

Weekend highlights India's achievement

Academic, cultural topics take stage at world conference

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DARTMOUTH, Mass. — Ahimsa — the Hindu doctrine of nonviolence — could be the key to ending war and terrorism in the world, said Eastern Connecticut State University professor June Fitz. That was just one of the ideas put forth during the recent International Conference on India's Contributions and Influences in the World. The event was hosted by the Center for Indic Studies at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Fitz was one of dozens of scholars from throughout the world who spoke at the three-day conference, organized by the World Association for Vedic Studies. About 250 people — some from China, Japan, India, Canada, the Caribbean and various parts of the United States — attended the conference. The weekend began on Friday morning with the blowing of conch shells. Bal Ram Singh, a UMass professor and director of the Indic Studies center, opened the conference. He told about a couple of his chemistry students who saw him on campus earlier that morning and asked him about his traditional dress. "I said, I'm going to a Vedic conference. I must dress like Vedic people," he said. "I guess we need this center. We need this kind of conference." Singh, who along with professor Suku Sengupta spent two years working on the conference, said Dartmouth was a fitting host because of a historic connection between Massachusetts and India. The tea thrown into the harbor during the Boston Tea Party of 1773 was produced by the British East India Co. During the incident, a ship called the "Dartmouth" was the first to carry the company's tea into Boston Harbor. "We have more than one reason to have the Center for Indic Studies here," Singh said. Bhu Dev Sharma, president of the World Association for Vedic Studies, said the conference provided an open forum for people of various faiths and backgrounds. "We invited a large number of people with different views so we can have discussion," he said. The conference was divided into 15 sessions, including a cultural program for the public Saturday night. Throughout the weekend, speakers discussed topics like ancient civilization, the Hindu religion, Sanskrit, Buddhism, philosophy, math, sciences and Indian thoughts on governance and management. In one of the opening addresses, Fitz, a professor of philosophy, talked about Gandhi's thoughts and the



Prafulla Velury offers a traditional prayer in the Kuchipudi dance style during the cultural program at the International Conference on India's Contributions and Influences in the World.



Sunanda Narayanan performs a rendition of "Vande Mataram."

importance of ahimsa, which stresses that all living creatures are sacred. Practicing ahimsa, she said, "softens the boundaries of self." "If the boundaries of self are too tight, one sees 'the other' as separate and different than oneself," she said. "It can lead to conflict and violence." Those who follow ahimsa believe in non-injury, non-violence and harmlessness, Fitz said. "If enough people on the planet practiced ahimsa, it would be possible to curb violence and possibly to end terrorism," she said. Gandhi, she said, believed ahimsa was the "means to truth of God" and the "basis of moral character." "Ghandi's practice of ahimsa surpassed what any human being could expect to achieve," Fitz said. To be effective in various parts of the world, ahimsa would have to be modified for different people, she said. For example, the West would not likely accept Gandhi's insistence on self-suffering, since they are so influenced by Aristotle's teachings on happiness. Westerners should be taught a form of ahimsa that gives them a sense of wellbeing, Fitz said. T.K. Roy, a coordinator for the Center for Indic Studies and a conference organizer, said he was mostly happy with the way the weekend went. "It was a very big task that we did and it was a very successful conference in terms of the guests that we had, the international scholars in every area," he said. However, he said, he wished more local people had attended and wonders if the \$150-per-person registration fee might have been prohibitive. In the future, the center plans to hold a similar conference on its own that would cost less, he said. In particular, he thanked Shankha Bhowmick, Madhu Jhaveri, Ishwarbhai Patel and Mahesh Patel for their work on the conference.