

Briton Beach Memoirs

'Bhaji on the Beach' Has Punjabi Characters but a Briti

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"Most people when they see me think brown skin—Indian woman, but I am very English in many ways," says filmmaker Gurinder Chadha. Similarly, her debut feature, "Bhaji on the Beach," with its sari-clad women, sprinkling of Punjabi dialogue and references to Indian culture, may seem a long way from "Howards End." But, as the 34-year-old Chadha insists, it is very much a film about England—that is, an England of curry and chips rather than tea and crumpets.

"Bhaji on the Beach," which opened Friday at the Key, follows a disparate group of South Asian women from Birmingham, England, as they take a day trip to the seaside resort of Blackpool. The group spans three generations: older women who hold fast to traditions from their native India; teenagers who, in the disapproving eyes of their elders, have become irretrievably Anglicized; and those in between, who have forged a path between two cultures with varying degrees of success. Blackpool itself is a quintessentially English resort (imagine a British Coney Island), and the individual stories of these women—one is a young medical student having a clandestine affair with a West Indian boy, another a young mother who recently left her abusive husband—seem no different from those of their white cinematic counterparts.

Chadha, whose parents emigrated from East Africa when she was 2 years old, describes the film as "a celluloid construction of my life." She grew up in the working-class West London neighborhood of Southall, and experiences familiar from the hybrid culture of that community found their way into her film. "My parents tell me that in every family they know, one of the Indian girls has married out," she relates; her own cousin married a Jamaican, causing so much consternation among her relatives that Chadha was the only one to attend the wedding.

"Bhaji on the Beach" is about a "negotiation" between traditionalism and Westernization, Chadha explains, rather than an identity crisis. Her characters freely mix and match from their two cultures; the film's soundtrack features a Punjabi version of the '60s British pop song "Summer Holiday"; and the "bhaji" of the title refers to an Indian dish that has become a popular snack among Asians in Britain.

Of course, not everyone believes that East and West can merge successfully. "You try fusion and all you get is confusion," clucks one of the older women in the film, outraged when she finds out that one of the young women in the group is pregnant by someone from outside the community. Still, at the end of her trip to the seaside, even the intractable old matriarch has thawed enough to accept the inevitability of change.

The reality, Chadha points out, is that young British Asians like herself have no direct links to India. "I may have relatives there, but I go to India as a tourist." Rather than feeling at home on Indian soil, she adds, "I just think, 'Oh my God, what a terrible smell of sweat,' and 'Am I going to get the runs?'"

British but . . .

Chadha is the first Asian woman to direct a British



feature; she made her first film, an award-winning documentary titled "I'm British but . . ." in 1989; four years later she had easily completed "Bhaji." "I have been very lucky," she says. "I never went to film school so I am learning now, trying to look at different genres and play around with visual styles."

"I'm British-but . . ." shares with "Bhaji" themes of cross-cultural fertilization: The documentary examines "bhangra," a hybrid of traditional Punjabi music and rhythmic Caribbean dance hall music and rap that was popularized by Asian deejays in England. Each of the young British Asians interviewed in that film defines their identity differently; they all look Indian, but their accents are Scottish, Welsh, English and Irish.

"Every country in the world has got its own idea of Indianness," says Chadha. "I like presenting the dichotomy of Indians in saris behaving and speaking in a very English way." Subverting audience expectations in "Bhaji on the Beach," Chadha presents the only woman of the group who lives in India, a Bombay socialite, as being the most Westernized of the bunch.

In "Bhaji," Chadha focuses on some controversial issues but the predominant tone of the film is one of light comedy. "I wanted to look at interracial relationships and men hitting women, but I didn't want to preach in any way," says Chadha, explaining that was she very influenced by the social-realist British cinema of the '60s. Such films as "A Taste of Honey" and "Up the Junction," about "working-class girls with backstreet abortions and mothers who were shouting at them down the street," served as her inspiration.

Interspersed with "Bhaji's" social comedy are fantasy sequences that pay homage to another influence in Chadha's film-education—the Hindu musical. One of the older characters' doubts about the hybrid British Asian

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Sarita Khajuria and Mo Sesay in a scene from "Bhaji on the Beach," whose director, Gurinder Chadha, says: "I may have relatives there, but I go to India as a tourist."

culture are expressed in vivid musical fantasies. These segments emulate the highly popular Bombay film genre that often imitates and parodies Western traditions to portray situations of dubious moral nature. For Chadha, this was yet another opportunity to skew audience expectations. "In England, one of the main ways that people connect with India is through these Indian films."

"There is no box that 'Bhaji on the Beach' fits into," says Chadha. "I mean, when does it stop being an English film and start being an Indian film, and when does it stop being a film that appeals only to an Asian audience?" Film, she explains, "is the perfect medium for someone like me. I can have as many layers and as many tangents as I want."

When "Bhaji" opened in London, Chadha hovered around at the back of one of the theaters where it was

playing. She noticed quickly that the most enthusiastic responses to the film came from women. "The last time I saw that kind of audience participation was at 'Thelma & Louise' at a cinema in London on Oxford Street. It was as if every woman in the audience was somehow joined together in sisterhood watching that film," she says.

And while she acknowledges that Indian men don't come off very well in the film, that's just fine with her. "My concerns were not really the men—most men are used to the situation the other way round," she says. "But a lot of men have said that it is very realistic. You can't generalize about the Indian community, it is as disparate as anything else."

"Bhaji's" success in London has opened doors for Chadha. Last month Britain's Channel 4 aired her latest short film, a documentary on Asian women comedians titled "What Do You Call an Indian Woman Who's Funny?" Now she's working on a script about an elderly Asian couple, not unlike her own parents in Southall. The film will essentially deal with the Asian diaspora as the couple look back at their past 35 years in Britain and previous years in Kenya. The project is very dear to Chadha, whose close ties to her family are in keeping with her Asian heritage.

And those ties are even close enough to shape her films. Chadha admits sheepishly that she avoided including any sex scenes in "Bhaji."

"We had to turn off the telly when there was someone kissing," she says, "so the idea of me directing a sex scene—my mom and dad will kill me!"