

Recalling Bangabandhu's Homecoming Wishing an End to the Present Impasse

by Rashid Suhrawardy

HAVING kept in close contact with political events in Bangladesh, whilst I have been in London during this past year and having recently returned to Dhaka, it has become apparent to me that the political situation, already hazardous at the time of my last visit a year ago, has progressed to a degree that this country, which has been scourged during its relatively short history with a series of political calamities, is once again facing a crisis of monumental dimensions, which may sound the death-knell of democracy.

On January 10th 1972 the nation of Bangladesh rejoiced in the homecoming of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after a nerve-wrecking incarceration in an incommunicado cell in a West Pakistani gaol. The feeling of euphoria transmitted on that day was not just symptomatic of the physical release of the father of the nation but, perhaps even more importantly, because his return symbolised and encapsulated all the hopes and aspirations of our beleaguered people; it symbolised and affirmed the great victory of a heroic nation, bought by the courage and the blood of the three million people, who gave their lives, and by the hardship and sacrifices suffered by other countless millions.

It is with great sadness

that one notes that 24 years after our Liberation all those sacrifices seem to have been made in vain. The unparalleled opportunity for democracy that our independence gave to us has slowly over the years been dismembered by each successive government, so that now, after two and a half decades, we have a government, elected in a purportedly free and fair election and claiming, therefore, to embody democratic principles, which has, during its five-year regime, rather demonstrated that it has been prepared to indulge in all the vices of its two autocratic predecessors. That behaviour, in itself, is despicable. However, what I find even more contemptible is the almost infantile implementation of its transgressions.

Let us not forget, and I wish to remind our foreign friends, in their understandable frustration, that it was the Magura by-election that was the catalyst for our present predicament. After the Magura fiasco 22 months ago it was patently obvious that the Opposition could not contest any elections under the aegis of this government. At least the alleged vote manipulation in Mirpur was slightly more subtle, the BNP actor coming through with a 2000 majority. Magura, a seat held by the Awami League for four decades, which had given them a 42,000 majority in 1991, contested during the mid-term of a government's tenure in office, when all governments in a true democratic set-up see a diminution in their popularity (N.B. The Republican rout of the Democrats in the Senate and The House of Repre-

sentatives during the mid-term of the Clinton Presidency and the fact that the British Conservative Party has not won a single by-election in the last three years), in an apparently rigged election, which saw the withdrawal from the scene of the Election Commissioner 24 hours before polling, overturned the Awami League majority and secured a 40,000 majority (a swing of over 80,000) for the BNP candidate. Notwithstanding the fact that the BNP party needed a morale-booster after its Mayoral election defeats in Dhaka and Chittagong, who on earth advised the Prime Minister that to contrive such an election mockery was going to increase her and her party's popularity in the country and abroad? That single aberration pushed the Opposition, firstly, into a very strange and unholy alliance and, then, into a position of making a demand for a neutral caretaker government, from which they find themselves unable to extricate themselves.

Madam Prime Minister, throughout these past 22 months your only reply has been that everything must be done within the parameters of the Constitution. Again, as the son of one of the foremost lawyers in the subcontinent I must be the last person to advise that the Constitution should be subverted — it is, after all, the lynchpin of a true democratic structure. However, the Constitution was framed to meet and embrace the demands of the people. Within its framework it has been amended on numerous occasions, as circumstances have dictated. It is, therefore, a mutative organ of our democratic order. However, and this addresses the crux of our current problems, the cardinal principles of democracy are fixed and immutable. When the essentials of democracy come into conflict with the articles of the Constitution something has to be given. If the Constitution takes precedence and democratic fundamentals are violated then, surely, the

Constitution needs to accommodate the democratic needs. It is simple but, in the realpolitik of our current crisis, a question of pragmatism. No one should take this demand for a circuitous re-routing of the Constitution lightly or irresponsibly.

The law of the land has erected many safeguards to protect the sanctity and inviolability of the Constitution and, in the present circumstances, with a dissolved Parliament, any amendment to the Constitution will require, at best, a certain amount of legal artifice. Whilst this is not the most salutary measure to achieve a solution to this seemingly intractable dilemma, if it helps to avert a political conflagration, which may be the most grave and intimidating we have faced since our Liberation, whatever misgivings we may have in adopting this artifice may be deemed as justified. Our eminent constitutional experts, even today, have categorically stated that there are ways, through the medium of the Supreme Court, to accommodate the inherent changes within the Constitution, provided there is a genuine consensus amongst the different political parties.

Madam Prime Minister, you have a unique opportunity, even at this eleventh hour, of allowing history to regard you as having played a significant and prominent role in safeguarding democracy in Bangladesh. If you fail to utilise this opportunity you will be remembered in less than glowing terms and your five-year tenure of government will be recalled, maybe, as a failure. However, if you possess real political shrewdness you should be able to use this to your advantage in any genuine political campaign. Again, may I ask you, are your advisors deterring you from making political capital from this opportunity? Can you truly trust them when you know that the current political stand-off may lead to a blood-bath and

law and order debacle? Do these people have their own political agenda? For some time we have gone through a theatrical comedy of yourself and the former Leader of the Opposition indicating that you would both be prepared to meet and discuss a possible resolution to this current crisis but no meeting has been achieved on the specious grounds of whether there should be a discussion with an agenda or without an agenda. The fate of the nation is hanging by a thread and, quite frankly, I say to both of you, there can no longer be room for such niceties. Our

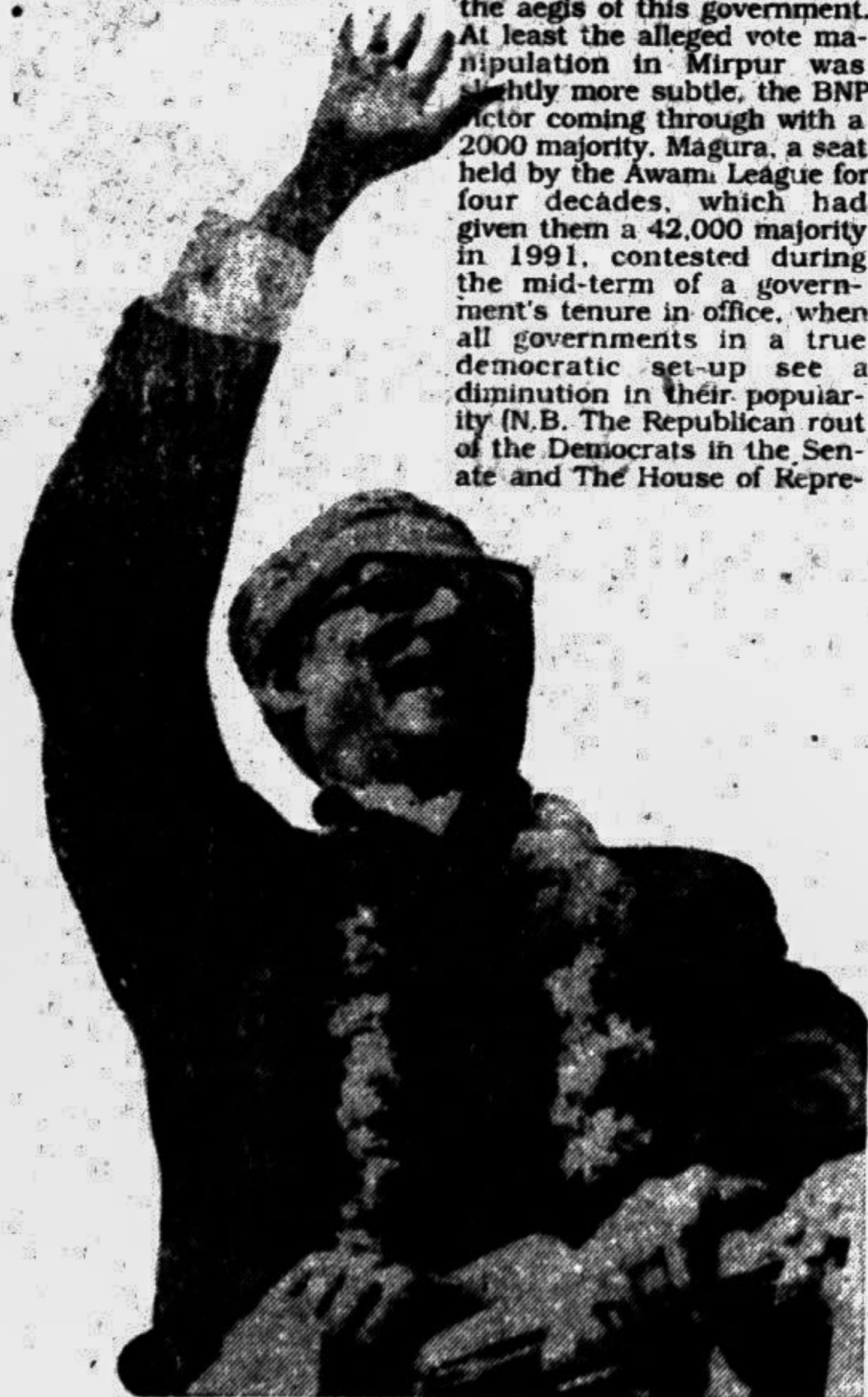
people have suffered so much during this disastrous period of the last two years.

The political football has now moved into the ballpark of the President. Here again, we have an individual, who, if he is prepared to seize the opportunity, can play a signal historical role in the salvation of our democratic edifice. Former Chief Justice, Shahabuddin, in 1991 emerged from relative obscurity to head an honourable and principled caretaker government and established himself in the annals of our political history, which will be remembered long after any of us are still around. The President, today, has within

his constitutional authority the powers to rescue the nation from this current impasse. However, he needs to act with an alacrity, a wisdom and an integrity that propels him beyond the charges of bias or prejudice.

We have had senior 'impartial' figures in the past — particularly some Chief Justices — who will be remembered as undiluted toadies of the government of the day. The President, to all intents and purposes, a government nominee, needs to help constitute an acceptable interim government, in which his role will not be seen as omnipotent but that

of a facilitator. From that format, the most important aspect of our electoral process, the concomitant organs for overseeing the general elections in an impartial and efficient way, may be developed. To put it bluntly, this is the last opportunity for resolving this crisis. If we do not avail ourselves of this moment every drop of blood that is shed in the inevitable ensuing fracas will be on our heads. We face one of the darkest hours in our history. Nineteen seventy-one, 1975, and 1981 came about through the carefully organised machinations of a handful of conspirators. This current situation is of our own making and it is within our capacity to resolve it. If we fail in that responsibility we will have betrayed those countless millions, who sacrificed so much in 1971 and we will have brought nothing but shame to this nation.



Bangabandhu comes home, January 10, 1972



among his comrades



alighting from the plane (above) at the airport, in ovation



hugged by Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Rehana and Sheikh Russel on return home

From Six Points to Liberation War

by Waheedul Haque

THE Six Points of 1966 acted decisively as the paving stone to the Liberation War five years later. While its importance, and influence in shaping the destiny of the Bengalees in the then Pakistan or even of the greater cultural entity of the Bengali-speaking peoples of the world cannot be overstated, there was indeed nothing new in that document. Whatever was there, was in the mind of all our people — excepting the votaries of communal politics and those that lived parasitically on the already putrefying body of Pakistan. It took a giant among men, one with stupendous courage and all-in submission to the genuine interests of the people and one identifying himself so perfectly with his people, to first know what was all that

unsaid longings and loathings about and then shape it into one mould and then shout that out with a big bang. To give the Six Points to the nation and to its subjugators, the colonialist Pakistanis, so closely after the Indo-Pak War was possible only for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And how he did that! In Rawalpindi! The timing, the manner and the follow-up of that pronouncement were such that things rolled fast into shaping the Liberation War without a moment of unnecessary dither. Together with the formulation of the Six Points, all these vitally important things also came from that incomparable man now laying claim to become one of the greatest leaders of man of all history.

Whatever was in the Six Points was implicitly in the

21 points of the 1954 Jukto Front. It took to many mass movements and full 12 years for the implicit to become explicit. The change was not easy. The 21 Points came riding on the crest of political awakening of the masses that history has rarely witnessed. It arose from a feeling of power that the masses felt with their proverbial awesome majesty. But after 1955, in spite of the repeated and heroic mass movements, that wonderful advance in the rights-consciousness of our people and resulting self-confidence of the masses was diluted beyond meaningful effectiveness. And the decade of Ayubi military dictatorship did more harm to the feeling of unity and resistance among the Bengalees than was there in 1954. The top crust of Bengali middle

class became beneficiaries to Ayubi doles of industry and jobs. Through the Writers' Guild, Pakistan Council, National Bureau of Reconstruction and other such agencies a broad section of Bengali intellectuals were bought out — with quite a bevy of unbelievable names in that rank. And then a whole political line-up, led by no less a heavyweight than Moulana Bhashani himself, started vigorous work as defenders of Ayub — all because Ayub was helping China to open a vitally needed channel to the United States.

If things were delayed for a year more, the Six Points, almost a sacrilege in '66, would have been open revolt in '67 or '68 and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman could have

been hanged on charge of treason with not many shedding tears over his loss. The timing of launching the Six Points was most opportune, considering another key factor in the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh.

The Ayubi dictatorship, benign to many because of the interest it took in the industrialisation of East Pakistan, was well set by 1960 to continue unchallenged up to any length of time if not eternity. But the challenge did come and from a most unlikely quarter. It came even before the 'Decade of Development' had even completed its third year. The whole world was preparing to celebrate the centenary of Rabindranath Tagore which fell on May 7, 1961. Cultural activists in East Pakistan, those that were active in the Language Movement and the Jukto Front electoral revolution, the historic Purbha Pakistan Sahitya Sammelan and the Kagmari Cultural Conference — got down to execute a befitting centenary festival. This must, by quality and magnitude, scale of participation and social impact, give the military dictatorship a jolt, so planned the activists. The administration feared as much and was on the point of cracking down on the preparations. At the last moment, on May 7 morning, the provincial government decided to relent. And the celebrations, continuing for about a month all over the then East Pakistan worked alchemy in the Bengali minds. And it became the fountainhead of subsequent cultural actions that congealed into one great movement, thanks to the epoch-changing works of Chhayannaut, the cultural group.

The last great, one-Pakistan influence on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his mentor Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy was dead two years before

the Six Points came. The cultural movement, by now manifest both in literature and the arts but most forcefully in the multitude of people's turning to their Bengali roots in culture in search of their true identity, seemed to have struck a chord in the Sheikh's mind.

The cultural resurgence made it easy for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to go for the Six Points uncompromisingly. And the same continued to work on him to shake loose the Muslim League moorings in him that tied him to the Two-nation Theory. Once this article of faith that was at the root of breaking India into two was brought into question, the fetters that bound a man's intellect and emotions, conscience and power of love to a Pakistani obsession, tended to lose hold. There may not have been a particular moment — as in Rabindranath's case of *Nirjhore Shapnobango* — at which the irrationality of the two-nation theory dawned on him. It is more likely that he saw light over a period spanning months and may be years. It is almost a certainty that on his journey towards a nationalism based on language and culture rather than on religion or even territory, he was both influenced and sustained by the cultural movement.

This can be well construed by personal and intimate details of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's going about his day's business specially after his release from the Agartala conspiracy case detention. The country was in a turmoil. And he was all the time humming some tune — mostly of some Rabindrasangeet. He seemed to be absorbing culture like desiccators absorb humidity. Politicians of the rightist communalist persuasion were never enamoured of culture. The Awami League leaders — all of them — were heirs to that tradition. He broke away from it.

We were talking on the

transformation of the Six Points into a full-scale War of Liberation for carving out an independent nation. Possibly from among the sprawling line-up of Awami League political leaders who had graduated from Muslim League philosophy to one caring more for the Bengalee people's interest but changing little in other respects, the Sheikh was first to know clearly in his mind that something more than disparity was wrong with Pakistan.

Democracy was an old issue with the Bengalees in the Pakistan that was. The great Language Movement was, in the garbs of a cultural struggle, a democratic fight in truth. From then on all of the numerous political movements had democracy as its goal. Democracy alone couldn't possibly answer the needs of his people. Pakistan was more fundamentally flawed than by the absence of democracy which was but a state of governance. The realisation was dawning upon him slowly but surely. And that was Six Points moving towards the War of Liberation.

When two politics respectively based on realising one's just rights in the material and power aspects of the state and the cultural aspect of the society fused into one, as it happened all through the sixties, it should become irresistible at least in the matter of opening one's eyes towards matters never thought to be important enough to care. By end of '69 a considerable section of the intellectuals as also some politician had been mentally weaned away from Pakistan — something that must have happened to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at least four years before that.

This conjectural picture of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is borne out well by the stance he took on the question of making Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic. His forceful spurning of proposals made

to this effect by Colonel Gaddafi and King Faisal is a study in diplomatic rebuttal and for the Bengalee people a wonderful legacy that celebrates state secularism. That went to show how deep in his mind he was convinced of the one-nation-ness of his people belonging as they do to divergent religious denominations. He was more Muslim than many preachers of the Islamic faith and yet was the stoutest defender of the secular state binding a pluralistic society.

There is another and a very underappreciated aspect of Mujib's metamorphosis from a patriotic Pakistani of 1946 to a burgeoning Bengali nationalist of 1966. By the time Six Points was proposed leftist prescriptions of class war and revolution founding the dictatorship of the proletariat had gone out of circulation. Mainstream parties of socialist persuasion were coming close to the AL position. Mujib, as a disciple of Suhrawardy, was an anti-communist die-hard. What made him to move away from worshipping bourgeois democracy and incline towards socialism? This growing inclination was not dictated to him by any political necessity. Inclusion of socialism as a goal in the AL manifesto in the sixties and making socialism one of the four state principles of Bangladesh in 1972 speaks of his growing faith in socialism as an instrument of raising the whole people together out of the morass of poverty and into a just and egalitarian society. In this he was coming close to the great statement of the time, Nehru and Allende, Neyerere and Nasser.

The sixties made Sheikh Mujibur Rahman what he reached out to be and remain as ever to a patriotic Bengalee. The Bangabandhu. And he made the sixties what it came to be. He tried to live his tenets — democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism. He paid with his life for this.



James Bond
by Ian Fleming
drawing by Frank



TOM and JERRY

