

The Toon Who Came of Age

by Sabir Mustafa

Within the space of eight years, Meena has turned from a mere flicker in the animator's imagination into a symbol for the girl child, inspirational and enchanting.

A girl doesn't need to go to school, she says to her mother. She needs to stay at home to help her mother with chores, says the father. What is the point of her learning to read and write since she will have to look after her husband's home in a few years anyway? asks the grandmother. The family can be from anywhere in rural South Asia. From the banks of the Ganges to the foothills of the Himalayas to the shores of the Bay of Bengal, stories about children, particularly discrimination faced by girls, have remained the same for centuries.

seven member-states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) declared the 1990s to be the Decade of the Girl Child.

The animated series forms the core of the Meena Communication Initiative (MCI) which grew out of the Saarc Decade of the Girl Child. The idea of MCI is not to show Meena as a super-heroine who can perform miracles, but to raise awareness in communities about the need to give girls and boys equal opportunities.

This meant projecting Meena as an intelligent girl who establishes her rights through gentle persuasion. Meena acts as a "wake-up call" for her parents, by showing that she is as much an asset as her brother Raju, if she would only have the same education opportunities and same care for her health and well-being.

The first Meena episode was ready for screening in 1992, and

by 1998, all 13 of the original series had been produced. Between 1993 and 1995, Meena episodes dealing with such diverse issues as education, girls' work load, early marriage, dowry etc, were broadcast over national television and radio networks in Saarc countries.

But the MCI is much more than just a series of cartoons. It involves development of supplementary materials such as comic books, dissemination and training. Distribution of the comic books brought non-formal and formal educational institutions and NGOs into the partnership.

An innovation took place early in 1998 when further research into audience response to the Meena series raised some critical questions. It was evident children enjoyed Meena as a cartoon character, but the core messages were getting lost. Many of the children could not identify with Meena as the girl

appeared as mature as a grown-up and was dealing with mainly adult issues.

This led to production of a number of new products and re-packaging of some existing materials.

This time, the help of Barbara Kolucki, the renowned programme director of US television series, Sesame Street, was obtained. Kolucki engaged a whole host of local scriptwriters and animators and conducted workshops to develop the new products.

The core messages that the products sought to convey deal with development of self-esteem, gender equity, inclusion of all children, character identification and the simple idea that learning is fun.

The idea was to make Meena more accessible to children of different categories of intellect. Special attention was also paid to make Meena relevant to all children, especially those in difficult situations such as children with disabilities, hard-to-reach children and those from the hill tracts.

These new products include script for audio cassettes, comic books, posters, games, songs, rhymes, quiz books, conversation charts, dramas etc. Four facilitators' guides, for formal school teachers and non-formal teachers, parents and elder children, were also developed to help these target groups effectively use the Meena communication materials.

Eight of the existing 13 animated films were re-packaged, to emphasize the message that Meena is one of them. The formats were altered to encourage debate and appeal to critical viewers.

The innovations have injected an added element of vitality and greater relevance into Meena materials, and a star is being re-born.

Within the space of eight years, Meena has turned from a mere flicker in the animator's imagination into a symbol for the girl child, inspirational and enchanting. She is the first South Asian "toon" character to make it to true stardom, because her stories reflect the stories of those in her audience right across the sub-continent.



First Practice, Then Preach

by Arifa Ghani

The educational institutions in our country are in a state of serious decline. It is high time we righted the situation or our own destruction could very well be at hand. The first thing we must do is to discourage active politics in the institutions since all administrative activities seem to have a link with national politics.

HUMAN beings are a species which loves to give advice, sermonise or preach, order, moralise, lecture and admonish. But very few people are seen to actually practice what they preach. Teachers are one class of the human species who are and always have been the directors of our lives. They hold the power to make or break a person morally. Teachers are the backbone of a society. They are the makers of the country's future. It is their products who ultimately exercise great influence on the development of a nation. At one time, not very long ago, teachers were held in great esteem, an esteem which almost equaled that held for God. The picture, however, has changed so drastically that it is impossible to believe. Teachers, and I am talking about the sincere and dedicated teachers, who, incidentally, still exist, are almost ashamed to own up to their profession.

examine, as teachers, whether we have been following our own code of conduct. As a recently recruited member of the teaching community, I have idealistic dreams. For me, as a student, the teacher could do no wrong. I would hear all kinds of rumours about the teachers but I could not bring myself to believe them. How on earth, I would ask myself, could a teacher engage in such things as I heard? It just was not possible. Luckily, I studied in a non-residential university and thus my contact with my teachers was limited to the classroom and class hours. But for the residential university student, like the Jahangirnagarians who have to live compulsorily on campus, the teacher-student relationship is a 24-hour one. If a student is sick, the teacher arranges treatment; if the food is not up to standard, the teacher is complained to; if a student's personal relationship is troubling him or her, the teacher is asked to help; if the student is having problems with studies, the teacher is asked for advice; if a get-together or cultural function is arranged, the teacher takes an active role; if a student wants career advice, the teacher is asked for suggestions. The list is endless as students turn to teachers for every necessity that they would normally turn to parents for.

In order to effectively carry out these duties successfully, the teacher has to be a role model. When I came into the teaching profession, my head was full of dreams and ideas. I felt honoured to have been accepted into this community. But gradually, as time went by, I began to grow disillusioned. Jahangirnagar University, being, as I have described, a residential university, I came into much closer contact with the students than I did with my teachers as a student. The atmosphere was informal, the teachers very friendly with the students and a cordial relationship prevailed, or so it seemed. I was shocked to see at one time that students did not hold their teachers in the same esteem as we had done. Students spoke disrespectfully of one teacher in the presence of another. I could not understand how students could ever get the guts or the desire to speak of a teacher in that way. But I soon discovered the

cause. The cause lay, of course, at the door of the teacher. If a teacher speaks disparagingly of his or her colleague in front of or to the students, it is only natural that the students will assume that it is okay for them to talk like that too. Students may of course complain about any irregularities in their academic life but there is a language for that. I have heard with my own ears students using vulgar and unacceptable language in describing the actions of teachers for which I had to severely chastise them. If the teacher had not spoken in this way, the student would never have had the guts to speak like this either. The first important lesson we must put into practice, therefore, is to learn to respect our colleagues and, at least, not to deprecate them in front of students no matter how we may personally dislike a person. It is important that students be kept at their studies so that they have no time to think about other unacceptable activities. Everyone knows that an idle mind is the devil's workshop. Naturally, if the main purpose of studying in an educational institution is not fulfilled, students will turn to other peripheral activities which may have very severe consequences, as we have seen. Teachers, again, must effect this. It is important that we learn to be punctual and sincere in taking our assigned classes. If we are sincere, the students, by example, will also become sincere. When a student arrives early in the morning all set to start the day with a refreshing lecture and finds that the teacher is absent and this continues for the next two periods, how then can we expect to find the students during the last period? They have already become bored and irritated and left in search of greener pastures.

Politics is another thing which has had a disastrous effect on educational institutions in our country. There was a time when the first class student became the leader of a group. It was the ideal student who engaged in politics as it was a way to effect a transformation to their conditions. Today, the picture is quite different. It is the student who has nothing better to do that gets involved in politics. He or she

(usually it is a he) gets into politics for the material benefits it will reap. Sometimes, of course, involvement is by accident or force. Whatever the case may be, the end result is the same — a chaotic turnout. Political parties in the universities and colleges are the student bodies of the greater groups of national politics. Every conscious adult individual naturally has his or her own political viewpoints. Unfortunately there are individuals who are fanatical in their support. Teachers are no exceptions. It has been seen that some teachers are so actively involved in politics that they forget their primary duties as a teacher. The teacher also encourages the activities of the student faction of the party which he supports. As such, the students of that particular group take advantages from the teacher in question who is just as willing to supply their demands because it might be personally beneficial.

The educational institutions in our country are in a state of serious decline. It is high time we righted the situation or our own destruction could very well be at hand. The first thing we must do is to discourage active politics in the institutions since all administrative activities seem to have a link with national politics. Politics may be allowed but they should have very little to do with the major parties or these parties should not be allowed to meddle in the affairs of the student groups. The election system for administrative posts should also be changed. Rather, such posts could be rotated among the senior professors of the university and the three-year duration lessened to two years so that all professors get a chance. Above all, however, all teachers need to look into their hearts and examine themselves first. Are they properly executing the serious responsibilities that they accept the minute they enter the teaching profession? Teachers, being teachers, are expected to know their duties and execute them conscientiously. They are the guides. They cannot be guided. What we need is an individual awakening. If you are a teacher, shoulder your responsibilities as a teacher. If you cannot, leave the profession to those who can. We must save our future.

by Jim Davis



A Disabled but Dynamic Writer Dwells on Her Dreams

by Fayza Haq

I feel like a child myself and I want to 'grow up quick'. I want to 'grow up' tomorrow, and thus the frustration enters. The dreams tell me that my problems will sort out ultimately and I will regain my mental balance.



Satya Mocharla

SATYA Mocharla, who had been an assistant editor of an Indian magazine at one time, and is now writing a book on her dreams, and is into women's issues, will be leaving Dhaka shortly after her fairly long stay in Bangladesh with her husband Björn Eder (of the Bangladesh International Red Cross & Red Crescent Society). Speaking to 'The Daily Star', she explained her disabilities, her failure to see in the sunlight without glasses, and inability to walk or move effortlessly. Born in Orissa in '44, she is in her mid-fifties. Her limbs are not very active today, as she was given the wrong medicines

for an ailment. "My first handicap occurred when I was born. The left hand was disabled at birth. The hand was paralysed. Later, 14 years back, when I was in Madras, with Björn — we have been living together for 20 years now — I had a slight infection and fever and according to the doctor's prescription, I took sulphur bacterium, three tablets a day. I began having reactions after two days, and by the time I went to the hospital, I lost my skin normalcy. There was internal bleeding, my nails were lost; my tear ducts failed to function; and the hospital authorities told me immediately that all these problems were a reaction to the drugs. While I was recovering, I had a left brain clot, so that my speech was damaged to such an extent that I could not then speak a single word in any language, and the right part of my body got paralysed. Now, even today, I cannot use my right hand and have to be careful with my right leg."

Asked what medicines Satya was taking at the moment, she replied, "I am not taking any medicines or massage or heat therapy here in Bangladesh. After the mishap, we immediately moved to Sweden, where I stayed for a year in a rehabilitation clinic, and then visited the same place for a year more, during the day. I exercised my muscles. This has helped somewhat but not completely."

Explaining how she writes, Satya elaborates, "I use a computer into which I speak and that writes for me. This is little bit complicated as the voice control is not accepting my accent and so I am still struggling." Asked why she does not get someone to take down dictations, Satya adds promptly, "Yes, I am doing that. At first, two years ago, I had a student from the Business Administration, DU, to do this job. This helper's name is Tapa and she is about 25 years old, but now she is too busy with her Master's degree. Now I have a young man from the same department of DU, called Tapan. Lately, he too has had to stop giving me time because of his studies at the university. I paid them roughly Tk 30,000 for all the assistance that I've had in this manner. The girl was not computer literate but the boy was. They were extremely pleasant. My speech and grammar gets difficult for the computer to catch up with, so I find it somewhat complex to work on my own. Added to that, my eyes give trouble, as they are photo-sensitive. The name of this book is 'Flying Tree' and it comprises 1,500 manuscript pages."

Dwelling on the theme, plot and characters of the book, Satya elaborates, "It is difficult to explain. After two years of my illness I feel unbalanced. I deal with my own son, who is now settled in USA, and has two children of his own. He is an issue by my earlier marriage to a South Indian teacher; and there are Björn's two children as well. Jealousy arose from the fact that I could not accept children in general surpassing me. This is a part of my unbalanced existence. Maybe I want to grow up myself and cannot with others developing too and perhaps excelling me. I feel like a child myself and I want to 'grow up quick'. I want to 'grow up' tomorrow, and thus the frustration enters. The dreams tell me that my problems will sort out ultimately and I will regain my mental balance. In my book I attempt to interpret my dreams. These dreams are interpreted according to Jung whose psychology I learnt at a psychology seminar."

"I cannot express myself perfectly in speech and am frustrated. I realised that this is not my actual personality. I asked myself 'How on earth can I recover and use my brain?' I have travelled, as you know, east Asian countries, and that gives me some background of strength. My religion helps, though I do not say my prayers regularly. I pray to my favourite god Vishnu, whose temple is situated in Trupati (India), a 100 miles from Madras; but as a Hindu I pray to many other gods too. I asked Vishnu to show me the way out of the darkness of my existence. Next, I had a dream that I could not exactly understand, but I remembered it. After three days of this particular dream, I heard a voice from within — in a very rich male voice — telling me to meditate more. It said 'If you do not meditate you can never climb out of the pit'. I dreamt and meditated, and I remembered my dreams, so as to put them on paper for others to read."

The book has the stream of consciousness technique. I searched and groped for vocabulary to express myself. The ultimate result is that these dreams are like a psychological therapy for my brain damage, plus a media through which I can hopefully recover my language and confidence in myself. My uncertainties, problems and jealousies are all recorded in the book. People can construe what they can from their reading and make their own conclusions."

What I aim at is to write again normally and not struggle with my speech. Fourteen years ago in Madras, I began working with 'Vivekanand Patrika', which dealt with Indian social problems, and every six months it had a special issue of

400 pages. I was then married to Venkateswaran, my first husband. Many of our problems stemmed from the fact that he came from a broken home. He had psychological problems, as a consequence, when his father abandoned his mother." Satya adds.

"In The Daily Star I sent an article on a Durga Puja incident, in which there was girl teasing, and a fiction piece about a prostitute's daughter who was eventually taken away by her mother's friends to be a prostitute herself, and both these articles were printed. Earlier, in Patna, 'Aditi's' editor, Viji, asked me to interview women in different projects, such as in agriculture. One group are traditional Muslim prostitutes, who entertain their clients with 'ghazals' and 'kathak' dance. Earlier, they were mistresses of nawabs and they are reduced to their present conditions with notices of their accomplishments on the door sign. These people are prostitutes for generations together. They do not outwardly announce themselves as prostitutes as such but say that they are good in singing or dancing as professionals only. I interviewed them and mainly their children, who, in turn, told me that they wanted to escape from the situation and have formal academic qualifications like other children in their environment in India. They hanker after both school, college and university education, and wish that someone would put money aside for this purpose. This book published by 'Aditi' was called 'Caged Lives' released in a workshop in Bombay. This is the only book I wrote after I got paralysed."

"Earlier I wrote a few articles on disability. The locale was Kanpur, and these pieces were published in a Swedish magazine for handicapped people. Incidentally, there is an enormous argument about the right to euthanasia for the severely handicapped, and those in severe physical and mental agony in Sweden. In principle, the Swedes cannot die on their own will, and I wrote about this euthanasia question (this does not exist in Sweden). This was published in the biggest Swedish newspaper 'Dagens Nyheter' ('Daily News'), for which I was paid 800 Swedish crowns, incidentally. While in Bangladesh, I plan to travel to Jamalpur soon to study the life of the prostitutes there. They are serving the ladies in Bangladesh too and I have great respect for their struggle for survival in a male dominated world." Satya continues about her literary endeavours.

"The aim of my 'mantras' and meditation, which are my constant preoccupation, is to recover my handicap — the use of my limbs and tears. As I explained before, the characters in my present book are some of my relatives and friends. Unknown people of whom I have little knowledge have also entered the scene. I am the protagonist in the dreams, with gods that come to my aid. The settings are Indian and Swedish. My aim is to help others who are handicapped like myself. It is to give them courage and patience. This is meant to be a universal guidance." Satya concludes about her present book.

Satya has travelled extensively with her husband, and when asked which place was the most remarkable and memorable for her, she pauses for a while and explains, "I loved Rome because even though I am a Hindu myself, I am fascinated by Catholicism, and specially the chants in the cathedrals and churches. I respect Christianity tremendously. I admit Catholicism has its drawbacks too, when a place like Ireland has its years of conflicts and struggles. Yet I admire the religious songs; and concepts like the Virgin Mary and have great esteem for Mother Teresa's work and the architecture that Catholicism can boast of. Also, there are ancient Roman sculptures and Renaissance pieces to view and admire there."

Asked to give her comments about Bangladesh, its poverty, illiteracy and starvation, Satya maintains, "The pollution, poverty and illiteracy does not overwhelm me as I am born in India, though India has a higher rate of literacy, specially where I come from. The rest of the Subcontinent has its own share of natural disasters, so that I am used to all the tragic scenes in Bangladesh and its metropolises. However, I don't approve of human suffering, naturally. Of course, the environment is a little depressing. I cannot deny. However, I overcome my depression by listening to Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Chopin sometimes. My loving cat Kall is there too. And last, but certainly not the least, I have a very supportive and understanding companion in Björn. I want to convert all my personal depressions into a positive energy. I have written in English and Telegu all throughout and this writing helps me tremendously, as I have stressed repeatedly."

Satya is certainly a remarkable woman to have achieved so much despite her nagging problems and handicaps. Battling against odds, she has brought new hope and dreams for the afflicted and tormented. Her courage and persistence deserve universal accolades.

Cobras are being Charmed Out of Existence

Jan Khaskheli writes from Karachi

SNAKES are falling prey to smuggling, pesticides and deforestation in Pakistan, raising concern that the days of certain species could be numbered. Pakistan's Minister of Environment, Makhdoom Ahmed Mehmood, told a recent wildlife conference that the diving numbers have led the government to ban the capture and trading in reptiles. Rafiq Ahmed Rajput, field officer in the Wildlife Department of Pakistan, says the python, the subcontinent's biggest snakes, has disappeared from the southern province of Sindh. "Snake charmers kill it on the spot and sell its skin which is widely used for making bags, suitcases, jackets, and shoes," he said. The cobra, too, is targeted by snake charmers, but for a different reason: they consider the species to be the best performer. The reptile is becoming

a victim of its own popularity. Only two species — the Indian desert cobra and the central Asian cobra — remain in the mountain regions, said Munaaf Qaimkhan, an executive for the Wildlife Department in Sindh. Traditional enchanters and charmers are certainly part of the traditional streetscape in Pakistan. But officials say they are proving a danger to the snake population, not least because many are trapped for illegal export to India. Most kept in baskets away from their natural habitat die within three months. "Artificial food can't keep the snakes alive," said Urs Bahrani, who keeps 200 at his farm in Karachi and is known locally as "king of the Cobra." Bahrani believes deforestation is also causing a decline in the country's snake population.

"Some species have not been seen for ten years in Sindh," he says. Not only the charmers and trappers decimate the snake population, every year, the government's National Institute of Health (NIH) in Islamabad buys about 3,000 live snakes worth \$60,000, extract their poison to create snake-bite vaccines, then kill them. It is a practice that bothers Bahrani. He believes it would be better to farm the venom from the snakes on an ongoing basis, rather than destroy the creatures after a single use. "I was asked to supply the live snakes to NIH, but I suggested supplying the poison instead of snakes." Indeed, NIH policy on how to acquire snakebite venom for vaccines appears to contravene the Convention on International Trade in Endangered

Species (CITES), which Pakistan has signed. Under its terms, snakes are to be kept alive after their poison is taken out. As if vaccine production and hunting were not enough, the use of pesticides restricted by most of the world is widespread in rural parts of Pakistan, says zoologist Saif Hafizurrahman. The insects on which some smaller species rely for food absorb the pesticides, which thus become part of the food chain and ultimately part of the snakes' diets. The country's agro-chemical companies promote the pesticides as safe, but a study by the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council has identified milk samples with persistent organo-chlorine pesticides. Among the pesticides found in the tests are some which have been de-listed, or pronounced harmful, by Government agencies. — Gemini News

