INTRODUCTION

India is an agrarian country. Majority of the population lives off the land. Mostly, agriculture is a seasonal occupation in India. When the agricultural work is not available, the rural folk carry out some handicraft work like fashioning out simple tools or some decorative fixtures. Thus, handicrafts provide part time employment to the agricultural population.

India has a range of forest dwellers. These people are untouched by urbanisation. They have traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs, the flora and the fauna, other important raw materials like wood, bamboo and so on. Using these raw materials, they fashion out goods through skilled hand work and the simplest of tools. These goods are later sold out at the rural markets.

In villages, there have always been families involved with a certain trade for generations. They may be the pot and clay work makers, the blacksmith, the carpenters, those involved in making simple tools or toys from simple material like wood. These products are generally utility based. But some of these may also be attractively created and may find use as decorative pieces in urban homes. Some of these traditional workers are experts in cloth making using the simplest of tools and no energy source other than human labour. They use raw materials like cotton, silk or any other natural fibre.

The creation created from human skill and ingenuity, from resources that are locally available, and using the simplest of tools is termed as a handicraft product. If some machines are used, then the proportion of input by the machine is very low compared to that of the human effort.

All the above handicraft activity generates employment. It may be full time, part time or seasonal. It brings money to the rural economy. It may be able to stop the run towards urban areas by the rural youth. This will help in stopping the emptying of the villages.

Handicraft industry needs very low investment. Nevertheless it needs to be nurtured, sometimes nursed and always protected from competitors by the government of the day.

These handicraft products created by the artisans, most of whom are illiterate and rustic need a market and a buyer. This work is done by the middleman. These middlemen procure handicraft goods from the artisan at a pittance and sell it to mostly city based traders, emporium owners, even government emporiums or exporters. It is these people who sell the material to the final customer. This leads to some level of exploitation of the artisans.

To help the artisans to challenge this exploitation and to create employment in rural areas and further to use productively the skills and resources, the government of India has created several handicraft boards at the central government level and even at the state level. These help in getting the handicraft products to the markets in the cities, through Haats, trade fairs, state government emporiums, and at various exhibitions in the country and abroad.
All these efforts are showing very little improvement in the situation of the artisan. Setting up emporiums and presenting the products at sales is all in the ambit of traditional marketing practices and they are not showing encouraging results.

This is where internet and marketing using the internet comes in.

Internet marketing makes use of the internet and all associated digital technologies to achieve marketing objectives. To use the internet marketing effectively, it has to be integrated to the traditional media.

There are two major avenues of internet marketing. They are:

SEO: search engine optimisation.

SEM: search engine marketing.

Along with these the tools of social media like face book, LinkedIn; watts up are to be used. Also affiliate marketing may be used. These bring about positive changes to the trade. Briefly, they are as follows.

Reduction of transaction time and distribution costs.

Enhances speed of delivery of information.

The consumer is at an advantage in negotiations.

Products can be advertised and made available all over the world at all times at very low costs.

The major problem faced in applying this technology is lack of knowledge about it by small handicraft artisans, dealers and middlemen.

The scope of this research project is to study how the internet usage will affect the fortunes of the handicraft artisan, the middlemen, the city based show room owners, traders and exporters. This will also include studying the overall impact the internet makes on the volume of handicraft trade.

The study is restricted to the state of Maharashtra. Some of the famous handicrafts from this region are as follows:

KolhapuriChappals: These are handmade leather footwear. There is not a single nail or adhesive used in its making.

SawantwadiHandicrafts: The Chitarees are a community involved in making wooden board games like chess sets, furniture sets, vegetable and fruit sets which are painted in vivid colours and then laquered.
Bidriware: They are small decorative utensils made from an alloy of copper and zinc and garnished with silver. The Paandaan, hookahs are examples of these products. They make attractive souvenirs.

Paithani Sarees: This has a history of more than 2000 years. They are sarees made from silk and zari of gold or copper used as embellishment. It can take up to 6 months to make one saree.

Narayan Peth Sarees: These are silk sarees with contrasting borders with zari work with different motifs.