

Chakmak - Sparking an Interest in Reading and Learning

Vinatha Viswanthan



Chakmak is a monthly science magazine in Hindi for children between the ages of 10 and 14 years. Conceived by Rex D’Rozario and Vinod Raina, it was launched in 1985. The idea was to encourage children to read, and in general, to supplement what they learnt at that age in schools while making it an enjoyable process. Chakmak at that time contained a fair amount of science in addition to stories, poems and pictures. The science was presented in diverse forms to hook readers, to encourage their creativity and encourage independent thinking. Poems, stories and illustrations by children were also published in each issue which helped children identify better with the magazine.

In over three decades, Chakmak has seen many changes. However, its broad goal remains – to be a supplementary reader, allowing children to read a wide range of topics while ensuring the process is enjoyable.

The idea of a science magazine for children was not a novel one for those involved in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), a path-breaking initiative that began in the '70s. *Bal Vaigyanik*, the science workbooks for middle school children, were written in Hindi. Also, a pedagogy that was unique and way ahead of its times was introduced in the schools that were a part of HSTP. The curriculum did not dish out information, but made the same topics covered in mainstream textbooks, enjoyable. The content was in the form of activities and questions, encouraging experimentation, data collection, comparison, scientific thinking, and it helped children understand diverse concepts by making science-learning relevant and fun. *Bal Vaigyanik* helped children (and teachers) think, want to know more, discover the magic of exploratory learning.

This curiosity, an eagerness to know more about science had little recourse at that time. It was

unlikely that a child in rural Madhya Pradesh had access to a reference library with books he could understand.

Thus was born *Chakmak*. Created for the *bal vaigyaniks*, 11-14 year olds were the target readers. It was meant as supplementary reading, specifically science reading for them. At that time, a Hindi science magazine for middle school children was an empty niche. Even now, there are few magazines with such a focus.

Look at the early *Chakmaks* and you can see that although science was a focus of the magazine, there were also articles on topics other than scientific ones such as current issues, social causes, articles on personalities, stories and poems. There were also several regular features or columns in the magazine. From the beginning, the magazine had *Mathapacchi*, where children were given puzzles to solve – both word and pictorial. The idea was to nurture a problem-solving attitude in readers. Then there was *Sawaliram*, a fictional character of whom a child could ask any question and be assured of an answer. *Sawaliram* was known at all the schools in which HSTP was being implemented. Dozens of postcards and letters would arrive for him every week, and in answering those, the *Eklavya* and *Chakmak* teams would often rely on the expertise of the finest minds in science in the country. For some of the questions were extremely challenging even if deceptively simple.

And then there was *Apni Prayogshala*, where by following some relatively simple instructions and using material almost any child would find around her, she would be able to put together something interesting, observe a phenomenon that she could wonder about in her leisure. Finally, there was *Mera Panna* – pages where children’s poems, stories and illustrations would find place. Children’s work always was prioritised, often on the cover, sometimes illustrating an article or story. In addition, there were crosswords, picture stories, *Khel Khel Mein*, jokes – several things that keep children hooked and happy. *Chakmak* was a *pitara*, a treasure trove for children.

As for the style and presentation of the content, there was a concerted effort not to be condescending to children. The style of writing was one where children were not talked down to. The illustrations and design of pages, from the beginning, were in diverse styles which included 'tribal' styles such as that of Jangadh Singh Shyam. Moving away from childish cartoons, good art for children was favoured. In general, whether it was with regard to the text or the illustrations and design, children were treated as equals to others.

At that time, with HSTP in full swing, with constant and continuous contact with children, the editorial team of *Chakmak* had a finger on the pulse of what children wanted to read in a science magazine. *Eklavya* people going to schools for HSTP follow-ups, for monthly meetings all carried bundles of *Chakmak* to be sold to children at subsidised rates of Re. 1 or Rs. 2 per copy. Often teachers at these meetings volunteered to reach the magazines to the students of their schools. Children also wrote to *Chakmak* quite frequently. Questions for *Sawaliram*, contributions for *Mera Panna* helped the makers of *Chakmak* know how children received it. At that time, teachers used *Chakmaks* in the classroom to discuss diverse topics, to do some of the activities in the magazine. So, *Chakmak* got constant feedback from the teachers as well and was being the supplementary reading-learning material it was intended to be.

A few years later came the *Chakmak* Clubs. *Chakmak* Clubs were children's clubs that were meant to be meeting points for children. While they took their name from the magazine and the magazine was read and discussed there, the magazine did not conduct these clubs. The clubs were over a hundred in number and were run by the children and youth at a location. Readings, narrations, discussions, music and fun were a part of these clubs. Here again, *Chakmak* was used so children would read widely. In the process, they would learn something from the magazine, and more importantly, from each other. *Chakmak* was the spark for many a heated discussion.

A look at the first decade or so of *Chakmak* issues and you will find it to be mainly a 'how and why' magazine. This was an important style of presentation as it reflected the approach of *Eklavya* to education to be explanatory, in a fun and authentic manner. At this time, the issues and topics covered in *Chakmak* were those of both the urban and the semi-rural middle class. The readers

however, were mostly children in the semi-rural Hindi belt.

In the late '90s, when the primary education programmes in schools began receiving more attention, *Chakmak* reflected this change in focus by including material for early readers such as short prose and poetry. All through these first ten to fifteen years, *Chakmak's* focus remained on science and its reach mostly included children in government schools and in non-urban areas.

This changed after about two decades or so. *Chakmak* began carrying a little less science. The change was for several reasons. One was that HSTP came to an end around this time. Another was a change in the editorial team. A new team with different expertise meant a different kind of *Chakmak*. Another reason was the realisation that, while as an organisation *Eklavya* had contributed to some extent to making science (and other subjects) more accessible to children, had developed a lot of material (including that in its magazines) in popularising these subjects, there was a great paucity in material in Hindi in children's literature. In fact, there was and still is, very little that constitutes the field of children's literature in Hindi. To some extent, we think of children's literature as that which is written for children. With this in mind, *Chakmak* began working with well-known (and not so well-known) authors to develop literature, including stories and poems for children. *Chakmak* became a platform for all those who had an interest in writing for children. At this time it also shifted from black and white to complete four-colour printing and being professionally designed.

Chakmak has always served as a rich resource of material for Eklavya's other publications. Collections of poetry, kavita posters, kavita cards, collections of stories have all been developed based on material first published in Chakmak. Examples include a collection of stories put together from submissions to Mera Panna such as Azadi ki Nukti and Lomdi aur Zameen. More recently, some stories from Chakmak have been published as picture books such as Patank ki Karamat, Saanp ne Socha, Hamari Gay Jani, Mujhe Koi Nahi Khilaya, Baitha Aas Lagaye. Currently, Eklavya is developing a collection of stories published by young adults in Chakmak. It can be said that literature written by children has come of age with Chakmak.

From the late-2000 onwards, *Chakmak* was published in this new avatar. More of fiction, more *Mera Panna* and a little less of maths and science. By this time there was another change – this was in *Chakmak's* reach. It shifted out of government schools and rural semi and non-urban areas to private schools and urban areas. The target age group also shifted gradually upwards during this phase – and now *Chakmak* catered more to high school children in addition to those in the middle school age group. To a large extent, *Chakmak's* content was being developed with these children in mind – their literacy levels, topics and issues relevant to them and their pockets as well. The schools in which *Chakmak* was used in the classroom were private schools. Children were being engaged in several ways, through activity columns, the column *Boli Rangoli*, where the poet Gulzar would give a couplet in one issue and children would send in their illustrations of it for the next. In another column *Agar-Magar*, they would ask Gulzar questions and he would answer them often in rhyme, frequently in a whimsical fashion. Young adults were being encouraged to write, a body of literature for this age group began to be developed via the column *Chashma Naya Hai* in collaboration with Ankur, an organisation in New Delhi. In collaboration with an organisation involved in conservation, Nature Conservation Foundation, a series of articles and

activities on nature were translated and published. There were experiments with format – a serial picture story *Biksu*, novels presented as a series, characters that made their appearance in several issues like *Ramsahay* and so on.

All through, *Chakmak* continued to be fun and supplementary reading material for school children with a potential to be used in the classroom.

So, over the years, there have been three groups of people who have used *Chakmak*. The first is the children for whom we make *Chakmak*. They have fun reading and learning from it. Historically, two other groups also have benefitted from *Chakmak*, though we have not made the magazine with them in mind. One is that of resource persons in diverse organisations working with children who have used the magazine's material to engage children in various ways. The other is teachers who have used *Chakmak* in classrooms to read from, and to also discuss and answer questions asked in the magazine. In this way, *Chakmak* always has been and continues to be a fun magazine for children and a resource for children, teachers and others in the field of literature and education.

Based on conversations with and inputs from Sushil Joshi, Tultul Biswas and C.N. Subramaniam.