the Juggernaut

PBS's 'Asian Americans' Is Overdue, But Is Just the Start

Bedatri D. Choudhury

May 27, 2020

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

Asian Americans protest the Vietnam War in a scene from PBS's new film series "Asian Americans."

(PBS/WETA/CAAM)

In 1997, PBS aired Loni Ding's two-part "docu-memoir" *Ancestors in the Americas,* about the history of early Asian immigrants. "She is the godmother

of Asian American documentary filmmaking," shared Renee Tajima-Peña, a professor of Asian American studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

It took over 20 years for anything similar to air on PBS again. This May, during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, the public broadcaster premiered *Asian Americans,* a five-hour-long documentary series with five episodes about the fastest-growing demographic in the United States that starts in 1850 and ends with the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Asian Americans is a seminal moment for American documentary films and creates a rightful place for Asian American stories. But the documentary had room to go further — to examine the political activism of South Asians beyond the bookends of Bhagat Singh Thind and 9/11, to go beyond the images of women in saris and men in turbans in montages, to explore the politics of gender and sexuality.

The show was a dream come true for Tajima-Peña, who had started writing the treatment for a multi-part documentary on the subject 25 years ago. Finally, in 2012, WETA, the PBS station serving Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., contacted her and the Center for Asian American Media to ask if they'd be interested in producing the series. Tajima-Peña then recruited her documentary colleagues — S. Leo Chiang, Grace Lee, and Geeta Gandbhir — to become episode producers. All were members of A-Doc, a group of Asian American documentary professionals who had a similar style of examining politics in their documentary filmmaking.

The series includes stories of Chinese railroad workers; the Filipino orphan Antero Cabrera who was put up as a human exhibit in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair; and South Asian immigrants such as Thind, a World War I veteran whose citizenship case reached the Supreme Court, and Moksad Ali, a Bengali Muslim trader who married a black woman named Ella Blackman in Jim Crow America. Ali, considered "white," could sit at the front of a train, while his wife and children had to sit in the back.

The first episode reminds the audience that Asian immigrants in America faced some of the toughest anti-immigration and anti-citizenship sentiment in the country. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was the first immigration policy that denied citizenship to an entire racial group — even though Chinese immigrants had built America's railroads. In 1918, Thind lost his U.S. citizenship because he was not a "free white person." It took the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 to allow naturalized citizenship for Indians and Filipinos, but it also set an annual quota of 100 immigrants from each group. More recently, concert pianist Tereza Lee's story inspired Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) to introduce the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act in 2001, which gave undocumented immigrant children a path to U.S. citizenship.

Bhagat Singh Thind in his U.S. Army uniform, in 1918. (Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind Spiritual Science Foundation)

"The arc of the moral universe is bent towards justice, and Asians in America have been on that trajectory from the very beginning," said Tajima-Peña.

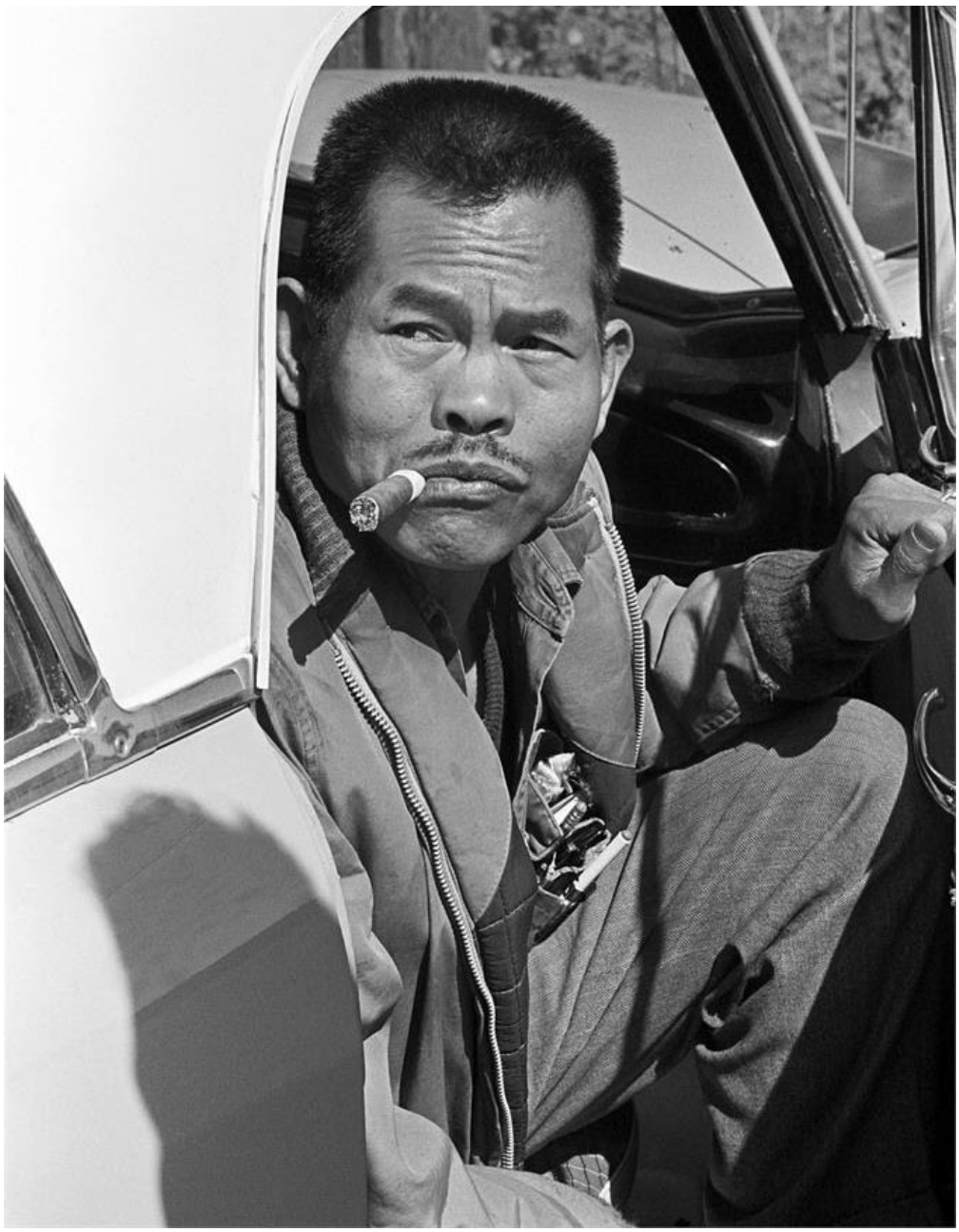
Chiang believes that this is the time to remind people that "things are not the same [as before]...It is because people such as Dalip Singh Saund [the first Asian elected to the U.S. Congress in 1956] fought for naturalized citizenship for South Asian immigrants."

The narrative of episodes two, three, and four meanders through the Chinese Exclusion Act, World War II, the detainment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps, the Vietnam War, and the formation of the model minority stereotype in the 1950s.

"The idea of the quiet, hardworking model minority needs to be undone because it's a racist identity that is used to create wedges: first between the African American community and us, and then among Asian Americans," said Chiang, who produced the first and the third episodes. "My intent with the series has been to completely do away with that idea and use our histories to call for solidarity. We can't keep making the same mistakes."

When the crew started working on the series in August 2018, they formed an archival team of 20 researchers that sought out personal archives and worked with the Japanese American National Museum, the Museum of Chinese in America, and the South Asian American Digital Archive.

"We did not want to make a 'sepia-tone' nostalgic documentary," Tajima-Peña explained. "It's not so much about how Asians became Americans but about how they shaped America."



Filipino American organizer Larry Itliong, with the United Farm Workers (UFW), in a scene from PBS' "Asian Americans." (PBS/WETA/CAAM)

The series also documents political activism in the community. It talks of the Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez-led California Grape Strike of the 1960s that demanded a labor union for farmworkers; the San Francisco State College Strike of 1968 that led to the formation of the first Asian American Studies department; the 1992 Los Angeles riots that polarized the city's African American and Korean American communities; and post-9/11 Asian American organizing.

In addition to conveying a complex history, the producers had to grapple with raising the show's $5.5 million budget — primarily driven by the high costs of licensing archival material. The team was fundraising as recently as February and didn't raise enough to produce a sixth episode, said Stewart Kwoh, executive director and president of Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles, who is also the series' project executive and helped raise at least $2 million of the budget. Kwoh and his wife, Pat Lee, are also working on an accompanying curriculum for PBS.

Asian Americans aired against the background of rising violence against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. "It's not new," Chiang reminded me. "In Angel Island [an island near San Francisco that served as a quarantine center during the bubonic plague], the Chinese would not be allowed entry into the country because they were seen as carriers of disease." When the island was converted into an immigration station in 1910, it was called the China Cove because it screened Chinese immigrants, who had to prove that they had U.S. citizen relatives to gain entry.

"When the president calls it the Chinese virus and invites racial violence," added Kwoh, "you need to have a public reminder of exactly how hard the community has fought to be here."

Grace Lee focused on family histories to bring specificity to historical events. "There has been so much writing, so many documentaries on these events that it was a challenge to say something new and make it look interesting," she explained. She counterbalanced the "official" narrative — the U.S. War Relocation Authority's film *A Challenge to Democracy*, for example, showed Japanese Americans benefiting from their time at concentration camps — with personal stories like that of the Unos, where the parents went to concentration camps while the sons served in the U.S. Army.

George Uno at home in Japan, looking through archives. (PBS)

"The very fact that the government calls these internment camps in its records is a whitewashing of history. We were all American citizens — these were concentration camps," said Tajima-Peña, whose family was also both drafted in the U.S. Army and taken to concentration camps.

Using archival footage is still not a perfect reflection of Asian American history — the archive is gendered, with mostly male subjects. "During the San Francisco State College strike, the people archiving the protests in 1968 stopped filming when a woman spoke up," Lee said. To feature a 1960 video of Patsy T. Mink's fiery Democratic National Convention speech in support of civil rights, the team had to search videos of white men before finding Mink in the outtakes.

Gandbhir produced the series' fifth and final episode, covering the 1980s to 2001. When her sister was born in the U.S. in the 1960s, her parents had only three options on her birth certificate: Negroid, Caucasoid, or Mongoloid. "My parents came in the wave of skilled immigrants because America wanted

'useful immigrants,'" said Gandbhir. "In all our usefulness, our identities were being lost. Almost like we didn't exist."

"I would've liked to have gone on and dived more into the story of South Asians but it was also important for me to bring out the tensions that get created within minorities by a white supremacist state," Gandbhir said. "I wouldn't be an intersectional filmmaker if I didn't do that." A large part of her episode covers the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

Some have a complicated relationship with the term "Asian American," which can feel exclusionary to certain groups. Radha S. Hegde, a professor of media and culture at New York University, shared, "There is always a tension when we use an umbrella term to bring a diverse group of people together. The trick, therefore, is to balance out each constituent group's distinct social, political, and cultural history."

The documentary producers are aware of the show's limitations. The producers had five hours to depict more than 150 years of Asian American history. Many documentaries on communities — such as *Latino Americans* or *The Italian Americans* — usually have only four to six hours to tell their stories, while PBS has also greenlit a 16-hour documentary on country music.

Part of the show's production crew, pictured at a detention center rally in Crystal City, Texas. (PBS)

"The series is a sampler. It creates an appetite for more Asian American stories in the future," Grace Lee explained.

"We haven't even been able to touch upon our LGBTQ histories, our mixed racial histories. There are some aspects of our histories that I haven't been able to put into the episodes," Chiang added.

The series also omits stories about diasporic Indians from the Caribbean, and those othered due to caste or class, said Anupama Rao, an associate professor at Barnard College. "We have to understand that each of these Asian American communities has its minorities," Rao said, "which is why it is important to read and write more subaltern histories."

Anirvan Chatterjee, who conducts the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, shared stories of South Asians who could have been included: political activist Kartar Dhillon, who worked as a Marine Corps truck driver during World War II before becoming a union leader and political organizer;

the Ghadar Party leaders who fought against the British Raj from U.S. soil in the early 1900s; Shyamala Gopalan, a civil rights activist and the mother of U.S. Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA).

Chatterjee encourages walk attendees to examine their family's immigration story, to ask themselves: "how are you here?"

Asian Americans is a great start in helping answer that question. There's still much more to say.

Bedatri D. Choudhury is a New York City-based journalist.

Related Stories