Muslim Politics Review
Vol. 4 No. 1, 2025, 76-112
https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v4i1.338

From Words to Violence: Tracing the Trajectory of Dangerous Speech and Its Impact on the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the phenomenon of 'dangerous speech' and its connection to the violent acts perpetrated against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Bangladesh. The Ahmadiyya community, also called the Qadiani movement, originated in the late nineteenth century in the Indian subcontinent and later expanded into Bangladesh in 1912. Despite this, Islamic clerics and many prominent political figures in Bangladesh adamantly refuse to recognize members of the Ahmadiyya community as Muslims. This refusal has sparked riots, political violence, divisions, and electoral maneuvering in Bangladesh. This research employs the 'dangerous speech framework' to delve into the underlying causes of violence against Ahmadi Muslims. Through rigorous content analysis and the examination of various secondary sources, this study contends that political violence and riots have been incited by 'dangerous speech' disseminated by religious orators and political figures. Furthermore, it posits a plausible cause-and-effect connection between dangerous speech and violence against Ahmadi Muslims, suggesting that inflammatory rhetoric can lead to violent acts. Such acts of violence can have a profoundly detrimental impact on the Ahmadiyya community, exacerbating their marginalization and discrimination within Bangladeshi politics and society.

Keywords: Ahmadiyya, Islam, dangerous speech, religion and politics, violence, Bangladesh

Introduction

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity. According to Pew Research, 24% of the world's population is Muslim.[1]There are more than sixty Muslim-majority countries in the world.[2] However, they are ethnically different and have different cultures, customs, and traditions. Furthermore, sectarian divisions exist based on differing beliefs about the Prophet, *khilafat*, political activism, and ways to gain societal power. As part of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh shares many faces of Islamic schism, traditions, paths, and roots.[3] The sectarian division of Islamic groups in Bangladesh is one of the major challenges to maintaining social and political harmony and upholding the country's recent economic and socio-cultural development.

Since the emergence of Islam in the Indian subcontinent, as well as in Bangladesh itself, the debate about the values and teachings of Islam among the various Islamic groups has been a contentious process. Every group interprets a particular issue of Islam according to their own founders' or trailblazers' interpretation.[4] Consequently, they talk against each other and sometimes erupt into violence because they think only 'they' are correct, and 'others' are wrong. They use subtle words or speeches to dominate other groups or other narratives.[5]

No one can deny the power of language. It may be an instrument for growth, comprehension, and connection. On the other hand, words can be used as weapons to stoke animosity, create division, and eventually provoke bloodshed. With a particular emphasis on the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh, this piece examines the potentially harmful power of words. People follow the progression of hate speech and discriminatory language toward a religious minority group and how it can

[1] Hackett & Mcclendon 2017
[2] World Population Review 2024
[3] Ayoob 2008; Riaz & Fair 2011; Riaz 2021; Islam 2022
[4] Hajjaz 2022
[5] Bangla Edition 2025

lead to actual harm.[6] For many years, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community (also referred to as Qadianis, although this is considered pejorative by the community itself) has many kinds of violence in Bangladesh. Due to their ideological and religious differences from mainstream Sunni Islam, Ahmadi Muslims are the object of hatred and violence.

This article examines how some stories and statements about the Ahmadiyya community, recently known as dangerous speech, foster hostility and jeopardize their safety. The conflict between Sunni theological schools and Ahmadiyya Jamaat (followers of Ahmadiyya) is one of the most perilous issues in Bangladesh. Several violent incidents have been perpetrated against the Ahmadiyya Jamaat and its congregation Jalsa Salana (formal annual religious meeting). Violent speech, attacks, and arson of houses and prayer halls have taken place pre-, post-, and -during Jalsa Salana. In all these cases, the speech is the primary catalyst of the violence. Against this backdrop, the authors intend to examine how cries for exclusion, allegations of heresy, and abusive language drive radical groups in Bangladeshi society to use violence against Ahmadi Muslims.

Based on secondary sources, this paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of the various factors contributing to the persistent violence faced by the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. It explores the socio-political dynamics, religious tensions, and historical context that have led to systemic discrimination and violence against this minority group. By examining violent incidents, the research seeks to uncover the underlying motivations of the perpetrators and the impact on the Ahmadiyya community's social cohesion, identity, and security. Additionally, the paper considers the role of media representation, public perception, and government policies in exacerbating or mitigating violence.

This research also investigates the possible connection between harmful speech and violent acts against the Ahmadiyya community. This

[6] Leah et al. 2022

study provides a window into the Ahmadiyya community's predicament in Bangladesh. When prejudice and intolerance are allowed to grow unchecked and intensified through language, a dangerous atmosphere can prevail. This essay emphasizes how critical it is to understand the risks associated with hate speech and how to take proactive steps to prevent it from spreading. The significance of this study is that it adopts a new approach, whereas other researchers employed a traditional approach, such as an 'identity issue',[7] called dangerous speech to examine the violence against Ahmadis in Bangladesh. This makes the study important to fill the lacuna and comprehend the issue from a different perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Dangerous Speech

There is no agreed-upon definition of dangerous speech. The terms 'dangerous speech' and 'hate speech' are often used interchangeably, but there is a subtle difference between them. Whereas hate speech is defamatory and used to express hatred to a person or group[8], dangerous speech spreads hatred and incites violence during the delivery of speech time or later.[9] Hate speech denigrates an individual or group because of their shared identity, which might include race, religion, or ethnicity. Definitions of hate speech that are too broad or ambiguous can be used to target minorities or political opponents while also endangering the freedom of speech.

On the other hand, dangerous speech can stifle dissenters and raise the risk of violence by prohibiting the peaceful expression of complaints. Susan Benesch, a Harvard University Professor and founder of The Dangerous Speech Project, defines the 'dangerous speech' as "any form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another

[7] Khan & Samadder 2013; Kabir 2016
[8] Vilar-Lluch 2023
[9] Benesch 2010

group".[10] According to this definition, spoken words, written material, or visual and mental imagery can all be examples of dangerous speech, including all forms of speech that can persuade people or organizations to support or engage in violent behavior against others. The main attribute of dangerous speech is its capacity to increase the likelihood of violent incidents.

With a focus on both content and context, the dangerous speech framework (2010) provides a methodical approach to analyzing speech in context and determining whether it has the potential to incite violence. The framework consists of five distinct parts. Firstly, *message*: look for hallmarks or patterns in speech that could encourage violence, such as threats to group integrity or dehumanization. The message can include five specific hallmarks: dehumanization, accusation in a mirror, threats to group integrity or purity, assertions of attacks against women and girls, and questioning in-group loyalty. To be considered dangerous speech, it must contain at least one of these hallmarks. Secondly, *the audience*: consider the audience's vulnerability to harmful communication, which may be impacted by unresolved trauma, fear, or financial difficulty. Third, *context*: examine the historical and social setting in which the speech is given, which is essential to comprehend its significance. Then, the *speaker*: consider the speaker's impact and their interaction with the audience. Finally, the *medium* is the method of communication, such as how social media contributes to the propagation of harmful speech.

The scope and applicability of dangerous speech are broad. In multiple countries, the framework has been applied to understand the triggers of violence and their impacts on politics, society, the economy, and culture. Besides, the concept of dangerous speech serves as a valuable tool in mitigating the potential for intergroup violence. These tools have been applied across various nations for two primary purposes: the examination of dangerous speech through collection, categorization, and

[10] Ibid.

analysis, as well as initiatives aimed at reducing the detrimental effects of such rhetoric by enhancing individuals' resilience against it.

Numerous initiatives have been undertaken in countries like the Czech Republic, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, and the United States, often spearheaded by entities like the Dangerous Speech Project, non-governmental organizations, and scholars.[11] Noteworthy projects include the Umati Pathbreaking Project in Kenya, conducted by iHub Research between 2012 and 2013, which gathered hateful and perilous rhetoric from various online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and newspaper comment sections.[12] Similarly, the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Sri Lanka produced a study titled "Liking Violence: A Study of Hate Speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka" in 2014.[13] Additionally, the collaboration between Addis Ababa University and the University of Oxford led to "Mechachal: Online Debates and Elections in Ethiopia" in 2015. In Myanmar, the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization monitored online hate speech, particularly on Facebook, during 2015 and 2016.[14] Based in Kano, the Centre for Information Technology and Development in Nigeria conducted a project to oversee hate speech and dangerous rhetoric on social media in 2015 and 2016. Lastly, the PeaceTech Lab, headquartered in Washington, D.C., compiled "Social Media and Conflict in South Sudan: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms" in 2016, focusing on identifying terms associated with hate speech rather than specific instances of their use.[15]

Emeline O'Hara and Tonei Glavinic have researched dangerous speech and its significance ahead of India's 18th national election, held in 2024. Their study emphasizes the importance of tackling harmful discourse in political environments, the difficulties in ensuring that

[11] Dangerous Speech Framework 2024
[12] Umati Report 2013
[13] Samaratunge & Hattotuwa 2014
[14] O'Hara 2023
[15] Glavinic 2022

politicians are held responsible for their language, and the impact of polarizing stories on societal unity and democratic mechanisms.[16] With the collaboration of a team from Dhaka University, including the corresponding author of this paper, Cathy Buerger produced a report dangerous speech in Bangladesh in 2023. The team analyzed 124 dangerous speeches and found five categories of people to be targeted for violence. The Ahmadiyya community is one of the five categories, as they are considered by many to not be 'true' Muslims, leading to their detractors inciting others to commit violence against the community, influenced by speeches delivered by persons of influence.[17] The violent incidents faced by Ahmadis will be analyzed in the following sections. However, the report and the violence against the various groups using dangerous speech indicate the applicability of the framework (for example, *see Table 1*). The framework will help to understand the causes and triggers of violence against Ahmadis in Bangladesh.

Table 1: Illustrations of dangerous speech. Compiled by authors from different sources.

Example of Dangerous Speech	Speaker	Audience	Hallmark	Risk of Violence
"Those who do not call the Ahmadis 'kafir' (infidels) are also kafir."	Ahammad Safi, deceased former chief of Hefazat-e-Islam	Madrasha Students/followers of Al Jameatul Ahlia Darul Uloom Moinul Islam-Hathazari	Devalue/Demeaning without Dehumanization, Threat to the integrity or purity of the in-group	Yes

[16] O'Hara & Glavinic 2024
[17] Buerger 2023

"Those who take the side of Qadiani and Rashed Khan Menon (a leftist politician) will be banned throughout Bangladesh." "The 'Chicken-thief' 'Shahriar Kabir' (a civil society member) will be beaten with shoes wherever he is found."	Mamunul Haque, influential Islamic leader	Followers of Hefazat-e-Islam in Dhaka/religious congregation	Devalue/Demeaning without Dehumanization, Threat to the integrity or purity of the in-group	Yes

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. It employs a robust content analysis method[18] to find dangerous speech against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. The authors identify and watch YouTube videos, follow Facebook posts, and analyze newspaper reports. Other credible sources, such as books and journal articles, are also reviewed to conduct a literature review of the study. After collecting examples of dangerous speech and violent incidents perpetrated against Ahmadis, the study uses a dangerous speech framework to analyze the consequences of the violent events. It is worth mentioning is that topic of the Ahmadiyya community is very sensitive in Bangladesh. Although the researchers write articles without bias toward any groups, specifically Sunni or Ahmadis, people may blame the researchers if the arguments go against certain groups.

[18] Halperin & Heath 2020

Literature Review: Historical and Religious Context

The indivisible oneness of God is an essential idea in Islam. Monotheism, in other words, is the foundation of a Muslim's whole belief system. This core principle of oneness tied Muhammad's (PBUH) followers together when he first began preaching the purpose of Islam in 613 CE. The Arab tribes at the time were split, leaderless, weak, and worshipped several gods, starkly contrasting this message. According to the Quran, these were gods who could "make nothing and were themselves formed, who could neither hurt nor aid themselves and who had no control over death or life."[19] Before the advent of Islam, the Arabs allegedly lived in al-Jahiliya, or the 'Time of Ignorance'.[20] However, a wide variety of ideological and political perspectives continue to persist in many contemporary Muslim societies.

The fight between Muhammad's followers and the Arabian people who did not accept Islam was nothing but for holding and exercising power. Allah promises to give power to his prophet and faithful followers (*muttakin*) if they follow Islamic rules correctly. The Quran says: "O Allah! Lord, over all authorities! You give authority to whomever. You please and remove it from whom you please; you honor whomever you please and disgrace whom you please—all good is in your hands. Surely, you alone are most capable of everything."[21] In Islamic history, many people in Mecca rejected Muhammad's message and bitterly resented his condemnations of their society's injustices. Most Meccans looked upon Muhammad and his followers with suspicion and even hatred. Muslims were persecuted for their beliefs. They found it difficult to survive and were, at times, even killed. In 622 CE, the Prophet and his followers left Mecca for Madina to survive their lives. Madina's people warmly received Muslims and sheltered them. In Madina, the prophet became the chief leader of the community and made a charter called Madina Sanad for peaceful

[19] Al Quran, 25:3
[20] Ansary 2009
[21] Al Quran 3:26

existence among the different religious groups. The Prophet started to exercise power and became one of the most influential people in human history, changing every aspect of the Arabic nation and transformed it into a new one.[22]

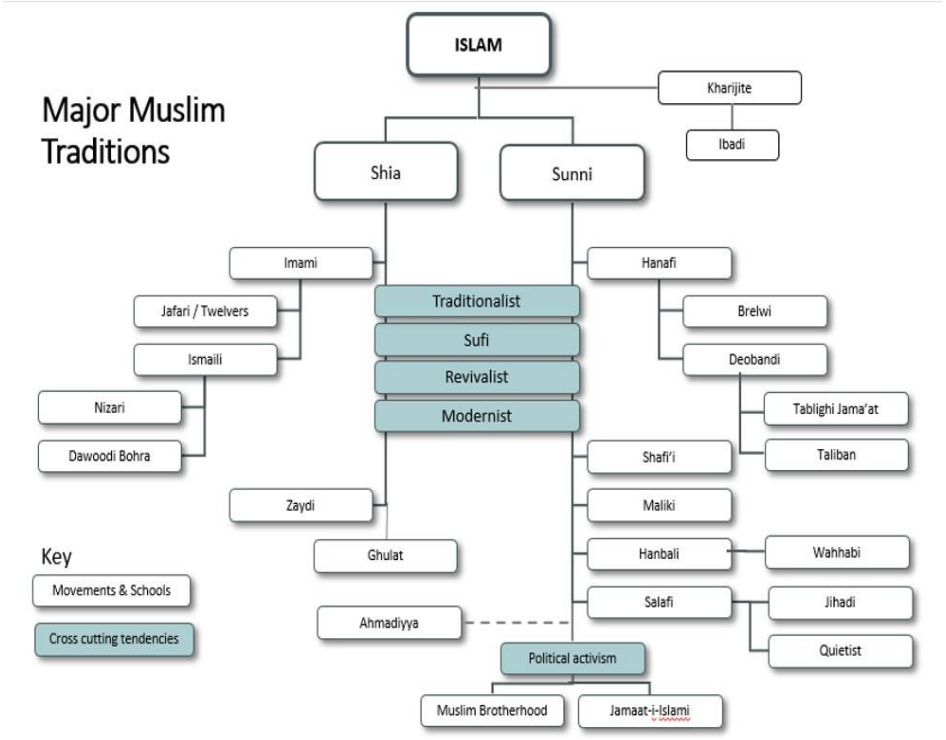
Muslim society was thrown into chaos[23] when the Prophet died in 632 CE after a brief illness. According to the Quran, Muhammad was the last prophet, and the Quran clarified that no other prophet would follow him. The Quran was humankind's final revelation until the end of time because it was God's final revelation. Nevertheless, who was to succeed Muhammad as the community's leader, and how was this person chosen? What, more importantly, would the nature of their authority be? Most of Muhammad's followers felt that, like the Quran, the Prophet had stayed mute on the matter, neither choosing a successor nor providing a specific voting mechanism. On the other hand, some believed that the Prophet had picked Ali, his son-in-law, cousin, and closest male relative, to follow him: Ali's adherents were dubbed 'Ali's Shia' or 'Ali's Party'. They became known as Shia Muslims, and the schism that arose between the Shia and the majority of Muslims, afterward known as Sunnis (those who follow the Prophet's path or *sunna*), has persisted to this day.[24]

Ali was not to succeed the Prophet and not become the new leader of the Muslim community, despite his supporters' assurances to the contrary. Abu Bakr, the prophet's father-in-law and close associate, was given the title of caliph (from the Arabic *khalifa*, which means successor). Abu Bakar was democratically elected by community leaders who thought he was too experienced to rule the Muslim community.[25] Later, the schism became even more severe, and Muslims were separated into numerous factions. Many of Ali's admirers, for example, were shocked by his decision and thought he had erred. The Kharijites ('those who secede') were a

[22] Hart 2000
[23] Lewis & Churchill 2015; Lewis 2014
[24] Ansary 2009
[25] Mawdudi 2001

group of dissenters who had their theology and political tactics. At the Battle of Nahrawan in 658 CE, Ali struck a heavy blow to the secessionists, but the Kharijites would have the final words. A Kharijite broke into the caliph's private apartment three years later, found Ali praying, and murdered him.[26] In terms of how to govern and who will be the authority of the Muslim nation, three main (*see Figure 1*) groups emerged, each with different interpretations of Islam. They are Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and Kharijite Muslims.

Figure 1: *Sectarian division in Islam.* Source: Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford[27]



[26] Ansary 2009

[27] Figure Source: Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford. See more https:// www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/hikmah-blog/christians-muslims-sectarianism

Sunni is the Islamic tradition that arose from proponents of election rather than blood succession to the caliphate; it is currently the dominant form of the religion in most parts of the Islamic world. Shia, on the other hand, refers to the Islamic tradition that backed the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib and his successors as Muslim community leaders. In Iran, Iraq, and other nations, it is now the dominant version of Islam. However, many Muslims strongly believe that the schism between Sunni and Shia is political, not religious.[28] Meanwhile, the Kharijites remained a modest but disruptive movement after Ali's death, spearheading revolts against the Umayyad administration that followed the Rashidun. The Kharijites, who were known for their extremism and puritanism, considered any Muslim who committed a significant offense to be an apostate. Intermarriage and contact with other Muslims were forbidden to them, and they insisted on a literal reading of the Quran.

Analysis of the Violence Against Ahmadiyya Jamaat

Bangladesh

There are four major Islamization theories in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. These are the 'religion of the sword' thesis, immigration theory, 'religion of patronage' doctrine, and the 'religion of social liberation' theory. Among them, the dominant view suggests that the social liberation, immigration, and patronage theories are most appropriate to explain the spread and consolidation of Islam in Bengal (India) and East Bengal (Bangladesh).[29] Bangladesh has faced the schism of Islamic groups since it emerged as an independent country.

The most populous group is Sunni, which comprises at least 80 percent of the country's total population. In contrast, Shia represent just two percent of the nation, making them a minority group in Bangladesh.[30]

[28] The Guardian 2015
[29] Islam & Islam 2018
[30] Pew Research 2012

Other Sunni groups active in Bangladesh include Ahle Hadith, Jamat-e-Islami, Hefajat-e-Islam, Pir-centric groups, and some extremist groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami Bangladesh, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, Hijbut Tawheed, and Shahadat-e-Al Hikma.[31] Within this diverse spectrum of Sunni groups, one can find a range of religious political organizations, notably Jamaat-e Islami, which seek to blend Islamic principles with governance. In contrast, there also exist more radical factions that have veered into extremism and terrorism, highlighting the complex and sometimes troubling dynamics within this branch of Islam.[32] Every group has different manifestos and implementation processes to achieve their goal: imposing shariah at the state level. Although plenty of Islamic groups are actively functioning in Bangladesh, this paper discusses only the Ahmadiyya group and the violence it faces.

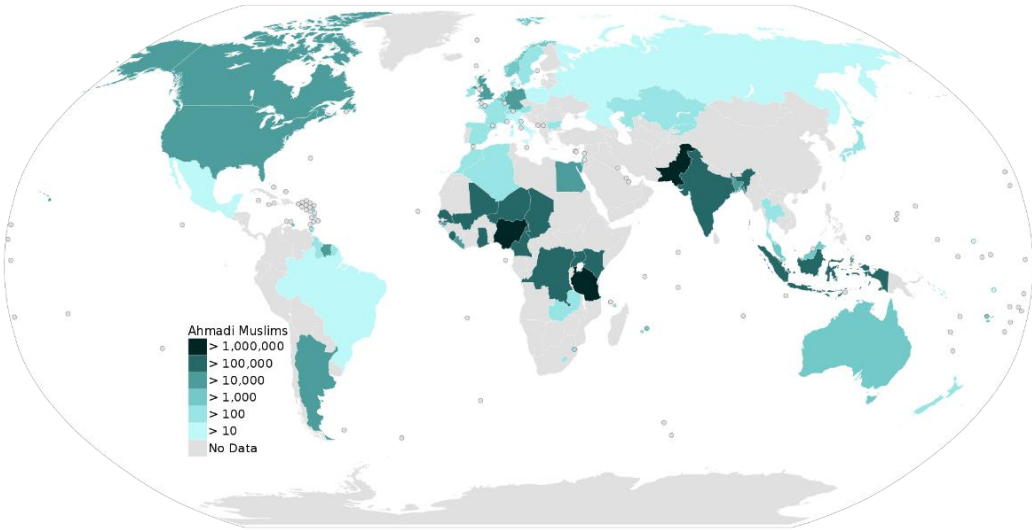
At the end of the nineteenth century, the Ahmadiyya movement arose in British-ruled India's northwestern province, which is contemporary Ludhiana, Punjab, India.[33] The movement's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, declared himself a divinely anointed Islamic reformer in 1882. The movement's name is derived from Ahmad, an alternative name for the Prophet Muhammad mentioned in several Islamic traditions. Ghulam Ahmad said he had come to resurrect Islam and restore it to its original purity.[34] He did not claim to be a new prophet, as in Muslim thought, the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of Islam, and anyone else who claims to be a prophet should be condemned.

Ghulam Ahmad argued that he was providing a new interpretation, not a new revelation, to lead the Muslim community back to its roots.[35] He saw himself as someone who could return Islam to its purest form. He

[31] Riaz 2016
[32] Riaz 2010
[33] Murphy 2016
[34] Ahmad 2016
[35] Motin 2018.

gathered supporters across Punjab and Sindh, and in 1889, he officially began the movement with an allegiance ceremony. Ghulam Ahmad controversially advocated only the spiritual form of jihad and the peaceful spread of Islam rather than any form of military confrontation in a climate of growing anti-imperialist sentiment in British-occupied India.[36] According to Ahmad, Isa (Jesus) did not die by crucifixion, nor was he saved from death on the cross by God's raising him to heaven, as Muslims usually believe. Instead, Isa collapsed, recovered, and travelled to Afghanistan and Kashmir to pursue Israel's lost tribes (Figure 2), where he died of old age.

Figure 2: Ahmadiyya Jamaat in the World[37] Source: Wikimedia, accessed April 2, 2024



[36] Slight 2019
[37] Wikimedia 2024

Ahmad claimed to be the second coming of Muhammad and Isa, not only a reformer of Islam. He was both the Mahdi (Guided One) and the Messiah, whom Muhammad prophesied would appear in the end times. One of the books published by the Ahmadiya community in Islam states:

> Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was born in Qadian, a small town in the Punjab, India in 1835. When he reached the age of 40 years, Hazrat Ahmad began to receive the revelations that would lead him eventually to the conviction that in his person the advent of the Mahdi was fulfilled. It was revealed to him that Jesus of Nazareth died a natural death and he was the Promised Messiah (peace be on him) of the latter days, and indeed a subordinate Prophet to the Holy Prophet of Islam.[38]

These assertions were too much for many Muslims, and Ahmad was labeled a heretic for questioning Muhammad's status as the Final Prophet and the revelations he received. When Ahmad died in 1908, his followers were divided into two groups: the Ahmadiyya Ahmadis, who accepted his claims and maintained his teachings, and the Lahori Ahmadis, who recognized him as a renewer of the Islamic faith but not as a minor prophet. Pakistani law declared Ahmadis to be non-Muslims in 1973, and from 1984, any Ahmadis who claimed to be Muslims, utilized Islamic terminology, or referred to their faith as Islam faced legal consequences. Persecuted, many members of Bangladesh’s Ahmadiyya community fled to the United Kingdom, where they today make up about 1% of the world's total Muslim population, even though many other Muslims do not regard them as such.[39]

The Ahmadiyya Jamaat was initially created in the district town of Brahmanbaria in 1912, when Maulana Abdul Ohayed, a saintly scholar, adopted the Ahmadiyya philosophy and started spreading it among the

[38] Ahmad 2016

[39] For more details about Ahmadiyya visit the website: https://www.alislam.org/

local Muslim population in what was then part of India, now Bangladesh. Maulana Ohayed received his Islamic education from Maulana Abdul Hayy of Farangi Mahall in Lucknow, India. Upon his arrival in Brahmanbaria, he assumed the role of a *qazi*, responsible for delivering judgments based on Islamic law, as well as serving as the Head Maulana of a prestigious high school. In addition, he served as the *khatib*, or prayer leader, of the Brahmanbaria Jame Mosque.

Maulana Ohayed is thought to have initiated communication with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1903, following the news of Ahmad's renowned prophecy. Initially, as a Sunni Muslim scholar, he displayed a strong curiosity over the foundation upon which Ahmad asserted his identity as a prophesied messiah, *mujaddid* (anticipated reformer), and *mahdi* (savior). The theological discourse, comprising of dispute, argument, and counterargument, between Maulana Ohayed and Mirza Ahmad spanned over several years, with the exchange taking place through letters. Following the demise of Ghulam Ahmad in 1908, Maulana Ohayed journeyed to Qadian in 1912 and encountered the inaugural caliph of the Ahmadiyya Jamaat. Then he adopted the Ahmadiyya doctrine. Upon his return to his birthplace of Brahmanbaria, the esteemed individual was well respected and recognized for his profound understanding of Islamic teachings.

As a result, other Muslims started to emulate him, leading to the gradual expansion of the Ahmadiyya community throughout the area. Between 1903 and 1909, four Muslims from different areas converted to the Ahmadiyya faith. However, the establishment of the Ahmadiyya Jamaat in Brahmanbaria in 1912 by Maulana Ohayed marked the official beginning of the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh.[40]

The initial congregation of the country remained operational until 1936, at which point it was relocated to Calcutta for a period of time. Eventually, it relocated to Bakshibazaar, Dhaka, where the community

[40] Ahmadiyya Bangla 2008

acquired land in 1946. Nevertheless, the Ahmadiyya community in Brahmanbaria continues to uphold a jamaat that is responsible for coordinating religious events, offering social assistance to the community, and promoting and disseminating the Ahmadiyya philosophy. The Ahmadiyya Jamaat currently has 103 branches and 425 community neighborhoods where Ahmadis live. There are 65 preachers, known as moballeg, designated to serve the community in various zones locations, according to a booklet published by the Ahmadiyya community.[41]

Messages

Many prominent and influential Bengali Islamic speakers have endorsed the statement that Ahmadis are not Muslim and have to be declared as kafir (infidels or non-Muslims) by the government of Bangladesh. Some went further, even arguing that anyone who does not denounce Ahmadis as *kafir*, are therefore themselves also *kafir*. This paper highlights some of dangerous speech about the Ahmadiyya community and their status in Bangladesh.

> *"Those who do not call the Qadianis kafir (infidels) are also kafir."*[42]

The speech's hallmarks are *devaluation and demeaning without dehumanization*, as well as a *threat to the in-group's integrity or purity*. Mentioning Ahmadis as non-Muslims in Bangladesh is one of the difficult conditions of living here peacefully. Let us consider the word *kafir* and its consequences in the context of Bangladesh.

The word *kafir* is derived from the Arabic language. In the Quran, the essential scripture of Islam, the word has been used many times with many meanings. Explainers of the Quran have also interpreted the word in their

[41] Ibid.
[42] Dhaka Times 2019

books, and two main interpretations currently dominate. One famous cleric explained:

> the word *kufr/kafir* has been used for two meanings: for ingratitude and denial of the truth. According to the first meaning, the sentence would mean: As against Allah's revelations, this behavior is adopted only by those who have forgotten. His bounties and those who have lost the feeling that they are flourishing by His bounty. According to the second meaning, it would mean: This behavior is adopted only by those who have turned away from the truth and are determined not to accept it. From the context, it becomes evident that here, the disbeliever does not imply every non-Muslim, for a non-Muslim who disputes a point in good faith for the sake of understanding Islam and who tries to grasp thoroughly those things which he finds hard to follow. However, a non-Muslim technically, yet that which has been condemned in this verse does not apply to him.[43]

The above Quranic interpretation of the word *kafir* is a way to create a separation between believers and non-believers to identify each other. The Quran and the hadiths, the primary sources of shariah, never mention any need to outcast or abuse unbelievers unless they commit any anti-Islamic activities. The Quran states:

> *"You have your way, and I have my way."*[44]

This means that my religion is entirely different from yours. You are not worshippers of my God, and I am not worshippers of your gods (beliefs). Because I cannot worship your gods and you are unwilling to worship my

[43] Al Quran 40:4
[44] Al Quran 109:6

God, you and I will never be able to walk along the same path.[45] However, in the context of Bangladesh, the word *kafir* is pejorative and derogatory. If someone states someone else is a *kafir*, it essentially casts a person out of a Muslim group, causing ordinary people look upon the individual negatively. People socially outcast the person, and it becomes tough for them to live in Muslim society. It sends the person into a vulnerable situation both religiously and socially. Followers of Sunni Islam groups such as Hefajat e Islam and Jamaat e Islami consider Ahmadiyya to be the polluter of the faith of Muslim people, alleging Ahmadis malpractice Islamic values in the name of 'false prophethood'. As a result, violence is perpetrated against the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh. Several violent incidents have occurred in recent years, claiming many lives and making Ahmadis even more vulnerable in the country.[46]

Speakers

It is understandable that when an influential speaker talks about any issue, their statements gain an audience and is quickly transferred to the wider community. Shah Ahmad Shafi was an influential Islamic scholar who is very popular among the traditional Islamic clerics known as Qawmi Ulema. He was a Bangladeshi Sunni scholar, chief of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, rector of Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari, and chairman of Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasah Education Board. As a result of his position, he was a very influential speaker who often incited people to kill atheists and bloggers. However, before the emergence of Hefajat-e-Islam in 2013, he was not widely known among the public.[47]

[45] Ibid.
[46] The Daily Star 2023)
[47] Prothom Alo 2014

Shah Ahmad Shafi repeatedly talked about Ahmadiyya people's issues. He made a statement in which he urged 'traditional' Muslims not to marry Ahmadi girls. He stated:

> *"Muslims cannot have relatives with Qadiani people. They cannot be buried in the yard of Muslim tomb"*[48]

Other influential Bengali speakers also followed Shah Ahamd Shafi and gave similar statements. Delwar Hossain Saydee[49] and Mizanur Rahman Azahri, for example, are notable Islamic scholars who have urged the government to declare Ahmadis as infidels. Azhari says:

> "There can be no other prophet after my prophet. The Prophet said that 30 false prophets would come out after me. The claimant of such a false prophet, we all know him, his name is Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani. In this country of so many Muslims, he still campaigned against the Prophet. His chaplains speak against the Prophet. They recognize Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani as the World's Prophet. They can never be Muslims. They have to be declared non-Muslims by the state... This idiot died by breaking into the toilet tank inside the toilet. Thousands of years of accumulated faeces have been eaten while eating excrement."[50]

Audience

The audience for this dangerous speech consists of a variety of groups and parties. Qawmi Ulema and students are the speakers' primary audiences. However, other Islamic groups and parties are also the

[48] *UND 2020*
[49] YouTube 2020
[50] YouTube 2019)

speaker's audience. Mawlana Zunaed Al Habib, the vice president of Jamiat Ulama e Islam Bangladesh, said in a protest movement:

> "The movement has started from Narayanganj demanding the Qadianis be declared non-Muslims. This movement will spread all over Bangladesh. We want the Qadianis to be declared non-Muslims in the state and those who speak on behalf of the Qadianis are also disbelievers."[51]

Speaking dangerous speech against the Ahmadiyya community, attacking them, blaming them for 'poisoning' Islamic values, and so forth are common in Bangladesh. Even suicide bombers have killed themselves in order to kill Qadinai people. Bangladesh experienced a suicide bombing in a mosque for the first time in 2015 . During the Jumma prayer inside an Ahmadiyya mosque in Bagmara in Rajshahi district on December 25, a terrorist blew himself up, injuring several others. According to allegations in the media, the slain terrorist was a member of the banned terrorist organization Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, which is allegedly linked to the Middle East-based Islamic State (ISIS).[52]

Response and Violence

Responses towards dangerous speech from the susceptible audience, the state level, and the speaker(s) are multidimensional. From Muslim members of the community to Islamic clerics, civil society, media, state, and law enforcement agencies have different responses based on their position, status, power, religious and political attitude. The speakers of the speech have long talked about the Ahmadiyya issue, frequently argued that members are not Muslim due to their nature of belief in the

[51] Somoy Naranyanganj 2020
[52] The Daily Star 2015)

sealed prophethood of Muhammad, and demanded the government to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims. This is perhaps because the speakers are vehemently against the Ahmadiyya philosophy and think that in order to defend Islam and its principles, Ahmadis ought to be deemed non-Muslim and that the Ahmadiyya doctrine ought to be abandoned since it contradicts Islamic precepts. The effects of classifying the Ahmadiyya philosophy as non-Muslim can be negative in society and politics in Bangladesh. Doing so has the potential to marginalize and persecute Ahmadiyya Muslims further (Table 2), denying them their rights and freedoms while also promoting division and intolerance within the larger Muslim community.

Dangerous speech, including online hate speech and disinformation, has severe consequences on marginalized groups like the Ahmadis in Bangladesh. Victims of online hate speech targeting religious minorities face significant social and mental repercussions, feeling offended, abused, and bullied, leading to increased insecurity and vulnerability in society. This harmful rhetoric exacerbates feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and low self-worth among victims, impacting their overall well-being. The oppressive environment created by such speech restricts the ability of marginalized communities to engage politically and contribute to societal progress, leading to a loss of organizational and creative spirits.

Table 2. Dangerous Speech and recent violence against Ahmadiyya Jamaat. Source: Compiled by authors from various sources.

Year	Place and Source	Nature of Violence	Casualties		Perpetrators
			Death	Injury	
2015	Rajshahi[53]	Suicide attack in the mosque	Yes	Yes	Jama'atul Mujahideen of Bangladesh, IS, but not verified.
2019	Panchagarh[54]	Vandalized and burned houses	No	Yes	Hardline Islamist groups
2020	Brahmanbaria[55]	Vandalized anded burn houses	No	Yes	Local Sunni supporters
2023	Panchagarh[56]	Arson and burned houses	2	No	Local Islamic clerics and people

The Ahmadiyya community is freuqently subjected to attacks on their mosques, residences, and businesses, as well as other aspects of their daily existence. The occurrence of these attacks can be attributed to the persistent prejudice and mistreatment endured by the Ahmadiyya community within society. The authorities must secure the protection and well-being of Ahmadis in light of these deliberate attacks.

[53] Manik 2015
[54] Dhaka Tribune 2019
[55] Dhaka Tribune 2020
[56] Newagebd 2023

State, Media, and Civil Society Responses to the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh

The Ahmadiyya community faces defamatory responses from the Islamic speakers and clerics.[57] Using the pejorative word "Qadini", the speakers excluded the Ahmadiyya community from the Muslim society and politics. In addition, the state as well as the government shows Indifference to the Ahmadiyya community's security.[58] In 2004, for example, the government of Bangladesh banned publications by the Ahmadiyya community, considered by many Sunni Muslims to be a heretical sect because they believed their founder, Mirza Gulam Ahmad, was a prophet. On the other hand, the local media response is mostly positive.[59] The Daily Star, for instance, is the most vocal newspaper, always producing reports, commentaries, and editorials on the rights of the Ahmadiyya community. Civil society is not interested in talking about the Ahmadiyya community. However, many members of the civil society express concern about violence against Ahmadis in Bangladesh.[60] A civil society activist also observed, "when we were young, we celebrated everything together—Durga Puja, Eid, Christmas—but now, slowly, you do not see communities observing these".[61] Some eminent citizens demand punishment for those responsible for attacks on Ahmadis.[62]

Marginalizing Ahmadis

People belong to multiple identities, and these identities vary based on religion, culture, social values, political ideologies, and other socio-economic perspectives.[63] Othering or marginalizing any person or group

[57] The Daily Star 2019
[58] Hashmi 2016)
[59] The Dhaka Tribune 2017
[60] The Daily Star 2010
[61] Ibid.
[62] The Daily Star 2019
[63] Fukuyama 2018

based on a singular identity is dangerous and damages social and political harmony. Amartya Sen, a noble laureate in economics and a philosopher of our time, illustrate the dangerousness of singular identity[64] and criticizes Huntington's idea, which emphasizes singular identity.[65] Thus, othering any community, particularly minorities in any country, harms social cohesiveness. Kabir shows how influential Islamic scholars, particularly Deobandi ulemas, use words and fatwas to othering Ahmadis in Bangladesh.[66] Kabir's other study[67] suggests how Ahmadis are othered in Bangladesh due to lectures of influential speakers. Several violent incidents occurred, for example, after influential speakers mentioned that the Ahmadis were apostates. In October 2004, 900 Sunni Muslims, armed with machetes and axes and led by a local imam (prayer leader), razed the building of prayer halls and living houses. An Ahmadiyya mosque was vandalized, and local Ahmadis were attacked in a Brahmanbaria neighborhood. The attack, which injured 11 Ahmadis, including six women, was carried out by the Deobandi faction of the International Tahafuzze Khatme Nabuwat Committee in Bangladesh.[68]

The perceived threat to the Ahmadiyya community from Sunni Islam in Bangladesh arises from a history of othering that has led to intolerance and violence.[69] This shift towards hostility has been fueled by political Islamic forces promoting a more exclusive Sunni Islam, eroding the country's syncretized religious traditions.[70] Additionally, the rise of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh, linked to more comprehensive processes of Islamization and international influences, contributes to the perceived threat.[71] The Ahmadiyya community faces insecurity and human

[64] Sen 2006
[65] Huntington 2005
[66] Kabir 2015
[67] Kabir 2009
[68] The Daily Star 2004
[69] Haque 2022
[70] Rahman 2018
[71] Kabir 2016; Lorch 2020

rights violations due to their religious identity, leading to violent experiences that hinder their socio-economic contributions and further exacerbate tensions with Sunni Islam.[72] These factors collectively contribute to the perceived threat to the Ahmadiyya community by Sunni Islam in Bangladesh.

A Case Study of Dangerous Speech that Led to Violence Against Ahmadis

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom adopted in 1972, Bangladesh's commitment to protecting religious minorities remains deeply contested in practice. Among the most vulnerable groups, the Ahmadiyya Jamaat has long faced persecution, exclusion, and targeted violence. This case study critically examines the violent attack on the 98th Annual Ahmadiyya Convention in Panchagarh in March 2023 through the lens of Susan Benesch's Dangerous Speech Framework. It situates the attack within broader patterns of impunity, state inaction, and the rising potency of extremist religious narratives in Bangladesh.

A tension between secularism and Islamic majoritarianism characterizes Bangladesh's constitutional identity. Article 2A[73] of the Constitution declares Islam as the state religion, while Article 41 ensures freedom of religion. This duality creates legal and ideological ambiguity that allows for both tolerance and repression, often depending on political expediency. The Ahmadiyya community identifies as Muslim yet faces doctrinal rejection and hostility from influential Islamist factions, particularly from groups like Khatme Nabuwat, which label them as non-Muslim and blasphemous. Human Rights Watch has documented decades of persecution, ranging from the vandalization of mosques to murders. A

[72] Khan & Samadder 2013
[73] Constitution of Bangladesh 1972

dangerous mix of religious misinformation, mob incitement, and state inertia further amplifies this hostile environment.[74]

On 3 March 2023, a violent mob—reportedly spurred by incendiary sermons and mobilization by extremist clerics—attacked the Ahmadiyya community's annual gathering in Panchagarh. Despite prior warnings and verbal assurances from authorities, the police presence was weak and reactive. The outcome was catastrophic: one person was killed, over 100 were injured, and 189 homes and 50 shops belonging to the Ahmadiyya community were destroyed.[75] The silence and inaction of state forces raise critical concerns about the role of the state—not just as a bystander but as an institution whose failure to act effectively emboldens perpetrators and normalizes violence against religious minorities.

The Panchagarh case fits Benesch's dangerous speech framework[76] well. First, the speaker, who was a local religious leader with historical credibility, acted as an inciter. Second, the audience, who are emotional religious followers, already primed to view Ahmadis as heretical threats, became easy targets for manipulation. Third, the context of Bangladesh's growing Islamist populism, declining secular civic space, and weak protection of minorities created a social climate ripe for violence. Fourth, the content and the language labeling Ahmadis as "anti-Islamic" or a "danger to the Sunni faith" clearly fall into the category of dehumanizing and delegitimizing speech as out-group people. Fifth, the medium of dissemination included mosques, loudspeakers, and social media, which allowed the incitement to reach a large audience quickly, escalating the threat.

The government's failure to prevent violence or provide timely protection reveals not just a security lapse but a structural bias. This inaction signals that some forms of violence are negotiable, depending on

[74] Human Rights Watch 2005
[75] Prothom Alo 2023; UPR Bangladesh 2023
[76] Susan Benesch 2010

the identity of the victims. Consequently, religious minorities are increasingly disempowered, silenced, and driven to fear-based withdrawal from public religious life. The 2023 Panchagarh incident was not an isolated event but part of a pattern of violence enabled by dangerous speech in Bangladesh. If the state continues to tolerate or ignore such incitement, it risks undermining the constitutional promise of religious freedom and sliding further into majoritarian authoritarianism cloaked in religious legitimacy. Systematic tracking and prosecution of inciters of violence, regardless of religious or political identity, as well as clear guidelines for police intervention in cases of religiously motivated unrest, are crucial. Collaborations with civil society and religious leaders to counteract dangerous narratives with inclusive messaging are essential. Religious freedom must not be treated as a privilege—it is a constitutional guarantee that the Bangladeshi state must uphold for all.

Conclusion

Religious intolerance is unfortunately widespread in Bangladesh. When religious intolerance increases, the space for alternative voices shrinks. Other religious minority groups hesitate to ask for their civil, political, and religious liberties, and are marginalized from mainstream society. Minority groups fall behind politically, economically, and culturally from other states' largest groups. The Ahmadiyya community faces significant challenges in a society like Bangladesh, where they cannot openly express their identities, especially in public places. Physical and verbal attacks have frequently been perpetrated against them as a result of their beliefs about the final prophet of Islam. Reasoned arguments and liberal frameworks have failed to persuade Bangladesh about the rights of the Ahmadi community. Academics, activists, journalists, fact-checkers, and secular political leaders have often responded angrily each time an incendiary comment was uttered or assaults were carried out, proving that traditional Sunni Islamic speakers' harmful speeches fostered, if not

sparked, violence against Ahmadiyya people. Given Bangladesh's divisiveness, counter-speech messages based on reason and compassion are unlikely to dislodge the impact of harmful speech. Human rights discourses are losing favor with the administration and its supporters, as evidenced by various types of overt and covert state-sponsored repression. Intensive positioning of Ahmadis as kafir has proven beneficial for many Islamic organizations and political parties; conversely, opposing this is a surefire way to electoral oblivion. As a result, Islamic organizations utilize the Ahmadiyya issue to gain more supporters and votes.

This study was designed to analyze the impacts of speeches of mainstream Sunni Muslims against the Ahmadiyya community that incited violence against the latter. It examins several violent incidents against Ahmadis and found that dangerous speech triggered the violence, revealing a clear and direct link between the hate discourse propagated by prominent Sunni intellectuals and the subsequent perpetration of violent crimes against the Ahmadiyya community. The study also reveals the influence of rhetoric in creating or shaping public sentiment and provoking acts that result in harm. Use of provocative language has fostered an atmosphere of intolerance and hate towards the Ahmadiyya community. For example, in a specific occurrence, a well-known Sunni scholar delivered a speech condemning the Ahmadiyya community as heretics, after which a group of followers launched an assault on an Ahmadi Mosque, resulting in substantial destruction. This exemplifies the direct correlation between dangerous speech and violence, as well as the perpetuation of discrimination against minority communities.

Whereas other studies on the Ahmadiyya issue emphasize traditional issues such as identity politics and vote politics, this study embarks on a new approach to understanding the violence against Ahmadis in Bangladesh. This study uses the Dangerous Speech Framework to better understand the causes of violence against Ahmadis in Bangladesh, revealing the fundamental motives behind the persecution faced by Ahmadis by examining the language employed in speech directed

against them. The framework enables a more thorough analysis of the language and narratives concerning Ahmadis, revealing the underlying causes of intolerance and discrimination. By employing this novel method, we can acquire a more intricate comprehension of the intricate dynamics involved in the persecution of Ahmadis in Bangladesh.

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