

# International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652  
ISSN Online: 2664-8660  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.31  
IJAHS 2025; 7(2): 597-600  
[www.socialstudiesjournal.com](http://www.socialstudiesjournal.com)  
Received: 10-10-2025  
Accepted: 15-11-2025

**Rajendra Pratap Singh**  
Doctoral Research Scholar  
Department of Sociology  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

## From Sermon to Screen: Transformation of Religious Communication in Digital India

**Rajendra Pratap Singh**

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i2h.356>

### Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally altered the ways in which religion is communicated, experienced and shared in contemporary India. This paper examines the transformation of religious communication as it moves from the embodied space of the sermon to the mediated space of the screen arguing that digital platforms have restructured religious authority, participation and visibility without dissolving religious belief itself. Drawing on sociological theories of religion, media, communication etc., the study explores how sermons, discourses and devotional practices are increasingly produced, circulated, and consumed through social media, video platforms, mobile applications. The shift from face-to-face interaction to digitally mediated communication has enabled religious messages to travel beyond local congregations, creating new forms of reach, repetition and immediacy while also altering the nature of religious experience. Digital preaching emphasizes visual aesthetics, performative charisma, algorithmic circulation allowing certain religious figures to gain prominence through visibility rather than institutional authority alone. At the same time, digital platforms facilitate the formation of online devotional communities that offer belonging and participation to dispersed audiences even as they introduce new hierarchies, exclusions, and commercial logics into religious life. The article argues that digital religion in India represents a hybrid form in which traditional beliefs, rituals, narratives are reworked rather than replaced, producing a complex interplay between continuity and change. By situating digital religious communication within broader processes of mediatization and public culture, the study highlights how religion adapts to technological environments while continuing to shape moral meaning and social identity in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Digital religion, Religious communication, Mediatization, Online sermons, Religious authority, Public culture, Media and faith, Digital communities, India

### Introduction

Religion has always functioned as a communicative practice sustained through oral transmission, ritual performance, embodied presence and shared symbolic worlds that bind communities across time and space where sermons, chants, storytelling, gestures, collective participation play a central role in producing religious meaning and authority. In the Indian context especially religious communication has historically relied on face-to-face interaction discourses delivered in temples, mosques, churches, satsangs, akharas and public gatherings where charisma, voice, bodily discipline, ritual timing etc. together shaped the religious experience (Weber, 1978) <sup>[11]</sup>. However, the rapid rise of digital media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of public communication, reorganizing how messages are produced, circulated and consumed across society including the domain of religion. Social media platforms, video-sharing sites, mobile applications and live-streaming services have created new communicative infrastructures that privilege speed, visibility, repetition, and visual performance, altering the relationship between speaker and audience and redefining the conditions under which authority is established (Castells, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>. Religious content has expanded dramatically across these platforms, ranging from live-streamed sermons, short devotional clips, digital darshan to religious podcasts, mobile prayer apps and algorithm-driven recommendations that continuously curate spiritual content for users. This expansion has enabled religious messages to transcend geographical boundaries and temporal constraints, allowing sermons once confined to a local congregation to reach dispersed and anonymous audiences, thereby reshaping religious publics into networked communities

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Rajendra Pratap Singh**  
Doctoral Research Scholar  
Department of Sociology  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

rather than territorially bounded ones (Hjarvard, 2011)<sup>[6]</sup>. At the same time digital mediation introduces new logics into religious communication, as visibility, aesthetic appeal, and platform algorithms increasingly influence which religious voices gain prominence and which remain marginal, subtly shifting authority away from traditional institutions toward digitally successful figures. The research problem addressed in this article lies in understanding how this transition from sermon to screen transforms religious communication without necessarily weakening religious belief itself challenging assumptions that modernization or digitalization inevitably lead to secularization. Instead, the central argument advanced here is that digital media reshapes religion by altering modes of communication, patterns of authority and forms of community while leaving the core symbolic and moral significance of religion intact. Digital religion does not replace embodied rituals or doctrinal traditions; rather it reworks them into hybrid forms where online and offline practices intersect reinforcing some traditions while reconfiguring others (Campbell, 2013)<sup>[2]</sup>. The objectives of this paper are threefold as first, to conceptualize religion as a communicative and mediated practice rather than a static belief system; second, to analyze how digital platforms transform religious authority, experience and participation in contemporary India; and third, to assess the broader cultural and social implications of this transformation for public religion and collective identity. The significance of this inquiry lies in its contribution to the sociology of religion and media by moving beyond binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, faith and technology or belief and media, and instead highlighting the adaptive capacity of religion within changing communicative environments. By situating digital religious communication within broader processes of mediatization and networked public culture, the study underscores that digital media does not dissolve religion but reshapes how it is spoken, seen, shared and experienced in everyday life producing new forms of religious visibility, belonging and authority in contemporary India.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Understanding the transformation of religious communication in digital India requires approaching religion not merely as a system of beliefs but as a communicative practice constituted through symbols, narratives, performances and embodied rituals that generate meaning and authority within specific social contexts. From a sociological perspective, religion communicates through stories, sermons, chants, visual symbols and repetitive performances that are designed to be seen, heard, remembered and emotionally experienced making communication central to how religious traditions sustain themselves over time. This communicative dimension becomes especially significant in the digital age where media technologies reshape the conditions under which religious messages circulate. The concept of the mediatization of religion most systematically developed by Stig Hjarvard provides a crucial framework for understanding this shift, as it suggests that religion increasingly operates through media logics rather than solely through religious institutions resulting in changes to religious authority, representation and practice (Hjarvard, 2011)<sup>[6]</sup>. In digitally mediated environments religious content must adapt to formats that privilege visibility,

brevity, affect, and repetition, subtly altering how religious meaning is produced and consumed. This transformation directly affects questions of authority and legitimacy which Max Weber famously linked to charisma, tradition and rational-legal structures. In digital religious communication, charisma becomes increasingly performative and mediated as authority is no longer anchored only in institutional position or ritual lineage but is also generated through online presence, follower counts, visual appeal and algorithmic amplification (Weber, 1978)<sup>[11]</sup>. Digital platforms thus reorganize religious authority by rewarding those who can successfully translate spiritual messages into media-friendly forms enabling new religious figures to emerge alongside and sometimes in competition with, established institutions. At the same time this process aligns with José Casanova's notion of public religion which emphasizes how religion continues to occupy public space rather than retreating into private belief even in modern and technologically advanced societies (Casanova, 1994)<sup>[3]</sup>. Digital media expands this public presence by allowing religious discourse to circulate continuously in networked publics where sermons, debates and rituals become part of everyday media consumption and public conversation. The concept of digital religion further helps to capture how religious practices are not simply transferred online but are actively reconfigured, producing hybrid forms where online and offline rituals intersect, overlap and reshape one another (Campbell, 2013)<sup>[2]</sup>. Online darshan, livestreamed rituals, virtual prayer groups, algorithm-driven devotional content illustrate how ritual performance is transformed without being erased, as embodied practices are supplemented by mediated participation. The analytical focus of this framework therefore lies in examining how digital platforms reorganize religious authority and meaning by introducing new criteria of legitimacy, new modes of participation and new symbolic hierarchies while still drawing upon older religious narratives and traditions. Rather than signaling secular decline, the mediatization of religion points to a restructured religious field in which communication technologies become central actors in shaping how faith is expressed, experienced, and publicly negotiated in contemporary India.

### Methodology and Sources

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical sociological approach to examine the transformation of religious communication in digital India treating digital religion as a cultural and communicative phenomenon shaped by media logics, authority structures and everyday practices rather than as a purely technological shift. The research design is secondary data-based which is particularly appropriate for analyzing large-scale changes in religious communication that unfold across platforms, regions, traditions and cannot be adequately captured through a single localized field site. Secondary analysis allows the study to trace broader patterns of continuity and change by engaging with already existing empirical material, theoretical debates and documented practices. The sources of data include a wide range of digital religious platforms and media content such as livestreamed sermons, recorded discourses on video-sharing platforms, religious mobile applications, social media pages of religious figures and institutions and publicly accessible online rituals which together illustrate how religious messages are produced,

curated and circulated in digital space. These materials are complemented by academic literature and policy documents from sociology of religion, media studies, cultural studies which provide conceptual clarity and empirical grounding for understanding mediatization, authority, public religion in contemporary contexts. In addition, media reports and published ethnographic studies are used to capture public debates, controversies and lived experiences surrounding digital religion enabling the analysis to remain connected to social realities without undertaking new ethnographic fieldwork. The primary analytical tools employed are discourse analysis and sociological interpretation through which religious messages, visual performances, narratives and communicative styles are examined to identify recurring themes related to authority, legitimacy, participation, community formation. Rather than treating digital content as neutral information, the study analyzes how meanings are constructed, how audiences are addressed and how power operates through visibility, repetition, and platform algorithms. The study also critically reflects on its limitations most notably the absence of primary interviews or participant observation which restricts direct access to individual motivations and subjective experiences; however, this limitation is offset by the ability of secondary data to illuminate structural and symbolic patterns that characterize digital religious communication at a broader level. Overall, this methodological approach enables a sociologically informed understanding of how religion is rearticulated through digital media while remaining attentive to both the possibilities and constraints of mediated religious life.

### **From Sermon to Screen: Changing Forms of Religious Communication**

The transformation of religious communication from sermon to screen represents a profound shift in how religious messages are produced, circulated and experienced in contemporary India marking a movement from embodied face-to-face authority toward mediated visibility shaped by digital platforms. Traditionally, sermons and religious discourses were delivered in physically co-present settings such as temples, mosques, churches, satsangs and public gatherings where authority emerged through bodily presence, vocal control, ritual discipline, the immediate affective bond between preacher and audience. Digital media has disrupted this mode by enabling sermons to be recorded, edited, livestreamed and endlessly replayed, detaching religious communication from specific places and moments and allowing it to circulate across time and space with unprecedented reach. Recorded and streamed content now forms a central mode of religious transmission, transforming sermons into portable media objects that can be consumed privately, repeatedly and selectively often outside institutional supervision. This shift has foregrounded visual aesthetics, sound design and performance as key elements of digital preaching, as religious communicators increasingly rely on high-quality video production, background music, graphic symbols, subtitles and carefully staged settings to sustain attention and emotional engagement. The visual framing of the preacher, the modulation of voice and the orchestration of sound and imagery together create a mediated religious experience that privileges affect, intimacy, spectacle reshaping how authority is perceived and felt (Campbell, 2013) <sup>[2]</sup>. Time itself is reconfigured in digital religious communication, as

sermons are no longer bound to ritual calendars or collective schedules but circulate continuously through algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize repetition, popularity and engagement. Algorithms play a crucial role in determining visibility amplifying certain religious messages while marginalizing others thereby introducing a new, largely opaque form of power into the religious field that operates beyond doctrinal legitimacy or institutional rank (Castells, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>. Within this environment religious figures increasingly function as influencers, gurus or digital preachers whose authority is built through metrics such as followers, views, likes and shares transforming charisma into a measurable and performative attribute. Online charisma is sustained not only through theological knowledge or ritual lineage but through communicative skill, emotional appeal, and the ability to adapt religious narratives to platform logics allowing new actors to gain prominence alongside and sometimes in competition with established religious institutions (Weber, 1978; Hjarvard, 2011) <sup>[11, 6]</sup>. This does not imply the disappearance of embodied authority, but rather its supplementation by mediated visibility where physical presence is translated into screen-based performance and symbolic proximity replaces physical co-presence. The key transition, therefore, lies in the movement from authority rooted in shared space and ritual discipline to authority generated through circulation, repetition and visual recognition. Digital religious communication thus produces a hybrid religious public where sermons continue to draw upon traditional symbols and narratives but are reshaped by media technologies that redefine how faith is seen, heard and followed. In this process religion adapts to digital environments not by losing its significance but by reconfiguring its communicative forms, revealing how technological mediation reorganizes religious authority, experience and belonging in contemporary India.

### **Digital Religion, Community and Power**

The rise of digital religion has significantly transformed how religious communities are formed, experienced, and governed, producing new configurations of power that simultaneously expand access and generate fresh hierarchies. Online devotional communities now emerge around livestreamed rituals, social media pages of religious figures, messaging groups and platform-based congregations that connect dispersed individuals through shared belief, affect and symbolic participation often without requiring physical co-presence or formal membership. These digital communities offer new forms of belonging especially for those geographically distant, socially constrained or institutionally marginal enabling participation through comments, shares, virtual prayers and online donations that simulate collective religious life (Campbell, 2013) <sup>[2]</sup>. Participation in digital religious spaces is marked by immediacy and interaction as devotees can directly address preachers, respond to sermons and publicly display devotion through visible digital gestures, creating a sense of intimacy and accessibility that contrasts with hierarchical and gatekept offline institutions. At the same time, this form of digital belonging is shaped by platform logics that structure visibility, interaction and recognition, producing stratified communities where some voices are amplified while others remain peripheral (Hjarvard, 2011) <sup>[6]</sup>. Power within digital religion is therefore unevenly distributed as administrators,

influencers, platform algorithms play a decisive role in shaping discourse regulating participation, and defining acceptable expressions of faith. The commercialization of religious communication further intensifies these dynamics, as digital platforms enable the monetization of sermons, rituals and devotional content through advertisements, subscriptions, paid consultations, branded merchandise and donation links, transforming religious communication into a market-oriented practice embedded within the attention economy (Einstein, 2008) <sup>[5]</sup>. This commercialization does not necessarily erode belief but it does reshape religious authority by linking spiritual legitimacy to economic success and digital popularity reinforcing inequalities between high-visibility religious entrepreneurs and less mediated practitioners. Digital religious spaces also reproduce forms of exclusion and polarization, as access depends not only on connectivity but on digital literacy, language proficiency and algorithmic visibility often marginalizing those who lack technological confidence or cultural capital. Moreover, online religious communities can become sites of ideological polarization where selective exposure, echo chambers and emotionally charged content intensify sectarian boundaries and moral absolutism reshaping religion's public role in divisive ways (Sunstein, 2017) <sup>[12]</sup>. Surveillance constitutes another critical dimension of power in digital religion as platforms collect data on devotional practices, preferences, interactions, rendering religious life increasingly visible to corporate and state actors and raising questions about privacy, control, governance etc. In this sense, digital religion operates within broader regimes of data power where expressions of faith are simultaneously acts of devotion and sources of information (Zuboff, 2019) <sup>[14]</sup>. The key insight that emerges is that digital religion democratizes access by lowering barriers to participation and expanding religious publics while simultaneously producing new hierarchies based on visibility, monetization and algorithmic control. Rather than dissolving power, digital mediation reorganizes it reshaping how authority, community and belonging are negotiated in contemporary religious life, revealing digital religion as a complex field where empowerment and exclusion coexist.

## Conclusion

This paper has traced the transformation of religious communication in digital India showing how the movement from sermon to screen reshapes religious authority, experience and community without dissolving belief itself. By conceptualizing religion as a communicative practice and situating it within processes of mediatization, the discussion demonstrated that digital platforms reorganize how religious messages are produced, circulated and received, privileging visibility, performance, repetition while reworking older ritual and narrative forms. Religious authority in digital India increasingly operates through mediated charisma where legitimacy is shaped not only by institutional position or lineage but also by online presence, audience engagement and algorithmic amplification requiring a reassessment of how authority is constituted and sustained in contemporary religious life. These shifts carry significant implications for religious practice and identity as digital mediation enables wider participation, flexible engagement and new forms of belonging while also introducing commercialization, polarization, surveillance into religious spaces. Religion remains publicly visible and

socially consequential aligning with arguments that modernity and media do not privatize faith but rather reposition it within changing public cultures. At the same time, the limits of digital mediation are evident as screen-based participation cannot fully replace embodied ritual, shared physical presence or the affective depth of co-present worship revealing digital religion as supplementary rather than substitutive. Digital platforms also reproduce inequalities of access, literacy and visibility reminding us that mediation reorganizes power rather than neutralizing it. Future research would benefit from ethnographic and comparative studies examining how devotees navigate hybrid online-offline practices, how authority is negotiated across generations and how different religious traditions adapt unevenly to platform logics. The central conclusion that emerges is that digital religion transforms communication without erasing tradition producing hybrid forms of faith and authority in which continuity and change coexist, redefining how religion is spoken, seen and lived in contemporary India.

## References

1. Bryman A. Social research methods. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2016.
2. Campbell HA. Digital religion: understanding religious practice in new media worlds. London: Routledge; 2013.
3. Casanova J. Public religions in the modern world. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1994.
4. Castells M. The rise of the network society. 2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2010.
5. Einstein M. Brands of faith: marketing religion in a commercial age. New York: Routledge; 2008.
6. Hjarvard S. The mediatization of religion: theorising religion, media and social change. *Cult Relig*. 2011;12(2):119-135.
7. Mitra DP. The ascetics of Kashi: a sociological exploration. *Int J Sociol Humanit*. 2025;7(2):257-267. doi:10.33545/26648679.2025.V7.I2D.208
8. Mitra DP. Religious tourism and ascetic integrity: a sociological study of economic dependency and sacred authenticity in Varanasi. *J Res Humanit Soc Sci*. 2025;13(7):72-80.
9. Mitra DP. Digital yug mein jātigat janagaṇanā: ḍeṭā, loktantra tathā asmitā kā antarsambandh. *Int J Arts Humanit Soc Stud*. 2025. doi:10.33545/26648652.2025.V7.I1G.219
10. Mitra DP. Caste, class and gender: intersecting oppressions in subaltern communities of rural India. India: Shodh Pravah; 2019.
11. Mitra DP. Caste based inequality, exclusion and social change in India. India: Shodha Prabha; 2023.
12. Sunstein CR. Republic: divided democracy in the age of social media. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 2017.
13. Weber M. Economy and society. Roth G, Wittich C, editors. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press; 1978.
14. Zuboff S. The age of surveillance capitalism. New York: PublicAffairs; 2019.