



IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

LIFE

AFTER THE ATTACKS

It has been a year since a Facebook post led to the burning of 11 Hindu homes in a village in Rangpur. The residents, though, still live in fear.

KONGKON KARMAKER

90-year-old Kamini Bala is one of the oldest victims of the brutal arson attack that destroyed homes of 11 Hindu families in Rangpur's Thakurpara village last November. An angry mob, enticed by an unverified Facebook post that supposedly demeaned Islam, looted the homes before setting the village on fire.

A year on, Kamini—despite her age—can still recall the exact details of that horrific afternoon. Her words aren't clear though and her voice quivers as she recollects the events that unfolded on November 10 last year. Her 65-year-old son, Dinesh Chandra Barman, joins in the conversation, in an attempt to clarify his mother's thoughts.

"She does not want to live here anymore. She wants God to take her away from here," he explains. These are the two sentences, Dinesh says, that his mother repeats every other day. "She lives in a state of uncertainty. She is scared that the village might face another attack."

Take a walk around the village and you realise that Kamini isn't the only one living in a state of fear. Kamini's neighbour, Amulla Chandra Roy, shares similar thoughts. A rickshaw-van puller, Amulla has just come home from work. He pulls out a few crumpled notes—amounting to Tk 200—out of his lungi and gives them to his wife.

"We wanted to go to India after the



90-year-old Kamini Bala, on a stool with her daughter-in-law



Titu Roy, the man blamed for posting the derogatory Facebook post, sits at a tea stall at the entrance of the village

attackers torched my house," he says, taking a breather. "But the locals and the ruling party leaders asked us to stay."

"This is what we got from the government after the attack," he adds, while pointing towards his newly-built corrugated tin house. "Before the roof of my house had a slope, but today we live in single-roof homes. It gets quite hot in the summer and it's not comfortable to stay here in the winter either," he states. He wants the government to rebuild their houses with bricks.

Dipika Rani Roy, another resident of the village, has a different kind of worry. She hopes that the police outpost, placed in the village following the attack, isn't closed down.

"We do not want anything. All we want to do is live in peace. We have heard that the government is preparing to close the police outpost box from

attack the village.

Apart from sharing the post online, copies of that post were printed and shared in mosques as well. There was a campaign of sorts, with loudspeakers and human chains, in the area, which eventually led to the aggression.

Titu, however, was arrested in mid November last year. He received bail nine months later in August and walked out of the Rangpur jail on August 22. He says that the police have asked him not to leave the village and that's why he's still there.

"I had nothing to do with the Facebook post that caused the havoc," claims Titu. "I bought a second-hand smartphone from Narayanganj seven days before the attack. I requested one of my acquaintances to open a Facebook account for me. After that something happened. I don't know what. I am not accustomed to Facebook," he explains.



One year on, villagers live in a state of uncertainty, scared that they might face another attack.

IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

here. That will be dangerous for us," she exclaims.

Dulali Rani Barman, who was busy drying a sack of paddy in an open space near Dipika's home, shares the concern. "Most of the males of the village go out in search of work. And that's when we feel the most vulnerable. You imagine the worst when they are not here. What if there's another attack? We don't have a safety plan," says Dulali.

The sentiment is obvious. While the government has done work on rebuilding the village, the pain and panic caused because of the attack still remains. As 75-year-old Pulin Chandra Barman puts it, "We received a lot after the attack, but it's not so easy to forget the attack. You can say that it has bruised our hearts."

Titu Roy's tale

At a tea stall in the village, located next to the roadside, sits Titu Chandra Roy. This is the man who supposedly posted the derogatory Facebook post which eventually led to the angry mob burning down the village.

Again, it's not as though the Facebook post was the only reason why the attack took place. Analysts say that the Facebook post was just a medium used to

This was precisely the argument that Titu's lawyer used at court to get him bail. "I told the court that this man does not have the skills to use a smartphone. How is it possible for him to post something on Facebook? He got a six-month bail on that basis," Titu's lawyer advocate Md. Badiuzzaman tells *The Daily Star*. "The police are now investigating the matter and we will see what happens when the charge sheet is made," he adds.

While speaking to the reporter, Titu explains that when the attack took place, he was in Faridpur, where his in-laws stay. Members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) picked up his wife immediately after the attack. A concerned Titu decided to go back to his village to see his mother. "I got on a bus to get down at the Paglapir area in Rangpur. But my friends asked me not to go there since the area wasn't safe for me," recalls Titu. Eventually, he decided to go to his daughter's house in Nilphamari. Two days later, the police picked him up from a village in Nilphamari and sent him to jail. "The police spared me. But my wife, who was in custody for four days had to suffer a lot because of me," he says.