

Can You Trust a Pre-Shipment Inspection in India?



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A pre-shipment inspection in India is generally worth trusting as a sample check, and it is only as reliable as the way it is set up. Book and pay the inspection firm yourself, keep the supplier out of the scheduling, rotate inspectors, ask for evidence you can check, and inspect small first orders too.

The Short Version

- An inspection is a sample check on one day. It lowers risk, it does not remove it.
- Book and pay the inspection firm directly, and never let the supplier choose or schedule the inspector.
- Rotate inspectors, keep the date short-notice, and ask for timestamped photos of carton numbers and tests.
- Ask whether the firm is accredited to ISO/IEC 17020. In India, NABCB accredits inspection bodies.
- Small first orders are the ones most often skipped and the ones that most need checking.

Mostly yes, as long as you remember what it is – one inspector checking a sample of your goods on one day. It's reliable when you book and pay the inspection firm yourself, keep the supplier out of the scheduling and ask for evidence you can check. It's weak when the inspection is arranged by the factory, run by the same person every time or skipped because the order looked too small.

A UK importer who owns a company in India said something in February 2026 that I keep coming back to. "Despite strong ties in India, we always have to invest in quality checks before the shipment leaves India"

([r/smallbusinessuk, 2026](#)). If someone with his own business on the ground still pays for an inspection on every shipment, the question for the rest of us isn't whether to inspect. It's how to set the inspection up so that its report means something. That's what this post covers, along with the small-order problem. The caveat – nobody publishes how often inspections in India go wrong, so I'm describing design, not a failure rate.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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- 01 **People with the closest ties to India still inspect.** A UK importer with an Indian company checks every shipment, and a former sourcing-business manager ran "two inspections for new orders. Pre-shipment inspection only for repeat". ([r/smallbusinessuk, 2026](#), [r/supplychain, 2026](#))
- 02 **Small first orders are the ones that go uninspected.** An Indian manufacturer says third-party QC is hired "If the order size is good", and buyers who learnt the hard way say to inspect "irrespective of how small the quantities are". ([r/ClothingStartups, 2025](#), [a seller forum, 2024](#))
- 03 **India has a formal check on inspection bodies.** NABCB, under the Quality Council of India, accredits inspection bodies to ISO/IEC 17020 and keeps a directory of accredited bodies. ([NABCB](#), read 18 October 2026)

What we don't know yet

- How often pre-shipment inspections in India are compromised, and whether rotation or unannounced visits change the outcome. We want to measure it from re-inspection disagreements on orders SourcingSync runs, and we'll publish a rate only when we have one.

1. What Does a Pre-Shipment Inspection Actually Prove?

That a random sample of your finished, mostly packed goods met the standard you set, on the day it was checked. The inspector pulls pieces

under a sampling plan, usually ISO 2859-1, and counts defects against your AQL. Reading that plan is its own skill, and [how to read an AQL inspection plan](#) walks through it.

What the report doesn't prove is just as important. It can't see chemistry, so pesticides, chromium in leather and cadmium in jewellery need a lab. It can't see what goes into the cartons after the inspector leaves. And it only covers the lot the inspector was shown. Our [quality control section](#) tells the story of a garlic importer whose lot passed inspection and still arrived with substandard produce mixed in, so I won't retell it here. The point for this post is narrower. A report is evidence about a sample, and the value of that evidence depends on how the sample was drawn and by whom.

2. Why Do Even Insiders Still Inspect?

Because trust and verification aren't the same thing, and the people who know India best seem to know that best. The UK importer above doesn't inspect because he distrusts his partners. He inspects because a shipment that's already left India is very hard to fix.

The former sourcing-business manager's cadence is worth copying too. Two inspections on new orders, which I read as one during production and one before shipment, then a pre-shipment check only once a supplier has a record with you ([r/supplychain, 2026](#)). That's the same logic as tightening inspection levels for new suppliers and relaxing them for proven ones. It treats inspection as the price of learning how a factory behaves, which is fair to the factory as well as to you.

3. What If the Inspector Is Paid Off?

It's a real worry among importers, and it deserves a fair answer. An India-to-Canada importer wrote in April 2026 that slipping a local inspector some

cash to pass a shipment is "a no-brainer" ([r/exportersindia, 2026](#)). He framed it as a hypothetical, and he is the same buyer who suspects, without proof, that it happened to his own lot. One buyer's suspicion isn't a rate, and we have no data on how often it happens in India or anywhere else.

So I'd treat it as a design problem, not an accusation. Most inspectors are honest people doing a repetitive job. But any check works better when nobody being checked has a hand in it. The weak points are predictable, and each one has a fix.

- **The supplier books or pays the inspection.** Then the inspector's customer is the factory. Book and pay the firm yourself, and have the report sent to you first.
- **The supplier picks the date.** Then the goods on the table on that day may be the best of the lot. Give the factory a short window, not a date, and let the firm confirm the day close to the visit.
- **The same inspector every time.** Familiarity is pleasant and it's also how standards drift. Ask the firm to rotate inspectors on your orders.
- **No way to check the report.** Then you're trusting a PDF. Ask for evidence you can verify, which is the next section.
- **Nothing ever gets checked twice.** Every so often, have a second firm re-inspect a lot, or check a sample on arrival against the report. If the two disagree, you've learnt something about the process, whichever one was wrong.

None of these accuse anyone. They aren't specific to India either. They work the same way wherever you inspect, and they protect an honest inspector as much as they catch a dishonest one.

4. What Should an Inspection Report Show You?

Enough that you could check it without having been there. I ask for these.

1. Timestamped photos of the carton numbers opened and the total carton count, so you know the draw came from across the shipment.
2. The sealed golden sample photographed next to production pieces.
3. Photos or short videos of the tests you named in the order, such as a fabric weight, a drop test or a measurement against the spec. A production agent in India's garment trade asks for a video of the fabric weight test on raw fabric before cutting ([r/streetwearstartup, 2026](#)), and the same idea works at the end of the line.
4. Each material lot or colour sampled separately, if your order has more than one.
5. If you booked a loading check, the container and seal numbers and photos of the doors closing.

A report with all of that is hard to fake and easy to compare with the next one. A report with a pass mark and three photos of a clean factory floor tells you very little, however honest the inspector was.

5. Is the Inspection Firm Itself Checked?

It can be, and it's worth asking. ISO/IEC 17020 is the international standard for bodies that carry out inspection, and in India NABCB, part of the Quality Council of India, accredits inspection bodies against it and lists the accredited ones in its directory ([NABCB](#), read 18 October 2026).

Accreditation means an outside body has assessed how the firm runs inspections, including its impartiality. It doesn't mean every report is right, and plenty of capable firms work without it.

So ask any firm you're considering two questions. Is it accredited to ISO/IEC 17020, and by whom? And does that accreditation cover the kind of inspection you're booking? Then check the answer in the accreditation body's directory rather than on the firm's website.

6. My Order Is Too Small for an Inspection. Now What?

This is where most first orders slip through. Inspection firms generally charge by the inspector-day, and a day costs much the same whether the lot is small or large. On a small order that's a big share of the value, which is why buyers skip it and why an Indian manufacturer says third-party checks get booked only "If the order size is good" ([r/ClothingStartups, 2025](#)). Small orders are also the ones most likely to run off the main line, so skipping the check on them gets the risk backwards.

A few ways to make it work.

- **Inspect anyway on the first order.** It's the only record you'll have of how the supplier behaves, and it sets the terms for every order after.
- **Check every piece for the defects that matter.** On a very small lot, many buyers skip sampling and look at each piece for the few things that would hurt them.
- **Combine visits.** If you buy from more than one maker in the same cluster, one inspector-day can sometimes cover two small orders.
- **Script a live video check as a stopgap.** You choose the cartons at random on the call, and the factory opens them and runs your tests on camera. It's weaker than an independent inspector, because the factory holds the camera, but it beats nothing.
- **Keep the balance until you've seen the goods.** Whatever check you run, it only protects you if money is still owed when the report comes in.

If you'd rather not juggle that from abroad, [SourcingSync](#) books and runs inspections in India at any order size, with the controls above built in.

Questions Buyers Ask

Should the supplier or the buyer pay for the inspection? ^

The buyer, directly to the inspection firm. If the supplier pays, the inspector works for the supplier.

Is a supplier's own QC report enough? v

Does a passed inspection mean my goods will clear customs? v

How often should I switch inspectors? v

7. Back to the UK Importer

He had every reason to skip the inspection. He knew India, he had his own company there and he had strong ties with his suppliers. He paid for the check anyway, before every shipment left. That isn't distrust. It's how a careful buyer treats a sample he didn't draw himself, on goods he can't easily send back. Set the inspection up so you control it, and its report is worth trusting.