

**Dnyaneshwar Mulay**, Secretary (CPV & OIA), Ministry of External Affairs, in an exclusive conversation with Businessworld's **Suman K. Jha** and **Anurit Kanti**, discusses the gamut of the work being done by his ministry, including the passport issuance process and its improvements over the years, twitter-seva, schemes for the Indian diaspora, among other things. Excerpts:

**Why do you think obtaining a passport remains a complex phenomenon even today?**

There was a time when getting a passport used to be an ordeal. In fact, every passport seeker had a horror story to tell. Today, in 99 percent of cases, passport seekers are likely to have a pleasant story to tell. In fact, some people say they got it in 24 hours, some people say 48 hours. I would say we have changed the passport story. It is now not just quantitatively different, but qualitatively different as well. This is one citizen-centric service that every Indian can truly be proud of.

**The minister is now also proactive on twitter, attending to complaints, etc. So do you have a twitter seva as well to attend to grievances over the passport issuance process?**

Yes, absolutely. We have a twitter seva. Any Indian who is in need is just a tweet away from being rescued. We also have the Madat portal, which has proven very effective in grievance handling and grievance redressal, and won several awards as well.

**How many passports are today issued daily, and how does**

**‘Soon there will be a passport office in almost every district of the country’**



**it compare with the issue rate in the last four years?**

Well, I won't be able to give you the number four years ago, but until last year passport issuances totalled around 55,000 and this year we have gone up to 70,000. So this is a huge jump, and the credit for this goes to the simplification process. In terms of absolute numbers, though, we have a long way to go.

**Do you have any targets as to universal passport coverage?**

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Well, it would be very difficult to set targets. My ministry's mission is to reach out to people, so they don't have to run around when they need a passport. We have adopted something called "50 km" policy, which means people do not have to travel more than 50 km to obtain passport. We are in the process of opening 251 new offices, in addition to the 93 that already exist. Soon we will be there in almost every district.

**The 251 new centres are coming up in association with the Depart-**

## IN CONVERSATION

**ment of Posts or are these exclusive RPOs?**

Of the 251 offices that are currently being set up, 187 have been opened already. And they are fully functional. Some of the smaller post-offices receive just 10-20 applications daily. We aim to complete the setting up of these offices by the end of this year.

**We know that the passport service runs on a PPP model with the TCS. How do you ensure the safety of such a large corpus of data?**

Yes, we have a partnership with TCS. In fact, TCS has received several awards, both for technological finesse, people-friendly service, the efficiency and quickness of the processes at the Passport Seva Kendras. No doubt, this is one of the most successful public-private partnerships in the country. No cases of data breach have so far been reported by the PSKs, which means that this partnership is technically very fit, and the supervision and monitoring from the ministry is regular.

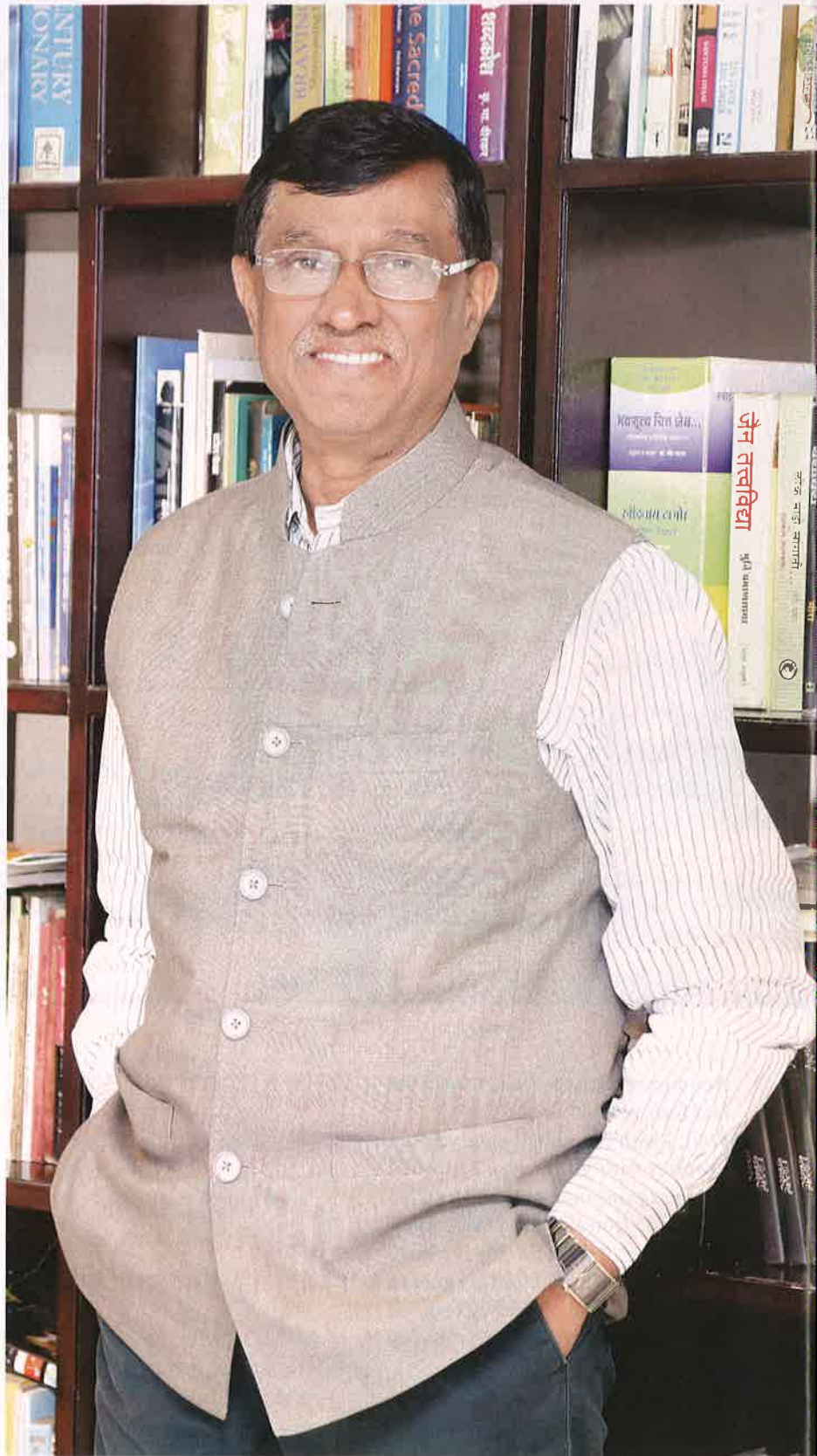
**Do you think there is room for more private sector participation in the process?**

Yes, we are using TCS for a couple of other services also. This includes a service called e-migrate, again a very successful one. It takes care of people who are vulnerable when they go abroad.

**You talked a while ago about newer centres coming up in association with the Department of Posts. Are there any targets as to such centres?**

Our broad policy or approach is to have a passport office every 50 km. What this means is that almost every district, Lok Sabha constituency would have a passport office. And that will effectively take care of the entire country's requirements.

**Last year we observed 50 years of the Passport Act. It was decided that passports would be issued in**



**Hindi and not just in English. So is there a plan to issue passports in Indian languages as well?**

So far, there is no such plan. The size of the paper matters, the number of our languages is huge. Even the eight scheduled languages would be too much. Besides, there are international standards that we have to follow.

**Now what has been the journey like for the last 50 years, since the enactment of the Passports Act in 1967? Why is it important and what have been the landmarks in the journey?**

Well, I would say that people did not relate to passports until very recently. Passport meant nothing to the common man. As mobility grew, the world became a small village, and the need to travel was felt. Technology and easy tourism has aided this. Travelling abroad for business and holidays, as well as for education has become necessary. And that's a major shift. And because of the overall progress of the nation, the need for passport is no longer restricted to the elite sections. It is now a privilege that the common man wants for himself.

**How and why do illegal passport agents continue to flourish and are there any measures to clamp down on these agents?**

If there are any cases of fraudulent

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passports, they are brought to our notice. But thanks to the transparency in the system, there is almost nil scope for an insider to be involved in the fraud. If something happens outside the passport system, then we do not have any control. We work closely with the law and order authorities to check illegalities. But I must say making illegal passports is no longer easy. The biometrics as well as all the unique data is now available with all the passport centres in the country and can be easily validated by our embassies and missions.

**Why do those with transferable jobs and not permanent jobs find it tough to get passports?**

I must admit that this is a problem area. Change of address is a major issue. Again, we try to plug every loophole that we see. We are trying to see what best can be done. Nobody these days stays at the address given in the passport. Passport symbolises a dynamic person who wants to move through air, land or sea port. And so the address is an anomaly, but for a variety of reasons, we have to really have an address. So we are trying to see if we can change the current method of police verification, because that is where the problem lies.

**What sort of feedback you get from the police verification process?**

The feedback that you get and I get are not very different. By and large, it is a process which is improving. States like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are able to complete police verification within 3-5 days. But there are cases of corruption, and of favours sought by certain people. We are therefore working very closely with the police authorities as well.

**Apart from organising the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, what is the government doing for the Indian diaspora?**

We have a very broad policy, which is

**OUR BROAD POLICY IS TO HAVE A PASSPORT OFFICE EVERY 50 KM. WHAT THIS MEANS IS THAT ALMOST EVERY DISTRICT, LOK SABHA CONSTITUENCY WOULD HAVE A PASSPORT OFFICE.**

to create channels of connectivity in every possible manner. As a result, we work very closely with the ministries of health, HRD, SMT, MT, and other ministries. Last year, we launched monthly and quarterly conferences called the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas conferences. We discussed how the cultural organizations of overseas Indians can be roped in to help distressed Indians abroad. We will also discuss the role the Indian diaspora can play in creating artificial intelligence awareness training programmes in India. We are also trying to ensure that the children of NRIs stay connected to India. Then there is a scholarship programme for the diaspora children.

**Is there a plan to encourage overseas Indians to adopt a village or undertake developmental initiatives?**

You would have heard about two schemes that we have. The HRD ministry's scheme Gyaan seeks to encourage members of the diaspora to come and work in India. The S&T ministry has a scheme called Vajra, which encourages expat experts, scientists, and researchers to undertake joint research or projects in India. **BW**

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