Myth in constructing contemporary Indian identity in popular Hindi film: The case of Ashutosh Gowariker

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Abstract. The present paper concentrates on particular mytho-religious symbolism and mythological structures used in two popular films by famous contemporary Indian film director Ashutosh Gowariker: *Lagaan* (2001) and *Swades* (2004). These films are significant in the history of Indian popular cinema not only for their complex problems related to the sensitive topics of anti-colonialism, nationalism and patriotism, but also for their widely used mytho-religious symbolism. My goal in this essay is to analyse these two films, identifying the mythological symbols and mythological structures used in the films, and to see how they organise the films' narrative and how they are connected with the issues of anti-colonialism, Hindu nationalism, and the construction of (idealised) Indian identity. In this paper I argue that the usage of mythological and mytho-religious symbolism functions as a useful tool for the director to transfer ideas related to national identity, nationalism, and anti-colonialism to the viewer effectively, as well as to express a political and social critique of contemporary India and to construct the images of idealised Indian identity in response.

Director Ashutosh Gowariker is one of the best known Indian directors of the past two decades. Despite having only five films in his filmography, the director gained worldwide fame in 2001 with the release of his film *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*.[1] In 2004 his fourth film, *Swades: We the People*,[2] was released. These two films of Ashutosh Gowariker are quite significant in the history of Indian popular cinema—not only for the excellent cinematography, but also for the director's contribution to exploring such complex topics as national identity, anti-colonialism, nationalism, and patriotism, all embedded in the attractive song-dance format of the Bollywood popular film genre. The director's film *Lagaan* attracted a huge amount of interest both from cinema-goers worldwide and from academicians: the film was analysed from the perspective of subaltern (Chakraborty 2003)[3] and postcolonial (Farred 2004) studies. Critique (mostly concerning the representation of untouchability) was expressed by Siriyavan Anand in the magazine *Himal* (2002).

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[1] Later in this essay, this film will be referred as *Lagaan*.

[2] Later in this essay, this film will be referred as *Swades*.

[3] In the next edition of the *Economical and Political Weekly*, the Deshpande commentary 'Subaltern Fantasies' was published, in which Chakraborty's approach to *Lagaan* was criticised.

However, one of the most interesting aspects of *Lagaan* and *Swades* is that both films, being so called 'secular' or social/drama films, have clearly pronounced mythological and mytho-religious symbolism and compose their narratives through particular mythological structures. The mythological aspect of both films has not been elaborated on very much in academic research, although I would consider it crucially important in understanding the message these two films are trying to convey to viewers.

My goal in this essay is therefore to identify the mythological symbols used in the films and see how they organise the narrative of the films into particular mythological structures. My focus will also be on how myth and mytho-religious symbolism function in these two films and on what this usage of myth provides for so called secular or social films, films which wouldn't be considered mythological in the sense of the genre. I argue that such use of mythological symbolism functions as a useful tool for the director to transfer ideas related to national identity, nationalism, and anti-colonialism to the viewer effectively. Mythological structures also serve as a background for the director to express his personal political and social critique of contemporary India and to construct images of idealised Indian identity in response.

Popular Indian cinema and (hinduised) national identity

Popular Indian cinema,[4] which has crossed the borders of India and reached the most distant corners of the world, plays an enormous role in contemporary Indian society. Indeed, popular Indian cinema, which not so long ago was not considered worthy of the attention of many Western viewers and academics[5], has now proved to be one of the most influential producers of films, annually releasing more films than any other cinema industry in the world. Popular Indian cinema is a very complex art form; as accurately observed by Asha Kasbekar, '[it] caters to a vast, heterogeneous, cross-cultural audience which is not always familiar with the Hindi language. In order to maximise its market share, it acknowledges the composite nature of its nationwide public and privileges visual and non-verbal modes of address' (Kasbekar 2002, 287). Thus with the numerous song and dance sequences, cult star-status actors, and the *masala* plot structure (containing such film genre elements as comedy, violence, romance and melodrama), Indian popular cinema creates a memorable spectacle. Yet at

[4] Despite a number of cinema industries inside India producing films in local languages (Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, etc), here and throughout this essay I use the term 'popular Indian cinema' to refer only to the Mumbai production and films made in the Hindi language.

[5] Popular Indian films quite often were defined as long, glossy, and semi-literate, replete with stock situations and moralistic clichés, etc. See Nayar 1997.

the same time it uses different *Indian* cultural codes, enabling Indian popular film to be perceived and appreciated by the vast variety of Indian spectators country-wide. The uniqueness of Indian popular film is its enormously wide cultural and structural background. Indian popular film bases its narratives and structures on such traditional Indian art sources as the great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, classical Sanskrit theatre, Parsi and folk theatre, but also assumes a modern form under the influence of Hollywood cinema and MTV (Gokulsing, Dissanayake 2004, 19–23), becoming a rich base for those who want to better understand and appreciate Indian culture, society and history. With the aid of its narrative and characters, popular film corresponds to the dreams, needs and fears of the spectators; reflects the happenings of the present time; and traces some real or imagined obstructions for the person and the society alike and looks for ways to remove them. In this way 'this cinema could be a collective daydream, in which the audience partly becomes the creator' (Raghavendra 2007, 24).

The years of India's independence were quite significant for the development of popular film. After independence India was looking for the ways to re-think and re-construct its identity, and since India's fascination with moving images had been firmly established already, popular cinema happened to be the right media for that aim. The question of national identity has always been an important part of the thematic frame in popular Hindi film, and throughout the course of major historical changes the conceptualized representation of national identity and idealised 'Indian-ness' was constantly being re-thought and re-considered. In the social films of the 1950s throughout the 1970s, the distinct Indian identity was not rarely represented through a constant dichotomy between the moral 'East' and degraded and corrupted 'West' (in such films as *Shree 420*, *Purab aur Paschim*, etc.), while in later developments in the family dramas of the 1990s we can trace a strong ambition to correspond to the economic and political developments and the raise of the *Hindutva*—the concept of Hindu nationalism (Malhotra, Alagh 2004).

Hindu nationalism is a relatively new construct. Its origin can be traced to around the middle of the nineteenth century, 'when, in reaction to the onslaught of aggressive modernism of mainly the Utilitarians and the social Darwinists, Christian evangelism, and exposure to European ideologies of nationalism, there began to crystallize a wide variety of "Hindu" responses in the public sphere of India' (Nandy 1995, 57). The fundamentalist concept of *Hindutva* framing the ideological base of Hindu nationalism, as noted by scholars, originated from some nationalistic principles, such as efforts to chalk out a new pan-Indian religion called Hinduism that would be primarily classical, Brahmanic and Vedantic and therefore not embarrassing to modern Indians; the encouragement to use Hinduism as an instrument of political mobilisa-

tion in national ideology; and the aspiration to masculinise the self-definition of the Hindus and, thus, martialise the community (ibid., 57–62). At the same time, the territorial aspect also appeared to be highly important, elaborating on the concept of *pitribhumi* (fatherland) with the presumption that only Hindus can be true patriots, but not Indian Muslims or Christians, with their holy lands in Arabia and Palestine (Sarkar 2007, 274).

The rise of *Hindutva* in the 1990s gave strong impetus to the fundamentalistic movements, the most notorious of them the *Ramjanambhoomi* movement, resulting in the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 and subsequent violence all across the country.

These political and ideological movements strongly and visibly affected the production of popular films in the 1990s. From the research done on this topic, we see the eager attempt of the directors of the period to reconsider Indian identity, and therefore 'productions of Indian identity in domestic dramas post-1990 have moved remarkably consistently towards the construction of a monolithic Indian identity that is Hindu, wealthy and supports a conservative patriarchy' (Malhotra, Alagh 2004, 31).

In this context, the films *Lagaan* and *Swades* made by director Ashutosh Gowariker provide us with some different pattern of representation of the idealised Indian national identity and the concept of nationalism. Further on in this essay, I will try to relate the widely used mythological structures and symbols in the director's films to the interpretation of the pictured concept of idealised national identity. I argue that mythology plays an enormous role in the director's films in enriching and legitimising the director's ideas related to anti-colonialism, postcolonial India and the present realities of nationalism and the future of (the ideal) India.

The mythological structure of Ashutosh Gowariker's films: *Lagaan* and the anti-colonial spirit

The mythological genre was always a part of Indian cinematic history, beginning from the first Indian silent movie, *Raja Harischandra* by Phalke, in 1913. Throughout the course of development of popular Indian film, however, we can see a very intimate relationship between the mythological and the social genres, namely their capability to incorporate in their narratives elements of both of them. For example, the super hit of the 1970s, *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975)—a devotional story of the local female deity and its manifestation in human world—together with the screened local *vrat katha* also incorporated distinctive inter-textual elements corresponding to the social position and satisfaction of lower–middle-class women (Lutgendorf 2003, 36–9). In a similar way, mytho-religious symbols quite often are incorporated in the narrative

structure of films that are not considered to be 'mythological' in scope, e.g. films that are clearly identified as 'social'. As Rachel Dwyer comments in her well-researched book on religion in Indian cinema, *Filming the Gods*: 'in the social, mythological stories are brought into everyday world, where they are retold as part of daily life until the division between religion and the mundane is blurred' (Dwyer 2005, 145–6). Other popular Indian film scholars also note some of the myth-related use of symbolism, especially in the representation of the idealised woman, which is quite often constructed with the help of the iconic—the idealised images of Sita from the *Ramayana* or Radha from the *Mahabharata* (Gokulsing, Dissanayake, 2002; Kasbekar 2002; Pauwels 2008).

In a very similar way, the films *Lagaan* and *Swades* by Ashutosh Gowariker, despite dealing with contemporary social topics and exploring the concepts of nationalism and patriotism, not only base their narratives on mythological structures, but also incorporate a number of clearly pronounced religious symbols and motifs in the narratives as well.

Proceeding with an analysis of the films, first of all it is important to mention that both films by Ashutosh Gowariker are related to the two main Indian epics. In the mytho-religious sphere they implement the motifs of the *Mahabharata* (*Lagaan*) and the *Ramayana* (*Swades*), and both films are structured according to some broader myth-related frameworks: the serpent and the thunder god (*Lagaan*) and the hero's journey (*Swades*). This complex use of different mythical frames is not unknown in practice as observed by scholars of film: 'being very complex constructions, films rarely devote themselves to any single myth or any single pattern of meaning, whether representational or expressional. Most films are ambivalent about the values and the realities they encompass, and virtually all include traces of more than any one myth alone' (Singer 2008, 10).

Some of the primary manifestations of myths are clearly visible in the construction of time and space in both films. The name of the film *Lagaan* has a certain mythological connotation since it consists of two parts: *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India*. The name directly suggests that there will be two separate timelines in the film: a historical line, which is identified at the very beginning of the film (the year 1893) and a mythological one, as implied in the name itself, since *once upon a time* is generally found in fairytales and myths. The actual time frame in the films is also related to mytho-religious festival practice; in *Lagaan* the narrative is centred around the *Krishna Jayanti* festival (the festival of the birth of Krishna) while in *Swades* it is related to the *Dasara* festival or (the festival marking the victory of Rama over the demon Ravana) That is to say the narratives are related to some of the most important Hindu festivals. The space in which both of the films take place refers to the centre

of the world. In *Lagaan* the narrator at the start of the film refers to Champaner as a town settled in the very heart of the country, and in *Swades* Mohan arrives in the town Charanpur (city of foot imprints)—a place indicated in sacred geography, where according to the legend Rama left his footprints. In other words, the actual time and space composition of both *Lagaan* and *Swades* does connote some important references in the mythological sense.

But let us now proceed to the analysis of *Lagaan*. The myth of the thunder god and the serpent that I want to use in the analysis of narrative structure of *Lagaan* is merely my interpretation; it is however hard to miss some obvious references in the composition of the film's narrative. To identify the myth structure, I will briefly refer to the story of *Lagaan*, which is as follows: the villagers of Champaner have to pay a tax (lagaan) in grain for the local supervisor of the province, Captain Russell. However, the country is impoverished by drought, and there is no sign of rain and no hope for the harvest. The situation is made even worse by Russell's whim to double the tax. The young peasant boy Bhuvan, unable to stand this injustice, make a bet with captain Russell; if his assembled team of Champaner villagers beats Captain Russell's British team in the cricket match, the entire province will be freed from the lagaan. At the end of the film, after continuous struggle on the cricket pitch Bhuvan and the villagers defeat the British and an intense rain spills from the sky, corresponding to the joy of Bhuvan's team.

The structural composition of *Lagaan*'s narrative resembles the structural composition of the famous Vedic myth about the thunder god Indra and his battle with a demon (*asura*), the giant serpent Vritra. There are many variations of this myth, but one of the most popular[6] is that Vritra drinks all the waters of the Earth, resulting in a terrible drought. The god Indra slays the serpent in battle and releases the waters, which spill over the earth. In the analysis of myths, the widespread model of the thunder god's victory over the serpent, possessing the water in the form of rain or rivers, is regarded as having a cosmogonic nature since 'the waters are necessary for the health of the community; by hoarding them, the serpent upsets the natural order whereby wealth and nourishment are allowed to circulate, and Indra must thus do battle to restore order' (Fortson 2004, 26). The interpretation of the Vedic myth is that Vritra impersonates chaos (as his name in Sanskrit suggests: Vritra—*Obstruction*), and only by slaying Vritra and releasing the waters can Indra perform a cosmogonic act restoring order from chaos and creating a new world out of it.

Following the anti-colonial discourse in the film *Lagaan* and relating it to the myth, we can see that the situation in Champaner could be considered a chaotic state in which

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[6] Found in the *Ṛgveda* X.155.

the drought and unbearable taxes applied by Captain Russell, who is driven by racism and colonial ideology, are interfering with the lives of the people and threatening them with starvation. Following the myth, we can replace the demon Vritra with Captain Russell, who represents British rule in general, while Bhuvan corresponds to Indra, or the cultural hero. The cricket match then could be interpreted as the cosmogonic battle in the myth, as well as an allusion to India's fight for independence in 1947. And when Bhuvan defeats the British in the cricket match, the symbol of pouring rain is that of restored peace and order in the world, or the symbol of the rightful victory of the colonised over the coloniser.

Continuing from the mythological structure discussed to some more visible mytho-religious themes in *Lagaan*, one can see the clearly established epic symbolism of the *Mahabharata* and the identification of Bhuvan with Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, in the film. The links between the two sets of mythical symbols (the Vedic and the epic) are quite related and cleverly organised by the director, as there are some links between Indra and Vishnu in Vedic mythology. As observed by Arthur Anthony Macdonell, Indra is quite frequently allied with Vishnu in the fight with Vritra (Macdonell 2002, 39). Krishna is also known as a demon killer and the one 'born to help to destroy' the *asuras* (Kirk 1972, 235). The identification of Bhuvan with Krishna is constantly re-established throughout the film. From the very start when Captain Rassell shoots the deer, which Bhuvan tried to protect, we see the eyes of Bhuvan filled with tears, allusions to the epics in which Krishna was shot by the hunter *Jari*. On the day of the *Krishna Jayanti* festival, Bhuvan also performs Krishna's role in the dance of Krishna and Radha, playing the flute, the attribute of Krishna, and in the eyes of the spectator he is represented as almost becoming an incarnation of Krishna himself. Krishna is the central figure in the *Bhagavadgita*, the part of the *Mahabharata* where the two armies of Pandavas and Kauravas engage in a fearsome battle in Kurukshetra. Trying to resolve the similarities between Bhuvan and Krishna, in a similar manner as interpreting the Vedic myth, we can trace the myth-related time of the great war of *Mahabharata* in the cricket match of *Lagaan*.

In the postcolonial context, the usage of these cosmogonic mythological elements in the film can be interpreted as the symbol of the collapse of the old regime and the start of a new life. As already observed in the Indra-Vritra myth, the battle between the two symbolised the cosmogonic myth of the creation of the world where chaos is being transferred into the world of order. Similarly in *Lagaan*, manipulating these myth identification codes and evoking India's fight for independence through them, the director is legitimating the anti-colonial discourse and presenting the colonisers as destructive and chaotic, while the colonised are able to restore a state of order by overcoming and defeating the colonisers.

In addition, it is important to note that the film's viewers take part in this mythologized drama as well; from the very beginning of the film the spectators have to be assured that the film (like the myth) will end with the victory of the cultural hero. That is the reason why Gowariker implements some very important symbols at the first half of the film, specifically in the scene when Bhuvan comes into the street of the village to practice batting. The first two times Bhuvan fails to hit the ball but the third try is a success; he manages to hit the ball and the ball flies right into the temple of Krishna situated on a hill, hits the prayer bell, and drops into the center of the *rangoli*. This is a subtle message for the viewer that Bhuvan's quest is the right one, that it is approved by the celestial forces, and that he will succeed in all his goals. This way the spectator is assured that no matter what Bhuvan does (his quest against the British) it is indeed the right course of action.

The hero's journey: Modern man, myth, and social critique of contemporary India

Swades has slightly fewer concrete references to myths than *Lagaan* and more strongly addresses the contemporary issues of India and Indians living abroad (or NRI—non-resident Indians) in a direct way. However, its structural composition quite clearly refers to what could be called the Monomyth, or the hero's journey, the model introduced by famous mythology scholar Joseph Campbell in his widely known book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. According to Campbell, many myths of various cultures follow a particular model of the cultural hero, who is called upon to perform some adventure or quest, leaving his home sphere and descending into the mythical world, where he has to tackle various dangers and obstacles to reach some particular goal. In the course of his adventure, the hero learns a lot about himself and his surroundings, thus acquiring the capability to progress and transform. In the course of the progress of his transformation, he is able to reach the goal.

The model of Joseph Campbell was influential not only in researching myths of various cultures, but also in understanding some pieces of literature and films (Vogler, 1998). In order to analyse how the monomyth functions in Gowariker's film *Swades*, let me briefly refer to the plot of the film. Mohan, an NRI living in the USA, leaves his home and travels back to the small village of Charanpur in his homeland with the aim of taking his childhood nanny Kaveri Amma with him to the USA. Spending some days in this small Indian village, Mohan learns about present-day rural India and its problems: illiteracy, segregation of the community by caste, and poor living conditions (the village is constantly suffering from power cuts). In order to help the village people, Mohan uses the river to construct a hydroelectric generator. He meets

his childhood friend Gita and falls in love with her. At the end of Mohan's stay, Kaveri Amma decides to stay in India and not to move to the USA. Going back to the States, Mohan feels constant nostalgia for his home in India, realises that he belongs in his homeland and returns to permanently settle there.

Here the monomyth is used in a manner similar to the use of the myth of the thunder god in *Lagaan*; it functions as a structuralising tool for the narrative. Mohan sets off for his journey, changing his 'real' place (the USA) for the small Indian village Charanpur which, as already mentioned, has a mythological connotation (the place where Rama left his footprints). In this modern reading of the monomyth, *Swades* does not have any supernatural beasts or events, which frequently occur in the monomyth; nevertheless these obstructions the cultural hero must overcome are identified through the modern context of present day rural India—illiteracy, child marriage, social segregation into castes, technological backwardness, the government's unawareness, and the people's own passivity to change anything. Constantly learning about and identifying these obstructions, Mohan thus makes his own quest—to mobilise the community and provide electricity to the village. With the help of the villagers, Mohan builds a hydroelectric generator and provides permanent light to the village. In this way Mohan transforms himself into a modern cultural hero, the one symbolically bringing back light to the people, a modern Prometheus.

Mohan in *Swades* stands for the 'active patriotism' related to the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi—the ideology that is a milestone for *Lagaan* as well. In *Swades* the concept of Mahatma Gandhi's *duragraha* or passive resistance is replaced by the active mode of a person's deeds. The person must stand up in battle and fight for his own wealth, not waiting for someone else to do it for him. This is exactly what Mohan does: changing the lives of other people he changes himself, finding power in community spirit and realising the necessity to work for your own sake as well as for the sake of your country, your land and your people. This particular message is generated for the spectators through the mythical structure, as Christopher Vogler observes in his analysis of the mythic structure in literature and films:

> the dramatic purpose of the Hero is to give the audience a window into the story. Each person hearing a tale or watching a play or movie is invited, in the early stages of the story, to *identify with* the Hero, to merge with him and see the world of the story through his eyes. Storytellers do this by giving their Heroes a combination of qualities, a mix of universal and unique characteristics. Heroes have qualities that we all can identify with and recognize in ourselves. They are propelled by universal drives that we can all understand: the desire to be loved and understood, to succeed, survive, be free, get revenge, right wrongs, or seek self-expression. (Vogler 2007, 30)

Identifying some obstructions in the contemporary Indian context, Gowariker also expresses a social critique of Indian society. His main target in *Swades* is the

still existent social segregation into castes and the dominant status of the upper castes over the *dalits* (untouchables). Here, Hindu nationalism of the present day echoes in the characters of the Charanpur elders. This is evident from a talk about America, when a member of the *panchayat* says: 'we have a thing which America never had and never will: culture and tradition' ('*lekin hamaare paas kuch aisa hai, jo unke paas na hai or na kabhi hoega – sanskar aur parampara*'). He continues with 'our country is the greatest country in the world' ('*hamara desh duniya ka sab se mahaan dehs hai*'). He is also supported by another *panchayat* member who says that culture and tradition are the greatest strengths of India ('*samskar aur parampara hamaara sab se bada taakat hai*').

However, as Mohan observes throughout the film, the definitions of culture and traditions in India's reality function in quite another way: this proclaimed patronisation of *culture* and *tradition* is merely the tool for the elders (representing the dominant upper castes) to reinforce their status in society. Analysing this representation of social division, I would like to borrow from Trinh T. Minh-ha the definitions of centre and margin (Trinh 1995, 215–7). The concepts of centre and periphery (or margin) are polished ideological practice. Positioning oneself in the centre clearly draws a demarcation line for those who are on the periphery. 'Any mutation in identity, in essence, in regularity, and even in physical place poses a problem, if not a threat, in terms of classification and control. If you can't locate the other, how are you to locate yourself?' (ibid., 217). Following this insight 'the other' in Gowariker's film becomes the *dalits* (untouchables), through whose otherness the higher castes are able to position themselves. If there wouldn't be untouchables (the periphery), the higher castes would not be able to position their own self and identity (the centre). In this way Hindu nationalism, which declares pride for India and proclaims it the greatest country in the world, still clings to outdated concepts of Hinduism and is mute to the persistent problems in India, making Mohan question this pride the country by asking '[h]ow did we become great then?' (*hum mahaan kaise hue?*).

In his own definition of what culture and tradition are, Ashutosh Gowariker implements the subject of the soil. In one particular scene, Mohan is heading back home to the USA and is stopped by Gita, who hands him a farewell present. This present is a small wooden box, filled with various spices and other natural products.[7] Gita explains that in this tiny box there is a collection of 'our culture'. I would suggest that this moment is quite crucial in understanding the director's point of view towards present-day India and what could be called the distinctive *Indian* identity. Here in this short scene we experience that the natural products, coming from the mother soil or

[7] From the couple of seconds that the camera peers inside the box, we can see vermilion, turmeric powder, rice, kusha grass, cinnamon, and other spices.

the homeland, these spices that are also an inseparable part of various cultural and religious ceremonies, are the true essence of cultural and national identity. Gita's view that these items in themselves are Indian culture, opposes the position of the elders of the village, who justify culture and tradition only to legitimise the old regime and the dominant status of the higher castes in society. Present-day Hindu nationalism, which adapted 'ancient' culture and tradition into a modern concept of nation (Partha Chatterjee cited in Virdi 2003, 28), leaves these concepts as empty definitions, declaring vain pride in India but appearing blind and deaf to the problems of its common people. In Gita's view, tradition and culture is an essence that is related to the soil and that is natural and something not material. Soil then is the essential link that connects the person and the community. The soil is like a collection of memories—a link between a person and nation, the 'eternal home' of the ancestors as Anthony Smith points out (Smith 1999, 270). The idea of community is as clearly pronounced in *Swades* as it is in *Lagaan*. Community—which every person becomes a part of regardless of his religion, social position or caste—is that idealised state in which a country can face and withstand its problems.

Representation of religion(s) in *Lagaan* and *Swades*

In addition to the mythological structure of the films by Gowariker, there is still one important aspect to be considered and that is the representation of religion.

Introducing the term of double temporality in his essay *The Double Temporality of Lagaan*, Grant Farred argues that *Lagaan* functions as a critique of the anti-colonial past at the same time as it operates as a critique of the postcolonial future of India (Farred 2004, 94). Quoting Farred, '*Lagaan* posits an Indian unity that resonates across more than a century and addresses itself—as the retrospectively idealized imaginary national community—to the ethnically driven, religiously tense and divided Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) India 2001' (ibid., 104). This reading of *Lagaan* is quite evident when examining Bhuvan's cricket team, as it is hard to miss the point the director is trying to make about his vision of the ideal India. If we take a closer look at the members of Bhuvan's team, we can see that there are representatives of both major social and major religious backgrounds: a multi-religious conglomerate of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—the main religions of India (even Elizabeth, being an unofficial coach of the team, also suggests a link with the Christian community). At the start of the cricket match, all the members of Bhuvan's team get ready for it according to their own religious identity—by chanting mantras from the Hindu manuscripts or Granth Sahib or Suras from the Koran. In the presence of Hindu na-

tionalism and post-Ayodhya communal religious clashes all over India, it is the director's vision of idealised India, driven forward by strong community spirit without the slightest social or religious segregation.

However, in the particular scene before the final day of the vital third match, we see the whole community of Champaner gathering for the common prayer for Krishna. This scene adds some hints worth of paying attention to concerning the role and status of Hinduism in present-day India. To this scene I will return shortly, before examining one more episode, this time from *Swades*. In *Swades*, during the *Dasara* festival a *ramleela*—or a staged performance of the *Ramayana*—is going on and Gita is performing the dance of Sita as she is imprisoned by Ravana and calling for Rama to come and rescue her. The structural composition of this scene clearly lets the audience identify itself with Mohan, who, like the spectators themselves, is watching the performance. From the composition of the scene, the viewers of the film, together with the village audience watching the performance, realise that it is a repetition of mythological time and space, as Ram, accompanied by Lakshman and Hanuman, finally appears on the scene from the divine-like light, or, speaking in the terms of Mircea Eliade, the performance 'suspends the flow of profane time, of duration, and projects the celebrant into a mythical time, *in illo* tempore' (Eliade 1974, 76). Here it is very important to note that Mohan steps into the *ramleela* performance with some lines he sings—lines which I would consider to be crucially important in interpreting the place and status of Hinduism in contemporary Indian society. Mohan sings: 'Rama is in every house, in every courtyard. The one who gets rid of Ravana from his heart will find Rama there (*Ram har ghar mei hai, Ram har aangan mei hai. Man se Ravan jo nikaale, Ram uske man mei hai*)'.

Continuing with the interpretation of these lines, we have to once again mention the main complex problem that the director points out throughout the film: and that is people's unawareness of their country, waiting for the government to solve all the problems, and not taking any steps to tackle these issues themselves. In *Ramayana*, the demon Ravana can be killed only by a human hand, and for this reason Vishnu takes the form of his seventh avatar as Rama with the mission to slay Ravana. So in this particular moment of *Swades*, when actual and mythical time intertwine, Mohan—the modern man—realises himself anew, namely through Hindu mythology. Rama becomes a model for any (and every) kind of action. Even in the contemporary context, the myth still functions as a particular signpost, signifying that a person will return to peace and personal satisfaction (Rama) when he eliminates the negative, misleading mode of thinking (Ravana). To add to the context, Mohan's realization of 'Man se Ravan jo nikaale—or the one who gets rid of Ravana from his heart' means that a person must take this important step himself.

The first lines say that 'Ram resides in every home and in every courtyard', however. Here, connecting the message to the aforementioned scene from *Lagaan*, we can interpret that the director considers Hindu mythology to be inseparable from any Indian person and the Indian national identity ('Ram resides in every home, in every courtyard'). Therefore, as seen before from the representation of religious practices in Lagaan, we can derive an interpretation of ideal India, as a multi-religious nation-state, where every religion has its own right to be cultivated and nurtured together with the related identity of the devotee. Yet we also see Hinduism functioning as a powerful device in which all other religions are absorbed and incorporated. In this case, Hinduism and Hindu mythology become inseparable from Indian national identity, and it is also viewed as a universal myth system for the devotees of any religion. Hinduism is supposed to be a protective moral/cultural/value system, providing for any Indian spiritual and moral standoff, yet it is perceived as a tolerant religion, not interfering in one's personal religious identity and letting other religions flourish in its surroundings.

By constructing such a complex issue for such a culturally and religiously diverse country as India, the director is opposing the extreme Hindu nationalism, *Hindutva* and related issues, which have always regarded India as the homeland of the Hindus, ignoring Indian religious minorities. Both films state that Hindu mythology is readily available for anyone living in India and is somewhat a universal mode of life, a wisdom providing solutions for difficult times. Thus opposing the nationalistic concept of *Hindutva*, Gowariker proposes a way of life framed by Hindu mythology as universal yet in keeping with personal religious practices.

This idea is also supported by the two superstars who are the leading actors in both films: Amir Khan (*Lagaan*) and Shah Rukh Khan (*Swades*). Although both are Muslims, they can still perform and adapt to Hindu roles and Hindu myth. This is the direct message for Indian viewers, who often tend to identify quite strongly with film characters and the actors: different religious identities being easily merged with Hindu mythology. By seeing their beloved film stars naturally adjusting to the prescribed roles, viewers can more easily be motivated to contemplate and follow the path presented in the films.

Conclusion

The definition of myth proposed by semiotician Roland Barthes states that myth is a type of speech, 'a system of communication that is a message' (Barthes 1991, 107). In a similar manner in Ashutosh Gowariker's films *Lagaan* and *Swades* (films that are not considered mythological per se), myth functions as a communicative tool serving

to validate some of the director's intentions to conceptualize his points about persistent problems in contemporary India, nationalism, patriotism and national identity. In *Lagaan* the director used some symbols related to the Vedas and the *Mahabharata* in order to draw parallels to colonial philosophy and to condemn colonialism as a chaotic state in India, approving the anti-colonial discourse and India's fight for independence. Myth in his film works as a legitimizing and justifying tool of anti-colonial perspectives. In *Swades* the director used the structure of the monomyth and images from *Ramayana* to show the weaknesses of present-day India and to point out possible ways to solve the persistent problems.

Through myth the director also revealed his concern about postcolonial present-day India and the situation with religious segregation. Through the representation of religious practices, Ashutosh Gowariker expressed his idea of the ideal India, where the major religions of India can live together. However, Hinduism could be interpreted as a universal and independent mode of instruction, readily accessible to any Indian and in this manner inseparable from the Indian national identity.

In the director's vision of the idealised India, great importance is laid on community spirit, where everyone can work for his country regardless of religious or social background. This is the director's vision of ideal nationalism—that which confronts the pronounced religious and social segregation in the militarised forms of Hindu nationalism.

The subject of the soil in the films becomes one more link between the person and the realisation of his national identity. As we can see in *Swades*, it is the scene in which Gita presents a small wooden box full of herbs, spices and pigments to Mohan, identifying it with 'our' culture. Through this scene the director also appeals to the Indian diaspora in the West, which has already lost its links with its soil. Soil in *Swades* is the medium that strengthens the transfer of cultural and religious symbols. Culture is thought to be a living organism, not separated from modernity or everyday life. In the film we can see the wish to oppose the traditional Hinduised sense of culture and tradition, which are represented by the village elders as just empty definitions used only for legitimising centuries-old social division and the dominant status of the upper castes. In Mohan's case, tradition and culture are closely related to active patriotism—it is the fight of all members of the community—an anti-colonial fight to firmly re-establish cultural and national identities (*Lagaan*) and the fight for the wellbeing of your motherland in order to create an ideal and flourishing society (*Swades*).

When talking about the concept of nation, Benedict Anderson uses the term 'imagined' to define it: 'it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of

them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 1991, 6). In Ashutosh Gowariker's films, myth is the tool that has the motivational role for people (viewers) to realize their communion with the country they all live in. Myth is also the vehicle for the simple, yet powerful suggestion that anyone can work and transform for the sake of the motherland, since both characters of the films discussed are common men who have the potential of becoming cultural heroes, indicating that anyone can do the same.

'No other art genre mirrors the psyche of Indians as does the popular film: the cinema hall is a temple, a psychiatric clinic, a parliament, and a court of law, and, of course, these in themselves are for them a great source of entertainment' (Nagaraj 2007, 87). To add to this, the films of Ashutosh Gowariker could be seen as both a reflection of the director's personal views of social and political issues in contemporary India and a medium to construct and transfer some important concepts of nationalism, patriotism, and national identity—all of that embedded in the attractive form of the popular Hindi film.

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