

Is Indian History Being Falsified? Public Interest Trends of Historical Figures, 2004-2023

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ABSTRACT

Since the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, concerns have been raised regarding the appropriation or undermining of the legacies of India's prominent leaders and the promotion of specific figures to reshape historical narrative by promoting right-wing Hindutva ideology. The study investigates these claims by examining changes in public perception of three significant historical personalities, Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Vallabhbhai Patel. Information seeking behavior is used as the theoretical basis to explain any change in public interest, measured using Google search volumes from 2004 to 2023. The data is split into two 10-year subsets centered around 2014 corresponding to BJP's rise to power. Welch's t-test is applied to the data to measure if there is any change in search volumes after 2014. Results show an increased interest in Sardar Patel during the period 2014 to 2023 and possible reasons are analyzed. However, no statistically significant changes were observed for Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. There is no evidence to suggest that the legacies of these personalities are being suppressed or appropriated to align with a Hindutva narrative, or that such actions, if any, have had any statistically significant impact on public interest.

Keywords: Hindutva, information seeking behavior, public opinion, Google trends

INTRODUCTION

India's political landscape underwent major changes in 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power with a clear majority under the leadership of Narendra Modi. One of the major criticisms aimed at the BJP, including the first BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government from 1998–2004, is their alleged attempt to impose a right-wing Hindutva ideology on the nation.

Kumbamu (2020, p. 161) characterizes the BJP as a “fascist” regime and argues that under their regime, “democratic institutions, including the judiciary, education, and the media have systematically been targeted and crippled.” Leidig (2020, p. 215) defines Hindutva, the ideology of the BJP, as a right-wing extremist ideology promoting Hindu majoritarianism and situates its origin in colonial India shaped by fascism and Nazism. According to Nielsen and Nilsen (2021, p. 21), the Hindu nationalist project of the BJP is a hegemonic enterprise that “allows religious majoritarianism to dictate law-making and override the precepts of secular constitutional morality, as well as the general democratic principle of protecting minority rights.” Bhaty and Sundar (2020, p. 1) conclude that “the Modi regime in India shares many exclusionary features in common with authoritarian populists elsewhere.”

Critics argue that this imposition of Hindu nationalism has manifested in various forms, including educational reforms (Flåten, 2017). Systematic attempts have been made to rewrite the history of India in conformity with the Hindu nationalist view of India. Sharma (2023) refers to this as the weaponization of history “within and outside the academy” to promote a Hindutva view of history as India’s legitimate history. According to Das (2024), “the Modi government has worked to promote a phony version of history in line with its Hindu chauvinist agenda.” He argues that historical education has become a “political battleground” where the BJP has been attempting to falsify Indian history by subverting institutions, minimizing public funding of

education and research, and suppressing thought. these actions. Bhattya and Sundar (2020, p. 1) explore the role of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), from which the BJP derives its ideology, and argue that the significant instrument for achieving a Hindu Rashtra (nation) is education, “with the RSS seeing cultural hegemony as more foundational than political control.”

It is argued that by reshaping historical narratives and prioritizing specific figures over others, the BJP is undermining the democratic and pluralistic ideals that underpin Indian society. Das (2024) observes that the party's agenda includes de-emphasizing the contributions of iconic leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru for his “famed insistence on the secular nature of the Indian nation-state.” At the same time, the BJP is allegedly seeking to appropriate the legacies of leaders like Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Bhagat Singh, and Subhas Chandra Bose.

During the run-up to the 2014 general elections, Narendra Modi portrayed himself as a “strong leader” following the legacy of the “iron man” of India, Vallabh bhai Patel (Jaffrelot, 2015, p. 154). According to Govindu (2018), the appropriation of the legacy of Gandhi has been a long-term project of the Hindu right. However, it was under Modi that the appropriation became institutionalized, with Modi claiming affinity with Gandhi “on two issue, khadi and sanitation.” In fact, some scholars trace back the appropriation of Gandhi’s legacy by the Hindu right to the works of M. S. Golwalkar, one of the founding members of the Hindutva movement.

Chaudhary and Narayan (2024, p. 1) characterize Golwalkar as the “most prominent example of Hindu Nationalists who attempted to incorporate Gandhi into the pantheon of Hindutva (Hindu-ness).” Modi, they say, has built upon this model by appropriating Gandhi’s legacy for the BJP and by portraying himself as an ascetic “within Hindutva politics that Golwalkar pioneered” and which in turn was based on the Gandhian framework of the “non-electoral ascetic political leader” (Chaudhary and Narayan, 2024, pp. 3-5). In this study three prominent figures participating in India's freedom struggle and in the making and shaping of modern India have been considered: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), and Vallabhbhai Patel (1875-1950).

Gandhi is universally recognized for his philosophy of non-violence and his important role in India’s freedom movement through civil disobedience and peaceful protests (Godrej, 2006). Jawaharlal Nehru, a close associate of Gandhi, became the first Prime Minister of independent India. He is referred to as “the father of Indian democracy” by the Indian National Congress party to which he belonged (INC, 2021). His worldview, which was “an amalgam of British socialist ideas and Indian concepts derived especially from Buddhism,” along with the ideas of Gandhi, influenced his vision for the country and India’s foreign policy (Hall, 2017, p. 116). For decades, Gandhi’s ideas of non-violence and Nehru’s views on secularism and socialism have shaped educational policies, including school and university curricula, and the public discourse on what constitutes Indian-ness. Vallabhbhai Patel was a senior leader of the Indian National Congress who served as the first Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister of India from 1947 to 1950. Known as India’s “Iron Man,” he played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence and in the political integration of India post-independence (Spodek, 1975, p. 125).

The starting point of our investigation regarding public interest in these 20th-century historical figures is the information seeking behavior model according to which people make “a conscious effort to acquire information in response to a need or gap” in knowledge (Case, 2016, p. 6). This need is “instrumental” as it involves the attainment of a specific goal, with the acquired information bringing the individual closer to their desired end state (Case, 2016, p. 80). As Timmins (2006) notes, the need for information arises “when an initial stimulus makes a topic salient in an individual’s mind and causes that individual to realize a gap between current information possession and the information he/she needs to make sense of the new stimulus.” Google Trends (GT) has been used to describe patterns of information seeking behavior in a wide variety of disciplines and use-cases including women’s health (Dehkordy et al., 2014), mental health (Zhao et al., 2022), human rights issues like sex trafficking detection (Wang et al., 2024), dietary changes like salt reduction in food (Suzuki et al., 2023), and international financial reporting (Zhang, 2023). We hypothesize that the general public has a broad need to seek information about the historical figures mentioned previously. This

specific need can arise from various purposes, including academic research, media discourse, or personal interest. Individuals key in relevant keywords into search engines such as Google to fulfill this interest. The information obtained is then used for various purposes, both private and public, potentially influencing the prevailing public discourse.

Using GT data, we attempt to understand how the public's interest in these personalities has evolved over 20 years from 2004 to 2023. GT search volumes serve as a reliable measure of public interest, showing how often a particular topic is searched for during a specified period and in relation to other topics. By examining search volumes, the study can identify patterns and shifts in the public's focus on these historical figures and the impact of how political events, such as the ascent of the BJP to power, may influence interest in historical narratives.

Studies have shown that when the volume of online searches of a topic is high, it means that the issue is important to the wider public. Using channel complementarity theory and media-system dependency theory, Weeks et. al (2012) concluded that conflict-oriented news coverage strongly predicted the volume of same-day online searches for related information. However, since not all salient issues result in online searches, aggregate search data must be seen as “indicator of information seeking” (Householder et al., 2018, p. 340). When a particular issue is highly visible and of relevance to a broader population, it can potentially shape and inform policy formulation (Curry & Olsen, 1977, p. 13).

However, when a topic consistently lacks public attention, it indicates that the public does not deem it as crucial as other issues. Consequently, a rise in online search volumes at a national level for the term “Sardar Patel” suggests that the topic is of some importance to citizens and has the power to shape the national public discourse.

Google Trends is a tool that helps in the analysis of search trends as well as comparison between terms across different geographies. Google does not provide absolute search volumes, and the publicly available data represents search volumes over a specific period, which have been normalized to a scale of 0 to 100. A GT score of 100 indicates the highest level of popularity recorded during the given period, while a score of 10 suggests that it is searched only 10% as often as its peak (Mukhopadhyay, 2023, p. 115).

GT data have been proven to be a reliable measure of information seeking behavior on various issues including public health, economics, and media studies (Dancy & Fariss, 2024, p. 255). According to Lorenz et al. (2022, p. 203), it has significant “value for social science researchers as a real-time monitoring tool or leading indicator of public opinion, and it may be especially well suited for measuring socially undesirable views.”

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative data analysis is used to investigate the claims that history is being falsified in India under the BJP government by de-emphasizing the contribution of some leaders and by appropriating the heritage of some leaders. Monthly GT data for web searches from January 2004 to December 2023 has been collected for a period of 20 years.

There are 240 data points, and the dataset is split into two groups of 120 each. The first sample (“before”) approximately corresponds to the period before BJP came to power. While Prime Minister Modi was officially sworn in on May 26, 2014, for convenience, the study assumes the 1st of January as the mid-point of the sample. The first sample, therefore, corresponds to the period from January 2004 to December 2013, while the second includes data from January 2014 through December 2023.

The statistical test used in this study is the Welch Two Sample t-test, which helps analyze whether there is a significant difference in the means of the two samples of potentially unequal variances. The null hypothesis that is tested for the three samples is that the mean of the search volumes on and after 2014 is equal to the mean of the search volumes prior to 2014.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mohandas Gandhi

Figure 1: Mohandas Gandhi: GT search volumes, 2004 to 2023

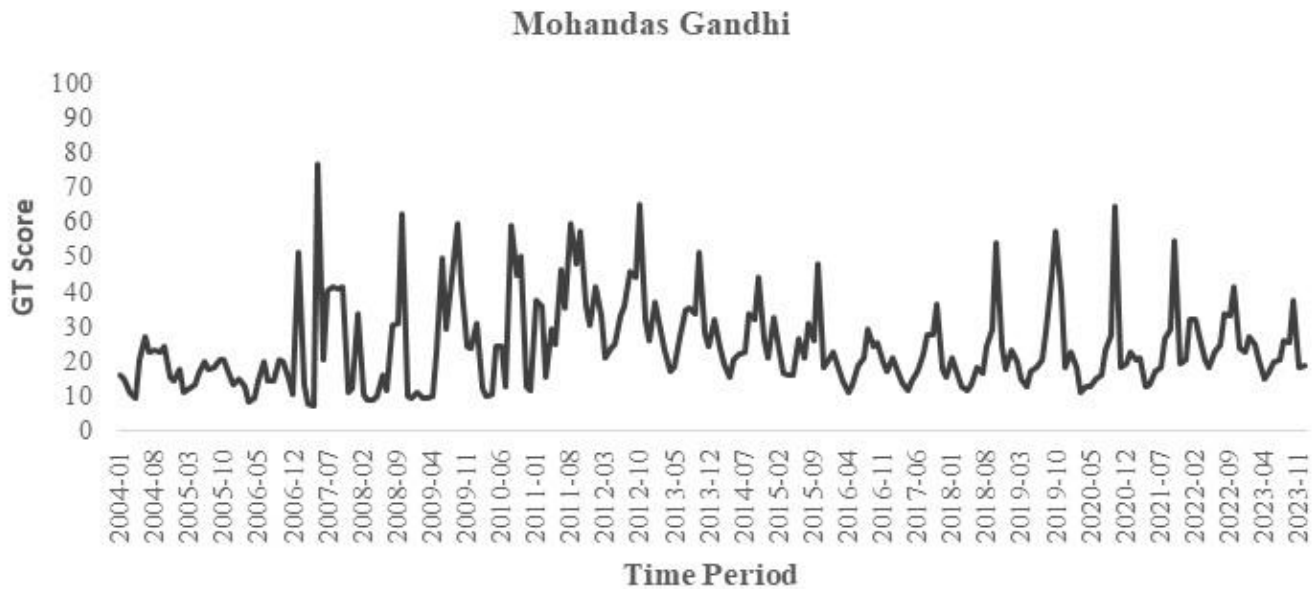


Table 1: Mohandas Gandhi: Welch's t-test Result

Parameter	Value
Sample size (both)	120
Mean (“before”)	25.81
Mean (“after”)	23.46
Variance (“before”)	224.74
Variance (“after”)	95.29
p-value (two-tail)	0.15

The graph in Figure 1 shows the Google search volumes related to Mohandas Gandhi. Average search volumes of three keywords were used: “Mahatma Gandhi” and two variants of his name, “Mohandas Gandhi” and “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.” No discernible long-term trends are evident on visual inspection. Noticeable seasonality is observed with peaks occurring annually in October, corresponding to the celebration of Gandhi's birthday on 2nd October, known as Gandhi Jayanti. The result of the Welch's t-test is given in Table 1.

The average search volumes after 2014 shows a decline of 8.9%, from 25.8 to 23.5. However, the p-value is

greater than 0.05. Therefore, we cannot reject the null hypothesis, and the observed decline in interest in Gandhi cannot be considered statistically significant.

Jawaharlal Nehru

Figure 2: Jawaharlal Nehru: GT search volumes, 2004 to 2023

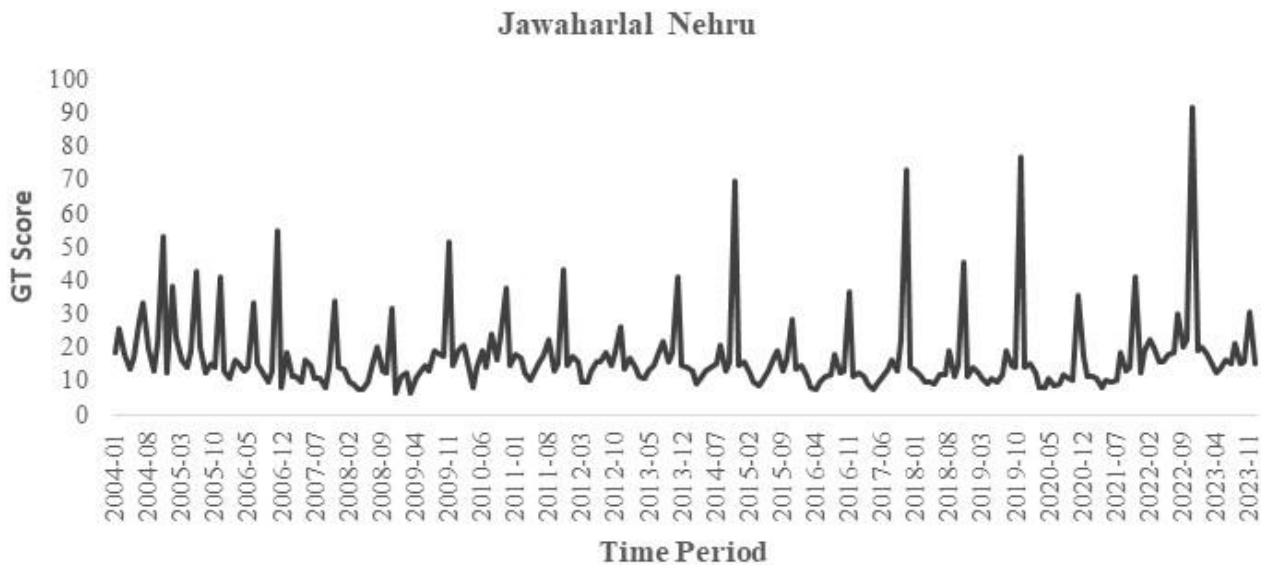


Table 2: Jawaharlal Nehru: Welch's t-test Result

Parameter	Value
Sample size (both)	120
Mean (“before”)	17.82
Mean (“after”)	16.97
Variance (“before”)	90.04
Variance (“after”)	172.39
p-value (two-tail)	0.57

The graph in Figure 2 depicts the Google search volumes related to Jawaharlal Nehru. The average monthly search volumes of three keywords, “Jawaharlal Nehru,” “Pandit Nehru,” and “Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru,” were used for analysis. Upon visual examination, no discernible long-term trends is observed.

A noticeable yearly seasonality is seen, with search peaks occurring annually in November, corresponding to Nehru's birthday (14th November) celebrated as Children's Day. Since 2014, these peaks have reached new highs every 2-3 years. The result of the Welch's t-test is given in Table 2. The mean search volume shows a slight decline from 17.82 to 16.97, which represents a decrease of approximately 4.8%. The p-value is, however, 0.28, indicating that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Therefore, there is no evidence to

suggest that this nominal decline is, in any way, statistically meaningful.

Vallabhbhai Patel

Figure 3

Vallabhbhai Patel: GT search volumes, 2004 to 2023

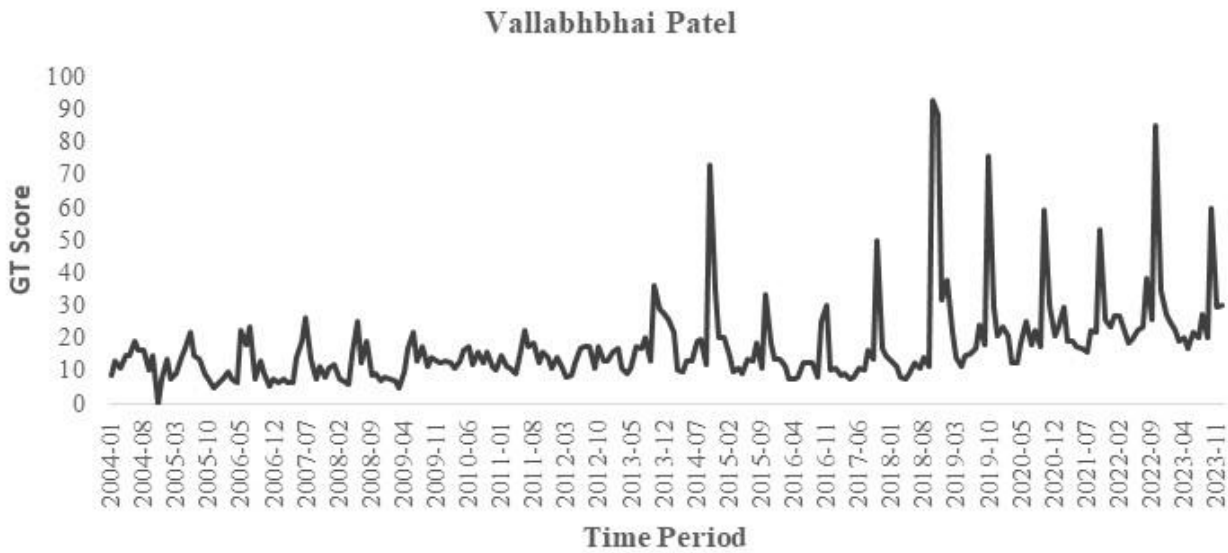


Table: Vallabhbhai Patel: Welch's t-test Result

Parameter	Value
Sample size (both)	120
Mean (“before”)	13.05
Mean (“after”)	22.19
Variance (“before”)	31.02
Variance (“after”)	260.36
p-value (two-tail)	0

The average of search volumes of three keywords: “Sardar Patel,” “Vallabhbhai Patel,” and “Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel,” is used for analysis. A visual inspection reveals a clear upward trend, particularly during 2013–2014, where there is a significant increase. This time frame refers to when Narendra Modi held the position of Chief Minister in Gujrat but had not yet taken on the role of Prime Minister. The increase in search volumes may correspond to Narendra Modi's announcement of the project on October 7, 2013. Every year, a noticeable increase in search activity is observed around October 31st, coinciding with Sardar Patel's birthday. We also observe a substantial increase in search volumes on October 31, 2018, which coincides with the

inauguration of the Statue of Unity. Within a short time, the statue became an important tourist attraction garnering much public interest, which is reflected in Google searches. The result of Welch's t-test (Table 3) shows an increase of 70% in average search volumes after 2014. The p-value is less than 0.05, which implies that the increase in searches is statistically significant and that there has been an increased public interest in Sardar Patel.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the claim that since the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in 2014, the legacies of India's prominent historical leaders are either being undermined or appropriated to fit into a right-wing Hindutva narrative. Using information seeking behavior model as the theoretical basis, changes in public perception of Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Vallabhbhai Patel from 2004 to 2023 have been investigated. Although the use of GT to analyze the effects of politics on the narratives related to historical figures is a novel approach, the study's findings are restricted due to the limited number of samples. Future research could include the analysis of more historical figures like Subhas Chandra Bose, Lal Bahadur Shastri, etc., as well as historical events like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Kashmiri pandit exodus, etc., to make the study more robust and comprehensive. The results of our study are summarized below:

Mohandas Gandhi: There is no evidence of increased public interest in Gandhi due to the alleged appropriation of his legacy by the BJP. There is, in fact, a slight decline of approximately 8.9% in average search volumes. However, this decline is not statistically significant, and there is no evidence to suggest that public interest in Gandhi is any different post-2014 compared to earlier periods, nor is there any indication of appropriation. Even if the BJP has appropriated Gandhi's legacy, as critics claim, there is no evidence to show that such appropriation has impacted public interest in any way.

Jawaharlal Nehru: Once again, there is no evidence of a statistically significant decrease in public interest due to the alleged suppression of Nehru's legacy by the BJP. There is no reason to suggest that interest in Nehru after 2014 differs in a statistically meaningful way from earlier periods. Even if there have been attempts to suppress Nehru's legacy, as claimed by critics, there is no evidence to show that such appropriation has impacted public interest.

Vallabhbhai Patel: An increasing trend in public interest is evident, particularly around 2013–2014. Overall, there is a jump of 70% in search volumes after 2014, indicating rising information seeking by the broader public in India. However, there is no evidence to attribute this increase to right-wing Hindutva politics, as claimed. The first spike is seen in October 2013, following the announcement of plans to construct a statue of Vallabhbhai Patel in Gujarat called the Statue of Unity. The second significant jump occurred in October 2018, coinciding with the inaugural ceremony of the Statue of Unity. From 2018 onwards, we observe annual search increases in the last quarter of the year, corresponding to Vallabhbhai Patel's birthday on October 31.

None of the three cases show any evidence of the appropriation or suppression of legacies of significant historical figures. Even if there were attempts to align political narratives with a right-wing Hindutva narrative, they have not had any statistically significant impact on public interest in these three major personalities.

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