

“I have not written to please — it’s a journey that I have undertaken...”

Jaswant Singh on his book, his perceptions of Jinnah, and the political milieu of the time...

The text of an interview that Karan Thapar did with Jaswant Singh, for the television programme ‘Devil’s Advocate’ that was broadcast in two instalments over CNN-IBN on August 16:

Karan Thapar: Hello and welcome to Devil’s Advocate. Tomorrow sees the publication of a biography of Mohammed Ali Jinnah which challenges the way we in India have seen the founder of Pakistan. It reassesses Nehru’s role in Partition, it sheds fresh light on the relationship between the early Gandhi and Jinnah.

If my hunch is correct, this book will attract considerable attention and may be even a fair amount of controversy. Today, in a special two-part interview with the author I shall discuss the book and his conclusions. He is, of course, the former Defence, Foreign and Finance Minister of India and also a former soldier, Jaswant Singh.

Mr. Jaswant Singh, let’s start by establishing how you as the author view Mohammed Ali Jinnah? After reading your book, I get the feeling that you don’t subscribe to the popular demonisation of the man.

Jaswant Singh: Of course, I don’t. To that I don’t subscribe. I was attracted by the personality which has resulted in a book. If I wasn’t drawn to the personality, I wouldn’t have written the

book. It's an intricate, complex personality of great character, determination...

And it's a personality that you found quite attractive?

Naturally, otherwise, I wouldn't have ventured down the book. I found the personality sufficiently attractive to go and research it for five years. And I was drawn to it, yes.

As a politician, Jinnah joined the Congress party long before he joined the Muslim League, and in fact when he joined the Muslim League, he issued a statement to say that this in no way implies "even the shadow of disloyalty to the national cause." Would you say that in the 1920s and 1930s and may be even the early years of the 1940s, Jinnah was a nationalist?

Actually speaking the acme of his nationalistic achievement was the 1916 Lucknow Pact of Hindu-Muslim unity and that's why Gopal Krishna Gokhale called him the Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity.

In your assessment as his biographer, for most if not the predominant part of his life, Jinnah was a nationalist?

Oh, yes. He fought the British for an independent India but he also fought resolutely and relentlessly for the interest of the Muslims of India.

Was Jinnah secular or was he communal?

It depends on the way you view the word 'secular,' because I don't know whether secular is really fully applicable to a country like India. It's a word borne of the socio-historical and religious history of Western Europe.

Let me put it like this. Many people believe that Jinnah hated Hindus and that he was a Hindu-basher.

Wrong. Totally wrong. That certainly he was not. His principal disagreement was with the Congress party. Repeatedly he says and he says this even in his last statements to the press and to the constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

So his problem was with Congress and with some Congress leaders but he had no problem with Hindus.

No he had no problems whatsoever with the Hindus. Because he was not in that sense, until in the later part of his years, he became exactly what he charged Mahatma Gandhi with. He had charged Mahatma Gandhi of being a demagogue.

He became one as well?

That was the most flattering way of emulating Gandhi. I refer of course to the Calcutta killings.

As you look back on Jinnah's life, would you say that he was a great man?

Oh yes, because he created something out of nothing, and single-handedly he stood up against the might of the Congress party and against the British who didn't really like him.

So you are saying to me he was a great man?

I'm saying so.

Let me put it like this: do you admire Jinnah?

I admire certain aspects of his personality. His determination and the will to rise. He was a self-made man — Mahatma Gandhi was a son of a Dewan.

Nehru was born to great wealth.

All of them were born to wealth and position, Jinnah created for himself a position. He carved out in Bombay a position in that cosmopolitan city being what he was — poor. He was so poor, he had to walk to work. He lived in a hotel called Watsons in Bombay and he told one of the biographers that there's always room at the top but there is no lift and he never sought a lift.

Do you admire the way he created success for himself, born to poverty but he ended up successful, rich?

I would admire that in any man, self-made man, who resolutely worked towards achieving what he had set out to.

How seriously has India misunderstood Jinnah?

I think we misunderstood because we needed to create a demon.

We needed a demon and he was the convenient scapegoat?

I don't know if he was convenient. We needed a demon because in the 20th century the most telling event in the entire subcontinent was the Partition of the country.

I'll come to that in a moment, but first, the critical question that your book raises is that how is it that the man, considered as the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity in 1916, had transformed 30 years later by 1947 into the 'Qaid-e-Azam' of Pakistan? And your book suggests that underlying this was Congress' repeated inability to accept that Muslims feared domination by Hindus and that they wanted "space" in "a reassuring system."

Here is the central contest between minorityism and majoritarianism. With the loss of the Mughal empire, the

Muslims of India had lost power but majoritarianism didn't begin to influence them until 1947. Then they saw that unless they had a voice in their own political, economical and social destiny, they would be obliterated. That's the beginning. That's still the purpose.

Let me ask you this. Was Jinnah's fear or anxiety about Congress majoritarianism justified or understandable? Your book in its account of how Congress refused to form a government with the League in Uttar Pradesh in 1937 after fighting the elections in alliance with that party, suggests that Jinnah's fears were substantial and real.

Yes. You have to go not just to 1937, which you just cited. See other examples. In the 1946 elections, Jinnah's Muslim League wins all the Muslim seats and yet they do not have a sufficient number to be in office because the Congress party has, even without a single Muslim, enough to form a government and they are outside of the government. So it was realised that simply contesting election was not enough.

They needed certain assurances within the system to give them that space?

That's right. And those assurances amounted to reservation, which I dispute frankly. Reservations went from 25 per cent to 33 per cent. And then from reservation that became parity, of being on equal terms. Parity to Partition.

All of this was search for space?

All of this was a search for some kind of autonomy of decision-making in their own social and economic destiny.

Your book reveals how people like Gandhi, Rajagopalachari and Azad could understand Jinnah, or the Muslim fear of

Congress majoritarianism, but Nehru simply couldn't understand. Was Nehru insensitive to this?

No, he wasn't. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was a deeply sensitive man.

But why couldn't he understand?

He was deeply influenced by Western and European socialist thought of those days. For example, dominion status would have given virtual independence to India in the 1920s, but Nehru shot it down.

In other words, Nehru's political thinking and his commitment to Western socialist thought meant that he couldn't understand Jinnah's concerns about majoritarianism? Nehru was a centralist, Jinnah was a decentraliser?

That's right. That is exactly [the point]. Nehru believed in a highly centralised polity. That's what he wanted India to be. Jinnah wanted a federal polity.

Because that would give Muslims the space?

That even Gandhi also accepted.

But Nehru couldn't.

Nehru didn't.

He refused to?

Well, consistently, he stood in the way of a federal India until 1947 when it became a partitioned India.

In fact, the conclusion of your book is that if the Congress could have accepted a decentralised federal India, then a united India, as you put it, “was clearly ours to attain.” You add that the problem was that this was in “an anathema to Nehru's centralising approach and policies.” Do you see Nehru at least as responsible for Partition as Jinnah?

I think he says it himself. He recognised it and his correspondence, for example with late Nawab Sahab of Bhopal, his official biographer and others. His letters to the late Nawab Sahab of Bhopal are very moving letters.

You are saying Nehru recognised that he was as much of an obstacle.

No, he recognised his mistakes afterwards.

Afterwards?

Afterwards.

Today, Nehru's heirs and party will find it very surprising that you think that Nehru was as responsible for Partition as Jinnah.

I'm not blaming anybody. I'm not assigning blame. I'm simply recording what I have found as the development of issues and events of that period.

When Indians turn around and say that Jinnah was, to use a colloquialism, the villain of Partition, your answer is that there were many people responsible, and to single out Jinnah as the only person or as the principal person, is both factually wrong and unfair?

It is. It is not borne out of events. Go to the last All India Congress Committee meeting in Delhi in June of 1947 to

discuss and accept the June 3, 1947 resolution. Nehru-Patel's resolution was defeated by the Congress, supported by Gandhi in the defeat. Ram Manohar Lohia had moved the amendment. It was a very moving intervention by Ram Manohar Lohia and then Gandhi finally said we must accept this Partition. Partition is a very painful event. It is very easy to assign blame but very difficult thereafter. Because all events that we are judging are ex-post facto.

Absolutely, and what your book does is to shed light in terms of a new assessment of Partition and the responsibility of the different players. And in that re-assessment, you have balanced differently between Jinnah and Nehru?

All vision which is ex-post facto is 20/20. It is when you actually live the event.

Quite right. Those who have lived it would have seen it differently but today, with the benefit of hindsight, you can say that Jinnah wasn't the only or the principal villain and the Indian impression that he was is mistaken and wrong?

And we need to correct it.

Let's turn to Jinnah and Pakistan. Your book shows that right through the 1920s and the 1930s, or may be even the early years of the 1940s, Pakistan for Jinnah was more of a political strategy, less of a target and a goal. Did he consciously, from the very start, seek to dismember and divide India?

I don't think it was dismemberment. He wanted space for the Muslims. And he could just not define Pakistan ever. Geographically, it was a vague idea. That's why ultimately it became a moth-eaten Pakistan. He had ideas about certain provinces which must be Islamic and one-third of the seats in the Central legislature must be Muslims.

So Pakistan was in fact a way of finding, as you call it, 'space' for Muslims?

He wanted space in the Central legislature and in the provinces and protection of the minorities so that the Muslims could have a say in their own political, economic and social destiny.

And that was his primary concern, not dividing India or breaking up the country?

No. He in fact went to the extent of saying that let there be a Pakistan within India.

A Pakistan within India was acceptable to him?

Yes.

So, in other words, Pakistan was often the 'code' for space for Muslims?

That's right. From what I have written, I find that it was a negotiating tactic because he wanted certain provinces to be with the Muslim League. He wanted a certain percentage [of seats] in the Central legislature. If he had that, there would not have been a Partition.

Would you therefore say that when people turn around and say that Jinnah was communal, he was a Hindu-hater, a Hindu basher, they are mistaken and wrong?

He was not a Hindu-hater but he had great animosity with the Congress party and Congress leadership. He said so repeatedly: I have no enmity against the Hindu.

Do you as an author believe him when he said so?

I don't live in the same time as him. I go by what his contemporaries have said, I go by what he himself says and I reproduce it.

Let's come again to this business of using Pakistan to create space for Muslims. Your book shows how repeatedly people like Rajagopalachari, Gandhi and Azad were understanding Jinnah's need or the Muslim need for space. Nehru wasn't. Nehru had a European-inherited centralised vision of how India should be run. In a sense, was Nehru's vision of a centralised India, a problem that eventually led to Partition?

Jawaharlal Nehru was not always that. He became that after his European tour of the 1920s. Then he came back imbued with, as Madhu Limaye puts it, a 'spirit of socialism,' and he was all for a highly centralised India.

And a highly centralised India denied the space Jinnah wanted.

A highly centralised India meant that the dominant party was the Congress party. He [Nehru] in fact said there are only two powers in India — the Congress party and the British.

That attitude in a sense left no room for Jinnah and the Muslim League in India?

That's what made Jinnah repeatedly say: but there's a third force — we. The Congress could have dealt with the *Moplas* but there were other Muslims.

So it was this majoritarianism of Nehru that actually left no room for Jinnah?

It became a contest between excessive majoritarianism, exaggerated minorityism and giving the referee's whistle to the British.

Was the exaggerated minorityism a response to the excessive majoritarianism of the Congress?

In part. Also in response to the historical circumstances that had come up.

If the final decision had been taken by people like Gandhi, Rajagopalachari or Azad, could we have ended up with a united India?

Yes, I believe so. It could have. Gandhi said let the British go home, we will settle this amongst ourselves, we will find a Pakistan. In fact, he said so in the last AICC meetings.

It was therefore Nehru's centralising vision that made that extra search for a united India difficult at the critical moment?

He continued to say so but subsequently, after Partition, he began to realise what a great mistake he had made.

Nehru realised his mistakes but it was too late, by then it had happened.

It was too late. It was too late.

Let's... [consider] the portrait you paint of the relationship between the early Gandhi and the early Jinnah. You say of their first meeting in January 1915 that Gandhi's response to Jinnah's "warm welcome" was "ungracious." You say Gandhi would only see Jinnah "in Muslim terms," and the sort of implication that comes across is Gandhi was less accommodating than Jinnah was.

I've perhaps not used the adjective you have used. Jinnah returned from his education in 1896. Gandhi went to South Africa and was returning finally — in between he had come once — to India [and] it was 1915 already. Jinnah had gone to receive him with Gokhale and he *referred* fulsomely to Gandhi. Gandhi *referred* to Jinnah and said that I am very grateful that we have a Muslim leader. That I think was born really of Gandhi's working in South Africa and not so much the reality of what he felt. The relationship subsequently became competitive.

But you do call that response “ungracious”?

I don't know whether I call it ungracious.

You do.

But I might have. Jinnah is fulsomely receiving Gandhi and Gandhi says I'm glad that I'm being received by a Muslim leader.

So he was only seeing Jinnah in Muslim terms?

Yes, which Jinnah didn't want to be seen [as].

Even when you discuss the impact of their political strategies in the early years before 1920 you suggest that Jinnah was perhaps more effective than Gandhi, who in a sense permitted the Raj to continue for three decades. You write: “Jinnah had successfully kept the Indian political forces together, simultaneously exerting pressure on the government.” Of Gandhi you

say “that pressure dissipated and the Raj remained for three more decades.”

That’s a later development, because the political style of the two was totally different. Jinnah was essentially a logician. He believed in the strength of logic; he was a parliamentarian; he believed in the efficacy of parliamentary politics. Gandhi, after testing the water, took to the trails of India and he took politics into the dusty villages of India.

But in the early years up till 1920 you see Jinnah as more effective in putting pressure on the British than Gandhi?

Yes, because the entire politics was parliamentary.

The adjectives you use to characterise their leadership in the early years suggests a sort of, how shall I put it, slight tilt in Jinnah’s favour. You say of Gandhi's leadership that it had “an entirely religious, provincial character.” Of Jinnah you say he was “doubtless imbued by a non-sectarian nationalistic zeal.”

He was non-sectarian. Gandhi used religion as a personal expression. Jinnah used religion as a tool to create something but that came later. For Gandhi religion was an integral part of his politics from the very beginning.

And Jinnah wanted religion out of politics.

Out of politics. That is right — there are innumerable examples.

In fact, Jinnah sensed or feared instinctively that if politics came into religion it would divide.

There were two fears here. His one fear was that if the whole question or practice of mass movement was introduced into India then the minority in India would be threatened. There could be Hindu-Muslim riots as a consequence. The second fear was that this will result in bringing in religion into Indian politics. He didn't want that — the Khilafat movement, etc., are all examples of that.

And in a sense would you say events have borne out Jinnah?

Not just Jinnah, Annie Besant also. When the Home Rule League broke up, resigning from the League Annie Besant cautioned Gandhi: you are going down this path, this is a path full of peril.

Both Jinnah and Besant have been borne out.

In the sense that mass movement, unless combined with a great sense of discipline, leadership and restraint, becomes chaotic.

As you look back on their lives and their achievements, Jinnah, at the end of the day, stood for

creating a homeland for Indian Muslims. But what he produced was moth-eaten and broke up into two pieces in less than 25 years. Gandhi struggled to keep India united, but ended up not just with Partition but with communal passion and communal killing. Would you say at the end of their lives both were failures?

Gandhi was transparently a honest man. He lived his political life openly. Jinnah didn't even live his political life, leave alone his private life, openly. Gandhi led his private life openly — [in] Noakhali with a pencil stub he wrote movingly “I don't want to die a failure but I fear I might.”

And did he, in your opinion?

Yes, I am afraid the Partition of the land, the Hindu-Muslim divide, cannot be really called Gandhiji's great success. Jinnah, I think, did not achieve what he set out to. He got what is called a moth-eaten Pakistan, but the philosophy which underlay it, that Muslims are a separate nation, was completely rejected within years of Pakistan coming into being.

So, in a sense, both failed.

I'm afraid I've to say that. I am, in comparison, a lay practitioner of politics in India. I cannot compare myself to these two great Indians, but my assessment would lead me to the conclusion that I cannot treat this as a success either by Gandhi or by Jinnah.

Your book also raises disturbing questions about the Partition of India. You say it was done in a way “that multiplied our problems without solving any communal issue.” Then you ask: “If the communal, the principal issue, remains in an even more exacerbated form than before then why did we divide at all?”

Yes, indeed why? I cannot yet find the answer. Look into the eyes of the Muslims who live in India and if you truly see through the pain they live — to which land do they belong? We treat them as aliens, somewhere inside, because we continue to ask even after Partition you still want something? These are citizens of India — it was Jinnah’s failure because he never advised the Muslims who stayed back.

One of the most moving passages of your biography is when you write of Indian Muslims who stayed on in India and didn’t go to Pakistan. You say they are “abandoned,” you say they are “bereft of a sense of kinship,” not “one with the entirety” and then you add that “this robs them of the essence of psychological security.”

That’s right, it does. That lies at the root of the Sachar Committee report.

So, in fact, Indian Muslims have paid the price in their personal lives.

Without doubt, as have Pakistani Muslims.

Muslims have paid a price on both sides.

I think Muslims have paid a price in Partition. They would have been significantly stronger in a united India, effectively so — much larger land, every potential is here. Of course, Pakistan or Bangladesh won't like what I'm saying.

Let's for a moment focus on Indian Muslims. You are a leader of the BJP. Do you think the rhetoric of your party sometimes adds to that insecurity?

I didn't write this book as a BJP parliamentarian or leader, which I'm not. I wrote this book as an Indian.

Your book also suggests, at least intellectually, you believe India could face more Partitions. You write: "In India, having once accepted this principle of reservation, then of Partition, how can now we deny it to others, even such Muslims as have had to or chosen to live in India."

The problem started with the 1906 reservation. What does the Sachar Committee report say? Reserve for the Muslim. What are we doing now? Reserve. I think this reservation for Muslims is a disastrous path. I have myself, personally, in Parliament heard a member subscribing to Islam saying we could have a third

Partition too. These are the pains that trouble me. *What have we solved?*

In fact you say in your book how can we deny it to others, having accepted it once it becomes very difficult intellectually to refuse it again.

You've to refuse it.

Even if you contradict yourself?

Of course, I am contradicting myself. It is intellectual contradiction.

But you are being honest enough to point out that this intellectual contradiction lies today at the very heart of our predicament as a nation.

It is. Unless we find an answer, we won't find an answer to India-Pakistan-Bangladesh relations.

And this continuing contradiction is the legacy of Partition?

Of course, it's self-evident.

Let's come to how your book will be received. Are you worried that a biography of Jinnah that turns on its head the received demonisation of the man, where you concede that for a large part he was a nationalist

with admirable qualities, could bring down on your head a storm of protest?

Firstly I'm not an academic. Sixty years down the line someone else — an academic — should've done it. Then I wouldn't have persisted for five years. I've written what I have researched and believed in. I have not written to please — it's a journey that I have undertaken, as I explained myself, along with Mohd Ali Jinnah — from his being an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity to the Qaid-e-Azam of Pakistan

In a sense you were driven to write this book.

Indeed, I still search for answers. Having worked with the responsibilities that I had, it is my duty to try and find answers.

And your position is that if people don't like the truth as you see it — so be it, but you have to tell the truth as you know it.

Well, so be it is your way of putting it, my dear Karan, but how do I abandon my search, my yearning and what I have found? If I'm wrong then somebody else should go and do the research and prove me as wrong.

In other words, you are presenting what you believe is the truth and you can't hide it.

What else can I do, what else can I present?

In 2005, when L.K. Advani called Jinnah's August 11, 1947 speech secular, he was forced to resign the presidentship of the party. Are you worried that your party might turn on you in a similar manner?

This is not a party document, and my party knows that I have been working on this. I have mentioned this to Shri Advani as also to others.

But are they aware of your views and the contents of the book?

They can't be aware unless they read it.

Are you worried that when they find out about your views, and your analyses and your conclusion, they might be embarrassed and angry?

No, they might disagree, that's a different matter. Anger? Why should there be anger about disagreement?

Can I put something to you?

Yes.

Mr. Advani in a sense suffered because he called Jinnah secular. You have gone further, you have compared him to the early Gandhi. And some would say that Gandhi is found a little wanting in that comparison. Will that inflame passions?

I don't think Gandhi is found wanting. He was a different person. They are two different personalities, each with

their characteristics, why should passions be inflamed? Let a self-sufficient majority, 60 years down the line of Independence, be able to stand up to what actually happened pre-1947 and in 1947.

So what you are saying is that Gandhi and Jinnah were different people, we must learn to accept that both had good points.

Of course.

And both had weaknesses.

Of course. Gandhi himself calls Jinnah a Great Indian, why don't we recognise that? Why did he call him that? He tells Mountbatten "give the Prime Ministership of India to Jinnah." Mountbatten scoffs at him, "Are you joking?" He says: "No I'm serious, I'll travel India and convince India and carry this message."

So if today's Gandhians, reading the passages where you compare between the two, come to the conclusion that you are more of praise of Jinnah than of Gandhi...

I don't think I am. I am objective as far as human beings have ability to be objective. As balanced as an author can be.

As balanced as an author can be?

Indeed, indeed. How else can it be?

Your party has a Chintan Baithak starting in two days time, does it worry you that at that occasion some of your colleagues might stand up and say — your views, your comments about Jinnah, your comments about Gandhi and Nehru, have embarrassed the BJP?

I don't think so, I don't think they will. Because in two days time the book would not have been [read]. It's almost a 600-page book. Difficult to read 600 pages in two days.

No one will have read the book by the time you go to Shimla!

Yes (laughs).

But what about afterwards?

Well, we will deal with the afters when the afters come.

Let me raise two issues that could be a problem for you. First of all, your sympathetic understanding of Muslims left behind in India. You say they're abandoned, you say they are bereft, you say they suffer from psychological insecurity. That's not normally a position leaders of the BJP take.

I think the BJP is misunderstood also in its attitude towards the minorities. I don't think it is so. Every Muslim that lives in India is a loyal Indian and we must treat them as so.

But you're the first person from the BJP I have ever heard say, "look into the eyes of Indian Muslims and see the pain." No one has ever spoken in such sensitive terms about them before.

I'm born in a district, that is my home — we adjoin Sind, it was not part of British India. We have lived with Muslims and Islam for centuries. They are part.... In fact in Jaisalmer, I don't mind telling you, Muslims don't eat cow and the Rajputs don't eat pig.

So your understanding of Indian Muslims and their predicament is uniquely personal and you would say...

Indeed, because I think what has happened is that we try and treat this whole thing as if it's an extension of the image of the U.P. Muslim. Of course the U.P. [Muslim] is... Pakistan is a step-child of U.P., in a sense.

The second issue that your book raises, which could cause problems for you, is that at least theoretically, at least intellectually, you accept that their could be, although you hope their won't be, further partitions. Could that embarrass you?

No, I'm cautioning. I'm cautioning India, the Indian leadership. I have said that I am not going to be a politician all my life, or even a Member of Parliament. But I do say this: we should learn from what we did wrong, or didn't do right, so that we don't repeat the mistakes.

In other words, this is — how shall I put it, a wake-up call?

Wake-up? Shaking....

A shake-up call!

Yeah (smiles)

My last question. Critics in your party allege that you are responsible for the party losing seats in Rajasthan, they allege that you are responsible for asking questions about the sanctity of Hindutva. Now, after this book, have you fed your critics more ammunition against yourself?

Time will tell (smiles)

But does it worry you?

Do I look worried? (smiles)

With that smile on your face, Mr. Jaswant Singh, thank you very much...

Thank you very much.