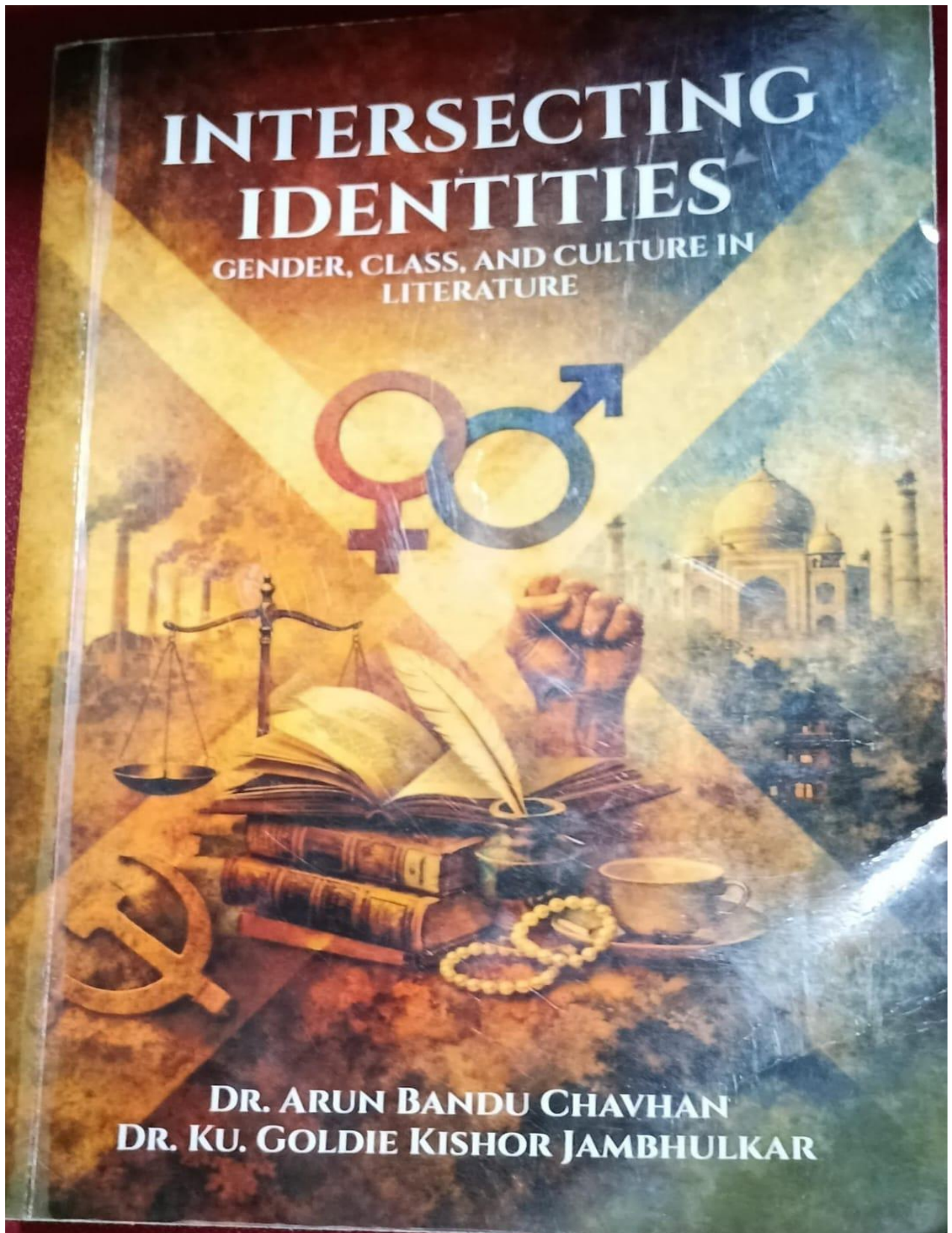


# INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

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GENDER, CLASS, AND CULTURE IN LITERATURE



DR. ARUN BANDU CHAVHAN  
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## 31. Dalit Feminism And Literary Expression - Dr. Avani Kanakia

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### Abstract:

This paper explores how Dalit feminist writers in India employ literary expression including autobiographies, poetry, and life writing to articulate intersectional experiences of caste, class, and gender oppression and foster a politics of resistance and self-definition. Rooted in the concept of “self-stories” or “testimonios,” such narratives are not mere literary ornamentation but serve as powerful tools for social activism and identity assertion. Foundational life narratives such as Shantabai Kamble’s *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*, Baby Kamble’s *Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke)*, and Janabai Kachru Girhe’s *Marankala* stand out as seminal works that document grassroots realities of Dalit women’s lives—ranging from educational exclusion to community resistance and forced labor. These works challenge dominant tropes by foregrounding the lived subjectivity of Dalit women rather than portraying them as silent victims. Dalit women’s poetry and autobiographical forms demonstrate a deliberate rejection of erasure. They disrupt mainstream feminist and Dalit literary movements through their powerful firsthand accounts. The emergence of platforms like *Samvadini–Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch*, formed under the Mahila Sansad initiative, marked a turning point creating a dedicated space for Dalit women’s narratives within the broader literary and political discourse. The oral, experiential, and vernacular dimensions of this literature spanning Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, and more serve both as reclaiming cultural memory and asserting agency. As scholars note, Dalit women’s life writing transcends conventional biography; it is an embodied form of resistance, giving voice to otherwise silenced lives. Overall, Dalit feminist literary expression in India signifies a potent fusion of literature and activism. These texts are grounded in lived realities, aimed at dismantling structures of

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caste, class, and patriarchal oppression, and insist on visibility, subjectivity, and social transformation.

**Key Words:** Intersectionality, Testimonio, Resistance, Patriarchy, Casteism, Voice, Autobiography, Marginality, Liberation, Authenticity

### **Introduction:**

Dalit women in India endure a tripartite oppression caste, class, and gender positioning them at the most marginalized extreme of society. As the UN Special Rapporteur and human rights organizations attest, they constantly face violence, denial of basic rights, and systemic marginalization. For instance, Dalit women are "often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse and violence". The deeply entrenched patriarchal and caste structures render them especially vulnerable to exploitation, bonded labor, and institutional neglect, with impunity often shielding perpetrators of gendered caste violence. India's legal framework and constitutional safeguards notwithstanding, discrimination persists especially within schools, workplaces, and legal systems where Dalit women confront humiliating segregation, educational exclusion, and police or judicial apathy. Educational inequality remains particularly stark, as caste-based stigmatization in schools further disrupts Dalit girls' learning and upward mobility.

This paper explores on our **President Droupadi Murmu** is a role model India, the multifaceted experiences of Dalit women analyzing their life conditions, educational barriers, political mobilization and revolutionary voice, systemic adversities, expressions of liberation, social positioning, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, outcomes, and broader implications. By centering intersectionality especially voices from grassroots movements like All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) and cultural articulations through autobiographical and literary works this study aims to underscore both the depth of Dalit women's marginalization and their emerging resistance and resilience.

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### Lived Realities: Social Exclusion & Patriarchy

Dalit women occupy the most marginalized positions within India's social hierarchy, suffering from a compounded, "twice-over" oppression first under the Brahminical caste structure and second through patriarchal domination, including from within their own communities. Guru (1995) articulates this dual subjugation: societal stigma from caste-based hierarchy and control of their mobility, sexuality, and labor by Dalit men reflecting an internalized patriarchal order.

Violence and exploitation are commonplace, from routine domestic abuse to systematic sexual violence as a tool for caste control. SAGE-published work underscores Brahminical patriarchy's use of sexual violence to reinforce social domination, pointing to normalized impunity and institutional silence. Moreover, Dalit women are subjected to ritualized forms of aggression—historical practices like the Devadasi system and “Chira” (ritualistic hymen-breaking by upper-caste men) continue to represent covert mechanisms of exploitation.

Cultural practices such as "Dola pratha" similarly entrench the sexual domination of Dalit women, granting landlords involuntary access to new brides and thus institutionalizing their vulnerability. Structural oppression also manifests in everyday labor and economic exploitation: Dalit women are relegated to low-wage, menial labor without access to land or fair compensation. When they attempt to assert rights, upper-caste forces often respond with brutality to maintain caste hierarchies.

Institutional neglect and policy failures further compound these vulnerabilities. The pervasive lack of basic infrastructure in Dalit-majority areas is emblematic of systemic neglect: for example, around 800 Dalit families in Uttarakhand have lived decades without electricity, healthcare, or education, despite court orders demanding government action. Government-provided support systems frequently underperform: One-Stop Centres for survivors are

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underfunded, understaffed, or effectively non-functional; helplines remain unpaid or defunct, and response to crises is often lethargic or insincere

These layers of oppression structural, cultural, and institutional converge to entrench Dalit women's marginalization. They highlight the urgent need for policies that meaningfully address intersectional vulnerabilities, uphold justice, and dismantle mechanisms of caste-patriarchy.

### **Literacy, Education & Class Barriers**

Dalit women in India continue to face significant educational disparities, reflecting the intersection of caste, gender, and class. While literacy rates among Dalit women have improved—from 41.9% in 2001 to 56.5% in 2011—their rates remain below the national average of 64.6% and significantly lower than those of upper-caste women.

Educational enrollment among Dalit women drops sharply at successive levels. For instance, while 15.6% of Dalit women enroll in higher education, the figure for dominant caste women is 35.2%. This disparity is attributed to systemic discrimination within schools, including segregation, denial of access to basic facilities like separate water sources, and teacher biases, leading to high dropout rates.

Additionally, political and social constraints, such as familial pressures and early marriage, further curtail Dalit girls' education. These barriers not only hinder their academic progress but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policy interventions that promote inclusive education, challenge caste-based discrimination, and empower Dalit women through targeted support and resources.

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## Revolution & Voices of Liberation

Dalit women in India have long been subjected to systemic oppression, but grassroots movements and organizations are amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights. The All-India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), established in 2006 by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), serves as a platform for Dalit women to raise their voices for justice. AIDMAM focuses on addressing violence against Dalit women, promoting leadership development, and strengthening their participation in local governance.

Similarly, the Ambedkarite Social Café in New Delhi, initiated by the Global Campaign for Dalit Women (GCDW), provides a transformative space for young women and girls from marginalized communities. Grounded in anti-caste and feminist principles, the café offers workshops on leadership, digital media literacy, and Ambedkarite education, fostering self-confidence and community engagement.

These initiatives reflect a broader movement of liberation, where Dalit women are reclaiming their narratives and asserting their rights. Through education, advocacy, and community support, they are challenging the entrenched systems of caste and patriarchy, paving the way for a more inclusive and just society.

## Societal Position & Weightage

Dalit women in India continue to occupy a marginalized position in both social and economic spheres, facing systemic barriers that hinder their advancement. Despite legal provisions and affirmative action policies, caste-based discrimination remains pervasive, affecting their access to education, employment, and leadership roles.

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### **Economic Disparities**

The poverty rate among Dalits is approximately 31.1%, significantly higher than the national average of 21.2%. This economic marginalization is compounded by lower literacy rates and higher unemployment among Dalit women compared to the general population. These disparities are reflective of deep-seated caste and gender biases that limit their opportunities for economic advancement.

### **Underrepresentation in Leadership**

In the corporate sector, Dalit women are notably underrepresented in leadership positions. A study by Avtar found that women occupy only 19% of C-suite roles in India, with caste-based discrimination further limiting opportunities for Dalit women. This underrepresentation persists despite evidence linking gender diversity to improved business performance.

### **Employment & Entrepreneurship**

Dalit women's participation in the workforce remains limited and often precarious. According to data from Maktoob Media and Round Table India, only about 24% of Scheduled Caste (SC) women are employed across various sectors, starkly contrasted by 72% employment among SC men. The employment available to Dalit women is predominantly menial, informal, and lacks job security or benefits, reinforcing their economic vulnerability. Many are engaged in daily wage labor, agricultural work, or domestic help, typically under exploitative conditions with little social protection.

In corporate India, Dalit women face significant challenges rooted in systemic caste and gender biases. Workplace environments are often hostile or indifferent, with a glaring absence of Dalit women in leadership or managerial roles serving as role models. Corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies tend to be caste-blind, failing to address the nuanced barriers Dalit women

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encounter. Stereotyping and exclusionary social norms further isolate them, limiting career growth and perpetuating feelings of alienation.

Entrepreneurship presents both opportunities and obstacles for Dalit women. While caste-based discrimination persists, limiting access to credit, markets, and social networks, government schemes aim to encourage Dalit micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) play a pivotal role by providing training, facilitating networking, and organizing trade fairs to boost Dalit-owned businesses.

Success stories, such as Sushma Nandeshwar's microfinance initiative supporting backward caste women entrepreneurs, exemplify the potential for economic empowerment through entrepreneurship. Yet, an Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIM-B) study reveals Dalit business owners face an approximate 16% income gap compared to their counterparts, even after adjusting for variables like education and business size. This gap underscores persistent structural inequities and market barriers.

Despite challenges, younger generations of Dalit women increasingly enter white-collar professions, including IT, education, and government jobs, signaling a slow but steady narrowing of caste-based occupational disparities. This trend highlights the importance of education and skill development in improving Dalit women's economic prospects and social status. While Dalit women continue to grapple with entrenched barriers in employment and entrepreneurship, concerted efforts by governmental bodies, grassroots organizations, and individual pioneers provide pathways for greater inclusion and empowerment. Continued policy focus on intersectional discrimination, financial inclusion, and targeted support is essential to bridge persistent gaps and unlock the full potential of Dalit women in India's economy.

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### President Droupadi Murmu's contributions to social empowerment of Dalit Women:

**Inclusive Banking & Economic Access:** At a recent event in Chennai, President Murmu advocated for **inclusive banking**, urging financial institutions to extend services to marginalized groups, including daily wage earners categories heavily populated by Dalit women. She highlighted the importance of digital finance, financial literacy, and government programs like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana that foster inclusion.

- **Visibility via Awards:** Her role in presenting the **Nari Shakti Puraskar** (Women's Empowerment Awards) aligns with efforts to recognize and celebrate women achievers across all communities, including Dalit women thus offering them visibility and encouragement.

### ➤ The progress of Dalit women in various areas over the past five years, based on available data:

| Area                               | 2018                 | 2023                 | Progress   |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--|
| <b>Literacy Rate</b>               | ~41.9% (2001 Census) | ~56.5% (2011 Census) | Significant improvement, though still below national average (~64.6%)  |
| <b>Higher Education Enrollment</b> | 21.02 lakh (2014-15) | 31.71 lakh (2021-22) | 51% increase, reflecting positive trends in access to higher education |

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| Area                                  | 2018   | 2023   | Progress  |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>Employment Rate</b>                | ~24% employed across sectors                           | Data not specified; however, overall female labor force participation increased to 41.7% in 2023-24                                      | Increase in female labor force participation; specific data for Dalit women not available |
| <b>Entrepreneurship</b>               | Limited data available                                 | Notable examples include Sushma Nandeshwar's microfinance company providing employment to over 500 women                                 | Growth in entrepreneurship, though challenges like caste-based discrimination persist     |
| <b>Social Exclusion</b>               | High levels of caste-based discrimination and violence | Continued challenges; however, initiatives like the Ambedkarite Social Café in New Delhi provide safe spaces and support for Dalit girls | Ongoing efforts to combat social exclusion and promote inclusion                          |
| <b>Policy &amp; Legal Protections</b> | Legal protections exist but enforcement                | Continued need for effective enforcement; grassroots organizations play  | Need for strengthened enforcement of existing policies                                    |

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| Area | 2018                | 2023                                    | Progress |
|------|---------------------|---|----------|
|      | remains a challenge | pivotal roles in justice and leadership |          |

## ➤ Key Observations:

- **Education:** There's been a notable increase in higher education enrollment among Dalit women, reflecting positive trends in access to education.
- **Employment:** While overall female labor force participation has increased, specific data for Dalit women is limited, indicating a need for more targeted research.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Examples like Sushma Nandeshwar's initiative highlight the potential for entrepreneurship, though challenges such as caste-based discrimination persist.
- **Social Exclusion:** Initiatives like the Ambedkarite Social Café demonstrate efforts to combat social exclusion and promote inclusion.
- **Policy & Legal Protections:** There's a continued need for effective enforcement of existing legal protections to ensure justice and leadership for Dalit women.

These observations underscore the progress made in certain areas, while also highlighting the ongoing challenges that Dalit women face. Continued efforts are essential to address these challenges and promote equity and inclusion.

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### Outcomes & Impacts

Dalit women in India have made significant strides in education, activism, and economic empowerment, leading to increased visibility and social change.

### Empowerment & Visibility

Literary works like Janabai Kachru Girhe's *Marankala* (1992) have been instrumental in shedding light on the struggles of Dalit women, particularly those from nomadic communities. Girhe's autobiography details her experiences with caste discrimination and the challenges of pursuing education, providing a voice to marginalized women. Similarly, Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) offers insights into the life of a Dalit woman, highlighting issues of caste-based oppression and gender discrimination. These narratives not only document personal histories but also contribute to the broader discourse on social justice and equality.

### Improved Literacy & Awareness

Initiatives like the Ambedkarite Social Café in New Delhi exemplify grassroots efforts to empower Dalit girls through education and skill development. Founded by Anju Singh in 2022, the café provides a safe space for marginalized girls, offering programs in English, computer training, arts, and leadership, all grounded in anti-caste and feminist values. This initiative has positively impacted the participants by building their confidence, identity, and leadership skills, fostering a sense of community and resilience.

### Policy & Institutional Shifts

While legal protections for Dalit women exist, effective enforcement remains a challenge. Grassroots organizations play a pivotal role in advocating for justice and leadership. For instance, Varsha Deshpande, founder of the Dalit Mahila Vikas Mandal, has been recognized with the 2025 United Nations Population Award for her work in empowering grassroots women through vocational training, financial independence, and access to essential services. Her

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efforts have contributed to policy changes and increased awareness of the issues faced by Dalit women.

### **Economic Upliftment**

Entrepreneurship and employment initiatives have enabled Dalit women to achieve a degree of economic self-reliance. Programs like the Skill Impact Bond (SIB) have trained thousands of youths, with a significant percentage being women, leading to improved job retention and financial independence. Additionally, organizations such as We Act have supported rural women entrepreneurs by providing market linkages, financial education, and digital literacy, thereby enhancing their business prospects.

The combined efforts of literature, grassroots activism, policy advocacy, and economic initiatives have contributed to the empowerment of Dalit women in India. While challenges persist, these developments signify a positive shift towards greater inclusion and equality.

### **Conclusion**

Dalit women in India navigate a complex landscape of caste, class, and gender-based oppression. Despite these challenges, they continue to resist and reshape their destinies through literacy, activism, entrepreneurship, and cultural expression. Their resilience is evident in grassroots movements, literary works, and emerging economic participation. However, systemic barriers persist, limiting their access to education, economic mobility, and justice.

Recent initiatives, such as the Dr. Ambedkar Scholarship Scheme in Delhi, aim to support Dalit students pursuing higher education abroad, covering expenses like tuition, travel, and living costs. Additionally, campaigns like 'Sankalp' in Noida and Ghaziabad focus on raising awareness about women's health, safety, and rights, providing workshops and outreach sessions to educate

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women and girls. These efforts signify a growing recognition of the need to address the unique challenges faced by Dalit women.

However, challenges remain. A recent Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report highlighted that over 40 government departments in Rajasthan failed to utilize ₹1,100 crore allocated for gender budgeting schemes in the financial year 2023-24, leading to a lack of access to vital programs for numerous women and girls.

### ➤ Recommendations

To further empower Dalit women and ensure sustainable progress:

1. **Enhance Intersectional DEI Policies:** Implement policies that address the overlapping discriminations of caste, class, and gender, ensuring inclusive representation and opportunities.
2. **Enforce Educational Inclusion:** Strengthen the implementation of educational schemes, ensuring that allocated funds are utilized effectively to promote Dalit women's education.
3. **Expand Support for Entrepreneurs:** Provide targeted financial and network support to Dalit women entrepreneurs, facilitating access to credit, markets, and mentorship.
4. **Strengthen Grassroots Alliances:** Collaborate with grassroots organizations to ensure that policies and programs are responsive to the needs of Dalit women.
5. **Amplify Dalit Women's Narratives:** Promote and support platforms that highlight the stories and achievements of Dalit women, fostering a more inclusive public discourse.

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By addressing these areas, India can move closer to realizing the vision of equality and justice for all its citizens, ensuring that Dalit women are no longer marginalized but are active contributors to the nation's progress.

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