



EDUCATION

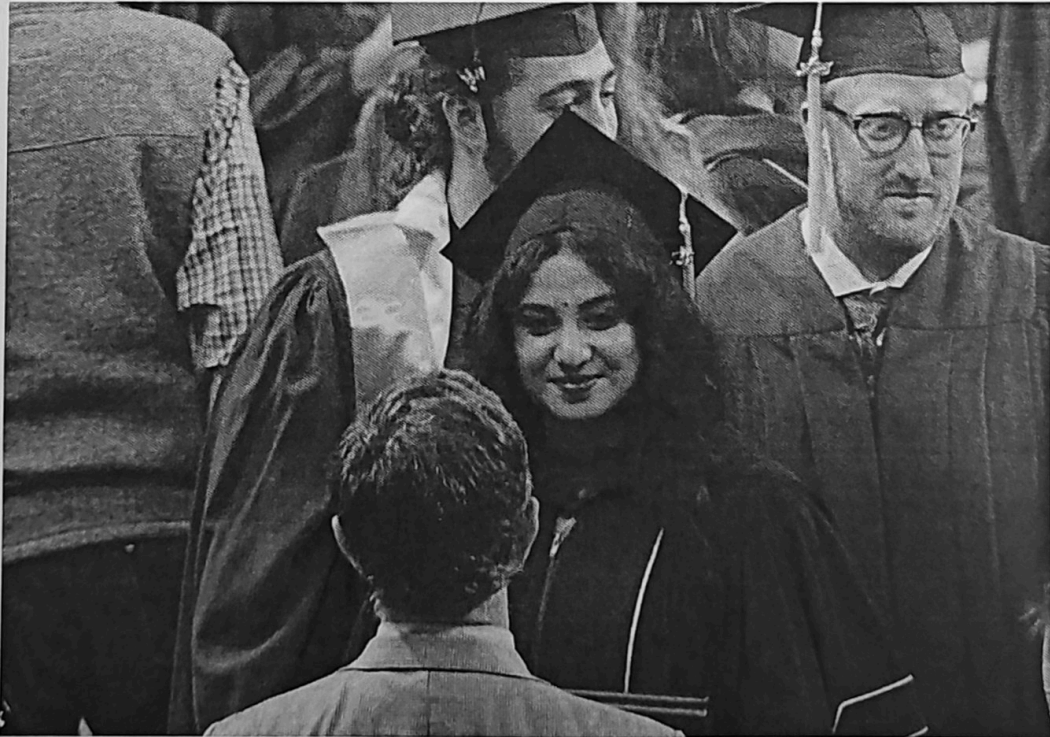
GOVERNMENT

JUSTICE

International student recounts 'numb' feeling after receiving email about her potential deportation

Recent graduate is seeking a court order allowing her to remain in South Dakota

BY: SETH TUPPER - MAY 13, 2025 2:53 PM



📷 Priya Saxena, center, receives congratulations from her attorney, Jim Leach, foreground, after graduating with a master's and doctoral degree from South Dakota Mines on May 10, 2025, in Rapid City. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

RAPID CITY – Priya Saxena was staying up late to read comments about her doctoral dissertation around 1 a.m. on April 7 when she saw the message in her email.

"I was numb at the time," she testified through tears Tuesday in a Rapid City courtroom, where she continued her fight to remain in

the country.

The email from U.S. immigration officials said her visa was revoked. Saxena called some friends and holed up in her bedroom.

“I was scared,” she said, “and I had no idea what to do next.”

Her fear was based on the realization that “I could be deported at any time,” she said. A student from India, she was less than a month away from graduating with master’s and doctoral degrees from South Dakota Mines, something she’d been working toward for five years.

Noem’s honorary degree sparks protest; meanwhile, a student she’s trying to deport earns a doctorate



An international student in western South Dakota overcame Kristi Noem’s attempt to stop her from graduating Saturday, while hundreds of people protested on the other side of the state where Noem received an honorary degree and delivered a commencement speech. The international

student is Priya Saxena, from India. She received two degrees from South Dakota ... Continue reading



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Her visa revocation was triggered by a criminal records check of international students undertaken by the Trump administration. The check turned up a four-year-old misdemeanor traffic conviction against Saxena, for failing to pull over for an emergency vehicle in Meade County.

The check also turned up a charge of driving under the influence against her from the same 2021 traffic stop, but her blood tested within the legal limit and the charge was dismissed. She had disclosed those legal matters to immigration officials when she obtained her most recent visa in 2022.

The criminal records check was part of a broader action by the Trump administration against more than 1,000 international students nationwide, not only for items appearing on their records but also for activity the administration described as “anti-Semitic,” such as publicly protesting Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza.

The administration initially terminated students’ records in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, which is used by colleges to verify and manage international student eligibility. Then the administration backtracked, leaving students such as Saxena with restored educational status but in limbo with their visas and their future.

Saxena testified that she decided to book a plane ticket to India and leave the country voluntarily, but then postponed the ticket and ultimately canceled it after speaking to a defense attorney in Rapid City, Jim Leach. Since then, they’ve sued U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem – the former governor of South Dakota – and Noem’s agency. The lawsuit alleges it’s illegal for the government to instigate an immigration enforcement action against Saxena for something the government already knew about before it issued her current visa.



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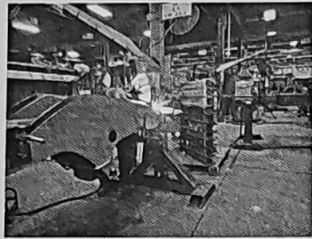
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With her degrees now in hand, and her visa not scheduled to expire until 2027, Saxena would like to apply for a program that allows international students to remain in the country and work in fields related to their degrees. Saxena has a doctorate in chemical and biological engineering and a master’s in chemical engineering.

U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier granted Saxena a temporary restraining order last month and extended it long enough for her to walk across the graduation stage and collect her degrees on Saturday at South Dakota Mines – the same day Noem appeared at another South Dakota institution, Dakota State University in Madison, to receive an honorary degree and deliver a commencement address. Noem was met by hundreds of protesters outside that ceremony.

On Tuesday, as Saxena was in court in Rapid City, Immigration and Customs Enforcement was conducting a “worksite enforcement action” in Madison, where the agency made an undisclosed number of arrests at two Madison businesses.

ICE makes 8 arrests in South Dakota city where Noem was subjected to a protest three days earlier



U.S. immigration officials conducted a “worksite enforcement action” that resulted in eight arrests Tuesday in Madison, three days after their boss, Kristi Noem, was subjected to a protest in the same South Dakota city. At least one of the two targeted businesses, Manitou Equipment, was awarded financial

support from the state while Noem was governor. ... Continue reading



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Saxena’s restraining order is scheduled to expire at the end of this week. Her court hearing Tuesday was about her request for a temporary injunction. That would stop the government from pursuing any further immigration enforcement proceedings against her while her lawsuit is pending. Judge Schreier heard testimony and arguments and said she’ll issue a written decision in the next few days.

Leach argued that Saxena needs protection from unlawful and unpredictable actions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He referenced the agency’s widespread deportation efforts under President Donald Trump and its shifting policies.

“Everybody’s afraid of ICE now, and she’s afraid,” Leach said of Saxena.

Michael Hofmann, an assistant U.S. attorney, argued that a temporary injunction would improperly restrain the government from taking further action if Saxena engages in additional criminal

activity, or if Saxena violates the terms of her U.S. residency in other ways. Hofmann argued that if a temporary injunction is granted, it should be narrowly tailored to allow the government to act in response to those possibilities.

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