Foreword

Plants play an important role in human life. They have a valuable place in mythology and religious ceremonies. Early humans recognized their dependence on nature to be healthy and for fighting against illnesses. Evidences of this early association have been found in the grave of a Neanderthal man buried 60,000 years ago. The earliest known medical document is a 4,000 year old Sumerian clay tablet that recorded plant remedies for various illnesses. By the time of the ancient Egyptian civilization, a great wealth of information already existed on medicinal plants. A lot of information along with hundreds of remedies was preserved in Ebers papyrus about 3500 years ago.

Western medicine can be traced back to the Greek physician Hippocrates (460-377 BC), known as the Father of Medicine. Early Roman writings also influenced the development of Western medicine, especially the work of Dioscorides (1st century AD). He compiled his knowledge of herbs in De Materia Medica, which contained an account of over 600 species of plants with medicinal value. For centuries medicine in the West meant herbal medicine. In other parts of the world, medicinal plants are an important element of indigenous medical systems. For example in the north-western Amazon, indigenous people use at least 1300 plant species to create drogas do cerato or wild drugs. In Southeast Asia, traditional healers use 6500 different plants to treat malaria, stomach ulcers, syphilis and other disorders.

The oldest traditional medical systems in the world include Chinese, Ayurvedic, Unani, Japanese, Homeopathy and chiropathy. The use of traditional medicine includes (a) Medication by use of medicinal plant, minerals, animal material (b) Non medication by acupuncture and yoga. Complementary medication includes acupuncture, herbal treatment, and manuals, spiritual and dietary treatments.
According to WHO estimate 80% of world population is depending on traditional medicine (Fains Worth et al., 1985). In India, Egypt, and Sudan around 70% of rural people use traditional medicine. In India and China 60% of the people affected with cholera and malaria are treated with herbal medicines. The market for traditional medicines in these countries is US$ 500 million, while Western medicine amount only US$ 300 million. Now in Singapore and Australia 50% to 60% of people were using alternative medicine as herbal medicine and around 17,000 herbal products are registered in these countries. In Belgium 40% of people depend on contemporary, 84% on homeomedicines and 74% on acupuncture medicine. 50% of France people take advantage of complementary medicine. But Germany 10,000 to 13,000 alternative medical practitioners are thriving well and 75% of them utilize complementary medicines. 77% of pain clinics utilize acupuncture. UK 90%- of medical practitioners was utilizing the complementary herbal medicines in the osteopathy and acupuncture. In 1990 US only 30% of the people were utilizing complementary medicines it grew to 40% in 1997.

India is one of the nations blessed with the rich heritage of traditional systems of medicine and rich biodiversity. India has 15 agro-climatic zones, (Aravind Kumar et al., 2007). This is the reason for which India is called the botanical garden of the world.

The present day diseases are all life style diseases. Many of the synthetic products are failing to serve their purpose. It is important to know more about the plants of our surroundings which can give a solution to many of these problems.

Two main health problems which are very commonly encountered now-a-days have been selected for investigation. Diabetes has become very common ailment afflicting humans irrespective of age. It is a world wide problem and India is not exceptional. Liver diseases are other serious problems faced by developing and developed countries. Even though there are a number synthetic drugs available for treatment, plant drugs are preferred due to less side effects and low cost.
There is a lot of scope for research in medicinal plants because there is growing
interest in this field. Only 6% of total plant species have been investigated so far.
There are a number of medicinal plants still to be explored which may serve the
needy people.