



# The Significance of Community Empowerment Portrayed through Ketan Mehta's *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*

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**Abstract.** The needs and wants of the people have been increasing at an alarming rate. For the overall development of society and individuals, people must actively participate in the endeavor for community empowerment. It creates healthy relations and also emphasizes the priorities of work to be done. The article aims to show the significance of teamwork or collective efforts of individuals in achieving Community development. *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*, a biopic by Ketan Mehta is taken as a primary source in elucidating the concept. The movie voices the concerns of the Dalit communities and aims at their reformation. It is uplifting not just for the Dalit communities but a lesson to all the members of society. The movie showcases the power of an individual to resolve the needs of the community and ultimately inspire the whole village as a unit to engage in the same.

**Keywords:** Environment, Nature, Community, Empowerment, Welfare, Solidarity.

## 1 Introduction

The indigenous tribal people of India are known for dwelling amid nature. The trees, mountains, and rivers are the sole sources of their livelihood. A major part of people living in industrial towns and cities are waking up to the need to protect and sustain the environment and ecosystem, through individual and collective efforts, campaigns etc. However, these indigenous tribes are untouched by the so-called civilisation and have been conscious of it since the beginning. To them, Nature is not an occasional visit, but a part of their daily lives. It is their food, clothing, and shelter, worshipped and protected at all costs. They have protested against taking over their land to build industries. The thought that environmental crisis only affects the tribal regions is a misconception. The air we breathe, and the food we eat are the same for everyone. While their love and dependence on Nature is known to everyone, a man chooses to go against the circumstances.

Dashrath Manjhi, an ordinary man from Gehlaur village in eastern Bihar, broke a mountain for the sake of his wife. He embodies a man who can move mountains for love. The co-existence of human beings, flora, and fauna constitutes an ecosystem. The movie *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*

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is based on the story of Dashrath Manjhi, a poor labourer belonging to the community of Musahar, one of the lower castes who catch and feed on rats for their living and are considered to be untouchables by society. The movie depicts that his wife, who was pregnant at that time, slips and falls from a mountain cliff, succumbs to injuries, and dies due to the delay in reaching the hospital. Broken with loss and anger, Manjhi single-handedly takes the initiative to break the mountain into pieces and fights through the taunts of the villagers as well as the schemes of the people in power, enduring the hardships of hunger, weather, physical pain, and injuries. Over the years, his madness is recognized by the villagers and they extend their solidarity by breaking the mountain together. They take a stand in favour of Manjhi when the police arrest him for tampering with the laws of nature without permission. The eccentricity which started as a form of revenge became a vision for a better future. Breaking the mountain and creating a road would mean having better access to schools, hospitals, and other services. The act was not to fuel his ego but to ensure that nobody else meets the same fate as his own. People must be well acquainted with the fable where an old man asks his sons to break a bundle of sticks and they fail to do so. This story gives us the life lesson that “United we stand, divided we fall.” What he achieved in years could have been achieved in less time, with the awareness, understanding, cooperation, and hard work of people. When people collectively put in their efforts, they reap the benefits together. This is an example of Community Empowerment. As citizens of a democratic society, people must be aware of the government's initiatives in their favour. However, due to some people exerting their influence over the naivete of the public, their community development becomes too good to be true. This is only possible if they become aware of their rights and collectively voice out against the injustices meted out to them. As depicted in the movie, the event is set against the backdrop of the post-independence era. It was also when ‘untouchability’ which goes against the Right to Equality was abolished. However, the double standards of the society as depicted in the movie is when the protagonist hugs the minister and his son and is thrashed in return. Moreover, in another scene, the minister's son is seen misbehaving with the so-called ‘untouchable’ wife of Dashrath. Power play among the classes, corruption, and mismanagement of funds are some of the barriers that hinder the overall development of society. There are several examples where rural communities have played a significant role in the empowerment of the environment. They are the places where communal interdependence and empowerment are practised effectively.

The indigenous tribes in India play a crucial role in preserving their art and the environment. Bringing people to work together makes them aware of their social duties, and rights and makes them realise their strengths and weaknesses. Due to the individual and isolated life in urban areas, the need for empowerment and preservation and sustainability of resources is not realised. While many urban areas are being facilitated with shopping malls, parks, and other places of amusement, many rural areas do not even have access to proper schools and hospitals. But the purpose is not to sit and wait for the government to take action, but to bring fellow people together and contribute in whatever means it is possible. The movie not only showcases the hard

work, diligence, and perseverance of the protagonist but also confronts us with the poor standard of living, discrimination, and propaganda of the political parties.

## 2 Literature Review

An article in *Researchgate* titled “The Role of Communities in Environmental Decisions: Communities Speaking for Themselves” by Robert W Collin and Robin Collin highlights the importance of the involvement of communities in overall development. It mentions the urban communities grappling with the issues of economic development, community development, and racial politics. It also indicates that most communities withdraw from government processes like environmental preservation and sustainability. They are then regulated by administrative agencies who take their advantage for private gains. It also discusses the ‘Right to Know’ laws, which report the problems of communities such as large amounts of emissions of chemical waste into soil, air, and water, etc. However, their job is only to report and not resolve their problems. Also, most small-scale problems go unreported which can become huge concerns over time.

Another article in Springer titled “Indigenous Participation and Incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives in Global Environmental Governance Forums: A Systematic Review(2021) by Melanie Zurba and Anastasia Papadopoulos discusses the significance of Global Environmental Governance (GEG) forums in implementing important frameworks such as ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) and Convention on Biological Diversities(CBDs) etc. The decisions regarding policy-making in the areas need to be addressed at the local or grassroots level i.e. after having discussions with the indigenous communities themselves. However, many a time, due to the intervention of the signatory states, they are largely marginalised from doing so. They are unable to fulfill their more meaningful duties that reflect their art and culture. Nevertheless, their participation in matters of Environmental governance is being acknowledged as necessary for indigenous rights. The article observes a growing awareness among the communities which also contributes to social benefits such as getting employment and enhanced self-esteem.

An article in the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts(IJCRT) titled Manjhi ‘The Mountain Man’ - A Confluence Of Isms(2023) by Dr Archana Jaiswal analyses the movie by Ketan Mehta as a passionate story of love and sacrifice on the surface level but with the largely concerned with the intersectionality of several isms such as communalism, secularism, feminism, casteism etc. The article presents a pathetic picture of the village Gehlaur as a place knee-deep in abject poverty, sickness, illiteracy and caste-based discrimination and exploitation. As observed in the article, the role of the protagonist Dashrath Manjhi essayed by Nawazuddin Siddiqui and his battle against the mountain also portrays a symbolic one against the upper-class landlords. His undying spirit earns him victory over the mountain as well as over the evils of casteism, feudalism, illiteracy and backwardness.

An article in *Towards Excellence, An Indexed Refereed Journal of Higher Education*, titled “Vignetting Dalit Heroism Through a Biopic; Manjhi - The Mountain Man” by Sameer N. Solanki discusses the biopic by Ketan Mehta as a celebration of the first Dalit hero. It is a recent perspective explored in the genre of biopics. The story of Dashrath Manjhi is an inspiration to break the shackles of caste and gender-based discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty and strive towards the reformation of the village. His vengeance for breaking the mountain initially mocked by the villagers, is finally lauded and supported. The protagonist emerges as the torch-bearer of the Dalit Community. Solanki in his article, has depicted Manjhi as a Messiah and a representative of ordinary people, especially those belonging to the Dalit communities, adding that it is also important that the energy, or in this case, the vengeance is channelised in the right direction, instead of resorting to Maoist violence the way one of his friends does.

### 3 Objectives

- To portray Community Empowerment and welfare as a goal achievable through the cooperation and efforts of the people cohabiting in the place.
- To stand against social evils like caste and gender-based discrimination, exploitation, corruption, and violence like the protagonist.
- To delve into the rights of people for the cause of holistic development of communities through the character sketch of Dashrath Manjhi.
- To emphasise the struggle and welfare of Indigenous communities through real-life cases.

### 4 Analysis

The indigenous tribes in several parts of India like Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chattisgarh have been living as a community in the lap of nature for ages. Living as a community not only inculcates the values of unity and interdependence but is also productive in setting and achieving welfare goals. To reap the benefits of a better life, it is important that every individual participates and contributes through their words and actions. Apart from the movie that has been taken into consideration, there have been many glorious occasions where people have shown the power of Community efforts and empowerment. Birsa Munda, a freedom fighter from the Munda tribe group in Ranchi, is an eminent figure in the Indian freedom struggle for independence. He united the tribal people of Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar against the unlawful seizure of the land by British officials. If not for him, the tribal people of the Bihar-Jharkhand belt would have been rendered poor and homeless. Haldhar Nag, a Sambalpuri tribal poet and writer, honoured with

the Padma Shri is called 'Lok Kabi Ratna' for his celebration of common aspects of life in his poems. He is the embodiment of Simple Living and High thinking. His poems are inspired by his simple life in nature, and his thoughtful connection with nature and society is evident in his poems like 'Dhodo Bargach' or 'The Old Banyan Tree'. His poems are written in the Kosali language, which is widely spoken in Western Odisha but marginally expressed. His simplicity and grounded attitude make him a son of the soil and a true representative of the people of Odisha. A great example of Community Empowerment is brought forth by the people of Piplantri, a village in Rajasthan, where 111 saplings are planted on the birth of a girl child. The villagers including the child's parents keep aside a sum of money as a savings deposit to be used later for her education or marriage. With this, the parents also sign an affidavit ensuring that the girl cannot be married off before she attains the age of eighteen. The plants too are cared for and protected like their own children. This initiative was taken by the village head Shyam Sundar Paliwal, who lost his daughter Kiran at a young age due to dehydration. This is a progressive step in the state of Rajasthan, which is infamously known for its dry climate, and water scarcity as well as for not valuing their daughters and marrying them off as child brides. It is also a matter of pride that the cleanest village in Asia is Mawlynnog, situated in Meghalaya, India. It is mainly inhabited by the Khasi tribes. Everyone in the community, from children to senior citizens holds themselves responsible for keeping their place clean and hygienic. It also boasts of women empowerment and a 100 percent literacy rate. Despite this fact, the people of the Northeast are marginalised in their own country. They are treated like foreigners in their own country which creates an identity crisis in them. Several organisations, as well as individuals, also team up voluntarily to empower themselves through work such as sanitation of neighbourhoods, providing food and other amenities for slum-dwellers, tree plantations, rescue teams, and foster care for stray animals etc.

## 5 Conclusion

As the movie *Manjhi: The Mountain Man* is based on a true story, it inspires people to be self-sufficient and take the lead in empowering themselves. But since everyone can't be a leader, they can at least follow those who take initiative for the development of a society. As members of a village, town and city, they have some basic responsibility towards the place. It cannot take place until one of them takes the initiative and others join in and extend their support. Before the government takes notice, matters such as sanitation, minimisation of pollution, and planting of trees should be taken care of at the grassroots level.

## 6 Limitations

There may be several books, articles, movies, and documentaries on the theme of environmental preservation and sustainability. However, the article takes into consideration only one movie. It mainly focuses on the aspect of Community Empowerment depicted through the movie and is

mentioned briefly through other real-life examples. It does not delve into the other social messages that can be imparted through the movie.

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