

Use of Terracotta Plates in Kashmir

by Virendra Bangroo

There is an age old relation between the clay and man. The simplest medium easily available has been the soft clay. Clay well kneaded with a proportioned amount of water is easily malleable. From times immemorial man has used this medium to express himself. Clay when baked takes a new form, called the terracotta. The terracotta in India has had a long history. Terracotta figures are shaped in all forms, in the round and in relief illustrating a variety of themes. The potter who used to make terracottas held an important position in society. Almost in every mohalla there was a terracotta centre. In olden days the potter served some particular homes only and he used to make waterpots, milkpots, vessels for cooking food and in return he received grains and money. Even now in the far flung areas of Kashmir, this tradition continues.

Although metallic utensils have replaced the terracotta vessels, still it is a flourishing craft. Pottery has a great role to play in man's life. Apart from its domestic and kitchen use, it is used in ceremonies. No ceremony is complete without the use of pottery. In Kashmir, pottery has an indispensable role owing to its use in both domestic and ritualistic purposes.

Shallow plate having ring like base is called Tabich and the shallow dish is called Toak in Kashmiri. The difference is in the size; the big one with a thick rim and a ring like base is called Tabich (plural-Tabchih) and the smaller one with the thin rim and without ring like base is called Toak (plural-Taek). These plates were used in ceremonies where there was abundant use of terracotta material. The traditional use of terracotta plates in Kashmir has not died - right from the birth ceremony to death ceremony, terracotta plates are used. These are still used in marriages for serving food in some rural areas in Kashmir.

In the village marriage feasts, some 50 years back, food was only served in the terracotta plates (tabchih); sitting arrangement for the people coming with the marriage party was made on the dry paddy grass. Dry clay was scattered in front of them and the terracotta plates to serve dishes were kept on it for the serving purpose. This tradition has now completely vanished and is a thing of the past. These plates (Taek and Tabchih) were used for one serving only and later on the broken postshreds mixed with paddy grass and clay were used for constructing and building purposes, called Yandrah Dosah in Kashmir. Excavations at neolithic sites, Burzhom and Guphkral have revealed similar types of wall constructions.

Tonsure Ceremony First time shaving the head of the male child with the razor blade is celebrated on some auspicious date at some famous tirtha like Martanda in Kashmir. Friends and relatives are invited on this ceremony. Cooked dried peas, yellow rice and sweet puddings are the special dish for this special occasion. Terracotta plates find special use here. Seven walnuts and shaved hairs of the child are kept in a terracotta plate (Toak). Hair and walnuts are to be sown after the ceremony is over, at a place adjacent to the child's house. Great care is taken of the budding walnut tree.

Devagon

Devagon is a prefunction requirement performed before the thread ceremony and marriage ceremony. A small yajna is performed and for this ceremony, terracotta plates have a great importance, so to say seven plates filled with special preparations are offered to seven goddesses. In Hindu mythology, number seven has a great significance. Seven goddesses called Saptmatrikas are (1) Varahi, (2) Maheshwari, (3) Vaishnavi, (4) Chamunda, (5) Kumari, (6) Brahmani, (7) Indrani. They are the important tantric goddesses worshipped either in a group or as individuals. Stone images of Chamunda, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani are

housed in Sri Pratap Museum, Srinagar.

Seven plates filled with sweet rice puddings (kheer) are decorated with walnuts, coloured sacred threads, cooked vegetable (Haend) and kidney beans. These plates (Tabchih) are called Divitsi Tabchih (plates belonging to goddesses). After the yajna is over these are given to the nearest relatives as blessing gifts.

Grapes used to remain fresh and green for months together in the sealed terracotta plates. Kalhana and Bilhana speak of its abundance in the Kashmir valley. According to Nilmata, Draksa or Grapes are mentioned as an offering for the gods. In Kashmir, many surnames are based on nick-names. Due to every day use, terracotta plates (Taek) finds its place in the surnames also, with a slight modification, like Tak and Taku.

Because of its domestic and ritualistic use, many idioms have come to be coined with reference to the terracotta plates:

Takaen Chhuk Aamut Vahravahna. (Irretrievably disturbed).

Taeky Zan Chhis Raevmit (Disgusted and disturbed).

Hiri Chhis Khasan Khirih Taek (Whatever comes to his mind he vomits out).

Taekis Manz Kadai Rath (Very very harsh).

Labhay Taekis Kyath (Making false promise).

Tavan Toak Chhuk (Crooked person).

Khirah Taek Aapravin (To talk with affection).

Chhari Taek Chuk Haven (Meaningless projections).

Akh Dudah ta Beyi Maajih Kyut Toak (You are yourself an unwanted guest, yet you ask for others).