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Opportunities & Challenges of Agritourism

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism has a potential to reduce farm uncertainty by supplementing an additional income and creating a job opportunity in the rural sector. However, starting and managing Agritourism business can be a challenging and risky for farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs in the absence of a professional skills set. Such challenges can be addressed through a need based professional certification/diploma/degree course/programme. In order to cater these needs/ challenges, a panel discussion on "Scope, Opportunities and Challenges of Agritourism" was organized by the School of Agribusiness and Rural Management (SAB&RM) of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU), Samastipur, Pusa, Bihar on 28th January, 2021 through a Virtual Mode with the objective of evolving a consensus on implementation of an effective skill development courses on Agritourism as part of the National Agricultural Higher Educational Project (NAHEP). Six distinguished panelists from both Industry and Academia were participated in the panel discussion. This panel discussion has come up with a suggestion to start a one year Post Graduate Diploma in Agritourism course to train interested students, working professionals and the budding entrepreneurs to contribute towards this industry and the farming community.

Key words: *Agritourism course; Rural tourism; Agricultural tourism; Farm tourism; Skill sets for Agritourism.*

Agritourism is a form of rural tourism, which is gaining more importance and growing as a large industry in recent years. It encompasses tourism and hospitality businesses such as hotels and resorts, agricultural tours, farmers' markets, and other recreational activities that is drawing mostly the urban visitors to the rural areas. It combines the aspects of agriculture and tourism industries, providing the social and educational benefits to visitors and an opportunity for farmers to maximize their profit and employment potentials on farm products and services. Moreover, it offers a unique experience of rural environment and landscapes (Singh, 2021). Agro-tourism is a better way to know about the traditional agricultural farming activities which brings us very close to mother-nature. Agritourism

is an activity that links the economic, social and environmental components of sustainability, strongly related to local communities and their attitudes towards tourism (Muresan et al., 2016).

Worldwide many terms have been used to convey the idea of Agritourism. It is multifaceted and may entail agricultural tourism, agro tourism, farm tourism, farm vacation tourism, wine tourism, Agritourism as well as some other related terms that are used interchangeably with Agritourism or that are complementary to Agritourism which includes nature tourism, rural tourism, alternative farming, wildlife enterprises, ecotourism, agritainment, heritage tourism, agri education and value-added agriculture (Swain et al., 2018). The tourists will perform so many activities at the time of their farm visits which may include buying produce directly from the farm,

milking of cows, sericulture processing, tractor ride, flying kites, eating authentic food, wearing traditional clothes, enjoying folk dance, folk songs, supplementary farming activities, wine unit visits, jaggery making, fruit picking, feeding animals, buying rural arts and crafts and participating in village fair and festivals etc. The involvement in activities will be based on the interest of visitors.

The development of rural tourism offers potential solutions to many problems faced by rural areas. Rural Tourism events have been found to increase business, income and employment and are seen to assist with social and economic development. It is one of the many opportunities that rural communities might consider to improve productivity and incomes (*Irshad, 2010*). The agro-tourism has become a cash crop for the farmers in Maharashtra and also an instrument of the rural employment generation (*Kumbahar, 2010*). Agri-tourism promotes livelihood security through improving the diversity and security of resources, skills and technologies that are available to agricultural communities. The promotion and showcase of the culture of the agriculture and rural families of different states in India and parts of Bihar will help the agriculturists (farmers) earn the well-deserved respect, as a supplementary income to his family. At the time of distress sale, it will act as an additional source of income for the farmers. For rural youth and farm families, it provides employment opportunities. Cultural transformation takes place between urban and rural people like social moral values, ethics, customs etc. It is also one of the potential sources for supporting a long-term goal of economic development of the Bihar state. Due to its rich heritage in artifacts, historical facts and natural resources, Bihar state can aim to attract and promote tourism to an existing tourist circuit like Buddhists, Jain, Ramayan, Sufi, Gandhi along with the ecological advantages. However, there are inherited challenges for the state to overcome and make the state as a favourite destination to the tourists while developing the agri and rural tourism circuits. In the absence of devoted policy framework, there has been a greater scope for amalgamating an existing rural tourist circuit with Agritourism in the state. This is also possible with the help of integrating various stakeholders and creating a single window platform for tourism promotion in the state of Bihar, in lights of other successful states like Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

Agriculture is the largest economic sector in

many parts of the world including India, which is also the largest job provider. Nevertheless, during the 20th century, the number of farmers has declined across the globe from 81 to 48.2 percent in developing nations and 35 to 4.2 percent in developed countries (*ourworldindata.org*). In addition, lower commodity prices, combined with intense national and international competition have forced farmers or agribusiness owners to make a choice of leaving the business, or finding a new way to sustain their income.

Agritourism has a potential to provide a means to reduce the uncertainty of farming or agricultural businesses by supplementing additional income and creating a job opportunity to the farmers. Farmers in many regions have realized the importance and desire to diversify their agricultural businesses into Agritourism, mainly to create a value-added product that meet the needs of the tourists. However, starting and managing Agritourism business can be a challenging and risky for farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs in the absence of a good planning and understanding of management practices. Agritourism business management and related issues covering fundamental knowledge in agriculture and tourism can be addressed through a need based professional/certification/diploma/degree course/programme. Such needful course should cover a basic understanding of Agritourism, Agritourism business management, Agritourism products and services, destination development and management, marketing management, marketing strategies and networking with all business stakeholders.

In this context, the School of Agribusiness and Rural Management (SAB&RM) of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU), Pusa, Bihar conducted a panel discussion on the topic entitled 'Agri-Tourism – Scope, Challenges and Opportunities'. Stakeholders involved in this sector were invited to discuss the potential scope, benefits, opportunities and challenges that lies in this sector, to explore the possible solutions from the University to design an academic course curriculum, research, and extension activities to enhance the skill development of the manpower required for the industry. The objectives of the study included:

- To understand the present status and the scope for Agritourism in India
- To explore opportunities and challenges associated with the Agritourism for various stakeholders

- To identify possible solutions to combat the challenges and to empower industry growth.
- To design academic course curriculum, research, and extension activities to enhance the skill development of the manpower required for the industry.

METHODOLOGY

A well designed and structured focus group discussion was conducted through online mode in the form of panel of experts from both academia-industries. *This panel discussion was held with the following expectations:*

- What are the challenges, advantages and the opportunities that could be foreseen to really promote the skill development courses in Agritourism to their full potential?
- Who are the takers of our skill development courses and the type of degree/diploma programme the University should have?
- How the curriculum should be balanced with Academics and the Industry?
- What should be the model curriculum and pedagogy for Agritourism?
- What kind of assured networking and the cooperation we should have to run these courses successfully for the sustainable development?

The panel discussion was organised in such a way that the first half of the session each speakers provided 7-8 minutes to express their perspective on the current trends and development in Agritourism based on their experience and understanding. And the second half was divided into four themes as per the expectations of the panel discussion, wherein each theme was of provided with 15-20 minutes duration. The relevant questions related to the themes were put across the table for deliberation by the moderator. The themes of the panel discussion were as follows:

- Demand assessment for skilled manpower in agritourism.
- Type of diploma/degree programme in agritourism.
- Model curriculum for agritourism.
- Ideal pedagogy for agritourism.

A few important questions put across the table under these themes include:

1. Whether there is a need for manpower/people that have knowledge in Agriculture and Tourism?
2. Who are our target group/ takers of Agritourism?
3. What are the job opportunities for our Agritourism

students?

4. What should be the pedagogy (method and practice of teaching)? What type of course we have to target? What skills should students gain in the course?
5. How the course should be balanced between Academics and Industry?
6. What kind of assured networking we should have? (Integration of technology with teaching tools - equipment, software and training).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion on Knowledge Gaps : The discussion was initiated by the moderator with a short-history of Agritourism. The concept of Agritourism was first discussed by the experts from University of Tennessee Extension Publication by considering it as an Agritainment in 1800s. The widespread use of the automobile in 1920s, made the agro tourism more popular and improved not only the agro tourism industry but also the economy of the country. The countryside visits and recreation became a way to get away from stress after the great worldwide depression in 1930-40s and World War II. Farm petting zoos and farm nostalgia gained demand during 1960s and 1970s. Farm vacations, bed and breakfasts, and commercial farm tours were popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Swain et al., 2018). A few states like Maharashtra followed by Kerala, Goa and Karnataka are the pioneer in terms of implementation of such form of tourism in the country (Krishna et al., 2019). As a result of boosting rural development from tourism point of view and encouragement of tourism infrastructure development in rural areas by state governments, Agri- Tourism Development Corporation was established on 16th May 2004 in Maharashtra (Alekhy and Shravanthi, 2019). Its aim is to promote Agro Tourism to help rural youth to earn good respectable living in the village and on the farm itself. Later, first ever International Agritourism day was celebrated on 16th May, 2008 in Pune. The ‘Tenth Five Year Plan’ opened up opportunities for agritourism in India (Swain et al., 2018). Certainly, as a developing field, it has its own share of challenges and management issues to face. The issues like guest-host relationship, sustainability, economic feasibility are important for any new tourism development at a destination. It is more so in the case of agritourism as it has a direct impact on the host culture and rural

community as a whole (Karri, 2016). Starting and managing Agritourism business can be a challenging and risky for farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs in the absence of a good planning and understanding of management practices. Whether we have a skilled manpower to cater to these requirements in the country was the basic question raised by the university administrators. Hence, the questions raised are what type of skill development we can impart. Who are our target group? What extent we have the scope? What type of degree/diploma programme the University can have? What should be our curriculum and pedagogy? An attempt to address these questions, the present discussion was taken up involving all the stakeholders of the Agritourism sector including Academicians, practitioners and policy makers to discuss the potential scope, benefits, opportunities and challenges that lies in this sector. The intention was to explore the possible solutions from the University to design an academic course curriculum, research, and extension activities to enhance the skill development of manpower required for the industry.

The fact is that there is a huge employment potential for tourism (Milalic, 2014) which is not been exploited by the Bihar farmers. Hence, this sector may act as a workforce multiplier for the economic development of Bihar. In this context, the University called for seeking the direction and vision of the tourism in Bihar and how to match it up with the role of the University in generating the workforce. The basic idea started with diversifying the activities of the school (SAB&RM) paving a way for designing a new course/s and curriculum for Agritourism. It is found that no university in India are offering any such courses or programmes related to Agritourism as on date. There is a scope for enhancing skills of Agritourism in India at many places such as Himachal, Kerala, Goa and Coorg of Karnataka (Mishra, 2012). One should feel about the progress of the shape Agritourism has taken in recent years, wherein people go and stay and visualise, how the crops are grown in the field. A majority knew that the Agritourism hot spots were not professionally managed and the manpower in Agritourism had a very little technical knowledge, which stimulated to contribute to this field by providing technically qualified manpower. The team engaged claimed that one of the major reasons for failure of most of the businesses is that people are not qualified enough and getting qualified

personnel to run these businesses is also difficult. Most of them are family owned and they barely have any agricultural qualification. The challenge that lies ahead of us is how to teach these things in agriculture to contribute to the integrity of the tourism industry. In this background, we have put forth a few questions to the panelists to discuss:

- Whether to have a Two-year full pledged post graduate course or one year diploma?
- How much is the requirement of qualified personnel in the field of Agritourism?
- What type of programme should we have?
- Where to get experts, whether to have adjunct faculty, distinguished professors, lecturers, guest faculty?
- Shall we begin with an entrance exam?
- What should be the pedagogy, whether to have 1 semester classroom teaching/ practical and 1 semester for internship in Agritourism hot spots?

Recently, the government support system has been encouraging the aspirant candidates of agritourism to take up various activities at the farm-level. In the case of Punjab, the government also gone one step ahead and helped the Agri entrepreneurs to purchase Citrus varieties from Florida with the Central assistance. Accordingly, a Horti-Tourism was set-up in 2008 by an entrepreneur in Punjab in the name of 'Citrus County'. Having working with this tourism project, it is understood that there is a need for diversification in agriculture to earn additional income from tourism, especially through horticulture (horti-tourism), which provides a beautiful, luxurious farm stays to give good memories for their tourists to go back with. The farm stays at Citrus County are tent accommodations with hi-fi facilities such as air-conditioners, Wi-Fi and all other services. Understanding the vast market for Agritourism, the Government of India extended the govt support and encouraged other states to adopt Punjab Model of farm tourism. The post COVID has also improved scope for farm tourism, as people want to get into small farm stays and start avoiding big hotels. There are also several opportunities and challenges to implement the same. Farming and Rural Tourism complement each other. More emphasis towards the policy level support from the respective state government/s in order to make this domain sustainable in long run was needed.

Looking into the success of Agri Eco Tourism at National level, especially the states like Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujarat, Goa, Kerala and Karnataka, the

policy makers of the state of Bihar focusing on Eco Tourism in collaboration with the Department of Forest & Climate Change. Bihar has tremendous opportunity for Agritourism because of its agriculture diversity such as Mango belts, Litchi belts of Muzaffarpur, Katarni Chura in Bhagalpur and famous local rice varieties of East Champaran etc. Tourism Department has already in collaboration with forest Department and introduced Eco-Tourism in East Champaran. Focused on experiential tourism where tourists experience a local hospitality. The potential sites in Bihar for the said purpose are Rohatas, West Champaran, Bodh-Gaya and Nalanda. Although Agritourism requires a less investment but generates an economic opportunity at grass root level. Regional officers from Govt Tourism Dept should visit Pusa & prepare a plan for Agritourism in this location through Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) models. Connecting an existing tourist circuit along with newly proposed Agritourism facility through popular agricultural commodities in the state is the focal point emphasized. Agritourism surely would double the farmers' income.

One should think of three important aspects before implementation of Agritourism activities such as -i) tagging with agricultural activities, ii) conversation of cultural activities in sites and iii) creating infrastructure for facilities & amenities to tourists (stay, stalls and activities). It is also true that incorporating a secondary agriculture activity helps to make Agritourism more successful and sustainable. Any concept of Agritourism organization/ concept should have something to show, sell and buy. Tagging of Culture and Heritage has to be made to develop a Unique Selling Proposition (USP).

In this context, the efforts of the University should be appreciated for taking up this task for understanding the lacunas in the industry and developing a suitable academic programme/s (degree/diploma/certificate) in agritourism. This initiative of the University would bridge the gap that exists between Agritourism and the Diploma holders by plugging them in the gaps of Agritourism sector. There should be a clear framework where the government can facilitate in developing Agritourism by imposing a less licensing process and enabling faster growth.

A few of the panelists are in the opinion that Agritourism is a marriage between Tourism and

Agriculture and the University as a path finder. It becomes a solution to engage small farm holders with a limited infrastructure but multiple stakeholders such as Agricultural activities, farm activities and marketing aspects. It is surely enhanced income of the farmers especially in Eastern states which have lower farmer income (against the notion of doubling farmers' income). Further, it will reduce farmer migration and creates an employment opportunity. The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model as the best approach in the state of Bihar, wherein a majority of the farming community belonged to the small and marginal category.

Theme-wise Discussion and Remarks by the experts : Synthesis of the expert's thoughts and opinions about the themes are as follows:

Theme 1. Demand Assessment for Skilled Manpower in Agritourism : The panelists were of the opinion that students should be trained for hospitality and human management. The graduates of this programme could be a site planner, entrepreneurs, managers and event organisers for organising events such as fruit festival (orange festival, grapes festival etc.) and community organisers. The programmes on Agritourism would give a trained manpower and their services could be utilised in the Agritourism field.

Theme 2. Need of degree/diploma programme in Agritourism : A course on Agritourism is offered by the Lovely Professional University. The panellist recommended chalking out the various courses that should be taught to develop skills and then decide the duration requirement to complete these courses. A period of 1 year would be ideal course duration. However, few recommended to intake only candidates with a degree in Agri and allied areas. It was mentioned that National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad has all diploma courses and panel recommended to rename the programmes with Management Studies in the title rather than naming as Diploma programmes.

Theme 3. Model Curriculum for Agritourism : The panel recommended the University to have a wide variety of courses such as Product Development (tourism products), Digital and Social Media Marketing, Business Communication, Agri Entrepreneurship, Economics, Business Analysis, Experience Delivery (such as cultural dance, storytelling, Food, music), Sustainable Tourism, Hospitality, including courses

on legal norms like incorporation of company, GST registration, Registration in Tourism Development Authority etc. Since, RPCAU as an Agricultural University, he suggested to include courses as Crop Farming, Horticulture, Food Production, Integrated Farming, Fisheries and Livestock Management. Diversity in the courses offered is necessary and suggested to include remedial courses/foundation courses in agriculture for people from non-agri graduation background. The panelists suggested to focus on tourism activities as part of the curriculum. Panelists advised to refer model curriculum for B.Sc programme in Agritourism developed by their organizations

Theme 4. Ideal Pedagogy for Agritourism : The panelists suggested to include a right kind of exposure visits and internships to farms irrespective of the status of management, size, and functional/dis-functional as part of the programme for a minimum period of more than 10 days. They quoted APJ Abdul Kalam on learning more from failure studies and suggested having a functional linkage with ATDC to enable the candidates to understand the process involved in Agritourism.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the discussion that there is a need for promotion of Agritourism in the country through the network of public and private sectors. Since agriculture is a state subject, development of professionals in the field of Agritourism should be a focal point in the policy framework of the tourism department. Development of such professional courses would not only help in the bridging gaps in Agritourism but also acts as a base point for potential entrepreneurs to initiate Agritourism start-ups. To create a demand for these courses, the University should have a better linkage with the state tourism department and start upgrading the skills of the employees who are working in the department, KVKs and State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) to bridge the gap and connection between farming community as well as policy makers. Since the engagement of various stakeholders in Agritourism results in prosperous development of the sector, as it is a sub-component of rural tourism. However, there is a huge scope for product specific development of Agritourism in India involving the experts and practitioners across

the country. Development of such need-based diploma programs would be helpful for promoting specialized professionals in the times to come.

Development of Agritourism through the skilled professionals should be extended further in mitigating the regional growth by linking Agritourism with the existing tourist circuits. There are also potential start-ups in the field of agriculture which can be linked with tourism industry for product and market development. Role of Cooperatives, FPOs, SHGs and other groups can also be explored on their attachment with the stakeholders in the field of rural and agricultural tourism. Amalgamation of field exposure along with in-house training should be extended further to the development of specialized courses in the field of rural and agritourism.

As an outcome of the current study, the School of Agribusiness and Rural Management would design an academic course curriculum including research, and extension activities by further contribution of the panelists and other experts in the field of Agritourism through rigorous brainstorming. The outcome of the discussion led to the introduction of Two year post graduate diploma programme in Agritourism by the University.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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