Dr. P. Rameshkumar (MG University, Kottayam)
Dr. SRP. Nayar (Inter Univ. Center for Astronomy, Pune)

The inaugural meeting of TUG India

Sebastian Rahtz

First stirrings

Back in the summer when I first started corresponding with C. V. Radhakrishnan in India about TeX and SGML-related matters, I little thought that I would be escaping the English winter for a week in Southern India at the start of 1998. But something seemed to crystallize in the minds of some Indian TeXies, and events moved fast in the subcontinent during the autumn. By November 16th, Radhakrishnan was able to announce to the world that the newest TeX user group had been born:

> The Indian TeX Users Group has been informally launched today at the academic premises of Department of Mathematics of University of Kerala, Trivandrum. Prof. KSS. Nambooripad, a world-renowned mathematician and an ace TeX programmer, chaired the session. He was unanimously elected as the Chairman of the Indian TeX Users Group. Following are the office-bearers of the TUGIndia.

Chairman:	Prof. (Dr.) K. S. S. Nambooripad
Secretary:	C. V. Radhakrishnan
Treasurer:	Dr. R. Rajendra
Executive:	Dr. A. R. Rajan (University of Kerala)
	Dr. E. Krishnan (University College, Trivandrum)
	Dr. V. N. Krishnachandran (Vikram Sarabhai Space Center)
	Dr. R. K. Chettiar (Department of Education, Govt. of Kerala)
	Mr. C. V. Rajagopal (University Observatory)
	Mr. Deepak Tony Thomas, Oracle Corporation, Bangalore

At the same time, they did me the great honour of inviting me to inaugurate the group, and I lost no time in accepting in principle. In the ordinary course of events it would have been beyond the finances of either TUG India or myself to pay for a trip there, but then a fairy godmother appeared, in the shape of the UK TeX Users Group. The committee considered my tentative suggestion, and agreed that support of such a potentially important group would be a reasonable use of group funds. That just meant fixing a date, and finding a flight, and all was in train. By an amazing coincidence, another member of the UK TUG committee, Kaveh Bazargan, had already booked a holiday over Christmas and New Year at precisely the location in India chosen for the TUG India launch, so we were able to mount an even more impressive presence.

India, and the inauguration

The TUG India meeting took place in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala state, which forms the southwest corner of India. It is a tropical area, which sometimes seems to be entirely covered in coconut palms and banana trees, and is famous for its Communist state government, its almost 100% literacy rate, and a general air of some prosperity and a good distribution of wealth.

The principal mistake I made before setting off was to contract a vile cold, which rendered me almost speechless during my first few days, and a poor picture of health for the whole stay. However, after a long flight from London, a sweaty wait in Mumbai, and then a short flight to Trivandrum, it was little hardship to be taken off after lunch to the excellent beach resort of Varkala. Talking TeX beneath the palms next to a sunny beach of the Arabian sea was a little disconcerting, but we managed....

On Monday January 5th, we gathered in the University Observatory (a purely courtesy title these days) for the opening ceremony of TUG India, at which Kaveh and I were joined as speakers by Professor Nambooribad, the group's chairman, the University Vice Chancellor, and the local member of Parliament (showing a healthy interest in IT matters). Kaveh and I tried to present the TeX world as a place of dynamism, excitement and new possibilities for conventional and electronic publishing, and some at least of our audience seemed convinced.

Many of the delegates were from typesetting companies (some of them suppliers to my own employer, Elsevier), with the biggest contingent from Madras — Thomson's office seemed to have sent almost all their R&D team. But there was plenty of academic interest too, and of course a special concern with typesetting Indian scripts.

It was a pleasure to be able to hand over to Radhakrishnan a selection of TeX-related books and journals, donated by Jonathan Fine, Malcolm Clark and myself, and to confirm the imminent despatch of back issues of *TUGboat* and MAPS to India. NTG had already sent a generous batch of 4AllTeX CD-ROM, of which each delegate was given a copy.

The first TUG India courses

On January 6th the serious work started, four days of tutorials in the morning on 'advanced' topics, and introductory LaTeX in the afternoons. I managed to avoid teaching the latter (I always find myself *apologizing* too much for LaTeX), but had fun in the mornings.

We started by dealing with a subject dear to my heart, and to that of some of the delegates — LaTeX to SGML translation. I expounded the Elsevier system, based on four stages of transformation:

1. LaTeX to dvi, using a very specialized class file, which redefines almost everything to put SGML markup into the dvi file;

2. dvi to ASCII (using Tobin's dtl programs);

3. ASCII to SGML against an intermediate DTD;

4. SGML to SGML for the final DTD (using a Perl library which directly interfaces with the NSGMLS parser).

It turned out that at least two others present had also thought of similar methodologies, which was reassuring.

From LaTeX to SGML, I moved on next day to DSSSL (Document Style Semantics and Specification Language) and its relationship with TeX — perhaps not everyone present quite went along with me on that one. We were on safer ground discussing general aspects of electronic publishing using TeX, and I was glad to be able to describe pdfTeX in some detail, to publicize what I consider a much under-rated alternative to LaTeX2html (Eitan Gurari's TeX4ht), as well as give a puff for my own LaTeX hyperref package.

On the third day, we moved onto pictures, and I attempted to make a (rather shaky) case for MetaPost. Colour was a subject where it was easier to find common ground, albeit by agreeing

that color separation specification in TeX was much too immature at present.

For the last day, I had decided that this was the moment where I would really make a first go at using Omega, and (somewhat to my surprise), I was able to write, compile and use a one-line Omega Transformation Process after some study of Omega examples. Since one of the Omega authors (Yannis Haralambous) is very actively working on the necessary OTPs, hyphenation and so on for typesetting Malayalam (the language spoken in Kerala), we can expect rapid deployment of Omega amongst those typesetting things like school textbooks.

. . . and some sightseeing

After talking TeX for 5 days, I was ready for some relaxation. We started with a shopping expedition, during which I bought some dresses for my daughters which are certain to lighten up wintry Oxford, and a selection of South Indian classical music. Then on the Saturday we drove across the state line into Tamil Nadu to visit the Padmanabhapuram palace of the Maharajah of Travancore, the princely state which occupied much of what is now Kerala until Independence. In the late 18th century, a replacement palace was constructed in Trivandrum, and Padmanabhapuram was left untouched. With elements from the 16th century, it is an incredible structure built almost entirely of teak, often intricately carved, and all ingeniously designed to keep the rooms cool with natural air-conditioning. Whether it was the ladies' bathing tank, the audience chamber, or the hall where 2000 Brahmins could be entertained to dinner, the whole place was a marvel of design — and preservation by the State Archaeological Service! Perhaps the best moment was when we were granted special access to view the Maharajah's private meditation apartment whose plaster walls were covered in marvelous paintings, and where a pair of coconut-oil lamps had been burning non-stop for 200 years.

From the past to the present, we drove to Cape Comorin, the southern-most tip of India, where you can see both sunrise and sunset across the sea from the same spot, and where three oceans meet. Here, in the late 19th century, Swami Vivekananda (a very influential religious reformer) swam out to a bare rock in the sea, meditated for five days, and achieved a state of enlightenment to accord him the status of a saint. Now there is a modern memorial on the rock, and we joined hundreds of pilgrims in the boat ride to examine the spot. Thence back north, trying to visit a Jain temple set deep in a cave, but sadly

the gates were locked, and some monkeys laughed from the rock.

On the Sunday, to Kerala's secret paradise, the long salt waterway that runs for 200 km parallel to the sea, sometimes as a wide as a lake, at other times turning into quiet green tunnels with barely enough depth for the boat. A vista of endless coconut palms, half-hidden houses, and small fishing boats provided a very relaxing boat trip.

Conclusion

This was a worthwhile, if exhausting, trip, and I hope it gave a good start to TUG India. When I left, they already had 79 members signed up, just from word of mouth, so the group looks set to be active. It is hoped to cycle the meetings around the different parts of India, as well as publishing a newsletter, so the current bias towards the south should soon be corrected.

I must, of course, take this space to extend the heartfelt thanks of Kaveh and myself to C. V. Radhakrishnan and the many others who looked after us so magnifcently during our stay in Kerala. They were very worthy ambassadors of a lovely part of India. I look foward to working with them, and hopefully to visiting India again soon.

TUGIndia can be contacted as follows:

C K Radhakrishnan
Secretary
TUGIndia
Kripa, TC 24/548, Sastha Gardens
Thycaud, Trivandrum 695014, India

Tel. +91 471 324341
Fax. +91 471 333186

Email: `tugindia@mailexcite.com`

⋄ Sebastian Rahtz
Elsevier Science Ltd
Oxford, UK
`s.rahtz@elsevier.co.uk`