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## Issue Brief

# Hindu Extremism Needs to be Reined in

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The dawn of 2016 has brought with it a hope of peace for the South Asian region. Despite some setbacks, India-Pakistan relations once again seem to be on the right track. The Pathankot incident no doubt was unfortunate and had the potential to derail the peace process that began between India and Pakistan after a gap of seven years. The attack on a University in Charsadda is another example where Indian involvement was widely speculated in the media, though the government sources remained reticent. Both sides have however wisely decided that the Pathankot, as well as the Charsadda incidents will not be allowed to become another Mumbai or another pretext to suspend the dialogue. However, besides showing a commitment to move forward with the dialogue process, it is also important that a conducive environment is created to discuss all issues of mutual concern in a result-oriented manner.

Since Modi enjoyed a great deal of support from 'Hindutva' groups throughout his election campaign, therefore, with his rise to power, Hindu hardliners of Sangh Parivar<sup>1</sup> feel that they now have a free hand to unleash a reign of terror across India. Religious minorities became the prime victim of this growing extremism. All sorts of crimes, including arson and rape, were committed against the Christian community and churches were set on fire. Even the Sikh community was not spared and several incidents of desecration of their holy book took place in 2015. Similarly, the Muslim community which always had a sensitive relationship with the Hindu majority saw worst forms of violence. A particular incident where a fifty-year old Muslim man was beaten to death by a mob on a suspicion that he had consumed and stored cow meat in his house is one such example. Besides indulging in such violent acts, Hindu groups also embarked upon a "*Ghar Wapsi*" programme where members of religious minorities are lured to convert to Hinduism with a promise of better education, health facilities and jobs.

Even India's relations with Pakistan could not escape this growing intolerance of the 'Hindutva' groups. Any person in India who tries to express goodwill for Pakistan faces the wrath of these groups. For example, black ink was thrown on the face of Sudheendra Kulkarni - a prominent figure in BJP - for his willingness to help former Pakistan foreign minister Khurshed Mahmood Kasuri launch his memoir in India.<sup>2</sup> Even sports, particularly cricket, which is the most popular game in South Asia and which could help in defusing animosity between the two countries, also became a victim of political tensions between the two countries. India and Pakistan have not played a cricket series since 2008 following the Mumbai attacks. When Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Chairman Shahryar Khan visited the headquarters of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) in October 2015, to discuss the prospects of resumption of cricket ties, activists of Shiv Sena attacked the headquarters shouting anti-Pakistan slogans and holding posters that read 'Shahryar Khan go back'.<sup>3</sup> Shiv Sena activists also objected to

shifting the venue to Sri Lanka saying that it would amount to honouring terrorist Ajmal Kasab and his team for the horrific 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks. Recently, besides an attack on Pak-India exhibition in the city of Dehradun again, by activists of Shiv Sena,<sup>4</sup> Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) office in New Delhi was also stormed by the members of Bajrang Dal.<sup>5</sup> The office was vandalised and again anti-Pakistan slogans were raised. And just recently, Pakistan's legendary ghazal singer Ghulam Ali's concert was called off in Mumbai for the second time on January 27, 2016 after threats were received by Shiv Sena activists.<sup>6</sup>

During his election campaign, Modi had repeatedly said that if elected to power, he would adopt a "muscular policy" towards Pakistan. Hence, soon after forming a strong Union government, a number of important ministers in the Modi government issued strong statements against Pakistan. Statement by the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar that India would use "terrorists to kill terrorists",<sup>7</sup> was undoubtedly most unfortunate. Similar statements were also issued by Indian Junior Minister for Information and Broadcasting following a cross border attack by India inside Myanmar. Pakistan was also blamed for the terrorist attacks at Gurdaspur and Udhampur without conducting a thorough investigation, nor providing credible evidence. Recently, following the attack at Pathankot and prior to the Charsadda incident, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had once again said that any individual or organisation harming the country "should also receive the pain of such activities".<sup>8</sup>

However, this time around, following the Pathankot and Charsadda incidents, it is heartening to see that both India and Pakistan have shown a commitment that they will not allow such incidents to derail the entire peace process and will move forward with the dialogue process - although no dates have so far been announced for the meeting between the two foreign secretaries which is a bit worrisome. Nevertheless, along with this positive development, it is also absolutely imperative that zealots in BJP, and hardliner 'Hindutva' groups like Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal are also reined in, whether against the religious minorities or Pakistan, and which have the potential to further complicate an already difficult and fragile relationship between the two countries. It is the responsibility of Modi government that a culture of peace and tolerance is promoted within India, as well as with the neighbouring countries. President Pranab Mukherjee has also advised his countrymen to guard against the forces of "violence, intolerance and unreason"<sup>9</sup> in his message on the Republic Day of India. Pakistan, on its part, has assured that it will make every possible effort to unearth the Pathankot conspiracy. In this regard, the steps that the Pakistan government has taken so far have also been acknowledged by the Indian government.<sup>10</sup> Besides discussing the strategic issues, both India and Pakistan must also take practical

steps to promote cultural and sports and people-to-people contacts. A firm commitment by both the governments to move forward in the right direction by defeating all forms of extremism will not only bring peace and prosperity in the two countries, but the entire South Asian region.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> Sangh Parivar refers to the family of Hindu nationalist organisations.
- <sup>2</sup> Khurshid Kasuri's book launch: Black paint smeared on Sudheendra Kulkarni's face, *Times of India* , October 12, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Shiv Sena activists storm BCCI HQ over Shaharyar - Manohar meeting, *Dawn*, October 19, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Shiv Sena activists attack Pak-India exhibition, *Dawn*, January 10, 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Bajrang Dal activists attack PIA office in New Delhi, *The News International*, January 14, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Ghulam Ali's concert cancelled in Mumbai after Shiv Sena threats, *The News International*, January 29, 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> Pakistan Slams Minister's statement, *The Hindu*, May 24, 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> Manohar Parrikar: Those who harm us must experience the same pain, *The Indian Express* , January 12, 2016.
- <sup>9</sup> Country should guard against forces of intolerance: President Pranab Mukherjee on R-Day eve, *Times of India* , January 25, 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> Pakistan moving in right direction on Pathankot attack probe: India, *The News International*, January 15, 2016.