

Feature

Development

# YEAR OF THE GIRL CHILD 1990 A Whimpering End ?

Sabah Chowdhury

*Did we really need a Year and then subsequently a decade to tell us that we mistreat women and other physically vulnerable ones ?*



A beaming, innocent smile of a Bangladeshi girl. Will the smile still be there on her face tomorrow ?

—Star Photo.

A few months ago, one English daily here carried the photo of a young girl being beaten up by a group of self-declared defender of public morals. It showed her face, twisted in pain and shame, a testimony to the kind of value we give to the status or position of a person officially vulnerable, but privately a kind of easy-to-hit beings, in the same category as stray dogs and thieves caught in the street.

We are not in the business of arguing in favour of women who let norms of public decency desert them for whatever reasons they may be but protesting beating a person and more so a woman is definitely something we should be making our business. This girl can't have been far beyond the teens and if she was not more than twenty was actually a girl child by the definition declared by the SAARC countries.

But then child beating, wife beating and other kinds of domestic violence is so common that we raise our eyebrows only when some one comes and does it on our behalf. Did we really need a Year and then subsequently a decade to tell us that we mistreat women and other physically vulnerable ones ?

Perhaps we do. After all unless a big noise is created we simply fail to remember that the girl amongst us eats less than her brother, studies even less and gets paid the least for a far greater amount of work.

All this has been lumped together in convenient donor packages, whether bilateral or UN sponsored. Perhaps it is the fate of all donor driven countries that even a moral attitude has to be donor inspired. We can't take moral stands unless we sign memorandums of understanding, and

ships the woman who gives it all to make way for the man ? 1990 was celebrated by the SAARC countries as the Year of the Girl Child. The observance carried with it the frank admission that things were not just wrong but very wrong with the status of women in South Asia. And the position was specially vulnerable when it came to the situation of the little girl.

Who is this little girl anyway ? In Bangladesh, she is the one who gets a rough deal soon after her birth and things get worse as the years go by. Isolated achievements by individuals in many of the SAARC countries are offset by the dismal scenario which society consigns to the female within it. And all this is done silently when within the family and with loud chants of approval when this discrimination is societal.

1990 came, saw and left without much of a conquest. The SAARC countries have declared the 90s as the decade of the girl child but that almost seems and excuse to extend the date so that more activities can be added to the incomplete agenda of finding liberation for the South Asian girl.

Commitment can't be matched by performance either one of the most flaunted public statement of 1990 was the governmental announcement of free education for the girl upto class 8. The programme has been suspended for fund constraints. Well, we are hurt but not surprised because as always the budgetary axe first falls on the girl's unprotected head.

Perhaps we should celebrate the SAARC Year of making promises. The UN Decade of Pious Wishes and so on. At least they have a strong chance of coming true. And forgive our bitterness, the one luxury we South Asian women have claimed for ourselves.

Sabah Chowdhury is a Staff Writer of The Star

NEW DELHI : Among every 20 children born in India, at least three do not get a chance to live up to five years age. What is happening to those who survive?

In the poor Indian households, children who are tough enough to fight malnutrition - which according to the UNICEF is the biggest killer of children in developing countries - enter the labour market instead of schools which their parents cannot afford for them. In the Indian upper and middle class families however, the children appear to be emerging as a powerful lobby to pressure their parents - thanks to the omnipotence of the 'idiot box' to which they are exposed. While the UNICEF and other organizations concerned with children have quite rightly concentrated on the plight of the poor children in the developing countries, a few groups and sociologists in India are trying to draw our attention to the way the urban middle class children are being brought up under the influence of the all pervading media and advertisement campaigns.

It is important to study this aspect since it is these children from the educated and privileged middle class homes who will grow up to be future politicians and bureaucrats, businessmen and professionals who will continue for quite some time at least, to decisively influence the policies and programmes of the Indian state.

Indian child psychiatrists and media persons have come out with interesting findings about children's responses to TV programmes and advertisements in middle class homes. They indicate that children are becoming decision makers regarding purchases not just for sweets and chocolates, but also for purchases of clothing, the type of two wheelers and also food. Advertisements on TV prompt a lot of kids to decide what they want to do with their

# Indian TV Commercials Play on Children's Innocence

by Sumanta Banerjee  
Special to The Star

pocket money which ranges from Rs 44 (app. \$2-1/2) per month in a city like Delhi to Rs 29 (about \$2) in smaller towns.

The success of new brands of cold drinks, Maggi Noodles and Cadbury Chocolates has shown that the child can be reached effectively through advertisements on TV. Television emerges supreme among all the media with 42% of viewers at prime time being children under 14. According to the children's Media Survey, undertaken in 1989 by a media organization in 16 representative cities all over India, children watch TV almost every day.

## The adverse impact of the all-pervading TV commercials on the Indian children is leading them to selfish pursuits.

What is the effect of these advertisements on the children? Dr Uma Krishnamurthy, a child psychiatrist at a semi-

underprivileged (who form the majority in a poor country like India) and the need for changing their socio-economic status. The slogans used for advertisements of consumer goods are cleverly worded like: "Everybody has one", "Other mothers give their children", "Why can't I have one?" They inspire the children to pressure their parents who in turn, buffeted by guilt, are ready to pamper their children, oblivious of their future responsibilities. If the trend continues, today's children from upper and middle class Indian homes will grow up to be people following selfish

Much depends on the middle class parents. Many among them have toiled their way up from humble beginnings to their present position of well-being in their attitude towards their children they seem to suffer from a certain guilt feeling: "I never had it so good; at least let my children enjoy life". The 'good life' for their children means their abdication of parental obligations as well as social responsibilities, and allowing the children to be swayed by the 'good things' offered by a consumerist society. Exploited by the commercial ads, the children in their turn exploit their parents.

Sumanta Banerjee, a noted Indian writer has served on the staff of The Statesman, Calcutta, and the Manila-based Depthnews. He is the author of a number of books on issues like child labour in Asia and the Nazalite movement.

Architect of the Green Revolution, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, the Albert Einstein Science Award in 1986 and Doctor of science degrees from 30 universities, Dr Monkomu Sambasivan Swaminathan's purpose in life has been simply to find ways of feeding the hungry.

In an age in which around half the world's population is undernourished, he could be described as a prophet - a scientific one - of our time.

Born in India in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, unlike many Indians of his generation who remained in the West after completing their education there, he returned home.

In 1954, two years after gaining his science doctorate at Cambridge University, for which he carried out research at universities in Holland and the US, he was working at India's Central Rice Research Institute at Cuttack in Orissa.

It was there that he began to play a key role in the technical breakthroughs that have won him the title of Architect of the Green Revolution. "It was, he explains, a reaction to the severe food crisis in India in the late 1950s and during the 1960s.

# A Green Scientific Sage In an Age of Hunger

*Simply finding ways of feeding the hungry is the life purpose of Dr. Monkomu Sambasivan Swaminathan. Known as architect of the Green Revolution and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, he now spends much of his time managing a sea-to-land project in his home state of Tamil Nadu.*

By SHEILA LEWENHAK

"Western countries - particularly the United States - envisaged that India would always be dependent on food imports. We not only had high population growth, but our people were increasing food production by encroaching on forest land.

"We responded to these problems by developing new genetic strains of rice and wheat, the high yield varieties." Within a few years the success of these HYVs, as they

shortages, benefitted least from HYVs.

Women in particular had to do far more work to produce the multiple harvests from these new strains of grain. In response to these criticisms and the then Indian Government's policies, Swaminathan and his colleagues modified their policies to reach the rural poor.

He is now applying all of the experience he has gained over the last 30 years into his latest project near Madras, capital of his home state. It involves 25,000 families in an integrated sea-to-land scheme on land donated by the state government. The central government supports the scientific research side.

Here, modern agricultural techniques, Gandhian stress on rural self-sufficiency and the newfound worldwide concern for conserving the environment are synthesised.

Above all, it is founded on Swaminathan's belief that agriculture rather than industry should be the cornerstone of development policy: that the ultimate priority must be to ensure that everyone is fed properly.

A small experiment with U-shaped earth walls to trap rain water has caught on like wildfire and enabled the peasants of Burkina Faso in North Africa to transform the Sahel region from an arid wasteland into the rich agricultural land it once was.

The experiment began in the northern province of Yatenga in 1977, inspired by Oxfam, but carried out by the peasants themselves under traditional groupings. They built earth walls to trap rain run-off for tree seedlings planted within them.

Called a diguette, the line of stones laid along a contour line improved water penetration and doubled crop yields, according to a new Oxfam report by Robin Sharp.

Three years after the first diguettes were built in the village of Baszaido, there was tall grass everywhere and a ripening crop in sharp contrast to barren stretches that existed before.

The report, entitled Burkina-New Life for the Sahel?, describes the courageous and resourceful way peasants are applying grassroots technology to fight desertification that threatened to eat up the whole

# Peasants Score Hat-trick Against Desertification

country.

In Mossi peasants organised themselves into "naam" groups, traditional village bodies of young people which undertook communal activities. This spread to other areas as farmers improved on the diguette system by digging compost, tree planting and putting goats into enclosures.

The government and international aid agencies took up the example, and more than 5,000 hectares are now cultivated this way in the Yatenga province alone. Everywhere, the result has been higher food production.

Although Burkina Faso is

semi-arid and highly vulnerable to drought, it produced a record cereal crop of 1.75 million tonnes in 1987. Output was even higher in 1988.

Says Sharp: "From 1983-1987 food production grew by more than seven per cent in striking contrast with the negative trends in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole."

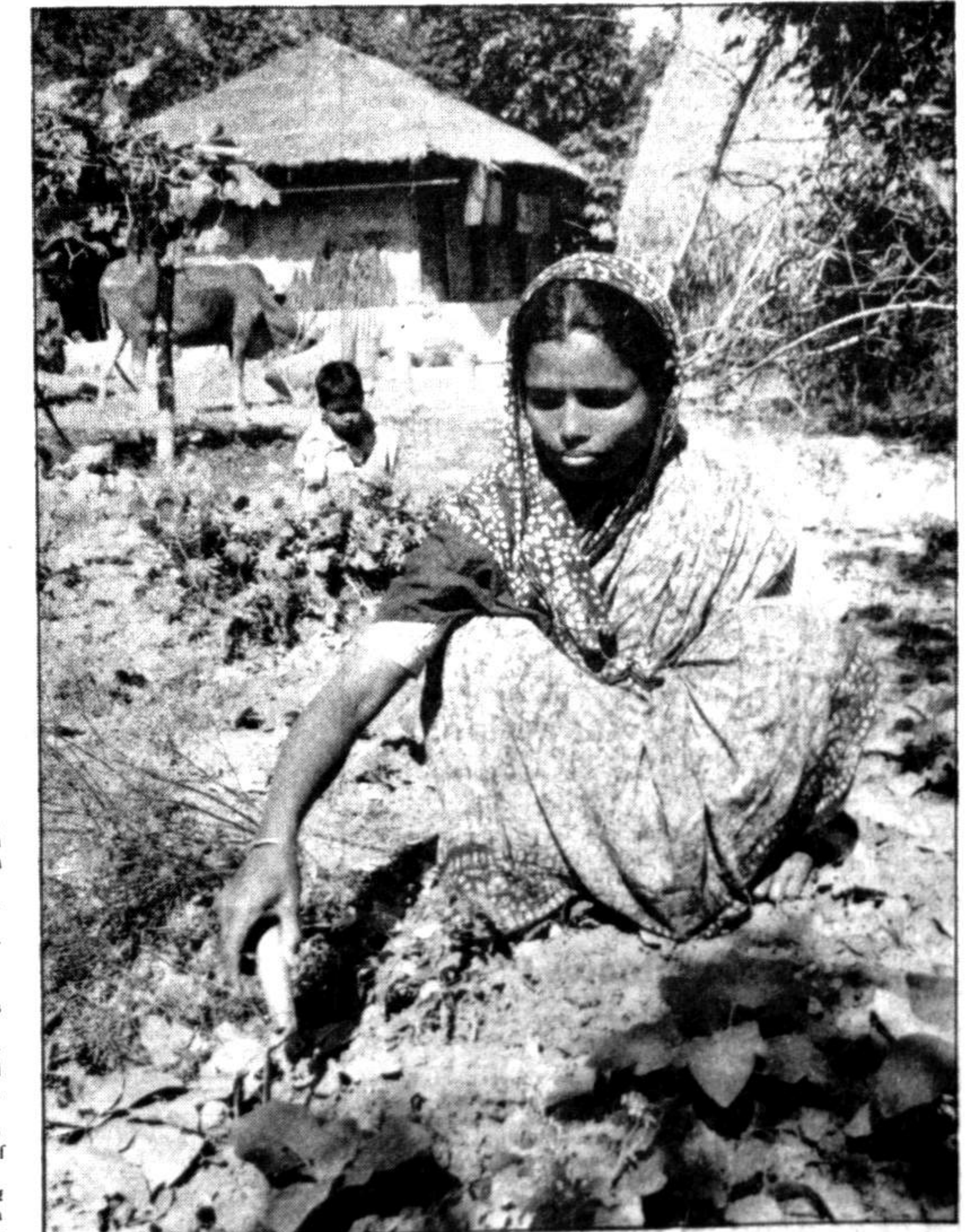
To encourage the peasants Captain Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's charismatic and visionary President assassinated in 1987, came up with the People's Development Programme (PDP) in 1983. Through it peasants built hundreds of schools, homes and

dispensaries in less than two years.

Sharp says: "Nearly 1,000 new wells and boreholes as well as 260 dams meant that water supplies available rose from under nine million tons in 1983 to 300 million tons in 1986."

The remarkable thing about Burkina Faso's success, says the report, is that it has come not from the development gurus' large scale solutions but from grassroots initiative.

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Grow more, eat more. The Grameen Bank offers services in such areas as health, nutrition and horticulture. It encourages its members to start kitchen gardens, making sure they are provided with a variety of seeds for that purpose. Photo shows a village woman tending her vegetable garden, ostensibly to eat plenty of it and sell the surplus.

# Donkey-powered Ploughs: A Rural Revolution

Farmers who depend on rainfall instead of irrigation in the semi-arid environment of Western Sudan are not presented with a lot of possibilities for innovation. Nor are they in a position to take risks.

No wonder then that introducing a technological innovation farming here is more than just a matter of handing farmers the technology.

As efforts to convince farmers in Darfur, the westernmost province of Northern Sudan, to use donkeys to pull a new kind of plough have shown, the acceptability of new technology depends simply on whether the farmers think it will be of any use to them.

Most important is avoiding the imposition of high technology from above. To be successful, innovation s have to be developed at the local level and designed to suit the needs of the community.

The kebabiya Smallholders Project, sponsored by Oxfam, is located in Darfur, a remote region of Western Sudan some 155 kilometres west of El Fasher.

The project was set up with the goal of helping the most disadvantaged cultivators in the area, namely those practicing rain-fed subsistence agriculture. Traditionally most cultivation in the area was done by hand, instead of through the use of animal traction.

Because rainfall has declined in recent years, farmers dependent on rainfed agriculture and livestock have seen their livelihoods threatened. That made it even more urgent to improve the local farming

*Appropriate technology and community involvement are the catch phrases so often wielded by development experts, but a grassroots project in Darfur, Western Sudan has combined the two. Two innovative donkey-pulled plough designs have caught on among local farmers as cheap alternatives to the camel-pulled model used by richer farmers.*

methods.

Both rainfed and irrigation methods are used for cultivation in the area. Rainfed agriculture is used for growing subsistence crops such as millet and sorghum recently, for groundnuts which have been introduced as a cash crop.

Camels have been used for animal traction by richer farmers for some time but many smallholders were eager to find an affordable alternative to the camel plough, which would both reduce human labour and increase productivity.

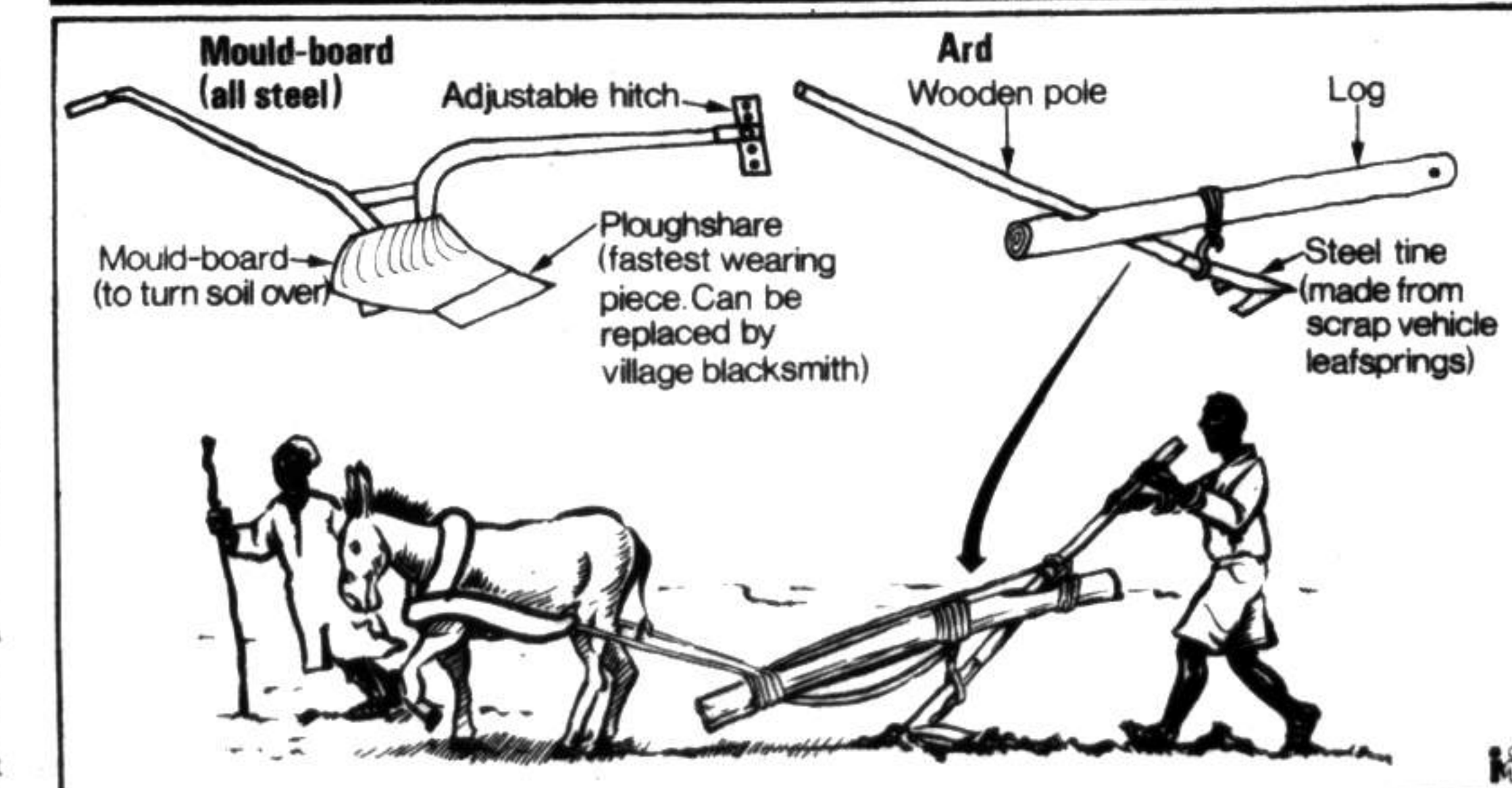
Several socio-economic studies in the area suggested that donkeys were possible alternative to camels, since about 70 per cent of house-

holds were found to own at least one donkey, which is generally used as a pack animal, for transport and fetching water.

In early 1988, the British-based Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) was approached by the Energy Research Council of Sudan to provide technical assistance with development of animal traction technologies in Western Sudan. Links were made with several rural development projects in the region and this eventually developed into a longer-term input on the Oxfam project.

Three blacksmiths have now been trained to manufacture ploughs which would otherwise have to be imported

## Two ploughs: 'small is beautiful'



at substantial cost from Nyala town, some 360 kilometres to the south.

At first, work focussed on designing a scaled-down version of the traditional camel plough, an all-steel mould-board plough. But while the mould-board plough was taken up enthusiastically by the farmers, its heavy, all-steel design was actually better suited for use in damper, heavier soils than those found in the kebabiya area. It is also heavy and awkward to handle and being made entirely from steel, is relatively expensive.

The search for alternative plough designs better suited to the area this year turned up a new model, based on an arid design that can be traced back to the earliest days of agriculture in the Nile Valley.

The arid design works on the same principle as a chisel plough, which is widely used in Europe. It is cheaper than the mould-board because steel is only used for the tine, which digs into the ground. The main frame is made of wood.

That also makes the plough lighter and easier to handle.

Rather than slipping over the soil, as the mould-board plough does, it merely cracks it, reducing soil moisture loss but still facilitating water infiltration. While not a replacement for the mould-board plough, the arid design gives farmers more choice.

Getting the wood out to farmers is a key component of this project.

Workers trained in using the plough and feeding and training of donkeys are selected by the local community rather than being brought in from outside.

In the past two years, 200 mould-board ploughs were produced by local blacksmiths.

GEMINI NEWS