

Jury Awards \$522,000 In Discrimination Suit

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STAFF WRITER

An Indian immigrant who worked for the Robert Plan Corp. has won a racial discrimination lawsuit totaling more than \$500,000 against the Bethpage-based auto-insurance company.

Rajagopala Raghavendra, who worked for the insurer for five months as a computer project manager, charged that a supervisor repeatedly singled him out for harsh treatment because of his dark skin color and cultural background and then wrongfully fired him.

A jury in U.S. District Court in Uniondale agreed with his claims, and after a 6½-day trial returned a unanimous verdict in favor of Raghavendra on March 31. It awarded him \$375,000 in punitive damages and \$147,000 in back pay.

"I feel really vindicated about the discrimination I had suffered at this company," the Hicksville resident said. "I felt the Robert Plan had taken away my dignity and the dream this country had to offer me."

The judge's decision, expected June 2, could uphold, amend or dismiss the verdict. In fact, the company, which denies the charges, is hoping that the judge will dismiss them.

"There's a terrible irony here," said Stu Levin, Robert Plan's senior vice president for corporate affairs. "We are a company that really built itself an environment where everybody succeeds on their merits," and, he added, "We certainly categorically deny that there was any reason other than performance-

based issues that led to his dismissal."

Raghavendra, 36, who has extensive computer experience and two master's degrees, started working for the company in September, 1994. Soon after, he said, his supervisor told his small staff to stop reporting to him. The supervisor has since left the company to "pursue an opportunity on her own," Levin said.



Newsday Photo/Dick Yarwood
Rajagopala Raghavendra
says he was unfairly fired.

Raghavendra said that when he asked questions to clarify expected work on a project, the former supervisor, who is white, would often scream at him. On his first day, she told him that he needed to "come up to speed."

If he came late to a meeting because he wasn't told about it in time or was returning from a trip, he alleged she would stop the meeting and upbraid him. Others reporting directly to her, all white, weren't subjected to the same treatment, he said.

Then in February, 1995, she fired him, saying that his performance was not up to her expectations. A few months later, he filed complaints with the Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission and the New York State Division of Human Rights. The EEOC issued a "right to sue" letter, allowing Raghavendra to take his case to court.

"The jury looked at the way the plaintiff was treated," said Raghavendra's co-counsel Rick Ostrove, "and it compared that to the way similarly situated people were treated, and I believe that they found he was treated less favorably."