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India and Israel: The great seduction

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Like all dreamers, Israeli entrepreneur Harel Cohen had an idea to change the world — well, to be precise, India.

“It’s one of the world’s biggest countries, it will be the world’s biggest economy in 40 years,” said Cohen, 37, an amiable, strongly built former Israeli army officer. “But with 22 languages and 10 scripts, India doesn’t have enough Indian-language keyboards.”

An e-mail and a flight to India in 2004 got him into the door of Vijendra Shukla, head of language technology at the government-run Centre for the Development of Advanced Computing in Noida and a pioneer in the development of Indian-language software.

Cohen is now CEO of FTK Technologies, which has a simple but smart way of programming keyboards for different languages: fit a webcam on a laptop to intuitively track the user’s fingers and create a “virtual” keyboard on screen, which mirrors the keystrokes of the real keyboard.

At the click of a mouse, it can switch from Kannada to Urdu or eight other languages. Indian words that took two minutes to type, now take 20 seconds.

It was December 2005 when, like hundreds of entrepreneurs who populate the tech hubs around Tel Aviv, Israel’s throbbing business capital, Cohen flew to New York. Within hours he sold his idea to a private investor. “I don’t think he’s ever been to India,” said Cohen of his investor. “He said, ‘it’s bound to be good, there’s one billion people there.’” It was as easy as that. “There’s a lot of money in Israel for ideas,” Cohen said. “That’s how it goes.”

People like Cohen are packing the flights to India and fuelling a spiralling but largely unknown trade beyond diamonds and secretive defence buys — India is now Israel’s biggest arms customer, with \$5 billion (Rs 2,000 crore) in purchases, officially, since 2001 - to infotech,

Annual trade is expected to touch \$5 billion, a 46 per cent rise since 2006.

“We've been around for 24 years, but only recently have we become sexy,” said Anat Bernstein-Reich (42), deputy chairperson of the Israel-India Chamber of Commerce, over lunch in



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