

By Tehmina Ahmed

Reclaiming History

Jinnah proves to be a well-made film that turns the tables on its detractors.

High ceilings, fans slowly stirring the air, white washed colonnades, liveried bearers throwing open a couple of varnished doors for every person who walks in to take a seat in the darbar hall. Not a scene from the controversial film *Jinnah*, but a scene from the governor's house in Karachi where it had its first, much delayed screening in Pakistan earlier this month.

At the end of an hour and 50 minutes, the audience got up in response to the playing of the national anthem as the credits rolled by. There might have been different opinions about the merits of the film, but at its conclusion Liaquat Merchant of the Jinnah Society, Governor Moeenuddin Haider and producer Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed spoke to a visibly moved audience.

What then was the controversy all about? Perhaps our own penchant for stabbing ourselves in the back, and the desire to admit only our own biased version of history. Ironically, its executive producer, Dr. Ahmed, has been accused in the west of attempting to rewrite history in the film to put Jinnah and the Muslim League in a better light. His detractors in Pakistan have accused him of doing just the opposite, even going to court to seek an injunction against the film.

Ahmed, on his part, claims that he "wanted to help Pakistanis reclaim their history." He was speaking in the context of the Oscar award winning *Gandhi*, a film that idealises the Mahatma, while portraying Jinnah and the Pakistan Movement in an

unfavourable light. As far as the revisionist charge is concerned, it might stick on examination of the treatment of politicians like Nehru and Gandhi, and the Nehru-Mountbatten connection. But where Mohammed Ali Jinnah is concerned, the film does more of a job of reverting to reality in its presentation of a man who seeks not a homeland for any brand of fanaticism but a place where Muslims can live in

explore the road to Pakistan and the historical events that led to a parting of the ways for the Muslims of the subcontinent. The film also deals with aspects of Jinnah's personal life, not breaking too much fresh ground in this respect, but building up a fairly credible picture of the Lincoln's Inn trained lawyer living in cosmopolitan Bombay, very much at home in its ways. It then traces the metamorphosis



Christopher Lee as the father of the nation.

peace with people of other religions.

Beginning at the dawn of independence with a dramatic scene of the Quaid being rushed to hospital with Fatima Jinnah at his side, the film employs a flashback technique to



to the man of conviction who begins to chart out a separate destiny that would lead to the traumatic partition of the subcontinent.

From the initial scene in the film we are transported into another realm, where the portly figure of Shashi Kapoor is seated in a room full of computer terminals and files. This is obviously an allusion to the day of reckoning, though Kapoor may not be the Gabriel he has been accused of representing. When Jinnah's name is keyed in, the computer fails to come up with any data and Kapoor finds the file on him missing.

Along with Kapoor, we accompany Jinnah on a walk through the past, peeking into scenes from time long gone. Jinnah's story unfolds along with the story of Pakistan, and his transformation from a young man who initially fights only for India's independence and becomes a leading light of the Indian National Congress to a disillusioned politician who believes that the Congress is dominated by Hindu nationalists who will not give the Muslims of India a fair deal after independence.

The struggle for Pakistan begins and the very characteristics for which Jinnah is criticised, his obduracy and refusal to compromise, give it momentum.

As the plot develops, the film takes as jaundiced a view of the Congress leaders as *Gandhi* did of Jinnah's character. "Wily old Gandhi" makes a cynical offer to Jinnah to become the first Prime Minister of a united India, while Pandit Nehru is portrayed as a cold-hearted philanderer who exploits Edwina Mountbatten's liking for him to the hilt.

Its portrayal of Jinnah lends some life to the man – what we get is a more human Jinnah than the one we have been accustomed to, but a Jinnah with no warts, nevertheless. Other Muslim League leaders appear to be men of no



▲ (Above) Scenes of riots at Partition; (left) Shashi Kapoor as the narrator.

significance and Liaquat Ali Khan is cast in an unfavourable light. In one scene he is rebuffed by his leader for seemingly advocating blackmail, as he has in hand a compromising correspondence between

Edwina and Jawaharlal Nehru.

The film brings up some fundamental questions as it goes into the rationale behind the two-nation theory. It does not gloss over the cost of attaining the coveted Muslim homeland. There are graphic scenes of a train drawing into Pakistan with only corpses on board, but the other side of the story is also told when a village of Sikhs is torched by a Muslim mob.

Directed by Jamil Dehlavi, the film received favourable reviews after its premiere at the London Film Festival and subsequent screenings at Los Angeles, Montreal and Cairo. Made on a modest budget estimated at about five million pounds, much of it contributions from Pakistanis in the US and UK, *Jinnah* obviously cannot lay claim to the epic grandeur of *Gandhi*. But it does have a ring of authenticity with regard to period and locale and the casting is sensitive.

The much reviled Christopher Lee

does a fine job of holding the role together and Shireen Shah is an uncanny reincarnation of Fatima Jinnah. Sam Dastur will pass as Gandhi but Rashid Suharwardy is less convincing as Nehru. James Fox and Maria Aitken do splendidly as Lord Mountbatten and his wife Edwina. Aside from the crowd scenes, the Pakistanis in the cast have been assigned only cameo roles. Shakeel is the bespectacled Liaquat Ali Khan and Talat Hussain turns in a moving performance as a refugee who loses his wife to the riots that accompanied Partition.

The Jinnah Society, formed in Pakistan at about the time the film was being shot on location, has been instrumental in providing support to the project at a time when media hype and the usual inflamed sensitivities threatened to bring its production to a halt. The film is now up for dubbing and an Urdu version is to be released in August. Whether this will stir up yet another storm remains to be seen, but considering the dearth of historical material on Jinnah and of good cinema in general, one hopes that the people of Pakistan will be given the opportunity to see an uncensored version and judge the film for themselves. ■

