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US facing reverse brain drain threat

One million skilled migrants are caught in a US green card backlog and a third are thinking of returning to their homeland. A new study warns the US may be about to experience a "reverse brain drain" of its technological knowhow.

The study, "Intellectual Property, the Immigration Backlog and a Reverse Brain Drain," warns of increasing frustration among skilled immigrants who have to wait for several years to become US permanent residents.

About 30 per cent of these immigrants, says the study's lead author Vivek Wadhwa of Harvard University, are Indians. As India's economic rises, many are increasingly open to returning to their home country creating "the potential for a sizeable reverse brain-drain from the US."

The study indicates the immigration backlog for skilled workers is much larger than had been earlier believed. Each step of the tortuous process by which a foreigner on a US worker's visa becomes a green card holder has a waiting list running into the hundreds of thousands.

The study estimates just over 500,000 employment-based immigrants are waiting for green cards. Roughly the same number of spouses and children are in a similar immigration limbo. The report concludes, "we obtain an estimate of the entire employment-based legal permanent residency queue in the US of 1.055 million." Many of the spouses are themselves skilled workers. An additional 126,421 green card applicants live outside the US.

The bottleneck is that the three categories of green cards these immigrants are eligible total a little over 120,000 visas a year. In other words, the backlog already represents "almost nine years' worth of employment visas."

No visa power

200,000 skilled immigrants have applications for labour certificates pending, the first step towards a green card.

50,132 immigrants are waiting for Form I-140, the Petition for an Alien Work, filed by an employee after the labour certificate is issued.

327,556 immigrants are waiting for an I-485, the last petition for a permanent resident visa — a green card.

555,044 family members of immigrants are trying to get green cards

126,421 immigrants from all the above categories who are living outside the US.

The only solution is for the green card allotment to be increased, but the failure of the Bush administration's immigration reform bill in the US Congress put paid to this.

The New Immigrant Survey, has shown these immigrants, whose waiting can now stretch out over several years, are prone to depression.

It found 34.5 per cent of the immigrants said they were "either planning to leave the US or were uncertain about remaining." Indians "stuck in the backlog" have formed a number of organisations, like Immigration Voice, to publicise their plight.

Wadhwa's study warns an Asian outflow would seriously damage the US at a time when immigrants provide nearly a quarter of the US's most competitive patents. Dovelyn Agunias, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, says immigration entrepreneurship is also constrained.

Many tech-heavy services industries depend on "circular migration" with entrepreneurs moving back and forth across the world. The US nationalisation process strictly limits overseas travel on immigrants — one stage forces them to not leave the US for five years.

"A system that allows circulatory migration would be better for everyone."

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of immigrants finding opportunities in the two boom economies of India and China increasingly attractive.

In China such people are called "sea turtles". In India they are labelled RNRI, Returning Non-resident Indians. Several websites already cater to the needs of such Indians and debate the merits of "reverse migration."

Desi industry is trying to cash in: the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers has set up the Association of Scientists of Indian Origin in the US to woo Indian-American engineers to work in the subcontinent. An estimated 40,000 RNRIs now work in India's infotech industry.

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