Sunlit Years

Turning 300 in the 3G age. Chakmak's story.

chakmak does not talk down to children. While the idea is to simplify, there's an abiding focus on its literary mandate.

E is the child of the universe; the sun is but a ball for him to play with,' writes Gulzar on the cover of the April issue of Chakmak. The master lyricist, along with some of the country's best litterateurs and educationists will converge on Bhopal on October 21 to celebrate a most remarkable occasion—the formal unveiling of the 300th issue of the popular Hindi children's monthly.

For 26 years, the magazine has entertained and educated children in numerous north Indian towns, with quality articles from the country's best. Founded by the educational institution Ekloya with active participation from scientists Jayant Narlikar and Arvind Gupta, Chakmak aimed to present science in a simple manner. "There'd been a lack of reliable sources of information on science in Hindi. Chakmak filled that gap," says editor Sushil Shukla. "By presenting science in an Indian context, it made it accessible for rural children," writer and former Chakmak editor Swayam Prakash adds.

Over the years, the magazine has also tackled literature, art, culture and current affairs. What stands out now is the active participation of some of India's finest literary names. An Udyan Vajpeyee essay on the sense of smell or an exclusive Gita Harirhan short story. Ashgar Wajahat's Pakistan travelogue have offered an eye-view on our neighbour and Gulzar has translated Tagore's poetry: Nirdiya Chor, Dopehri, Kaagaz Ki Kashthi among others. "Chakmak has been able to encourage authors to write for kids," says writer Vinod Kumar Shukla, adding, "I was never inclined to write for kids earlier. But it feels good to be a reader and writer of Chakmak." His novel Hairo Ghasa Ki Chhappar Wali Jhagredi Aur Bauri Pohat was serialised in Chakmak before being published in its entirety by Rajkamal earlier this year.

A strong association with literary giants has meant an abiding focus on experimentation and innovation in content. For instance, Wajahat is doing a series in which he narrates abstract tales and kids are encouraged to send their views. Poet Rajesh Joshi decodes verses and Mera Pray Chitr is a page devoted to art appreciation. While the idea is to be simple, literary and entertaining, the magazine doesn't employ predefined ideas of what qualifies as suitable for kids or not. "We trust their maturity and understanding, treat them at par and don't give them childish gibberish," Sushil Shukla says. There have been articles on thorny issues like the nuclear policy, the ban on M.F. Husain and Irom Sharmila's fight.

Even its fiction content isn't about imaginary, mythological worlds or feelgood fairytales. You can find complex, mature stories with sad, even nihilistic, ends. "The stories are real, not illusions," says 11-year-old Ananya Jain, a regular reader for the past five years. Yash Nehra, II, has been reading it since he was four. His 8-year-old sister, Kimaya, learnt her alphabet from Chakmak. "They feel a deep sense of belonging for the magazine," says their mother Neelam Nehra. Several of their drawings have been published and they eagerly await the 200-page special issue to see if their work has been carried on Mera Panna (My Page) again.

The world of Chakmak (is small but) its reach strong, and intense, especially in the Hindi belt. A majority of the 12,000 copies printed monthly reach lakhs of kids through schools and libraries. Many write in from the tribal areas of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. "If's given them space to express their spontaneous creativity," says Swayam Prakash. He calls it a "bhagdaari" (collaboration) with the children. And that is what sets Chakmak apart. It's the reason why, even with the onslaught of TV and the Net, so many still wait for their copy every month.