

Al-Jazeera Interview: Jaswant Singh

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Singh's book has provoked a storm of reaction in his own country [EPA]

Jaswant Singh, a former leader with India's main opposition party, has sparked controversy in his own country with a book on Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) expelled Singh over his book Jinnah: India-Partition Independence, which offered a sympathetic portrayal of Jinnah by an Indian writer.

The local government in Gujarat, a state controlled by the BJP, even moved to ban the book, saying it ran counter to public and national interests.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Singh, a former finance and foreign minister, gave his thoughts on the controversy sparked by his book, as well as on his former political party.

Al Jazeera: When you say that perhaps we need controversy to educate people, that seems to imply that there is some problem for India and Pakistan confronting that history.

Jaswant Singh: We have been manufacturing history, inventing history.

For example, India has demonised Mohammad Ali Jinnah just as Pakistan has demonised Mahatma Gandhi, or [Jawaharlal] Nehru or [Sardar Vallabhbhai] Patel.

They were all Indian. All of them were great Indians. Gandhi and Jinnah were really contemporaries ... and Gandhi himself called Jinnah a great Indian.

In terms of the book that you have written, what is more important - that discussion takes place in India about that history or that Jinnah is viewed differently?

The book has sparked controversy in India over its portrayal of Mohammed Ali Jinnah

Once the full book is read, [and] the narrative is grasped, then you understand the enormity of the tragedy and the fruitlessness of the partition, certainly to me.

This is not to question the reality of Pakistan, of Bangladesh, but we have to find an answer to the problems of that period.

We created a partition to end peace. There is no peace in Pakistan (inside it), there is no peace in India and there is no peace in Bangladesh. There is no peace between the countries.

You say in the book that "Pakistan is doubtless Muslim but theocentrically it's not a theocratic state". I mean, that's quite a loaded statement to make.

Not at all. "Theocentrism", where society is centred on Islam - this is in line whether Pakistan, India or Bangladesh, where faith is of paramount importance.

Pakistan is not theocratic in the sense it is not the Mullah that is governing Pakistan ... but Pakistan society is governed by Islam. That is the difference. It is a very vital and important difference that has to be understood by the West about Islam.

Should Pakistan be governed in a secular fashion though?

Pakistan should be governed as they determine for themselves ... I can wish that it would be better that they were governed as Jinnah had dreamt that they ought to be governed, but it's for Pakistan to decide.

You say in the book that the modern mind just cannot comprehend Islam precisely because it is a totality. It makes it very difficult for Pakistan to govern in anything that might resemble a secular fashion.

The Western mind cannot grasp the enormity and subtlety of Islam.

India has more Muslims living in it as citizens of India today than Pakistan has. We have lived with Islam for centuries.

Islam has been absorbed by the ethos of India.

I think India understands Islam much better than the West does. You see it as an adversary. We see it as part of the Indian vividity. The real renaissance of Islam would have taken place in undivided India if there had not been a partition.

I'm asking you a very personal and direct question because you've been such an integral part of the BJP. Do you take any responsibility for the state of affairs? Do you think that the BJP, not just for the country but for the good of itself, needs to reform?

Of course I take responsibility for everything that the party has done up till the moment of my exit. Until the day, I am a member of the party [and] I am responsible for everything the party has had to do or done.

As it is, the political parties that exist in the country are really functioning like private limited companies or family concerns ... congress of course is purely and unashamedly a family concern and they don't make any bones about it, but the same problems seem to have afflicted my former political party. It has become sycophantic, full of time-servers.

These are not the ideals with which we began. The purpose of the party was the service of the nation.