

TEN QUESTIONS WITH

# PARMINDER NAGRA

She shot to fame by bending a ball like Beckham – now she's telling it like it is as Brummie detective DI Ray

**Parminder Nagra got her big break in 2001 aged 26, when she was cast as the football-mad teen Jess in *Bend It Like Beckham*. After moving to the US, she joined *ER* as Dr Neela Rasgotra, a role she played until the final episode in 2009, becoming its longest-serving cast member. Since then, she's appeared in *Agents of SHIELD*, *Fortitude*, *Intergalactic* and *Maternal*, and in 2022 made her debut as DI Rachita Ray in ITV1's police drama *DI Ray*, which is now in its second series.**

**It's been 23 years since *Bend It Like Beckham*, which helped launch yours and Keira Knightley's careers. Has there ever been any talk of a sequel?** I heard Gurinder [Chadha, director] had said somewhere she'd got an idea of where a sequel would go, but I don't know – sequels can be tricky. The expectation is so up there, especially with something so beloved. Can you imagine if *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* or *The Breakfast Club* had sequels? Some things need to be left alone.

**So you don't ever wonder what Jess would be doing now?** I don't know what she'd be up to. Would she be coaching? Would she have a daughter who was getting into football? I almost don't recognise that girl that was in *Bend It*. I know it's me, but it feels like I'm watching someone else.

**CHAMPIONS**  
As Jess, with Keira Knightley's Jules, in *Bend It Like Beckham*



**'When friends' children kick a ball, there's an expectation I'll bust out some moves'**

PARMINDER NAGRA

**Have you been able to play football since then, or does everyone get their cameras out if you go near a ball?** When friends' children are kicking a ball around, I think there's an expectation that I'm suddenly going to bust out some moves. The training for that film was intense, and I do sometimes think, what if I'd have carried that on? I'd probably be a lot fitter!

**There's a second series of *DI Ray* currently on ITV1 – was the character easy to get back into?** I felt more settled with her this time, even though she's unsettled at the start of series two. I get who she is – fundamentally, she's someone who wants to do the right thing and get to the truth, even if it ruffles a few feathers. But in season two, it's about playing the politics a little bit more, so I'm just nodding



**NO-NONSENSE**  
Playing DI Ray, with Patrick Baladi as DI Patrick Holden

my head and saying yes, then doing what I want anyway!

**What reaction did you have to series one?** I had so many texts saying it was lovely to see a south Indian person on screen that just isn't stereotypical. But ultimately, it's a numbers game, because it's showbusiness. In terms of audience, it felt like it had been received well and people stayed to the final episode. But it's all a work in progress, so when you're going back to do a second series, you're asking what are the things that worked? What didn't quite work? How do we make it better? I mean, we got to do series two, they ordered six this time, and they're longer episodes, too.

**Is there any other series you've done or character you've played that you'd like to return to?** *Alcatraz* was a big one [she played Dr Lucy Banerjee in JJ Abrams' one-season 2012 sci-fi show]. That series was like a good meal – it was just so sumptuous. My character existed in the present and also in the 60s, so she was straddling timelines. And then it finished, so we never got to find out what was going on with her! We had an amazing cast, it was ridiculous – Sam Neill, Mahershala Ali, Rami Malek...

**Similarly, how disappointed were you when ITV's *Maternal* didn't get a second series?** Oh we were all gutted! I loved straddling that line between comedy and drama. When we took a deep dive in terms of emotion, we really went there. I'd love to do something with that tone again.

**And finally... you spent your 30th birthday with George Clooney – who starred in *ER* before you joined the cast – having bumped into him at the restaurant you were celebrating in. Any starry plans for your 50th next year?** I'd need Tom Cruise at the next one! My 30th birthday was the most surreal experience of my life. At the end, I went to take care of the bill because I'd been with all of my friends and they said no, George had taken care of it. It was nuts! **STEVE O'BRIEN**

**It's filmed in Birmingham, but you're still based in L.A. How does that work for you?** My son goes to school in Los

Angeles, but I've been lucky because filming *DI Ray* overlaps with the holidays, so I go from being a mum to being a crime-fighter!

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*DI Ray* is Sunday–Tuesday at 9.00pm on ITV1, or catch up on ITVX

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO...

## be a TV mechanic



**RESTORATION MAN**  
Ant Anstead

**Ant Anstead's new show follows the TV mechanic's attempts to turn a profit by restoring classic cars. The money will help him renovate the 500-year-old farmhouse he's bought for his parents in the Bedfordshire countryside.**

**BORN A MECHANIC** As a young child [Ant grew up in Cambridgeshire], I was always fascinated with building stuff. I'd build go-karts and throw myself down hills with my brothers! I built my first car when I was 16. I worked out quite quickly that I could buy a wreck, fix it, sell it, make a bit of profit and go buy another one. I source all the cars.

**THIS IS REAL** A lot of TV shows put themselves in the reality space but aren't necessarily real. For this show, I said, "Guys, I've bought the house for real. I'm fixing cars because I can make some profit. Just come and press record." There were no production meetings, no director. It's more accessible and free-flowing.

**PRESENTING V POLICING** I got my TV presenting break with *For the Love of Cars* with Philip Glenister in 2014. I learnt to be a TV host from my six years working in the police [he joined at 18], before

becoming a mechanic in 2005. There were times I'd turn up in uniform to a drunken bar fight and I'd have to be clear, concise, lead the moment. It's the same with presenting. Plus it gave me a sense of proportion. Policing was serious work. This is just fun!

**MY DAD IS A NATURAL** I live full-time in America [with partner Renée Zellweger]. We met on an American car show called *Celebrity IOU: Joyride*. She's a car person. She's not involved in this, though, as she's really busy! When I come back to the UK it's all about family. I roped in my three brothers, my sister, an auntie, my mum and dad. My mum restored the seats on an MG Midget! She is slightly uncomfortable on camera, but my dad is a natural. I think he will be on *Strictly* by next year!

**DIY!** For this series, we restored eight cars in 12 weeks, but not all of the cars were profitable. None of the restorations were what we call rotisserie restorations, where you take the car apart and it sits on a spit. We fix the interior and frames, get the engine running. I'd love for someone to watch this show and give it a go themselves!



**CAR PERSON**  
Ant's partner Renée Zellweger

Ant Anstead: *Born Mechanic* is on *Quest* on Thursdays at 9.00pm and available to stream on Discovery+