

Re-Examining the Critical Analysis of Indian Society and the Caste System in *Swades: We, the People* (2004)

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For far too long, Ashutosh Gowariker's *Swades* (2004) has maintained its status as an Indian cinema cult classic. It is a film about a non-resident Indian (NRI) from the USA who visits India to reconnect with his foster nanny. Through his visit, he becomes deeply involved in the socioeconomic issues of the village of Charanpur and ultimately decides to return and settle there. It owes its high status to several features but primarily to its frank depiction and criticism of certain ills of Indian society.

Those ills persist to this day, and in light of this, it is pertinent that *Swades'* status and reputation be re-examined. Whilst Gowariker's film was certainly ahead of its time, not recognising its limitations would be both a disservice to the aim of progressing Hindi cinema as well as to the very real issues that the film delves into. Inevitably, such a conversation will expose *Swades* as deeply hesitant and trifling in its subversion and critical analysis.

To expose *Swades'* criticality as hesitant and trifling, this article will begin by presenting two crucial ways in which the film does engage in both filmic and cultural subversion. Firstly, Gowariker successfully presents a uniquely nuanced depiction of the NRI, forgoing the typical depictions. This novel conceptualisation lets the narrative critique the caste system—an endogamous system of social stratification unique to India—¹and conceives of an Indianness that can perhaps be detached from adherence to such oppressive traditions. Unfortunately, because of the large

focus on the NRI experience, Gowariker falls woefully short of providing an enduringly meaningful critique of the caste system. It stereotypes the characters of marginalised identities, something that can be seen in current Indian cinema, arguably because no lessons are learnt from *Swades*. This article concludes that there is an important message within that resonates to this day, but realising it is conditional on taking *Swades* off the pedestal on which it has been placed.

Scholarship on *Swades* and its relevant themes must be recognised for its contributions to the ongoing conversation about Hindi cinema and the various social issues which are framed within it. Kae Reynolds has recognised *Swades* for its use of servant leadership in the characterisation of the protagonist, Mohan Bhargava.² Relatedly, Amy Bhatt, Madhavi Murty, and Priti Ramamurthy critique the film for operating within a neoliberal framework in which caste (and other social justice issues) are treated merely as barriers to the final aim of economic development,³ rather than issues in and of themselves.⁴ Examination of late-1990s and early-

1 For detailed understanding of the caste system in India, it is crucial to learn from oppressed-caste voices. Some of the most notable works on the subject and experience are: BR Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (seventh edn, Verso Books 2014); Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (sixth edn, Zubaan Books 2016); and Om Prakash Valmiki, *Joothan* (third edn, Columbia University Press 2008).

2 Kae Reynolds, 'The Hindi language film *Swades: We, the People*: A different kind of journey to the east' (2013) 7(1) *The International Journal of Servant Leadership* 279.

3 Near the end of the film, Mohan leads a bottom-up electricity generation project, since the village was plagued with unreliable electricity. Making the climax an economic development project has been criticised.

4 Amy Bhatt, Madhavi Murty, and Priti Ramamurthy, 'Hegemonic Developments: The New Indian Middle Class, Gendered Subalterns, and Diasporic Returnees in the Event of Neoliberalism' (2010) 36(1) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 127 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/652916>> accessed 14 February 2021; Prem Singh, 'The Representation of the Dalit Body in Popular Hindi Cinema' (2011, unpublished) <https://www.academia.edu/25943972/The_Representation_of_the_Dalit_Body_in_Popular_Hindi_Cinema> accessed 27 March 2021.

2000s Hindi cinema suggests that *Swades* was distinct in its portrayal of NRIs and the West and lacked a cultural superiority complex. Nonetheless, the more simplistic portrayals have persisted.^{5–6} Furthermore, *Swades* is recognised for depicting oppressed-caste people as passive and in need of rescuing and recent Hindi cinema films have continued to reinforce the stereotypes of Brahminical saviour complex).^{7–8} Most scholarship critical of *Swades* relates to caste and neoliberalism, and tends to highlight similar films, rather than critiquing it in isolation.

At the outset, it is essential to outline the Indian caste system as well as the current realities of caste-based oppression. This is crucial to evaluating *Swades*' message. Caste is an endogenous system of social stratification. It has a long and complex history, but throughout various historical periods on the Indian subcontinent, caste-based stratification has endured as part of the dominant religious culture of Hinduism.⁹ Through the processes of bonded labour and or strict segregation, those labelled 'Brahmins' and other privileged castes have attained great generational wealth and power,¹⁰ and those labelled 'Dalits'¹¹ have been made to experience untouchability, violence and exclusion.¹² One's caste identity is virtually inescapable and shapes every aspect of existence.¹³

According to Rajesh Sampath, caste oppression is comparable to racial oppression to a certain extent. Police brutality, workplace discrimination, and privilege blindness are but a few violations to which oppressed-caste people are constantly subject.¹⁴ Caste has endured perhaps because of its religious roots. Hindu epics and the *Manusmriti* feature stark lessons against caste transgression.¹⁵ Eradication has been more difficult since the Modi administration professed a desire to shape India into a Hindu-*rashtra* (state), with

caste politics being redefined as acceptable and defensible to suit this agenda.¹⁶

Having outlined *Swades* and the caste system, the article can begin to examine *Swades* for its subversiveness that facilitated its frank social commentary.

To convey the depth of Gowariker's subversion in the depiction of the NRI protagonist, it is important to be aware of the socioeconomic conditions in which *Swades* enters the Indian consciousness. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Indian economy had been liberalised for over a decade, with it bringing rapid change. Huge shopping centres materialised alongside the bazaars in major cities, bringing foreign retailers into India. Migration opportunities increased tenfold post-liberalisation because of the emergence of an upwardly mobile middle class whose members took up work placements and educational opportunities abroad, particularly to the UK and USA. Whether one emigrated or not, for the middle-class, this was a time of improving living standards and a sense that all social issues have been, or will be imminently, resolved.

As Western media—from the Disney Channel to Comedy Central—began to permeate the televised landscape, Indians became keenly aware of the stark differences in lifestyle. Regardless of social class and region, they were being exposed to the superior quality of life in foreign countries, even as things were improving at home.

The yearning for a Western lifestyle of ease and prosperity began to clash horribly with a sense of patriotic pride. After all, adulation of the Occident is difficult to reconcile with a colonial past and the contemporary realities of racism that the Indian diaspora faced. The NRIs—with their theoretically split loyalties—became prime real estate for Indian cinema to play out these clashing values in vivid Technicolor.¹⁷ It would not be far-fetched to argue that an 'Indian identity' was strengthened by Bollywood in careful opposition to Western culture. At this time, many films featured overly patriotic themes. The plots follow the model of 'Indians in the Occident realised India is just so much better'. NRIs were presented in binary terms—those who 'lost touch' with their roots were villainised,¹⁸ and 'good' ones always felt alienated and yearned to be in their true home.¹⁹ Indian authenticity was measured by checking how much an NRI resisted the 'Western mindset' and maintained their *sanskaar aur parampara* (cultural norms and tradition), even though 'there is no single opinion about what these values are'.²⁰

In these vacuously patriotic times, Gowariker released *Swades*, which had all the markers of a film that would deliver on contemporary audiences' nationalistic expectations.

Except, *Swades* ignored various Bollywood cinematic tropes,²¹ and

- 5 Ravinder Kaur, 'Viewing the West through Bollywood: a celluloid Occident in the making' (2002) 11(2) Contemporary South Asia 199 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0958493022000030168>> accessed 14 February 2021.
- 6 Laya Maheshwari, 'How Bollywood stereotypes the West' (BBC Culture, 2017) <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170922-how-bollywood-stereotypes-the-west>> accessed 12 February 2021.
- 7 Vidushi, 'Cinematic Narrative: The Construction of Dalit Identity in Bollywood' in Einar Thorsen, Heather Savigny, Jenny Alexander, and Daniel Jackson (eds), *Media, Margins and Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015) 123.
- 8 Khushi Gupta, 'Stereotypes in Bollywood Cinema: Does Article 15 Reinforce the Dalit Narrative?' (2021) 13(1) Inquiries Journal 1 <<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1868>>.
- 9 Romila Thapar, *The History of India*, vol 1 (second edn, Penguin 1990) 28.
- 10 Rajorshi Das, 'My Casteism & Privileges: A Test For Upper Caste People In Academia' (*Feminism In India*, 2020) <<https://feminisminindia.com/2020/06/10/casteism-privileges-test-upper-caste-people-academia/>> accessed 14 February 2021.
- 11 Caste is hierarchical. Several groups are between Brahmins and Dalits on the caste ladder.
- 12 Das (n 10); Adam Withnall, 'Caste in India: What are Dalits and how prevalent is casteism in modern-day society?' *The Independent* (30 September 2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-caste-dalits-brahmins-hindu-society-b718984.html>> accessed 14 February 2021.
- 13 Kaur (n 5); Varghese K George, 'Caste is the constant' *The Hindu* (2016) <<https://www.thehindu.com/sunday-anchor/conversion-confusion-caste-is-the-constant/article6711442.ece>> accessed 27 March 2021.
- 14 Rajesh Sampath, 'Racial and caste oppression have many similarities' (*The Conversation*, 19 June 2015) <<https://theconversation.com/racial-and-caste-oppression-have-many-similarities-37710>> accessed 12 February 2021.
- 15 Tejas Harad, 'Why Manusmriti is the symbol of the caste system for anti-caste reformers' (*The News Minute*, 3 November 2020) <<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/why-manusmriti-symbol-caste-system-anti-caste-reformers-136809>> accessed 14 February 2021.

16 Avishek Jha, 'BJP's 2019 victory: How caste-based politics has been redefined and reinvented' (*South Asia @LSE*, 26 June 2019) <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/06/26/bjps-2019-victory-how-caste-based-politics-has-been-redefined-and-reinvented/>> accessed 14 February 2021.

17 Laya Maheshwari, 'How Bollywood stereotypes the West' (BBC Culture, 2017) <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170922-how-bollywood-stereotypes-the-west>> accessed 12 February 2021.

18 As in *Pardes* (1997).

19 As in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995).

20 Kaur (n 5) 207.

21 Song lyrics featured the messages of the story and weren't mere eye or ear candy. The romance was not the focus of the narrative, and it lasted three hours without much epic drama.

more importantly had a protagonist who turned a critical eye on India, rather the West. The sheer beauty of Mohan's character lies in his genuine critique of the Indian government (the intertemporal entity) and Indian society at large, whilst being attached to and invested in it. The film begins with Mohan deciding to visit his foster nanny—a personification of India—because he believes he has a duty to not be so detached from her. His undeniable attachment does not render him blind to the ills of Indian society, which he credibly exposes in private, and when the village elders question him.

This realistic NRI character naturally allows for more meaningful critique, and the most notable issue that Mohan condemns is the Indian caste system. Mohan repeatedly mentions caste—not just caste-based discrimination—in the list of issues that plague the country, at a time when middle-class Indians hardly interrogated their caste-based privileges at all. This would have been the first time this generation of the audience was made to confront sociopolitical issues, since themes 'concerning class/caste oppression, workers' rights ... [had] been tucked away' in the post-liberalisation Indian cinematic landscape.²²

In *Swades*, degrees of casteism are depicted through the characters. First, there is Mela Ram, an entrepreneurial chef, who is not allowed to sit in on the village elders' meetings. Then, there is Birsa, who is deeply afraid that the village school will not admit his children. Finally, there is Haridas, a severely impoverished farmer, kept poor by the refusal of the community to do business with him because he is viewed as a caste traitor for abandoning the 'prescribed' occupation.

The lack of any obvious display of physical violence or verbal abuse against these oppressed-caste characters stresses the extent to which the caste system has been normalised under the guises of peace and social harmony. Casual acceptance of caste-based segregation marks some of the film's most powerful sequences. In a scene of an outdoor cinema, all the oppressed-caste people are made to sit on the other side of the makeshift screen. After spending a day helping with the task of enrolling children to the local school alongside Mohan, Mela Ram pauses at the cinema divide, shakes Mohan's hand, and gestures to the fact that he cannot sit with the privileged-caste protagonist.

Mela Ram and the rest of his peers are forced to watch the entire film, including the title, *inverted*. The cruelty of this is emphasised by how one of *Swades*' major themes is the way in which oppressed-caste people are excluded from their right to education, embodied by Birsa's struggles. One can easily envision a village elder character remarking: 'They can't read, so how does it make a difference whether they view the film from this side or the other side?'

In depicting the normalisation of caste, Gowariker acknowledged casteism as essential to Indian society. After all, the fact that societal structures are a central feature of Indianness forces the audience to wonder what exactly they should be feeling any attachment or loyalty to. Essentially, *Swades* asks, can one conceive of an Indianness without social subjugation under the guise of *sanskaar aur parampara*?

Gowariker's answer is revealed when Mohan leaves Charanpur for the USA. It is held in the parting-gift token. It is a wooden box with compartments filled with spices essential to Indian cuisine. When back in the USA, Mohan's nostalgia for India is shown through a

montage. It features the people he met, rich farmland, traditional architecture, and finally the very spices that come from the soil. Thus, Gowariker fashioned a pathway towards an altered sense of Indian identity at a time when cinema blindly mimicked the Indian tendency to claim superiority based on adherence to centuries of religious culture. This critique is not limited to Hindu religious culture. One could question the merits of linking national identity to a specific geographical region, but the attempt to shift the focus away from vague and uncritically accepted social norms such as caste is noteworthy.

The pathway from a critical protagonist—with whom the audience must identify—to a vision of an inclusive Indian identity that has divested itself from oppressive tradition bears further examination. In fact, this examination of *Swades*' messaging will reveal that the pathway is broken, because it relies on an incomplete analysis of the Indian caste system.

Gowariker's method for creating a new Indian identity is to employ caste-blindness. An entire song—'Yeh Tara Woh Tara' ('Star Here, Star There')—is dedicated to this message, although it never uses the word 'caste'.²³ When Mohan was asked by the village elders about his own caste identifier, he simply says, 'What difference does it make?' Although this response is meant to challenge caste adherence, when viewed in conjunction with the message of caste blindness, it suggests a wilful apathy towards an issue that has lasted for centuries. Much like race blindness, caste blindness does not rectify centuries of trauma and injustice. In the aforementioned scene where Mohan displays an initiative to discard his caste identity, he is sat in front of the village elders and Mela Ram—one of the few oppressed-caste characters—is pointedly excluded from the conversation. Mohan had made no effort to have him included, which would have been far more meaningful than claiming his own indifference to caste identity.

Furthermore, merely two seconds afterwards, Mohan volunteers his caste identity and—to no surprise—he is a Brahmin. If it takes a Brahmin man to convince the other privileged caste people to not commit caste-based atrocities, has caste identity truly been challenged? For Gowariker and other filmmakers like Anubhav Sinha,²⁴ to present an outcome where caste oppression ends on the oppressor's terms cheapens the message.

The film might convince the audience that its project to display the humanity of oppressed caste people is well executed. When Mohan visits Haridas (Bachan Pachehra), Haridas narrates his story of injustice with tears in his eyes. The camera pans slowly forward as Pachehra's voice and malnourished appearance become the focal point, and the audience forgets all else. It is a deeply moving scene, undoubtedly the emotional apex of the film.

However, Haridas—like the other oppressed-caste characters—never displays any anger at his oppressors. It is Mohan who exclaims, 'This is an injustice!'. Haridas, the man subjected to the injustice, is only afforded some poetic dialogue intended to invoke the audience's pity. There is a privileged-caste saviour; the lower-caste people talk about their plight politely and eloquently with a sense of resignation,

23 Although the song does not mention caste, the film alludes to caste by playing it during the segregated outdoor cinema event scene. During the song, the makeshift screen that divided the villagers is brought down and all the children sing together about ignoring differences and truly unifying.

24 The director of *Article 15* (2019), a crime drama film about a police investigation about the disappearance of three Dalit girls. The film is inspired by several real-life incidents.

22 Kaur (n 5) 206.

never outrage; and the story itself 'does not answer questions like who created caste'.²⁵

The characterisation of Dalit people—especially as lacking in anger—reveals the oppressor's desire never to be harshly critiqued. A Dalit (and oppressed-caste) identity has been fashioned by the dominant caste to create boundaries and put conditions on Dalit liberation. In doing so, any hint of anger is classed as a digression, a reason to discredit the voice (and therefore the message) without feeling guilty. This is evident in Indian media's treatment of Mayawati, a Dalit politician and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Her rise to mainstream politics has been praised by prominent journalists for avoiding the 'abuse of the upper castes', and she was later characterised as 'raging again, on the warpath'.²⁶ It is saddening, though unsurprising, that privileged-caste people have their blindspots. This underscores the need to question and dismantle each misguided fictional representation of oppressed caste people. Lack of such examination has impoverished *Swades'* legacy. Storytellers and film-watchers continue to place it on a pedestal, and they remain nostalgic about themes that did not shake them out of their comfort zones.

To give an idea of the current state of Hindi cinema, one can consider Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*. The latest major film to depict caste-based violence, it features all the aforementioned tropes. The glaring difference is that the director does not shy away from the darker themes of sexual violence. Whilst there was more criticism of the Brahmin saviour complex, in a panel discussion on NDTV, Sinha can be seen as deflecting from the criticism. He says: 'If it's wrong to show a Brahmin, then we can re-cast with a Dalit hero, but in today's times this story is a humble beginning'.²⁷ Rahul Sonpimple, a Dalit student activist, could be seen looking unsatisfied with the director's response. It is evident that a lack of critical engagement with *Swades* has resulted in repeating patterns of casteist storytelling, employing all the tropes that damage the cause of caste eradication, and openly profiteering from uninspired narratives of caste-based oppression.

Is there hope for more grounded social commentary, which centres the voices of the oppressed? The current political climate does not provide any reassurance. The Modi administration cannot tolerate an iota of criticism) and routinely acts to subdue and threaten it.²⁸ Its primary aim (besides maintaining power) is to continue to act on a Hindu nationalist agenda. Any criticism that can be even vaguely considered an attack on Hinduism—which anti-caste storytelling would certainly be—is likely to receive strong pressure to be rescinded, if it gets published at all.

The most recent behaviour of the Modi administration—attacking public figures such as Rihanna and Greta Thunberg for their opinions on the farmer protests—has already revealed its wild and unhinged character to the world. Less known is the tendency of Bollywood personalities to act as governmental mouthpieces. This

is widely interpreted as a sign of the devastating reach and influence that the Indian government wields.²⁹

That said, creative resistance is free to take root in any space it can. In a thread on Twitter, Raghu Karnad, an Indian journalist, pointed out the historical precedent of raising awareness and forming resistance against previous Indian regimes through important institutions such as The New York Times and Western governments.³⁰ Promisingly, the most recent iteration of resistance is the 'younger generations of Indian expats and diaspora', which uses safer spaces such as social media to profess support for issues back home.³¹

However, the diasporic community is also dominated by privileged-caste people. It therefore remains important that lending a critical voice does not overshadow the ongoing efforts of oppressed-caste people to create their art and provide their critique.³² Therefore, questioning *Swades'* elevated status is a small step towards making space for better narratives, especially given that I am a part of the community that largely holds *Swades* in very high esteem.

Ultimately, after re-evaluating the film, only one message from it still resonates with me, as an NRI in 2021 looking at a fictional NRI in 2004. Just like Mohan, voices like mine need to recognise their own privilege and hold Indian institutions accountable.

25 Khushi Gupta, 'Stereotypes in Bollywood Cinema: Does *Article 15* Reinforce the Dalit Narrative?' (2021) 13(1) *Inquiries Journal* 1 <<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1868>>.

26 Bhatt, Murty, and Ramamurthy (n 4) 139–40.

27 NDTV, 'Does "Article 15" Have An Upper-Caste Gaze? Filmmaker Anubhav Sinha Responds' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uldZs7DbBfA>> accessed 14 January 2021.

28 Meenakshi Ganguly, 'Dissent is "anti-national" in Modi's India – no matter where it comes from' (*Scroll.in*, 2019) <<https://scroll.in/article/946488/dissent-is-anti-national-in-modis-india-no-matter-where-it-comes-from>> accessed 14 February 2021.

29 Geeta Pandey, 'Farmers' protest: Why did a Rihanna tweet prompt Indian backlash?' (*BBC News*, 2021) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-55931894>> accessed 14 February 2021.

30 Ironically, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the group that rallied foreign bodies and lobbied them to put pressure on Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s, is closely associated with the Modi administration and supports curbing dissent.

31 Raghu Karnad (*Twitter*, 3 February 2021) <<https://mobile.twitter.com/rkarnad/status/1356917930194202627>> accessed 14 February 2021.

32 Satyajit Amin, 'Dear Indian Diaspora, We Need to Talk About Caste' (*Varsity*, 2020) <<https://www.varsity.co.uk/opinion/19634>> accessed 27 March 2021.