

# Most 'Top Indian Supplier' Lists Are Really Freight Forwarders

Yash Khatri

Founder, SourcingFrom

Updated 12 Oct 2026 7 min read

Our read of US shipping records for 21 Indian product lines found that 19 of the 20 biggest "Indian suppliers" are freight forwarders or logistics firms, and that many bills carry no shipper name at all. The post explains why the lists come out this way and how to tell a maker from a mover.

## Key takeaways

- 19 of the top 20 names in the US ranking for India are forwarders or logistics firms, holding about 96% of those bills.
- Between 13.5% and 85.2% of India-origin US sea bills carry no shipper name, depending on the product.
- Real makers are focused: 13 of 15 maker profiles had one product chapter at 57% or more of their bills.
- A missing name is not proof a supplier doesn't ship, since US rules let shippers keep names off manifests.
- Read any top supplier list as leads, never as a ranking.

Nineteen of the twenty biggest "Indian suppliers" in US shipping data don't make anything. They move boxes. That's what I found when we read the US import records for India, and it changes how you should read every "top exporters" list you'll be handed this year.



This post walks you through what we counted, why the lists come out this way, and how to find the real maker hiding behind a forwarder's name. One honest caveat up front – the data is US sea imports only. It says nothing direct about cargo to Australia, the UK, the UAE or Europe. The patterns travel well though, because the same Indian exporters ship to all of them.

---

### SourcingFrom Intelligence

powered by Kirnova – the intelligence company

---

**01**    **19 of the 20 largest "Indian suppliers" by US sea bills are freight forwarders or logistics firms.** They hold 1,035,047 of the 1,076,618 bills in those 20 rows, about 96%. The one exception is a tyre maker. *(Our read of US bill-of-lading records as published by ImportYeti, 23 Sep 2026 · Verified count)*

---

**02**    **Between 13.5% and 85.2% of India-origin US sea bills carry no shipper name at all,** depending on the product. Woven babywear is the worst at 85.2%, hand-

knotted carpets the best at 13.5%. *(Same records, 21 HS codes · Verified count)*

---

- 03 Real makers are focused.** 13 of 15 maker profiles we read had one HS chapter at 57% or more of their bills, usually 72% to 99%. Spread across many chapters is the trader or forwarder tell. *(Same records · Verified count, reading Indicative)*
- 

#### What we don't know yet

- How the picture looks for cargo to Australia, the UK, the EU or the UAE. None of those countries publish shipment-level records like the US does.
- Anything about air freight, which manifests don't cover. Fine jewellery is the big blind spot (58 India-origin US sea bills for HS 7113 in over eleven years).

## 1. What We Counted

In September 2026 we read the public US bill-of-lading pages for 21 Indian product codes, from knit T-shirts and babywear to carpets, tiles, furniture, spices and leather shoes. Each page lists India-origin sea shipments into the US since 2015, about 50 named shippers, their addresses and the ports involved. We also read India's country summary page, which ranks the biggest "Indian suppliers" by shipment count (US bill-of-lading records as published by [ImportYeti](#), read 23 Sep 2026).



That country ranking is the one people screenshot. It's also the one that misleads the most. Of the top 20 names, 19 are forwarders, NVOCCs (carriers that don't own ships) or logistics companies. Between them they hold about 96% of the shipments in that top 20. So a buyer who reads it as "India's biggest exporters" is really reading a league table of who books the most containers.

I don't think anyone is hiding anything here. The record simply names whoever filed as shipper, and on a consolidated or house bill that's very often the forwarder. The real exporter sits further down, or in the address line, or nowhere at all.

## **2. Why A Forwarder Ends Up As The "Supplier"**

Picture a 40-person knitwear unit in Tiruppur shipping eight pallets to a small US brand. It doesn't book a whole container. It hands the cargo to a

forwarder, who groups it with other exporters' goods and files one master bill with the shipping line. On the US side the record can show the forwarder as shipper, sometimes with the words "on behalf of" and the maker's name tucked into the address (our read of the same records).

That's ordinary freight practice, and it's how small factories reach small buyers. It also explains why the forwarder share is highest in the products where small orders are common. Forwarder-named rows took 62.6% of named shipments in woven babywear, 48.5% in leather shoes, 33.1% in women's woven blouses and 21.6% in knit T-shirts. In hand-knotted carpets it was just 1.6%, and in bed linen 2.8% (US bill-of-lading records, our count).

| Product               | Forwarder share of named shipments |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Woven babywear        | 62.6%                              |
| Leather shoes         | 48.5%                              |
| Women's woven blouses | 33.1%                              |
| Knit T-shirts         | 21.6%                              |
| Bed linen             | 2.8%                               |
| Hand-knotted carpets  | 1.6%                               |



Carpets are the cleanest line we read. 93.5% of the named carpet shipments came from the expected weaving towns, Bhadohi alone holding about half of them. Those exporters ship their own boxes under their own names. If your product looks like that, the lists will serve you reasonably well. If it looks like babywear, they won't.

### **3. The Bigger Gap: Shipments With No Name At All**

Here's the number that surprised me more. On every Indian product page we read, a good chunk of the shipments had the shipper recorded as "missing in source document". It ran from 13.5% for hand-knotted carpets to 51.8% for bed linen, 55% for sweaters, 56.6% for knit babywear and 85.2% for woven babywear (US bill-of-lading records, our count).

Some of that is paperwork gaps. Some of it is deliberate. US rules let a shipper or importer ask customs to keep its name off the published

manifest (19 CFR 103.31), and plenty of exporters and brands do just that. So a supplier who doesn't show up is not a supplier who doesn't ship to the US. It may simply be a supplier, or a customer, who values privacy.

What does that mean for you? Never cross a supplier off because they're missing from a shipping database. And never put one at the top because their name appears a lot, until you know whose boxes those were.

## 4. How To Tell A Maker From A Mover

You don't need a paid tool for most of this. You need a supplier's own shipment summary, or the quotes and documents they send you, and four questions -

**Does the name sound like freight?** "Logistics", "shipping", "cargo", "line" or "worldwide" in a name is a hint, not a verdict. Read the address field too. "On behalf of", "OBO" or "A/C of" followed by another company usually means the second company is the exporter (our reading, Indicative).



**How spread out is the product mix?** This is the best single test we found. Real makers are narrow. 13 of the 15 maker profiles we read had one product chapter at 57% or more of their shipments, usually 72% to 99%. The odd one out was spread over nine chapters with the top one at 32%, and it shipped 99% of its bills to a single customer, which looks like a sister company (US bill-of-lading records, our count, reading Indicative).

**Does the address fit the product?** A Tiruppur address for T-shirts fits. A Mumbai address for carpets might be a trader, or might just be a head office. In bed linen and tufted carpets most Mumbai addresses in the top ten were mills' head offices, so don't treat a big-city address as proof on its own (same records).

**Is the profile merged?** Some databases fold one company's shipments from several countries into a single profile. One "Chennai" shipper we read turned out to be a global forwarder whose own page showed mostly

Vietnamese and Chinese ports of loading. Always read the raw address and cargo descriptions, not the database's labels.

## 5. Traders Aren't The Problem, Not Knowing Is

I want to be fair to everyone in this chain. A forwarder consolidating small exporters is doing a useful job. A merchant exporter who places your order with three workshops and answers for the quality is a normal Indian business model, and often the right one for a mixed range. We cover that properly in [manufacturer vs trading company](#).

The trouble only starts when you think you're talking to a factory and you're actually talking to its freight agent, or to a list that ranked freight agents as factories. Then your audit, your sample and your price talk all go to the wrong desk. The fix is simple. Ask who makes it, who answers for quality, and who will sign the commercial invoice. Then check the answers against the records on [how to check an Indian supplier](#).

There's a small upside in the data too. Of the seven smaller makers we read (2,000 or fewer US shipments), six shipped 12% to 38% of their bills as part-container loads, mostly on forwarders' house bills (same records). So a maker who ships through a forwarder is often the one already set up for a small buyer like you. More on that trade-off in [LCL vs FCL](#).

## 6. What This Means If You Don't Buy For The US

Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the UAE and the EU don't publish shipment-level import records, so there's no equivalent list for your market. That cuts both ways. Any "top Indian exporters to Australia" list you see was built from something else, usually directories, trade-fair catalogues or paid listings, and it deserves the same four questions.

The US records are still useful to you as a reference. An exporter who ships steadily to US retailers under its own name has a visible track record. One who appears only inside a forwarder's address line may be just as good, but you'll have to do more of the checking yourself. If that's more legwork than you have time for, [SourcingSync](#) can trace the actual factory behind a name and visit it for you.

## 7. So, How Should You Read A "Top Suppliers" List?

As a list of leads, never a ranking. Strip out the forwarders first. Then sort what's left by how focused each company is on your product, and by whether its address matches the town that makes it. India's export base is spread wide anyway - in 15 of the 21 product lines we read, the ten largest named shippers held under 20% of all shipments (same records). There's no secret top ten to find. There are a few hundred decent mid-sized makers and you're picking among them.

Nineteen forwarders sitting on top of India's supplier ranking isn't a scandal. It's just what a table of boxes looks like. Read the address, ask who makes it, and the list starts working for you instead of against you.

Related reading: [Why "Indian manufacturers" email you](#) · [Is a city address a trader sign?](#) · [What an Indian GST number tells you](#)