International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 10, October 2026)

Reinterpretation Of Indian Folk Art Motifs for Contemporary Sustainable Apparel: A Design Development Study

A Study Based on Traditional Warli and Phad Painting

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***Abstract*—The Aim for conducting this research is to study how the fashion industry has adapted the various Indian Folk Art traditions and the consumer behaviour towardsit. From the early civilization days, human beings believed in appreciation of one or the other form of art or craft.**

At the same time, sustainable fashion requires attention to material use, waste, production practices, product longevity and social value. This study proposes a design-development framework for reinterpreting selected Indian folk-art motifs—primarily Warli, Madhubani and Gond—for contemporary sustainable apparel. The process combines cultural-context study, motif identification, stylization, repeat and placement development, sustainable material selection, prototype construction and consumer evaluation. The study contributes a practical model linking cultural heritage with contemporary apparel design and sustainability, while emphasizing attribution, contextual sensitivity and responsible adaptation. The approach is intended to support fashion educators, designers and researchers in developing heritage-inspired products without reducing folk art to decorative reproduction. Fashion designers have played a major role in not only bringing the art to the global forum but also have ultimately made the art alive. Today, many fashion designers are inspired by charm of our traditional folk art style. Methods like fabric painting, block printing and various types of embroideries are few of the techniques which makes Indian fashion appreciated and accepted across the world. This study focuses on the development of these folk art forms and their impact on the fashion industry. Fashion designers have played an important role in not only bringing the art to the world arena but also has ultimately made the art live by providing livelihood to the artisans.

The study demonstrates the potential of traditional Warli and Phad visual languages to generate contemporary apparel designs while maintaining a connection with Indian cultural heritage. The research proposes a systematic pathway from traditional folk-art study to motif reinterpretation, surface development, sustainable material selection and contemporary garment development.

***Keywords*—Warli Painting, Phad Painting, Indian Folk Art, Sustainable Apparel, Contemporary Fashion, Motif Reinterpretation, Surface Design, Cultural Heritage, Design Development, Circular Fashion**

I. INTRODUCTION

"Traditional Inspiration, Sustainable Innovation."

Indian folk art consists of variety of art forms which includes plastic arts, visual arts and textile arts etc. Broadly it covers pottery, sculpture, painting, woven silk, etc. India is rich in diverse and versatile art forms which are characterized on the basis of its geographical land area. A strong sense of design is characteristic of Indian art and can be seen in its modern and traditional art forms respectively.

The sustainable development of these art forms are influencing to a great extent to the global fashion industry. Fashion, as mentioned earlier has played a major role in not only bringing the art to limelight but also has ultimately made the art live.

The fashion industry provides an important medium through which traditional visual languages can be interpreted for contemporary audiences. However, the use of traditional motifs in apparel should extend beyond simply copying an existing artwork. A research-based design approach can analyse the formal characteristics of an art tradition and transform them into new compositions, silhouettes and surface applications.

Warli painting is particularly distinguished by its geometric visual vocabulary. Traditional Warli compositions use shapes such as triangles, circles, squares and lines to depict people, animals, trees, houses, rituals and community activities. The tradition also reflects the relationship between the Warli community and nature.

Phad painting, originating in Rajasthan, is traditionally a narrative art form associated with painted cloth scrolls. Government documentation describes its relationship with folk epics such as those of Pabuji and Devnarayanji and notes its use of handwoven khadi cloth and natural pigments.

The distinctive characteristics of these two traditions provide opportunities for contemporary fashion designers to develop garments that communicate cultural narratives through modern silhouettes and sustainable surface-design techniques.

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At the same time, sustainable fashion research increasingly emphasizes circular design, reuse, recycling, waste reduction and designing garments for longer use. Recent research in the Indian context identifies circularity and resource efficiency as significant areas for development in the apparel and textile sector.

A. Need for the Study

The present study is undertaken to explore traditional Indian folk art as a valuable source of inspiration for contemporary fashion design, with particular emphasis on the visual and design characteristics of Warli and Phad painting traditions. The study aims to document and analyze the distinctive motifs, forms, colours, lines, compositions and cultural elements associated with these traditional art forms and to reinterpret their motifs for contemporary apparel rather than merely reproducing complete traditional paintings. It further seeks to develop contemporary women's apparel that reflects Indian cultural heritage while responding to present-day fashion aesthetics and consumer requirements.

B. Objectives of the Study

- To Study the traditional characteristics of Phad and Warli painting.
- To identify significant motifs and visual elements from both art forms.
- To analyze their lines, shapes, colours and compositions.
- To simplify and abstract selected traditional motifs.
- To develop contemporary surface-design compositions.
- To select suitable sustainable textile materials.
- To develop contemporary women's garment concepts.
- To incorporate Warli and Phad-inspired motifs into the developed garments.
- To formulate an evaluation framework for the developed designs.

C. Research Questions

- What are the distinctive visual characteristics of traditional Warli painting?
- What are the distinctive visual characteristics of traditional Phad painting?
- How can Warli and Phad motifs be abstracted and transformed for contemporary apparel?
- What sustainable materials and surface techniques can be used for the proposed garments?
- How can traditional visual narratives be integrated into contemporary women's garment silhouettes?

D. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the reinterpretation of Warli and Phad folk-art motifs for contemporary sustainable apparel, particularly women's casual and semi-formal wear such as dresses, tops, tunics, skirts, and jackets. It explores traditional motifs, themes, lines, forms, and colours and adapts them through modern design techniques such as stylisation, repetition, colour modification, and creative placement. The study aims to integrate Indian cultural heritage, contemporary fashion, and sustainable design through the development of aesthetically appealing and functional garments using suitable sustainable fabrics and surface-design techniques.

II. Methodology

The research follows an exploratory, descriptive and secondary-data-based methodology. The supplied IJRDET template has been followed for the organization and presentation of the paper.

Secondary information was The study follows a descriptive and design-development approach. Relevant literature on Warli, Phad, sustainable fashion, and traditional textiles is reviewed, followed by the selection and reinterpretation of suitable folk-art motifs. The motifs are developed using contemporary colours, layouts, and surface techniques such as hand painting, block printing and appliqué. Sustainable fabrics such as khadi, handloom cotton, organic cotton, recycled cotton, and upcycled fabrics are considered for developing selected apparel and accessories. The final designs are evaluated based on aesthetic appeal, cultural relevance, sustainability, functionality, and contemporary applicability.

Literature Review- Published research papers, academic journals, and articles related to fashion and textile studies.

III. Historical Context Of Indian Folk Art- Warli And Phad Painting

Warli painting is associated with the Warli community of Maharashtra. Government sources describe the tradition as a visual expression of daily and social life, with nature playing an important role in its imagery. The visual language is based on relatively simple geometric forms. Human figures are frequently created using triangular structures, while circles, squares, lines and dots contribute to the composition. Themes include community activities, agriculture, festivals, animals, trees and rituals.

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Traditional Warli painting also has a strong material connection with the environment. The traditional process uses mud-based wall surfaces, rice-paste white pigment and bamboo painting tools. This relationship between nature, material and visual expression provides a particularly relevant foundation for sustainable fashion research.

Phad painting is a traditional Rajasthani folk-art form originating in Bhilwara. It traditionally functions as a narrative medium associated with folk heroes and epics. Painted cloth scrolls were used in storytelling performances in which narratives were communicated through visual imagery, music and performance.

The traditional process involves preparing hand woven khadi cloth, sketching figures and applying colours in a defined sequence. Government documentation identifies red, The narrative character of Phad is particularly valuable for apparel design because the garment can become a three-dimensional storytelling surface.

IV. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study is:

Traditional Warli +Traditional Phad
↓
Historical & Visual Study
↓
Motif Identification
↓
Motif Extraction
↓
Simplification & Abstraction
↓
Colour Palette Development
↓
Surface Pattern Development
↓
Sustainable Material Selection
↓
Contemporary Silhouette Development
↓
Prototype Garment
↓
Design Evaluation
↓
Final Sustainable Apparel Concept

V. Design Concept

"From Traditional Stories to Contemporary Silhouettes."
The collection proposes two design chapters:

Chapter I – WARLI

"Rhythm of Life"

The Warli section interprets:

- human figures,
- Tarpa dance,
- trees,
- animals,
- agricultural activities,
- village houses,
- circular compositions,
- geometric forms.

Chapter II – PHAD

"Stories on Cloth"

The Phad section interprets:

- narrative figures,
- horses,
- trees,
- architectural forms,
- decorative borders,
- storytelling sequences,
- traditional colour relationships.

VI. Design Development Procedure

The Warli-inspired garment based on the provided design concept may be developed as a contemporary women's dress and The Phad concept is developed from its traditional narrative structure.

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TABLE I
DESIGN DEVELOPMENT PROCEDURE

Stage	Activity	Description
Stage 1	Cultural-context study	Study the visual language, themes and appropriate meanings of selected traditions.
Stage 2	Motif selection	Identify 6–10 motifs or motif families with clear design potential.
Stage 3	Motif analysis	Analyze line, shape, form, colour, rhythm, scale and symbolism.
Stage 4	Stylization	Simplify or reorganize forms without claiming that the resulting motif is an original traditional motif.
Stage 5	Repeat/placement	Develop borders, all-over repeats, panels and engineered placements.
Stage 6	Sustainable material selection	Select suitable natural, recycled, up cycled or handloom fabrics where technically appropriate.
Stage 7	Surface application	Explore hand printing, embroidery, appliqué, fabric painting or controlled digital methods.
Stage 8	Garment development	Create contemporary silhouettes and prototypes.

VII. Selected Folk-Art Visua Directions And Their Contemporary Apparel Applications

TABLE II
SELECTED FOLK-ART VISUAL DIRECTIONS

Tradition	Visual direction for study	Possible apparel application
Warli Painting	Geometric human figures, nature/community scenes, rhythmic linear forms	Borders, engineered placements, embroidery, restrained prints
Phad Painting	Narrative human figures, animals, trees, floral motifs, bold outlines, flat colours and narrative compositions.	Panels, tunics, jackets, embroidery/ print

VIII. Proposed Sustainable Apparel Collection

- Code- D1
- Design concept- Warli and Phad One-Piece A-Line Dress
- Development direction- One-Piece A-Line contemporary dress; restrained geometric-circle border; handloom/natural-fibre base; low-surface-material approach.
- Code- D2
- Design concept- Men's Jacket set
- Development direction- Men's Jacket set contemporary dress; restrained geometric- warli small border and Phad painting motifs, handloom/natural-fibre base; low-surface-material approach.

The following techniques are proposed:

TABLE III
SUSTAINABLE SURFACE-DESIGN TECHNIQUES

Technique	Warli Application	Phad Application
Hand painting	Geometric figures, Linear figures	Narrative figures, details
Block printing	Repeated motifs	Borders/panels
Appliqué	Geometric forms	Figures and architecture

IX. Design Development Process For The Reinterpretation Of Warli And Phad Motifs

Table IV
DESIGN DEVELOPMENT MATRIX

Stage	Warli	Phad
Inspiration	Nature and community	Narrative and folklore
Motif selection	Human figures, trees, animals	Figures, horses, architecture
Abstraction	Geometric simplification	Narrative simplification
Colour	Earthy/monochromatic	Vibrant traditional-inspired
Surface	Print/embroidery/ appliqué	Panel/print/appliqué
Silhouette	Minimal contemporary	Paneled contemporary
Sustainability	Handloom/ up cycled fabric	Khadi/ up cycled fabric
Final concept	Contemporary Warli dress	Contemporary Phad dress

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Figure 1 Traditional Warli and phad Painting Mood Board



Figure 3 Colour Board, Swatch Board-Development of a Warli and Phad-inspired colour and surface-design composition.

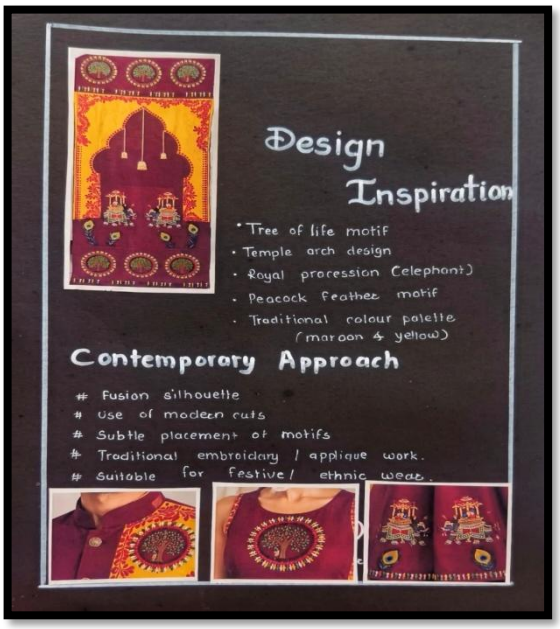


Figure 2 Traditional Warli Painting Elements Used As The Visual Inspiration For Contemporary Apparel Development.



Figure 5 Design-1 and Design-2 Contemporary women and men garment developed using reinterpretation of traditional Warli and Phad motifs visual elements.

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Figure 6 Technical Sheet with all details

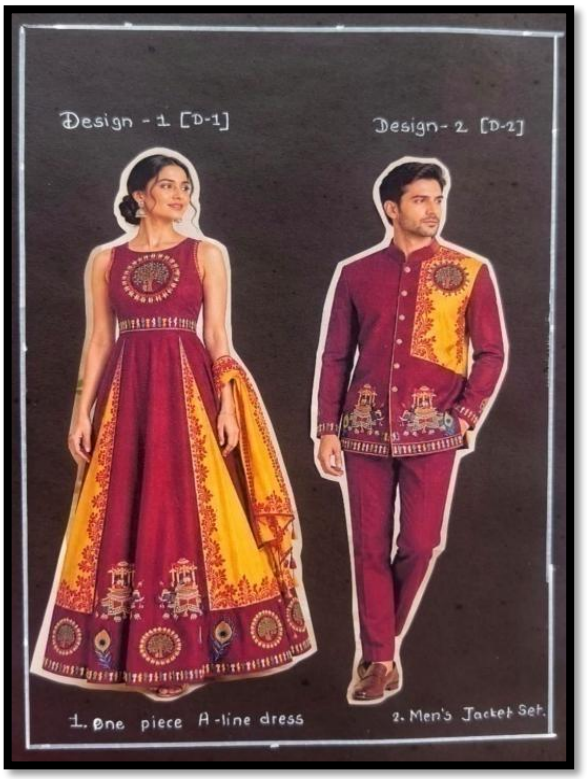


Figure-7

Contemporary women and men garment developed using reinterpretation of traditional Warli and Phad visual elements. The garment concepts developed from the provided reference images can be treated as design-development prototypes for the research study.

X. Findings And Suggestions

The study is expected to demonstrate the potential of traditional Warli and Phad painting motifs in developing innovative and sustainable contemporary apparel. It aims to integrate Indian folk-art heritage with modern fashion through eco-friendly fabrics, natural colours, and creative surface-decoration techniques while promoting cultural preservation and sustainable fashion practices.

Traditional Warli and Phad motifs should be incorporated into contemporary apparel while preserving their cultural identity. The use of sustainable fabrics, natural dyes, and eco-friendly surface-decoration techniques should be encouraged. Collaboration with local artisans and evaluation of consumer preferences, garment durability, and market acceptance can further support sustainable fashion development.

XI. Conclusion

The present study proposes a design-development framework for the reinterpretation of traditional Warli and Phad painting motifs into contemporary sustainable women's apparel.

Warli provides a distinctive geometric language based on human figures, nature, community activities and ritual imagery. Phad provides a narrative visual language developed historically on cloth and associated with storytelling traditions.

The research does not propose direct reproduction of traditional paintings. Instead, it follows a process of visual study, motif extraction, simplification, abstraction, surface development and garment integration. The sustainability component adds a further dimension by encouraging the selection of suitable handloom or lower-impact materials, efficient pattern development, use of textile remnants, upcycling and durable garment construction. Such approaches are consistent with contemporary research into circular apparel design and textile-waste reduction.

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