



# Spotlight

## **Bajrang Dal: The Saffron Avengers**

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## Bajrang Dal: The saffron avengers

Bajrang Dal is part of the "Sang Parivar" and is the militant youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization that promotes the ideology of Hindutva. The militant youth wing was named Bajrang Dal to emphasize the physical might of the greater saffron family.<sup>1</sup> The name of the organization is influenced by the Hindu deity Hanuman, who led the armies of Lord Rama into battlefields.<sup>2</sup> It was founded in 1984 by Vinay Katiyar to forward the ideology of the Sangh i.e. RSS. Their ideology is based on "Seva Surksa Sanskrit" which means protection of the Hindu Culture. The main objective of this youth militant group is to:<sup>3</sup>

1. Rebuild the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya by demolishing the Babri masjid, the Krishnajanmabhoobi temple, and Kasi Vishwanath Temple in Mathura and Varanasi.
2. Prevent cow slaughter
3. Protection of India's Hindu Identity by preventing Hindu-Muslim marriage and Christian conversions.

The origin of the Bajrang dal can be traced back to the Babri Masjid demolition movement in Ayodhya. In 1984 the Ram Janaki Raths started a procession from Ayodhya to Lucknow to mobilize support for the Ram temple. During the procession, the Raths received threats from anti-Hindu elements and the Uttar Pradesh government denied security to the procession. To escort the Raths (procession), Vinay Katiyar organized the Hanuman army. After the Ram Janaki Yatra Bajrang dal was always on the forefront and came into prominence in 1992 when they stormed the Babri Masjid and waved a saffron flag on the Mosque building. Thus, the saffron nationalist militant group is the offshoot of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict established by VHP to increase Hindu mobilization for the Ayodhya movement and the protection and promotion of Hindutva.

The Bajrang dal, initially was active in Uttar Pradesh and from there it achieved momentum and reached Bihar, Gujarat, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan and by 1993 it increased its influence throughout India. The militant wing is highly organized in its structure, it is divided into different levels and has organized various akhanda or shakhas throughout India where young men between the ages of 15-25 receive religious and cultural education and self-defense, and arms training. The Dals participate in different activities such as balopasana diwas, where the young Dals are trained in wrestling and gymnasium they also organize religious recitals (Hanuman Chalisa) and temple gatherings.<sup>4</sup> Apart from violent activities, the Bajrang dal also participate in social work, from arranging social and religious events to assisting the Hindu communities during natural calamities. The Bajrang Dal has a separate program for students called the Vidyarthi Pramukh, which aims to spread its influence among the students and attract them to join the ideology of "Seva Surksa Sanskriti".<sup>5</sup> This program also promotes a narrative against cow slaughter and Muslim demographic growth.

The Bajrang Dal is the most assertive among the allied Sangh organizations and strongly advocates

<sup>1</sup> Rajeev Deshpande, "Bajrang Dal: The Militant Face of the Saffron Family?" *Times of India*, 30 September 2018.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Bajrang-Dal-The-militant-face-of-the-saffron-family/articleshow/3542674.cms>

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Vikas Pathak, "The Musclemen of Hindutva," *The Hindu*, 12 December, 2015.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/on-the-bajrang-dals-birth-evolution-and-activity/article7977309.ece>

<sup>5</sup> ibid

the Hindutva cause. Mostly it is referred to as the rouge child of the Sangh Parivar, as they believe in killing for the cause of protection. According to one of the RSS members the banringi are "all the riff-raff and scarp of society and the discards of the Sangh Parivar land up in the Bajrang Dal."<sup>6</sup> The organization has attracted national and international attention because of the grave human rights violation and the violent means they adopt for the protection of cows and the eradication of social evils from the Hindu Dharma.

Members of the saffron avengers are involved in moral policing and different hate crimes and have attacked Muslims and other minorities in the name of Hindutva. One of the cases which attracted world attention and which led to worldwide outrage was the murder of Graham Staines in Odisha. Graham Staines along with his two sons were burnt to death by a member of the Bajrang Dal, accusing him of converting people in the name of missionary activities.<sup>7</sup> According to Human Rights Watch report, the militant group is also believed to be involved in the 1998 attack on Christians in Southeastern Gujarat and the 2002 riots against Muslims in Gujarat.

Recently in March 2021 the belligerent Hindu outfit, harassed four Christian women, two nuns and two postulants, in Uttar Pradesh and forced them to leave the train at the Jhansi station.<sup>8</sup> The Bajrang Dal accused the two nuns for religious conversion and because of their affray and pressure the situation escalated and the nuns were detained by the Government Railway Police for interrogation. Based on the accusation of the Bajrang Dal they were questioned by the police for five hours and afterwards they released the nuns as they could not prove that the nuns were involved in forceful conversion. They four Christian women departed by the next train along with police escort because of the fear of vengeance from the saffron avengers.

The militant wing is also involved in vicious mob attacks and lynching against Muslims for Love-Jihad (interfaith marriage). They have even pressurized the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh to draft the law against the Love-Jihad known as the Prohibition of Unlawful Religion Conversion Ordinance. The purpose of this legislation is to encumber Hindu-Muslim Marriages. Under the new anti-conversion law, a man named Rashid was jailed for marrying a Hindu girl he loves. The couple was intimidated by the fierce mob of Bajrang Dal accusing Rashid of forceful conversion, which led to the imprisonment of Rashid and the unfortunate miscarriage of their first child.<sup>9</sup> Post the legislation more than 30 Muslim men are convicted in Uttar Pradesh. After the implementation of the love-jihad legislation, anyone found guilty will be imprisoned for over 10 years.

The militant nationalist group has also maintained the hardest line on cow slaughter and in the name of cow protection the saffron avengers have attacked hundreds of Muslim and other religious minorities. In 2017 a fierce mob of Bajrang Dal attacked Irshad Khan, Arif, and their father Pehlu for transporting cows.<sup>10</sup> Although they had a paper to prove that they have a legal permit to transport cows, still they were pulled out of the truck and were beaten mercilessly by the belligerent Bajrang

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<sup>6</sup> Uday Mahurkar, "Bajrang Dal: The Rouge Child of the Sang Parivar," *India Today*, 27 February, 2013. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19990208-bajrang-dal-the-rogue-child-of-the-sangh-parivar-780109-1999-02-08>

<sup>7</sup> Ruben Banerjee, "Staines Killing: Murder of Australian Missionary and his two Sons in Orissa Shocks India," *India Today*, 8 February 1999

<sup>8</sup> Sravasti Das Gupta, "Attack on Kerala Nuns in Jhansi 'reeks of politics', says Minorities Commission Member," *The Print*, 1 April 2021. <https://theprint.in/india/attack-on-kerala-nuns-in-jhansi-reeks-of-politics-says-minorities-commission-member/632424/>

<sup>9</sup> Vatsala Gaur, "Love Jihad: A Match Made in heaven, Judge on Earth," *The Economic Times*, 25 December 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/love-jihad-law-a-match-made-in-heaven-judged-on-earth/articleshow/79958162.cms>

<sup>10</sup> Eliza Griswold, "The violent toll of Hindu Nationalism in India" *The New Yorker*, 5th March, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/the-violent-toll-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>

Dal mob. The mob was eventually disbanded by the police and the injured victims were rushed to a local hospital where Pehlu succumbed to his injuries. Since BJP coming to power the cow-related violence has increased tenfold and because of BJP backing, they have managed to unleash violence without being held accountable. The saffron militant wing has also banned the screening of different movies over the concern of promoting profanity and threat to the Hindu Dharma.

After the revocation of the ban, Bajrang dal, has for years remained in the shadow of VHP, but after the election of Narendra Modi, to the Prime Minister's office, the saffron avengers have burgeoned exponentially. Invigorated by the BJP victory, the Bajrang dal has once again gone on the forefront and has instigated religious violence. The Bajrang Dal is used as muscle power by the Sangh and BJP in particular, to promote the agenda of Hindutva mainly for the political cause and generate support for BJP. The BJP uses the Bajrang dal where they cannot take a public stance on controversial issues. The BJP government often dissociates itself from any outrageous act of violence.<sup>11</sup> The uncontrolled activities of Bajrang Dal for the promotion of Hindutva as a political and cultural force has far-reaching consequences on the lives of minorities residing in India. Today, the minorities in India live in fear, but the saffron militant group roam around freely and continue their vandalism without being questioned, as they are backed by the allied Sangh organization and the BJP in particular.

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<sup>11</sup> Rajeev Deshpande, "Bajrang Dal: The Militant Face of the Saffron Family?" *Times of India*, 30 September 2018.