

The many dimensions of Ajith Kumar

Having read his eminently accessible and lucid essay on the lion-tailed macaques in the book *In Danger* edited by Paola Manfredi, I was a bit in awe of him. In 1999, we met briefly at the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) office in Delhi. Little did I know how closely we were destined to work together, how much I would learn from him about mentoring, let alone teaching, and the huge vacuum his sudden and untimely departure would leave in my life.

Ajith was introduced to me formally by Dr Ullas Karanth, founder of the Centre for Wildlife Studies, as the anchor of the Master's Programme in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS). I began teaching the first batch though only in their second year. We worked together for 25 years. I was the black sheep – a historian among scientists, and a social scientist among wildlife experts. Despite the strong personalities and opinions around me, I credit Dr. Ajith, then Director of NCBS Dr. K. Vijayraghavan, and Dr. Karanth for giving me the freedom to teach as I saw fit. Dr. Ajith was the one we turned to day in and day out, to solve the many problems we faced, especially in a new M.Sc. programme.

Teaching at the M.Sc. programme was a challenge worth taking head on. As a historian, I had to get across key themes in India's environmental history as well as 'conservation, science and society' to fifteen highly motivated post graduates, mostly from the sciences, in just three weeks. The energy and drive of the students across the six batches I taught in Ajith's time, helped.

But equally vital was his constant presence and counsel. He knew every student, both past and present, and was deeply aware of their strengths and weaknesses. His invaluable guidance helped me navigate my first teaching job in India, and my first time teaching students of science. Ajith was a great researcher, an unmatched mentor, tutor, and a fine friend.

There were at least three dimensions to him, two well known: the first was his original almost eccentric humour, never offensive and always setting all at ease. The second was a razor-sharp intellect, especially in the biological sciences.

It is the third and not so well-known dimension that I came to appreciate: his granular view of the strengths and weaknesses of each student. This included an assessment of how they were doing at any point in time. Needless to say, this included present and former students across the years. I always wondered about his instant recall and more so, his precise, almost cryptic assessments. This was combined with a genuine compassion for students.



Ajith Kumar with the 6th batch of M.Sc. students at the Kadamane field station, 2015. © Prasenjit Yadav.



Ajith with Chandni Gursrikar, and Gopal Khanal from the first international cohort of the NCBS MSc Programme, at Bharatpur, 2017. © Rasika TS.

Ajith was a leading scholar who set aside a large part of his life for institution building. When he retired, he visited former students and others in the field, sending me photos and videos on WhatsApp from those locales. These included pictures from Chilika Lake, Western Ghats, and from India's sea shores. His remarkable ability to communicate with all people at a human level was matched only by an insatiable curiosity about the natural world. He was last in Pachmarhi, central India, on a field trip, and I awaited photos of gerbil trapping and students negotiating steep slopes.

I never got those photos. No one ever will. But in my idea of his afterlife, he is cracking silly jokes in the evening, making everyone near him laugh, and enjoying the unending journey that began with his beloved macaques in the Anamalai hills of the Western Ghats. The flesh is gone but the spirit will live on, as will his legacy.

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Citation: Rangarajan, M. (2026). The many dimensions of Ajith Kumar. In *Zoo's Print* 41(8): 01–02.