

Movies

BY LORRAINE ALI

JESS IS HAVING ONE OF those dreams that make her kick the covers off the bed. She's embroiled in a crucial soccer match, her teammate, U.K. football hero David Beckham, at her side. The stadium goes wild as she maneuvers past packs of grunting players. Then whack! She kicks the ball past a flummoxed goalie, and the 5-foot-3 Indian girl from suburban London scores the winning goal for Manchester United.

Indians—let alone Indian girls—don't play on English soccer teams. It's a scenario found only in dreams, and in Britain's unlikely, irresistible indie hit "Bend It Like Beckham." The movie, which was directed by Gurinder Chadha, is the story of 18-year-old Jess (Parminder Nagra), a tomboy who wants to play soccer but is forbidden by her Sikh parents. Jess dodges finger-wagging, sari-clad mums and leering British boys. She befriends a blond London girl named Jules (Keira Knightley), who's bent on bolting to America because her homeland doesn't have a pro team for women. She acts a little like Rocky. She learns a little about romance—and a lot about girl power. "When Gurinder first approached me, I was thinking, 'Who wants to see an Indian girl kicking a football around?'" says Nagra, 28. "I know," says Knightley, 18, who was sitting next to her in a Manhattan café last week. "I was personally worried that people would laugh at it. But they were amused and intrigued. Or maybe they just wanted to see a bunch of girls running around in shorts."

"Bend It" took just eight weeks and

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIGEL HARRY FOR NEWSWEEK



VICTORY DANCE
Nagra and Knightley in a Manhattan café

Goood!

The irresistible underdog 'Bend It Like Beckham' becomes a word-of-mouth hit

\$4.5 million to make—and it has grossed \$55 million since it opened around the world a year ago. Last month the movie debuted in the States in just six theaters.

"Bend It" has been expanding cautiously around the country, but it's already made \$3 million here and has been selling two or three times as many tickets at each the-

ater as the run-of-the-mill fare currently in the top 10. "Bend It," which was largely financed by the British Film Council, may or may not go the big, fat, Greek distance,



but it's already jump-started Knightley's career. She's got a lead role in Jerry Bruckheimer's summer swashbuckler, "Pirates of the Caribbean," which hits theaters in July. By then Knightley will be something of a star if "Bend It Like Beckham" keeps riding the wave.

Director Chadha began writing "Bend It" six years ago, inspired by the themes of her own adolescence. "The most important thing to my mum was that I learn how to cook Indian food, but I refused," says Chadha, who used her mother and her aunts as extras in the film. "I'd say, 'What you don't realize, Mum, is that you are oppressed.' She'd say, 'When you get married and can't cook, you tell your mother-in-law she's oppressed, because I'm the one who's going to get a bad name, not you.' To this day I don't cook chapati."

Nagra doesn't cook much, either. Since the age of 18 she's been too busy acting on London's theater circuit and on British TV. She grew up with her immigrant Indian parents north of London and, like most kids in her community, was weaned on Bollywood videos and American TV



GIRL POWER: Nagra (top), who plays a teen dreaming of soccer stardom, scored big with costar Knightley (above, right) in "Bend It"

shows. "We'd loved 'The A-Team' and 'Happy Days,'" she says. "I used to fancy Face. My mum liked the Fonz." As for Knightley, she wasn't really exposed to Indian culture before meeting Nagra and the "Bend It" crew, who often spoke Punjabi on the set. "I didn't have a clue what they were saying," she says. "You get kind of paranoid—are they talking about me? Especially when we were doing the soccer sequences, because I knew I wasn't as good as all the other girls. A couple of times I turned around and was like, 'What? What are you saying? Just tell me!' They'd be like, 'We're talking about the food, actually.' Very embarrassing."

After "Bend It" wrapped, there were even bigger culture shocks in store. Knightley traded Chadha's tight, family-like set for the massive spectacle of Disney's "Pirates of the Caribbean," in which she plays a feisty girl kidnapped by pirates. "What was most shocking is that in 'Beckham,' you can see I have spots"—pimples—"but

in 'Pirates,' they were like, 'Don't worry, we'll CGI them out.' 'CGI out my spots? Wow, you can do that?' To get up in the morning and not worry about that, it's like, whoa, I need to get my feet back on the ground here."

Nagra has yet to be swept off by Hollywood the way the blond Knightley has. This is, after all, the same Hollywood that's still patting itself on the back for recognizing Halle Berry as 2002's best actress after ignoring her African-American predecessors for more than 75 years. "With Parminder, people may simply think 'ethnic,' whether it's Latina or whatever," says Chadha, who's currently turning "Pride and Prejudice" into a Bollywood musical. "It's a shame, really. She could play a doctor, a nurse, a housewife, a stripper, anything. Even a footballer." Right now, Nagra just hopes never to see another script with the words "arranged marriage" in it. "I want to break the glass ceiling," she says. "There's more to second-generation Asians than just cultural conflict." Sounds like what the movie industry needs is a good, swift kick. ■