Plants have been the major source of drugs till the nineteenth century. In Sanskrit the word 'Oshadhi' (अश्च) means or comprises the entire plant kingdom (flora). The word drug is derived from the French work 'drogue' which means a dry herb. Valuable medicinal properties are found not only in rare herbs growing in remote forests of Himalayas, but also in commonly used kitchen vegetables. Anti-diabetic effects of 'Vegulin' (from Cabbage) and 'Charantin' (from Bitter Gourd), the later having more potent action than the synthetic Tolbutamide; anti-fertility effect of m-xylo-hydroquinone (from Peas); strong germicidal properties of 'Allin' (from Garlic); anthelmintic activity of the extracts of Pumpkin seeds etc. are some of the striking examples. With the advent of synthetic drugs, the general impression is that plant products are no longer important in the present day therapeutics. A scientific study, however, reveals a different picture. An analysis of some 1.05 billion prescriptions dispensed from the community pharmacies in U.S.A. during 1967 showed that 25% of these contained one or more active principles from higher plants. Several undesirable effects of synthetic chemicals that are being used resulting in 'iatrogenic' (physician induced) diseases, are coming to light each year and there is trend to avoid them and resort to natural products particularly the plant products.

Medicinal plants have a special significance for India because the Indigenous systems of medicine (Ayurvedic, Unani etc.), which provide
relief to a large majority of the people, use drugs chiefly from the Vegetable Kingdom.

The country has a wide topography and agro-climatic conditions permitting growth of an estimated number of 20,000 plant species. These factors have made research on medicinal plants an important facet of bio-medical research in India.

Contradictory views are expressed on Indian systems of medicine and Herbal therapy. There are staunch supporters and vehement opponents. The former have a blind faith in the inspired doctrines and teachings contained in the vedic literature and consider them to be incapable of improvement by modern scientific techniques. On the other hand some practitioners of the Allopathic system consider that researches on the ancient systems and herbal therapy will be infructuous and will entail sheer waste of time, money and energies. Both these views are exaggerations. The need to pursue the studies is, however, obvious as the plants growing in India are really our concern and no one else is going to investigate them. It is necessary for advancement of knowledge and economic development. Cheap medical aid, within the means of the masses, can be provided only by utilization of local resources and substitution of indigenous drugs for more expensive foreign drugs. The need, therefore, is to look at the problem dispassionately and to study it with an unprejudiced mind. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru rightly pointed out, "Learn all that you can from ancient Indian medicine but do not believe that the last word could have been said a thousand years ago".

Fortunately this spirit of inquiry is now evident in our country and there has been tremendous activity particularly in the post-independence era. Research on medicinal plants took great strides during
this period. Though attempts at revival are discernible in the pre-independence years also, it was only in the last 2-3 decades when the activity shifted from anthropological and field surveys to laboratory screening. Many projects in this area were launched at the National and Regional research laboratories; medical, veterinary and pharmacy colleges and university departments all over India. Compared to all the earlier periods, considerable effort has been devoted for investigations on medicinal properties in Indian plants through many government, semi-government and private bodies. Whether this is the best way the money could be spent to make a substantial impact on the discovery of new drugs or revival of old remedies with addition of knowledge, remains to be seen.

The present study is an attempt to review the effort and achievements in research on Indian medicinal plants from 1947-48 to 1976-77.