

Potential Growth of Agrotourism using Online Traveling Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Agrotourism is a recently emerged and an important part of a tourism industry which can definitely improve the livelihoods of farmers. Today, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has increased competitiveness in tourist markets and strategic tourism management. The research aims to explore the potential Growth of Agrotourism using Online Traveling Platforms and contribute towards the same. Five Agrotourism centres based in Ratnagiri were selected using nonprobability sampling. Content analysis was used to analyse data collected from face-to-face interviews. The findings show that the technology is viewed as an important component for agrotourism growth. Though factors like ICT awareness and literacy hinder the growth of agrotourism. The study concludes by recommending guidelines on how to overcome some of the factors affecting the growth of agrotourism.

Key Words: Agrotourism centres, Information technology, Online platforms, Website.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agrotourism is a special form of tourism that has emerged through the need for survival of small farmers and land-owners, who have therefore decided to apply traditional methods of land cultivation, avoiding pesticides and chemical substances. Although products of these cultivations witness a growing demand, these lots are rarely profitable[1]. Therefore, in their endeavor to supplement their income, small owners have been offering alternative forms of tourism to visitors who wish to return to nature (Higham and Luck, 2002), to contact traditional modes of land cultivation, even to participate actively in them.

Agrotourism is a combination of tourism experience in agricultural surrounding. It involves agricultural operations that bring tourist to the farm. Agrotourism includes certain elements of direct sales and any type of participation or observation of agricultural production by tourists. It is a form of business activity, where the farmer opens his farm to the visitors and allows them to view different agricultural activities such as sowing, harvesting, and processing.

The urban societies having roots in villages always have curiosity about rural lifestyle, culture and traditions. In addition, these Agrotourism units provide family friendly recreational activities, which the traditional tourism may not provide. Villages provide various recreational activities to urban dwellers through there festivals, traditions, handicrafts, languages etc. which add value to the travelling experience. Agrotourism attracts those travelers who not only want to relax but also want to learn new things, which lead to value addition to their visit.

Agrotourism is emerging as an alternative for traditional tourism mainly due to three reasons, firstly the increasing curiosity of urban dwellers towards rural lifestyle, secondly the increasing number of nature lovers and thirdly the increasing demand of less expensive travelling options.

Indian culture has always generated immense sense of astonishment amongst tourists world-wide. The whole panorama of socio-cultural practices where religion is integral part of life has fascinated people all over the world. In 21st century where India is excelling in IT revolution, there still exists India which is primarily rural. There are several big cities and metros in different parts of the country, yet majority of population still lives in villages offering closer look to ancient Indian culture. Such unique characteristics of Indian society can help in the development of Rural and Agro tourism.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 2.1 To understand the current usage of Online Travel platform by Agrotourism centres.
- 2.2 To understand the potential growth of Agrotourism using Online Travelling platform.

3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some of the limitations of this study are:

- 3.1 The paper is based on limited number of respondents.
- 3.2 Authenticity of data provided by these respondents cannot be assured.

4. SAMPLE DESIGN

Ratnagiri District was chosen for the purpose of data collection due its location, increasing number of agrotourism centres in region, and operational convenience. Ratnagiri district has largest number of agrotourism units in konkan region. Ratnagiri has 9 talukas (Mandangad, Dapoli, Khed, Chiplun, Guhagar, Sangameshwar, Ratnagiri, Lanja, Rajapur) Therefore, on the basis of convenience random sampling method 5 Agrotourism centers were selected.

5. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) Internet has reached around 481 million of Indians (in December 2017). Urban internet penetration stood at 64.84% and that of Rural at 20.26%. Under the government's famous Digital India platform several new and unique starts ups are flourishing. Applications are available that not only store our vital banking and other related information but can also help us in online payments, apply for aadhar card, and even recharge our mobiles. With upcoming online payment applications like BHIM, Paytm, PhonePe, Tezetc, making transactions have become easier. Apart from online payments, various other applications related to Lifestyle, Hotel booking, Health etc are mushrooming. It is safe to say we are now acknowledged virtually better than our real self. Agriculture in general and Agrotourism in particular should hustle intensively in order to survive in such a virtual era.

Since last few decades tourism industry has shown all the glories to become one of the important pillars for many countries, India being no exception. According to the Government of India's Ministry of Tourism, FTA (Foreign Tourist Arrivals) in the period of January to March 2018 were 31.27 Lakh. According to WTTC (World Trade and Tourism Council) India's Travel and Tourism sector ranks 7th in the world in terms of contribution to India's GDP. Travel and Tourism sector was able to contribute a total of 9.4% of GDP It is also interesting to point that most of the revenue, 88% to be precise, comes from domestic travel.

Increase in Internet access and a rise of middle-class segment in country, have resulted in emergence of a new industry viz; Online Travel. When we say Online Travel Industry, we include each platform available these days that improve the travelling experience. It includes various online applications that ease the hardships of hotel booking, train booking, airplane booking. The main aim of these online travel providers is to make traveling easy and affordable. Moreover, other online platforms such as the social media, adds in the value to make traveling a more customized deal. Travelers are free to review various online travel providers and give their valuable opinions about the quality and dependability of these providers. To name a few providers, we have famous players like MakeMyTrip, Goibibo, Trivago, Tripadvisor, ClearTrip, Yatra etc. MakeMyTrip and Goibibo are currently the market leaders capturing 31% and 27.4% market share, respectively as on July 2017(Kalagato Report). These platforms gives the user a convenient way to find the perfect hotel at lowest price.

With growing internet access and ease of planning a vacation using online providers, huge step has been turned and it has opened up a whole new world of possibilities. One such possibility that could be encashed, if harnessed appropriately, is the combination of Agrotourism and online travel. Agrotourism provides the exact customized sentiment that these tourist crave for. It provides the travelers a getaway from bizarre routines of urbanized world. Being visible online gives these agrotourism a shot at making it work. It is rather in a more infant stage right now. Eventually if it wants to survive, it needs to be EVERYWHERE. And by everywhere, we mean the virtual world.

6. DISCUSSION

When five Agrotourism centres based in Ratnagiri (Names not disclosed due to anonymity clause) were studied for the purpose, following were the findings:

- 6.1. All five Agrotourism centres have their own website that are updated approximately once in 6 months

6.2. Some of these Agrotourism centres are also active on social networking applications. Following table shows the centre that are active either on facebook or instagram or both.

Table 1 Active on Social Networking applications

Centre	Facebook likes	Instagram followers
A	-	-
B	1329	-
C	3045	253
D	3085	668
E	-	-

(Figures in Thousands) (Source- Facebook, Instagram)

As seen in the table, only 2 centres have active accounts on both facebook and instagram. Rest of the centres are not present on both the social media platforms. These social media platforms have the power to create a buzz about your product/service in the virtual world. This buzz is then in turn converted into much loyal customer base. It is even important to point out that the cost associated with being active on social media is absolutely insignificant.

6.3. Now a days it is just not enough to have an active account on facebook and instagram. Times for advertising have changed drastically over the last two decades. Facebook and instagram offer a paid advertisement section. It is easy to find the target audience for your advertise on Facebook and Instagram. All you need to do is select the age group of audience you want o target, then select where you want your advertise to be placed. These apps offer many ad formats like Video, Photo, Slideshow, carousel etc. Once you choose the format of the ad, you can set a budget for the ad and create your own ad. These apps also give you the opportunity to manage your ad and to monitor the response on daily basis. You can know how many people “like”, “Share”, “Comment” on your ad. This feature is also known as real time reporting. The centres in review have not taken advantage of these social media advertisement features. It is important for these centres to understand the reach of these social media platforms. This is where they have a real life shot at making their centre a successful venture. The possibilities are countless in the world of social media advertising.

6.4. Another upcoming trend in online travel industry is to be available on various online booking applications. Travelers today are more codependent on these apps to find a suitable hotel while sitting comfortably at home. Agrotourism centres also provide accommodation facilities to visitors. Hence, when asked whether they were registered on any of the online booking app, following were the responses.

Table 2 Registered on Online Booking applications

Centre	MakeMyTrip	Goibibo	Tripadvisor	Yatra	Trivago
A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
B	-	-	✓	✓	✓
C	-	-	✓	-	-
D	-	-	✓	-	-
E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

(Source- field visit)

Top five market players are considered for the above phenomenon. It is evident that all five centres are registered under atleast one of these online booking application. However, when we consider other centres, the above responses cannot be generalized. There are many other centres that go unnoticed due to the mere fact that they aren't visible online.

7. CONCLUSION

There has been a substantial growth in the number of internet users in India. Tourist are now more than ever so aware of various trends. It is only logical for agrotourism centres to encash this awareness. Online travel platforms along with social media provide Agrotourism centres with great opportunities and a huge potential to grow. Agrotourism in particular needs to shake hands with online technologies that fetch customer's right at their doorsteps. While some have already joined the online race, it will be interesting to grasp the performance of this collaboration in future.

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