# Postcards from Post: interview with Richard Niall and Kiran Karamil, Australia’s agricultural counsellors in India

(Duration 11 mins 31 secs)

## Transcript

[Video begins]

**Tim Dawson [Host]:** Australia exports over 70% of its agriculture, fisheries and forestry produce and DAFF has a network of agricultural counsellors posted in Australian embassies across the globe to help make that trade happen.

In this series, we'll hear from those counsellors. Welcome to Postcards from Post.

Today we're talking with our agricultural counsellors based in New Delhi, India, Richard and Kiran who are responsible not only for India but for a whole range of countries in South Asia. Good morning to you.

Both of you are based in New Delhi and India, but you have other countries that you're responsible for. Can you tell us about those countries and can you give us an idea of the markets across all of these countries?

**Kiran Karamil**: So, we look after, I believe 7 countries, including India, so that also ranges from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

The level of engagement varies for from country to country, but I can firmly say that Pakistan and Bangladesh take up a significant amount of our time as well. So, Rich looks after Pakistan. I look after Bangladesh and off the back of some funding we received recently, we'll be doing a lot more engagement.

Those are pretty exciting markets, because it's really been untapped. So, a lot of our work

is really to understand what those markets have to offer. So, yeah, it's definitely an exciting time to be not just in India but looking after the region.

**Tim Dawson:** Wow. And you, you're right. Not only are they untapped markets, but they're enormous markets, aren't they?

**Richard Niall:** Yeah. Yeah. So, in 2023 India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, all three countries entered our top 20 agriculture, fisheries and forestry trading partners for the very first time with India 13th, Bangladesh at 16th, and Pakistan at 20th. These seven countries are home to about a quarter of the world's population. And so, at 2050 we're expecting possibly up to a third of the population based in this area. So, lots of opportunity, for growth.

**Tim Dawson**: And the population dynamics are changing as well.

**Kiran Karamil:** Yeah, that's right. So, you know, the emerging middle class across the region is

providing a lot of potential and opportunities for our high-quality premium products, of course there's still a significant base that is below that, threshold that we're looking at.

But, you know, a small piece of 1.4 billion with India, let's say is enough to keep a

business very well occupied, for the rest of their lives if they really want to.

**Tim Dawson**: Part of your role is to be present to find opportunities for Australian agriculture and to build the relationships that can enable those opportunities to come to fruition. What do you do on a day-to-day basis to, provide opportunities for Australian industry?

**Kiran Karamil**: So, on a day-to-day basis, we spend probably 90% of our time on this thing and not on the phone, necessarily, but on WhatsApp, because the primary way in which people communicate in this region is through WhatsApp.

So, a lot of what we're doing is on the phone, talking to our stakeholders, talking to the Indian government, whether it's an issue or, you know, as in, like a detained assignment. We'll be on there

talking to someone.

If it's around just an issue that we're trying to prosecute, we'll be on there as well. Our locally

engaged staff equally are on the phones. That's the primary way in which we communicate. But then we also, of course, make a lot of official calls build up a lot of those relationships.

And Rich can probably talk about the real value of being able to get into country. Because Pakistan being a difficult part of the world to get to despite being India's neighbour having to go to Dubai, I think, Rich being there literally last week showed a lot of opportunities, and I guess the value of the face-to-face engagement. I don't know if you want to talk about some of the conversations and some of the outcomes we got in fact a few months ago.

**Richard Niall:** Yeah. Yeah. So, Tim, back to your question, we’re trying to look for opportunities for win outcomes in the South Asia region. And one of the key things that we're seeing a lot in market is actually climate shocks, which leads to issues with food inflation.

Australia has the opportunity to be a very reliable partner for India to provide those staple items. To be able to help stabilise some of these food prices in order for the population to have, food security at a national level. So that's something that we're seeing across the region, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well.

**Tim**: So, what do we currently export, in agricultural produce to this region? And where do you think you see the opportunities to either grow or find new opportunities with new products?

**Kiran Karamil:** A lot of what we're providing at the moment, particularly this region, is lentils and pulses. It's a staple commodity. That's, you know, as Rich mentioned, it's feeding into that food,

food security, agenda for the region. There's a lot of products that we're exporting that's not necessarily grown in the region. And so it provides a really important input into manufacturing.

Particularly food manufacturing.

So, that's been, I guess, largely the base in which we've been operating. But that is definitely shifting. We're seeing a lot of high-end premium products coming in, like lamb, horticulture, as two good examples. Wine has seen some significant growth over the last few years in India in particular.

**Tim Dawson:** Wow. And are there any particular commodities from Australia that you can

see? You know, there might be a window of opportunity to get into this area indeed also for fisheries and forestry?

**Kiran Karamil**: Yeah. Look there. There's a lot I think. I think textiles is really an interesting

picture for the region you know, off the back of the ATMAC programme. We've seen a lot of our industries engage, particularly, wool and I'll get Rich talk about wool. But there's a lot of because this

is almost a textiles hub.

As you know, countries are trying to shift away from China and their manufacturing base Bangladesh. I see as, like, a short-term opportunity. When it comes to products like wool, they're not

necessarily playing in the wool space.

They do a lot of cotton manufacturing, but we see that as an opportunity to really shift a lot of that you know. Cotton exports potentially into Bangladesh, but India, I think, is a medium to long-term opportunity. Where there's a pretty strong manufacturing base that's growing significantly and Rich in particular, has done a lot of work with our wool industry to, I guess, to deepen those relationships and engagement. So that, you know, we become a partner of choice.

**Tim Dawson**: Rich, can you tell us about the opportunities for dairy in this region?

**Richard Niall:** So, dairy, there's a couple of opportunities. The first is on the co-operation narrative in support of our comprehensive economic, co-operation agreement negotiations.

So dairy is one of the most sensitive sectors in India, employing about 80 million people, but and also India has the largest dairy herd in the world. But it's also the most uniquely unproductive, producing around 5 to 10 litres per cow per day. That differs to Australia, where we produce about 30 to 40 litres per cow per day.

So, from our perspective, there's a real opportunity here for Australian industry to work

closely with Indian dairy industry to help support productivity outcomes to demonstrate our co-operation credentials. This might help in turn support, ongoing trade initiatives between both our countries.

**Tim Dawson:** Australia and India have a long relationship, including fighting each other on the

cricket field and we're very passionate about that. We have good relations but there are lots of

challenges geopolitically around the world. How important is it that we have agricultural counsellors as part of that general relationship?

**Kiran Karamil:** Agriculture, I think, provides, I guess, you know, opportunities to open

doors that you otherwise would not be able to you know. The High Commissioner, he's put agriculture as front and centre of his agenda, you know, and that's something he's been very clear to us. And he's been very clear to stakeholders that he's engaging with.

So, we are relied on, you know, subject matter experts. We're able to talk with authority around what Australia can offer, in terms of agriculture. And I'm not talking about exports, but we're talking about capacity building.

**Tim Dawson:** Can you provide a story where you've had an interesting, or fun moment in the

role. Or maybe something that was lost in translation?

**Rishard Niall:** So, last year, we had obviously the cricket World Cup, and that was based here in India. So, we had the Australian cricket team visiting India different parts of the year, but I was down at Gujarat for a global fisheries conference hosted by India’s Department of Fisheries and at the hotel I was staying at when I checked in. Guess who rocks up? The man, the myth, The legend. Steve Smith himself pulls up into the hotel.

**Kiran Karamil:** In March last year, we had the prime minister here. I had nothing to do with the Prime Minister's visit, apart from trying to sort out avocado market access. But at the last night, we were at the HOMs [Head of Mission’s] Lawn. Just, you know, a bit of a farewell for the for the Prime Minister.

I was standing in the back with a few others just, you know, kind of observing what's

happening and like, oh, we should probably go home now. It's around 5:30 in the afternoon. We're trying to sneak out. But Barry O'Farrell, our previous High Commissioner. He pulls me over and

he's like Kiran, come here. Come here because he's having a chat to the Prime Minister, and he grabs me. He pulls me over and he goes, “do you know who this man is?” This is the avocado guy. So, he introduced me to Prime Minister Albanese as “the avocado guy”.

**Tim Dawson:** What would your message be to the Australian agricultural industry who want to export their products to this region?

**Kiran Karamil:** Have a look at what this region has to offer because there are plenty of opportunities. There's a strong team here, from DAFF. But across the diplomatic network with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Austrade as well where we're here to support any industry that wants to come and engage with India.

That includes navigating through the regulatory hurdles of which there are countless and Rich has done, a lot of it, dealt with a lot of it.

But there are so many opportunities here, and I think there's, a lot of hesitancy, particularly people who have come into this market maybe 15, 20 years ago and gone. Oh, India's very hard, but the India from 20 years ago is not the same India that we're seeing today.

**Richard Niall:** Last year's GDP growth figures for India were 8.4%. that type of growth is too big to ignore particularly in a region that houses about 2 billion people. So, the message that I would say to the industry which builds on Kiran's, message is the three P's patience, persistence and partnerships.

It takes a lot of time to understand this market, and each state and territory is a country unto itself. That's the staying in India. So, taking the time to understand each individual state and its specific, market segments, will really, really help my industry be successful.

**Tim Dawson:** Thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it. And, it sounds like you're doing an incredible job in the region. So, thank you to Rich and to the Avocado Guy, Kiran for your time. And keep doing an excellent job over there for Australian Ag.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

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