

Natural Products Insider

Amid COVID-19, Sabinsa president rushed home to India

Amid COVID-19, Shaheen Majeed of Sabinsa – a manufacturer, supplier and marketer of herbal extracts and other products – rushed home to India from the United States. He discusses his recent travels and the growing pandemic's impact on global commerce.

[Shaheen Majeed](#) | Mar 18, 2020



Editor's note: This is the first in series of first-person accounts describing the effects of the coronavirus on individuals and their businesses in the natural products industry.

As [Sabinsa's](#) president worldwide, one of my duties is to support our global business units, whether that be for executive meetings or various trade events. I was in the U.S. to attend Natural Products Expo West. When its understandable cancelation occurred, I decided to spend time until my return ticket home visiting customers in California and

holding meetings at our Utah facility. Although I have been living in India with my wife and kids and based in our Bengaluru headquarters for the past three years, I still maintain a secondary residence in Payson, Utah. This arrangement is standard practice when I attend U.S. tradeshows.

Customers were either dealing with the cancellation of Expo West or were just too worried about what was going around them to hold normal meetings. The customers I did speak with reported seeing some spikes in immune supplement sales, and all expressed concerns for their employees. We talked about many of the steps both suppliers and customers would have to take going forward. We didn't foresee at that time the many lockdowns, changes to our kids' schooling, and what all those and other developments would bring.

In the midst of meetings in Utah about a cosmetic contract manufacturing expansion we're doing, I received word of a [news](#) bulletin issued by the Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), March 11, that all visas and Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards (which I hold as an American citizen) would be suspended at 12:00 GMT (Greenwich Mean Time) on Thursday, March 13 until April 15. You can imagine my concern about being away from my family for a month, so I dropped everything to find a way home. Fortunately, I was able to board a (very expensive) flight out just a few hours later.

My flight from Salt Lake City to Chicago was full, as were the airports, but the planes to London and then India were not full at all, nor were the airports. As a frequent traveler, I'd say it was down anywhere between 40 to 60%, across the three airports I traveled through. When I was in London, they were still not aware of India's MOHFW news bulletin; this lag in communication is something for debate where the transport of people and goods happens continually. Interestingly, President Donald Trump's similar statement with regard to U.S. border restrictions was announced eight hours after India's. The wording on that announcement was vague, so it was uncertain if I could return to the

U.S. if I missed the cutoff in India. There were no delays, fortunately, and I landed in India 5 a.m. on Friday the 13th.

There were no airport health checks at Salt Lake City or the transit points at Chicago and London; however, in India, airport officials were far more on top of virus control. Luckily when I landed, no other flights were present. Screening was quick and simple: A fast laser shot at the forehead to check my temperature and an additional screening paperwork to fill out, noting places visited and contact details. The new form goes to another government body, while the usual immigration document is for the immigration side of the government.

Since arriving in India, I've been taking precautions, social distancing, trying my best to flatten the curve. Workplace procedures that we have instituted are reinforcing those practices. The need of the hour seems to be dismissing false information and over-paranoia, helping us to get our facts straight and make sound decisions.

Impacts on commerce

In terms of how this virus is affecting commerce worldwide, it's incredible what is unfolding. [We are fully operational](#), but our business is tied to supplies from the cultivation and harvesting of medicinal herbs here in India, and also in South East Asia and parts of Africa. We monitor them closely but have never had to factor in any potential government lockdowns, a new issue our team must now track.

We have been assessing our stocks in the various warehouses we have globally, and at present, we are confident we have a six-month supply. However, increased demands on certain ingredients will consume more of our resources, so we are working on adapting quickly. All the while, we're keeping sanitation, hygiene and other safe practices at the highest priority levels.

I assume many of the practices we are taking up or reinforcing are similar to those of the other raw material suppliers. Yet, these are tough times, posing challenges the world has not seen before. As long as goods can move—even if there are limited people to provide the required handling, processing, packaging, and move product into the marketplace—they can and will reach customers. If transport companies reduce staffs, cargo will still move, but it may take additional time.

A worry on my mind is the international shipment of goods and those seaports and airports closing for cargo. I'm also concerned that innovation in product development may falter for a spell, but it is sure to resume once the virus subsides.

We'll adapt. I believe humans are the most adaptive species, and I wish everyone to be safe and healthy.

Shaheen Majeed has been involved in nearly every aspect of the Sami Labs/Sabinsa Group of Companies. He oversees the Sami-Sabinsa contract farming program to ensure best agricultural practices and fair pay for farmers, the expanding portfolio of published studies on the company's branded ingredients, and is deeply involved in regulatory compliance to meet requirements in numerous countries throughout the world. He holds board positions with Sabinsa, Sami Labs, and Sami Direct, the Group's successful multi-level marketing company in Southeast Asia.