*Swades* film review by Reviewed by: [**Vijay Venkataramanan**](http://www.planetbollywood.com/feedback.php?Recipient=PBStaff&Subject=Review%20of%20Swades) Reviewer's Rating: **9** out of **10**

*“There are entertaining films, there are artistic films, and there are some films that are simply necessary”.* - Jack Lemmon

As India enjoys urban development, technological leaps, and the software boom, her villagers still struggle to accumulate basic needs such as education and electricity. **Swades** makes a timely plea to Indians at home and abroad. It serves as a reminder that in order for globalization and its trickle-down theory to work, initiatives also need to begin at the grassroots level. Change initiated by an individual regardless of how small it may be, is a beginning nonetheless. In the case of **Ashutosh Gowarikar**’s protagonist, Mohan Bhargava (**Shahrukh Khan**), that change emerges through a simple aim of lighting a bulb.

Mohan Bhargava, a scientist working on NASA’s Global Precipitation Measurement satellite instinctively decides to return to India to trace his childhood nanny, Kaveriamma (**Kishori Balal**). Upon tracing her down to Charanpur, a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, Mohan finds himself in a world that stands as the polar opposite to his American lifestyle: one where the residents consider themselves lucky should their kids be able to attend school till the fourth grade or should they receive a few hours of electricity a day. Within this glum paradigm, Gita (**Gayatri Joshi**) toils hard, teaching at the local school, hoping to create some sort of change for the better. She repeatedly retorts to Mohan’s criticism of the government’s inability to provide for its people by questioning his contribution to this society. Amidst this ideological conflict, Kaveriamma ponders over Mohan’s request that she go to America with him. Gita stands as the lone hindrance, refusing to let go of the lady who was also a mother figure to her. In a desperate attempt to force a solution, Kaveriamma assigns Mohan a simple task - to collect overdue rent from a poor farmer who has leased Gita’s land. The journey alters Mohan’s relationship to this world of passive people who yearn for a leader to initiate a progressive step. Mohan decides to lead these neglected people in a simple battle against disunity and dependency, with the sole aim of powering a light bulb.

After directing the epic-scaled, Academy Award nominated period drama [**Lagaan**](http://www.planetbollywood.com/Film/Lagaan/), Ashutosh Gowarikar settles for simplicity. Shahrukh Khan finally sheds off his star persona, enacting a refreshingly subtle, but powerful performance thanks to the director’s sensitive storytelling. Though he introduces his protagonist as a pragmatist, Gowarikar carefully imbibes Mohan Bhargava with the emotional capacity to act passionately within rational means. As was witnessed in [**Lagaan**](http://www.planetbollywood.com/Film/Lagaan/), Gowarikar extends that rationality and articulation to every supporting character, developing each one with the aim of influencing his protagonist’s goal. One such character, Gita inspires Mohan through her own example, to lead and create change. The serenely beautiful Gayatri Joshi makes a classy and confident debut in a strong, well-written role carrying herself with unassuming grace and poise. Humor is skillfully played with, extracted out of the village-folk’s innocence. **Dayashankar Pandey** stands out as Mela Ram, the local chef who dreams of opening *dhabas* on American freeways, but eventually helps Mohan realize that one needs to “light the lamp” in his own house before lighting up the neighbor’s.

Gowarikar’s writing is strongly focused, characterization once again, proving to be his forte. Like [**Lagaan**](http://www.planetbollywood.com/Film/Lagaan/), **Swades** too tells the story of good triumphing over evil. This time however, evil has no face but is rather equated with regressive ideology. The enemy lies within in the form of passive acceptance of injustice by those who suffer it and ignorance by those who witness it. Mohan Bhargava helps Charanpur’s villagers identify this enemy, teaching them to fight it, while at the same time, learning from them, how to fight the enemy within himself. **Javed Akhtar**’s lyrics effectively ponder over these emotions through powerful musical interludes such as *Yeh Jo Des Hai Mera* and *Pal Pal Hai Bhaari*.

Gowarikar carries forth his penchant for authenticity ably supported by **Nitin Desai**’s skilful production design. **A.R. Rahman**’s music further enhances the tone of Gowarikar’s storytelling, characteristically using vocals and classical, Indian instrumentation in the songs and the evocative score. *Swades* however, is not a flawless film. Unlike its predecessor *Lagaan*, it suffers from inconsistent pacing due to amateurish editing by **Ballu Saluja**. Surprisingly, the film also lacks *Lagaan’s* qualitative presentation and finish, largely because of **Mahesh Aney**’s average camerawork and a poor postproduction job in the sound department.

Despite the negligible technical flaws, Gowarikar succeeds as a storyteller because his script has its heart just at the right place. A simple but inspirational experience, **Swades** must be seen by every Indian, not to be educated about his or her country’s problems, but rather to be reminded about a responsibility to act and make a difference. Patriotism has a new face.

<http://www.planetbollywood.com/Film/Swades/>

**Review #2 (American Review) by Kathy Gibson of AccessBollywood** [46 Replies](http://accessbollywood.net/2013/06/11/movie-review-swades-2004/#comments)

*Swades* is one of the first Bollywood films I watched. At the time, I absolutely loved it. Hundreds of movies later, I wanted to see if it still holds up. Happily, it does.

In short, *Swades* is the story of a NASA scientist who realizes that the meaning he’s been searching for lies not in the stars but in a small village in India. It’s about belonging to a community where one can have a dramatic impact on the lives of its members. It’s shamelessly inspirational, and effectively so.

Shahrukh Khan gives what is probably my favorite of his performances as the scientist, Mohan. Wracked by guilt for having failed to visit his childhood nanny in India in the twelve years since his parents’ deaths, Mohan takes a two-week leave from his weather satellite project to find his nanny, Kaveri Amma (Kishori Balal), and bring her back to the States.

[. . . .] (I’ve omitted some plot summary here)

*Swades* is directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, who specializes in long runtimes. Yet, even at 189 minutes, the movie is so well-paced that it never feels slow. Within twelve minutes, Mohan is on his way to India. He learns of Gita’s problem with the village council at the hour mark. At two hours, he meets a destitute farmer who goes without a meal so that Mohan, his guest, may be treated according to custom, spurring Mohan to reconsider his plan to return home. New wrinkles appear in the plot at exactly the right times.

Mohan occupies an interesting position in the village. Despite his ethnic heritage and having spent his childhood in Kaveri Amma’s care, his years in America have made him an outsider. His advocacy for reform — greater access to education, especially for girls, and integration of the castes — appeals to the more liberal members of the village, but not the conservative council members. With time, Mohan becomes more of a diplomat and less of a dictator.

That process gets at the heart of *Swades*. Mohan finds his place in a community, using his powers to influence but not to force change. Mohan admits that his parents’ deaths closed him off to social opportunities in America. When he finally realizes around age thirty that he wants to belong, all of his peers have married and moved on with their lives, leaving him behind. Moving to India gives him a fresh start.

The theme of belonging is overshadowed by a nationalist tone that is sort of unnecessary, even if it was a popular movie convention of the time. Originally espousing American values like tolerance and ingenuity, Mohan falls blindly under his home country’s spell. His decision to stay is scored by the lovely but over-the-top populist song “Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera.” He tells his Indian-American co-worker at NASA, “You’ll have to come there and see things. Otherwise, you’ll never understand.”

This turn at the end undercuts Mohan’s rationale for returning to India. Rather than leaving NASA to use his skills to help his new friends and loved ones, the movie frames Mohan’s return as that of an ethnic Indian succumbing to the irresistible pull of his homeland. It’s a nice sentiment, but one that doesn’t ring especially true with what we’ve seen to that point.

That said, such patriotic sentiment is not unique to *Swades*, and it doesn’t diminish the universality of the desire for friendship, love, and a place to belong. Thanks to a terrific soundtrack by A. R. Rahman, touching performances, and a great screenplay — contributed to by a young Ayan Mukerji, who went on to direct *Wake Up Sid* and *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* — *Swades* stands the test of time. It remains one of my favorite Hindi films.

<http://accessbollywood.net/2013/06/11/movie-review-swades-2004/>

About the reviewer: I’m Kathy Gibson, an entertainment writer living in the Chicago suburbs. In 2007 and 2008, I reviewed Hindi movies for [The Naperville Sun](http://www.suburbanchicagonews.com/napervillesun/index.html). I now post my reviews at this website, exclusively. I am a member of the [Online Film Critics Society](http://www.ofcs.org/). [. . . .] I don’t speak Hindi, so I rely entirely on English subtitles to understand the dialog in Hindi films. And, as a Caucasian woman who’s lived her whole life in Illinois, I occasionally miss certain historical and cultural references particular to India. That said, I’ve rarely found that my linguistic or cultural deficiencies limit my enjoyment of Bollywood films. In my reviews, I try to judge the Hindi films I see in relation to all movies, not just other Indian films. However, I do make some allowances for the smaller budgets and different expectations for Bollywood films, as compared to most mass market fare coming out of Hollywood.

## **Review #3 Swades Movie Review - Chasing great Indian dream, 'Swades' mesmerises**

*Subhash K. Jha*, IANS  [Saturday, December 18, 2004]

|  |
| --- |
| Somewhere in a village in northern India, a train brings the troubled protagonist Mohan Bhargava chugging to a halt at a godforsaken station. A little boy runs along screaming, "Water for 25 paise." Mohan, who has never touched anything but mineral water in India, buys the water...probably contaminated but still water that belongs to his soil, his country....The life-defining moment in Ashutosh Gowariker's eagerly awaited follow-up to "Lagaan" is so sincerely sublime and so intricately poignant that it brings to mind some of the most tragic interludes on the vicissitudes of Indian poverty, as seen in Satyajit Ray's "Pather Panchali" and Bimal Roy's "Do Bigha Zameen"."Swades" is a unique experiment with grassroots realism. It is so politically correct in its propagandist message that initially you wonder if the government of India funded the director's dream.But, no, this neo-classic, conceived and designed as the great Indian journey into the heart and soul of poverty, is funded entirely by Gowariker's idealism. It's a work that's as simple, lucid and lyrical as a tune sung in repose by that minstrel who sings not because he must but because he knows no other thing.There's an enchanting intimacy to "Swades" that invites you in without trying. The plot is so obvious that you wonder why an ambitious, commercial behemoth like Gowariker would want to make a film about a young, highly successful Indian expatriate's rediscovery of his roots! Once the director sets off on this journey of self-discovery with his protagonist, he doesn't flinch from the sheer transparency of his familiar yet fascinating tale. Often in this long and finally deeply fulfilling voyage you wonder what could possibly have prompted the director to make a film that doesn't pull any punches, resorts to no gimmicks and chooses to stay supine at a time when cinema has become hysterically over the top.As Mohan takes a homesick journey from his cushy job in NASA in the US to a village near Delhi to meet up with his foster-mother (Kishori Ballal), we often finds him in situations that could eminently qualify as clichés on patriotism. But "Swades" avoids being a 3-hour-15-minute long flag of nationalism. There're hardly any hysterical highs (not counting the grand moment when Mohan unleashes water-generated electricity) or looming lows in the storytelling.The format adopted by Gowariker is akin to a TV soap. Life flows effortlessly and fluently along with the multitude of characters creating an elaborate drama conveying the opposite of the two other notable NRI-returned-home films "Pardes" and "Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge" with Shah Rukh Khan in the lead. If the other two films were giddy, glamorous celebrations of patriotism, "Swades" is far more austere and comprehensive in its view of India's acute need to recognise its weaknesses and strengths and act accordingly...and urgently.Parts of the film are patently polemical. Gowariker stops the narration to let Mohan lecture the characters on why we as a country haven't been able to provide food and education at the grassroots level. The passionate dialogues by K.P. Saxena ring true even when their righteousness threatens to pitch the words from the pulpit.Gowariker isn't scared of his idealism getting the better of his cinematic impulses. It doesn't adopt any of the technical methodologies that a multimillion epic must necessarily adopt in order to spin a marketable web of eyeball-arresting images. |

<http://www.indiaglitz.com/swades-hindi-movie-review-7121.html>