



Bend it like Beckham (2002)

Director: Gurinder Chadha

Certificate: 12

Run time: 112 minutes

If you liked this film, you might also like: *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell 1999), *Brick Lane* (Sarah Gavron 2007), *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland 1927).

Reviews:

Roger Ebert: "I saw more important films at Sundance 2003, but none more purely enjoyable than "Bend It Like Beckham," which is just about perfect as a teenage coming-of-age comedy."

Key Performances:

- **Parminder Nagra** as Jess – the girl who would be Beckham
- **Keira Knightley** as Jules – Number 9 Hounslow Harriers
- **Jonathan Rhys Meyers** as Joe — Team manager

Film Notes

Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* is, on the surface, a hugely accessible film about football, friendship and family. At its centre is Jess Bhamra (Parminder Nagra), an eighteen-year-old British Sikh girl living with her traditional Punjabi family in Hounslow. Jess dreams of becoming a professional footballer, but her parents expect her to concentrate on becoming a respectable young woman. Her secret participation in a local women's football team therefore becomes much more than a sporting adventure: it is a struggle over who gets to determine her future.

The film is particularly interesting when viewed as part of the development of British Asian cinema. It belongs to a tradition of films in which the supposedly opposing worlds of "British" and "Asian" culture collide, but Chadha gives the familiar culture clash a distinctly youthful and optimistic twist.

An important starting point is Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), written by Hanif Kureishi. Set during the Thatcher era, Frears' film explored race, class, sexuality and British Asian identity through Omar, a young British Pakistani man attempting to make his way in London. Its world is considerably darker than Chadha's: racism, economic inequality and social divisions are ever-present. Yet both films are interested in characters who refuse to fit neatly into a single cultural category.

Chadha herself had already explored these questions in *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), her feature-film debut. A group of British Asian women travel to Blackpool for a day trip. The

excursion becomes an examination of generational differences, gender, racism and changing ideas of identity.

There is an important progression from *Bhaji on the Beach* to *Bend It Like Beckham*. In the earlier film, cultural conflict is often experienced by women across several generations. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Chadha places a young woman firmly at the centre. Jess isn't rejecting her family or her Sikh identity; she wants the freedom to combine them with the person she wants to become. Football becomes a metaphor for this negotiation. As Chadha herself explained, it was about “trying to break out and do things differently” without necessarily rejecting one's culture.

This makes youth such an important theme. Jess and Jules (Keira Knightley) are both negotiating adulthood, sexuality, friendship and parental expectations. Their parents represent different versions of authority, but the film avoids simply presenting older and younger generations as enemies. Jess eventually discovers that independence does not have to mean abandoning her family.

Chadha's direction is crucial to the film's tone. Her filmmaking combines British social realism with the colour, energy and heightened emotions associated with Indian popular cinema. Music, costume, comedy and football create a much more exuberant world than the gritty realism of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Yet beneath the feel-good surface are serious questions about racism, gender expectations, sexuality, cultural belonging and what it means to be British.

The film's great achievement is perhaps that “British Asian” identity is no longer presented as a contradiction. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chadha could make a mainstream popular film in which being British and being Asian were not mutually exclusive identities. Jess does not have to choose between the two. She can be both—and can also be a footballer.

In that sense, *Bend It Like Beckham* represents an important stage in the journey from the challenging cultural confrontations of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, through the generational and gender conflicts of *Bhaji on the Beach*, towards a more confident, youthful and mainstream British Asian cinema.

Enjoy!

1. Robert Egbert reviews <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bend-it-like-beckham-2003>
2. Conversation with Gurinder Chadha https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shnHWt_-jHg
3. Internet Movie Database https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0286499/?ref_=ttfc_ov_i