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IN DEPTH / VISA OUTSOURCING

I
N THE AFTERMATH OF THE September 11, 2001 attacks on the twin towers in New York, the United States of America and some other nations decided to outsource their visa application processes as a security measure. VFS Global was among the first to open the Mumbai consulate in 2001. Sixteen years later, it has a tough competitor in Delhi-based BLS International, which is competing for business both in India and across key global markets.

Market leader VFS Global, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Kuoni Group, headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland is still leading from the front but off late BLS International has had some overseas success.

"We recently won the global visa outsourcing contract from Spain MAEC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation — Spain) marking our widespread reach in Europe," said Shikhar Aggarwal, Joint Managing Director, BLS International. The e-governance project worth over Rs 1800 crore from the Punjab government is another feather in the cap of BLS International.

But VFS Global is going steady. Its spokesperson said, "For India, we have seen a steady rise in the past years, which is in line with the growth perspective of the outbound travel market, increase in travel from the growing middle class and increased travel from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities."

TAKING ON THE GOLIATH

Delhi-based BLS International is nudging its way forward amidst older players in the visa outsourcing and identity management business **By Ashish Sinha**

Travel Boom

For both VFS and BLS, the visa services business is booming, thanks to a healthy growth in travel. After all, there are over 65 million valid passport holders in India, of whom nearly a third are active travellers. Finance ministry data indicates that around 21 million Indians travelled abroad for business or tourism in 2016. Nearly 30 per cent of the visa applica-

tions were processed by either VFS Global or BLS International, said Aggarwal. Other operators like Thomas Cook or Cox and Kings also operate in this space but none match the scale and size of VFS and BLS in their ability to handle millions of visa applications each year. Their source of revenue is the processing fee.

"A combination of tourism, education, business, and visit to family and

International provides services across 50 countries. For the Indian government, BLS has visa centres in the Embassy of India across Vienna (Austria), Beijing and Shanghai (China), Hong Kong, Vilnius (Lithuania), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Oslo (Norway), Oman, Manilla (the Philippines), Warsaw (Poland), Moscow and St. Petersburg (Russia), Singapore and Madrid (Spain), among others.

BLS is also an authorised service provider for attestation of documents by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). It provides services to the Embassy of Kuwait, the High Commission of Malaysia and several others in visa/attestation of documents/Apostille in India. The Apostille stamp is a square shaped computer generated sticker stamp, pasted on the reverse of the document by the MEA. Under normal circumstances, once the document is Apostilled, it does not require further attestation.

Aggarwal proudly announced that BLS International was the only Indian company competing on a global platform for visa services or identification data services. "We are currently bidding for global visa outsourcing contracts in countries like Thailand and Myanmar. We processed nearly three million applications last year and expect to double the number in FY 2017-18."

A VFS Global spokesperson shared some numbers to back the claim that the company was a market leader in India.

friends is boosting the business," said a senior official in the Union ministry of tourism. Here are the numbers to back the argument. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, 58 million to 60 million Indians travelled overseas for tourism or business. Globally, there are over 30 million people of Indian origin living in over 150 countries, with roots in India. Around 0.4 million Indian students are estimated to have taken admission in an overseas university last year. All parameters point to a healthy growth in the visa services business in the coming years.

In India, VFS Global serves 37 client governments (including 20 Schengen States), out of 381 visa application centres. BLS

"We processed nearly 3 million applications last year and expect to double the number in FY 2017-18"

SHIKHAR AGGARWAL,
Jt. Managing Director, BLS International

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