

## A Smoother Landing: India's New Baggage Regime Welcomes the World

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### Kunal Savani

Partner, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas Advocates & Solicitors



### Shivam Garg

Principal Associate, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas

Airports are often the first point of contact between a nation and its travellers. For years, India's baggage regime felt like a relic from a slower era, functional, but out of step with the fluid reality of global mobility. The newly introduced Baggage Rules, 2026 attempt something more ambitious than a routine update: they reimagine how a rapidly expanding and globally integrated India should welcome its returning citizens, visiting professionals, and tourists.

The older framework, born in 2016, was not inimical to travellers, but lacked precision. Its principal deficiency was not taxation but uncertainty. Ambiguous concepts such as "personal effects," uneven interpretation of temporary imports, and a rigid Transfer of Residence (ToR) system created a climate where outcomes often depended on which airport you landed at and which officer examined your luggage. For expatriates shipping back years of accumulated household goods, or frequent flyers carrying professional equipment, the experience could swing unpredictably between smooth clearance and bureaucratic purgatory.

### The Changes Made

The 2026 Rules begin by addressing ambiguity directly. Definitions have been sharpened and passenger categories more intelligently drawn. The law now clearly distinguishes residents, tourists, and foreigners holding non-tourist visas with minimum stay thresholds. This constitutes structural reform rather than mere semantic refinement. Customs exemptions exist to facilitate personal mobility, not commercial import disguised as baggage. By clarifying intent through precise classification, the new framework shrinks the grey zones that previously bred disputes.

Equally notable is the recalibration of duty-free allowances. The general free allowance for eligible air passengers rises to ₹75,000, an acknowledgement that inflation and digital living have quietly rewritten the economics of personal travel. A modern traveller's essentials include laptops, wearables, and electronics that were previously classified as luxury goods. Explicitly permitting one new laptop duty-free represents a recognition rather than a concession of contemporary life. The same logic informs the overhaul of jewellery

rules: scrapping outdated monetary caps and moving to weight-based limits removes the absurdity of pegging personal adornment to fluctuating commodity prices.

### Transfer of Residence regime

The substantive centrepiece of these reforms is the reinvention of the Transfer of Residence (“**TOR**”) regime. Under the previous system, the layered structure was not very conducive. The new rules introduce a layered structure that rewards duration of stay with proportionate relief. For Indians returning after extended overseas careers, exemption limits now stretch to ₹7.5 lakh. Foreign professionals relocating to India under long-term contracts receive parallel concessions, acknowledging the reality that global talent mobility is now a cornerstone of economic growth.

This redesign represents legal clarity beyond mere generosity. The conditions governing ToR prior usage, limits on short visits, continuous stay requirements, and the boundaries of customs discretion are now codified with precision. What was once governed by administrative practice and inconsistent interpretation is now written into the rulebook. For families relocating across continents, predictability is as valuable as the exemption itself.

The scope of eligible goods has also been updated to reflect contemporary realities. Modern households contain devices unimaginable when earlier baggage frameworks were drafted: tablets, gaming consoles, robotic vacuum cleaners, air fryers, smart projectors. By publishing an updated and exhaustive list of permitted household articles, the new regime eliminates the unpredictable outcomes where a gadget’s classification depended on individual interpretation. The message is simple: customs law must evolve alongside consumer technology.

### Procedural reforms

Parallel to these substantive reforms is a significant procedural transformation. The Customs Baggage (Declaration and Processing) Regulations, 2026 consolidate decades-old fragmented rules into a unified digital architecture. Electronic declarations, advance filing, post-filing modification, and risk-based screening replace paper-heavy processes and routine physical inspections. Instead of treating every traveller as a potential violator, the system pivots toward intelligence-led verification.

For business travellers and tourists carrying high-value personal equipment, the introduction of formal temporary export and re-import certificates represents a significant advancement. Previously handled through informal arrangements, such cases now operate within a defined legal channel with clear timelines and obligations. Discretion yields to documentation, and uncertainty yields to defined process.

Peripheral reforms, including clearer crew allowances, explicit linkage to foreign exchange regulations, and structured rules for pet imports, close long-standing gaps that often triggered disproportionate confusion. Individually modest, collectively they signal a regulatory philosophy focused on coherence rather than patchwork fixes.

From a tourism and diaspora perspective, the symbolism matters as much as the substance. Customs friction is one of the most memorable and often emotional moments in international travel. A returning migrant who has spent years abroad does not experience baggage clearance as a technical procedure; it is part of the homecoming ritual. A visiting professional interprets efficiency as a sign of institutional maturity. By aligning passenger facilitation with global best practices, India strengthens not only logistics but perception.

### Challenges remain.

Digitisation demands infrastructure, training, and public education. Early rollout may bring confusion as passengers adapt to new categories and forms. Risk-based systems must be calibrated carefully to preserve security without sliding back into blanket inspections. And

the long-term success of the reforms will depend on consistent implementation across airports, the persistent vulnerability of many well-designed policies.

Yet the trajectory is unmistakable. The 2026 framework replaces a suspicion-driven model with one rooted in clarity, technology, and differentiated treatment. It accepts a simple truth that international mobility is no longer exceptional but ordinary. In doing so, it reshapes the customs experience from a checkpoint into a gateway that recognises the rhythms of modern travel and meets them with a regulatory system built for the present, not the past.