

India's largest firm calls on government to open up legal market to foreign firms

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Lorraine Cushnie

The newly merged Fox Mandal Little (FML), India's largest law firm, has petitioned the Indian government to open up the country's legal market to foreign law firms, proposing five steps that could speed up the process.

The letter also calls for the government to look at the UK and Singapore systems of regulating international firms as potential models for India.

Som Mandal, head of the international practice at FML, said: "We've submitted a paper to the government saying it should open up to foreign firms.

"They've allowed other foreign companies such as accountants to open, so why not law firms?" In the letter Mandal suggested five actions that could allow foreign firms into India and bring it into line with other legal markets. These include: the Ministry of Law & Justice, along with the Attorney General's office and leading law firms, to form a committee to draw up rules for international lawyers; compulsory professional negligence insurance for all law firms; and guidelines for advertising in legal directories.

International law firms were forbidden from operating in India when in 1996 a group of lawyers in Mumbai made representations to the High Court regarding the Advocates Act, which prevents foreign firms practising Indian law. Mandal attributes this hostility towards outsiders to fear of competition.

The decision meant that firm such as Ashurst Morris Crisp, Chadbourne & Parke and White & Case had to give up their liaison offices.