ABSTRACT

The farming industry in Maharashtra is facing decreasing profitability because of declining returns from agriculture produce. So, the farming sustainability in the future is related to the ability of farmers to generate additional income from existing farm resources.

The purpose of this research was to study Agritourism as a strategy to promote agricultural economic development in Maharashtra. This study also identifies the existing major opportunities that trigger and challenges that restrict Agritourism growth and expansion. This research examines the extent of additional income from Agritourism centers as a supplementary income source for farmers of Maharashtra. It also focuses on the tourists’ expectations from the Agritourism centers when they visit such centers. For the purpose of precise research study hypotheses were formulated and further tested statistically. They were,

H₁: Agritourism is beneficial co-activity for the farmers which provides them additional income source.

H₂: Tourists are satisfied with the Agripreneurs services at ATC’s.

Findings of this study about the management of Agritourism business are based on data collected from twenty two Agripreneurs engaged in Agritourism operations and findings related to important elements of Agritourism are based on the data gathered from 967 Agritourists. Interviews, observations and mail surveys were used to collect information about samples from a population. MART (Maharashtra Agriculture and Rural Tourism) officials were interviewed for their views on Agritourism, including opportunities and challenges before the industry. Questionnaires were sent to all ATCs out of which 22 centers responded. The eleven Agritourism centers were personally visited for field interviews and observations of Agritourism activities. Tourists’ survey was completed by the researcher and also by using self administered questionnaires which were provided to tourists at Agritourism centers.

All the Agritourism centers have been studied along with tourists’ survey which clearly portrayed the Agritourism industry from both the sides of supply and demand. Farmers use Agritourism business for diversifying farm products and market for generating supplementary income. Success of any Agritourism center depends on the farm size, types and number of activities, geographical location and months of operation. In many
cases, Agritourism also helped farmers' children to remain on the farm. This research has shown that Agritourism is financially beneficial to the farmers in Maharashtra.

All ATCs having distinctive types of characteristics, offer different Agritourism experiences for the tourists groups. The important factors in tourists’ decision to visit Agritourism center farm are scenery, local sightseeing, recreational activities, experiencing traditional ways of life, food, guide, package cost, transportation access and safety and security. Tourists’ age group, distance they travelled to reach ATCs and gender of tourists play important role in giving importance to these factors. Satisfaction level of tourists depends on food quality, accommodation, friendliness of people, activities at the center, organized excursions, and accessibility to cultural heritage sites, safety and security.

A good opportunity exists to encourage Agritourism development in the Maharashtra state. The full potential of Agritourism has not been realized in the Maharashtra. Problems should be solved through proactive policy and strategic investment in Agritourism so that farmers interested in providing on-farm recreational or educational activities get motivated. Farmers should also conduct a feasibility study to know the potential for Agritourism development at their farms. More comprehensive district wise study is essential for Agritourism development in the Maharashtra for further research.

**Keywords: Agritourism, Agritourism centers, Farmers, Agritourists.**