I called my friend Situ in Hatiya to tell him something was going on in Dhaka. "Go inside and lock the door!" he said firmly. I remember looking down at the cup in my hand, "Okay, but first I'll finish my tea."

There were numerous other events of course – the Shahbagh Movement which stands out for being peaceful, the Hefazat rally – events that had little impact on 26 as such – unlike the uncountable number of hartals that are forced upon all Bangladeshis. During one of them, a friend had to jump out of the window of a burning bus on nearby Satmasjid Road, and along with many others he ran into 26, where he stopped to knock at my front gate. Not knowing him the doorman didn't open it. Fortunately the danger had passed. I heard about it later.



PHOTO: FIROZ

On another day I was going to the office, then in Gulshan, and the CNG I'd hired made it barely fifty metres before a group of men stopped the vehicle and started to smash its windows and tear the back cover. The young driver was as terrified as I was – I jumped out (fortunately the lock was on the passenger side) and considered involving myself in a scuffle to protect the driver – but I had my laptop with me and anyway, the driver managed to flee in his half-destroyed vehicle. It was later I heard there was a CNG strike going on. I was lucky there'd been no fire.

But of course the bulk of memories from 26 are not these. In the meantime it's where my Bengali Amma spent a week recuperating after a minor operation – and she used to talk about her childhood in Bogra and how things were way back when. I'll never forget the look on villager Siddique Bhai's face either, when we found him with his wife and adult son in a crammed hotel in Farm Gate – in Dhaka to start chemotherapy – and we took them home and they saw for the first time where they would be staying. He was so thrilled at the sight of what was for them a little luxury that he said his pain was gone!

There were others too. One night I counted five patients and nine guests, all Hatiyalas, with a range of conditions from a broken hand to diabetes, with the extras sleeping on mats in the living room.

It was at 26 that Situ cooked chingri (shrimp) for my Australian parents before we all left for Hatiya, that afternoon when my Dad went momentarily missing on a rickshaw. It was at 26 where Dad put his elderly bones to the test to jive with the energetic kids of my cleaner – who from then on call him Dada.

It was also to 26 that the whole Bangladeshi family came when Situ suffered a brain aneurysm, underwent brain surgery and nearly died. His wife Lovely ran the household then while with his brothers and I decided what to do for his treatment.

Of one hundred with his condition it is not an exaggeration to say that only one will make a full recovery – most don't survive – and in part it was because of 26 that Situ was the one. And later, well on his way to recovery, he finally had the courage to verbalise what we had both been thinking – "I am aliving," he said one day, in his creative English, in the 26 living room.

Come to think of it, even the mosque committee stayed with me while they visited Dhaka's Hatiyala business community in the hope of finding funds for the village mosque extension. It was Ramadan and we used to share the iftari they'd arrange each evening, although I wasn't fasting.

It's funny how in Bangladesh life goes on through the various crises and mostly unsavoury political tremors. Even in the memories both personal and political parts are there. It's a bit like juggling.

Now I am in the new flat, starting with new memories and the Bangladeshi flag is in the cupboard.

I haven't been able to bring it out this year – not because its usual hanging spot is kilometres away but because, with people being burnt alive in buses and having their skulls blown open by bombs, it seems insensitive.

Those sacrifices of 1971 for an independent, free nation: in these most recent days, it's not always easy to understand what it was for. Perhaps I'll give 16 December a miss this year. Maybe the flag can come out when Bangladeshis have a political environment that points to a better future, one that is sufficiently mature to truly honour the memory of those great sacrifices. ■