

The Real Competition for Indian Botanicals Is Not China—It Is Synthetic Substitutes

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For years, talks about Indian plants have been about how they compete with other countries, usually China. These talks have been shaped by things like pricing pressure, the size of the farms, and the fact that the US is the biggest exporter. But this view doesn't take into account the real problem that Indian botanicals are facing right now. The biggest competition isn't based

on where you live. It is fake substitutes.

Brand priorities are changing in the global nutraceutical and wellness business. More and more, big multinational companies want ingredients that they can count on. They want molecules that work the same way every time, don't get contaminated easily, have prices that are easy to predict, and can be quickly scaled up. These needs naturally make synthetic options more appealing. Not because synthetic products are better, but because they make things more certain.

People are still interested in natural products, so this change isn't because of that. The global market for botanical extracts is steadily growing, which shows that there is a strong need for health solutions based on plants. The only thing that has changed is how much people can handle change. Brands are less willing to put up with uncertainty in agriculture these days, especially since there is more regulatory scrutiny, audit expectations, and quarterly performance pressures.

It is hard for agriculture to meet this need for predictability. It can take six to eighteen months for a plant-based ingredient to go from being grown to being ready to use. Things like the weather, the quality of the soil, the availability of workers, and how crops are handled after they are harvested can all have an effect on the results. Bad weather in important ashwagandha-growing areas of India in 2023 caused big drops in yields, which drove up the price of raw materials. These kinds of problems are no longer one-time events. Climate change is now a permanent problem.

Tight supply-demand margins make the problem worse. India grows ashwagandha on about 10,780 hectares, which is just enough to meet current demand. With such a small margin, one bad season does more than just mess up procurement. It often makes formulation teams rethink the ingredient completely, which speeds up the switch to synthetic substitutes.

The industry is also partly to blame for not getting the issue right. Botanicals are often treated as interchangeable goods, with the main factor being the price per kilogram. Long-term formulation security often comes in second place. When prices go up and synthetic options come out at much lower prices, reformulation is the best way to go. Once a plant-based ingredient is replaced, it almost never comes back. This is because synthetic molecules quickly become part of regulatory documents, stability studies, and global supply systems.

Indian exporters feel this pressure very strongly. Climate stress, a lack of workers, and inconsistent yields are all driving up the cost of raw materials, but the prices of finished ingredients don't always keep up. Synthetic ingredients work well to set a price limit. When botanicals go over that limit, profit margins get smaller and pricing power goes away. Problems with quality make this problem worse. The presence of active content, heavy metals, pesticide residues, and microbial load continues to make it hard for regulated markets to accept.

Demographics are at the heart of these problems. Only about 20% of the raw materials used to make medicines in India come from organized farming. The other 80% comes from the wild and forests. This makes it impossible to avoid changes in the composition of the soil, the amount of rain, the altitude, the amount of pollution, and the way crops are harvested. Many rejections from other countries are not because the extraction process failed, but because there were problems with the raw material source.

We don't need to give up on plants or try to beat synthetic chemicals in a direct way. It means picking the right areas and using science to back them up. Indian botanicals should be grown in places with a lot of land, consistent rainfall, soil that is free of pesticides, clean air, and farming methods that are good for the environment. Handling things properly after harvest is also very important.

But just looking at demographics isn't enough. These farming models need to be checked. To build an agricultural system that regulators and global brands can trust, you need to do soil profiling, geographic traceability, regular testing of active markers, degradation studies, and strong microbiological controls.

Synthetic ingredients make things easier and give you more control, but they can't always match the complexity of whole plant systems. More and more clinical evidence shows that full-spectrum botanical extracts work better than isolated molecules. This complicatedness is still one of India's best features.

India is one of seventeen mega biodiverse countries. It has thousands of medicinal plant species and a long history of traditional knowledge. No lab can make this much depth on a large scale. But now, complexity without control is not enough. People who combine the wealth of nature with modern science will own the future.

This moment calls for coordinated action, investment, and a promise to raise Indian botanicals from being just goods to being globally strategic assets for policymakers, manufacturers, and brand leaders.

Laboratories will keep getting better at what they do, but being efficient doesn't mean being complicated. If we put money into smart farming, thorough testing, and science that can stand up to scrutiny from all over the world, Indian botanicals can stay

important around the world. Convenience, not China, is the real competition. Indian botanicals can still get through this problem.