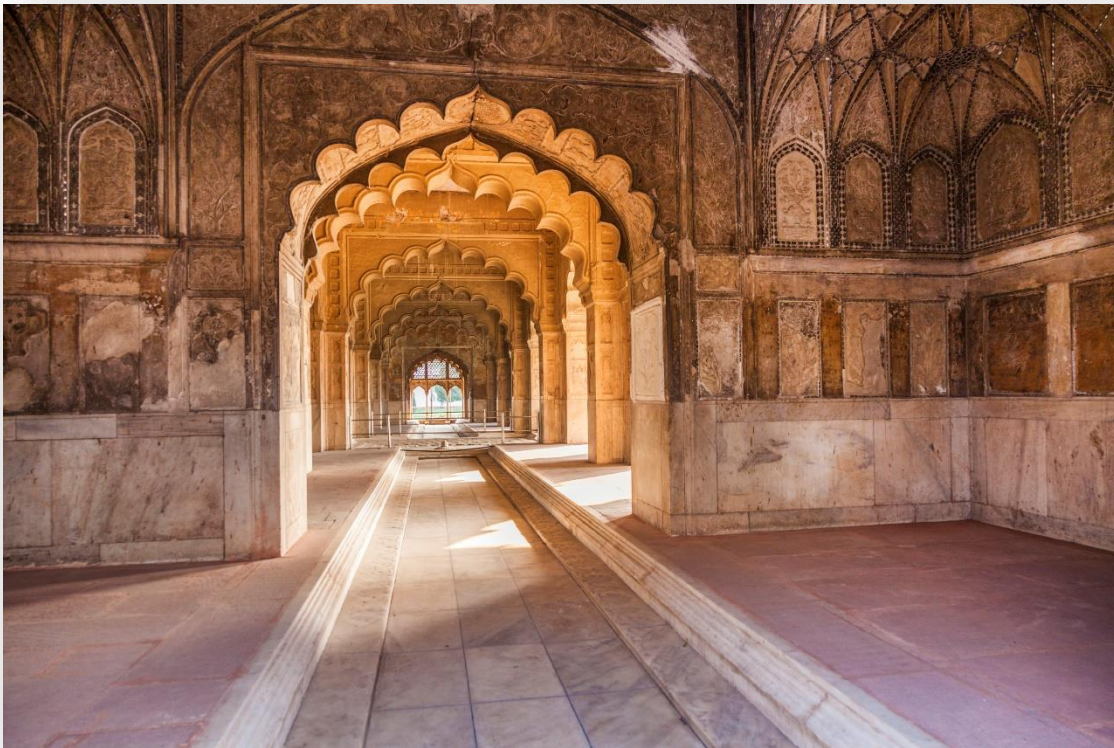




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INTERNATIONAL LAWYERS NETWORK



**LEXCOUNSEL LAW OFFICES
ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS ENTITY IN INDIA**



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ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS ENTITY IN INDIA

***“Establishing a Business Entity in India”***

Mr. Alishan Naqvee
Partner
LexCounsel Law Offices – New Delhi

***“Establishing a Business Entity in India”***

Ms. Neha Yadav
Principal Associate
LexCounsel Law Offices – New Delhi

1. Types of Business Entities**1.1 Description of the types of entities available in India through which to conduct business**

A foreign entity may establish a business presence in India by:

- opening a liaison office, branch office or project office;
- appointing a distributor or franchisee;
- commencing its own operations in India;
- forming a joint venture with an Indian entity; or
- acquiring an existing business in India.

1.2 Matters to be considered when choosing a particular business entity type

A liaison office can only be established to primarily explore and understand business opportunities and climate in India for the foreign parent entity. A liaison office is not permitted to earn any income in India by conducting any business or commercial activities in India.

A branch office can carry on business activities while a project office can be established to execute a specific project. However, since a branch office or a project office would not be considered a legal entity separate from its parent company, the business income generated by them would be taxable at the rate of tax applicable to foreign companies (40% plus surcharge and cess) which is higher than the rate of tax applicable to companies incorporated in India (ranging from 25% to 30% plus applicable surcharge and cess).

Applications for establishment of a liaison or branch office in India are considered by designated authorized dealer banks (“**AD Bank**”) in accordance with guidelines issued by Reserve Bank of India (“**RBI**”). However, prior approval of RBI may also be required in certain cases such as where the applicant is a citizen or registered/incorporated in certain notified countries or where the principal business of the applicant falls in certain notified sectors such as defence, telecom etc.

In view of restrictions on the activities and tax implications for liaison, branch and project offices, establishment of a wholly owned subsidiary, or strategic alliances through joint ventures, technical collaborations or distributorship arrangements with existing Indian companies by and large remain the preferred options for foreign entities to establish a long-term presence in India.

2. Steps and Timing to Establish**2.1 Brief overview of steps to incorporate/constitute each**

Companies incorporated outside India, desirous of opening a Liaison/Branch office in India have to make an application in



prescribed form to the AD Bank, along with prescribed documents including the English version of the certificate of incorporation/registration or Memorandum & Articles of Association attested by Indian Embassy/Notary Public in the country of registration and audited balance sheets of the applicant entity for the last few years as prescribed.

Incorporation of a company in India is an administrative process which takes approximately 15 (fifteen) to 20 (twenty) working days from filing of incorporation related documents (“off the shelf” companies are not recommended in view of related due diligence issues and liabilities). The MCA21 e-Governance programme by the Government of India has simplified the entire incorporation process and the process may be completed online. For the purpose of e-filing forms, a digital signature certificate has to be obtained from the concerned authority without which e-filing cannot be done. The purpose of the digital signature is to ensure the security and authenticity of documents filed electronically. It generally takes only 1 (one) working day to obtain a digital signature. Also, persons seeking appointment as directors of an Indian company are mandatorily required to obtain director identification number (“DIN”) without which such appointment would be invalid. Allotment of DIN takes approximately 3 (three) to 4 (four) working days. The DIN is specific to each individual and there is no requirement of a fresh DIN for appointment as a director of other Indian company/ies. A company incorporated anywhere in India is entitled to carry on business activities throughout India.

Joint ventures other than by way of incorporating a new company (i.e. other than by way of investment in a new company jointly

with the Indian partner) may be formalized by way of a simple transfer of shares. However, transfer of shares between Resident and Non-Resident need reporting to the RBI. Further, depending on the percentage of foreign direct investment contemplated, prior approval of the concerned ministry/department may be required if the business of the new company falls in a sector, where 100% foreign direct investment is not permitted under the automatic route (i.e. without prior government approval).

Other contractual arrangements such as distributorship/franchise agreements or trademark/brand licensing agreements etc., for doing business in India can be formalized in 1 (one) to 2 (two) days, except where sector specific licenses are involved. India does not have any standard regulations for protection of franchisees, and thus the relationships are broadly governed by the contracts between the parties.

3. Governance, Regulation, and Ongoing Maintenance

3.1 Brief summary of regulation of each type and ongoing maintenance, reporting requirements

Primary regulations under Indian laws:

- i. Companies Act, 2013;
- ii. Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 and RBI regulations governing establishment and operations of Branch Office/Liaison Office/Project Office (as updated from time to time);
- iii. Income Tax Act, 1961; and
- iv. In addition, an Indian company would also require obtaining common licenses and registrations, such as Goods and Services Tax registration.



3.2 Immediate Requirement: Setting Up – Compliances usually on-going/time based:

- A. Under the Income Tax Act, 1961, every entity is required to have a Permanent Account Number (“**PAN**”), Tax Deduction and Collection Account Number (“**TAN**”) and deduct tax at source (“**TDS**”) for all the payments made to its employees at the percentage given under the relevant provisions of the Income Tax Act, 1961.
- B. Board Meetings/Annual General Meeting (“**AGM**”)/ Resident Director – Every company is mandatorily required to hold 4 (four) Board meetings and 1 (one) AGM in a year. It is also mandatory for every company to have at least 1 (one) resident director.
- C. Every Listed Company /Public Company with paid up capital of Rs 100 Crores (Rupees Hundred Crores) or more / Public Company with turnover of Rs 300 Crores (Rupees Three Hundred Crores) or more shall have at least 1 (one) woman director.
- D. Listed Company are also required to appoint at least 1/3 (One third) of total number of directors on their Board of Directors as independent directors. Further, the certain classes of public companies are also mandated to have at least 2 independent directors.

3.3 Filings with the registrar/reporting requirements:

Example:

- A. Annual Filing e-Forms: Form for filing annual return by a company having a share capital, particulars of annual return for the company not having share

capital, form for filing balance sheet and other documents, form for filing Profit and Loss account and other documents, form for submission of compliance certificate have to be filed with the concerned Registrar of Companies annually;

- B. Return of Particulars of Directors and Key-Managerial Personnel’s (“**KMP**”) – Return containing such particulars and documents of the director and other KMP shall be filed with the Registrar within 30 (thirty) days from the date of appointment/resignation of every director and KMP and also within 30 (thirty) days of any change taking place;
- C. Return of appointment of Managing Director (“**MD**”), Whole Time Director (“**WTD**”) and Manager – Company is required to file a return within 60 (sixty) days of the appointment of a MD, WTD or Manager;
- D. Filing of Income Tax returns is required to be done every year by the entity operating in India in addition to the TDS return which is also required to be submitted with the tax authorities annually.

Relatively, the operational on-going and maintenance requirements with respect to companies incorporated under Indian laws are quantifiably more than Liaison Office/Branch Office/Project Office. That said compliances for companies also defer based on their classifications. For example: Public Limited companies have more compliance in general as compared to Private companies. Small companies and one-person companies do not have so many compliances, as compared the



larger/more traditional forms of companies etc.

3.4 Requirements for local shareholding/directors

It is mandatory for every company to have at least 1 (one) resident director i.e. a person who has stayed in India for a total period of not less than 182 (one hundred and eighty-two) days in the previous calendar year.

However, there is no such requirement in the case of shareholders, and all the shareholders can be non-resident.

3.5 Minority shareholders' rights and protection

Companies Act, 2013 has sought to empower the minority shareholders in many ways including the class action suit. Under the concept of class action suit, a suit may be instituted against the company as well as the auditors of the company by the minority shareholders. Companies Act, 2013 further provides for provisions relating to oppression and mismanagement which empowers minority shareholders to file an application for relief to the Tribunal in case of oppression and mismanagement. Under Companies Act, 2013, the Tribunal may also waive any or all the requirements given under Companies Act, 2013 and allow any number of shareholders and/or members to apply for relief, though this power to waive is rarely exercised by the Tribunal.

4. Foreign Investment, Thin Capitalisation, Residency and Material Visa Restrictions

4.1 Any significant barriers to entry for an offshore party

The Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 and the rules and regulations framed thereunder provide the basic legal framework

for foreign investments in India. The RBI together with the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, Ministry of Commerce and Industry and various other ministries and departments of the Central Government contribute to framing and modifying sector specific regulatory framework and are involved in granting of approvals for foreign investments in India depending upon the sector in which the operations of the target entity falls.

4.1.1 Financial Collaboration

In terms of the current Foreign Direct Investment ("FDI") policy, foreign investment up to 100% (hundred percent) of the securities (including shares and fully and mandatorily convertible preference shares and debentures) of Indian companies is freely permitted in most sectors ("**Unregulated Sectors**"). However:

- Foreign investment beyond prescribed percentages is not permitted without prior government approval in a few sectors/activities, such as insurance, scheduled/regional air transport services, banking, telecom, defense, and multi-brand retail trading etc. ("**Regulated Sectors**"). A financial collaboration in the Regulated Sectors ordinarily requires the presence of an Indian equity partner to hold the remaining equity and compliance with the relevant sectoral conditions on entry route, conditionalities and caps.
- Foreign investment is prohibited in certain sectors including atomic energy, lottery, gambling, trading in transferable development rights, manufacturing of tobacco products or

substitutes, railway operations (except for permitted operations), etc.

- FDI in limited liability partnerships (“LLPs”) is permitted, subject to certain conditions e.g. the FDI is allowed, under the automatic route, in LLPs operating in sectors/activities where 100% (hundred percent) FDI is permitted and there are no FDI linked performance conditions. Investment in LLPs either by Foreign Portfolio Investors (“FPIs”) or Foreign Venture Capital Investors (“FVCI”) is not permitted.
- A foreign investor can, without prior government approval, invest in unlisted securities of an existing Indian company in Unregulated Sectors, in accordance with the pricing guidelines, and subject to overall compliance with the FDI policy, and accordingly such securities can also be issued/transferred to it by Indian or foreign shareholders.

4.2 Any capitalisation obligations

Presently, there is no requirement for incorporation of companies with any minimum paid up share capital under the Companies Act, 2013. However, from a foreign investment perspective, any foreign investment beyond prescribed percentages is not permitted without prior government approval in Regulated Sectors. Further, depending upon the sector of investment, there could be certain minimum capitalization norms applicable under the prevailing foreign direct investment policy.

4.3 Any special business or investment visa issues

Foreign nationals are allowed to come to India on business or employment visas, depending on the nature of their deployment and other similar factors.

For reasons of taxation, deputation of employees of foreign parent companies to their Indian subsidiaries is ordinarily avoided.

As per the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India latest guidelines, employment visas are only granted to foreign nationals drawing salaries in excess of a prescribed amount per annum. The minimum salary stipulation however does not apply to ethnic cooks, translators and language teachers brought for project related work in India. The employment visa has to be issued from the country of origin or domicile of the foreigner. Foreign nationals may also use the ‘Project’ visa regime for coming to India for execution of specific projects in the power and steel sectors.

Persons travelling to India on long term employment visas need to register themselves with the jurisdictional Foreigners Regional Registration Office within specified time (ordinarily fourteen days) of arrival in India.

4.4 Any restrictions on remitting funds out of India (withholdings, etc.)

Foreign investors can repatriate funds out of India through a number of options including dividends, fees for technical and administrative services, royalties, interest, capital appreciation, etc., after payment of applicable taxes. India also has double taxation avoidance agreements (“DTAA”) with all major economies of the world including

Australia, China, Germany, France, Spain, Singapore, USA, UK and Japan to name a few.

4.4.1 Repatriation of Profits

Indian companies can remit their profits to a foreign collaborator by way of dividends subject to dividend distribution tax at 15.00% (fifteen percent) plus applicable surcharge and cess. There is no limit on the rate of dividend on equity shares that can be distributed or repatriated out of India.

Branch offices of foreign companies can also remit business profits to their principals subject to withholding tax at 40% (forty percent) plus applicable surcharge and cess (unless lower tax rate is prescribed by the DTAA).

4.4.2 Repatriation of Fees and Royalties

The royalties/fees for technical services can be remitted to non-residents subject to deduction of withholding tax at prescribed rates. If the foreign collaborator belongs to a country having a DTAA with India, it can avail credit of withholding taxes paid in India.

As discussed above, the lump sum technical know-how fee and/or royalty may also be converted into shares of the Indian company, subject to regulatory compliances.

4.4.3 Capital Gains

In the absence of stipulation of a lower rate of tax by the DTAA, capital gains can be repatriated out of India subject to withholding tax between 10% (ten percent) to 20% (twenty percent) (plus applicable surcharge and cess), depending on their nature.

4.4.4 Capital Repatriation on Disinvestment

AD Banks ordinarily allow repatriation of sale proceeds of a security (net of applicable

taxes) provided the security is held on repatriation basis and the sale has been made in accordance with prescribed guidelines and tax clearance/'no objection' certificate from Indian tax authorities has been produced. Repatriation may be made through normal banking channels.