

Famous Hollywood Celebrities with Roots in India

1. Hollywood super starlet Vivien Leigh of *Gone with the Wind* fame was born Vivian Mary Hartley on the campus of St. Paul's School in Darjeeling, India to Irish-Parsi parents. She attended Loreto Convent in Darjeeling until the age of six when her family moved to Europe.



Image credit: [Gone with the Wind via Wikimedia](#)

Vivien Leigh ruled Hollywood in the forties. She has won two Oscars, one for her stellar performance as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) opposite Clark Gable and as Francis Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Even today, many a movie fan will know her name, yet not many know that she has her roots in India.

Vivien Leigh was born Vivian Mary Hartley on the 5th of November, 1913 in the beautiful hill station of Darjeeling in India. Her father, Richard Hartley, was Scottish, while her mother, Gertrude Mary Frances, was of mixed heritage whose father was a Parsi named Michael John Yackjee. Vivien studied in Loreto Convent in Darjeeling until the age of six after which her family sent her to England where she was admitted into the Sacred Heart Convent in Roehampton, in southwest London. It was there that she met Maureen Sullivan, another iconic actress, who encouraged her interest to be in films. Recognizing her desire to be an actress, her father enrolled her in London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. The rest of the story is history. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vivien_Leigh)

2. Merle Oberon, Academy Award winner and leading lady of Hollywood in the thirties, was famous for her role in *Wuthering Heights* opposite Laurence Olivier. She was born Esthel Merle Obrien Thompson in Mumbai, India to British-Eurasian parents. She grew up in Kolkata where she worked as a telephone operator under the name Queenie Thompson and also performed at the famed nightclub Firpo's.



Image credit: [Wikimedia](#)

Who could have guessed this ethereal beauty who was famous for playing Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* (1939) opposite Laurence Olivier was a simple, Anglo-Indian girl who worked as a telephone operator in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in India. Although an accomplished actress who won the role of Cathy from Vivien Leigh, Oberon has never acknowledged her Indian roots. She has always claimed she was born in Tasmania, Australia, a bluff that fell through when records proved who she really was and where she came from.

She was born Estelle Merle O'Brien Thompson in Mumbai, India on February 19th, 1911. Nicknamed "Queenie," nothing is known of her biological father, but her mother was Constance Selby, the daughter of an Irish tea plantation foreman and his wife, Henry Selby and Charlotte Selby, who were Eurasian. When Charlotte remarried Arthur Thompson, a mechanical engineer for the Indian railways, Merle was raised as their daughter and her mother's sister instead. Poverty struck her family when Arthur died after which her mother relocated the family to the city of Calcutta, India (now Kolkata) where she lived under the name "Queenie Thompson." She was home-schooled and grew up liking theatre where she performed at the once-renowned Kolkata nightclub, Firpos. Oberon and her mother moved to England when she was 17 where she worked in clubs under the name "Queenie O'Brien." It was then that she met the acclaimed director and her future husband, Alexander Korda, who introduced her to Hollywood. She finally adopted her new name, Merle Oberon. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merle_Oberon)

3. Iconic crooner Engelbert Humperdinck famous for his hits like “*Spanish Eyes*” and “*The Last Waltz*” was born Arnold George Dorsey in Chennai, India to a British father and Anglo-Indian mother. His family immigrated to Leicester, England where he eventually changed his name to Engelbert Humperdinck.



Image credit: [Wayne Dilger via Wikimedia](#)

He wowed people with his rich baritone voice that made his two greatest hits, *Please Release Me* and *The Last Waltz*, chartbusters selling a million copies each. Until today, many know and listen to the golden voice of Engelbert Humperdinck, but that wasn't his real name. Humperdinck was born on the 2nd of May, 1936 as Arnold George Dorsey in Madras (now Chennai), India. His parents were Mervyn Dorsey, a Scottish Army engineer, and Olive, who was from south India.

Speaking to the *Guardian* in an interview, Engelbert recalled how in his younger days, his family moved to Leicester, England when he was just ten. He was a plump, bucktoothed boy who sold newspapers to pay for saxophone lessons. Leaving school at 15, he changed his name to “Gerry Dorsey” and soon started performing small gigs in men's clubs traveling even to Germany. Life was tough for Engelbert who recalls eating just porridge, minced meat, and mashed potatoes for meals. It was his manager (incidentally the same one who managed Tom Jones) who decided on drastic measures and reinvented the singer giving him the new name of Engelbert Humperdinck

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engelbert_Humperdinck_\(singer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engelbert_Humperdinck_(singer)))

4. Sir Cliff Richard was born Harry Webb in Lucknow, India in 1940 to Anglo parents. He lived in a small house in Hazratganj, Lucknow where his mother worked as a dormitory matron in La Martiniere School. The family moved and lived in Kolkata till immigrating to London in 1948.

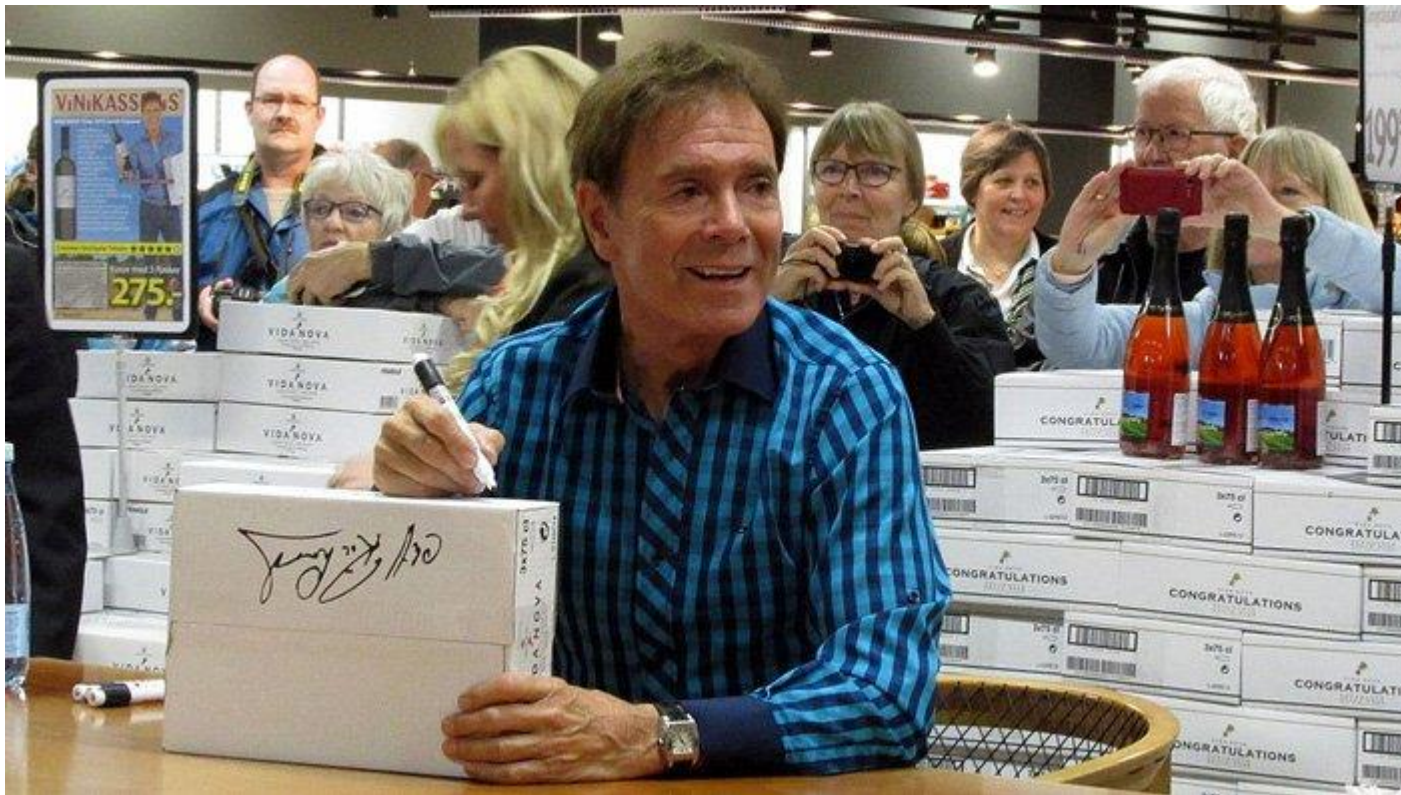


Image credit: [Tomasz Sienicki via Wikimedia](#)

Today, he is known as “Sir Cliff Richard,” but there was a time when Cliff was a boy called “Harry Roger Webb” who lived on a small street in Maqbara near the busy shopping district of Hazratganj in Lucknow, India. Born in 1940 at the King George Hospital, Victoria Street, in Lucknow, Richard’s mother Dorothy worked as a matron in the prestigious La Martiniere School. His father, Englishman Roger Oscar Webb, worked in the Indian Railways; both parents were born and raised in India.

From Lucknow, the family moved to Calcutta (now Kolkata), India and lived on Dobson Road in Howrah district near Calcutta. He attended St Thomas School and even sang for the school choir. When India gained independence in 1947, the family was traumatized by the ensuing riots and left for England in 1948. Richards was eight at the time. From luxury in India to a small and humble accommodation in England, Richard took to music and formed his first commercial band in 1958 simultaneously changing his name and calling his group Cliff Richard and the Drifters (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliff_Richard)

5. Freddie Mercury of Queen is a Parsi and was born Farrokh Balsara in Zanzibar but raised in Mumbai. He attended St Peter's boarding school in Panchgani where he cultivated his love for music and formed his first band The Heretics. One of his musical influences was famous Indian Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar.

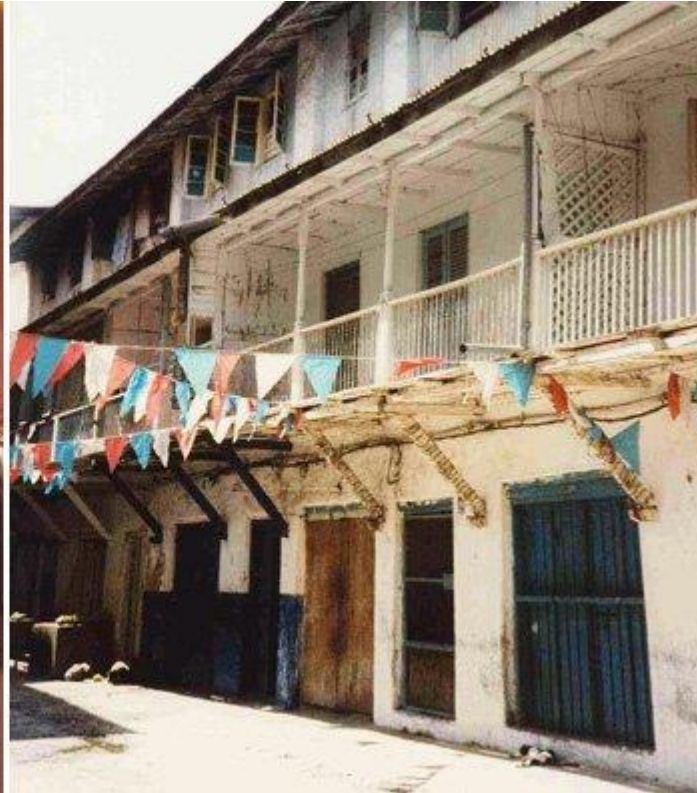


Image credit: [Carl Lender/Flickr](#), [Wikimedia](#)

Does Freddie Mercury need any introduction? Perhaps not, but as Farrokh Balsara, he certainly does. As one of the most iconic rock stars of the 20th century, Freddie Mercury was once a lovable little border at St Peter's boarding school in Panchgani near Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

Born in 1946 to a Parsi parents Bomi and Jer Balsara in Zanzibar, little Farrokh was moved to India. His passion for music was exhibited at an early age when he even formed his own band in school naming it The Hectics. It was in school that he nicknamed himself "Freddie," and one band member even recalled how he had the uncanny gift of hearing a tune on the radio and playing it back on the piano.

The family moved to England in 1963, and seven years later, he would become "Freddie Mercury" the lead singer of Queen that propelled him to superstardom. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freddie_Mercury)

6. Erick Avari famous for his roles in *The Mummy*, *Independence Day* and *Stargate*, was born Naruman Eruch Avari in Darjeeling, India to Parsi parents who were influential in the region and owned the town's only two cinema halls, Rink and Capital.



Image credit: Universal Pictures

Darjeeling is a quaint hill station in India, and many a westerner knows of its popularity as an affordable doorway to the Himalayas. Until the eighties, Darjeeling had only two cinema halls, the Rink and the Capital, whose clock tower was symbolic of the hill station. Both were owned by Erick Avari's family who were members of the influential Avari-Madan household that owned and controlled several businesses in Darjeeling, Calcutta (Kolkata) and across India.

Erick was born Naruman Eruch Avari in 1952 in Darjeeling. He was never really a part of his illustrious business family having spent his years in European boarding schools and subsequently attending a university in the US. He graduated to acting from theater and has been seen in several Hollywood films such as *The Mummy*, *Independence Day* and *Daredevil*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erick_Avari)

7. X-factor Australia winner Samantha Jade may have been born in Australia, but she was born to Anglo-Indian parents. Her father, Kevin Gibbs, is half Fijian and half Indian.

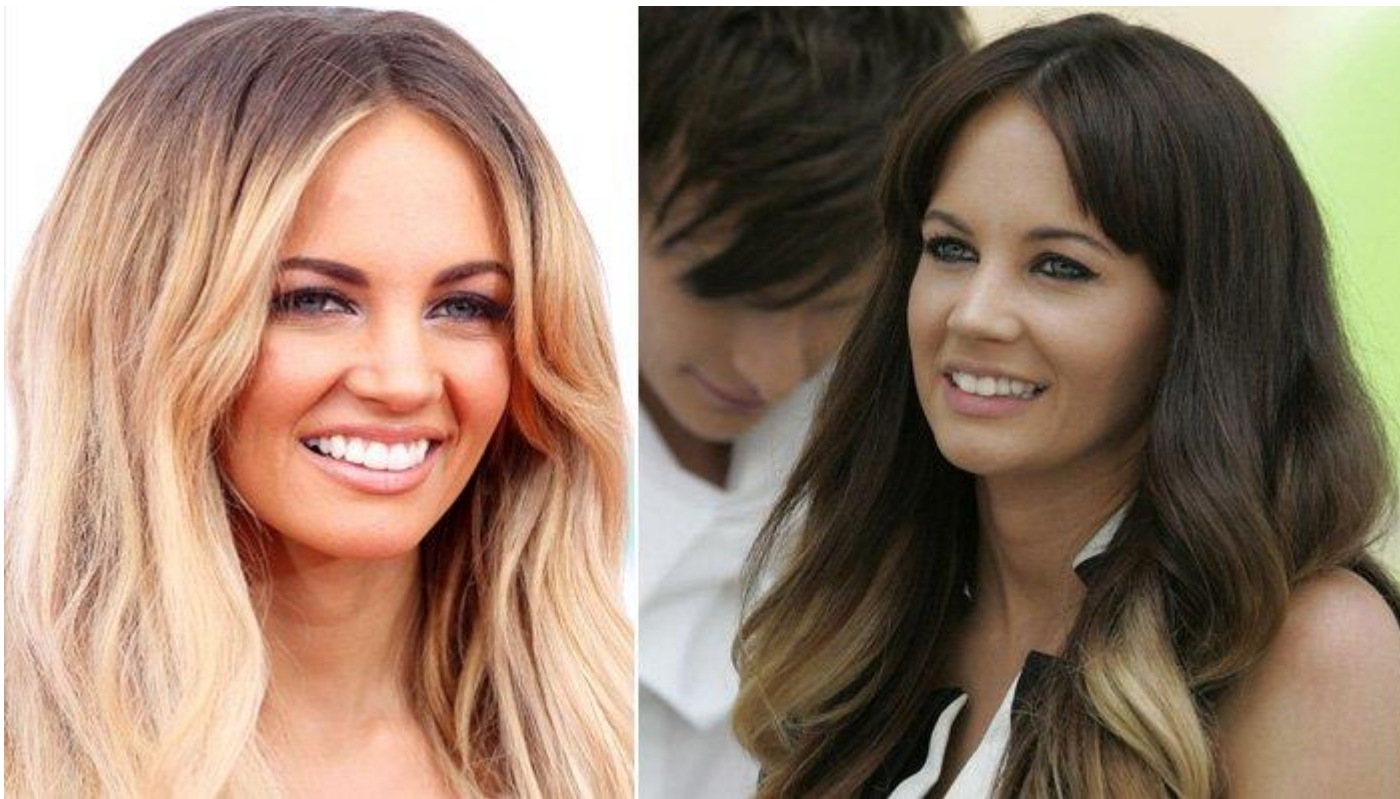
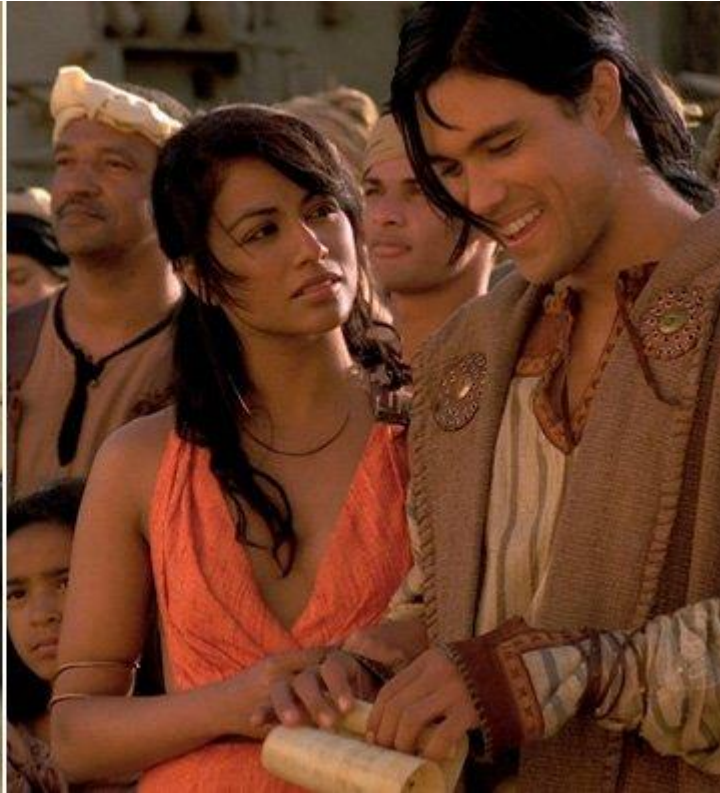


Image credit: [Eva Rinaldi/Flickr](#)

Samantha Jade has always been in the limelight ever since she was a child model in Perth, Australia where she was born and raised. Jade was born in Perth, Australia on the 18th April 1987 to an Anglo-Indian father, Kevin Gibbs, and Scottish mother, Jacqueline Dean Gibbs. Jade has been modeling since she was four. Her talent as a singer and songwriter took her to the stage of the X-Factor where she won the fourth season of the contest. Jade has had quite a measure of success in her career as a TV star, a singer, and a songwriter. She even starred as Kylie Minogue in the TV miniseries *INXS: Never Tear Us Apart* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samantha_Jade)

8. Karen David is best known for her role as Layla in the *Scorpion King 2: Rise of a Warrior* and Princess Jasmine in the American TV series *Once Upon A Time*. She was born in Shillong, India. Her father is a Khasi-Jew while her mother is half Indian and half Chinese.



[Image credit: Universal Pictures, Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia](#)

You might have seen her in the *Scorpion King 2: Rise Of A Warrior* and felt that she is beautiful with no doubt. But there is more to Karen Shenaz David than that role. She is an accomplished singer-songwriter and television actor having appeared in TV series like *Castle* and *Criminal Minds*, to name a few.

Karen Shenaz David belongs to one of the Khasi tribes in India having being born in 1979 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India to a Khasi-Jewish father and an Indo-Chinese mother. She was raised in Canada and subsequently in London where she took up acting as a career. David studied at the Guildford School of Acting and was one of the original members of the West End Musical *Mamma Mia!* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_David)

9. Freida Pinto of *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Immortal s* was born and raised in Malad, Mumbai, India to a south Indian Catholic family. Her mother worked as a school principal while her father was a senior branch manager for the Bank of Baroda. Pinto excelled in school and worked as a model until her big break in *Slumdog Millionaire*.



Image Credit: DFID/Flickr, Georges Biard/Wikimedia

When Freida Selena Pinto was immersed in her efforts to make it big in the modeling world of Mumbai, India, little did she know that she would one day be selected for something really big. The actress of Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire* came from a humble, middle-class family where her father, Frederick Pinto, worked as a bank manager and her mother, Sylvia Pinto, as a school principal in Mumbai, India.

Freida was born on the 18th of October 1984 and raised in Mumbai India. She studied at St Xavier's College and after graduation pursued a career in modeling through the Elite Model Management company. *Slumdog Millionaire* was her first big break in films, after which she went on to star in several others such as *The Immortals* and *The Planet of the Apes*.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freida_Pinto)

10. Academy Award winner Sir Ben Kingsley of Gandhi fame is of Indian origin and was born Krishna Pandit Bhanji in Snainton, Scarborough, England to an English mother and Gujarati father Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji. Throughout his college years, he was obsessed with theater.

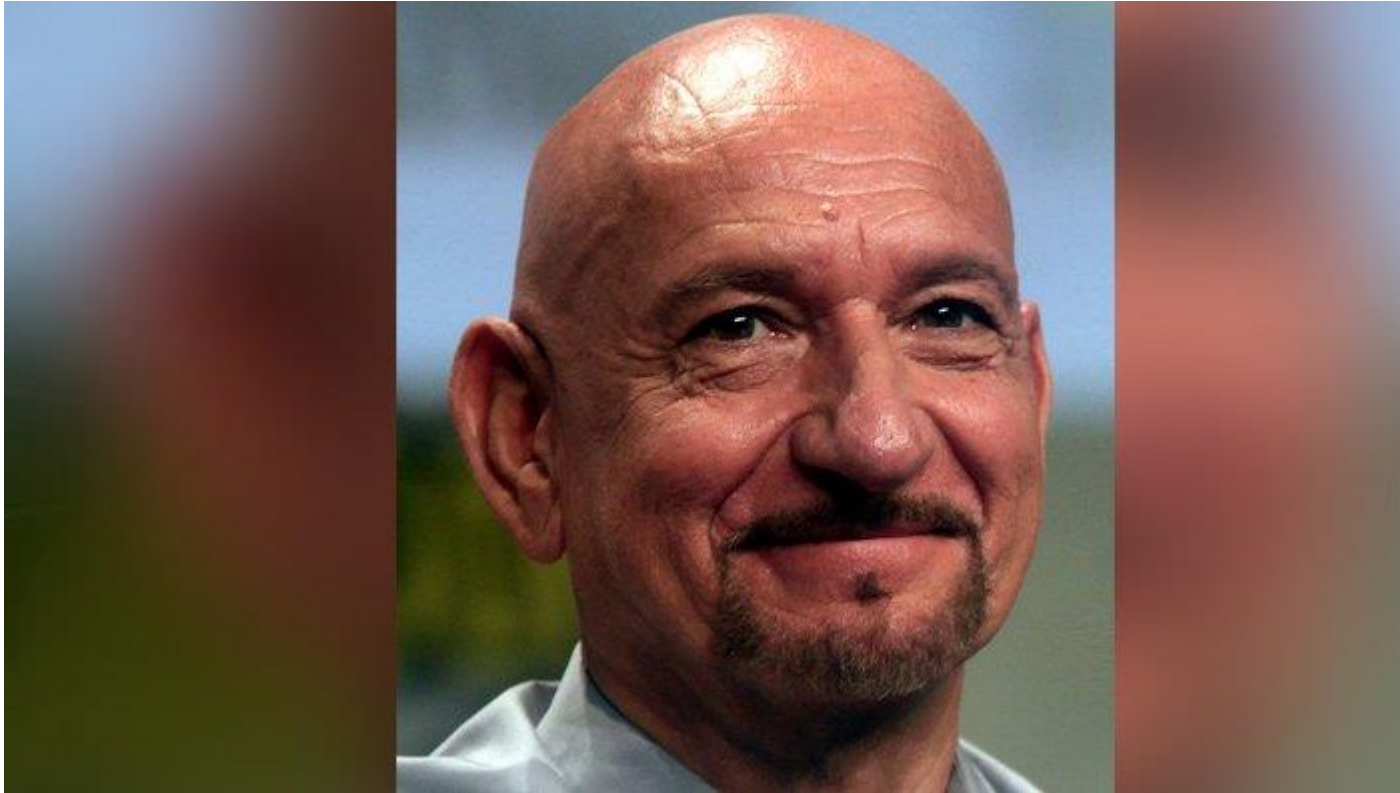


Image credit: [Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia](#)

Sir Ben Kingsley needs no introduction. Without bias, one can truly say it was his iconic performance as Gandhi in Richard Attenborough's Academy Award-winning movie of the same name that has inspired millions around the globe. Through the movie, people came to know more about Mahatma Gandhi, and it was Ben Kingsley who shone in a role which seemed tailor-made for him

Kingsley may have changed his name to a more acceptable one in Hollywood, but he was born as Krishna Pandit Bhanji, a name typically given to a Gujarati in India. Born in 1943 in Scarborough, England, Kingsley's mother was Anna Lyna Mary, an English actress and model, while his father, Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji, a doctor, was of Indian descent but born in Kenya. Kingsley was fascinated with theater and devoted his life and career to stage and film. He changed his name around 1977 when he acted in Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Kingsley)