

# Bhanu Athaiya

(1929-2020)

Mumbai Legacy Project  
D Ward



In the history of Indian cinema, there have been several creative filmmakers, art directors and designers, but it took some time for an Indian artist to win an Academy Award. Bhanu Athaiya, the costume designer for the film Gandhi (1982), the only female amongst the Progressive artists and a pioneering painter (D'Mello 2020), was the first Indian Academy Award winner.

Bhanumati Rajopadhye was born on 28th April 1929 to Annasaheb and Shantabai in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. Her father was the royal priest in the princely state of Kolhapur (PTI 2020). However, he was a self-taught artist (Hoskote 2020) and photographer who worked in the films of Baburao Painter. Bhanu's early acquaintance with art came through her father. Annasaheb introduced his daughter to the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt and Turner and engaged a person to teach her papercraft (Hoskote 2020). He would ask her to clean his brushes and palette (Lala 2008). Annasaheb passed away when Bhanu was only nine.

After completing her primary education in Kolhapur, considering her passion for art and painting, her mother enrolled Bhanu in the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. Here, she came in contact with the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) for the first time (Shaikh 2020). The group consisted of modern artists based in Bombay. It was formed in 1947. Training under VS Gaitonde and many other artists allowed a better understanding of the contours of the human body and the balance between figure and background, which proved beneficial to her in the future. In 1951, she won the Usha Deshmukh Gold medal for the artwork Lady In Repose. Amrita Sher Gill's earthy palette was a crucial influence on this piece. Bhanu contributed three canvases to the 1953 group exhibition of progressive artists held at Bombay Art Society's Salon on Rampart Row and became a part of the Progressives (Princeps 1953) with KH Ara, Akbar Padamsee, MF Husain and others (Shaikh 2020). She began making illustrations for fashion magazines such as Fashion & Beauty and Eve's Weekly. Shortly after the 1953 exhibition, she quit the world of art for cinema (Nagree 2018).

Bhanu's first break as a costume designer came in Dutt's hit film C.I.D. in 1956. She remarked, "It was so fulfilling that I did not feel the need to do anything else, like opening a boutique. Top stars started approaching me on their own and recommending me to filmmakers (BBC 2020)". After marrying lyricist and poet Satyendra Athaiya in 1959, she changed her name to Bhanu Athaiya. Many films followed, such as Pyaasa (1957), Chaudhvin Ka Chand (1960), Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962), Guide (1965) and Amrapali (1966) (Singh 2012). In the costumes for the films, she tried defining the Indian identity in the era of Independence (Nagree 2018). She went on to create some of Bollywood's memorable looks.

A great opportunity presented itself when Richard Attenborough offered her the job as costume designer for his film Gandhi within 15 minutes of her audition in 1982. However, this was a time of no internet, which made designing costumes to resemble different decades tough (BBC 2020). Her designs created history when she won an Oscar for Best Costume Design in 1983, along with John Mollo (DNA 2020). She also received a nomination for the BAFTAs (Ramchandran 2020). Bhanu went on to work with eminent Indian filmmakers like Yash Chopra, B. R. Chopra, Vijay Anand, Raj Kapoor and even International filmmakers like Conrad Rooks and Richard Attenborough. Designing evergreen looks for Nargis, Waheeda Rehman and Sridevi, she transformed her love for art from paper and brush to the big screen.





With a career spanning six decades, with over 100 films, Bhanu became Bollywood's most sought-after costume designer. *Teesri Manzil* (1966), *Johny Mera Naam* (1970), *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1979), *Meera* (1979), *Karz* (1980), *Ek Dujhe Ke Liye* (1981), *Prem Rog* (1982), *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Chandni* (1989), *Aashiqui* (1990) and *Swades* (2004) were classic films that showcased her designs. She won the National Film Award for Best Costume Design for *Lekin* (1991) and *Lagaan* (2002). In 2009, Filmfare honoured her with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Her autobiographical book, "The Art of Costume Design" was published in 2010. In 2012, she returned her Oscar to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for safekeeping (BBC 2020). On 15th October 2020, she died at the age of 91. Bhanu Athaiya treated the big screen like a canvas and brought realism, artistry, and an innovative aestheticism to Indian cinema.

#### References:

"Bhanu Athaiya: Costume designer who won India's first Oscar dies". BBC. 15th October 2020.

"Veteran costume designer Bhanu Athaiya, India's first Oscar winner, dies at 91", DNA. 15th October 2020.

D'Mello, Rosalyn. "Bhanu Athaiya: The Sartorial Modernist". OPEN. 27th November 2020.

Hoskote, Ranjit. "Bhanu Rajopadhye Athaiya: The Legacy of a Long-hidden Sun", in *Bhanu Athaiya*, Mumbai: Prinseps. December 2020.

Lala, Smita. "My Fundays- Bhanu Athaiya". *The Telegraph*. 7th May 2008. [https://web.archive.org/web/20110525221923/http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080507/jsp/telekids/story\\_9233599.jsp](https://web.archive.org/web/20110525221923/http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080507/jsp/telekids/story_9233599.jsp)

Nagree, Zeenat. "Before Bhanu Athaiya, the Oscar-winning designer, there was Bhanu Athaiya, the modernist painter", *Scroll*. 31st July 2018.

Prinseps. 'Progressive Artists' Group Exhibition of Paintings Catalogue', Prinseps. 1953.

PTI. "Kolhapur residents mourn daughter who put town on world map By Nikhil Deshmukh", *The Week*. 15th October 2020.

Ramchandran, Naman. "Bhanu Athaiya, India's First Oscar Winner for 'Gandhi,' Dies at 91" *Variety*. 15th October 2020.

Shaikh, Ayaz. "Prinseps's 'Bhanu Athaiya Estate Sale' sets out to give the late designer her due as an artist", *Architectural Digest*. 1st December 2020.

Singh, Lada Gurdeep. "First Indian to win an Oscar, Bhanu Athaiya wants to return her award", *India Today*. 23rd February 2012.

