

Archiving Like Ajith

Sometime in the summer of 2016, Venkat Srinivasan, met Ajith at the “Wildlife Office” (of the M.Sc. Programme) to learn about this somewhat unique program’s history. Venkat had joined the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) to set up an archive of the institution, but more urgently, to develop an exhibition around its history.

Ajith started narrating historical data points and moments in the path leading up to the M.Sc. programme. But he was also curious about the intent of an archive and what it was going to collect. When Venkat tried to explain that they didn’t have much about the history of NCBS yet, and would be open to any kind of material to begin with, Ajith offered him a bemused look. He turned around from his desk, and pinched out a set of perforated sheets with numbers on a grid. Ajith’s Braille paper notes were the first ecology collection at the then NCBS Archives, and paved the way for many more. [These field notes](#) about tree-living mammals in the Anamalai Hills scribbled on Braille paper are somewhat legendary in archiving circles and Ajith has held rockstar status in more than one discipline.

The story goes that as a financially constrained graduate student in the early 1980s, Ajith was in search of good non-blotting paper for his field notes, one that would survive the humidity of the rainforests. He met a fellow student who was visually challenged and had received “bundles” of the Bible in Braille from a church in the United States. Ajith and his colleagues would go on to request for their own copies of the Bible from this church. That brief conversation at the Wildlife Office was the beginning of Ajith’s close collaboration with the Archives at NCBS, one that continues through some of the alumni of the M.Sc. Wildlife programme.

In August 2016, Ajith gave a long interview for the Archives’ Oral History collections, where he

discussed his own journey, and the history of these notes. He followed it up with an innocuous ‘a question about archiving’ email on September 30, 2016. I have a question, he said. Folks in the conservation and wildlife biology community were keen to preserve the pioneering research of the ornithologist, Ravi Sankaran. “Any idea how this can be done? Possible in NCBS, as part of our involvement with the Andaman and Nicobar Environment Team (ANET)?” Ajith knew this was an “NCBS Archive”, and was trying to explore the institutional boundaries. But the more one went into Sankaran’s material, the more it became clear that this would be the first true set of archival papers sourced from outside the NCBS community. It hinted at what was to unfold soon. Anchored by the [Ravi Sankaran Papers](#), these archives [opened to the public](#) in 2019, not as the NCBS Archives but as the Archives at NCBS, a centre for the history of contemporary biology in India.

By 2020, the Archives at NCBS had started to receive queries from other scientific disciplines, and saw an opportunity and a responsibility in catering to science broadly. By 2022, this was cemented by a grant to catalyse its efforts in preserving the history of science in contemporary India. History of ecology and conservation in India was going to be the focus area for the first year of the grant. To make this happen, Venkat reached out to Ajith again for guidance, to Samira Agnihotri, alumna of the first batch of the M.Sc. Wildlife Programme, and to Hari Sridhar, a post-doctoral scholar then, who had initiated a project to document the stories behind celebrated journal papers in ecology. Samira had also joined the Archives, and through Ajith’s network that spread far and wide, some of the most valuable ecology collections are open to the public today.

One must browse through the entire digital catalogue, or visit the Archives in person to



An open call for collections from ecology and conservation, May 2023. © Dhatri S Aradhya.



MS-030-1-1-1-5 One-horned rhinos from Chitwan being released in Dudhwa National Park, 1985, Ashish Chandola Papers



MS-033-1-2-OS20-12 Tracing sheets of bird plates prepared for publication with notes and revisions marked in pen and pencil. Carl D'Silva papers

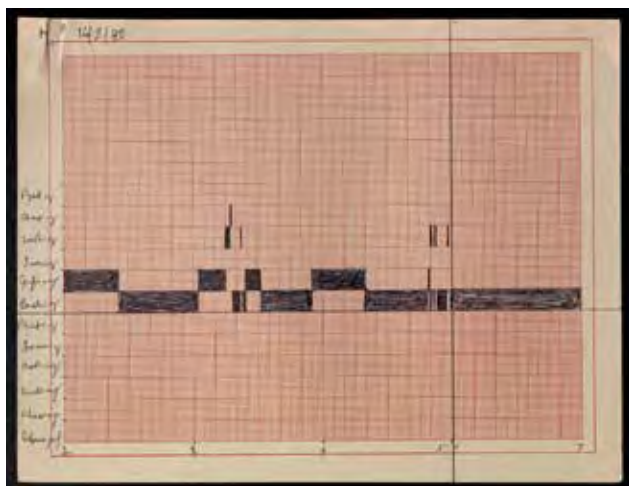
comprehend the richness of these collections, but we offer a brief glimpse through select documents for this article.

Ashish and Shanti Chandola donated Ashish Chandola's 35 mm slides, photo negatives and contact sheets that include photographs of Billy Arjan Singh at Tiger Haven and the Crocodile (Gharial) Project led by H.R. Bustard in 1977. Each of these tells a story. These include slides that covered the translocation of Greater one-horned rhinoceros from Nepal to India in the late 1980s, and much more. This collection demonstrates the significant role of wildlife photographers and film makers in capturing important moments in the history of wildlife conservation in India.

Through the Chandolas, the Archives was able to get in touch with the family of Carl D'Silva, the artist from Goa, famous for his illustrations for Salim Ali's *Book of Indian Birds*. While generations of bird enthusiasts and wildlife biologists would be familiar with the coloured plates from the book, few know that Carl also created life size decoy models of the Bengal florican, cementing the role of art in applied ecology. These models were used in a study on the florican's movement and dispersal patterns by Asad Rahmani at the Bombay Natural History Society.

In addition, the collections that Ajith helped bring in also reveal the artist behind the ecologist, through the field notebooks of Ravi Sankaran and R J Ranjit Daniels, and others. Field notebooks are a treasure trove in an archive, making visible the human side of research. They often contain grocery lists, personal notes for learning new languages, and journals of daily life in the field.

In 2023, Ajith offered to spend a few weeks in Dehradun with his old friends from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and help them pack their papers for the Archives. He joked that he was looking forward to the evenings reminiscing about good times with his friends over whiskey, and would perhaps manage to squeeze in some archiving work. The papers of [BC Choudhury](#) came



MS-042-1-1-2-5 Graph by Sunil U Gupta and B C Choudhury studying crocodile behavior before and during a solar eclipse at Nehru Zoological Park, 1980. BC Choudhury Papers

to the Archives sorted and carefully packed, with notes for the Archives Team and gifts sent for Ajith. Through this visit, the Archives also received its first botany collection: the [GS Rawat](#) papers.

Ajith's network was not restricted to wildlife biologists and academics. The Archives holds the papers of [Sanjoy Deb Roy](#), an officer of the Indian Forest Service, that include photographs from a function commemorating 10 years of Project Tiger. And through two generations of the M.Sc. programme's students, came the first collection of a civil society environmental movement: the [Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi](#)". Samira was the co-advisor for Abhijith AV, from



Ajith with members of WPSS at the Archives at NCBS, April 2024 (Photo courtesy: Ravi Kumar Boyapati)

the 2020-22 batch of M.Sc. Wildlife Programme at NCBS, and was visiting his field site and home in Wayanad. Abhijith introduced her to his father, Manoj Kumar, who told her that Ajith had stayed with them many years ago as well. "Strangers immediately felt like family", said Samira. "They told me about their collective that has been fighting for the environment and Adivasi rights for decades. We visited one of the founding members, N Badusha and asked him if he would be interested in giving an oral history interview. And the rest is history"! Sometime later, when members of the WPSS visited the Archives, Ajith was the interlocutor, translating between Malayalam and English, seamlessly engaging with everyone in the room, and speaking at length about the conservation issues in Wayanad.

Ajith brought ecology collections to the Archives with the spirit of gentle mischief and generosity he was known for. Ajith placed his humanism before everything else. It comes through in the material he has helped bring to the Archives as well, through the trust people placed in him, and the networks he invested in. Ajith's archival papers, too, now rest at the Archives at NCBS, including a collection of rare wildlife stamps from across the globe, which he joked could be useful in a financial crunch.

Every time we say that the Archives at NCBS is a public centre for the history of science in contemporary India, we remember Ajith for the nudge and his gentle query on how to work within and across its boundaries. Archives are a political act, and Ajith knew this best.

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