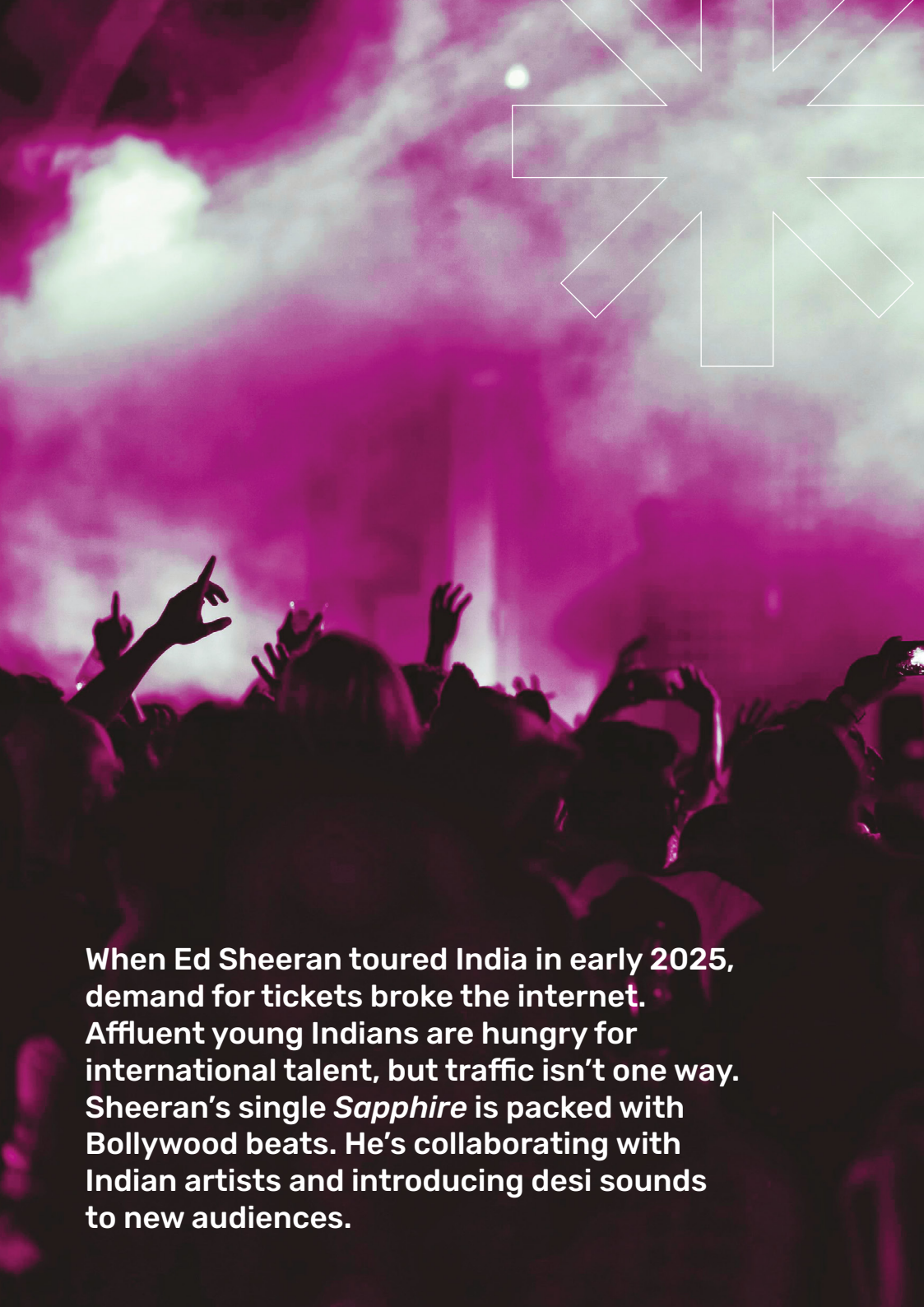
India Insider





When Ed Sheeran toured India in early 2025, demand for tickets broke the internet. Affluent young Indians are hungry for international talent, but traffic isn't one way. Sheeran's single *Sapphire* is packed with Bollywood beats. He's collaborating with Indian artists and introducing desi sounds to new audiences.

The art of being understood halfway across the world

Trade may begin with a shared agreement but thrives on trust and collaboration. With a free trade deal in place the UK–India corridor is projected to get a £25billion boost with tariffs down, optimism up, diplomacy polished. Yet beneath the numbers lies a harder truth: cross-border trade is complex and an acquired skill.

The invisible soft infrastructure of trust and cultural fluency will determine whether this corridor becomes a thoroughfare or a *cul de sac*.

The door is open. Some large companies are well established. Many more, large and small, are planning their approach.

Winning requires the ability to listen and learn; to communicate with a disparate set of stakeholders; to design products and services that appeal to an aspirational young generation who are new to brands and whose loyalties are yet not set.

Both nations speak English. Neither uses it the same way. What Britain calls clarity, India may hear as coldness; what India calls enthusiasm, Britain may mistake for exaggeration. Two rhythms out of sync. Success requires common understanding.



Bilateral trade between the UK and India hit £44.1billion in the four quarters to Q1 2025 — up 10.1% year-on-year.
GOV.UK



India's economy is projected to become the world's 3rd largest by 2030.
S&P Global



65% of British firms cite India's fast growing economy, 60% its consumer market, as key drivers of expansion.
DTNEXT

From handshakes to shared prosperity

The UK–India opportunity is an unfolding story about how two markets, one steeped in heritage, the other powered by youth and aspiration, can learn to think, speak, and build together. The numbers are compelling: billions in tariff reductions, thousands of new jobs, and an open runway for innovation across sectors from fintech to food. Once the politicians have left the stage, the real work begins to translate policy into trust, and opportunity into participation.

This playbook is written for the people now tasked with turning headlines into human momentum. It examines how cultural fluency is vital for those who want to:

- Build confidence inside before projecting it outside
- Earn credibility in the market
- Bring investors on the journey
- Understand the grammar of aspiration.

Fluency, in this context, is built on empathy and sensitivity.

Once the politicians have left the stage, the real work begins to translate policy into trust, and opportunity into participation.

The opening section focuses on employees. British firms often talk about entering India as if it were a logistical challenge. It is an act of reorientation. Employees need to see India not as an outsourcing threat but as an opportunity for growth.

From there, the narrative moves outward to the market which is the compass of growth. British customers prize track record and reliability. Indian consumers look for novelty and adaptability. The winning voice blends both. The third section turns to investors, an audience that isn't persuaded by ambition alone. They want to see the balance of risk and reward: India promises both.

Finally, the playbook looks at the generation that is integral to this bridge: Midnight's Grandchildren - young Indians who've come of age in the era of economic liberalisation, growth and opportunity. They want brands that help them state their individuality without breaking intricate social codes. They like to work for firms that offer purpose and progress. International credentials appeal but companies must be able to deliver on the promise.

Threaded through these short chapters are insights from brands that are already active in the corridor. Together they form a playbook for success in a corridor that is equal parts economic and emotional.



Successful expansion is an inside job

Your India strategy will thrive when employees see opportunity, not threat.

When a British firm announces plans to expand into India, the boardroom hears opportunity; the workforce hears offshoring. The moment a CEO utters the words "I had a successful India trip", the employee rumour mill responds with "job losses, relocation, uncertainty".

The UK–India corridor, may be one of the most promising routes for economic growth in decades. But what's meant as a growth strategy can easily be misread. Internal communications, often treated as a housekeeping function, is the first instrument for any enterprise seeking to build a bridge across the two economies.

Employees are the first market that every cross-border strategy must win.

Navigating the perception problem

Managing this perception is not about sugar-coating the facts; it's about providing context. Internal communications must be clear on intention, consistent in tone, and credible in evidence. A well-crafted internal narrative should pre-empt concerns and make a case for India as a strategic imperative and catalyst for growth.

- UK pharma company AstraZeneca positions hiring in India as part of an expansion strategy not retrenchment. Expanding its R&D centre in Karnataka is powering the search for 20 new medicines by 2030 and giving it access to the next generation of scientific innovation.
- Educational publisher Pearson is increasing its workforce in the UK and India. It sees India as a top three growth market but also hires staff in Noida, Bengaluru and Chennai to provide technology support to operations globally.
- London Stock Exchange Group frames its expansion in India not as an alternative to growth elsewhere but as a way of improving diversity in its global workforce.
- SAP pioneered distributed R&D as the basis for its enlarged operations in India.
- HSBC uses Indian centres as a testbed for new financial systems that are later rolled out in London and Hong Kong. The message reframes India as a laboratory, not a workhouse.



Reframing globalisation

For employees in the UK, international expansion is a chance for career growth. It lets them flex their know-how, governance, and financial discipline in a new, fast growth market: The corridor's value lies in the complementarity.

In effect, the corridor should be a feedback loop: insights developed in India flow back into global design, product strategy, and market innovation.

Employees need to see the loop not as a zero-sum game but as a once in a lifetime opportunity. India's scale will accelerate growth, their own roles will evolve, and both groups will win.

Narratives, not memos

In a cross-border context, the message must operate on three levels at once: strategic - why this makes sense for the business; emotional - why it matters to individuals; and cultural - how we make it work.

The UK's business culture values plain speaking; India's values relational warmth. A communication strategy that ignores either will fail both. The art lies in crafting a message that reads as credible in Manchester and inspiring in Mumbai.

A survey found only 60% of UK professionals say they're motivated to "go beyond" their roles — compared to 71% globally and 84% in India.
Korn Ferry

Arrive without seeming to have just landed

Market relevance and leadership are earned not declared.

Global firms typically enter India with fanfare. They roll out their global campaigns, open fancy facilities and announce their world-class products to a billion-strong nation. Rather than come rushing, Indians may respond with polite indifference and an enigmatic head waggle.

Today, the question is not whether foreign firms can 'exploit' opportunity in India, but whether they can take a leaf out of Ed Sheeran's songbook and co-create.

True leadership means using global experience to understand local complexity, not to overwrite it.

It requires acknowledging that the future of innovation may be written in Bengaluru as easily as in Cambridge.

The vanity of expertise

Multinational firms often mistake their historical success for a transferable truth. Expertise is a liability when it dulls curiosity.

Coursera and Udacity imagined that their online courses would simply satisfy the Indian appetite for learning. They discovered, belatedly, that students were not seeking self-paced tutorials but accredited degrees that conferred social legitimacy. By contrast, Edtech company Hardskills has built a business in India by creating learning content that's uniquely Indian. Its completion rates far outstrip the sector averages. Its success is cultural fluency masquerading as product innovation.

The currency of credibility

For years, Harvard Business School case studies treated India as a laboratory for Western theories of growth. Then Indian faculty members began writing their own cases: on Reliance Jio's digital strategy, HDFC Bank's customer model, Infosys's governance reforms. The intellectual current reversed. Today, Harvard's Indian cases are among its most downloaded globally. Influence flows in both directions, a reminder that leadership is conversational.

Companies that grasp this symmetry treat market intelligence as a joint venture. The CFA Society in India for

Winners are not transplanting international blueprints and hoping they sell. They are working together with local partners to collect data and develop products that suit the needs of Indian customers.





example, doesn't treat global ethics' standards for finance as a translation job. It convenes local regulators, asset managers, and academics to debate what 'fiduciary duty' means in the local market. This dialogue builds trust because the knowledge that emerges blends the best of global compliance and local relevance.

A similar story unfolded in the energy sector. When environmental advocacy firm Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI) partnered with NITI Aayog, India's policy think tank, to chart a pathway for electric mobility, it didn't arrive with American blueprints. It recruited local experts to collect data and build models that reflect the nuance of the Indian context. Together RMI and NITI Aayog produced policy frameworks that informed India's EV incentives and infrastructure planning.

RMI's credibility in India grew not because it spoke loudly, but because it listened long enough to speak with authority.

The risk, reward and romance of scale

Investors can misprice firms targeting the world's largest democracy.

Every investment wave begins with a story. Japan's in the 1980s was one of relentless efficiency; China's in the 2000s, one of scale and state discipline. India's narrative, however, has always been messier. Part democracy, part bureaucracy, part miracle.

India's economy is forecast to be the world's third largest by 2030, with a middle class approaching 250 million people. Yet it still ranks 63rd on the World Bank's ease-of-doing-business index and 119th for contract enforcement. Its appeal comes with a health warning.

The UK-India Free Trade Agreement offers the optimism of a 'corridor of capital'. But when enthusiasm wanes, so does investor patience.

In 2013, Diageo acquired a controlling stake in United Spirits. Within two years Diageo had learned the hard way that Indian growth stories come with labyrinthine regulations, accounting oddities, and the powerful resistence of entrenched interests. Yet a decade later, Diageo's India business is thriving. Putting boots on the ground, it listened and learned.

The art of discernment

There is a temptation, when expanding, to flood investors with data: capital expenditure plans, demographic curves, ESG indicators. The footnotes can drown out the story.

What investors really want is discernment. The art of investor communication lies in telling them which numbers matter and why.

The smartest investor communications turn the country from an emerging-market bet into systemic exposure. Most global supply chains already run through India in some form so some India exposure is already priced in.



Managing the deficit

BP's joint venture with Reliance Industries, launched in 2011 and later expanded, framed India not as a frontier but as a proving ground for the energy transition. It was an act of narrative engineering: climate ambition rendered investable through Indian growth.

Managing real and perceived risk

When Vodafone entered India in 2007 with an $11billion acquisition, it did so with the quaint assumption that contract law meant roughly the same thing in India as it did in the UK. A few years and a hefty retrospective tax bill later, it discovered the flaw in that logic. The unwelcome surprise spooked not only Vodafone investors, but the investor community more widely. The reward of India's growth story might be real, but the risk of its governance vagaries may be worse.



While India has made strides in corporate governance and tax reform, capturing the reality can help investors distinguish between systemic and operational risk. The government's production-linked incentives, tax reforms, digital infrastructure and insolvency codes have reduced some of the friction that once terrified foreign capital. But India is still a long game - resilience and patient capital are required.

Viksit Bharat: India is on track to become an advance economy by 2047.
IMF

Current real-GDP growth remains strong: the World Bank reports India grew ~6.5% in FY 24/25.
World Bank

US tariffs on India will encourage it to explore new export markets.
India Today





Understand the grammar of aspiration

Midnight's Grandchildren are cultural chameleons.

In 1991, when India liberalised its economy, the signifiers of progress were foreign brands: Coca-Cola, Levi's, MTV. Today they are local. What matters to young Indians now is less global validation, more global parity.

When Zara entered India in 2010, it enjoyed early success among urban elites. But by 2020, local upstarts such as Nykaa and FabIndia had captured the zeitgeist, fusing global aesthetics with regional craftsmanship. Zara remains aspirational, but not indispensable. Stand in the queue for an early morning Mumbai to Bengaluru flight and the cool kids are carrying bags by local luggage maker Mokobara, sporting sneakers made in India by Rare Rabbit and listening to music through headphones by boAt. In the words of Prime Minister Modi, they are 'vocal for local'.

21st-century consumers are replacing imported aspirations with local symbols of success. Indians are proud of indigenous 'desi' brands. A British firm entering this space must recognise that the currency of aspiration has changed.



Fluency is soft power

By 2024, India was Netflix's second fastest market for new subscribers. The streamer achieved this with a strategy that combines a uniquely Indian cost and content play: It offers a low-cost Rs149/month (£1.30) subscription for mobile only users. It understood that India required more than subtitles added to global content, and it commissioned Indian series such as Sacred Games, She, and Delhi Crime. All massive hits.

Marketers like to segment India into income tiers, but between the elite and the poor lies a vast middle whose aspirations are elastic: global in technology, local in sentiment, and turned off by patronising narratives as Tata Motors found when it billed its Nano as 'the world's cheapest car'. Aspirational Indians are proud and pragmatic, digitally native and status conscious.

The companies that thrive in India are those that read social signals as indicators of confidence, desire, and risk.

At home in India

The most successful foreign brands in India—Apple, IKEA, Hyundai—have mastered cultural fluency. When IKEA entered India, it dropped the Scandinavian minimalism theme and focused instead on everyday functionality—storage for small apartments, furniture that withstands humidity, designs that accommodate extended 'joint' families. It competes with local brands such as Pepperfry, an online, retailer founded by former eBay executives. Hyundai's product portfolio and customer-centric innovations were handsomely rewarded when in 2024 it scored India's biggest ever IPO.

Market fluency is a philosophy of attention—the art of hearing a culture think aloud and replying in its own cadence.





Education is a route to betterment

Education is a powerful signifier of status and an avenue to social mobility. Overseas education may open up new job prospects. But motivations vary. Indians often make decisions not on a western ideal of individualism but on a collectivist one, rooted in parental and grandparental ambition. Educators need to market reassurance to extended families alongside freedom to curious young adults. British universities planning to enter India must respond to this market sensitivity by offering learning programmes that meet the unique needs of Indian students.

When the University of Arizona launched its "microcampus" model with Amity University in India, it offered students a chance to earn a U.S. degree partly in-country, at a fraction of the cost. The approach worked because it matched the psychology of the aspirational middle: ambition without abandonment.

Adapt to win

Past generations looked outside for inspiration and aspired to the trappings of international success. In the 21st century – often billed as the Asian century – the tables have turned. India is not just a market and source of talent. Increasingly it is also a source of innovation. The UK-India corridor will be an exciting space in the coming decades. To paraphrase Darwin: The winners will not be the strongest or most intelligent but those best able to adapt their products, services or business models to the Indian context.

~98.6% of youth believe India is a digital superpower suggests young Indians are not just waiting for "global opportunity" but see their own country as an opportunity.
Observer Research Foundation

HORN OK PLEASE

Indian drivers honk to excess. It's a cultural thing. The former head of Audi India said 'a horn in Mumbai is used as much in one day as a horn in Germany in a year'. European carmakers have redesigned their horns for durability and volume to meet the needs of local honkers.

Local calling

Phone makers tailor their products to the Indian market. Many handsets include dual SIMs because Indians will use different networks for calls and data and a phone may be shared by several family members. Operating systems support regional languages. And often specs promote the quality of stereo speakers because the phone is used as a broadcast medium and has to compete against the honking of cars.

Meet the Maharaja, Mac



McDonald's success in India is a masterclass in localisation. Famed for selling beef elsewhere, in a country where many see the cow as scared, it makes a range of items suitable for local taste – either to satisfy the love of spice or to suit dietary requirements such as vegetarian and Jain (no onions, no garlic). The Maharaja Mac comes in chicken and vegetarian varieties.



WhatsApp में हिंदी

Indian's love of the messaging app has made it the company's biggest market. It supports payments in local languages and is integrated with India's Universal Payments Interface (UPI). India users get features others don't such as the ability to scan QR codes within the chat.



Mobile movie mania

The streamer offers a low-cost, low-resolution mobile-only subscription for Indian users.

The UK is a world leader in creativity that generates a return on investment. Our architects, film producers, electronic games creators, musicians, publishers and, critically our designers contribute over £124billion to the economy, making up 5.2% of the total UK GVA.

The design of products and services is critical to the success of any business, and the UK-India Free Trade Agreement presents an exciting opportunity for all businesses. But, every company that participates in the UK-India corridor will need design and communications support because effective design is foundational to the cultural fluency required to win in export markets. Our designers have this capability.

Deborah Dawton
CEO Design Business Association

With offices in London and Mumbai, Indigo/magenta is the only specialist B2B design and communications business in the UK-India corridor. With 15 years' experience co-founders Mark Hannant and Munni Trivedi are among a small number of adventurous entrepreneurs who have already put down roots and built networks that will help the next wave of businesses find their way in India.



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magenta is a fresh thinking creative studio headquartered in Mumbai. It provides B2B content and communications design support to companies engaged in cross-border trade.

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