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Original Research Article

Changing Lifestyle and Cultural Transformation among the Apatani Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: A Geographical Analysis

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Abstract: The Apatani community of Ziro Valley in Arunachal Pradesh has a distinctive cultural landscape shaped by traditional agriculture, indigenous ecological knowledge, customary institutions, religious practices, traditional housing, food, dress, and community life. In recent decades, however, the community has experienced considerable socio-cultural and economic transformation due to modernisation, education, improved transportation and communication, market integration, tourism, technological development, and changing aspirations. This study examines the Apatani community's changing lifestyle, identifies the major factors driving these changes, and assesses their positive and negative implications for cultural identity and traditional knowledge. The findings indicate changes in occupation, housing, agricultural practices, food habits, traditional attire, religious practices, and community decision-making. The survey also shows that traditional institutions such as Buliang and indigenous ecological knowledge remain important. At the same time, traditional attire, facial tattoos, traditional agricultural dependence, and some ritual practices are declining. The study concludes that Apatani society is experiencing a gradual transition from a predominantly traditional lifestyle towards a mixed and modern way of life. A balanced approach to development is therefore necessary to improve living standards while preserving cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, and environmentally sustainable practices.

Keywords: Apatani, Arunachal Pradesh, Cultural Transformation, Indigenous Knowledge, Lifestyle Change, Modernisation, Ziro Valley.

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INTRODUCTION

Ziro Valley, the headquarters of Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh, is an important cultural landscape of the Eastern Himalayas. The valley is characterised by pine-covered hills, extensive rice fields, traditional settlements, and rich biodiversity. The Apatani are the principal inhabitants of the valley and have developed a distinctive socio-cultural system closely connected with the local environment. Their traditional livelihood is based mainly on intensive wet-rice cultivation combined with fish farming, supported by indigenous irrigation and resource-management practices.

Traditional Apatani society is also characterised by distinctive housing, handloom traditions, festivals, customary institutions, and indigenous religious beliefs. Bamboo and timber have historically been important construction materials. Traditional dress, food practices, agriculture, and community institutions have contributed to cultural continuity. Facial tattooing and the use of nose plugs were once important markers of Apatani identity but have declined considerably in recent generations. The Apatani way of life is now undergoing considerable transformation. Increased access to formal education, transportation, communication, markets, modern employment, technology, and external cultural influences has affected traditional occupations, housing, food, clothing, religion, and social relationships. The community is therefore experiencing a transition in which traditional practices and modern lifestyles increasingly coexist.

The present study examines this transformation from a geographical perspective by considering changes

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in the interaction between people, culture, economy, and environment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rapid urbanisation in Ziro Valley has contributed to a gradual reduction in the area devoted to traditional paddy cultivation. The increasing use of modern agricultural tools has also reduced dependence on traditional farming implements and practices. There has been a noticeable shift from agriculture towards government employment, tourism, business, and commercial farming, including crops such as kiwi and Chinese bamboo. This transition has contributed to a shortage of labour for traditional rice cultivation. At the same time, several cultural practices are declining. Facial tattooing and nose plugging among women have largely disappeared, while the everyday use of traditional hand-woven clothing has decreased.

Improved transportation and connectivity have accelerated commercial activity and urban expansion. These changes have also created concerns relating to water supply, waste management, and the loss of green spaces. Environmental changes and episodes of intense rainfall have further affected agriculture and transportation. These developments demonstrate the need to examine how modernisation, urbanisation, economic change, environmental pressures, and external cultural influences are transforming the traditional agricultural and cultural landscape of Ziro Valley.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the traditional lifestyle and cultural practices of the Apatani community.
2. To assess changes in the lifestyle, customs, and cultural practices of the Apatani people.
3. To identify the major factors responsible for changes in Apatani lifestyle.
4. To analyse the positive and negative impacts of modernisation on Apatani social and cultural life.
5. To understand the perceptions of Apatani people towards changing patterns of lifestyle and culture.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary and secondary data.

- **Primary Data**: Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire contained 20 questions covering lifestyle, occupation, agriculture, housing, education, food habits, clothing, religion, ecological knowledge, connectivity, tourism, and perceptions of social change. Respondents from different age groups were included to obtain varied perspectives. The questionnaire responses were analysed using descriptive and comparative methods. Percentages were used to identify major trends, while respondents' explanations were used to interpret the nature of lifestyle changes. The survey material indicates a respondent base of 15 persons for the questions for which percentages are reported.
- **Secondary Data**: Secondary information was obtained from books, research articles, journals, reports, and relevant online sources concerning the Apatani community and Ziro Valley. These materials were used to provide historical, cultural, environmental, and socio-economic context.
- **Data Analysis**: The collected information was analysed through descriptive and comparative analysis. Survey responses were organised into tables and percentages to identify changes in traditional practices and perceptions of modernisation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing literature indicates that Apatani society has been studied from several perspectives, including agriculture, ecological knowledge, settlement, religion, food, cultural change, and modernisation. Studies on Apatani agriculture and resource management emphasise the importance of wet-rice cultivation, indigenous ecological knowledge, and traditional resource-use systems. The literature reviewed for this study also indicates concerns regarding the gradual weakening of traditional ecological knowledge under the influence of modern development. Research on Apatani clothing highlights changes from traditional attire towards modern and Western forms of dress. Factors such as comfort, cost, availability, and changing social preferences have influenced the reduced use of traditional clothing in everyday life. Studies of religion and cultural transition point to the influence of Christianity and wider cultural interaction on Apatani belief systems and dress practices. Research on food transition also identifies changes associated with occupation, wage employment, changing food preferences, and globalisation.

Other studies have considered changes in family structures, educational migration, and urbanisation in Arunachal Pradesh. Collectively, these studies suggest that Apatani society is experiencing a broader transformation associated with education, migration, employment, market integration, and external cultural influences.

RESEARCH GAP

Previous studies have examined individual aspects of Apatani society, particularly agriculture, ecological knowledge, settlement, religion, food, and cultural practices. However, the combined effects of modernisation on everyday lifestyle—including occupation, housing, clothing, food, education, religion, governance, and perceptions of change—require further attention. The present study attempts to address this gap

by examining these dimensions together through primary survey data and by considering both the benefits and challenges of modernisation.

TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE OF THE APATANI COMMUNITY

- **Agricultural Practices and Economy:** The traditional Apatani economy is primarily agrarian. The community developed a sedentary wet-rice cultivation system rather than depending mainly on shifting cultivation. Rice is traditionally cultivated along with fish, while millet and maize are also grown. The rice-fish farming system makes efficient use of water and land. Irrigation channels and earthen structures help distribute water across the fields. Bamboo and pine are also important resources. Bamboo is used for construction, food, fencing, furniture, and household purposes, while pine provides timber, fuelwood, poles, and other resources. Organic waste and decomposed vegetation are traditionally used as natural manure. These practices demonstrate the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge and local resource management in the Apatani agricultural system.
- **Settlement Pattern and Housing:** Traditional Apatani settlements are characterised by closely spaced bamboo and timber houses, narrow pathways, bamboo fencing, and other bamboo structures. Traditional houses are constructed mainly from bamboo, pine wood, and cane, with raised floors and bamboo walls. Bamboo has historically been central to Apatani life. It is used for construction, food, household items, and cultural practices. This close relationship is reflected in the traditional expression that people “live with bamboo and die with bamboo.”
- **Social Structure and Governance:** Apatani society has traditionally been organised around clans, families, kinship, and community relationships. The Buliang, a traditional village institution, plays an important role in dispute resolution, social regulation, and community affairs. Traditional social organization emphasizes cooperation and collective responsibility. Men and women contribute to agricultural and household activities, while customary practices regulate social relationships and community life.
- **Religion and Belief System:** The traditional Apatani belief system is associated with Donyi-Polo, in which the Sun and Moon have important spiritual significance. Abotani is regarded as an ancestral figure. Traditional beliefs are closely connected with nature, spirits, rituals, and community life. Although Christianity has gained followers among sections of the community, Donyi-Polo continues to retain importance among many Apatanis.
- **Festivals and Rituals**: Important traditional festivals include Murung, Myoko, and Dree. These festivals are associated with purification, friendship, prosperity, agriculture, and community relationships. They provide opportunities for social interaction and reinforce cultural identity.
- **Food Habits**: Traditional Apatani food includes rice, bamboo shoots, vegetables, fish, meat, and locally available foods. Knowledge of medicinal plants and natural remedies is also an important component of traditional knowledge.
- **Dress and Ornaments**: Apatani textiles are recognised for colourful geometric patterns, including diamond and zigzag designs. Traditional women's clothing includes Bilang Abi (Gale), Ji Abi, Haitey Abie/Heti Abi, Pisa Linda, and Supung Tari. Men's traditional clothing includes Jig-Jiro, Jikhe Pulye, Jikatari, and Jilang Pulye. Facial tattoos and nose plugs were historically important cultural markers among Apatani women. These practices have largely declined among younger generations.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR LIFESTYLE CHANGE

- **Modern Education:** Modern education has expanded opportunities for the Apatani population. Young people increasingly pursue professional careers in teaching, administration, engineering, business, and other sectors. Education has improved literacy, awareness, and employment opportunities but has also reduced the transmission of some traditional knowledge and oral practices.
- **Urbanisation and Migration:** Improved transport and communication have encouraged movement towards towns and cities for education and employment. Urban exposure has influenced housing, food, clothing, occupation, and social behaviour.
- **Technological Advancement:** Mobile phones, the internet, television, and modern tools have changed communication and everyday activities. Technology has increased convenience and access to information while reducing dependence on some traditional skills.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND DEVELOPMENT

Government programmes in education, healthcare, agriculture, and rural development have improved infrastructure and accessibility. Roads, schools, hospitals, and communication networks have contributed to improved living conditions while also encouraging changes in traditional practices.

- **Tourism and Cultural Interaction:** Ziro Valley's natural and cultural attractions have increased tourism. Tourist destinations and events such as the Ziro Music Festival have created economic opportunities and increased interaction with outsiders. At the same time, tourism may contribute to the commercialisation and modification of cultural practices.
- **Economic Change:** The economy is gradually shifting from subsistence agriculture towards a more diversified and cash-oriented system. Government employment, business, tourism, and other occupations have increased household income and reduced exclusive dependence on traditional agriculture.
- **Globalisation:** Globalisation has increased exposure to different cultures through education, media, travel, and communication. Modern clothing, food, entertainment, and social practices are increasingly visible, especially among younger people.
- **Changing Social Values and Aspirations:** The younger generation increasingly seeks higher education, professional employment, improved income, and modern living standards. These aspirations are contributing to changes in family structure, occupational choices, and social relationships.
- **Decline of Traditional Practices:** Traditional attire, facial tattoos, rituals, handicrafts, indigenous agricultural practices, and oral traditions are becoming less common. The decline of traditional priests is another concern. Young people may prefer alternative careers, while some are reluctant to assume priestly responsibilities because of the perceived risks associated with ritual performance. Consequently, the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge is weakening.

IMPACTS OF LIFESTYLE CHANGE

A. Positive Impacts

- **Education and Awareness:** Modern education has increased literacy, knowledge, skills, and awareness. It has also expanded participation in professional, administrative, and academic activities.
- **Economic Opportunities:** Diversification into government employment, private-sector work, entrepreneurship, and tourism has created additional sources of income and reduced dependence on subsistence agriculture.
- **Infrastructure and Healthcare:** Improved roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and communication networks have enhanced accessibility and living conditions.
- **Connectivity and Exposure:** Improved connectivity has expanded access to information, education, markets, and cultural exchange. It has also created opportunities for wider recognition of Apatani culture.
- **Empowerment and Social Mobility:** Changing economic conditions have expanded occupational choices and opportunities for social mobility. Increased female literacy and participation in secondary and tertiary activities have also created new opportunities for women.
- **Improved Standard of Living:** Modern housing, sanitation, electricity, consumer goods, healthcare, and other amenities have improved comfort and convenience.

B. Negative Impacts

- **Decline of Traditional Culture:** Traditional rituals, customary practices, dress, and oral traditions are increasingly being modified or abandoned, creating concerns about cultural continuity.
- **Weakening of Social Structure:** Individualism, nuclear families, urban influence, and reduced communal participation have contributed to changes in traditional social structures. Survey responses also suggest increasing roles for government authorities and individuals in community decision-making.
- **Loss of Indigenous Knowledge:** Traditional knowledge relating to agriculture, forests, medicine, and handicrafts is at risk of declining as intergenerational transmission weakens.
- **Decline in Religious Practices:** Changes in religious affiliation and reduced participation in traditional rituals may affect the continuity of Donyi-Polo practices and associated cultural knowledge.
- **Religious Change and Social Tensions:** Differences between traditional beliefs and Christianity may sometimes create differing perceptions regarding rituals and community activities. However, the study also recognises that different beliefs can coexist peacefully.

CULTURAL COMMERCIALIZATION

Tourism may create income opportunities but can also lead to the modification or commercialisation of cultural practices.

- **Environmental Concerns:** Modernisation, infrastructure development, market-oriented activities, and changing land use may place pressure on the ecological balance traditionally maintained by Apatani practices.
- **Youth Identity:** Young people exposed to both traditional and modern cultures may experience difficulties in balancing cultural heritage with contemporary aspirations.
- **Dependence on External Systems:** Greater dependence on markets, outside goods, technologies, and employment has reduced the degree of traditional self-sufficiency.

- **Language and Food Changes:** The growing use of dominant languages and increasing consumption of processed and market-based foods may affect linguistic and dietary traditions.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire findings demonstrate that lifestyle change is occurring across several dimensions. The major results are summarised below.

Sl. No.	Aspect	Major Finding	Interpretation
1	Traditional agriculture	53% are not engaged in primary activities; 40% remain actively involved; 7% are partially involved.	Dependence on traditional agriculture is declining.
2	Agricultural inputs	47% use traditional methods, 13% use both traditional and modern methods, and 40% are not involved in farming.	Traditional agriculture persists among farmers, with gradual modernisation.
3	Housing	67% live in semi-modern houses, 20% prefer concrete houses, and 13% prefer traditional houses.	Semi-modern housing is becoming dominant.
4	Reasons for housing change	67% cite modern lifestyle, 20% durability, and 13% social status.	Lifestyle change is the main driver of housing transformation.
5	Buliang	87% consider Buliang highly active and 13% moderately active.	Buliang remains an important institution.
6	Decision-making	40% identify individuals/families and government as influential; 20% identify Buliang.	Traditional and modern governance systems now coexist.
7	Traditional attire	53% wear it occasionally, 40% during festivals, and 7% daily.	Traditional clothing is increasingly symbolic.
8	Facial tattoos/nose plugs	47% completely reject the practice; 27% show no preference; 13% are neutral.	Acceptance has declined considerably.
9	Food	80% mainly consume a mixed diet; 20% mainly consume traditional food.	Food habits are becoming more diverse.
10	Most affected age group	46% identify youth, 27% all age groups, 20% middle-aged, and 7% elderly.	Youth are perceived as most affected.
11	Education	60% receive both formal and traditional education; 27% formal only; 13% traditional only.	Modern and traditional education coexist.
12	Impact of education	Employment, knowledge, occupational diversification, and economic growth are major benefits.	Education is a major driver of socio-economic change.
13	Sustainability	93% consider traditional practices highly sustainable and 7% moderately sustainable.	Indigenous practices are widely perceived as sustainable.
14	Traditional ecological knowledge	60% believe youth value it; 20% say very little; 13% not at all; 7% some appreciation.	Traditional ecological knowledge remains important but faces transmission challenges.
15	Connectivity	All 15 respondents expressed high satisfaction with road and transport connectivity.	Improved connectivity is widely perceived positively.
16	Religion	60% follow Donyi-Polo, 33% Christianity, and 7% both.	Traditional and Christian beliefs coexist.
17	Religious change	93% attribute changes to individual choice and 7% to Christianity.	Personal choice is perceived as the major factor.
18	Religious coexistence	40% view coexistence as neutral, 27% negative, 27% very positive, and 6% somewhat positive.	Opinions about religious change are mixed.
19	Tourism	53% perceive significant economic benefits, 27% some benefits, and 20% very little benefit.	Tourism provides economic opportunities, although benefits may vary.
20	Satisfaction with lifestyle change	Most respondents' express satisfaction because of improved sanitation, transport, food supply, and economic opportunities; some report land and religious concerns.	Modernisation is broadly viewed positively but has created social challenges.

The survey demonstrates that change is neither uniform nor complete. Traditional agriculture continues among some respondents, and traditional ecological knowledge and Buliang remain relevant. At the same

time, modern housing, mixed food habits, reduced use of traditional dress, changing religious practices, and occupational diversification indicate substantial transformation. The findings on housing and attire are particularly significant. Semi-modern houses are dominant, while traditional dress is largely restricted to occasional or festival use.

The survey also demonstrates continuity. A large majority consider Buliang active, while 93% consider traditional practices highly sustainable.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that modernisation in Ziro Valley is producing a hybrid lifestyle rather than a complete replacement of traditional culture. Traditional and modern practices coexist in agriculture, education, housing, governance, religion, and cultural activities. The decline in agricultural dependence is one of the clearest changes. More than half of the respondents are no longer engaged in primary activities, while those remaining in agriculture show continued dependence on traditional methods. This suggests that the issue is not simply modernisation of agriculture but a broader occupational transition.

Housing provides another example of cultural adaptation. The dominance of semi-modern houses suggests that people are not necessarily abandoning traditional architectural ideas completely but are modifying them to meet contemporary requirements. Similarly, traditional clothing has shifted from everyday use towards ceremonial and symbolic use. Education appears to be a major mechanism of social mobility. The majority of respondents reported a combination of formal and traditional learning, suggesting that complete cultural detachment has not occurred. However, the preference for professional occupations and modern education may reduce the time available for traditional knowledge transmission. Religious change is also complex. Donyi-Polo remains the primary belief system for a majority of respondents, while Christianity has a significant presence. The fact that most respondents attribute religious change to individual choice rather than external religious influence suggests that modernisation is also associated with greater individual autonomy.

Tourism presents both opportunities and challenges. It generates income and promotes cultural recognition but may also encourage commercialisation. Therefore, tourism development needs to be culturally sensitive and locally beneficial.

Overall, the findings support the view that Apatani society is undergoing transition and adaptation rather than complete cultural replacement.

SUGGESTED MEASURES

Based on the findings, the following measures are recommended:

- **Balance Tradition and Modernity:** Modern education, employment, housing, and infrastructure should continue, while equal attention should be given to traditional knowledge and cultural practices.
- **Document Indigenous Knowledge:** Knowledge related to traditional agriculture, ecological management, handicrafts, language, rituals, and Buliang should be systematically documented through schools, colleges, cultural organisations, and government institutions.
- **Promote Sustainable Development:** Traditional sustainable agricultural and resource-management practices should be integrated with appropriate modern technologies to improve productivity without compromising ecological balance.
- **Promote Local Employment:** Skill development, eco-tourism, handicrafts, local enterprises, and cultural industries should be encouraged. Tourism benefits should be distributed more widely among local communities.
- **Strengthen Community Institutions:** Traditional institutions such as Buliang should be encouraged to work alongside modern administrative structures in appropriate areas of community life and conflict resolution.
- **Encourage Youth Participation:** Young people should be actively involved in learning traditional language, dress, food, festivals, crafts, agriculture, and ecological knowledge. Schools and community festivals can provide important platforms for this purpose.

These measures are consistent with the study's central finding that development should improve living standards without undermining cultural heritage and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the Apatani community of Ziro Valley is undergoing significant social, cultural, economic, and occupational transformation. Traditional agriculture, housing, clothing, food, religion, and social practices are being influenced by education, urbanisation, technology, improved connectivity, tourism, economic diversification, globalisation, and changing aspirations. Modernisation has brought important benefits. Better education, improved transport, healthcare, sanitation, employment opportunities, communication, and economic diversification have contributed to improved living standards. At the same time, the transition has created concerns regarding the decline of traditional attire, facial tattooing, indigenous agricultural practices, ritual knowledge, language, and other aspects of cultural

heritage. The findings nevertheless show that modernisation has not completely displaced traditional culture. Buliang remains relevant, Donyi-Polo continues to be followed by a majority of respondents, traditional agricultural knowledge remains important among farming households, and traditional practices are widely perceived as environmentally sustainable.

The Apatani community is therefore experiencing a process of cultural adaptation in which traditional and modern elements coexist. The challenge is not to reject modernisation but to ensure that development is culturally and environmentally sustainable. A balanced approach involving documentation of indigenous knowledge, youth participation, sustainable agriculture, culturally sensitive tourism, local employment, and strengthening of community institutions can help preserve Apatani cultural identity while enabling continued socio-economic development.

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