

Mob attacks on Star, Prothom Alo scripted

FROM PAGE 1
Alo building marked out by a red cross, said, "These are India's powerhouses in Bangladesh. This country will not be safe until all Indian agents, including Prothom Alo and Daily Star, are 'Joy Bangla-ed'."

Originally, "Joy Bangla" is a Bangla phrase meaning "Victory to Bengal", and has been in use since the 1971 Liberation War. In recent years, however, "Joy Bangla Kora" has taken on a very destructive meaning on social media, often used to imply destroying or eliminating something or someone.

Another Facebook post appeared on the same day in a different group titled "Bharot Birodhi Shoinik [Anti-India Soldier]", which has more than 100,000 members. The post, made by a group moderator named Md Fakrul Islam, read, "Burn the offices of Prothom Alo and Daily Star."

The direct calls to violence began intensifying from the night of December 17, roughly 32 hours before the actual event. They continued the next day.

Almost all the posts were made by profiles with real-sounding names, but with little to no personal information or regular social activities. Their online behaviour mostly involves posting and amplifying hate speech.

VIOLENCE UNFOLDS, INCITEMENT INTENSIFIES

Since the late evening of December 18, 2025, the atmosphere was already tense in Dhaka and elsewhere. Emotions ran high across social media immediately after the death of Sharif Osman Bin Hadi, a potential candidate in the February election and convener of Inqilab Moncho, was announced around 9:40pm.

Soon, groups of protesters marched towards Shahbagh in the capital, which helped set the stage for the violence that unfolded throughout the night and the next day.

Findings show social media calls for violence were most frequent between 11:30pm on December 18 and 1:00am on December 19. This was the period when crowds began gathering, preparing for the assault, and carrying out the actual attacks on the two newspapers.

Around 11:15pm on December 18, a small group of individuals first gathered outside the Prothom Alo premises in Karwan Bazar, marking the start of a violent night. Over the next 30 minutes, the mob grew in size and became increasingly aggressive, and by 11:45pm, the attacks began.

Between 10:00pm and 11:00pm – just before the mob assembled in front of the Bangla daily – there were at least nine direct calls for violence posted on Facebook.

"Burn down Prothom Alo, demolish Daily Star to the ground, blow up the Indian Embassy and Indian hegemony," one post declared.

It was posted from a profile in a Facebook group called Pinaki Bhattacharya - পিনাকী ভট্টাচার্য, which has 157,000 members.

Pinaki Bhattacharya is a Bangladeshi national and social media influencer, currently living in France, with 3.1 million followers on Facebook. Pinaki is not among the administrators of this group, and during the violence, he made no posts directly calling for attacks. However, he has long positioned himself as a harsh critic of the two dailies and labelled both as pro-Indian outlets.

The volume of incitement surged over the next 45 minutes, between 11:00pm and 11:45pm, with 34 more unique posts directly calling for violence against the two newspapers. To draw attention, many posters used tactics such as tagging all their followers or adding hashtags like "#highlight".

Sakib Ahmed was among those posting during that period, as people were starting to congregate. He posted in the "Bharot Birodhi Churanto Andolon" public group as well as the other group called "Bharot Birodhi Shoinik", writing, "Prothom Alo, Daily Star, Kalbela! Tomorrow is their last day!"

Together, the two groups have around 180,000 members.

Sakib, 21, is an undergraduate psychology student at Government Azizul Haque College in Bogura. "I saw that people were on the streets and I knew what would happen next. So I posted that to spread the word," he told The Daily Star in January 2026. He insisted that no one instructed him to make the post.

THE PROVOCATEURS

Fifteen minutes after the attack began on Prothom Alo, US-based Bangladeshi influencer Elias Hossain issued his first direct call for violence of the night. "Come to Prothom Alo,

TIME	POST NARRATIVE	ON THE GROUND VIOLENCE
Dec 17 midnight-- Dec 18 10:30pm	"Indian agents," "enemies of the revolution," "traitors."	No on the ground attacks yet
10:30pm--11:15pm	"Burn it down, demolish it," specifying the "Karwan Bazar" location	People gather outside Prothom Alo
11:15pm--11:45pm	"Tonight is the right time! If the target is missed, we will regret it again,"	Crowd increases; slogans intensify
11:45pm	Live broadcasting of the attack	Vandalism begins
11:50pm--12:00am, Dec 19	"End (Grave) of Prothom Alo," "Next target..."	Fire at Prothom Alo; staffers evacuate
Dec 19 midnight--12:20am	"On the soil of Bengal, the grave of Prothom Alo has been dug. Next target: The Daily Star."	Attackers move towards The Daily Star
12:11am	"Grab them one by one and slaughter them"	Chhayanaut, Udichi threatened, not yet attacked
12:20am--12:30am	"First The Light [Prothom Alo] is finished, Daily Star is de,,,d [dead]."	Crowds intensify at The Daily Star
12:30am--1:00am	"Daily Star done, well done boys"	Vandalism and arson
1:00am--onwards	"Fire at Prothom Alo and Daily Star offices due to an electrical short circuit!"	Journalists trapped; rescue delayed
1:30am--2:00am	"Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, Chhayanaut - all legal targets"	Chhayanaut attacked
7:30pm	"Crush all those patronised by India like Udichi"	Udichi attacked, set on fire



Despite repeated requests Meta didn't cooperate with us to deactivate accounts found to be responsible for inciting and mobilising violence.



"To all my friends, I am deeply sorry that I failed you. I made scores of calls to the right people, trying to mobilise help, but it did not arrive in time."

Shafiqul Alam, then-press secretary to CA

everyone. Half the job is done," he posted on Facebook at midnight. Within just one hour, the post garnered nearly 77,000 engagements.

Elias, once a journalist, posted his next call for violence five minutes later, writing, "Not a single brick of Prothom Alo must be left." The post drew more than 95,000 engagements over the next hour.

Offline, the mob set fire to Prothom Alo around the same time.

Another post came five minutes later. "If the army comes to save Prothom Alo, give them the due answer." This post received more engagement than each of the previous ones.

At 12:20am on December 19, he posted, "Prothom Alo done, now come to Daily Star everyone." Within four minutes of that, employees of The Daily Star rushed downstairs to escape the premises, only to find a mob gathering and hurling stones at the building. The Daily Star journalists and employees immediately ran upstairs and took shelter on the roof, where they were trapped in thick smoke until they were rescued after 4:00am. That post reached 77,000 people in one hour.

Elias went on to publish four more posts over the next three hours, each calling for further violence or justifying it. One post falsely claimed that no staff members were trapped inside the building, insisting instead that everyone had already escaped. Together, these four posts amassed more than 2.67 million engagements.

From midnight to half past midnight – the interval between the attacks on Prothom Alo and The Daily Star – direct calls for violence from other actors also intensified. During this period, 87 posts (excluding those from Elias) calling for or celebrating the attacks generated more than 30,000 engagements.



(Clockwise) The ruins of Udichi after being set on fire by mob on December 19, 2025; The interiors of The Daily Star after the flames were extinguished, taken the morning after the attack; Furniture lies broken after mob vandalised Chhayanaut around 2:00am on Dec 19, 2025 PHOTO: STAR



Other influential users provoked violence in similar language.

Former Vice-President of Zia Cyber Force, Meer Zahan, posted at 1:00am on December 19: "The list is not very long, add more if there are any. 1. Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Dhanmondi. 2. Chhayanaut, Dhanmondi. 3. Udichi. 3. Prothom Alo. 4. Daily Star. Unless these are 'Joy Bangla-ed', their jumping around won't stop."

By 1:30pm on December 19, hours before the attack on the Udichi office was underway, this post had more than 8,500 reactions and was shared more than 300 times.

Additionally, various pages that claim to post satire and memes built hostile narratives against the two newspapers. Satirical Facebook page Anwar TV posted a photocard with images of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star buildings and wrote, "Prothom Alo and The Daily Star are the largest enablers of Indian hegemony in the country."

On the ground, this online hate translated into a physical blockade of emergency rescue services, putting lives at risk. TV footage shows the mob obstructing fire service vehicles as they attempted to reach The Daily Star, forcing them to turn back, as 29 journalists and staffers remained trapped inside the burning building.

Around 12:35am on December 19, the attackers broke through the steel gate and glass doors of The Daily Star building and entered the premises. Inside, they set fires on the first three floors, destroyed computers and equipment and looted valuables from different floors.

A similar scene unfolded at Prothom Alo.

At 1:45am, an initial Fire Service unit arrived near the Karwan Bazar metro station but was intercepted by the mob, forcing it to retreat.

The siege only began to ease when a portion of the mob diverted towards The Daily Star, thinning the crowd. Only then were the joint forces able to secure the perimeter, finally allowing firefighters to begin operations at 2:30am, nearly three hours after the fire was first ignited.

"That day, we faced several obstacles while trying to reach the accident sites. However, with the cooperation of the army, members of the law enforcement agencies, and many others present, we were ultimately able to reach the locations and douse the blaze," Lt Col Mohammad Tajul Islam Chowdhury, Director (Operations and Maintenance) of the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence, told The Daily Star on February 8.

CHANGING TARGETS, SHIFTING NARRATIVES

Two hours after the assault on The Daily Star and three hours after the arson attack on Prothom Alo, social media posts began identifying Chhayanaut Bhaban in Dhanmondi as the next target. The call to attack Chhayanaut was repeated at least 15 more times before the institution was finally set ablaze around 1:30am on December 19, leaving the building heavily damaged.

The name appeared online as a target as early as 11:38pm on December 18. One post, by a user named Faruk Khan, listed four locations – Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, Chhayanaut and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre – with their addresses. Exploiting Hadi's death to justify the attacks, this poster wrote: "Tonight is the perfect time. If we

miss the target, we will regret it again until we lose another Hadi."

Faruk's profile contained little personal information beyond a "Daripalla" badge (Daripalla – weighing scales – is Jamaat's electoral symbol). His post was copied verbatim by other users. At that moment, at least one newspaper was already under attack.

Between the start of the violence and the following morning, 958 unique Facebook posts directly called for or celebrated the attacks, generating 360,455 likes, shares, and comments. And eight public Facebook groups with a combined membership of about 1 million at the time of the attack, published 88 posts inciting or justifying the violence, none of which were removed in real time.

The fourth major target, the central office of Bangladesh Udichi Shilpigosthi on Topkhana Road near Jatiya Press Club, was not attacked until around 7:00pm on December 19. A fire broke out around 7:30pm and was brought under control 30-40 minutes later. No casualties were reported, but the building suffered extensive damage.

Threats against Udichi had circulated since the night of December 18. At least 10 Facebook posts called for the organisation to be destroyed and its members killed.

One post shared at 12:11am on December 19 read: "Chhayanaut, Udichi, Megh Mallar – we have to grab them one by one and slaughter them." The account that posted it appeared anonymous and contained almost no personal information.

From late December 18 into the early hours of December 19, the tone of online content shifted. Direct incitement gave way to celebration, satire, and mockery, with many users praising the attacks using

expressions such as "Alhamdulillah" meaning "praise be to Allah". Some users framed the assaults as the "right thing to do" or a "necessary step".

At least 38 users circulated narratives seeking to justify the violence, including claims that "closing The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and the Indian Embassy would make the country 95 per cent healthy".

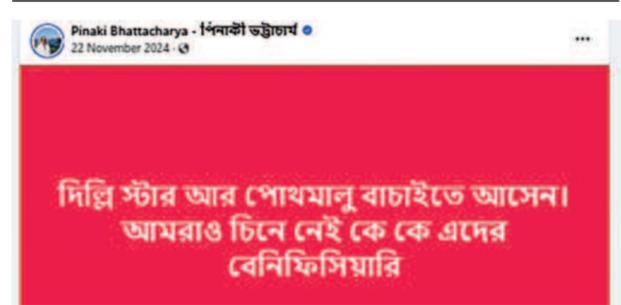
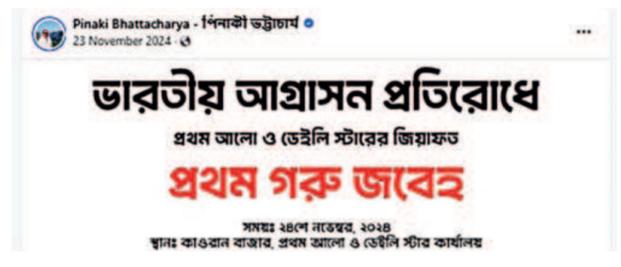
"As long as Prothom Alo and The Daily Star remain in this country, Indian hegemony will remain. Now is the time to bury Prothom Alo and Mujibism," read one post. Various users also spread misinformation immediately after the arson that the fire on both media started from a gas stove or electric short circuit.

A LONG-RUNNING CAMPAIGN

Findings show that the online posts that directly called for or celebrated attacks outnumbered narrative-building posts by roughly 20 to 1, and generated nearly 30 times more engagement.

But this adversarial campaign against The Daily Star and Prothom Alo did not begin in December 2025.

For over a year beforehand, two Bangladeshi diaspora influencers, Pinaki Bhattacharya and Elias Hossain, had been consistently advancing a hostile narrative against the two outlets on Facebook and YouTube. They falsely accused the two papers of "serving Indian interests" and discrediting some of their reporting during Sheikh



Hasina's government.

Over time, a range of pages with satirical names mimicking the two newspapers, such as "Delhi Star," "Delhir Alo," and "Prothom Alu", appeared on social media, frequently spreading misleading claims about their editors and editorial stance.

In November 2024, crowds gathered outside both newspapers for several days, chanting slogans that labelled them "Indian agents" and Sheikh Hasina's "enablers." Around the same time, Pinaki announced a "Ziyafat", a ceremonial cow slaughter, outside the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star offices as part of a protest-celebration.

The December 2025 attacks followed a renewed wave of incitement triggered by the shooting of Sharif Osman Bin Hadi in Dhaka on December 12. Posts circulating after the shooting essentially claimed that Prothom Alo and The Daily Star had "set the ground" for the incident.

After Hadi's death on December 18, this narrative intensified sharply, falsely branding the newspapers as "Indian agents", "cultural fascists", "agents of foreigners", "associates of militant dramas", "associates of the Pikhana and Shapla killings", "enemies of the revolution", and "traitors", making it a catalyst to organise a mob.

In an article earlier this month, an Indian fact-checking portal (boomlive.in) wrote how, for more than a year, Pinaki and Elias have run parallel and often overlapping campaigns on Facebook and YouTube "to investigate and organise a series of mob attacks on political and media institutions in Bangladesh, thanks, partly, to their proximity to power".

META, GOVT TURNED BLIND
Despite days of threats circulating SEE PAGE 9 COL 1