

Indian students say new social media scrutiny cost them U.S. visas

Four Indian students were rejected for U.S. visas after undergoing a new Trump-era social media screening. All were told they had failed to prove ties to India.

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By Supriya Kumar

NEW DELHI — Kaushik Raj felt like his future was falling into place. He'd just won a \$100,000 scholarship to pursue a graduate degree in journalism at Columbia University. A U.S. visa was the only thing that stood between him and a new life in New York.

Raj, 27, wasn't overly concerned. He had completed every stage of the traditional application process. As a last step, he had to allow American authorities to vet his "online presence."

He wasn't too active on social media, he said, and refrained from publicizing his personal feelings about hot-button global issues, such as Israel's war in Gaza. He had, however, spent four years working as a journalist and would post links to his stories, which often focused on hate crimes and were critical of India's treatment of its Muslim minority.

On Aug. 21, two months after the new social media screening policy was announced by the Trump administration, he received a letter from the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi telling him his application had been rejected. The letter, which he shared with The Washington Post, did not cite his online activity. Instead, it stated he had not demonstrated sufficient ties to India that would “compel” him to return home after his time in the United States. It came as a shock to Raj, who was born and raised in India and had made clear during the application process that his entire family lives in the country.

It was “clearly because they have gone through my social media,” he said. “I will apply to the U.K. now.”

Raj’s story is not unique. Three other Indian students who applied for American visas after the recent policy change shared strikingly similar accounts with The Post, along with supporting documentation. All said they had made it through every other stage of the application process and were rejected after the social media review. All were told by U.S. authorities that they had failed to prove strong enough ties to India despite having spent their whole lives there.

The ramifications are potentially enormous for young Indians, who accounted for nearly 30 percent of all international students in the United States in the 2023-2024 academic year, according to the Institute of International Education. What was once a relatively swift and straightforward process is now characterized by weeks or months of “administrative processing,” students and immigration experts said — requiring applicants to open up their online lives for review by U.S. authorities, without any guidance on what they might deem disqualifying.

Presented with details about the cases in this story, White House deputy press secretary Anna Kelly said “The Trump administration is ensuring that so-called ‘guests’ in our country are not posing a national security threat or trying to undermine U.S. foreign policy.” The U.S. Embassy in India and the State Department did not respond to requests for comment.

“This is the kind of stuff that totalitarian regimes engage in,” said Charles Kuck, an immigration lawyer based in Atlanta, who has represented several international students facing visa revocations as part of the administration’s broader crackdown on campus speech.

In March, immigration authorities began detaining and moving to deport foreign students at U.S. universities. Some had participated in pro-Palestine protests, others appeared to have been targeted for writing op-eds or online posts critical of Israel. Among them were Indian citizens, including Ranjani Srinivasan, a PhD student at Columbia University who had her visa revoked in March, and Badar Khan Suri, a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown University who was detained by authorities for allegedly spreading “ Hamas propaganda.”

“If they’re taking activities that are counter to our foreign — to our national interest, to our foreign policy, we’ll revoke the visa,” Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters in March. “We are not going to be importing activists into the United States.”

Two months later, on May 27, Rubio announced a temporary halt to visa interviews while expanded vetting procedures were put in place. On June 18, the State Department unveiled the new policy to “identify visa applicants who are inadmissible,” instructing applicants to “adjust the privacy settings on all of their social media profiles to “public.”

Darsh Vatsa, fearing what the changes could mean for him, rushed to submit his student visa application in late May. His embassy interview was scheduled for July 10, five weeks before his classes were set to begin at Trinity College in Connecticut. On Aug. 19, the day after he had planned to fly to the United States, he received his rejection letter, saying he had failed to establish ties to India.

Vatsa was admitted last year to Trinity, where he hoped to get a liberal arts degree, but took a deferment so he could care for his ailing grandparents in the eastern state of Bihar. Awarded a scholarship that covered almost all his expenses, Vatsa said the decision to study abroad was a no-brainer.

At the interview, he was asked by a consular officer to make his social media accounts public and told his application had been sent for “administrative processing.” At that moment, Vatsa recalled, anxiety began to set in.

The 18-year-old was outspoken on X and Instagram, fiercely critical of the Indian government and of Israel’s actions in Gaza, carried out with U.S. funding and diplomatic support. Self-censoring was a departure from his values, he said, but he couldn’t afford to lose his chance at an American education. So he “completely stopped posting about international politics,” Vatsa said, and tried to wipe his accounts of content he thought could be held against him, recounting hours spent over three consecutive days “mass-unliking” posts.

He has now abandoned hopes of going to the United States and has started applying to colleges in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. And he is back to posting what he wants online: “They will find out what you think regardless,” he said.

Indians currently in the United States on student visas told The Post they feel muzzled. A 26-year-old PhD student at Louisiana State University, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of repercussions, said she used to freely criticize both the Indian and American governments on social media.

She has all but stopped posting online, she said, “because anything can be considered grounds for getting deported or your visa getting canceled.”

A 25-year-old on a student visa in New York said he watches his words even on phone calls with his partner in the U.K. “I feel unsafe in my own home because I don’t know who’s listening,” he said.

An Indian student who had secured admission to North Carolina State University to study computer engineering said he had spent nearly \$2,000 on his pursuit of a U.S. education, including application fees and multiple trips to New Delhi. He too was rejected after the new round of online vetting, he said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he plans to reapply.

“I want to work in AI, and the U.S. is the best place for it,” he said. “I have to try again.”

Getting approved for a visa after being rejected was “highly unlikely,” said Kuck, the immigration attorney. “Not while Donald Trump is president.”

To Raj, the crackdown on speech in the United States mirrors the Indian government’s suppression of dissent. “Everyone goes [to the U.S.] because they are troubled by their own countries,” he said. “If you will be censored so much there too, what is the point?”

Albert Cahn, founder and executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a New York-based civil rights and technology think tank, said Trump is using “expansive national security powers ... to target those who simply don’t agree with him.” He said it was a clear violation of the first amendment, which applies to citizens and visitors alike.

That view was echoed on Tuesday in a sweeping ruling in Boston by U.S. District Judge William Young, who excoriated the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department for seeking to target noncitizens for “speaking out” on U.S. campuses earlier this year, with the aim of “tamping down pro-Palestinian student protests.”

It was, he said, a “truly scandalous and unconstitutional suppression of free speech.”
