

## **Thousands of Indian professionals in UK face uncertain future over new visa rules**

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**London:** Indian professionals are making a last-ditch effort to appeal to the UK government over a new 35,000 pounds salary threshold requirement which comes into effect from Wednesday.

Thousands of Indian and other nationals from outside the European Union (EU) living and working in Britain on a Tier 2 visa may have to leave the country or be deported if they earn less than 35,000 pounds a year once the terms of the visa expire.

Earlier, a Tier-2 visa holder could apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK with an annual income of around 21,000 pounds. The new rule comes into effect on April 6 and is likely to affect thousands of Indian skilled professionals.

"This is the country I did my Masters in. Fell in love with the place. Got my first job. Got married and started a family here. Have a job I love. What more could I ask? If I have to leave then it will be devastating. Have to leave friends, a company I love, a place I love," said Abhijit, an advertising operations manager.

He is one of many Indians who have joined the 'Stop 35K' campaign group against what they believe are discriminatory changes to the criteria for non-EU nationals applying for "Indefinite Leave to Remain" (ILR) in the UK at the end of a five-year period of living and working in the UK.

The campaign is aimed at a reconsideration of this rule and encouraging the UK Home Office to undertake research into industry-specific thresholds.

Concerned by the move, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had raised the issue with British counterpart David Cameron during a meeting on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in the US last week, saying skilled IT professionals from India should not find it difficult to come to work in the UK.

"Cameron promised to take a look at it. He said we do not want to disadvantage bonafide IT companies, but at the same time we would also want to ensure that the UK system is not misused," ministry of external affairs spokesman Vikas Swarup had said.

Kesavan, employed as an audiologist in the UK, said, "I have been working and living in the UK for the past six years. I came here on a student visa to do my Masters degree after which I started working for NHS (National Health Service) for the past four and half years on a senior position.

"I even own my flat here in London. Because of this 35k rule I might have to leave my job, flat and relocate to a different country. More importantly I have not used public funds in any form during my stay here so far."

Kesavan's views were echoed by consultant Shwetal, who said: "If this goes ahead, I won't be able to continue working in this country, this will affect me in ways that many may take for granted. I love the freedom, independence and security this country provides me as a woman.

"The fact that I am surrounded by world class art, academia and knowledge power houses. The varied cultures and people from all walks of life that enrich my life and make it interesting to wake up each morning and be aware that today this country will provide me a new adventure, a new lesson, a new start."

Indian professionals have formed the largest category of individuals issued such visas over the years.

According to the UK's Office of National Statistics, of the 55,589 Tier 2 sponsored visa applications cleared in 2014-2015, nearly 78 per cent were for Indians (31,058).

The exact figure of the non-EU nationals affected by the new salary threshold requirements remains uncertain but it is estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 workers.

Many teachers will also be hit by the new rule at a time when Britain is struggling with teaching staff shortages. Kevin Courtney, deputy general secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), has called on the government urgently to reconsider the policy.

"It seems absurdly counterproductive to force schools to dismiss teachers they've trained and invested in, and who are still very much needed, at a time when highly skilled qualified teachers are in great demand," he said.

A UK Home Office statement said: "The UK government changed the settlement rules in 2012 to break the link between coming to work in the UK and staying here permanently. We were clear that the new rules would apply to migrants who entered Tier 2 from 6 April 2011. Those individuals were aware when they entered that new settlement rules would apply to them."

There are some exemptions under the changes, including those employed in a PhD-level occupation and workers who fall under the UK's "shortage occupation lists" such as nurses, and certain categories of health professionals and IT specialists.

A Home Office spokesperson said: "In the past it has been too easy for some businesses to bring in workers from overseas rather than to take the long-term decision to train our workforce here at home.

We need to do more to change that, which means reducing the demand for migrant labour. That is why we commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to provide advice on significantly reducing economic migration from outside the EU.

"These reforms will ensure that businesses are able to attract the skilled migrants they need, but we also want them to get far better at recruiting and training UK workers first."

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