

Reimagining Indigenous Textile Traditions for Future Societies: A Study of *Karbi* Textiles

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Abstract—Indigenous textile traditions embody the cultural identity, ecological wisdom, and artistic heritage of tribal communities. This study focuses on the textile practices of the *Karbi* tribe of Assam, exploring their traditional knowledge systems, craftsmanship, and potential relevance in contemporary fashion design. Through secondary research and qualitative analysis, the study examines the origin, historical evolution, materials, techniques, motifs, colours, and socio-cultural significance of *Karbi* textiles. The research highlights the community's deep connection with nature, reflected through their use of locally available fibres, natural dyes, and symbolic motifs inspired by their surroundings, beliefs, and social practices. Traditional weaving practices, primarily carried out by *Karbi* women, serve not only as a means of clothing production but also as a medium for preserving cultural narratives, identity, and intergenerational knowledge. The study identifies the factors contributing to the decline of *Karbi* textile traditions, including industrialization, changing consumer preferences, limited market accessibility, and reduced transmission of traditional skills among younger generations. To address these challenges, the research proposes revival strategies emphasizing sustainable practices, design innovation, documentation, and integration of indigenous aesthetics into contemporary fashion applications. The study introduces a conceptual design approach that explores the reinterpretation of *Karbi* textile elements while maintaining cultural authenticity. By bridging traditional craftsmanship with modern design sensibilities, the research emphasizes the potential of *Karbi* textiles to contribute to sustainable fashion narratives and promote the preservation of indigenous textile heritage in a rapidly evolving global design landscape.

Index Terms—Indigenous textiles, tribal motifs, sustainable fashion, *Karbi* tribe, Design intervention, cultural preservation and revival strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Textiles serve as vital cultural artefacts that embody the social, spiritual, and ecological frameworks of communities. Indigenous textile traditions in India, in particular, represent a rich combination of cultural identity, environmental knowledge, and artisanal skill, developed and sustained over generations. These traditions are deeply connected with nature, utilizing locally available resources, natural dyes, and symbolic design systems that reflect community beliefs and practices. In the contemporary context of globalization and fast fashion, such indigenous textile systems face significant challenges, including declining patronage, industrial competition, and the gradual erosion of traditional knowledge. As a result, many of these practices are at risk of marginalization or extinction. Despite increasing discourse on sustainability in fashion, the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary design remains limited and underexplored. This highlights a critical research gap in understanding how traditional textile practices can be meaningfully reinterpreted for modern applications while preserving their cultural integrity. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore the potential of indigenous textile systems for future design contexts by bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary design approaches. The study focuses on uniqueness of *Karbi* tribal textile traditions, material culture, techniques of manufacturing those textiles, motives and their symbolic language. Through this analysis, the research seeks to evaluate their relevance in contemporary fashion and propose pathways for sustainable design integration, contributing to both cultural preservation and innovation.

II. ORIGIN, HISTORY & EVOLUTION OF *KARBI* TRIBE

The *Karbi* Anglong Autonomous Council *Karbi* tribe is one of the major indigenous tribal communities primarily inhabiting the hill regions of Assam, especially the districts of *Karbi* Anglong and West *Karbi* Anglong. The *Karbhis* belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and are believed to have migrated from regions of present-day southern China and Myanmar through the northeastern hill tracts into Assam several centuries ago. Linguistically and culturally, they are associated with other tribes of Northeast India belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family.

Historical narratives and oral traditions suggest that the *Karbhis* underwent multiple phases of migration before settling in the hill regions of Assam. Their migration was largely influenced by geographical conditions, inter-tribal movement, and the search for fertile land suitable for shifting cultivation (jhum cultivation). Over time, the community developed a distinct socio-cultural identity closely connected to nature, ancestral worship, and agrarian practices.

Over time, the *Karbhis* developed rich artistic and craft traditions, particularly in weaving, music, dance, and ritual practices. Weaving emerged as an important cultural activity among women, producing textiles that reflected community beliefs, social identity, and environmental influences. Traditional garments such as *Pini*, *Pekok*, and *Rikong* became markers of ethnic identity and ceremonial significance.

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, the *Karbi* region witnessed socio-economic and political transformations. Increased interaction with mainstream society, modernization, education, and market influences gradually altered traditional lifestyles and craft practices. While these changes created new opportunities, they also contributed to the decline of certain indigenous traditions and hand-woven practices.

III. TRADITIONAL ATTIRE AND FABRICATION PROCESSES

The *Karbi* people possess a rich textile heritage in which weaving is not merely a functional activity but an important expression of cultural identity, social values, and traditional knowledge. Among the *Karbhis*, weaving is predominantly practiced by women and is considered an essential skill passed from one generation to another. *Karbi* textiles are traditionally handwoven using cotton yarn on indigenous looms, particularly the loin loom (backstrap loom). The process begins with the preparation of yarn, including spinning, dyeing, and arranging the warp and weft threads before weaving. Traditionally, natural dyes derived from locally available plants, roots, and other natural resources were used to create earthy shades. The weaving process involves intricate arrangements of warp and weft threads to create distinctive geometric patterns. The skill of the weaver is reflected in the precision of yarn placement, colour combinations, and the creation of symbolic motifs. Textiles are produced for various traditional garments; attire of women consists of *Pini*, *Pekok*, *Vamkok* and *Jiso*.

- *Pini* is a type of skirt of black colour and worn around the waist tied with a belt. It can be of different designs like *jangre*, *santok*, *honki ranchom*, *marbong homkri*, *ahi cherop*, *chamburukso apini*, *mekserek* etc.
- *Pekok* is a square piece of cloth tied at the right shoulder. It can be of different colours and designs like, *pe duphirso* – for young women, *pe sleng*, *pe jangphong* – for middle aged women and *pe sarpi* – old women. Other designs are *pe khonjari*, *pe luru*.
- *Vamkok* is a belt used to tie the *Pini* tight at the waist. It has colourful fringes at both the length ends. In *Vamkok* the motifs were carried with many different natural figures of birds, seeds, flowers, thorn, with most decorative weaver.
- *Jiso* is a long black cloth with designs and decorated fringes at the length end worn to cover the breasts. Nowadays it has been replaced by the blouse.
- *Rikong* – a traditional textile piece used as a wrap or shawl.



Image 1: Karbi women's attire and traditional fabrics



Image 2: Karbi women's traditional attire

Karbi men attire includes *Choi*, *Poho*, *Rikong* and *Sator*. These are of different types like *choi hongthor*, *choi ik*, *choi ang*, *choi miri* etc. *Choi hongthor a ki-ik*, *choi hongthor ake-lok* are meant for young men. While *choi ang*, *choi miri* are for middle aged and aged men.

- *Poho* is worn around the head or used as a muffler.

- *Rikong* is the loin cloth worn by men during work, but it is rarely used now.
- *Sator* is a white piece of cloth worn by men around the waist as the dhoti covering the whole length of the legs. A long *pe seleng* is also used as *sator* with colourful designs all over and borders at both the length end which covers up to the knee.



Fig. 2 Traditional textiles of Karbi men

Image 3: Karbi Men's Traditional Attire

- Choi ang: A person who possessed a higher-ranking status worned this jacket specially married males.
- Choi ek: It was a traditional *Karbi* black jacket worn by unmarried males. This jacket was slight shorter than Choi ang with short braided (Apre) lower fringes
- Choi-kelok: It was a traditional *Karbi* white jacket worn by unmarried males in festive occasions and dance as well. This jacket was slightly shorter with long braided (Apre) in lower fringes.



Image 4: 1, *Karbi* woman weaving Pini on back strap loom; 2, *Karbi* girl weaving motif using *harpi*; 3, Traditional motifs on garment. a) *Bidumkek*; b) *Keching arveng*; c) man on elephant holding umbrella (R) and hand fan (L); d) peacock; 4, *Phongrong angsu* (circles), spinous fruits of *Castanopsis indica* in *vamkok*; 5, *Vosomek* motifs on *Choi hongthor*; 6, *Karbi* bachelor attired in *choi hongthor* during traditional *banjar* dance; 7, *Karbi* woman putting on *Pi sarpi*, red-black stripped cloth and 8 *Bidumkek* motif in *Tiwa* garment.

IV. KARBI'S TRADITIONAL FABRIC MANUFACTURING TECHNIQUE

Karbi women still use *Takiri* a hand spindle to spin yarn. The *Karbi* loom known as *kachivur-atherang* is a backstrap loom, which may have originated from the art of basketry and mat making credited to *Saibisai jang-re*. It is a simple implement consisting

of the following parts basically made from bamboo-1. *Therang* (loom bar) 2. *Thening* (shed rod) 3. *Thepun* (measuring rope) 4. *Uvek* (bobbins) 5. *Thelangpong* (heddle rod) 6. *Barlim* (pattern sticks) 7. *Ingthi* (reed/comp) 8. *Hi-i* (Heddle) 9. *Harpi* (batten) 10. *Honthari langpong* (Bobbins) 11. *Thehu* (the backstrap) 12. *Dang* (tightening stick) 13. *Lang vet* (sponging stick).

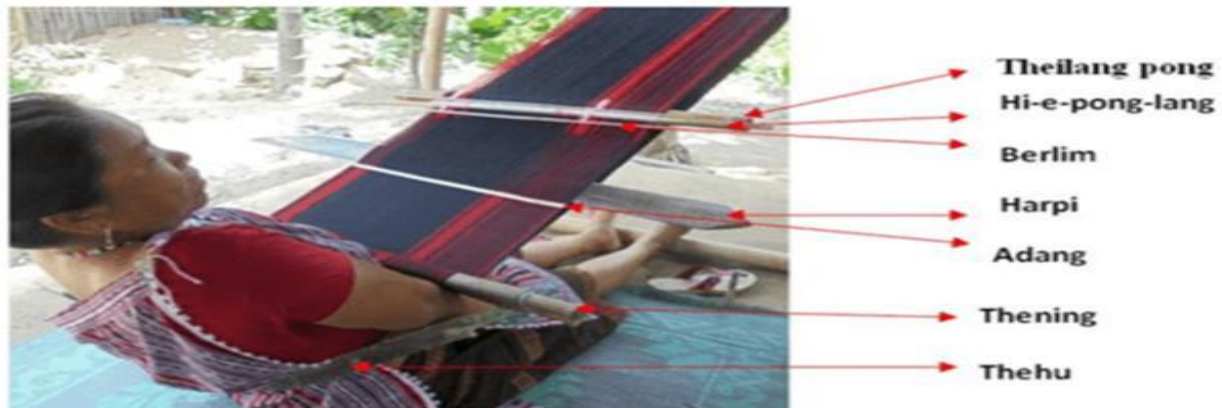


Image 5: *Karbi* Woman weaving fabric using backstrap loom

With this traditional loom the weavers till today make various intricate designs inspired by nature, birds, fishes, flowers, trees and in modern times new objects also appear in their creations, aeroplane (rot ahem) being one of them.

V. TRADITIONAL MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Karbi textiles feature motifs inspired by the surrounding natural environment, social life, traditional belief, also like animals (goats, peacocks, elephants), and plants (flowers, leaves), which are woven into intricate patterns that often carry symbolic meaning. Common patterns include, the *Jamiliaman* (two birds on a tree) and the *Rekong Vevot* (a red border with geometric designs). Geometric motifs, such as the diamond shape, are also used, often representing good fortune. The *Karbis* use *eri* and cotton as *manjor* composition in their traditional clothing.

Animal and bird motifs

- *Jamiliaman*: Two birds sitting on a tree, facing each other.

- *Betoh*: A goat, used as a symbol of purity and for animal sacrifice.
- *Engnar*: An elephant, symbolizing strength.
- *Pipli*: A butterfly, representing freedom, joy, and merriment.
- *Loka Paro*: Pigeon motifs, often woven into silk garments.
- *Mourah*: Peacock motifs, a commonly used symbol.

Plant and flower motifs

- *Mir*: A flower motif, frequently used in women's attire, often combined with a leaf motif. The petals symbolize the union of the five *Karbi* clans.
- *Gach*: A tree motif, sometimes paired with birds.
- *Geometric* and symbolic motifs
- *Rekong Vevot*: A specific 15cm red border on the *Rekong* loincloth for men, woven with traditional motifs.
- *Diamond* motif: The only geometric motif used, it represents good fortune and is influenced by Assamese designs.



Image 6: Traditional Motif of *Karbi* Textiles

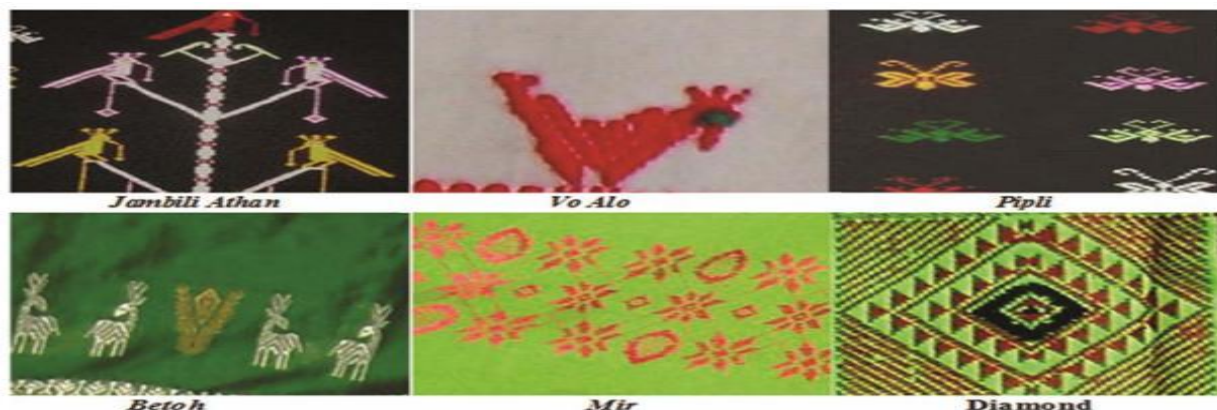
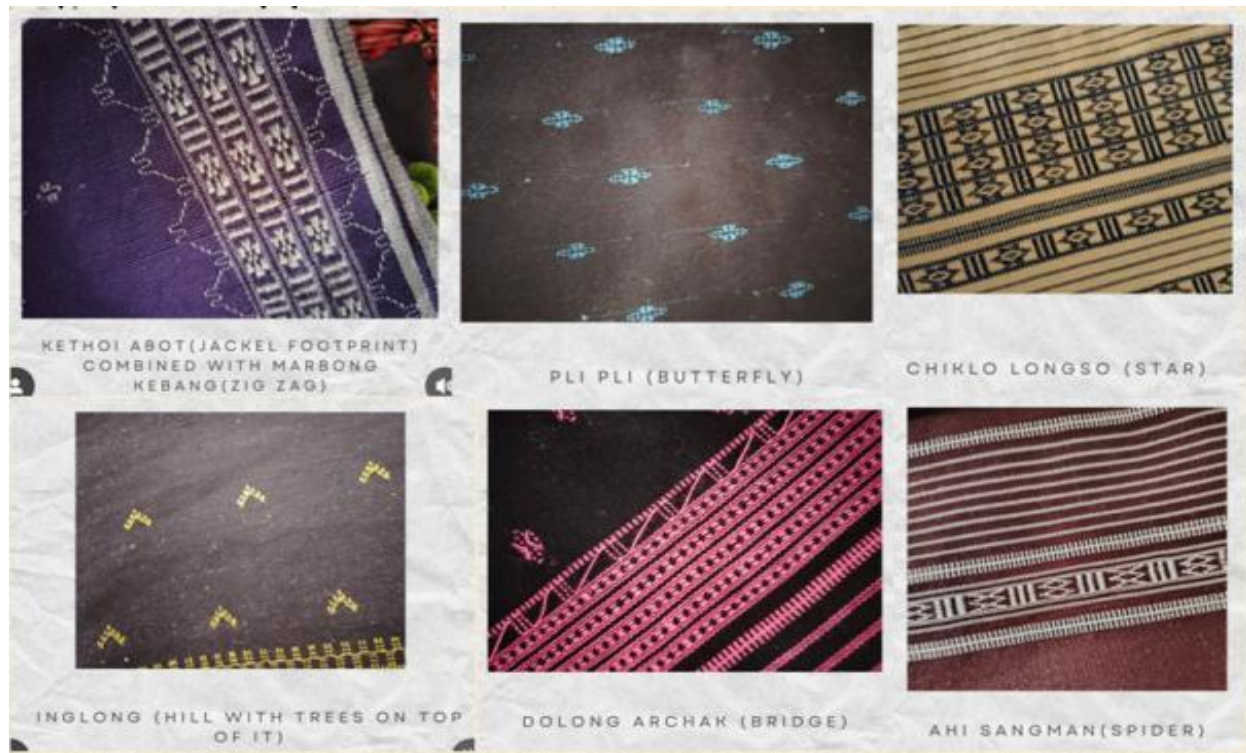


Image 7: Traditional Motif of *Karbi* Textiles

Image 8: Traditional Motif of *Karbi* Textiles

Karbi textiles are recognized for their vibrant yet balanced colour combinations. Traditionally, colours were obtained from natural sources, including plants, roots, bark, and minerals. The colour palette reflects both aesthetic preferences and symbolic meanings.

- Red: Represents energy, vitality, celebration, and auspicious occasions.
- Black: Symbolizes strength, protection, and connection with ancestral traditions.
- White: Represents purity, simplicity, and harmony.
- Yellow: Associated with nature, prosperity, and positivity.
- Green: Reflects forests, agriculture, and the community's dependence on the natural environment.

VI. DECLINING FACTORS OF *KARBI* TRIBAL TEXTILE

The traditional textiles of *Karbi* tribal community face several challenges in the developing contemporary global textile market due to changes on socio – economic conditions, industrial revolutions and rapid shifting in consumer preferences. The

major declining factors and challenges affecting *Karbi* textiles are,

1. Competitions from Mass- produced Textiles: The availability of inexpensive machine-made fabrics and synthetic textiles has significantly reduced the demand for handmade *Karbi* textiles. Power loom products can be produced faster and sold at lower prices, making it difficult for traditional hand-woven fabrics to compete in mainstream markets.
2. Reduction in traditional weaving practices: Traditional weaving skills, especially among younger generations, are gradually declining as younger community members seek alternative career opportunities. The time-intensive process of hand weaving is often viewed as less economically rewarding compared to other professions.
3. Loss of indigenous knowledge transfer: *Karbi* textile knowledge, including traditional motifs, weaving techniques, colour symbolism, and dyeing practices, has historically been passed orally and practically from elders to younger generations. Reduced participation in traditional

weaving has resulted in limited transmission of these skills.

4. Limited market access and commercial recognition: Despite their cultural and artistic value, *Karbi* textiles have limited visibility in national and international markets. Many artisans lack access to organized marketing channels, branding, e-commerce platforms, and opportunities to connect with contemporary designers.
5. Lack of design innovation: Traditional *Karbi* fabrics often remain limited to conventional garment forms and ceremonial uses. Without adaptation into contemporary products such as fashion apparel, accessories, and lifestyle products, their appeal among modern consumers' remains restricted.
6. Challenges in raw material availability: The increasing dependence on commercially available yarns and synthetic materials has affected the traditional use of locally sourced fibres and natural dyes. Availability, consistency, and cost of quality raw materials are significant concerns for artisans.
7. Changing life style and reduced cultural values: Traditional *Karbi* garments that were once an essential part of daily life and cultural ceremonies are increasingly replaced by modern clothing styles. Reduced everyday usage directly impacts demand and artisan livelihoods.
8. Economic challenges faced by artisans: Many weavers face issues such as low wages, irregular income, lack of financial support, and limited access to training and infrastructure. These factors discourage continued involvement in traditional textile production.
9. Limited awareness among consumers: The cultural significance, craftsmanship, and sustainability value of *Karbi* textiles are not widely recognized outside the community. Lack of consumer awareness affects their market potential.
10. Limited documentation and research: Many traditional motifs, weaving methods, and cultural meanings associated with *Karbi* textiles remain insufficiently documented. Lack of systematic documentation creates challenges in preservation, education, and future innovation.

VII. REVIVAL STRATEGIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF *KARBI* TEXTILES

To promote *Karbi* textiles in the global market, revival strategies should focus on preserving cultural authenticity while improving design adaptability, artisan livelihoods, market visibility, and sustainable production. The following strategies can support the revival and global recognition of *Karbi* textile traditions:

1. Documentation and Preservation of Traditional Knowledge: Systematic documentation of *Karbi* weaving techniques, motifs, colour symbolism, traditional garments, and cultural narratives is essential for preserving indigenous textile heritage. Developing digital archives with photographs, videos, weaving processes, and artisan stories will safeguard traditional knowledge. Documenting the symbolic meanings of motifs will further support their authentic preservation and informed application in contemporary textile and fashion design.
2. Skill Development and Knowledge Transfer: The continuity of *Karbi* weaving traditions can be strengthened by encouraging younger generations to acquire traditional weaving skills through structured training programs. Establishing community-based weaving centres and incorporating *Karbi* textile studies into design and craft education will facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer and ensure the long-term preservation of this indigenous craft.
3. Integration with Contemporary Fashion Design: Collaborations between *Karbi* artisans and contemporary fashion designers can facilitate the adaptation of traditional textiles for modern markets. Indigenous motifs, patterns, and weaving techniques may be incorporated into apparel, accessories, home furnishings, and sustainable fashion collections while preserving their cultural identity. Such design interventions can enhance the global relevance and commercial appeal of *Karbi* textiles without compromising their authenticity.
4. Promotion of Sustainable and Eco-Friendly Practices: Promoting the environmental benefits of handwoven *Karbi* textiles as sustainable

alternatives to industrial fabrics can enhance their global appeal. Encouraging the use of natural fibres and traditional dyeing techniques, while positioning *Karbi* textiles within the slow fashion and ethical fashion movements, can strengthen their recognition as eco-friendly and culturally significant textile products.

5. **Digital Marketing and E-Commerce Promotion:** Digital platforms can play a crucial role in enhancing the global visibility of *Karbi* textiles by showcasing artisan profiles, product collections, and the cultural narratives behind each craft. Strategic use of social media and collaborations with ethical fashion marketplaces and international craft platforms can improve market accessibility, consumer awareness, and commercial opportunities for *Karbi* weavers.
6. **Participation in National and International Exhibitions:** Promoting *Karbi* textiles through handloom exhibitions, sustainable fashion fairs, cultural festivals, and international craft events can significantly enhance their global visibility. Such platforms can position *Karbi* handwoven textiles as heritage luxury products, attracting wider consumer interest and creating new market opportunities for traditional artisans.
7. **Collaboration with Designers, Researchers, and Institutions:** Collaborative partnerships among *Karbi* artisans, fashion designers, textile researchers, government craft organizations, and academic institutions can foster innovation while preserving traditional knowledge. Such interdisciplinary collaborations can support the development of contemporary textile products that respect cultural authenticity and enhance the market potential of *Karbi* textiles.
8. **Development of a *Karbi* Textile Brand Identity:** Developing a distinctive brand identity that emphasizes indigenous craftsmanship, natural aesthetics, cultural narratives, and the handmade value of *Karbi* textiles can enhance their market recognition. Effective branding strategies can position *Karbi* textiles as authentic heritage products, distinguishing them from mass-produced fabrics and strengthening their appeal in global markets.
9. **Craft Tourism and Experiential Learning:** Promoting textile-based tourism through immersive experiences, such as observing traditional weaving processes, interacting with artisans, participating in workshops, and purchasing authentic handcrafted products, can enhance cultural appreciation and consumer engagement. Such initiatives also provide additional income opportunities, contributing to the economic sustainability of *Karbi* weaving communities.
10. **Revival Through Educational Awareness:** Integrating *Karbi* textile heritage into fashion and textile curricula, along with organizing workshops, seminars, and exhibitions, can enhance awareness among students, designers, and consumers. Encouraging academic research and scholarly publications will further support the documentation, preservation, and promotion of *Karbi* indigenous textile traditions.
11. **Government and Institutional Support:** Strengthening government and institutional support through handloom development schemes, artisan welfare programs, infrastructure enhancement, market linkage initiatives, and design development projects can significantly contribute to the revival of *Karbi* textiles. These measures can improve production capabilities, expand market access, and ensure the long-term sustainability of traditional weaving communities.
12. **Innovation in Materials and Product Development:** Product innovation can be achieved by integrating traditional *Karbi* weaving techniques with organic cotton, natural fibres, sustainable blends, and contemporary silhouettes. Such design interventions can create market-oriented products that meet global consumer preferences while preserving the distinctive aesthetics and cultural authenticity of *Karbi* textiles.



Image 9 : Digitized contemporary *Karbi* Attires for Ethnic and Casuals





Image 10 : Digitized contemporary *Karbi* Attires for Ethnic and Casuals

VIII. CONCLUSION

The textile traditions of the *Karbi* community represent a significant repository of indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and sustainable craftsmanship. However, rapid socio-economic transformations, industrialization, changing consumer preferences, and diminishing intergenerational knowledge transfer have threatened the continuity of this rich handloom heritage. The present study highlights the importance of adopting an integrated revival framework that combines systematic documentation, skill preservation, design innovation, sustainable production practices, market diversification, and digital promotion. Strengthening collaborations among artisans, designers, academic institutions, government agencies, and the fashion industry can facilitate the adaptation of *Karbi* textiles to contemporary market demands while preserving their cultural authenticity. Furthermore, positioning *Karbi* hand-woven textiles within the global discourse on sustainable and ethical fashion can enhance their visibility, commercial viability, and cultural significance. Such initiatives not only contribute to the economic empowerment of *Karbi* weaving communities but also support the broader objectives of safeguarding India's intangible textile heritage. Ultimately, the sustainable revitalization of *Karbi* textiles depends on achieving a balanced integration of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design innovation, ensuring that this unique weaving tradition continues to thrive and inspire future generations in an increasingly globalized textile and fashion landscape.

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