THE HINDI LANGUAGE FILM SWADES: WE, THE PEOPLE

A Different Kind of Journey to the East

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> Hesitating to act because the whole vision might not be achieved, or
> because others do not yet share it, is an attitude that only hinders progress.
> —M. K. Gandhi, epigraph of Swades: We, the People

In recent decades, the film genre has gained great influence in its reach, scope, as well as economic power. Film possesses another form of power: the power to evoke emotion through visual and auditory effects. The analysis of motion picture depictions of leadership, as noted by Oliver and Reynolds (2010) and numerous other scholars of leadership education, lends itself well as a tool for conveying core values of leadership. As a scholar of leadership, it has been my privilege to study the works of Robert K. Greenleaf and other servant-leadership authors. When I learned that the International Journal of Servant-Leadership publishes film reviews, I felt compelled to make a contribution and share the story of one of my favorite movies. The colorful, surprising, and emotional world of Indian musical films is where my cinematic heart lies. In the motion picture Swades: We, the People (Gowariker, 2004) the path and purpose of servant-leadership is illustrated through an Indian-born U.S. resident, Mohan Barghava, who embarks on a journey to the East—back home to India. The protagonist's story in Swades (the original Hindi title) was inspired by the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a leader who, as Blanchard, Blanchard, and Zigarmi (2010) noted, is regarded as an archetypal servant-leader (p. 261). On a mission to find his childhood nanny and bring her home with him to Washington, D.C., Mohan finds in a rural Indian village more than his former caregiver; he finds a "called leader's" (Blanchard, Blanchard, & Zigami, p. 272) deep sense of purpose: to follow the calling to serve first and then the obligation to lead.

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BACKGROUND

The Bollywood Phenomenon

Although Hindi language films cannot necessarily be considered mainstream in six of the seven continents, they nevertheless represent an enormous cultural force. The Hindi film industry is known as Bollywood—a blend of Mumbai's colonial name, Bombay, and Hollywood. Chopra (2007) noted that Hindi language films are also produced in other cities and film production in South Asia encompasses far more just Hindi language or Indian national cinema. Bollywood, however, has remained a synecdoche for South Asian cinema and the Hindi films of India remain the major contributors (Chopra). This film industry has major significance worldwide. Bollywood consistently releases more than eight hundred films per year, compared to some six hundred Hollywood releases (Russo, 2008). It has been called the most-watched in the world with fifteen-million-strong audiences on a daily basis in some 12,500 cinemas in India alone (Chopra, 2007). This can be accredited to the combination of India's already huge population of more than one billion and the estimated twenty million Indian expatriates and foreign-born Indians residing throughout the world (Walton-Roberts, 2004). Such expatriates are termed NRIs, that is, Non-Resident-Indians (Rao, 2007). The Indian Diaspora has diversified the already culturally and economically diverse population of India even more dramatically and has become a major force in changing the face of modern Indian cinema (Rao, 2007). Filmmakers in India also face a unique challenge of gaining the appeal of one of the most diverse ethnic populations of the world (Chopra, 2007).

Münchmeyer (2005) stated in her documentation of the Bollywood film industry, that essentially, film is the only form of entertainment for the masses. Film also constitutes the NRIs' emotional and cultural connection to the homeland (Chopra, 2007). The glue that holds Hindi film together and also bonds people of Indian origin throughout the subcontinent and the world is music (S. Khan, in an interview in Münchmeyer, 2005). Bollywood movies are characterized by 150–180 minutes of drama and comedy inter-mixed with complex song and dance routines—similar to what one might see in a musical stage production. Soundtracks are not an afterthought to Bollywood movies; they constitute a major marketing tool (Münchmeyer, 2005). Amodeo (2004) stated that soundtracks are generally released before the film—so all of India is singing and dancing to *filmi sangeet* (film songs)

long before seeing the movie itself. In India, film score composers, like the singers and actors, enjoy special celebrity status, giving live performances to sold-out theaters and in television appearances (Amodeo).

The Central Figures in the Film Team

Chopra (2007) described the industry as dominated by family dynasties and human icons. The director, composer, and leading male in *Swades* are no exception to the superlatives of Hindi film. International Movie Database (IMDb) named the director, Ashutosh Gowariker, as one of Bollywood's elite filmmakers (2010b). His most successful project to date is the 2001 release *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*, which among the numerous awards and nominations received internationally was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (IMDb, 2010c).The original soundtrack composer for *Swades*, Allah Rakha (A. R.) Rahman, was ranked among the one hundred most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine (Lakshmi, 2009). Lakshmi noted that Rahman has composed the score of more than one hundred films. Academy Awards fans may be familiar with the "Mozart of Madras" (Lakshmi): *Time* magazine reported that of the eight Oscars awarded in 2009 to Boyle and Tandan's 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire*, Rahman received two for Best Score and Best Song, as well as two Golden Globes (Lakshmi, 2009). According to data in the IMDb (2010a) Rahman also composed the score for another Academy Award–winning movie, Kapur's 2007 filming of *Elizabeth: The Golden Years*, and for Pimlott's 2004 premiering Broadway musical *Bombay Dreams*, which, according to the Internet Broadway Database (IBDb) was originally produced by Andrew Lloyd Weber (IBDb, 2010).

In 2008, the leading man of *Swades*, Shah Rukh Khan, was ranked number forty-one of the fifty most powerful people in the world by *Newsweek* (Zakira, 2008). Khan has been called the Tom Cruise of India (Chopra, 2007, p. 194), but his most well-known alias is King Khan (p. 11). Münchmeyer (2005) hailed Khan as the Bollywood star who brought the story of the NRI to the Indian big screen. Compared to Cruise's thirty-some films (IMDb, 2010f), The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) listed Khan's filmography as more than seventy motion pictures—including the more recent U.S. release of Johar's 2010 film *My Name is Khan* (2010e). According to Chopra (2007), Khan's appearances have drawn record crowds both at home and abroad. Films in which Khan is the leading man

have been frequently screened at international film festivals and enjoyed critical acclaim. A recent example was the showing of Bollywood super-star choreographer Farah Khan's 2007 directing debut *Om Shanti Om* at the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival. The two Berlinale screenings of *Om Shanti Om* sold out in only a few minutes after ticket sales opened (Brug, 2008), then a first in the history of the festival (Olszowska, 2008). This record was topped by the 2010 screening of *My Name is Khan*; tickets for this Shah Rukh Khan appearance at the Berlinale were sold out in seconds (Shedde, 2010).

Chopra (2007) stated that *Swades* enjoyed a record international release for the NRI population. In India proper, however, the film was a box office flop (Chopra). Nevertheless, Gowariker—writer, producer, and director—received national recognition for the film. In 2005 India's Screen Weekly Awards honored Gowariker with the Special Jury Award; Gowariker took the Zee Cine Awards 2005 Critics Choice Award for Best Director and together with co-writer M. G. Sathya the Technical Award for Best Story (IMDb, 2010d). The film also took the National Film Awards, India 2005 Silver Lotus Award for Best Cinematography (IMDb, 2010b). In 2008 Gowariker was honored by the World Kids International Film Festival (WIFF) for his contribution to "entertainment with a purpose" through the film *Swades* (INAS, 2008). This recognition is testimony to the cinematic value the film has to offer. With these bits of cineastes' trivia I hope to illustrate the significance an international film such as *Swades* can have, even if it is virtually unknown to the fans of the U.S. mainstream film industry. In the following, I will illustrate how the story of *Swades* could contribute to our understanding of servant-leadership as a depiction of an exemplary personal journey of service and leadership.

SWADES: A FILM ABOUT PURPOSE

As "entertainment with a purpose" *Swades* advocates a revival of the values Gandhi represents—social transformation and social justice through servant-leadership. The inspiration for the film came from the stories in Bakshi's 1998 book *Bapu Kuti* (Chopra, 2007). According to Bakshi (1998) Mahatma Gandhi was often referred to as *bapu*, a Hindi term of endearment for a father figure, and *kuti* refers to a mud hut typical of Indian rural villages. *Bapu kuti*, papa's hut, refers to the ashram Gandhi lived in before his assassination. Today Gandhi's home is a mecca for admirers of the late

Indian civil rights leader (Bakshi, 1998). The name of the male protagonist in *Swades* (Gowariker, 2004), Mohan, is a derivation of Mohandas, Mahatma Gandhi's given name. Thus, it creates a symbolic connection to Gandhi. When Gandhiji is invoked, images of his iconic revolutionary leadership surface. In this spirit, Gowariker (2004) presents a storyline and dialogue in *Swades* that reflect a site of gentle and respectful struggle between tradition, social order, the self-organizing forces of life, the urgency of social justice, and empowerment of the least privileged.

In *Bapu Kuti*, Bakshi (1998) recounts the stories of twelve Indian nationals who follow in the footsteps of Gandhi in search of solutions for social transformation. Part of their journey entails a return to their home-land—*swa-des*—India. The protagonist, Mohan, in *Swades* (2004), like Gandhi, finds purpose in service, in finding ways to facilitate what Heifetz (1994) called "adaptive work" (p. 69). Mohan demonstrates the principles Greenleaf (2002) described in caring for the weakest in society and making giants not out of a single person, but out of the community. The film depicts not only a physical return to the homeland but also a metaphysical return to one's identity, purpose, and destiny. Jaworski (1998) describes such personal journeys as central to the life of a servant-leader.

CHARACTER AND PLOT SUMMARY OF THE FILM *SWADES*

Mohan

Swades is the story of Mohan Bhagava's quest to reunite with his past, which evolves into a journey of self-discovery. Mohan finds his purpose as a servant-leader through his involvement in the lives of his childhood nanny, Kaveriamma, the local schoolteacher in Kaveriamma's rural village, Gita, and the entire community in a rural Indian village. Mohan is, as Gandhi was and numerous modern-day Bollywood protagonists are, an NRI—an expatriated non-resident Indian. Mohan received his university education in the United States and works as an engineer for satellite technology for NASA. Mohan is a successful project manager for the NASA venture Global Precipitation Measurement (GPM), which aims to prevent global water shortages using satellite technology. On the anniversary of his parents' death, Mohan reveals to a trusted colleague that he is troubled by guilt for having lost contact with his childhood nanny. Driven by his regret over neglecting the woman he considers his second mother, Mohan decides to take vacation

time to go on a mission. He intends to find Kaveriamma and convince her to come to the United States to enjoy her old age in peace, dignity, and comfort.

Gita

Gita is the local schoolteacher in the remote Indian village of Charanpur. She struggles to uphold the values of education and respect for cultural heritage. Unlike many women in India, Gita has a university degree and a profession. She is willing to accept some traditional practices out of respect to her elders, such as an arranged marriage. She is, however, unwilling to accept a marriage that would deny her practicing her profession and contributing to the betterment of Indian society through education. Gita advocates making education accessible for children of the lower castes, as well as for girls, toward the long-term advancement of Indian society. Still, she finds her values in conflict with the immediate needs of the community. At a meeting of the village council, the elders discuss the village's need for grain storage. Gita is faced with the challenge of finding more students for her school or rescinding the school building to the village council. Thus, Gita represents another site of struggle between traditional and emancipatory views of gender and class as well as a struggle between the immediate desperation of rural Indians and the visionary emancipation of India's folk in a global economy.

Kaveriamma

Mohan and Gita are connected by Kaveriamma, the woman that both consider their second mother. While Mohan was in the United States pursuing his career, Kaveriamma was placed in a senior citizens' facility in India. Kaveriamma was released from the facility by an unnamed woman, and since then she has been caring for two orphans in a rural village. One of the orphans, Gita, turns out to be not only the mystery woman who took Kaveriamma out of the senior citizens' facility, but also a former neighbor and playmate from Mohan's childhood. Mohan's and Gita's parents were friends before both sets of parents met with premature death. Kaveriamma is a clever, respected, and well-liked member of the community. She is also a landowner, a detail that is revealed as a catalyst to the film's climax and turning point.

Mohan's Quest

When Mohan embarks on his two-week journey to India he expects to be reunited with Kaveriamma, but does not expect the experience to transform him and his life. Mohan's quest leads him to the remote village of Charanpur. Kaveriamma has settled there with Gita and her younger brother Chikku. Upon his arrival, the villagers are both leery of this outsider and excitedly curious. When Mohan reveals his plan to Kaveriamma he places her in a predicament. Gita is devastated at the prospect of losing another mother-figure; Kaveriamma is torn between her commitment to Gita, the life she knows, and the prospect of a comfortable and peaceful retirement. Despite his conviction that he is doing the right thing, Mohan also becomes conflicted about the feelings he is developing for Gita, his desire to care for Kaveriamma, and his responsibility to return to the GPM project team at NASA.

Mohan's Transformation: A Journey toward Servant-Leadership

As the film unfolds, Mohan's initial role as a visitor to Charanpur undergoes profound change, and Mohan experiences a deep transformation. Throughout his transformation, viewers can observe behaviors often described in servant-leadership literature. Mohan displays several of the ten characteristics of servant-leadership described by Spears (1998). He encounters servant-leadership behavior in others, and discovers a way to be the change he wants to see rather than to impose his judgment and vision on others.

Gowariker (2004) portrays rural Indians as upholding a normative and hierarchical understanding of leadership. References in the film demonstrate the traditional view that members of the highest class, the intellectuals, have an obligation to live up to their status by leading. Greenleaf (2002) did not support this kind of intergenerational or class-based hierarchy of leadership. Greenleaf, however, appealed to those who have the desire to serve and the capacity to lead to fulfill an obligation to lead (p. 58). Mohan's transformation from a hierarchical leader to a servant-leader challenges his own and the villagers' perceptions of leadership. At a meeting of the village council, the village elders are keen to learn more about life in the United States. In subsequent conversations with the elders Mohan is questioned about racial and economic injustices in the United States. At the same time, he is

becoming increasingly aware of the oppressive gender and caste systems at work. Mohan condemns these traditional practices as backward. However, the village leaders question Mohan's right to criticize their ways of life. Gita is also quick to challenge Mohan's right to judge the Indian people for their political troubles and adherence to tradition at the expense of progress. She criticizes Mohan for invoking his identity as an Indian national but simultaneously lacking basic knowledge of the country's cultural heritage, participating in the diasporic brain drain of India, and referring to the Indian people as "you," that is, as "other" from himself. The film in this way engages its characters in a conflict concerning the validity of traditional values in a local context and contemporary values in a global context as well as the role and power of community over the individual. Both parties are unwilling to give up their positions. Bennis (2004) noted that effective conflict resolution entails not making anyone wrong (p. xv). Although Mohan disagrees with the elders' views, he has to learn, as Bennis advised, to forego his ego and focus on a solution.

Mohan's perspective begins to change after he experiences that his judgmental view of Indian social order begins to estrange him from Kaveriamma and Gita. Mohan respects Gita and Kaveriamma; he is driven by his desire to give back the care Kaveriamma gave him and to support Gita's cause to maintain the school. He realizes that if he wants Kaveriamma to come and live with him in the United States, he needs to help her solve her more immediate concerns. This is his first step toward the servant-leader capacities noted by Spears of awareness, self-awareness, and healing. Mohan sets out to recruit new students for the school in part to heal the relationship with Gita. In this act, he becomes what Autry (2004) describes as a "resource" for people (p. 49). Through conversations with families of upper and lower castes he becomes more informed about the immediate circumstances and cultural values of the community. Mohan engages in the kind of listening and persuasion Spears (1998) described as servant-leader behaviors. Mohan is able to clarify what values and needs are particularly important to the villagers, and he becomes able to frame maintaining the school as an appeal to those values. Mohan's transformation transpires gradually as he becomes more embedded in the village environment and community. This behavior is also characteristic of servant-leadership as building community (Spears). Autry (2004) reminds us that servant-leadership and conflict resolution is about bringing people together and "getting them to make a human connection" (p. 54).When a blackout occurs during a

public gathering to watch an old movie, Mohan seizes the opportunity to appeal to the villagers' sense of community and common purpose. This scene is played out as a song and dance interlude that metaphorically compares individuals to night sky stars and colors of the rainbow, which only attain their full potential in composition with others. Mohan helps the villagers make a human connection by sharing the experience of something fantastic: looking through a telescope.

The turning point in Mohan's personal journey comes when Kaveriamma sends him to collect payment on her land, which she leases to a farmer in a neighboring province. Mohan is deeply moved by his encounter with the farmer Haridas and his family. Devastated by drought and by being outcast for changing his trade from weaver to farmer, Haridas weeps for the misery of not being able to feed his children and the embarrassment of not being able to pay the rent. Nevertheless, Haridas displays deep respect for the cultural practice of hospitality *atithi devo bhavah* (guest is god), offering Mohan and his guide food and a place to sleep. Haridas's matter-of-course act of community reveals an aspect of servant-leadership that Wheatley (2004) describes as a host mentality (p. 243). Mohan is deeply disturbed and moved by Haridas's plight. Spears (1998) asserts that empathy allows servant-leaders to accept and recognize people for their unique spirits (p. 4). Haridas is an outcast in his own community, but Mohan sees with a "level of compassion and gentleness" (Wheatley, 2004, p. 243) Haridas's value as a human. Kaveriamma, a servant-leader of her own accord, had hoped that by sending Mohan on this journey under the pretext of collecting rent from Haridas she would be able to influence Mohan to rethink his purpose in India. Kaveriamma is committed to Mohan's personal growth, a demonstration of another servant-leadership characteristic outlined by Spears (p. 6). Mohan certainly begins to engage in an inner struggle over the meaning of the misery and injustice he has witnessed.

When yet another power outage darkens the village during a celebration, Mohan is outraged by the villagers' passive attitudes of learned helplessness and indifference to literally and metaphorically living in the dark. To demonstrate that they are not powerless in the face of an indifferent government, Mohan mobilizes the community in a collaborative effort to harness the hydropower of a nearby spring and generate electricity for the entire village. Mohan is thus transformed from a judgmental outsider to a productive community member and a servant-leader. Through Mohan's

foresight and conceptualization—two further servant-leader characteristics (Spears)—he is able to empower the community to take their needs into their own hands. In this sense, Mohan fulfills the ethical obligation Greenleaf (2002, p. 39) put forth to use foresight as a servant-leader. His projects to mobilize the community, create a self-sustaining hydraulic source of electricity (water and light), and promote the value of education for all also demonstrate Wheatley's (1998) understanding of life as creative, affirming, and self-organizing—that life cannot be controlled, but life-force can be harnessed and applied toward a better future.

Mohan's transformation, however, is not yet fully complete. He extends his vacation to help the village complete the self-sufficient hydroelectric power source, yet Mohan's responsibilities at NASA are too pressing to simply abandon. Kaveriamma and Gita are not willing to leave the village for a life of luxury. Mohan returns to the United States alone. Visions of the relationships he cultivated in Charanpur haunt him and Mohan experiences an inner struggle. In the end, Mohan completes the mission to launch the GPM satellite and gives his resignation to NASA. Mohan returns to India to make his own contribution to the community and transformation in India.

CONCLUSION

Jaworski's 1998 essay emphasized the experience of servant-leadership as a personal journey of self-discovery and purpose. The film *Swades* depicts such a transformative journey in a story that is profound in its humanity. The story deals with themes of social justice, social change, and personal transformation at levels that are very real but perhaps also quite distant from a typical American's own personal reality. Action and dialogue depict clashes of contemporary global and culturally traditional values, roles, and leadership, themes that are significant to servant-leadership today. In handling the theme of social justice, Gowariker (2004) mobilizes several metaphors. The film uses water and light as metaphors for unifying human needs, satellites and telescopes, technology and nature for unifying global perspectives with local perspectives. Mohan embedded the values of social justice into the dialog with the elders and community through his comparison of Americans' access to electricity, water, and education with that of rural Indians. Recognizing that social justice is in conflict with the

social order of the traditional caste system Mohan engages throughout his transformation in gentle persuasion with community members of all castes, and in the modes of leadership described by Wheatley (1998): valuing and integrating diverse voices and personal experiences, promoting social change, advocating collaboration, integrative conflict resolution, and participative decision making. As such, Mohan's journey of self-discovery and purpose awakens in him a deep desire to serve and an obligation to lead through his experiences of living and practicing servant-leadership as a member of and resource to the community of Charanpur.

The film *Swades: We, the People* (Gowariker, 2004) pays homage to people throughout the world who struggle for social justice and social change. I opened this paper with the epigraph to the movie, a quote from Gandhi: "Hesitating to act because the whole vision might not be achieved, or because others do not yet share it, is an attitude that only hinders progress" (as cited in Gowariker). *Swades* demonstrates that like the acts of Gandhi and other servant-leaders, even the smallest of acts has the possibility to forge humanity ahead in the struggle for undoing hierarchical notions of leadership and to find purpose in serving the needs of others and serving the purpose of our destiny. The power of this colorful and musical Bollywood movie surpasses any words that I could conjure in a paper review. Therefore, I urge scholars of servant-leadership to seek out *Swades* and add the DVD to your library of servant-leadership media.

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