

A SURVEY ON PERCEPTION AND CHALLENGES FACED BY FARM TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS IN ADIVASI DOMINATED JUNGAL MAHAL REGION OF WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the paper is to understand the perception and challenges faced by farmers for promoting agrotourism in the Jungal Mahal region of West Bengal. It is done by examining the policy ecosystem, infrastructure, economy, capacity building and access to finance factors in the region by means of both primary and secondary research. The motivation derives from the likely impact of this study for rural development, farmer income diversification, and general tourist sector growth. The study's goal is to give policymakers, businesses, and academics important insights.

Keywords: Agrotourism, Rural Entrepreneurship, Economic Challenges, MSME.

INTRODUCTION

Agro-tourism is the blend of agricultural production or processing and tourism. It involves inviting visitors to farms and engaging them in varied activities for aiding income generation. These activities may include farm tours, animal interaction, knowledge about traditional farming practices or recreational activities like fishing, trekking, and enjoying farm-fresh food. In India, agro-tourism is a promising niche tourism segment, ensuring unique experiences for the visitors. Agrotourism has significant benefits in three crucial areas of development - economic growth, environmental preservation and maintenance of cultural heritage. It can contribute to economic growth by providing new employment opportunities for rural residents. From an environmental perspective, agrotourism can contribute to the preservation of the environment, ecosystems and agricultural lands and minimize environmental damage. Additionally, agrotourism can help to maintain cultural heritage in rural areas by providing the rural residents an opportunity to showcase and celebrate their traditional values (Hrymak et al., 2019).

The Jungal Mahal region in West Bengal consisting of West Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram districts which is primarily an adivasi dominated region. Topographically, one fifth of the total area in this region is covered with dense sal forests inhabiting tribal communities, and wildlife. While the region offers excellent landscape and scenic charm, the erratic monsoons have adversely impacted agriculture and forced the natives to migrate to other places to earn a living from menial jobs. As high as about 47 per cent of the families in the region live below the poverty line. The development of agro tourism in this region can be an exemplary model to uplift the backward regions. It provides an opportunity to both elevate the standard of living of the natives and boost the economy by developing a tourist hub in the region.

While several efforts have been made in terms of policy response by the government for the upliftment of the region, it still faces certain challenges. This paper delves deep into the importance of some of the key factors for development of a region as an agro tourism hub including policy ecosystem, infrastructure, economy, capacity building and access to finance, and the challenges of the same.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Policy Ecosystem

The travel and tourism industries are two of the largest industries in India. The contribution of the travel and tourism Industry to India's GDP was 6.9% in 2019, and the year 2021 saw an 11% increase in tourists' footfalls in India with \$8.797 billion in forex earnings compared to 2020 (Ministry of Tourism Government of India, 2022). The Government of India has been taking bold steps to become a World Leader in tourism by 2047. With a roadmap and strategically designed vision, India has the potential to witness an unprecedented growth in tourist movement in terms of international arrivals and domestic tourists. It is especially of key relevance as the tourism industry operates hand in hand with many other industries, so the growth of tourism also helps other industries flourish. Despite its key relevance and contribution, India still lacks a foundational framework in the National Tourism Policy. (Dsouza et al., 2023)

Agrotourism Policy Ecosystem in India

Out of the tourism policies of twenty-seven states and six UTs, 13 states and UTs have no provision or mention of agrotourism or related aspects. Among the 20 documents synthesised by Dsouza and others (2023), that encouraged the development of agritourism, 17 policies were unclear on subsidies, loans, and state-funded investments, or had given minimal importance to agritourism. Current agrotourism policies have shortcomings due to the dearth of information on inter-sectoral effects and effects on the different stakeholders of the industry. Only few policies have clear provisions set aside for the development of agrotourism, but most policies reflect a structural absence on the roadmap to develop agrotourism through clear subsidies, loans, and state-funded investment plans. The authors, thus, have pointed to an urgent need to develop and implement policies that are pragmatic, achievable, stakeholder-centric, and transparent to encourage farmers to take up agrotourism on their land. In addition, the development of agrotourism policies must be followed by implementation and monitoring through definitive institutional mechanisms. (Dsouza et al. 2023).

Conversely, some states like Maharashtra and Kerala have pioneered in developing policies for development of agro-tourism. The state of Maharashtra has launched the Agritourism Development Corporation (ATDC) to encourage farmers to take up agrotourism by offering training and conducting skill development programs. Kerala, on the other hand, launched Sustainable, Tangible, Responsible, Ethnic Tourism (STREET) in May 2022, a project that introduced the tourists to experiential tourism in the unexplored rural lands of the state.

The Jungle Mahal Region

The Government of West Bengal launched the 'State Capital Investment Subsidy', a sub-scheme under the 'West Bengal Incentive Scheme,' in February 2021 to support tourism

development across the state. It enables small and micro enterprises to receive subsidies on fixed capital investment, that is, the investment made in building and plant and machinery in tourism units.

Infrastructure

According to primary research conducted by Mane and Patil, facilities such as purified drinking water, electricity connection, electricity backup, fresh food and good connection of connecting roads is of most importance to visitors at an Agrotourism centre. They have also concluded that while the satisfaction of visitors is positively correlated with the availability of quality infrastructure, agrotourism centres in India lack sufficient infrastructural facilities and need development to increase the market (Mane et al., 2017).

The Jungle Mahal Region

According to a study by Dasguptanayak and Bhunia (2016), while nearly 75 percent of the people have access to 'safe water' in rural West Bengal, in Jangalmahal only about 45 percent of the villagers get drinking water from safe sources. Among the rural dwellers of Jangalmahal, latrines within the premises are available to only a little more than 10 percent of the households. In other words, as many as 90 percent of people still use open or public spaces for defecation. As compared to this, the situation at the state level is far better although it needs to be further improved. In Jangalmahal, only a little more than 10 percent of the households reported bathrooms within the premises.

While the availability of these facilities in rural homestays and agrotourism centres is imperative, the absence of the same can be attributed to limited level of awareness, socio-economic development, education, poverty, practice and rituals which add to the complexity of ensuring these facilities in the region (Dasguptanayak and Bhunia, 2016).

Economy

In the last several decades because of the widening gap between rural and urban areas, rural communities have been experiencing challenges, such as migration, low prices of products, and economic recession (Varmazyari et al., 2018; Askarpour et al., 2020; Pérez-Olmos and Aguilar-Rivera, 2021; Rauniyar et al., 2021). Research findings show that in adverse economic circumstances (e.g., poor harvests or low prices), attracting tourists for agrotourism purposes may be a complementary method of income generation for farmers (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008; Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Baig et al., 2020). Enhanced scope for agrotourism would have direct consequences in the transformation of employment infrastructure in the region and the economic empowerment of the residents (Lak et al., 2022). Agrotourism generates significant contributions to the process of rural development. These contributions may be in the form of: revenue growth, access to work, exchanges between rural and urban areas, multiplier effects on direct investment, strengthening the local structure through working groups, stimulating the development of physical infrastructure, the diversification of economic activities, increase the value of properties in an area, creating a ready infrastructure, create opportunities for other economic developments (Sunitha, 2021). Agrotourism is considered a key factor for local development (Muresan et al., 2016), especially in marginal rural areas where

the possibilities to develop alternative job options are restricted (Forleo et al., 2017) or where the environmental and cultural heritage are strongly appreciated by tourists (Garrod et al., 2006).

Capacity Building

Training programs for local communities in Hospitality and Tourism Management

It is widely argued that people are vital for the successful delivery of tourism services and, as a consequence, those who work in tourism are widely portrayed as a critical dimension in the successful operation of businesses within the sector (Baum et al., 2009). The tourism industry relies heavily on continuous interactions with visitors, thus, providing exceptional service is essential to ensuring customer satisfaction in this sector (Preksha, 2024).

In case of development of agro - tourism industry in remote regions, there may be challenges because of the cultural values that are deep-seated among service providers, that is, farmers being attached to their land and resources. Their inclination to protect the same may prevent them from welcoming the thought of farm diversification through agro - tourism due to lack of awareness and information (Dsouza et al., 2023).

Marketing Strategies

Agro-tourism initiatives may not receive as much attention or be as successful as they could be due to difficulties in marketing farm-based products and drawing tourists to rural areas (Praharee, 2021). Effective marketing is crucial for attracting more visitors, especially from urban areas (Preksha, 2024). In the case study of Kolutmara of Panch Tiger reserve, it was noted by the researchers that the absence of a robust marketing strategy has hindered its promotion as an agro-tourism centre. The absence of extensive marketing strategies such as posters, banners, flyers, and robust social media marketing campaigns significantly limited the visibility of the project.

The Jungle Mahal Region

According to local representatives of the region, while several resorts depicting the culture and heritage of the local communities are coming up in the region, the natives are not able to benefit from the same because of the lack of training and financial support¹ This can be associated with the lack of education opportunities in the region. A report released by Pratichi Trust and Asiatic Society of Bengal in 2020 has revealed the poor state of education. The data from adivasikalyan website shows that only as many as 1950 students are enrolled in Middle and Higher School combined (VI - XII Standards). Also, the Sikshree scholarship given to ST day scholars has fallen drastically since 2014²

Access to Finance

Financial resources are necessary for agrotourism to prosper and endure (Badulescu et al., 2015). The success of an agrotourism businesses depends on the availability of financial resources. Access to finance is imperative for sustainable development of agrotourism industry as it is required for infrastructure development, environmentally-friendly tourism object planning, managing operational costs, effective marketing, training and education, and environmental preservation. These elements require financial support to ensure success, such as adequate accommodations, minimizing environmental impacts, covering expenses, promoting tourism,

enhancing service quality, and implementing eco-friendly practices. (Wulandari et al., 2024). These initiatives can thus get the required financial support from government grants and subsidies or rely on more innovative investment models such as Public Private Partnership, Community Based Tourism or Volunteer Tourism model. (Wulandari et al., 2024)

Government Grants and Subsidies

Governments at various levels, including national, regional, and local, frequently offer grants and subsidies to foster the growth of agrotourism. These financial support programs play a crucial role in funding infrastructure development, facilitating capacity building efforts, supporting marketing initiatives, and promoting the adoption of sustainable practices within the agritourism sector. (Wulandari et al., 2024)

Public Private Partnerships (PPP)

The PPP investment model is a partnership between the government and private companies, and it offers several advantages for the development of agrotourism. While the PPP investment model can provide more financial support and market access, it requires human resources and professional management for effective implementation. (Wulandari et al., 2024)

Community Based Tourism (CBT)

The CBT investment model is a partnership model that involves the local community in the planning, development, and management of sustainable agrotourism. The CBT investment model emphasizes community empowerment, including providing shares in agrotourism businesses, supporting the preservation of natural resources, protecting the environment, and promoting cultural and social preservation. (Dan, 2022). The CBT model has greater impact on the local community and is more sustainable, but it necessitates careful planning and support from all stakeholders. (Wulandari et al., 2024)

Volunteer Tourism Model (VT)

The VT investment model is similar to the CBT investment model, with the emphasis on involving the local community in the planning, development, and management of agrotourism. The main difference is that the VT model involves volunteers who work voluntarily to assist in the development of agrotourism, such as environmental conservation and community development initiatives³ The VT model is beneficial for learning and preserving local culture, but it must ensure that voluntary activities truly benefit the surrounding community (Wulandari et al., 2024).

Inadequate access to finance can pose several challenges in sustainable development of the agrotourism industry. These challenges can be inferred from the 4As Framework for tourism categorised into Attractions, Accessibility, Ancillary and Amenities. In attractions, issues include high initial investment, seasonal fluctuations, operating costs, and risk management. Accessibility-related challenges involve transportation infrastructure and public transportation. Amenity-related financial issues encompass infrastructure development, facilities and equipment, staffing and training, and quality assurance. Ancillary services face challenges in staffing and expertise, equipment and supplies, and partnerships (Wulandari et al., 2024).

The Jungle Mahal Region

The financial penetration (banking and post office services) in the region has been lower as compared to the state of West Bengal and India, making the access to loans difficult. The absence of banking institutions or the complexity of their procedures often impedes tribal farmers from securing loans. For tribal farmers interested in developing agro-tourism sites, significant investment is required to make these sites appealing to visitors (Preksha, 2024).

Objectives of the Research

1. To identify the challenges of developing Agrotourism for structural transformation.
2. To identify means to uplift local community and livelihood for better profits, rents and finance from Agrotourism

Research Model

Type of research: This study is mostly based on empirical data acquired from fieldwork with a population linked to both tourism and farming in West Bengal's tribal dominated Jungal Mahal Region. This study intends to examine the impact of three dependent factors on just one independent variable through a mixture of linear regression and data analysis using SPSS to identify the influence of three dependent variables all at once.

Quantitative research of this kind of study includes controlled experiments and polls, as well as statistical procedures such as regression and correlation. Quantitative research is an impartial examination of a phenomena or event based on numerical data obtained via observation and statistical analysis. Examples of this kind of study include controlled experiments and polls, as well as statistical procedures such as regression and correlation.

Collection of Data

There are 384 respondents in the sample involving several stakeholders related to tourism in the districts of Bankura, Purulia and Midnapore. Much important respondents include local farmers, local government representatives, business actors in the logistics and supply chain and involved local communities. These respondents were chosen using Purposive Sampling approach keeping in minds the main goal of the research to find out the elements at the upper primary stage, it was thought vital that the collection include the participants who had expertise in education and e-learning.

$$\text{Sample size} = \frac{\left(\frac{Z^2 X p (1-p)}{e^2} \right)}{1 + \left(\frac{Z^2 X p (1-p)}{e^2 * N} \right)}$$

The Case Processing Summary provides an overview of the dataset used in the analysis:

- There are nearly 250 valid examples, accounting for 100% of the data.
- There were no omitted instances in the study, indicating that all data pieces were incorporated.
- There are 250 examples, accounting for 100% of the dataset

Analysis of Data and Results

The agrotourism business in West Bengal has a serious problem since there has been a lack of thorough knowledge of the impact of finances on structural change. This study investigated the complex dynamics of financial investments, economic outcomes, policy considerations, sustainability practices, entrepreneurial opportunities, and cultural preservation within the agrotourism landscape in rural pockets. The overarching problem is the absence of detailed insights into how financial resources contribute to the development of agrotourism, hindering informed decision-making for stakeholders involved in this sector.

The above data highlights respondents' perceptions of various factors that influence the development and success of Agrotourism, including government policies, infrastructure local economy, training programs, access to finance.

The above data reflects respondents' perceptions of key factors influencing Agrotourism, including the importance of the role of government policies, and impact of infrastructure development on the local economy, socio economic environment, the potential of Agrotourism to transform rural economies through capacity building, access to finance.

With a score of 0.941, Cronbach's Alpha is deemed very high. The 5 factors being reviewed show a high level of internal consistency. A high Cronbach's Alpha score (0.9) indicates that that the information points are highly related and reliably measure the same idea.

A high level of correlation between the dependent variable and the predictors is shown by the model, as evidenced by an R-value of 0.886. An adjusted R² value of 0.780 shows that the model is still robust after taking the whole number of predictors into consideration; an R² of 0.785 shows that the model explains around 78.5% of the variability in the dependent variable. The average distance between the anticipated and observed values is 0.509, according to the Standard Error in the Estimate.

The analysis reveals that a favorable socio economic environment, access to finance for initial investments, and the potential for Agrotourism to transform rural economies through extension education and capacity building significantly influence perceptions of government policies being clear and favorable.

Specifically, Government policies ($B = 0.217, p < 0.001$), Socio economic environment ($B = 0.078, p = 0.017$), and Capacity building ($B = 0.117, p < 0.001$) all positively affect these perceptions. Access to finance ($B = 0.580, p < 0.001$) is the strongest predictor, indicating a strong positive association. In contrast, the factor for lack of basic infrastructure for tourism directly influencing these perceptions was not supported ($B = -0.048, p = 0.146$).

Agrotourism contributes to rural livelihoods by creating employment opportunities, generating additional income streams, and empowering local communities. As agrotourism enterprises expand and evolve, they create demand for a range of services, including accommodation, transportation, food, handicrafts, and tour guides, thereby creating jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities for rural residents. Moreover, agrotourism can provide supplementary income for smallholder farmers, artisans, and other stakeholders, through the sale of agricultural products, handicrafts, and cultural experiences. By leveraging the economic potential of agrotourism, rural communities can diversify their income sources, reduce dependency on traditional agricultural activities, and improve standards of living. Additionally, agrotourism can contribute to the revitalization of rural economies by stimulating local investments, supporting small-scale enterprises, and fostering economic linkages with other sectors, such as hospitality, food processing, and transportation.

Overall, structural transformation in agrotourism can be achieved through immense promise for enhancing sustainability, competitiveness, and rural livelihoods, thereby unlocking the full socio-economic potential of rural areas and promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

State Government and Institutional Support

State Government bodies at various levels play a crucial role in supporting agrotourism through a range of programs and initiatives designed to promote rural development, sustainable agriculture, and tourism. For instance, in West Bengal, the Ministry of Tourism's Rural Tourism Scheme provides financial assistance for developing rural tourism infrastructure, marketing support, and capacity building.

National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) offers schemes that provide low-interest loans and grants to agrotourism projects, supporting farmers in diversifying their income sources and improving their livelihoods includes measures that support agrotourism by funding projects that integrate agricultural activities with tourism. These measures provide grants for building agrotourism facilities, promoting local food products, and developing sustainable tourism practices. Additionally, various state governments in the West Bengal offer agrotourism grants and incentives through their departments of agriculture and tourism, aiming to boost rural economies by attracting tourists to farms and rural areas.

Role of NGOs and International Organizations

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations also play a vital role in supporting and promoting agrotourism. NGOs often work directly with local communities, providing resources, training, and technical assistance to help farmers and rural entrepreneurs develop and market their agrotourism offerings. For example, organizations like Agrotourism World and the International Agrotourism Network offer platforms for knowledge exchange, networking, and best practice sharing among agrotourism practitioners globally.

International organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) contribute to agrotourism development by promoting sustainable tourism practices, facilitating international cooperation, and providing funding for pilot projects and research. The UNWTO, through its Sustainable Tourism for Development Program, supports projects that enhance the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of tourism, including agrotourism. The FAO, on the other hand, focuses on integrating agrotourism into rural development strategies, promoting local food systems, and supporting smallholder farmers. Moreover, initiatives by international development agencies like the World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) provide financial and technical support to agrotourism projects in developing countries. These agencies aim to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods by fostering sustainable and inclusive rural **tourism. For instance, IFAD's Rural Development Program includes components that support** agrotourism as a means to enhance rural livelihoods and diversify income sources. By leveraging the support from government bodies, NGOs, and international organizations, agrotourism entrepreneurs can access the necessary resources, expertise, and networks to develop successful and sustainable agrotourism ventures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Policy Frame work

A comprehensive policy framework for Agrotourism in West Bengal should focus on promoting sustainable rural development while preserving agricultural heritage. The reforms should begin by establishing clear guidelines and standards for Agrotourism operations, ensuring the safety, quality, and authenticity of experiences. Financial incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies, could be offered to farmers willing to diversify into Agrotourism, helping them develop the necessary infrastructure and skills. The government should also facilitate partnerships between farmers, tour operators, and hospitality sectors to create integrated tourism packages. Capacity-building programs should be implemented to train farmers in hospitality management, marketing, and sustainable tourism practices. To address potential challenges, policies should include measures to protect local ecosystems, maintain agricultural productivity, and ensure fair distribution of tourism benefits within rural communities. Additionally, a national Agrotourism board could be established to oversee promotion, quality control, and coordination among various stakeholders. By implementing these reforms, West Bengal can harness its rich agricultural diversity to boost rural economies, preserve traditional farming practices, and offer unique experiences to domestic and international tourists.

Development of Cluster Agrotourism

As the future of farm tourism endeavor may demand large tracts of land to accommodate the many components stated in the strategy. The tiny farmers, who have farmland of less than one hectare of land, are at a loss for how to profit on this possibility with their little holdings, but the big farmers, who have farms of more than ten hectares, have a better chance of starting such operations. It is reason for serious worry that these growers may be deprived from the advantages of agribusiness initiatives in a nation where 86% of farmers have small and marginal holdings. Farmers with small, scattered holdings may form agrotourism development cooperatives. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) finances agrotourism cooperative organizations. The financing gained may be used to improve infrastructural amenities on farms to enable tourism.

Subsidies for Agrotourism

Subsidies and grants for agrotourism are essential tools that support the growth and sustainability of this sector, providing financial assistance and incentives to encourage development in rural areas. There are various types of subsidies available for agrotourism, each catering to different needs and objectives. Direct financial grants are commonly provided to fund the initial setup and expansion of agrotourism projects, such as building accommodations, visitor centers, and recreational facilities. These grants can cover a significant portion of the capital expenditure required, making it easier for entrepreneurs to start or scale their operations. Tax incentives are another crucial form of subsidy, offering deductions, credits, or exemptions to agrotourism businesses that invest in infrastructure, employ local workers, or implement sustainable practices. This not only reduces the tax burden on these businesses but also encourages investment in eco-friendly and community-oriented initiatives. Additionally, subsidized loans and interest rate reductions provide agrotourism operators with access to affordable financing options, enabling them to undertake larger projects and improve their services without incurring prohibitive debt costs. Furthermore, specific subsidies are available for sustainable practices, such as organic

farming, renewable energy installations, and conservation efforts, promoting environmental stewardship and long-term viability.

Eligibility criteria for these subsidies and grants vary depending on the funding body and the specific program. Generally, applicants must demonstrate that their projects align with the goals of promoting rural development, sustainability, and community engagement. This often involves providing a detailed business plan, financial statements, and proof of compliance with local regulations. Some grants may require matching funds from the applicant, ensuring that they have a vested interest in the project's success. The application process typically includes submitting a comprehensive proposal outlining the project's objectives, expected outcomes, and how the funds will be used. This may be accompanied by supporting documents such as feasibility studies, environmental impact assessments, and letters of support from local authorities or community organizations. Applications are usually reviewed by a committee or panel, which assesses the feasibility, potential impact, and alignment with funding priorities before making a decision. Successful applicants are then required to adhere to reporting and monitoring requirements, providing regular updates on the project's progress and outcomes to ensure accountability and transparency. By understanding the types of subsidies available and the eligibility criteria, agrotourism entrepreneurs can effectively navigate the funding landscape and secure the necessary resources to achieve their goals

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