

“Why should truth be provocative?”

Jaswant Singh responds, in an interview with **Karan Thapar** broadcast by CNN-IBN, to the criticism that by writing a biography of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, he has been playing with fire and he has been irresponsible or he has been naive; and in either event he has ended denigrating the core values of his former party, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Karan Thapar: Jinnah is a red rag to the BJP — you know that like anyone else. Therefore by writing a biography of the man you have been deliberately playing with fire and, if you have ended up burnt, then you have only yourself to blame?

Jaswant Singh: Well, of course, I’m to blame for whatever I do. I don’t transfer the blame to anybody, but I can question the decision, which is different. There is a degree of simple-mindedness in my expulsion because a distinction has to be made between the late Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s personal attributes as a human being and his politics. The first, which is the personal attributes, are admirable. His equations with human beings of all communities were a real example even then. His politics were abhorable, particularly after 1940.

Except for the fact that you have gone much further. You’ve said that Jinnah was a great man. You’ve said that Indians have demonised him. You’ve said that he is not the only one, perhaps not even the principal person responsible for Partition. Now I put it to you that that is just not provocative, it’s asking for trouble.

Why should truth be provocative? Why should attempting to find what actually happened when Partition took place [be provocative]? You are a consequence of Partition because in essence the two provinces of India got divided. Punjab and Bengal. Both still call themselves Punjab. I’ll come to what you have asked. I am not being provocative, I am being inquisitive, and I wanted to find out for myself what caused it.

Except for the fact that there are some areas where being inquisitive is going to provoke trouble. You knew better than anyone else. After 30 years in the BJP, after being in the Jan Sangh before that, there are certain red lines that one doesn’t cross. You have crossed it not just willingly, you crossed it almost deliberately. You defied a party.

I crossed it knowingly but not as a red line. It is my understanding that in personal expression, finding out the truth about India’s Partition, no political party can lay down red lines. We are not living in Stalinist Russia. We are living in India where the tradition of *shastrarth* is foremost even in *Sanatan* thought.

Let me come back to that point you are making by giving you an analogy. You are saying that writing a biography of Jinnah, which challenges the way Jinnah is perceived both by this country and more importantly by your former party and also Pakistan, is your right in your personal capacity. But that’s tantamount to saying that Arun Jaitley in his personal capacity can defend Afzal Guru

because he has a right as a lawyer to take up whatever brief he wants, that's not how politics work and you know it?

That's a choice. I don't want to go into which barrister or lawyer takes up which case because that would not be relevant to today's inquiry.

But the point I am making is not which barrister takes up which case, the point I am making is that parties have co-beliefs and they expect their members to adhere and subscribe to them. If you want to question them, be it intellectually or emotionally, do so from outside the fold but you can't expect to do it from within the party and then get away with it.

Core beliefs? What is so core that I have disturbed ...and get away? I am not a criminal to get away.

The BJP believes that Jinnah is a villain, you don't share that. In fact, you question his demonisation. You end up saying he was a great man, that shakes the fundamental beliefs and they don't like that.

Firstly he [Jinnah] has been demonised in India. I stand by that statement. He is a 'great man' was a term used by late Mahatma Gandhi. In my book, I have quoted Gandhi to say, it's in the Cabinet Mission, Shimla 2, and Gandhi says, "Mohammed Ali Jinnah was a great man and a leader of a great party."

Except that in the interview to me last week, you agreed that you personally think of him as a 'great man.'

Yes, indeed I do.

But that sticks in the throat of your former party and you knew it would.

I didn't think they would be such small-minded as to hold a view against me which are the personal attributes of a historical person.

Do you really believe that as one of the most senior leaders of the BJP, you could afford in your personal capacity to hold views and write opinions of Jinnah and Patel, which the party itself does not endorse and still expect the party not to take action against you?

I did certainly. I didn't think my party is so narrow-minded, so limited or so nervous about Jinnah and/or Patel as to get so riled by what I have written. I have a feeling which I voiced also that perhaps my former colleagues hadn't really read the book when they passed the sentence on me.

They even admit that they passed the sentence on you because of what you said in the interview to me last week but that's another matter.

Is that a curb on freedom of speech?

But you say that you didn't believe your party was so narrow-minded, so small minded as to object to your holding certain views. The truth is, that these views that you hold run against party discipline, they run against what the party considers core beliefs, were you being naive and thinking that you could say this and expect the party won't take action?

No, I was not being naive. These are the views that I hold. I reiterate and I have not stated an untruth. On the contrary, the party should be worried if untruth becomes the core of the party.

You say that if untruth becomes the core of the party, but the problem is that parties hold to myths, whether they are truths or untruths is academy. One of the myths your party holds to is the belief that Sardar Patel stood up against partition to the end. You have questioned that myth by equating Patel with Nehru, by bracketing them together. Nehru is someone your party is happy to criticise, Patel they consider an icon. By bracketing one with the other, you have denigrated an icon and you did it deliberately.

I've not denigrated an icon, I've simply pointed out the facts of history. The late Sardar Patel had his secretary in V.P. Menon. V.P. Menon was his adviser as well as Lord Mountbatten's adviser, the plan for Partition was sold to Patel by V.P. Menon. It's a fact of history. Jawaharlal Nehru, in the month of March 1947, asks Patel [in the context of the transfer of power]: "Please help me with the Congress Working Committee."

I concede readily that these are facts of history, you are not making them up. The problem is that you are rubbing facts of history into the face of a myth the party cherishes and demolishing that myth. No party expects it and you did it knowing that this was going to be the outcome. And therefore I put it to you, were you playing with fire or were you being naive?

No, I was neither. I was attempting to find the truth. It was a search for truth as to what lies or lay behind our Partition.

You are really saying to me that nothing motivated you more than just what you call — the search for truth?

Absolutely.

In which case, let me ask you: What you wrote is a political biography of M.A. Jinnah. Why then have you completely ignored the fact that he knew of, he approved of and probably authorised the Tribal Pathan invasion of Kashmir which led directly to the October 1947 war? Why do you overlook that?

I don't overlook it, but the book ends with Partition and his death.

But this happened before Jinnah's death?

I know, but that's a separate subject. Of course, he had authorised it. I've also pointed out the great killing of Calcutta in vivid detail. I don't overlook any of the mistakes of his public life.

Except you called the man a 'great man', you said India has demonised [him] and yet you completely overlooked and ignored the fact that he launched against India the first threat to Indian sovereignty and the first war that India faced. And he did it within three months of Partition. That doesn't find a mention?

That would have required altogether a different and a separate book. Already it was running to 900 pages. The book had to be cut down. There are limits to it.

But shouldn't this have been part of a political biography of Jinnah by an Indian politician?

No, I don't think so. It's a decision that an author has to make and a decision that is governed by many factors.

Authors always select what they want to put in. In that selectivity, have you lost your objectivity, have you lost your balance?

I don't think so.

You have no qualms about leaving out this particular part?

I have no qualms at all. As a former soldier I say this because that is an inquiry that goes very deep and to not just Jinnah ordering the launching, but the conduct of the entire operations by Indian leaders too.

What happens if people turn around and say that by overlooking and ignoring this, you have not only written an one-sided account but you have exculpated Jinnah of the charge of launching war against India?

I haven't exculpated because among the first of the sentences that I used in this interview was that a distinction has to be made between his personal attributes and his public conduct. These are two very different things.

That explains and underlines why you left this out?

I haven't left it out. It was practically not possible for me to cover that and also to go into Jinnah's death and then go into what Pakistan today is.

Is it convincing to say that it was practically not possible?

That's up to you. The author has to make a choice and the author might not be able to convince everybody.

You stand by that choice?

Absolutely.

I want to ask you the difference between what you said about M.A. Jinnah and Mr. Advani said. And bear in mind that one of the reasons publicly given for your expulsion by Arun Jaitley when he addressed a press conference is that you called Jinnah a great man. On June 4, 2009, Mr. Advani wrote in the visitors' book in the Jinnah mausoleum in Karachi. He ended with the following sentence: "My respectful homage to this great man." What's the difference between your calling Jinnah a great man and Advani calling him a great man?

One expression is by Lalji Advani and the other is by Jaswant Singh.

That's the only difference?

Also some phraseology.

That is it?

I'm sure that's it. Hadn't this question best be asked to Advaniji?

The sentence begins: "My respectful homage to this great man." Now, the Oxford English dictionary defines homage as an acknowledgement of superiority, dutiful reverence. In other words, it is the duty and the reverence that one pays to someone who one acknowledges as superior. What do you make of that?

That he paid homage.

Should one pay homage to politicians or gods and gurus?

That is really for Lalji Advaniji to make up his mind about.

Do you pay 'homage' to Jinnah?

I don't pay 'homage' to Jinnah. I just make a separation between his personal attributes, which were admirable, and truly his equations with other human beings, and his politics, which was abhorrent.

When Mr. Advani pays homage, one assumes that he is paying homage to everything that Jinnah stood for and not making a separation.

It's for Advaniji to answer.

The point I'm making to you is: are there double standards here? Has one set of criteria been used for Advani and another for Jaswant Singh?

I'm outside of the periphery of the BJP's radar screen, I wished they hadn't used the word 'expelled' and they had a better choice of phrases to use. Even in the [military] academy we had better use of terms. If a gentleman cadet was found unfit for something, he was 'withdrawn.'

In other words, the ‘expulsion’ hurts you?

Yes, it hurts me.

It could have also been done a little more gracefully?

Oh without doubt, by personally coming and telling me. He hasn’t even telephoned but that doesn’t matter, now it’s too late.

When at 1 o’clock they telephoned you at Shimla to say that you have been expelled, did you ask them if they had read the book?

It was Rajnath Singhji who had called and I certainly did ask, in Hindi of course, has the book been read? And to which his response was, in Hindi, saying, *Haan bhai sahab, kitab kahi logo ne padi hai, bahut gussa hai* (Some of us have read the book and are not too happy about it).

But the book had been out for only 36 hours...

Not even 36 hours, August 17 about 7:30 and August 19 about 1 o’clock, that’s not even 36 hours.

In fact, on August 18, just 12 or 15 hours after the book was out, Rajnath issued a statement completely disassociating the party from the book?

I believe and apprehended that it was without really reading it.

So when Rajnath claims that the book had been read, do you think he was lying?

Ask him that question.

What’s your feeling?

I don’t want to go into my feelings. I have blanked that chapter out.

Do you believe that the book had been read?

It’s quite a feat in speed-reading if you read almost 700 pages. I don’t believe that my prose is fiction. It’s not easy. It requires attention. It would be a remarkable feat.

I want to reiterate this point: Rajnath actually said to you at 1 o'clock in the afternoon on August 19, when he was expelling you, that the book had been read?

Kahi logo ne padi hai (People have read the book).

Giving you the impression that he too had read it?

No, that was not the impression I gather. When you say *kahi logo ne*, you are referring to the second person.

In other words, the views they had formed were based on a reading of the book?

So I was told.

Which you find hard to believe because it's not an easy book to read?

I don't believe that because it's not practical.

Did you question him about this?

No, I did not. I don't question. It is undignified. It is not in my make-up.

So you accepted it even though

I laughed.

You laughed?

I laughed ruefully, and I did tell him with some pain, I believe, I rather really wish, bhai Rajnath Singhji, *Advani aur aap personally bula kar baat kar lete* (I rather Advaniji and you could have called me personally for a talk).

What was his answer to that?

He kept quiet, and said, *phir baat karenge* (we will talk about it), and put the telephone down.

But *woh mauka phir baat karne ka aaj tak nahi aya?* (but that promise of calling up again hasn't taken place till today?).

Woh mauka kaahaan se aayega, woh sadak toh chali gayi (where will the time come from? It's already too late).

Have you lost respect for people like Rajnath Singh and Advaniji?

I don't want to answer that question. It's a highly personalised comment. May god give them whatever they are looking for.

Justice, or revenge?

Good luck.

Jaswant Singh, a pleasure talking to you.