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Agritourism in Western India: A comparative analysis of benefits for tourists and hosts in Maharashtra and Goa

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Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of visitor experiences and the socio-economic impacts of agritourism in the Indian states of Maharashtra and Goa. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 200 agritourists and 45 agritourism centre operators. The research assessed visitors' perceived enrichment from participating in farm activities and the personal benefits derived from their agritourism experiences. Results indicated that while a majority of visitors in both states found the activities highly enriching, the specific benefits differed significantly. Visitors in Goa prioritized a change from their daily routine and learning from nature, whereas those in Maharashtra valued opportunities for reflection on personal values and recalling past memories, as confirmed by Mann-Whitney U tests. For hosts, agritourism led to significant positive socio-economic impacts, including the adoption of technologies like drip irrigation, farm diversification, improved financial status, and enhanced social participation. The findings underscore that agritourism success is context-dependent. The study concludes that tailored, state-specific strategies—emphasizing leisure and biodiversity in Goa and cultural heritage in Maharashtra—are essential for maximizing agritourism potential as a sustainable driver of rural development, enriching visitor engagement while bolstering local economies.

Keywords: Agritourism, visitor experience, socio-economic impact, comparative study, rural development, Maharashtra, Goa

Introduction

Agriculture in India is undergoing a significant transformation, not only in terms of production systems but also in the diversification of income-generating opportunities for farmers. Among the various allied activities, agritourism has emerged as a promising avenue that bridges farming with consumer experiences. Broadly understood as tourism activities conducted on working farms, agritourism has been described in multiple ways across literature. It is often used interchangeably with terms such as agrotourism, farm tourism, farm-based tourism, and rural tourism (McGehee & Kim, 2004; Barbieri, 2010) ^[10, 11]. Weaver and Fennel (1997) ^[18] defined it as “rural enterprises which incorporate both a working farm environment and a commercial tourism component,” while Barbieri and Mshenga (2008) ^[2] emphasized its role in attracting visitors through farm-based practices.

In recent years, agritourism has gained traction in India as a niche sector within the broader tourism industry. States such as Maharashtra, Goa, Kerala, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh have pioneered initiatives that highlight its potential to provide farmers with alternative income streams while offering urban visitors authentic rural experiences. Farm stays, guided visits, and trail-based tours are increasingly appealing to travelers seeking experiences beyond conventional sightseeing. Agritourism thus serves as a platform for mutual exchange: farmers showcase their knowledge, skills, and cultural traditions, while visitors

reconnect with authentic food, forgotten tastes, and rural heritage.

International studies (e.g., Comen & Foster, 2002) ^[5] highlight that the success of agritourism depends on several critical factors, including location, marketing strategies, understanding customer expectations, creativity, and effective management of visitor experiences. In the Indian context, particularly in Maharashtra and Goa, agritourism enterprises have not only contributed to rural livelihoods but also enriched visitor experiences by blending recreation with education, cultural engagement, and a sense of connection to farming communities. This paper explores the experiences and benefits of visitors engaging in agritourism in these two states, and socio-economic impacts of agritourism on both visitors and hosts/operators in Maharashtra and Goa, offering insights into its role as a sustainable model for rural development and experiential tourism.

Methodology

The present study employed a descriptive-cum-exploratory research design to analyze the perceived experiences, personal benefits, and socio-economic impacts of agritourism on both visitors and hosts/operators in Maharashtra and Goa. A mixed-methods approach was followed, combining quantitative tools with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of agritourism dynamics.

Study Area and Rationale

The research was conducted in the states of Maharashtra (MH) and Goa, which were purposively selected for their unique agritourism models. Maharashtra is recognized as the pioneer of agritourism in India, with the Agritourism Development Corporation (ATDC) playing a central role in promoting farm-based tourism. Goa, on the other hand, integrates agritourism with its broader leisure and eco-tourism industry, focusing on horticultural crops, plantations, and spice gardens. These two contrasting contexts offered an ideal setting to study both rural-focused and tourism-driven forms of agritourism.

Sampling Procedure

A multistage purposive sampling technique was adopted for selecting respondents. In the first stage, a list of agritourism centres (ATCs) established before or during 2016 was obtained from official directories and stakeholder agencies. In the second stage, a total of 45 ATCs were selected, comprising 30 from Maharashtra and 15 from Goa. This ensured a representative mix of well-established and emerging units. For the visitor sample, 200 agritourists (100 from each state) were randomly selected from among those visiting the sampled ATCs during peak tourist seasons.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and direct observation. Visitor-level data focused on their participation in farm-based activities, perceived enrichment, and personal benefits gained. Host-level data included parameters such as employment generation, material changes, expenditure patterns, farm improvements, changes in standard of living, financial status, and social participation.

To capture changes over time, the year 2016 was chosen as the benchmark. Data from the period 2013–2015 were treated as “before,” while 2016–2018 were considered “after.” This benchmark was chosen after consultations with experts and because 2016 marked a significant expansion phase for agritourism in both states. Moreover, respondents were more comfortable recalling changes from the recent 5–6 years rather than older data.

Tools and Techniques of Measurement

Visitor experiences were measured on a three-point continuum scale (*not so enriching*, *enriching*, *extremely enriching*), while personal benefits were rated on a five-point continuum (*no benefit to highly beneficial*). For hosts, socio-economic impacts were assessed using categorical

responses and rating scales across six major dimensions: material changes, expenditure, farm improvements, standard of living, financial status, and social participation. Employment generation was measured in terms of man-days per year, averaged across the “before” and “after” periods.

Statistical Analysis

Data were processed using SPSS and MS Excel. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, skewness, and range were used for summarizing employment data. The paired t-test was applied to determine the significance of changes in employment generation before and after 2016. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare differences in perceived benefits among visitors across the two states. For socio-economic parameters of hosts, the McNemar test was employed to analyze categorical changes. Qualitative responses from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically to support and enrich the quantitative findings.

Results and Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the perceived experiences of agritourists in Maharashtra and Goa with respect to their participation in farm-based activities. Agritourism offers visitors a unique opportunity to engage directly with agricultural practices, rural lifestyles, and local traditions, thereby contributing to both recreation and learning. Understanding tourists’ perceptions is essential, as it not only reflects the effectiveness of agritourism activities but also guides hosts and policymakers in designing more engaging and sustainable models.

To capture these experiences of visitors, farm-based activities were broadly categorized into three domains: production activities (such as milking cattle, gardening, ploughing, harvesting, and fruit/vegetable picking), agri-machinery operation, and processing activities (including dairy, fruit, vegetable, cashew, and spice processing). The responses of agritourists were analyzed to determine whether these activities were perceived as *not so enriching*, *enriching*, or *extremely enriching*.

Perceived experience of agritourists in the participation of activities

The overall activities in the ATCs were classified into three categories namely, production activities, agri-machinery operation and processing activities. The distribution of respondents according to their perceived experience in activity participation of Maharashtra ATCs is reported in the Table.01.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to their perceived experience in activity participation (Maharashtra) (n=100)

Sr.no	Kind of activities	Not so enriching		Enriching		Extremely enriching	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
a)	Production activities						
i	Milking of cattle	12	12.0	36	36.0	52	52.0
ii	Feeding of animals	16	16.0	34	34.0	50	40.0
iii	Gardening	10	10.0	37	37.0	53	53.0
iv	Ploughing the fields	18	18.0	33	33.0	49	49.0
v	Harvesting of crops	10	10.0	36	36.0	54	54.0
vi	Picking of fruits and vegetables	18	18.0	32	32.0	50	50.0
b)	Operate agri-machineries	20	20.0	33	33.0	47	47.0
c)	Processing activities						
i	Processing of dairy products	8	8.0	38	38.0	54	54.0
ii	Fruit processing	7	7.0	37	37.0	56	56.0
iii	Vegetable processing	4	4.0	37	37.0	59	59.0
iv	Preserved fruits and vegetables	11	11.0	37	37.0	52	52.0

Majority of the respondents felt that their experience was extremely enriching in all the activities regardless of age and gender differences. Notable activities those were regarded as extremely enriching were vegetable processing

(59%) followed by fruit processing (56%) and harvesting crops (54%). Operating agri-machineries was also perceived as extremely enriching by 47 per cent of respondents.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to their perceived experience in activity participation (Goa) (n=100)

Sr.no	Kind of activities	Not so enriching		Enriching		Extremely enriching	
a)	Production activities	f	%	f	%	f	%
i	Milking of cattle	8	8.0	30	30.0	62	62.0
ii	Feeding of animals	6	6.0	34	34.0	60	60.0
iii	Gardening	6	6.0	31	31.0	63	63.0
iv	Making of handi -crafts	8	8.0	33	33.0	59	59.0
v	Harvesting of crops	10	10.0	36	36.0	54	54.0
vi	Picking of fruits and vegetables	3	3.0	14	14.0	83	83.0
b)	Operate agri-machineries	20	20.0	42	42.0	38	38.0
c)	Processing activities	f	%	f	%	f	%
i	Processing of cashew products	6	6.0	18	18.0	76	76.0
ii	Fruit and spice processing	9	9.0	30	30.0	61	61.0
iii	Vegetable processing	4	4.0	27	27.0	69	69.0
iv	Preserving fruits and vegetables/wineries	9	9.0	17	17.0	74	74.0

Table 4.17 shows the distribution of respondents according to their perceived experience in activity participation of Goa ATCs. Hence, the activities were classified into three categories namely, production activities, agri-machinery operation and processing operation. Majority of the respondents felt that their experience was extremely enriching in all the activities irrespective of age and gender differences. Notable activities those were regarded as extremely enriching were Picking of fruits and vegetables (83%) followed by Processing of cashew products (76%) and Preserving fruits and vegetables/wineries (74%). Operating agri-machineries was perceived as enriching by 42 per cent of respondents. The activities also vary from Maharashtra since the components differ in both states. These findings are consistent with results of Patil, C, (2018) [14] and Chadda & Bhakare (2012) [3] which reported that agritourism creates a win-win situation for both the farmers as well as the tourists. The farmers benefit by deriving extra source of income and tourist hunger for natural and peaceful environment is satisfied. Frequency of income generation increases from once a year to once a week. Gender bias is reduced as both male and female get equal opportunities to earn from the employment generated through various allied activities like Emu, organic and dairy farming. The findings clearly demonstrate that agritourism offers multi-dimensional benefits to visitors by combining recreation

with rural experiences. Activities such as milking cattle, gardening, harvesting, and food processing were consistently regarded as enriching. The differences between Maharashtra and Goa reflect the contextual influences of biodiversity, cultural practices, and the positioning of agritourism in local tourism economies. In Goa, the prominence of biodiversity and leisure-oriented tourism led tourists to emphasize “change from daily routine” and “learning from nature” as prime benefits. Conversely, Maharashtra’s agritourism enterprises, located in more traditional rural settings, fostered nostalgic and reflective experiences such as recalling past memories and reinforcing personal values. These differences align with prior research (e.g., Patil, 2018) [14] indicating that agritourism experiences are highly context-dependent.

Personal benefits from agritourism farms as perceived by agritourists

The personal benefits as perceived by tourists in both states were measured on a five point continuum from no benefit to highly beneficial. These are the effect of agritourism bestowed upon tourists as an outcome of this enterprise to other stakeholders than farmers. Table is also evident for the significantly differing benefits from each other along with varied preferences among themselves.

Table 3: Comparison of the Perceived personal benefits for visitors for Maharashtra and Goa ATCs n=200

Sr. No.	Personal Benefits	MH (Sum of ranks)	Goa (Sum of ranks)	Mann-Whitney U test	Z value	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
I.	Spend time with their family in farm	9723.0	10376.5	4.676	-0.847	0.397
II.	Learn more about nature	9117.0	10983.0	4.067	-2.419	<0.05*
III.	Be with people having similar values	9466.0	10634.0	4.416	-1.529	0.126
IV.	Give their mind a rest	9832.0	10268.0	4.782	-0.566	0.571
V.	Experience new and different things	10117.0	9982.5	4.932	-0.175	0.861
VI.	Think about their personal values	10902.0	9198.0	4.148	-2.217	<0.05*
VII.	Recall good times from the past	10899.0	9200.5	4.150	-2.211	<0.05*
VIII.	Enjoy the smells and sounds of nature	9458.0	10642.0	4.408	-1.542	0.123
IX.	Share their agritourism skills	10121.0	9979	4.929	-0.184	0.854
X.	Have a change from their daily routine	9110.0	10990	4.060	-2.458	<0.05*
XI.	Experience solitude	10656.0	9444	4.394	-1.571	0.116

*significant at 5 per cent level

Mann-Whitney U test results revealed that visitors to Maharashtra sampled ATCs perceived thinking about their personal values is important than all other possible benefits listed under the table 4.24. It was followed by their liking to recall good times from past and experiencing solitude. The situation is different Goa with the visitors' maximum preference towards the benefit of change from daily routine followed by benefit of learning from nature. The four perceived benefits among the visitors were found significantly differing between the states at 5% level of significance.

As per data in the table 03, visitors preferred to learn more from nature and to have change from daily routine in Goa than Maharashtra. This may be due to the fact that the former state more rich in biodiversity than latter and the tag of final destination of entertainment to Goa has made the tourists to respond in such direction. At the same time,

visitors in Maharashtra preferred benefit of thinking personal values and recalling good times from past than Goa tourists. This may be due to the fact that the agritourism farm in former state is little away from cities and authentic rural life and way of life made them to form such opinions.

Over all socio-economic impact of agritourism on operators/hosts

The overall socio-economic impact of agritourism on hosts/operators was conceptualized as combination of below mentioned parameters such as material changes, changes in expenditure pattern, overall farm changes, changes in standard of living, changes in financial status and change in social participation. Some of the parameters are measured categorically and few on continuum. The results as per each component/parameter are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Table 4: Components of socio-economic impact of agritourism and its significance the study area n=45

A. Material Changes				
Sl No.	Particulars	Mcneamar Statistic	Exact Pr >= S	Level of significance
1	Pump set/ Bore well	6.000	0.0610	NS
2	Tractor/ Van/ vehicle/bullockart	5.000	0.0625	NS
3	Drip /sprinkler irrigation system	23.000	<0.001	**
4	Structures for activities and games like swings, wooden furniture, lawns etc	21.000	<0.001	**
B. Change in expenditure pattern				
1	Food items	1.471	0.3323	NS
2	Education	6.004	0.0020	*
3	Healthcare	5.261	0.0647	NS
4	Social Function	0.818	0.5488	NS
C. Overall farm changes				
1	Purchased new lands	1.600	0.3438	NS
2	Improved the existing lands	5.333	0.0386	*
3	Diversified cropping system	13.500	<0.001	**
4	Leased out lands for cultivation	5.762	0.0266	*
5	Purchased additional livestock	1.333	0.3877	NS
D. Changes in standards of living				
1	Had better health care	0.889	0.4807	NS
2	Had better nutritious food	1.471	0.3323	NS
3	Spent more money for clothing	3.769	0.0923	NS
4	Spent more for religious, marriages and other ceremonies	0.818	0.5488	NS
E. Changes in financial status				
1	Repaid old loans	6.390	0.0520	*
2	Increased savings/ deposits	5.000	0.0504	*
3	Invested money on other enterprises	7.316	0.0034	*
4	Incurred loss and debts	2.000	0.5000	NS
F. Change in social participation				
1	Many farmers approach me for agritourism related information	2.25	0.2101	NS
2	Emerged as a leader/ progress farmer	1.00	0.4545	NS
3	Become effective communicator as agritourism host	2.25	0.2101	NS
4	Outside contacts increased	23.14	<0.001	**
5	Subscribed farm publications and general publications	6.81	0.0488	NS
6	Received awards/ recognition	12.56	<0.001	**
7	Served as resource person in training programme on agritourism	4.00	0.1250	NS

Note: ** Significance at 1 per cent level; * Significance at 5 per cent level

The results in Table 4 revealed that material changes were measured on a five-point continuum (1 = no change to 5 = greatly changed). The McNemar test showed significant adoption of innovative technologies like drip irrigation and modern structures for tourism, while no major change was observed in existing assets such as borewells and vehicles. Agribusiness ventures demand high initial investment, but

returns after breakeven bring material improvements (Prabhakar, 2010) ^[16], consistent with Huff and Munro (1985) ^[7], Karampela *et al.* (2016) ^[8], and Nickerson *et al.* (2001) ^[12], who emphasized that diversification through agritourism improves asset use and resource allocation. Expenditure patterns indicated a significant rise in spending on education, as operators invested extra income from

agritourism in family education and training. Similar observations were reported by McGehee and Kim (2004)^[10], who found that agritourism income often enhances household welfare through better access to education and training.

Farm-related changes included land improvement, crop diversification, and leasing additional land, driven by tourists' expectations for diversity and high-quality farming, as well as farmers' motivation from steady returns. These findings support Gil Arroyo *et al.* (2013)^[6], who highlighted agritourism's role in promoting on-farm innovation and diversification.

Standard of living showed no significant change. However, financial status improved through increased loan repayment capacity, savings, and reinvestment, though no significant impact was found on losses or debts. Despite limited direct sales, agritourism was perceived as beneficial for farm profits (Tew & Barbieri, 2012)^[17], echoing the findings of Phillip *et al.* (2010)^[15] and Chand and Sirohi (2015)^[4], who noted agritourism's contribution to rural income stability.

Social participation increased significantly, with greater external contacts, awards, and recognition. This aligns with Barbieri and Mshenga (2008)^[2], McGehee *et al.* (2007)^[11], and Ollenburg and Buckley (2007)^[13], who emphasized that agritourism strengthens farmers' social networks, visibility, and community engagement.

Conclusion

Agritourism has proven to be a vital bridge between agriculture and tourism, creating immersive visitor experiences while generating tangible socio-economic benefits for rural communities. The comparative analysis of Maharashtra and Goa reveals that, although agritourists in both states found their participation highly enriching, the perceived benefits differed in nature. Visitors to Goa placed greater emphasis on leisure, novelty, and learning from nature, whereas those in Maharashtra highlighted reflective and nostalgic experiences rooted in cultural and farming traditions.

These findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to agritourism may not be effective. Instead, policymakers and entrepreneurs should adopt state-specific strategies that leverage unique natural, cultural, and social assets to maximize visitor satisfaction. In Goa, this may involve integrating wellness, biodiversity, and eco-learning into tourism packages, while in Maharashtra, highlighting traditional practices, heritage farming, and community-based experiences could resonate more strongly.

By tailoring interventions to these contextual differences, agritourism can be strengthened as a driver of sustainable rural development, offering pathways for employment generation, enhanced farm incomes, and cultural preservation, while simultaneously enriching visitor engagement with agriculture.

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