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Research

Ethnomedicinal botany of the Apatani in the Eastern Himalayan region of India

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Abstract

This paper investigates the wealth of medicinal plants used by the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Apatani have traditionally settled in seven villages in the Ziro valley of Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern Himalayan region of India. The present study has resulted in the documentation of 158 medicinal plant species used by the Apatani group of villages. These medicinal plant species were distributed across 73 families and 124 genera. Asteraceae was the most dominant family (19 species, 11 genera) of medicinal plants, followed by Zingiberaceae, Solanaceae, Lamiaceae and Araceae. For curing ailments, the use of aboveground plant parts was higher (80%) than the belowground plant parts in the Apatani group of villages. Of the aboveground plant parts, leaf was used in the majority of cases (56 species), followed by fruit. Different belowground plant forms such as root, tuber, rhizome, bulb and pseudo-bulb were used by Apatani as a medicine. About 52 types of ailments were cured by using these 158 medicinal plant species. The results of this study are further discussed in the changing socio-economic contexts.

Introduction

Tribal communities are mainly the forest dwellers who have accumulated a rich knowledge on the uses of various forests and forest products over the centuries. India possesses a total of 427 tribal communities, of these more than 130 major tribal communities live in North East India, which is comprised of the 8 states Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The major tribal communities of the North East India have been categorized into sub-tribes and if these sub-tribes are taken into account the total number of tribal groups reaches up to 300. In general, the tribes of North East India have been categorized into two broad ethnic communities, such as the Khasi and the Jaintia tribe of Meghalaya, who belong to 'Monkhemar' culture of Austoic dialect, and the rest of the tribal groups are basically Mongoloid, who belongs to Tibeto-Burman subfamily of Tibeto-Chinese group [1-3].

In the North East India, each state contains a number of tribal groups. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the states in North East India inhabited by 28 major tribes and 110 sub-tribes [4]. Arunachal Pradesh is the 12th mega biodiversity region of the world [5]. More than 545 species of orchids have been reported from the state, which is the highest number of orchid species known from any single state of India [6]. Such a rich biodiversity in the state has provided an initial advantage to its inhabitants for observ-