

Violence against Indian Dalit Women under Narendra Modi Government: Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence Analysis

Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan Dalit India di Bawah Pemerintahan Narendra Modi: Analisis Kekerasan Kultural Johan Galtung

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ABSTRACT

Artikel ini akan membahas tentang kekerasan yang dihadapi perempuan Dalit India pada masa pemerintahan Narendra Modi. Kekerasan kultural merupakan bagian dari pelanggaran Hak Asasi Manusia (HAM) yang salah satunya terjadi di kawasan Asia Selatan yaitu India. Fenomena kekerasan kultural terhadap perempuan di India, khususnya pada kasta Dalit menjadi sesuatu yang menarik untuk dibahas, sebagaimana kekerasan yang dihadapi perempuan Dalit di India sudah terjadi sejak zaman kuno hingga sekarang pada masa pemerintahan Narendra Modi. Pemerintahan Modi tidak dapat memberikan perubahan yang besar terhadap hidup dan hak-hak perempuan Dalit. Hal ini ditunjukkan dengan masih adanya kebijakan yang membuat perempuan Dalit menderita. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana kekerasan terhadap perempuan Dalit India di pemerintahan Modi terjadi menggunakan teori kekerasan kultural yang dicetuskan oleh Johan Galtung. Dalam penelitian ini, ditemukan bahwa nilai agama menjadi faktor yang dominan mendorong terjadinya kekerasan kultural terhadap perempuan Dalit India. Selain itu, tingkat patriarki yang tinggi menunjukkan bahwa kekerasan kultural ini merupakan sebuah fenomena yang tidak akan pernah berhenti pada setiap era pemerintahan.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Perempuan Dalit India, Kekerasan Kultural, Narendra Modi*

This article will discuss the violence faced by Indian Dalit women during the reign of Narendra Modi. Cultural violence is part of human rights violations, one of which occurs in the South Asian region, India. The phenomenon of cultural violence against women in India, especially the Dalit caste, is an interesting topic to discuss, whereas the violence faced by Dalit women in India has occurred ever since ancient times until the current era during the reign of Narendra Modi. The Modi government has not been able to make a significant difference in the lives and rights of Dalit women. This is shown by the existence of policies that make Dalit women suffer. This study aims to analyze how the violence against Indian Dalit women in the Modi government occurs using the theory of cultural violence that was coined by Johan Galtung. This study found that the religious aspect was the dominant factor driving the occurrence of cultural violence against Indian Dalit women. In addition, the high level of patriarchy shows that this cultural violence is a phenomenon that will never diminish in every governmental era.

Keywords: *Indian Dalit Women, Cultural Violence, Narendra Modi*

The issue of violence against women has become an unavoidable global phenomenon, even in the international sphere, violence against women is considered a form of discrimination and violation of human rights. Women are objects that are very vulnerable to violence. This is because women are often regarded as weak and powerless. In addition, women also have physical characteristics that are considered different from men, creating a stigma that women are second-class citizens (Biaison and Vlachoud 2005).

The phenomenon of violence can occur due to various reasons, such as religion, ethnicity, culture, group, or gender. Conflict, sexual violence, and rape against women often happen. In addition, physical violence can also occur in situations where there is a traditional view that women are property and sexual objects. The violence is not only limited to physical and can also happen non-physically or invisibly, such as the violence that occurs to women in India, namely in the Dalit caste. The life of Indian society is generally still classified as classical and patriarchal. Therefore, matters that include reproduction, sexuality, and social activities are still placed in the setting of patriarchal values and expressed through certain cultures (Manimekalai and Sivakumar 2021).

The Dalit caste, known as *untouchables*, is defined as the untouchable community. Dalit women often receive unfair treatment and are marginalized from society, such as not getting access to proper education, employment, health, political participation, and traditional ceremonies (Rowshan and Khan 2016). Dalit women face verbal, physical, and sexual violence in the public and private spheres. In the public sphere, Dalit women are verbally and physically attacked, for example, when trying to access public resources or seeking justice after an incident of violence. In the private sphere, Dalit women are attacked for not being dutiful wives, not bearing children or sons, or not bringing sufficient dowry into a marriage. Dalit women face violence from community members, police officers, in-laws, and their families. Between the norm of subjugation of women and the cultural norm of a "natural" caste hierarchy, women are constantly attacked and used (Mahey 2004).

The May 2014 general election was a significant moment for India in the post-colonial era as it witnessed the landslide victory

of the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), also known as the Indian People's Party. Another highlight of this electoral result was that a single party could gain a clear majority of seats, winning 282 out of a possible 543 seats in Parliament after thirty years. Although the party enjoys a majority in the lower house, it has formed a coalition government that honors pre-election understandings with other parties. This coalition government includes some Hindutva affiliates that support militant political Hinduism and Hindu supremacy, while other coalition parties call for regionalism (Ansari 2016).

During Modi's leadership, he issued a zero-tolerance policy to punish perpetrators of violence against women. The policy did not work effectively, so India remains a dangerous country for women. This argument is based on a survey conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2018, which further states that sexual violence, cultural violence, and human trafficking are the causes of Modi's policy failure to create a safer Indian environment for women. The treatment of Dalit women is increasingly inhumane, and the rape cases they face are also getting worse. Dalit lawyers who handle cases of caste discrimination and gender violence stated that in 2019, cases of rape against Dalit women increased by 18.6 percent compared to 2018 (Ariyanti 2020).

A report from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in 2016 showed a 25% increase in atrocities committed against Dalits. It was also noted that women were the worst victims of these atrocities. Rape against Dalit women has doubled in the last ten years. In the first year of the Modi government, an average of 6 Dalit women were raped every day (Kang 2019). Moreover, NCRB's data analysis also recorded 251,068 incidents of crimes committed against Dalit men and women over six years, from 2014 to 2019. Crimes committed against Dalit women and girls accounted for 15.11%. This percentage of crime has increased by 46% (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch 2021).

The discussion of violence faced by Dalit women in India, especially in the era of the Modi government, is interesting and essential amid the many phenomena of violence, discrimination, and human rights violations that continue to occur to Indian Dalit women. The interpretation of the Dalit caste for centuries has led

to inhumane actions. Based on the focus of the discussion, this article aims to answer how cultural violence against Indian Dalit women in the era of the Modi government.

The framework used to analyze the problem is the concept of cultural violence initiated by Johan Galtung in his writing entitled "Cultural Violence". Galtung explains that cultural violence is violence in an intangible form. In this case, culture is not related to entities and culture as a whole, but rather as aspects of the culture. Symbolic aspects in society that can trigger cultural violence are religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, formal science, and cosmology. These aspects can legitimize structural and direct violence. In this research, the authors use a qualitative approach. Data is collected through literature studies derived from secondary sources such as books, journals, news, and data issued by institutions and bodies whose research matters related to Dalit women's violence in India.

The State of India's Dalit Women during Modi's Era

The victory of the Narendra Modi-led BJP made India, a former secular republic with a democratic government system, shift to a Hindu nationalist direction. The caste system also validates the point that the agenda of Hindu nationalism is not about forming a Hindu collective by liberating people of lower castes from centuries of oppressive caste systems. Instead, Hindu nationalists sought to entrench upper-caste hegemony (Ansari 2016). In the winter of 2016 to 2017, news of female sterilization circulated in the context of population control, symbolizing power by targeting the body. Moreover, the wombs of poor, Dalit, Adivasi, and religious minority women in India were used as sites of violent intervention. The Modi government considers the population explosion highly impactful on economic development (Wilson 2018). Giriraj Singh, the Union Minister, stated that in the BJP government under Narendra Modi's administration, Modi has barely hidden the link between his government and the increasingly dominant discourse of Hindu supremacy.

Dalit women are also victimized by social customs and religious practices in Hindu society. One such custom is known as *Devadasi* (temple prostitution). Devadasi takes place when Dalit girls are married off by their parents to village deities. Later, these girls are sexually exploited by upper-caste landlords and wealthy people in the village. This tradition has been going on for so long that it is difficult to eliminate. This system of Devadasi is still in place during the Modi government. Dalit women in India live in a patriarchal society divided along caste lines (Shingal 2015).

Being born into the Dalit caste makes these women particularly vulnerable to violence. There are three religious reasons why this institution continues to thrive. First, the broader societal practice of perpetuating the Devadasi system through the belief that the younger a woman is devoted, the more God will bless her and her family. This tradition is characterized with great respect because *devadasi* are usually only taken from the lowest castes. The women chosen to become a *devadasi* were subject to be honored as if they were Goddess Lakshmi because they married a deity (Shingal 2015).

Secondly, many women willingly enter or are forced into the *devadasi* system because it is seen as the only way for Dalit women to create a revolutionary awakening in India amidst the rigid caste system. The caste system not only determines the relationship between two individuals but also limits the ability of an individual to move above their birth caste. Many of their families consider marriage to a deity as a way to move up in the strict caste system. Third, and perhaps most alarming, is the reality that many Hindu priests seem to actively condone and perpetuate the practice (Shingal 2015).

According to a 2015 Equity Watch report, the rate of official crimes, particularly rape cases against Dalit women, has increased by more than 47 percent since the previous decade (IDSN Briefing Note 2016). Then in the era of the Modi government, Indian society still perpetuates the Sanskrit Hindu legal text, *Manusmriti*. In this case, men and women are differentiated in their positions. According to the *Manusmriti* text, women are not entitled to education, independence, or wealth, so these guidelines justify the treatment of Dalit women as sex objects. This is also supported by

the culture of the Dalit community, which is still very patriarchal by placing women's position under men, so Dalit women are limited in making decisions related to the household, even tortured by their partners when they do not give birth to sons and are considered unfilial to their partners (BBC 2019).

This teaching has been going on long before the Modi government. Dalit women thought that with Modi elected Prime Minister of India, life would improve. However, they continue to receive inhumane treatment. During Modi's administration, Dalit women in India experienced violence influenced by the teachings of the Hindu legal text *Manusmriti* which positioned women only as sexual objects, and even the killing of Dalit women committed by Brahmins was explicitly considered a light matter which was the same as killing animals. This situation makes the rate of rape and even murder of Dalit women amount to an average of 10 women every day (BBC 2020).

This is also reinforced by India's conservative society that emphasizes the highly patriarchal Dalit society, in which Dalit society places women as second-class citizens. Therefore, the traditional caste system is still very much embedded and cultured in Indian society until the Modi government, although various things have been done both during the Modi government and the previous government period. For example, during the Modi government, a zero-tolerance policy for perpetrators of violence was established. However, the policy was only seen as a symbol because its implementation did not match reality. The policy does not solve the violence faced by Dalit women (Ariyanti 2020). Based on NCRB analysis data, there were 251,068 incidents of crimes committed against Dalit men and women over six years, from 2014 to 2019. Crimes committed against Dalit women and girls reached 15.11%. This crime has increased by 46%, whereas previously, crimes against Dalit women based on AIDMAM data (2021) amounted to 29.33% (AIDMAM 2021). The following table is an analysis of data from NCRB 2014-2019 regarding the number and percentage of crimes committed against Dalit women:

Table 1.
NCRB analysis table on number and percentage of crimes against Dalit women

Year	Total Crimes listed under the SC/ST (PoA) Act	Total Crimes against Dalit Women registered in SC/ST (PoA)	Overall crimes against Dalit women and children recorded under the SC/ST (PoA) Act (%)
2014	40.300	5.149	12,77%
2015	38.564	5.713	14,81 %
2016	40.774	6.501	15,94%
2017	42.969	6.347	14,77%
2018	42.539	6.818	16,02%
2019	45.922	7.510	16,35%
Total	251,068	38,038	5,11%

Source: AIDMAM (2021)

Dalit women and girls are vulnerable objects in a society with a conservative, Brahmanical, and patriarchal mindset. Sexual violence against Dalit women is rampant such as those perpetrated by the police and local authorities. Furthermore, there are many considerations regarding protection for the perpetrators of violence, and the caste system in India is one of the factors that plays a massive role in the cases of violence faced by Dalit women. Caste has a different role in cases of violence against Dalit women, in which their bodies are often used as a tool for upper caste communities to subjugate and oppress Dalits. The NCRB report states that from 2014 to 2019, the forms of violence experienced by Dalit women based on caste and gender reached 81 cases (AIDMAM 2021).

The forms of violence experienced by Dalit women include rape, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. This is the most common form of violence. Out of 81 cases of violence experienced by Dalit women during 2014-2019, 38.27% or 31 incidents were cases of rape and sexual violence. Then, 10% of all cases of violence against Dalit women, consisting of 8 incidents, were murder cases. Based on a report from NCRB, this study presents several examples of violence faced by Dalit women during the Modi government. As for

October 13, 2019, a Dalit woman was labeled a witch and accused of using black magic, which caused the daughter of a traditional healer to die. Following this incident, family members of the deceased victim brutally beat the Dalit woman and forced her to eat human feces (AIDMAM 2021).

Furthermore, on March 13, 2020, a Dalit woman was stopped by an upper-caste man for drawing water from a government tap. Later, the man humiliated the Dalit woman by calling her an untouchable and stating that Dalits were not allowed to use the tap as it was used by upper castes. The man also said that the Dalit woman's touch caused the water to become impure. However, the Dalit woman ignored the prohibition and continued to fill the water. This made the man angry, inviting other men from the upper caste to attack the Dalit woman by grabbing her hair and pushing her away (AIDMAM 2021). Based on cases of violence experienced by Dalit women in India during the Modi government period, it is clear that they have constantly become victims of inhumane treatment and were deprived of their rights. Furthermore, several rules formed during the Modi government era are part of the four forms of threats to basic human needs.

Forms of Cultural Violence against Dalit Women in the Era of the Modi Government Based on Aspects of Cultural Violence

The various forms of cultural violence experienced by Indian Dalit women, as discussed in the article above, show that this violence does not just happen. The violence faced by Dalit women during the Modi government is, in fact, caused by several aspects that are in line with Galtung's explanation about "Cultural Violence". These aspects are religion, ideology, language, empirical science, and cosmology.

Religious Aspects

Based on Galtung's explanation, cultural violence in the aspect of religion states that religious teachings or doctrines can be used to justify everything, whether right or wrong. The religious aspect

views that the right thing comes from God, while the wrong thing comes from Satan. Therefore, it can be understood that when religious teachings are applied through wrong practices, this is known as a form of cultural violence (Galtung 1990). Furthermore, Galtung states elected and unelected things in the following table:

Table 2.
The Chosen and the Unchosen

God Chooses	And Leaves to Satan	Consequences
Human species	Animal, plants, nature	Speciesism, ecocide
Men	Women	Sexism, witch-burning
His people	The others	Nationalism, imperialism
Whites	Colored	Racism, colonialism
Upper classes	Lower classes	'Classism', exploitation
True believers	Heretics, pagans	'Meritism', inquisition

Source: Galtung (1990)

Based on the table above, it is explained that the chosen are God's choice, and the unchosen are part of Satan. This, of course, creates its consequences, whereas those who are not chosen or are part of the devil are vulnerable to unfair treatment, such as acts of racism, classism, ecocide, class discrimination, sexism, and exploitation (Galtung 1990). In relation to cases of cultural violence, Indian Dalit women in the Modi era are faced with the *devadasi* system (temple prostitution), which is a social custom in Hindu religious practice that causes Dalit women to experience forced sexual exploitation by upper castes, such as landlords and wealthy people in the region (Hossain 2016). Dalits are considered lower class, so they experienced exploitation by being treated unfairly and inhumanely, especially Dalit women who are killed, raped, and exploited. Based on Galtung's table of chosen and unchosen in the aspect of religion, cultural violence also views the lower class as satanic or unchosen; thus, the violence faced by Dalit women results from low caste status.

Ideological Aspects

In his writing, Galtung argues that ideology has a significant impact on human perception or views, where ideology in a country

can be influenced by the religion of the majority in that country. Galtung also explained that the state is an extension of God's hand, so the state has control in organizing life by either creating or destroying it (Galtung 1990).

Cultural violence in the aspect of ideology faced by Indian Dalit women during Modi's reign is related to Modi's victory, which has an impact on the Indian government system. The connection is shown through India, which previously adhered to secular democracy and then shifted to a Hindu nationalist state (Hindutva), thus, causing the existence of the caste system to be stronger and this made caste groups, especially those at low levels such as Dalits, increasingly marginalized (BBC 2019). Hindutva is a vehicle for social development and governance. The BJP has believed since 1989 that Hindutva is an ideology that promotes Hindu values as the foundation and culture of Indian society (Deutsch Welle 2022). During Modi's reign, Hindutva encouraged and promoted Brahmanism at the expense of people from lower castes (Puniyani 2021).

This Brahmanism policy negatively impacts Dalits, especially Dalit women, because this policy legalizes the killing of Dalit women. This is explicitly affirmed through the view that killing Dalit women is a minor offense for the Brahmins because it has the same meaning as killing an animal (Forum 2007). This discriminatory Brahmanism policy has led to cases of harassment, murder, or acts of violence faced by Dalit women not being registered in the First Information Report (FIR). Dalits dare not report acts of violence to the police for fear of retaliation from upper caste groups and intimidation from the police. The police are also known to abuse their authority and have dealt with upper castes (CNN 2014).

Language Aspect

Galtung argues that language can be an instrument in cultural violence when language is used to discriminate or prejudice against a particular group through spoken words. In this case, language becomes a driving factor in cultural violence (Galtung 1990).

Cultural violence experienced by Dalit women in the aspect of language occurs because the language used by the Dalit caste differs

from the language used by castes considered higher. Although some languages are classified as the same, their pronunciation is done differently. Dalits are prohibited from learning and speaking Sanskrit on the grounds that it is the exclusive property of Brahmin education and is the language used in the writing of the Vedic scriptures. This has led to Dalit women being considered inferior and incompatible with the teachings of truth because they cannot read the Vedas. This has been going on for a long time, but the Modi government has done nothing to change this (Kaushalya 2015).

Aspects of Empirical Science

In the aspect of empirical science, Galtung explains that economic doctrine functions as a justification for a rule, so it is part of cultural violence that is implicitly buried in the economic aspect. This happens because the limited sources of economic production make it difficult for economic resources and subsequently lead to economic inequality (Galtung 1990).

Cultural violence in the aspect of empirical science faced by Dalit women during the Modi government was shown in 2016-2017, along with the rampant news related to suppressing the population explosion. In this case, the Modi government is trying to suppress the population explosion by making a policy that is predicted to be a solution to the problem. A dense population certainly limits economic resources because the need for these resources is large (Wilson 2018).

The Modi government assumes that the offspring of the poor will hinder India's economic growth. This assumption consequently encouraged the government to mass sterilize people with low income to control population growth in India. The mass sterilization policy carried out on poor women also includes the practice of sterilizing women from Dalit groups (Wilson 2018).

Aspects of Cosmology

Based on Galtung's explanation of the cosmological aspects of cultural violence, cosmology is designed to store basic assumptions about reality. In this case, the cultural aspects that Galtung has

explained can be seen from the origin of the culture. Cosmology is interpreted as a concept to look further into reality and determine that something usually happens and naturally (Galtung 1990).

In the case of cultural violence against Dalit women in India, the cosmological aspect emphasizes that stereotypes of Dalit women as sexual objects and patriarchal culture are still very much attached, especially with Dalit communities that still put Dalit women's position below men. This continued until the Modi government. Therefore, when Dalit men make mistakes, Dalit women become the betting material for torture because the position of Dalit women is below men (Kang 2019).

This is the influence of the Modi government era, which still perpetuates the source of Hindu law known as *Manusmriti*. The *Manusmriti* explains that the position of women and men is differentiated and justifies the role of Dalit women as mere sexual objects. This, in turn, creates a gap between men and women, with men being in a superior position. In contrast, Dalit women are marginalized because they are only considered as sexual objects. Dalit women are restricted in making decisions related to the household and are even tortured by their partners when they do not give birth to sons and are considered unfilial to their partners. The Modi government firmly upholds the values of *Manusmriti* (Varma 2017). This causes gender inequality that takes place in India to be even more inherent, especially for Dalit women, who are considered second-class citizens with a position below men.

Conclusions

Violence against Dalit women in India dates long before the Modi government and has been perpetuated throughout several periods of government until now. Violence against Dalit women in India continued in the same way until the Modi government, the current prime minister of India. The violence that occurred in this era is cultural in nature. Based on the result of the research in this article, it can be concluded that cultural violence against Indian Dalit women during the Modi era can be explained by using the concept of cultural violence introduced by Galtung in his writing

entitled “Cultural Violence”. There are five aspects that result in cultural violence against Dalit women, namely aspects of religion, ideology, language, empirical science, and cosmology.

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