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September 7, 1999

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## Hindu Groups Denounce Universal Studio For 'Deception'

*R S Shankar* in Hollywood

 A still from  
 Xena - Warrior Princess

Livid with rage that Universal Studios aired last week a controversial episode of the popular television series, *Princess*, a coalition of Hindu groups condemned the studio, saying the re-edited version of the episode was still hurtful to Hindus worldwide.

The leaders of the group, the World Vaishnava Association, said the studio had hurt the feelings of the community even more by airing the episode during the Krishna Janamasthami week. The episode was aired in many states the past week, while several states would be broadcasting it across the month.

But Sunil Aghi, a community leader and businessman specializing in insurance in California, who served as a consultant to when the episode was pulled out of circulation about six months ago and was re-edited, called the protesters self-serving leaders.

Says Aghi, who appears at the end of the episode with Renee O'Connor, one of its actresses, "an accurate portrayal of our deities is important to us, but even more important goal is to enlighten people of other faiths about Hinduism." O'Connor replies: "With understanding comes tolerance."

Aghi says the protesters have neither understanding nor tolerance that are the hallmarks of Hinduism. "Just because the episode shows Hindu

gods in a fictionalized situation, it does not insult or harm Hinduism." He says he prevailed in having a scene that showed Hanuman's head cut off be removed from the episode.

To Tusta Krishnadas and others angry at Universal Pictures, Aghi has become part of a conspiracy to cheat and mislead Hindus.

"By bringing this man [*Aghi*] into the picture, and presenting him as the spokesperson for one billion Hindus across the world, the producers and distributors of the episode have salted the wounds of Hindus," says Syamasundar Das of the Chaitanya Mission, one of the protesting organizations.

"And by showing the film during the holy week for the Hindus, they have kicked us in the head."

Others in the protest include the American Hindus Against Defamation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Ramanuja Sampradaya, the Hindu Students Council and the World Vaishnava Association. Tusta Krishnadas of the Vaishnava group successfully led the protest against the episode six months ago said people like Aghi end up doing more harm to Hinduism than any good.

The producers of *Xena* say the controversial episode, even in its original version, has received praise from such publications as *Hinduism Today*. Even then, the episode was pulled out, at a "huge loss running in millions" and was re-edited because they did not want to be seen as offending Hindus and Hinduism.

But the protesters do not buy the explanation.

Syamasundar Das says: "Universal and *Xena* stars spend an hour trivializing Hinduism and treating Lord Krishna and other Hindu deities as fictional characters," he says, "then they have the audacity to pontificate about how they want us to enlighten people about Hinduism, and promote tolerance... Their hypocrisy is outrageous."

The controversy comes soon after Warner Bros removed a Bhagavad

Gita *shloka* used in *Eyes Wide Shut* in prints being used in over a dozen countries where the film opens this month, Universal used "deceptive" methods to fool the Hindus, the protesters say.

"If they truly had any respect for Hinduism and Hindus, why do they trivialize our religion, and refuse to consult with Hindu religious leaders and organizations that have influence over Hindu community?" asks Vijay Pallod, a governing council member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

"Hindus around the world have been deeply offended by Universal and their actions will not be forgotten easily."

Krishnadas asserted that Aghi has been put forward by Universal Pictures as an expert on Hinduism.

"How can Aghi possibly be considered a representative of Hinduism and Hindus? People should know Aghi for what he is, not what he pretends to be."

"Aghi is nothing more than a political activist who has become Universal Studios' yes man and has been compensated for the role," he added, claiming Aghi was given "red carpet treatment when he was flown to Australia to be with the stars and director of *Xena*."

Aghi says he is his own man, a deeply religious person, and he will not allow anyone to buy his conscience.

"Hinduism is not a centralized religion," he says. "I did not make any claim to be a Hindu leader. On the other hand, who are these people who pretend to speak for what they claim to be one billion Hindus?"

Meanwhile, Aghi laughed at the claim of the coalition that over 150 organizations are supporting its action. He wondered if some of the organizations listed in Norway, the far east and central Asia had more than a handful of members.

Ajay Shah of the AHAD says: "Some people talk about the First

Amendment, the freedom of expression."

"If that is the case, if the freedom of expression prevails to offend something that is sensitive to us, let the studios and networks remember there are one billion Hindus across the world, and they have huge economic clout."

Shah did not elaborate if his organization and allies plan to initiate an economic boycott of Universal Pictures.

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