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Sharing the Abundant Human Knowledge When Old Cultures Meet in Cyberspace

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Global Memory Net for International Collaboration

I am privileged to have been a consultant to India several times in the last two decades, and thus have learnt to love this country and its people, and to appreciate greatly the enormity of the richness of the Indian cultural heritage and resources. Yet, none of the previous visits was as special as my latest one in late February 2004. This weeklong trip was packed with actions and excitements, meeting old friends and making new ones. Aside from speaking duties in Delhi, Bangalore and Mysore, related to my current international digital library project, *Global Memory Net*, supported by the US National Science Foundation [1, 2, 3], this trip offered me opportunities to meet with high government officials and decision makers, like Dr. Dhanendra Kumar, Secretary, Department of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and numerous leaders and directors of the library, museum, archaeology, and archive institutions; to work with a dedicated group of high-level Indian colleagues in discussing and drafting "Digital India" proposal; and to have first-time personal experience with the rich cultural and heritage resources of a part of South India – with its fascinating history of the last Maharaja era.

So, when I had the farewell lunch with my host in Bangalore, Mr. N. V. Sathyanarayana [Sathya hereafter], I was glowing with a satisfaction of having such a trip, and rambled on a number of thoughts related to the great opportunities lying ahead of us in this digital age when countries like India and China – with abundant old cultures and history – meet in cyberspace. Little did I know that this would lead to a request to share my thoughts and perspectives with the readers of *U&I* in one page. This is quite a request given the time restraint! But, I see the value for doing so, since many have communicated with me favorably after my keynote at *ICDL 2004* and lecture in Bangalore, articulating what they see as difficulties, problems and issues facing them; and requesting further information and possibilities for collaboration. This gives me the opportunity not only to thank my hosts in Delhi - TERI and ICDL organizers, Informatics in Bangalore, and Prof. Shalini Urs of University of Mysore for their invitations and generous hospitalities; but also to thank those who communicated with me collectively for their friendship, thoughtfulness, and idea/knowledge sharing. In addition, I will also expand further on some areas, which I could not cover in my talks. Let me start by addressing two of the many questions posted to me by Sathya.

What is the highlight of your trip if you have to pick only one?

As difficult as it is, if only one is allowed, unquestionably it

has to be the private audience with his Excellency, the Honorable President Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, at the President's House (Rashtrapathi Bhawan).^{*} It was truly inspiring to hear his vision in information access and sharing, and to have close discussions with him on universal access, India's International Digital Library Portal (*US-India Million Book Digital Library Project*) which he officially inaugurated in September 2003, *Global Memory Net* for more collaborative activities, restoration, etc. He repeated his challenges offered at the *ICDL 2004*:



Courtesy of the President's Official Photographer

- To evolve methodologies to share *all digital contents* with no barriers,
- To pledge that *information of value* shall be shared freely across the world." [3]

After my visit, I have found an abundance of tributes paid to this visionary Scientist-President of our times on the Web. I have read *Wings of Fire*, an autobiography of this undisputed father of India's missile program. I cannot help envying my Indian colleagues in digital library arena for having such a leader who is both supporting and challenging them. Digital library initiatives, to him, is in line with his strategy of accomplishing his vision and dream of making India into a technological superpower, and leading India to be a developed country.

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