

Retro-Modern India

Author: *Manuela Ciotti (2010)*

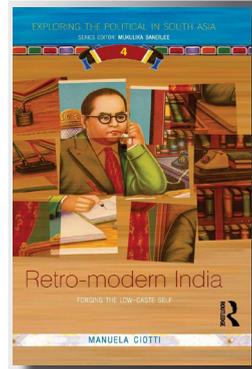
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Reviewer: *Zeeshan Husain*

PhD Research Scholar,

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

E-mail: zeeshanhusain@gmail.com



For the past two decades or so, modernity has been getting re-examined by experts from several disciplines as diverse as philosophy, architecture, painting, literature, cultural studies and social anthropology, among others. Consequently, the Enlightenment and its project have been critiqued on various fronts. Some of the most serious criticisms made against ‘modern’ knowledge are that of racism, misogyny, Orientalism, colonialism, and for the past few years, Islamophobia as well. To a certain extent, the present scholarship accepts that modernity is not a universal phenomenon and it has significant limitations. What are those limitations and to what extent are many projections of modernity still relevant? Which arguments are valid, and which ones are not? Amongst the arguments advanced by modernity, which ones are worth keeping and which ones are not? Is it one singular *modernity* or there are multiple contextual *modernities*? *Retro-modern India* (2010) tries to answer some of these tough theoretical questions of the present age. The book is an exercise in social anthropology and takes ethnography as the methodological tool. The writer, Manuela Ciotti, gives us a systematic view of the modern self of a marginal social group in India. Her position is that of understanding modernity as much a non-West phenomenon as it is Western.

Chamar Modernity

The book is an enlarged version of her doctoral dissertation. It is based on a fieldwork conducted in a village in Uttar Pradesh in India. This village, which she calls Manupur, is located a few kilometres away from Banaras city, a city known across the world for its Sanskritic cultural heritage. An ethnographic fieldwork was carried out for twenty-one months from 1998 to 1999, with further short

visits till 2005. Ciotti interviewed three generations of Chamars from both genders. This ethnography focuses on a single caste, namely, the Chamars who are considered untouchables as per Hindu social order. The book is rich in ethnographic details, and sociological concepts are interspersed throughout the text. The overall narrative is a dialogue between theory, concepts and field observations, all weaved in a seamless fashion. The leitmotif, in the fabric thus weaved, is the Chamar life-world. It is this life-experience of a single ex-untouchable caste which is the focus of the book. Ciotti has coined a neologism 'retro-modernity' (p. 35) and it certainly hits the bull's eye to understand Dalits in modern India.

In simple terms, Ciotti argues that for the Chamars, their past, present and future are deeply embedded into each other. This entanglement is so strong that the Chamars are moving ahead in their conceptual framework of time by constantly referring to the past. This past is itself imaginary and emanates from the present life circumstances. Thus, the present/modern is located in past/non-modern and that past/non-modern itself is re-created in the imaginings of the present/modern. In her own words, "in order to be modern in contemporary India, the Chamars appropriated the features of a past modernity" (p. 12). In the introduction chapter, Ciotti delves deep into the recent debates surrounding modernity, rather 'alternative modernities' (p. 36). She coins the term *Chamar modernity* to make the point that Chamars have their own version of modernity which is overlapping with, yet different from, the modernity as we understand it in common parlance. This 'past modernity' is situated not in the West, but within Indian history and culture (p. 20). Ciotti's site of observation is local, supra-local and national (p. 21). Modernity, for her, has two forms—metropolitan and provincial—which are 'not mutually exclusive but a web of juxtaposed fields of powers, economies and identities' (p. 16). For Chamars, modernity and development are synonymous. But Chamars are not the beneficiaries of economic growth since India adopted the privatisation (LPG) model. Rather they are logically on the losing side, as Scheduled Castes (SCs) would not get reservations in private sector jobs and education. Thus their chances of improving their status as middle class get slimmer. Ciotti places her concept of modernity more in the discursive space than in the material one. Hence it is the aspiring middle class which displays the tendency of 'retro-modernity', modernity as status, not telos (p. 38).

There is one small point made in the book which is worth mentioning here as details will emerge later. Ciotti (p. 36) uses the term 'reproduction' to state how Chamars imitate the lifestyle of the nineteenth century Indian middle classes which was a product of colonial modernity itself. The second term which she uses is subversion by which she means a Dalit movement for human rights and dignity. Recently, a few thinkers have stressed on 'subversion' to understand Dalits in India. Retro-modernity is exactly that tension between 'reproduction' and 'subversion' (p. 35). The second point is Ciotti's disagreement with Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2002) distinction between elite and subaltern/peasant classes (p. 43). For Chakrabarty, elites understand secular-religious binary, but not the subalterns. Ciotti submits that such a distinction is not justified because if that were the case, we would not witness most of the upper and middle class people supporting the Hindutva ideology and a party rooted therein. The book tells us, albeit indirectly, that 'Chamar modernity' is in favour of Dalits, Muslims and women while 'high caste Hindu modernity' is against these vulnerable groups.

The subtitle of the book provides us with an equally important facet of the book. It tells us about the empirical-cum-conceptual arguments of the book. It places the *Chamar Self* at six fields: changing political economy, weaving occupation, modern education, their religious belief, rising political consciousness and transforming gender roles. It is the interplay of these six fields that makes a Chamar modern, or retro-modern in their outlook. These fields are never understood as separate but as a web of factors mutually affecting each other.

Political Economy and the Making of Modern Chamar

Retro-modern India locates the formation of Chamar identity in the political economy at local, regional and national levels. It says how, with a changing agrarian economy, the Chamar self has changed as well. Some portions are dedicated to political economy at the national and international levels, but the book quickly narrows down to regional and local economies. At the level of Uttar Pradesh, land remained central for control as zamindari abolition remained ineffective, though Ciotti could have said why the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) never saw a serious redistribution of land. One reason, as Zoya Hasan (1988) tells us, was the resistance of GB Pant against RA Kidwai's plan to implement land redistribution. This meant that rural Chamars were mostly agricultural labourers while urban Chamars were employed as industrial labourers. Few SCs who got land titles never got the right to cultivate their land. Work and ritual statuses were closely tied, and UP had, what is often called, Jajmani system (p. 68). Manupur had the same pattern where Brahmins, Thakurs, and Kayasths were landlords, in control of social relations as well (p. 74). Chamars preferred to work within the village and the nearby Benares city (p. 77). Chamars in eastern UP had neither done leatherwork nor carried carcass for at least four generations. Citing the seminal essay 'Dalit movements in India' (1999) by Nandu Ram, Ciotti says that eastern UP Chamars fought against the humiliating practice of post-partum rituals done by Chamar women where the Chamar women had to cut the umbilical cord of the new born.

No major outward migration was observed by Ciotti during her fieldwork. It was in the 1930s that the Chamars started to work in the handloom weaving industry (p. 72). Weaving was the first urban occupations for the Manupur Chamars (p. 73). Most of the master weavers were Muslims and they trained Chamars for sometime before employing them as workers (p. 73). This shift of patron-client relationship from high caste Hindu landlords and Chamar peasants to Muslim weavers and Chamar workers brought about a series of effects altering the social relations among these groups. Older ties got broken and newer ones formed. Chamars were now free from the almost bondage-type working conditions to fairly conducive labour relations.

Another aspect is jobs for the aspiring middle class Chamars. Chamar youth showed preference for government jobs over private ones. This is quite unusual as government jobs are way too few to cater to any social group. As per Ciotti's own survey in 1999, government salaries contributed to the livelihood of 10 per cent of the Chamar households. But what is the reason for the Chamar non-preference for private jobs? Ciotti never asks this question, sadly. I, personally, would submit that this happens due to the rampant discrimination which youths face at the hands of their high caste Hindu bosses.

Tani-Bani of Chamar-Muslim Relationship

Our conceptualisation of Self is always in relationship with others; thus, being is equally a becoming. For Manuela Ciotti, Chamars of Benares have an extremely cordial relationship with the Muslims in the nearby region. This positive image of Muslims is located at two nodal points—the occupation of weaving and the memory of anti-Muslim pogroms. Weaving gave birth to interdependency between Muslims and Chamars that was much better than the Jajmani system of old. Ciotti states how Chamar weavers got interest-free loans, better wages, flexible work timings, friendly working conditions and no stigma of untouchability while working under Muslim weavers. This was also because Muslim weavers themselves were from middle/low ranking castes. Thus, no serious conflict of ritual status ever occurred between them. As stated earlier, this has been happening since the 1930s onwards when Chamars got involved into weaving under the guidance of Muslim master-weavers. Daily commuting to Benares city, riding a bicycle became a common thing among the Manupur Chamars. Ciotti argues that the weaving occupation loosened the tight grip of caste which was based on stigmatised work. Here she disagrees with Nicolas Dirks (1992) and BS Cohn (1987), who argue that colonialism consolidated caste. Weaving broke, partially though, the older Jajmani bonds where rural Chamars were labelled outright as untouchables when they worked as sharecroppers under Brahmin, Thakur and Kurmi landlords. Ciotti also departs from the usual Marxist understanding of ‘working conditions’ where only measurable entities like wages, sanitary conditions, workers safety, timing, etc., are considered. She believes that as anthropologists, our task should also be to understand the experiential aspect of ‘working conditions’. It is here that the Chamars felt more liberated under Muslim weavers than under dominant caste landlords. All these together were a new and welcome experience for Chamars.

Closely associated with the weaving aspect, is the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments in eastern UP. Citing the work by N. Kumar (1988), Ciotti discusses how the sari became the main artefact within the silk weaving industry in Banaras. Weaving helped Muslims gain socio-economic prominence and this created status anxiety among the rich Hindus. Traders and moneylenders like Marwaris, Sindhis, Gujaratis, Agrawals and Khatri based in Banaras city despised this growth and peddled anti-Muslim sentiments. Sadly, the middle ranking castes among the Hindus fully bought this sentiment and embraced the militant form of Hinduism. They started committing violence against not only Muslims but also Dalits (Gooptu, 1997). As a consequence, business was badly affected both in terms of economic growth and social relations. One pogrom took place in 1939. Hindu traders stopped transacting with Muslim weavers, which further made Chamars vulnerable. In such situations, Chamars found themselves to be the victims of resurgent Hinduism despite getting their untouchables stigma reduced over time. This again consolidated their ties with Muslims, and they found solace in their own religion—Ravidasi. This has been my experience as well with Chamars in 2020 when I visited Banaras. I found Chamars to be extremely sensitive to the Muslim question and considered all religious minorities as their own—*manav manav ek samaan*.

Sadly, this weaving part was on the wane while Ciotti's fieldwork approached its completion. Younger generation Chamars were freer from Muslim master-weavers but again dependent on high caste Hindu traders in the city. This made them partially dependent upon contingencies of a global market and vulnerable to casteist overtures as well.

Modern Education as Liberation

Next to political economy and weaving, is the importance of education in the making of the modern Chamar self. Ciotti's findings are almost similar to what has been reported across India about the significance of modern education among Dalits. Education for Manupur Chamars is not merely acquisition of skills and a step towards employment—though their enthusiasm for education is as strong as that of Brahmins—it is far more profound than this instrumental understanding of education. For Chamars, *parhe likhe hona* (to be educated) not only means to be literate and skilled but also to be refined in character and thought. Modern education is the only form of education that Chamars received as the doors of traditional 'Hindu' knowledge were closed on both women and Shudras. It was the colonisers who opened the door for everyone. Till today, we find high caste Hindu men opposing affirmative action programs for women, SC, ST and OBCs in educational institutes. This refinement in character is an interplay of modern education with social status and political orientation. An educated Chamar supports his wife, remains aware of the politics of Uttar Pradesh, leads a frugal life, is critical of Brahmanism/ Hinduism, avoids liquor, has family planned, and has some social standing gained through cultural capital. It is this well-educated section among the Chamars, which is re-writing the Dalit history through the prism of social justice (p. 120).

Ciotti observes that education is not reproducing the social inequalities but is levelling differences. A few college youths told her that casteism is deeper and hidden among the urban educated high caste Hindus than the rural ones. Despite increasing social status, Manupur Chamars were aware that the congenial behaviour of Brahmins over the past few years is because of changing power dynamics rather than any change in heart. The best part of chapter 4, is the use of works by Marc Bloch (1989) differentiating between traditional and modern knowledge and how Chamars completely reject their traditional knowledge in favour of the modern one. One, however, does not understand fully why Ciotti places growing political awareness among the Chamars solely due to modern education, perhaps an error drawn from the assumptions of Dipesh Chakbaraty and Sudipta Kaviraj. It is the same education which has become a tool at the hands of high caste Hindus to oppress Muslims, Dalits and women. Interestingly, Ciotti herself makes it clear earlier that the Chamar self is a web of interaction among education, religion, occupation and political economy.

Ravidasi Chamars: Religion as Social Justice

One of the strengths of *Retro-Modern India* is its theoretically sound approach towards religious beliefs of the Chamars. Manuela Ciotti must be applauded for using the work

of anthropologist Talal Asad (1993) and his understanding of religion as a historical product of discursive formation. Who is a Hindu and who is not, is looked at through Asad's lens. Hinduism remains an anthropological category shifting its meaning across time and space. Citing the work of Mark Juergensmeyer (1982) on Ad Dharm movement in Punjab, Ciotti states that religion for Dalits has remained a central force for social movements since long ago. It is here that the book is at its best. Religion, for Dalits, is not antithetical to modernity, but a part of it. The religious-secular binary does not hold in the Dalit lifeworld, indeed in anyone's lifeworld. Ciotti critiques the inadequacy of the Enlightenment framework to understand human behaviour and thought. Following Asad, the book says that religion is constitutive of modernity and not opposed to it. This includes Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism.

Chamar lifestyle is different from caste Hindus in many ways. This non-Hinduness of Dalits in UP, has also been mentioned in other anthropological works (Searle-Chatterjee, 1994). For example, they have their own rituals, they eat pork, have their own minor temples, and bury their dead (p. 152). Since the 1990s, the Chamars have stopped calling Brahmin priests. They have their own interpretation of Satya Narayan Katha, they support inter-caste marriages, reject Hinduism, and accept Saints Kabir and Ravi Das. Due to the rise of the BSP, some showed interest in Buddhism while most considered themselves to be Hindus for namesake. There were also a couple and two women who became Christians. Ciotti's usage of the term 'genealogical amnesia' borrowing from Carsten (1995) tells us why Manupur Chamars do not remember their own ancestors, reject Brahmanical versions of their lowly origin, and have their own myths of origin around Adi Hindu theme. 'Chamars have selected which past to emphasise', Ciotti quips.

The non-Hinduness of the Chamars takes a distinct form during anti-Muslim pogroms. Chamars find themselves stuck between two extremes—caste Hindus as attackers and Muslims as victims. Citing the works of Zoya Hasan (1996), Mary Searle-Chatterjee (1994) and Nandini Gooptu (2001), Ciotti says that militant Hinduism, though supported by urban high castes, percolates down to middle order castes. This has been twice the case with 1930s and late 1980s UP. Urban Hindus became anti-Muslim while rural ones became anti-Dalit. As stated earlier, upward mobility of Muslims and Dalits led to status anxiety among high caste Hindu traders and middle caste Hindu workers. One is surprised to see the situation still persisting where middle order castes are re-playing their roles as 'warrior defenders of Hinduism', a phrase used by Gooptu (2001) while describing communalism in UP during the 1930s. This led to two things—consolidation of Chamar-Muslim relationship and spread of Saint Ravidas' message.

The Chamar self is intermeshed with the twin figures of Ambedkar and Ravidas and no conversation would occur without mentioning either of the two, reflects Ciotti. Banaras might be a centre for Brahmanical Hinduism, but Chamar subjectivity negates this powerful discourse. Social equality remains the core of the preaching of Saint Ravidas, a fourteenth century saint. Quoting Vijay Prasad (2000), Ciotti says that the ideology of Ravidas and an independent location in the economy gave Chamars a distinct subjectivity. Perhaps this also explains how Shiv Narayani and Satnampanthi Chamars also have the same idea of religion—a practical philosophy for social justice.

Party Politics for Life and Justice

Another important source of the Chamar modern self is politics. For Chamars, politics is an inextricable part of their lifeworld. In Manuela Ciotti's words, 'Chamar politics revolved around the most intrinsic features of the community's social persona.' Using a work by Paul Brass (1965), the book says how the poor (which consisted of mostly Dalits and Muslims) were in patron-client relationship with the Congress government. Interviews with villagers show that Indira Gandhi was revered among Dalits and Muslims for her *Garibi Hatao* program. From the late 1980s onwards, the discourse of the BSP started gaining ground in Banaras. Chamars knew what 'bahujanwaad' (rule by plebeians), as well as 'manuwaad' (rule by patricians) was. This book accepts how, more than the material rewards, it is the discourse of development that influenced Chamars. The author details how both material and symbolic benefits accrued to Dalits whenever Mayawati got power. This includes fulfillment of SC-ST quota in government jobs, Ambedkar Village Scheme for rural development and renaming of districts after Bahujan icons. If Ciotti agrees with Corbridge and Harris (2001) on the concepts of 'material' and 'symbolic benefits', we find her disagreeing with Kanchan Chandra (2000) on the concept of 'ethnic parties'. For Ciotti, BSP was not a Chamar party but a group of all marginalised castes and groups. Her interviews showed her how deeply Chamars were influenced by the image of Ambedkar but only few talked about Buddhism. Much of the Hinduisation of SCs can be attributed to the Poona Pact which made SCs dependent upon caste Hindus for their welfare. This aspect could have been elaborated a little more. The Hinduisation of SCs is a deliberate plan by the Indian state. Despite all these, the book tells us how 'Chamars' preferred this term and found 'Harijan' to be casteist. The term 'Dalit' was used only during political meetings and had little relevance for the Chamars of Banaras.

Chamar Women and Modernity

Ethnographic accounts have always faced one major limitation, that is, fieldwork with women participants. Fieldwork for women ethnographers is also more challenging than for men. Manuela Ciotti must be applauded for doing fieldwork in a patriarchal set up and bringing out the hitherto hidden aspect of rural women of UP. Ciotti interviews a number of women from Chamar caste and unlocks the interaction among social development, change in gender relations and modernity. There is no denying that gender relations among the Dalits are different from high caste Hindus. Chamar women have been working outside their houses for centuries, are outspoken and enjoy greater sexual freedom. No reported cases of dowry and female foeticide were heard of by Ciotti. It is here that we see how Dalit women have an edge over high caste Hindu women as far as making life choices is concerned. This is peculiar to Dalit women as even Brahmin women are not allowed to marry non-Brahmins. Chamar modernity is equally a cause and an effect of these historically empowered women. Modern education and the consequent new middle class have brought certain changes in this narrative.

Ciotti, in her signature style, again uses two hermeneutic tools to understand Chamar women subjectivity. N. Kumar (2005) delineates ‘historical’ and ‘anthropological’ women—the former is an urban, middle class, educated, high-caste Hindu who was active in the anti-colonial struggle while the latter is the rural, poorly uneducated, low caste woman who had little idea about the national struggle. The former is assumed to be urbane while the latter is rustic. Both Chamar men and women, while becoming middle class, are imitating the lifestyle of the high caste Hindus of the colonial period. Thus, modernity again takes a retro turn. Chamar women receive education and reproduce a higher class status but are equally burdened by newer norms of domestication. This gender roles reproduction among the newly middle class Chamars draws its repertoire not from local Hindu elites but from the nationalist imaginings of the nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu elites.

Ciotti critiques the concept of ‘capital circulation’ by Bourdieu (1986) positing that it is not a gender-neutral process. Increase in cultural capital leads to a slight decrease in freedom of younger Chamar women. Still men preferred educated and working women for marriage and supported them during participation in village panchayat elections. While Dalit women are supported by Dalit men, caste Hindu women are opposed by their own family and kinship men. Thus, the reproduction of class among the Chamars is never unilinear. As mentioned earlier, there are many elements in the making of the Chamar self which make Chamar modernity quite different from the usual caste Hindu modernity. One feels slightly disappointed to see no proper mention of inter-caste and inter-faith marriages among the Chamar women—one of the biggest indicators of women empowerment. Nevertheless, one strong point which the book makes is that Chamar women do have a significant contribution in the imagining of India as a nation.

Limitations and Way Forward

Retro-Modern India succeeds in telling the story of a formerly untouchable caste in India. I have few quibbles and a doubt about the method used in the book. All along the text, Ciotti has used the term ‘Hindu-Muslim riots’ by which she actually meant anti-Muslim pogroms. She uses the phrase ‘low castes’ by which she means ex-untouchables and not ‘backward classes’. There is the usage of the expression ‘urban middle class of colonial times’ by which she actually means *Hindu* urban middle class. She has made mention of ‘direct and mediated dominance’, the concepts used by Jeffery, Jeffrey and Jeffrey (2008) but not elaborated upon it. In the same way, Ciotti could have elaborated much more deeply on the importance of reservations in education and jobs. Much of the desire for government jobs comes from the fact that the untouchables can get middle class jobs only through reservations due to extreme casteist environment in both education and jobs. She has mentioned that in the 2005 village election, a Chamar won the seat. This was the first time a Dalit became a village chief which became possible only due to the reservation of seats for SCs. Ciotti merely mentions that even backward class Hindus preferred Brahmin pradhans but has not asked why? It is in this context, I want to raise a methodological question to

the book at hand. How can one understand one's Self without looking at it through the eyes of others? Our selves are constituted of both self-image and the image which others have of us. Both images influence each other. How do Chamars find themselves vis-à-vis caste Hindus? How does the untouchability line influence this? Are well-educated middle class Chamars accepted by caste Hindus? Why did educated Chamar youth tell Ciotti that they face deeper and subtler casteism in cities? Recent scholarly works point out a change of form, not lessening, of casteism. Readers should know that like Chamars/Dalits, Muslims and Christians are also considered as untouchables in the Hindu social order. The Chamar modern self is equally forged through such event interactions of daily experiences of humiliation, casteist political institutions, and exclusionary discourses. The Chamar self and a desire for social justice become synonymous with each other.

Nevertheless, the book makes a significant contribution to our present understanding of modernity, Indian society, Uttar Pradesh culture and Dalits. It must be read by social anthropologists to understand Indian society in general and Dalits of Uttar Pradesh in particular.

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