

Developing Agritourism in Ratnagiri District of Konkan (Maharashtra) : Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Many countries across the globe have used agritourism, as a strategy for rural development, for restructuring farm economy, to curb the problem of rural- urban migration, to maintain food security, to sustain agricultural lands and to supplement the farm household income.

In Western countries, agritourism centre owners get firm support from Government, N.G.O.'s and various agencies. In India, Maharashtra state is a pioneer state to initiate the concept of agritourism. Ratnagiri district from Konkan region of Maharashtra is industrially backward, has rich tourism potential and agriculture economy. But it is known for outmigration as it cannot provide descent employment opportunities to its people.

"Agritourism" has not received recognition as an agri -allied industry hence the owners are deprived of direct support from the government and other funding agencies. Though State Government has mentioned agritourism in its State Tourism Policies, nothing comes in reality. Most of the agritourism centre owners from the Ratnagiri district belong to the first generation of the agritourism business are struggling by their own to settle in this business without any government help..

Therefore, the present research based on the field work attempts qualitative analysis to understand the problems faced by agritourism centre owners from Ratnagiri district of Konkan.

Survey results reveals that scarcity of labours, lack of good approach roads, load shedding, lack of finance, lack of professionalism, meagre agri- insurance, ignorance about schemes of the government, problems in interaction with public, Problems in getting Licenses and Permissions, in availability in getting competent workforce, Challenges with Marketing and Publicity, scarcity of water.

KEYWORDS: agritourism, challenges, agritourism centre owners, Ratnagiri district

1 Introduction

Agritourism is a value-added product that generates additional income from the farm and introduces a farm brand to customers, which opens the opportunity for the creation of a loyal consumer base for all farm products (Hawkes, 2013). Agritourism is generally implemented in disadvantaged agricultural lands. It is developed as a sector with the aim of not only a development instrument for local people who are dependent on agricultural production but also for sustaining the agricultural lands.

2 Objectives of the study

1. To study need of agritourism in Ratnagiri district
2. To Study challenges faced by owners of agritourism centres from Ratnagiri district
3. To suggest recommendations based on empirical results

Ratnagiri district is one of the maritime districts of south Konkan in the state of Maharashtra. Ratnagiri district has 1543 villages across its nine tehsils. The district is predominantly rural in nature with 16.35 percent index of urbanization (Population Census, 2011). Agritourism is a form of rural tourism and the district is rural in nature. It is industrially one of the backward districts of Maharashtra state.

The agriculture economy and rich tourism potential of the district along with vivid geography of the district offers variety of relief, variety of tourism attractions and different types of agricultural products. This will help to explore new innovative ideas and agritourism products. This will facilitate to customize the farm attractions.

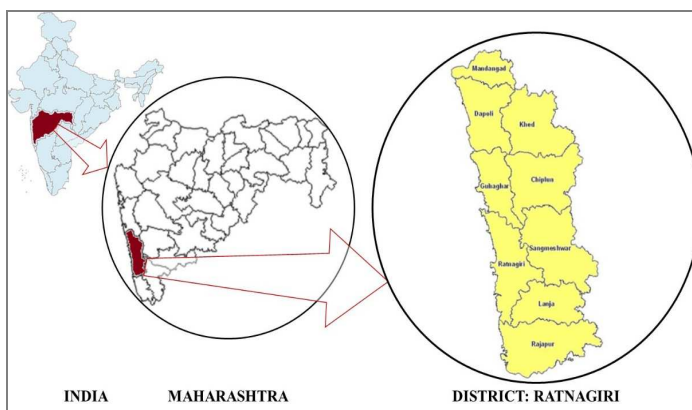


Fig 1: Location of Ratnagiri district

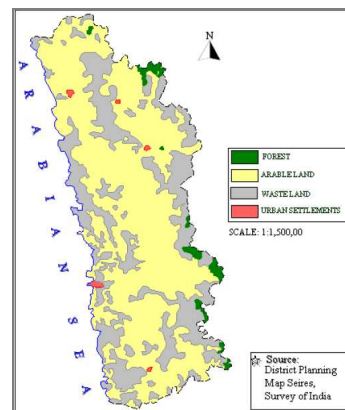


Fig 2: Land use of Ratnagiri district

3 Literature Review

In research on agritourism in British Columbia, Lack (1997) categorized its challenges as "*lack of training, lack of marketing, lack of quality control, lack of appropriate insurance, lack of finance, conflict of agritourism with primary agricultural activity, distance from markets, infrastructure limitation and farm disease*". Sukdeo, Thorat, Pragati, Deshmukh, Sainath, Aher and Wawale, (2012) also suggest that harnessing the agritourism potential of Akole taluk of Maharashtra state needs infrastructure development, training and education for the farmers, access to farm credit, measures of waste management. John Colton and Glyn Bissix bring out similar issues and challenges related to agritourism development in Nova Scotia. The other study identifies the major challenges facing agritourism operators that constrain industry growth and expansion in New Jersey State (Brian J. Schilling Lucas J. Marxen Helen H. Heinrich Fran J. A. Brooks*, (2006). The study conducted by Eshun and Tetey revealed that Adjeikrom Cocoa Farm Tour Facility (Ghana) mentions that it has huge prospects for growth if challenges are addressed such as inadequate skilled personnel, poor state of the Visitor centre, incoherent marketing of the destination, and inadequate Government support and low record of domestic tourists.

4 Data and Methodology

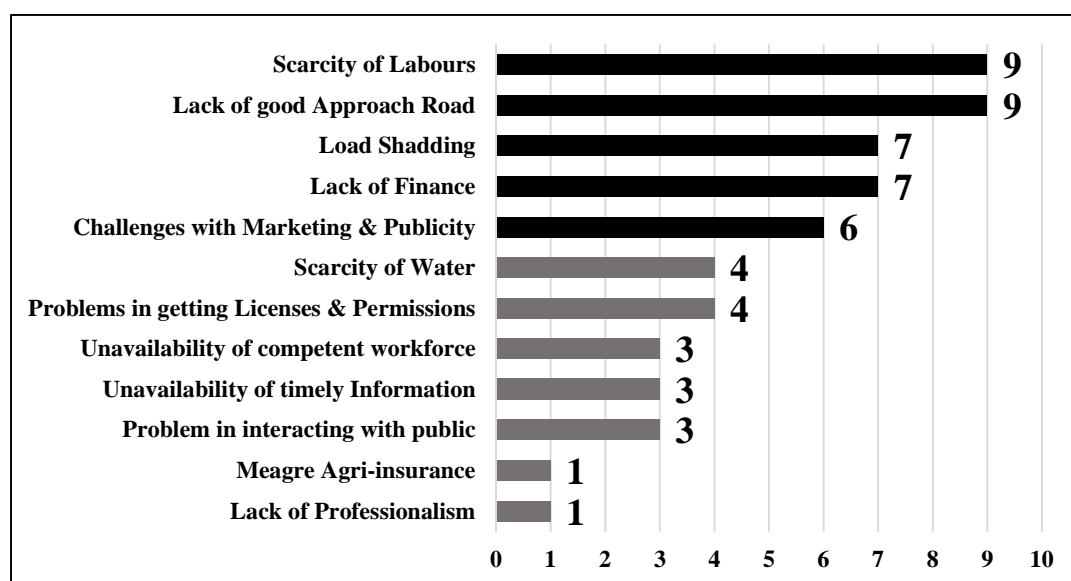
This paper is based on the primary data. Case study method based on the field visits of eighteen agritourism centres was employed for data collection. Wide literature review coupled with interview methods and field observations were used to furnish the data.

5 Findings

5.1 Issues and Challenges faced by agritourism centres from Ratnagiri district

Shortage of labour and access to good approach road are the crucial challenges followed by the problems of access to finance and load shedding. Then third significant problem is absence of to marketing and publicity, scarcity of water, problem in obtaining licence/ permissions. The lack of effective training of employee, limited access to information and problem in interaction with public are recorded as secondary challenges. Unavailability of Insurance cover against natural calamities, absence of professionalism are the least-faced challenges by the agritourism centre owners from Ratnagiri district.

Fig 3: Magnitude of the Challenges faced by agritourism centres from Ratnagiri district



Source- fieldwork by researcher

5.1.1 Scarcity of Labours

Scarcity of labours is another biggest problem faced by the majority of agritourism centre owners. Many agritourism centre owners belong to first generation those have bought farm land and are struggling to establish in this business. So they lack regular traditional labour supply which otherwise farmers have. The literacy rate of the district is quite descent, hence the literate people find job in the organize sectors like hotel industry or manufacturing unit. In Ratnagiri district other economic activities are gradually increasing which provides attractive wages as well as prestige to the labours than agriculture sector. Shortage of labour is common due to outmigration of the young male population to the nearby cities in search of livelihood. People from

Ratnagiri district are festival and traditional loving hence absenteeism is high during religious occasion and festivals.

Farm wages have become more competitive and many agritourism owners do not afford to pay it. Studies in New Jersey shows that many farm households use their family labours (Schilling et al., (2006); Fisher, (2006). Those agritourism centres provide round the year employment to the labours face little problem of scarcity of labours.

5.1.2 Lack of good Approach Road

Another central factor is the presence or absence of transport infrastructure. Most of the settlements and tourists spots are located away from NH-17 and stations of Konkan railways. Conditions of feeder roads are pathetic and are too narrow to pass even single SUV vehicle. The roads have very minimal and not so legible signage.

5.1.3 Load shedding

Some part of the Ratnagiri is facing acute power shortage. Everything is shut because it is the weekly power-cut day. On other days, there's load shedding for nearly six hours. Tourist places are also affected and there is loss of income. Many interior areas has about two to four hours of power cut at a fixed time each day with rare cases of unexpected power cuts.

5.1.4 Lack of finance

Most of the agritourism centres from Ratnagiri district are in the nascent stage and funding is a critical issue at the initial stage of any business. Most of the agritourism centre owners have preferred to start business by investing their own money, some have taken loan from Bank of India or local Cooperative Credit societies. Even survey of 549 company founders in the United States, Wadhwa et al. (2009) found that 68% respondents viewed the availability of financing or capital as important. According to the study of Bruch and Holland (2004), about eleven percent of Tennessee agritourism operators stated a need for financial assistance.

5.1.5 Challenges with Marketing & Publicity

Most of the agritourism centres from Ratnagiri district are in nascent stage. Hence they need strong marketing and publicity to attract the tourists. Very few have developed their web site and most of them are depend upon mouth publicity. MTDC seems to be the passive actor in the show of agritourism development in Maharashtra state. It does not put any special efforts to boost marketing of agritourism in the states of Maharashtra. Che, Ann Veeck, and Gregory Veeck (2005) stated that once the owner of the agritourism centre manage to come over the marketing-related barriers, then nothing can stop the agritourism centre from developing to its fullest potential.

5.1.6 Scarcity of Water

Small holding agriculture depend more on ground water compared to large farmers who has more access on canal water. Ground water is depleting in many areas of

India. Marginal and small farmers will be facing acute problems regarding water in future. Therefore, water management is going to be crucial for these farmers.

5.1.7 Problems in getting Licenses & Permissions

Gram Panchayat issues the licence and permissions for construction of the cottages for the tourists, for expansion of agritourism activities. Many a times the members of *Gram Panchayat* expect some percentage while making the land "non agriculture" for construction purpose. Non-resident or outsider agritourism owner usually faces the additional problem in getting permissions.

5.1.8 Unavailability of competent workforce

Male workers sometimes consume alcohol when they are on duty. Absenteeism is common among male compared to the female workers. Some labours are marginal farmers hence they are busy at the peak time of farming on their own farm in farm related work like harvesting, transplanting of paddy, time of fairs and festivals.

5.1.9 Ignorance about schemes of the Government (and Unavailability of timely Information)

Some agritourism owners were not aware and other few had partial knowledge about the government schemes for the farmers. The study of Bruch and Holland (2004), of Tennessee agritourism operators has noted a problem in the transparency of knowledge as informational gaps existed. This has created the need for education and outreach.

5.1.10 Problem in interaction with public

Some agritourism centre owners expressed the need for training to facilitate the handling of tourists from cosmopolitan cities or foreigners. They lack in communication and soft skill or patience or fulfilling the expectations of the tourists.

5.1.11 Meagre Agri-insurance

Most of the agritourism centre owners have been badly affected due to *Phayan* cyclone. Inadequate agri-insurance cover against natural disasters like *Phayan* cyclone, hailstones and nuisance from animals like monkey, wild bore, pigs and bison to the farm land. The Government scheme of crop insurance considers the entire district as one unit. Hence the individual farmers face the problem of availing descent compensation against losses.

5.1.12 Lack of Professionalism

Many agritourism centre owners were earlier either businessmen or in service. When they changed their profession, they lack the necessary training i.e. gimmicks of the new business such as planning, publicity, charging remunerations as per the market rates, networking, use of innovative ideas, handling crisis, managing labours and other resources and so on. Kumbhar V, (2009) has reported that agritourism centre owners from the Maharashtra state faces some major problems are as lack of perfect

knowledge about agritourism, poor communication skill and lack of commercial approach of the small farmers.

6 Recommendations

1. Training and Capacity building

This can help the agritourism centre owners for developing professionalism, to inculcate the skills of entrepreneurship, to plan the business activities, to develop soft skills and so on.

2. Help from Self help Groups (SHG)

The SHGs can solve the problem of scarcity of labours. Many SHG are engaged in processing agri-food products which will help to produce value added goods for the tourists. Successful agritourism centres had SHGs for housekeeping and cooking work that never came across the problem of scarcity of labours.

3. Development of basic infrastructure

Tourism industry thrives on infrastructure. Ratnagiri district lacks basic facilities in the interior pockets where most of the agritourism centres are located to take the benefit of rural atmosphere. Government should ensure water and electricity supply to the agritourism centres located in the in the district on priority basis along with good quality approach roads to increase the connectivity.

4. Recognition and status to agritourism as industry

Agritourism could boost the rural economy. The State Tourism Policy should give fillip to this sector as the State Government has done very little. Recognition to this industry will help to minimize the challenges faced by the industry. There are around one hundred fifty agritourism centres in the state and all these are running without any government help.

5. Product Development

This should include sound agritourism development with proper planning, investment in tourism-related infrastructure, and a wide range of activities to satisfy the diverse tastes of tourists. There is urgent need to support agritourism infrastructure development by providing technical assistance, facilitation and promotion, and economic impact analysis support.

6. Community Involvement

For any village to become an agritourism destination, not just a stop off point, structured networks and collaborative agreements between public and private sectors are essential. But Community involvement is a key part of the equation.

7 Conclusion

The fact that agritourism enterprises tend to be small scale and supply a highly seasonal market present a number of other challenges for agritourism development. Not all rural areas are equally attractive to agri tourists and simply providing

accommodation facilities does not guarantee demand. The agritourism centre owner must work to increase the stay of tourists by providing attractive total product package and to sustain the flow of the tourists, offering suitable opportunities for spending. Developing and organizing agritourism may require a significant investment either beyond the means of the business owner or greater than justified by potential returns. Otherwise service providers, local communities and businesses may find it difficult to adapt to a service role. The quality of products and services must match tourist's demands and expectations.

Brown (2002) found that in developing countries like India; agritourism has been given little consideration mostly by small-scale farmers, and it consequently affects rural economy by limiting the economic opportunities such as job creation, food security, farm revenue, a viability of rural society and a sustainable and diverse environment.

Despite not getting any financial or marketing assistance from the government, agritourism has grown to be Rs 13.14 crores industry in Maharashtra. According to ATDC, there are 127 set-ups across the state offering tourists a chance to experience a slice of rural life. And Konkan could play a major role in attracting tourists with proper planning, firm backing of the support system.

Acknowledgement

Author thanks to the University Grants Commission for providing financial assistance to undertake present research work (Project FILE. No.: 23-215/12(WRO) 4TH Feb 2013)

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