

A PEEP INTO THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE PARSIS IN INDIA A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

P. N. Tavaria

[This article is taken from the book "A Manual of Kshnoom" by P. N. Tavaria. Often people ask today, where has our "PARSIPANU" gone and what are the reasons of our gradual decline as an ethnic group? The simple answer is that we have discarded our own lofty tarikats and instead chosen to ape the Western Culture. Well read on and more importantly, let us learn and imbibe something of our own past ways of life. - Editor.]

In days of yore the day-to-day life of the Parsis was very much different from what it is now inasmuch as it was in keeping with the Zoroastrian religious principles of "Ashoi", i.e., righteousness and purity of body, mind and soul. Before the early dawn the ladies in the family would get up, sweep their own floor and stamp decorative designs of chunam or powdered chalk or limestone powder. The lime content of chalk has the property of cleansing the air, and hence the custom of stamping shallow tin boxes with their bottoms perforated into artistic designs. After imprinting the above designs they (ladies) would carry the censer with the 'loban' (benzoin) fumigating all over the house. The word 'loban' comes from Pahlavi, 'Ahlob' meaning 'pure', and loban has the property of spreading purity and of disinfecting. And so this traditional custom of fumigating with benzoin in the house at dawn and twilight every morning and evening has for its purpose the disinfection of the house and the creation of a healthy atmosphere, and the invocation of Divine grace. Twice a day the whole streets inhabited by the Parsis were filled with fragrance and made holy by the soul-elevating perfume of incense fumigated by Parsi ladies at the entrance of their houses. In the important centres of the Parsis, like the towns of Navsari and Udvada, and especially in the

localities where the priests reside, the children would be heard chanting their sacred Avestan prayers at night-fall.

At a very early age were the children taught the Zoroastrian way of life, and the habit of purity and cleanliness was inculcated in them. For drinking water a goblet with the lipped top was used instead of a glass, because the former permitted drinking without that vessel touching the mouth and getting polluted with germs. So strictly was the principle of hygiene observed that at the tender age of three or four, children were given a small goblet and taught to drink the water in the above hygienic manner. Similarly, at a very early age of their childhood they were made to give up the habit of putting their fingers in the mouth and making them unclean. While sewing, the Parsi girls in those days invariably used a pair of scissors for cutting the thread, but never used their teeth for the purpose. Whilst eating at home or at a visit, articles of pastry like cakes, biscuits, etc., were never bitten, but broken with the fingers or cut into pieces suitable for putting them in the mouth so as to avoid contamination by germs. Eating things by biting, except in rare circumstances, was considered the way of the most filthy and lowest classes of aboriginals. Similarly, smoking was strongly abhorred and was quite unknown in the

community. But later on, especially during the last hundred years or so, a sort of inferiority complex set in with the result that the un-hygienic and unclean ways and habits of the richly and smartly dressed. Westerners came to be regarded as stylish, and blindly imitated. Thus in our ignorant and foolish craze for becoming what is being believed to be 'reformed' (?) and smart by taking to smoking, biting eatables etc., we retrograded, and assumed the filthy ways and habits of foreigners discarding our superior habits in eating, drinking etc., and thus died out our time-worn high Zoroastrian principle of purity and scientific cleanliness.

In every Parsi home greatest care was taken about the home fire. It was kept alive and unextinguished. Members of the family recited the holy Avestan prayers before this fire, which was always kept sacred and undefiled by the touch of persons in an impure state of the body. The fire thus specially nurtured had the power of attracting the blessings from the divine regions, and of sending up the force of the prayers and the rituals performed in the home on to the divine planes. To preserve the purity of the sacred fire non-Parsis were not allowed to enter the room where the fire burned.

In ancient Iran a sort of isolation-home in every locality in charge of a matron used to be reserved for use by ladies in their periods, as we have isolation-wards for infectious diseases today. But when the Parsis migrated to India a separate room on the ground floor was kept for the purpose in the absence of the provision of the isolation home mentioned above. The reason for selecting the ground floor was based on hygienic principles. During the periods of the

monthly sickness the body of the woman concerned is infected with myriads of harmful ultra microscopic microbes of impurity. In the case of the ground floor these microbes are directly attracted away to the solid base and its sub-strata, because of the magnetic power of the later; whereas in the case of the upper stories those microbes remain suspended in the atmosphere and contaminate them.

In every home in those days of yore, ladies strictly and scrupulously observed isolation on the ground floor during their monthly periods. A lady in menstrual state took special care not to come into contact with fire and articles of food or water or with outsiders or other members of the family.

The people then had such immense faith in their religion, that with hearty sincerity they responded to the observance of many an austere religious rite. The dress of the ladies was made to facilitate the observance of religious practices including that of Kusti-rite (of untying and tying the sacred thread-girdle with prayer formulae). It was not fashioned from the Fashion Books of the Western dress makers. So staunch was their faith in the Religion, and so untiring were they in its service that they ungrudgingly put up with many inconveniences and willingly sacrificed many transient pleasures and comforts; and they could do all that, because side by side with the enjoyments of the physical body, the thoughts of the betterment of the soul, the belief in the existence of life after death in the worlds beyond, heaven and hell, good and evil, and Divine Justice in Reward or Retribution etc. - all these were constantly before their minds eye.

The religious ceremonies of the dear departed ones of the family were had performed in the residences where the deceased lived, moved and had their being, and not in the fire-temples, as ceremonies performed in the former way were more efficacious than those performed outside the home.

At the end of every Zoroastrian year, the 18 days' religious ceremonies known as Muktād in honour of the departed souls of the family were also got performed in the residential homes where the deceased used to live. During all these holy eighteen days, the (cocoanut) oil-lamps burning, the glittering silver pots and vases kept on marble-topped tables and filled with sacred well-water holding fresh roses with stems and other fragrant flowers of superior aura, the fire glowing in a censer kept in front of the Muktad tables, the holy fragrance of the sandalwood and benzoin burning over it pervading the whole house the priests melodiously chanting the Avesta Fravashi and Āfringān and Pāzand Āfrin prayers, morning and evening, and the family members-both young and old-devoutly offering their prayers- All These lent beauty, charm, piety and sublimity to the place, and turned that Muktad apartment into a varitable paradise on Earth. During those holy days one or two members of the family who performed the sacred duties of cleaning the Muktād place, daily changing the flowers, water etc., had special and stricter codes of purity to observe than other members. They scrupulously kept aloof from and did not come in contact with other persons, and slept on a mat (with out mattress) for their nightly rest.

Such is the rough picture of the pious-minded Zoaroastrians of those by-gone days,

whose austerity and stoicism did not fail to impress the tender minds of the children in the house, who joyfully shared some of the duties on holy occasions such as above, the performance of which brought home to their juvenile minds the early lessons of purity, cleanliness, prayers and rituals, so that they grew up as men and women of high character, where by the community shone out in the past as regards their character and morals.

ONE

One song can spark a moment
One flower can wake the dream.
One tree can start a forest
One bird can herald spring.
One smile begins a friendship
One handclasp lifts a Soul.
One star can guide a ship at sea
One word can frame the goal.
One vote can change a nation
One sunbeam lights a room.
One candle wipes out darkness
One laugh will conquer gloom.
One step must start each journey
One word must start each prayer.
One hope will raise our spirits
One touch can show you care.
One voice can speak with wisdom
One heart can know what's true.
One life can make the difference
You see it's up to "YOU"

* * * * *