

**STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION OF TOURISTS IN
MAHARASHTRA'S RURAL TOURISM INDUSTRY**

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Abstract

Rural tourism has today become an important sector of Maharashtra's economy. It is a driving force of socio-economic development for rural communities, it being an experience gained with rich cultural, heritage, and natural beauty. In this study, various perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding the total experience of tourists engaging with rural tourism in Maharashtra are thrown light upon. The research evaluates determinants such as high-quality infrastructure, hospitality, engaging with culture, and conservational efforts towards the environment within a mixed methods approach, using a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. Authenticity, local engagement, and sustainability determine tourist experience in terms of their positivity. Among the determinants considered, it is evident that despite tourists' appreciations for being immersed in culture and serene environments, issues of accessibility, facilities, and service standards remain major issues. The present study attempts to shed light on how the rural tourism industry can enhance the level of satisfaction and contribute toward sustainable rural development in Maharashtra. Specific recommendations are given to policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities.

Keywords: *Maharashtra, rural tourism, satisfaction, Sustainable Development, Tourism Motives*

1. Introduction

Rural tourism is the newest alternative mode of tourism, which allows visitors to have direct immersion into the cultural, natural, and historical heritage in rural areas. The industry of rural tourism in India has recorded a huge growth as travelers are seeking true and out-of-the-way destinations. Maharashtra is one of the richest states in India for rural landscapes, with different villages and small towns having rich tradition, cultures, and unique natural environments (Rao et al., 2020). This new form of tourism does well to add to the state economy, stimulate rural development, and conserve cultural heritage with sustainable development (Das & Chatterjee, 2018). However, success in rural tourism is highly reliant on the perceptions and satisfaction of the tourists themselves, which will eventually translate into the tourists' decision to recommend and revisit such destinations (Prasad et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore perceptions and tourist satisfaction with regard to places under rural tourism in Maharashtra, India. The study identifies the factors that lead to the positive experience of tourists according to key elements of infrastructure, hospitality, cultural engagement, environmental conservation, and community involvement identified by Singh & Gupta (2019). Moreover, the research has identified sectors that need improvement in order to increase tourist satisfaction for long-term sustainability in the area of rural tourism. The findings of this study will be of interest to the tourism operators, policy makers, and the local communities in planning more engaging and rewarding rural

tourism experiences while promoting the growth of this niche sector within Maharashtra (Kumar & Rao, 2021).

2. Background of Study

Maharashtra, a state renowned for its vibrant culture and stunning landscapes, has increasingly embraced rural tourism as a means to promote sustainable development and preserve local heritage. Rural tourism not only offers visitors a chance to experience authentic village life but also supports local economies and encourages cultural exchange. This study aims to investigate tourists' perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding rural tourism in Maharashtra, focusing on factors that enhance or detract from their experiences. By understanding these elements, stakeholders can develop targeted strategies to improve offerings, ultimately fostering a more rewarding environment for both tourists and local communities. With its profound effects on the world economy and socioeconomic development, tourism has emerged as a key component of contemporary economic development. Its impacts are complicated and vary throughout different communities, determined by culture, attitudes, and resources. Even if tourism has positive social and economic effects, there are drawbacks. Adventure, cultural, environmental, and agricultural tourism are all included in the subcategory of rural tourism. This industry promotes relationships between visitors and locals to improve experiences and help local communities by showcasing rural life, the arts, and heritage. Rural tourism has grown to be a significant sector of the broader tourism industry, providing distinctive experiences that honor the history and culture of rural communities (Ghosh & Sharma, 2022). Maharashtra is a fantastic travel destination for rural visitors because of its varied landscapes, rich cultural history, and historical significance. From the Ghats in the West to the Konkan coast, the rural areas of the state attract tourists who seek an authentic experience away from the cities.

3. Rationale of Study

Maharashtra's rural tourism is growing in popularity because of the state's distinctive cultural heritage, breathtaking scenery, and opportunities to experience traditional lifestyles. Hence the purpose of this study is to examine the perception and satisfaction of tourists towards rural tourism destinations in Maharashtra, India, focusing on the factors that influence these perceptions and the levels of satisfaction and the factors that lead to them. Perceptions affect travelers' expectations, experiences, and general well-being, which affects their propensity to return and refer others to the location. Rural tourism can be satisfying in many ways, including life quality, accessibility, interacting with local people, and safeguarding cultural and natural resources (htt3). A visit to rural Maharashtra gives travelers from the city not only a change of scenery but also a link to the land that grows our food and to long-standing agricultural and cultural customs. Six farm stays in Maharashtra to give you a taste of country life. To be more precise, the popularity of rural tourism in Maharashtra is rising.

4. Objectives of Study

- To analyze the key factors influencing tourists' perceptions and satisfaction in Maharashtra's rural tourism destinations, focusing on elements such as infrastructure, hospitality, cultural engagement, and environmental sustainability

- To identify the challenges faced by tourists in Maharashtra's rural tourism industry and propose actionable strategies for enhancing tourist satisfaction and promoting sustainable rural tourism

5. Literature Review

Rural Tourism:

Rural tourism, a global trend, showcases rural life, art, culture, and heritage, contributing to local economic and social development. Research shows psychological factors like serenity, freedom, and rural traditions drive people to visit rural places, enhancing the tourism experience (Jha S. , 2021). A significant component of rural culture is what is meant by "rural tourism." Any kind of travel that highlights rural culture, art, and heritage while also boosting the local economy and social fabric is considered rural tourism. Rural tourism goods are unique in that they aim to provide visitors with personalized attention, a taste of the distinctive village life, and the chance to engage in local customs, activities, and lifestyles. Rural tourism locations exhibit a distinctive blend of traditional characteristics, such as local collaboration, trust, and reciprocity, resulting in a primarily small-scale, environmentally conscious offering (Jha, 2021).

According to Vincent (1987), rural tourism offers opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to interact and broaden their perspectives. It can discourage relocation from rural to urban areas, promote social, cultural, and intellectual growth, and create employment opportunities. Villagers should respect local culture while designing tourist lodgings and access attractive bank financing arrangements. According to (Kant, 2022), rural tourism is increasingly important to the tourist sector, but it faces challenges such as finances, culturally relevant training, and collective decision-making. Long-term residents of rural areas are more likely to welcome expansion and change, while agriculture tourism diversifies economies. Rural tourism requires a close-knit community's adaptation to capitalism, which can imperialize family independence and traditional values. Native Americans are becoming more active in the tourism sector to gain independence and preserve cultural traditions.

- **Rural Tourism and Its' Socio-Economic Impact**

Rural tourism is perceived as one of the most potent tools for the socio-economic upliftment of the rural communities. Research work has displayed that rural tourism can generate income for local communities, facilitate cultural exchange, and conserve rural traditional practices. Maharashtra has experienced rural tourism as it becomes a vital contributor to the economy of the region, especially those areas offering rich cultural and natural heritage sites. According to Patil and Kumar, (2023), the overall rural tourism infrastructure development has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction; they suggest, in turn, that improved tourist satisfaction enhances repeat visitation and long-term growth. However, it was also considered by authors that improper services and lack of proper training of locals can even harm potential economic benefits. It seems that the conclusion of the study concludes with the main benefits of rural tourism, that is, generating economic gain but still relatively sustainable in terms of improved infrastructure and local people participation.

- **Challenges in Sustainable Rural Tourism:**

There is a great importance of sustainable rural tourism development for environmental protection and heritage preservation in rural areas. As highlighted by Singh and Dash (2022), sustainability in rural tourism development has proven to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism such as environmental degradation and cultural commodification by providing long-run benefits for rural communities. There have been initiatives of sustainability integration into rural tourism development in the state of Maharashtra. According to Singh and Dash (2022), despite this, infrastructure inadequacies, general lack

of awareness among the village community, and policy support seem to be some of the daunting issues for the sustainable tourism initiatives. The literature would, therefore, require a collaborative approach involving government bodies, local communities, and tourism operators in overcoming the challenges and promoting sustainable rural tourism in Maharashtra.

- **Rural tourism in India**

There has been much discussion in the literature about rural tourism in India (Pearce 1989; Bramwell 1994; Seaton et al. 1994). Travel to rural areas is a wide phrase that covers a range of actions that occur in rural regions. Fourth, international markets conveying information, and conveying information has altered market dynamics and trends for conventional goods. Simply expressed, it is a "state of 'mind' that can be measured and evaluated (Sharpley & Sharpley (1997). India has a rich cultural heritage, historical monuments, and natural resources, making it a popular tourist destination. The tourism industry in India contributes significantly to foreign exchange earnings and is one of the leading global industries, contributing 11% of global GDP. Rural tourism in India has the potential to generate employment opportunities, sustainable livelihoods for local communities, and preserve rural India's culture and heritage. It is located in rural areas, functionally rural, and based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises. Rural tourism products showcase rural life, art, culture, and heritage, and local communities benefit economically and socially. India has a lot of potential for rural tourism, with its rich traditions of arts, crafts, and culture. Rural India can emerge as a hub of important tourist spots, attracting both Indians and foreigners. Some potential areas for rural tourism in India include Gujarat, Kerala, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Karnataka, Bihar, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Sikkim. Some potential areas for rural tourism in India include Gujarat, Kerala, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Bihar, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Sikkim. To develop rural tourism, it is essential to understand the rural environment, demography, socio-culture, economic, and political background of the area. This can be achieved by involving rural people in the development process, providing them with financial empowerment, and promoting their cultural and social development. Creation of employment opportunities, especially for rural youth (Vernekar, 2016)

Rural tourism has the potential to empower local people and foster community development in India, contributing to local sustainable development and providing a response to modern society's leisure needs. Rural tourism can be a valuable tool for sustainable human development, including poverty alleviation, job creation, environmental regeneration, and development of remote areas, as well as the advancement of women and other disadvantaged groups. The study found that rural tourism has the potential to: Preserve natural beauty, local traditions, customs, and foods. Provide a unique selling point for tourists through direct interaction with local (Jha, 2021)

- **Maharashtra tourism**

Maharashtra attracts the maximum number of tourists in India, but there is still a gap in understanding the tourist potential of the state and the efforts needed to attract more international tourists. The state has won many awards, but there is room for improvement in infrastructure, referrals, and hospitality. Most travelers visit Maharashtra for sightseeing, and the state is popular for its tourist attractions, including historical places, heritage and pilgrimage centers, culture, and scenic beauty. Tourism is a significant driver of socio-economic growth, creating job opportunities, generating revenue for the government, and contributing to infrastructure development. Maharashtra, with its rich cultural heritage, diverse geography, and various tourist attractions, has tremendous potential for tourism growth. (Dr. Shradha Vernekar, A study on "Tourism in Maharashtra and its future potential", 2021)

Maharashtra offers boundless opportunities for the development of the agro tourism industry due to its varied culture and topography (Shamrao). Traditional agriculture's financial landscape could be altered by agro tourism. Because of the unpredictable monsoon and unstable commodity prices, Maharashtra's agriculture industry is become increasingly precarious. According to (Potdar, 2012), too many farmers are indebted and unable to afford it. In several regions of Maharashtra, farmers are taking their own lives as a result of farming-related issues. Maharashtra's natural surroundings, diverse range of agricultural goods, and array of rural customs and celebrations make the state very promising for the growth of agro tourism. Developing an agro tourism business is an excellent opportunity (Fulsundar, 2020)

- **Types of Rural tourism**

Saad (2022) noticed that rural tourism involves visiting rural areas for leisure, recreation, and education, with an emphasis on connecting with local communities and preserving cultural and natural resources. It brings economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability, offering tourists' relaxation and exploration opportunities while supporting local economies. The study highlights the potential of rural tourism to provide unique experiences for travelers and benefit rural communities through sustainable practices and community engagement, emphasizing the importance of addressing challenges for successful development.

As per (Rural Tourism: Types, Benefits, Challenges, Growth, August 2021) in essence, rural tourism is any activity that happens in the countryside. It has several facets and might include ecotourism, adventure travel, nature tourism, farm-agricultural tourism, and cultural tourism. Mass and alternative tourism combine to form tourism. Large numbers of individuals looking for cultural vacations in well-known resort areas define mass tourism. Among the variety of attractions found in rural tourism are:

1. Cultural Tourism
2. Environmental travel
3. Farm-to-table travel also known as agro tourism

Many words, including "agritourist," "farm tourism," "rural tourism," "soft tourism," "alternative tourism," "eco-tourism," and several more are used to characterize tourism activities in rural areas. These terminologies vary in meaning from one country to the next. moreover, which can be categorized into several kinds like Though the term "agritourist" is often used to refer to any type of tourism in rural areas, it is most commonly used to denote travel products that are "directly associated with the agrarian environment, Tourism in the Wilderness and Forests: Visitors explore the rural area's natural beauty and wilderness. Green tourism is the term for travel to rural or environmentally friendly destinations. It is more frequently used to define types of travel that are seen to be more, Ecotourism is a type of nature tourism—that is, travel to pristine, natural areas—that places an emphasis on providing visitors with an enjoyable, educational experience while also actively promoting environmental conservation and direct benefits to local communities and cultures.

- **Concept of Agro Tourism**

Agro-tourism is a novel concept in the travel industry. A public farm-based company is known as agro-tourism. These specialized agro-tourism locations are often public and provide activities, sights to visit, and produce or presents for purchase. "Travel that combines agricultural or rural settings with products of agricultural operations - all within a tourism experience" is the definition of agritourist. "Agro-Tourism is that Agri-Business activity, when a native farmer or person of the area offers tours to their agriculture farm to allow a person to view them growing, harvesting, and processing locally grown foods, such as coconuts, pineapple, sugar cane, corn, or any agriculture produce the person would not encounter in their

own country," says Mr Pandurang Tavare (ATDC, Pune). Agro-tourism has the capacity to generate large-scale employment and additional income sources for farmers in Maharashtra. The state has a great potential for agro-tourism development due to its natural conditions, diverse agro-products, and rural traditions. Kumbhar Vijay Maruti, "Agro – Tourism: Scope and Opportunities for the Farmers in Maharashtra" Focused Maharashtra has a great potential to the development of agro – tourism, because of natural conditions and different types of agro products as well as variety of rural traditions, festivals Agro tourism is a tourism business but it is different from the common tourism because it has a base of agriculture and rural lifestyle. Agro-Tourism has the potential to change the economic face of traditional agriculture. Agro-tourism has the potential to generate large-scale employment and additional income sources for farmers in Maharashtra, India, and can contribute to the state's economic development. Maharashtra has a great potential to the development of agro Tourism because of natural conditions and different types of agro products as well as variety of rural tradition, festivals Maharashtra has a great potential for agro-tourism development, but there are problems of low awareness about this business among farmers and lack of finance and proper vision (Shamrao, 2022).

- **Agro Tourism in Pune**

Many tourist attractions can be found in the Pune area, including historic temples, historic forts and monuments, forests, wildlife, a distinctive hill station, pilgrimage sites, and a rich heritage of festivals, art, and culture. The district of Pune possesses a wealth of historical and cultural legacy that has not been fully investigated by the government and tourism sectors. The district of Pune possesses significant potential for the growth of agro-tourism due to its natural surroundings, diverse range of agricultural goods, and array of rural customs and celebrations. The Pune district presents a good possibility for the development of an agro tourism enterprise. However, there are issues with farmers' lack of knowledge about this industry as well as issues with finances and appropriate perspective in Pune.

Survey of one of the agro tourism development and promotion agency, conducted for the year 2015 – 16, has produced the month wise details of tourists arrival and generated revenue. These results are of all the most popular 127 agro tourism centers located in different districts of Maharashtra, and specially 74 in Pune (Patil, 2020). In the Pune district, there is an excellent chance to grow an agro tourism business. However, there are issues with farmers' lack of knowledge of this industry, as well as issues with finances and appropriate perspective in Pune. The farmers gain from having an extra revenue stream, and the natural environment is satiated for the tourists. "A range of activities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their business" is what is meant to be included by the term "rural tourism." Any type of tourism that highlights rural life, art, culture, and tradition while promoting it, helping the local economy and society and fostering interactions between visitors and residents for a more fulfilling experience. The Pune area has a lot of promise because of its diverse manufacturing systems and cultural features. In its original form, this variation is enough to draw travelers. Although there has been a noticeable increase in tourism in recent years, it has been disorganized and sporadic. The Pune region's agro tourism industry can only flourish if it is closely connected to the local communities that supply the tangible assets used in tourism. This is crucial for two reasons: first, the rural stakeholders in question need to gain socially and economically from their own assets; second, the rural community must actively participate in order to preserve the eco-biodiversity and uniqueness of traditional values.

- **Perception and Satisfaction of Tourists towards Rural Tourism**

Tourist satisfaction is one of the crucial determinants that establish the success of rural tourism. As revealed by Gokhale and Shinde (2021), it is necessary to recognize tourists' perception of rural tourism

products in order to enhance the quality of the tourism product. In this study, it is discussed on the state of Maharashtra, which shows that tourists have been mainly attracted to this place for the authenticity of cultural experiences, natural beauties, and peacefulness and serenity. Still, the absence of infrastructural and accessibility facilities and the quality of services does not make the problem of tourists relevant in influencing their overall satisfaction. Besides, Gokhale and Shinde (2021) suggest that local tourism operators, along with policymakers, should focus more on fulfilling this gap to enhance satisfaction and sustainable growth. The literature review here underlines the fact that tourist satisfaction plays an essential role in developing the formulation of strategies toward rural tourism and points toward areas that need attraction toward tourist expectations.

Rural tourism plays a key role in modern tourism, supporting sustainable development, poverty reduction, job creation, and environmental conservation. It also empowers marginalized groups and promotes cultural exchange. Government support is crucial in promoting rural tourism for economic growth and social progress, fostering a strong Indian identity and global reputation (Sahoo, March 2016). Zhan (2023) studied that tourist satisfaction is a critical determinant of the success of tourism development. Satisfied tourists are more likely to return and recommend the destination, which is essential for sustainable tourism growth. The study concentrated on a few different types of tourism, including business, medical, and sightseeing travel. Certain elements that were used to form conclusions about the state's tourist potential have been identified by the study. The elements gave details about the state of tourism in Maharashtra at the moment, the facilities that make it easier for travelers, the many kinds of tourism, and the state's marketing initiatives. The investigation started with a hypothesis that was based on variables like: Information about travel in Maharashtra; state-sponsored travel advertising; media outlets employed in this regard; infrastructure for travel facilitation; sources of referrals; and Maharashtra residents' hospitality to tourists. In any tourism industry, visitors—also referred to as clients, consumers, or buyers—are among the most crucial elements (demand side) of a business.

According to Kozak and Rimmington (2000), visitor satisfaction plays a crucial role in destination marketing success as it impacts several decisions such as destination choice, product and service consumption, word-of-mouth publicity, and likelihood of repeat visits. Many studies have been conducted on the concept of satisfaction since it was found to be the most significant theme in psychology and visitor behavior. This is because satisfaction is a fundamental metric used to assess the effectiveness of destination amenities, services, and products (Noe and Uysal, 1997). Both tourist groups' overall happiness levels were modest, with local visitors showing higher levels of satisfaction than foreign visitors. While neither group was very likely to return to the locations, they were both very likely to suggest them to others. To increase visitor satisfaction, these two groups did, however, highlight the need for better educational programs, entertaining activities, farm product diversification and processing when appropriate, availability of farm products for direct sale to visitors, staff efficiency improvements, improved hygienic and sanitation conditions, and improved road conditions leading to the destinations. Farmers that engage in agritourist generally need to focus more on a few areas of their business, particularly with reference to the qualities that the visitors found unsatisfactory and those that they found to be unimportant. Sri Lanka is currently concentrating on boosting tourism in the nation following the end of the ethnic conflict. Priority one should be given to rural development, particularly through fostering rural tourism. Agritourist is a good fit in this situation and has room to grow into isolated rural areas. The results of this study could therefore be helpful in creating legislation and implementing marketing campaigns in addition to enhancing the networks and condition of rural roads (Routray, 2012)

The following key areas emerged from the literature review and few observations were made:

1. Tourist Perception and Satisfaction:

- ✓ Tourists are increasingly attracted to Maharashtra's rural areas due to the state's rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and opportunities to experience traditional lifestyles.
- ✓ The perception and satisfaction of tourists play a crucial role in the success of rural tourism. Positive experiences lead to higher likelihoods of revisiting and recommending destinations.

2. Rural Tourism in Maharashtra:

- ✓ Maharashtra has significant potential for rural tourism, especially in sectors like agro-tourism, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism.
- ✓ Despite this potential, there is a gap in infrastructure development and awareness, especially among local farmers, which hampers the growth of rural tourism.

3. Economic Impact:

- ✓ Rural tourism has the potential to provide economic benefits such as job creation, additional income for farmers, and overall economic growth in rural areas.
- ✓ The growth of agro-tourism can significantly alter the economic landscape of traditional agriculture by providing alternative income sources.

The following challenges were identified from the literature review:

- ✓ The primary challenges include low awareness among farmers about the benefits of agro-tourism, lack of adequate financial resources, and insufficient infrastructure.
- ✓ Issues like inadequate marketing, poor road conditions, and the need for better tourist amenities were highlighted as areas requiring improvement.

Few gaps that were identified from the literature review are as follows:

1. Potential for Sustainable Development:

- ✓ Rural tourism can be a powerful tool for sustainable development in Maharashtra, preserving cultural heritage while providing economic opportunities for local communities.
- ✓ The integration of rural tourism with the local economy and culture is essential for long-term success.

2. Tourism Experience:

- ✓ The success of rural tourism is heavily dependent on the quality of the tourist experience, including factors like accessibility, interaction with locals, and preservation of natural and cultural resources.
- ✓ Tourists' satisfaction is crucial for the continued growth of rural tourism, with a strong emphasis on improving infrastructure, services, and overall tourist engagement.

3. Need for Government and Community Involvement:

- ✓ The findings suggest that government support and community involvement are critical to overcoming challenges and maximizing the potential of rural tourism.
- ✓ Policies aimed at enhancing infrastructure, providing financial support to farmers, and promoting rural tourism through effective marketing strategies are essential.

4. Role of Agro-Tourism:

- ✓ Agro-tourism emerges as a key component of rural tourism in Maharashtra, offering unique experiences that combine agriculture with tourism.

- ✓ There is a need for greater awareness and education among farmers to fully exploit the opportunities provided by agro-tourism.

The above facts emphasize the importance of addressing the challenges facing rural tourism in Maharashtra while capitalizing on its significant potential to drive economic growth and cultural preservation. Being specific about Maharashtra's rural tourism is growing in popularity because of the state's distinctive cultural heritage, breathtaking scenery, and opportunities to experience traditional lifestyles. "A range of activities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their area in order to generate extra income for their business" is what is meant to be included by the term "rural tourism." Any type of tourism that highlights rural life, art, culture, and tradition while promoting it, helping the local economy and society and fostering interactions between visitors and residents for a more fulfilling experience

6. Conclusion

Maharashtra's rural tourism industry has a lot of potential because of the state's breathtaking natural surroundings, unique cultural heritage, and availability of authentic experiences. Agro-tourism in particular has the potential to boost the state's economy, create jobs, and support sustainable development through safeguarding cultural and natural resources. However, in order to fully achieve this potential, problems including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of awareness among farmers, and financial constraints need to be fixed. Another crucial component in the success of rural tourism is the perceptions and pleasure of visitors, which are influenced by a variety of factors including accessibility, quality of life, and interactions with local residents. These areas need to be improved if rural tourism in Maharashtra is to grow in a sustainable manner.

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