

Exploring the Potential of Agritourism: A Gateway to Sustainable Development in Kumaun Region of Indian Central Himalayas

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Abstract

Agritourism, a fusion of agriculture and tourism, is a new ray of hope for the sustainable development of rural regions livelihoods, economies, and other related sectors. This concept combines both aspects, with the potential to provide economic benefits to rural livelihoods and enrich the experience for tourists who visit the place. Agritourism has potential as a catalyst for sustainable development in the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand state, which is the eastern part of the state, boasts rich scenic natural beauties, cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and all above organic and traditional agricultural practices. The paper explores existing agritourism initiatives in the Kumaun region, ranging from farm stays to culinary experiences. and analyzes the economic benefits, challenges, and prospects of agritourism. This abstract underscore the transformative power of agritourism in encouraging sustainable development in rural areas of the Kumaun region while preserving cultural heritage, promoting environmental conservation, and enhancing socio-economic well-being.

Keywords: *agritourism, agriculture, Kumaun, economic development.*

Introduction

In the last few years, a new mode of tourism has rapidly become popular among tourists, and they are also preferring to experience it. It is becoming famous in different countries around the world in the name of agritourism. Now the question arises: what is agritourism? As the National Agricultural Library ^[1] defines, it is a form of commercial enterprise that is the linkage of agricultural production processing with tourism to attract tourists, which has the main purpose of entertaining them while generating income for the host. Through the combination of agriculture and tourism, it offers new revenue sources ^[2]. It 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 ^[2a]. Overall, this growing dimension of tourism has the potential to create meaningful relationships between urban and rural communities. It is also pronounced as agrotourism, farm tourism, and agriculture tourism ^[3]. This type of tourism encompasses a number of activities, which include visiting farms, activities on farms, educational visits, recreational or leisure purposes, programs, etc., which give the tourist an experience of rural life and become a source of income for rural households. Destinations where such practices take place, so-called agritourism sites, usually have accommodation, guided tours and hands-on activities through which tourists can stay and 'live' in a rural village, experiencing farming life first-hand, and learning about a certain region's farming practices and its culture.

The services regarding agritourism are different, but in some studies, they are categorized by the different researchers. Chase et al. ^[4] describe them in five categories, i.e., direct sales, education, hospitality, outdoor recreation, and entertainment. Tew & Barbiery ^[5] describe the activities and services under agritourism as recreational activities, tours, etc. The activities under this tourism can educate the visitors about the importance of agriculture and the challenges that farmers and agriculture are facing in a rapidly changing world. Enjoying a slower pace of life, engaging in hands-on activities in agriculture, connecting with local communities, understanding the local customs, traditions, and way of life, etc. are the benefits gained by the tourists as they want to get rid of the fast-moving life of cities for some time and wish to spend a peaceful time in the lap of nature with local communities.

Objectives of the study

The objective of the present study is to find the status of agritourism in India, economic benefits of agritourism, challenges of agritourism and prospects of agritourism in Kumaon Himalayan region.

Research Methodology

In the present study a descriptive research design was adopted by the researchers and the data was collected from the various secondary sources.

Agritourism in India

As India is predominantly an agrarian economy, agriculture plays a pivotal role in the economy. It contributes about 13 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country and occupies more than 75 percent of the of the population in agriculture, directly or indirectly ^[6]. This new dimension of tourism is becoming a significant tourist development opportunity for India due to its rich rural heritage, diverse agricultural practices, and authentic cultural experiences. It has a range of economic and social activities, which are a combination of travel and agriculture. As the historical evidence reveals its history, the seeds of this dimension of tourism were sown by Pandurang Taware by establishing the Agritourism Development Corporation, India, in 2004 in Maharashtra ^[7].

Agritourism has the potential to generate new sources of income and increase its contribution to the GDP. It also has scope for the development of rural communities and rural parts of the country and aligns with sustainable tourism. In recent years, some states in the country have been practicing agrotourism. The agrotourism market in India exhibited a remarkable growth rate (GAGR) of 19.9 percent between 2023 and 2028 ^[8], and revenue is increasing at a rate of 20 percent annually ^[9]. In India, agritourism encompasses a variety of experiences tailored to showcase the country's diverse agricultural landscape and rural culture. Some of the common types of agritourism in India include culinary, visits to tea estates, spice plantations, orchards, Ayurveda and wellness, sustainable and ecotourism, adventure activities, and rural art and craft. Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Himachal Pradesh are some states in the country that have successfully implemented this concept ^[10].

Economic Benefits of agritourism

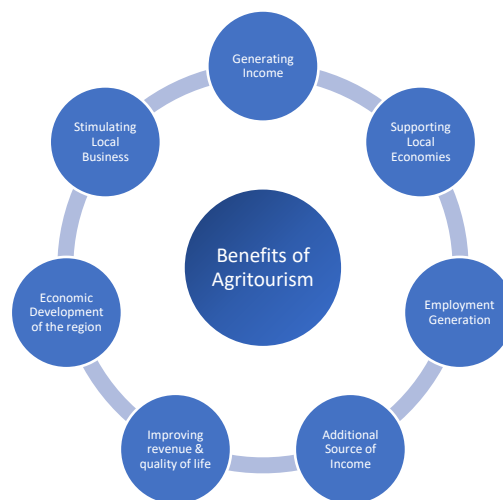
Agritourism is the fusion of agriculture and tourism. The combination shows the possibility of numerous economic benefits to local rural households and the economy as a whole and can support communities by generating income, creating jobs, and supporting local economies ^[11]. As this dimension of tourism can flourish mostly in rural areas and be beneficial to rural people so it serves as a catalyst in these regions. It diversifies the income streams, generates employment opportunities, and, at the same time, also works to stimulate the local economies. Agritourism has the

potential to create an additional source of income for rural households with a low or minimum investment. This has a huge scope, especially in the hilly regions where traditional agriculture is only sustainable and livelihoods may be limited, which gives birth to the push migration from the region, and Kumaun region of the state is not any exception.

Agriculture has been found to provide many benefits to farmers. Offering board services and selling agricultural products to agritourists improves the revenue and quality of life of farming families ^[12]. A survey study done by Schilling (2012) ^[13] found that agritourism farms in New Jersey earned at least half of their farm income, and 36 percent earned all their income from agritourism. If agritourism expands, this will require additional manpower in different areas, directly or indirectly, i.e., staff to manage accommodations for guests, tour operators and guides, reestablishment of village and cottage industries, and other hospitality services that not only include the farmers but also the local residents who are not involved in agriculture for their livelihood, which will be helpful in reducing unemployment and migration and empowering people in the region by enhancing the socio-economic wellbeing of rural communities.

When a tourist moves to these places, he will spend money on transport, accommodation, meals, etc., which will be helpful in injecting the money into the local economy. This influx of tourist expenditure will help stimulate the demand for local goods and services. Additionally, this will also contribute to the growth of local village and cottage industries that are associated with food processing or manufacturing, handicrafts and handlooms, agro-processing units, etc., which will encourage local entrepreneurs, artisans, and producers and will be helpful in the development of a vibrant ecosystem of small-scale enterprises.

Economic Benefits of Agritourism



Source: [12], [13] and author's own findings

This tourism is directly related to the rural regions where agriculture is the only source of livelihood. If seasonal fluctuations arise or they face market uncertainties due to various reasons, agrotourism has the potential to mitigate them. Having more types of business in farming can help farmers not rely too much on markets that change a lot. It can also help them make money all year round. Plus, it will keep farm traditions, old knowledge, and rural places alive. This helps save cultural identities and promotes using land in ways that last. So, agritourism gives many economic benefits to rural areas, farmers, and local economies. Agritourism has huge potential for economic growth in the Kumaun region. It can be a powerful way to earn money in different ways, create jobs, help local business grow, and keep cultural heritage alive.

Challenges of Agritourism

As agritourism can be a good opportunity to develop new sources of income for farmers and be helpful in the development of rural economies, it also faces a number of challenges. Wanole et al. (2020) ^[14], Vishwanath et al. (2022) ^[15], in this regard, identified the challenging factors as, i.e., high cost of labour, land development and maintenance costs, no insurance coverage, low profits from products, lack of awareness about credit and subsidy facilities for all, lack of training, and weak communication skills. Some other challenges that this new dimension of tourism faces are limited infrastructure and basic amenities; the marketing awareness of agritourism is another challenge where the tourists have no awareness about these new tourism destination opportunities for their leisure and education; the seasonality of the tourism is another challenge where it depends on crop harvesting or some other factors, the marketing awareness of agritourism is another challenge where the tourists have no awareness about this new tourism destination opportunities for their leisure and education, seasonality of the tourism is another challenge where it depends on crop harvesting or some other factors and it may be a hard task to sustain this during off-peak time; and the balance between tourist inflow and sustainability is also a big challenge because avoiding this important factor can harm agriculture as well as the environment, both in the near future and in the long run. Skill development among rural communities may be another challenge, which is essential to providing consistent quality and standards to visitors. Lack of awareness of government policies regarding complex regulations and bureaucratic procedures may be a challenge in developing agritourism. Skilled and trained manpower is another challenge, with a lack of entrepreneurial skills in rural areas due to a lack of approach to financial institutions for various reasons. Lack of business planning skills may be another challenge to be faced in the development of agritourism.

Sustainability is a big question and this is an important element of agritourism ventures working in natural landscapes and depending on the well-being of ecosystems to prosper. If sustainability in agriculture is prioritized, then agritouristic activities may reduce their ecological footprints, conserve nature while adding value to long-term environmental sustainability. First and foremost, sustainable agricultural practices are necessary for maintaining the ecological balance of destinations; it should be ensured that farming does not negatively affect natural habitats or compromise with environment integrity. By adopting sustainable farming methods, we shall ensure continued productivity in agricultural areas over time; these also serve among other things as means through which tourism impacts on environment can be addressed best. When such places attract tourists there can occur depletion of resources and disturbance to ecosystems which support them. Conservation agriculture and agroecology too have potential of safeguarding biodiversity together with its benefits at large scale levels so need be designed least disruptive activities towards delicate eco systems. Finally, therefore sustainable agricultural practices form foundation for successfulness as well profitability in agritourism since they assist in minimizing negative effects towards environment, conserving natural resources.

Prospects of Agritourism in Kumaun Region

Kumaun, the eastern part of the northern state of Uttarakhand, is an administrative division that consists of six districts with typical topographic conditions and scenic beauty. The hilly part of the state provides the opportunity to explore the lush landscape & scenic natural beauty, rich culture and heritage, healthy and nutritious cuisine, organic and traditional agricultural practices. This region is filled with a wide range of agritourism activities for the visiting tourists to the villages. They can feel the real experience while staying in these villages and participate in different agriculture activities to experience a village life in the hills. As the organic farming is a flourishing sector and it's a new trend specially in the metro cities, if the tourists from these places visit, they will have a good and interesting exposure to the techniques by which the farmers do the organic farming. Fruit orchards are another destination where tourists can experience the opportunity to pick fresh fruit and sample local produce. Culinary experiences have a wide range of

scope to get familiar with the rich, nutritious cuisine of Kumaun by learning to prepare the dishes and tasting them. The rural hilly part has a scope of guided nature walks meeting with local villagers and artisans where they can learn about traditional crafts, music, and dance forms unique to the Kumauni culture.

Trekking and adventure Agritourism can host a number of tourists by experiencing nature walks, river rafting, bird watching, and wildlife safaris in combination with cultural experiences. When the tourists will stay in local accommodations which in some places are turned into heritage homestays and run by the local households, allows tourists to experience the local hospitality, lifestyle, tradition, culture and food. This tourism is a gateway to connect the metro busy life with a peaceful nature, and it is also helpful by contributing the economic development of local communities and promoting sustainable agriculture in the region. Agrotourism can generate direct marketing opportunities for local farmers to increase revenues, enhance the viability of their farm operations, and ensure a more stable income^[16]. The development of agritourism can be a good opportunity for return migrants and reduce out-going migration. At the same time, it may be remedial for turning ghost villages.

SWOT Analysis of Agritourism in Kumaun Region

The analysis shows the strength, weakness, opportunity and threat in agritourism in the Kumaun region of Indian Central Himalays-

1. Strengths –

- (a) **Natural Scenic Beauty and Landscape** – The Kumaun region is full of natural beauty, stunning landscapes and biodiversity that can attract tourists.
- (b) **Cultural Heritage** – The region has its own rich culture, traditions, rituals, fairs, folklore which can enhance the visitors experience to know the rural life and culture.
- (c) **Organic Farming** – Emphasis on organic and sustainable practices appeals to eco-conscious tourists which is an important strength in the region.
- (d) **Community Involvement** – The agritourism is an enabler to involve the local community (i.e., farmers, villagers etc.) and can be economically benefit them from tourism.

2. Weakness -

- (a) **Infrastructure** – Infrastructure is an important variable in promoting the tourism and limited access to infrastructure can restrain the tourists to visit such places.
- (b) **Seasonality** - The seasonality nature of tourism may lead to fluctuations in income to the local people because tourism peaks in certain seasons.
- (c) **Awareness** – Lack of marketing awareness, use of modern technique for marketing etc. are some obstacles in the proper development of tourism in rural regions.
- (d) **Skill Gaps** – Lack in proper training about the management of tourism and hospitality is another weakness in this tourism.

3. Opportunities –

- (a) **Growing interest in Sustainable Tourism** – In recent years the demand has increased for eco-friendly travel experiences specially by youth. So, this can be an opportunity to promote the tourism.
- (b) **Government Support** – There is much potential for government initiatives to promote the agritourism in the Kumaun region.
- (c) **Diverse Activities** – This dimension of tourism can provide diverse opportunities for tourist who stays in the villages and experience the nature, culture and village life.
- (d) **Global Markets** – Has potential for attracting international tourists who are looking for a unique experience in rural or agritourism.

4. Threats –

- (a) **Climate Change** – Environmental changes could impact agricultural practices and disaster related problems to the region may be a big threat.
- (b) **Competition** – Other region with similar topographic conditions may offer more developed agrotourism opportunities to the visitors.
- (c) **Economic Factors**- The economic factors globally can be a threat to this dimension of tourism through affecting the tourism budget.
- (d) **Cultural Erosions**- There is a risk of commercialisation leading to loss of authentic cultural practices.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that this sector has immense potential to make the region an agrotourism hub due to the favourable and diversified agroclimatic zones, alluring nature, and traditional and organic farming methods. As agriculture is a subsidiary and its share in gross domestic product is declining year-by-year, people are transforming their primary occupation (which is mostly agriculture) to other sectors by migrating from their villages. The development of agritourism can develop their socio-economic status and local economy and can be a big solution to the problem of outmigration from the hills. But it is important to develop this tourism with sustainability so that it can be a long-term rewarding opportunity for developing the villages of Kumaun with basic infrastructure and amenities in the near future so that they can be role models for other parts of the country in agrotourism.

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