

Crafting opportunities in Khur village of South Khorasan Province



Iranica Desk

The story of South Khorasan Province and the people who have long dedicated themselves to the art of stone carving is a tale of artisans who, each in their small or large workshops, have kept the light of this craft alive by employing and training several individuals. Among these artisans is Mohammad Mahdi Ahaninjan from the Khur village in Khusf, a craftsman who has been turning the wheel of his life with gem cutting for 14 years.

In an interview with IRNA, Ahaninjan shared that for years, driven by a passionate spirit, he has spent countless hours in the surrounding deserts collecting colorful stones, which he then stores in his yard as precious and semi-precious gems. His 14 years of dedication to this profession have not only inspired him but also motivated other residents to follow suit.

This craftsman highlighted that his work has led to job creation for the youth of Khur village, recognized as the National Village of Agate Carving, where more than 25 gem-cutting workshops currently operate. Ahaninjan elaborated on his expertise in gem cutting, describing it as a form of carving or sculpture. "I am the first person in Khur village to learn carving, or sculpturing, without a teach-

er and with great difficulty," he explained.

He noted that as the demand for polished stones and cabochons diminished, he turned to sculpture, teaching himself the craft. "One day, while observing a tree in my yard from my room's window, I was inspired to carve a statue resembling that tree. That was how I began my first sculpture, and I later continued with carvings of horses, leopards, and other animals."

Ahaninjan expressed immense joy in working with beautiful and colorful natural stones, stating, "For hours each day, I

engrave designs and patterns onto the lifeless surfaces of semi-precious stones."

However, he also discussed the challenges facing the industry, emphasizing that marketing remains the most significant issue. "The foremost wish of any artist is the hope of selling their products," he said.

He explained that agate stones can be found in the deserts surrounding the village, where they are transformed into various cabochons and valuable products in local workshops and homes, eventually sold at different exhibitions. "We encounter

no issues securing raw materials, cutting stones, or producing jewelry in the region, but the main problem in the carving industry is marketing and sales," he added.

Ahaninjan emphasized his satisfaction with working in this industry, provided there is effective marketing. He remarked, "With the various support from officials, this industry could thrive much more than it currently does, especially now that livestock and agriculture are not profitable due to ongoing droughts. Engaging in this industry has created jobs and

income for the villagers."

He noted that, for example, in the current year, 80% of his production in the gem carving field has gone unsold. "Our products are primarily sold at provincial, regional, and national exhibitions. Due to the high costs of booths and travel, we are unable to participate in regional and national exhibitions and can only attend provincial ones," he explained.

Ahaninjan expressed hope that provincial officials would support them in covering booth costs so they could sell their products. "Due to various issues, I have not been able to participate in national and regional exhibitions so far," he lamented. He added that most residents of Khur village are engaged in collecting precious and semi-precious stones from the surrounding deserts and storing them in their homes. "Currently, there are 20 to 25 gem carving workshops active in our village, and if the marketing issue is resolved, definitely more individuals will be attracted to this profession, contributing to job creation in the region," he stated.

The artisan shared one of his aspirations: "I wish to have a workshop equipped with all the necessary tools so that I can teach carving to others, allowing them to avoid the hardships

I faced in learning without a teacher."

Hassan Ali Fouladi, deputy head of South Khorasan Province's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization, stated that various provincial, regional, and national exhibitions are the best venues for selling handicrafts, with the organization of these exhibitions planned annually at both provincial and national levels.

He added, "Usually, due to high costs related to accommodation and travel, artisans in the province struggle to participate in national and regional exhibitions."

Fouladi emphasized that cyberspace is the best platform for selling handicrafts from South Khorasan Province, stating, "According to documentation, there are about 300 artisans actively working in the field of gem carving in the province, but unofficially, there are over 600 artisans working and making efforts in this area."

He also highlighted the various specialized training provided to gemstone artisans in South Khorasan Province, noting, "In the National Agate Carving Village, we have more than 70 gem-cutting workshops, but a significant portion of the village residents are engaged in collecting precious and semi-precious stones."



● IRNA

Maragheh's religious heritage and architectural legacy

Iranica Desk

Maragheh is a significant center for studying the architectural features of rock-cut religious sites. The establishment of a church at the Maragheh Observatory Hill is closely linked to the status of non-Islamic religious followers within the scientific complex and the religious policies of the Ilkhanids.

In an interview with ISNA, Saeed Satarnejad, a Ph.D. archaeologist from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Mohaghegh Ardebili University, emphasized that one of the main characteristics of historical sites in any region is their ritual spaces.

He noted that these spaces have long been regarded with interest, sanctity, and respect by socially devout groups committed

to religious doctrines. From this perspective, Maragheh stands out as an exceptionally significant and enduring center for the study of hand-carved religious architecture in the history and culture of northwestern Iran. Understanding all aspects of this architecture can greatly enhance our knowledge of the religious beliefs of past communities in the region.

Satarnejad further explained that since Maragheh is considered one of the first political centers of the Ilkhanid period, it features worship spaces associated with various religions and sects, some of which have survived to this day.

He pointed out that the hand-carved church on the observatory hill is one of the region's ritual spaces, commonly known

among locals as the "Caves of the Observatory". This architectural monument was created during the Ilkhanid period in the rocky terrain of the hill.

Satarnejad stated that the continuity and expansion of Christianity, unlike the teachings of other non-Islamic religions such as Buddhism, were influenced by the policies of Nestorian leaders in relation to subsequent Ilkhanid khans, particularly Ghazan Khan (Mahmoud). As a result, Christian followers maintained an active presence in the urban structure of Maragheh until the Qajar era, in contrast to Buddhists.

He added that understanding these religious spaces could significantly contribute to recognizing the reasons behind the persistence of certain non-Islamic

religions, particularly Christianity, during that time. Therefore, to obtain comprehensive and reliable information about these events, efforts have been made to study the hand-carved church at the observatory hill, which serves as one of the important centers of these events. This involves field studies, including visits and documentation of the rock-cut spaces, as well as referencing written sources from the Islamic period to reach scientific conclusions.

This archaeologist noted that the results of this research, while introducing and recognizing the largest rock-cut church in Iran during the Ilkhanid period, are also significant for understanding the interactions between Islam and other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions.



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