

Now, Lawyers Inc. dating B'wood stars

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NRI Special Offer!

MUMBAI: One number which you will find on Aishwarya Rai's cellphone book would be her lawyer's. Apart from trouble-shooting, he would be sought out by the actor for advice on the latest offer she might have received from Hollywood. Rai apart the Indian entertainment industry is proving to be an emerging market for legal firms.

"There is certainly an increased activity in the legal profession from the entire entertainment industry. All my contracts, for instance, are legally signed. As the industry gets increasingly corporatised, there will be more contractual documents," says film-maker Shekhar Kapur who has worked in both India and Hollywood.

Big legal firms like Nishith Desai Associates, AZB & Partners, DSK Legal, along with some new firms like Naik Naik Iyer & Co have realised the potential of this sector as a business stream and have reaped rich results.

"We are doing a huge amount of work in this sector. With Satellite TV broadcasters, radio players, cable operators, production houses in both TV and film, sports personalities, private equity investors all need regulatory compliance issues, structuring deals, regular contracts, Intellectual Property (IP) related issues and mergers and acquisitions are all form a substantial part of our business over the last five years," say managing partners, Zia Mody and Ajay Bahl of AZB & Partners who have even done a stint of work for Raveena Tandon apart from ESPN Star Sports, ESPN, Hathaway, Walt Disney & UTV.

Saniav Leela Bhansali decided to share a bit of his limelight with the legal eagles and rolled his law firm, Nishith Desai Associates' name on the credits for Black. "The potential is huge. A lot of individual talent is being recognised, from artistes to production. So you have people who need make-ups artistes from abroad or Hollywood studios who are looking at Indian stories to make movies.

Shoots are outsourced to Indian production houses by studios from the West, all of this has to be put into a proper legal framework," says senior associate, Gowree Gokhale of Nishith Desai Associates, whose says this sector accounts for at least 10% of the firm's business. Besides Bhansali, their clients include, Shekhar Kapur, Anil Kapoor, Vidhu Vinod Chopra (one-off), Mukta Arts, Feroz Khan (theatre) and Worldsapce among others.

The increased corporate interest in the entertainment and media sector is one of the main reasons that legal firms are seeing so much activity. "A lot of funding was not balance sheet funding some years ago. With corporates and venture capitalists as well as banks showing interest, funding has to be structured which requires legal service providers.

We are a small firm who have a lot of production houses, multiplex chains as clients. For sure it is growing revenue stream with a lot of untapped potential and almost all big firms are looking at it with interest," says Ameet Naik of Naik Naik Iyer & Co who adds that this sector gives him as much as 45-50% of his business and is still growing.

Kapur, with his experience of both worlds, adds a word of caution. "The increased role of the lawyer has both advantages and disadvantages. It gets in investors who get a certain comfort from legalese, so funds from VCs, angel investors and banks are easier to attract. The disadvantage is that legal fees do not get into the screen, like in Hollywood there is so much use of the lawyers that at least 20% of their budget is legal. So, we need to watch that it does not become a huge burden. Also, it cuts of interpersonal interaction, a crucial part of our business and I'm not very sure that is a good for us," ends Kapur.

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