

Observe, Read, Connect and Publish: Literary Contribution of Dr. Ajith Kumar

Dr. Ajith Kumar, fondly known as Ajith Sir among his students, was an accomplished scientist, mentor, and collaborator. His deep commitment to wildlife biology and conservation in India is evident through his association with numerous organisations, the large number of students he mentored, and the broader scientific and conservation community he engaged with. This is a modest attempt to shed light on his contributions to scientific literature, policy, and public engagement. Dr. T. R. Shankar Raman, Dr. Y. Chaitanya Krishna, and Pooja Pawar have created a digital collection of the literature he contributed to, available as an open-access library on the Zotero platform. (https://www.zotero.org/groups/5895078/dr_ajith_kumar_bibliography/library). Reading through his publications is much more than a tour of various ecosystems—learning about diverse taxa and reckoning with the alarming threats to the country’s biodiversity and wilderness.

Not Only Primates

Ajith Sir began his scientific endeavour with Dr. Kurup, at the Western Ghats Regional Centre of Zoological Survey of India, where he was part of field surveys and behavioural study of the Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the Western Ghats. His first scientific paper, published in 1981, detailed the association between an infant Lion-tailed Macaque, its mother, and the rest of the troop. From budding naturalist to veteran primatologist, his scientific inquiries of primates included research on Lion-tailed Macaque infant behaviour (Kumar & Kurup, 1981) to interactions within the troop, inter-troop dynamics, and the sexual behaviour of Lion-tailed Macaques (Kumar, 1985; Kumar & Kurup, 1985), for his PhD thesis (Kumar 1987), while also highlighting the threats to their habitats, their ecological role in rainforests

and management (Kumar, 1994a, Kumar et al., 1997). His passion for studying the Lion-tailed Macaques remained unbroken for over five decades.

In the early 1990s, his research expanded to other arboreal mammals such as the Travancore Flying Squirrel (*Petinomys fuscocapillus*), Large Brown Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis*) (Ashraf et al., 1993), Malabar Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*), Nilgiri Langur (*Semnopithecus johnii*) (Umapathy & Kumar, 2003), civets - Brown Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*) and Malabar Civet (*Viverra civettina*) in the Western Ghats (Kumar & Johnsingh, 1990), and Phayre’s Leaf Monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*) (Gupta & Kumar, 1994), Namdapha Flying Squirrel (*Biswamoyopterus biswasi*) (Kumar 1998), and Bengal Slow Loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*) (Swapna et al, 2009) in northeast India, along with other primates across the country. The geographic span of his research directly or with his students spanned from the southernmost part of the Western Ghats in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve to the Himalayas in the north and the Sikkim and the Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago in the east. It is remarkable to note that most of the species-centric publications were followed by detailed reports and publications on threat assessments and potential conservation and management implications. In addition to species specific ecological studies, he pioneered in investigating ecological concepts such as impact of forest fragmentation in the Western Ghats. This focused on communities of small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles.

In the following decades, along with his students, his scientific inquiry further broadened to study various life forms, including non-primate mammals (Sivaganesan & Kumar, 1993, 1994, 1995; Sridhara

et al., 2013; Krishna et al., 2016; Srivastava & Kumar, 2018, Rege et al., 2020, Khatiwara et al., 2023), birds (Ramachandran et al., 2017; Munje & Kumar, 2022), insects (Dolia et al., 2007), lizards (Ishwar et al., 2003), plants (Krishnadas et al., 2021; Gopal et al., 2023), and marine mammals (Panicker et al., 2020). He co-authored a total of 112 publications (including reports and popular articles). The major research themes that ran across landscapes—from mountains to plains to the coasts and to the deep sea—were population ecology, behavioural ecology, landscape and community ecology, evolution, and conservation science. Understanding impacts of habitat fragmentation on wildlife was one of the major research themes that his students pursued for scientific research. He mentored students to assess habitat use of various taxa in commercially important agroforestry plantations such as coffee, tea, rubber, teak and sal. Freshwater ecosystems such as streams, wetlands and rivers were his treasured habitats too, with publications on Asian Small-Clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinereus*) (Prakash et al., 2012), water birds (Ramachandran et al., 2017), and stream dwelling frog community (Vasudevan et al., 2006).

His publications included peer reviewed journals, newsletters, bulletins, magazines and regional reports. He diligently submitted reports to the Ministry of Environment and Forest, India and respective State Forest offices. He also contributed several book chapters to Forest Department publications and magazines. During the Silent Valley Movement, he articulated compelling ecological arguments for the conservation of endemic species of the southern Western Ghats (Yoganand & Kumar, 1999). In an article for Down To Earth magazine (2006), he expressed his fear about vanishing Malabar Civet (*Viverra civettina*) from the Western Ghats and hoped that it would not follow the same fate as thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) in Australia that went extinct due to hunting pressure. Unfortunately, Malabar Civet remains a mystery till date and its validity as a unique species is

debated due to lack of reliable evidence by his own students who he mentored (Rajamani & Mudappa, 2010).

In-house Reviewer 2

Ajith Sir not only encouraged us to translate our ideas into scientific questions, but he was also a rigorous critic. He was so well read in the literature of the field that he would immediately point out missing references and conceptual gaps in our proposals, applications, reports, and manuscripts. He never hesitated to reject an idea if it was not sound enough. He paid attention to the smallest details, including grammar. It was often frustrating to receive his feedback on a document that would return bleeding with comments and corrections. He would insist on inculcating critical thinking, voicing opinions and finding solutions. He was widely read and maintained an enviable collection of books on nature and ecological history. In the middle of intense discussions, he would pull out a relevant book from his shelf and say, “*I will lend you this book only if you promise to return it.*” I am sure many of us are guilty of misplacing or forgetting to return his books.

People’s Scientist

He was a remarkable collaborator and mentor who initiated and sustained numerous collaborations and cordial relationships over the years. He worked and published with 117 co-authors on Indian studies, and his contributions to two global-scale studies placed him among more than 600 co-authors. He was remarkably successful in sustaining collaborations with organizations, both small and large, across the country. This facilitated valuable networking opportunities, collaborative research projects, and shared learning experiences for numerous early-career researchers. Apart from his formal roles at few research institutions such as Wildlife Institute of India, Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, National Centre for Biological Sciences and Centre for Wildlife Studies, he engaged with several organisations by serving as research advisory board member,

attending annual work seminars and meetings, examiner for numerous MSc and PhD theses, and agreeing to be a referee for students, early career researchers and peers.

Starting with his PhD fieldwork in the Anamalai Hills, he laid the foundation for long-term engagement between field researchers and diverse stakeholders, including Forest Department staff at all levels, mahouts from the elephant camp, and local residents. He cared for people as deeply as he did for his beloved macaques and their forests. During his visits to students at their field sites, he made it a point to interact with field assistants and local villagers, who remembered him fondly even decades later. He went out of his way to help field staff in times of need, and his relationships with them paved the way for his students to work in those landscapes with full local support.

Study tours were thoughtfully planned to enable students to interact with Forest Department personnel—from officers to watchers—as well as local conservation practitioners and researchers. He ensured that his students connected with experts in their areas of interest. His network of peers, students, and friends, along with his long-term relationships with them, made the field of ecology and conservation seem like a very small world. He celebrated his students' achievements as his own, with great pride.

A Visionary for Field Research and Ecology

Ajith Sir loved spending time in the wild—walking through the wilderness, observing nature, and discussing it at length with students until his last breath. He was a strong advocate for field ecology and was instrumental in promoting field research in many remote parts of the country. He actively identified potential sites for field research, collaborating with and encouraging other organizations to conduct studies in these areas. Today, thanks to many organisations and

their leadership, several well-equipped field stations across the country facilitate fieldwork and long-term monitoring. He was also part of a global-scale assessment of tropical field stations in biodiversity conservation (Eppley et al., 2024), which highlighted the key role that field stations play in conservation.

He never missed an opportunity to interact with forest personnel, ranging from IFS officers on probation to anti-poaching watchers. At a time when a substantial proportion of IFS trainees came from IITs and engineering colleges, he engaged with institutions such as IIT Palakkad in 2016-2017 and was actively involved in teaching along with these students the introductory course on ecology, biodiversity and conservation to increase students' familiarity with the subject. His passion for teaching extended beyond professionals. He was equally fond of working with school students. In collaboration with Ashoka University, Ajith Sir was instrumental in structuring a hands-on Ecology and Wildlife Conservation course for students in Grades 11–12 as part of the Lodha Genius Programme from 2023. This programme also enabled many of his students to engage with teaching.

Though he did not consider the number of scientific publications as the sole measure of one's merit, he was deeply aware of their importance in academia and conservation. He was particular that his students published their work in national and international journals, submitted reports to respective forest department offices and equally insistent on writing popular articles to make research accessible to a wider, non-scientific audience. Today, what we miss is perhaps that unexpected morning call and the familiar, unwavering question: "*Where is your manuscript?*"

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