INTRODUCTION

A historical perspective on the use of medicinal plants for the treatment and cure of disease indicates that traditional medicinal practices have been associated with humanity time immemorial (Halberstein, 2005). These traditional practices involve therapeutic methods using conventional medicines that have been handed down orally through generations. In view of ethnic segregation over several years, these practices are unique to each community and group, which have survived. Knowledge of ancient traditional practices is now limited to a few closed communities, especially the remote tribal/marginalized population for whom it becomes a part of their cultural practices (Bhattarai et al., 2010).

In the contemporary, emergence of multidrug resistant strains of bacteria is being frequently noticed, and quite recently this phenomenon has been critically analyzed and documented (Laxminarayan et al., 2013). This indicates the necessity to continue the search for newer compounds to combat new infections. Efforts are being made to discover new antimicrobial compounds from various sources viz., micro-organisms, animals, plants etc. One such source is folk medicine. Systematic screening of these sources could result in the discovery of novel effective compounds (Diallo et al., 1999).

In India, although 1.5 million practitioners use around 25,000 effective plant based formulations, 6,400 flowering plants in India were reported to have ethnomedicinal values, whereas, only 10% of these are used in drug and pharmaceutical industries (Verma et al., 2007; Mehrotra and Mehrotra 2005). In the recent past impetus is being accorded to promote traditional health care system prevalent among the indigenous communities from various parts of India. In this context, documentation of ethnobotany of medicinal plants used by the indigenous tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands assumes significance (Gupta et al., 2004).

Andaman and Nicobar Islands are home to some of the most isolated communities in the world. These communities have been living in virtual isolation for thousands of years. Their survival during all these centuries of isolation would have heavily depended on the effectiveness of health care and ethnomedical practices that evolved over the years.
Nicobarese tribe belonging to Mongoloid group is one of six indigenous tribes of these Islands residing mainly in Nicobar district of the territory. Though the tsunami 2004 devastated their normal life of tribal communities, they still maintain their traditional socio-cultural practices. The invaluable knowledge and innovative practices of these traditional practices needs to be protected from extinction, as also from the ruthless commercial exploitation. Although there have been several attempts to document the medicinal plants used by the indigenous communities of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a comprehensive effort to document ethnomedicine and health care practices of the indigenous communities of these islands are lacking.

The phytochemical research based on ethnopharmacological information is generally considered as an effective approach in the discovery of new anti-infective agents from higher plants (Kloucek et al., 2005). Currently available information on the medicinal plants in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is restricted to prevalence and documentation (Gupta et al., 2004; Dagar, 1996; Dagar and Dagar, 2003). However, these studies were restricted to few villages in isolated Islands. The medicinal properties of plants lies in the chemical substances that produce a definite physiological action in the human body (Edeoga et al., 2005). However, information on the usage of medicinal plants and the mode of preparation of remedies, their dosages and mode of application are lacking. Generating information on these lines and understanding these aspects are essential to initiate a conservation mechanism.

Against the prevailing scenario, studies were undertaken to observe the ethnomedicine and health care practices among the Nicobarese tribe and to assess the medicinal properties of plants, with the following objectives:-

1. To generate the information on ethnic practices among the Nicobarese setting, identify the medicinal plants utilized by the Traditional Knowledge Practitioners and documentation of such practices in the form of Community Biodiversity Registers.
2. To assess the antimicrobial potentials of the crude extracts of selected medicinal plants.
3. To attempt, extraction, isolation and identification of the active compounds and subsequently to assess the antimicrobial potentials of purified compounds.