Soft Power of Faith: Social Media Strategies of Indian Faith-Based Organizations

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Abstract

This paper studies Faith-Based Organizations and their use of social media. Their impact and interaction with the public influence thousands, and it is imperative to examine them. Known for humanitarian work, secular activities, and the wisdom of spiritual leaders, young adults are keenly drawn to the logic they teach. Undoubtedly, their digital presence on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, X, and WhatsApp, and their ability to address day-to-day issues have redefined faith as 'modern' and 'convenient.' This research studies accounts of the two most popular spiritual organizations in India and how they construct narratives of nation-building and service. This is learned through YouTube videos and viewers' comments to understand how religious principles are balanced and how people respond to them. Six videos from FBOs since 2019 are selected based on their remarks on politics, national security, protests, and terrorism, and the top ten comments are then studied using thematic analysis. By analyzing content strategies and engagement patterns, the study enhances understanding of the digital public sphere in a religiously diverse democracy and the evolving role of FBOs within it. India states 'Secularism' as one of the core values in the Preamble to its Constitution; however, evidence suggests it has been violated. Through the nationalization of one religion, the public is marginalized from their interests and compelled to follow a specific code of practice. Based on theories of nationalism, this study examines whether FBOs adopt a highly diplomatic stance or a non-neutral approach in their public messaging and if religion is further polarized.

Keywords: Religion, Secularism, Hinduism, Social media, Polarization

1. Introduction

Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) are a growing presence globally, driven by a shift in the approach to religion. With the shift away from traditional

religious practices (visits to temples and churches), the approach has evolved to promote a secular agenda focused on humanitarian and charitable service. Development work is deeply rooted in their ethos, and such work is often carried out through charities, as also stated in the holy books of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. FBOs and Community centres have developed strategic relationships with government agencies, such as an initiative led by former US President George W. Bush that involved collaboration between the state and FBOs. To facilitate partnerships in development sectors, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) has formalised its engagement with FBOs through the Faith Partnership Principles. India does not have a single national faith, but state governments have documents detailing partnerships with regional FBOs. For instance, to deliver vocational training, the Sri Sri Rural Development Programme (SSRDP) is affiliated with the Art of Living Foundation.

However, FBOs have been accused of patronizing Islamic militants, coercing the poor, and providing sectarian social services. Donors often view FBOs with suspicion and an ulterior motive of religious conversion. In India, particular concern is given to proselytization, sectarian service delivery, and foreign influences shaping public discourse and regulations. Anti-conversion laws under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) severely curtail missionary activities and Islamic activities in madrasas. This study is time-sensitive, as it explores how state agencies choose to engage with religious actors, whom they include and exclude in their propaganda project, and how they use media as an institution. Internationally, the subject of religion has grown exponentially as well, as we can see in the post-Cold War period, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Partition of India and Pakistan, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

1.1.Research Objective

To analyze how leading Indian FBOs use YouTube to frame service and nation-building while balancing religious and secular appeals, and to assess whether their post-2019 messaging leans neutral or nationalist, as evidenced by audience comment patterns.

1.2.Background

1.2.1. India: Land of many religions

India is a land where faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism originated. Hinduism, India's home to one of the world's oldest religions, is seen as a

'way of life' in India. Muslims constitute over 14% of the population (213 million people), making India the third-largest population after Pakistan and Indonesia. India is also home to 26 million Christians and more than 20.08 million Sikhs. Due to its diverse religious demographics, historians and leaders recognized this diversity. In 1950, the Indian Constitution declared the country a secular republic, guaranteeing freedom of religion and protection against religious discrimination.

However, since mid-2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won the parliamentary majority, making Narendra Modi the Prime Minister, and the instances of religious violence and intolerance have increased. Incidents of communal violence rose to 822 in 2017, up from 644 in 2014 according to Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018. Cow vigilantism- perpetrated attacks by Hindu nationalists against illegal cow smugglers- and cow slaughterhouses have gained attention since 2014, with a 97% increase in such attacks on Muslims. Amnesty International India reported 902 hate crimes against Muslims and Dalits in the country between 2015 and 20193, after which the organization was forced to shut down its operations in India in 2020, citing government attacks and bank account freezes. The U.S. State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report highlights numerous incidents of mob lynching, hate speech, forced religious conversions, and intimidation of minorities, declaring India a country of 'particular concern'.

Tensions between different faiths are not new. The Partition of British India in 1947 was mainly along religious lines, with Muslim-majority regions forming Pakistan and Hindu-majority areas remaining in India. However, the reality was much more complicated. The Muslim League's two-nation theory heightened communal tensions, and subsequently, the British left under Lord Mountbatten's plan. Pakistan became a Muslim-majority country, and India adopted a secular framework, despite having a Hindu majority. This partition, based on the religious differences, triggered one of the most traumatic partitions in the world's history. Millions of people crossed borders amid violence, massacres, and dispossession. This communal deadlock left deep scars on generations, shaping their identity, citizenship, governance, and idea of politics.

In 2002, the Gujarat program violence happened between Hindus and Muslims and led to the death of over 1,000 people and the displacement of more than one lakh Muslims. In 2008, in Odisha, Hindus blamed Christians for the death of Hindu leader Swami Lakshmananda Saraswati, despite a Maoist insurgent group claiming the responsibility. This event came to be

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known as the Kandhamal violence, triggering a wave of anti-Christian violence in the country (Naqvi, 2024). The ferocity of religious violence can often be seen through bombing, nuclear attacks, explosives, suicide bombs, firebombs, and military attacks. At times, they are motivated by leftist ideologies, such as in the case of Shining Path and Tupac Amaru in Peru, the Red Army in Japan, regional separatism in the case of Basque militants in Spain, and Kurdish nationalists in Turkey. Involvement of public officials invokes 'state terrorism' that subjugates the populace, such as the pogroms of Stalin, genocidal killings of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, government-supported violence of Hutus and Tutsis in Central Africa, and death squads in El Salvador initiated by the government-this odd combination of religion and violence results in extreme ideologies and fundamentalism.

During the pandemic (2020 - 2022), Islamophobia was widespread and was more mentally harmful than COVID-19 because it attacked the minds of innocent and vulnerable people, spreading fear and misinformation while normalizing stigma, discrimination, and violence against Muslim communities and those perceived to be part of them. Claims that the virus was spread because of Muslim gatherings for prayer meets in the Mosque, and cases of Love Jihad were repeatedly shared across social media and presented in mainstream news to sensationalize, scapegoat, and manufacture a narrative of blame. Amplifying fear, prejudice, economic boycotts, policing of interfaith couples, vigilante harassment, and diverted attentions from public health measures left lasting psychological harm and deepened communal divides.

1.2.2. Legal Framework

The Constitution of India articulates, in its Preamble and Articles 14-16 and 25-30, the establishment of a secular state and the guarantee of freedom of conscience. It further promises the right of every individual to freely profess, practice, and propagate their religion, subject to the maintenance of public order, morality, and health. These rights ensure equality in the exercise of religious freedom and prohibit discrimination based on religion in public life and employment. Articles 25 to 30 of the guarantee complete freedom of faith to every denomination to practice their holy beliefs without any inhibitions. Articles 25 and 26 empower religious autonomy, while Article 27 prohibits the State from compelling any person to pay taxes to promote any specific religion or religious denomination. This establishes a clear separation between the State's fiscal authority and an individual's religious convictions.

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Articles 28, 29, and 30 protect the affirmative dimensions of spiritual practice. It can be accurately stated that secularism holds the supreme value of equal application to both the majority and the minority. It can also be seen through landmark cases such as the Sabarimala Temple Entry case in Kerala, S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, and Ratilal Panachand Gandhi v. State of Bombay. While these guarantees are strong, they are not absolute: the state may regulate or restrict religious practices when necessary to maintain public order or protect health and morality, and state-funded educational institutions may not provide religious instruction. Article 44, a Directive Principle, further states that the state should work to establish a uniform civil code applicable to all citizens regardless of religion.

Recent cases showcase how these constitutional principles are interpreted and implemented. In February 2024, Uttarakhand enacted a state-level Uniform Civil Code (UCC) covering marriage, divorce, succession, and related matters for its residents, with exceptions for the Scheduled Tribes. This indicates a move toward the goal of Article 44; other states, including Assam and Gujarat, have announced exploratory steps but have not yet enacted a comprehensive code. At the federal level, rules for implementing the Citizenship Amendment Act were issued in March 2024, enabling fast-track naturalization for certain non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, while constitutional challenges to the Act's compatibility with equality and secularism guarantees are still pending before the Supreme Court. For example, the Gujarat High Court has stayed parts of the 2021 amendments insofar as they criminalize interfaith marriage outright without evidence of force or fraud. Provisions of Karnataka's 2022 law have been challenged and partially modified in practice.

Federal law authorizes the central government to ban organizations considered a threat to public order or national security. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) permits the declaration of groups as "unlawful" and the designation of terrorist organizations and individuals; the ban on the Popular Front of India, imposed in September 2022 under UAPA, remains in effect. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), strengthened by 2020 amendments, regulates foreign funding to civil society and religious organizations; data from the Ministry of Home Affairs show a significant drop in active FCRA registrations, from about the mid-20,000s a decade ago to roughly 16,000 - 17,000 by late 2023, due to cancellations and non-renewals, along with stricter compliance and reporting requirements. Together, these constitutional provisions and laws create a secular framework that safeguards religious liberty while allowing regulation to maintain public

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order, national security, and financial transparency.

2. Literature Review

The marginal difference between the religious and secular divides is judged by determining legitimacy rather than the conflict with core values (Acevedo, 2020). The Supreme Court established the Essential Practice Doctrine (EPD) as a legal standard to decide which religious practices are protected under Article 25 of the Constitution. The doctrine developed through a series of court rulings. It began with the 1954 Shirur Math case and has served as a foundation for the debate over the Hijab ban. However, critics argue that the doctrine has been inconsistently applied, especially in cases involving gender equality (Sonkar, 2023). The distinction between essential and non-essential parts of religion was meant to allow courts "to cleanse religion of practices which were derogatory to individual dignity" (Das Acevedo, 2018). Yet courts have assumed a theological role by claiming the authority to distinguish between the two.

2.1.Secularism in India

Secularism is studied differently in each country, based on its historical, cultural, societal, and religious background. The rising religious tensions, politicization of faith, and extremist acts promote radical ideologies and have increased communal hostility. However, secularism is promoted as a means to reduce this divisiveness and strengthen national unity. In India, the origins of secularism can be traced back to the country's rich history of pluralism, which has fostered a culture of tolerance and coexistence. Unlike Western secularism, which strictly separates religion and government, Indian secularism permits the state to interact with religious groups. However, critics argue that the Western model of secularism is aggressive and is used as a tool by political parties to control religion, pushing faith entirely out of the private sphere (Nandy, 1988). Scholars believe the concept is Eurocentrically biased, hindering a constructive discussion of secularism in the global context and failing to account for the historical and cultural significance of the relation between the state and religion (Dressler & Mandair, 2011).

The term 'Secularism' was added to the Preamble of the Indian Constitution through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1976, during the Emergency, to affirm the government's role in supporting all religions fairly and without bias. It does not officially endorse any religion, but sometimes intervenes to promote justice and equality. Secularism prevents any single

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religion from dominating political power and protects democratic values. India follows a 'principled distance' that supports equality and reform.

"I do not expect India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Musalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another."

M.K. Gandhi, Young India, Dec 1927

India's experience with secularism can be understood through two main perspectives. The first is the Nehruvian ideal, in which the state embraces religious diversity and remains neutral among all traditions (Bhargava, 2024). Unlike models that emphasize a strict separation of religion and state to protect each from the other, this approach aims to treat all religious groups equally, often involving the state in religion to promote equality. In this context, the opposite of "secular" is "communal," a term used for promoting the interests of one's own group at the expense of others, often linked to chauvinism and potential violence. The second perspective is rooted in Hindu nationalism. Here, India is viewed as a nation primarily based on Hindu tradition, with followers of other faiths expected to recognize its primacy. Non-Hindus, on the other hand, can be seen as potentially "communal," with their religious and national loyalties viewed as conflicting. Proponents of this view often label the Congress's neutral secularism as "pseudo-secular" for acknowledging religious diversity, and instead promote a "religion-blind" secularism that treats Hinduism as part of national culture, an approach that, in a Hindu-majority country, tends to favour Hindus (Bhargava, 2002). Interestingly, the Hindu nationalist movement positions itself as the defender of this form of secularism, sometimes viewing minority claims on the state as communal. Critics argue this ideology is historically inaccurate and can be used to justify discrimination against non-Hindus (Bhargava, 2002).

Unofficial attacks by the BJP government have targeted the Muslim population in particular. Examples of such can be systematically understood through the Hijab Ban in Karnataka, where Muslim students were denied to wear the veil in the school premises; the Bulldozer demolition drive in Uttar Pradesh, where the state authorities violently demolished the houses of Muslim businessmen who were accused of communal clashes. And in Madhya Pradesh, the Enforcement of Anti-conversion laws, intensified cow-protection policing, and recently made arrests under anti-Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) protests, where people have to give a 'religious test' to stay in India. The law excludes granting Indian citizenship to only Muslims who came to India before 2014. Curtailing civil liberties for minorities directly

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erodes constitutional values and pushes the nation one step closer to authoritarianism.

2.2.Politicization of Religion

Politicization refers to the process of transforming an issue, event, or topic into a matter of debate by imbuing it with a political slant, often to gain a political advantage (Altınordu, 2010). It takes place within religion, region, social, cultural, economic, governance, and political parties, utilizing these areas to advance their agendas and frame them in ways that appeal to their supporters (Syarif, 2017). While raising awareness and preventing problems by focusing on critical issues is essential, highlighting trivial matters to attract votes leads to division, conflict, and the exploitation of public welfare and peace (Haynes, 2002). The need to study Hinduism and Hindu nationalism within the context of Indian democracy is an increasingly important research area, as it explores multiple perspectives on how to approach this topic. For example, it examines gender roles for women (Williams & Deo, 2018), the implementation of Western secularism in India (Cesari, 2023), and political-economic perspectives on demographic dynamics (Anwaruzzaman, 2025).

Indian political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta notes that the moment Prime Minister Narendra Modi performed land worship in 2020, the Ram Temple symbolically marked the arrival of a strong Hindu nation (Mehta, 2022). He was regarded as the monarchical protector of Hinduism, safeguarding the faith and reviving its traditions. An article by Sharma, (2020) in Newslaundry mentions that all major newspapers covered the Temple inauguration event, and Modi's speech echoed every sentiment of a populist leader, from historical memory, construction of victimhood, being subjected to foreign invasion, to describing Muslims as the enemy and not the British from the colonial past. People will sway when the PM himself emphasizes the Ram temple as the epicenter of civilization. Due to internal challenges within a democracy, Hindu nationalism emerged. Even after the triumph at Ayodhya, the focus on reclaiming sites has shifted to the Gyan Vapi Mosque in Varanasi and the Temple Free Movement, which aims to bring all Indian temples under shared central governance.

M. Vaishnav emphasizes that Hindus, as Hindus, should never lose political power (Vaishnav, 2024). He also highlights various ways in which Hindu nationalism has manipulated demographics in all forms to gain advantages in elections. For example, concerns about minorities related to conversion to Hinduism and the use of temple symbols during international conferences,

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such as the G20 summit, serve to promote their ideas.

However, in recent times, religion has evolved into a tool for socialization and a way of life, with the rise of FBOs that combine spiritual guidance with community service and engage followers through digital platforms. This change has broadened their role in public discussion settings, raising concerns about politicization, polarization, and the merging of secular and religious realms. This paper examines how leading Indian FBOs use YouTube to showcase their services and nation-building efforts, striking a balance between spiritual and secular appeals. It assesses the tone of their approach as extreme, neutral, or passive.

2.3.Conceptual Framework of FBOs

Indian FBOs have expanded over the past three decades, building on long-standing religious traditions of seva (selfless service) and the growth of the NGO sector following liberalization (Hanson, 2011; Copeman, 2009; Botz-Bornstein, 2024). Their significance lies in combining moral authority, volunteer mobilization, and local embeddedness to deliver education, health care, social protection, and disaster relief, often reaching marginalized communities with high levels of trust and cultural competence (Clarke, 2013; Jeavons, 2004). The need for FBOs is underscored by persistent service gaps, uneven public provision, and the demand for community-rooted institutions that can translate ethical commitments into sustained nation-building (Gnanakumar, 2020).

An exclusive definition of FBO is hard to find, as most definitions exclude informal organizations actively involved in development work. Earlier, the term FBO was often replaced with RNGO (Non-Governmental Organisation). RNGOSs were defined as “Formal organisations whose identity and missions are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religions and spiritual traditions and which operate on a non-profit, independent voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level collectively” (Boehle, 2010; Berger, 2018).

Nathaniel Adams and the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) use the term “faith-based” in an inclusive sense (Adams, 2016). Adams adopts WFDD’s broader category of “faith-inspired organizations” (FIOs), encompassing any entity engaged in development, broadly defined, whose mission and vision are inspired or guided by a religious tradition or sub-sect,

including organizations with histories deeply rooted in such traditions. Within this diverse field, the salience of religion in missions and operations varies: some place religious propagation at the center while undertaking social welfare, whereas others see religious values as simply underpinning formal relief and development work. Beyond definitions, scholars such as G. Clarke (Clarke & Ware, 2015), Matthew Clarke (Clarke & Ware, 2015), and Occhipinti (Occhipinti, 2015) stress the use of typologies to sharpen analysis. G. Clarke has identified five categories of FBOs: faith-based representative bodies, faith-based charitable or development organizations, faith-based socio-political organizations, faith-based missionary organizations, and faith-based radical, illegal, or terrorist organizations. In a similar vein, Clarke and Jennings define FBOs as organizations whose activities are inspired and guided by the teachings and principles of a faith. This inclusive definition encompasses traditional religious charities as well as NGOs inspired by faith (Clarke et al., 2007).

There is no single, definitive count of FBOs in India, as the numbers vary depending on the definitions and data sources used. Under a narrow definition focused on service-delivery NGOs that explicitly identify with a faith, the total is likely in the low tens of thousands. Using a broader view that includes NGOs, societies, and trusts with religious purposes in government registries, the number increases to tens of thousands or more. This uncertainty arises from multiple registration routes (trusts, societies, Section 8 companies), the lack of a central "FBO" category, religious bodies registered as public charitable trusts without clear labels, and many entities operating informally or as part of larger organizations. Still in its nascent stage, the field is dominated by organization-specific case studies, such as those documented by the World Faiths Development Dialogue and UNFPA, which examine initiatives inspired by particular religious philosophies.

2.4.Rise of FBO in Each Religion

Across South Asia, the evolution of FBOs is closely intertwined with the development of religious institutions and traditions. Early organizations of Hinduism emerged in the later Vedic period as ashrams and acharya-kula established by sannyasis (Mishra, 2008). Initially centers of religious reflection, these institutions became pivotal in advancing literature, astronomy, mathematics, and therapeutics, and offering education to the broader public. Temple-affiliated mutts (cloisters) similarly developed as significant hubs of religious study, and many ashrams later evolved into pathshalas (schools) during the medieval era. This institutional trajectory

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continued through the colonial period and into modern times, shaped by diverse philosophical schools, including Advaita, Madhva, and Vishishtadvaita, which founded distinct mutts (e.g., Shankara Mutt, Ashta Mutt, Parakala Mutt). In the colonial era and early postcolonial decades, new organizations arose under leaders such as Swami Vivekananda (Sri Ramakrishna Mission), Sri Aurobindo (Sri Aurobindo Ashram), and Sri Ramana Maharshi (Ramana Maharshi Ashram). Followed in the mid-twentieth century by institutions associated with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, J. Krishnamurti, and Swami Chinmayananda. These bodies have consistently combined religious and social engagement, establishing hospitals, educational institutions, and welfare programs tailored to contemporary needs. With the rise of Buddhism, viharas founded by the sangha offered analogous institutional forms, and numerous monasteries were established in centres.

In Islam, early FBOs took the form of madrasas and Sufi khanqahs. The mosque was the first institution of learning, with instruction initially linked to mosque settings before evolving into mosque–khanqah complexes that provided both lodging and education. In Muslim India, madrasas served as institutions of higher learning, training civil and judicial officials. At the same time, a vibrant tradition of Sufi shrines developed around the tombs of saintly figures, offering shelter and free food to their followers (Bano, 2006). The waqf, a trust mechanism that supports philanthropic and social welfare initiatives, emerged in the early Muslim period, with land and property endowed for the benefit of the needy. In India, waqf properties continue to operate under state-regulated, semi-autonomous boards.

Historically, while charitable services in ancient and medieval India were often provided through individual acts of philanthropy, organized and institutionalized social services essentially took place within religious frameworks- such as ashrams and mutts, gurdwaras and deras, waqfs, khanqahs, and madrasas (Srivastava & Tandon, 2005). Within Christianity, missionary activity, has emphasized education and health provision. This organizational model facilitated the formation of welfare institutions among Hindu and Muslim elites, who sought to counter the influence of missionaries. Protestant efforts began in the Madras Presidency, with the first English mission arriving in 1727 and establishing schools in Madras, Tanjore, Cuddalore, Palamcottah, and Trichinopoly; the Baptists commenced work in Bengal in 1793 (John, 2007). The Catholic Church built extensive networks of higher education. Expansion accelerated as proficiency in English became advantageous following its adoption as the official and court language in

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1835. Numerous missionary-founded institutions from this period endure, including Madras Christian College (1839), St. John's College, Agra (1850), St. Stephen's College, Delhi (1881), and the Christian Medical Colleges in Ludhiana (1864) and Vellore (1918). Buddhism made significant contributions to the development of health services across Asia in the seventh century onwards. Several scholars argue that traditional Indian medical knowledge advanced within Buddhist monastic settings (Donden, 2003); (Dummer, 1988); (Meyer, 1988).

2.5.Significance of FBOs in India

Historically, Indian FBOs were rooted in monastic institutions, such as mathas, ashrams, bhakti sampradayas, Sufi khanqahs, gurudwaras, and church missions, that embedded spirituality into everyday life through practices. Contemporary FBOs retain these idioms but professionalize and scale them, translating spiritual disciplines into lifestyle programs, such as yoga and meditation curricula, stress-management workshops, eco-spiritual campaigns, and structured volunteerism, delivered through schools, hospitals, self-help groups, disaster relief networks, and digital platforms. This integration of spiritual practice with welfare provision has proved to foster social cohesion and reach underserved communities. It raises concerns about commercialization, proselytization, and majoritarian framings of "national culture," highlighting the importance of transparent governance, interfaith sensitivity, and rights-based safeguards. These practices have FBOs to shape lifestyle-oriented approaches to spirituality in India (Chaudhuri, 2010).

By integrating spirituality into their lifestyles, FBOs convert spirituality into daily habits through structured teaching, ritual practices, service platforms, and community management. Hindu movements, such as the Art of Living and Isha Foundation, establish routine practices through yoga and meditation courses in schools, workplaces, prisons, and rural centers, combining inner disciplines (e.g., Sudarshan Kriya, Inner Engineering) with volunteer seva in activities like river cleanup, tree planting, and disaster relief. Ramakrishna Mission and Brahma Kumaris incorporate values education, Rajyoga meditation, vegetarianism, de-addiction, and scheduled reflection routines into school assemblies, neighbourhood centers, and women's groups. Sikh organizations promote seva as a way of life through universal langar, volunteer-led hospitals, relief efforts, and youth service camps. At the same time, groups like Khalsa Aid activate trans-local networks for humanitarian projects that promote generosity and responsibility. Muslim charities implement zakat and sadaqah as ongoing commitments, linking them to livelihoods, scholarships, health camps, and Ramadan fasting practices that

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blend spiritual discipline with nutrition, sobriety, and community kitchens. Christian groups, such as Caritas India, diocesan social service organizations, and the Missionaries of Charity, encourage prayer, fellowship, tithing, stewardship, and caring for the vulnerable through self-help groups, hospices, and disaster response efforts. To make spirituality practical and lasting, digital tools have helped unite diverse communities. Events such as WhatsApp Satsang, livestreamed kirtan, meditation apps, and webinars are active to support daily practice and tie ethical behaviours with psychosocial supports.
A faith identity can profoundly shape an organization. It influences internal operations, leadership, governance, culture, and policies, as well as external relationships with partners, donors, and other stakeholders. It also affects how organizations build their own capacity and support others' capacity. Greater attention to faith is not inherently beneficial: faith can have a dark side and, mishandled, may do more harm than good. Engagement with faith, therefore, needs to be undertaken carefully, inclusively, constructively, and with sensitivity.

2.6.Faith as a Soft Power

Faith functions as soft power when states and societies use religious narratives, institutions, and rituals to attract, establish legitimacy, and create transnational bonds, shaping preferences without force while reinforcing national identity (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1984). Governments and faith networks put this into action through heritage diplomacy (pilgrimage circuits, temple and mosque restoration, UNESCO listings), cultural programs (festivals, media, music), education and scholarship, as well as humanitarian efforts. India promotes yoga diplomacy via the UN-recognized International Day of Yoga, develops Buddhist connections through pilgrimage routes and academic projects, and fosters “civilizational” ties with Southeast Asia through Ramayana-themed exchanges. Meanwhile, Sikh charities like Khalsa Aid exemplify a service-oriented appeal. Turkey projects its influence through the Diyanet’s overseas mosque networks, restores Ottoman-era sites in the Balkans, and produces popular religious-historical TV dramas. Saudi Arabia’s management of Hajj and Umrah, along with scholarships to Islamic institutions and support for halal standards, expands its cultural influence, just as Iran’s seminaries in Qom, pilgrimages to Iraqi shrines, and clerical networks strengthen Shia transnational bonds. The Vatican uses moral diplomacy through papal speeches on peace, migration, and climate change, amplified by Caritas and other Catholic relief groups; Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah promote a “moderate Islam” image through education and interfaith dialogue. These efforts are successful when framed

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as inclusive, and service-oriented. Tied closely with nationalism, these symbols could risk backlash and loss of credibility, highlighting that lasting faith-based soft power is rooted in pluralism and public welfare.

2.7.Reporting Faith: Media's Role and Responsibilities

Even after constitutional guarantees, judicial oversight, and a vibrant press, freedom of speech and the media have remained weak in independent India. Although the state has expanded its authority to curtail media freedoms and has applied stringent statutes with increasing latitude, a trend that has intensified in recent years (Beck, 2010). Sen analyzes the shifting political positions on incorporating press freedom into the Constitution and the subsequent amendments, tracing the evolution of the doctrine through key judgments (Sen, 2024). This analysis highlights both the use and misuse of sedition provisions and other media restrictions in contemporary practice. The role of media and internet platforms in shaping resistance to state-promulgated religious nationalism is little understood, particularly regarding how religious groups use these channels.

3. Research Questions

RQ1: How do top Indian FBOs use YouTube to frame service and nation-building and balance religious vs secular appeals?

RQ2: Do their messages on major events since 2019 lean neutral or nationalist, and how is this reflected in audience comments?

4. Methodology

This research uses thematic analysis as a qualitative methodology (Terry et al., 2017) to examine the videos of the two most prominent religious leaders from the leading FBOs in India. Both spiritual gurus are also seen as lifestyle coaches as they discuss topics relevant to today's generation, such as stress management, relationships, adulting, depression, and forgiveness. Their knowledge and spectrum of issues range from soft emotions to healthy lifestyle, to national security, and civic responsibility. Against this broad canvas, our analysis examines how Sadhguru (Isha Foundation) and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Art of Living) translate spiritual discourse into the vernacular of contemporary self-help and public reason, linking individual well-being (meditation, breathwork, diet, productivity) with social goods (family

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harmony, environmental stewardship, nation-building). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identify three recurring themes: (1) self-regulation and emotional literacy as competencies for modern life; (2) the scientization and universalization of spiritual practices through psychological and biomedical framings; and (3) moral citizenship, where inner transformation is positioned as a prerequisite for collective security, development, and social order.

This study concentrates on nationally salient events from 2019 to 2025 - including the Pahalgam terror attack, the Karnataka hijab controversy, nationwide Anti-CAA protests, protest movements in Nepal with implications for India-Nepal relations, and the contested reception and state-level restrictions on the film The Kashmir Files, which portrays the violence and displacement of Kashmiri Hindus, because they sit at the intersection of security, constitutional rights, secularism, gender and education policy, cross-border diplomacy, and freedom of expression. Each episode investigates intense public debate, legal and policy responses, and widespread youth mobilization, thereby shaping civic discourse and everyday anxieties around identity, belonging, and safety. The study focuses on 2019–2025, encompassing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term (2019–2024) and the onset of his third term (2024-2025). This interval is analytically salient given the intensification of religious majoritarianism and consolidation of executive power, as well as the passage of events, laws, and policy initiatives widely interpreted as contravening democratic norms, civil liberties, and institutional checks and balances. By examining how leading faith-based figures address these flashpoints, the study captures how spiritual messaging is mobilized to interpret national crises, propose coping frameworks, and articulate moral citizenship for a generation navigating polarized media, rapid policy shifts, and evolving social norms.

Channel name	**Subscribers**	**Joined in**	**No. of videos** (As of Oct 2025)
Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar	9.25 million	April, 2008	1, 500
Sadhguru	12.5 million	March, 2007	4, 500

Table 1: Official statistics for Sadhguru and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's YouTube channel (as of October 2025)

Videos of the two spiritual leaders were analysed from their official YouTube channels. English-language content that was longer than five minutes and

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directly addressed the chosen national issues (2019–2025) to ensure relevance, depth, and comparability was selected. Transcripts were created and verified for accuracy, then coded in MAXQDA using inductive thematic analysis to develop and refine themes; short clips, promotional videos, and duplicates were excluded. To understand audience reception, we also thematically examined the top ten user comments beneath the selected videos, screening out spam, non-English, and bot-like entries, to capture viewers' interpretations, emotions, points of agreement or disagreement, and perceptions. Combining speaker discourse with comment threads enabled us to connect message framing with public understanding and to evaluate how spiritual guidance is engaged. All data were publicly available, and identifiers were anonymized. (Read Annexure I & Annexure II for details).

5. Result

Issue	Date	Number of comments analysed	Dominant sentiment	Dominant themes	Illustrative comments
Pahalgam terror attack	24 Apr 2025	10	Positive	Charismatic authority and moral courage; national solidarity; heightened emotional tone; security-oriented framing	"Only Sadhguru can speak like this directly and clearly"; "As an Englishman, I stand with Bharat… The World stands with India"
CAA protests	28 Dec 2019	10	Positive (8) Mixed (2)	Policy legitimation (support for CAA/NRC/	"Sadhguru … make me support NRC and CAA"; "'CAA

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				NPR); accountability/identity; compassion frame ("too little, too late"); political blame attribution	is too little compassion, too late' aptly put"
Hijab controversy	22 Feb 2022	10	Positive (8) Mixed (2)	Unity-over-division framing; media scepticism; admiration for communication skills; controversy management	"We continuously look at what divides us"; "He roasted her and whole media so calmly"

Table 2: Analysis of Sadhguru's videos

Issue	**Date**	**Number of comments analysed**	**Dominant sentiment**	**Dominant themes**	**Illustrative comments**
Nepal protests	15 Sep 2025	6	Positive (2) Negative (3) Neutral (1)	Contested authority (accusations of "fake guru"); national pride/comp	"You don't know what you're talking about… fake guru"; "Audio

				arison; production /audio quality critique; perceived question avoidance	teams… making it extremely difficult to hear"
Kashmiri Hindu genocide	18 Mar 2022	10	Positive (7) Negative (1) Neutral (2)	Recognition and naming (genocide vs exodus); historical grievance; justice and return; film as truth-telling	"Don't say it
Terrorism against Humanity	17 April, 2022	5	Positive (5)	Terrorism is fatal, experience is haunting,	"Gurudev ji please take me in your shelter immediately please I bow to you I'm surrendering you help me save me protect me bless me I need you a lot I also know without telling you have known my

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					problems please"

Table 3: Analysis by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's videos

6. Discussion

Across the six videos, both Sadhguru and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar operate as hybrid authorities who translate spiritual idioms into civic language, but audience reception diverges by issue and leader. Sadhguru's response to the Pahalgam attack elicited almost uniformly affirmative responses, valorizing his moral courage, directness, and national solidarity, suggesting that a heightened emotional tone can strengthen perceived legitimacy in security crises. His framing of the CAA/NRC debates was perceived as a clarifying, policy-legitimating narrative that couples compassion with accountability. At the same time, the hijab controversy drew praise for a stance that prioritized unity over division and scepticism toward media polarization.

In contrast, Sri Sri Ravi Shakar's Nepal protests video attracted contestation, including charges of inauthenticity and critiques of production quality, highlighting how cross-border sensitivities and delivery conditions can undermine the message's uptake. His discussion of the Kashmiri Hindu genocide evoked strong affect, calls for accurate naming, historical memory, justice, and dignified return, demonstrating that spiritual leaders are expected to acknowledge wounds explicitly while channelling grief toward constructive civic aims. Comment threads served as sites of identity performance and sense-making, where viewers aligned with national pride, negotiated terminology (genocide vs. exodus), and sought emotional regulation and guidance. Triangulating these patterns, three cross-cutting dynamics emerge: the consolidation of charismatic credibility through clarity and affect; the use of spiritual framing to normalize particular civic stances (security, accountability, unity); and the conditional nature of authority, which can be contested when messages seem evasive or poorly delivered. While this communicative style can soothe anxieties and reduce polarization by emphasizing common goods, it can also harden positions if complex issues are oversimplified or framed primarily through grievance.

7. Conclusion

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The analysis shows that leading faith-based figures in India play a significant role in shaping public interpretations of high-stakes national events, bridging inner well-being with civic responsibility. Sadhguru's assertive yet integrative framing is widely received as reassuring and directive during crises. In contrast, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's messaging draws strong support on trauma recognition but faces sharper scrutiny on cross-border politics and delivery. Overall, their interventions can legitimize policy narratives, promote unity, and provide coping frameworks that resonate with digitally engaged audiences; however, credibility hinges on transparent naming, empathetic acknowledgment of pain, and careful navigation of media dynamics. Future research should expand beyond English-language, longer-form videos to include vernacular content, additional platforms, and longitudinal tracking of how online reception translates into offline attitudes and actions, while comparing other FBO leaders to map the broader ecology of spiritual-civic communication in contemporary India.

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Notes

5. Article by Times of India, in July 2018, on Rise in Communal Violence: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/111-people-killed-in-822-communal-violence-incidents-in-2017-mha/articleshow/65133124.cms
6. Article by Supreme Court Observer, in Nov 2018, on Cow Vigilantism: https://www.scobserver.in/journal/9-cow-vigilantism/
7. Article by The Hindu, in Oct 2019, on Rise of Hate Crimes: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/amnesty-report-hate-crimes-rose-sharply-the-first-half-of-2019/article29598191.ece
8. Report by the U.S State Department, Annual International Religious Freedom Report, in Sep 2022 on India: https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/

9. Article by Newslaundry, August 2020, on Newspaper analysis of Ram Temple inauguration: https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/08/06/tryst-with-destiny-to-the-god-we-failed-how-major-newspapers-covered-rammandirbhoomipujan

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