

*November 27, 2005*

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## **Rocking for Rajasthan**

**F**rom where I am sitting and writing this at 4 a.m. on a Friday morning Pacific Time, I can see a strip mall about a mile away, brightly lit up against the backdrop of the imposing Mount Rainier, south-east of Seattle. Traffic is already streaming towards the mall, which has a Wal-Mart, a Target, an Office Depot, and other familiar American retail giants. It's the day after Thanksgiving, otherwise known as "Black Friday," arguably the biggest shopping day in the United States.

On this day, American stores advertise rock bottom prices in "Doorbuster" sales (e.g. laptops under \$ 400) starting in the wee hours of the morning. Hence the 4 a.m. traffic and stampede when doors open. Black Friday heralds the five-week shopping window lasting till Christmas, a period during which more than half of all U.S consumer shopping takes place.

There's a reason I'm not part of the shopping mob besides not wishing to be crushed to death on a cold wintry morning. Simply as a matter of personal and professional interest, I regularly do an inventory check in large stores such as Wal-Mart and Target to get a sense of what and how much they are importing from India. Right now, I've topped off that routine by looking up three fly-by-night websites that offer a sneak preview into what the big ticket Thanksgiving sales items are going to be. I think I know what I want and I will buy it online.

Between all this, I'm exchanging e-mails with Jaswant Singh Sengar, an itinerant marketing executive from India, who has written to me saying my last column about Roopraj Prajapati, the Rajasthani dhurrie-maker, is only a part of the story, and do I know about the success of Jodhpur handicrafts and furniture? Yes, I do, I say, because I have seen the products in Wal-Mart and Target, although I did not narrow it down to Jodhpur.

Sengar says the industry employs about 200,000 people directly and indirectly in Jodhpur district with an annual turnover of \$ 200 million. Now wait a minute, I respond, can you authenticate the numbers, because if what you say is correct, something truly remarkable is happening here because for all the hoopla about call centers, it still employs only around 500,000 people all over India.

Sengar comes back saying, sorry, he understated the numbers. Attached to his next e-mail are four jpeg files of the 2004-2005 Annual Report of Jodhpur Handicrafts Exporters Association (JHEA) showing exports grew from Rs 300 crores in 1997-1998 to Rs. 900 crores (\$ 200 million) in 2003-04. It is expected to reach Rs 1200 crore (around \$ 270 million) in 2005-2006. Direct and indirect employment generated is 3 lakhs, not 2 lakhs.

Jodhpur sells to Wal-Mart, Target, Pier 1, Bombay Company and Sundance Catalogue (owned by Robert Redford) among others. And yes, many businesses sell directly on the Internet, as a simple search can confirm.

More than a decade ago, friends, and even family, mocked me for eulogizing the internet. "Of what use is your computer and Internet for a poor villager who has no food in his stomach?" they sneered. Others rubbished globalization and how it would marginalize the Indian hinterland.

Guess we have an answer to all these questions now. Who knows what hidden entrepreneurial potential, talent and energy lies locked up in the Indian boonies? If Jodhpur can do \$ 300 million worth of business in just handicrafts, what about 600 other districts?

Anyway, I was going to hunt for some nifty Ipod accessories online. Change of plans. Looking for a nice rocking chair from Rajasthan.

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