Indelible Ink

Varada Mohan Nikalje*

The curiosity of children is boundless, and sometimes it can be quite challenging to respond to their questions in a suitable and age-appropriate manner. I recall an interaction with a group of children, all studying in Grade 3, about the indelible ink. It was the day after the elections, and the children noticed the stain on my fingernail and the skin around the base of the nail. One child commented:

"My mother has a similar mark on her forefinger."

"Why is it on your finger?" asked another.

"Who put it there?" was another query.

"My father says the mark is because of the elections. What are 'elections'?"

I seized the last question, and told the children that 'elections' meant the process of electing, or choosing, a leader. This, I explained, would be similar to how they choose the class monitor. Every child would have a say in the matter, naming the person of their choice. That involves making a decision. "Oh! Yes" they chorused. The concept of decision-making was familiar to them. One of them related it to making a choice of what to eat at a wedding, where an array of dishes would be placed at the buffet. "Yes," I smiled. "There, you could go back for a second ice-cream. But here, once you have voted, you cannot go for a second time. That's why the ink is put on the forefinger, as an indication that a person has voted. This is done so that the same person should not vote again and again.

Further, I asked them to notice that the ink is applied partly on the nail and partly on the skin at the

Professor, Department of Elementary Education, NCERT, New Delhi

base of the nail. The ink cannot be washed off from the skin; it remains on the nail until the nail grows out and is replaced by a new one. "The ink travels up the nail," as one child solemnly explained to me.

"Do the election people buy the ink from the market?" asked another. "No, they are given bottles of the ink only for the elections," I answered. The children seemed satisfied with my answers.

It is a misconception among most adults that children are too young to grasp concepts such as elections, democracy, etc., when, in fact, these are all layered. As the child grows, a deeper layer may be explored. For instance, it would be of interest for the older children to know that the indelible ink was first manufactured at the Election Commission of India's request by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. It was to counter the challenge of fraudulent voting, that research work on formulating the ink began in the 1950s by scientists. Later, the National Research Development Corporation patented it.

Mysore Paints & Varnish Limited has been licensed to manufacture the ink. It was first used in the 1962 general elections. People in Karnataka proudly recall that it was established in 1937 by Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the then Maharaja of Mysore.

When ballot papers were the norm, voters had to mark their preference on them. Before the paper was given to the voter, a voter's index finger would be marked with the ink. It is a purple-black ink, applied on the index finger of the voter's left hand at the polling booth to prevent the duplication of votes. It continues to be used in all the elections across India.

A 10 millilitre ink bottle is enough to mark the fingers of approximately 700 people. The ink is exported to more than 30 countries around the world, including Thailand, Singapore, Nigeria, Malaysia, and Cambodia. However, the procedure of its application varies. In Columbia and the Maldives, voters need to dip their finger in the ink. In Burkina Faso, a country in West Africa, the ink is applied with a brush, while nozzles are used in Turkey.

An ounce of experience is worth a pound of theory. Hence, participating in an election would embed the process in children's minds.

A teacher may display pictures of three animals pasted on the cardboard, such as an elephant, a monkey, and a kangaroo. The children should 'elect' which one they would like to have as a pet. Thus, a 'fun election' can be held, which will help them understand how voting works. Each child can come up and make a mark on a sheet of paper at a 'ballot stand'. Make a large badge for yourself (the teacher) as the 'Chief Election Officer'. Let the children count loudly after you as you write down the results.

Show children pictures of the elderly people going to the polling

booth to cast their vote, supported by family members, walking with the help of canes, etc. Ensure that children understand that the persons/children with special needs/*divyangjan* must also vote. Let children imbibe the idea that voting is to be taken seriously.

In this context, since all adults are supposed to vote, some of the children were unsure about whether their adult family members had participated in elections. Children were encouraged to find out from young adults in the family (18 years and above) whether they had filled the form to apply for voter card. If they are registered to vote, children can have a look at the voter identity card. (This topic becomes part of our message during discussions with parents—celebrate voting with your children! Share with them when and where and how you vote!)

As elementary school teachers, it is our privilege and duty to develop good habits of not only health and hygiene but also critical thinking and decision-making among children. More importantly, it can set the stage for students' future involvement as engaged and informed citizens.

Children are our future scientists, authors, doctors, diplomats, caretakers, service workers, astronauts, or civic officials, and most importantly, one day they will all make decisions in our democracy. It is of utmost importance for us to teach our children the basics of civic life. Voting is a civic responsibility and a democratic way to voice our concerns.