

Promoting Sustainable Tourism Through Agri-Tourism: A Case Study of Sonitpur District of Assam

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Abstract

Agri-tourism is a type of tourism that combines Agricultural activities with tourism, and has the potential to contribute to sustainable rural development. This study aims to assess the feasibility of Agri-tourism for sustainable rural development in Sonitpur District of Assam, India. The methodology of the study is based on secondary data sources, such as academic research, government reports, publications etc. Agri-tourism has the potential to create economic empowerment opportunities for rural communities in Sonitpur District. It has the ability to create income opportunities for farmers and generate employment for local residents by providing tourists with a window into rural life. Through the development of necessary infrastructure, Agri-tourism can help to enhance the quality of life for rural residents. Additionally, by promoting sustainable Agricultural practices, Agri-tourism can help to conserve natural resources and promote environmental sustainability. However, there are challenges that need to be addressed for Agri-tourism to be successful in Sonitpur District. These challenges include inadequate marketing and promotion, limited access to finance, and lack of infrastructure. To overcome these challenges, a collaborative effort between the government, private sector, and local communities is essential. Agri-tourism can be a promising avenue for sustainable rural development in Sonitpur District of Assam. This can contribute to poverty reduction and enhance the economic well-being of the community.

Keywords: Agri Tourism, Sustainability, Prospects, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Agri-tourism is an innovative concept that brings together the tourism and Agriculture, offering visitors an opportunity to experience the farming way of life and gain insights into the food and Agricultural production processes. The fundamental principle of Agri-tourism is to provide tourists with an engaging and interactive experience where they can partake in various Agricultural activities like crop harvesting and animal feeding, among others. Agri-tourism offers a diverse range of experiences, such as farm stays, farm tours, and farm-to-table dining. Visitors can not only gain insight into the Agricultural industry but also explore the local food culture, indulge in traditional dishes, and purchase handmade crafts and locally grown produce. The concept of Agri-tourism promotes sustainable tourism and provides economic benefits to rural areas by supporting local Agriculture.

Assam, a state located in the northeastern part of India, is famous for its stunning natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and diverse wildlife. With an array of tourist attractions ranging from picturesque

landscapes to ancient temples and historical monuments, Assam never fails to captivate its visitors. Furthermore, owing to its vast Agricultural landscape, favorable climate, and fertile soil, the state holds immense potential to emerge as a leading Agri-tourism destination. In Assam, Sonitpur District is renowned for its wildlife and biodiversity, with several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries such as the Nameri National Park and Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary offering incredible opportunities for nature walks and wildlife tourism. Additionally, the district boasts a rich agricultural environment that combines the natural beauty of the region with its rich traditional culture and heritage. Visitors can get the opportunity to learn about sustainable Agriculture practices, connect with nature, and support the local economy, making it a wonderful opportunity for cultural immersion and ecological awareness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Malkanthi and Routry (2011) stated that the development of Agritourism can be a beneficial factor for the local communities of developing countries such as Sri Lanka, India, and others. In addition, it is essential to raise awareness among farmers and the public about the industry. Providing farmers with adequate access to financing and credit facilities is crucial for the success of this sector.

Barbieri (2019) stated that Agritourism research has made significant advances in descriptive, ontological, and epistemological aspects, establishing itself as a subject of scholarly study. The future of Agritourism will range from ag-interpretation to ag-themed spaces.

Krishna and Sahoo (2020) stated that creating awareness about the global outreach of sectors like Agritourism must begin by targeting the younger generation, particularly farmers. They emphasized the essential role of Agritourism in sustaining and promoting rural economies.

Kothari and Perwej (2021) stated that the establishment of Agri-tourism activities can bring significant value to both farmers and the rural population by promoting sustainable development and revitalizing local communities. Agri-tourism provides an alternative source of income for farmers, thereby making it a desirable development strategy.

Mandi *et al.* (2019) Rural tourism and Agri-tourism are important contributors to the GDP of any country, particularly in India where the economy is largely based in rural areas. These forms of tourism not only generate employment opportunities, but also help to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable human development. Agri-tourism, in particular, is emerging as a significant component of the tourism sector in India. While it is currently in its early stages, with appropriate support from the government, it has the potential to grow and thrive.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has two primary objectives to investigate the potential of Agri-tourism in the Sonitpur District. Additionally, this study aims to devise effective strategies that can be implemented to facilitate the growth and development of Agri-tourism within the region.

SIGNIFICANCE OF AGRITOURISM

Agri tourism has several benefits from the regional economic development to the environmental conservation. Some of the benefits of the Agri tourism are:

(i) Economic development: Agri-tourism has the potential to contribute to the economic development of Sonitpur district by providing an alternative source of income for farmers and local

communities. This can lead to the improvement of the local economy and create new job opportunities.

(ii) Preservation of local culture and traditions: Agri-tourism can play a significant role in preserving the local culture and traditions of Sonitpur district. By promoting traditional farming practices and showcasing local food and handicrafts, it can help to preserve and promote the unique cultural heritage of the region. This can also provide a platform for the local community to showcase their cultural identity and attract visitors interested in experiencing the local way of life.

(iii) Environmental conservation: Agri-tourism can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable Agriculture and eco-friendly practices, leading to the conservation of the environment and natural resources of the district. This can help to preserve the biodiversity of the region.

(iv) Diversification of tourism: Diversifying the tourism industry in the district, Agri-tourism can attract visitors who seek to experience the local culture and way of life. This can help to reduce the dependency on traditional forms of tourism and promote the region's unique selling points, such as traditional farming practices and locally grown produce.

(v) Local entrepreneurship: Agri-tourism can promote local entrepreneurship in the district by encouraging the development of small-scale businesses such as farm stays, local food restaurants, and handicraft shops. By encouraging entrepreneurship, Agri-tourism can help to build the capacity of local communities and support their long-term economic growth.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is a descriptive analysis that aims to determine the potential for Agri-tourism in the Sonitpur District of Assam. To achieve this objective, the study gathered pertaining information from secondary data sources like relevant journals, books, websites etc.

PROSPECTS OF AGRITOURISM IN SONITPUR DISTRICT:

Sonitpur District, situated in the north-central region of Assam, India, boasts a remarkable potential for Agri-tourism. This potential is evidenced by several factors, including the district's fertile lands, diverse flora and fauna, and cultural variety. Here are some factors that indicate the possibilities of Agri-tourism in Sonitpur district:

i. **Agricultural Diversity:** The district's economy is primarily based on Agriculture, operating as an agrarian economy with around 80% of the population relying on Agriculture and related activities for their livelihood. Although rain-fed cultivation of a single paddy crop still prevails in most areas, but with the introduction of irrigation facilities such as shallow tube wells, high-yielding seed varieties, and tractors has made multiple cropping feasible. Consequently, both Rabi and Kharif cropping are now practiced in the district. The economy of the region is also greatly supported by its numerous tea gardens, which constitute a significant feature of the district's Agricultural landscape. A total of 73 tea gardens span over an area of approximately 281,660 Bighas in the district, with Monabari being the largest tea garden in Asia, covering an area of 1,018 hectares and located near

Biswanath Chariali. In addition to the large tea gardens, small tea growers also contribute to the tea industry in the district. The diverse Agricultural landscape of Sonitpur offers an excellent opportunity for Agri-tourism activities in the district. Visitors can be given the opportunity to explore the various crops grown in the area, learn about farming techniques, and interact with local farmers. Farm stays can also be a suitable component of Agri-tourism, allowing visitors to experience the rural lifestyle firsthand by staying in a farmhouse. Such farm stays provide an opportunity to observe and participate in daily farm activities like planting, harvesting etc.

ii. **Cultural heritage:** Sonitpur district is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, owing to the presence of numerous ethnic communities such as Bodo, Mishing, and Nepali. Each community has its own distinct traditions, festivals, and cuisine, which can be highlighted to tourists through cultural tourism and homestay experiences. In addition to cultural tourism, culinary tourism can also be incorporated as part of Agri-tourism activities. Visitors can savor the local cuisine, which is heavily influenced by the district's Agricultural diversity. Traditional dishes made from locally sourced ingredients provide a unique culinary experience for visitors. These activities not only promote tourism but also offer an opportunity for visitors to gain knowledge about the local culture, farming techniques, and rural lifestyle.

iii. **Wildlife Tourism:** Sonitpur district has several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, including Nameri National Park and Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary. These natural reserves provide ample opportunities for wildlife and nature tourism, enabling visitors to embark on exciting jungle safaris, bird watching tours, and nature walks. With a significant number of tourists visiting these parks, the district can leverage the potential of Agri-tourism by offering visitors a new form of tourism experience. This can encourage visitors to extend their stay in the region and explore the diverse Agricultural landscape, thereby boosting the local economy.

iv. **Accessible location:** Tezpur, the sub division of Sonitpur District, is well-connected to major cities in Assam such as Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur etc. Moreover, the district is also connected very well through the rail route and the major station of the district is Rangapara North. The air connectivity within the state and outside the state via Kolkata is also available. All these transportation facilities make it easily accessible to domestic as well as foreign tourists. The district is also located close to other popular tourist destinations such as Kaziranga National Park, Majuli Island etc. So, the district can utilize its advantageous location to attract tourists by incorporating Agri-tourism as a unique natural experience

POTENTIAL PLACES FOR AGRI TOURISM IN SONITPUR DISTRICT

There are numerous locations within Sonitpur District where Agri-tourism destinations can be developed. Some potential places include:

i. **Tezpur Litchi Garden:** The litchis of Tezpur are widely acclaimed worldwide for their delicious taste. The litchi gardens in Tezpur offer a stunning sight during the litchi season, which is bound to enthrall tourists with its beauty. The litchi garden areas have the potential to be developed into an Agri-tourism destination, where tourists can visit during the litchi season to learn about litchi cultivation, relish various litchi varieties, and buy litchis directly from the farmers.

- ii. **Rangapara Tea garden and Golf Course:** Rangapara has great potential to be developed as an Agri-tourist spot surrounded by 16 exquisite tea gardens, located about 30 km from Tezpur. The tea gardens in this area are renowned for producing high-quality tea. To enhance the tourist experience, cozy cottages can be built within the tea estate where they can savor the taste of different tea varieties while enjoying the beautiful surroundings. Activities like tea plucking with the tea tribe people and observing the tea production process from leaf to cup can add to the delightful experience. The stunning Thakurbari Golf Course is another major attraction that can offer tourists captivating views during the morning and evening hours. Overall, the region has the potential to be developed as an enchanting natural destination for tourists to relish.
- iii. **Nameri National Park:** Nameri National Park, located in Sonitpur District, offers great potential for Agri-tourism. The park has rich biodiversity and is home to several species of animals, including tigers and elephants. Additionally, the forest villages of the Nameri area, such as Chapaloga and Nalghuguri, have the potential to be developed into Agri-tourism destinations. Visitors can blend themselves in the locals' way of life in the forest area, enjoy the peaceful atmosphere of the forest, and relish the sound of the flowing Jia Bharali river. Moreover, tourists can engage with the locals to learn about their customs and even participate with them in Agricultural activities.
- iv. **Organic Farming at Jamugurihat:** Jamugurihat boasts several organic farms where tourists can experience organic farming practices and taste locally grown organic produces. These farms cultivate a wide range of crops, including rice, vegetables, fruits, and spices. One such firm is the Kanaka Pam in Jamugurihat, which is an Agriculture-based establishment where tourists can stay and immerse themselves in the production of organic food, as well as participate in activities such as milking cows. This place should be promoted as an Agri-tourism destination to attract tourists.
- v. **Bhalukpong:** It is a small town located on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, offers stunning views of Agricultural fields that can be developed into a prime Agri-tourism destination. Tourist huts can be established here to allow visitors to soak in the natural beauty of the Arunachal Pradesh hills, engage in crop harvesting, interact with locals, and relish local cuisine in a natural setting.
- vi. **Fish farming areas:** In the village area of the district fish farms are there in the district, where tourists can learn about the various techniques and practices of fish farming. They will be able to observe the fish breeding, feeding, and harvesting processes and even try their hand at fishing.
- vii. **Livestock farms area:** These farms can be great spots for Agri-tourism as they showcase animal husbandry and offer opportunities for tourists to interact with domestic animals like cows, goats, etc. This can be a unique and educational experience for tourists who are interested in learning about the rural way of life and livestock farming.

These are some of the places, have great potential for Agri-tourism development, and with proper planning and execution, they can attract a significant number of tourists interested in experiencing Agriculture and rural life.

CHALLENGES TOWARDS AGRI TOURISM:

There are certain challenges that may hinder the development of Agri-tourism in the district. Some of these challenges may include:

- i. **Language barrier:** Language barrier is a significant challenge in promoting Agri-tourism in Sonitpur district. As the experience of Agri-tourism is provided by the farmers, cultivators, and locals who make indigenous products, they may find it difficult to interact with tourists who speak a language other than their mother tongue. This can lead to communication gaps, misunderstandings, and hinder the overall experience of tourists.
- ii. **Limited Awareness:** Due to a lack of awareness about Agri-tourism, people may not realize the potential of this type of tourism in the Sonitpur district. This led to a lack of investment and development in the sector.
- iii. **Seasonal Nature of Agriculture:** Agri-tourism activities are limited to certain periods due to the seasonal nature of Agriculture. To sustain the interest of tourists, it is important to offer a diverse range of activities that can be enjoyed throughout the year.
- iv. **Lack of skilled workforce:** The development of Agri-tourism requires skilled manpower such as guides, farmers, tour operators, etc. However, the availability of skilled manpower can be limited in the region, which is a major challenge towards promoting Agri-tourism.
- v. **Sustainability:** To promote Agri-tourism, it is crucial to adopt sustainable practices that do not harm the environment or local community. The benefits of tourism should be shared with the locals, and measures should be taken to ensure that tourism activities do not cause any environmental damage.

STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRITOURISM

In order to promote the concept of Agri-tourism in the district, it is important to identify and effectively utilize the natural resources available in a sustainable manner. To achieve this goal, the following strategies are recommended:

i. Development of a Model: The state of Maharashtra in India is at the forefront of promoting and developing Agri tourism in the country. The Agri Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) was established in 2005 and owns a 28-acre pilot Agri tourism project in Palshiwadi, Tal Baramati District of Pune, which is located 70 kilometers away from Pune City. The primary activities of ATDC involve running the Agri tourism center, encouraging more farmers to take up Agri tourism, and organizing training and research programs. ATDC facilitates bookings for tourists and provides assistance to farmers. It saves the marketing cost of the farmers and they can also take bookings themselves. In 2007, ATDC partnered with the Maharashtra State Agri Tourism Vistar Yojana to launch a training and skill development program. The program initially trained 52 farmers and continues to this day. The Agri Tourism model has been replicated in 328 Agri Tourism centers across 30 districts in Maharashtra. This initiative has helped to preserve and enhance the village environment, village traditions and culture, customs, village acts, and handicrafts. The Agri tourism model offers an authentic rural experience to visitors and has helped to generate sustainable supplementary income and local employment in the state of Maharashtra.

A potential way to create a model for Sonitpur District in Assam is by taking cues from the successful Agri tourism model of Maharashtra. The first step could be to establish an organization similar to ATDC that provides support and training to farmers, helps them to participate in Agri tourism, and facilitates tourist bookings. This organization could then identify areas to promote local cuisine and Cultivation, cultural practices, and handicrafts. By adopting this model, Sonitpur District could not

only generate sustainable income and employment but also preserve and promote its distinct cultural and natural heritage.

ii. Promotion by the State Government: The State Government of Assam has established 6 tourist circuits to enhance the convenience of tourists. Circuit 1 covers a period of 8 nights and 9 days and includes popular destinations such as Guwahati, Kaziranga, Nameri, Dirang, Tawang, Bomdila, Tezpur, And Guwahati. The Sonitpur District is part of this circuit and features Tezpur and Nameri on the 3rd and 4th day of the itinerary. To promote Agri-tourism in the district, it is recommended to include Agri-tourism destinations. Additionally, an extra day can be added for Agri-tourism, extending the tourist's stay in the district, and contributing to the local economy's growth. It is also essential for the district administration to promote Agri-tourism, in addition to other forms of tourism, within the district.

iii. Training and capacity building: To ensure the success of Agri-tourism, it is crucial to equip local farmers and communities with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide high-quality services to tourists. This can be achieved through training programs that focus on hospitality and hygiene standards, as well as sustainable farming practices to minimize negative environmental impacts. By building their capacity, farmers and communities can effectively participate in Agri-tourism activities, generating additional income for themselves and contributing to the local economy.

iv. Market Development: To make Sonitpur a desirable Agri-tourism destination, effective marketing is crucial. Collaborating with travel agencies, tour operators, and online platforms to create awareness and promote Agri-tourism activities, along with building a strong online presence through social media and websites, can attract tourists from different regions. While Assam promotes wildlife, historical, and pilgrimage tourism with a focus on eco-tourism near national sanctuaries, there is a need to market the new dimension of Agri-tourism to attract urban dwellers and showcase the rural way of life in the district. By promoting Agri-tourism as a unique and educational experience, the district can tap into a new market and diversify its tourism industry.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, Agri-tourism can offer several benefits to the Sonitpur district, ranging from economic development to environmental conservation. By promoting sustainable Agriculture and eco-friendly practices, Agri-tourism can help preserve the region's unique cultural heritage, promote entrepreneurship, and diversify the tourism industry. With its diverse Agricultural landscape, rich cultural heritage, and wildlife reserves, Sonitpur district has a remarkable potential for Agri-tourism. The incorporation of Agri-tourism activities can not only promote tourism but also offer visitors an opportunity to gain knowledge about the local culture, farming techniques, and rural lifestyle. Thus, the development of Agri-tourism in Sonitpur district can serve as a catalyst for the overall development of the region, contributing to the growth of the local economy and the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage.

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