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Storying Seeds: Literary Representations, Intangible Heritage, and Agripreneurial Pathways for Empowering Marginal Farmers in Rural Bengal

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Abstract

This article explores how literary representations and intangible cultural heritage in rural Bengal serve as active resources in agripreneurship for marginalized farmers. Through interdisciplinary analysis, the complex interrelationship between folk narratives, rituals, community identity, and agricultural innovation is unpacked. Drawing examples from tribal communities in districts such as Birbhum, Bankura, and Malda, the paper demonstrates how storytelling, traditional festivals, and artisanal crafts are not only preservers of identity but engines for economic transformation. The challenges these farmers face—fragmented land holdings, weak institutional support, and social exclusion—are foregrounded. The study argues that the integration of cultural capital with modern entrepreneurial strategies enables resilient, ecologically attuned, and locally rooted pathways to development. The article concludes by advocating for policies and educational interventions that nurture this synergy between heritage and economic agency, helping marginal farmers both sustain their livelihoods and safeguard Bengal's rich agro-cultural tapestry.

Keywords: Literary representation, Folk culture, Intangible heritage, Farming, Agripreneurship, Agro-cultural tapestry, Marginalized farmers

Introduction

In the rural tracts of Bengal, marginal farmers face daunting structural disadvantages: small land holdings, unreliable access to resources, absence of robust market connectivity, and

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pervasive marginalization by social, political, and institutional apparatuses. More than just economic entities, these communities have forged and preserved a vibrant cultural fabric—woven from songs, rituals, festivals, and literary storytelling—that deeply intertwines with their agricultural endeavors. The cyclical rhythms of nature and cultivation permeate Bengali folk poetry and oral tradition, fostering a unique relationship between community, landscape, and labor.

Yet, against the backdrop of globalization and ecological uncertainty, rural livelihoods face mounting threats. Industrial monocultures, erratic climate patterns, and shifting consumer preferences have intensified the need for innovative responses among small farmers. Confronting these realities necessitates a re-examination of the role of literary and cultural resources in catalyzing entrepreneurial adaptation. Can the intangible heritage embedded in rural Bengal's cultural memory serve not just as a repository of nostalgia, but as a dynamic wellspring for agripreneurial innovation and empowerment?

Anchoring this study is a multidisciplinary lens that bridges literary studies, cultural anthropology, rural development, and business management. The aim is to demonstrate how integrating literary narratives, ritual knowledge, and communal art forms into agripreneurship can create sustainable economic opportunities, fortify collective identities, and champion ecological stewardship. This approach is not merely restorative or preservative but transformative, embedding tradition within the evolving demands of twenty-first-century agrarian economies.

Literature Review

Empowering marginalized farmers through heritage-based entrepreneurship draws on an extensive scholarly landscape, traversing the work of folklorists, economists, and rural sociologists. Bhattacharya (2019) emphasizes how Bengali folk poetry functions as an indigenous knowledge system, chronicling planting cycles, soil management, and harvesting wisdom while reinforcing environmental ethics (Bhattacharya 77). Cultural anthropologists such as Chakrabarti (2018) document the centrality of collective action and community rituals in sustaining both social order and productive land use (Chakrabarti 114).

Conversely, several studies critique the persistent vulnerabilities of rural farmers. Mandal (2019) and NABARD's microfinance surveys underline how fragmented landholdings and exploitative market structures inhibit economic mobility for smallholders, cementing dependence on subsistence practices (Mandal 83; NABARD 22). Das (2017) elucidates the vital, underrecognized role of women in agricultural operations—critical for both material productivity and the maintenance of ritual/cultural practices, yet systematically excluded from resource control and decision-making.

International frameworks, such as UNESCO's reports on intangible cultural heritage, advocate for safeguarding practices that continuously adapt to local realities. They highlight the need for integrating cultural preservation within economic and infrastructural policies for rural communities. The success of initiatives like West Bengal's Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCH), as chronicled by government and media sources, provides compelling evidence:

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heritage, when creatively reactivated, can drive rural livelihood diversification and micro-entrepreneurship (“About RCCH” 3; “Durga Puja Economy” 6).

Scholars of rural development advocate participatory methodologies—peer-led learning, self-help group mobilization, and collaborative institutional frameworks—as vital for translating indigenous knowledge into viable enterprise (Dey 93). The literature thus converges on the view that a synergy between tradition and structured engagement—academic, governmental, or non-governmental—is instrumental for sustainable empowerment in marginalized agrarian settings.

Socioeconomic Context of Marginal Farmers in Rural Bengal

Marginal farmers—those possessing less than one hectare of land—form the backbone of Bengal’s rural population, comprising over 96% of farm families (NABARD 22). Their socioeconomic realities are compounded by persistently low productivity, absence of credit, and minimal access to infrastructural or technical upgrades. Areas such as Birbhum and Bankura, dominated by Santal and other tribal communities, epitomize a profound symbiosis between agricultural livelihood and cultural identity.

Despite their rich storehouse of traditional knowledge, these groups face formidable barriers: lack of mechanization, insufficient storage, and wholesale intermediary exploitation drastically reduce market earnings (Mandal 83). Financing is a chronic bottleneck, with smallholders largely excluded from formal banking channels. Governmental initiatives are often rendered ineffective by bureaucratic inertia, inadequate block-level staffing, and communicative disconnects (Mandal 91).

Women in these communities are central to every stage of production—transplanting, weeding, harvesting—and sustain the family economy through household management and ritual organization. However, their contributions, though pivotal, often remain unpaid and formally unrecognized, perpetuating gendered inequalities (Das 59).

On a positive note, systems of reciprocity and community solidarity knit together agricultural life. Santal agrarian culture, for instance, revolves around festivals, oral traditions, and cooperative labor, reinforcing resilience against climatic and economic shocks, and acting as a vital channel for knowledge and resource sharing (Chakrabarti 114).

These challenges and dynamics underscore the need for development models sensitized to culture, gender, and indigenous knowledge—not merely top-down modernization, but inclusive empowerment rooted in social realities.

Literary and Cultural Representations of Agriculture and Rural Life

Bengali folk literature offers both a chronicle and an instructional manual for agrarian communities. Oral traditions such as Khanar Bachan encapsulate centuries of empirical wisdom—detailing everything from optimal planting dates to pest management—infusing practical experience with aesthetic and ethical dimensions (Bhattacharya 77). These poetic forms serve as vehicles for ecological stewardship, community cohesion, and resistance to adversity.

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Rituals and festivals articulate the agricultural calendar, transforming the mundane cycle of sowing, tending, and harvest into performative events with communal and cosmological significance. Moichhara (a festival welcoming the ploughing season) and Sair (celebrating the end of monsoons) are more than seasonal markers: they foster solidarity, invoke the protection of deities, and reinforce reverence for land (Saha 132; UNESCO 14).

Written Bengali literature, from Rabindranath Tagore to contemporary writers, frequently elevates the dignity of rural labor while critiquing socio-economic exploitation. Through narrative, poetry, and drama, authors illuminate agrarian hardship and resilience, codifying memory, and instilling a sense of rural identity as foundational to the broader cultural imagination (Ray 105).

Gendered participation is woven into these narratives and rituals. Women's roles in the performance, preparation, and transmission of ritual are vital, sustaining not only food security but also the affective and spiritual dimensions of rural life.

Taken together, these intangible heritages—songs, rituals, literary works—function as repositories of both technical knowledge and ethical values, anchoring present-day adaptation in a deep reservoir of communal memory and innovation.

Cultural Heritage as a Resource for Agripreneurship

Intangible heritage, far from being merely symbolic, is increasingly leveraged as a source of economic dynamism. Initiatives such as West Bengal's RCCH, in collaboration with UNESCO, reveal how traditional crafts—Patachitra, Dokra, Chau masks, among others—can be transformed from low-income wage labor to viable microenterprises, fueling income growth, direct market access, and creative innovation ("About RCCH" 3).

The Durga Puja festival, one of Bengal's signature events, exemplifies the economic vitality latent in ritual life: it engages thousands of artisans and unskilled workers in pandal construction, idol making, and food services, generating hundreds of crores of rupees annually and contributing 2.5–3 percent to West Bengal's GDP ("Durga Puja Economy" 6).

Cultural storytelling, when paired with market-savvy branding, enables rural producers to differentiate their goods: organic farming collectives, for instance, market products using narratives of tradition, biodiversity, and environmental stewardship, resonating with urban and global consumers (Tourest 19).

Moreover, cultural hubs and artisan clusters act as incubators for collective innovation: they facilitate digital literacy, formal banking access, and vertical integration into tourism and retail, particularly empowering women and youth (Dey 88).

Thus, the creative activation of heritage in Bengal represents not only the preservation but the productive deployment of cultural resources—grounded in memory, relevant in contemporary markets, and vital for rural regeneration.

Opportunities and Challenges for Agripreneurship Among Marginal Farmers

Across Bengal, the confluence of market demand, ecological urgency, and heritage potential is generating new avenues for marginalized agripreneurs. Organic farming is fast emerging as a promising sector, offering premium pricing for ecologically responsible and

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traditional agricultural outputs (DRCSC 12). Community seed banks leverage indigenous varieties and agro-biodiversity, mitigating the risks of monoculture and climate change, while creating microenterprises in seed provision and preservation.

Agro-tourism allows rural families to supplement farm income by curating experiential stays, guided farm visits, and cultural immersion programs. Artisanal food businesses—producing pickles, snacks, sweets, and beverages from endemic recipes and ingredients—find eager clientele among urban, diaspora, and tourist markets.

Collective action models, anchored in FPOs (Farmer Producer Organizations) and women's SHGs, provide essential scaffolding: they aggregate production, secure better input and output prices, and facilitate training and credit (West Bengal Food Processing and Horticulture Department 34). Youth entrepreneurship programs contribute technological innovation and bridge generational change.

Yet, pervasive obstacles remain: inadequate formal education, weak infrastructure, lack of cold storage and processing, limited digital literacy, persistent social inequities, and bureaucratic hurdles in accessing government schemes (UNDP 18). Social exclusion—based on caste, tribe, or gender—can blunt participation and innovation, unless proactively addressed by policy reform and grassroots mobilization.

Policy frameworks, such as the state's Krishak Bandhu and central government's RKVY, offer targeted funding, insurance, and capacity-building. SFAC provides interest-free loans and incubation for rural agri-ventures; NGOs like DRCSC champion climate adaptation and livelihood diversification among the most vulnerable (SFAC 41; DRCSC 12).

Bridging structural constraints and heritage opportunity, therefore, hinges on cross-sectoral collaboration and sustained investment in capacity and infrastructure.

Interdisciplinary Strategies for Empowerment

Achieving transformative empowerment for marginal farmers requires methodologies that synthesize literary/cultural studies with agronomic extension, business modeling, and participatory pedagogy. Making indigenous knowledge central to agri-enterprise and innovation is not only a matter of cultural pride but also of pragmatic efficacy.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and other interactive models enlist farmers as co-designers, enabling contextually relevant experiments, drawing on both scientific and traditional sources (Dey 93). Peer-led capacity building—among SHGs, youth collectives, craft guilds—demystifies entrepreneurship, enhances digital skills, and builds organizational self-confidence. Women's leadership, in ritual as well as production, is systematically advanced through targeted training and credit support.

Academic and governmental involvement is key: universities and policy institutes must partner in documentation, research, and the codification of indigenous enterprise models. Building cultural archives and open-access repositories strengthens both cultural heritage and entrepreneurial inspiration.

Educational initiatives are fundamental: curricula that integrate folk tales, agricultural poetry, and ritual performance with ecological literacy and market analysis develop holistic,

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future-ready rural entrepreneurs. Extension services deploying storytelling, drama, and folk music are especially effective among populations with low formal education.

Collaboration with NGOs bridges communication gaps and strengthens the organizational infrastructure needed to translate heritage into sustainable livelihoods. Holistic empowerment thus emerges from the deliberate intersection of knowledge, creativity, policy, and community aspiration.

Conclusion

The intricate interplay of literary representation, ritual heritage, and rural innovation in Bengal offers a robust framework for empowering marginal farmers. Stories, festivals, and artisanal crafts are revealed not only as symbols of communal identity but as practical resources sustaining economic agency and ecological balance. Interdisciplinary, participatory models that fuse tradition with modern enterprise provide a significant path forward—one rooted in both memory and the demands of contemporary markets. The ongoing revitalization of cultural assets through craft hubs, cooperative enterprise, and heritage tourism affirms that heritage can equip marginalized groups—especially women and youth—with new tools for survival, dignity, and social ascendancy. Policy and educational investment must continue to nurture this creative synergy, ensuring that Bengal's agrarian futures are resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant.

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