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They are skilled and educated, in demand and good for America — so help them stay for good

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Raghu Jayachandran has a message for Sen. Dick Durbin.

If Durbin would only get on board with an immigration bill now stalled in the Senate, Jayachandran believes, it would pass and a huge backlog of employment-based green cards for Indians waiting to live permanently in the U.S. could begin to be cleared up.

"If Sen. Durbin agrees, this bill is passing," Jayachandran told me.

Jayachandran is partly right. Support from Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, is crucial, but I wouldn't put the onus solely on him. Sen. Mike Lee, a Republican from Utah, has proposed this flawed bill, which maintains a system of winners and losers for getting these green cards. Immigrants from India and China would be the new winners. They have been losers for far too long.

The despair for Jayachandran and other Indians stuck in a 50-year employment-based green card backlog should motivate Lee and Durbin to reach an agreement.

"In December, Senator Lee and I reached a bipartisan agreement on a reasonable approach to help the families affected by this backlog," Durbin said in a statement. "These families are going through hardship that no family should face. And the sooner we resolve them, the better off they will be and America will be. When Congress is able to return, I hope that Senator Lee and I can move forward and offer the agreement we reached on the Senate floor."

Jayachandran, 41, reached out to me last week on social media. He is a software engineer from India who came to work in the U.S. on an H-1B visa in 2005. Jayachandran lives in Atlanta, where he and his wife are raising their U.S.-born daughter and son. He is a federal contractor for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For the last 10 years, he has been waiting for his employment-based green card to live permanently in the U.S.

He might die of old age before he gets it. He is stuck in the backlog. If he were from any other country except perhaps China, which also is facing a backlog, he would have had his green card years ago.

On March 30, the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research group, reported that the backlog of approved petitions for green cards for highly skilled immigrants now tops a million. Skilled Indian workers make up 75% of that backlog.

Indians applying for this green card today could end up waiting 90 years, according to Cato.

"They'll need two life spans," Jayachandran said.

The U.S. issues 140,000 employment-based green cards annually, and highly educated or skilled immigrants get a portion of them. Those limits were put in place 30 years ago, before the U.S. tech industry became as massive as it is today. These people are good for America, and we should not be encouraging them to take their talents elsewhere.

But raising the number of green cards won't fly with Republicans' restrictionist agenda.

Lee's bill would keep current caps on employment-based green cards but eliminate a 7% per-country cap. That would help people from India and China, but it would lead to longer wait times for people from other countries.

Durbin blocked Lee's bill from passing by unanimous consent in October, and he has been slammed for it on social media by some of the bill's supporters. A House bill already is in the books. It sailed through the chamber last year with significant bipartisan support, 365-65.

The agreement Lee and Durbin reached in December came undone after Lee made more changes to the bill. For one, a "do no harm" clause, to protect applicants with approved petitions from getting stuck in a yearslong wait, was withdrawn. Lee's bill now also faces opposition from the American Immigration Lawyers Association over that change.

Durbin wants additional protections for families whose children turn 21 while awaiting green cards. Currently, when they turn 21, they lose their eligibility for green cards. They are spit out of the system and must start anew in India, a country they don't know, or stay in the U.S. as international university students or possibly H-1B workers.

Durbin had proposed his own bill, which is much stronger than Lee's because it would raise the number of green cards. That's the best answer, but Republicans won't go for it.

So it's Lee's bill or nothing. Nothing just won't do for people like Raghu Jayachandran. They can't be left in a black hole known as the backlog.