

Good-for-health crayons



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All Natural Organic Crayons Special Arrangement

Walnut hulls, onion skins and flowers make their way into school art supplies

In January, archaeologists working on a site near an ancient lake in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, UK, discovered what may be the world's oldest crayon. Dating to over 10,000 years ago, the 22 mm long stick is made with ochre, a natural clay earth pigment, similar to the material used to colour the artworks in ancient Egyptian tombs and cave paintings.

Sticking to the all-natural concept centuries later, a few people closer to home continue to fashion colours from nature. "It was my daughter who inspired me to create organic crayons," says Rashmi Bharti, co-founder of Avani (avani-earthcraft.com), a Kumaon-based cooperative founded in 2012. "Most art supplies available in the market today use synthetic ingredients and I wanted to develop something that wasn't harmful for children." She is readying to launch six new shades of crayons in September.

Flower power

Bharti works with plant-based dyes used in textiles, which are made with locally-available walnut hulls, pomegranate rind, onion skin, indigo and flowers like marigold, boneset and cherry plum. "Local farmers cultivate wastelands to grow our raw materials. We are growing indigo for the past four years and have initiated the cultivation of madder recently," explains Bharti, adding how after sourcing, the raw materials are sun dried and the colours extracted at their dyeing unit.

At Ahmedabad-based Azafran Organics (azafranorganiccrayons.com), raw materials are grown at their own farm to create non-toxic and edible crayons. “We use soya wax, palm wax, soya butter and food grade colours in our Veggie Crayons. Waxes and soya butter are melted and mixed with natural colour pigments and poured into moulds. The mixture is then allowed to cool and become solid,” says company director, Aditi Vyas.

Priced at Rs. 170 for a box of six, Avani’s crayons also use organic beeswax from the Keystone Foundation in the Nilgiris (that works with honey gatherers). “Each box needs 24 gms of beeswax. They come in six shades — red, orange, yellow, green, indigo blue, and grey black,” adds Bharti, who churns out 2,000 sets a month and also offers customisation options.

Cost factor

Mumbai-based social enterprise Sew Saw Handmade procures crayons from Avani and supplies them in bulk to play schools in Goa and parts of Maharashtra. “Since the dyes are derived from nature, the colour palette will be limited,” says founder Shipra Baranwal. While people are all for organic products today, Baranwal feels India continues to remain a price sensitive market.

“The process of making crayons is not as difficult as convincing parents to buy them,” says Bharti, adding, “Our crayons are priced higher than plastic ones available in the market but the benefits are ten-fold.” Convincing people about the advantages of a non-toxic product for their children remains a challenge. Stressing on their health benefits, Coimbatore-based paediatrician Dr Usha Elango, says, “Regular crayons are made with paraffin wax and ingredients like polyethylene that are not safe for a child. If the thin sticks are swallowed, the wax can stick to the intestines,” she says.

Healthy fingers

Keeping this in mind, Vyas’s crayons are square blocks which come in eight shades — blue, yellow, brown, pink, red, green, orange and black — and have a three-year shelf life. “The shape improves hand-eye coordination and motor skills,” says Vyas. Priced at Rs. 350, they are available in stores across Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata and Bengaluru and on amazon.in.

Plant-based dyes are made with flowers like marigold, indigo, boneset, cherry plum and flame of the forest.