

Resurrecting Mr. Jinnah

By Anwer Mooraj

Seated on the spacious lawn of the Sindh Governor's House on the night of May 29, deep in seeding grass, waiting for the start of the premiere of Akbar S. Ahmed's much awaited film *Jinnah*, I hadn't the slightest idea what to expect. Press columns had in the recent past been littered with stories of interference by Pakistan's ministry of information and various other pressure groups, of court cases and stay orders, of having had to snip off scenes and introduce fresh ones, of refining and altering dialogues, of passing the hat around the Pakistan American doctors' community and last but not least, falsifying the sepia tints of history. We might be in for a bit of a cinematic pastiche, I thought, where Mr. Jinnah would be projected as some kind of crusading modern theocrat acceptable to both the religious and secular forces that mould public opinion in the country. In other words, a story-line calculated to please everybody.

Nothing of the sort happened. In fact, the film turned out to be elegantly produced and eminently viewable. The founder of the nation, portrayed for the last 50 years as an austere and inflexible father figure continuously confronted by a rising inflection of uncertainty, was now depicted as a human being who had his weaknesses, could experience ecstasy and suffer bouts of depression. Above all, a man who was capable of deep introspection and self doubt. In this review, however, I am not commenting on the historical, but rather on the cinematic aspects of the film.

In order to achieve his objective, Akber S. Ahmed required an

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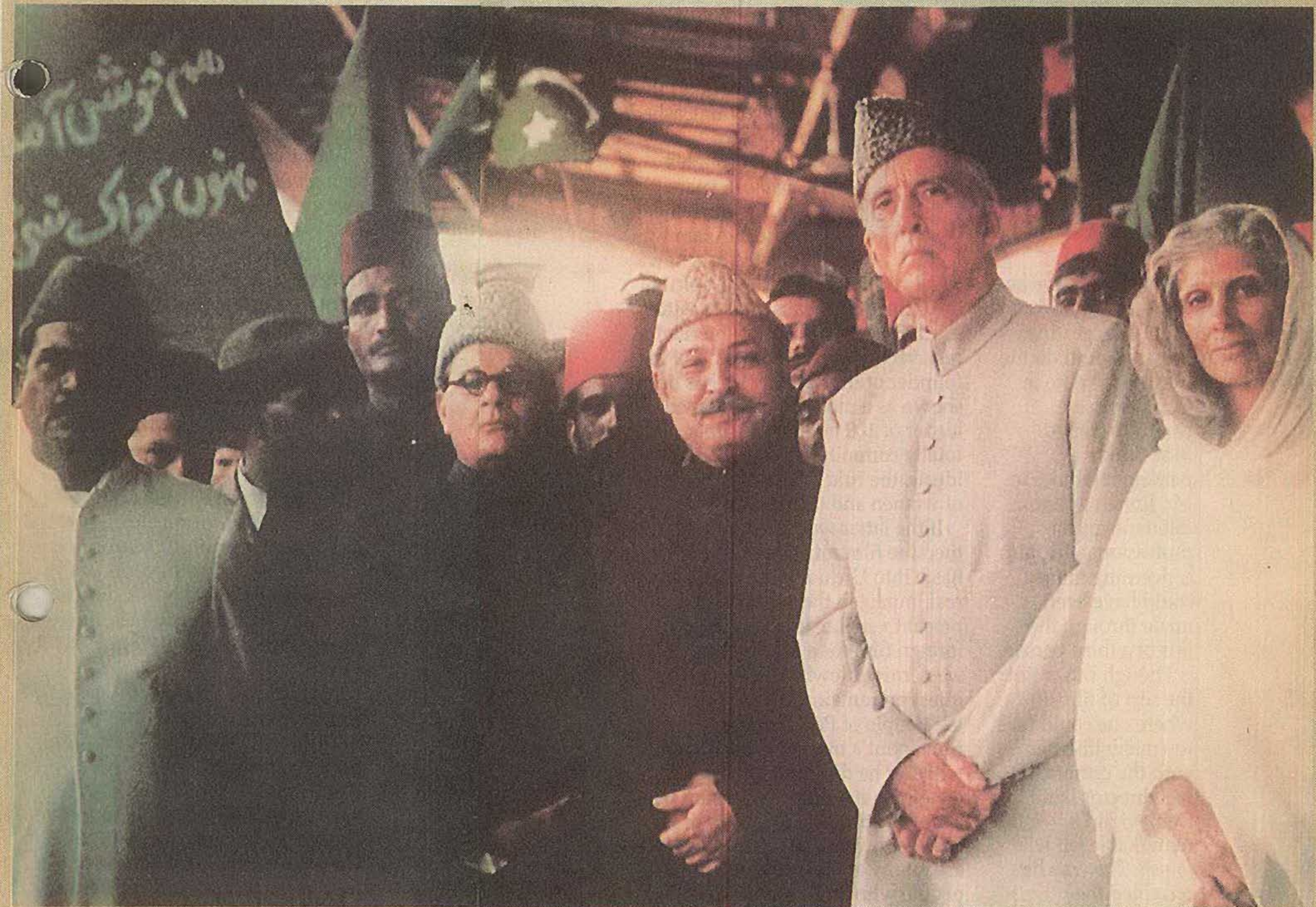
Herald

alter ego, the Quaid (Christopher Lee) travels backwards in time through a series of flashbacks. This turning back to a situation, without physically leaving it, has a touch of Sartre about it and certainly adds an interesting dimension to the film. But in spite of the brouhaha and fanfare, the general impression was nevertheless one of a low-budget cameo production. This is understandable since the lack of adequate finance plagued the team from the very inception.

The script was well written and the treatment careful and respectful.

moment in the film, three scenes stood out as cinematic landmarks. The old Mr. Jinnah meeting himself as a young man (Richard Lintern), recently married and in the prime of life was one of the few happy moments in the movie. Shot against the friction of foliage, time just seems to stand still in this scene.

The second noteworthy scene was that of the young Mr. Jinnah breaking down after hearing of the death of his beautiful young wife Ruttie (Indira Verma). A poignant scene which had the faint-hearted among the audience dabbing at



approach which was significantly different from the curiously cobbled together pieces televised in the past on ceremonial occasions. And so he introduced a technique which, though not original, was nevertheless quite effective.

Egged on by the narrator (Shashi Kapoor) who plays Mr. Jinnah's

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While there was never a dull

their eyes, it was meant to demonstrate that this great leader of men, who always managed to display a cool serenity, was capable of experiencing considerable remorse.

And finally, back to the old Mr. Jinnah conducting the mock trial which, in a sense, is perhaps the

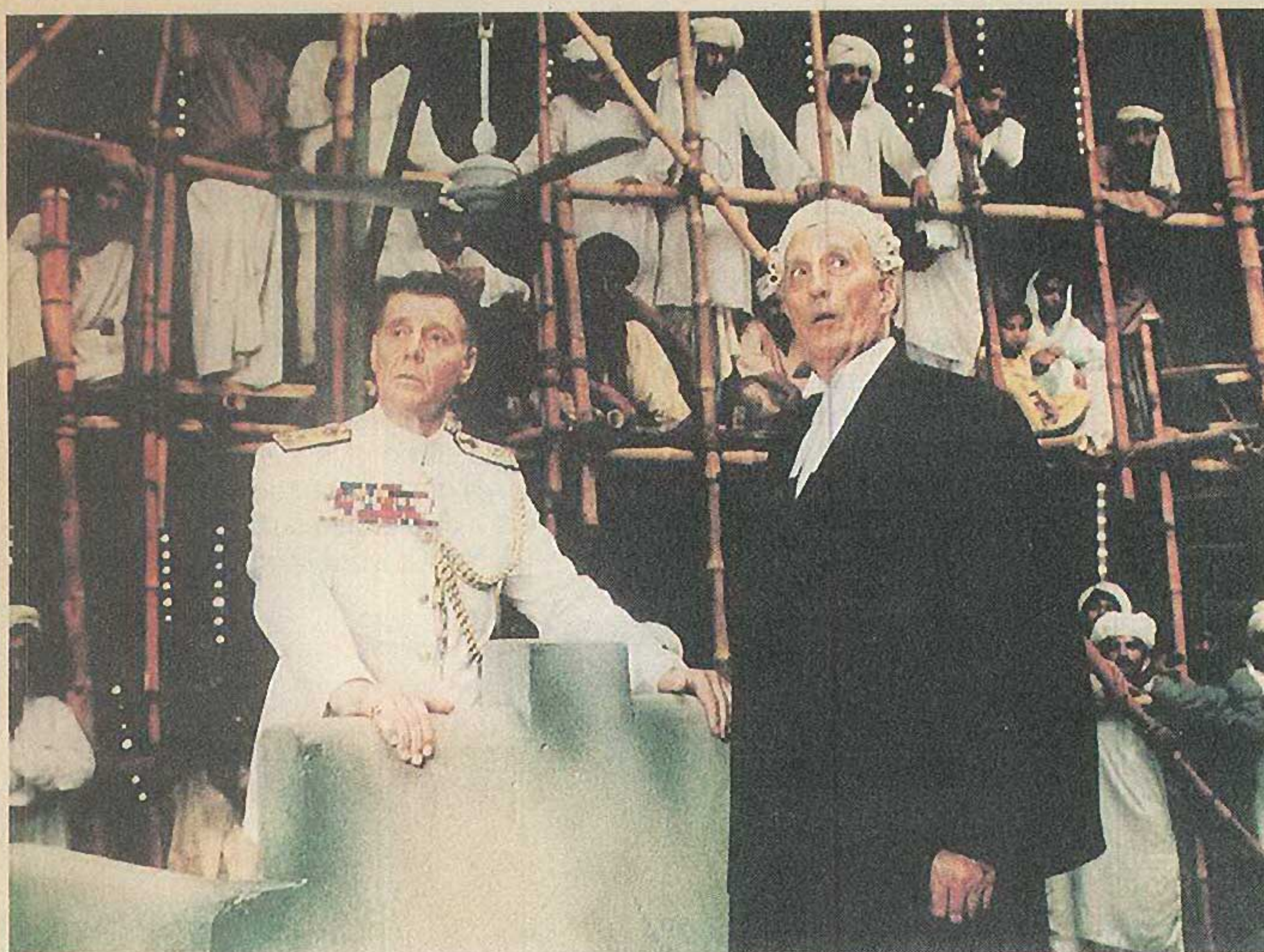
most important scene in the film as it tries to offer an explanation for why things went drastically wrong after Partition. Lord Mountbatten, Radcliffe, Gracey and other upholders of the empire are in the dock answering a carefully scripted charge sheet. Each face betrays polite misgivings as the great Lincoln's Inn barrister convincingly demonstrates Mountbatten's complicity and active participation in a grand plan to ensure that the new emerging nation should get off to a disastrous start.

Now a word about the cast.

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Christopher Lee was absolutely convincing as Mr. Jinnah. His commitment was total and he played his role with considerable understanding and dignity. His resemblance to the Quaid after the make-up crew had done its job was uncanny. The handsome Richard Lintern portrayed the young Mr. Jinnah with considerable dash and the right amount of recklessness. And the beautiful Indira Verma seemed rightly to belong to the Travers era of sporty baronets, girls with rigid curls, silly young men in blazers with scarves flying in the breeze and the general aura of everything being tickety boo.

Shireen Shah was competent as Miss Fatima Jinnah and Maria Aitkins did justice to the role of Lady Mountbatten, which was certainly not an easy part to play.



angles to accentuate the height of the ceilings were some of the techniques he employed most successfully.

After the show was over and the audience filed out on to the lawn, a little bewildered but considerably wiser, some people did ask what was the point in making such a film 50 years after Pakistan was created. Was it because somebody felt an irresistible urge to counter the publicity unleashed by Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* 16 years ago, in which the Quaid-e-Azam was depicted as a hawk

Sam Dastur came across rather well as the wily Mahatma and Rashid Suhrawardy's performance of Pandit Nehru would, I think, have won the approval of Roshan Seth. But I wasn't at all happy with the selection of James Fox to play the governor general. Lord Louis Mounbatten was a tall, athletic, handsome and dapper Englishman with a commanding presence who had a gift for dominating political situations and who greatly enjoyed his role as eminence grise. In the film, he was made to look more like a sixth form schoolmaster on holiday in the tropics, rambling over a pub lunch, than an envoy of the king emperor who was about to pluck the 'Jewel' from the Crown.

Nor was I pleased with the role assigned to Liaquat Ali Khan (Shakeel) who came across as a fringe thinker forced to assume a para-political role. The scene in which he is closeted with Mr. Jinnah

in an airplane and the latter says he is going to take a salary of only one rupee a year, possibly suggesting that Liaquat Ali Khan should do the same, struck the only sour note in

an otherwise carefully crafted film. Surely a passing reference to Mr. Jinnah's almost dilettante quasi-professional disdain concerning money could have been made through the lips of a third person.

Though this is not the sort of film where one could take too many liberties with the camera, I feel director Jamil Dehlavi did a remarkable job with *Jinnah*. The way he recreated the political and social atmosphere of the

period was admirable. The sets, magnificent in red sandstone and terracotta with wide terraces, jalousies, louvered shutters and ample lawns, were elaborate and authentic. The interplay of light and shade, the garden scenes shot in soft focus sunlight and the low camera

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totally out of sync with the spirit of the times? Or because the unsettled conditions in the country merited a resurrection and exhumation of the founder of the nation who has been shown as a modern, enlightened leader of 100 million Muslims, totally committed to democratic ideals, the rule of law and the rights of women and the minorities?

If the latter was the motivation, then the film must be dubbed post-haste into Urdu if it is to have any real impact in the country. In its present version, it is very much a foreign film for a select, westernised few. But the nagging question remains unanswered. Are the people of Pakistan ready for a film about a man who questions whether he did the right thing in creating a new country, a man who is now a stranger in the city of his birth and whose ideals and vision are totally at variance with the people who now rule this troubled land? Even if *Jinnah* does eventually manage to find its way into the local cinemas, there is no guarantee that it will attract movie audiences addicted to the emotion-drenched sagas of the Lahore studios or the apocalyptic pulp with its clanging, shrieking metal that is imported from Italy and Hong Kong. Only time will tell. ■