

Reviving Tradition: A Contemporary Take on Apatani Tribal Costumes

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Abstract: This paper presents a practice-based study that reimagines the traditional dress of the Apatani tribe from Ziro Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, into a versatile, trans-seasonal capsule wardrobe, for niche cultural tourism markets. Drawing inspiration from the community's original zero-waste practices the study advocates a revival of zero-waste pattern making within contemporary context. The objectives of this paper are: (1) to revive and apply Zero-waste pattern making practices from Apatani cultural traditions in contemporary context and (2) to create a commercially viable collection that balances cultural symbolism and modern usability. Traditional Apatani clothing practices are increasingly under threat as modernization, climate change, global fashion trends, and shifting lifestyles reshape daily life, creating an urgent need for adaptive heritage-based solutions. This study employed an ethnographic approach in Ziro Valley, home to the Apatani tribe. Data was collected through focus group discussions, interviews, surveys, photo-ethnography, and a market study to understand traditional attire and its relevance for the younger generation. The designs are centred on reimagining traditional garments through adaptations in silhouette, fit, pattern, and colour palette, paired with complementary regional handloom textiles. Developed as a compact, season-neutral capsule wardrobe using zero-waste pattern-making techniques, the collection aligns with sustainability principles.

Both manual and AI was integrated into the design workflow. Prototypes were developed manually in muslin to visualise the silhouette and fit while AI-tools such as “the fabricants, sketch-to-image generation and virtual model photography” were used to visualise variations in colour schemes, and motif placements prior to physical sampling, thereby optimising time, resources, and creative experimentation.

This research demonstrates how traditional-inspired fashion, sustainable design practices, and digital tools can work together to both preserve cultural heritage and appeal to modern consumers, while also supporting several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It offers a replicable model for other indigenous communities seeking to revitalise traditional dress within modern lifestyles and global fashion markets.

Keywords: Apatani Tribe, Traditional Costume, Youth Fashion, Zero-Pattern Making, AI Design, Cultural Sustainability.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fashion tells stories about who we are and where we come from. In India, it has always played an important role, linking communities and traditions through clothing. Fashion operates as a cultural archive, recording the material, social, and symbolic expressions of communities over time. It is a way for people, especially young women, to express their identity and feel confident.

This study focuses on the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, whose distinctive textiles record social status and clan history, yet risk being pushed aside by global trends. Ziro Valley, homeland of the Apatanis, was nominated for UNESCO World Heritage status in 2014 because its inhabitants have sustained an intricate balance between

agriculture, forestry and craft practices for centuries. Apatani women weave hand-loomed fabrics with striking geometric motifs and vivid colour combinations. Most studies on Apatani dress focus on textiles, motifs, and weaving, yet the silhouette and fit practices, how the garments shape the body and convey cultural values remain undocumented. By reconstructing the dress in muslin and recording its fit directly on the body, this study addresses that gap, providing the first systematic analysis of silhouette as both a cultural marker and a foundation for sustainable, contemporary design adaptation.

Writers on contemporary Indian fashion observe that young people in the Northeast are particularly style-conscious. One report notes that individuals from the region “love to experiment with fashion,” displaying a boldness and self-assuredness that sets them apart from

mainstream trends. Another feature highlights a “je ne sais quoi” (*It is a French phrase, refers to an elusive or indefinable quality that makes someone or something distinctive or appealing*) about Northeast creators and suggests that their inherent sense of fashion is shaped by the environment and the people they grow up seeing (Shriya, 2021). In the same piece, local entrepreneurs explain that growing up surrounded by thrifted clothing and local music scenes nurtured an instinct for mixing and matching garments in novel ways (Shriya, 2021). Another article describes how individuals from the region “love to experiment with fashion,” displaying a boldness and self-assuredness that sets them apart from mainstream trends (Nida, 2023). Such observations underscore how daily exposure to diverse cultural influences nurtures an instinct for mixing and matching garments in novel ways. These traits are evident among Apatani youth, who increasingly juggle heritage and global fashion inspiration through social media, education and migration. In recent decades, multiple pressures have challenged the continuity of these traditions. Modernization has altered lifestyle patterns, diminishing the frequency of traditional dress use. Globalized fashion trends have shifted aesthetic preferences towards Western silhouettes, while climate change has influenced the practicality of wearing traditionally woven fabrics. As young Apatanis migrate to urban centres for education and employment exposure to global fashion trends has further reduced the everyday use of traditional clothing, repositioning the Apatani traditional dress as a cultural symbol mainly expressed during festivals, rituals or community gatherings. In parallel, there is a notable rise in consumer demand for sustainable, ethical, and culturally authentic fashion. Younger demographics, especially Millennials and Gen Z, increasingly prioritize environmental responsibility, traceability, and cultural integrity in their purchasing decisions (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012). The capsule wardrobe concept, a minimalist clothing system based on a small number of versatile, high-quality pieces, has emerged as an approach that aligns with these values while also reducing overconsumption. The literature on sustainable fashion underscores how design interventions can support cultural preservation.

This study arises at the intersection of these dynamics: Can Apatani dress traditions be contemporised into a capsule wardrobe that satisfies youth fashion sensibilities while maintaining cultural integrity and ecological responsibility?

➤ *Demographic, Cultural and Fashion Context of the Apatani Tribe*

Arunachal Pradesh among seven sisters of Northeast is one of the 29 states in India, sharing international borders with Bhutan to the west, China to the north, and Myanmar to the east. Within this landscape, the Apatani tribe is indigenous to the Ziro Valley in the Lower Subansiri district, with settlements across seven large villages, Hong, Hari, Bula, Dutta, Hiza, Mudang-Tage, and Michi-Bamin, alongside the towns of Old Ziro and Hapoli. Belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, the Apatani community numbered 43,777 out of the district's total 13,83,727 population according to the 2011 Census (India, n.d.). Despite their

relatively small size, they represent a culturally vibrant group whose identity is deeply embedded in traditional craft and dress practices. The traditional garments of the Apatani tribe distinctly embody their cultural heritage, illustrating a coherent amalgamation of textiles, ornaments, hairstyles, and facial tattoos. Although the practice of facial tattooing is presently no longer practiced, it retains its significance as a pivotal element of their historical narrative. The Apatani tribe, acknowledged for its abundant cultural heritage, exhibits exceptional proficiency in the art of traditional textile production. Their fabrics were crafted on loom looms, a time-honoured technique integral to their cultural identity. These meticulously handwoven textiles feature intricate geometric patterns, predominantly fashioned through the extra-weft weaving method, which enriches the fabric's dimensionality and tactile quality. The fabrics frequently exhibit vibrant stripes and elaborately crafted motifs that embody the tribe's artistic sensibility thus enhances their aesthetic allure. Not only are the designs decorative, but they also encapsulate cultural symbolism, capturing centuries-old narratives and traditions that have been passed down through generations. The Apatani weavers traditionally produce a variety of textile products, each exemplifying a unique blend of utility and artistry, thereby underscoring the tribe's unwavering commitment to sustaining their textile heritage, which serves as a significant reservoir of historical, artistic, and anthropological value. The traditional attire of Apatani women epitomises both the region's temperate climate and its profound cultural legacy. Everyday garments typically consisted of a top referred to as Tarii, a knee-length cylindrical skirt known as Abi, and a draped shawl or hanging wrap termed Pulye, which afforded warmth during frigid, frequently snowy winters. Historically, Apatani women were often topless in their daily lives, reserving the upper garment solely for ceremonial purposes. During the prominent festival of Supung, they donned a specialised top designated as the Supung Tarii. The term “Tarii” refers to an upper-body garment, while Supung denotes a high-value traditional celebration. The Supung Tarii is characterised as a sleeveless white top intricately woven from a blend of cotton and acrylic yarn, distinguished by its elaborately adorned back panel. A vertically woven band in hues of mustard yellow, red, and blue creates a striking contrast against a deep blue background, with delicate fringes adorning the hemline. The top measures approximately 50 cm in length and 60 cm in width, achieving a harmonious balance between structural integrity and elegant drape. The Abi, serving as the principal lower garment, is a knee-length cylindrical skirt traditionally crafted from acrylic yarn. Seven distinct categories of Abi exist, each linked to specific festivals, occasions, or gender classifications. This intricate system of garment utilisation underscores the Apatani community's sophisticated interplay between attire, ritual, and identity (Carolin, 2023). Motifs convey multiple layers of significance associated with social identity, age, and status, while the practice of weaving itself cultivates social cohesion among women (Suravi et al., 2019). During the period of British colonial rule, the Apatani tribe experienced relative isolation from external influences. However, following independence, enhanced connectivity and governmental initiatives in the Northeast precipitated transformations in traditional dress.

Educational reforms, economic prospects, and interactions with mainstream Indian society introduced novel fabrics and dressing styles (Bordoloi, 1991). T. (2025) emphasises that modernisation and climate change are undermining the continuity of Indigenous attire through diminished availability of natural fibres and dyes, as well as shifts in youth preferences towards Western styles. Globalisation and digital media have exacerbated alterations in youth fashion within Northeast India. Influences from Korean pop culture, Japanese manga, and Western television have moulded aesthetic sensibilities, while thrift markets promote practices of reuse and upcycling (Shriya, 2021). Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube furnish inspiration and connect Apatani youth with global designers, thereby broadening their perspectives while simultaneously imposing pressure to conform to rapidly evolving trends (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012).

The limited presence of mainstream retailers has further encouraged self-styling, entrepreneurship, and creative use of local textiles (Nida, 2023). These demographic, cultural, and global forces form the context in which Apatani attire and cultural identity must be reimaged for relevance and continuity.



Fig 1 Apatani Attire Worn by Woman and Man



Fig 2 Front and Back of ‘Tarii’ the Regular Wear Top



Fig 3 Front and Back of ‘Supung Tarii’ the Festive Top

➤ *Research Gap*

Current studies on Apatani attire predominantly examines textiles and motifs, yet offers limited insight into youth perspectives, patterns of everyday use, and underexplored dimensions such as silhouette and fit.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic research design with a participatory action research (PAR) framework. Multiple datas were collected through, ethnographic research, surveys, questionnaires and interviews. Ethnography was selected as it allows for in-depth cultural immersion, enabling the researcher to capture the nuanced relationship between attire, identity, and social practice (Centobelli et al., 2022).

The study is structured in three phases. In the exploration phase, the researcher undertook fifteen days field visits to Ziro Valley, attending festivals, engaging with weavers and artisans, and accompanying women in their daily activities to examine how clothing practices intersect with labour, climate, and ritual. Detailed field notes and photographic documentation recorded both aesthetic and socio-cultural contexts. The co-creation phase convened elders, artisans, and young women in participatory workshops to articulate key design priorities, including comfort, modesty, versatility, and cultural symbolism.

The prototyping phase is currently in progress. Five iterative design prototypes have been developed to date and are presented in this study, while community feedback will be collected upon completion of the remaining prototypes to inform subsequent refinement.

➤ *Research Site and Context*

Ziro Valley was chosen as it is the native homeland of the Apatani, where almost every member of the community has ancestral roots and residences. In parallel, Itanagar, the capital city of Arunachal Pradesh was included as it hosts a significant urban population of the Apatani tribe. This dual selection allowed the study to capture perspectives from both the traditional cultural landscape of Ziro and the urbanised context of Itanagar, thereby providing a balanced understanding of Apatani identity, dress practices, and their

evolving relationship to heritage and modern consumer culture.

➤ *Survey Instrument, Analysis and Key Findings*

The demographic information, lifestyle preferences, familiarity with Apatani apparel, challenges to wearing it, and attitudes towards modernisation and sustainability were acquired through the use of a designed questionnaire that was sent in June 2025 using online forms and telephonic interviews. Excel spreadsheets were utilized to perform the analysis of the responses, and bar charts and heatmaps were utilized to visually represent the frequency distributions and cross-tabulations.

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The survey contained 37 closed-ended questions, organised into five sections: (1) demographic details (age, gender, occupation, residence); (2) lifestyle and preferences (cuisine, entertainment, influencers); (3) familiarity and usage of traditional Apatani attire (knowledge of Apatani attire and perceived distinctive features); (4) Fashion is passion (frequency and context of wearing the attire reasons for non-use, fashion attitudes and sustainable practices); and (5) Design intervention (interest in contemporary adaptations and willingness to adopt redesigned garments). Likert-type scales were used to assess the influence of celebrities, peers, and family on fashion choices, while multiple-response questions captured preferred garments and styling practices. Data were analysed using Microsoft Excel, with frequency distributions and cross-tabulations visualised through bar charts and heatmaps. (Refer Table 1 for a summary of key survey findings and Table 2 for the primary reasons for non-use of traditional attire).

Table 1 Summary of Survey Results (N = 55 respondents)

Category	Key Findings
Demographics	Age: 26–35 yrs (51%), 31–35 yrs (27%), few under 25 or over 40 Gender: 96% female Occupation: Govt. 42%, Pvt. 22%, students/entrepreneurs/homemakers (remainder) Residence: Itanagar 70%, Ziro 15%
Lifestyle & Preferences	Cuisine: 48% regional/Indian, 93% prefer home-cooked meals Entertainment: Bollywood films & documentaries most popular Platforms: YouTube & Instagram dominant Fashion influence: Mainly friends & family; minimal celebrity/influencer impact
Familiarity & Usage of Apatani Attire	Familiarity: 58% “somewhat familiar”, 38% “very familiar” Distinctive features: motifs, colour combinations, overall look Usage: 69% occasional, 16% rare, 11% often, 1 never Context: Mostly ceremonies/festivals; sometimes elements (shawls, jewellery) adapted
Functionality & Barriers	Positives: Comfortable when fitted well Limitations: Heavy wool fabric unsuitable in heat/humidity Barriers: Discomfort (31), cost (9), availability (4), concern of “costume-like” look outside rituals
Cultural Significance & Adaptability	93%: attire retains cultural significance Adaptation: 60% yes, 25% maybe, 15% no Language competence: 67% intermediate, 25% advanced, 16% basic
Fashion & Sustainability Attitudes	Fashion orientation: 44% minimalists, 31% casual followers, 20% experimental Fit preferences: Regular 53%, relaxed 38%, tailored 7%, oversized 2% Sustainability awareness: 49% yes, 40% somewhat, 11% no Practices: responsible shopping, local/handcrafted, reuse, upcycling, occasional fast fashion
Interest in Modern Collection	87% yes, 13% maybe Desired features: simplified versions for daily wear, modern silhouettes using Apatani textiles, functionality (pockets, zippers), reimagined motifs for casual/office wear Preferred palette: traditional colour schemes

Table 2 Reasons for Not Wearing Apatani Attire

Reason	Count
Comfort issues	31
Expensive	9
Unavailability	4
Not common practice (risk of being seen as odd)	1
Too costume-y for daily wear	1

Below are the three visual summaries that support the textual analysis:

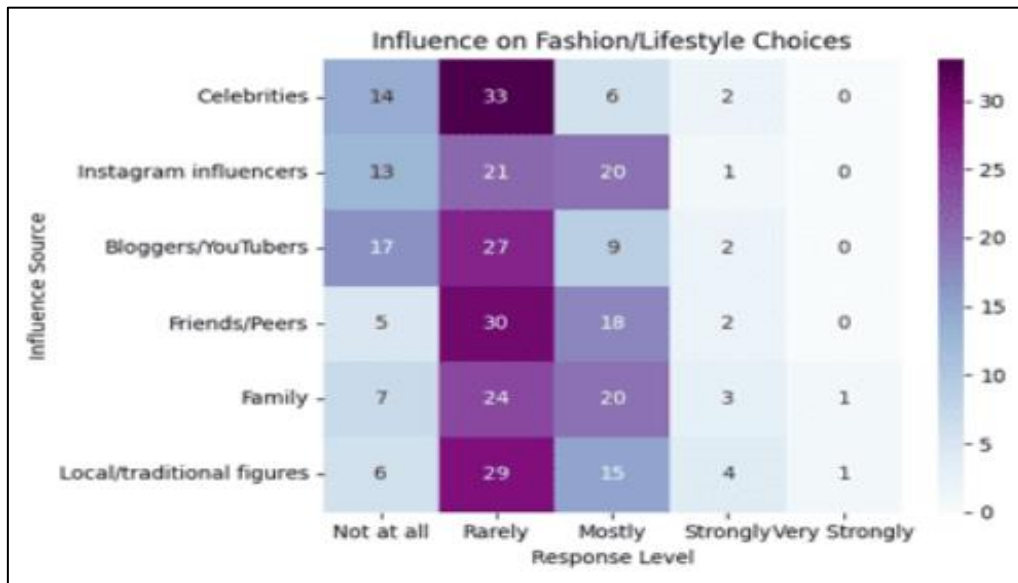


Fig 4 Influence of Various Sources on

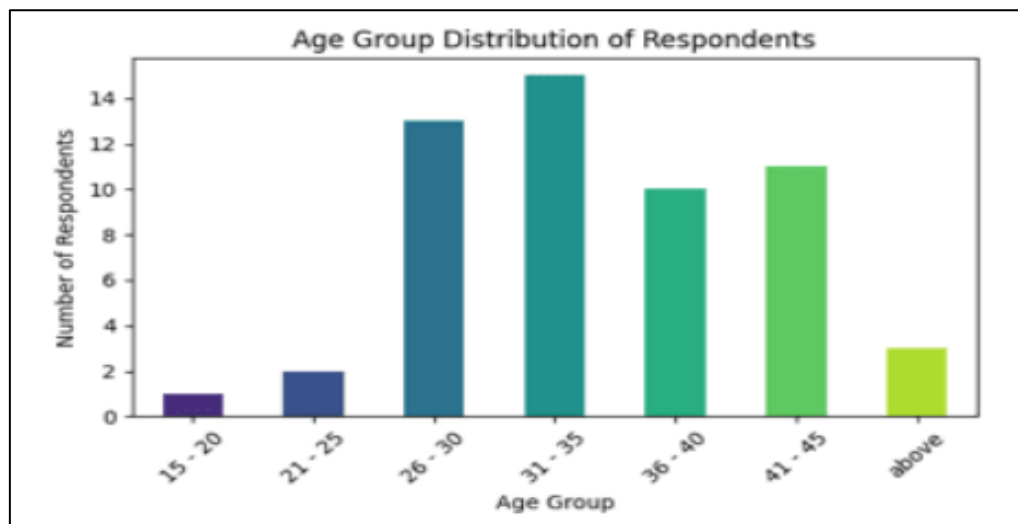


Fig 5 Age Distribution of

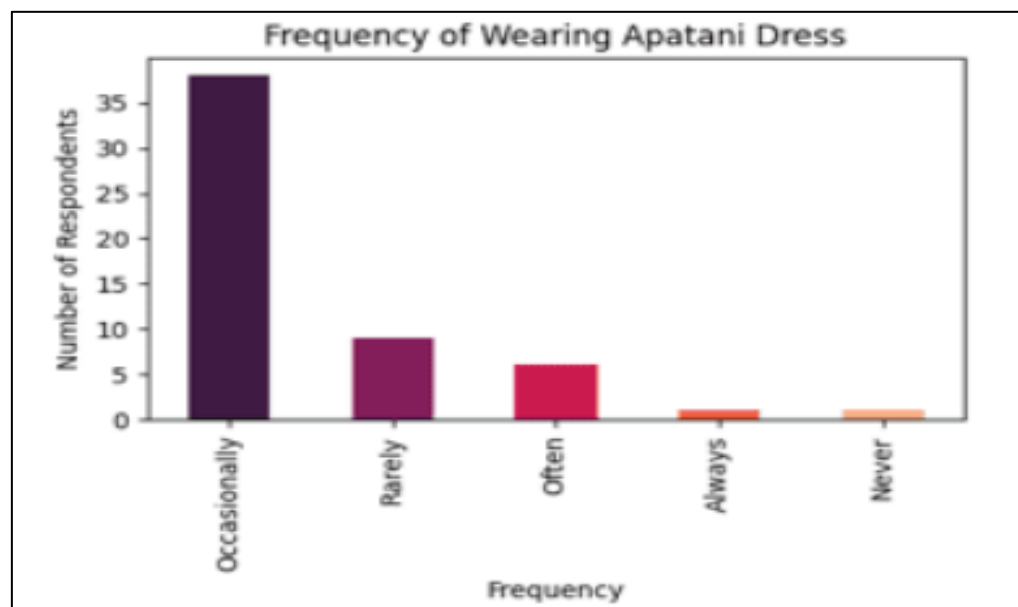


Fig 6 Frequency of

The heatmap demonstrates that friends/peers and family exert the most influence on respondents' fashion choices, while celebrities and Instagram influencers have little impact (Ref. figure 4).

The bar chart confirms that most respondents are concentrated in the 26–35 age range, with very few younger participants (Ref. figure 5). This bar chart illustrates that traditional dress is worn predominantly on an occasional basis, with only a handful of participants reporting frequent use (Ref. figure 6).

➤ *Design Process, Prototyping and Silhouette Analysis*




Zero-waste pattern-making techniques were used to reduce fabric waste, and traditional motifs were digitally reinterpreted with AI-assisted tools such as The Fabricant's sketch-to-image generation and model photography. These tools helped to visualise silhouettes and colour schemes more quickly. As part of my ongoing PhD thesis, about 20 garment samples including tops, bottoms, and single-piece outfits are being developed with locally sourced handloom fabrics. The designs aim for versatility, allowing mix-and-match use to create nearly 50 different looks. Out of the planned 20 samples, seven have so far been developed using AI and are presented in this paper. Community feedback will be collected once all samples are completed, which will support further refinement. Studying the silhouette of Apatani traditional dress is an important part of this process. Liliana et al. (2025) notes that silhouettes show not only the style of clothing but also reflect social and cultural identity. For the Apatani, the silhouette is modest and practical, representing values of community and belonging while still being suitable for daily use. Lee (2015) also highlights that silhouettes in clothing historically play a role in shaping identity, linking

dress forms to gender, status, and cultural norms (refer Table 2 for comparative mapping of Apatani garment components to modern silhouette categories). A comparative analysis was done, setting the archival photograph of a young Apatani woman from the 1940s, in Apatani traditional ensemble, against the author's technical replica constructed in muslin. This muslin copy serves as an analytical tool to record silhouette reflected in the original structure of the garments, free from decorative elements, providing a sound basis for analysing line, proportion, and cultural meaning and crucially, to reverse-engineer the tribe's inherent zero-waste construction techniques. (Refer fig. 7).



Fig 7 Young Apatani Women in Apatani Traditional Attire

Table 3 Comparative Mapping of Apatani Garment Pieces to Modern Silhouette Categories.

Apatani Garment	Form Contribution	Silhouette identified	Description
Tarii – 1	Wide and loose on shoulder and fit on the waist. Clean lines with emphasis on waist.	Inverted triangle 	Tarii is the everyday blouse of Apatani women, marked by its smaller size, closer body fit, and a less elaborate back design. Its simplified construction makes it practical and well-suited for daily use.
Tarii – 2	Straight torso, modest upper body definition. Creates clean lines without waist emphasis; aligns with columnar silhouettes.	H-line / Straight 	Supung Tarii traditionally worn during rituals and festivals. Characterized by its larger size and intricate woven design at the back, marking it as a ceremonial garment.
Abi (Skirt)	Cylindrical fall from waist to knee; elongates figure. Similar to sheath/straight skirts; emphasizes verticality.	H-line / Semi-fitted 	Abi is a tubular skirt used for everyday wear. While the silhouette remains consistent across 7–8 types, variations in color combinations carry distinct cultural symbolism and meaning.

<p>Pulye (shawl)</p>	<p>Hanged, Wrapped, Symmetrical. A rectangular piece adds fluidity, transformability, and cultural layering logic.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Symmetrical/Loose</p> 	<p>Pulye (Shawl) is a versatile shawl worn daily, with style of draping adjusted according to climate. Historically hung loosely, it is now more often wrapped, reflecting shifts in dressing practice.</p>
<p>Assembled Ensemble</p>	<p>Semi-fitted, columnar silhouette with layering and subtle flare.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Hybrid H-A line</p> 	<p>AI generated picture of a model wearing Apatani traditional dress constructed in muslin fabric to understand the line and proportion of the silhouette.</p>  <p>A composite outline that merges structural stability with draped adaptability.</p>

Table 4 Mapping of Sustainable Approach of the Study is Shown

Sl. no	Design Strategy	Sustainability Outcome	Relevant SDG
1	Zero-waste pattern-making & modular design	Minimised textile waste; extended garment life	SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production
2	Local sourcing of handloom textiles	Reduced carbon footprint; strengthened local economy	SDG 11: Sustainable Cities & Communities
3	Community-led co-creation & artisan training	Fair value distribution; skill development	SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth
4	Capsule wardrobe (seasonless versatility) Reviving Traditional dress by contemporary design intervention.	Reduced overconsumption; long-term consumer value Strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.	SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production

III. RESULTS

The AI-assisted design stage created 5 garment pieces that reflect the muslin-constructed silhouette of Apatani dress. These prototypes use zero-waste techniques, modular styling, and reinterpreted color combination to make versatile pieces suitable for modern wardrobes (Refer Table 5). Designed for mix-and-match use, they can generate 15 different looks. The silhouettes remain rooted in Apatani culture but include practical updates such as adjustable closures, pockets, and modular drapes. The collection will

grow to 20 pieces, with colour variations and community feedback guiding future refinements.

The Inspiration and Vision Board brings together Apatani clothing images, fabric samples, landscapes, zero-waste layouts, and modular fashion references. Cultural patterns and seasonal colours show the link between tradition and innovation. Diagrams highlight fabric efficiency and adaptable design, giving a clear visual summary of sustainable, research-based development (Refer Fig.8).



Fig 8 Inspiration and Vision Board

Table 5 Fashion Flats and AI-Based Colour Reinterpretations of Contemporary Designs

Loose cape or shrug with kimono sleeves designed for easy layering, reflecting Apatani silhouettes and the board's focus on zero-waste, modular design.

A jacket/cardigan like shrug or cape, designed to be worn open, is a practical and versatile layering piece. Derived from a rectangular piece and inspired from the shawl.

The adjustable waist and pleats in the skirt add styling options, while the rectangular layout supports zero-waste cutting and easy replication for modular wardrobe systems.

LOOK-1

LOOK-2

"LOOK-1" and "LOOK-2" demonstrate two styling options derived from the same base pattern. This reflects a modular approach, allowing multiple garments from one construction.

IV. DISCUSSION

The survey results underscore a paradox: Apatani youth value the cultural significance of their traditional attire yet rarely wear it. Practical barriers, discomfort, weight and climate unsuitability, outweigh cultural motivations. However, the strong interest in a modern, sustainable collection suggests that reinterpretation can re-activate cultural dress if it meets contemporary standards of comfort and versatility. Participants' preference for regular and relaxed fits and minimalist aesthetics parallels global shifts toward comfort-driven clothing. The emphasis on sustainable practices reflects a growing environmental consciousness among youth; they are receptive to collections that utilise local handloom fabrics and zero-waste patterns.

The project's participatory approach proved critical. Involving elders and artisans ensured that cultural protocols were respected when adapting motifs and silhouettes. For instance, sacred motifs used exclusively in rituals were not appropriated for everyday clothing. The collaboration also empowered local weavers to innovate within their tradition, enhancing economic opportunities. The AI-assisted design process accelerated concept development by visualising how traditional patterns could translate into contemporary garments, enabling iterative feedback from participants. This demonstrates that digital technologies can support heritage preservation when deployed ethically.

V. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study extends beyond cultural preservation; it opens new avenues for contemporary designers to engage with heritage sustainably while responding to global market demand for ethical and responsible fashion. Designers working in diverse cultural settings can adapt the sustainable design strategies outlined here in the study, such as modular fashion, capsule wardrobe, Zero-waste pattern making and community-led innovation. While 5 prototypes were created and analyzed, the full capsule collection is still under development, and consumer acceptance testing has yet to be conducted at scale. The study should be viewed as a foundation for further exploration. Future research and design practice can expand the scope by testing market scalability, refining designs with broader community feedback, and applying these methods across other indigenous traditions to build a global framework for sustainable, heritage-based fashion.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that traditional Apatani dress can be revitalised through participatory, sustainable design. A survey of 55 Apatani women reveals strong cultural attachment to traditional attire yet low frequency of wear due to practical barriers. Nevertheless, there is substantial enthusiasm for a modern, sustainable capsule wardrobe incorporating Apatani motifs, colour palettes and hand-woven fabrics. The research created digital prototypes using zero-waste pattern-making, modular construction and AI-assisted visualisation, bridging cultural authenticity and

contemporary style. Findings contribute to literature on heritage-based fashion and sustainable design and offer a replicable model for other indigenous communities seeking to adapt traditional dress for modern markets. Future work should include quantitative evaluation of the market performance of such collections and explore scalability in collaboration with local cooperatives.

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