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**DAWN**

# Magazine

**PERSONALITY** BY RAZESHTA SETHNA

## Playing the mortal Jinnah



**Jinnah** places the Quaid-i-Azam in a befitting context during the struggle for Partition where we see him as a pro-western, tolerant and moderate leader unlike historical censure which labels him as cold and calculating

**I**t's been almost two years since Jamil Dehlavi shot Jinnah in Pakistan amidst storms of controversies designed at ostracizing the cast and crew. It was then that the government decided to withdraw its pledged funding of rupees 60 million forcing the producers to seek out alternative financial avenues. Fund-raising in Karachi could not meet the total cost of this film.

It was later in the USA that a group of Pakistani doctors (forming the Quaid Film Project Ltd-USA) led by Moin Qureshi and Dr Naseem Ashraf, rescued the film by contributing one and a half million dollars as investors. The Quaid Film Project Ltd-UK/USA owns the film and all commercial profits raked in by the company will later be used to pay off Pakistani and other investors.

Finally, produced with a shoestring budget estimated to rest between \$3 to \$5 million, Jinnah has been screened at private showings in Hollywood (1998), the Montreal Film festival in late 1998 and the London Film Festival in November 1998 - all to rave reviews. Later next month, it will be screened at the Cannes Film Festival and the Houston Film Festival where I am convinced that theatres will be full to their capacity to watch a dignified and principled man who navigates through a moral question in his lifetime.

In Pakistan, Jinnah will be launched in May this year at the Governor's residence in Karachi through the efforts of the Jinnah Society in conjunction with the Quaid Film Project Ltd-UK-USA and Mandviwalla Entertainment Ltd as the distributors of the film.

The Jinnah Society is an organization that was established in the wake of the film crisis in 1997 by impressed Karachiites who campaigned to defend the film against media criticism and held small fund-raisers to support the venture. Members of the Jinnah Society include Liaquat Merchant, Julian Singha, Ali Hasnain, Mr & Mrs Shafqat Shah Jamote, Ali Raza, Spenta Kandawalla amongst others, all of whom believed that the film needed advocacy in Pakistan.

A retired, Pakistani army major Lal Khan Bhatti filed a case in the Sindh High Court against Akbar Ahmed, Jamil Dehlavi, Shashi Kapoor and Christopher Lee for defamation of Jinnah but the case was thrown out. He alleged that the script distorted history; that it inappropriately cast Christopher Lee who 'was associated with horror and sex films in the past and does not bear any resemblance to Mohammed Ali Jinnah; that there is a Gabriel and Satan in the script; and that Shashi Kapoor is an Indian actor.

This resulted in igniting initial scepticism fuelled by biased and uninformed media reports. Jamil Dehlavi's talent as a director-cum-scriptwriter was not endorsed by the Pakistani public who perceived him as a rebel artist.

What does an Indian actor do in this film as an archangel left to judge the Father of the Nation? How would Dehlavi's Jinnah be portrayed? questioned certain quarters. Dehlavi has answered all that and much more through this film which is definitely not a propaganda history lesson but a cinematic experience.

Jinnah was viewed by Nawaz Sharif at the GHQ on April 2, 1999 where it is believed that the film was given a standing ovation. Kudos goes to the tenacity of producer Akbar S. Ahmed and director Jamil Dehlavi, both of whom did not can the project back in 1997 but were determined that it would see the light of day.

"An art film," said Akbar S. Ahmed at a special screening at the Governor's house, "without stringent adhering to historical

narration alone."

Perceptions will change rapidly when this film is released nationwide proving that it was made to document the life and times of the Quaid-i-Azam with accuracy but not without sensitivity and emotion. The script is reflective of a well-integrated project where cinema is used to create symbols of grandeur.

Despite the major hiccups, shooting continued amidst security for the cast in mid-1997. I was witness to many of the gruelling hours spent by the cast and crew in the blazing summer sun as they worked to finish the film. It was quite amusing to watch how the British crew beat the heat by ingeniously wrapping their heads in white cotton turbans or how they sat through soft cow-dung covered bastis and collapsible straw huts for nearing 24 hours as they recreated a Muslim village in 1946-47 which is evacuated and burnt down by the Hindus.

The film wants to tell another story of Jinnah. Of 50 years ago when millions of Muslims packed their bags and trekked across the border on foot and in trains leaving their homes in India for an unexplored country. Two million and more were killed in bloody violence as 15 million lost their homes during Partition. Families never met for decades; even today many remain separated or lost to another country.

Jinnah, the statesman as we have been tutored to recognize, hangs on the wall of public offices and colleges or is the perfect politician portrayed by history books. In this film he is more than the creator of Pakistan but a pained and devastated man. Destroyed by the vacuum in his own personal life and the slaughter of his Muslim immigrants in 1946-47.

Probably Attenborough's Gandhi showed him as a 'cold, devious megalomaniac, bent on the bloody partition of India' but in fact Jinnah was terribly humane. He died one year after Pakistan's creation and was eclipsed in history by the more charismatic figures of Nehru and Gandhi. The bloody scenes of migration in the wake of uprooting left him thinking whether he had made the correct decision: he is shocked when the train carrying Muslims to Karachi is strewn with dead bodies. When Shashi Kapoor asks him one last question: if you had to beg forgiveness of one person in your life, who would that be? We are taken to the desert where Talat Hussain plays the role of father to a Muslim refugee girl and is walking besides a bullock cart when he sees the Quaid. A teary eyed Jinnah speaks to the girl who barely recognizes him in her grief. Lee is said to have actually shed tears: it was such a poignant moment.

The refugees are projected with an aerial view as they chant in a frenzy led by Talat Hussain: Quaid-i-Azam Zindabad and I had goose bumps all over my arms. It was a magnetic chant that might inspire the masses who will watch this film dubbed in Urdu and hopefully be discerning enough to comprehend that Muhammad Ali Jinnah scarified his life to carve out a liberal Muslim state. Liberal because he was no fanatic. He was

not part of the leadership breed we see today.

For a western audience viewing this film in the 21st century, this may be inconceivable. But Jinnah's role models were Englishmen; he spoke the Queen's English; he wore Saville Row suits and did not don a beard; he married a Parsi woman; did a stint as Romeo on the London stage whilst at Oxford and was a barrister from Lincoln's Inn. Yet all this made Dehlavi's Jinnah

upright, honourable, incorruptible, tough and sympathetic: an amalgamation that Pakistanis have not examined because they are so used to the extremist clergy and militant dictators of present times.

Jinnah had hard choices before him: many scholars like Ayesha Jalal are of the view that he never wanted a separate state but that he was advocating a separate Muslim entity within India but when the Congress party rejected that in 1946-47, he had no alternative left. The film tackles this and says that under the circumstances what Jinnah did was the best thing possible for the Muslims of India.

The film opens not long after Partition on a desert road with an

ambulance out of gas trying to hurtle ahead with a sick Jinnah and an anxious Fatima Jinnah. Jinnah had been plagued with consumption during his later years but was determined no one find out about his condition. The subsequent scene is within an ancient library with stacks of books in tall shelves but one with computers. A wobbling Shashi Kapoor welcomes Jinnah in a transitory area before he is sent permanently to an afterlife.

More of a purgatory setup with Kapoor as the film's narrator and Jinnah's humorous judge. The relationship between the two frames the high moral values of the Quaid: he refuses to peep through a key hole when Kapoor wants to find out the exact nature of Nehru and Edwina's meetings! Shashi Kapoor is like a device of fantasy used to journey through a life where the complexities of politics is not the only treated perspective of this film.

What is also interesting is that a local audience will be able to recognize historical locations used in this film: as Kothari Parade, Mohata Palace and the Governor's house in Karachi amongst other private old residences belonging to established families. The Baluch Regiment plays for the film but it is the dramatic version of the national anthem rendered for a particular scene that is a novel insertion: when Allama Iqbal talks to the young Jinnah in England trying to coax him to return to India and politics.

Many will not be ecstatic with the portrayal of Nehru played by Rasheed Surhawardy as the much-talked of romance between the leader of the Congress and Edwina Mountbatten is given quite a lot of cinema space. Of course there are no explicit bedroom scenes but she does assert in not so many words to Nehru that Dickie has lent her to him. And love letters exchanged between the two are also mentioned in the film.



**KAPOOR AND LEE: The odd couple (?)**



Many say this relationship effected Partition and the division of districts as Kashmir and sidelined Jinnah from the entire process in pre-1947 India. Scholars have used this relationship to assess the story of Independence claiming that Mountbatten was more accessible to Nehru and the concerns of the Congress. James Fox as Mountbatten in no way blatantly shows any homosexual inclinations yet he is not disturbed when his wife behaves like a discreet tease with Nehru. Sam Dastoor plays the role of Gandhi who sort of echoes the ideas of the young Jinnah and later respects the Muslim League leader more than Nehru.

It is indisputably the relationship between the young Jinnah (Richard Lintern) and his wife Ruttie Pettite (Indira Verma) that many will see for the first time in a film. "I loved her more than I showed it," he confesses to Shashi Kapoor. They make a handsome couple who ride together as lovers but their marriage dies soon after Jinnah gets involved with the politics of Partition. He changes into a spokesperson for the millions of Muslims when once he was merely a barrister in Bombay. It is a sad story between Jinnah and Ruttie but truly depicted as we see scenes when the beautiful Ruttie is craving for attention but her husband has no time. She dies very young of cancer leaving a tiny Dina who is cared for by the Pettite's. Her funeral is shown in the film where Richard Lintern gives a powerfully stirring performance immediately dispelling all notions that Jinnah was a coldhearted man. He was a man who could not decide at first whether his own life or his political convictions were more important.

The climax of the film is created with the narrator (he acts as the judge yet again) giving Jinnah a lawyer's wig and a gown in the eternal room after which he enters an English courtroom with refugees packed in public galleries staring at you with pained expressions. What follows is a series of questions posed to India's last viceroy who stands accused for being an enemy of Pakistan. Jinnah submits pieces of evidence stating Mountbatten moved the date of Partition up by eight months; he gave the whole military arsenal at Ferozepur to India after it had been allocated by Radcliffe to Pakistan when he drew up the boundary; made a mess over Kashmir and did not send in British troops to stop the slaughter. The entire scene might be critiqued for being a bit farfetched or annoy the British press for putting Mountbatten on the dock but nonetheless it answers many of the questions that followed Partition. It is another device used to create imaginary cinema at its best. Jinnah replies to Mountbatten's refusal to send in troops: "After two hundred years of looting, exploiting and colonial theft? I suppose my Lord there is honour among thieves. My Lord, I rest my case."

At a time when Pakistan needs to reinforce national pride and trust within the nation, Jinnah might just about be used to do that. We are on the lowest rung of the ladder of progress because corruption and dishonourable politics has destroyed this nation. "I want to show that the Muslim world has produced great leaders like Mohammed Ali Jinnah who believed in human rights and women's rights," said Akbar S. Ahmed.

I believe that after 50 years of Pakistan we have a film that finally deals with the real father of the nation - not as some divine ruler but as a man who as Gandhi puts it is the 'greatest advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity'. In the film he is shown addressing a group of Muslims where he indicates religious tolerance: "You will be free to go to your mosques, to your temples or any other places of worship in your Pakistan." We should bow our heads with shame at the mention of the Quaid-i-Azam's principles after 50 years of corruption, injustices and political horrors. He must be terribly distressed and angry with his Pakistan after half a century. "History," Jinnah said in 1947, "will be the ultimate judge of Pakistan." ■