

Divergent Perspectives: USCIRF vs. Public Opinion on Religious Freedom in India

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Abstract

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a U.S. government body, has expressed significant concerns about the state of religious freedom in India in recent years. It has particularly highlighted what it alleges to be a decline in religious freedom, especially since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power in May 2014. The USCIRF's annual reports claim that Hindu groups routinely orchestrate violence against Muslims, Christians and other minorities, often with the tacit support of the Indian State and its various organs. This paper examines the commission's claims regarding worsening religious freedom in India, specifically examining the alignment of these claims with public opinion on the matter. A quantitative analysis of 19 years' worth of Google Trends data is conducted to evaluate if public opinion on religious freedom has significantly worsened, since the BJP came to power. The study examines 9 specific dimensions of religious freedom in India. Results show that 8 out of the 9 dimensions display a statistically significant decline in search volumes after mid-2014. In these 8 cases, the average decline in web searches is more than 75%, indicative of a sharp relative decrease in perception of worsening religious situation in India, which is quite contrary to the USCIRF's allegation of increasing religious intolerance.

Keywords: USCIRF, religious freedom, public opinion, political communication

Introduction

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) claims to be an independent and bipartisan U.S. federal government commission, monitoring the state of religious freedom worldwide, flagging instances of religious persecution, and providing recommendations to the U.S. government. Established in 1998, the commission publishes a yearly report called *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF Annual Report) which provides a detailed report of what the commission perceives as human rights violations in different countries across the world, and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government on potential intervention in including diplomatic pressure or economic sanctions. According to the USCIRF, the worst offenders or “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) are those who are ostensibly engaged in “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.” Next in line are the “Special Watch List” or SWL countries who engage in two of the three criteria alluded to earlier. Older annual reports, had another category called Tier 2 which included those countries which engaged in one of the three criteria (“Frequently Asked Questions,” n.d.). The activities of the commission in furthering global religious freedom, are in line with the stated U.S. commitment to be “at

the forefront of promoting religious freedom internationally” (Marsden, 2020). The USCIRF in its reports over the years, has been particularly critical of India, alleging worsening religious freedom especially since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014.

India was placed on the USCIRF watch list for the first time in 2009. The 2010 report pointed out that while that Indian government “recognized the problem of communal violence”, enough was not being done to address the plight of the minority Christian and Muslim communities and that attacks on “their places of worship continued, along with incidences of intolerance against both” (USCIRF, 2010, p. 242). The 2011 report grudgingly agreed that some “positive steps” were being taken by the national and local authorities to improve religious freedom in India; yet their efforts were being undone by “organizations with Hindu nationalist agendas, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)” who were apparently responsible for “the increase in communal violence against religious minorities” (USCIRF, 2011, pp. 243-244). By 2013, India had been demoted to ‘Tier 2’, with the allegation that minority groups like Christians and Muslims were experiencing “an increase in religiously motivated harassment and violence” from Hindu groups who often used rape as “a common feature of communal violence” against Christian and Muslim women (USCIRF, 2013, p. 233). As per the commission, things took a sharp turn for the worse with the rise of BJP to power in 2014 and India allegedly witnessed unprecedented communal violence and strife. The commission claimed that in 2015 there had been “numerous violent attacks and forced conversions by Hindu nationalist groups, such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).” They reprimanded the Indian state for failing to protect religious minority communities including Muslims and Christians who had been subjected to state-sanctioned intimidation, violence and “derogatory comments by politicians linked to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party” (USCIRF, 2015, p. 149).

The government of India rejected the 2015 USCIRF report with the foreign ministry categorically stating that the report appeared to be based on a “limited understanding of India, its Constitution and its society” (“India rejects US 'freedoms' report,” 2015). However, the narrative of rising intolerance coinciding with the BJP’s ascent to power was immediately picked-up by media houses like BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, DW and others across the world. President Barack Obama, in a “notably sharp speech” reprimanded India for its decline in religious tolerance and declared that India would not succeed if it remained “splintered along the lines of religious faith” (Baker and Barry, 2015). The German media outlet DW was equally critical of the “sharp rise in religious and cultural intolerance since PM Narendra Modi took power last year” (“Intolerance in India,” 2015). Media personalities, public intellectuals, artists and film actors commented how India was witnessing “extreme intolerance” and a few well-known personalities returned their national and state awards as a sign of protest. Shah Rukh Khan, an Indian Muslim actor remarked that “religious intolerance and not being secular in this country” was the worst kind of crime one could do against their nation (“Shah Rukh Khan criticizes,” 2015). Another Muslim actor from India, Aamir Khan also expressed concern at the ostensible rise in extremism commenting that he was “alarmed and shaken” and would probably even leave India if the need arose (“Aamir Khan alarmed,” 2015).

In 2020, the USCIRF finally demoted India to the bottom of the human-rights watch list and designated her a country of particular concern (CPC) for ostensibly “engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).” The report alleged that India witnessed a “drastic” decrease in religious freedom following the BJP’s re-election in May 2019. The report went on to suggest that “discriminatory policies, inflammatory rhetoric, and tolerance for violence against minorities at the national, state, and local level increased the climate of fear among non-Hindu communities” (USCIRF, 2020, p. 20). The key reason for this continued worsening of religious freedom, the U.S. commission alleged, was a direct result of the BJP government’s ideological vision of establishing a supremacist “Hindu state at both the national and state levels through the use of both existing and new laws and structural changes hostile to the country’s religious minorities” (USCIRF, 2022, p. 20).

The commission claimed that the Indian government promoted “Hindu nationalist policies” like the passage of a the “religiously discriminatory” Citizenship Amendment Act, unleashing mob violence, banning inter-faith marriages, and by building “large scale detention camps” for non-citizens (USCIRF, 2021, p. 20). As per the 2023 report, the BJP government at all levels “promoted and enforced religiously discriminatory policies”, “continued to suppress critical voices” and “prosecuted a number of journalists, lawyers, rights activists, and religious minorities advocating for religious freedom” (USCIRF, 2023, p. 24). For four times in a row from 2020 to 2023, therefore, the commission designated India as a country of personal concern. The commission seems to believe that violation of religious freedom in India, a secular democracy was “particularly severe” and similar to that of dictatorial and theocratic regimes like North Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria (USCIRF, 2023, p. 2).

The Indian government has repeatedly rejected the USCIRF annual reports on India; it’s official position has been that the reports are “biased and motivated”, and that they are “based on misinformation and flawed understanding” (“Motivated and biased commentary”, 2023). The Ministry of External Affairs of the government of India in an official response stated that the USCIRF reports misrepresented facts and that their prejudicial reporting against India was a reflection of their lack of understanding of “India, its plurality, its democratic ethos and its constitutional mechanisms” (“Official Spokesperson’s response to media”, 2023). Outside of the Indian government, the USCIRF reports have been criticized for being biased against India through its presentation of selective evidence which suits a specific narrative and by omitting those which challenge the view of deteriorating religious freedom. A report by Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies provides a few instances of systemic anti-India bias in the 2022 report (FIIDS, 2022):

“... instead of recognizing that the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is an act that gives citizenship to refugees who were religiously persecuted from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, it’s wrongly projected as an act to take away citizenship. Similarly, it failed to mention that the National Registry of Citizenship (NRC), which is common in the most democratic countries, is being implemented as per the ruling of India’s court. While India handled Covid with massive vaccinations and treatments irrespective any bias, not just to India’s but also exported outside vaccines India, the report falsely claimed some questionable survey.”

Allegations of bias against the USCIRF are not new. More than a decade ago, the commission was accused of focusing primarily on the plight of Christians in different countries while “while too often ignoring other religious communities and downplaying their claims of persecution” (Boorstein, 2010). The commission has been also been accused of gathering intelligence about other countries in the name of investigating religious persecution and human rights (B, “Surpassing Goebbels”, 2009). Malhotra and Neelakandan (2011, pp. 273-275) in their analysis of USCIRF reports noted several inconsistencies, methodological flaws and biases in the commission’s presentation and interpretation of the supporting data. The authors cite evidence to suggest that while the commission seems deeply troubled about re-conversion of Christians in India to Hinduism, they champion the conversion of Hindus to Christianity as a move into greater freedom. The authors further note that while alleged atrocities against Christians are presented in “specific details, even without any independent verification,” atrocities communities by terrorist Christian groups are either briefly mentioned or dropped altogether. India is not the only country to have rejected the findings and recommendations of the USCIRF. China has repeatedly rejected the USCIRF’s assessment of religious freedom violation in China and its recommendations accusing them of having “political bias against China,” of attempting to “slander China’s religious policies” and interfering in China’s internal affairs (Hearth, 2020).

Given this background, it is important to investigate whether religious freedom in India has indeed declined since the middle of 2014 or not, as alleged by the USCIRF. One way of studying this issue is by gauging public opinion on religious freedom in India over the years. Public opinion not only represents the collective

views, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular population, but also often provides valuable insights into societal attitudes and preferences. Studies have shown that public opinion have a “substantial” impact on public policy and that “salience enhances the impact of public opinion” (Burstein, 2003, 29). Put simply, when a certain issue is more visible and pertinent to the broader population, it has the potential to exert a more profound influence on decision-making and policy formation. If the increase in religious strife is indeed an important issue in the Indian context, it is natural that the topic should be at the top of mind of most people, significantly shape public discourse and potentially influence actions taken by institutions, governments, or organizations. The converse is that if a topic is consistently being ignored or not finding enough traction in the public opinion space as compared to other issues, it is likely that that the public does not deem it to be as important or as serious as other issues.

In this study, public opinion on religious freedom is studied based on data sourced from Google Trends (GT). GT is a valuable tool for examining search patterns and relative popularity of specific search terms across a long period of time. Studies have shown that GT data serve as a good indicator of public opinion on a wide array of issues. It has been found to be correlated with different economic indicators and has also been used in short-term forecasting (Choi and Varian 2012, p. 2). GT allows for comparisons between terms and normalizes search data to the time and location of a query. The scores provided by GT indicate the popularity of a search term relative to its past performance. A score of 100 signifies peak popularity during the measured time period, with values below 100 indicating lesser popularity (“FAQ about Google Trends data”, n.d.).

Internet search data has been used as proxies for public interest in various issues like environment (Funk and Rusowsky, 2014, p. 3101), biodiversity (Troumbis, 2017, p. 1495), breast cancer screening in Brazil (Vasconcellos-Silva et. al, 2017) and societal concerns on pesticides (Schaub et. al, 2020, p. 1). GT is also being used with increasing frequency in sociology, political science, economics and other social sciences. As noted by Lorenz et al. (2022, p. 203), Google Trends data “has 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.” Specifically in the area of religious studies, Yeung (2019, p. 253) has utilized GT data to measure Christian religiosity based on the assumption that religious people tend to search for certain terms more than non-religious people. In the area of human rights, Dancy and Farris (2023, p. 1) make use of GT data to analyze various factors impacting the discourse on human rights. Religious freedom and its various manifestation may, in this sense, be visualized as lying at the intersection of religion and human rights, and GT is therefore a useful tool to investigate its various aspects. In the present study, GT has therefore been used to evaluate public opinion in India on religious freedom and its various dimensions.

Methodology

This paper employs quantitative data analysis to investigate the validity of the claims made by the USCIRF regarding deteriorating religious freedom in India. The study examines and analyzes 9 specific keywords associated with religious freedom especially in an Indian context, selected from USCIRF annual reports from 2014 to 2023. During content analysis, the 10 annual reports were studied in detail, and all possible keywords associated with religious freedom were identified. In the next phase, a filtering criterion was applied and terms linked to anti-Semitism, xenophobia, apostasy, blasphemy laws, and anti-Ahmadi laws were excluded from the list. Even though such terms are legitimate indicators of religious freedom, they are not relevant in an Indian context. The frequency of the remaining keywords were tabulated year-wise. The mean of the frequencies across the ten-year period was calculated for every term, and only those keywords were selected whose average frequency was greater than or equal to 2 (Table 1).

Table 1: Keywords by Frequency

| Keywords | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | Mean |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| hate speech | 2 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 20 | 12 | 10 | 7 | 6 | 7.3 |
| communal violence | 12 | 14 | 13 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6.7 |
| forced conversion | 2 | 8 | 11 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 6.6 |
| religious intolerance | 5 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 8 | 0 | 4.7 |
| hate crime | 4 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 3.0 |
| religious tension | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2.9 |
| religious discrimination | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2.7 |
| religious violence | 4 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 2.5 |

In addition to these terms, the phrase “violence against Muslims” was also retained for further examination, although the average occurrence is 0.7 across 10 years (Table 2), which is less than the cut-off of 2. This is because Muslims make up almost 74% of all minorities in India (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2023), and therefore it is likely that in 3 out of 4 alleged instances of violence against minorities by Hindu groups, Muslims are ostensibly the victims.

Table 2: Violence against Muslims

| Keywords | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | Mean |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| violence against Muslims | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0.7 |

The final chosen keywords therefore include 9 terms: 'communal violence,' 'forced conversion,' 'hate crime,' 'hate speech,' 'religious discrimination,' 'religious intolerance,' 'religious tension,' 'religious violence,' and 'violence against Muslims' and cover various dimensions of religious freedom, including minority rights, violence, intolerance, and discrimination. Together, these keywords provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and aspects related to religious freedom, enabling an assessment of the state of religious freedom and highlighting areas of concern for minority communities. The study analyzes each of these terms and attempts to answer the following general questions:

- Has there been a significant deterioration in public perception of any of these parameters after mid-2014? If so, is the change meaningful? Is it statistically significant?
- Is there enough evidence to support the claims made by USCIRF reports that since 2014 there has been a sharp decline in religious freedom in India?

To answer these questions, the study utilizes 19 years of Google trends data, specifically focusing on the period before and after mid-2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. For each of these 9 keywords, monthly trends data for web searches from January 2004 to June 2023 has been collected. There are 234 data points for each of the terms, and each dataset is split into two groups. Although the actual date of swearing in of Prime Minister Modi is 26 May 2014, for the purpose of the study the data has been split at mid-year in June-July period of 2014 and not in May 2014. The first group therefore contains 126 data points and corresponds to the period January 2004 to June 2014, prior to the ascent of BJP to power. The remaining 108 data points from July 2014 to June 2023 correspond to the period after BJP came to power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

By validating the increase or decrease of the two samples, using an appropriate statistical test it becomes possible to state with reasonable confidence whether a specific search term has indeed experienced a significant rise or not. The Welch Two Sample t-test used in this study is a statistical hypothesis test used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two independent groups, assuming unequal variances and potentially unequal sample sizes. Welch's t-test is a statistical method used to compare the means of two independent samples, especially when the sample sizes and variances are unequal. It helps determine if the observed difference is likely to be a real effect or simply due to random variation. The null and alternative hypotheses for all the 9 keywords follow the same pattern. The null hypothesis (H_0) that the difference in means between the two samples is less than or equal to 0. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) is that the difference in the mean is greater than 0.

$$H_0: \mu_A - \mu_B \leq 0$$

$$H_1: \mu_A - \mu_B > 0$$

The output of Welch's t-test includes the following components:

- **t-value:** The t-value measures the difference between the means of the two samples in terms of standard error. It indicates the extent to which the means differ from each other.
- **Degrees of Freedom (df):** Welch's t-test calculates degrees of freedom using a formula that takes into account the sample sizes and variances of the two samples.
- **p-value:** The p-value represents the probability of obtaining the observed t-value or a more extreme t-value if the null hypothesis is true. A small p-value indicates that the difference between the means is statistically significant, while a large p-value suggests that the difference is likely due to chance.

Results

Graphs corresponding to the 9 datasets are given next. These graphs capture Google Trends search data for Web Searches for India from January 2004 to June 2023. Each graph visually represents the search interest index, with higher values indicating higher search interest and lower values indicating lower search interest. This data allows one to observe trends, fluctuations, and patterns in public interest for the specified terms over the years.

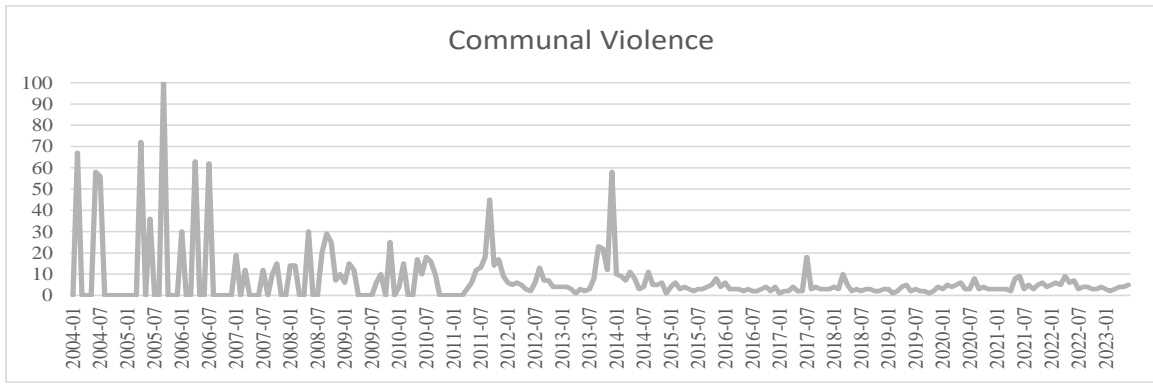


Figure 1

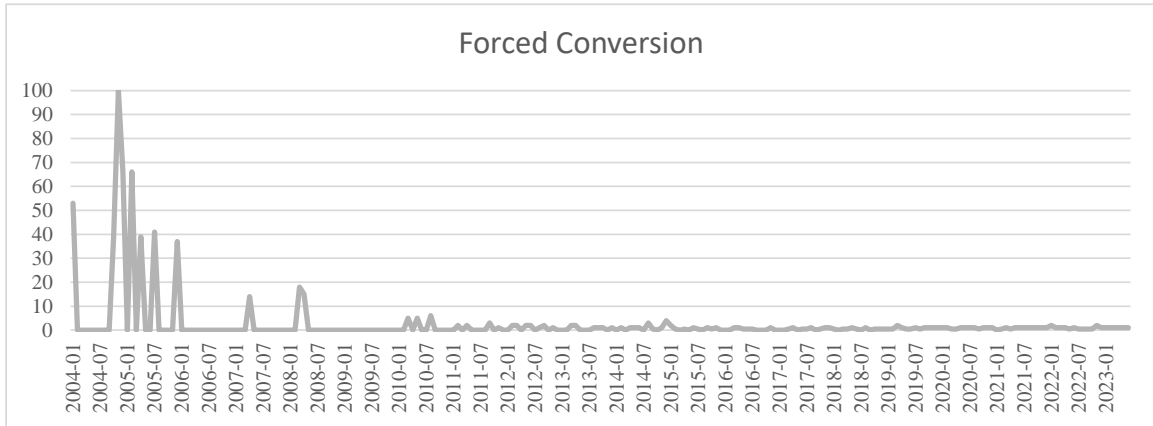


Figure 2

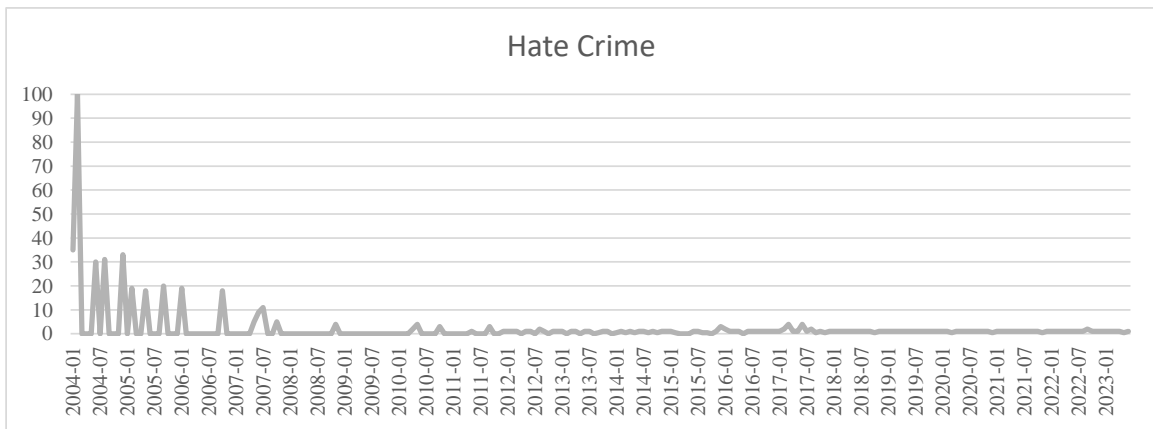


Figure 3

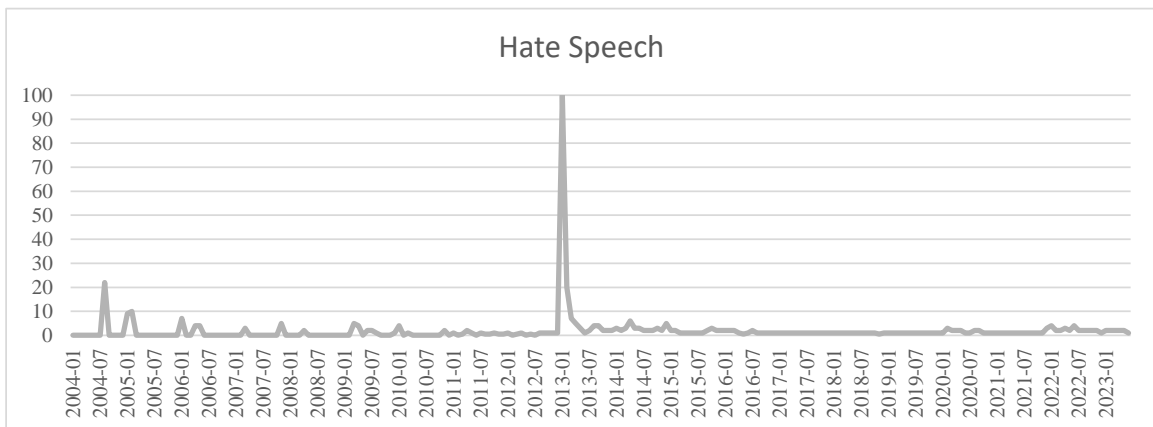


Figure 4

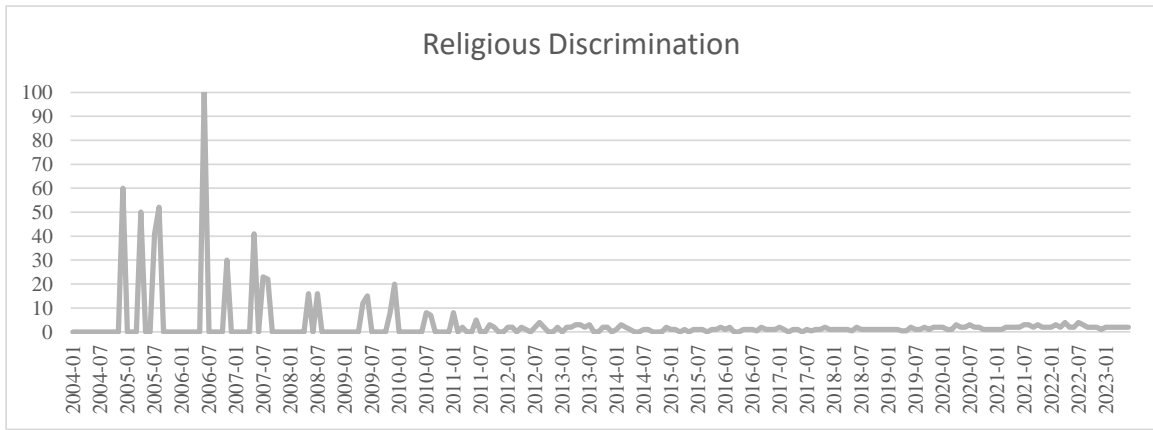


Figure 5

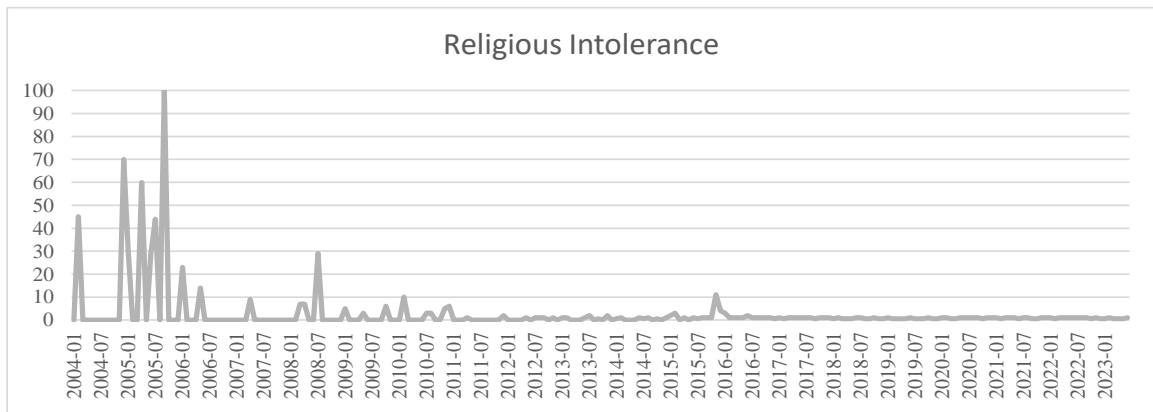


Figure 6

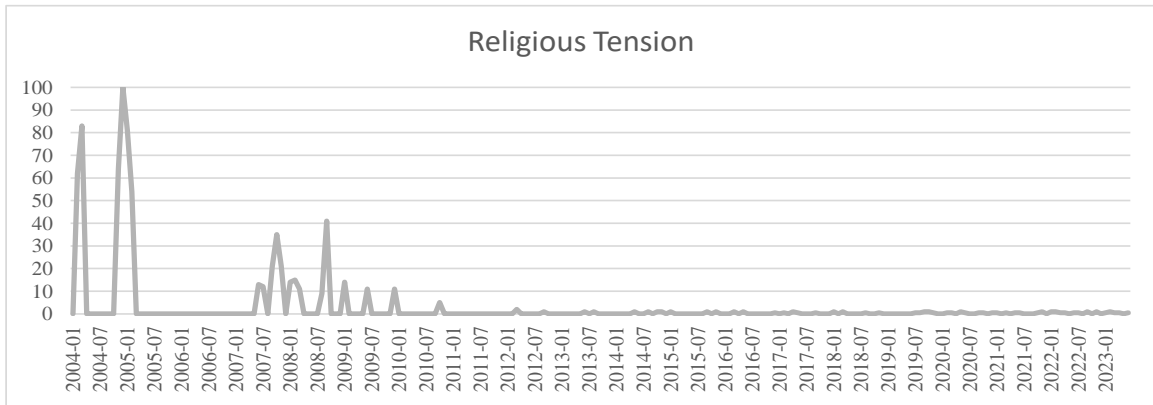


Figure 7

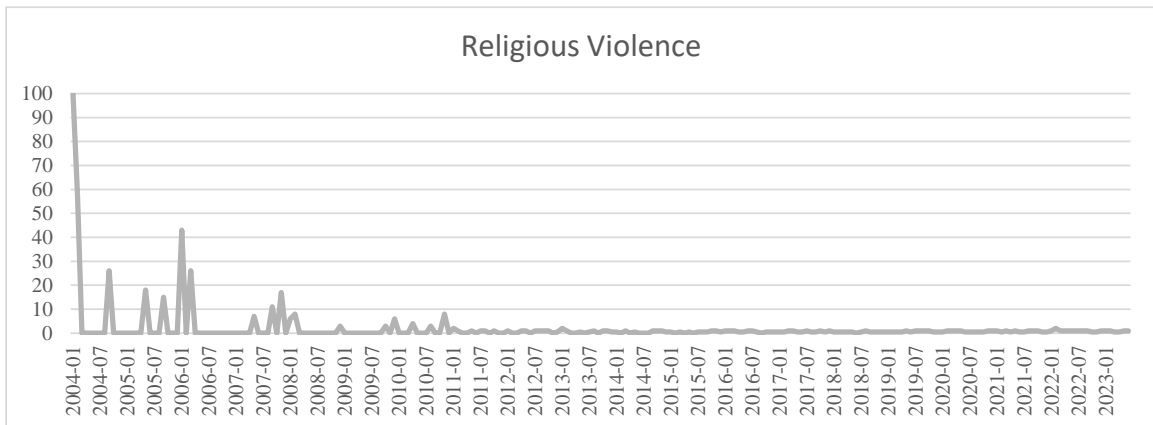


Figure 8

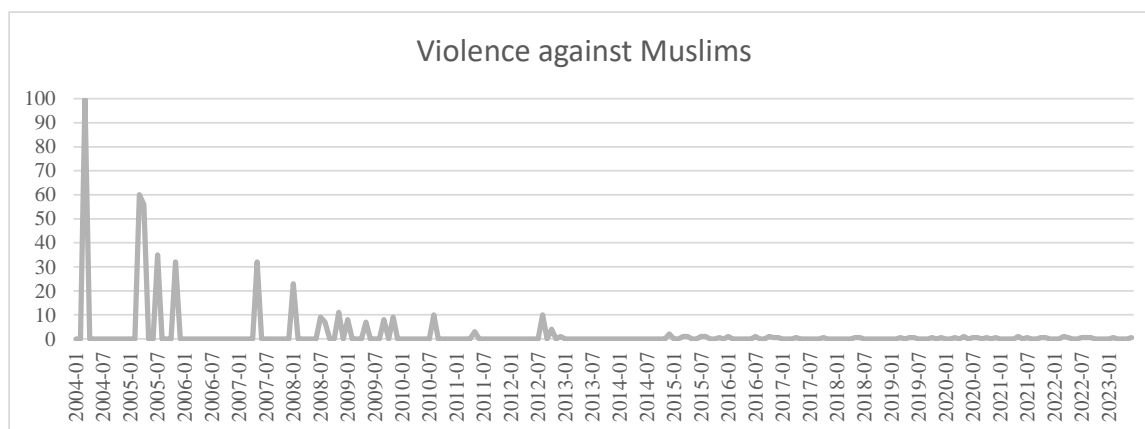


Figure 9

Except for the term “Hate Speech” where a spike is observed between January to June 2013 (Figure 4), all the other terms display a sharp decline in the period after mid-2014 (Figures 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). The next step is to examine whether the decline is statistically significant and to this end all the 9 datasets are subjected to Welch's t-test.

As noted earlier, this test helps us determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of the two samples. If the average searches after June 2014 for the term “Religious Violence” is significantly lower in a statistical sense than the average searches prior to June 2014, then it may be concluded that public perception of religious violence has witnessed a decline and people do not consider it to be a major issue, especially in comparison to other issues.

A tabulated representation of the data and the output of Welch's t-test is given next (Table 3):

Table 3: Output of Welch’s t-test for the 9 samples

| Sample name | t-value | df | p-value | Mean of x | Mean of y |
|--------------------------|---------|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Communal Violence | 4.1961 | 130.1 | 2.496e-05 | 10.484127 | 3.908257 |
| Forced Conversion | 2.7184 | 125.49 | 0.003744 | 4.2539683 | 0.7431193 |
| Hate Crime | 2.1457 | 125.78 | 0.01691 | 3.119048 | 1.018349 |
| Hate Speech | 0.88206 | 126.92 | 0.1897 | 2.194444 | 1.458716 |
| Religious Discrimination | 2.662 | 126.1 | 0.00439 | 4.634921 | 1.408257 |
| Religious Intolerance | 2.587 | 126.84 | 0.005405 | 4.1746032 | 0.9678899 |
| Religious Tension | 3.3814 | 125.16 | 0.0004813 | 5.4206349 | 0.3211009 |
| Religious Violence | 2.2997 | 125.23 | 0.01156 | 3.0634921 | 0.6972477 |
| Violence against Muslims | 2.7996 | 125.25 | 0.002964 | 3.3730159 | 0.2293578 |

The p-value was found to be below 0.05 (5% significance level) for 8 out of the 9 terms studied, which include 'communal violence,' 'forced conversion,' 'hate crime,' 'religious discrimination,' 'religious intolerance,' 'religious tension,' 'religious violence,' and 'violence against Muslims.' This result leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis (Table 4). In practical terms, this suggests a substantial and statistically significant decline in negative public perception regarding religious freedom since June 2014.

Table 4: Null Hypothesis Rejection

| Dimension | Null Hypothesis | % Decrease |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Communal Violence | Rejected | 63% |
| Forced Conversion | Rejected | 83% |
| Hate Crime | Rejected | 67% |
| Religious Discrimination | Rejected | 70% |
| Religious Intolerance | Rejected | 77% |
| Religious Tension | Rejected | 94% |
| Religious Violence | Rejected | 77% |
| Violence against Muslims | Rejected | 93% |
| Average | | 78% |
| Hate Speech | Not Rejected | |

However, when considering the term 'hate speech,' the p-value exceeded the defined threshold of 0.05. As a result, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for this term (Table 4). This suggests that hate speech is a potential future area of study wherein a more in-depth exploration of its various dimensions may be analyzed to garner better insights.

The mean reduction in search volumes across the 8 other specified terms is an impressive 78%. Particularly notable are the substantial declines in searches related to "religious tension" and "violence against Muslims," both exceeding 90%. This trend contradicts the prevailing narrative of increased violence against minority groups, particularly Muslims, since the middle of 2014. Notably, even the term with the smallest reduction, "communal violence," demonstrates a decline of over 63%.

Conclusion

The results show a consistent and substantial decline in public interest in 8 out of 9 terms associated with religious intolerance and violence against minorities. This paper therefore demonstrates how the USCIRF's consistent portrayal of a deteriorating religious freedom landscape in India is substantially different from public opinion on religious freedom estimated using Google Trends data. If public opinion is regarded as a reflective mirror of societal sentiments, the results suggest a notable decline in public concern pertaining to religious tension, faith-based discrimination and intolerance. Of course, sporadic religious conflicts can and do occur in India. However, that is the exception rather than the norm, and the prevailing public focus appears to be more future-oriented and geared towards the ideals of progress and development.

Consequently, the narrative perpetuated by the USCIRF, which depicts an India marked by religious intolerance stemming from a Hindu-majority population targeting Muslims and Christians, is false and needs to be rejected.

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