**Islamic Waz in Social Media: Inciting Violence Against Minorities**

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In the digitalized era, almost anything and everything is available on YouTube. Islamic Sermons or Waz have also been popularized as a mass medium in Bangladesh. Watching Waz has become a trend among almost all Muslims in Bangladesh. Digital media has proliferated during the COVID pandemic quarantine, as everyone had to stay at home. Videos became widely available for people to watch at home. Many Waz are now recorded and posted on YouTube by various channels. While they are suitable for Muslims to hear daily, there are some issues around this Waz. The biggest problem is that many sermons are inappropriate yet are publicly available to the masses.

Many speeches given by some Radical Muslims include misogynistic lectures and hatred towards other religious minorities, which reinforces power over both minorities. Mass people devoted to their Islamic Clerics do not question their speeches and believe in everything they say. These misappropriated lectures support false ideologies among the Bangladeshi people. Bangladesh, a country still far from Gender equality, falls into danger as many Bangladeshi men and women, literate or illiterate, in fear of God, believe in these sermons. Bangladesh is also a secular state according to the constitution; however, we often see religion-based violence happening in Bangladesh. Some of these speeches, hadiths, or sayings are untrue, but the misinformations are never corrected; no one has ever tried to fix this issue. Preachers with hatred for women and other religious people tend to portray their contempt in speeches without any basis, inciting violence among Muslims and non-Muslims during their festivals. Many devoted people fear their religion and God and think their preacher’s words are the only way to heaven. They sell these fears to earn money, and men admit they get a large sum for spreading this information. Many women have been victims of violence, abuse, internet hatred, and many more because no accurate information is available among many Muslims in Bangladesh. A myth, an ideology, and propaganda are created through this spread of “Waz-Mongers.” This myth reinforces hatred towards the marginalized community based on gender or religion. Just for the political gain of making Bangladesh an Islamic country, this is a vital tactic religious leaders use to create their idealized state.

To begin with an explanation, Waz is a type of Islamic oration or speech primarily consisting of “the glory of Islam and the greatness of its Prophet.” These speeches are delivered mainly by Muslim scholars such as a Huzur, a Molla, a Pir, or Moulana. Waz Mahfils are public gatherings where a Muslim scholar delivers Islamic Sermons to a group of people, talking about the earth, Human beings, and the history of the Muslim Prophets. Waz Mahfils were once more common in rural areas, but now they are everywhere, in small towns and large cities. A few happen in front of BRAC University, Mohakhali Campus as well. While Political Islamists and Extremists with communal intentions sometimes like many innocent and naive Islamic Sermons, Waz Mahfils. (Al-Zaman, 2022) Two majorly affected people from these Sermons might be Women and religious minorities. Both of them have become a constant topic in every Waz.

Social media is not alien to Bangladeshi society, and it interacts with many social affairs. In this case, we must consider Bangladesh's socio-religious climate. It would be easier to explain the issue with Waz. Mahfils and their subjects in Bangladesh are shifting to Islamic revivalism, trying to make Bangladesh an utterly Muslim country. Now the current phenomenon is called “Social Mediazation” of religious gatherings.

Social media has everyone, and every community together in them, so it is safe to say Islamists and Islamic Radicalism also have a place on the Internet(Al-Zaman, 2022). However, the issue is gaining traction on social media, specifically YouTube, which has branched out into hate on other digital platforms.

Many Waz Videos by Islamist Leaders surfaced on YouTube starting in 2017. The number of uploads and views on YouTube began rising. YouTube is now quite accessible as it is pre-downloaded on most phones, allowing even people who cannot read or write to access it easily. If you are new to YouTube, Waz videos are easy to find. It became easy and convenient to discover and listen to sermons in the comfort of one’s home. It gives a practical understanding of religious quotes, Quran Hadiths, and more. However, most of the topics in these sermons were hateful towards different groups. Blind faith in the spiritual leaders has always been a common phenomenon among Muslims in Bangladesh. Their opinion often influenced people, especially those with little literacy. This kind of speech has been one of the core reasons for the religious majority to attack minorities, whether they are a gender minority or a religious minority. “In the waz-mehfil [congregations], speeches attack people personally. Political hate speeches were also heard in these programs," HN Ashequr Rahman, president of the parliamentary standing committee, told The Daily Star last night.

Controlling a woman’s mind and body is something a patriarchal society of Bangladesh has been following for years. As someone actively having an effect because of these values, I can say that society does enforce this idea among women. Waz Mahfils preaches misogynistic remarks against women and girls and promotes many socioreligious superstitions. Sometimes these Waz Mahfils also try to justify patriarchal rules that have been defied by many developed and developing countries in the world.

Professor Sadeka Halim of the Sociology Department of Dhaka University also mentioned how the sermons include negative remarks about women. They talk about controlling women’s minds and bodies. Furthermore, their speeches also criticize other religious people in the country. They have a lasting impact on society. (Mithu, 2021).

There are many examples of these sermons that portrayed severe hatred towards women. Abdur Rajjak Bin Yusuf is a popular Waz speaker in large gatherings where he says things like “নারী জাতি এত কঠিন জাতি।” “নারী জাতি ভয়ংকর জাতি।”(Women are such a difficult race.” “Women are a dangerous race”). This is not the only time he said something similar. In another sermon, he said, "Women have not been created for 'technology.' Women have been created only to serve their husbands and breed babies." In another video, he says, "Satan's conspiracy is weak, but women's conspiracy is strong. Women are dangerous." Furthermore, lastly, to quote him, he also said, "Begum Rokyea is a stigma (কলঙ্ক) for the nation," "All the foolish and illiterate women like her are a stigma for the nation." (Mithu, 2021)

He is not the only preacher who has been misogynistic and shown hatred towards women. Shah Ahmed Shafi was another one of the nation's most radical Islamist clerics and the chief of Hefazat-e-Islam, which opposed policies that aimed at enhancing the welfare of women, including those concerning education for girls. (Uttom & Ronald Rozario, 2019)

Many women's rights organizations met with Faridul Haque Khan, Minister of State for Religious Affairs, hoping to stop misogynistic Waz and have proposed five recommendations to the ministry; These include preventing and controlling the Waz, monitoring the offline and online Waz, and also taking legal action if possible. All the women’s rights organizations wished for peace and tolerance in every religion in Bangladesh. (“WE CAN Alliance Talks With Religion Ministry to Stop Misogynistic Speech,” 2021)

As a Feminist, we can see the reinforcement of Patriarchy in these people. Islamic ideology includes Purdah and other rules. However, the complete dominance of men is not something that has been taught in Islam. Women have the right to study and to do jobs, which is ultimately discouraged by the preachers. While their radical views are getting pushed, we can tell that this has become a business. Treading away from this path and saying something opposing may harm their business significantly. Keeping their company is also essential for their political gain. Their views include a Muslim-only, Muslim-led country. Hating women and other minorities helps them control and manipulate the masses. They keep their women in the dark and actively help without challenging their views. However, as we see, some women are trying to stop these sermons as we see above.

Islam does not treat women as devils or “instruments of the Devil,” just like Abdur Razzak says. Islam does not speak against women’s economic or social freedom, even in politics. Due to Bangladesh's patriarchal and male-dominated society, some misconceptions remain among Bangladesh Muslims, as they are fed into beliefs through religious gatherings and sermons. Lack of awareness and the mentality of dominance in men are common reasons in this scenario. (Patoari, 2019)

Similar online and offline sermons or Waz incites hate against other religious minorities. It incites severe violence and reinforces a hateful ideology against them, despite them being citizens of the same country. Of course, because of political dominance, this is a great way to “Naturalize” hate in any community, keeping the country dominated by only Radical Muslim Men. Many organizations opposed these sermons and are asking the ministries to monitor both kinds of sermons, those available online and those not recorded.

The preachers rant against the Hindu and Christian communities and brand them as Kafirs and infidels. They also question the liberation war, its fighters, and martyred intellectuals. They all despise events like Pahela Boishak, Ekushey February, Krishna Janmashtami, Durga Puja, Buddha Purnima, Christmas, and other religious and cultural events.

The Cumilla attack was one of Bangladesh's most heinous and dangerous events from the 13th to the 16th of March 2021. During their festival, Durga Puja, many Hindu communities succumbed to attacks from violent Muslims around the country. It was found that many of the religious speakers were involved in spreading misinformation to the masses.

During 2021, Cumilla violence resurfaced in various videos from Waz of Islamic speakers, making it evident. Evidence from videos includes "Quran demeaned at Cumilla Puja Mondop, Quran rescued Nauzubillah.” The video had over 1.5M views and was uploaded at 5:00 PM on the day of the incident by a channel named Pirojpur Islamic Media, alias Torun Waz. The owner of this channel also includes a “Khatib”(preacher) from Khulna, who uses these videos to promote his preachings. (UNB, 2021)

Another preacher, Maulana Abdur Rahim Biplobi, was arrested for commenting, which would ultimately incite temple attacks over false news of the desecration of the holy Quran in Cumilla. In several speeches, he has shown hatred towards the Hindu community, including “No puja mandap will be spared in Bangladesh,” and accusations towards the authority for other communal acts of violence. He also called for an unruly protest on 14th October 2021.

The videos available for people to watch are viewed by thousands, or even millions, which may be dangerous because these teachings are reaching far into this country. The ideologies are embedded among the masses, and they do not believe in them. These Islamist radicals have also issued hate speech against the national flag and the national anthem, demanding the “Islamization” of school textbooks.

According to Roland Barthes, myth is a system that naturalizes cultural ideologies or beliefs, whether these myths are false or true. It is easy to use this made-up ideology preached in religious sermons on women. Myth can easily make certain beliefs and ideas sound natural and unavoidable to people, whether it is a religious sermon or, For Example, French Imperialism and the black child. The myth has been naturalized in the French. Similarly, Muslim people in our country believe that Muslims and Women are some sort of evil to the religion.

Barthes says, “What allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, an honest relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system (268).” The reader, in this case, is innocent Muslim people believing in their leaders, and the ideologies are the common enemies of Islam. However, it perpetuates online hatred, abuse, and violence.

Muslims in Bangladesh are very scared due to a lack of Islamic knowledge, which is a massive reason why they unquestioningly believe in them. The propaganda helps more sermons, the masses are manipulated, and those at the top are always getting paid and staying there. No one can challenge their beliefs because their propaganda has already been established, much like that of powerful politicians and governments.

Preachers have the power over a mass to change the narrative at any time. They do not have to rely on other mainstream media. The control over the production of the content enabled them to build their narrative and reach millions without almost any cost." This kind of preaching helps men because it can help them execute patriarchal domination in society. It becomes easier for men who want to dominate women; they can use these preachings by Bangladeshi preachers and gain whatever they want.

Through constant reinforcing, propaganda starts, propaganda that only Radical Muslims would want. Bangladesh is a secular country, which means this country is separate from all religious institutions. However, the predominant religious base keeps trying to make this country consist of only one religion, Islam. These people demand changing the constitution and rewriting it all with the Holy Quran and Hadith. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is a nation born from martyrs who fought hard, and this would disrespect the nationalism of Bangladesh.

The tradition of Waz Mahfils was once a symbol of peace and harmony in the community. However, capitalistic and political influence has ruined the environment of these gatherings. It has become a political way to control the people. Bangladesh is a country going through development. But political power plays through the misappropriation and misinformation of Religious texts. That said, a woman’s or a Hindu person’s freedom should not be discussed among some men in one place without them being in a position to challenge those ideologies. With that being said, religious sermons should not become a political or capital weapon. Religions often promote peace, which can be achieved if everyone, every minority, co-exists in society without the fear of violence. One way to encourage secular peace is to remove or alter religious sermons from the country’s major religious communities.

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