

FROM ANJUM NIAZ IN ISLAMABAD

'Jinnah' — a mix of history and obsession



Even Akbar's harshest critics cannot call his film on Jinnah a complete flop. Technical lapses are there. As is a "filmi" format flitting back and forth in time, testing the viewer's grasp on chronology. More so, for a foreigner to keep tabs on the birth of Pakistan and its founder can well prove an exasperating experience. He's quite likely to walk out. Still Akbar knows best. As the executive producer and co-script writer, having sunk three-and-a-half million pounds, surely he will give a different spin on his production to lure the hard-boiled Hollywood Moghuls like Warner Bros and MGM into sitting up and taking notice. Otherwise, the Quaid Project Ltd is in deep blue sea.

"Jinnah" recently went to the Cannes film festival and returned with unremarkable success. "Our agents called The Film Company said that the film did generate some degree of interest among the European market, but there was a lukewarm response from the Indians," says Dr Akbar S. Ahmad. Considering the steamy bedroom scene showing Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru cavorting with Lady Edwina Mountbatten as the star-crossed lovers, it can hardly titillate the Indians and have Bollywood barons snap up "Jinnah" to take back home from France and treat their audiences to Edwina stooping to conquer Nehru. The mad Shiv Sena would go madder. Bal Thackray would burn down the cinemas and put a price on Akbar's head. As it is, Akbar and his filming crew were shooed away and booed from Bombay when they wanted to film Quaid's house which is in the government of India's possession as "benami" property.

That leaves us with Hollywood. But Akbar has already come up with some information which does not augur well for "Jinnah" raking it in among the American market. Here's a damp squib: "Our sales agent for America told Christopher Lee (the man who plays Jinnah) that in a heart-to-heart with the top film executives of Warner Bros and MGM, the agent was told that while they found the film very good, nonetheless they were not too sure as to how the American audience would take to a Muslim hero who fights the British first and then the Hindus for a separate homeland for the Muslims in the subcontinent. Their mindset does not allow for a Muslim being a hero.

"These same American film producers have for the last ten years spent billions on showing Bruce Willis, Harrison Ford and Arnold Schwatznager as heroes challenging a mad Muslim villain. Now to show their audiences a rational, cool and level-headed Jinnah instead of a crazy terrorist would be a sea change. The audience would throw up their buckets of buttered popcorns and walk out!"

Akbar seems to have sealed his fate as far as the British audience is concerned: "To see a Muslim as the protagonist and a British (Lord Mountbatten) as the villain is perhaps too radical for them to stomach!"

"I'm on a double-bind," Akbar says ruefully. But did he not think of this when he was going in for a grand film on Jinnah, or was the man too opinionated and obsessed with Jinnah to a point of financial recklessness risking three-and-a-half million pounds? "On

hindsight, the idea was rather ambitious...foolishly ambitious." He muses. But the next minute he cheers up and declares, "I am very confident that in the end, the quality of our production will eventually triumph." And when will that time come? I ask him. He has no answer. "It's like a ship, it can either sink or sail."

Lucky for him, that those who have invested in his venture are not at Akbar's throat demanding their money back. Amazingly they have put their blind trust in him and are now keeping their fingers crossed for a financial windfall. Should Jinnah become a blockbuster in the West, Akbar, Jamil Dehelvi and the investors will be laughing all the way to the bank.

Akbar, however, is not laughing at the moment. He's trying to put a brave face on it while holding a trophy crafted by Gulgee and

presented to him by the Jinnah Society which along with 2000 guests went into wild raptures after being treated to an exclusive preview at the Governor's House in Karachi recently. The most ecstatic of them all was Governor Moinuddin Haider. Words of praise from all who see the film have largely overwhelmed Dr Akbar S. Ahmad, but what he needs most is hard cash at God speed.

While Akbar and his friends have staked their last cent in making this film, financial succour from the Sharif government can hardly be expected at this time when the government itself is cash strapped. Or can Finance Minister Ishaq Dar or Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif rub Alladdin's lamp and save the Quaid Project Ltd (QPL) from defaulting? Probably not.

The good news is that the censor board here has finally passed the film after giving



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REWRITING HISTORY: Christopher Lee trying to do justice with the legendary role of Jinnah

Akbar sleepless nights for over two years when a group of elders from Lahore, notable among them Majeed Nizami and the late Z.A. Suleri found many a fault as did the media with Akbar's "fantasy." All the schisms suddenly surfaced and Akbar and Jamil found themselves against the wall. Even "count Dracula" Christopher Lee who plays Jinnah was shredded to pieces as was Shireen Khan who plays Fatima Jinnah. An Urdu newspaper exhorted its readers to stone her to death! And Shashi Kapoor (God is he obese!) needed police protection when he visited his ancestral home in the "galis" of old Peshawar. "Why have a Hindu and a Dracula in "Jinnah"? was the battle cry. Emotions had reached such a frenzy. The whole country had turned against Akbar.

"The project was on the point of a collapse. People who earlier gave me a red carpet treatment refused to recognize me. They wouldn't answer my phone calls. I was declared a persona non grata. At this lowest point the Jinnah Society was born and the head of Jinnah family Liaquat Merchant mobilized a group of stalwarts from Pakistan Movement days to pitch in. Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, Syed Hashim Raza, Prof Shariful Mujahid and Zeenat Rashid

to name a few. "I am also grateful to Hameed Haroon who took me to meet Nizami to iron out our differences about the film."

Akbar adds a human drama to the whole affair: "I had a cast and crew of 100 flying into Karachi. It was a nightmare because we had money enough to sustain us for the next 24 hours. My wife Zeenat and her friends were going around selling their jewellery; my family and friends were raising funds through selling their properties and people like Farouk Captain were holding fund raisers for QPL...in walks a man in my hotel room with a flowing beard and a black *shalwar kameez* and said to me, "I've been sent. As long as you are in Pakistan, you will succeed. I will see you off myself."

That was artist-turned-a-philanthropist Jimmy Engineer. And true to his word, he never left Akbar's side until Akbar finished filming and went back. "In my darkest hour, God sent him," says Akbar who is a great believer in a verse from Quran where it says that "God gives *izzat* (honour) to whomever He chooses and *zillat* (dishonour) to whomever He chooses." Akbar has today put all his faith in his Creator and is confident that He will see him through.

But along with people pledging him their support when Akbar had hit rock bottom, he had others who were leaving the ship. The most significant being Dr Zavar Zaidi of Jinnah Papers. Dr Zaidi didn't agree with the way QPL was being run. He thought Akbar had personalized it to the point of damaging the project. "He's my *ustad*, he gave me a gold medal when I was his student at FCC in Lahore. Naturally, it was a traumatic experience for me to lose his support. But as an historian, he had a different point of view on the treatment of the film. A cinema script for an art film has to be different."

Having lived abroad for full ten years, having earned a reputation as a well-respected historian, academician, author and a commentator on Islam, Akbar formed the Quaid Project Ltd five years ago with some of Britain and Pakistan's heavyweights as its directors. "My wife and I work gratis for the project because the budget is very tiny. Zeenat does all the secretarial work for us. What I get paid as a producer and co-script writer, I promptly put back in the project." He was lucky to find good financiers in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and the Middle East. Darul Mal Islami, run by Prince Faisal, son of late Shah Faisal, alone gave QPL 250,000 pounds. The last to come on board was Dr Nasim Ashraf of the Pakistan American Doctors Association who salvaged QPL by pumping in a hefty \$1.2 million when its funds went dry.

The caretaker government of former president Farooq Leghari got the Pakistan Banking Council, comprising 8-10 banks, to give QPL 700,000 pounds. Had Farooq Leghari not spearheaded this campaign, Akbar would never have received such a strong financial support and vote of confidence from his country.

The present government has not given any money. But Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Minister Mushahid Hussain have been very generous with the state resources. All the state buildings were ungrudgingly made available to the filming unit. Another strong source of support was the Army, says a grateful Akbar.

Mushahid now wants the film to be dubbed in Urdu. God knows when "Jinnah" will be made available for the ordinary Pakistani audience.

One can take issue with how seriously Akbar takes himself. The man is a trifle full of himself while being too focused on getting good publicity for his mega-project. Abroad, he has earned it. He's unflappable and in the end, has earned it here as well by pulling off a masterpiece. But will he ever recover the money, who knows? ■