

Need for Revamping Agri-Tourism Initiatives of Kerala in the Post Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Agri-tourism in India is gaining popularity as a niche tourism segment that combines agriculture and rural experiences with travel and leisure activities. Agri-tourism has been successfully implemented in Indian states like Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana and Karnataka. But Agri-tourism in Kerala is still in its infancy stage. In this study, the researchers analyze the Agri-tourism policies of the states of Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana and Karnataka. For the successful implementation of Kerala agri-tourism, the researchers also suggest revamping the current agri-tourism policy of the state.

Keywords: Agri tourism, COVID-19, GDP

Introduction

Tourism sector is a key driver of socio-economic progress in many countries through the creation of jobs and enterprises, export revenues, and infrastructure development. Over the past few decades, tourism has experienced continued expansion and diversification to become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. As a worldwide export category, tourism ranks third after chemicals and fuels and ahead of automotive products and food. In many developing countries, tourism is the top export category. It contributes about 12% of the total world exports. Prior to the pandemic, Travel & Tourism accounted for 1 in 4 of all new jobs created across the world, 10.6% of all jobs (334 million), and 10.4% of global GDP that is US\$9.2 trillion (**WTTC Report 2021**). Moreover, international visitor spending amounted to USD 1.7 trillion in 2019 (6.8% of total exports, 27.4% of global services exports). But the impact of the corona virus pandemic has hit the tourism sector hard. In this pandemic situation, due to international travel ban various governments emphasized on domestic tourism for the revival of the tourism sector. The current epidemic does not allow people to congregate, and people prefer less crowded or alienated agri tourism areas.

Agro tourism in India has immense potential - it can provide unique experiences and opportunities to understand local life and immerse oneself in India's rich agricultural heritage. Promoting agro-tourism offers dual benefits - it can offer unique experiences and opportunities to understand India's rich agricultural heritage, while also becoming a source of livelihood for the people of rural India. Agri tourism in India is relatively a new concept and to a lesser extent it is popular in India. But this COVID Pandemic has given new impetus to agri tourism development, as Albert Einstein said, "*In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.*"

Impact of COVID-19 on tourism sector

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, generating huge foreign exchange and employment for many countries. This sector plays an important role in boosting the economy of a country. But the impact of the corona virus pandemic has hit the tourism sector hard. The corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has triggered an unprecedented crisis in the tourism economy, given the immediate and immense shock to the sector. Governments around the world have taken various measures to prevent the spread of the virus such as restrictions on travel, business activities, and people-to-people interactions etc have paralyzed the tourism economy.

As the spread of the virus intensified, it caused many job losses and unemployment, halted production and made life unbearable for many people. Major tourism related industries like tourism Food services, transportation, entertainment and hotel business are facing the crisis mostly. So COVID 19 has had significant macro economic repercussions in countries where this sector supports many jobs and businesses. The financial costs of tourism from this epidemic will continue to rise if further spread of the virus is not addressed. Complete closure of territories and hard quarantine measures taken by various countries are very difficult for a third world country like India.

Trends in tourist arrival to India

As a favorite tourist destination, India receives both foreign and international tourists. As a result of COVID-19 and the ongoing restrictions to international mobility, Tourism sector suffered losses and almost become stagnant. Table 1.1 explains the trends in foreign arrivals, non-residents Indians arrivals and international tourists’ arrivals during 2018 to 2022. It also depicts the percentage variations of tourist arrivals over previous years.

Table 1.1 Tourist Arrivals in India during 2018 to 2022

Year	Number of Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India (In millions)	Percentage (%) Change over Previous year	Number of Non-Residents Indians Arrivals (In millions)	Percentage (%) Change over Previous year	Number of International Tourist Arrivals in India (In millions)	Percentage (%) Change over Previous year
2018	10.56	5.2	6.87	1.5	17.42	3.6
2019	10.93	3.5	6.98	1.6	17.91	2.8
2020	2.74	-74.9	3.59	-48.6	6.33	-64.7
2021	1.52	-44.5	5.48	52.6	7	10.6
2022	6.44	321.5	7.89	43.9	14.33	104.43

India Tourism Statistics 2023

The table 1.1 shows the number of foreign tourist arrivals in India increased from 10.56 million in 2018 to 10.93million in 2019 with annual growth rate of 3.50 percent. But it decreased to 2.74million in 2020 with -74.9 % growth rates. The same trend has been seen in case of Non-residents Indians arrivals and international tourist arrivals. Number of foreign tourist arrivals again increases to 6.19 million in 2022 at a growth rate of 305.4%

Objectives of the study

1. To make clear the concept of 'Agri Tourism' and to describe the importance of agri tourism in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. To understand the opportunities of Agro Tourism in Indian.
3. To provide insight into need for revamping the agri tourism initiatives of Kerala.

Methodology

The present paper is based on secondary data obtained from various literary sources, including various research papers, news articles and websites.

Meaning and Definition of Agri-Tourism

Agri-tourism is considered to be a combination of tourism and agriculture. In other words, a farm area operated with the help of a rural tourism unit can be considered as agri-tourism. Tourists can see and do the basic principles of agriculture in agri-tourism and buy agricultural products too. At the same time, agricultural farms have a number of activities, including production, post-production and processing activities, which are linked to the tourism sector, which attracts visiting tourists to such ventures or activities. Agri-tourism activities have a dual purpose, one is to educate tourists about local farming practices, provide them with some recreation and the other is to provide a source of income for the host farmer. That is, the main focus is on increasing farm incomes while providing visitors with entertainment, recreation, and educational experiences. Agri-tourism activities may vary by place and time. City dwellers who visit farms love to stay at the farm house, engage in farming activities, enjoy a variety of rides such as animal rides, bullock cart rides, tractor rides, eat local food, and experience fresh fruits and vegetables on the farm. They strive to understand local art and culture.

The term "agri-tourism" is often used interchangeably with "agri-tourism," "agro-tourism," "farm tourism," "agricultural tourism," or "agritainment." Regardless of the exact definition or terminology, any definition of agri-tourism should include the following four factors:

- Agri Tourism combines the essential elements of tourism and agro-industry.
- Agri-tourism attracts the general public to visit agricultural areas.
- Agricultural tourism is designed to increase agricultural income.
- Agri Tourism offers visitors entertainment, recreation or educational experiences.

Barbieri and Mshenga (2008), defines Agri-tourism "any practice developed on a working farm with the purpose of attracting visitors."

Cambridge Dictionary, "the business of providing holidays for people on farms or in the countryside".

World Tourism Organization (1998) defines agri-tourism as "involves accommodation being offered in the farmhouse or in a separate guest house, providing meals and organizing guests' activities in the observation and participation in the farming operations."

Agro Tourism Opportunities in India:

1. India is a large market for travel and tourism. It offers a diverse portfolio of niche tourism products such as rural, agri, medical, wellness, sports, MICE, eco-tourism. India ranked 34 in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019 published by the World Economic Forum. In WTTC's Economic Impact 2019 report, India's Travel & Tourism GDP contribution grew by 4.9%, which was the third highest after China and Philippines. Additionally, the report also highlights that

between 2014 and 2019, India witnessed the strongest growth in the number of jobs created (6.36 million). Contribution of the travel and tourism sector to the GDP of India in 2019 was 6.9%. By introducing Agro-tourism concept, not only present growth rate (Pre Pandemic) is sustained but also this value addition contributes to further growth.

2. The tourism sector in India is an integral pillar of the Make in India program. The tourism industry in India plays a role of significant economic multiplier and becomes critical since India has to grow at rapid rates and create jobs. 100% FDI in the tourism industry is allowed in tourism construction projects, including the development of hotels, resorts, and recreational facilities. Such favorable conditions will be conducive to the growth of rural or agri tourism in India.
3. India has already established itself as one of the best tourist destinations in the world. Value addition through the introduction of innovative products such as agro tourism will strengthen the competitiveness of the Indian tourism industry in the global market.
4. India has a diverse culture and geography that offers vast and limitless possibilities for the growth of agri tourism business. Diverse agro-climatic conditions, diverse crops, diverse agricultural practices, peoples, cultures, landscapes and multi-location tourism products provide opportunities to promote agri tourism projects in India.
5. The modern lifestyle has made life stressful and reduced the average life expectancy. Therefore, people are constantly on the lookout for environmentally friendly ways to make life more peaceful. Therefore, there is an opportunity to establish agro-tourism centers and promote out-of-town tourism centers in rural areas. But adequate facilities and publicity are needed to promote such centers.

Agri tourism initiatives in Indian

India is a land of villages. A large section of India's population living in rural areas is still traditionally dependent on agriculture and allied activities. Even though around 50% of the total workforce is engaged in agricultural activities, it contributes only 19.9 per cent (2021) of total GDP. Moreover, the income from agriculture sector is declining day by day and these villagers do not have enough alternative employment opportunities. Therefore, in order to increase the contribution of the agricultural sector, existing agricultural activities should be strengthened by providing additional income generating activities. Tourism will be a boon in this regard. Combining tourism with agriculture will help to increase the contribution of the agricultural sector to GDP and thereby facilitate economic development. The concept of agri tourism was introduced in the 10th Five Year Plan as part of rural tourism, on which 103 projects were sanctioned and in the 12th Five Year Plan Rs.770 crore was allocated for this. Rajasthan and Kerala have achieved the early benefits of this initiative. Later, Maharashtra became the most advanced state in implementing agri-tourism in various districts. One of the main objectives of this study is to look at how agri tourism projects in Kerala can be restructured for tourism development. This study is based on the content analysis of various farm tourism policies or project implemented in different states of India.

1. Maharashtra

The state of Maharashtra is the pioneer state to develop and promote Agri Tourism in the country. The Agri Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC), based in Baramati, Maharashtra, was the first to sow the seeds for agri-tourism projects in India. ATDC was founded in 2004 by Pandurang Tawar, an entrepreneur from the farming community. The main activities include operating its Agri-tourism centre along with encouraging more farmers to take up Agri tourism, conducting training and research

programs. ATDC, the umbrella organization of agri-tourism, has been successfully operating agri-tourism projects owned by it. In 2007, ATDC launched Training and skills development programs with Maharashtra State Agri Tourism Vistar Yojana. This Agri Tourism model has been replicated in 328 Agri-tourism centres across 30 Districts in Maharashtra, which has helped to conserve, enhance the village environment, village traditions and culture, customs, village arts and handicrafts.

The Maharashtra State Agricultural and Rural Tourism Co-operative Federation Limited (MART) have formulated a policy for agri-tourism in Maharashtra. The federation was set up on 12 December 2008 at Baramati in Pune district of Maharashtra. It helps farmers to supplement their income from farm produce by initiating tourism related activities in their farm areas.

Infrastructure required for accreditation of agri-tourism units in Maharashtra

- Agricultural tourism centers can be started by individual farmers, agricultural co-operative societies, agricultural research institutes, agricultural universities, or agricultural companies.
- There should be at least 3 rooms for registration of agri-tourism Center
- Maintain records, visitor's book and feedbacks obtained from the guests
- Housing arrangements and food distribution facilities should be provided
- Hold Minimum two to five acres of land.

Tourism Department support Activities

- Undertakes training and certification programs for newcomers in agri tourism business
- Acts as a facilitator and promoter of the concept of agri tourism.
- Attracts guests through marketing to the agri tourism units
- Agri tour Packages are prepared for tourist.

New agro tourism Policy of Maharashtra 2020

In September 2020, the Maharashtra Cabinet approved an agro-tourism policy aimed at reviving the tourism sector and supporting the rural economy. Some of the objectives of the policy are - rural development through agro-tourism, ensuring market for agricultural products, promoting agro-related businesses, providing employment to rural youth, organizing exhibitions of folk arts and traditions, and providing a pollution-free and eco- friendly environment experience.

2. Punjab

Punjab , also Known as Bread Basket of India, is the best place for agricultural tourism, perhaps one of the most rejoiced destinations all over India. The Government of Punjab has launched the Farm Tourism Project to attract tourists and give them a first-hand look at rural life. The scheme formulated detailed guidelines for connecting the progressive farmers and farm house owners in the district. Under the scheme, the owner of a farm house will be the host and guide to the visitors. Those enrolling under the scheme should provide visitors with a hygienic environment with modern facilities and must meet the standards set by the Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board. The license for agri-tourism/farm tourism to the trained farmers is issued for five years. There is a provision of No Objection Certificate (NOC) to the farmers regarding pollution and safety clearances. The board organizes meetings from time to time and undertakes promotional activities for farm tourism via the internet, publications and media relations. The quality of services offered by the farm owners are verified by the district authority as well as the tourism department. The tourism department would provide training and technical knowhow to the farm owners.

3. Haryana

Haryana has immense possibilities of growth in the Tourism sector with its varied attractions. The state has the huge potential for agri tourism also. A Number of farms are identified by the government of Haryana in the six districts Faridabad, Gurgaon, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Karnal, Mewat. The farm owners provide food and lodging for the guests. Local games like kabaddi, gulidanda and wrestling are the main regional games that tourists love to participate in. Tourist attractions include tractor rides, bullock cart rides, village tours, kite flying, vegetable gardening and horticulture sessions.

Haryana Tourism department introduced Farm Tourism Policy in 2015. In collaboration with 21 farm owners in Haryana, the Department of Tourism has come up with special holiday packages for selected farms in Haryana. This attracted a large number of tourists to the farm stay units. As part of this policy, infrastructure to farm tourism sites was improved with the assistance of the Public Works Department and the Public Health Department. The following guidelines have been proposed for setting up of farm tourism units in Haryana as part of the farm tourism policy.

- Tourism Units should have at least 2 rooms
- Collect visitor book and feedbacks received from guests
- Farms have a clean and tidy environment with comfortable modern facilities for visitors.

4. Karnataka

The State of Karnataka has implemented a new agro-rural tourism policy in 2020, which aims to attract an investment of `5000 crore and create one million direct and indirect jobs within the next five years. The new policy also aims to increase the sector's contribution from 14.8% to 20% by 2025. Agri Tourism Policy in the state aims to promote not only agricultural activities but also various aspects of rural life in Karnataka such as local cuisine, culture, traditions and arts. Mandatory Project Specifications for this Agri Tourism Project are-

- The agri-tourism project is to be set up on land owned by farmers, farmers' organizations or farmers' producers' societies.
- The minimum farm area should be 5 acres (2,17,800 square feet). Up to a maximum of 10% of the total land available under the farm should be acquired for activities related to agri tourism; the rest of the farm land should be set aside for agriculture and agricultural activities.
- Areas for agri-tourism activities should be clearly demarcated.
- The agri tourism project should be easily accessible to the public by motor vehicle.
- Gate, compound wall, name boards, etc. should be present at the entrance area. There should be a reception area at the entrance to welcome visitors. The reception area should have all the necessary information about the location, other services and activities
- There should be Cafeteria and dining area with adequate seating arrangements for visitors. The main meal served to the visitors should be local home cooked food or local cuisine.
- There should be adequate parking facilities.
- Walkways within the farm should be clearly marked.
- Visitors should be provided with free purified drinking water.
- There should be clean and well-maintained toilet facilities with separate toilets for men and women.
- Must have the required licenses / No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the concerned local authorities and other concerned authorities may be applicable for the respective project.

5. Kerala

An agriculture dominated State, Kerala has great potential to develop agro-tourism on a large scale without further investment. About 350,000 lakh hectares of land under paddy cultivation can be converted into tourist attractions and the benefits of tourism can be passed on directly to farmers. Kerala tourism department started green farms project in the year 2009. As a step towards this, Kerala Tourism department has launched Green Farms Kerala, a special venture aimed at preparing farms / plantations in the state to receive tourists. Infrastructure required for accreditation of Farm tourism units in Kerala

- Minimum 10 acres of farm or 50 acres of plantation
- Parking area
- Development of entry area
- Ticket counter, guardroom, gate, name boards etc.
- Compound wall at the entry area
- Stalls or shopping area outside or inside the farm
- Restaurant/coffee shop/snack bar
- Walkways, signage etc. within the farm
- Toilet facilities inside and outside the farm

Kerala Agri-Tourism Network project; In order to link agriculture with tourism a new project named Kerala Agri-Tourism Network project inaugurated by Tourism Minister of Kerala Sri. Muhammed Riyaz in September, 2021. The objective of this project is to find and develop 500 new tourism hubs in the rural areas in collaboration with the Local Government Department within 5 years.

Need for revamping agri- tourism initiative of Kerala

Based on the analysis of agri tourism / farm tourism policies implemented in various states of India, the agri tourism policy in Kerala needs to be revamped in order to suit the agricultural sector and the landscape.

- Lack of an appropriate agri-tourism policy will stagnate the agri-tourism development in Kerala. Under the current Farm Tourism Scheme in Kerala, 10 acres of land or 50 acres of plantation is required to be registered for a Farm Tourism Unit. Therefore, under the existing policy, only large landowner farmers can register their units under the Department of Tourism. But in states like Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka and Maharashtra, only one or two acres of land are required to register an agri-tourism unit. Therefore, ordinary or small farmers can also become partners in the agri-tourism scheme.
- Similarly, one of the most notable features of Maharashtra Agri Tourism is that the Maharashtra Agricultural and Rural Tourism Co-operative Federation Limited (MART) deals with matters related to agri-tourism and implements projects. With the formation of MART, Maharashtra has become one of the best agro-tourism states in India. Following this model, if a special department is set up to coordinate Kerala agri-tourism, the farm tourism sector in Kerala will be able to achieve further growth.
- The concept of farm or agri-tourism is clearly stated in the agro-tourism policy of the states of Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka and Maharashtra. However, the concept is not clearly mentioned in the farm tourism implemented in the state of Kerala. Therefore, farmers in Kerala do not have a clear

understanding of the concept of agri tourism. Therefore, the concept of Agri Tourism should be included in the proposed Kerala Farm Policy at the outset of the project.

- In order to register an agri tourism unit in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Maharashtra, the farmer who is a member of the scheme must have successfully completed the specialized training of the agri tourism department. As there is no such training in Kerala at present, farm tourism entrepreneurs do not know enough about how to run a farm tourism business. Therefore, agri-tourism training should be made mandatory in the proposed Kerala Farm Tourism Policy.
- Existing agri tourism projects in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka and Maharashtra list all the requirements of a farm tourism unit in the form of a checklist of facilities for approval and registration of Agri Tourism Center. If such a checklist is included in the Farm Tourism Scheme of Kerala, the Agri Tourism units in Kerala can be classified into different grades on the basis of faculty. That will contribute to the success of the project
- Maharashtra Agri Tourism Policy only mentions community participation in agricultural tourism activities. Agri-tourism can only be promoted through community participation. Not only farmers but also the rural communities are involved in agro-tourism activities. Therefore, community participation should be included in the proposed farm tourism scheme in Kerala.
- Finally, in every state where the Agri Tourism Project has been successfully implemented, there is an association or movement for those involved. The Agri Tourism Development Corporation of Maharashtra is an example. But those who run agri tourism business in Kerala do not have such an association. Therefore, such an association should be started soon in Kerala immediately to coordinate the agri tourism business

Conclusion

Kerala, a land of natural abundance, is ideal for becoming an agri tourism destination. But agri tourism in Kerala is still in its infancy stage, but once its full potential is utilized, it will benefit tourists and rural people alike. There is a lot that needs to be done in terms of setting standards for this venture. Although many agri tourism entrepreneurs have set up farms in the state, it needs to be standardized. Once a system is in place, the potential for developing agri tourism in other places is huge. In the future, other destinations could be brought to the agri tourism map in a similar way. Implementing agri tourism with a view to the future, given its impact on the economy and society, will pave the way for a better tomorrow.

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