

# The Mercury News

## Coming soon to a theater near you: the H-1B visa

*Skilled-worker permits under fire by Trump Administration are subject of new film*

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It's billed in the official trailer as "The untold story of over 1.5 million immigrants in America." It's plugged as a "must see" by one of the co-founders of Instagram and is set in Silicon Valley. And it's a drama based on what many Americans probably see as a very undramatic subject:

The H-1B visa.

But the movie "For Here or To Go?" will undoubtedly stir the passions of the estimated one million H-1B visa holders in this country. One member of that group is San Francisco-based Rishi Bhilawadikar. The 33-year-old filmmaker wrote and produced this emotion-charged story of one Indian tech worker struggling to navigate a visa program now in tumult because of the Trump Administration's hard-line stand on immigration.

The movie, which opened in theaters across the country Friday, is timely: April 1 was the first day of the annual lottery for three-year H-1B visas, and federal officials recently announced they would suspend fast-tracking the work permits. So the film, which follows the story of a software professional caught up in the serpentine U.S. immigration system should resonate in Silicon Valley. H-1B visas are often used by tech companies and other employers seeking highly specialized workers. Tech companies such as Google, Facebook and Apple have reacted strongly against moves by President Trump to tighten up rules for obtaining the permits.

"For Here or To Go?" which derives its title from the ubiquitous question asked by coffee-shop cashier that befuddles many newly arrived foreigners received financial backing from Silicon Valley investors. Trump is trying to tighten the immigration system, and his administration's efforts to monitor H-1B visas were revealed in a leaked executive order.

"It's the untold story of hundreds of thousands of legal immigrants who drive a nice-enough car but avoid buying expensive furniture for fear of having to leave it all behind," Bhilawadikar told Bloomberg News. "I set about making this film to humanize my story and the story of a million others like me."

There could be as many as two million Indian workers currently on the backlog list for a green card, according to David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute think-tank. Many of them live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area where success stories of foreign-born chief executives such as Sundar Pichai of Google are part of the local lore. But the H-1B

visas are also controversial and critics say they give high-end tech jobs to foreign workers at the expense of American-born job-seekers.

The movie was first shown two years ago at the Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose and has since been screened at festivals in Melbourne, Toronto and Mumbai. Bhilawadikar, who came to the United States as a 22-year-old computer engineer to get a master's degree from Indiana University, has been on a skilled-worker visa for 11 years. He says he could be 40 by the time he gets his green card.