

Khorasan Razavi's carpet industry faces growing challenges

Iranica Desk

For generations, handwoven carpets have been an integral part of the lives, culture and economy of families across the cities and villages of Khorasan Razavi Province, where generations of weavers have worked at their looms. For many rural women and families, carpet weaving has not only helped preserve a cultural heritage but has also provided a source of income and livelihood. Today, however, this long-standing tradition faces a range of economic and structural challenges that threaten its future.

Mostafa Zaboli, a veteran handwoven carpet weaver in Khorasan Razavi Province, said rising raw material costs, declining economic returns, the entry of inexperienced workers into the trade and waning interest among young people in learning the craft were among the main challenges facing the province's carpet industry.

Unless weavers' economic circumstances improve, he warned, it would be unrealistic to expect younger generations to continue working at the looms and pass the craft on to future generations.

Zaboli told ISNA that rising raw material prices were

among the most pressing problems facing carpet weavers today. Yarn, wool and other weaving materials account for a significant share of production costs, and price increases directly affect both the final cost of carpets and the income earned by weavers.

Labor costs have also risen, pushing up production expenses. However, the market cannot absorb price increases indefinitely, and producers cannot raise their prices without considering consumers' purchasing power, he added.

Under these circumstances, producers face a difficult choice: raise prices and risk losing customers, or cut costs by using cheaper raw materials, potentially compromising the quality of their products.

Zaboli identified the entry of unskilled and inexperienced individuals into the trade as another challenge, stressing that carpet weaving is a specialised profession that requires proper training before work begins. Weavers must understand raw materials, know which types of yarn and wool are suitable for different carpets, follow designs accurately and observe the technical principles of weaving. Without these skills, carpet quality may deteriorate, ultimately damaging the



reputation of handwoven products, he said.

The issue becomes particularly significant when carpets are sold in competitive markets, where customers assess quality before making purchasing decisions. If standards decline, producers cannot expect to retain buyers' trust, Zaboli added. He also expressed concern over declining interest among young people in carpet weaving, saying the profession's economic prospects were no longer attractive enough to draw new entrants as they once did.

Young people today seek jobs that offer predictable

earnings and a clearer financial future. When carpet weaving requires months of labor and considerable effort but generates income that fails to keep pace with living costs, it is hardly surprising that they turn to other occupations, he said. Zaboli warned that a decline in carpet weaving would mean more than a reduction in production. It could also undermine employment among rural households and lead to the loss of traditional knowledge and skills associated with the craft.

For carpet weaving to survive into future generations, the economic conditions of weavers must first improve,

he said, adding that those who have devoted years to mastering the craft should be able to earn a living from their skills.

Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi, a researcher specializing in handwoven carpets, said the industry's problems could not be attributed to economic factors alone. One of the most significant challenges in recent years has been the declining number of weavers and diminishing incentives for people to work in the sector.

When carpet weaving is no longer economically viable, workers gradually leave the profession. However, the industry depends not sim-

ply on labor but on skilled and experienced artisans, he said.

Over years of practice, experienced weavers develop an intricate understanding of designs, colors, yarn, wool, knot density and quality. Such expertise cannot be acquired in a short period. Consequently, the departure of experienced weavers represents more than a shrinking workforce; it also risks the loss of accumulated knowledge and craftsmanship, Hashemi said.

He described the simultaneous departure of skilled artisans and the entry of inexperienced workers lacking sufficient knowledge as a serious threat to the industry. As experienced workers leave and less-qualified individuals take their place, carpet quality can gradually decline, he warned.

Hashemi said authenticity, diversity and quality had been key factors underpinning the standing of Iranian carpets in domestic and international markets.

In previous years, attention to designs, patterns, dyeing techniques and production quality had helped strengthen the industry's market position. Maintaining that standing, he added, would require continued planning and careful oversight.

The researcher identified the use of suitable raw ma-

terials as a fundamental principle of high-quality carpet production, noting that appropriate wool, quality dyes and adherence to technical weaving standards all contribute to a superior product.

Manufacturers should not sacrifice the quality of raw materials simply to reduce production costs, he said.

Emphasizing that the carpet market depends above all on trust, Hashemi said customers' confidence rests on a product's quality, authenticity and technical characteristics.

Preserving the authenticity of traditional designs and motifs is another important concern, he added. The carpets of each region form part of its cultural identity, and patterns developed over generations should not be abandoned merely to cut costs or speed up production.

However, preserving tradition does not mean ignoring market demand, Hashemi said. Carpets must retain their cultural identity and traditional characteristics while also adapting to changing consumer preferences.

Today's customers may seek different sizes, colors, designs or even uses for carpets. Producers, therefore, need to understand both the heritage of their craft and the market and its customers' needs, he said.

Telesm Cave captivates visitors, frightens locals

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High on Mount Manesht, in Sarab-e Eyvan Rural District in Ilam Province, lies Telesm Cave, a site long associated with fear and folklore. With its winding passages and intriguing local legends, the cave has become one of Ilam Province's most enigmatic natural attractions — a place many mountaineers prefer to admire from the outside.

For years, Telesm Cave has been surrounded by strange local beliefs about lights mysteriously going out and visitors falling ill. The stories have turned the cave into one of the province's most mysterious natural sites. But do these legends have a basis in reality?

The cave stretches approximately 300 meters from its entrance to its deepest known point. The first 100 meters are open, while the remainder runs beneath a ceiling covered with stalactites. At a depth of about 100 meters, the cave branches into three passages. One of these extends for around 20 meters but becomes extremely narrow and difficult to traverse after the first 10 meters.

Beyond this challenging section, the cave continues in a semi-circular formation to a depth of approximately 200 meters. From around the 260-meter mark onward, the passage narrows further, with part of the route having collapsed.

The cave is composed primarily of limestone, while its floor con-



sists of a mixture of soil and rock. It was identified in 1990 by the Ilam Mountaineering Association in cooperation with the tourism affairs department of the provincial Department of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Local beliefs surrounding the cave are so deeply rooted that even its name, Telesm, has become associated with these stories of mystery and enchantment.

Mohsen Karimi, a resident of Sarab-e Eyvan, told ISNA that the cave is "strange and magical," claiming that most people who enter it eventually become ill.

He also said the cave is a refuge for animals including snakes, owls, bats and scorpions, adding: "As soon as you enter, any source of light goes out for no apparent reason."

According to Karimi, bats accompany explorers near the cave's entrance. Some hang upside



down from the cave's formations, while others fly at a height close to visitors' faces. Limestone formations and a floor covered with soil and rocks are among the cave's other notable features. Farzad Sharifi, director general of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization of Ilam



nation: the accumulation of carbon dioxide in enclosed and deep sections of caves.

"In limestone caves, particularly in deeper areas where ventilation is insufficient, carbon dioxide — which is heavier than air — can accumulate near the floor or in lower layers," he said. "Studies conducted in similar caves have shown that at carbon dioxide concentrations of around three percent, lamp flames can go out because there is no longer enough oxygen to support combustion."

Sharifi noted that in some caves around the world, entering areas with high concentrations of carbon dioxide can cause torches to go out within seconds.

He added that carbon dioxide accumulation can also cause dizziness, shortness of breath, extreme fatigue and even unconsciousness. Such symptoms, he said, may explain local accounts

of visitors "falling ill" after entering the cave. Prolonged exposure in the deeper sections can make these symptoms more severe.

Telesm Cave was officially registered as a national natural heritage site in 2020. The designation recognizes the site's importance from a conservation perspective. However, reports indicate that access to the cave remains difficult and hazardous, and plans have been discussed to restore the route and make access easier.

Sharifi said that, on the one hand, Telesm Cave is not suitable for general tourism because of genuine hazards, including potentially dangerous animals, bats, possible carbon dioxide accumulation and sections affected by rockfalls. On the other hand, he said, the cave is one of the province's officially registered natural attractions and, if properly managed, could become a destination for adventure travelers and geotourism enthusiasts.

Although partly rooted in fear and a lack of scientific understanding, local stories may nevertheless reflect the cave's real hazards: limited ventilation, potentially dangerous wildlife, and passages that become progressively darker and more difficult to navigate.

The scientific explanation for carbon dioxide accumulation offers a rational account of both phenomena at the heart of the legends: the extinguishing of lights and the illness experienced by some visitors.