

Skilled immigrants suffer US limbo

By Brajesh Upadhyay
BBC News, Washington

When Pankaj Kakkar sang the American national anthem on the Capitol Hill lawns, Congressman Jim McDermott commented: "Son, you sing it better than me."

Unfortunately, this compliment does not take Mr Kakkar, a computer professional working for Google, any closer to the Green Card dream he has been chasing for the past 11 years.

Almost a million skilled immigrants like him from India, China, Pakistan and other countries are stuck in the backlog for employment-based permanent residency, more commonly known as the Green Card.

The current system takes anywhere between six to 12 years to grant one.

Several skilled immigrant groups have been trying hard to draw the attention of US lawmakers to their plight and on Tuesday hundreds of such professionals from all over the country staged a rally in the nation's capital waving American flags and carrying placards.

They have been more innovative before, for instance, when they deluged US citizenship and immigration services director Emilio Gonzalez with white flowers - a Gandhian form of protest popularised in a Bollywood blockbuster.

But so far, things haven't changed.

'Endless delay'

Meenal Sinha is an IT professional who has been living in the US for the past nine years.

My parents don't get a visa to visit me because I am their only child and officials say they may not return to China

Phong Tang

She says not having a Green Card means you have to stick with the same company that got you a work visa - and that means fewer promotions and salary rises.



Millions of skilled foreigners head to the US

"We have given the most productive years of our careers to this country. We have always played by rules, yet this endless delay," she says.

For Phong Tang, a programme analyst from China, this long wait also means that he has not been able to see his parents in nine years.

"They don't get a visa to visit me because I am their only child and officials say they may not return to China once they are here. I can't go because I can't get a similar-paying job there," he says.

So, he still waits for that elusive Green Card which is no longer green. It's literally been changed to off-white.

But what hasn't changed is its hallowed status. In fact, in the class-conscious close-knit Indian community it even has a snob value.

Manoj Karan and his wife, Niti Karan, have lived in the US since 1999, and have managed to clear just the first of the several stages it takes to get a Green Card.

"It's so embarrassing when our peers ask, 'You don't have a Green Card yet?'," says Niti, a qualified computer professional who can't work because she doesn't have a work visa.

A Green Card would have solved that problem.

Supporting voices

Green Cards also make life easier for entrepreneurs and consultants, who have returned to India, as they can travel in and out of the US without visa hassles.

Immigration Voice, a lobby group of highly-skilled legal immigrants, says the US grants a million Green Cards each year - of which only 140,000 are for skilled professionals.

"Of these 140,000 a large number goes to dependents, leaving a very small number for professionals," says co-ordinator Jai Pradhan.

There are a few Congressmen like Jim McDermott who have supported their cause.

"We are sustaining this economy by sweeping the brains from all over the world. If we stop that we will go down abruptly," says Mr McDermott, who represents Washington State's 7th district and is also the chairperson of the India Caucus in the House of Representatives.

But there are not many lawmakers who are as vocal and the debate in the country is focused on illegal immigrants coming primarily from Latin American countries.

Reverse brain drain

Most of the professional migrants in the US are from India and China - the two booming economies. Do these professionals think of going back?

"In eight or nine years you start growing roots, you have a house, a lifestyle. My kids were born here and they are American citizens. It's not an easy decision," says Meenal Sinha.

The decision may be difficult but a trend has already begun - the description for it is "reverse brain drain".

A study by Harvard University warns of "increasing frustration among skilled immigrants who have to wait for years for a permanent residency".

Vivek Wadhwa, the study's lead author, says about 30% of these immigrants are Indians.

"As India's economy rises many are increasingly open to returning to their home country, creating the potential for a sizeable reverse brain-drain from the US," he says in the study.

It is an issue US policymakers will soon have to think about.

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