

Frame one: *sarees* flapping in the salty breeze of an English seaside resort. No, this is not the precursor to a song sequence from the latest *Bombay* movie. This is Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*—the first film directed by an Asian woman in Britain. Pan to two middle-aged Indian women sitting on a bench by the seaside in Blackpool, England. Now move into a tight close-up. Bangle clad hands hold a small, greasy parcel of ubiquitous English chips. Gingerly, one of the women tries a piece and turns to her companion saying, "*mazaa nahin hai*". With a mischievous smile, her friend fishes out a small jar of *mirchi* from her purse and sprinkles red powder over the limp pieces of potato. "*Ab mazaa aaya!*" they exclaim as they devour their seasoned meal.

This small exchange contains all the threads that run through *Bhaji on the Beach*—cultural misalliance, dissatisfaction, innovation, humour and female friendship. Chadha concentrates on the lives of a handful of Indian women living in Birmingham. They are part of an Asian women's support group, Saheli. And the premise of this colourful film is a women-only day trip to nearby Blackpool.

What starts off as a day free of men soon turns into a nightmare where fathers, boyfriends, husbands and sons appear (literally and metaphorically) to cast their shadows on the lives of women. Junder is a young wife who has recently run away from her husband's family, taking their little son with her. Hashida is on her way to medical school in a few months and typifies the Asian dream of success in a foreign land. Except for one tiny glitch: she just discovered that she is pregnant with her Jamaican boyfriend's child (shades of *Mississippi Masala* with a more probable conclusion). Asha is a

Film

Bhaji on the Beach

Director: Gurinder Chadha

Running time: 101 minutes

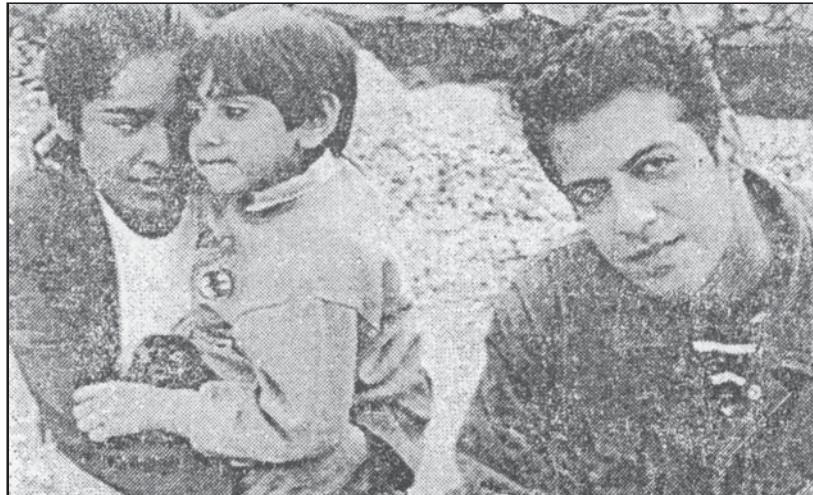
UK 1993

Review: Sharmila Sen

middle-aged wife and mother who runs a neighbourhood newspaper and provision store. She is tormented by recurring headaches and vague daydreams that point toward a deep-seated dissatisfaction with life.

It is with Asha's surreal daydream that the film opens. She is surrounded by larger-than-life images of Hindu idols, bright red cans of Coca Cola, and video cassettes of latest Amitabh Bachchan films. Lost in this nightmare of conflicting cultural messages, Asha has lost her gift of music. Once a popular singer at weddings and festivals, Asha cannot join in the songs any longer.

The second generation does not have it any easier. Sure they no longer wear *sarees* or *salwar kameez*. But hidden under their latest designer jeans and wildly sprayed hair lies a terrible angst: Asian boys of their age seem to prefer white girls. Madhu and Ladhu, two giggling teenage girls, seek their juvenile revenge against the boys by sneaking illicit Southern Comforts and desperately trying to seduce white boys. Trying to battle their demons, these two giggle, lie, and flirt their way through Blackpool, hoping to have a little fun and not get caught by the "*aunty-shantys*".



Kim Bithana and Jimmi Harikishan in *Bhaji on the Beach*

This handful of sub-plots forms the nervy, unabashedly colourful *Bhaji on the Beach* which comes complete with a Hindi film style song in the rain and plenty of bilingual dialogue. The divergent storylines and characters are literally herded together by Simi, the smart-talking leader who organizes Saheli, and who at the end slumps onto a bench by sea with a pack of cigarettes—her resolve to quit smoking broken by the stress of having to manage her *sahelis*. The darker side of the narrative warns that being Asian, being female, being an outsider—can all be hazardous to one's health.

Abusive husbands, demanding parents, non-committal boyfriends—these are but a few of the minefields the women have to negotiate at home. Outside, they are met with racist men making sexual comments, irate restaurant owners who cannot tolerate Asian women taking out their homemade *parathas* on their premises, and perverse old men fascinated by the exoticness of a sari-clad brown woman on English shores. Despite some tense moments of divisiveness, the film ends on a somewhat hopeful note when this band of women with enormously different values unite in the face of violence against one of their own.

No one rides off into the sunset at the conclusion of *Bhaji on the Beach*. Nor do the lovers live happily ever after. Fortunately, Chadha's film is not a one-dimensional work that aligns itself with a single philosophy.

It is a film that leaves room for doubts: it is a film about an evolving diasporic culture that is neither akin to modern India nor akin to white England. With a strong cast featuring Kim Bithana, Jimmi Harikishan, Santa Khajuria, Mo Sesay and Zohra Sehgal among others, *Bhaji on the Beach* is a well-crafted, humorous, first venture into a topic that is sure to incense and inspire.

