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IIM INDORE

The Politics of Historical Personalities: Textual Analysis of Speeches by the Indian Prime Minister

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The politics of historical personalities: Textual analysis of speeches by the Indian Prime Minister[1]

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Abstract

The paper brings light to the politics of historical personalities in the Indian political discourse by an analysis of 53 speeches delivered by the Indian Prime Minister (PM), Narendra Modi, between October 2014 and February 2019 as part of a new communication intervention ('Mann ki Baat' (MkB)). We used the principle of 'balance' as a baseline to investigate whether the speeches reflected an imbalance in the salience given to historical personalities. A preliminary analysis reveals the following: We find higher salience of historical personalities that are ideological sympathists of the PM's party as compared to those that are ideological opponents of the party. Interestingly, the highest salience was received by the category of ideological 'targets', which comprises personalities that are not connected to the PM's party but with whom alignment was sought to be projected. The apparent strategy for aligning targets was by drawing connections between the personalities and the policies of the government. Further, we find that aggregate personality mentions rose over time and the increase was driven by mentions to ideological sympathists. These preliminary findings on the ideological leanings of the speeches are interesting as MkB had been repeatedly projected as serving an 'apolitical' purpose. Thereby the study brings light to the subtle innovations in communication that politicians can employ for furthering ideological objectives.

Keywords: political communication, politics, ideology, politics of public policy, Mann ki Baat, India

Word count: 5,173 words

Introduction

The substantive power that words bring to political communication has been extensively analysed. Earlier studies have looked at how the politician's choice of words such as the use of pronouns (Pennycook, 1994), verbs (Castella, McGarty & Musgrove, 2009) and nouns (Galasinki & Skowronek, 2001) has an influence on the message that is communicated. For instance, Pennycook (1994) presents an account of how pronouns such as 'we' or 'you' can implicitly convey who is being represented or not represented within a political speech. Castella, McGarty and Musgrove (2009), on the other hand, bring light to how the creative deployment of verbs and nouns can enjoin emotions of fear. Galasinki and Skowronek (2001) study how political figures differ in their choice of proper nouns, in order to project their favoured cultural reality.

Within this discourse on words used in political communication, there is a vibrant conversation on how names function as political artefacts. Names, as described by Bourdieu (1991), are infused with 'symbolic capital', which is what makes them an attractive resource for leverage in the political sphere. The politics of names is observed to take centre-stage when there are proposals directed at changing names of public streets, cities or provinces. Two studies come to light in this regard. The first is the study by Rose-Redwood (2008), which investigated the shift from numbered streets to street names in New York city as emerging from a felt need for preserving the city's cultural 'memory'. Another study by Faraco and Murphy (1997) examined numerous street name changes in Spain during the twentieth century and highlighted that the changes were driven by the goals and ideologies of the political regime in power.

A less higlighted but quotidian exercise of names by politicians is in their political speeches. The deployment of names of people in political speeches reflect the 'cultural reality' (Galansinki & Showronek, 2001) that politicians intend to project and through this the names also serve as vehicles for transmitting political ideology. Historical personalities projected by politicians represent the signposts of the 'heroic national history' (Bourdieu 1991) and politicians are therefore selective in their choice of 'heroes'. Galasinki and Skowronek (2001) illustrate the differing projection of historical personalities in an empirical study that analyses the speeches delivered by three Polish political figures. They find that the ideology of the political figure influences not only which historical personality is cited in the speech but also what contributions made by the personality are highlighted.

To our knowledge, Galasinki and Skowronek (2001) is the only study that examined how names of historical personalities are deployed in political speeches. The insights from the study draw out the contrasting use of names in the public addresses of politicians. However, we feel that the data used for the analysis was limited as the number of speeches analysed for each political figure ranged between only one and three. The limited evidence makes it difficult to arrive at substantive inferences about the proclivity of politicians to particular historical personalities as mentions in one speech may be influenced by contextual factors. Further there could be temporal variation in the salience of historical personalities, which is not captured in an analysis limited to a few speeches.

In this study, we bring evidence from a large set of speeches delivered over a period of four and a half years in order to examine the relationship between a politician's ideology and the historical personalities that finds mention in his/ her speeches. The main question

that we investigate is: Does the ideology of a historical personality matter for his/ her salience in a politician's speech? The data for examining this question comes from a unique communication intervention ('Mann ki Baat'[4] (MkB)) introduced by the Prime Minister (PM) of India between October 2014 and February 2019 through which he delivered 53 speeches. We analysed the salience of historical personalities in the speeches by categorising the personalities into four ideological buckets. The preliminary findings are summarised below.

The evidence suggests that ideological alignment did influence the salience of historical personalities. We found that ideological sympathists received higher salience than ideological opponents. Interestingly, the highest salience was received by the category of ideological 'targets', which constitutes personalities that are not connected to the PM's party but with whom alignment was sought to be projected. Further, we find that aggregate personality mentions rose over time and the increase was driven by ideological sympathists. These findings on the ideological leanings of the speeches are interesting, as MkB had been repeatedly projected by the PM as serving a 'non-political' purpose. Thereby the study brings light to the subtle innovations in communication that politicians can employ for furthering ideological objectives.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In section two we describe the context within which MkB speeches were delivered. Section three illustrates trends in aggregate personality mentions across four and a half years and reports descriptive data disaggregated across ideological categories. Section four presents evidence from a novel

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[4] A close English translation of 'Mann ki Baat' is 'Speaking from the heart'.

quasi-experiment that examines the impact of ideology on personality salience. Finally, the last section discusses the implications emerging from the study.

The context

MkB was a communication programme initiated by the PM four months after taking office in 2014. It is important to recognise the circumstances surrounding which the programme came to life. The national elections in 2014 marked a radical shift in the Indian polity. First the election results marked the first instance after 25 years when a single party garnered a majority in the national legislature. Second it also marked the first occasion when the PM's party i.e. the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority in a national election. Prior to this, the BJP had formed the national government for a full five year term on only occasion (between 1999 and 2004), which was a coalition government formed out of over 20 parties. The prospect of leading a majority government in 2014 and with a party ideologue at the helm presented an opening for the BJP to pursue its ideological projects, which had earlier been constricted by coalition partners.

What ideological projects mean in the Indian context needs to be clarified as party ideology has had a fairly ambiguous history in India. Scholars (Yadav & Palshikar, 2003; Suri, 2013; Chhibber & Verma, 2018) have observed that parties in India do not differ along the conventional ideological axes as parties in Western Europe or the US. This has led some scholars (Chandra, 2004) to conclude that Indian parties are mostly patronage driven while others (Chhibber & Verma, 2018) have set out to explore some unexamined differentiation between parties.

However, one area where the difference between Indian parties (at least the two major parties Congress and BJP) is particularly evident is in their divergent narratives on Indian history. So far this ideological difference has found reflection in the politics of many Indian states, particularly those where both the BJP and Congress have a history of leading majority governments. For instance, it has been observed that changes in power between the two parties is frequently accompanied by efforts from new governments to prescribe changes to the contents of school history text books in order to correct the historical 'inaccuracies' (Pednekar, 2017; Chowdhury, 2018). Many such changes pertain to the way historical personalities have been projected in the text books. In addition, state governments also differ in the choice of historical personalities that they seek to honour on birth and death anniversaries, commemorate by sponsoring statues or dedicate government programmes. These efforts underline the centrality of historical personalities in the ideological politics of the two national parties but surprisingly there has not been any empirical study on the subject. We endeavour to partially bridge this gap by presenting a systematic analysis of historical personalities projected in the speeches delivered by the Indian PM.

Coming to the specific intervention of MkB, the programme, as projected by the PM, was a medium through which he wished to connect with citizens[5]. MkB was implemented through a monthly telecast of the PM's speeches on radio, television and the internet. During the first three months, speeches were scheduled in the first half of the month but

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[5] The objective of the programme was communicated by the PM in the first speech of MkB

after January 2015 the broadcast schedule was shifted to the end of the month. Throughout this period the programme was telecasted on Sunday mornings at 11 am.[6]

An interesting facet of MkB was that the programme had been projected as an 'apolitical' intervention. This position was highlighted by the PM in the first episode itself, in which he communicated that MkB was meant to share his "heartfelt thoughts with one and all". A similar stance found reflection in the sixth speech in which he assured listeners that his intention to connect with people was borne out of a patriotic feeling. In a later speech, he highlighted his efforts to ensure that MkB does not "become a programme of political one-upmanship, allegations and counter allegations". Finally in the 50th episode telecasted in November 2018 he recalled that when he commenced MkB he had "firmly decided that it would carry nothing political, or any praise for the Government, nor Modi for that matter anywhere." To demonstrate that he had met this objective, he cited the findings of a lexical study of MkB speeches that reported that the programme had "remained apolitical".

This apolitical projection of MkB found resonance with India's election agency and the media. Over the five years, the Election Commission of India (ECI) repeatedly upheld the government's position that MkB was apolitical (*India Today,* 2015). Media articles (Tewari 2018, *Swarajya* 2018) further attested that MkB was not 'overtly political'. This apolitical persona of MkB makes the examination of the speeches more interesting as if we find an ideological imbalance in the speeches, it may bring light to a subtle communication strategy employed by the PM.

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[6] The choice of Sunday mornings to telecast the programme is interesting as it follows the legacy of earlier blockbuster tele serials such as Ramayana (1987), Mahabharat (1988) and Satyameva Jayate (2012) that were also telecasted on Sunday mornings.

Textual analysis method

We now describe the textual analysis method. We analysed 53 MkB speeches to examine the salience of historical personality mentions and also the context within which the mention was made. Salience of personalities was compared using the principle of balance as a baseline, which presumes that in an unbiased scenario there would be no difference in the salience given to personalities. This principle has been applied earlier to investigate partisan biases reflected in media reporting of political campaigns (Lowry and Shidler, 1995; D'Alessio & Allen, 2000).

The coverage of personalities was limited to personalities that lived during the pre-independence period (late 19th century up to 1947) and after independence (1947 to today). The reason for limiting the analysis to this subset was because both the Congress party and the BJP affiliate RSS trace their origins to the pre-independence period. This made it easier to interpret ideological alignment for personalities that were contemporaneous with these organisations as compared to those that came from an earlier generation.

The analysis began with keyword searches of names of historical personalities but we felt that enumerating word frequencies alone would give a limited sense of the space that was devoted to each historical personality. So we expanded the conception of salience to reflect the number of sentences in a single speech where a historical personality found mention either directly (by name) or indirectly (through pronouns). Consequently, salience

of a historical personality in a speech was measured[7] as the number of sentences in an MkB speech that carried reference to the personality.

Thereafter we used this measure of salience to descriptively compare mentions across historical personalities. In order to make meaningful comparisons, we categorised personalities into four ideological categories: (a) ideological sympathists (b) ideological opponents (c) ideological targets and (d) others. We argue that the creation of ideological categories would facilitate cross-category comparisons and thereby give an insight on the ideological disposition of the speeches. However, carrying out a categorisation exercise is challenging as it becomes important to project a clear differentiation between categories so that we follow a consistent basis for placement of personalities. Therefore, we now explicate how we defined each category.

The category of ideological sympathists constitutes the historical personalities that had an ideological alignment with either the PM's political party (BJP), its antecedent party (Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS)) or its cultural affiliates (such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)). This alignment was manifested either in direct terms (such as organisational membership) or by indirect means (such as when the party projects the person's candidature for a political position). Ideological opponents, on the other hand, cover personalities that had, on at least one occasion, demonstrated a scathing ideological critique of the BJP, BJS or its cultural affiliates. Here we consider only critiques that manifested as tangible action such as when a personality instituted a ban on the RSS or he/ she dismissed BJP ruled state governments by exercising India's emergency laws.

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[7] We validated this measure of salience by correlating with word frequency counts.

The third category of ideological targets are personalities that are not conveniently amenable to categorisation as ideological sympathists as they were neither directly nor indirectly aligned with the BJP or its cultural affiliates. However, in this case, there is evidence to suggest that the PM has been making efforts to project ideological alignment with these personalities. Such evidence includes launching of government schemes and programmes in their name or sponsoring of statues to honour their contributions. The fourth category of 'others' collates all personalities that we find difficult to categorise under any of the earlier mentioned categories.

Further to the categorisation we carry out three types of descriptive analysis. First we compare the cumulative salience given to the four categories of personalities. Second we investigate the context within which personalities are mentioned. Third we examine for temporal variation in the salience of personality categories over a period of four years.

The descriptive analysis can report patterns in the data but it is not sufficient to make strong claims for a connection between ideology and personality salience. In order to strengthen the claim we also present evidence from a quasi-experiment implemented using a comparative cases method. Having outlined the method for textual analysis we will now turn to the findings.

Findings

We first report aggregate data for personality mentions in MkB. This is intended to give a general sense of the importance given to historical personalities in the speeches. Figure 1 shows the percentage space given to historical personalities in every monthly speech:

- Figure 1 –

The figure shows wide variation across speeches. Some speeches received no mention, while others showed high mention (as high as 45% in September 2018). The figure also reveals the occasions during which mentions were made. In most cases we found that the PM highlighted a historical personality to commemorate his/ her birth or death anniversary. These anniversary mentions accounted, in all, for as high as 70 per cent of total mentions. The balance 30 per cent of the mentions usually connect a historical personality with a government programme or policy. We will elaborate on the specifics of how personalities were related to government programmes in a later section.

However, given that birth and death anniversary accounted for a bulk of mentions, we expected that mentions would be fairly systematic and cyclical. There was only one major addition (former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee passed away in 2018) to the list of anniversaries over the four years. So we anticipated that there would not be much variation in mentions on a year-to-year basis. However, the data tells a different story as shown in Figure 2.

- Figure 2 -

We find a rise in mentions, particularly conspicuous in the last two years. While historical personalities figured in only 6.7%[8] sentences of MkB in the first year and dropped to 5.1% in the second year, it rose steeply thereafter to 8.7% in 2016-17 and was even higher at about 14% in 2017-18. The trend reveals an accretion in the historical personality content of MkB over time.

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[8] The first year historical personality mentions were driven by the first speech in which personality mentions constituted 28% of the speech.

We now turn to which personalities were mentioned and who accounted for a large proportion of the increase in mentions. Figure 3 presents the individual personality data on historical personality mentions grouped into the four categories.

- Figure 3 –

We find variation in mentions across the categories. In aggregate terms, the mentions to ideological sympathists forms only the third highest category although it is conspicuously higher than mentions to ideological opponents. The category of ideological opponent receives lowest mention among all four categories. Further illuminating is the observation that ideological targets were given the highest salience.

We now turn to a disaggregation of mentions based on the occasions when they were made such as whether they were birth/ death anniversary mentions or non-anniversary mentions. We find that for the two categories of sympathists and opponents a bulk of mentions (83%) came on the occasion of birth/ death anniversary. However, anniversary mentions constitute a lower proportion (70%) for targets and the rest 30 percent mentions came on non-anniversary occasions. As non-anniversary mentions constitute a large proportion of the most salient category of targets we dug deeper to investigate the nature of these mentions. We found that a substantive number of non-anniversary mentions were efforts to draw connections between targets and government programmes. Examples of these links are mention of Mahatma Gandhi in the context of the government's cleanliness programmes and its programme to promote Khadi, reference to Vallabhai Patel in consonance with the efforts to strengthen national unity and B.R. Ambedkar when talking about protection of constitutional rights and safeguarding the interests of the labour class. We interpret that a large number of programme-related

mentions for target personalities are indicative of efforts to project ideological alignment using the language of governmental policy.

Lastly we explored the temporal trends in the salience of the four categories. Examining this is pertinent as we had earlier observed that the salience of historical personality mentions has risen over four years. Figure 4 illustrates the trend.

- Figure 4 –

The figure shows that mentions of the categories of targets and ideological opponents is fairly consistent. This suggests that opponents have received systematically low mentions throughout the four years. Interestingly, there appears to be a steady movement across the two categories of others and sympathists. The proportion of sympathists in the total mentions has risen steeply from only 9% in the first year to 26% in the four year. Corresponding to this trend was a decline in others from a high of 44% in the first year to 23% in the four year. This apparent shift of salience from others to sympathists suggests a steady accretion in the ideological content of the programme, as sympathists can be more directly related with the party ideology as compared to others.

One illustration of the ideological shift reflected in the speeches can be observed in the variation in mentions to a core BJP/ RSS ideologue, V.D. Savarkar. We find that, during the first two years, Savarkar did not receive any mention, neither for his birth anniversary (28th May) nor his death anniversary (26th February). However, this changed from the year 2017 as Savakar found elaborate mention in the speeches for his birth anniversary in May 2017 as well as May 2018. This example illustrates the descriptive finding that the ideological content of MkB seems to have grown over the four years.

The temporal trends illustrated so far show general patterns in the data but such descriptive analysis can be challenged with arguments centred on the concern of alternate explanation. One may, for instance, observe that the two ideological opponents, Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru share the same birth month of November, which usually coincides with the period when the country's pan-India festival of Deepavali/ Diwali is celebrated. As the PM gives prominent space to cultural themes in MkB it may be argued that the lesser space given to opponents may be because the PM wishes to find space for the cultural mention. So in order to claim a clear connection between ideology and personality salience we need to control for other influences.

We were fortunate that the data presented an opportunity for exercising the comparative case-study method. We describe below how the method was applicable and thereafter present the findings.

Comparative case-study

The comparative case-study or the most similar method, as explained by Seawright and Gerring (2008), entails a comparison of two or more cases that are similar on all measured variables except the independent variable of interest. The premise of this method is that given 'similar' cases, it may be claimed that the observed variation in the dependent variable is caused by the difference in the independent variable.

We argue that this method can be used to establish that the difference in personality mentions in MkB is tied to the ideology of the personality. In order to apply the comparative case-study method we need to locate at least two cases that differ only in terms of the independent variable of personality ideology. This will enable a claim that an

observed change in the dependent variable is due to personality ideology alone and not due to an alternate explanation.

We found two archetypal cases for comparison, where the ideology of the personalities were distinguishable while other factors remained the same as both personalities shared their birth/ death anniversary in the same month. This empirical structure facilitates the argument that any difference in mentions within MkB is only due to ideology.

The specific cases are the birth anniversary (28th May) of the ideological sympathist, V.D. Savarkar, and the death anniversary (27th May) of the ideological opponent, Jawaharlal Nehru, both with anniversaries in May. The two personalities, Savarkar and Nehru, are widely acknowledged in the literature (Varshney 1993) to be differentiated in ideological terms. There is, therefore, a clear difference across the two cases with regard to the independent variable.

We now turn to examine difference in the dependent variable on mentions in MkB. The table below compares mentions across all four years for the month of May.

- Table 1 –

We see a visible difference in mentions over the last two years (2017 and 2018). For the years prior to this we had earlier highlighted that the speeches did not mention Savarkar. However, the ramp up of ideological content since then has seen high prominence given to Savarkar.

The disparity in treatment to the two personalities can also be seen in the qualitative content of the mentions. To illustrate this the table reproduces below the MkB speech excerpts from May 2017 and May 2018.

- Table 2 -

We find that both the quantitative as well as qualitative evidence show difference with regard to the dependent variable. Given that all other factors were rendered constant in light of the shared anniversary month, we argue that there is strong evidence to connect the personality's ideology with mentions in MkB.

Conclusion

The paper contributes to the literature on political communication by bringing light to the role that names of historical personalities play in political speeches. We surmised that politicians cite historical personalities in order to achieve ideological objectives. As a result we expected that party ideology influences the type of personality that is projected and how he/ she is projected. To test the hypothesis we analysed data from 53 speeches delivered by the PM of India between October 2014 and November 2018 under a unique communication programme (MkB).

The preliminary findings support the expectation. The descriptive analysis shows that ideological sympathists received higher salience than ideological opponents. The highest salience was received by the category of ideological 'targets', and the speeches projected ideological alignment by drawing connections between the personalities and the government's policies. Further, we find that aggregate personality mentions rose over time and the increase was driven by mentions to ideological sympathists. In addition to the descriptive analysis, the connection between ideology and personality salience was examined using a quasi-experiment and the findings lent support to the descriptive results.

These findings, however, come with a qualification. We may only imply from the analysis that there is a connection between the ideological standing of a personality and his/ her salience in the speeches. However, the evidence is not sufficient to infer whether or not the PM intentionally gave more salience to one personality over another and even if he did whether this selective emphasis was motivated by ideological considerations. The best we can possibly say with the available evidence is that the MkB speeches, whether or not intended, reflected an imbalance in the projection of historical personalities based on ideological orientation. On the other hand, the evidence arms us to argue that MkB did reflect ideological leanings and by virtue of this it did not 'perform' the 'apolitical' role that it was projected to play.

We believe one limitation of the study is that its scope was restricted to analysing speeches of the same politician over time. A more wholesome examination of historical personality mentions in political speeches could use multiple speeches from ideologically diverse politicians in order to reveal contrasts in historical projections. This could be one potential prospect for future research.

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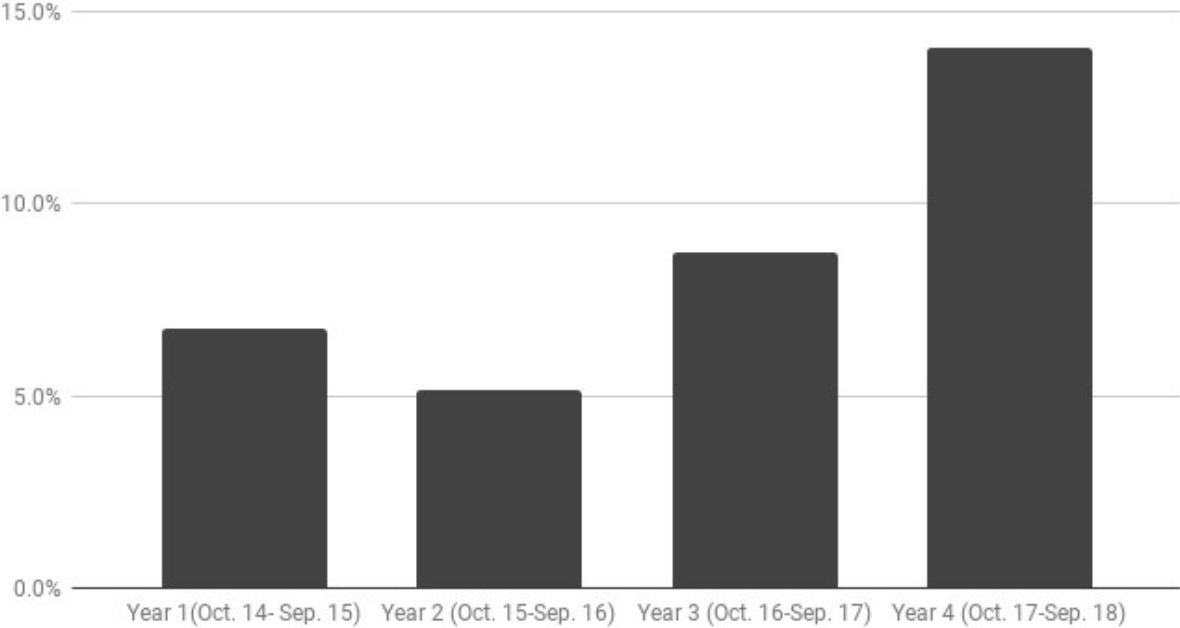
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Figures

Figure 1: Trends in aggregate historical personality mentions
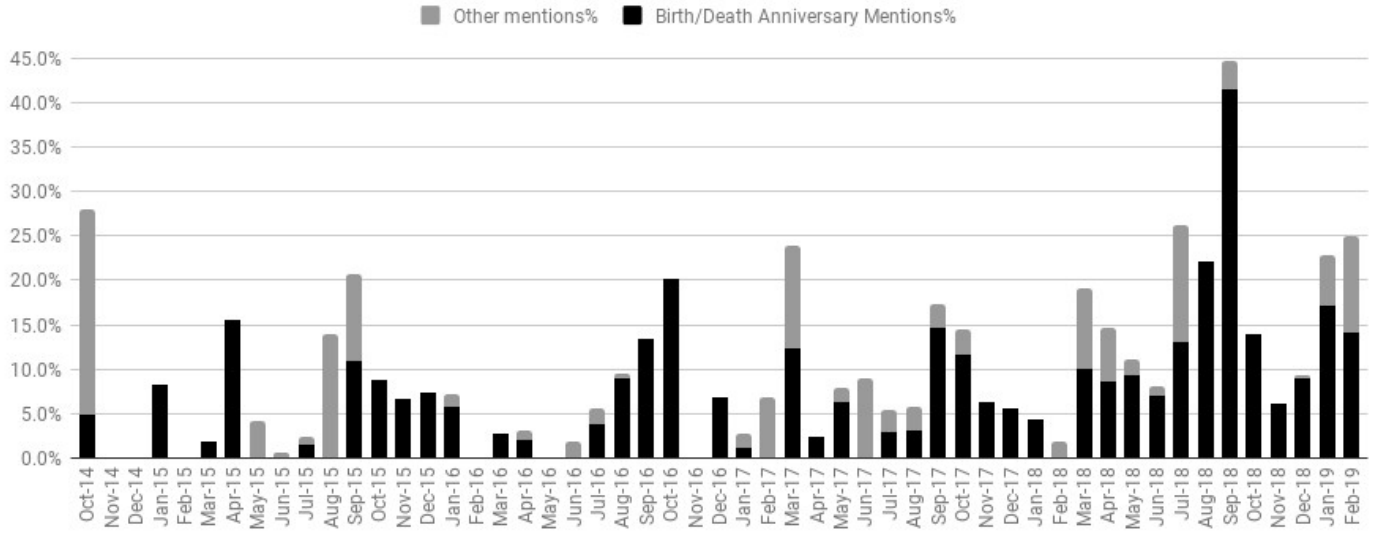
Figure 2: Growth in historical personality mentions over the four years

Figure 3: Break-up of mentions across ideological categories
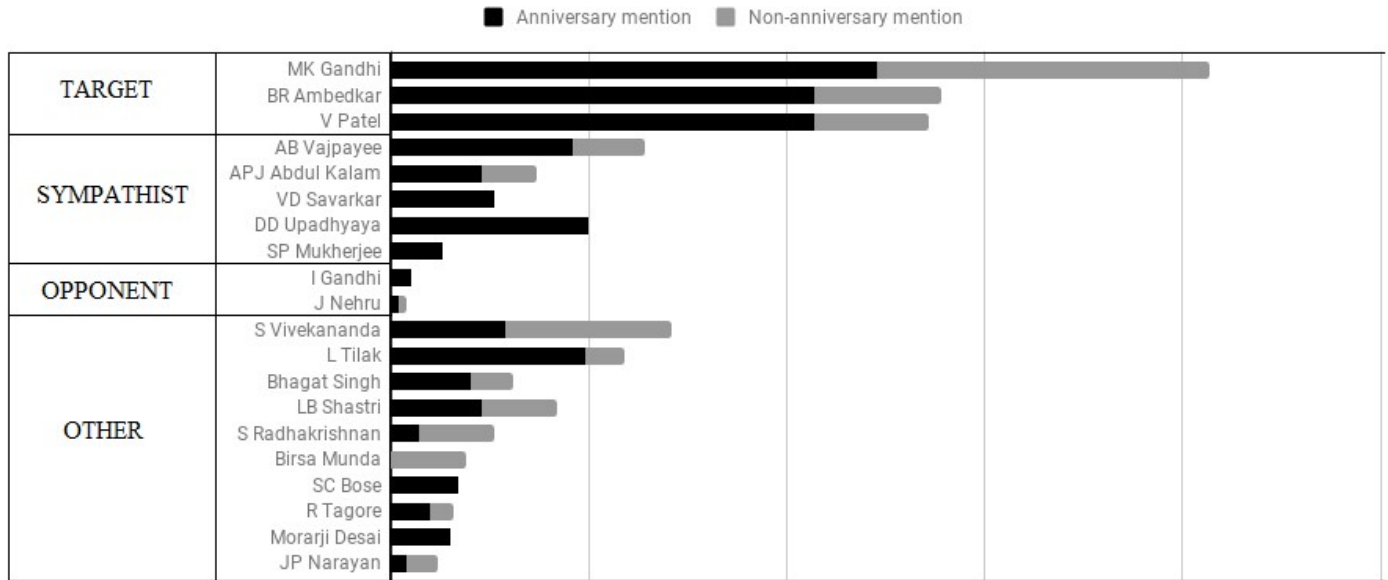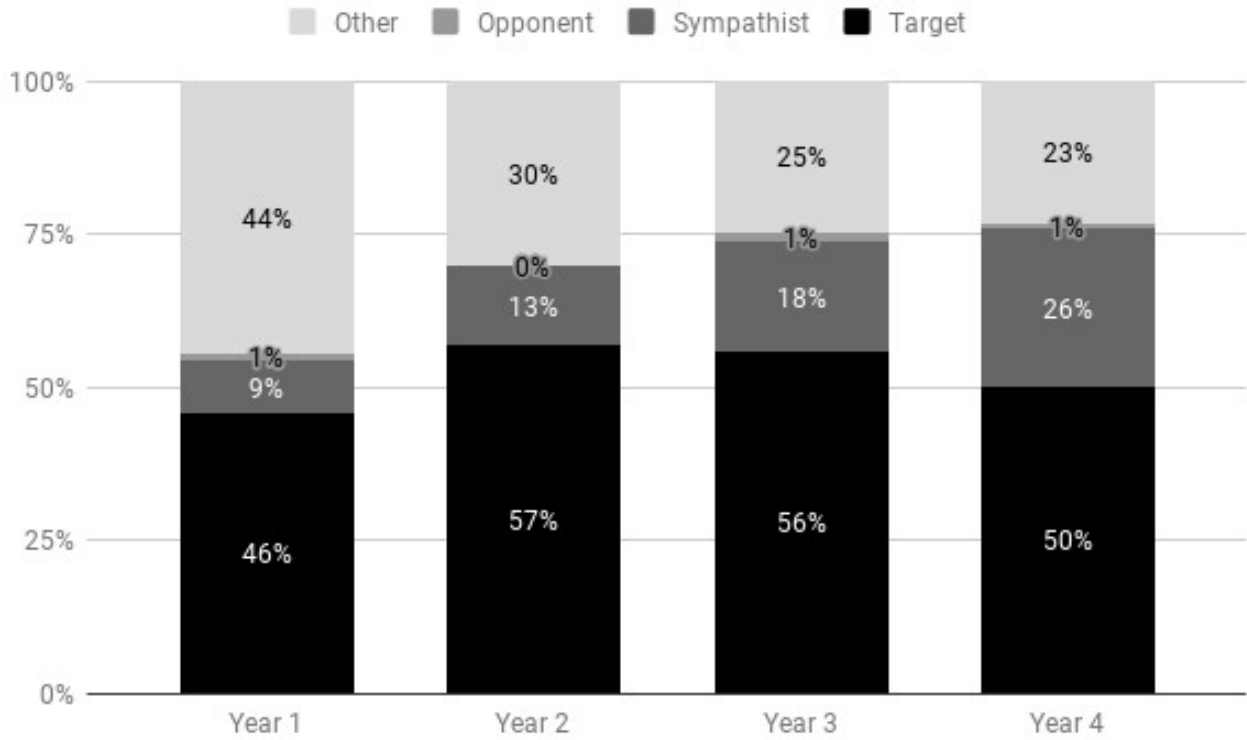
Figure 4: Temporal trend for mentions in various categories

Tables

Table 1: Comparison of mentions to V.D. Savarkar and Jawaharlal Nehru in MkB

Personality	May 2015	May 2016	May 2017	May 2018
V.D. Savarkar	0	0	13	13
Jawaharlal Nehru	0	0	0	2

Table 2: MkB speech excerpts mentioning Nehru and Savarkar in May 2017 and May 2018

Month/ year	Jawaharlal Nehru	V. D. Savarkar
May 2017	No mention	"Many years ago, I visited Andaman & Nicobar Islands. I went to see the Cellular Jail there. Today is the birth anniversary of Veer Savarkarji. Veer Savarkarji had written a book "Majhi Jannmathep" while in incarceration. He used to write poems on the walls of his prison cell. He was confined to a very small cell. These seekers freedom must have gone through immense torture. I was inspired to visit the Cellular Jail only after reading Savarkarji's book "Maazi Janmthep". A light and sound show is also shown there which is very inspiring. There was hardly any state in India youths from which were not exiled to the dark waters of Andamans and were forced to spend their youth in this Cellular Jail during the freedom movement. included people of every language, every state and every generation had faced tortures during this struggle Today is the birth anniversary of Veer Savarkarjee. I would definitely want to tell our younger generation that to even perceive what kind of torture and trouble these freedom fighters had suffered to achieve freedom for us one must visit this Cellular Jail. Once we go there We come to know as to why this was called Kaalaa Paani or the dark waters If you get a chance, please pay a visit to this place which is actually a pilgrimage of our freedom struggle."
May 2018	"My dear countrymen, today is the 27thof May, the death anniversary of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru ji. I render my pranam to Pandit ji.	"Memories of this month are also linked with Veer Savarkar. This was the very month, the month of May 1857, when Indians had displayed their strength against the British. In many parts of the country, our youth and farmers demonstrated their bravery whilst standing up against the injustice. It is indeed sad that we kept on calling the events of 1857 only as a rebellion or a soldiers' mutiny for a very long time. In fact, May 1857 was not only evaluated as a minor historical incident but was also an attempt to dent our self-respect. It was Veer Savarkar who boldly expostulated by writing that whatever happened in 1857 was not a revolt but was indeed the First War of Independence. Savarkaralong with his band of brave hearts celebrated the 50ᵗʰanniversary of the First War of Independence with great fanfare at India house in London. It is

		also an amazing coincidence that the month which witnessed the First Struggle for Independence was the month in which Veer Savarkar ji was born. Savarkar ji's personality was full of special qualities; he was a worshipper of both weapons or shashtra and Knowledge or shaashtras. Generally Veer Savarkar is renowned for his bravery and his struggle against the British Raj. But besides these sterling qualities, he was also a striking poet and a social reformer who always emphasized on goodwill and unity. A wonderful account about Savarkarji has been given by our dear honorable Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji. Atal ji had said – Savarkar means brilliance, Savarkar means sacrifice, Savarkar means penance, Savarkar means substance, Savarkar means logic, Savarkar means youth, Savarkar means an arrow, and Savarkar means a Sword! Behold! What an accurate depiction of Savarkar by Atal ji! Savarkar marched alongwith both poetry and revolution. Besides being a sensitive poet, he was also a courageous revolutionary."