Place of Craft

Down the burnish lane

Shops at the famous Tichhugalli, known for their traditional copper wares, have been forced to adapt to the times due to a decline in customers. But despite it all, the alley still remains a place to explore.

TAN PEI LIN

Copper alley, commonly known as Tichhugalli, is known among locals as the place to go to for copper and brass items. These shops, owned by the Tamrakar community, have been there for generations.

"This place is called Tichhugalli, famous for copper and brass utensils," says 23-year-old Amrit Tamrakar, who looks after his father's shop.

Also known as "Copper Alley", the lane is dotted with numerous copper craft shops. The fronts of these stores are crowded with towers of copper and brass pots of all shapes and sizes.

These utensils are popular among the Nepalese because they are believed to benefit one's health. According to Amrit, food cooked in copper pots can prevent gastric and stomach diseases. Moreover, pure copper pots and plates are said to be more hygienic than those with a mixed alloy. Sufferers of arthritis also believe that eating and drinking from copper utensils can alleviate pain.

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The production of copper utensils dates back to ancient times, with the Tamrakar community being traditionally involved in their making. The shops along Tichhugalli are family businesses and have been there for decades, passed down through generations of sons.

Tamrakars have lived in that alley for years, explaining the presence of the numerous copper shops there. People know that Tichhugalli is the place to go to for copper items through reputation alone.

Compared to other newly opened businesses, the ones in Tichhugalli are said to produce goods of a higher caliber simply due to their more experienced craftsmen.

Private workshops owned by these craftsmen were once the norm but many have closed down.

Most of the items are now being made in Lagankhel, with the exception of a few.

One such existing workshop belongs to 60-year old Narendra Tamrakar.

The craftsman hammers daily on raw copper materials and shapes them into beautiful pots and plates. A Dikchi (plain pot) takes about one day to complete, a Kharkhand (carved pot) about four to five. Carvings are traditionally hammered on using an iron pick.

Most of the shops carry a wide variety of items – ranging from big water pots to plates and also to decorative statues and pieces. All items are traditionally handmade by skilled workers.

Making such products by hand requires a lot of time and skill, resulting in prolonged production. Some shopkeepers also feel that people nowadays have less use for copper items due to the advent of steel and plastics.

"These utilities are losing their essence," says Sagar Tamrakar, whose father's shop is over 30 years old. "The business is moving in a different way – instead of being employed as utensils, they are put to use as decorative items."

Rajesh LalTamrakar has been taking care of the shop for 15 years. With no sons to pass the business on to, he thinks that the shop will have to close soon.

Another shopkeeper, Rajesh Lal Tamrakar, agrees: "These goods will soon lose their popularity. Copper products are very heavy compared to newer steel and plastic goods."

Business has been "crawling," only picking up during specific periods such as the dowry season, says Sagar.

However, some shopkeepers believe that for this business to continue, they have to adapt with the times and cater to the changing demographics.

This belief has led to most shops carrying a variety of goods to keep up with the tough competition down the alley. That being said, Tichhugalli is still a must-visit – be it to purchase handcrafted items or to admire the beautiful copper goods.