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TELEVISION

Krishna, Meet Xena

Should Hindus be upset with her Godly encounter and winning joust with Indrajit?

lassiwithlavina.com

Hindus tuning into "Xena: warrior Princess" on February 28 were startled to find Lord Krishna, Hanuman, Kali and Indrajit among the cast. Not all were pleased, believing the show to be sacrilegious. For the uninitiated, X:WP, as fans call it, is one of the most popular TV shows in the world. Now in its fourth season, it is running only a stride behind "Baywatch" for worldwide viewership. In this New Zealand-produced show, Xena (Lucy Lawless, a former "Miss New Zealand"), her companion, Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor, of Houston, Texas), and a multitude of ancient Gods, angels and others join forces to do battle with demons, ghosts, warlords and others of villainous ilk. Early in February, the show began a series set in India, the first dealing with an evil yoga teacher, the second with spirit possession and the third with reincarnation. The fourth, "The Way," brought Xena face-to-face with Lord Krishna.

In the Krishna episode [see opposite], Xena and Gabrielle meet an avatar, Eli (Timothy Omundson), who preaches "The Way," which is none other than the path of ahimsa--noninjury. Eli and Gabrielle are captured by Indrajit, the King of Demons. This is

the same Indrajit, brother of Ravana of the Ramayana, long ago slain by Lord Rama. However, as with many of the Xena episodes, ancient legends are reworked as needed. Xena, after turning into Maha Kali with the help of Lord Krishna, defeats Indrajit and saves Eli and Gabrielle.

Initial protests to the program were made by stunned Hindus who had not seen the show but heard an advance report stating that Xena beat up Hanuman, that Lord Krishna was depicted inappropriately, and that Xena and Gabrielle were lesbian.

Once the show aired, even Krishna devotees were split in their opinions. Hanuman is not harmed by Xena, much less beat up. In fact, they strike up a close friendship. Lord Krishna is depicted in a loving, Godly manner. There is no hint of lesbianism in the episode. It is true, however, that such a relationship between Xena and Gabrielle is implied in other episodes, and is assumed by a section of the show's fans. Criticism then shifted to the complaint that it is not right to depict Lord Krishna doing things he never did in traditional epics, (such as counseling Xena). Critics also worry that the producers might take greater liberties with Hindu themes in the future if no complaint was made at this stage.

We asked our New York correspondent, Lavina Melwani, former editor of India Worldwide, cofounder of the Children's Hope charity and prominent member of the Sindhi community, to watch the episode. She reported, "My husband and I enjoyed the show. It conveyed the philosophy of nonviolence and love very well. It brought Hindu ideas into the mainstream, reaching

an audience that would not be exposed otherwise." Our Hinduism Today staff in Kauai liked it, too. Lord Krishna was accorded reverence, even by Xena, who "doesn't like Gods," as Hanuman points out in cajoling her to pray to Him. Most impressive was the preaching of ahimsa. At one point Eli says, "That cycle of violence has to be broken, Gabrielle, and the truth is that that can only be done through nonviolence." By show's end, Gabrielle--who has spent four seasons at Xena's side bashing the bad guys--hurls her fighting staff into the river and vows to change her violent ways.

The producers have obviously worked hard researching Hinduism. Earlier episodes set in India contain moments of high philosophy along with occasional silly adaptations of traditional Hindu themes. Dr. Ravi Palat of Auckland University, hired as a consultant for the India series, was puzzled by the flap. "There are hundreds of movies which portray Hindu deities as fictional characters," he said.

Newsweek magazine picked up on the controversy (and the related outrage at Mike Myer's truly tasteless spoof of a Hindu Goddess in Vanity Fair) and offered this advice, "Maybe it's time Hollywood gave up the Hinduism thing." Don't count on it, and don't be surprised if you see more and more Hindu themes on film. Hinduism's visual richness and profound content provide fertile ground for endlessly intriguing and creative cinematography.

Xena: "The Way"

In this controversial episode of "Xena: Warrior Princess," Xena and Gabrielle meet the peace-preaching avatar, Eli. Gabrielle

and Eli are kidnapped by Indrajit and hauled off to the demon's Sri Lankan hideaway. With the guidance of Hanuman, Xena prays to Krishna for help. Krishna appears and blesses Xena. In the final battle with Indrajit, a dying Xena turns into Kali, destroys Indrajit and saves Eli and Gabrielle. (Scenes read in rows, left to right across both pages(web surfers: see hard copy.)

Pondering:Xena: "I've been thinking a lot about reincarnation."
Gabrielle: "Maybe being a warrior isn't the right karma for you."

Avatar Eli:They meet and join a gentle sage and healer who preaches, "You must cast all hate and violence from your heart."

Hanuman and Xena:After Xena tries to attack Hanuman, who has slipped into their camp at night, they become friends.

Please help me:After the avatar and Gabrielle are taken by Indrajit, Xena prays for Krishna to come and help.

Krishna appears to Xena:In Lordly style, with words of God, a blue-skinned Krishna convinces Xena to follow her own dharma.

Holy touch:Krishna empowers Xena to defeat Indrajit. Xena then infiltrates the demon's Lankan lair.

Evil demon king: Xena meets Indrajit and cuts off one hand. He sprouts six arms and mortally wounds Xena.

Grace: With her dying breath, Xena whispers "Krishna" who saves her by transforming her into Maha Kali.

Fierce Goddess: A multi-armed Kali confronts the malevolent Indrajit.

Kali Ma!: Biting Indrajit's hand with glee, then chopping of another arm, Kali finally cuts off the wicked one's head.

Choosing nonviolence: Gabrielle gives up her warrior past for the "way of love," tossing her fighting stick into the river.