

# Meena THE GIRL CHILD IN SOUTH ASIA

**A STAR IS BORN.** "Please can I go to school?" Meena asks her parents appealingly. "Girls don't need to go to school," her father replies. For most girls in South Asia this would be the end of the story. But in this case, it is just the beginning of the story of a lively and determined little girl called Meena.

Meena is the enchanting heroine of a cartoon film series being developed by UNICEF with government and NGO partners in South Asia. This film series is part of a set of communication materials which aim to promote the status of the girl child in South Asia. The stories about Meena are full of entertaining adventure and comedy, but at their heart lie the real-life problems faced by female children. They show how girls and their families can transform their lives, developing problem-solving and communication skills.



Meena is a symbol for the girl child in South Asia. She speaks to us directly of the girl child's needs for equal treatment and opportunities. This image from the first poster gives Meena's appeal: "Send your girls to school."

## DECADE OF THE GIRL CHILD.

The 1990s have been declared the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child. In the countries of South Asia female children face discrimination in many aspects of their lives. The governments recognise that the future of this region depends on improving the status of girls and women so that they can play a more active role in the development of their communities and countries.

Meena can be seen as a symbol for the girl child. She has an infectious zest for life and a clear vision of what her future can hold. Through the film series we see Meena fulfilling her potential. It suggests that all girls have this potential if only they are given the opportunities. Meena represents a dynamic role model for female children and a powerful advocate for their cause. The project has received financial assistance from the Government of Norway.



This South Asian version of Meena was created by combining designs from the different countries.

## HOW THE SOUTH ASIAN MEENA GREW

While Meena was conceived in Bangladesh, the project represents an exciting joint venture for South Asia. The countries taking a leading role are Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. Meena's development has only been possible through the strong spirit of cooperation and commitment throughout the region. A team of UNICEF and government communication and information officers from these countries along with artists, animators and media specialists have worked together to create the special South Asian designs for Meena.

Artists from each country produced images for Meena, her family and her village. In Bangladesh eminent artists such as Mustafa Monowar, Rafiqun Nabi, Mahiuddin Faruque and Shishir Bhattacharjee all generously contributed some delightful designs.

These illustrations gave inspiration for creating the characters for the South Asian context. Ram Mohan, the leading animator in India, then combined these designs into the cast of characters for the film series. These models emphasised the common elements of the different cultures and minimised the discrepancies. Meena and her family came alive as characters on Ram Mohan's drawing board. When these designs were pre-tested, people declared that Meena came from their country - that Meena was one of their little girls.



## WORKING WITH HANNA-BARBERA

Hanna-Barbera Productions, the world famous animation studios and creators of characters like Tom and Jerry and the Flintstones, are giving generous support to the Meena Project. The first pilot episode was produced by Hanna-Barbera in their Fil-Cartoons studios in Manila. Hanna-Barbera's expertise gave the cartoon film delightful elements of humour. Mithu, Meena's comic parrot, came alive as a hilarious character. Artists from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, went to Manila for training in animation. There they learnt all the stages in the process of animation production. The project also aims to encourage the development of animation skills in the region.

Hanna-Barbera's studios in Manila and Ram Mohan's studios in Bombay will co-produce 12 more episodes of the Meena series during 1993 and 1994.

## RESEARCHING MEENA

The project is based on an extensive programme of research. Each film episode is pre-tested at two stages in rural and urban areas in all four countries. The first episode, "Meena: Count Your Chickens", was also field tested after the animation was completed. This was one of the largest qualitative research programmes ever undertaken in South Asia, involving 2600 respondents in four countries. The highly positive results indicated Meena's success in communicating to people across the region. The animation fascinated and entertained audiences of all ages. They identified with the characters and situations and later discussed the issues very seriously. According to the independent researchers, the potential of Meena as a communication tool is "unlimited".



Researchers in Nepal test the first Meena film, comic book and poster with children.

