

[Home](#) > [Interview](#) > A lightly carried legacy

A lightly carried legacy

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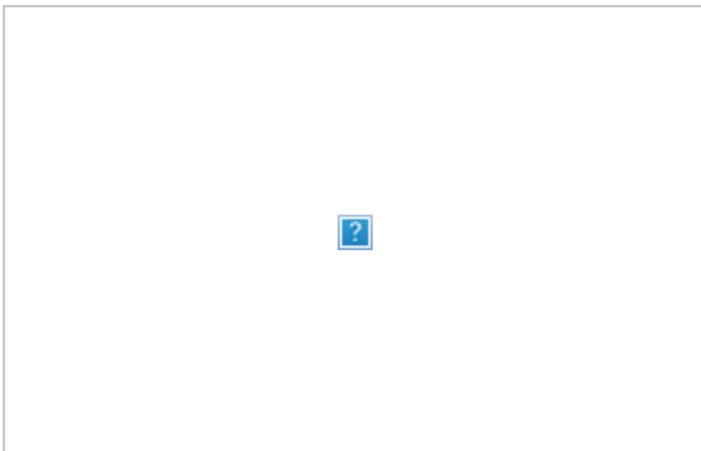
It is always fascinating to meet the progeny of famous people to see if the past comes through in any way. Vishaal Desai is 28, a film-maker and passionate about his work in the way that young people now are, if they are lucky. Morarji Desai, fourth prime minister of India, just happens to be his great grandfather. In conversation with Carol Andrade

Three weeks ago, on April 10, the 16th death anniversary of Morarji Ranchhodji Desai passed un-noticed. Yet if you mention his name, the response (and there still is) is usually equal parts awed remembrance and affectionate amusement. Single-handedly, the man who was an Indian independence activist, the fourth Prime Minister of India from 1977–79, the first Indian Prime Minister who did not belong to the Indian National Congress and the first Indian to receive the highest civilian awards from both India and Pakistan, the Bharat Ratna and Nishaan-e-Pakistan, did more than anyone else to practice and propagate urine therapy.



Down the corridor from the offices of this newspaper, a young man who stands a shade over 6 feet 2 inches, with a distinctive face and a sharply designed beard, carries the Morarji Desai legacy lightly on his shoulders. At 28, Vishaal Desai is forging his own path as a maker of short films. A graduate from the London School of Film, he is toughing it out, and loving every minute.

For the past six weeks, he has been working on his first film, a 12 to 15 minute short which he expects will take him another two weeks to finish. "It's called Envy, and is part of a series of seven films called The Seven Deadly Sins. Next is Gluttony," he says blandly.



Then will come Greed, Wrath, Sloth, Pride and Lust, and we cannot help but hark back to what Morarjibhai would have made of the whole thing. We suspect he would not have been a whit fazed, for he once told a woman journalist from a local newspaper that women would never be the equal of men – till they stopped cooking for them!

Vishaal spent the first 13 years of his life in the benevolent shadow of a man regarded as a legend by much of the country. Is he interested in politics himself? The answer is emphatic. "I have nothing to do with politics. By the time we were born, my great grandfather was already out of it and our memories of him are of a loving man, very soft-spoken, with whom you could sit in

comfort. Of the four of us (the children of brothers Bharat and Jagdeep through Moraji's son Kanti Desai), only one has expressed any interest in politics. The rest of us are doing our own thing."

Vishaal's 'thing' developed gradually. "At first, it was animation, because I was into gaming. He thought he would do animation courses. By the time he finished school and then did a B. Com from HR College, it all came together – his interest in animation, the possibility of video, a passion for films. "Much of it was fuelled by Star Wars in 1999. I was blown away by the visual effects and that pointed me in the direction of film. Because I also love live action! And at the London Film School, I picked up a camera for the first time." He was hooked.

"I'm a story teller at heart. For me, it's about the story." And stories are what he is telling through his short films which will finally be viewed not as a documentary but as an independent film.

Like any young film-maker, he is facing budget problems, though his concept was intriguing enough for him to get some financing from the school itself. "The rest I put in but I am hoping to fund the second one on the basis of this. It's a taster, as

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will be the next one – Gluttony – which I am hoping to finish by September. By next February, I want to be able to send the lot to Cannes for a showing, to film festivals, to television studios.” The theme for his seven-film offering was inspired by Polish film-maker Krzysztof Kieslowski’s “The Decalogue”, based on the Ten Commandments, and is an unpredictable look at the way the seven deadly sins affect lives in their omission as well as commission.

Does he think he will ever enter politics? It must be a question that has been put to him quite a lot, for there is fleeting irritation on his remarkable face. “All I can say is that politics disillusioned me and with my mindset, there is little chance I will ever consider it. I am not my great grandfather. At the end of the day, I’m me, I live in a different time and age. What my great grandfather did was very relevant to his time and his age. What would he have felt about politics today if he were alive? I cannot tell. Maybe he would do things differently. Maybe not. But of one thing I am sure – he would never compromise his principles.”

But he is conscious of his own history, even if no pressure has ever been placed upon them to conform to it is a burden. Conscious enough to ensure that very few people abroad knew about it! He is a child of his time, doing a job for his time in the best way that he knows.

One thing he seems to have inherited, a reluctance to indulge in small talk! Morarjibhai was famous for letting people know that he had little time for chit-chat as well, not always gently either. As a brand new prime minister in 1977 (to 1979), he received a surprise visitor in the form of the Chief Justice of India M H Baig, who came to congratulate him.



And Morarjibhai let him know that it was inappropriate for a Chief Justice to call on a prime minister, that a letter would have done equally well. But then, the inference was that his predecessor Mrs Indira Gandhi would have approved. After all, she had declared the Emergency during which all civil liberties were suspended for more than 18 months and even judges toed the line!

Vishaal, on the other hand, is still thinking things through on the film-making front – with an equal lack of compromise!

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