



AGRO TOURISM: AN ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITY



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ABSTRACT :

Agrotourism is not a new concept in developed countries however in India it has not really found any ground yet. This is a very comprehensive activity. In this activity a visitor must get holistic exposure of rural life. This is a participatory tourism activity. In this phenomenon the visitor is expected to participate in various agricultural activities and should not remain merely a spectator as in many other forms of tourism. If it is done as a well-planned activity at the village level then most of the drawbacks or negative effects can be controlled.

Small places like Bali and Cyprus have been conducting this activity for last many years. This is a very popular activity in many western countries like USA, Germany. Therefore in India also it should be well received. Our farmers should change their mindset and start thinking more innovatively so that they can convert their challenges into the opportunities.

KEYWORDS : Agrotourism, Employment, Agriculture, Participation.

INTRODUCTION:

Agrotourism is comparatively a new term in India. However it would be in the best interest of the farmers that they learn more about it and adopt it at the earliest.

Agrotourism is a comprehensive activity involving the farmer and the tourist. It does remain restricted at providing lodging and boarding to those who visit the farm but it offers them a very unique experience of rural lifestyle.

EVOLUTION

Though it is an activity having rural environment as backdrop and farm as its centre stage it did not start as a supporting activity to the farmer. Agrotourism is primarily a tourism activity.

Tourism as a phenomenon has always been in search of new motives and reasons and destinations for tourists to travel. Adventure tourism evolved through such quest. Visiting rural area or unexplored area was one of the activities of adventure tourism. Over a period of time people started realizing the potential of this activity. As a result more investment started flowing in and the infrastructure and tourism facilities at the rural destinations improved. As the infrastructure in the rural area started developing, the rural destination ceased to remain a destination for the adventure tourism. The adventure factor got subsided and other people who were not particularly interested in adventure tourism also started visiting rural area. Thus 'Rural Tourism' become a separate motive of tourism activity.

Entertainment is another important factor in tourism process. It refers to the recreational activities available at the destination. Tourism is predominantly an urban phenomenon which thrives on disposable income. The visitor needs recreational activities at the destination. In rural area such typical urban facilities are naturally not available therefore tourism found recreation in the daily routine of the local people to which the tourists were unexposed to. Thus working on a farm, plucking fruits etc activities became the recreational activities. These are known as participatory recreational activities and thus 'Agrotourism' was born.

Definitions

It would be appropriate at this stage to have a look at certain definitions of Agrotourism.

"Agritourism refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation."

University of California Small Farm Center

"Agrotourism, for example, is a form of rural tourism, in which visitors have the opportunity to participate in the functioning of the system that they visit, and thus become participants in the local culture."

University of Kentucky

Elaboration

Tourism being an urban phenomenon a common tourist doesn't have exposure to the rural lifestyle nor has experienced the lifestyle that prevails in rural area. Rural tourism is the one which offers a lifetime experience to the visitor of the local lifestyle, culture and rituals, language and daily routine.

Agrotourism is a subset of 'Rural Tourism'. It offers more specialized experience. It is not just visiting or staying at some farmer's house as it is being practiced in most of the cases in India. As the definitions clearly state, any activity to qualify as 'Agrotourism' activity should include participation of tourists in farming activities and educational aspect must be an integral part of the entire process.

Process

Though agrotourism seems to be an activity conducted by a farmer at his level as an independent business venture, in India it is advisable to practice it as a comprehensive activity at the entire village level. To attract tourists some basic infrastructure should be kept ready at the farm. Certain basic urban needs have to be satisfied. Basic hygiene and cleanliness has to be observed. All this requires money and since in India investments in tourism infrastructure in general and in rural tourism or 'agro tourism' in particular are hopelessly insufficient providing such infrastructure at farmer's level is almost impossible. Considering the size of the land-holding, mindset and sustaining capacity of an average farmer it looks difficult that all farmers can afford it. Some big and rich farmers can do such activity at individual level since they have huge land holding and financial capacity to sustain. Therefore the village as a whole should step-in.

Though this can be practiced in any village, very few villages would actually be able to do it. The basic reason is minimum infrastructural facilities like toilets, drinking water, good roads, satisfactory electricity etc.

Along with the physical infrastructural facilities, educating the villagers regarding this activity is an important and critical prerequisite. It is not good enough just to inform them about the activity but their anxieties if any should also be addressed. Tourism does bring some social, cultural and environmental side effects. However with proper education of the villagers and disciplined execution of agrotourism these side effects can be minimized or in some cases can even be avoided.

Offering stay in the house built in a rural architectural style and offering local food is no agrotourism. That can be offered in city also. Agrotourism should offer a comprehensive life experience. The tourist should loosen up, throw away any inhibitions.

When the entire village comes forward to welcome tourists, then other activities like carpenter, smithy-

work, dairy etc. can also be accommodated. Local art and handicraft can be promoted. Some may provide stay, some may provide food, some may offer guide services to view various activities, some may participate in-staging such activities etc.

Under agrotourism many activities are to be offered to give the visitor a holistic experience. Mind well the visitor has come to get an experience but he/she is not exactly equipped enough to indulge. They generally expect 'Staged Experience' than the real one so that their urban habits do not get disturbed.

In Disneyland one experiences pirates, thunderstorms, and wild animals etc. and enjoys the staged attempt to offer right quantity of thrill. In the same manner in Agrotourism the hardships and inconveniences are needed be staged for the visitors to experience.

Tourism never claims to offer exposure to the reality to the core. Therefore one may take the visitors to the real farm and show the activities etc. but when it comes to involving them into any of the agro-activities one has to offer a staged version where enough precautions are taken against any accident and injury to the tourist.

Success of any tourism activity lies in the tourist-holding capacity of the place. In other words for how many days a tourist would like to stay at a particular place depends on the attractions and activities offered by the place. That means for how long the place or destination can hold a tourist. If there is enough to offer the tourist would stay for more days and more number of days means he/she will spend more which means more revenue for the village. Therefore, every village should create a set of activities so that a visitor would spend at least 3-4 days. One can combine other tourism motives like visiting historical places or places of geographical importance or religious places etc. in addition to the recreational activities offered at the farm. Similarly showcasing local folk art and culture can also be used as an added attraction.

Isolated efforts by one or two farmers would take a longer period to break even or investment would be limited which results into insufficient facilities and/or poor quality. All other activities like marketing, logistics etc. would be difficult to manage at individual level, in Indian scenario. However, if the entire village comes forward, then the break even would be much faster and resources can be pulled together. This would reward not just the farmer but also the entire village.

Stake-holders of Agro-tourism:

Every villager should come forward and offer one's services and expertise. Agrotourism is a financially rewarding activity for practically every villager who would like to participate but it offers immense opportunities of self-employment for women and youth of the village. Women can take care of food and house keeping, youth can look after the visits, translation, activities and other logistics. Adults can showcase skills, look after financial, marketing and liaison activities.

Agro-tourism need not be seasonal activity. However, one expects major rush on weekends and during school and college holidays. During the peak season of agriculture, the adults may not have time to pay attention to such activities. In that case women/youth can shoulder the responsibilities. One cannot say to the tourists to come only when farmer is free. When farmer would be free then there would be nothing to see or offer to the tourists.

Attractions and Activities

The real essence of agro-tourism lies in staying with the farmer's family and having exposure and firsthand experience of local food, local clothing, ornaments, rituals, festivals, customs etc. Getting to know about history of the village, geographical speciality, nearby places like temples, caves, forts, sea-beaches, water-bodies like lakes, river should be an essential part of the entire package. In other various activities, plucking of fruits, cutting of food products etc. can be included. Villages can organize a small lecture to help them, identify various common trees and plants etc.

Effects and Benefits

Tourism is a wonderful activity which benefits everybody. Therefore agrotourism also offers benefits to the visitor, farmer and the village.

In nutshell benefits offered by agrotourism to various stakeholders are listed below.

To the visitor

1. Interesting excuse to visit a place which one would never had visited.
2. Opportunities to expose different lifestyle and culture and thereby enrich oneself.
3. Ego satisfaction – status symbol i.e. trying to be different.

To the state

1. Additional tourist attraction leads to more revenue.
2. More employment in rural area.

To village / former point of view

1. Revenue generation for the entire village
2. Opportunities to get some exposure to urban culture and modern life style.
3. Employment opportunities for youth and women
4. Psychological motivation to improve farming.
5. Agriculture gets glamour
6. The positive image building for the village or cluster of villages

This is the easiest way to follow what Ravindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi had said. Both these visionaries had asked us to go to rural India. If with the help of this activity one can generate enough employment and balance interface between urban comforts and rural life styles, people will stop migrating to cities in search of employment. In fact they will start migrating back to their native villages if comparable income can be offered to them at village level.

Most Indians coming back to India from the USA and other developed countries claiming that India now offers more opportunities and comparable income. The same way one can hope. The villagers dwelling in cities would come back to their native places.

Limitations

Tourism is comparatively a green activity. It does not create much pollution. However, unplanned tourism on large scale certainly brings bad effects. Modern / Urban lifestyle and behaviour can create ripples, Urban habits like smoking, drinking, gambling can creep in the local culture.

Excess tourism especially unplanned invites prostitutions and thefts. Environmental damages are inevitable. Pressure on civic activities and that leads to lot of problems for the local residents. All these drawbacks can either be eliminated or avoided if one plans tourism systematically at the village level.

Closing Remarks

It is relatively a new phenomenon in India. It will take more time to gain popularity. However there is no alternative to have it as a planned tourism activity. For each village or a cluster of villages suitable model of 'Agro tourism' will have to be created. One standard model may not suit all the villages which would like to initiate this activity.

Generation of employment opportunities for people of all ages and educational background is the most important take away of this phenomenon. People with skill and even without skills can have self-employment opportunity.

From long term perspective this activity will bring prosperity to the village and to the villagers. Better education, civic amenities, infrastructure will help to reduce the hardships and discomforts of the villagers. Migration will be reduced and the youth of the village will remain in the village making it lively, youthful and happy.

Once the response gets better then the village should go for activities involving more adventure or

hardships that would be the second stage of agro-tourism. The day this activity would become entirely a staged experience that would be an indication of 'developed Bharat' and not just 'developed India'. Hope this activity would get to that stage at the earliest. In developed world, this activity still attracts lot of tourists. Therefore, in reality it would never go out of fashion, but the present perceptions and expectation should actually be out of fashion.

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