



## Iconic Meena remains ageless at 21

TAMANNA KHAN

SEPTEMBER 24 was the 21st birthday of the most favourite girl of South Asia. She is none other than Meena, the nine-year-old village girl who through her inquisitiveness, social concerns and goodwill has won our hearts over the last 21 years. Starting out as an advocate for girl's right in the 1990s, the popular animated cartoon character has become an agent for social change today.

In recognition of the need to focus on and promote girl's rights, the 1990s were designated the Decade of the Girl Child by the governments of the SAARC countries. Meena's birth came about in the UNICEF office, Bangladesh at the same time of the Girl Child Decade when statistics showed that girls in South Asia were very disadvantaged in health, education and overall rights. Neil McKee, the then head of Programme Communication and Information Section of UNICEF Bangladesh, wrote to The Daily Star.

He said that the idea of using animated film for development came up in a conference in Prague, in the former Czechoslovakia. "I was trying to figure out how we could use animated film and comic books in Bangladesh.

In fact, as I woke up one morning a girl child character came to my mind and I began to try to sell the idea and raise the money to create her," he said.

Shamsuddin Ahmed, who was a Communication Officer of the project in the 90s, said, "She had to be a village girl about 8-10 years old with a family, father, mother, a grandmother and a younger sister and a pet."

"We needed a sweet, short name common to all the South Asian countries, and I came up with Meena. It was approved by all the seven nations - Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Maldives,

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Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka," he said.

"The pet was needed to add entertainment. Initially, it was a monkey but Sri Lankans disapproved it because monkey is considered to be sacred there," he said, adding, "India suggested a parrot which turned out to be even better as parrots can talk and go anywhere."

However, it was difficult to find an artist then who was familiar with animation in South Asia. Ram Mohan had a small studio in Bombay with some know-how on the subject. In an interview now available in the studio website, he shared how Rachel Carnegie, the Project Director of Meena Initiative, contacted him.

He described how Meena had to look like a general girl, who would be identified with all the seven South Asian countries. In fact, he had to draw Meena in different costumes like salwar kameez and lehenga or skirt blouse and shirt, duppata etc. and take these alternatives to the field, shown to focus groups and finally arrive at a figure generally accepted everywhere.

To make sure that Meena was acceptable and likeable, 200 focus groups in four countries were conducted as well as 50 interviews for each episode. In all, over 10,000 children and equal numbers of adults were estimated to have participated in the research process.

Sharing his experience, he said: "We had to keep the details minimal. It was the most difficult when it came to the women to wear. For men it was easy, we had to show a shirt and a lungi. But when it came to women, it became difficult because if we show wearing a saree she would look Indian or Bangladeshi, a salwar kameez then she would look Pakistani. So what we did was the women always had a scarf like duppata with legs folded. Or if the mother had to stand up, we would show children standing before her in order to cover the lower part of the body. So that it was not understood if it was a saree or a skirt etc. We didn't

want anyone to comment on whether he or she belongs to a particular country."

Several Bangladeshi artists including Rafiqun Nabi, Shishir Bhattacharya and Mostafa Monwar were involved in the creation of Meena. Bangladeshi artists including Shishir Bhattacharya and Mostafa Monwar were sent to Hanna-Barbara studio in Manila, Philippines where the animation was given life, reflected Shamsuddin.

In December 1992, the first episode of the Meena series Count your Chickens, was broadcast on BTV, said Neil.

The subsequent Meena series directly promoted many of the following rights enunciated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) such as:

- all rights apply to all children irrespective of the child's sex (article 2);
- both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and the development of the child (article 18);
- the right to protection from all forms of neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation (article 19);
- the right to the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness (article 24);
- the right to education (article 28); and
- the right to rest and play (article 31).

The Meena series aims not to preach about rights, but rather to enhance knowledge through discussion of the issues and to support communities and families in finding ways to fulfill their children's rights to the best of their abilities.

The five-year Meena project then continued for almost ten years. The project was at a low profile for some times, it then gained pace on 2007,

said Shamsuddin, adding how Meena today has outperformed her mandate.

Mira Mitra, focal point for Meena Communication Initiative in the UNICEF said, "Meena is now mainstreamed in several government programmes. Meena materials are used by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, Ministry of Mass and Primary Education, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Ministry of Information."

"When we created Meena in the 90s we thought of it as an initiative that could be mainstreamed with several projects," she said.

Meena's role has changed over the years. She began her journey as an advocate for girl child's right was not limited within her home. Mira said, "She listens and observes different social problems, shares it with others in her family and community and opens other people's eyes about the issues. Then adults take the responsibility to solve the problem."

A total of 27 Meena episodes have been produced till September 2013, out of which 15 were made jointly by Hanna-Barbara and Ram Mohan Studio. The first episode was translated in 30 languages of India, eight European languages, Arabic, Burmese and Chinese. Meena comic books have been produced in four languages in Bangladesh.

Today Meena along with her entire family and an extended one, is being produced in Bangladesh by Bangladeshi animation houses.

Meena character is very popular among children as well as among adults, and is seen as a positive character. It is pivotal to explore more ways using Meena in social development programmes. She is a social change agent who along with her family, extended family and community can raise children's issues that are essential to ensure rights of children.

## Meena Day observed across the country

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

WITH the theme, "Child Marriage and Child Labour can be Prevented if Quality Education is Ensured", Meena Day was observed in the country on September 24. Different programmes and events that marked the day included:

► More than 500 children participated in an event organised by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) at LGED Bhaban, Agargaon. Children were at the forefront of organising a drama, a puppet and a Muppet show at the programme. Afsarul Amin, Minister for Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) was present as the Chief Guest while Nance Webber, Chief of Communication for Development Section, UNICEF and Mr Kazi Akhter Hossain, Secretary of MOPME were present as special guests. Syamol Kanti Ghosh, Director General of DPE presided over the program.

► Enabling Environment for Child Rights (EECR) project organised a program at Korail slum at Banani. Mustafa Monwar, one of the creators of Meena was present as chief guest while Mira Mitra, Communication for Development specialist was present as special guest. The first Bangladeshi to climb the Mount Everest was also present at the event. Thirty slum children trained on interactive theatre staged a show on child marriage and child labour. Dhaka Information Office of UNICEF organised a screening of Meena.

► Unicef awarded the Meena Media Award to 32 journalists from print and electronic media for their outstanding work in promoting child rights during the last one year.

► Colourful processions, rallies, and discussions were organised at 17 government primary schools in three project upazilas of Bandarban district. Students, parents, teachers, officials of education department and members of School Management Committee participated actively in the programmes.

► Highlighting the theme of Meena Day, Sylhet based NGO Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FVDB) organised programmes at 75 unions.

► Other NGOs like Rupantar at Satkhira, SUS at Netrakona, BRAC at Cox's Bazar and adolescent theatre group Bhoror Alo at Bogra held rallies, discussions and staged interactive popular theatre (IPT).

► TV channels and newspapers also covered Meena Day's programmes held at different places across the country.

► All radio stations including Bangladesh Betar aired special programmes like drama and musical show on Meena.

## Modernising Meena

JAMIL MAHMUD

IT was the year 1992 when Bangladesh Television aired the first episode of "Meena" series. Narrating her struggle to go to school, the episode, "Count Your Chickens", soon won hearts of children and Meena subsequently became a natizen across South Asia.

Now, she is a friend of millions because of her capability in simple storytelling and providing necessary messages.

Initially intensive research was carried out to find the perfect look and name for her. Before finalising the Meena, we know now, artists from four countries had to draw dozens of different South Asian girls.

First formative research process involved surveying of over 10,000 children and equal numbers of adults in focus group discussions and interviews across South Asia. Investment in this research has been essential for enabling people to participate in the creation of Meena and for achieving the acknowledged authenticity of Meena's voice.

Research also was conducted to decide on the attire Meena should dress on and the type of life she might have and it still continuing to speak with children to find out what sorts of stories children want to know about her.

Lingering this, further questions regarding Meena's introduction in newer forms of media could be placed. A topic of debate could be aroused: whether Meena is perfectly fitted where she belongs or she needs more "friends" and "likes" as well as "followers".

Dr. Mira Aghi, D Director of research for the project, thinks Meena has the ability to have many more friends and followers as she can be fit into modern social networks like facebook and twitter.

"Meena is a girl who is amiable and approachable. She welcomes everyone and brings out the best in individuals. She respects everyone and everyone likes her, simultaneously she is very independent. She is successful in raising issues and bringing people to her viewpoint."

"All these qualities are what the youths today want to possess," said Mira Mitra, Communication for Development Specialist of UNICEF Bangladesh.

Mira recalled the early days of Meena were dealt in "a very special way and it



Meena has been raising her voice against discrimination, child marriage etc. Children are learning from her. So, it would be appropriate to reach her through as many platforms as possible.

emerged totally from the ground". She said the research team worked on the lingo of the masses because they wanted to recognise a regional identification in Meena.

"Meena is beyond time and boundaries. You go to any of the South Asian countries and they would say Meena is their native girl. The Nepalese, Indians would say that she is a Nepalese or Indian as the Bangladeshi would say she is a Bangladeshi," said Mira.

Mira believes that Meena has the ability to see the best in others, a quality which today's young would love to emulate.

Eminent artist Mustafa Monwar, another key person behind Meena's inception, said that using advanced platform such as facebook and twitter in further popularising her would be a timely step.

But he observed that things have to be

ensured in the process so that the target children, who are mostly from villages, are not being overlooked.

"I see nothing wrong to introduce her in social networks. Internet usage in the country is growing fast but it is still to reach the height of television popularity, nevertheless computers have been supplied in schools across the country and children can be benefited from it," he said.

Monwar said that "school broadcasting", which is a popular medium among children in Japan, can be initiated in Bangladesh. Moreover, he opined that airing Meena episodes on cable channels and providing CDs of those among children would be a successful step.

Meanwhile, Md. Faruque Jalil, Director of Policy and Operations, Directorate of

Primary Education said that Meena is such a character whom not only children but parents also like. He was of the view that social networks can be used in popularising Meena.

"Meena has been raising her voice against discrimination, child marriage etc. Children are learning from her. So, it would be appropriate to reach her through as many platforms as possible," he said.

Jalil said that the government is planning to incorporate Meena in its new projects like developing terminal competencies for children.

As concluding remark you may consider the following:

Meena materials have been available mostly in audio-visual and print media. It is now time to introduce Meena materials in digital format like interactive games.

## Meena casts magical spell on countless lives

AKRAM HOSEN

HAVING grown up in a society where girls are often denied their rights to education and are not treated like boys, Meena gave me the courage to ask for my mes during my adolescent years," said Mehjabin Archi, a mother of two girls.

The reason why she had been so attached to the cartoon show is that she could easily identify herself with the female characters. "The challenges facing girls in the cartoon reflect the predicament of most Bangladeshi girls."

A woman in her 30s, Archi is an NGO official in Savar, outside Dhaka. Talking about her memories of watching "Meena" she said how it shaped her perception of girls' role in society.

"My in-laws and my parents were upset when they knew that I didn't have a son. But remembering the stories of Meena, I vowed to myself that I would never let my girls feel that they are less wanted," she said.

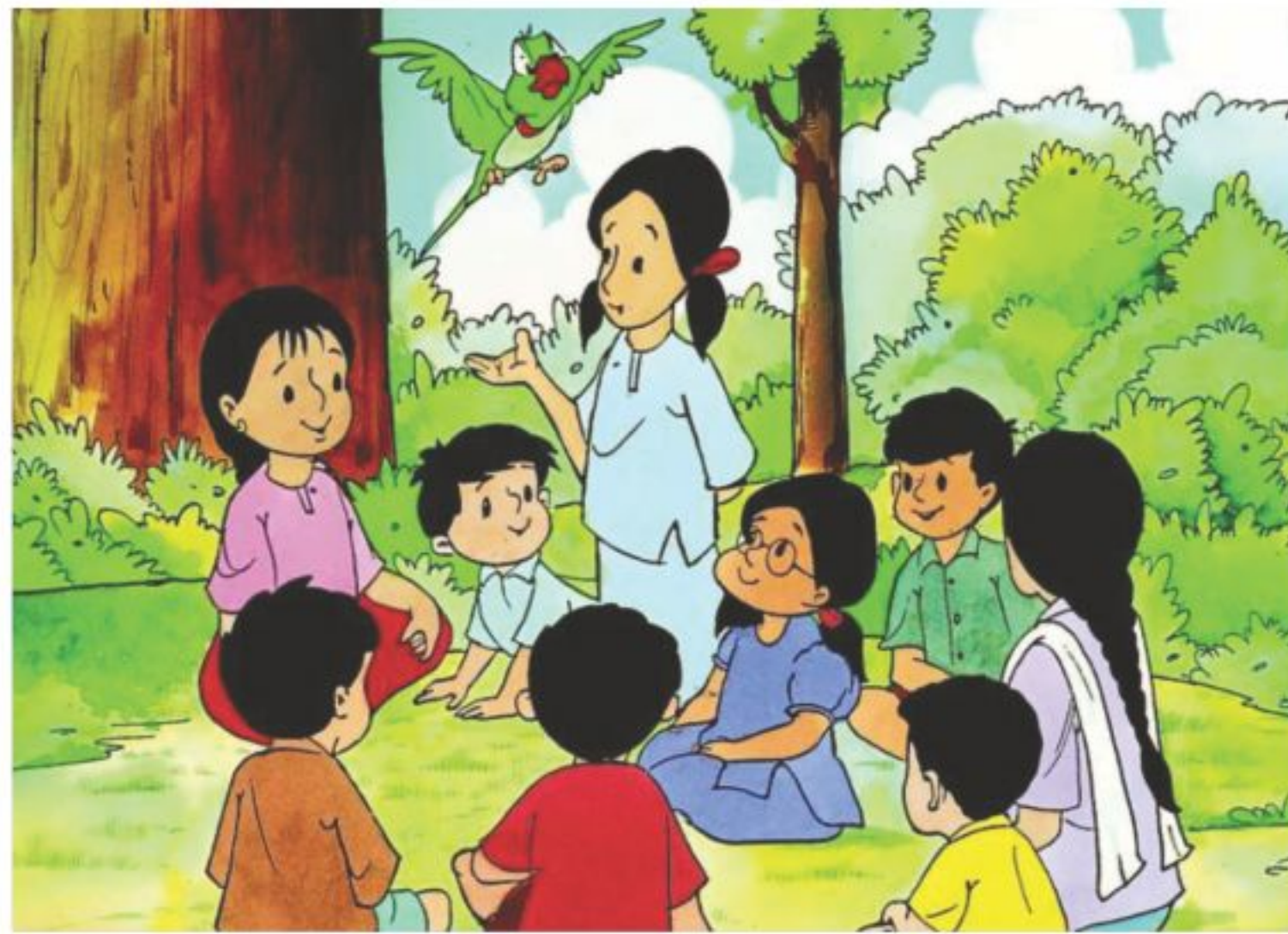
Archi first watched "Meena" show on the state owned TV channel BTV when she was a teenager in the mid-1990s.

"The theme song of the show, *Ami Baba-Mayer Shoto Adorer Meye* [I am the most loved daughter of my parents] still touches me as it reminds me of how girls are treated in this country," said the mother, who does not regret that she has no son.

Early marriage is the biggest challenge facing Bangladeshi girls. In the town where Archi lives, many families take their girls away from school and marry them off before they come of age.

"No matter what the neighbours say I am determined to make my girls complete their education before they

It is remarkable to note that children these days feel the same about Meena as their mothers felt two decades ago. Meena is no stranger to Bangladeshi households and even in the region.



get married," she said. In her efforts to go to school or fighting child marriage, Meena remains a great source of inspiration for Archi.

It is remarkable to note that children these days feel the same about Meena as their mothers felt two decades ago. Meena is no stranger to Bangladeshi households and even in the region.

"I really enjoy watching Meena, the stories are entertaining and fun. I also learnt about maintaining basic hygiene like washing hands with soap before having meals and using sanitary latrines from the shows," said Archi's daughter Namira Roja, a student of grade V.

Namira's sister Samira is also fond of Meena, Mithu and Raju, the main characters of Meena.

"Whenever I visit a house and

see that the girl's distribution of food is smaller than that of the boy I protest," said Samira who reads in grade III.

Commenting on how Meena had taught her the importance of schooling, she referred to an episode of Meena where Meena's father told her not to go to school anymore. But Meena kept hanging around the school and learnt how to count.

"When chickens were stolen from the house, Meena realized what was happening because she could count," said Samira.

Besides learning the importance of schooling both the sisters realised that girls are capable of doing everything that a boy does.

"The girls often emulate Meena's dialect and amuse others, their mother said.

## Children fondly learn from Meena books

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

ALTHOUGH Meena Books gained much popularity among the children, distribution of these books remains suspended for the last five years.

The government with the support of UNICEF and financial support from multi donor agencies under the Intensive District Approach to Education for All (IDEAL) and the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-I) produced and distributed Meena Books from 1993 to 2007 at all the government and non-government primary schools across the country.

With the end of the project, distribution of these books became suspended, said UNICEF and government officials.

"Distribution of these books remains suspended because of unavailability of fund," said Faruk Jalil, Director (Policy & Operations) of the Directorate of Primary Education.

However, the government and donor agencies have agreed to incorporate the issue in the 'Third Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-III)' that started from 2012 and is to be continued till 2016.

Under this project, distribution of Meena books is likely to start again soon, said officials concerned.

The main aim of distribution of these books was to introduce joyful learning materials to make the children aware about different social issues and to develop reading skills, said Mira Mitra, Communication for Development Specialist of UNICEF Bangladesh.

Children are the primary audience of Meena materials, and behaviours of young children continue to develop when they enter into the education

systems, either in pre-primary or primary schools. These books helped to reach a large number of children through the primary education system. The books are powerful communication tools and have tremendous potential to improve reading and comprehension of children and at the same time to learn about social issues that are relevant to ensuring their rights. Moreover, children read these books with pleasure and enthusiasm, she added.

Talking to The Daily Star, Rokeya Begum, headmaster of Kagojipara Government Primary School at Munshiganj, said the books were helpful to children because they could learn many things from these books.

The learning issues included washing hands with soap before taking food and after coming out from toilet,

stop discrimination to girl child, child marriage and dowry.

"I saw in classroom that children were fond of these books, and as they love photos of Meena, Mithu and Raju, they could learn through seeing these photos," she said.

Noted child education expert Dr. Manzoor Ahmed said the contents of Meena books were developed in very simple and easily-understood language with colourful pictures. That is why children got interested to read the books.

"I think distribution of these books should be continued," he added.

It is also now time to think how these materials can be made available to rural children of Bangladesh who do not have access to good reading materials.

Meena brought together children growing up in a society riddled with inequality.

However, Meena's stint on television during the later years has a bit of dubious nature. She is rarely seen around nowadays, and it cannot be really determined whether the cartoon is actually being shown.

Amirul Islam, currently head of programmes of GTV, and known best for his affiliation with Ekushey Television, claimed that he had not encountered this popular television show for a while.

"Meena's popularity is immense. I had formerly worked in a television station in London, where I aired Meena. The response was very positive. The village girl appealed even to Bengali children growing up in a developed country," he told The Daily Star.

There used to be more free air time to broadcast Meena before, since television stations devoted less time to advertisements, he said.

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ZYMA ISLAM

EVERYONE born in the 1990s remembers Meena as a part of their childhood.

Meena was a face that graced the televisions - and minds - of all children regardless of whether they lived in the city or in a village.

This little girl was liked equally by the child who watched a shared television in a village square, and the tiny pampered royalties with television sets in their own rooms.

This is because Meena taught things universal to all children - learning how to count, remembering to wash hands before meals, demanding equal distribution of foods among girls and boys.

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dropped from slots, and Meena could be shown in their stead, he suggested.

Amirul also added that GTV plans to devote more time to programmes for children, and Meena.

Parvez Chowdhury, head of programmes in Dosh Television told The Daily Star that UNICEF should sit with television stations and discuss how long the episodes should be.

"Many episodes of Meena do not match our time slots. We often end up giving a much larger time slot just to fit in a few extra minutes, and then we have to think about how to fill up the extra time," he said.

Meena often also coincides with the commercial interests of television stations, he added.

"We are however eager to perform our social responsibility," said Parvez.

Shamim Shahed, programme head of Bangla Vision, believes Meena does still receive some amount of airtime.

"Airing the cartoon raises our Target Rating Points, an assessment of the number of viewers subscribing to the television channel. Meena makes television stations more popular," he said.

However, Shamim believes that Meena should undergo a change to incorporate the crises of our rapidly urbanizing society.

"Meena must visit the city, and portray problems that are faced by the children of urban areas," said Shamim.

UNICEF must also devote itself in making more episodes, since right now the series has been exhausted several times, he added.

In 2011-2012, six new Meena episodes were produced and two are being produced in 2013.

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TRIBENI CHAKMA

IT would be surprising for the audiences of 'Ami MeenaBolchi' [It is Meena speaking]

programme at Bangladesh Betar, to know that Farzana Islam Tithi, 24, who is a Masters student at Eden Girls' College, gives the voice of Meena, a nine-year-old animated cartoon character.

While UNICEF started the paper work of the programme as a pilot project to bring Meena live on ABC radio in July, 2012, the opportunity to become Meena came at her hand.

At that time, Farzana used to work there as a jockey of ABC radio and in that show she came to know about the audition for Meena's voice over. She was selected almost instantly, she said reminiscing how her life as Meena started.

"Since I worked as a radio jockey, I already knew how to conduct live programmes and this experience also gave me an upper-hand," she said.

But the challenge with ABC radio was only people of Dhaka and its outskirts could listen to the programme. To take it to a wider audience nationwide, 'Ami MeenaBolchi' went on air in Bangladesh Betar from April this year. One can now enjoy this programme from anywhere in the country every Friday from 10:15am to 11:20am.

Already twenty six episodes have been broadcast, which drew children's attention from all over the country as they could interact with Meena, Raju and Mithu live.

"Everyone loved Meena from their childhood and everyone, regardless of age, watched the cartoon eagerly. I also used to watch it. May be Meena's accent struck to my mind since then and I believe that feeling helped me in my voice over for Meena," said FazaanTithi.

Abrar Sajid Pasha, student at Class-

V in Aroni Biddalov, gives the voice of Raju who is the younger brother of cartoon character Meena. When Abrar was in Class-I, he got the opportunity to give audition for Raju's voice.

Interestingly, 42-year-old Kamal Ahsan Bipul, gives the vocal of Mithu, a parrot pet of Meena in the radio programme. He is a theatre, radio and television artist. He could imitate the voice of cow, frog, tiger and other animals easily.

While sharing his experience about 'Ami Meena Bolchi' Bipul said, "One day a six-year-old boy came with his mother at Bangladesh Betar to meet