

by Namrata Joshi

'HE 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 Eklavya 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 Udayan Vajpayee essay on the sense of smell or an exclusive Gita Hariharan short story. Asghar Wajahat's Pakistan travelogues have offered an eye-view on our neighbour and Gulzar has translated Tagore's poetry: *Nindiya Chor*, *Dopahar*, *Kaagaz Ki Kashti* 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 *Hare Ghaas Ki Chhappar Wali Jhonpdi Aur Bauna Pahad* 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

Going strong *Chakmak* has a passionate readership

Sunlit Years

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

which he narrates abstract tales and kids are encouraged to send in their views. Poet Rajesh Joshi decodes verses and Mera Priy 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

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

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, 11, 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. "It's given them space to express their spontaneous creativity," says Swayam Prakash. He calls it a "bhagidaari" (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. □