Choosing a Freight Forwarder, Your Own or the Supplier's

SourcingFrom

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Whether to let your Indian supplier choose the forwarder or bring your own depends on shipment size, frequency and value. The supplier's forwarder is fine for small, simple shipments with every charge quoted in writing. For full containers or regular orders, buy FOB or FCA with your own forwarder and compare quotes in five blocks.

The Short Version

- With a supplier-chosen forwarder you have a contract with neither the Indian forwarder nor its destination agent.
- On CIF, destination charges are billed at arrival and often exceed what was discussed.
- FOB India is not a cap. Origin charges can add 15–20% to a landed cost quoted FOB, by one procurement lead's account.
- Get the destination tariff in writing from the actual destination agent before the goods sail.
- Avoid EXW from India, since only an Indian exporter can file the export formalities.

In April 2024 a buyer posted on a freight brokers' forum with one line that every importer should read before their first order from India - "the Indian shipping company has been holding my container as hostage" (r/FreightBrokers, 2024). The supplier had arranged the freight. The goods were made, paid for and across the ocean. And the buyer couldn't get them, because of a dispute between parties they'd never chosen.



The replies were sympathetic and not much help. One pointed out that "the person you contracted with is liable to you", which is true and doesn't free a box. We'll come back to how this should have been set up. This guide answers the question underneath it - should you let your Indian supplier choose the forwarder, or bring your own, and how do you compare forwarder quotes so the final invoice looks like the quote? The honest caveat is that we haven't yet run our own mystery quotes across Indian forwarders, so the cost patterns here come from forwarders and buyers on the record, not from our measurement.

1. When the Supplier's Forwarder Is Fine

Let's be fair to suppliers first, because the default answer isn't "never". Indian exporters ship every week. Their forwarder knows the factory, the inland haul to the port and the paperwork, and their rates can be good. A UK forwarder told a small buyer to "ask your supplier in India for a freight

forwarder, they'll likely have better rates than DHL etc" (r/smallbusinessuk, 2024).

Using the supplier's forwarder is reasonable when:

- you're shipping a few cartons by air or courier, where a forwarder of your own adds little
- the supplier is experienced, and has shipped to your country before with the same forwarder
- you've agreed who the importer of record is, and it's you (see importer of record)
- the quote names every charge to your door, in writing, including destination charges

If any of those fails, the convenience starts costing you.

2. What Goes Wrong When You Don't Choose

In our research on shipping from India, supplier-controlled freight sits behind a cluster of repeat failures (gap register GAP-031). Four matter for this decision.

The Agent Chain Breaks

A supplier-chosen forwarder in India hands your cargo to its agent in your country. Two separate firms, and you have a contract with neither. When one doesn't pay the other, your cargo is the collateral. A US seller wrote that "the agent in India still has not paid the amount to the agents in the U.S. and the US agents are holding my shipment" (r/AmazonSeller, 2024). That's the same failure as our opening buyer's, two buyers, months apart.



Destination Charges Move After Sailing

On CIF terms, the supplier pays the ocean leg and the destination agent bills you at arrival. Indian forwarders say it openly - "many importers receive an attractive LCL freight quote, only to find that the destination agent collects substantial local charges" (LinkedIn, Indian forwarder, 2026). Another forwarder put it as "at destination, the charges are higher than previously discussed" (LinkedIn, 2026). The cargo is on the dock by then, so you pay.

Terms Change After Dispatch

A buyer found the supplier had switched the shipment to express and added the cost to the balance invoice (FS-SHP-064). Small, and common.

You Can't See the Booking

India bookings in 2026 are slow. One forwarder wrote that "It took 4 weeks for our agent to send a BC for 10×20GPs" (r/freightforwarding, 2026), and another that "VGM delays and incorrect EGM filings cause nearly all last-minute vessel rollovers I see out of India ports" (r/freightforwarding, 2026). With your own forwarder you see these delays coming. With the supplier's, you hear about them when the goods are late.

3. When to Bring Your Own

Our rule of thumb from the patterns above - bring your own forwarder once you're shipping a full container, shipping regularly, or your goods are worth more than you could afford to lose for a month. Buy on FCA or FOB so the supplier's job ends at the Indian port or the supplier's door, and your forwarder takes it from there.

Two cautions. First, FCA or FOB needs a supplier who can do the Indian export clearance. Many small makers can't, and one UK buyer wrote that their vendor would "just handover to logistics provider and rest i've to take care" (FS-SHP-055). A trader or merchant exporter often handles this well, which is one good reason to buy through one. Ask early, "Can you quote FOB and file the shipping bill?" Second, avoid EXW from India. It puts the Indian export formalities on you, and only an Indian exporter can file them. EXW explains why.



4. How to Compare Forwarder Quotes

Most quote comparisons go wrong because the buyer compares the ocean freight figure, which is the one line least likely to be the problem. A procurement lead wrote that "origin charges alone add 15–20% to a landed cost that was quoted 'FOB'" (LinkedIn, 2026), and an Indian exporter explained why. Terminal handling and other port charges are set on line tariffs, so "your buyer sees $400+ in 'origin charges' even on FOB" (LinkedIn, 2026). We don't quote charges as prices here, they move, but the structure is the same every time.

So ask every forwarder to quote the same shipment, on the same terms, broken into these blocks.

Block	What should be in it	Who pays on FOB
Origin	Inland haul from the factory or ICD, terminal handling, bill of lading, seal, VGM, export documentation	Supplier up to on board, but check which lines they're passing on
Freight	Ocean or air freight, fuel and security surcharges, any war-risk or chokepoint surcharge	You
Destination	Terminal handling, delivery order, CFS or unpacking (LCL), port and agency fees	You
Customs	Brokerage per entry and per line, any bond, duty and tax paid on your behalf	You
Delivery	Haul to your warehouse, waiting time, tail-lift	You

Then ask four questions of each quote.

1. **Is the destination tariff in writing,** from the actual destination agent, before the goods sail? This one question kills most LCL surprises.
2. **Direct or transhipped, and where?** And for Europe and the US East Coast, Suez or the Cape. Transit times depend on it. Sea freight routes covers the routes.
3. **Is the bill of lading a house bill or a master bill,** and who is named as consignee? If it's a house bill from the supplier's forwarder, you depend on that forwarder's agent to release the goods.
4. **What happens to charges if the ship is diverted or rolled?** In 2026 diversions left Gulf-bound boxes in Nhava Sheva with storage billed to the cargo owner (FS-SHP-044).



5. Small Shipments and Inland Factories

LCL from India has its own traps. A small shipment of a cubic metre or two attracts around ten separate fixed charges - "Each charge is 500–1500 but there are 10 such charges" (in rupees, r/exportersindia, 2026). Below a couple of hundred kilos, air or courier often works out close, a point the low-value imports guide picks up.

If you're buying from several Indian suppliers into one consolidation, budget for it properly. "Every supplier files a separate shipping bill and you pay separate gate/handling charges" (r/supplychainIndia, 2026). And if your supplier sits inland, near an ICD such as Jaipur, LCL may still have to be trucked to Nhava Sheva or Mundra before it's consolidated, according to one Indian forwarder (vendor) - "for LCL jaipur icd dont stuff a console box" (r/exportersindia, 2026). FCA at the ICD works well for full containers, less so for small loads. Ask the forwarder where your LCL will actually be stuffed.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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01 **Two buyers, one failure.** US buyers in 2024 described containers held at destination because the supplier's Indian forwarder hadn't paid its overseas agent. Neither buyer had a contract with either firm. *(r/AmazonSeller, r/FreightBrokers, FS-SHP-019.)*

02 **Forwarders admit the LCL gap.** Three forwarders, two of them Indian, said in 2026 that LCL destination charges often exceed what was discussed before sailing. *(LinkedIn, FS-SHP-056.)*

03 **FOB India isn't a cap.** Origin charges on line tariffs can add 15-20% to a landed cost quoted FOB, by one procurement lead's account, with an Indian exporter describing the same pattern from the other side. *(LinkedIn, FS-SHP-054.)*

What we don't know yet

- ☐ The measured gap between Indian forwarder quotes and final invoices. Our planned test is ten forwarders quoting three standard shipments (1 CBM LCL from an inland ICD, 5 CBM LCL and a 20-foot FCL), then checked against SourcingSync invoices (gap register GAP-030). We'll publish it here.

05 / Decide here

1. Choose who books the freight before you choose the Incoterm, then match the term to it.
2. Get every quote in the five blocks, with the destination tariff in writing.
3. Know whether you're on a house or master bill, and who releases the goods.

Ready to act

Need hands-on help?

Booking freight under your control from India, briefing the supplier for FOB or FCA, and checking each invoice against its quote is execution. SourcingSync does it, as your side in India.

Talk to SourcingSync ↗

Questions Buyers Ask

My supplier says their forwarder is cheaper. Should I believe them?

Often it is, on the freight line. Ask for the destination charges in writing from their destination agent, then compare the total to your door, not the ocean figure.

Do I need a forwarder at all?

What should a first container from India look like?

Can I switch from the supplier's forwarder later?

6. Back to the Hostage Container

Our April 2024 buyer had a contract with the supplier and nothing else. The forwarder was the supplier's, the destination agent was the forwarder's, and the dispute between them was none of the buyer's making. Set up the other way, with FOB terms and a forwarder the buyer appointed, the same shipment has one firm answering to the buyer from the Indian port to the door. There's still a dispute risk, but it's with someone the buyer chose, and pays, and can call.

Related guides: importer of record, sea freight routes, FOB, CIF, payment methods, why FOB India quotes and invoices differ, Mundra or Nhava Sheva, Amazon FBA from India.