

Deconstructing Jinnah



Pulling off a challenge with

B i n a S h a h

Richard Attenborough's "Gandhi" portrayed Quaid-e-Azam as an evil schemer. Can Jamil Dehlavi's film repair the damage done to the image of the father of the nation?

Karachi 1948: A Dakota plane has landed on a dusty air-strip outside Karachi. The first passenger to alight is Fatima Jinnah, accompanied by her ill brother, Mohammed Ali Jinnah who is taken from the aircraft in a stretcher and put in an ambulance. But the ambulance soon runs out of petrol and as Fatima Jinnah and the doctor stand on the road, watching clouds race across the pink evening sky, the founder of Pakistan lies dying inside the ambulance.

This is the first scene of Akbar S Ahmed and Jamil Dehlavi's movie "Jinnah" which premiered in Pakistan at the Sindh Governor's House in Karachi. Organised by the Jinnah Society, the gala evening included an awards ceremony in which Graham Layton and Hakim Saeed were posthumously presented with the annual award given to people who would do Jinnah proud. The highlight of the evening, however, was not the presentation of the awards nor the lengthy speeches ("You've made us wait two years, so you might as well wait another hour", quipped Ahmed in his speech), but the screening of the most talked about film for Pakistanis all over the world.



Bringing back the golden years -- extras on the set of the film



Director Jamil Dehlavi (left) and Akbar S Ahmed (right) share centre stage in Karachi

"Jinnah" is an artistic account of the events that shaped not only the foundation of Pakistan but the life of its creator. It is neither an epic, nor a historical documentary and while there are no gaping historical inaccuracies, events have been creatively played with to give colour and vibrancy to the facts. The result is a highly watchable, gripping portrayal of the time in which Mohammed Ali Jinnah (Christopher Lee), renowned barrister, rose to become the man who single-handedly changed the face of South Asia.

Putting to rest the rumours of angels, Shashi Kapoor makes his appearance right at the beginning of the film as the Narrator, a gatekeeper of sorts, one who goes through the records and makes recommendations as to where the about-to-die should make their eternal abode. However, just as Jinnah's soul arrives in the library where the Narrator works, the computers have crashed and Jinnah's file is missing. The alternative method, the Narrator informs Jinnah, is to actually revisit, by crossing time and space, the significant events of Jinnah's personal and public life, to see whether he should be rewarded or punished for his actions during his lifetime.

This is, of course, a metaphor for the many questions being asked about Partition in retrospect. Was the creation of Pakistan a triumph or a travesty, can the massive loss of life during Partition be blamed on Jinnah or not, did he sacrifice the happiness of his loved ones -- sister Fatima (Shireen Shah), wife Ruttie (Indira Varma), daughter Dina (Vaneza Ahmed) -- for his singular ambitions and was he an honourable statesman or a manipulative politician?

Thus begins a dual odyssey, backwards through his life for Jinnah, but forwards for the audience through the early days of the Indian independence movement. Dehlavi has chosen not to move chronologically but in a series of flashbacks as he jumps from one event to the next. This technique causes some confusion, giving the movie an erratic, disjointed feel at times but you grow used to it as the film progresses and eventually the sight of a youthful Jinnah (Richard Lintern) receiving advice from the elder Jin-

nah in the same frame begins to make sense.

The important historical moments are all there: the Congress meetings, the passing of the Lahore Resolution, the arrival of Jinnah as Governor-General in the new Pakistan. The early scenes show Jinnah's growing frustration with the condescension of both Gandhi (Sam Dastor) and Nehru (Rashid Suhrawardy) towards the Muslim minority, while the later scenes portray Jinnah's evolution into his role as leader of a new, vulnerable nation.

Richard Lintern and Christopher Lee have masterfully played their roles. Lintern's young Jinnah is highly intelligent, a skilled barrister, and a man who combines propriety with passion. His speeches are delivered with a forceful intensity and yet some of the most touching scenes of the movie show his love for the beautiful yet fragile Ruttie. Her funeral, where Jinnah breaks down and weeps for his lost wife, is heart-rending.

Lee, as the older Jinnah, has a more complex role: he must not only portray the historical scenes that occurred while he was alive, but he must also take stock of events, defend his decisions, and revisit painful episodes at the end of his life with the Narrator. It requires Lee to call upon two levels of performance: one as a dignified, firm, resourceful decision-maker, the other as an introspective, almost brooding but determined individual. Lee has succeeded on both levels. His Jinnah is ambitious, headstrong almost obsessive in his desire to create Pakistan, yet he displays a witty charm and a dry sense of humour that makes you realise the depths of his character.

Many moments in the movie highlight Jinnah's impeccable manners and morals. At a dinner party in Bombay, the English hostess slyly insults Ruttie by suggesting she wear a shawl over her décolleté dress, and Jinnah defends her by saying, "when Mrs Jinnah feels the need for a wrap she will ask for one herself". In another scene, when Liaquat Ali Khan (Shakeel) suggests that Jinnah use stolen letters between Edwina Mountbatten and Jawaharlal Nehru to gain leverage in the Pakistan negotiations, Jinnah refuses point-blank, stating unequivocally that he will not use blackmail to gain political advantage. "I am sorry for the thought that has blackened your generous mind", he chastens Khan.

The two lines in the movie that drew spontaneous applause from the audience also had to do with Jinnah's beliefs. A religious fanatic attempts to take Jinnah's life because Jinnah supports the rights of women and minorities. In the only show of anger throughout the whole movie, Jinnah shouts, "you are an ignorant fool -- I have fought for the rights of your mother, your sister, and your children's children -- Islam has no place for fanatics like you". And in another scene Jinnah informs Liaquat Ali Khan that he will be the first

Prime Minister of Pakistan. "And as for your remuneration, my own salary is one rupee per month. We must be the first to set an example".

Yet "Jinnah" is never a preachy film. Things can and do go wrong for Jinnah, as illustrated in the scenes that show the slaughter of Muslim migrants. Jinnah holds on to his belief that he was acting for the good of the millions of Muslims who did survive Partition but is deeply grieved by the loss of life and suffering inflicted upon his people. Still, the Narrator gives Jinnah a chance to make amends. When asked by the Narrator if there is one person that he would like to apologize to, Jinnah chooses to visit a girl who has lost her mother while crossing into Pakistan. This scene is the climactic end of the film, one that is better seen than described on paper.

A standout performance in the movie is that of Shireen Shah, who plays Fatima Jinnah all the way from her youth to her old age. She plays Fatima with the right amount of tenderness, yet the saccharine sweetness of a martyr is avoided and an interesting moment emerges when Fatima says to Ruttie's photograph that she could never see Jinnah through to his destiny the way she, Fatima, could. Although in the movie Fatima denies any jealousy, this points to a rivalry that might have subconsciously existed between the two main women in Jinnah's life and highlights some of the complexities of Fatima's character.

Another subplot in the movie is the affair between Edwina Mountbatten (Maria Aitken) and Jawaharlal Nehru. Although the filmmakers promised there would be no outrageous sex scenes, the bedroom scenes leave no doubt as to the nature of their relationship, and the influence that Nehru has on both Edwina and her husband Lord Mountbatten (James Fox) is a running

thread throughout the film.

Dehlavi as a director thoroughly entices the eye of the viewer with unconventional camera angles. One scene shows Jinnah and his doctor in conversation from the vantage point of the ceiling -- you can see the two speaking between the slowly rotating blades of an old-fashioned fan. Another shot traces Jinnah's movements as he is walking on the beach, following his hand reaching down to pick up a coin, and focuses on his beautiful shoes. The result is a feeling of power, of muscularity and yet by staying in sync with the actor's movements, Dehlavi achieves fluidity and sensuousness as well. This is a director who treats every scene with love.

On the other hand, he creates a number of jarring images that stay in your mind long after the film is over. One of the most violent is that of a refugee woman being killed by a spear stabbed into her stomach. Another is a scene where Hindu troublemakers throw a dead pig over the walls of the mosque into the ranks of the Muslims standing in prayer.

"Jinnah" is not an easy film to watch. It does not veer towards sentimentality -- a trap that would have been all too easy to fall into, given the subject matter and the controversies that arose during the making of the film. Instead, Dehlavi lets the strength of the characters, the acting, and the compelling nature of the story speak for itself. His deft touches are like the strokes of a painter, adding the right amount of light here and shadows there. This creates an effect that is subtle, understated and in the end far more powerful than a trite tear-jerker or an overreaching epic.

In watching "Jinnah", you are forced to really exercise your mind to understand the movie, which is the richest experience any film can offer.