

By Syed Ali Dayan Hasan

# Partitioning Aesthetics

*The skillfully crafted Jinnah clears up more historical misconceptions than it perpetuates. Opposition to the film, in fact, has more to do with politics than aesthetics*

**A**kbar Ahmed's *Jinnah* is perhaps the most talked about film in Pakistan's cinematic history. The subject of a vicious media campaign even as it was being filmed, it began receiving highly critical reviews based on viewings of rough cuts long before it was in any state to be reviewed at all. Reviews, however, often say as much about their writers as they do about the subject. And this is particularly true in the case of *Jinnah*.

The Jinnah Society held a special preview of the film at the Sindh Governor House last month to celebrate the forthcoming launch. The film goes on nationwide release on May 28, on the specific request of the prime minister who feels that the film would be the perfect kick-off to the extensive celebrations planned to commemorate Pakistan's first anniversary as a nuclear non-power.

It is a measure of the intellectual myopia that envelopes Pakistan that a film as mainstream as *Jinnah* has generated continuous controversy. Panned by conservatives and liberals alike, *Jinnah* stands accused of distorting history by both sides. It certainly does that, but by no means to an extent that warrants the vitriol that has been directed towards it.

Imran Aslam's petty attacks on the film now stand exposed as misguided, to say the very least. It is a pity that a person who is otherwise known for his creativity

felt obliged to indulge in a bitter personalised vendetta. Admittedly, Akbar Ahmed is not renowned for his intellectual integrity, but if anything, *Jinnah* may well emerge as the only project undertaken by the gentleman that stands the test of time.

Directed by Jamil Dehlvi, *Jinnah* is an incredible improvement on Dehlvi's last Pakistan related effort — the execrable *Immaculate Conception*. Dehlvi and Ahmed attempt to fuse the genres of the feature film and the docu-drama, with a smattering of magical realism thrown in for good measure. And it is to the credit of the director that he succeeds for the most part in making the fusion cinematically viable. The film also employs the flashback technique.

This fusion of genres and the use of flashback serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it enables the film to cover a considerable time-span while maintaining narrative coherence and cinematic credibility, and on the other, it creates a mechanism for conveying the epic nature of a life that actually had very few moments that would make conventional epic cinema. Meanwhile, the peculiar brand of magical realism serves a polemical purpose. Besides providing a distance to the events in an attempt to answer contemporary questions, it is used to clarify historical misconceptions. The film would have been a terrible disaster



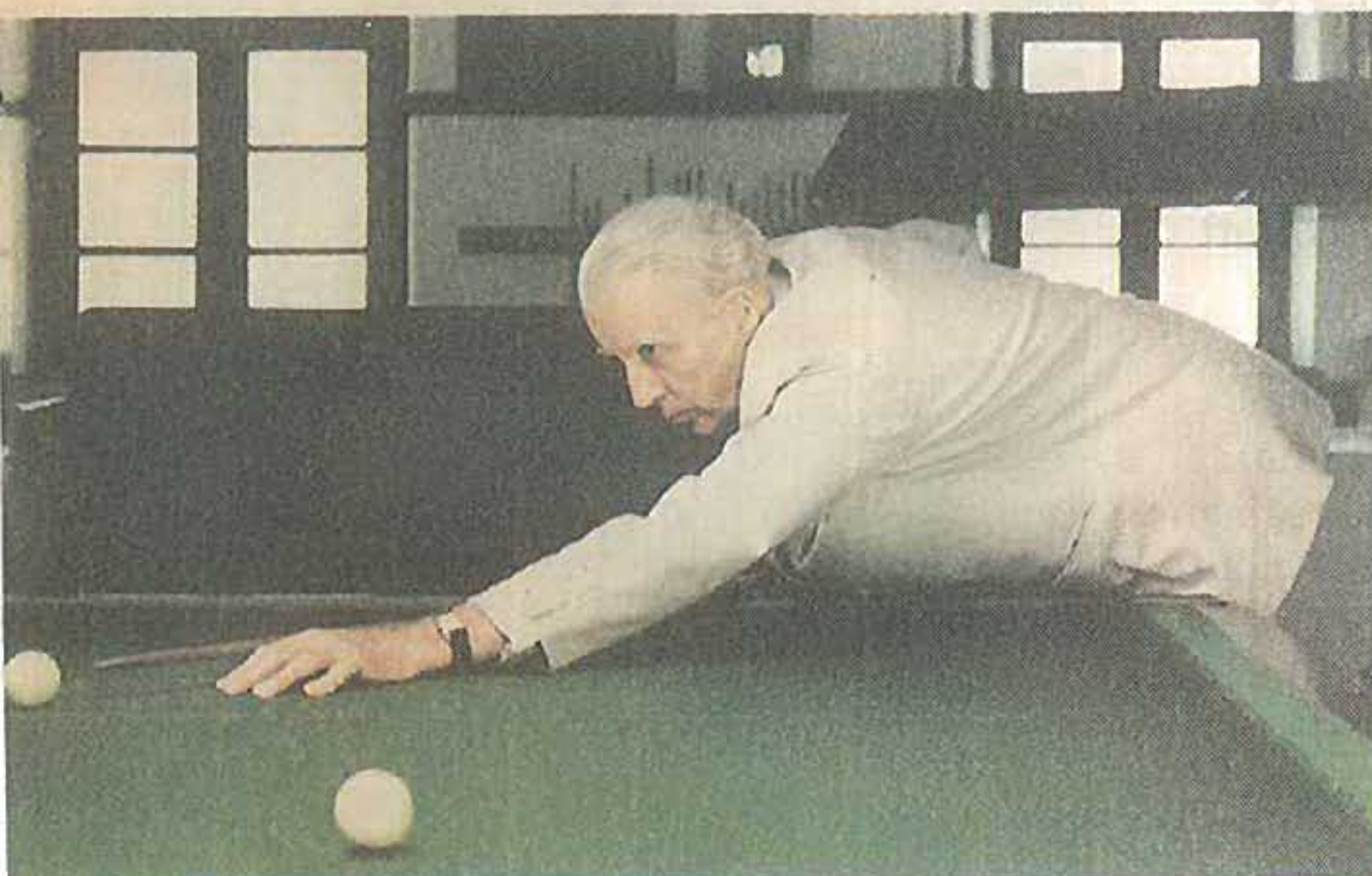
**A hero's welcome: Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan**

had all the experimentation not worked. But fortunately for the filmmakers, it does.

The much-maligned Christopher Lee puts in a thoroughly convincing performance as Jinnah. Lee has little room to display dramatic range in



**Complex relationship: Jinnah with his daughter**



**Confirmed anglophile: Jinnah plays billiards**

the character, but the blame for that must lie with the personality of old Mr. Jinnah. Lee is utterly credible as the frail and dying but nevertheless authoritarian and introverted leader. Young Jinnah is played by the rather handsome Richard Lintern. Portraying Jinnah for at least as long as Lee, Lintern has received little attention or acclaim for his efforts. He succeeds in doing justice to a difficult role while maintaining a stylistic consistency with Lee. Shireen Shah gives a commendable performance as Fatima Jinnah. In fact, of all the actors, she possibly comes closest to recreating the real

person. Rashid Suharwardy and Sam Dastur, meanwhile, are competent as Nehru and Gandhi, respectively. James Fox, however, makes for a rather poor Mountbatten who appears to be a wimpish yet arrogant ninny. Arrogant Mountbatten may have been, but he was certainly no wimp or ninny.

Played by the Pakistani veteran Shakeel, poor Liaquat Ali Khan gets a raw deal, though. One suspects that Ahmed's prejudices overrode the demands of objectivity in this instance. This key Muslim Leaguer and Pakistan's first prime minister comes across as an unquestioningly subservient, hapless flunky. A basic history lesson would clear this misconception for Dr Ahmed.

A "must-see", *Jinnah* is a more human portrayal of the Quaid-e-Azam than ever seen or even acknowledged by the state. If nothing else, it faithfully encapsulates the essential schizophrenia of the Pakistan Movement and the dichotomy between the political rhetoric and the personal reality of Mr. Jinnah.

Despite its protestations of presenting the "real" picture, however, the film fails to square the circle of Jinnah the man versus Jinnah the politician essentially because the contradictions in Jinnah simply cannot be rationalised away. Jinnah was, after all, a complex man operating in a complex situation. The film also indulges in a historical lie by suggesting that Iqbal "dreamt" of Pakistan, ran straight to Jinnah and informed him that he had to race back to India to "create Pakistan", which Jinnah obligingly did at the speed of summer lightning.

Yet, it manages to be a

sophisticated film. Sometimes obviously, sometimes between the lines, the film does succeed in conveying both human and political complexity. And it does so, while attempting not to compromise the existence of Pakistan today. It can be argued that this is perhaps unnecessary. However, the film situates itself in a pre-existing historical debate. While perpetuating one simplistic interpretation, it also does away with several historical misconceptions and raises many important questions. Furthermore, it does this while humanising Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah (Rehmatullahalleh).

So, there are on balance, more reasons for *Jinnah* to be seen than there are for it not to be. It would serve Pakistanis well to learn that their leader was a man who had no time for obscurantists, and who had relationships of equality with several very strong, highly westernised women. It would serve them well also to see that the same man created a homeland for the Muslims on the grounds that coexistence was impossible, married a non-Muslim and could only respectfully disagree with his own daughter when she did the same. Above all, it would do Pakistanis good to know that even their founding father did not claim to have all the answers.

There are many in Pakistan who can never like *Jinnah* because they fundamentally disagree with Jinnah the man. These are the people who do not subscribe to the politics of separatism or negativity. They continue to believe that coexistence was, indeed is, possible and that Partition was a terrible error with horrific consequences. These questions remain. But if there is no place for such people in Pakistan today, the blame cannot be laid solely, even principally, at Jinnah's door. The Two-Nation theory may be flawed, but then Jinnah never laid any claim to perfection. A historical study of Jinnah clearly indicates that even he was never entirely free of these doubts. The film must not be viewed as the definitive word on Pakistan or Jinnah but as a partial insight. And a partial insight is better than no insight at all. ■