

# Exploring Two Facets of Cinematic Nationalism: Revisiting Lagaan and Swades

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**Abstract:** *Nationalism, as scholars argue, is not merely a political ideology but a cultural sentiment expressed through collective belonging, shared memory, and aspirations for a nation's future. Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has served as one of the most influential cultural mediums for articulating nationalistic narratives. This paper explores two distinct yet interconnected facets of cinematic nationalism by examining Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001) and *Swades* (2004). *Lagaan* depicts pre-independence resistance against British colonial rule, using cricket as a metaphor for empowerment, unity and subaltern assertion. *Swades*, on the other hand, expands nationalism in the post-independence era through themes of development, responsibility, and self-driven civic engagement. Through thematic analysis, this paper argues that *Lagaan* represents nationalism rooted in anti-colonial struggle and communal unity, whereas *Swades* advances a non-violent developmental nationalism beyond rhetoric. Drawing on Andrew Vincent's and Benedict Anderson's theories of nationalism, the study examines how cinema constructs collective identity. The findings highlight how Gowariker shifts nationalism from external confrontation (*Lagaan*) to internal introspection (*Swades*), offering a holistic view of the nation's past challenges and future responsibilities.*

**Keywords:** Cinematic Nationalism; Indian Cinema; *Lagaan*; *Swades*; Nation-Building

## 1. Introduction

Nationalism, as Andrew Vincent (2002) explains, transforms collective consciousness—built on language, ethnicity, memory, and culture—into a political doctrine seeking institutional expression. Cinema, as a modern cultural form, often becomes a vehicle through which such ideological narratives find visual articulation. In India, where cinema is consumed by millions across linguistic and regional divisions, films have historically shaped perceptions of nationhood, belonging and citizenship (Dwyer & Pinney, 2001; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2012).

Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001) and *Swades* (2004) stand as significant contributions to cinematic nationalism because they represent different eras and expectations of the Indian nation. *Lagaan* is set in the late 19th century under colonial rule and captures nationalist resistance through a symbolic cricket match. *Swades*, in contrast, is situated in independent India and reflects on development, social justice and the responsibilities of educated citizens toward their homeland.

Both films have achieved critical and popular acclaim, but academic engagement often focuses on either colonial resistance (*Lagaan*) or developmental nationalism (*Swades*). This paper attempts to bring the two into dialogue to show how Gowariker constructs a continuum of nationalism—one that begins with resisting oppression and evolves into self-accountability.

## 2. Literature Review

The relationship between nationalism and cultural production has been widely examined within theoretical frameworks that understand nations as socially constructed entities shaped through shared stories, symbols, and emotional experiences. Benedict Anderson's idea of nations

as "imagined communities" (2006) and Partha Chatterjee's exploration of postcolonial nationalism (1993) both emphasise that national identity is not inherent but created through cultural practices, including cinema. Homi Bhabha (1994) further extends this argument by suggesting that popular representations of national identity are formed within hybrid cultural spaces where identities are negotiated and reimagined. Within Bollywood, these negotiations frequently unfold through heightened emotional narratives, moral conflicts, and depictions of community solidarity, reinforcing cinema's role in shaping the public imagination of the nation, as Viridi (2003) observes.

Within the Indian context, scholars have repeatedly acknowledged Hindi cinema as a powerful site for constructing national identity. Earlier films such as *Mother India*, *Shaheed*, and *Border* forged heroic templates of patriotic sacrifice that aligned the nation with ideas of duty, martyrdom, and collective endurance (Chakravarty, 1993; Kazmi, 1999). However, scholarship also notes a shift in more contemporary cinema, which increasingly emphasises internal forms of nationalism connected to development, diaspora belonging, and civic responsibility (Mehta, 2010; Athique, 2012). These films depart from traditional portrayals of external conflict and instead explore the lived realities of nationhood within the domestic and developmental sphere.

Studies focusing on *Lagaan* often interpret the film through a postcolonial framework, reading the cricket match as a symbolic site of resistance wherein villagers, by mastering a colonial sport, assert cultural and intellectual equality with their oppressors. Ghosh (2019) argues that the film's narrative structure—centred on collective struggle, inter-religious cooperation, and caste inclusivity—mirrors Gandhian models of nationalism that emphasise unity, moral integrity, and nonviolent assertion. Thus, *Lagaan* becomes a cinematic metaphor for anti-colonial self-assertion, with its

emphasis on community mobilisation and the symbolic overturning of colonial hierarchy.

In contrast, scholarship on *Swades* positions the film within the trajectory of developmental nationalism. Kumar (2005) highlights how the film redefines patriotism through the protagonist's commitment to social improvement rather than emotional rhetoric or dramatic confrontation. Mohan's engagement with issues such as electricity generation, water scarcity, caste barriers, and rural underdevelopment embodies a form of nationalism grounded in civic responsibility and ethical service. Rao (2007) further argues that *Swades* is crucial in shaping cinematic representations of diaspora identity by foregrounding themes of return, rootedness, and moral responsibility toward one's homeland. Through its attention to rural realities, the film situates nationalism within everyday acts of development rather than battlefield heroics. Although both films have received extensive individual scholarly attention, existing literature rarely brings *Lagaan* and *Swades* into direct dialogue. They are often treated as separate case studies representing distinct cinematic eras and ideological concerns. This fragmented approach overlooks the continuum of nationalist ideologies they collectively explore—from anti-colonial resistance to postcolonial development—and the ways in which Gowariker's films contribute to the broader cinematic construction of Indian nationhood. By placing these films within a comparative analytical framework, this study addresses a notable gap in existing scholarship and demonstrates how their complementary visions enrich contemporary understandings of cinematic nationalism.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and textually grounded methodological framework that draws primarily from film analysis, cultural studies, and nationalism theory, wherein both *Lagaan* and *Swades* are examined not merely as cinematic texts but as cultural artefacts embedded within historical, political, and ideological contexts, and therefore the methodology seeks to understand the films' narrative structures, character arcs, symbolic imagery, visual metaphors, and socio-political subtexts through a systematic process of thematic interpretation. The first stage of the methodology involves a close, repeated, and attentive viewing of the two films in order to identify patterns, dialogues, scenes, and tonal elements that represent broader nationalist discourses, while simultaneously comparing these observations with existing scholarly debates in the fields of postcolonialism, Indian cinema, cultural nationalism, and identity formation. The second methodological component consists of thematic coding, where key concepts such as anti-colonial resistance, communal unity, caste dynamics, diaspora identity, rural development, civic responsibility, technological intervention, and emotional or symbolic nationalism are grouped under analytical categories, allowing the study to create a structured parallel between the two films' representations of nationalism across pre-independence and post-independence timelines. Additionally, the study employs intertextual and comparative analysis to evaluate how Gowariker's directorial choices communicate shifting nationalist paradigms, thus enabling a multi-layered interpretation that

connects cinematic representation with historical conditions, cultural psychology, and evolving discourses of Indian nationhood.

### 4. Analysis & Findings

The analysis of *Lagaan* and *Swades* reveals that Ashutosh Gowariker constructs nationalism as an evolving emotional, political, and ethical phenomenon shaped by the historical conditions in which it is imagined and practised. While both films belong to different temporal locations—*Lagaan* rooted in the late nineteenth-century colonial landscape and *Swades* embedded in the early twenty-first-century developmental context—they are bound together by a shared ideological commitment to redefining national belonging. What emerges from a close reading of the films is a complex interplay between cinematic form, political rhetoric, social commentary, and cultural memory, through which nationalism appears not as a monolithic sentiment but as a layered and dynamic force. In *Lagaan*, nationalism grows organically from collective grievances, shared suffering, and the urgent need to reclaim dignity from an oppressive colonial regime. In contrast, *Swades* frames nationalism as a process of internal awakening and social responsibility, suggesting that in a postcolonial nation the moral task lies not in fighting an external enemy but in transforming internal structures of inequality and stagnation.

The narrative strategies of the two films further highlight the shift from mythic nationalism to grounded realism. *Lagaan* incorporates melodramatic intensity and epic storytelling, using a dramatic cricket match as an allegory for liberation and self-worth. Its setting, events, and emotional trajectory resemble a legend passed down through community memory, where ordinary villagers rise to extraordinary heroism. The cricket field becomes a symbolic battlefield, a stage where the colonised assert their identity by mastering the very game that represents British superiority. This mythic mode intentionally elevates the villagers' struggle into a collective epic, suggesting that anti-colonial nationalism relies on emotional mobilisation, symbolic resistance, and the creation of shared heroes. In sharp contrast, *Swades* situates its narrative within a realistic rural landscape marked by electricity shortages, caste-based restrictions, food insecurity, and migration. Rather than presenting nationalism through spectacular action or grand confrontations, Gowariker envisions it through the everyday activities of building a hydroelectric generator, teaching in a village school, engaging with community members, and confronting one's own privilege. The realism of *Swades* shifts the cinematic imagination from external battlefields to internal civic spaces, underscoring that twenty-first-century nationalism must emerge from practical service, scientific rationality, and compassion.

A closer examination of power dynamics in both films demonstrates how nationalism adjusts its focus over time. In *Lagaan*, the British Empire is the clear oppressor, and the villagers' resistance becomes an urgent moral duty. The collective energy of the village is united by injustice, and the cricket match transforms into an opportunity for the colonised subjects to disrupt the hierarchical order. The victory symbolizes a reversal of colonial power, and the

villagers' mastery of a foreign sport becomes a declaration of intellectual and cultural equality. However, *Swades* positions its struggles within Indian society itself, focusing on the inequalities that persist long after independence. Mohan's encounters with poverty, caste discrimination, and infrastructural neglect reveal how nationalism in a sovereign nation must confront internal weaknesses rather than external enemies. The shift from resistance to introspection marks a significant transition in the cinematic representation of national identity: from reclaiming autonomy to fulfilling responsibility.

The spatial politics of the films also indicate that Gowariker places the village at the heart of national imagination. Champaner in *Lagaan* is both a site of exploitation and a site of extraordinary unity, encoding the colonial experience into its drought-stricken fields and overburdened farmers. Charanpur in *Swades*, although fictional, represents a typical Indian village that exists on the margins of development yet functions as a moral anchor for the diasporic protagonist. Through these spaces, Gowariker proposes that the village embodies the true spirit of the nation—historically oppressed, culturally rich, and full of unrealized potential. The rural landscape becomes more than a setting; it becomes a symbolic foundation for constructing authentic nationalism, reminding viewers that the essence of the nation lies not in metropolitan centres but in its most neglected communities.

Another significant finding concerns the construction of the nationalist subject. In *Lagaan*, Bhuvan emerges as a leader not by asserting dominance but by fostering unity. His commitment to inclusiveness—expressed through the selection of players from diverse castes and communities—transforms the cricket team into a miniature representation of a pluralistic India. His leadership reflects collective nationalism, where the hero's primary function is to facilitate solidarity among people who share the burden of oppression. On the other hand, *Swades* foregrounds an individualistic yet ethically grounded nationalism through Mohan Bhargava, whose personal transformation fuels social transformation. Mohan begins as a globalised, technically skilled professional distanced from the realities of rural India, yet his gradual emotional and ethical re-rooting shows that true nationalism requires an inner journey before it becomes an outward intervention. His choice to leave NASA and return to Charanpur is a metaphor for the need to prioritise national responsibilities over personal advancement.

Cinematic symbolism intensifies this ideological movement. In *Lagaan*, the cricket ball, the drumbeat of village gatherings, the dusty field, and the collective rhythm of the songs create emotional surges that bind the villagers together. Each symbol reinforces the epic struggle for dignity. In *Swades*, electricity becomes the central metaphor for empowerment, illuminating not only homes but minds. Water scarcity points to systemic neglect, while moments such as Mohan drinking unfiltered platform water symbolise his return to the heart of India. These symbols reveal the core message of both films—that nationalism must ultimately strive to enhance human dignity, whether by resisting oppression or addressing structural deficits.

Caste emerges as a decisive thread that distinguishes the historical from the contemporary nation. *Lagaan* uses caste as a backdrop that must be momentarily suspended for the larger goal of defeating the colonial rulers. The acceptance of Kachra, a Dalit, into the cricket team symbolises the temporary overcoming of caste boundaries in service of national unity. *Swades*, however, confronts caste head-on as a present and persistent obstacle to national progress. Mohan's encounter with the water-carrying taboo directly critiques caste ideology and reveals how such social barriers undermine the possibility of genuine nation-building. The films thus expose the evolution of nationalism from a force that overlooks internal conflicts for external victory to a force that must dismantle internal inequalities for real national growth.

Gender representation further enriches the films' nationalist frameworks. Gauri in *Lagaan* embodies cultural strength and resilience, grounding the village emotionally and serving as a spiritual support to Bhuvan's mission. Gita in *Swades* represents intellectual assertiveness, social awareness, and progressive thinking. These characters demonstrate that women are not peripheral figures but essential agents in shaping nationalist consciousness. Their presence suggests that the nation's moral and cultural fabric depends significantly on women's voices, perspectives, and leadership.

At the sonic level, A.R. Rahman's music plays a critical role in shaping emotional nationalism. The surge of *Lagaan*'s songs generates collective inspiration and fosters a sense of resistance, while the introspective melodies of *Swades* evoke longing, self-reflection, and moral urgency. Rahman's compositions act as emotional bridges between the characters and the audience, translating political ideals into affective experiences.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that *Lagaan* and *Swades* represent two stages in the evolution of Indian nationalism: the first concerned with reclaiming autonomy through unity and resistance, and the second directed towards reconstructing the nation through responsibility, development, and ethical citizenship. When read together, the films propose that nationalism is most meaningful when it sustains both emotional bonds and practical commitments, when it honours the struggles of the past while remaining attentive to the demands of the present. Gowariker's cinematic nationalism therefore expands beyond the limited binaries of patriotism and sentimentality; it emerges as a dynamic continuum that invites viewers to confront, celebrate, question, and reimagine what it truly means to belong to a nation.

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