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DARTMOUTH -- Saturday, the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth inaugurated its Center for Indic Studies with a program in the school's main auditorium.

The program began at 10:30 a.m. and lasted until the 7 p.m. dinner closed out the formal learning portion of the day. During that time, Indic culture was examined, explained and celebrated.

For many Americans the notion of Indian culture doesn't extend much beyond curry powder and perhaps an image of Gandhi.

But the growing presence of Indian immigrants in America and the electronically-prodded shrinking of our world means that all of us now must know more about an ancient culture that retains its vibrancy today.

Saturday's event was an interesting blend of the secular and the spiritual.

University Chancellor Jean MacCormack spoke words of welcome, but Yogi Satyam lit the lamp, blew a celebratory conch and said the benediction.

Panel discussions included "How Indic Traditions of Tolerance and Pluralism Can Help Reduce Global Conflicts and Violence," as well as "The Role of Women Or Family System in the Diasporic Indian Community."

There was also music and there were Hindu scriptures on sale in the lobby.

The event wasn't just limited to local experts on Indian culture, either. Harvard's Dr. Dinesh Patel spoke, as did Dalpat Patel, mayor of Bordentown, NJ and Shashi Tripathi, consul general of the Indian Consulate in New York.

One of the afternoon's more popular events was a slide show and lecture presented by author Robert Arnett.

Arnett, a man whose deep Southern drawl seems at war with his Indian costume, has a deep curiosity about the culture, religion and arts of India.

That curiosity led him to travel extensively in India and to author "India Unveiled," a well-received collection of his travel stories and insights.

Arnett's slides were applauded, but more so were his remarks and stories about Indian culture.

Arnett, who has never married, told his audience how the Indian custom of arranged marriage came to seem less strange to him.

He said he was explaining to an Indian friend that he hadn't married because he had never found a woman with whom he had "soul unity."

"Soul unity comes through many years of marriage," his Indian friend responded.

The event ended with a dinner that gave those not familiar with Indian food a chance to become more familiar with another aspect of this ancient culture.

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