

Do Indian Suppliers Charge for Samples, and Do You Get It Back?



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Most Indian makers charge for samples made to your design and ask to be paid before sampling starts, because the cost is set-up work, not the piece itself. Experienced exporters often send stock samples free and charge only the courier. The fee is sometimes credited against the bulk order, but only if you agree that in writing before you pay.

The Short Version

- A development sample is paid for set-up work, so the fee is not the price of one piece.
- Advance before sampling is normal practice in India, not a warning sign on its own.
- Credit against bulk happens, but nobody publishes how often. Get it written on the proforma invoice.
- Budget for two or three rounds, and save money by sampling fewer styles, not by haggling.
- A sample parcel marked as a gift is a misdeclaration on your import. Ask for a true commercial invoice.

Yes, most Indian manufacturers charge for a sample made to your design, and most want paying before they start. Sometimes the fee is credited against your bulk order, but that's a deal you make in writing, not a rule you can count on. Samples from stock are a different story, and experienced exporters often send those free and ask you to cover only the courier.

In April 2026 a group of Indian exporters argued about this exact question on a trade forum, and it's worth hearing their side first. An exporter with 12 years in the business said flatly "Do not charge. Send it for free" ([r/exportersindia, 2026](#)). Another suggested sending the samples on a

commercial invoice with a token value, and a third, in a different thread, suggested marking the parcel as a gift ([r/exportersindia, 2026](#), [r/exportersindia, 2026](#)). So within one trade there are three habits, and you'll meet all of them. I'll come back to that thread at the end, because the last two habits put a risk on you, not on the exporter. One caveat - nobody publishes sample terms for Indian suppliers, so what follows is practice as buyers and makers describe it, not a norm.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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01 Indian makers usually want an advance before sampling starts, not only before bulk. An India-based founder who met 12 to 15 apparel makers found "Most wanted an advance to kick-start the process", and an Indian maker confirms samples go out "with prepaid amount". ([Hacker News, 2023](#), [r/streetwearstartup, 2025](#))

02 Experienced exporters often send samples free and charge only the courier. Newer ones sometimes under-declare the parcel, which leaves the importer holding a misdeclared entry. (*Our log of Indian exporter threads, 2026*)

03 Whether the fee comes back is the open question. Our desk research found samples "commonly charged and then credited" against bulk, with terms that vary by supplier and no data on how often. (*Our desk research, 2026*)

What we don't know yet

- Typical sample terms and credit rates by category. We plan to ask the same sample questions of a panel of Indian suppliers and publish what they say.

1. Why Do Indian Suppliers Charge for Samples at All?

Because a development sample isn't one piece of your product. It's a pattern, a print or embroidery set-up, a strike-off, sometimes a small batch

of dyed yarn, and a day of the best people in the sampling room. A production agent put it plainly in 2025: "Expect to pay properly for samples, you are paying for setup not just the garment" ([r/streetwearstartup, 2025](#)).

Small buyers often read the fee as profit, and suppliers answer that a proper maker earns nothing on samples. Our [MOQ and pricing section](#) goes through that argument, so I'll only say where I land. I side with the set-up view. The fee is front-loaded because the cost is.

The advance has a second reason, and it's the same one behind the large deposits Indian makers ask for on bulk. Small makers run on customer cash, and they've all met the buyer who collects samples and never orders. The full background is in [why Indian suppliers ask for full advance](#). Paying first for a sample isn't a red flag on its own. Paying first to a business you haven't checked is, so run the basic checks on [verifying Indian suppliers](#) before any money moves.

2. When Is a Sample Free?

Mostly when it costs the maker little. A piece from a running line or from stock needs no pattern and no set-up, so an exporter who wants your business will often send it free and ask you to pay the courier, which is the 12-year exporter's habit above. Our [MOQ and pricing section](#) describes the same three arrangements across the trade.

A free stock sample answers a narrower question, though. It shows the maker's general standard, not whether it can make your spec. An automotive buyer summed up the problem with taking capability on trust: "They tend to tell you whatever you want to hear" ([r/procurement, 2026](#)). Plenty of buyers report the opposite, and a buyer of steel and aluminium construction parts who visited his suppliers says he "never had any issues" ([r/procurement, 2026](#)). Either way, the fix is the same. A claim of capability

only counts once a sample made to your spec passes, and that sample is rarely free.

3. Do You Get the Sample Fee Back?

Sometimes. Our desk research of supplier and agency sources found that samples are "commonly charged and then credited" against bulk, with terms that vary by supplier. We grade that Indicative, because we found no data on how often it actually happens or on what terms. That's one of the questions the forums can't answer, and we've logged it as field work.

What I'd do is treat the credit as something you negotiate, then write it down. Ask for it on the proforma invoice for the samples, not in a chat message. The useful wording names four things.

- **What's credited.** The sample fee only, or the courier too.
- **Against which order.** The first bulk order of that style, or any order.
- **By when.** A credit with no end date tends to get forgotten on both sides.
- **What happens if the sample fails.** If the maker misses your spec and you don't go ahead, is a second round free?

A maker who agrees to all four in writing has thought about foreign buyers before. One who won't commit to any of them may still be a good maker, and you've simply learnt the fee is a cost, not a deposit.

4. How Many Sample Rounds Should You Budget For?

Two or three, and more with a new maker. Sampling discipline varies a lot. The India-based founder above met 12 to 15 makers and wrote that "There are no SOP's or any organized sampling process in most Indian companies ... All samples were rejected" ([Hacker News, 2023](#)). An Indian maker on another

forum describes the opposite, "Sample every design" ([r/streetwearstartup, 2025](#)). Both kinds exist, and you can't tell which you've found until a parcel arrives.

So the saving isn't in the price of each round. It's in the count. Sample three styles carefully rather than eight in a hurry, score each round on the [sample evaluation checklist](#), and number your corrections so the next round answers them one by one. A maker that fixes your corrections in round two is worth more than one that was cheap in round one.

5. What Happens If You Skip the Sample to Save Money?

You move the argument from the sample to the bulk, where it costs far more. The worst sample story in our research is a Canadian brand that skipped a pre-production sample on one style to hit a deadline, then disputed the whole order and withheld the entire balance, including for the styles it had accepted (an Indian maker's account, [r/streetwearstartup, 2025](#)). The top reply was four words, "He shoulda did the sampling". The full story is on [how to source from India](#), so I won't retell it.

The lesson for fees is simple. A pre-production sample in bulk fabric and trims is the cheapest insurance in the order, and if a supplier asks you to pay for one, pay. Even a perfect sample doesn't guarantee the bulk, for reasons covered in [the sample was perfect, why wasn't the bulk?](#), but skipping it guarantees an argument.

6. How Should the Sample Parcel Be Declared?

Truthfully, on a commercial invoice that shows what it is and what it's worth. This is the part of the April thread that matters to you. A parcel marked as a gift, or invoiced at a token value, may save the exporter paperwork at its end, but the declaration lands at your border under your name. Labelling

commercial goods as a gift or a sample to lower the value is misdeclaration, as our [importer of record guide](#) explains.

Tell your supplier before it ships how you want samples declared, and ask your customs broker how samples enter your country and whether your country's low-value rules apply. The general picture is in [low-value imports](#). It's a small parcel, but it's also the first document the supplier ever sends in your name, and it tells you how the shipping documents on the bulk order will look.

7. What Does a Fair Sample Deal Look Like?

Something like this, agreed before you pay.

1. A sample proforma invoice from the exporter's registered business, paid to its business account.
2. The round named on it - proto, fit or pre-production.
3. The credit terms, if any, in the four parts above.
4. The courier method and who pays it.
5. A true commercial invoice on the parcel.
6. A pre-production sample in bulk material, signed and sealed as the golden sample before bulk starts.

If you'd rather someone in India ran the rounds, judged each sample against your spec and sealed the golden sample at the factory, [SourcingSync](#) does that for buyers at any order size.

Questions Buyers Ask

Is it normal to pay for samples before the supplier starts? ^

Yes. An advance before sampling is common in India and reflects the supplier's cash position, not a scam on its own. Check the business first.

Will the supplier refund the sample fee if I don't order? v

Why is a free sample from one supplier and a paid one from another? v

Should I haggle over the sample fee? v

8. Back to the April Thread

The 12-year exporter who said "send it for free" was describing a business confident enough to invest in a buyer. The ones suggesting a gift label or a token invoice weren't villains either. They were small exporters trying to save a paperwork step. But only one of those three habits is free of risk for the importer, and it's the plain one. Pay for the sample that's made for you, get the credit in writing if you can, and make sure the parcel says what it really is.