

Hank Azaria apologises ‘to every Indian person’ for voicing Apu in The Simpsons

Azaria, who is white, voiced the role of the Indian American shopkeeper from show’s inception in 1989 but stood down last year



Hank Azaria in Los Angeles on 16 January 2020.

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The actor Hank Azaria has apologised “to every single Indian person” for his portrayal of Apu in The Simpsons.

Azaria, who is white, voiced the role of the Indian American shopkeeper from the show’s inception in 1989 but stood down last year amid criticism of racial stereotyping. He said he was willing to be held accountable for its “negative consequences”.

Speaking on Monday on the Armchair Expert podcast hosted by the actors Dax Shepard and Monica Padman, who is Indian American, Azaria, 56, said that though he believed the show was founded on good intentions, it contributed to the “structural racism” in the US.

He said that it had also taken him some time to realize that his portrayal of Apu Nahasapeemahettilon was offensive to the Indian American community.

“I really didn’t know any better,” he said. “I didn’t think about it. I was unaware how much relative advantage I had received in this country as a white kid from Queens.

“Just because there were good intentions it doesn’t mean there weren’t real negative consequences to the thing that I am accountable for.”

To Padman, he said: “I really do apologise. I know you weren’t asking for that but it’s important. I apologise for my part in creating that and participating in that. Part of me feels I need to go round to every single Indian person in this country and personally apologise.”

Azaria’s character came under close scrutiny in a 2017 documentary, *The Problem with Apu*, made by the Indian American comedian Hari Kondabolu as a look at “how western culture depicts south-east Asian communities”, according to IMDB.

In *The Simpsons*, Apu, an immigrant from West Bengal with a doctorate in computer science, runs the Kwik-E-Mart convenience store in Springfield. Storylines involving him have often been contentious, including an episode aired in 1996 in which the mayor sought to expel undocumented migrants and Apu purchased a forged birth certificate from local mobsters.

In tweets about the podcast, Kondabolu welcomed Azaria’s apology but saw it as a “comeuppance” for the show.

“The ‘Apu Controversy’ is not real. Racism isn’t ‘controversial’, it’s a constant,” he wrote. “Unless you think People of Color finally standing up for themselves is ‘controversial’. However, I suppose a word like ‘controversy’ is more clickable than ‘comeuppance’.”

In another tweet Kondabolu called Azaria “kind and thoughtful”, which he said proved that “people are not simply ‘products of their time’ but have the ability to learn and grow”.

Earlier this year Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, told the BBC the show was striving for inclusivity. Last year he announced that non-white characters would no longer be voiced by white actors, and in February he said the Black actor Kevin Michael Richardson would assume the role of Julius Hibbert, an African American doctor, from Harry Shearer, who voices characters including Mr Burns.

“Bigotry and racism are still an incredible problem and it’s good to finally go for more equality and representation,” Groening said.

But he said there had been no intention to sideline or offend ethnic minorities.

“All of our actors play dozens of characters each, it was never designed to exclude anyone,” he said.

In an interview on NPR last year, when he announced he was standing down as Apu, Azaria said: “After a lot of soul-searching and doing workshops and reading and talking to people, [I realised] I had a blind spot or two when it came to this character.”

In the *Armchair Podcast* he said he had worked on understanding the issue with the help of his teenage son Hal.

“I was speaking at my son’s school, I was talking to the Indian kids there because I wanted to get their input,” he said. “[There was] a 17-year-old, he’s never even seen The Simpsons but knows what Apu means. It’s practically a slur at this point.”

Azaria said he “read, spoke to people who knew a lot about racism, spoke to lots of Indian people and went to seminars. I realised I have had a date with destiny with this thing for 31 years.”