



We Indians already wait many years for green cards. Then my husband was murdered

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My friends, neighbors and many other well-wishers know about the night I lost Srinivas Kuchibhotla, my beloved husband. Only a few know about the harrowing immigration struggle that overtook my grief after that fateful night. Srinivas, an aviation systems engineer, was shot and killed at an Olathe restaurant in a horrific 2017 hate crime perpetrated by a man yelling “get out of my country.”

Srinivas was my rock, my only family here, and the principal holder of the visa that allowed us to stay in America. After Srinivas died, I lost my legal status to stay in the country, despite being approved for lawful permanent residency in the United States based on his skills, under the Green Card for Employment-Based Immigrants program. Today, I am in the U.S. on a temporary H-1B work visa I obtained through my employer.

We were many years away from receiving our permanent green cards because an arcane law limits the number of cards that can be given to people of any one country in a year. We were among hundreds of thousands of skilled workers from India waiting for decades for that documentation, while our peers from other countries have gone on to become permanent residents much more quickly. The libertarian Cato Institute says these federal quotas make workers from India wait the longest — multiple decades for many, and an average of about 17 years for those with bachelor’s degrees.

Each moment that I think about how Srinivas’s life was cut short by the anger and hatred of that lone individual, I spend another moment thinking about what Srinivas had hoped to achieve once he got his green card. There are many others like Srinivas who have died waiting in the green card backlog, and their hopes and dreams have died with them.

I want my experience to remind people about the lives impacted by our broken immigration system. That is why I advocate for the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act in Congress — the only bill to ensure green card equality. It would require employment-based green cards to be assigned on a “first come, first processed” basis, rather than according to immutable characteristics such as one’s country of birth.

Soon after Srinivas' murder, I raised a question to the U.S. government: Do we belong? Every step I take to advocate for this bill is a step toward finding that answer — and also toward helping millions of taxpaying, law-abiding, backlogged immigrants feel like they belong to this country we have made home.

For those stuck in multi-decade green card backlogs, the Fairness Act isn't about immigration. It is about seeking equal treatment under the law. When people literally die while waiting in line for years, they leave their dependents in limbo. I know of at least three other women whose husbands suffered untimely deaths. Like me, they have struggled to overcome their grief while also managing immigration issues for themselves and their children.

I know of highly-qualified women who came to the United States wanting to serve high-profile federal agencies such as NASA, but their immigration status prevents them from even applying. I grieve for women who are trapped in abusive marriages because of their financial and immigration dependence on spouses who are the families' primary applicants. I grieve for a family who lost a young child to a serious illness that could not be treated because they were geographically bound to the place where the father worked.

We cannot travel back to our home countries for funerals, let alone weddings or to support our parents' medical needs, because we fear being stuck abroad and uprooting our lives. Children born overseas who accompanied their parents to the U.S. are "aging out" of green card applications and may need to leave the country. Self-deportation is the only alternative to living this life of constant fear. But is that really a choice?

I felt some relief when the Fairness Act passed the House with 365 yes votes. However, this relief was short-lived, as the bill is being blocked in the Senate by Sen. Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois. The heartache of a stalled legislation is bad enough, and Durbin's remarks on the Senate floor while blocking the bill were unfortunate.

However, a video of a September constituent event at which the senator made his attitudes toward the bill and immigrants from India well known shows something even worse. Besides criticizing the bill using untruthful and flawed talking points to justify discrimination and oppose equality, Durbin laughed and made an offensive joke while taking a mock green card from a constituent, sarcastically saying, "Thank you very much. I have been waiting for years."

I have been restless and anxious ever since the video from that event emerged. It wasn't just the senator's laughter; it was his indifference and insensitivity toward Indian immigrants. After watching him introduce an unpassable bill on the Senate floor instead of lifting his block on the Fairness Act, I felt particularly disheartened that he chose political posturing over humanity.

When Durbin killed the Fairness Act, the immigrants in our green card backlogs were essentially told to get out of the country. I can't help but think about the killer who shot my husband in hatred, yelling "get out of my country." For me, the outcomes of the hate crime against my family in Kansas and Durbin's block are the same.

After Srinivas, I have struggled to find a way to stay in America, my new home. I did not let one man, my husband's murderer, affect my belief in America and who we are as a nation. I'm also hopeful that Congress will make the right decision by passing this bill whose time has come, and not let the inhumanity of one senator overrule the will of the House.