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The number of Indians left waiting for an American green card skyrocketed in 2019

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The number of rejected US green card applications of Indians stood at the lowest in a decade last year at 1,352.

While that metric alone is impressive, it does not paint the full picture.

Nearly 7,000 green card applications by Indian alien workers were pending—almost 35 times the number in 2018, data from US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) show. The data refers to form I-140, which seeks to make an alien worker eligible for an immigrant visa based on employment.

Overall, with 56,608 green cards approved for Indian workers, the group received nearly half of all permanent residency permits issued in 2019. The number of applications being approved ticked up from last year but it was still well below 67,493 in 2016.

A losing battle

Indians face the worst backlog when it comes to getting a green card, thanks to a 7%-per-country cap on allocations each year. Nearly 800,000 workers and their families—most of them Indians—are waiting for employment-based green cards. USCIS is still processing applications from 2009; libertarian think tank CATO Institute estimates that the wait time for Indians with advanced degrees is 49 years.

A rampant concern is that these long queues may push Indian talent out of the US. “What does that ultimately mean? Valuable, skilled people decide they should leave because they’re never going to get what they had hoped for,” Bruce Morrison, a lobbyist and immigration attorney, told the Washington Post. Morrison wrote the 1990 bill that increased the number of employment green cards. “And valuable people don’t come because they figure our system is so broken they can’t see their way through it. Therefore, other countries bidding for these skilled workers get

those workers. Companies in America move jobs abroad to employ those skills elsewhere. And American prosperity suffers.”

Already, Indian techies have started looking to Canada, Japan, and other countries with less cumbersome and more welcoming immigration processes.

In the US, the House of Representatives passed the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act of 2019 bill to eliminate the annual per-country cap on employment-based immigrant visas in July 2019. However, it failed to pass the Senate vote. Meanwhile, Donald Trump’s merit-based immigration plan to bump up the share of highly-skilled immigration from the current 12% to 57% could tip the scales, but it is still far from being implemented.