

# Bend It Like Beckham

Dir. Gurinder Chadha, UK/Germany 2002, Certificate 12A



## Introduction

Bend It Like Beckham was one of the surprise hits of 2002, making over £11,000,000 at the UK Box Office and hitting a chord with a range of audiences at cinemas. A vibrant and colourful British comedy about a young girl from a Sikh family who desperately wants to play football against the wishes of her traditional parents, the film can be seen to follow the path of other recent British-Asian films such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Anita and Me* and *East Is East* in its examination of culture clashes and family traditions.

Bend It Like Beckham takes these themes and adds extra ingredients to the dish – football, Shakespearean confusions over identity and sexuality, in-jokes about both British pop culture and the Sikh way of life, and a music soundtrack mixing a range of East/West sounds and musical styles.

It is also useful to look at Bend It Like Beckham within a wider context of the British Asian experience in popular culture and media, such as portrayal of Asian culture on television including Ali G, *Goodness Gracious Me*, families in soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* – even the new Walkers Crisps advert has Gary Lineker in a mini-Bollywood musical - and the Asian language, music and fashion that has now flowed into the mainstream.



## Film Synopsis

Jesminder (known as Jess) is a Sikh teenager living in Hounslow, who loves to play football. Her parents disapprove, wanting her to settle down, get a job as a lawyer and marry a nice Indian boy.

Meeting up with another teenage girl, Jules, while having a kick around in the park, Jess discovers there is a local girl's football team and also that there is a chance she could play professionally.

She joins the team (lying to the coach, Joe, that she has told her parents) and becomes best friends with Jules; whilst the team get a chance to go to Hamburg to play. In Germany, Jess and Jules have a falling out over Joe, and Jess' subterfuge is discovered by her parents and she is banned from playing.

A crucial cup match is planned (where an American scout will be present) on the same day as Jess' sister's wedding. Will Jess and Jules make up? Can Jess get to the match **and** the wedding?



## Curriculum Links

The film is a very useful tool for work on a range of topics within Film and Media Studies, particularly for exploring representation and studying contemporary British cinema. It is available on both VHS and DVD and is still in UK distribution.

Certificate 12A

Suitable for: GCSE, A Level

[NOTE: PE teachers may also find it useful to explain the off-side rule!]



## Representation

The film explores a number of themes and gives us two main areas of study in terms of representation: gender and the British Asian experience. These two areas can be brought together by looking at the main protagonists, Jess and Jules, their respective families and the issues explored.

Jess is the central character and in the main, we follow the story through her experiences. She is shown as an intelligent young woman, who tries to be a 'good' girl for her mother and father, but who is also passionate about playing football. Jess has already started to move away from traditional ways (her name is westernised from Jesminder) whilst her family think that football will have a corrupting influence - 'showing your bare legs to the boys' says her mother. However, her rebellious streak is not aimed to hurt her parents.



Our first sight of Jess is actually in a fantasy sequence, playing for Manchester United and scoring the winning goal, and then we see her in her room, surrounded by icons traditionally linked to boys (football scarves, posters, wearing a Manchester United top). Jess is seemingly not bothered by her appearance and is not interested in 'typical' teenage girl activities (shopping, boys, make-up, clothes, pop music etc.). When her mother finally gets her into the kitchen to teach her how to cook a traditional Indian meal, Jess is seen playing keep-up with various vegetables!

Jess only becomes aware of her femininity when she gets to know Joe and begins to change (literally in Hamburg, when Jules dresses her up for the party and does her hair).

Jules complements Jess in a number of ways - their names are similar, both want to play football, both have trouble from their mothers. Like Jess, Jules is shown to be ambitious but at least has the backing of her father. Her mother, just like Mrs Bharmra, wants her daughter to be more 'traditional', trying to stop her buying a sports bra and worried that her obsession with football is making her less feminine.



Jess' family and background are explored in a number of ways and emphasise the bringing together of the traditional and the modern in contemporary British-Asian life.

Elements such as the picture of the Holy Man on the wall of the front room, the costumes and greetings and the disapproval of marriage outside the community are contrasted with the modern thinking of characters such as Jess and Tony - who is planning to tell his mother he is gay.

Tony is shown as a positive character who acts in a 'decent' manner towards Jess, pretending he wants to marry her so she can go to America to play football.



Jess understands and accepts Tony's gayness, but we never learn what happens when Tony comes out to his more macho male friends and his more traditional family.

Jules and Jess' suspected 'lesbian' relationship is handled with humour - Jules' Mum shown as being totally over the top in her condemnation then calming down when she learns the truth, admitting she was a fan of Martina Navratilova!

The traditional v modern conflict is not just simply shown as an older v young generation dispute. Jess' sister Pinky is just as traditional in her outlook as her mother - 'Don't you want all this?' she asks Jess on her wedding day, and Mr Bharmra is shown to be sympathetic and understanding of Jess' point of view.

Racism is touched on both in terms of institutionalised racism (Mr Bharmra was not let into his local cricket club due to membership rules) and more directly, when Jess is called a Paki by an opposing player.

The character of Joe is Irish, and sympathises with Jess, implying that he also has experienced racism from the English.

Unlike a film such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, an exploration of racism is not the film's main theme or concern. Overall, the Asian community is shown as both retaining their traditions and culture but integrating successfully into some aspects of British life.



## Genre

Although the film could fall within a number of areas (teen movie, sports movie etc.), the film is essentially a comedy centred on the British-Asian community and there are a number of comic traditions and situations used.

### ● Culture clash

Always a rich mine for comedy, the film not only looks at the differences between the British and Asian lifestyles, but also the clashes within the Punjabi community itself.

British people trying to 'get' the Asian culture are gently mocked, particularly when Jess arrives to see Jules, Mrs Paxton responds with a feeble 'Oooh, I made a lovely curry yesterday' and tells her that her mum will obviously be 'fixing her up with a nice handsome doctor', as of course, according to English people, all professional Asian men are doctors!

Joe arrives at Jess' house to explain about the crucial match and Pinky, Jess' sister, asks why she has brought home a 'Gora' (slang for a white person). 'He's Irish' says Jess, to which Pinky replies 'Yeah well they all look the bloody same', which turns the traditional stereotype on its head.

### ● Sight gags

Used in cinema from the silent days, *Bend It Like Beckham* uses them to add to the comedy, particularly at the expense of Jess' older relatives. A mobile phone rings in the front room and about ten elderly Punjabi women rummage in their bags to answer. They reappear when Jess has to take a crucial free kick and she imagines the opposition wall has become four of her relatives plus her pleading sister.

### ● Comic misunderstandings

The film is rife with misunderstandings and confusions which come to a head at Pinky's wedding. Through a series of misheard conversations and wrong assumptions, Mrs Paxton thinks Jules and Jess are lovers, and while in the early part of the film she makes a joke out of it, telling Jules 'There's a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one without a fella!', she becomes increasingly distressed about the situation.

Confronting Jess at the wedding, Mrs Paxton accuses her of being 'all respectful here with your lot' and finally shouts 'get your lesbian feet out of my shoes!', shoes which Jules had lent Jess earlier.

This also provides some comic lines of dialogue, again from the confused elderly relatives - 'I thought she was a Pisces'...'She's not Lebanese, she's Punjabi!'



## Audiences

In terms of UK cinema audiences, the key demographic or target group for the film on its release was teenagers and twenty-somethings (approx. 12-25 year olds), aiming specifically at the female market.

Given the rise in interest in football amongst young women in terms of the growth of women's football clubs, more women watching the game and the recent 'player as superstar pin-up' phenomenon (David Beckham, David Ginola, Robert Pires etc.) it was thought there was an untapped female audience for a movie about football that had two strong female central characters.

In tabloid film magazine language, it could be seen as both a 'chick flick' and a 'date movie' with its mixture of football, comedy, romance and a young attractive cast appealing to both male and female audiences.

The film's release in April 2002 also benefited from the media interest leading up to the World Cup in Japan, and coincided with the frenzy around David Beckham's toe, that could not help but assist the film.

The UK poster and adverts emphasise the comedy aspects of the film over the sport (bright colours, smiling faces, press quotes such as 'you'll be grinning from ear to ear'... 'hilariously fresh'... 'the best British comedy since Bridget Jones's Diary'.

The tagline on the poster, 'Who wants to cook Aloo Gobi when you can bend the ball like Beckham' sums up the dilemma of Jess in one line, playing her Punjabi traditions against her new British identity.





## Director

The director, **Gurinder Chadha** was born in Kenya of Asian descent and grew up in Southall, London. Her first media job was as a news reporter for BBC Radio and she made her first short film in 1990, called I'm British But... which explored some of the issues brought out in Bend It Like Beckham.

She continued making short films and documentaries for television, and directed her first feature, *Bhaji on the Beach* in 1993. In 1999 she went to Hollywood to make *What's Cooking* and is currently working on a new feature, where Bollywood meets Jane Austen, called *Bride and Prejudice*.

## The Stars

The two main actresses, **Parminder Nagra** and **Keira Knightly**, are from Britain, and although they both play teenagers, Parminda Nagra was actually 26 when the film was shot.

Both had had little film experience before, although Nagra had been on television since the mid 1990s including parts in *Casualty*, *Holby City* and a feature length *Twelfth Night*, playing Viola.

She will be seen next in *ER* when the new series starts in the UK in 2004.

Keira Knightly played the part of Princess Amidala's double in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and starred in the British thriller *The Hole* in 2001 with Thora Birch. She is currently on UK screens in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Her next projects include playing Guinevere in the historical epic *King Arthur*, and a British comedy directed by Richard Curtis, *Love - Actually* starring Hugh Grant.





## Box Office Information

Bend It Like Beckham was released in the UK in April 2002, having been shot on location in London during the previous summer. On its opening weekend, it took £2,000,000 across the country and its total box office was over £11,500,000.

The film was released in the United States in March 2003 where it has now so far grossed 28 million dollars.

## Notes on Bollywood

'Bollywood' is a term used by journalists, filmmakers and the media to describe the large scale, popular musicals produced in India for national and international consumption. The name comes from combining Hollywood and Bombay, the city which is the centre of the Indian film industry. The films are usually a mixture of colourful romance, comedy and family drama, with, sometimes, up to a dozen musical sequences.

Many films have been released in the UK, usually in Hindi without English subtitles.

There are two very useful articles available from the British Film Institute about the genre - Hooray for Bollywood and Bollywood and Beyond: Teaching Indian Cinema. Visit [www.bfi.org](http://www.bfi.org) and click on 'education' for details.







## Credits

Screenplay: Gurinder Chadha, Paul Mayeda Berges and Guljit Bindra

Photography: Jong Ling

Music: Craig Pruess

Songs include: Move on Up (Curtis Mayfield); The Power of Love (Amar); Independence Day (Melanie C); Dream the Dream (Shaznay Lewis); Inner Smile (Texas); I Wish (Victoria Beckham); Jind Mahi (Malkit Singh); My Final Peace (Gunjan)

## CAST

Parminda Nagra ..... Jesminder Bhamra  
Keira Knightley ..... Jules Paxton  
Jonathon Rhys-Meyers ..... Joe  
Anupam Kher ..... Mr Bhamra  
Shaleen Khan ..... Mrs Bhamra  
Archie Panjabi ..... Pinky Bhamra  
Frank Harper ..... Alan Paxton  
Juliet Stevenson ..... Paula Paxton  
Shaznay Lewis ..... Mel  
Ameet Chana ..... Tony  
Kulvinder Ghir ..... Teetu  
Pooja Shah ..... Meena  
Paven Virk ..... Bubbly  
Preeya Kalidas ..... Monica  
John Motson  
John Barnes  
Gary Lineker  
Alan Hanson ..... Themselves

Available on VHS (Warner Home Video) and DVD

DVD includes commentary from Gurinder Chada, a behind the scenes documentary, the Hot Hot Hot video, 10 deleted scenes and a recipe for Aloo Gobi.



## Related British-Asian Titles

### ● **My Beautiful Laundrette** (UK 1985, Cert 15)

Directed by Stephen Frears

Written by Hanif Kureshi

Controversial Channel Four Film from the middle of the Thatcherite period starring Daniel Day Lewis as a white racist thug who changes his allegiance when he starts a gay relationship with a young Asian entrepreneur (Roshan Seth).

VHS: (Video Collection International)

### ● **Bhaji on the Beach** (UK 1993, Cert 15)

Directed by Gurinder Chadha

Written by Meera Syal

Exuberant comedy in the Ealing style, exploring the racial and generational problems that follow a Birmingham Asian Women's group as they have a day trip to Blackpool.

VHS: (Video Collection International)

### ● **East Is East** (UK 1999, Cert 15)

Directed by Damian O' Donnell

Written by Ayub Khan-Din, based on his play

Set in Salford in the 1970s, on the surface this is a comedy of manners seen through the eyes of the youngest son in the family, but the film has a darker side exploring domestic violence and physical and mental abuse.

VHS and DVD (Video Collection International). DVD extras include director's commentary, deleted scenes, behind the scenes footage.

### ● **Monsoon Wedding** (Fr/It/USA/Ger 2001, Cert 15)

Directed by Mira Nair

Written by Sabrina Dhawan

Set in Delhi and in Hindi and Punjabi with English subtitles, this is a fascinating insight into the problems and preparations of a Hindi wedding ceremony and the clash between older traditional family members and the modern younger generation. However, like East Is East, it also has a darker undercurrent.

VHS: (Front Row TV Limited)



● **Anita and Me (UK 2002, Cert 12A)**

Directed by Metin Huseyin

Written by Meera Syal, based on her novel

Set in a 1970s Midlands town, the film centres on a twelve-year-old Indian girl Meena and her friendship with the blonde, glamorous fourteen-year-old Anita and her dysfunctional family.

VHS and DVD (Icon Distribution Ltd.). DVD extras include director's commentary, deleted scenes, trailer and behind the scenes footage.

● **Bollywood Queen (UK 2003, cert to be confirmed)**

Directed by Jeremy Wooding

Cross cultural musical romance mixing Bollywood with the UK club scene.

Released in October 2003



## Useful Websites

- **INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE and message boards**

[www.imdb.co.uk](http://www.imdb.co.uk) then search for BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM

If you search for **Parminder Nagra** and **Keira Knightly** and read the message boards, there are some extremely interesting discussions from fans about the actresses in the film, their image and how they have been treated in the press, particularly the obsession with Knightly's weight!

- **INTERVIEW WITH PARMINDER NAGRA and KEIRA KNIGHTLY**

[www.atnzone.com/moviezone/features/benditlikebeckham.shtml](http://www.atnzone.com/moviezone/features/benditlikebeckham.shtml)

The two actresses interviewed in America while publicising the film.

- **THREE IMAGINARY GIRLS**

Amusing review of the film from two female fans from Seattle.

[www.threeimaginarygirls.com/imaginaryboybendit.asp](http://www.threeimaginarygirls.com/imaginaryboybendit.asp)

- **OFFICIAL US WEBSITE**

Interactive site with a quiz, trailers, photo gallery and the 'physic soccerball'!

[www.foxsearchlight.com/benditlikebeckham/](http://www.foxsearchlight.com/benditlikebeckham/)

## F I L M E D U C A T I O N

RESEARCHED and WRITTEN by MIKE KIRKUP

With thanks to Jonny Tull, keeper of the Tyneside Cinema information files  
and Laura at Redbus Film Distribution

© Film Education 2003