



Promoting Child Rights

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. Neill 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 then the money to create her," he said.

Shamsuddin Ahmed, who was a Communication Officer of the project in the 1990s, 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, dupatta 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 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 dupatta and most of the times sitting down 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."

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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 sometimes, it then gained pace on 2007, to raise children's issues that are essential to ensure rights of children.

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 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.

Ensured 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.

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