

Kochhar and Co gets licence to operate as foreign lawyer in Japan

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MUMBAI

Delhi-headquartered law firm **Kochhar and Co.** has secured a Japanese Gaikokuho-Jimu-Bengoshi (registered foreign lawyer) licence and opened an office in Tokyo with one Indian lawyer, while also hoping for permission to open a stand-alone local law office in Dubai.

Rohit Kochhar, managing partner of Kochhar and Co., said in a phone interview from Tokyo that the firm opened the office, located in the Akasaka commercial district in Tokyo, to consolidate its position as a pioneer in Japan and as the first Indian law firm to open an office in that country.

The "arduous" process to get a Japanese foreign law licence took two years, he said, and required "myriad formalities, approval, paperwork, interviews and registrations", including a translation of the Indian Advocates Act, 1961, into Japanese.

"We feel that even our existing clients and the clients we retain in future will draw a much higher degree of comfort by virtue of the fact that we have an office (in Japan)," Kochhar said, "as well as a Japanese (office) manager and an Indian qualified lawyer stationed here that they can reach out to not only in their own time zone, but also in their own city and within an environment that is closer to their own culture."

Japanese firms have been investing steadily in India over the

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past few years, such as 2008's acquisition by Daiichi Sankyo Co. Ltd of Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd for \$4.6 billion, or the January 2012 purchase of a 26% stake by Nippon Life Insurance Co. in Reliance Capital Asset Management Ltd for ₹1,450 crore.

On Thursday, Mitsui Sumitomo Insurance Co. Ltd said it will purchase a 26% stake in Max New York Life Insurance Co., a joint venture between Max India and US-based New York Life Insurance Co. for ₹2,731 crore in an all-cash transaction.

Kochhar and Co.'s former Bangalore associate Rianna Lobo has now been stationed in Japan for two weeks as a resident attorney to do Indian legal work and build client relationships. "We are just looking at providing a better communication channel between Japan and our offices," she commented.

However, the firm is not allowed to practise Japanese law and has no plans to "ever hire a Japanese lawyer because we never want to compete with Japanese firms", said Kochhar.

Kochhar said that when he first came to Japan on business

in 1995, he was one of the first Indian lawyers to interact with the Japanese industry and law firms. Now, he admitted, the market has become more competitive, as most Indian law firms are tapping the market and its clients.

Khaitan and Co., for example, has a full-time Japanese lawyer on retainer in Mumbai to develop the firm's Japan business, while most other major Indian firms are regularly instructed on India-related transactions by Japanese companies.

"There is now much greater activity (in Japan) that one can see from Indian law firms than there was ever in the past," said Kochhar, though he also attributed this to the increasing "general sense of competitiveness" in the Indian legal market.

Kochhar and Co. is also in the process of applying for a licence to practise local law in Dubai without being affiliated to a local firm, said Kochhar, adding that he expected the process to be completed in several weeks.

Kochhar has an office in Singapore, too, where Mumbai-headquartered law firm Wadia Ghandy and Co. had set up an office in 2011, *Mint* had reported in December.



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