

FEATURES

# In lieu of an autobiography: B.R. Ambedkar and his 'Waiting for a Visa'

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Today is December 6: the death anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, affectionately called Babasaheb by his followers. To his followers, the day is hardly a reminder of his death. On the contrary, they usually see it as the occasion to celebrate the greatness of his life and not the lack of its longevity. Further, by alluding to a crucial Buddhist belief of Mahaparinirvana, and ascribing it to the day, Babasaheb's followers concede that he was as blessed and enlightened as Buddha himself was and did not leave behind any karmic debt--thanks to his hugely meaningful life of sacrifice, devotion, compassion and empathy

for the subjugated, among others.

The question, however, is what did Ambedkar himself think about his life? In an era where it was both fashionable and normative for public figures to write their autobiographies, he seems to have missed the bus. Or was it a deliberate choice on his part to miss it? However, there are shreds of evidence that he wanted to write his autobiography, in English. In fact, the editors of his Writings and Speeches claim in Volume Three that he had an intention to pen down the life of Mahatma Phule and the history of the Indian Army beside, his own life account. But an autobiography doesn't seem to have been too high in his list of literary priorities, because he never wrote it. Or was it the fact that he hardly imagined any distinction between his personal and public life--unlike his contemporaries?

Kartar Singh 'Polonius' quotes Ambedkar's views on his own life: "In public life, I will not do a thing which I cannot defend publicly" (Yusufji 102). Those who had the chance to live with Ambedkar, make it amply clear through their written reminiscences that Ambedkar's personal life was never expunged from his public life. He himself gives an example of it in a letter written in February 1948 to his would-be wife Sharda Kabir--asking and informing at the same time--in a rather frisky way: "You have not cared to enquire into my past" and then replies "But it will be available to you at any time in the pages of many Marathi magazines" (13).

In lieu of an autobiography proper, *Waiting for a Visa* remains a trustworthy textual substitute on Ambedkar's personal life. Unfortunately, barring *Annihilation of Caste*, many of Ambedkar's writings still

prescribed text for study at Columbia University. Prof. Frances W. Pritchett of the same university has edited it for classroom use. (See here:

[http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt\\_ambedkar\\_waiting.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_waiting.html))

The six autobiographical episodes that appear in *Waiting for a Visa* seem like snapshot chapters of a detailed autobiography--if Ambedkar had ever written it. The title *Waiting for a Visa*, however, is a bit odd--keeping in mind the straightforward and non-euphemistic style of writing that we see in Ambedkar. Does the word *Waiting* refer to the historical wait of Dalits who do not have the visa to enter into the mainstream of Hindu society? Or is it the word that Ambedkar employed simply to create a 'point of reference' for his foreign readers? At the beginning of his narrative, Ambedkar confirms that he is writing the narrative to introduce foreign readers to the plight of untouchables in a caste-ridden society. Further, in *Waiting for a Visa*, Ambedkar also contemplates on the methodology of his narrative vis-à-vis a general description or a record of cases. Finally, he decides to proceed with lived narratives.

Through his archiving of records/cases in *Waiting for a Visa*, Ambedkar's focus is more on the systemic structure of caste operative in the Indian society. The same is exemplified by the first part that describes the inhuman treatment meted out to him while in Koregaon. Ambedkar writes:

This incident has a very important place in my life. I was a boy of nine when it happened. But it has left an indelible impression on my mind. Before this incident occurred, I knew that I was an untouchable, and untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations. For instance, I knew that in the school I could not sit in the midst of my classmates according to my rank, but that I was to sit in a corner by myself. [...] 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. [...] The work of shaving and haircutting was done by my sister because we were untouchables and no barber would consent to shave an untouchable.

All this I knew. But this incident gave me a shock such as I had never received before, and it made me think about untouchability –which, before this incident happened, was with me a matter of course, as it is with many touchables as well as untouchables. (165-166)

The scene of a dozen Parsis armed with sticks lined before me in a menacing mood, and I standing before them with a terrifying look imploring for mercy, is one which so long a period as eighteen years has not succeeded in fading away. I can even now vividly recall it –and never recall it without tears in my eyes. It was then for the first time that I learnt that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi. (174)

He moves further through his vivid description of being tossed off from a *Tonga* while heading to Chalisgaon. It was beyond the caste dignity of the local *Tonga* drivers to accommodate an untouchable in their carts. The organizers, therefore, were forced to arrange an amateur amongst themselves. The arrangement ensured a fatal accident, though Ambedkar escaped a major causality, somehow.

In other parts, Ambedkar gives voice to the humiliating caste experiences of nameless people. Quite empathetically, he re-lives the experience and abuse of a 'bhangi boy' posted as a revenue officer in rural Gujarat. The young officer's life is threatened by caste Hindus until he resigns from his position.

Ambedkar then goes on to recount the plight of an untouchable teacher whose wife dies because the doctor refuses to give proper care for the fear that he himself will be polluted, by coming in contact with the so-called untouchables. In another episode, Ambedkar proves how the virus of caste has entered into almost all the religions in India. By refusing to share water from their tank, the Muslims too prove that they subscribe to the caste norms set by the Hindus, as was proved earlier by the Parsis.

In a nutshell, these autobiographical notes of Ambedkar are relatively 'low' on describing the self of the individual but 'high' on exposing the 'discriminatory othering-self' of Indian society that kills the very basis of an individual self. How can a society that boasts of speaking against discrimination, so selectively ignore Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa*? It baffles one to note that almost all Indians hail the 'experiments' of Gandhi and ignore the 'inferences' provided by Ambedkar.

I too grew up reading Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and did not even know the existence of Ambedkar's autobiographical notes until I reached PhD. We empathize with Gandhi's call to make salt but why ignore Ambedkar's demand for everyone's right over water? Ignoring Ambedkar is easy but engaging with him is difficult. This is also the lesson one can draw from the large neglect of his *Waiting for a Visa* and other writings. However, as a society, we have now reached a point where ignoring Ambedkar seems rather difficult. And even if with some magic we do so, we do it at our own peril. Now,

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## References

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([http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt\\_ambedkar\\_waiting.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_waiting.html))

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