India, like other developing countries, is still struggling to reach the goal of 'Health for All', which her policy makes accepted at Alma Ata in 1978 to achieve by the year 2000. The failure on this front, may have led the health policy makers in the country to draft a new National Health Policy in 2002, nineteen years after the earlier policy was formulated in 1983. Not only this, for the first time in the history of independent India, a separate policy on traditional systems of medicine—National Policy on Indian Systems of Medicine & Homeopathy—2002, has been drafted, which shows a greater interest and acceptance of making the traditional medicines as a viable source of health care. Government of India has stated that one of the objectives of this policy is, “To promote good health and expand the outreach of health care to our people, particularly those not provided health cover, through preventive, promotive, mitigating and curative intervention through Indian Systems of Medicine and Homeopathy” (National Policy on ISM & H, 2002).

The role of traditional medicines in providing the health care to the population in the developing countries in general and India in particular, needs to be investigated, understood and the findings should be incorporated while formulating the future health care policies. As the Indian government has reported that for 65% of its population, traditional medicine is the only available source of health care (WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002–2005). The present study is a step towards this direction, in order to find out the role
being played by a traditional system—Ayurveda, in fulfilling the health needs of the population in an urban setting of the city of Chandigarh. The data was collected from all the six Government Ayurvedic health centres and one private Ayurvedic hospital –Pt. Kedarnath Memorial Ayurvedic Hospital. The emphasis of the study was on assessing the utilisation pattern of the population as affected by the scope and traditional nature of this health care system.

The health scene in India, provides a diverse picture, because of the occurrence of different kinds of health care systems, from magico-religious tribal medicines, folk medicines, then the greater traditions of Ayurveda, Unani medicine, Siddha medicine, Naturopathy, Yoga and Amchi system of medicine to the west originated systems of Homeopathy and Biomedicine. The development of these diverse medical beliefs is the direct result of contact of Indian civilisation with the other ancient civilisations of the world, and later historical events of repeated invasions from Arabia and Central Asia and ultimately of becoming India the largest colony of British Empire. Thus, the occurrence of medical pluralism has provided a variety of choices for the population in terms of health care facilities. But, the situation is not so simple, as there is a great disparity in the availability of health care facilities in the entire country, whether in traditional systems of medicine or in the much advanced biomedical system. Moreover, the pluralistic medical beliefs occur in their true form only in the urban centres of the country, where all types of medical facilities are available, while in the rural areas people have limited choice of health care. The rural population mostly remain dependent on the traditional medical practitioners of either Ayurvedic or Unani systems in northern parts of the country and Siddha system in southern India. Tribal and folk healers cater mostly to the tribal areas of the country. Small cities and towns have the facilities of Homeopathy, Naturopathy and Yoga along with other
traditional systems of medicine. The health care facilities in biomedicine, which is the major component of the official health care infrastructure in the country, could not have been made available to the larger section of the population, so far. This inadequacy of the official health care facilities, mostly in biomedical system, makes the role of traditional medical systems of the country even more important.

Today is the age of information boom and people are becoming more and more aware about their health needs along with the sources of their fulfillment. The medical anthropologists describe the medical phenomenon as influenced by the social and cultural beliefs of the people. It has now become important to study the scope, utility and survival value of the traditional systems in an atmosphere of competition with the biomedical system, as well as in their role as complementary partners to this advanced system of medicine. The city of Chandigarh provides this ideal situation, where people have the facilities of most advanced health centres of biomedicine and the traditional health care in Ayurveda, Unani, Homeopathy, Naturopathy and Yoga. Chandigarh is the modern urban centre with high rate of literacy and per capita income in the country. Thus, the survival of a traditional medical system—Ayurveda, amidst the most advanced health care facilities, points towards the potential this system has in sharing the responsibilities of health care.

Ayurveda, as the part of Indian academic medicine is one of the most advanced and scientific traditional medical system. It has its own history of divine origin, well-founded concepts, theories and methods of treatment. It is known as ‘science of life’, as it propagates not only the knowledge of keeping a person free from the diseased conditions but also a complete way of leading a life which is full of happiness and useful to the society as a whole. Ayurveda as a full-fledged system of health care developed probably near the end of
Vedic period, in the seventh century BC. The two most famous treatises of this system—Charaka Samhita and Susruta Samhita, appeared between 4th century BC and 5th century AD. The exact time period of their composition is a debatable issue. The major development in Ayurveda has been witnessed in the ancient period. It was in this system that the procedures of conducting sophisticated surgeries were developed for the first time anywhere in the world. But this practice was later abandoned in the Buddhist period, because of religious sanctions towards practising non-violence. It has now become a major limitation of Ayurveda, which has somewhat restricted the scope of this system. However, in the post-Buddhist period, a special branch called Rasasastra (latrochemistry) came into existence, in which properties and the methods of processing metals, minerals, gems and jewels were described. These methods have been used both for the promotion as well as preservation of positive health and prevention as well as cure of diseases. The proponents of Ayurveda claim that the judicious use of these metallic preparations can obviate the need for surgery in several ailments and thus make the patients free from risk-factors. Even several diseases for which medicines are not available at present in biomedicine, can be successfully cured by these preparations.

The growth and propagation of Ayurveda slowed down in the medieval period and later in the modern period, with the advent of European powers, it was completely neglected and denounced as merely a case of quackery. Ayurveda and other traditional systems of the country suffered a severe damage to their reputation because of the colonial government’s policies of promoting only biomedical system as the only valid, modern and scientifically proven system of medicine. This negative campaign about this ancient system resulted in the emergence of a narrow vision about the efficiency of this system in the minds of educated urban population. After
Independence, efforts have been made by the government to provide Ayurveda, its legitimate status in the arena of health care. The establishment of a separate department of Indian System of Medicine and Homeopathy, in 1995, under the Ministry of Health and Family welfare, has helped in providing a necessary direction for developing and implementing the right policies for the growth of this system. But the old sceptical mindset still persists among a considerable portion of the urban population, which affects their utilisation pattern of this traditional system.

The first and foremost factor in selecting the health care services of any particular medical system is the kind of awareness about that system among the general population. In Chandigarh, majority of the patients, near about 71%, have been found having knowledge about the benefits of Ayurveda and the availability of health care services of this system in the city. In accordance with the hypothesis, the Ayurvedic health care services in the city are not as widespread and advanced as in the case of Biomedicine. There are only six government Ayurvedic dispensaries in comparison to the 34 government dispensaries of biomedicine. At the secondary and tertiary level of health care, the Ayurvedic system has only one private hospital, which is of no match to the two government hospitals and one highly equipped Institute of national importance of biomedical system. 85% of the Ayurvedic doctors of these health centres themselves feel that the health care facilities of Ayurvedic system are inadequate in the city. Besides this, the number of private Ayurvedic practitioners in the city are very less in comparison to the practitioners of biomedical system. The worst thing about these private Ayurvedic practitioners is that, majority of them practice biomedicine rather than their own field of speciality.

This vast difference in the level of infrastructure in Ayurvedic and Biomedical health care services has a predictable effect on the
utilisation of these services. Ayurveda has been considered as a second option for treatment by 67% of the patients in the present study, thus validating the hypothesis. At first instance, people utilise those health care services which are easily accessible to them and moreover they tend to follow other patients in this matter. They determine their own course of action on the basis of the positive results of the treatment in case of other patients who are already utilising these services. That was the reason for the 60% of patients, who came to get Ayurvedic treatment only when their relatives or other known persons, who already got cured, recommended them to utilise these health care services.

The traditional nature of Ayurveda has greatly played a role in shaping the perceptions of people about this system, whether positive or negative. It has been found in this study that majority of the people consider this system as reliable, because of the use of plant based medicines. They feel that Ayurvedic therapies are closer to the nature and thus harmless to the body. Contrary to the hypothesis, people do not consider that Ayurveda has a limited scope of cure, as majority of them, about 60%, consider this system as a valid, scientifically based system. But, in comparison to the widely used biomedical system, about 41% patients feel that Ayurveda is still less developed, and 20% say that it has same level of development. Patients’ opinion is generally affected by the technical advancement shown in every aspect of the treatment in biomedicine, from diagnosis of the ailment upto performing the highly sophisticated surgical operations. The Ayurvedic medical practitioners also feel that the scope of this system is reduced by the absence of any surgical treatment, for which they have to recommend the patients to the advanced centres of biomedical system in the city. At the same time, they emphasise that in the branch of medicine, the Ayurvedic system is much more advanced than biomedicine. Ayurvedic medicines have almost
negligible side–effects, rather they have side benefits. On the contrary, the chemical based drugs of biomedical system produce harmful side effects. It has been seen that the allopathic medicines have now become a major distracting factor for the patients to utilise the biomedical system, which has ultimately pushed these patients towards Ayurveda.

Contrary to the hypothesis, people do not deliberately select Ayurveda for the minor ailments only, and for complex type of cases, they prefer biomedical system. In contrast, it has been found that majority of the cases, which come for Ayurvedic treatment are in the chronic stages of the ailment. The primary reason for this trend is people’s preference for biomedical system as the first choice of treatment. When they do not get satisfactory results from the most advanced health centres of this system, only then they think about Ayurveda for treatment. By that time, their ailment has already become chronic. The major reason for their selecting the biomedical system over any other system of medicine, is because of its image of a most advanced and modern system of medicine. Other major factors that came to light in favour of biomedicine are the –quick relief from the ailment and comparatively easy methods of treatment. In accordance with the hypothesis, 80.5% of the patients felt that the methods of treatment in Ayurveda are lengthy and cumbersome. In Ayurveda, the herbal and herbo-mineral based medicines are very slow in action, which comparatively take longer time period for producing desired effects. In addition, patients have to take care of several precautions in diet control and change in their life style, which demands a lot of patience from them.

Until now, the popular perception was that the traditional medicines are cheaper and easily available, but this study has presented a rather different picture. Ayurvedic treatment when followed in its entirely takes longer time period and proves expensive
to the major proportion of the population. This factor has even led some of the patients to abandon the treatment in between, as they found it difficult to bear the burden of slow paced and expensive treatment. The Ayurvedic medicines, available in the market, manufactured by big pharmaceutical companies are very costly and in most cases beyond the reach of poor patients. These medicines are mostly herbal based, with some of the herbs very rare and not easy to procure, which result in rise in the cost of medicines. The other argument which the people associated with Ayurveda give is that the use of metals like gold, silver and mercury etc. makes these medicines expensive. In Chandigarh, most of the Ayurvedic health care facilities are being provided by the government health centres at a highly subsidised rates and a private charitable hospital which runs on no profit no loss basis. That is why the patients belonging to all the sections of the society utilise these services. But still the expensiveness of the Ayurvedic treatment and its longer duration, have emerged as the two most prominent factors, which have prevented the patients from utilising the health care services in Ayurveda.

With the passage of time, the general practice of Ayurveda has also shown certain changes, particularly in the diagnostic techniques and in the field of dispensation of medicine. Today the practitioners of Ayurveda try to present themselves with modern looks, which is more or less similar to that in the biomedicine. This exercise is mainly to enhance their image among the people, who prefer the use of modern technology during the course of treatment. As Leslie (1967) points out that, “while these sophisticated indigenous medical systems appeal to ancient texts, they combine modern institutional forms—hospitals, colleges and schools of medicine, pharmaceutical companies, and so on—as well as certain modern medical concepts with those of traditional civilisations”. The
Ayurvedic doctors of Chandigarh’s dispensaries and hospital, use stethoscope, sphygmomanometer as a part of their medical kit. The Ayurvedic hospital of the city has a well-equipped pathological laboratory and a modern diagnostic center built completely on the pattern of biomedical system of medicine. Ayurvedic doctors themselves recommend these diagnostic tests to the patients, even though the treatment in their own system of medicine does not require these tests. Sometimes they do it for the satisfaction of the patients and sometimes for confirming the positive effects of their own treatment.

In the last twenty years, Ayurveda, as a system of health care has gained a considerable respect, mainly due to the promotion of its products and therapies in the electronic and print media. On the lesser side, this has also resulted in the practice of branding anything which has some herbal content as Ayurvedic in nature and aggressive promotion of what some critics call ‘cosmetic’ or ‘candy’ Ayurveda. The acceptability of Ayurvedic system has been increasing gradually within as well as outside the country. The opening up of health spas, which mainly cater to international tourists and high economic class people, offer various kinds of stress bursting therapies and massages. Even though they do not cover all the strata of the society, but they show the highly enterprising nature of the system and its commercial ability, which somehow helps in creating a better perception about the capacity of the system.

Today, the Ayurveda has also been granted the status of an official system of health care in Hungary, South Africa and Mauritius, besides India. The international recognition of this system, has opened up new avenues of its growth and of further research to enhance the efficacy and scope of its treatment. Moreover, it has been generally seen that the popularity at the international level has always helped any kind of concept, technique or service to have a
better chances of acceptance within the country. The major part of our population has been depending upon the services of traditional practitioners, particularly of Ayurvedic system of medicine. But this is merely because that they have no other facility of health care. To make the Ayurvedic system a fully developed and flourishing system of health care, a lot has to be done on the part of Ayurvedic practitioners, government and the common people. Due to the economic constraints and lack of funds, government Ayurvedic hospitals and health centres could not be established in every part of the country. But it has been found that private Ayurvedic practitioners are accessible to the common man almost in the entire country. If these practitioners faithfully make use of Ayurvedic techniques, they could establish it as a primary system of health care. This could happen only if the students of Ayurveda should be provided with proper education and training in the field of Ayurvedic medicines. At present, the number of Ayurvedic and biomedicine medical colleges are almost equal, but there is a lot of difference in the standard of education being imparted in both types of colleges. An additional problem about the traditional system of medicine is that of accounting for the decline and loss of knowledge of various aspects such as dissection, drugs and medicinal plants which the practitioners of the past possessed. To compensate this loss, new research has to be started. Further, there is a strong need of updating the treatment facilities in the Ayurvedic hospitals and health centres. As in Chandigarh also, which is the capital of two states and is one of the major urban centre of north India, there is no government Ayurvedic hospital.

In view of the huge working structure and man power in the country, adequate acceptability of Indian medicines and the enormous difficulty in making biomedicine available to the common man, modern health programmes should incorporate studies of
ancient lore and empirical data which have survived scrutiny for thousands of years. The most necessary requirement today is to make the Ayurvedic system affordable and within the reach of common man. Ayurveda is the system, which has greater part of it devoted to the prevention of the disease, by practicing balanced lifestyle. If that could be followed, major problems of our health care would be solved in this country, where approximately 26% of the population still lives under poverty line.