Walking Softly, Observing Quietly, and Thinking Deeply: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Making of a Generation of Wildlife Scientists at the Wildlife Institute of India

This tribute traces the essence of Dr. Ajith Kumar, scientist, teacher, mentor, and philosopher, through the memories and reflections of those who knew him best. It is as much a story of a man as it is of a way of doing science that emphasizes humility, precision, curiosity, and deep respect for life in all its forms. Ajith Kumar began his scientific journey by studying the Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the rainforests of the Western Ghats, a species that would become a symbol of his ecological philosophy, characterized by its sensitivity to fragmentation, requiring patient observation, and often being overlooked. His early training in behavioural ecology, particularly his doctoral work at the University of Cambridge, laid the foundation for a lifetime of asking difficult, often unpopular questions about the interface between animals, forests, and humans. Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in the 1990s and early 2000s was a space of intense learning and institutional experimentation. Ajith Kumar helped shape that intellectual culture by focusing on foundational skills, field techniques, statistical literacy, ecological reasoning, and mentoring students not only in data collection but also in asking meaningful questions. Whether walking behind a group watching langurs or quietly working on a laptop in the corner of a dusty field station, his presence was steady, generous, and unassuming. His field visits were often less about checking progress and more about checking in, listening to student dilemmas, teaching them to design a research study, suggesting methodological tweaks, and reminding them gently to keep their

Figure 1: Dr. Ajith Kumar (sitting, extreme right, 2nd row from bottom) at the Wildlife Institute of India, 1989

curiosity alive and not give up hope. All this with his signature dose of humour in everything.
Two of us (Nima and Shomita) were part of the first Master's batch from WII during 1988-89, and we were introduced to Ajith when he came to teach us Behavioural Ecology. He turned out to be much more of a friend than a teacher. His classes were full of hilarious anecdotes that often sent us into hysterical bouts of very loud laughter.

The other faculty members would wonder what we were doing, and when once Dr. Alan Rodgers strolled by to check, he was entrapped in this madness himself. Yet, we learnt some of the most relevant fundamentals in ecology from Ajith. He taught us to be critical and irreverent in a good way. He mentored without us realising that he was doing it.

We just imbibed it from him. It's difficult to tease out the lecture hall sessions with Ajith from our interactions outside, especially in our hostel hall, after class hours. Whenever he was there, which was very often, we unintentionally drifted into academic discussions since it was such a lot of fun.

Other faculty like BC Choudhary and our seniors, the researchers, would also join in and narrate their field stories, and that is actually how we grasped a lot about field work, interpreting results, and articulating these to others. In the classroom, we used to have small seminars where we were made to present a topic. At first, some of us were mortified because we were being judged in a way, but Ajith eased it for us with his humour (often quite wicked but none of us were offended by him) and comical critique, pointing out flaws in logic or the use of grammar and language. As part of the module that Ajith was teaching us, we had a field session on the wonderful campus of the Forest Research Institute (FRI), where WII began its journey. We were seven in the batch, and Ajith took us to observe Tarai Gray Langurs (*Semnopithecus hector*). He taught us various techniques used to study primate behaviour, including group and focal scans that we had to conduct on the langurs. The field session was long-drawn and sometimes a bit monotonous, but overall great fun with Ajith around. What was even more amusing was when we were shown how to analyse the data and interpret results, and Ajith sprung a surprise– while we were observing monkeys, he was meticulously conducting group and focal scans on us. He had a neat analysis of us as a group and individually, which he proudly presented to us and, of course, most hilariously!

He continued this with the next batch (Kaberi's batch), where he would often carry notebooks filled with scribbles, drawings, counts, and observations on field trips. It was not unusual for students to discover that, while they were trying to get their first focal animal scan done, Ajith had already collected an entire dataset on the students themselves, as a playful meta-lesson on observation. Little wonder that he figured out and understood his students well – they were his primary study troops. Beyond Behavioural Ecology, his role in developing the computing lab and promoting statistical training among ecologists in India was quietly revolutionary.

Long before "quantitative ecology" became a buzzword, Ajith was helping students troubleshoot SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) and guiding them through their first ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) or GLM (Generalized Linear Model). His insistence on clarity, rigour, and ecological relevance raised the bar for field-based research. He was a pillar of WII's faculty – a teacher who never needed to raise his voice to command respect.

What made his teaching so powerful was his deep integrity and unshakeable belief that good science could, and must, be done ethically, collaboratively, and with care. He was not just a faculty member, but a philosopher-naturalist, educator, and mentor who defined what it meant to *think ecologically*. His caring nature for students and researchers went beyond the classroom.

Ajith's involvement with the second M.Sc. batch at WII ramped up just as Dr. Alan Rodgers moved on, and soon, he became the go-to person for Behavioural Ecology, Statistics, and field-based animal behaviour. He introduced us to the mysterious arts of focal and scan sampling, quietly trailing behind on field trips like a benevolent ghost—with a camera slung over his shoulder, of course. I (Kaberi) still remember him shadowing our line of students as Dr. Johnsingh marched ahead through the Goral ridges of Rajaji National Park. His silent presence gave us more courage than we realised.

Then came Sariska. When Nitin Rai sprinted after a tiger for a photo (because why not?), Ajith's calm but firm voice cut through the chaos: "*Observe, don't chase.*" Lesson learned. He also introduced us to statistics. For most of us, SPSS was as foreign as a spaceship, and the Apple Macintosh Plus or SE was our first glimpse of a futuristic glowing box.

We stared in awe. Karmavir Bhatt remembers being completely baffled by statistics at first, but Ajith never lost patience. You could ask him the same question five times in one class—and he'd explain it, each time as if it were the first. And with a grin, he once quipped to Karmavir, "*Primatologists look up, herpetologists look down*"—spot-on career guidance!

Ajith and I (Kaberi) bonded over two gastronomic passions: fish and jackfruit. What else would you expect from a Malayali and a Bengali? After work, we would jump on his scooter—BC sometimes joined in—and zoom off to hunt the biggest, freshest Ganga fish. Triumphantly, we would return, cook up a fish-storm in the hostel, and grumble about how ripe jackfruit was a delicacy underappreciated in North India.

Both Geetanjali and I (Kaberi) did our dissertations under Ajith's guidance, studying the not-so-glamorous langurs in Rajaji. Ajith smiled and said, "*You just need a solid dataset and to finish on time.*" No fluff, just the essentials. Of course, I fell behind.

Fieldwork, lab work, and the unavailability of a computer didn't help. Ajith stepped in, offered his home ("*five thirty-three, under the mango tree*"), and lent me his computer, the only personal one among faculty. I wrote my entire thesis at his dining table while he floated by with just the right balance of stats critique, logical nudges, and tea. No big talk about mentorship, just quiet, generous support.

A gentle push from him, and I was back on track. Classic Ajith.

Figure 2: Dr. Ajith Kumar (far right) at Rajaji National Park, 1991. Photo credit: Ajai Saxena.

Ajith had a gift for storytelling. Even when things went off-track, we'd turn to him. He would listen, nod, and then with that signature laugh, shift the energy from panic to perspective. Suddenly, everything felt manageable. That was his magic. When he mentored the third M.Sc. batch, his first message was unforgettable. A group arrived breathless at 8:59 a.m. (helping classmates up FRI's epic slope), and he deadpanned: "*You're being paid Rs. 33 rupees 33 paise to be on time, not to give excuses.*" The bar was set. But moments later, the humour crept in, and his warmth took over. Anand Pendharkar recalls how Ajith looked at his spreadsheet and said, "*Zero data is data too.*" He spotted patterns Anand hadn't seen, doodled a graph, and that became Anand's first paper. That was Ajith: a statistician with X-ray vision and a soft spot for lost-looking students.

He remembered every student's name, long after they left. When Anand left academia for the Doon School to lead their Environmental Science program, many doubted and raised eyebrows about his leaving academia. Ajith looked at him and said, "*If your student becomes Prime Minister or heads an industry, they will make massive impacts on wildlife and our planet. Their love for wildlife may come from your teaching and not from your thesis. So carry on.*"

Even his colleagues respected him deeply. His science wasn't about ego—it was about truth, integrity, and quiet excellence. Dr. Rawat said, "*He listened even if he disagreed, explained gently, never held grudges.*" That was rare.

His love for jalebis was legendary. Every visit to Dehradun came with a call to Dr. Asha Rajvanshi: "*Please bring fresh jalebis!*" And his cooking—well, that was an adventure. B.C. Choudhury fondly remembers the infamous Coorgi fish curry: "*two kilos of fish, two kilos of coriander, and a suspicious amount of cigarette ash*". Only Ajith and Johnsingh dared to eat it. Ajith's pranks were just as sharp. Once, he and BC decided to test WII's botanical brain, Dr. G.S. Rawat. Ajith scaled a wall in the far corner of FRI, plucked a tiny yellow flower growing from a crack, and proudly challenged Dr. Rawat to identify it. Dr Rawat examined it and calmly said, "*Old wall species. Grows on cracks in historic buildings.*" Game, set, match.

Researchers at WII leaned on Ajith constantly. He would help analyse messy datasets and guide struggling minds. Wesley Sunderraj, studying Nilgiri Langurs (*Semnopithecus johnii*), remembers Ajith suggesting a non-parametric approach that impressed even Dr. Johnsingh. Wesley still remembers walking to Manohar's tea shop with Ajith every day and calling him "*Aaiya*", a term of deep respect in Tamil and Malayalam. His most vivid memory? "*Ajith never said no to anyone seeking research advice.*"

Now, when we walk in the field, we still feel Ajith's presence. In the silence before a question. In the calm before a sighting. In how we watch, listen, and care. Dr. Ajith Kumar's legacy isn't just in papers or methods or field stations. It's in all of us, the students, colleagues, field assistants, and communities he shaped. He taught with his feet on the ground, his camera slung over his shoulder, loads of humour thrown in, and his heart fully in the forest.

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