

Ethnobotanical studies of magico-religious plants with reference to Khampti tribe

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Abstract: Ethnobotanical studies of magico-religious plants used by Khampti tribe were carried out in 6 villages of Lakhimpur district of Assam. The information was gathered through questionnaires and discussion. A total of 48 plant species belonging to 30 families and 44 genera were observed to use in different magico-religious practices. The documented plants were grouped into three use categories. Maximum of plant species (75%) were used in sacred and religious rites followed by taboos (33.33%) and magical belief (12.5%). On the basis of plant parts used, leaves were the most dominant part with 17 plant species. Among documented plants, *Ziziphus jujube* was the most culturally significant plant.

Keywords: Khampti, Assam, Magico-religious practices, Cultural important index.

I. INTRODUCTION

Khampti tribe, one of the schedule tribe of Assam belongs to Tai race and are known as Shaghai. They are immigrants of Upper Burma and are concentrated in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and North Lakhimpur district of Assam [1]. The total population of this tribe is 1,106 which constitutes 0.03% of the total ST population of Assam. About 75.41% of the tribe resides in the rural areas [2]. They follow *Hinayana* Buddhism religion and worship Lord Buddha as a God. They also worship earth as Goddess and spirits of ancestor [1]. The major festivals of Khampti tribe are *Sangken*, *Poi-Pee-Mau*, *Poileng*, etc.

An examination of literature reveals that few studies have been carried out on religious practices and conservation of plants around shrines and pagodas of Khampti tribe [3]. However, the detailed account of ethnobotanical study on plants related to magico-religious practices in this tribe is lacking in Assam. Therefore, the present study is taken up to document the plants used in different magico-religious practices and to determine the culturally significant plants in Khampti tribe

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted from December 2014 to March 2018 in Lakhimpur district of Assam. The geographical co-ordinates of the district are 93°42' and 94°20' E longitude and 27°53' and 27°53' N latitude. Six villages namely Borkhamptigaon, Borpothar no.1, Deotula, Gosaibarikhampitigaon, Sribhuyangaon and Tipling were selected for the present study. Prior Informed Consent (PIC) was taken from the informants. The ethnobotanical informations were gathered through a questionnaire survey [4]. The collection of plants samples, preparation of herbarium and identification of plants were done by using standard methodology and literature [5,6]. A total of 51 informants (31 males and 20 females) were interviewed. The culturally significant plants were determined by using an ethnobotanical index i.e., Cultural important index [7].

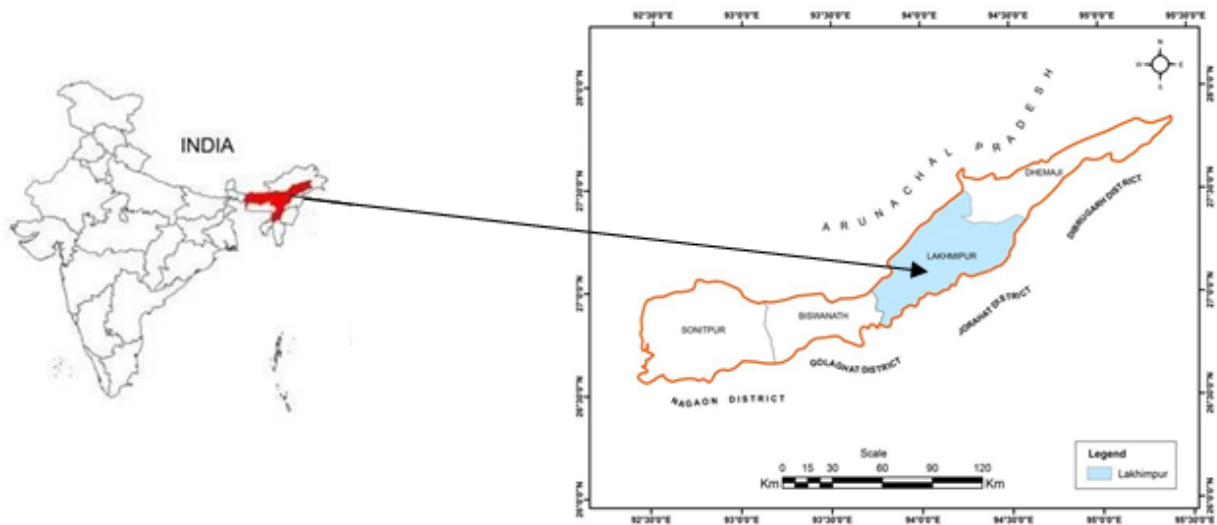


Fig 1: Map showing study sites

III. RESULTS

A total of 48 plant species belonging to 30 families and 44 genera were collected and documented for the present study (Table 1, Fig.2). The most dominant family was Poaceae (10 species) followed by Arecaceae (4), Rutaceae (3), Apocynaceae (2), Leguminosae (2), etc. The tree with 22 species was dominant category and followed by herbs, grasses, shrubs and climbers (Fig. 3). The whole plant was dominant category among all plant parts in magico-religious practices followed by leaf, stem, fruit, wood etc. (Fig. 4).



Fig.2. Magico-religious practices of Khampiti tribe (A-C) and plants used in magico-religious practices (D-F):
 (A) *Maaikom sumphai* festival, (B) *Buddha purnima*, (C) Culm of *Bambusa tulda* used to support long branches of *Ficus religiosa* as a ritual, (D) *Ficus religiosa* (Sacred tree), (E) *Arundo donax*, (F) *Phrynium pubinerve*.

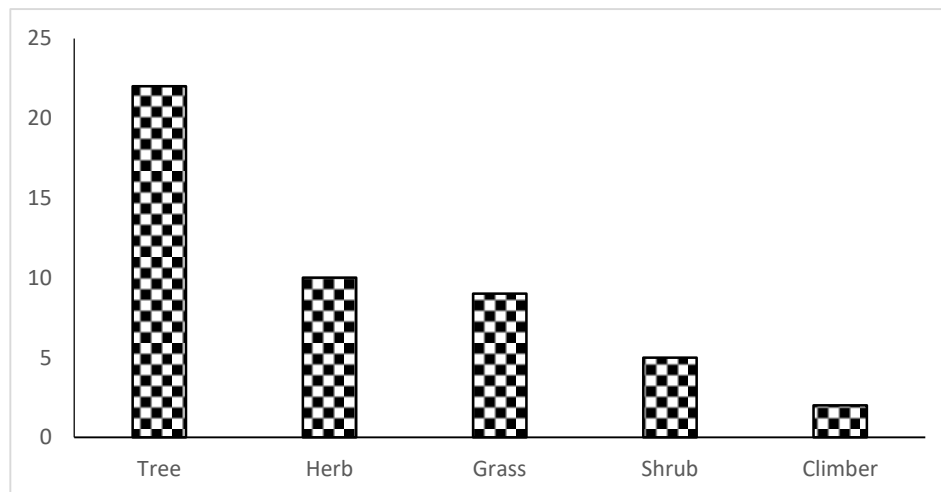


Fig 3: Habit of magico-religious plants

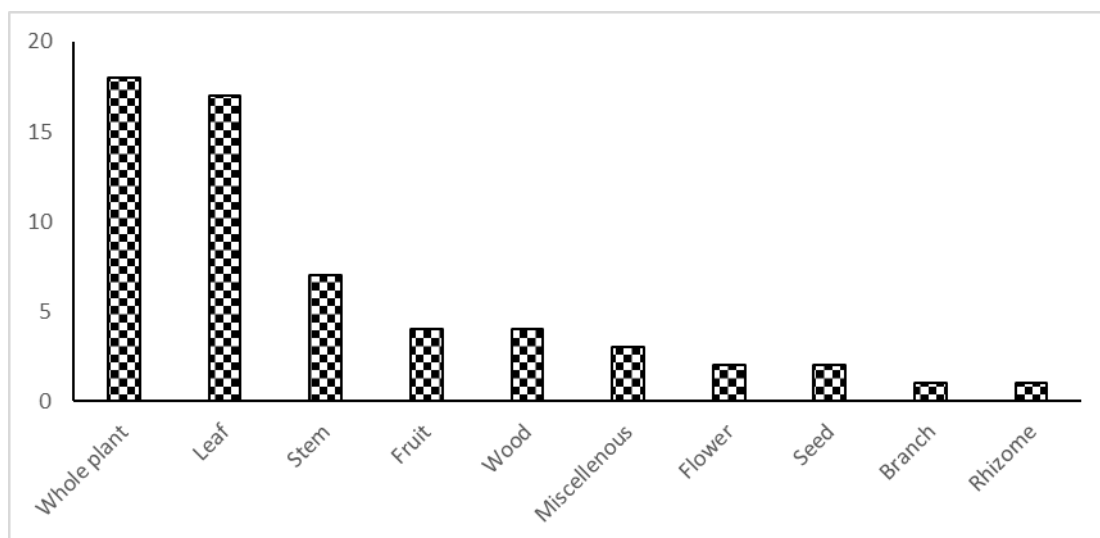


Fig 4: Different plant parts used in magico-religious practices.

Table 1: The plant used in the magico-religious practices of Khampti tribe

Sl.no.	Botanical name	Family	Common and vernacular name	Habit	Part used	Uses
1.	<i>Acacia farnesiana</i> (L.) Willd.	Leguminosae	Sweet acacia (E), Korom neng (K)	Shrub	WP	The tree is raised in the front yard to prevent the entry of evil spirit.
2.	<i>Acorus calamus</i> Linnaeus	Acoraceae	Sweet flag (E), Bach (A)	Herb	R	The rhizomes are used to prepare garland for curing common cold and also for protection against evil spirit especially practised in children.
3.	<i>Aegle marmelos</i> (Linnaeus) Correa	Rutaceae	Bael (E), Mak lak (K)	Tree	L	The leaves are offered to Lord Buddha during a religious rite in <i>Sanken</i> festival.
4.	<i>Allium sativum</i> Linnaeus	Amaryllidaceae	Garlic (E), Puro-ching (K)	Herb	BL	The bulbs are used to prepare garland for curing common cold and also for protection against evil spirit especially practised in children.
5.	<i>Alpinia nigra</i> (Gaertn.) Burt	Zingiberaceae	Bamboo-leaved Galangal (E), Munhayu (K)	Herb	L	The leaves are used for wrapping cooked rice to offer in the monastery during <i>Sanken</i> festival.
6.	<i>Alstonia scholaris</i> (L.) R. Br.	Apocynaceae	Devil tree (E), Maitang (K)	Tree	W	The wood is used to prepare coffin during the final rite.
7.	<i>Areca catechu</i> Linnaeus	Arecaceae	Betelnut palm/ Arecanut (E), Magmuh (K)	Tree	F	The fruits are offered during a ritual called <i>Hak Som na</i> , which is related to first transplantation of paddy.
8.	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam.	Moraceae	Jackfruit (E), Tun-malang (K)	Tree	WP, W	The dye from the wood is used for colouring the clothes of Monk during a ritual of <i>Shiva Kathing dan</i> . The tree is not planted in the front yard of the house and is considered as taboo.
9.	<i>Arundo donax</i> L.	Poaceae	Giant reed (E), Mai-oue (K)	Grass	S	The stem is used for supporting the long horizontal branches of <i>Ficus religiosa</i> , a sacred tree, in a ritual called <i>Kaam mai</i> .
10.	<i>Bambusa balcooa</i> Roxb.	Poaceae	Plains bamboo (E), Maichang bhuluka (K)	Grass	S	The culm is used for the preparation of ceremonial shed (<i>Chang fra</i>) used during <i>Lufra</i> ceremony in which idols of Lord Buddhas are offered to the monastery.

11.	<i>Bambusa pallida</i> Munro	Poaceae	- Maichang bijuli (K)	Grass	S	The culm is used for the preparation of ceremonial shed (<i>Chang fra</i>) used during a ceremony called <i>Lufra</i> .
12.	<i>Bambusa tulda</i> Roxb.	Poaceae	Bengal bamboo (E), Maichang-ching (K)	Grass	S	The culm is used for supporting the long horizontal branches of <i>Ficus religiosa</i> , a sacred tree, in a ritual called <i>Kaam mai</i> . It is used as a substitute of <i>Arundo donax</i> .
13.	<i>Bombax ceiba</i> Linnaeus	Malvaceae	Silk-cotton tree (E), Tun-lue (K)	Tree	W, WP	The wood is used to prepare coffin during the funeral rite. The tree is not planted in the front yard of the house.
14.	<i>Brassica juncea</i> (Linnaeus) Czern.	Brassicaceae	Indian mustard (E), Horiyo (A)	Herb	SD	The oil obtained from seeds is used for lighting lamp during major festivals like <i>Buddha Jayanti</i> and lamps are lighted...at the base of the tree, around monastery and roads of the village.
15.	<i>Calamus tenuis</i> Roxb.	Arecaceae	Bareilly cane (E), Wai(K)	Climber	WP	It is considered inauspicious and is not grown in front yard of house.
16.	<i>Capsicum annuum</i> Linnaeus	Solanaceae	Cayenne (E), Joliky (A)	Herb	F	The dried fruits are used as a remedy against the evil eye.
17.	<i>Carica papaya</i> L.	Caricaceae	Papaya (E), Aomita (A)	Tree	F	The fruits are used for lighting of the lamp during <i>Kati Bihu</i> .
18.	<i>Citrus limon</i> (L.) Osbeck	Rutaceae	Indian wild orange (E), Tun-ma-lue (K)	Shrub	WP	It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.
19.	<i>Citrus megaloxycarpa</i> Lush.	Rutaceae	Sour pummel (E), Mak lung (K)	Shrub	WP	It is not planted in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.
20.	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> Linnaeus	Arecaceae	Coconut (E), Mo-un (K)	Tree	L	The leaves are offered to Lord Buddha during a religious rite in <i>Sanken</i> festival.
21.	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (Linnaeus) Schott	Araceae	Taro (E), Moan (K)	Herb	WP	The whole plant is offered during a ritual called <i>Hak Som na</i> , generally practised during the first transplantation of paddy.
22.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i> (Linnaeus) Pers.	Poaceae	Bermuda grass/ Wire grass (E), Yeame-chai (K)	Herb	L	The leaves are offered to Lord Buddha during a religious rite in the <i>Sanken</i> festival.
23.	<i>Dillenia indica</i> Linnaeus	Dilleniaceae	Elephant apple (E), Tun machang (K)	Tree	F, WP	The fruits are used for lighting of the lamp during <i>Kati Bihu</i> . It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.
24.	<i>Elaeocarpus floribundus</i> Blume.	Elaeocarpaceae	Indian olive (E), Jalpai (A)	Tree	WP	It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.
25.	<i>Erythrina stricta</i> Roxb.	Leguminosae	Indian coral tree (E), Tun-mai-tong (K)	Tree	WP	There is a prohibition of planting in the front yard of the house.
26.	<i>Ficus religiosa</i> L.	Moraceae	Sacred fig (E), Ahot gash (A)	Tree	WP	This tree is considered a sacred tree.
27.	<i>Garcinia pedunculata</i> Roxb. Ex Buch.-Ham	Clusiaceae	Monkey fruit (E), Maahao (K)	Tree	WP	It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.
28.	<i>Gossypium herbaceum</i> Linnaeus	Malvaceae	Cotton (E), Quie (K)	Shrub	FS	The flosses are used for lighting of lamp in a religious rites. The thread is used to weave cloth during <i>Shiva Kathing dan</i> . During the marriage ceremony, the thread is used to tie the leaves of <i>Phragmites karka</i> .
29.	<i>Heteropogon contortus</i> (L.) P.Beauv. ex Roem. & Schult.	Poaceae	Black speargrass (E), Kha (K)	Grass	L	The leaves are used to prepare the ceremonial shed (<i>Chang fra</i>) during <i>Lufra</i> .
30.	<i>Lagerstroemia speciosa</i> (Linnaeus) Pers.	Lythraceae	Pride of India (E), Ajar (A)	Tree	WP	The tree is not planted in the front yard of a house.
31.	<i>Livistona jenkinsiana</i> Griff.	Arecaceae	Himalayan fan palm (E), Tong ku (K)	Tree	L	The leaves are used for making the ceremonial shed (<i>Chang fra</i>) used during <i>Lufra</i> .
32.	<i>Mangifera indica</i> Linnaeus	Anacardiaceae	Mango (E), Tun mong (K)	Tree	L, WP	The leaves are used for preparing holy water called <i>Tameta</i> and is sprinkled around village boundary to protect against natural calamity. It is not planted at the front yard of a house and is not considered as auspicious.
33.	<i>Mesua ferrea</i> L.	Calophyllaceae	Ceylon ironwood (E), Tun-kamko (K)	Tree	L, WP	The leaves are offered to Lord Buddha during a religious rite in the <i>Sanken</i> festival. The tree is not planted in the front yard of the house and even the tree shadow should not fall on the house because as per their belief system.
34.	<i>Mimusops elengi</i> L.	Sapotaceae	Bullet wood (E), Khid-la (K)	Tree	L	The leaves are offered to Lord Buddha during a religious rite in <i>Sanken</i> festival.
35.	<i>Musa balbisiana</i> Colla	Musaceae	Wild banana (E), Koi-athia (K)	Herb	L, S	The leaves are used as offering plate during a ritual called <i>Hak khow</i> or <i>Hak Som na</i> . The stem is used for preparing ceremonial structure (<i>Komuchai</i>) in the four corners of village boundary during <i>Poi sanken</i> . This ritual is generally done for the protection of village against natural calamity.
36.	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn.	Nelumbonaceae	Lotus (E), Mo-uu/ Mok Mou (K)	Herb	FL, S	The flowers are offered to Lord Buddha during major festivals like <i>Buddha jayanti</i> . The fibre obtained from the stem mixed with the thread is used for weaving clothes during...ceremony like <i>Shiva Kathing dan</i> , which are offered to monks.
37.	<i>Oryza sativa</i> Linnaeus	Poaceae	Asian rice, Red rice (E), Khow-Nou (K)	Grass	SD, ST	The puffed rice are offered during religious rites in all festivals. A rope from straw is made and tied on tree base, granary, and cowshed unit especially to protect its property against natural calamities and to ensure better productivity, which is generally performed one day prior to the celebration of <i>Sitang mepi</i> .
38.	<i>Phragmites karka</i> (Retz.) Trin.ex Steud.	Poaceae	Tall reed (E), Mai kan lao/ Loa (K)	Grass	L	The leaves are used during marriage ceremony and the leaves are placed on both side of the staircase traditional house (<i>Chang ghar</i>). It is considered as auspicious and also prevents entry of evil spirit.
39.	<i>Phrynium pubinerve</i> Blume	Marantaceae	- Tong ching (K)	Herb	L	The leaves are used for wrapping cooked rice offered to monastery during the <i>Sanken</i> festival.
40.	<i>Piper betle</i> Linnaeus	Piperaceae	Betle (E), Mai-mou (K)	Climber	L	The leaves are offered to Goddess Lakshmi in a ritual called <i>Hak khow</i> or <i>Hak Som na</i> .
41.	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i> L.	Poaceae	Sugarcane (E), Oie (K)	Grass	L, S	The leaves are used to prepare ceremonial altar during <i>Buddha purnima</i> . The molasses (<i>Gur</i>) obtained from the stem are used to prepare a round shaped sweet (<i>ladab</i>) with puffed rice (<i>Akhot</i>), which are offered and distributed to devotees.
42.	<i>Saccharum ravennae</i> (Linnaeus) L.	Poaceae	Ravenna grass (E), Ikora (A)	Grass	L	The plant is offered to Goddess Lakshmi during a ritual called <i>Hak khow</i> for better agricultural productivity.
43.	<i>Santalum album</i> L.	Santalaceae	Indian Sandalwood (E), Namcha (K)	Tree	W	The wood is used during final rites of Monk (<i>Bhiku</i>). The wood is also considered best for carving Buddha statue.
44.	<i>Syzygium jambos</i> (L.) Alston	Myrtaceae	Rose apple (E), Chape (K)	Tree	L	The leaves are used for offering during religious rites of <i>Sanken</i> festivals.
45.	<i>Tabernaemontana divaricata</i> (Linnaeus) R.Br. ex Roem. & Schult.	Apocynaceae	Crape jasmine (E), Mok-ya-khow (K)	Shrub	FL	The flowers are offered to Lord Buddha during puja daily.
46.	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Fabaceae	Tamarind (E), Mekang (K)	Tree	WP	It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious due to its sour fruit.
47.	<i>Terminalia chebula</i> Retz.	Combretaceae	Myrobalan (E), Mana (K)	Tree	WP	It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious due to its bitter taste.
48.	<i>Ziziphus jujuba</i> Mill.	Rhamnaceae	Jujube (E), Tun-mok-kho (K)	Tree	L, B, WP	The leaves are offered during religious rites of <i>Sanken</i> festivals. The tender branches of the plant are used to clean the body during <i>Sitang mepi</i> festival as a ritual. The branches of the plant are kept at the wall of house, granary and the main gate to provide protection against the evil spirit. It is not grown in the front yard of a house and is considered inauspicious.

A-Assamese, E-English, K-Khampti, B-Branches, BL-Bulb, F-Fruits, FL-Flower, FS-Flosses, L-leaves, ST-Straw, R-Rhizomes, S-Stem, SD-Seeds, W-wood, WP-whole plant.

The result given in Table 2 showed that plants were divided into three categories based on their uses in magico-religious practices. Maximum numbers of plants were used in sacred and religious rites followed by taboos and Magical belief.

Table 2: Use categories and their percentages

Sl. no.	Use categories	Number of species	% of species
1	Sacred and religious rites (SAR)	36	75%
2	Magical belief (MAG)	6	12.5%
3	Taboos (TAB)	16	33.33%

The result presented in Table 3 shows that *Phrynium pubinerve* and *Ficus religiosa* have the highest CI (0.961 and 0.941) in sacred and religious rites and taboos category. *Ziziphus jujuba* has maximum total and mean CI followed by *Ficus religiosa*, *Mangifera indica*, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, *Bombax ceiba* and other genera (Fig.5).

Table 3: Total and mean cultural important indices of 15 most important plants

S.No.	Name	SAR	MAG	TAB	Total CI	Mean CI
1.	<i>Ziziphus jujuba</i>	0.882	0.745	0.922	2.549	0.85
2.	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	0.941	0	0.941	1.882	0.63
3.	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	0.863	0	0.824	1.687	0.56
4.	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	0.863	0	0.745	1.608	0.54
5.	<i>Bombax ceiba</i>	0.863	0	0.569	1.432	0.48
6.	<i>Mesua ferrea</i>	0.941	0	0.431	1.372	0.46
7.	<i>Dillenia indica</i>	0.569	0	0.686	1.255	0.42
8.	<i>Phrynium pubinerve</i>	0.961	0	0	0.961	0.32
9.	<i>Cynodon dactylon</i>	0.941	0	0	0.941	0.31
10.	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>	0.941	0	0	0.941	0.31
11.	<i>Bambusa tulda</i>	0.902	0	0	0.902	0.30
12.	<i>Syzygium jambos</i>	0.902	0	0	0.902	0.30
13.	<i>Citrus indica</i>	0	0	0.902	0.902	0.30
14.	<i>Livistona jenkinsiana</i>	0.882	0	0	0.882	0.29
15.	<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i>	0.882	0	0	0.882	0.29

SAR- Sacred and religious rites; MAG- Magical belief ; TAB- Taboos; Total CI-Total cultural important index; Mean CI-Mean cultural important index;

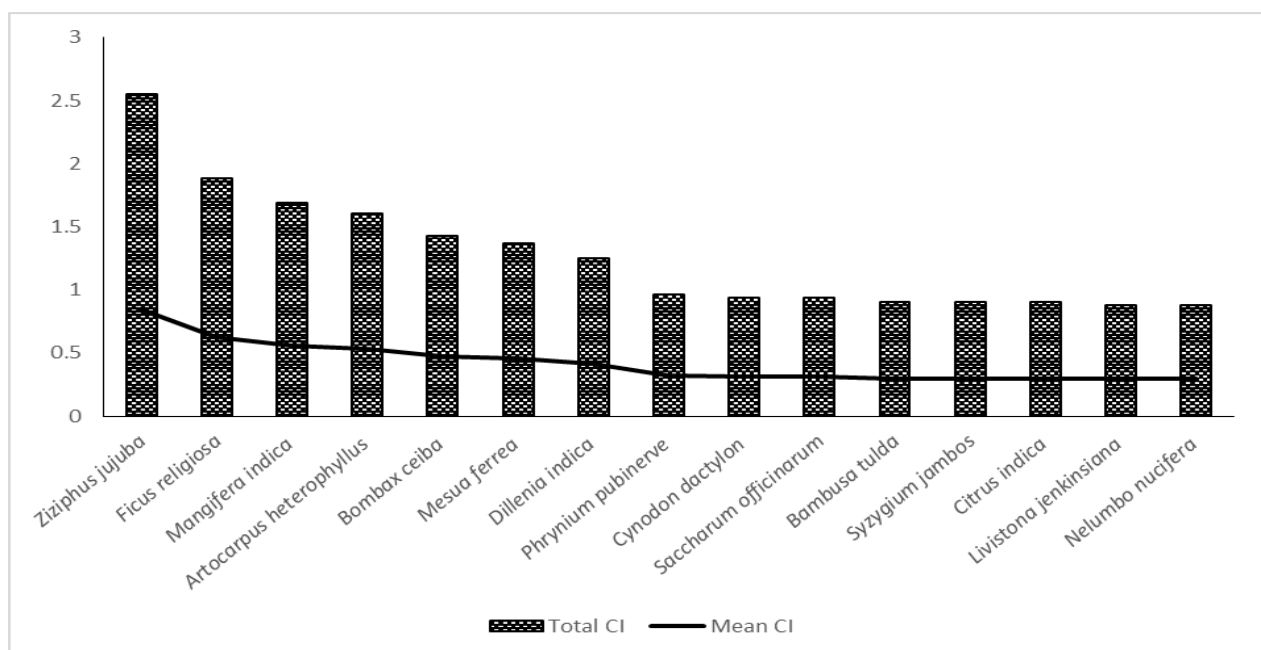


Fig 5: Total and mean cultural important indices of plants used in magico-religious practices.

IV. DISCUSSION

The present study documented a total of 48 plant species belonging to 44 genera and 30 families. The number of species in the study is found higher than other studies reported from Tehri Garwal [8], Banswara district of Rajasthan [9], Surguja division of Chhattisgarh [10], Terai region of Gorakhpur [11], West Bengal [12], Indo-gangetic plain [13], Andhra Pradesh [14], Bishnupur district of Manipur [15] Hill-Tiwas tribe of Assam [16], Fatehpur district of Uttar Pradesh [17], Central India [18], Gujarat [19], Hajong tribe of Assam [20], *Dobur uie* of Mising tribe from Assam [21], Darjeeling Himalaya [22] and however it is found lower than other studies reported from Nalbari and Sonitpur district of Assam [23], Bodo tribe from Assam [24], Tripura [25].

Poaceae was dominant family with 10 species, followed by Arecaceae (4), Rutaceae (3), Apocynaceae (2), Leguminosae (2), etc. which is similar to the finding reported from other tribes [23, 25, 26]. The present study reveals that most of members of family Poaceae are used for making ceremonial altar. The tree was the dominant category with 22 species and is similar to the finding reported from Nalbari and Sonitpur district of Assam [23] and Tripura [25].

The people of this tribe light lamps by using fruits of *Carica papaya* and *Dillenia indica* during festivals reflect that they still follow customs and traditions of their ancestors. They perform all religious rites for better production of crops and protection of their community from evil spirits and may be the reason for maximum percentage of plants used in sacred and religious category. Like other tribes of NE India, the growing of big trees with spines, thorns, sour fruit are not preferred in front yard of house. They are of belief that such trees are inauspicious and may bring bad luck to them. The use of these plants namely *Acacia farnesiana* and *Ziziphus jujube* due to presence of thorns, spines or prickles in them and *Allium sativum*, *Acorus calamus* and *Brassica juncea* to drag away evil spirit due to presence of peculiar odour are considered as taboo according to their belief. Similar observations are made in Tripuri tribe also [25] which shows that tribes of NE India share some common knowledge among them.

Ziziphus jujuba has highest CI value (2.549), followed by *Ficus religiosa* (1.882), *Mangifera indica* (1.687), *Artocarpus heterophyllus* (1.608), *Bombax ceiba* (1.432), etc. The maximum cultural important index of *Z. jujuba* is due to its utilisation in all three use categories whereas other plants are used in one or two used categories. The present investigation reveals that *Z. jujube* is the most culturally important plant in Khampti tribe.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Khampti tribes use 48 plant species belonging to 30 families in magico-religious practices. Trees are the most dominant with 22 plant species. The documented plants are categorized in three use categories namely sacred and religious rites, magical belief and taboos. *Ziziphus jujuba* is the most culturally important tree with highest CI value. The present investigations show that Khampti tribe has a good knowledge of plants used in magico-religious practices.

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