

'Apu was a tool for kids to go after you': why *The Simpsons* remains problematic

*The standup comic Hari Kondabolu talks about his documentary *The Problem with Apu*, which uses the notorious Kwik-E-Mart clerk as a springboard to discuss issues of representation and minstrelsy in pop culture*



*Hari Kondabolu, whose documentary *The Problem with Apu* comes out on 19 November. Photograph: Yoon Kim*

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The words “thank you, come again” have haunted Hari Kondabolu, the Queens-born standup comic, for 28 years, he tells us at the beginning of his new documentary. Why? Because that’s the catchphrase uttered repeatedly by a certain cartoon store clerk, *The Simpsons*’ Apu Nahasapeemahpetilon, a beloved recurring character who was more or less a noxious pastiche of south Asian stereotypes.

Voiced by the white actor Hank Azaria, Apu is an unlikely subject for a documentary, having appeared in less than one-third of the show’s 623 episodes. But he’s also an appropriate case study into issues of representation, especially for a film that’s as much about *The Simpsons* as it is Kondabolu’s attempt to unpack – per the documentary’s title – *The Problem with Apu*.

The 35-year-old comic, whose standup comedy album *Mainstream American Comic* debuted at No 1 on the iTunes US charts, had been entertaining the idea of making a

film about Apu for several years, ever since he delivered a scathing monologue about him on W Kamau Bell's talkshow *Totally Biased*. Like so many Americans, Kondabolu is a big fan of *The Simpsons*; when he first took note of the show in the early 1990s, at which point south Asian representation in pop culture amounted to very little, he was thrilled to see himself on screen. "I didn't even know that the guy from *Short Circuit* was not Indian until I was in my 20s," he says. "At the time, I was just excited that a brown guy existed."

But by the time Kondabolu was in middle school, Apu became something more sinister: a stereotype that gave school bullies carte blanche to pick on him. In the eyes of classmates, Kondabolu became an Apu. And his parents, who had immigrated to the US from India, became Apus too.

"There are a billion reasons to love *The Simpsons* and Apu was one of them," Kondabolu, who in 2008 earned a master's degree in human rights from the London School of Economics, says. "But when you sit in high school, which is, I think for most of us, the lowest point in our lives, you realize [Apu] was a tool for kids to go after you. And this was perfect, right? A caricature with this ridiculous accent that nobody has. And even though I grew up in Queens, I still had the same vulnerabilities, and my parents were accented. I thought: how are they going to view my parents, how are they going to view me?"

Being called an Apu, or being mocked on the basis of the stereotypes the character peddled, is an experience shared by many south Asian actors and performers, including Aziz Ansari, Kal Penn, Hasan Minhaj, Sakina Jaffrey and Aparna Nancherla – all of whom appear in the film to discuss the character, representation writ large, and the number of times they've been offered roles as cab drivers and corner store clerks. There's also a cameo from Whoopi Goldberg, whose collection of "negrobilia" – old tchotchkes, knick-knacks, and ephemera that offensively portrayed black Americans – helped Kondabolu place south Asian typecasting within a longer tradition of minstrel entertainment.

The documentary arrives during something of a watershed moment for discussions of minority representation in pop culture, specifically that of the south Asian community. Aziz Ansari's Emmy-winning Netflix series *Master of None* featured an episode in its first season called *Indians on TV*, in which Ansari's character, Dev, an aspiring actor grappling with the thorny issue of industry tokenism, loses out on a role for refusing to perform in an Indian accent. As Kondabolu says in his documentary, actors like Ansari, Minhaj and Mindy Kaling (whose sitcom *The Mindy Project* just completed its six-season run) are living testaments to the improved prospects of Indian performers in Hollywood; their successes, though, are somewhat anomalous, since many south Asian performers still play second fiddle in an industry that, despite incremental gains, remains resistant to diversification. Kondabolu, then, aimed to make a documentary about a single, widely known character, using him as a universally recognizable springboard into a conversation often fraught with accusations of oversensitivity.

"This is kind of a perfect example, because everyone knows *The Simpsons*, even if they haven't seen any of the episodes," Kondabolu says. "So you start with something small and build from there, remove layers and figure out what's happening. There is a legacy of this, and from generation to generation it looks different, but there is no such thing as post-racial."



Hank Azaria, who voices Apu. Photograph: Danny Moloshok/AP

For a long time, the standup had no idea that the man behind Apu’s exaggerated lilt was Hank Azaria, who’s done voiceover work for dozens of different Simpsons characters. That Azaria was reluctant to take part in the film provided a perfect narrative device: in between conversations with south Asian performers, Goldberg, the Simpsons producer Dana Gould, and the comic’s own parents, Kondabolu attempts to track down Azaria, which lends the film a propulsive tension not unlike that of Michael Moore’s documentary *Roger & Me*. The comic gets close – his email exchanges with Azaria are shown in the film – but never nails him down. As Kondabolu says on screen, Azaria was uncomfortable being at the mercy of his edit and proposed instead that someone neutral, like Terry Gross, conduct the interview.

“When we realized that that wasn’t going to happen we were prepared for it, but I’m still so down to have the conversation,” Kondabolu says. “But to be perfectly honest, I don’t really care so much. *The Simpsons* is 30 years old. What’s important about this is the legacy of minstrelsy, the legacy of these kinds of representations, and the fact that they continue today even though they look different. The Apu part is all in service to that, and if I have a conversation with him, it’s not actually going to be this indictment.”

In the film, Kondabolu deftly analyzes what Apu meant then and now, and the ways offensive depictions like these materialize primarily because they’re assumed to be benign. “Apu reflected how America viewed us: servile, devious, goofy,” he says. “A white dude created a stereotypical Indian voice, and a bunch of white writers in the room laughed at said stereotypical Indian voice, and this led to the creation of my childhood bully and a walking insult to my parents.”

This dynamic, in which ethnic stereotypes and homogeneous writer’s rooms create a kind of feedback loop of racial insensitivity, explains why Kondabolu, whose routines are incisive and hilariously scornful, saw the appeal of standup, which allows him to bypass Hollywood’s overwhelmingly white bureaucracy.

“Whenever I’ve gotten auditions that I think are terrible, I refuse to do the audition or take the part,” he says. “I get into a room and they want an accent – I refuse to do it. Those are the moments where I think: thank God I have standup.

“I’m not dependent financially on someone else’s money and view of me,” he continues. “I make my money by presenting myself as a full human being. Aziz [Ansari] came through standup, Kumail [Nanjiani] came through standup, Hasan [Minhaj] came through standup, I came through standup. It’s direct to consumer, farm to table.”

The Problem with Apu premieres in the US on 19 November on truTV at 10pm