INTRODUCTION
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India has several indigenous plant based medical systems. Ayurveda, the oldest and practised throughout the country, must be over 3000 years old, as the earliest writings on the subject by Charaka and Sushruta are dated around 300 BC. Siddha, widely practised in Tamilnadu, has a greater mineral, than herbal content. The Unani system, popular among the Muslims, is the result of an interaction between the Arab world and India. The Tibbi system is prevalent in Tibet. There is even a Nakula Samhitha that deals with plant based veterinary medicine. Whatever the system of medicine, plants are very important sources of drugs. Homoeopathy, originated in the early 1800s and now quite popular in India, is also largely based on plants. The allopathic system of the west still has a considerable number of plant based drugs.

Currently, there is a strong awareness the world over, that the plant based medical systems of China, Africa and India are the only sources of effective and inexpensive medicine for the millions of poor people in the developing countries. Besides, medical chemists have realised that new therapeutically active chemical structures should be found among the constituents of living organisms since the possibilities of synthesising new structures are limited and fast dwindling.
The people of numerous small tribes living in the hills and other remote places in India use plants as food and medicine. The practices of these people, largely unknown outside, are less affected by civilisation and so form an important part of our country's heritage. If we do not take urgent steps to consolidate this information it would be lost to us for ever, since it is not recorded but is conveyed from generation to generation only by the word of mouth.

An effective utilisation of any kind of information requires a systematic evaluation. One of the important reasons that have put the indigenous systems of medicine in a bad light is that a lot of unfounded claims have contaminated genuine practices that were tested for centuries. A thorough assessment of the efficacy of the various formulations and claims of the indigenous systems of medicine is essential. This can be achieved only when we consolidate all available information on the subject. Starting with the works of Charaka and Sushrutha written in Sanskrit to modern phytochemistry, information on Indian medicinal plants and medical practices is widely dispersed in thousands of publications. It takes a lot of labour and time to find answers even to simple questions relating to medicinal plants. In the current surge of interest on Indian medicinal plants, the number of people and institutions