

Waiting for a Visa: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Indictment of Caste and Untouchability

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'Waiting for a Visa' is a 30-page autobiographical account written during 1935-1936 by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Chief Architect of the Indian Constitution and one of modern India's greatest social reformers. In this brief yet powerful narrative, he recounts his deeply painful personal experiences of untouchability and caste discrimination. He uses these episodes not merely as memories but as testimony - exposing the brutality of caste oppression and the everyday indignities faced by the marginalized. The title itself is a compelling metaphor. Just as a visa grants entry and acceptance, Ambedkar suggests that the oppressed in India have long awaited recognition as full and equal citizens. Their "visa" to dignity, rights, and belonging remains perpetually pending. Crucially, the work underscores that even a highly educated man like Ambedkar could not escape the entrenched barriers of untouchability. It reveals how deeply this inhuman practice had permeated social life, denying even basic entitlements necessary for a free and dignified existence.

Ambedkar noted that foreigners often struggled to understand how Untouchables could live on the margins of a Hindu village - cleaning its filth, running its errands, collecting food from its doorsteps, shopping from a distance, and regarding the village as their home - and yet never touch or be touched by any of its inhabitants. To convey this harsh reality, he believed the most effective method was to present actual recorded instances of the treatment meted out to the Untouchables. 'Waiting for a Visa' emerged from this conviction. By documenting events from his own life and from the lives of other Untouchables, Ambedkar offers a stark, direct, and unembellished portrayal of caste tyranny. 1

He begins 'Waiting for a Visa' with a searing childhood experience of caste humiliation. In 1901, when he was barely nine, he and his brothers, and two sons of his deceased sister were living in Satara with an aunt (father's sister). His mother had passed away, and after retiring from the army, his father was working as a cashier in distant Goregaon. He invited the children to stay with him during the summer vacation. Dressed in new clothes for their first train journey, Ambedkar, his elder brother, and a nephew set out for Goregaon.

They disembarked at Masur, the nearest railway station to Goregaon, around 5p.m. Their father or his peon was expected to receive them, but to their dismay, no one arrived to pick them up. Within minutes, all other passengers had left. The Station Master approached them out of curiosity; from their appearance and speech, he initially assumed they were Brahmin children. However, upon

learning that they were Mahars - Untouchables, his expression changed abruptly, and he withdrew with visible repulsion. Confused and saddened, the children, decided to hire a bullock cart, but no cartman was willing to risk "pollution" by touching them or allowing them to sit in the cart. Only after the Station Master intervened did one cartman agree, on two harsh conditions: they must pay double the fare, and they must drive the cart themselves while he walked alongside.

They began their three-hour journey at 6:30 p.m. A short distance from the station, the cartman suggested halting for dinner by the dry bed of a river, saying there would be no



वीजा की प्रतीक्षा

जाति और अस्पृश्यता पर
डॉ. बी.आर. अंबेडकर का
ऐतिहासिक अभियोग

Hind
यह प्रस्तुति डॉ. अंबेडकर द्वारा 1935-36 में
लिखित आमनकाथामक वृत्तान्तों पर आधारित
है। यह केवल ऐतिहास नहीं, बल्कि एक विचित्र
समाज की पीड़ा का दस्तावेज़ है।

which had until then been a matter of course for both touchables and untouchables alike.2

The next episode relates to Ambedkar's experience after his return to India in 1917, following his studies in the United States and his admission to the London School of Economics. He had been granted scholarship by His Highness Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda for higher education at Columbia University, New York (1913-1917). In 1917, he proceeded to London, and joined the postgraduate department of the London School of Economics but was compelled to return to India before completing his studies, as the term of scholarship had expired and he was bound by service obligations to the Baroda State.

On his arrival in Baroda, Ambedkar found no one at the railway station to receive or guide him. Troubled by the immediate question of lodging, he enquired about accommodation and was directed to a Parsi inn that accepted paying guests. Knowing that Parsis followed the Zoroastrian faith, he initially felt reassured that he would not face untouchability there. However, when the caretaker learnt that he was a Hindu, accommodation was refused. After repeated entreaties, he was allowed to stay only by assuming a Parsi name, and paying a rupee and half per day for boarding and lodging.

The room allotted to him was small and dingy, with an adjoining bathroom. The rest of the space was a large hall cluttered with broken furniture, planks, and rubbish. A small hurricane lamp provided the only light at night, illuminating barely a few inches.

In these oppressive surroundings, Ambedkar lived in complete isolation. The caretaker brought him tea in the morning, breakfast around 9:30 a.m., and dinner at about 8:30 p.m.

During this period, he was appointed a probationer in the Accountant General's Office by the Maharaja of Baroda. He would leave the inn around 10 a.m. for work and return late in the evening, spending most of his time reading to cope with the loneliness of what he described as a dungeon. His condition was so heart-rending that when his nephew from Bombay came to deliver his luggage and witnessed his plight, he broke down in tears and had to be sent back immediately. Ambedkar knew that his assumed identity could not remain undiscovered for long. Before his efforts to secure the official accommodation could succeed, the inevitable crisis arrived.

On the eleventh day of his stay, as he was preparing to leave for office, a group of about a dozen tall, sturdy Parsis armed with sticks confronted him at his door. They accused him of concealing his identity, abusing a Parsi name, and polluting the inn. Ambedkar stood silent, fully aware that persistence in the deception might invite physical assault or even death. His silence and meekness alone saved him. He pleaded for at least a week's time, but they refused to listen and issued an ultimatum to leave by evening or face grave consequences.

Left bewildered, his heart sank, and he cursed all and wept bitterly. He had no untouchable acquaintances in Baroda. His Hindu and Indian Christian friends, when approached, declined to help on one pretext or another. By 4 p.m., with no alternative left, he decided to return to Bombay. The train was scheduled for 9 p.m. To pass the intervening time, he sat alone in a public garden named Kamathi Baug, lost in sorrow and vacant thought, remembering his parents in utter desolation. At 8 p.m., he returned to the inn, settled his account, and vacated the premises.

Ambedkar had gone to Baroda with high hopes, determined to serve first the Maharaja who had financed his education, despite having other offers. Yet, after only eleven days, he was forced to abandon Baroda and return to Bombay. The scene of armed Parsis confronting him and his own terrified plea for mercy, he says, remained etched in his memory even eighteen years later. He recalled it vividly and never without tears. It was through this experience that Ambedkar realized, for the first time, that a person deemed untouchable by Hindus was equally untouchable to Parsis.3

In 1929, Dr. Ambedkar, a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly, was appointed



by the Bombay Government as a member of a committee to investigate the grievances of the Untouchables. While travelling to inquire into a case of social boycott against Untouchables in a village on the Dhulia line, he got down at Chalisgaon railway station. He was received by his local people, who requested him to spend the night with them in their locality – Maharwada, about two miles away across a river. He consented and expected to be taken there immediately. But, he kept waiting at the station without explanation. After nearly an hour, a tonga was brought to the platform, and he boarded it as the sole passenger. The delay was later explained: no tongawalla was willing to drive a tonga carrying an Untouchable. So, a compromise was reached - the tonga owner would hire it out but would not provide a driver. Consequently, an untrained Mahar was asked to drive the tonga.

Soon after departure, the tonga narrowly escaped a collision with a motor car. Upon reaching the culvert over the river, which required a sharp turn, the horse bolted. The wheel struck the side stone of the culvert with great force, hurling Ambedkar onto the stone pavement, while the horse and carriage fell into the river. He was rendered unconscious and later carried to Maharwada amid the cries and lamentations of men, women, and children. He sustained multiple injuries, including a fractured leg, which left him disabled for several days.

Reflecting on the incident, Ambedkar noted the tragic irony: to preserve his dignity, the Mahars of Chalisgaon had placed his very life in danger. The episode revealed a harsh social truth - that a Hindu tongawalla, himself no more than a menial, could claim a sense of dignity rooted in caste that made him feel superior to an Untouchable, even when the latter was a barrister-at-law.

In 1934, Dr. Ambedkar and his colleagues planned a sightseeing tour to the Buddhist caves at Verul (Ellora). To avoid the customary difficulties faced by an Untouchables tourist in remote regions, the group chose to travel incognito, informing local contacts only at places where they intended to halt. The group halted enroute to visit the ancient fort at Daulatabad. At the fort entrance, without forethought, some members washed their faces and feet at the nearby tank. As they proceeded to seek permission to enter the fort, an elderly Muslim suddenly came shouting: “Dheds (Untouchables) have polluted the tank!” His outcry quickly incited a hostile crowd, who abused the group, denounced their “arrogance,” accused them of forgetting their supposed duty to remain degraded, and demanded that they be taught a lesson. The appeasing pleas of Dr. Ambedkar and his companions had no impact on the crowd.

The fire of wrath of the crowd was soon directed at the local Untouchables who had gathered there. The abuse became so vulgar and intense that the situation threatened to erupt into a riot, possibly even murders.

The group restrained itself with great difficulty. When a young Muslim in the crowd repeatedly insisted that everyone must conform to his religion, Ambedkar, now visibly impatient, asked pointedly whether that religion would permit an Untouchable to draw water from the tank if he converted to Islam. The directness of the question silenced the crowd. Turning then to the fort guard, Ambedkar demanded angrily to know whether they would be allowed to enter the fort. Permission was granted with condition not to touch water anywhere inside the fort, and an armed guard was deputed to ensure compliance.

Through this episode, Ambedkar demonstrated that untouchability was not confined to Hindu society alone. An Untouchable was treated as an Untouchable among the Parsis and Muslims too.

The next case is equally revealing. It concerns an Untouchable schoolteacher from a village in Kathiawad

and is documented in a letter published in Young India, the journal edited by Mahatma

Gandhi, in its issue dated 12 December 1929. The letter recounts the teacher's heartrending tale of his desperate attempts to secure medical treatment for his wife, who had recently given birth, and how both mother and child died due to denial of care.

According to the letter, wife of the teacher fell gravely ill suffering from severe diarrhea, chest inflammation, labored breathing, and acute pain in the ribs two days after giving birth to a child. When he sought medical help, a Hindu doctor refused to visit a Harijan household or even examine the patient. After the intervention of Nagarkar and other intermediaries, who guaranteed payment of a two-rupee fee, the doctor reluctantly agreed to attend only on the condition that the examination take place outside the Harijan colony.

The teacher was forced to carry his ailing wife and newborn child outside the colony. Even then, the doctor avoided physical contact: the thermometer was passed through a Muslim, and the disease was diagnosed pneumonia. The doctor sent some medicine but refused to return for further examination, despite receiving his fee. The letter ends with the heartbreakingly declaration: “The lamp of my life has died out,” as his wife passed away the next afternoon.

The identities of both the teacher and the doctor were withheld at the teacher's request, fearing reprisals, but the facts were undisputed. The episode requires no further explanation. Despite being educated and bound by professional ethics, the doctor refused to render humane medical care. His conduct il-

lustrates the cruel reality of caste prejudice, wherein a Hindu would rather be inhuman abandoning both conscience and professional duty than touch a so-called Untouchable.

Another more telling incident, narrated at a meeting of the Bhangis (sweepers) held on 6 March 1938 at Dadar, Bombay, starkly exposes the persistence of untouchability within colonial government institutions. The testimony came from a young Bhangi boy appointed as a Talati (village Patwari) in Kheda District of the Bombay Presidency. Having passed the Vernacular Final Examination in 1933 and studied English up to the fourth standard, he was appointed on 19 February 1936 and posted to the Mamladar's office at Borsad. Upon joining, he was instantly subjected to blatant caste discrimination: he was contemptuously asked to disclose his caste despite having already done so in his application, verbally abused by a clerk, ordered to maintain distance, and compelled

to place his appointment papers on the ground to avoid physical contact.

Discrimination extended to the most basic necessities. He was barred from using common water vessels and provided a separate rusted pot, usable only by him, and even this depended on the presence of a waterman who frequently absented himself to avoid serving him, leaving him without drinking water during office hours. He was denied lodging by caste Hindus, while even fellow Untouchables refused him shelter for fear of social retaliation. For several days, he survived on the purchased bhajas (deep fried food items) eaten outside the village and slept in the verandah of the Mamladar's office. Unable to endure the humiliation, he shifted to his ancestral village, Jentral, walking nearly eleven miles daily to work place for over a month.

His professional marginalization continued unabated. Placed under another Talati for training, he was denied entry into the village office and was given no training during two months assignment. The village headman openly questioned the legitimacy of his appointment, invoked his hereditary occupation as a sweeper, warned him against aspiring to equality, and forced him to abandon the job. The hostility culminated in a violent episode at Saijpur, where he was sent by the Talati to prepare population table of the village. After being ignored by officials on reaching the village office, he briefly sat on a chair. This provoked an enraged mob, led by the village librarian, who abused him in the vilest terms, dragged him off the chair, and threatened to cut him to pieces. Fearing imminent death, he wrote a note to the Mamladar stating that his life was in danger and

requesting that his parents be informed. But he was coerced by the librarian and the mob to destroy the note and promise to resign. Subjected to continued day long humiliation, he ultimately took leave and returned to Bombay.

This episode demonstrates that untouchability in colonial India was not merely a social prejudice but a structural reality embedded within administrative practice.

Taken together, these six incidents constitute a cumulative indictment of the ‘Waiting for a Visa’ emerges as one of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's most uncompromising and morally charged indictments of the caste system and the practice of untouchability, presented not through polemics but through the stark force of lived experience. The episodes narrated in the text lay bare the systemic nature of social exclusion, revealing how caste operates through everyday institutions – education, employment, religion, public space, and even humanitarian conduct to deny basic human rights and dignity to vast sections of society. The narrative is deliberately restrained, yet its cumulative effect compels the reader to confront the normalization of cruelty embedded within social custom and religious sanction. Crucially, the work

transcends the realm of personal memoir to function as a sociological and moral document, exposing the hollowness of political freedom in the absence of social democracy. Ambedkar's critique extends beyond individual prejudice to the structural foundations of Hindu social order, which, he argues, perpetuates graded inequality, and renders legal equality ineffective without radical social reform. The metaphor of the “visa” thus acquires a profound significance: it symbolizes the denied entry of the oppressed into the moral, social, and civic community of the nation. For Ambedkar, the way forward lies not in charity or reformist appeasement but in the annihilation of caste through reason, constitutionalism, and the ethical reconstruction of society grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity. Read in this light, ‘Waiting for a Visa’ remains not merely a historical testimony of suffering but a continuing moral challenge to Indian democracy, urging it to bridge the enduring gap between constitutional ideals and social reality. The way forward, as Ambedkar envisions, lies in transforming social relations alongside political institutions, replacing inherited hierarchy with liberty, equality, and fraternity as lived principles. In this sense, ‘Waiting for a Visa’ remains not only a historical testimony but an enduring challenge to modern India to confront its unfinished moral, democratic, and constitutional obligation.

Source: 1. BAWS, Vol. 12, 1993, p. 663; 2. BAWS, Vol. 12, 1993, pp. 665-671; 3. BAWS, Vol. 12, pp. 673-678; 4. BAWS, Vol. 12, pp. 679-681; 5. BAWS, Vol. 12, pp. 683-685; 6. BAWS, Vol. 12, p. 687, 7. BAWS, Vol. 12, pp. 689-691