

What Is an Indian Shipping Bill and Why Ask for a Copy?



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A shipping bill is the export declaration an Indian exporter files with Indian customs, electronically, before goods leave by sea or air. Customs clears it with a Let Export Order. You never file one, but a copy is worth asking for. It names the exporter, shows the invoice number, the Indian tariff code and the declared value, and since April 2026 its invoice number has to match the one on a preferential certificate of origin. It is also how you find out whether your maker or a trader exported your goods.

The Short Version

- The shipping bill is India's export declaration, and Indian law puts it on the exporter.
- Customs answers with a Let Export Order, which is the export clearance.
- Since April 2026 the invoice number on a preferential certificate of origin must match the shipping bill.
- The exporter named on it is the one who answers for the export. It may be a trader, and that's normal.
- The value on it is an FOB value for Indian purposes, so it can differ from your contract price.

A shipping bill is India's export declaration. The Indian exporter, or its customs broker, files it electronically with Indian customs before the goods leave by sea or air, and customs clears it with a Let Export Order. You never file one and can't, but asking for a copy is one of the cheapest checks you can run, because it shows who exported your goods, on which invoice and under which code.

Most buyers first hear the term when a supplier says "the shipping bill is filed" or "we'll send the shipping bill with the documents". It sounds like freight paperwork. It's actually the Indian half of your customs story, and since April 2026 it's the document your certificate of origin gets matched against. The caveat - India runs courier and postal exports through their own routes, so a parcel may not move on a classic shipping bill at all, and what your supplier can send you depends on how the goods left.

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- 01 **The shipping bill is the exporter's legal job.** Section 50(1) of India's Customs Act says the exporter "shall make entry" by presenting electronically "a shipping bill" for goods leaving by vessel or aircraft, and "a bill of export" for goods leaving by land. (*Customs Act 1962, CBIC copy dated 30 March 2022, read 18 October 2026*)
- 02 **The certificate has to match it.** Since April 2026 the invoice number on a preferential certificate of origin must match the shipping bill exactly, and a trade adviser described a mismatch as costing the buyer the duty benefit. (*DGFT Notification No. 05/2026-27, 7 April 2026, the listing Verified and the rule text Reported because the PDF is a scan, our forum-signal log FS-SHP-060*)
- 03 **Each shipping bill is work for a small exporter.** An Indian handicraft exporter said each bill has to be closed with the bank once payment arrives, and that closing "2000+ shipping bills which are B2C is a nightmare". That's one reason small makers push buyers towards fewer, larger shipments. (*r/StartUpIndia, April 2025, FS-SUP-054*)

What we don't know yet

- ☐ How often Indian exporters will share a shipping bill copy with a first-time foreign buyer. Our guess is most will if asked before shipping, but nobody has counted it.

1. Who Files It, and When?

The exporter. India's Customs Act defines the exporter broadly, as including "any owner, beneficial owner or any person holding himself out to be the exporter", and section 50 puts the shipping bill on that person ([Customs Act, CBIC copy](#)). In practice the exporter's customs broker files it on India's customs system, ICEGATE, using the exporter's Importer-Exporter Code. No IEC, no shipping bill, which is why a foreign buyer can't export goods from India in its own name. [IEC, RCMC and export registrations](#) explains the code.

It's filed before the goods go, typically around the time the cargo reaches the port or the inland depot. Customs may examine the goods, and then gives a Let Export Order, the LEO, which is the export clearance. Only after that do the goods load. The order of documents and who handles each is on [exporting from India](#).

2. What Does It Show?

The shipping bill is a structured declaration, so it carries the facts Indian customs needs. For a buyer, the useful ones are these.

- **The exporter.** Name, IEC and GST registration. This is the firm that answers to Indian customs for the export.
- **The invoice.** Invoice number and date. Since April 2026 this has to match your certificate of origin.
- **The goods.** Description, quantity and India's 8-digit ITC(HS) code.
- **The value.** An FOB value in the declared currency, for Indian purposes.
- **The route.** Port of loading, destination and, after clearance, the LEO date.
- **The consignee.** Normally you, or the party you named.

Field names differ between the forms brokers use, so read the copy you get against this list rather than looking for exact labels.

3. Why Is It Worth Asking For?

Four reasons, each a check you can't easily run another way.

It tells you who exported your goods. If you paid a manufacturer and the exporter on the shipping bill is a different firm, that's worth a question, not an alarm. Traders and merchant exporters are a normal part of Indian trade, and many small makers ship through one (see [manufacturer vs trading company](#)). But the firm on the shipping bill is the one that answers for the export, issues the origin paperwork and receives your money through its bank, so it should be the firm on your invoice.

It's what your certificate of origin is matched against. Since April 2026 India requires the invoice number on a preferential certificate to match the shipping bill exactly ([DGFT Notification 05/2026-27](#)). A certificate raised on the proforma number and a shipping bill on the final invoice number is the mismatch that loses a 0% rate. Check all three - commercial invoice, shipping bill, certificate - carry the same number. The exporter's side is on [how an Indian exporter gets a certificate of origin](#).

It shows the code India recorded. The ITC(HS) code should start with the same six digits as your own import code. If it doesn't, read [why your supplier's HS code doesn't match your tariff](#) before your broker files.

It proves the goods left. The LEO date is the export date in Indian records. If a shipment goes missing, or a dispute starts over whether goods were shipped, that's the document that settles it on the Indian side.

4. Why Doesn't the Value Match What I Paid?

Often because it's meant to be different. Indian customs asks the exporter to declare an FOB value, so on a CIF or delivered contract the freight and insurance are backed out before filing. That's normal, and our [FOB](#) page explains it.

What isn't normal is a value far below what you paid once freight is taken out. That can mean the supplier is under-declaring in India, sometimes alongside an offer to under-declare at your end too. The second is your problem directly, and it's covered in [my supplier offered to under-declare the invoice](#).

5. How Do You Ask Without Causing Offence?

Put it in the PO as a normal document request, so it isn't a question of trust later. Something like "Copy of the shipping bill and Let Export Order, with the invoice number matching the commercial invoice and certificate of origin, PDF to us within three days of LEO." Experienced exporters send these routinely. A small maker exporting through a logistics provider may need to get it from that provider, so ask early.

You can also check that a shipping bill exists. ICEGATE has a public enquiry section, and practitioners describe a status check by port code, shipping bill number and date without logging in. Menus there change, so ask your forwarder or broker if you can't find it. Never rely on a link or QR code printed on a document someone sends you.

If the supplier can't produce a shipping bill at all, find out how the goods left. A courier export runs under CBIC's separate courier rules, a post export under its own, and some small makers hand goods to a logistics firm that exports in its own name. Each is legal. Each changes who the exporter is,

and whether you can get a certificate of origin. [Buying in Indian wholesale markets](#) covers the case where the seller isn't the exporter.

Ready to act

Need hands-on help?

If your supplier can't export, or you want the shipping bill, LEO and certificate checked against each other before the goods sail, SourcingSync can act as the Indian side and run the checks.

[Talk to SourcingSync](#) ↗

6. Why Do Small Suppliers Prefer Fewer Shipments?

Because every shipping bill is a record that has to be closed. India's export rules track each export against payment received through the exporter's bank, and an exporter with many small shipments has many bills to reconcile. An Indian exporter selling direct to consumers abroad described it as "a nightmare" at thousands of bills, and said its bank charged per bill (r/StartUpIndia, April 2025). Banks differ, and one reply said its bank did it free.

For you, that explains a pattern. A small maker who quotes more per piece on many small parcels, or pushes for one consolidated shipment, isn't being difficult. It's pricing the paperwork. It's also one more reason not to split an order into parcels, which we cover in [can you split an India order to stay under the duty-free limit](#).

Questions Buyers Ask

Do I need a shipping bill to clear goods in my country?



Usually not. Your broker needs the commercial invoice, packing list, bill of lading or air waybill and, for an FTA rate, the certificate of origin. The shipping bill is a check, and occasionally evidence if customs questions origin.

Is a shipping bill the same as a bill of lading? 

What is a Let Export Order? 

My supplier's name isn't on the shipping bill. Is that a problem? 

7. So What Should You Ask For?

The shipping bill is India's record that your goods left, by whom and on which invoice. Ask for it in the PO, check the exporter, invoice number and first six digits of the code against your other documents, and you'll catch most origin problems before your broker does.