



## **Management and Economics**

# **The Tightened Noose: Ambedkar's "Waiting for a Visa"**

**Ashwannie Harripersaud**

We are becoming accustomed to the deluge of instances of prejudice against individuals and groups of individuals. The prejudice has innumerable roots, among them race, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, gender, and class. In several places—like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Malaysia, and South Africa under apartheid—prejudice has been constitutionally entrenched. Almost all prejudice and the misery that befalls us as a consequence spring from a sense of exclusivity and superiority. This sense, coupled with greed, led to the deracination of entire peoples, like the First Nations of the Caribbean; to the enslavement of millions of Africans; to the still-prevailing indentureship system; to the wholesale murder of Jews during WWII, to list a few of the horrors.

It ought to be indisputable that discrimination of any sort leaves a lasting bruise on the human psyche. When that oppression is elasticized onto an entire group, the bruise becomes a festering wound; but when it is protracted for centuries, then humanity itself begins to decay. And yet, oppression is often a thing multi-layered; it reproduces itself when the oppressed exercises power over those less powerful than themselves. Each layer exerts an ever-heavier burden beneath over generations, ever more damaging, ever more lasting. This paper explores one such instance in Indian history by focusing on Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's work entitled: "Waiting for a Visa".

Seen from the outside, India is known as the most populous democracy in the world. It is seen as a country that is known for its rich culture, traditions, and its Bollywood films. Especially by

those whose ancestors have been taken out of India almost a century ago, India has become a romanticized homogeneous entity that is kept alive by superficial rituals and the commemoration of festivals like Phagwa and Deepavali. India, the simplified, the stereotype, the abstract.

India provides an example of how multi-layered, protracted, and multifaceted oppression can be. The brutality of English colonialism, compounded by religious oppression, the relegation of women to subservience, and the caste system are some of the layers.

The caste system has been entrenched in India for centuries. This oppressive caste system is a social hierarchy based on birth, where individuals are categorized into different groups based on their occupation, social status, and religious beliefs.

The caste system in India has its roots in ancient Hindu society. It was believed that this would help to create an organized and efficient society. The caste system has four main castes: Brahmins – the holy priests; Kshatriyas – the warriors; Vaishyas – the merchants; and Shudras – the laborers. The caste system was designed to be a closed system, where individuals were not allowed to move from one caste to another. The system has been so implacable as to be almost inescapable.

The caste system has had a profound impact on Indian society. It has created a rigid social hierarchy, where individuals are judged based on their birth and not on their abilities or achievements. The caste system has also been a major contributor to economic inequality in India.

The lower castes are often denied access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which has resulted in them being relegated to menial low-income jobs, leading to poverty and unemployment.

The caste system has also led to social discrimination and violence against the lower castes. The lower castes are often subjected to physical violence, harassment, and discrimination. There have been reports of violence against Dalits, who are considered to be at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Many Dalits have been killed, raped, or beaten for challenging the caste system.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a great Indian jurist, economist, and social reformer who was born in 1891 in the town of Mhow in the Central Provinces (now Madhya Pradesh). He was the principal architect of India's Constitution and is often referred to as the "Father of the Indian Constitution". His life and work continue to inspire and influence generations of Indians to this day.

Dr. Ambedkar was born into a family of low-caste Dalits who faced discrimination and oppression at the hands of the upper-caste Hindu society and at the hands of Muslims. He himself faced discrimination and exclusion from schools and colleges due to his caste, which made him acutely aware of the plight of his community. Despite these obstacles, he managed to secure an education and went on to study law at Columbia University in the United States.

Upon returning to India, Ambedkar became a vocal advocate for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized communities. He played a crucial role in the Indian freedom struggle and was a key figure in the Dalit movement, which sought to fight the entrenched caste system and its attendant inequalities. He founded the All India Scheduled Castes Federation and the Independent Labor Party, both of which sought to give voice to the marginalized and oppressed sections of society.

However, Dr. Ambedkar is perhaps best known for his role in drafting the Indian Constitution. As

the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, he worked tirelessly to ensure that the Constitution reflected the aspirations and values of a democratic and secular India. He was a fierce advocate of social justice and equality, and his ideas influenced the Constitution's provisions on fundamental rights, minority rights, and affirmative action.

In addition to his legal and political work, Dr. Ambedkar was also a prolific writer and thinker. His writings on the caste system, Buddhism, and social justice have had a profound impact on Indian society and continue to be studied and debated to this day. He was also a passionate advocate of education and believed that education was the key to uplifting the oppressed and marginalized sections of society.

Dr. Ambedkar's life and work have had a lasting impact on India and its people. His struggle against caste discrimination and his advocacy for social justice continue to inspire and influence generations of Indians, particularly those from marginalized communities. His legacy is a reminder of the power of determination, education, and advocacy in bringing about positive change in society. He remains a towering figure in India's history and an inspiration to those fighting for social justice and equality around the world.

"Waiting for a Visa" is a short autobiographical account by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, written in 1935-1936 and first published as a booklet by the People's Education Society in 1990. This short story highlights the struggles faced by Dr. Ambedkar at different stages of his life.

"Waiting for a Visa" revolves around Dalits (formerly known as "untouchable"). The story highlights the difficulties faced by Dalits and their struggles to get a good education thereby extricating themselves from an oppressive tradition in India. The Dalits question whether the insurmountable corruption that plagues India will ever be addressed to create a society with equality and justice.

"Waiting for a Visa" is a powerful story that highlights the difficulties faced by people of India who are seeking a better life. The protagonist is a symbol of the millions of people in India who are trapped by poverty and oppression and who are unable to escape their circumstances despite their best efforts. The story is a poignant reminder of the struggles faced by those who seek a better life by overcoming obstacles that may seem unsurmountable.

The story also highlights the broader issues of corruption and bureaucracy that are prevalent in India, and how these factors contribute to the suffering of the people. The man's struggle to secure a visa is a metaphor for the difficulties that many people in India face in trying to better themselves and achieve their dreams.

Dr. Ambedkar's short story "Waiting for a Visa" highlights several important themes that remain relevant today. The story takes place in the 1920s when Dr. Ambedkar himself was waiting for a visa to go to America and study law. Through the experiences of the protagonist, the author sheds light on themes such as discrimination, oppression, and the fight for equality.

One of the central themes in the story is discrimination. The protagonist, who is a Dalit (formerly known as "untouchable"), faces immense discrimination and prejudice from the people around him, including government officials. Despite his hard work and determination, he is constantly reminded of his lower status in society and the obstacles he must overcome to achieve his goals. The discrimination he faces highlights the harsh reality of the caste system and the struggle for equality that Dalits have faced for generations.

Another important theme in the story is oppression. The protagonist is not only discriminated against based on his caste but he is also oppressed by the British colonial government, which has a stranglehold on the lives of the people in India. This story also highlights the corrupt and oppressive nature of the colonial government and

the lengths to which people had to go in order to achieve their goals.

Finally, "Waiting for a Visa" is a story about the fight for equality. Despite the discrimination and oppression faced by the protagonist, he never gives up. He continues to strive for his goal of studying in America and becoming a lawyer, despite the many obstacles in his way. This shows the importance of perseverance and determination in the face of adversity and serves as a reminder that even in the darkest of times, hope and a desire for change can still be found. The visa about which Ambedkar writes is not so much a literal visa as it is a metaphor for the means to travel to a future that is both free and fulfilling.

Part One "**A Childhood Journey to Koregaon Becomes a Nightmare**" in Ambedkar's "Waiting for a Visa" provides a vivid and compelling account of Dr. Ambedkar's early life during the 1900s and the various obstacles he faced as a member of the Dalit community. It highlights the extreme poverty and social exclusion that marked his childhood, as well as the caste-based discrimination he faced in every aspect of his life:

*I knew that in the school I could not sit in the midst of my classmates according to my rank [in class performance], but that I was to sit in a corner by myself. I knew that in the school I was to have a separate piece of gunny cloth for me to squat on in the classroom, and the servant employed to clean the school would not touch the gunny cloth used by me. I was required to carry the gunny cloth home in the evening, and bring it back the next day.*

*While in the school I knew that children of the touchable classes, when they felt thirsty, could go out to the water tap, open it, and quench their thirst. All that was necessary was the permission of the teacher. But my position was separate. I could not touch the tap; and unless it was opened for it by a touchable person, it was not possible for me to quench my thirst. In my case the permission of the*

*teacher was not enough. The presence of the school peon was necessary, for he was the only person whom the class teacher could use for such a purpose. If the peon was not available, I had to go without water. The situation can be summed up in the statement—no peon, no water.*

*At home I knew that the work of washing clothes was done by my sisters. Not that there were no washermen in Satara. Not that we could not afford to pay the washermen. Washing was done by my sisters because we were untouchables and no washerman would wash the clothes of an untouchable. The work of cutting our hair or shaving the boys, including myself, was done by our elder sister, who had become quite an expert barber by practicing the art on us. Not that there were no barbers in Satara, and not that we could not afford to pay the barber. The work of shaving and hair-cutting was done by my sister because we were untouchables, and no barber would consent to shave an untouchable.*

*All this I knew. (Paragraphs 25-27)*

At the same time, however, it is a story of resilience and perseverance, with Ambedkar using education as a means of achieving social and economic mobility and ultimately becoming one of the most influential figures in modern Indian history. Implicit here too is the lot of women and girls who are trapped in a tighter circle of gender roles; oppression becomes an ever-narrowing concentric circle.

In Part Two "**Back from the West and Unable to find Lodging in Baroda,**" Dr. Ambedkar recounts his struggles to find housing upon his return to India after his studies in England. Despite his prestigious education, he is discriminated against by landlords in Baroda who refuse to rent to him because he is a Dalit. He describes the various strategies he tries to find a place to live, including changing his name and appearance, and having his Brahmin friend

negotiate on his behalf. Ultimately, he is forced to live in a run-down house with no amenities, where he is further subjected to discrimination and prejudice.

*I heard [the] footsteps of a considerable number of people coming up the staircase...Instantly I saw a dozen angry-looking, tall, sturdy Parsis, each armed with a stick, coming towards my room. I realized that they were not fellow tourists, and they gave proof of it immediately.*

*They lined up in front of my room and fired a volley of questions. "Who are you? Why did you come here? How dare you take a Parsi name? You scoundrel! You have polluted the Parsi inn!" I stood silent. I could give no answer. I could not persist in impersonation. (Paragraph 15)*

This chapter is a lesson on how caste-based discrimination is fostered through religious differences and decadence of the fundamental values of humanism. This experience solidifies his commitment to the fight for Dalit rights and the eradication of caste-based discrimination in India.

Part Three "**Pride, awkwardness, and a dangerous accident in Chalisgaon**" continues to highlight the challenges that Dalits encountered, especially those challenges faced by Dr. Ambedkar. He recounts how he was proud of his academic achievements and his position as a government employee, but this pride was tempered by his awareness of the discrimination he faced as a Dalit.

The most dramatic event in this section is the dangerous accident Ambedkar was involved in while travelling by "tonga" to Chalisgaon. The wheel of the "tonga" (one-horse carriage) in which Dr. Ambedkar was travelling in struck against the side stone of the culvert of the river. Dr. Ambedkar was trapped in the wreckage and suffered severe injuries. He writes about the painful recovery process emphasizing:

*"To save my dignity, the Mahars of Chalisgaon had put my very life in*

*jeopardy. It is [=was] then I learnt that a Hindu tongawalla, no better than a menial, has a dignity by which he can look upon himself as a person who is superior to any untouchable, even though he [the untouchable] may be a Barrister-at-law". (Paragraph 9)*

Only later in this section did Dr. Ambedkar realized that what appeared to have been an accident, nearly costing him his life, was actually a consequence of yet another discriminatory act with which he is faced simply because the "tongawalas" refused to drive him to the village. Instead, the "tonga" is rented to an inexperienced 'untouchable' driver nearly costing Dr. Ambedkar his life.

*On enquiry I was told the real facts. The delay at the railway station was due to the fact that the tongawalas were not prepared to drive the tonga with a passenger who was an untouchable. It was beneath their dignity. (Paragraph 7)*

Dr. Ambedkar does not shy away from presenting his challenges in an ironic yet relatable way; he visits Chalisgaon in an attempt to investigate the allegations of oppression and tyranny faced by the villagers, but he himself was confronted by fate similar to that which he was sent to investigate.

Overall, this part of Dr. Ambedkar's life story provides a glimpse into the challenges he faced as a Dalit in early 20<sup>th</sup> century India, and the resilience he showed in overcoming those challenges. The inherent attitude of intolerance and fanaticism in the Indian temperament is a long-drawn result of the colonial subjugation which has barred every prospect of growth in the subcontinent for the past century.

In Part Four "**Polluting the water in the fort of Daulatabad**" the focus is on the belief wherein people from lowest rungs of the caste system, the untouchables, are not allowed to touch or utilize the items of everyday use to preserve the prestige of the higher castes. The author highlights the poor treatment of Untouchables, who were denied

access to the water in the fort by Muslims. Dr. Ambedkar notes that even though the water was meant for everyone in the community, the Muslims prevented the Untouchables from using it, claiming that they were polluting it. Bias, therefore, was by no means exclusive to higher class Hindus.

The author argues that such treatment of Untouchables was unjust and demonstrates the deep-rooted discrimination that exist with the Muslim community towards lower-caste Hindus. The author further explains that this kind of mistreatment was a result of the Muslim community's belief in the superiority of their religion and culture:

*One young Muslim in the crowd kept on saying that everyone must conform to his religion, meaning thereby that the untouchables must not take water from a public tank. I had grown quite impatient, and asked him in a somewhat angry tone, "Is that what your religion teaches? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan?" (Paragraph 9)*

Part Four of Dr. Ambedkar's "Waiting for a Visa" portrays how the Muslim community treated the Untouchables with disdain. The author uses this story to show how the oppressed and marginalized communities in India are subjected to constant mistreatment and how the caste system creates a rigid hierarchy that perpetuates inequality and injustice across religions in India. The scourge of caste superiority is now compounded by the bigotry of religious superiority.

The following chapter "**A doctor refuses to give proper care, and a young woman dies**" unfolds yet another dreadful tale of injustice and corruption. A Dalit school teacher loses his wife in childbirth due to the lack of medical attention. Her identity as an untouchable prevents the doctor from attending to the needs of the dying mother.

*I went to call a doctor--but he said he would not go to the house of a Harijan,*

*nor was he prepared to examine the child. Then I went to [the] Nagarseth and Garasia Darbar and pleaded [with] them to help me... Then the doctor gave his thermometer to a Muslim, he gave it to me, and I gave it to my wife and then returned it by the same process after it had been applied. (Paragraph 2)*

Dr. Ambedkar concludes the fifth incident by portraying the practical irrelevancy of the doctor's Hypocritical Oath in the face of prejudice. Caste bias overwhelms any code of conduct which binds him to his profession. The incident illustrates how a Hindu will wholeheartedly prefer to be inhuman and abandon an ailing human rather than touching an "untouchable".

In chapter six "**A young clerk is abused and threatened until he gives up his job**" Ambedkar narrates the story of a Bhangi boy who receives no respect and dignity in his profession as a Talati (village scribe). The story begins with the introduction of a young clerk who belongs to a lower caste and is working in a government office. The clerk is subjected to verbal abuse and humiliation by his colleagues, who make derogatory remarks about his caste:

*Addressing the Ravana (village servant) he said, "Who allowed this dirty dog of a Bhangi to sit on the chair?" The Ravana unseated me and took away the chair from me. I sat on the ground. (paragraph 9)*

It becomes practically impossible for the boy to continue his job when the villagers refuse to obey him due to his caste identity, a direct consequence of the widespread practice of untouchability and the profound prejudices which supports its prevalence in reputed government offices in India. This chapter also highlights the psychological impact of discrimination and harassment on individuals:

*I was already tired of life, and felt enraged at being thus ignored and insulted. (Paragraph 8)*

Their alarming threats force the boy to leave his job permanently and resettle with his parents in Bombay.

"A young clerk is abused and threatened until he gives up his job" sheds light on the pervasive caste discrimination in India and the oppression faced by the lower-caste people. The story of the young clerk is a reminder of the struggles and hardships faced by many individuals in India, and the need for social and political reform to ensure that all citizens are treated equally and with dignity.

It may be said that these stories are needlessly repetitive, but this very repetition demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of biases of this or any sort in India or anywhere else. It demonstrates the strangle-hold that caste bias has or had in India, and acts as a caveat against our own cultural and individual prejudices. These instances dramatized by Dr. Ambedkar hold up to us in different times and different places the debilitating and dehumanizing consequences of biases, bigotry, and gender oppression. Implicitly, we are asked to learn. There is also another underlying signal if we are to take the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a whole: that justice and goodness will eventually triumph over prejudices and inhumanity.

#### Reference:

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