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Text



By MONA SARIKA

Sudhir Kapoor, 25, got the call from his employer late last year. It was bad news: The economic downturn meant the technology company had to let him go.



Mona Sarika

He had arrived on an H-1B visa for highly skilled workers—but the layoff left two options: quickly find another job or go back home. In a few weeks, he was on a plane to Mumbai.

"I do feel bad for anyone losing a job, whether it's an American or an H-1B foreign worker. But for H-1B foreign worker, if we don't get a job, we have to go back to our home countries," said Mr. Kapoor.

As The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) late last month, this year marks the first time in a long while that H-1B visas are going unused. As of Sept. 25 -- nearly six months after the U.S. government began accepting applications for H-1s-- only 46,700 petitions had been filed. Last year, all 65,000 were spoken for on the first day.

In February, President Obama signed legislation placing certain restrictions on companies that received government bailout money, such as ensuring they did not displace American workers with H-1B visa holders. While Bank of America rescinded offers to some MBA graduates of U.S. universities as a result, it appears layoffs are more often to blame for the lack of visa renewals. As their fate becomes increasingly uncertain, a growing number of Indians in America — both temporary workers and permanent residents who only a few years ago fought to win lucrative jobs from Wall Street to Silicon Valley--are now packing up and heading home to India.

an economics professor at Columbia University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

H-1B visa holders say they feel they are in a state of limbo, ready to pick up and move wherever the economy or work takes them. Lives have been disrupted, and some said they were under tremendous stress to pay back mortgage loans for buying houses and cars. Many had children born on U.S. soil and wonder how their children will adjust to **Indian** schools and a different way of life.

It is one of the major vulnerabilities for professionals on the H-1B visa. "The moment you don't work, you're out of status, you have no grace period," said immigration attorney Tahmina Watson. Workers can either leave the country within a matter of days, or convert to a B1/B2 tourist visa, which doesn't allow them to work, but buys them a few months to sell their homes and cars, make travel arrangements or find a **new** school for their children.

Some are grateful for the U.S. experience nonetheless. Niraj Sharma, a **New** York City consultant, was forced to pack in his entire life in the U.S. and return to India within a month. "The H-1B process was clear and we knew its limitations," he reasons. "But the work experience in the U.S. was tremendously valuable and it provides us with leverage in Asia to prosper."

Unlike previous generations who permanently settled in U.S, Mr. Sharma thinks of himself as part of a **new Indian** nomadic class: "If the next opportunity is in the U.K. or Africa , we will go there. ...People have always moved to places of opportunity. While the U.S. will always be a beacon of opportunity, other countries have also started competing with it."

There is a difference between choosing to go back home and being forced to. H-1s have been reluctant to publicize their plight, for two reasons: They fear that most Americans are unsympathetic to their predicament, and many do not want their family and friends in India to know that their American dream didn't quite work out.

Moving back to India is unsettling for immigrants after spending years living and working in U.S. Both they and India have changed during their stint abroad. "We knew this wasn't going to be a smooth ride or piece of cake for us. The biggest worry for us was not about moving here (to Bangalore), but about what we would do after this. Would we have to go to a different city in the U.S.? Could we go back to the Bay Area?" said Sweta Mehta, who moved last year from California, to Bangalore.

She had immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 18 to attend college. After graduating, she went to work for Intel, got married, and settled in Sacramento . However, when she and her husband got laid off, they had to leave US and move to Bangalore . Her six year-old misses her life in America . "She was asking about her friends and teachers," said Ms. Mehta.

To smooth the transition, Ms. Mehta and her family moved into an apartment complex that's popular among returnees from the US. Aside from the amenities that remind them of the U.S. , it provides a community with whom they can share stories and experiences. "It makes a difference that people have lived in U.S. ," she said. Mindful of the uncertainty, the Mehta still have their eye on returning to the U.S. -- when the economy improves.

Returnees, too, are finding it harder to get a job at an **Indian** company than just a few years ago. If someone has worked abroad for more than seven years, they are often found unfit to work in "resurgent India ." And managers have to tread carefully between paying them more than "locals."

Still, for the first time, the depth of the recession and bleak labor market are forcing **Indian** immigrants still in the U.S. to ask a question their predecessors never would have: Why stay?

"What America 's basically saying is, 'We've educated you, we've trained you, we've taught you all about our markets,'" says Vivek Wadhwa, a successful **Indian**-born tech entrepreneur turned Duke University professor. "Now you have to get the hell out of here.

Mr. Wadhwa estimates the U.S. will lose at least 100,000 Indians in the next three to five years. Ironically, he says, "they're exactly the kind of people we want to be here to fuel the economic recovery."

The typical **Indian** professional's journey to the U.S. used to begin in one of two ways—the student visa or the H-1B.

"Our generation has benefited because America has welcomed us and we have learned so much here," said Himanshu Khare, a software professional in Boston on a H1B visa, but thinking of going back to India.

"But now the H-1B has become a distant dream, ending our great American dream. It's time for us to say goodbye to America , and hello to India "

—Mona Sarika is a graduate student and freelance writer who hails from India and currently lives in **New** York City.