What's the news on Muslims in Modi's India?

Print Media, Religious Discrimination, Cultural Dynamics, Text Analysis, Topic Modelling

Extended Abstract

In India, Anti-Muslim sentiments and calls for genocide against the community have been increasingly observed on social media (Mashal, Raj, and H. Kumar 2022), with the government turning a blind eye towards growing Muslim hatred. Through 2019, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) passed a series of laws which reaffirmed this anti-Muslim sentiment. The presence of religiously guided politics in a secular country furthers the schisms within society, which are witnessed not only through socio-spatial relations on ground but also those prevalent online and in traditional media.

In this project, we wish to understand how news reporting about Muslims in India in print media has changed in the last two decades. The election of Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India has resulted in several changes in not only the policies instituted against Muslims, but it may have also changed the depiction of the religious minority in the press. The relation between the Indian press and the government has historically been a deeply entangled one (Sonwalkar, 2002). We wish to study how different Indian newspapers have investigated the question of Muslims through a longue durée approach, not only by observing print reportage since 2014 (i.e. the accession of Modi as Prime minister) but also the years preceding him. This allows for a comparative analysis that sheds light on the development and evolution of different media outlets and the way they report about Muslims over a timespan of almost two decades.

First, all English language press articles containing the regular expression "muslim*" in the title and leading paragraph were collected between Jan. 2004 and Dec. 2022 from news outlets in the Indian Subcontinent, using the media aggregator Factiva. Thereafter, we reduced the dataset to 15 Indian newspapers, trying to cover not only the right-left spectrum of political leanings, but also encompassing the regional specificities of the country[1]. This resulted in 141,607 articles to analyse.

Looking at the share of articles about Muslims over time in Fig. 1 (top panel), we observe an overall increase in volume from the time Modi came into power. This can be explained through the multiple laws and acts passed by the BJP that target religious minorities and muslims in particular, one example being the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). CAA was driven by Hindu majoritarian politics that sought to dismantle citizenship protection for Muslims as well as incorporate Assam and Kashmir (the only Muslim majority province in India) within a militarized governing zone. This led to the Delhi Riots in 2020, resulting in violence and police brutalities against the Muslim community and supporters of the Anti CAA Protests.

After observing this overall increase in articles related to Muslims after 2014, we focus on a set of sub-topics which deal with the question of social unrest along with the growing islamophobia and its varying manifestations in the country. These topics, extracted by Factiva through semi-supervised topic modelling, were summarized by the authors into larger categories such as "religion", "discrimination", "crime", "social issues" and "terrorism".

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[1] For the purposes of which, we selected, The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, UNI (United News of India), Indian Express, Press Trust of India, Deccan Chronicle, The Pioneer, Deccan Herald, India Today, Tehelka (India), New Indian Express, Kashmir Monitor, The Telegraph and The Statesman.

Analysing how these topics are treated and have evolved in the different newspapers gives us insight into the different ways of reporting on the topic of Muslims in India. We see that the subject of religion increases dramatically after 2014 (Fig.1 top), meaning an overall rise of interest on the question of Islam and the integration of religious communities in the Hindu majority.

Next, we focus on the subject of discrimination, where we observe a strong variance in volume and momentum of reporting across news outlets, while the overall frequency is rising after 2014. Newspapers such as India Today or The Telegraph, both right-wing newspapers, barely report on discrimination until 2018, with the latter picking momentum only by 2020. On the contrary, newspapers such as The Hindu, Indian Express and Hindustan Times focus on this theme as early as 2014. The Hindu and Indian Express are both left-leaning newspapers, so this observation attests to their political orientation. Hindustan Times, even though being centre-right leaning newspaper, was part of a controversy during 2016-2017 wherein the editor had started the 'Hate Tracker' which was a "national database on crimes in the name of religion, caste race… it was intended to be a crowd-sourced database of hate crimes in India since September 2015" (Srivas 2017). This initiative, which uncovered many otherwise unnoticed hate crimes, ruffled the feathers of the ruling government, forcing the editor's exit from the newspaper. This episode helps understand the rise of articles on discrimination in 2016 in Hindustan Times and the sudden dip after. Reports about the close relation between the chairperson and editorial director of the Hindustan Times, Shobhana Bhartia and the inner circles of the ruling government attest to this observation (Dev 2018), proving the power of the government in the ever growing disappearance of free media in the country.

In a further step, we will investigate the textual content of the articles using automated narrative analysis by extracting the most salient subject-verb-object relations, in order to shed light on the main actors involved in the depiction of Muslims and their relations. For instance, we shall observe how hate crimes around muslims are reported, quantifying the varying positions of Muslims as either actors or objects of violence in the Indian context. Furthermore, we shall refine the existing topic model using state-of-the-art techniques based on contextual embeddings (Grootendorst 2022) in order to more precisely classify the different news outlets based on the events and themes they focus on.

References

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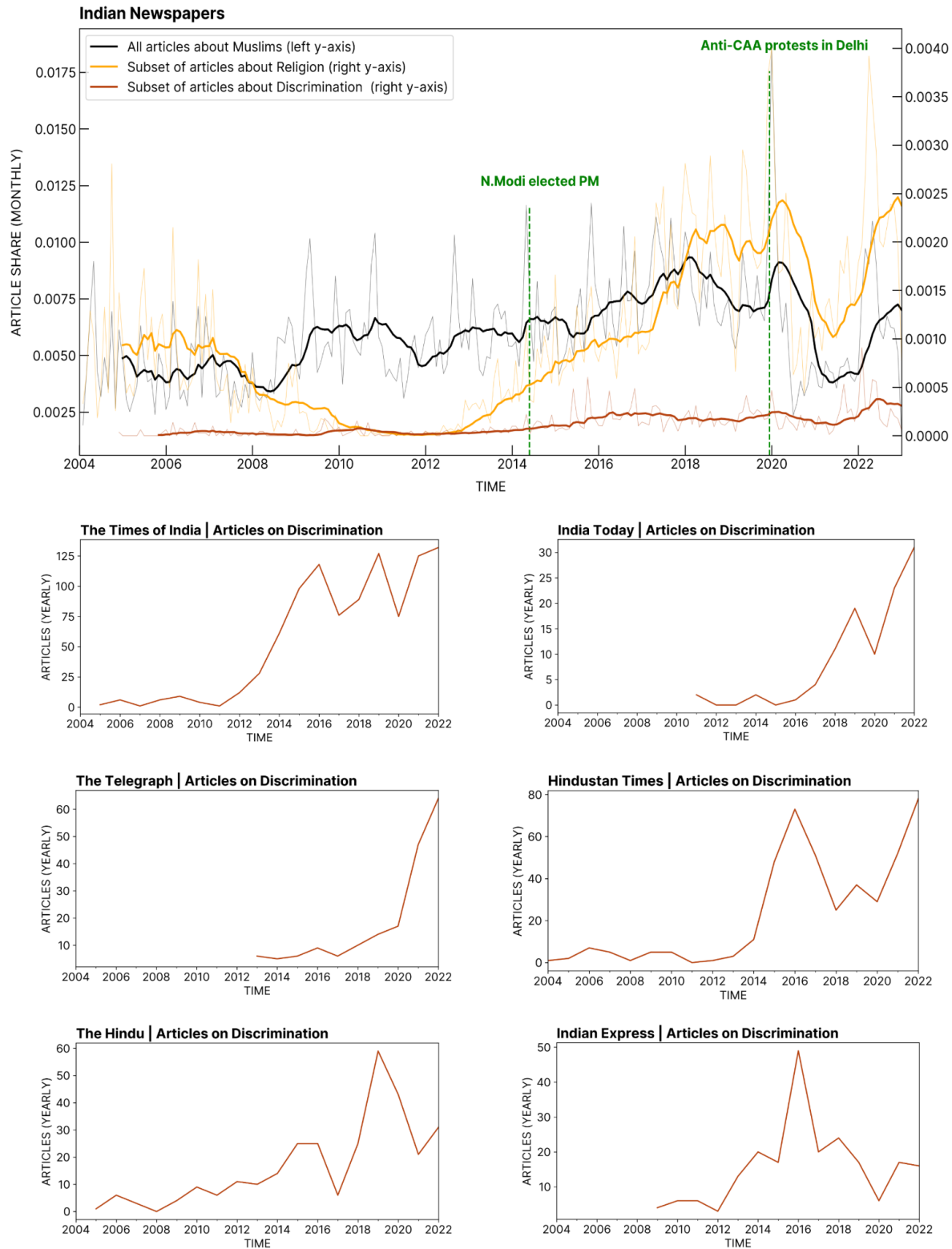
Figure 1: The top panel shows the share of articles about muslims in the selected set of Indian newspapers. We observe an overall increase of articles after Modi's election, and more particularly a stark increase of the topic of religion. The six lower panels shed light on the different trends in reporting about discrimination for different newspapers.