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Foreign law firms in India: what the Bar Council rules allow

A clear explanation of the Bar Council of India's rules on foreign lawyers and law firms, including reciprocity, registration and fly-in fly-out visits.

For decades the position was simple: foreign law firms could not practise in India. That position has changed in carefully limited ways, and Indian firms should understand exactly where the lines now fall.

The background

In 2018 the Supreme Court, in Bar Council of India v. A.K. Balaji, held that foreign lawyers cannot practise law in India, in litigation or otherwise, but may visit on a casual "fly-in, fly-out" basis to advise on foreign law, and may take part in international commercial arbitration subject to the rules.

The Bar Council of India then framed the Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022, notified in 2023. After strong reactions from the Indian Bar, amended rules were notified in May 2025.

What the amended rules permit

- Foreign lawyers and firms may register with the Bar Council of India to practise **foreign law and international law** in India, in **non-litigious** matters.
- Entry is on the basis of **reciprocity**: the home country must offer comparable access to Indian lawyers.
- They may take part in international arbitration seated in India, within the limits of the rules and the Advocates Act.
- Short advisory visits remain possible without registration, under fly-in, fly-out conditions that include a cap on days spent in India in a year.

What remains closed

Foreign lawyers and firms may not appear before Indian courts, tribunals or statutory authorities, and may not practise Indian law. Litigation stays with advocates enrolled in India.

What Indian firms said

Several leading Indian firms welcomed the direction while questioning the process, arguing that changes of this weight should rest on amendment of the Advocates Act rather than on rules alone. That debate is still open.

What it means for Indian firms

The practical message is to prepare rather than to wait.

- **Compete on quality.** Clients will compare service, systems and responsiveness.
- **Use reciprocity.** The same principle opens doors for Indian lawyers abroad.
- **Collaborate with care.** Any arrangement with a foreign firm must fit the rules. No affiliation should be claimed until a formal agreement exists.
- **Invest in people.** The contest will be for talent as much as for clients.

The larger aim

Liberalisation is a means, not an end. The test is whether Indian firms grow stronger, Indian lawyers gain access to the world's work, and more cross-border business is advised from India. Rules that deliver those outcomes deserve support.

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Read online: https://indianlawfirmsassociation.com/foreign-law-firms-in-india-bci-rules-explained/

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