

# A sincere effort but not without limitations

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*Swades (Our Country)*, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker

*Swades (Our Country)*, English-international title) is Ashutosh Gowariker's follow-up to the hugely successful *Lagaan*, a film appreciated for its novel idea of basing a story on the game of cricket, set in late nineteenth-early 20th century colonial India. While not attempting an entirely serious portrayal of the material and cultural context of the time, *Lagaan* probably scored with audiences because it represented a refreshing change from the usual kitsch of family dramas, revenge plots or the now increasingly (and already something you could be refreshed from) pervasive genre of "skin flicks."

Set in contemporary times, *Swades* looks at the issues of the Indian Diaspora, the return to one's roots, a feeling of something lacking (perhaps of traditional bonds or a sense of community) in the fragmented (or at least non-Indian) American society.

The story unfolds with Mohan Bhargava (Shah Rukh Khan) working on a global precipitation-measurement system at NASA in the US. Articulate in his defense of the need for a mechanism to predict rainfall patterns in the face of imminent global water shortages, and applauded for this defense, Mohan appears disturbed in his moment of triumph. India is featured on the map of the world as one of the locations for collecting data.

Mohan's thoughts have drifted back to India, his homeland, to Kaveri Amma, the woman who was his *dai* (nanny) and looked after him when he was growing up. Mohan feels he has become selfish in his drive for personal achievement and left his roots behind, not having maintained contact with Kaveri Amma since she went back to the village.

Thinking of her, Mohan takes three weeks' leave and returns to India. Knowing he will find it difficult adjusting to life in the village, Mohan meets a friend in the city and rents a trailer/caravan. He heads to the village, coincidentally meeting Geeta (his friend from childhood and eventual love interest—who now teaches in the village) along the way.

Mohan reaches the village and has a tearful reunion with Kaveri Amma. One senses that she will be central to the story. However, she is given little opportunity to do so and receives summary treatment as the passive caregiver who does become the catalyst, but in a largely inert fashion. At another level, such treatment creates the anticipation that Mohan and the story will go beyond his personal motivations and address the larger

realities. This anticipation too is disappointed—leaving us wondering again about the role of Kaveri Amma. She also brought up Geeta, another member of our "selfish" generation, who went beyond personal ambition to return to her village and teach.

Mohan sets about making the acquaintance of some of the "characters" in the village: the postman with a penchant for wrestling; the cook who dreams of a *dhaba* (roadside restaurant) on the freeway in the US; the children in the village; and Geeta, who is now facing pressures from the village *panchayat* (council) to relocate her school, which occupies space disproportionate to its attendance. Geeta aims to start further classes in school so the children have the opportunity to go on to college.

Geeta and Mohan have an inconclusive debate about the problems of deprivation, the gap between the village and the city, the development of India, the role of the state, whose responsibility it all is, and who can make a difference. Their views are somewhat vague, and their perspectives remain unclear.

Mohan is faced with a village divided and backward, lacking electricity, girl children removed from school at an early age, children of untouchables not even allowed in school; a village stagnating, some hoping for change, others cynical about its possibilities, but no one doing anything about it.

Mohan emerges as this quasi-outsider (he has roots in this village after all, even though he has not been there most of his life), quasi-messiah (perhaps the outsider villagers had hoped would come and solve their problems). He argues with the *panchayat* to prevent the relocation of the school, managing (without any but the mildest resistance) to get the daughters of a progressive *panch* and, what's more, the children of an untouchable family living on the outskirts of the village integrated into the school.

In the interim, a romance blooms with Geeta, without any of the all-too-familiar song-and-dance and petty violence ("to protect, or even profess his love") routines. This is a strand Gowariker develops with restraint and "less is more" effectiveness.

Speaking generally as well, it is difficult to imagine anyone easily accusing Gowariker of frivolity or lack of seriousness. It is clear that the central theme is indeed the central theme. Though not articulated with great clarity, it is not a cheap idea

thought of near the end of the film, while the movie is simply splashed with song-and-dance numbers/visual titillation/double-meaning humour to make up time. The filmmaker's sincerity is not in doubt. His motivations, vision and politics, however, leave some questions hanging in the air.

The issue Mohan addresses and for which he eventually gives up his comfortable and successful life in the US is that of electricity. With *shramdan* (voluntary labour) from the village, he works to build a small hydroelectric power plant that will harness water and generate electricity. With some misgivings and murmurs of discontent, the village residents throw their support behind him, and they succeed. "Go light your bulb," says his boss at NASA, and the film concludes with Mohan beating the postman at a friendly game of wrestling. The prodigal has returned, the son is back to the soil and all is well with the village.

As in *Lagaan*, the director glosses over, or rather, points to and *then* glosses over, the issue of caste, and indeed a whole host of issues. Gowariker seems bothered by caste differences and issues of poverty, backwardness, underdevelopment, etc., and this disturbance urges him to touch upon these issues repeatedly in his films. Unfortunately, his politics do not afford him any viable vision or cogent ways forward. Caste is brought up, then resolved in the most passionately delivered speeches by the protagonist, simply wiping away centuries of history. Surely, things are not this simple, as perhaps a perusal of newspapers every month for reports of caste atrocities might reveal.

At a screening of *Swades* in Mumbai, I asked Gowariker about this—how he points to, then glosses over the issues of caste and religion. His response went something like this: 'I like to look at things simplistically; I am not saying remove caste, it cannot be removed—perceive the [caste] difference, but go beyond it; if I do any more, it will be a movie that is only screened in Pali Hill and Malabar Hill [two affluent neighborhoods of Mumbai], and then goes to France.'

What is one to make of this? I am not a resident of those neighborhoods, and I raised the question. Is Gowariker telling us that he does not want to make things too difficult? That "reality," unless presented simplistically, would be too difficult to digest? Well, then spare us the utopia at least.

This concern with "deprivation," or more accurately, "backwardness"—perhaps there may be an even more inclusive term for the undifferentiated reality that the filmmaker perceives—boils down to the concrete activity of bringing electricity to the village.

The new democratic plank in Indian electoral politics is that of the old issues of *roti, sadak, bijli* (food, roads, electricity), in the face of the rather embarrassing failure of the "India Shining" campaign, aimed at the middle class but transmitted across the country through television, consumed (and not digested, as the last national polls revealed at the expense of the BJP) by all those for whom India's shine is rather more dull.

Through the example of Mohan and Geeta, the movie attempts to send a message, a nationalistic call to action—even, perhaps, an exhortation to go back to the villages. It may be true that "we, the people" share so much that unites our identities, and a request for personal responsibility may be worthwhile. However, the film makes it appear that somehow this is all too easy. Oversimplification or glossing over of issues, and a liberal humanist evocation of finer sensibilities—one doubts seriously if this will create anything but an effervescent enthusiasm, dissipated soon were one to actually act on these impulses. Many may expect things to happen simply because "they have arrived." The resultant frustration may only breed cynicism, and even eventually blaming the victim. Gowariker's film has indeed inspired some people to return (16 Indians living abroad have e-mailed him to let him know that they are returning to India), and he must be congratulated for such impact. But what exactly should they come back and *do*? One only hopes those who have returned don't turn to him in disillusion some years hence.

The film on the whole tackles a welcome (though somewhat unclear) theme, but offers few insights. It is, however, an effort to be valued. The enthusiastic proclamation of Shahid Khan (a television personality who anchors various entertainment shows) that this film will make Gowariker's intellectual reputation as a filmmaker is ample evidence of the poverty of contemporary filmmaking even looking at such themes in mainstream cinema—essentially homophobic movies using titillation in the guise of lesbian rights and freedom of expression notwithstanding [1]. Perhaps Gowariker's success lies in staying within the mainstream, making a film many might watch—and resisting the temptation to go into the rather snobbish "art cinema" genre. Indeed, another attempt would not be entirely unwelcome.

[1] Please see *Girlfriend*, directed by Karan Razdan, released 2004.



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