

## Jinnah on the Silverscreen\*

At the end of the Chicago screening of the film “Jinnah,” its director Jamil Dehlavi briefly stated the three goals he had in mind when he took up the project. He intended (1) to correct history, (2) present the liberal side of Islam, and (3) bring to life a person largely unknown to younger Pakistanis both at home and abroad. What he did not declare, however, was known to everyone. The main purpose of Dehlavi and his Executive Producer, Akbar S. Ahmad—the two wrote the screenplay, and the latter was the initiator of the project and its chief spokesman on many occasions—was to produce a ‘tit’ for what the two had taken to be a ‘tat’ directed at Pakistan, i.e. Richard Attenborough’s film, “Gandhi.” The latter was very much on the mind of the largely Pakistani-American audience too, for almost everyone I spoke to afterward asked me: how does it compare with “Gandhi?”

Such a comparison would be unfair, for the simple reason that all films are made with money, and Attenborough had a great deal more money to spend on his. He even received considerable financial support from the Government of India. Dehlavi and Ahmed never got the promised financial support from the Government of Pakistan, and their film could be completed only due to the efforts of many Pakistanis living abroad. That the duo finished the project against severe odds goes much to their credit. Secondly, Attenborough, a seasoned actor and director, had already made a few box office hits before he made “Gandhi.” Dehlavi, to my knowledge, had made only two feature films earlier: “Blood of Husain;” and “Immaculate Conception.”

I saw “Blood of Husain” a long time ago in San Francisco, at a film festival, and “Immaculate Conception” on a similar occasion later in Chicago. Both, I remember, were terribly confused films, verging on being ridiculous, even crude. They were excellent examples of what happens when someone desperately strives to be profound but lacks the wit even to be clever. I, therefore, am very happy to report that “Jinnah” does not suffer from such ‘profundicitis’. Dehlavi has finally made a real film. Its narrative line is accessible, and no gratuitous symbolism overwhelms the fairly straightforward fare actually offered. On the whole, it makes for an enjoyable cinematic experience; occasionally, in fact, it is quite moving. Christopher Lee plays the older Jinnah with a dignity and restraint that is amazing when compared with his extravagant performances in the horror films he is famous for. His selection for the role was received with derision and anger in Pakistan, but now even his worst detractors should have no hesitation in honouring him.

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\* Written in May 1999, it was sent for publication in Pakistan in some journal, but I can’t recall where.

The film opens with Jinnah's final hours. He is brought back to Karachi from a hill station, mortally ill. The ambulance breaks down on the way from the airport. As they wait for a new ambulance, Jinnah goes into a coma, in which state he finds himself in a sort of limbo that is conceived as an archive. There he views his life in a long series of flashbacks, guided by "The Narrator" (Shashi Kapoor), whose task, supposedly, also includes giving the final verdict on Jinnah. This narrative device, according to Akbar Ahmad, was introduced at Dehlavi's insistence. In an article by Fatima Yamin (*Dawn*, April 18, 1999), Ahmad is quoted as saying, "It was Jamil's idea to move the straightforward script into the realm of fantasy. He felt it would be more exciting this way. Initially I was uncomfortable, but I realized it would make for a better film." I'm not sure it always does that. The device works to the extent that it allows Dehlavi to link assorted, deliberately chosen incidents, but it becomes clumsy when he uses it to editorialize more explicitly by setting up 'straw' questions then knocking them down. Incidentally, Gandhi (Sam Dastor) and Nehru (Robert Ashby) are also shown near the end of the film watching on TV monitors the BBC's coverage of the demolition of the 'Babri' Mosque, apparently still awaiting the posterity's judgment.

Nehru, of course, is the big villain of this film. Ambitious. Selfish. Having an affair with Edwina Mountbatten (Maria Aitken) almost as if to have an inside access to imperial power. I didn't count the minutes, but Nehru-Edwina bedroom scenes appear to get almost as much time as do all the scenes of Gandhi and Mountbatten (James Fox) combined. Edwina fiercely identifies with Nehru's causes. Like Lady Macbeth, she even shores up his ambition to be the first prime minister of India when it begins to crumble in the face of growing communal violence in Delhi. No explanation is offered as to how or why the two originally found each other, but the script does offer, through the filmic Nehru, two explanations for Mountbatten's apparent indifference to their affair: (1) he was tired of Edwina and, therefore, her infidelity did not bother him; and (2) he had a 'special' notion of friendship, which included the three of them—a kind of *ménage à trois*, with some hint of male homo-eroticism thrown in for good measure.

At one stage, the "Narrator" offers Jinnah an opportunity to spy upon the two lovers, but he firmly declines. Later, Liaquat Ali Khan (Shakeel) brings him some purloined letters of the two lovers and suggests that they be used for political goals, but again Jinnah is resolutely upright. He even scolds Liaquat for entertaining such a vile thought.

Fatima Jinnah (Shireen Shah), however, is shown in another scene asking Edwina to use her special relationship with Nehru to stop the anti-Muslim carnage in Delhi; Edwina declines because Nehru had earlier told her not to expect any public favours from him. Thus in terms of what happened to the Muslims of Delhi—i.e. India—before the Partition and afterward, Ahmad and Dehlavi place the blame almost exclusively on Nehru.

The rest of the blame is portioned out on to Gandhi and Mountbatten. The former is depicted as being duplicitous in politics and overbearing in manners—his patronizing attitude towards Jinnah makes Fatima—and us too—furious. As for Mountbatten, he is utterly vainglorious, acting out of either an innate vanity or a peeve at not being allowed by Jinnah to be the Governor General of Pakistan.

This is political biography as palace intrigue, par excellence. The impression is enhanced by the way the two women in Jinnah's life are depicted. Ruttie (Indira Varma) is stunningly beautiful but flighty and petulant, quite incapable of understanding the "destiny" of the man she marries against her Parsi parents' wishes. It is Jinnah's sister, Fatima, who not only understands that "destiny" but also devotes her entire life to make sure that her brother achieves it. Fatima, however, is obsessively possessive of her brother and appears resentful of the young girl her mature and famous brother falls in love with. (According to the film, Ruttie and Jinnah seemingly had only one shared pleasure: horse riding. It provides for a scene much like in a 'masala' film, galloping horses and all.) Besides being a counter figure to Ruttie, Fatima is also a counter figure to all the men of the Muslim League. Throughout the film, it is she who brings to Jinnah news of what was happening then in India. In an early scene, she comes to the rescue of Muslims—in Bombay?—when they are attacked by "Hindu" policemen. She is with Jinnah—at Lahore?—when they allegedly meet a refugee train from India which turns out to be full of corpses—the only survivor is an infant. Fatima steps through the corpses and picks up the crying baby. The music's volume obligingly rises.

The only other Muslim League leader shown in the film is Liaquat Ali Khan, who gets barely two lines. He is also shown to be dour, suspicious looking, capable of 'dirty tricks', and utterly useless. He comes to no one's rescue, and can't even make sure his Quaid gets a decent ambulance ride. Before seeing the film, I had no idea that there existed such a maligned image of Pakistan's "Shahid-e-Millat" among some sections of the Pakistani intelligentsia.

But what about the 'Muslims of India', in whose name ostensibly the demand for Pakistan was made? At the beginning of the film, they get mentioned as a persecuted minority who must be saved. In the middle, they appear as refugees, seeking shelter in Pakistan. Near the end, they are again obliquely mentioned, when Nehru and Gandhi are shown watching the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya on a TV monitor. Apparently, they remain a persecuted minority. So, one might ask, what was gained by creating Pakistan? The question is never raised explicitly, but an answer is seemingly implied. The way all non-Muslims are shown in this film suggests what Dehlavi and Ahmad have in mind: Pakistan saved the Muslims of the majority provinces from the Hindus and Sikhs. Towards that end, they even have Jinnah refer to the fate of the Jews of Germany under Hitler, not realizing in their perfervid patriotism that if that were an accurate analogy it only put Pakistan in much worse light. After all, Israel, the second nation after Pakistan to come about in the name of a religion, regarded itself as a home for *all* the Jews in the world, while Jinnah and others never thought of Pakistan as a home even for all the Muslims of British India.

Dehlavi and Ahmad, to their credit, have made some explicit attempts to make the film relevant to the present day Pakistan. They have, for example, provided an occasion in the film where Jinnah passionately denounces illiberality and fanaticism. It is a composite of two incidents. In 1943, a member of the Khaksar Party—a short-lived quasi-military organization, mainly limited to the Punjab and founded by Enayatullah Mashriqi, a

believer in National Socialism and an admirer of Hitler—attacked Jinnah with a dagger. In 1947, some members of the same party, armed with shovels—their symbolic weapon—tried to attack a session of the Muslim League’s Working Committee but were stopped by the League’s workers. In the film, one shovel wielder hits Jinnah and accuses him of being not true to Islamic injunctions concerning women. Jinnah furiously rebukes him: “You’re an ignorant fool. I have fought for the rights of your mother. . . . Islam has no place for fanatics like you.”

There is no record of what Jinnah said in 1943, but it is a bit unfair to turn the Khaksars into Muslim fanatics. Silly they might have looked in their uniforms, but communal fanatics they were not. Dehlavi and Ahmad would have done much better by showing Abul A’la Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami, denouncing Jinnah, Fatima Jinnah and the concept of Pakistan. That would have been truer to history and also more directly relevant in today’s Pakistan.

They also use another historical incident to critique the present state of Pakistani polity, when they show Jinnah addressing the first session of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (August 11, 1947). They have him denounce the twin evils of “bribery and corruption.” The scene got spontaneous applause from the audience in Chicago, as it no doubt did in Pakistan, too, where the exploits of politician-plunderers are much better known. The scene in the film is indeed true to history. What Dehlavi and Ahmad, however, leave out from that momentous speech is what official Pakistan has also suppressed for most of the Islamic Republic’s history. Given the ongoing persecution of Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians and given also the rampant sectarian violence in the name of some ‘True’ Islam, it would have been more purposeful to show Jinnah further stating (as he in fact did): “You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State. . . . We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State. . . . [We] should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.” Perhaps to a neo-traditionalist like Akbar Ahmed these words sounded like secular heresy and had to be ignored, but they remain Jinnah’s own words. If Jinnah had any vision of Pakistan it was of a secular state. That Ahmed and Dehlavi confuse it with their own mix-bag of liberalism, Islamism and territorial nationalism hardly amounts to ‘correcting’ history. These words were whitened out of Jinnah’s public record during the days of the mulla General, Ziaul Haq, and that was understandable. But by leaving them out in their film Dehlavi and Ahmad only belittle a major moment in Jinnah’s life. They simultaneously indicate their lack of interest in probing into the contradictions that Jinnah’s life—like all lives—contained.

As a cinematic achievement “Jinnah” is good enough. Though long, it holds your interest. As a biography, it brings out several aspects of Jinnah’s life that have often been neglected in most public remembrances in Pakistan. But, by trying simultaneously to be a film about the ideology of the Pakistan as well it falls victim to an inherent contradiction. For most of his life, Jinnah was *not* an ideologue of Muslim exclusivism. The film,

therefore, ends up presenting a Manichean world in which Jinnah stands for the ‘good’ while Gandhi, Nehru, and Mountbatten together form an ‘evil’ triumvirate over which Jinnah prevails. That, to Akbar Ahmed and Jamil Dehlavi, may seem a fit rejoinder to Attenborough’s “Gandhi,” but in fact it merely lowers their otherwise commendable effort to the level of juvenile hero-worship.

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