024. In the video, Dr. Mohsin criticises preachers who require monetary arrangements for their sermons, labelling them as fraudulent and deceitful. Using provocative language, he declares:

“They are undeniably frauds, not genuine religious scholars or preachers. You are even more foolish than they are. What is the purpose of inviting them to deliver a sermon? You allocate 100,000 Bangladeshi Taka (approximately 851 US dollars) for the helicopter rental, plus an additional 200,000 BDT for their visit. Moreover, you must make an upfront payment of 50,000 BDT and another 30,000 BDT on the day of arrival. *Oreeee Haramkhorer Ghore Haramkhor* [a derogatory phrase used to describe individuals who earn money through illicit means]! Are they truly *dā’i* [preachers], or are they *dajjal* [a deceptive figure in Islamic eschatology who is prophesied to emerge before the end of time]? Can you identify the genuine perpetrator? Are you referring to yourself or to them? The responsibility of determining the answer now rests with you. There is no need for you to ask me about this matter” (Mohsin, *n.d.*).

The provocative nature of this video aligns with Facebook’s engagement-driven design, where controversial content typically generates heightened interaction. For example, one commentator, @Md. Sayef Ullah, remarked:

“It is also forbidden [in Islam] to give and receive money without any contract [for preaching purposes]. Regardless of the number of *fatāwa* [Islamic legal doctrines] and *ḥadīth* that may support its legality, preaching the Qur’ān prohibits the taking of money. Preaching *ḥadīth*, however, allows for money acquisition, as the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* are distinct.”

The final portion of this comment—“Preaching *ḥadīth*, however, allows for money acquisition, as the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* are distinct”—appears to be a sarcastic critique of Mohsin, given that he is a Salafī or *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* scholar who strictly adheres to *ḥadīth*

narrations.

Another commentator, @Md. Tomij Uddin, responded to Sayef Ullah's comment in a mocking tone, writing: "O father *dharmā-guru* [religious leader], you are guru, you are great, you are right 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔!" In a more confrontational manner, @Muhammad Bin Jasim referred to Mohsin as a "Khārijite," implying that he is no longer part of Islam. In contrast, there were favourable remarks as well. @Al-Imran Hussain Rassel expressed his appreciation, commenting, "*Jazākallāhu khayran*" [May Allāh reward you well] and "*Māshā Allāh*." Similarly, @Shaykh Md. Julhas Uddin praised the speech, describing it as "very important" (Mohsin, *n.d.*).

Salafism vs Deobandi Ḥanafism: Analysing Sectarian Rhetoric in Muftī Rezaul Karim Abrar's *Wa'z*

This section delves into the profile of a highly influential *Wa'z* Islamic scholar and preacher in Bangladesh, Muftī Rezaul Karim Abrar, who is affiliated with the renowned Deoband madrasa in Uttar Pradesh, India. Widely recognised for his conservative perspectives, he has received both acclaim and criticism for his preaching.

Specifically, we examine his personal Facebook page, "Rezaul Karim Abrar," which boasted 452,000 followers as of 6 July 2024.² A thorough review of his page reveals that he consistently advocates for *Wa'z*sm and Deobandism while opposing Salafism in nearly all his posts, videos, reels, and live streams. Notably, the majority of individuals in Bangladesh adhere to the *Wa'z* school of thought, and all Qawmī madrasas (renowned orthodox and private Islamic schools) are affiliated with the Indian Deoband madrasa.³

Muftī Abrar has achieved significant popularity on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, due to his contentious discussions and reactions against Bangladeshi Salafī 'u-lamā'. He frequently voices his disapproval of Dr. Mohsin's preaching and *fatwā* (Islamic legal rulings) by sharing videos on his Facebook page. One such video, where he expressed sectarian rhetoric against Dr. Mohsin and even mentioned the possibility of taking legal action against him, was identified during our research. For demonstration purposes, this video has been included as Figure 2.

2 See his personal FB page, Rezaul Karim Abrar (*n.d.*).

3 To know more about the Qawmī masrasas in Bangladesh and their affiliation with Deoband madrasa, India, see S. Al-Hasani et al., 2017; S. M. A. Al-Hasani, 2020; Bhuiyan, 2010; Masum, 2020.



Figure 2: From above to below: (i) A screenshot of Abrar’s Facebook page. (ii) A screenshot of his video titled [translated by the author]: “I request that Muzaffar b. Mohsin withdraw this statement. If not, we will pursue legal action for labeling the entire Deobandi group as polytheists, *inshā’ Allāh* [God willing].”

The aforementioned video was uploaded on 29 April 2024. It received 3.9k likes, 1.9k “love” reactions, 214 “care” reactions, 154 “ironic” reactions, 32 “sorrowful” reactions, 10 “furious” reactions, and 6 “astonishing” reactions. Additionally, it garnered 1k comments and a total of 68k views by 6 July 2024. In the video, Abrar begins the discussion by analysing a short clip featuring Dr. Mohsin, in which Mohsin labelled Deobandis as *mushrikūn* (polytheists).

Mohsin’s statement was essentially made in response to a challenge from Brother Rahul Amin, a well-known preacher who adheres to the Salafī ideology, to debate with Abrar and another prominent ‘*ālim* (Islamic scholar), Ali Hasan Osama, who also advocates the *Wa’z* Deobandi ideology. The proposed debate topic was whether the *tarāwīḥ* prayer—a specific prayer performed during the month of *tarāwīḥ*—should consist of 8 *raka’āt* or 20 *raka’āt*, reflecting different methods of performing the prayer.⁴ Recently, Mohsin also participated in a debate with Osama on this matter.⁵

4 To know about Brother Rahul’s challenge for the debate, see All Hanafis, *Including Ali Hasan Osama vs Brother Rahul Will Be Played on April 12.*, n.d. .

5 Watch Brother Rahul vs Ali Hasan Osama, n.d.; *Muftī* Ali Hassan Usama vs Brother Rahul Ruhul Amin Debate Video Details If You Do Not See It, You Will Miss It., n.d.

This dispute in Bangladesh largely stems from the differing practices of Salafis, who advocate performing *tarāwīḥ* as 8 *rakaʿāt*, while regarding 20 *rakaʿāt* as *bidʿa* (an innovation in Islam), which they strictly forbid. Conversely, all Bangladeshi *Waʿẓs* support and promote the practice of performing 20 *rakaʿāt*, while considering the performance of 8 *rakaʿāt* as invalid (Brother Rahul vs Ali Hasan Osama, *n.d.*; *Muftī Ali Hassan Usama vs Brother Rahul Rubul Amin Debate Video Details If You Do Not See It, You Will Miss It, n.d.*).

Interestingly, in the aforementioned video, Abrar criticised Mohsin’s statement by questioning his theological stance and threatening legal action against him:

“How could he so easily categorise those who have made significant contributions to the protection of Islam in this subcontinent and the global spread of Islam as polytheists [*kāfir*]? If a person harbours such intense jealousy and loses their fear of God, they are capable of committing such an act. Given your religious differences with the Deobandis, is it appropriate to label them as polytheists? If Mohsin’s statement does not classify him as a *Khārījī* [no longer a part of Islam], it raises the question: who exactly falls under the category of *Khārījī* in the world?

We find it surprising that Muslims around the world are so sensitive to labelling someone as an infidel [*kāfir*], even when they are not. So, as a *ʿālim*, how can Mohsin label us as infidels? It is clearly stated in the *ḥadīth* [prophetic narration] that ‘if a Muslim calls someone an infidel, but he is not an infidel, the accuser himself becomes an infidel.’ Therefore, it can be said that Mohsin’s statement has led him to be a *Khārījī*. If you [Mohsin] persist in such activities, we will take legal action against you” (“*I Request That Muẓaffar b. Mohsin Withdraw This Statement. If Not, We Will Pursue Legal Action for Labelling the Entire Deobandis Group as Polytheists, inshāʾ Allāh [God Willing].*”, *n.d.*).”

After carefully analysing the video and its 1,000 comments, it became evident that the majority—approximately 85%—expressed positive sentiment, reflecting Abrar’s ability to rally support among his followers. A smaller proportion, around 5%, maintained a neutral stance, while the remaining 10% conveyed negative viewpoints. We collected several comments from each category.

Supportive comments included one from @Md. Shah Jahan Imam, who left a particularly noteworthy comment that received 255 reactions: “Even if thousands of Muẓaffar b. Mohsin are born among you [Salafis], one Rezaul Karim Abrar is enough... *Inshāʾ Allāh.*” Similarly, @Mukhtar Mahmud remarked: “Law enforcement should take him [Mohsin] into custody. A serious remand will fix his issues.” @Mawlānā *Maḥbūb al-Raḥman* Saydī commented: “He goes on with unbridled speech. Such an initiative is welcome.”

In contrast, @Nahidul Islam expressed intense anger and hatred, stating: “I have never seen someone as audacious and mentally unhinged as Muẓaffar b. Mohsin in my life.” However, the majority of positive comments followed a similar pattern, with almost every comment expressing gratitude to Abrar and calling for legal action against Mohsin. This demonstrates how Abrar’s rhetoric consolidates his authority within his ideological community and illustrates how his followers actively participate in sectarian discourse.

On the other hand, neutral and negative comments highlight the divisive impact of Abrar’s strategy. For instance, @Muhammad Shaifulla remarked: “Both of you are envious

and arrogant.” Similarly, @Anwarul Anwarul commented: “I think you started insulting each other first. May Allāh grant us all the right understanding.” @Delwar Hossain added: “As you are, so are they.” Essentially, all impartial commentators denounced both Abrar and Mohsin.

In response to negative comments supporting Mohsin, @Nayan Ahmed Srimangal wrote: “If you sue, it will be proven in court. Regardless of whether you engage in debates or lawsuits, you will definitely lose, *inshā’ Allāh*.” It is worth noting that the majority of Bangladeshi Salafis consider Deobandi *Wa’zs* as *bid’atis* (innovators in Islam).⁶

Interestingly, @Akmal al-Dīn made a sarcastic remark, asking: “Why Abrar? Did Mohsin’s remark become ingrained in your body or not?” Similarly, @Razaul Naqsabandi posted a sardonic comment: “You will pursue legal action, and will they sit and suck lollipops? If there are more worms, take medication to alleviate the itching.” Strangely, in almost every negative comment, Abrar appears to be the target of absurd and mocking criticism.

Sunnism vs Salafism: Examining Muftī Gias Uddin Tahery’s *Wa’z*

In this section, we explore the profile of another highly influential Sunnī (shrine-based) preacher in Bangladesh, Muftī Gias Uddin Tahery, widely recognised as “Tahery Hujur.” We analysed his verified Facebook page, “Mufti Gias Uddin Tahery,” which boasts an impressive following of 1.4 million users.⁷ He is well-known for his engaging and entertaining style of preaching but is often criticised by some followers of the *Wa’z* and Salafi schools of thought, who accuse him of being a “Bhondo preacher” (hypocrite). Some also describe him as a “Mazar Pujārī” (shrine worshipper).

Numerous counterfeit Facebook accounts, pages, and groups have been created in his name. A simple search on social media, particularly Facebook, reveals an abundance of videos, reels, and memes based on his *wa’z*. These contents have garnered millions of views, likes, and reactions.

Upon examining his verified Facebook page, it became evident that he often conducts live *wa’z* sessions while delivering sermons in person. Occasionally, he also posts video clips of his offline *wa’z* as reels on his page. During a thorough review of his page, we identified a provocative video in which he criticises those who label him a “Mazar Pujārī,” specifically targeting Salafis. For demonstration purposes, this video has been included as Figure 3.

⁶ To know detail about theological debates between Salafis and deobandi *Wa’zs* in Bangladesh, see Matthew D. Yarrington, “Lived Islam in Bangladesh: Contemporary Religious Discourse between Ahl-i-Hadith, “Hanafis and Authoritative Texts, with Special Reference to al-Barzakh,” November 25, 2010, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/5690>.

⁷ See his verified FB page *Mufti Gias Uddin Tahery*, n.d.

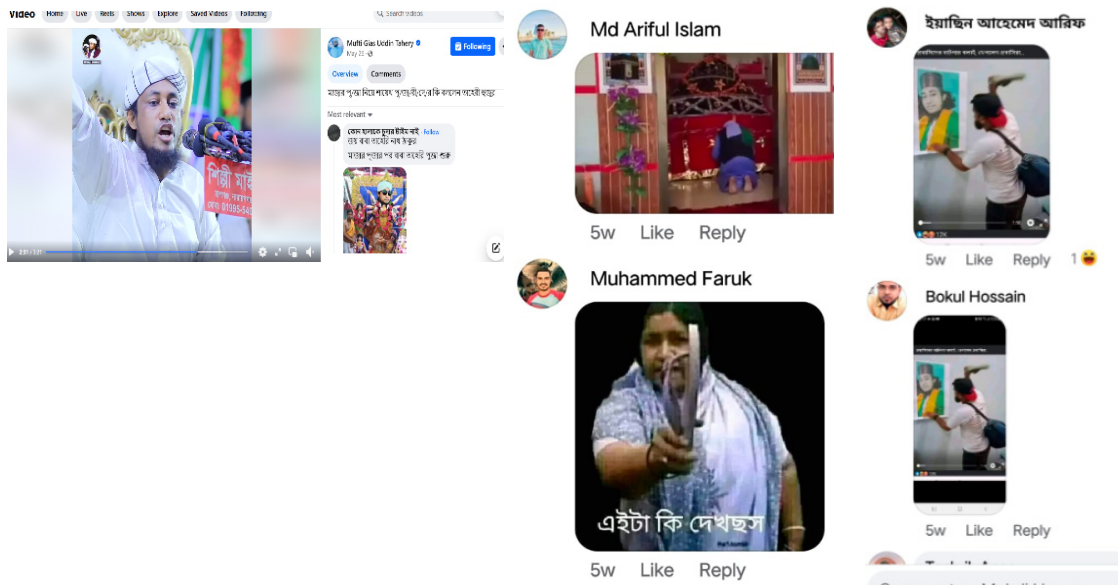


Figure 3: From left to right: (i) A screenshot capturing the analysed video titled [translated by the author] “What Did Tahery *Huzur* Discuss with the ‘Shaykh Worshippers’ Regarding the Worship of the Shrine?” (ii) A screenshot from the video’s comment section, depicting Tahery worshipping at a shrine while a shoe is displayed towards him. (iii) A screenshot showing two other commentators breaching Tahery’s photo with a shoe.

On 26 May 2024, the aforementioned video was uploaded, garnering 1k likes, 1.4k comical reactions, 626 “love” reactions, 95 “care” reactions, 3 “stunning” reactions, 3 “distracted” reactions, and 43 “indignant” reactions. Additionally, the video received 1.2k comments and a total of 52k plays. In the video, Tahery argues that visiting shrines or tombs is a *sunna* (the practice of the Prophet, his companions, and successors) while vehemently criticising Salafis for misrepresenting shrine-based practices:

“Although we do not engage in the worship of shrines, the Salafis falsely accuse us of doing so. Indeed, they are a collective of barbers. The barber’s profession includes trimming hair, while their responsibility extends to the trimming of *Dīn* (Islam). All of these *naformān* [those lacking faith or *īmān*, specifically referring to Salafis] classify us as ‘shrine worshippers!’”

He further draws a parallel with Saudi Arabia, arguing that while Salafis claim there are no shrines in Saudi Arabia, there were, in fact, shrines present, which were later demolished by Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najdī (the founder of the so-called Wahhābī movement). He asserts:

“The shrine of the Prophet *Muḥammad* remains unaltered, but they lack the courage to seize the opportunity to touch it. They know that if they touch it, doom will come. Now tell me, am I right?”

Tahery then issued a direct threat to the Salafīs, challenging them to attempt the destruction of shrines located in the renowned Sylhet district of Bangladesh:

“We will fracture your legs [if you attempt to destroy shrines]. Do not attempt to speak out against the shrines of our revered spiritual leaders [*Sufis*]; otherwise, you will face the wrath of Allāh” (*What Did Tahery Huzur Discuss with the ‘Shaykh Worshipers’ Regarding the Worship of the Shrine?*, n.d.).

This confrontational tone illustrates his use of sectarian debates to mobilise his supporters and incite engagement on Facebook.

Upon reviewing the comments on the video, it became evident that the majority, approximately 90%, expressed negative attitudes, while only around 10% were positive. Interestingly, a significant portion of the negative comments consisted of trolling memes, as depicted in Figure 3. Notably, most of these memes mock Tahery, portraying him as a “Bhondo” (hypocrite), “Majar Pujari” (shrine worshipper), “Bid‘atī” (innovator in Islam), “Hindu Tagore” (Hindu priest), “comedian,” “Juta Mari” (shoe breacher), “Baul singer” (a type of folk or Sufi singer, as Tahery sings about their revered spiritual leaders or Sufis)⁸, and other derogatory terms.

Conversely, despite the overwhelming negativity, the 10% of positive comments predominantly express admiration for Tahery’s boldness and reinforce his authority within his community. For instance, @Tariqul Islam commented: “*Hujur* [a respectful title for the ‘*ulamā*’ in Bangladesh], I have listened to many of your *wa‘z*. All the words you are expressing here are accurate and demonstrate your bravery. *Alḥamdulillāh* [Thank God]. You are our pride in Brahmanbaria [the renowned district where Tahery was born].” In an aggressive and impolite manner, Md Noor Uddin Jungey remarked: “They [Salafīs] were born in the house of the Prophet’s enemy; therefore, they label visiting the shrines as ‘Puja’ [worship].” Nonetheless, the remaining positive comments are nearly identical, expressing admiration for Tahery with phrases such as “*Alḥamdulillāh*,” “*Māshā Allāh*,” and “You are the pride of Sunnī ‘*ulamā*,” among others (*What Did Tahery Huzur Discuss with the ‘Shaykh Worshipers’ Regarding the Worship of the Shrine?*, n.d.).

Synthesising Sectarian Dynamics: Lessons from Three Key Preachers

The activities of Shaykh Dr. Muzaffar b. Mohsin, Muftī Rezaul Karim Abrar, and Muftī Gias Uddin Tahery illustrate how Facebook transforms Islamic preaching into a competitive and divisive digital phenomenon. This study reveals that sectarianism on Facebook is not merely a continuation of offline tensions but is actively shaped by the platform’s design, which incentivises religious leaders to engage in provocative discourse to expand their online presence and consolidate their authority. The competitive nature of this digital engagement highlights how Facebook amplifies sectarian divisions, redefines religious

⁸ To hear Tahery’s songs, see Binodon, 2023; Showrov Ahmed, 2020.

authority, and impacts the social fabric of Muslim communities in Bangladesh.

Shaykh Dr. Muzaffar b. Mohsin exemplifies how preachers leverage controversy to drive engagement. His frequent critiques of *Wa'z* preachers, such as his viral video on contractual prerequisites in preaching, demonstrate the deliberate use of sectarian rhetoric to provoke reactions. By positioning himself as a bold critic of opposing ideologies, Mohsin not only garners significant online attention but also fosters a polarised digital environment where his followers actively defend his views. This dynamic underscores Facebook's role in amplifying sectarian debates by prioritising content that encourages interaction, effectively turning theological disputes into tools for digital authority.

Mufti Rezaul Karim Abrar adopts a contrasting strategy to Mohsin's confrontational style by using Facebook to publicly defend the Deobandi *Wa'z* ideology while actively contesting Salafi critiques. His video threatening legal action against Mohsin for labelling Deobandis as polytheists illustrates how theological disagreements are escalated into public controversies. This shift reflects the increasing influence of audience engagement in shaping religious authority, as Abrar mobilises his followers to support his critiques and counter opposing views. The alignment of Abrar's rhetoric with the sentiments of his followers demonstrates how sectarianism is transformed into a participatory phenomenon on Facebook, where user reactions contribute to the perpetuation of divisions and the reinforcement of digital authority.

Mufti Gias Uddin Tahery offers a distinctive perspective on how Facebook merges religious discourse with broader social and political commentary. His provocative defence of shrine visitation and his strong critiques of Salafi reformism, including his threat to retaliate against those targeting shrines, demonstrate how digital platforms enable preachers to intertwine theological arguments with political and cultural identity. Tahery's ability to attract large audiences and provoke heated debates underscores the platform's design to reward controversy, where divisive content not only sustains engagement but also solidifies his authority within his community. His rhetoric, often framed as a defence of traditional practices, further illustrates how sectarianism becomes a tool to mobilise followers and assert dominance in the digital space.

These three cases collectively reveal that Facebook functions as more than a medium for religious discourse; it serves as a transformative space where competition among preachers intensifies sectarian tensions. The platform's emphasis on visibility and interaction reshapes the traditional metrics of religious authority, favouring preachers who can generate viral content over those with established scholarly credentials. This shift not only deepens divisions within the Muslim community but also redefines the negotiation of religious influence in the digital era. These preachers employ competitive strategies that exploit Facebook's incentivisation of divisive rhetoric, transforming sectarianism into a calculated performance to consolidate digital prominence in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This study critically examined how Facebook influences religious authority and affects the unity of Muslim communities in Bangladesh, focusing on three prominent preachers: Shaykh Dr. Muzaffar b. Mohsin, Muftī Rezaul Karim Abrar, and Muftī Gias Uddin Tahery. While the Internet is often viewed as a tool for fostering unity under the concept of a digital *umma*, our findings reveal a contrasting reality. Rather than bridging divides, Facebook incentivises fragmentation by encouraging preachers to adopt divisive rhetoric to enhance their visibility and authority.

The analysis highlights three significant insights. First, Facebook transforms Islamic preaching into a competitive arena, where preachers employ provocative discourse to attract engagement, thereby intensifying sectarian divisions. Second, the platform empowers followers to actively participate in these debates, fostering a participatory form of sectarianism that reinforces group loyalties. Finally, the emphasis on metrics such as likes, shares, and comments redefines religious authority, shifting it from traditional scholarly credentials to digital performance.

However, this study is limited by its exclusive focus on Facebook and the activities of three preachers, leaving broader dynamics on other social media platforms and diverse voices within Bangladesh's Muslim community unexplored. Future research could expand the scope to include comparative analyses across platforms or regions, enriching the understanding of how digital spaces shape religious discourse and sectarian dynamics globally. This research contributes to the fields of digital religion and media studies by demonstrating how platforms like Facebook actively reshape religious authority and amplify sectarian divisions.

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