
BOOK REVIEW: WAITING FOR A VISA

Anshika Srivastav, Bennett University

B. R. Ambedkar, Waiting for a Visa

Introduction:

In the unique world of autobiographical literature, "Waiting for a Visa" by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands still holding a timeless masterpiece position that arranges together not only the personal narratives but also shows the societal reflections making it into a whole of a compelling narrative. The book "Waiting for a Visa" is a 20-page autobiographical story of B. R. Ambedkar written during the 1935–36.

It consists of remembrances drawn by Ambedkar, related to his and the societies experiences relating to untouchability. The book consists of a very brief introduction which is further divided into six sections, relating Ambedkar's experiences with untouchability, starting from his childhood. The struggles in his life were more like an ocean, never-ending still he never lost hope and always stood for his and societies rights and stood up for equality to all.

Sections 1,2,3 and 4 consist of Ambedkar's own life experiences and sufferings, while Sections 5 and 6 consist of experiences faced by the other people in society at that time with untouchability.

Ambedkar in this book portrayed not only the challenges faced by him and the society but he also mentioned about the first time he felt what untouchability is in spite of suffering it from his birth. "Waiting for a Visa" is not just an autobiography, it unveils different harsh faces of the society that is present in the deep-rooted prejudices that were followed in India even if it devoid the rights of being a human.

Through his fluent prose and unwavering resolve, he wrote the experiences of his own life from the margins of society to the pinnacle of leadership and reform. This whole book was written in such a way that it felt like I was an eye witness of all the discriminations that were faced by Ambedkar and the other people.

Own Analysis:**1. *A childhood journey to Goregaon becomes a nightmare:***

The first chapter introduces the readers with the struggles that Ambedkar faced just because of the fact that he belonged to a lower caste of untouchables. Throughout this whole chapter the part that I witnessed was how caste was kept above humanity. While reading this chapter I felt like entering into a world where hierarchy of caste was kept above the essence of humanity. This chapter by Ambedkar unveils a society where the people have no mercy the only fact, they care about is the caste of the person.

For instance, when all of them reached to the toll-collector's hut, they asked the cartman that if they could get water, on which the cartman replied that the *"toll-collector was a Hindu and there was no possibility for them to get water if they told the truth about their caste. Then the cartman told them to pretend to be Mohammedans and try their luck"*¹ this shows that how during that time people were deprived to their natural rights on the basis of their hierarchical status in the caste system. The societal setup was such that humanity never came into existence.

I even saw that how people were first asked *"who are you?"* before giving them the consent to have water. This is not only about the untouchables not getting the water to drink but as seen in this chapter when Ambedkar went to the toll-collector telling him that *"he was a Mohammedans and even though he conversed well in Urdu he was denied having water"*².

In this chapter I felt like being into a society where the denial of natural water rights becomes a striking symbol of the pervasive discrimination faced by marginalized communities. The chapter sheds light on a world where the most fundamental human needs were subject to the oppressive grip of caste-based discrimination. Through his vivid recollections, Ambedkar painted a picture of a society where access to water was not a matter of basic human right or natural right but a privilege that was reserved for people belonging to higher castes. The young Bhimrao's encounters with water scarcity

¹ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa* (first published 1990) 3

² Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa* (first published 1990) 6

and the denial of access to public water sources becomes symbolic of the systemic inequalities that defined his early life.

Ambedkar's individual encounters emphasize the cruel reality that, for those consigned to the lower castes, something as fundamental as get to water was not ensured. It was a stark update of how profoundly caste progressions had entered indeed the foremost essential perspectives of day-by-day presence. The chapter made me to look on the broader issue of denied natural rights to even have water to drink. The chapter compelled me to see the harsh reality that how people from lower caste were devoid of their natural rights.

2. *Back from the west, and unable to find lodging in Baroda:*

In the second chapter of the book, I saw that how the Indian society sees the untouchables. During my reading of the second chapter, I came cross another phase of society where untouchability is not limited to any one religion rather it is spread across the whole stratum of the Indian society. As it was mentioned in the book “*It was then for the first time that I learnt that a person who is untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi.*”³ this shows that when Ambedkar thought of seeking shelter in a Parsi inn, he was there with the thought that they don’t follow the tradition of untouchability but when he faced the reality, he saw that untouchability has no exceptions.

This phrase written by Ambedkar shows that how at that time untouchability was not performed by any particular religion or a group of people having a higher position in the caste hierarchy but all the religions in the Indian society were following the practice of untouchability. This was not limited to defamation by words, untouchability was such a practice that people would probably come into such a phase that they might also kill the Dalit person. Ambedkar in this chapter showed that how untouchability knows no humanity. People become blind after knowing that the person in front of them is a Dalit. At that time people never consider about what education one has, all they considered was the caste you belong too.

³ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa* (first published 1990) 10

This chapter not only unveiled this phase of society, but it also showed me that how education level even carries no value in front of the caste system. Ambedkar at that time was abroad return he received his education in a place where the practice of untouchability was unheard. Even after having a lot of knowledge, he was unable to attain a shelter for himself as he was a Dalit.

In this chapter Ambedkar showed that how caste is kept at top in the hierarchy of Indian society and the practice of untouchability is not restricted to any particular religion it is being followed within whole of India. I even saw that education level and knowledge is of no value in front of the Indian caste hierarchy.

3. *Pride, awkwardness and a dangerous accident in Chalisgaon :*

In the third chapter of the book, I analysed that how even the profession of a person was kept inferior to the caste system. Herein I saw that how a Hindu *tongawalla* had a dignity by which he saw himself superior to all the untouchables regardless of their professional post. This chapter made me unveil another face of the society which showed that caste is even above the profession one practices.

This chapter illustrated that how the persuasive caste system followed in India casts its dark and deep shadow even over the career and aspirations of an individual. In this chapter this can be seen very clearly as when the other untouchables approached the *tongawalla*, for giving Ambedkar a ride to the village that he was supposed to go the *tongawalla* declined as he was Hindu and was not ready to sacrifice his dignity by giving a ride to an untouchable.

This whole scenario not only made me angry but also made me think that how back in time caste prevailed over everything. Being a Barrister-at-law had no value. The only fact that mattered was the caste you belonged from. The *tongawalla* denied to give Ambedkar the ride just because Ambedkar was an untouchable and this made zero value of the fact that he was a Barrister-at-law. The villagers to show respect to Ambedkar had to then come to a compromise with the *tongawalla* and then amongst them one person came to become the cartman and since this was for the first time, that person became nervous and ended up falling from the culvert into the river.

The chapter serves as a stark reminder that, for many in India, one's caste often determined their educational and career opportunities. Dr. Ambedkar's journey mirrors the struggles of countless Dalit individuals who faced discrimination not because of their abilities, but because of their caste origins.

4. *Polluting the water in the fort of Daulatabad:*

In the fourth chapter of this book, I analysed that how untouchables were exploited by the other caste peoples. This shows that how caste hierarchy is above kindness and maintenance of peace around the whole society. This whole incident made me look that how the Indian society has been stratified on the basis of caste. There has been a vertical stratification in the whole Indian society with reference to the caste system.

This whole system of vertical caste stratification has made the society set with a mindset that people of higher caste have more rights and the people belonging to the lower castes are to be treated as if they are not a part to the society.

In this chapter, Ambedkar showed that how when he with his group visited to a monument, they were treated so inhumanly. They faced the anger of the whole mob just because of the reason that they had drunk water from the public tank. The Mohammedan crowd present there were in such grave anger that they were ready to kill all of them.

Later on when Ambedkar, protested then they were allowed to visit the monument but a guard was sent with them, so as to keep an eye that they don't touch the monument or try to drink the water from the tank making it polluted for the other caste people. Through a personal anecdote, Dr. Ambedkar exposes the deeply ingrained prejudices that cut across religious lines and hindered social progress. This chapter highlights the urgent need for social reform and equality, echoing Dr. Ambedkar's lifelong struggle for justice and the abolition of the caste system.

In this whole incident again I came to see that how untouchability is a practice followed by any one religion but is spread to the whole of Indian society. As Ambedkar said "*This will show that person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a*

Mohammedan."⁴

5. *A doctor refuses to give proper care and a woman dies:*

In the fifth chapter of this book, I analysed that how even people who are well-educated and are of new generation have such a narrow mindset and practice the tradition of untouchability. In this chapter I saw that how a well-educated Hindu doctor declined to provide medical assistance to a Harijan despite of his education and medical training, that doctor allowed the caste biases to prevail upon his professional and ethical promises and responsibilities.

In this chapter, there was a letter published in the "**Young India**", a journal by Mr. Gandhi, here in the letter the teacher told his painful life incident of losing both her wife and child, just because of the fact that the doctor declined to treat them, as they were Harijans. The doctor even declined to enter into the Harijan society and this made the teacher compelled to take his wife out of the society.

I was shocked to read the way the doctor treated the wife of the teacher. It was so unethical. The doctor passed the thermometer to a Muslim and then it was passed by the Muslim to the teacher and then he checked the temperature, the whole process was followed to take back the thermometer.

This whole incident made me very anxious, as this showed me that how even after attaining the degree of doctorate, "*a doctor would prefer to be inhuman rather than touching an untouchable.*"⁵ This chapter provided me with an emotional and showed me the real face of the society regarding the practice being followed of untouchability which was even followed by the highly educated professionals. It served me as a heart pinching reminder of the urgent need for social reform and the eradication of caste-based discrimination. This chapter left me with a heavy heart, reflecting on the profound inhumanity that could persist when deeply ingrained societal prejudices were left unchallenged.

⁴ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa* (first published 1990) 13.

⁵ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a Visa* (first published 1990) 14

6. *A young clerk is abused and threatened until he gives up his job:*

In the sixth chapter of this book, the whole incident was very heart-wrenching and emotional. This chapter unveiled that face of society that one might not even imagine. This whole incident showed that how belonging from a higher caste can give one the power to even threat a lower caste person to death. In this chapter I saw that how due to extreme caste-based discrimination and humiliation a Bhangi with higher educational degree was forced to leave his job and was threatened to be killed.

The whole incident describes that how the boy was treated as an outcast, not only by the locals but also by his colleagues in the government office. The refusal to touch or use the furniture of his office, the restrictions were imposed on accessing even the drinking water, he even struggled to find a place to live and provide himself with a shelter, and he was even humiliated for his wish he endured for wanting to be treated equally as other human being.

*“The incident where he was surrounded by an angry mob, verbally abused, and threatened with violence merely for sitting on a chair is particularly harrowing”*⁶ this whole incident shows that a person’s life was even not considered after their cast was known or revealed.

The chapter unveiled the cruel face of untouchability and the profound resilience required for individuals like the Bhangi boy to challenge the status quo. It is a poignant reminder of the injustices that prevailed during that time, painting a picture of the immense obstacles Dalits faced in their quest for equality.

This chapter portrayed a powerful indictment of the caste-based discrimination and social hierarchies that plagued Indian society. It is a gut-wrenching account that compels readers to confront the brutality of untouchability and the incredible strength it took for individuals like the Bhangi boy to strive for a life of dignity and equality.

Conclusion:

The whole book “Waiting for a Visa” to me was more than just a book. It was so well narrated

⁶ Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Waiting for a Visa (first published 1990) 16

that I felt like being an eye-witness to all the incidents and felt an emotional connection with all the incidents that were mentioned in the book. The all six chapters showed that how caste has been kept superior to humanity, education, profession, and any other aspect.

The book showed that how in the Indian society the practice of untouchability is not restricted to any particular religion or group of people but is a practice followed by whole of the Indian society. It transcended religious boundaries, showing that caste discrimination knew no exceptions.

I felt like this book is a very underrated book among this generation. This book unveiled many harsh faces of the Indian society showing that how caste was superior to one's life. This book gave me an eye-opening glimpse into the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination that pervaded Indian society during his time.