

Come home to THE VILLAGE

Ronnie Screwvala is trying to reverse rural migration by improving conditions in villages. Sreelatha Menon reports

In *Swades* (2004), Shahrukh Khan plays a NASA scientist, Mohan Bhagwat, who comes to his village in India on vacation and decides to relocate permanently in order to use his education and skills to improve the lives of villagers. Ronnie Screwvala, who co-produced the film with Ashutosh Gowariker, now wants real life to imitate art.

Screwvala, who sold his controlling stake in UTV, the company he founded, to Walt Disney early this year and is currently managing director of Walt Disney India, hopes to facilitate the home-coming of migrants, *à la Swades*, by improving living conditions in villages. He is doing this through Swades Foundation, the new name given to SHARE, the corporate social responsibility wing of UTV.

Screwvala's goals for the foundation are ambitious. He says he wants both scale and impact. "We want to impact the lives of one million people in Ratnagiri and Raigad districts of Maharashtra in five years. We will then exit these areas and move to other districts in the state and outside, devoting five years to each place. The objective is to make these villages suitable for migrants to return," he says. He has put in ₹350 crore of his own money into the foundation, which he says will be supplemented with an equal amount in donations.

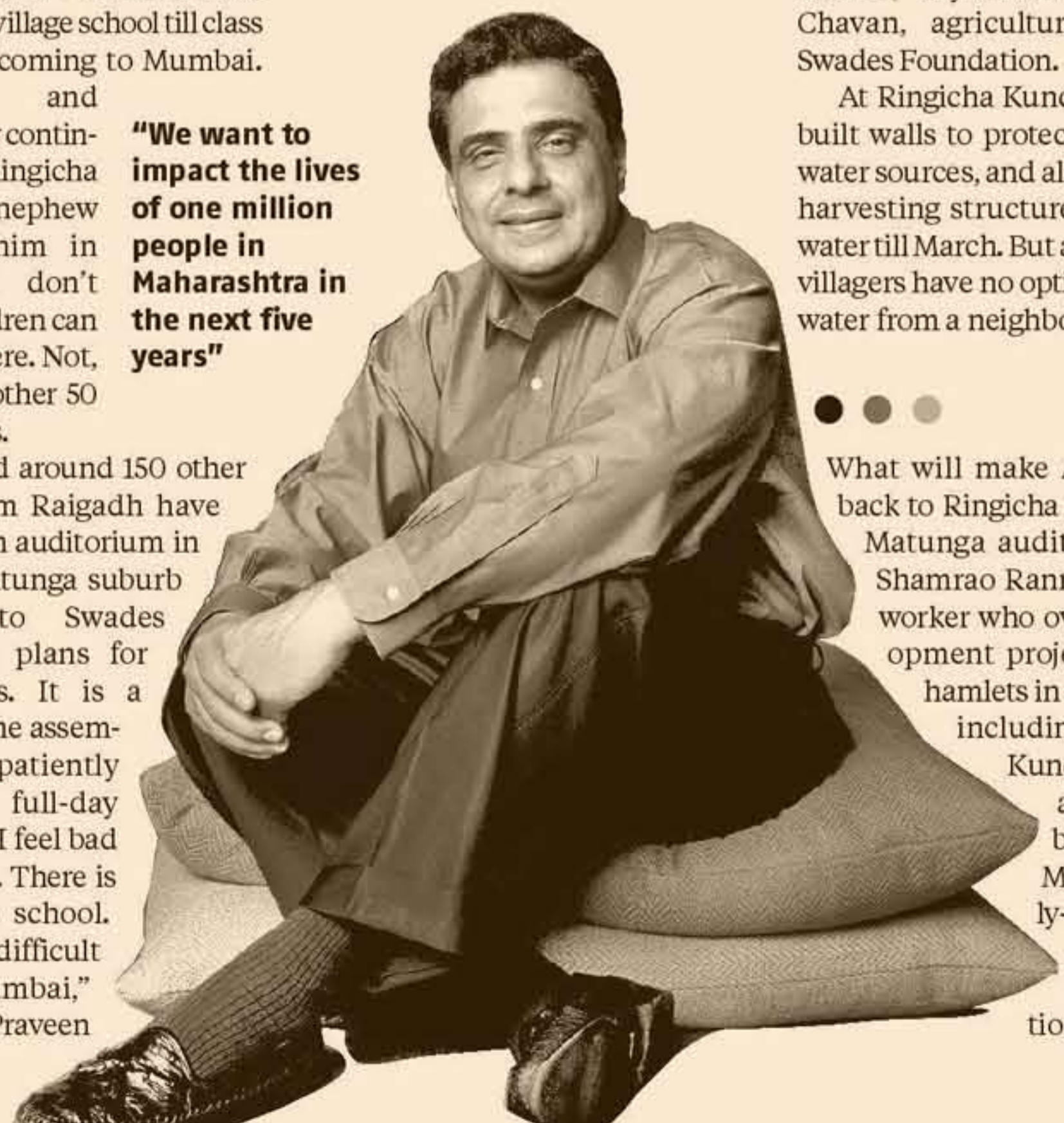
Sudhakar Adkale, a computer engineer who lives in Santacruz, Mumbai, is a potential real-life Mohan Bhagwat. A native of Ringicha Kund village, located 200 km away in Mahad block of Raigadh district, Adkale says he has great hopes from Swades Foundation's project. "People should go back. But it depends on how the plans are implemented," he adds. Adkale studied in the village school till class seven before coming to Mumbai. His father and divorced sister continue to live in Ringicha Kund, but his nephew stays with him in Mumbai. "I don't think my children can go and live there. Not, maybe, in another 50 years," he says.

Adkale and around 150 other migrants from Raigadh have gathered in an auditorium in Mumbai's Matunga suburb to listen to Swades Foundation's plans for their villages. It is a Sunday, but the assembly sits patiently through the full-day programme. "I feel bad for my village. There is no water, no school. But it is also difficult to live in Mumbai," says Adkale. Praveen

Aggarwal, who heads Swades Foundation, says most migrants want to return home. "We have visited the houses of many migrants and found, sometimes, 70 people sharing a room. They take turns to sleep at night," says Aggarwal.

Ringicha Kund is a small village with just 44 households and a population of 300. Most young men here have left the village to earn a

"We want to impact the lives of one million people in Maharashtra in the next five years"



living in the city, leaving behind aged parents and womenfolk.

Swades, in its earlier avatar as SHARE, has been working in many of these villages for close to 20 years. Every house has a toilet, smokeless stoves, solar-street lights; several water-harvesting structures have been built too. But water is still a problem in peak summer. Water scarcity is endemic in the green rocky mountainous terrain of Raigadh. A large creek runs through Raigadh — but its water is salty, unfit for drinking or irrigation.

"We have to let people fill water from taps rather than get water in buckets from a distant source," says Screwvala.

At Nagaon Jangam Vadi village in Mahad, a Swades Foundation project uses the earth's gravity to bring water through the year from a spring well to taps in the village. In a village in Mhasla block, a farmer collected rain water in a tarpaulin-covered pit and raised 14 different crops. "We took people from other blocks to see this farm and learn from it," says Babasaheb Shahaji Chavan, agriculture officer at Swades Foundation.

At Ringicha Kund, Swades has built walls to protect two natural water sources, and also a rainwater harvesting structure that retains water till March. But after April, the villagers have no option but to buy water from a neighbouring village.

What will make Adkale come back to Ringicha Kund? At the Matunga auditorium, Vijay Shamrao Ranmala, a social worker who oversees development projects in all 92 hamlets in Mahad block, including Ringicha Kund, lays out the agenda for the block in chaste Marathi as neatly-dressed Raigadh sits in rapt attention. "Every



(Clockwise from top left) Women and the elderly constitute a majority of the scant population of Ringicha Kund; women gather around the water taps in Nagaon Jangam Vadi. The water comes from a spring well and is supplied using the earth's gravity; beneficiaries of cataract operations arranged by Swades; a woman cooks on a smokeless stove supplied by the Foundation; and a tailoring school for women in Pangari village

Swades village will have easy access to safe drinking water, toilets and additional sources of income related to agriculture. It will have informed and empowered leadership including women's self-help groups, farmers groups, producers associations, and so on, which will have access to information on government schemes and best practices, and will be linked to the marketplace. Every family will have a bank account and access to formal credit." Adkale cheers up further at the mention of industrial investment in the area.

Screwvala has a vision for the model villages he wants to create. "Big bang approaches are not the best strategy," he says. "It has to be a lot of small things. Creating jobs is different from creating occupations. We are not here to create jobs. We have to empower people to earn," he says.

Ranmala says a beginning has been made by grafting around 3,000 mango saplings with high-yielding Alphonso varieties in three villages. These will yield fruit in three years. Cashew is also being grafted with high-yielding varieties in Mahad and Mhasla, which are

focus blocks now. "We want to set up farmers clubs which can become producer companies of cashew and mangoes to supplement the single paddy crop they harvest in rain-fed farms," says Chavan.

Most farmers here have tiny patches of land where they grow paddy, which is mostly consumed through the year with little left over to sell. Swades Foundation has introduced them to cash crops like turmeric and water melons, besides goading them to grow vegetables with waste water. There are scattered success stories. A farmer in Ringicha Kund made ₹3,000 in three months, growing vegetables on his patch.

There are no dairies, so Swades has appointed veterinary doctors to advise villagers in artificial insemination, informs Nicola Monteiro, director, social work. It has also tied up with an NGO, Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation, which is working in 16 states and is known for scaling up agro-based initiatives.

The destruction caused by animals like boars and monkeys is another dampner. Village elders in Pangari in Mahad block are negoti-

ating with Swades to fence their fields. "A fence around an acre costs ₹60,000. We are willing to help if villagers agree to have all fields share a common fence," says Aggarwal.

A health-worker also has been appointed in some villages, and Sightsavers, an NGO, has agreed to train villagers as barefoot ophthalmologists to screen patients for treatment in hospitals in towns. On the skills front, the Foundation is talking to a manufacturer of LCD panels to train villagers in repair and maintenance. "We want to design courses with partners. Education has to include language skills, technology, computers and training in livelihood," says Screwvala.

Since this February, when Screwvala announced Swades Foundation's agenda, 60 people have been recruited. The number will go up to 300 as the Foundation extends its operations to over 770 gram panchayats and population of 1.1 million. A beginning has been made in about 160 villages, says Screwvala. In two years, hopefully, Adkale and other migrants will consider moving back.