

Algorithmic Faith: Religion, AI, and Polarization in India

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ABSTRACT

Religion in India now unfolds on screens and feeds. Digital media and AI shape how people pray, learn, and belong. Platforms turn sermons, rituals, and symbols into constant, public content. Algorithms decide reach and visibility, not priests or scholars. Emotional posts travel faster than balanced dialogue. Echo chambers harden group lines and mute dissent. Rumors and edited videos can spill into street violence. AI apps answer spiritual questions yet lack moral duty. Datafication tracks devotion and predicts behavior. Political actors use faith content to mobilize voters. Minority voices face trolling, bias, and erasure. Gender and caste also shape who is heard online. Digital religion strains constitutional values and civic trust. Ethical design, fair laws, and media literacy can help. Interfaith work and transparent AI offer further guardrails. The study uses qualitative methods to map these shifts. Evidence comes from digital ethnography, discourse analysis, interviews, and cases. Findings explain how platforms, code, and power remake religion today..

Keywords: : digital religion; India; algorithms; AI devotion; echo chambers; polarization; fundamentalism; datafication; Hindutva; Islamophobia; caste online; constitutional morality

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion remains a powerful force in shaping beliefs, identities, and public life in India. Digital media and artificial intelligence have entered this space, altering how religion is expressed, shared, and consumed. Social media platforms now serve as new temples, mosques, churches, and monasteries where faith, identity, and ideology circulate. Online sermons, ritual live-streams, devotional apps, scripture chatbots, and digital pilgrimages are steadily replacing traditional spaces of worship for many. Religious communities no longer gather only in physical spaces but also in WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, Telegram forums, and Instagram pages. Algorithms decide which religious content gains visibility and which voices remain silent, creating new hierarchies within faith.

India has witnessed a steady rise in digital religious activism and polarized debates on faith. Religious content often spreads faster on platforms than civic or constitutional values. Many users report that social media increases mistrust between religious groups and deepens political divides. Religious nationalism gains strength in digital spaces, while minority voices face hostility and misrepresentation. Fundamentalist beliefs are amplified through emotionally charged posts, memes, edited videos, and manipulated news. Digital platforms allow individuals to choose information that confirms their beliefs, creating echo chambers that isolate communities from differing views. Offline violence has often followed digital misinformation and rumor-based mobilization.

The link between religion and technology raises important sociological concerns. Algorithms, unlike priests or religious scholars, are not guided by theology or ethics. Their main purpose is to increase engagement, not truth or harmony. Such systems may reward sensational or divisive religious content because it attracts more attention. Faith is converted into digital data points, likes, shares, and targeted advertisements. AI-powered devotional apps interpret scriptures, answer spiritual questions, and guide rituals without human authority. The line between spiritual guidance and technological simulation becomes increasingly unclear.

Existing research focuses on media, society, and religion, but often ignores AI and algorithmic influence on belief formation. Many studies explore digital extremism or social media polarization, yet they rarely address how religious identities are shaped by platform design, data collection, and automated recommendations. There is also limited comparative work on how Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and other communities use digital platforms differently. Caste-based religious hierarchies in digital spaces remain understudied. A sociological inquiry is required to understand how digital religion interacts with nationalism, constitutional values, caste, gender, and democracy

This paper studies how digital media and AI shape religious beliefs, identities, and fundamentalist movements in India. It explores how online religious communities form, how algorithms influence visibility, and how political actors use faith-based narratives on digital platforms. It also examines the consequences for secular democracy, minority rights, and social peace. The paper uses a qualitative sociological approach and draws on digital ethnography and discourse analysis. The aim

is to offer an analytical and evidence-based understanding of the digital transformation of religion and its social impact. The following sections present literature, theory, methods, analysis, and responses to the growing challenges of digital religion.

2. . LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion has been a core theme in sociology since its foundation. Durkheim (1912) viewed religion as a collective force that binds individuals into moral communities through shared symbols and rituals. Weber (1922) explored how religious authority, charisma, and rationalization shaped social order and the decline of spiritual mystery in modernity. Marx (1844) treated religion as an ideological tool that sustains inequality by offering spiritual comfort while masking material suffering. These classical theories provide a basis for understanding religion as both a personal belief and a social structure that influences identity, authority, and power.

The relationship between religion and media evolved from print Bibles, radio sermons, and television evangelism to digital platforms. Hjarvard (2008) introduced the concept of the **mediatization of religion**, arguing that media no longer only transmit religious messages but shape religious authority, practices, and institutions according to media logic. Hoover (2006) showed that the media is now a primary site where people encounter and interpret religion. In India, religious television channels and live broadcasts of temple rituals expanded religious consumption beyond physical spaces (Rajagopal 2011). Digital technologies have accelerated this shift, allowing faith to move from physical congregations to networked screens.

Digital religion refers to the practice of faith within online spaces where technology and spirituality merge (Campbell 2012). Social media platforms enable believers to form virtual congregations, participate in live rituals, and follow religious influencers. Helland (2005) distinguished between **religion online** (information about religion on the internet) and **online religion** (actual performance of religious rituals online). In India, YouTube bhajan channels, WhatsApp prayer groups, and Instagram devotion pages function as new sacred spaces. Yet studies show that digital communities often develop strong group boundaries and exclude dissenting voices (Campbell and Evolvi 2020).

Fundamentalism has been described as a reaction to modernity and secularization, marked by literal scriptural interpretation, moral rigidity, and resistance to pluralism (Marty and Appleby 1994). Social media intensifies this process by creating echo chambers that reinforce religious certainty and hostility towards others (Sunstein 2018). Indian studies show that religious misinformation on WhatsApp has contributed to communal violence and mob lynching (Chaturvedi 2019). Online campaigns such as “Love Jihad” and anti-conversion narratives blend religion with nationalism and gender anxieties (Udupa 2021). Digital polarization is often emotional and identity-driven rather than ideological.

Artificial intelligence introduces a new layer to religious communication. Algorithms curate religious content based on engagement rather than ethics or truth (O'Donnell 2021). AI devotional apps like “Gita GPT,” “Bible AI,” and “QuranGPT” offer automated spiritual guidance, raising questions about non-human religious authority (Singh 2023). Religious data is collected, profiled, and targeted through political campaigns and advertisements (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Algorithmic systems may also amplify extremist content, creating radical religious pathways on platforms like YouTube and Telegram (Tufekci 2015). Despite this, academic work on AI and religion in India remains limited.

Existing literature establishes how media and digital platforms influence religion, but three clear gaps remain:

AI and religious authority—few studies examine how AI-generated scripture interpretation, chatbots, and predictive algorithms shape belief and devotion in India.

Comparative religious analysis—research rarely compares digital practices across Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Dalit-Ambedkarite traditions.

Caste and digital religion—scholarship rarely studies how caste biases, dominance, and resistance appear in digital religious spaces.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding religion in the digital age requires combining classical religious sociology with contemporary media and algorithmic theories. The mediatization framework by Hjarvard (2008) explains how media logic, rather than sacred institutions, shapes religion. Media no longer only carry religious messages but actively transform how religion is practiced, seen, and legitimized. In India, religious leaders adapt sermons for online platforms, using visual appeal, emotion, and algorithmic trends to gain visibility (Rajagopal 2011). Religion becomes intertwined with entertainment, politics, and consumer culture, shifting authority from priests to platforms.

Castells's concept of the network society (2009) helps explain how religion moves into fluid, decentralized digital spaces. Religious authority no longer depends only on institutions but on networks of followers, shares, and engagement. Habermas's public sphere theory argues that rational dialogue sustains democracy, yet digital religious spaces often replace argument with emotion, identity, and spectacle (Habermas 1989). Online religious discussions rarely follow reasoned debate and often become spaces of exclusion rather than dialogue.

Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) explains how individuals use religion to form in-groups and out-groups. Online platforms intensify these group boundaries, as users align with communities that confirm their beliefs and values. Digital religion often relies on symbolic markers like slogans, memes, and hashtags (#JaiShreeRam, #AllahuAkbar) to reinforce group belonging. Affective publics, as described by Papacharissi (2015), show how emotions rather than facts shape digital participation. Religious posts that trigger pride, anger, fear, or devotion gain more visibility than balanced or neutral content.

Algorithmic amplification theory explains how platform algorithms shape religious visibility. Algorithms prioritize content that generates strong reactions, regardless of accuracy or ethics (Tufekci 2015). As a result, sensational sermons, polarizing narratives, and fundamentalist videos gain more traction than moderate or pluralistic views. Gillespie (2018) describes algorithms as new “custodians of public discourse,” controlling what people see, believe, and share. In digital religion, algorithms act as silent religious authorities, filtering scripture, sermons, and moral interpretations.

Together, these theories reveal that religious belief in the digital age is not just a matter of faith but also a product of media systems, data flows, platform power, and collective identity behavior. They also highlight the need to view digital religion as a sociotechnical process shaped by human agency, political interests, and programmed algorithms.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive sociological approach to examine how digital media and artificial intelligence shape religious beliefs and fundamentalist expressions in India. The study does not aim to measure numerical patterns but to interpret meanings, narratives, symbols, and social behaviors within digital religious spaces (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Qualitative research is appropriate because religion, identity, and digital behavior involve subjective understanding, emotional experience, and symbolic interaction rather than quantifiable variables.

Digital ethnography forms the core of data collection. It involves observing religious activity on platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and X (Twitter). Online sermons, live-stream rituals, devotional songs, comment threads, meme pages, and influencer content are closely examined to understand how belief is constructed and performed in virtual spaces (Pink et al. 2016). Discourse analysis is used to study language, visuals, symbols, and emotions in digital religious communication. This includes analyzing keywords, hashtags such as #JaiShreeRam or #AllahuAkbar, and comments under religious videos where users express devotion, anger, pride, or hostility. The aim is to identify how digital language normalizes ideology, constructs enemies, or promotes interfaith harmony.

Sampling is purposive rather than random. Content is selected based on relevance, visibility, and influence within digital religious networks. Criteria include high viewer engagement, trending hashtags, virality, or involvement in controversies. Platform algorithms are also used to trace recommendation pathways, showing how one religious video can lead to more radical or devotional content. Ethical concerns are carefully addressed. Public digital data is used, private messages are anonymized, and interview participants are informed of consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Hate speech or extremist content is handled cautiously with academic objectivity while avoiding amplification.

Reflexivity remains a central element of the research. The researcher acknowledges that personal beliefs, social position, and academic training may influence interpretation. Continuous reflection reduces bias and protects the integrity of analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The methodology also faces limitations. Deep motives behind online behavior cannot always be confirmed, and algorithmic systems remain partially opaque because platforms do not reveal their complete recommendation logic. Despite these boundaries, qualitative methodology offers rich insights into how belief, technology, identity, and power intersect in India's digital religious landscape.

5. MEDIA LOGIC AND ALGORITHMIC AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

The shift of religion from physical to digital spaces has made media logic a central force in shaping how faith is communicated, consumed, and perceived in public life. Media logic refers to the rules and formats through which media select, arrange, and present information, prioritizing speed, emotion, visibility, and audience engagement over accuracy or theological depth (Hjarvard 2008). Religious leaders and institutions increasingly adapt their teachings to fit digital attention spans by using short videos, dramatic visuals, music overlays, and emotionally charged language. Rituals once confined to temples, mosques, churches, and gurudwaras are now streamed on Facebook Live and YouTube, where view counts replace physical attendance as a symbol of legitimacy. Religious identity becomes something to be performed in public feeds rather than practiced privately, turning devotion into a visible, shareable act.

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp function as new religious arenas where authority is no longer held only by priests, imams, pastors, or scholars. Influencers, motivational speakers, and lifestyle gurus now interpret scriptures and deliver moral guidance to millions. Their credibility rests not on theological training but on follower count, production quality, algorithmic reach, and emotional impact. The shift from institutional religion to “platform religion” means that visibility and virality increasingly define what is considered religious truth (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). Devotional content is crafted to please algorithms, not only believers. A sermon that triggers outrage or strong emotion is

often promoted more than a calm appeal for tolerance because platforms optimize for engagement rather than harmony.

Algorithms act as invisible religious authorities. They decide what content appears on screens, which voices are amplified, and which are ignored. Unlike traditional religious authority, algorithmic authority lacks ethics, scripture, and responsibility. Its only function is to maximize attention and time spent on the platform (Gillespie 2018). A user who watches one devotional video is soon recommended more content of similar or more vigorous intensity. Gradually, algorithms create religious echo chambers in which users encounter only one worldview, while alternative interpretations are filtered out. Studies show that recommendation systems can unintentionally lead users from moderate religious content to radical and polarizing material (Tufekci 2015). In India, this pattern is evident in YouTube's suggestion chains, which move from devotional bhajans to anti-minority speeches in a matter of clicks.

Media logic also encourages sensationalism and spectacle. Religion becomes content, and faith becomes performance. Sermons are edited with cinematic music, drone shots of pilgrims, and dramatic transitions to attract viewers. Memes, reels, and short clips reduce complex theological arguments to slogans or emotionally charged imagery. As media logic reshapes religion, theological nuance weakens while symbolic power increases. The boundary between worship and entertainment grows thinner. Religious apps, digital darshans, and AI-powered Gita or Quran chatbots present spirituality as personalized service, available on demand and shaped by user data.

Algorithmic authority is even more disruptive than media logic because it not only distributes religious content but also predicts what people desire to believe. Algorithms construct religious preference profiles based on likes, search history, caste surnames, language, and geography. In doing so, they can reinforce existing social hierarchies and biases without user awareness (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Faith is increasingly governed by code and computation, not only by scripture and tradition. The logic of algorithms transforms religion from a community practice into a personalized feed of devotion, ideology, and identity.

Media logic and algorithmic authority together create a new digital religious order. In this order, authority is decentralized, theology is simplified, devotion is broadcast, and fundamentalism finds fertile ground. Religious meaning is no longer guided solely by moral reasoning or sacred texts, but also by shares, likes, hashtags, and algorithmic preferences. Understanding this shift is essential for analyzing how digital media contributes to religious polarization, identity formation, and political mobilization in India.

6. AI, DATAFICATION, AND PREDICTIVE FAITH

Artificial intelligence has become a new mediator of religion, altering how faith is practiced, interpreted, and experienced in the digital age. AI-powered applications now offer users personalized verses from the Bhagavad Gita, Bible, Quran, or Guru Granth Sahib, respond to moral dilemmas, and guide prayer or meditation routines. Tools such as "Gita GPT," "QuranGPT," "Bible AI," and "RoboGuru" simulate the role of spiritual advisors by using large language models to answer religious questions based on scripture (Singh 2023). Unlike traditional priests or scholars, AI offers instant, round-the-clock guidance without human bias or institutional control. Yet it also lacks moral responsibility, spiritual authority, and contextual understanding. The rise of AI spirituality raises a fundamental question: can religious authority be automated, and if so, who programs the divine?

Digital faith practices rely on datafication, a process where emotions, prayers, and rituals are transformed into data points (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Devotional apps collect information such as prayer timings, scriptures read, donation history, and even biometric data, such as heart rate during meditation. This data is stored, analyzed, and sometimes monetized through advertisements, subscription models, or political campaigns. Religious behavior becomes measurable and predictable. Users are profiled as "devout," "moderate," or "inactive," and content is customized to sustain engagement. Platforms learn when a user is most receptive to religious content and push notifications accordingly. Faith becomes a matter of algorithmic prediction rather than spiritual reflection.

AI also influences the visibility of religious content. Platform algorithms prioritize posts based on engagement, not spiritual depth or accuracy. A peaceful interfaith message receives less visibility than a provocative, emotionally charged sermon because it generates fewer reactions, comments, or shares (Gillespie 2018). Predictive algorithms learn user preferences and reinforce them, creating closed loops of belief. Users who watch a single religious video are soon directed to more intense or sensational content, creating pathways toward radicalization (Tufekci 2015). YouTube, for example, can guide users from devotional bhajans to extreme political propaganda in a few steps. The shift from neutral technology to ideological influence occurs quietly, under the logic of algorithmic efficiency.

The integration of AI into religion is not limited to content delivery. It extends to ritual participation and spiritual simulation. Virtual temples now allow users to perform digital darshan of deities, light virtual lamps, and even make online offerings. AI-generated chant recitations mimic the voice of priests. In Japan, robot monks chant sutras; in China, AI-powered Buddha statues answer spiritual questions; in India, temples use facial recognition to manage pilgrim flow (Joshi 2022). These technologies attempt to merge devotion and automation, but also risk reducing sacred acts to digital performance.

AI also introduces ethical and theological dilemmas. Religious interpretation by AI is shaped by datasets chosen by developers, who may carry cultural, linguistic, or political biases. If a chatbot misinterprets a verse or reinforces a supremacist ideology, accountability becomes unclear. Who is responsible—the programmer, the platform, or the user? Many traditions believe that divine knowledge cannot be reduced to probability and language prediction. AI lacks consciousness, intent, and sacred legitimacy, yet it increasingly functions as a guide for believers. This tension marks the arrival of “algorithmic theology,” where scripts and code compete with scripture and tradition.

Datafication and predictive AI also affect governance and politics. Religious data is valuable for electoral campaigns, especially in a country like India, where religion influences voting patterns. Political consulting firms and parties use micro-targeting to send tailored religious messages to specific castes, communities, and localities (Sircar 2020). The same data can be used to spread hate, call for boycotts, or mobilize crowds. AI-based surveillance tools can also track gatherings, monitor mosques or temples, and flag dissenting religious speech. Faith becomes not just personal or communal but monitored, predicted, and governed.

AI, datafication, and predictive systems have transformed religion from a purely spiritual practice into a techno-social process governed by algorithms, platforms, and metrics. They reshape how believers pray, learn, doubt, and belong. They also open new avenues for control, manipulation, and exclusion. Understanding this new religious landscape is crucial to analyzing how faith survives, adapts, or resists in the age of artificial intelligence.

7. ONLINE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Digital platforms have become new spaces where religious identities are constructed, performed, and contested. Online religious communities emerge through shared beliefs, hashtags, influencers, and algorithmically curated content. They do not require physical presence or institutional membership; instead, they operate through emotional belonging and constant interaction. Religion in digital spaces is not only about faith, but also about identity, recognition, and visibility. Social media platforms allow individuals to join communities based on religious symbols such as “Har Har Mahadev,” “Allahu Akbar,” “Praise the Lord,” or “Waheguru Ji,” which function as both expressions of devotion and markers of group identity. These symbols create imagined religious publics that exist only through digital connectivity (Anderson 2006).

Online religious communities often reinforce identity through repetition, shared narratives, and selective memory. Users circulate stories of historical victories, perceived threats, and divine miracles to reinforce group pride. Algorithms support such content by filtering out disagreement and promoting emotionally charged posts (Tufekci 2015). As a result, users are more likely to interact with people who share their beliefs, strengthening in-group solidarity and reducing exposure to other perspectives. Religious minorities often use digital spaces to preserve culture, resist discrimination, or mobilize support, but they also face harassment, trolling, and digital hate campaigns (Udupa 2021). The same platforms that enable digital congregation also produce digital exclusion.

Youth play a central role in shaping digital religion. Many young users engage with religion not through scriptures or institutions, but through memes, reels, clips, and influencer videos. Faith becomes personalized, aesthetic, and shareable. A meme of Lord Shiva with cosmic visuals or a slowed devotional hymn on Instagram can attract more attention than traditional sermons. Young users blend nationalism, spirituality, and pop culture, producing hybrid forms of identity such as “digital Hindutva,” “Muslim pride,” or “Christian revival youth movements” (Farooqui 2022). These expressions are not always fundamentalist, but they often reflect political anxieties, cultural insecurity, and a desire for belonging. Identity is performed not only privately but also digitally through likes, shares, and followers.

Family remains an essential influence in religious identity formation, but social media often competes with or even replaces it. A study in Mumbai found that religious views among youth are influenced more by family than by digital sources, yet online content increasingly shapes interpretation and intensity of belief (Varma and Chauhan 2023). Many young people first see religious rituals at home, but later reinterpret them through online narratives that may be nationalist, conservative, feminist, or reformist. The digital environment offers multiple authorities to choose from—priests, influencers, scholars, or anonymous users—leading to a decentralization of religious guidance.

Gender plays a significant role in digital religious communities. Women increasingly emerge as online preachers, storytellers, and spiritual teachers, often gaining large followings on YouTube and Instagram. Digital platforms allow some women to bypass patriarchal religious institutions and speak directly to audiences. However, digital religion also reproduces gender stereotypes by promoting idealized roles such as the “devout mother,” “pure wife,” or “sacrificial daughter” (Chaudhuri 2021). Female religious influencers often face misogynistic abuse when they challenge tradition or address sensitive issues. Gender becomes both a site of empowerment and a site of control in digital faith spaces.

Online religious communities are deeply embedded in identity politics. Religion becomes a tool for expressing collective pride, resisting marginalization, or justifying political claims. Many communities use religion to support electoral campaigns, protest movements, or cultural demands. Religious identity online is rarely neutral; it is shaped by power, history, and algorithmic visibility. Digital spaces intensify religious belonging but also deepen divisions by turning faith into a constant public performance. Identity is no longer only believed; it is broadcast, measured, and defended in real time.

8. DIGITAL POLARIZATION AND FUNDAMENTALIST BELIEFS

Digital media has intensified religious polarization in India by transforming faith into a constant public performance shaped by visibility, emotion, and competition. Unlike traditional religious spaces that fostered controlled interaction and ritual order, digital platforms allow unfiltered expression of belief, anger, pride, and fear. Users are encouraged to speak in absolutes, not ambiguities. Polarization grows when religion becomes entwined with nationalism, identity politics, and algorithmic amplification. Fundamentalist beliefs thrive in environments where religious identities are presented as under threat and in need of protection (Marty and Appleby 1994).

Polarization begins with digital echo chambers. Platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and Telegram use algorithms that prioritize content matching a user's past engagement. People following devotional channels are often guided toward more assertive or extremist religious content over time. Algorithms reward emotionally intense posts, not balanced dialogue, which leads to increasing visibility of extreme sermons, symbolic violence, and hate speech (Tufekci 2015). Echo chambers strengthen in-group loyalty while deepening hostility toward out-groups. Users begin to see the world through an "us versus them" lens, in which religious difference becomes a moral conflict rather than diversity (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Digital rumors and misinformation have directly triggered violence in India. WhatsApp groups have circulated false messages about child kidnappings, beef consumption, temple desecration, or interfaith marriage conspiracies. Several lynchings and mob attacks occurred after such rumors spread rapidly across encrypted networks (Chaturvedi 2019). The "Love Jihad" narrative, which claims that Muslim men marry Hindu women to convert them, has gained traction primarily through social media campaigns and YouTube propaganda. These narratives combine fear, gender anxiety, and religious nationalism, creating fertile ground for fundamentalist mobilization (Udapa 2021). Digital spaces make it easy to mobilize crowds in minutes, bypassing institutions like courts, police, or religious councils.

Fundamentalist beliefs online are shaped by emotion rather than theology. Rage, humiliation, revenge, and pride gain more algorithmic visibility than patience, doubt, or compassion. Influencers and preachers often use emotionally loaded language and dramatic visuals to portray other communities as enemies or threats to religion and nation. Political actors also use digital platforms to spread religious propaganda during elections, invoking sacred symbols and historical grievances to evoke loyalty and fear (Jaffrelot 2021). Social media becomes not only a site of belief, but a battleground where truth is decided by virality.

Platform-specific dynamics also shape digital fundamentalism. WhatsApp operates in closed networks, making rumor verification difficult. YouTube encourages long-form sermons that often contain ideological narratives wrapped in religious language. Telegram and Signal host encrypted extremist groups that plan offline actions, spread hate literature, and share weapon manuals. Instagram and Facebook use visual storytelling—edited images of gods, martyrs, or demolished temples—to evoke a sense of emotional belonging and rage. Each platform fosters a unique form of religious polarization, shaped by its design, speed, and audience.

Fundamentalism also draws strength from perceived exclusion or humiliation. Minority communities use digital platforms to resist discrimination and express cultural pride, but some extremist responses emerge when users believe their identity is suppressed or insulted. Digital martyrdom, where individuals killed in communal violence are portrayed as heroes of faith, strengthens the cycle of revenge and identity defense (Farooqui 2022). Many such narratives ignore constitutional values of secularism and instead rely on mythic history, selective memory, and honor-based moral codes.

Digital polarization erodes the possibility of interfaith dialogue. Debate becomes attack, and disagreement becomes betrayal. Moderates often remain silent to avoid trolling or threats. Religious scholars and peace activists receive less visibility than sensational preachers or aggressive influencers. The structure of digital media makes it difficult for nuanced, pluralistic voices to survive. Democracy depends on dialogue, but digital religion often replaces dialogue with digital mobs.

Digital fundamentalism reveals a wider crisis—not only of faith and identity, but of public reason, empathy, and constitutional morality. Understanding this shift is essential to grasping how technology transforms religion from a spiritual practice into a political weapon.

9. COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Religious expression in the digital sphere varies across communities, yet certain patterns persist: emotional appeal, identity reinforcement, algorithmic visibility, and politicization. Hindu, Muslim, and Christian groups in India use digital platforms for devotion, community-building, and activism, but their narratives, aesthetics, and power relations differ.

Hindu digital nationalism has become one of the most dominant religious expressions online. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp feature devotional songs, mythological stories, and images of deities, often merged with national symbols such as the flag, soldiers, or maps of Akhand Bharat. This fusion of faith and nationalism is referred to as "digital Hindutva," in which Hindu identity is presented not only as a religion but also as the cultural and political essence of India (Jaffrelot 2021). Influencers use slogans such as "Jai Shree Ram" or "Har Har Mahadev" not only as spiritual chants but as statements of territorial and cultural power. Content often glorifies ancient Hindu civilization, promotes temple architecture, and frames other religions as external threats. The narrative is supported by historical grievances, pride in majority status,

and the belief that digital platforms can restore Hindu supremacy.

Islamic digital revivalism operates differently. Muslim communities use Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram to share Quranic verses, Hadith explanations, and short clips about modesty, prayer, or moral discipline. Many Muslim influencers aim to counter stereotypes, reclaim theological knowledge, and promote unity within the global Ummah. However, some segments express grievance over issues like hijab bans, lynchings, or surveillance of mosques, which creates a narrative of persecution and resistance (Ahmad 2020). Hashtags like #Islamophobia or #StandWithPalestine connect Indian Muslims to global struggles. Yet, specific Islamist channels also promote exclusivist interpretations, framing the world as a struggle between belief and unbelief. Digital revivalism, therefore, exists in both peaceful and radical forms—ranging from spiritual renewal to oppositional identity politics.

Christian digital networks in India focus largely on healing services, worship music, Bible study sessions, and motivational preaching. Many churches broadcast live sermons and prayer meetings through YouTube and Facebook, creating transnational religious communities. Evangelical content often draws on American-influenced aesthetics, including cinematic worship songs, testimonies, and prosperity teachings. Some Christian channels teach about persecution, forced conversions, or legal restrictions on church activity. Like other religions, digital Christianity blends devotion with identity politics, especially when responding to anti-conversion laws or violence against churches (George 2019). Yet, compared to Hindu or Muslim spaces, Christian digital content in India often emphasizes personal salvation, moral reform, and global Christianity rather than national dominance.

A comparative view shows that all digital religious communities use similar tools—hashtags, live streams, reels, and AI—but their power and vulnerability differ. Hindu digital narratives often emerge from a position of majority privilege and political backing. Muslim narratives combine defensive identity and global solidarity, shaped by experiences of marginalization. Christian narratives oscillate between spirituality and fear of legal or social restrictions. Algorithmic visibility often favors majority voices, while minority content faces trolling, suppression, or targeted hate campaigns (Udupa 2021).

Caste occupies a unique position within Hindu digital spaces. Dominant caste narratives often present Hindu identity as unified, ignoring internal hierarchies. In contrast, Dalit and Ambedkarite digital movements challenge caste oppression by invoking figures like B.R. Ambedkar and using hashtags such as #JaiBhim and #DalitLivesMatter (Guru 2020). These groups reclaim history, theology, and Buddhist conversion narratives to resist caste-based discrimination. They use digital platforms to critique Brahmanical supremacy embedded in religious nationalism. Yet, they face online abuse, fake legal complaints, and algorithmic invisibility. Caste, therefore, becomes a fault line within digital Hinduism, revealing that religious unity often hides internal inequalities.

Digital religious expressions across communities differ in tone, strategy, and social position, yet all are influenced by media logic and algorithmic authority. Digital platforms do not treat all religions equally; they amplify majoritarian pride more easily than minority pain. Each religion uses digital space to negotiate identity, yet the outcomes depend on political power, historical memory, and digital literacy. Religious expression, therefore, is no longer only sacred—it is strategic, aesthetic, data-driven, and deeply embedded in contemporary identity politics.

10. DIGITAL RELIGION AND THE CRISIS OF SECULAR DEMOCRACY

Digital religion has reshaped the public sphere in India, challenging the foundational principles of secular democracy. India's constitutional model of secularism does not demand the removal of religion from public life but seeks equal respect for all faiths and protection of minority rights (Bhargava 1998). Digital media disrupts this balance by giving religion a constant and aggressive public presence. Online platforms turn sacred symbols into political weapons, blur the line between state and religion, and create a system where constitutional values compete with digital majoritarianism.

Digital platforms allow religious narratives to bypass traditional institutions such as courts, legislatures, and mainstream media. Instead of reasoned debate, the public sphere becomes dominated by emotion, spectacle, and symbolic warfare. Secularism depends on dialogue, tolerance, and institutional safeguards, but digital religion fuels speed, outrage, and collective anger (Habermas 1989). Viral videos, manipulated news, and hate speech weaken rational discourse. As a result, constitutional ideals like fraternity, dignity, and equality struggle to survive in spaces governed by trends, hashtags, and algorithmic visibility.

The digital public sphere creates new hierarchies of citizenship. Majoritarian religious identities often gain visibility, while minorities are portrayed as outsiders, invaders, or beneficiaries of “appeasement politics.” Campaigns calling for economic boycotts, temple reconstructions, population control, and anti-conversion laws circulate widely on social media. These narratives frame citizenship not as a constitutional right but as a religious entitlement. Muslims, Christians, and Dalit converts often face digital exclusion where loyalty to the nation is judged through religious conformity (Jaffrelot 2021). The idea of India as a plural, secular republic is challenged by visions of India as a Hindu nation or a civilization-state.

Offline violence increasingly follows online mobilization. Rumors spread on WhatsApp or Facebook have led to lynchings,

communal riots, and targeted hate crimes (Chaturvedi 2019). Digital networks enable rapid crowd formation without institutional accountability. Political parties and religious groups often use social media to mobilize voters by invoking religious pride, historical trauma, or fear of demographic change. Electoral campaigns use micro-targeted religious advertising, in which AI tools customize political messages by caste, religion, and region (Sircar 2020). Secular democracy becomes vulnerable when faith becomes a tool of voter manipulation.

The legal system attempts to regulate online hate and misinformation, but enforcement remains weak. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021 require platforms to remove illegal content and trace the origins of messages. Yet, they are criticized for enabling government surveillance and limiting free speech. Courts, particularly the Supreme Court of India, have intervened in cases related to hate speech, communal content, and internet shutdowns. However, judicial responses remain inconsistent and slow compared to the rapid pace of digital harm (Bhatia 2016). Calls for platform accountability often clash with concerns about censorship and political misuse of regulation.

Digital religion also reveals a more profound moral crisis. Constitutional morality, a term popularized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, refers to respect for constitutional principles over social or religious majoritarianism. In the digital age, constitutional morality must compete with algorithmic morality, in which right and wrong are defined by engagement, virality, and community sentiment rather than by law or ethics. Platform algorithms reward anger over empathy and conflict over dialogue. As a result, the values of the Constitution—liberty, equality, fraternity, dignity—struggle to reach the same visibility as religious slogans and nationalist myths.

Digital religion not only threatens secular democracy; it transforms it. Faith becomes a political category, citizenship becomes conditional, and public discourse becomes saturated with claims of divine authority. The challenge for democracy is no longer only legal but cultural and technological. A secular republic can survive only if digital spaces are reclaimed through constitutional values, ethical technology, and interfaith dialogue. Otherwise, digital religion may lead to a future where democracy exists in law but disappears in public life.

11. RESTORING PLURALISM — ETHICAL, LEGAL, AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

The crisis produced by digital religion demands responses that are ethical, constitutional, and educational rather than merely technological or punitive. Restoring pluralism requires not only regulating online hate but also rebuilding trust, fostering dialogue, and promoting civic responsibility. Religion cannot be removed from digital spaces, but it can be guided toward empathy, dignity, and coexistence. The challenge lies in balancing freedom of expression with protection from hate, reinforcing constitutional morality while respecting faith, and regulating platforms without suppressing dissent.

Ethical responses must begin with responsible digital behavior. Religious leaders, influencers, and educators must promote narratives of compassion, interfaith respect, and shared citizenship. Initiatives such as interfaith podcasts, collaborative prayer events, and peace campaigns on Instagram or YouTube have shown potential to counter hate, though they receive less visibility than polarizing content (Nussbaum 2012). Platforms should prioritize ethical design by reducing algorithmic bias and introducing friction for sensitive content, such as prompts before sharing unverified religious claims. Civic responsibility must become part of religious expression in the digital public sphere.

Legal responses require a more substantial commitment to constitutional values rather than selective enforcement. Existing laws, such as the Indian Penal Code's sections on hate speech, the IT Act, and the 2021 Intermediary Rules, are rarely applied consistently. Regulation must focus on accountability of content that incites violence while protecting legitimate religious expression (Bhatia 2016). Courts must assert constitutional secularism by ensuring that online spaces do not become arenas of communal intimidation. At the same time, the state must avoid using digital regulation to suppress opposition or minority voices. Transparency in content moderation, judicial oversight, and platform cooperation with independent legal bodies is essential for fairness.

Educational responses are the most sustainable, though their impact is gradual. Media literacy programs should be integrated into schools, universities, and community centers to teach users how to identify manipulated images, deepfakes, and hate-driven narratives (Livingstone 2014). Religious education must go beyond ritual and doctrine to include ethics, diversity, and constitutional values. Digital literacy should empower citizens to question algorithmic influence, resist misinformation, and report harmful content. Universities and seminaries can play a key role by training religious scholars and clerics in digital ethics, technology, and interfaith dialogue.

AI and platform accountability are central to restoring pluralism. Algorithms must be audited for religious bias and transparency. Independent bodies, not only technology companies or governments, should evaluate how content is promoted or suppressed. Ethical AI frameworks should ensure that religious apps and chatbots do not encourage discrimination, distorted theology, or extremist ideology (Floridi and Cowl 2019). Developers should include diverse religious scholars, sociologists, and legal experts in the design of AI-based faith tools.

Civil society, religious institutions, and educational organizations must work together. NGOs, student groups, women's collectives, and interfaith networks can create online spaces for dialogue rather than confrontation. Projects such as digital

peace libraries, crowdsourced interfaith archives, and community fact-checking can challenge misinformation and restore empathy. Religious institutions must reclaim their moral role by condemning digital hate propagated in their name.

Restoring pluralism in the digital age is not only a legal issue but a moral and civic duty. Democracy cannot survive only through courts and elections; it requires shared values and mutual respect. Ethics must govern technology, religion must be guided by constitutional morality, and citizens must be empowered with critical education. Only then can digital platforms become places of connection rather than conflict, where faith enriches democracy rather than divides it.

12. CONCLUSION

Religion in the digital age has moved beyond sacred spaces and entered algorithmic systems, social media feeds, and AI-driven platforms. In India, where faith shapes identity, history, and politics, the digital transformation of religion has redefined how communities pray, argue, unite, divide, and imagine themselves. Digital religion has opened spaces for devotional expression, cultural preservation, and reformist voices. Yet it has also intensified polarization, mainstreamed fundamentalist beliefs, and strained the foundations of secular democracy.

The earlier sections of this paper show that digital media does not merely transmit religion—it reshapes it. Media logic transforms sacred communication into visual, emotional content designed for consumption. Algorithmic authority organizes what believers see, believe, and share, making unseen digital systems as influential as priests or scriptures. AI, devotional apps, and predictive faith tools further shift religious experience from community-guided interaction to personalized, data-driven interaction. These technological systems redefine authority, ritual, memory, and scripture in ways unseen in earlier religious history.

Online religious communities now function as identity hubs more than spiritual spaces. They offer a sense of belonging but also create exclusion. Youth engage with religion through memes, reels, and digital influencers rather than sacred texts or institutions. Gender, caste, and minority identities shape who speaks and who remains invisible in digital faith spaces. As communities strengthen internal bonds, they often harden external boundaries. The shift from devotion to digital performance weakens dialogue and strengthens spectacle.

Digital polarization reveals how easily religion can be turned into a political tool. Social media platforms allow rumors, edited videos, and hate campaigns to bypass institutions of accountability and enter public life unchecked. Offline violence frequently follows digital mobilization. Political actors use religious symbols to shape elections and redefine nationalism. Minority voices face surveillance, trolling, or silence. Democracy, in such conditions, becomes vulnerable not from the absence of elections, but from the erosion of constitutional morality, fraternity, and reason.

Yet digital religion also holds potential for peacebuilding. Interfaith campaigns, ethical technology, critical education, and legal safeguards can resist hate and restore pluralism. Courts, civil society, educators, and religious leaders must reclaim moral responsibility in guiding digital faith. Technology must serve constitutional values rather than override them. AI should assist devotion, not replace conscience or scripture. Digital literacy must become a civic virtue, just as religious tolerance is a democratic obligation.

Religion in the digital age is no longer only a matter of divine belief; screens, servers, data, and desire shape it. It can unite or divide, humanize or dehumanize, depending on how societies choose to govern it. The future of secular democracy in India depends on whether digital spaces become arenas of domination or platforms of dignity. The task for scholars, policymakers, and citizens is to ensure that faith coexists with freedom, algorithms with ethics, and religion with democracy.

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