

## Mumbai Lawyer Suril Desai Talks About His Documentaries Iron Khan And Mumbai Jews

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**A lawyer who specialises in bitcoin and blockchain technology has produced two documentaries - not on Edward Snowden or Julian Assange - but on a former Kashmiri militant and Mumbai's Jews**



Suril Desai. Pic/Ashish Raje

Mumbai lawyer Suril Desai has an IMDb page. It boasts of one credit (producer of Iron Khan, a documentary), and will soon have company (executive producer of Mumbai Jews). Iron Khan is about Parvez Khan, a rehabilitated militant from Kashmir, who runs a lodge in Gulmarg; Mumbai Jews needs no explanation. The two stories are linked, according to Desai, as "sitting in India, if I can do these two stories together, it can influence societies and it can influence the Middle-East peace crisis. Because it's the same entities, which are against each other."

We meet Desai, 38, in the office of his father's highly sought-after firm, Nishith Desai Associates, in BKC. The firm is into trend forecasting. "We look at different technologies, at social and political movements, [because] with every new technology, every new business model, every new political change, comes along a new legal and tax problem."

Desai, however, is the in-house disruptor. "I focus a lot on innovation, technology, privatisation of space exploration, humanitarian laws." He's an expert on bitcoin and its applications, about which he says, "Blockchain without bitcoin is like saying, 'I give you the Internet, but I won't allow you to have your website.'" So, how does a square gent like him get into the world of films?

### **Boarders without borders**

In 2014, Desai visited Gulmarg for a snowboarding competition — he was the sponsor — and met Naseer Khanday, who was managing a backpackers' lodge. Khanday was working on a docu about the snowboarding culture in Kashmir, and after a few discussions, Desai, who was already a documentary buff and a news junkie, came onboard. But, as events unfolded, the docu snowballed and became about Parvez Khan, an ex-militant, who had been running Raja Hut for almost 15 years, when it was sealed by the Gulmarg development authority.

"If you see the documentary, there is a point when his older son was like, 'What do you want me to do? You want me to pick up an AK-47, like my father did?' The court [eventually] gave the order in his favour. But, he lost one entire winter season, and it became a very tragic situation, because these people are reforming, they're coming back into society. It's a very positive, uplifting story about how people can change."

Snowboarding still forms the landscape of the film. "You will see young Kashmiri girls wearing the hijab and snowboarding. It's such an addictive, demanding sport. It'll take you about two hours to go on top of the mountain and minutes to come down. Everything becomes about the now; your perspective shifts. If I can convince even one person, who's radicalised or is really angry and agitated and is about to join the militancy, to pick up a snowboard, that itself is an achievement for me."

### **Tragedy leads to hope**

The other docu came about because of 26/11. Desai, who lives in the NCPA Apartments, started volunteering with the Jewish Nariman House after the attack. "I realised that the Oberois would take care of the Oberoi, the Tatas of Taj and the government of CST. But, the Nariman House was complicated, because after the attacks, funding for religious organisations became strict. So, I started helping them."

Ten years later, Desai is one of the fastest friends the Mumbai Jewish community has. So much so that when he heard of an Israeli documentarian called Oren Rosenfeld, who was making a docu on the community in Mumbai, he became executive producer. "The secular fabric of India is such a powerful medium. We underestimate its power. This documentary brought me a lot of closure. Because the terror attacks in Mumbai were blamed on the Kashmir LeTs [Lashkar-e-Taiba], and I could get a different perspective on the whole issue."

Desai is wading into these subjects, because he wants to understand: "How do you make the world more compatible? I'm very close with the brother [Moshe Holtzberg] of the slain rabbi [Gavriel Holtzberg]. He saw Iron Khan and he enjoyed it. At the level of people-to-people, there's no conflict." A casual observer would say that's a good place to start.