

# A Problem With the Problem With Apu

By Sean McCormick

The Simpsons and I have had a near-daily relationship for decades now – it was the only therapy I could afford during my turbulent 20s. The show is both a celebration and an occasionally savage indictment of the times we live in. I owe it my fealty.

Sadly, my beloved show – now heading into its 32nd season – might be missing a familiar face this Fall.

In January 2020, voice actor Hank Azaria announced that he was voluntarily stepping away from the role of Apu after receiving criticism that the Apu character was an Indian-American stereotype being played by a white actor. “Once I realized that that was the way this character was thought of, I just didn’t want to participate in it anymore,” Azaria told the New York Times in an [interview](#).

Indian-American comedian Harry Kondabolu felt so strongly about the Apu character that he made a documentary in 2018 called “[The Problem With Apu](#),” which advocated for the character’s removal from the show.

Apu first appeared on The Simpsons in “The Telltale Head”, which aired in February 1990. Back then, it was [hardly a stretch](#) that a convenience store might be run by someone of [Indian or Pakistani descent](#). The overwhelmingly [poor response](#) to Kondabolu’s documentary trailer suggested that he might be an outlier. Was Kondabolu’s crusade “[wokeness](#)” gone amok or was there substance to this?

One of the main complaints was Azaria’s broadly comical version of an Indian-American accent. In the documentary,

actress Sakina Jaffrey described it as “[patanking](#)” – to speak English with an exaggerated enunciation that is more an offensive caricaturization than an accurate representation of an Indian accent. Many Indian-American actors have felt cursed with this expectation when trying to find [roles to play](#).

Not everyone wanted him gone, however. Opinion columnist Bhaskar Sunkara was in support of keeping Apu on the show. “Apu was an emotionally developed character, much more so than other Simpsons characters, he cared about his family and worked tirelessly to support them. He was also allowed to be zany and kooky – he wasn’t just there in the background, he had his own plotlines, he was neurotic, unique, not just a prop for diversity,” he wrote in a 2018 [column](#) for The Guardian.

Kondabolu’s documentary did inspire me to dig deeper into my own interpretation of his issue with the Apu character. It finally struck me that his generation of Indian-Americans are around the same age as The Simpsons. They are much more mainstream now and many are desperate to separate their hard-won [identities](#) from the worn-out Indian-American tropes that they feel Apu Nahasapeemapetilon perpetuates. Tropes that are pretty easy for white viewers to become too comfortable with.

I also realized that The Simpsons have failed to evolve commensurately with the times during its three-decade run. That’s an eternity in American culture. They had over 600 episodes to implement a Darwinian gradualism to the different characters to prevent any of them from becoming [anachronisms](#). By the time the show finally [acknowledged](#) there might be a problem, it was too late. Their response to Kondabolu’s claims came across as strangely [tone-deaf](#).

Apu was demonstrably a [funny and thoughtful](#) character at times, but his foibles as a stereotype were never at my expense as a white male.

The Simpsons have had a great run, but the show's been in [hospice](#) for a while and there are [rumors afloat](#) that it might be taken off of life support after this upcoming 32nd season – with or without Apu.