

From the Himalayas to the Western Ghats: My Journey with Ajith

It all began with Dr AJT Johnsingh, whom I met for the first time in May 1983. It was at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, where he, along with Prof Madhav Gadgil, Dr Raghavendra Gadagkar, and Dr SN Prasad, took me for a walk through the campus looking for birds. Soon afterwards, Johnsingh found himself a niche at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and he was followed by Prasad.

I visited WII in the winter of 1991. WII was then nestled within the Forest Research Institute's Van Vihar campus in Dehradun. It was on this visit that I was introduced to Dr Ajith Kumar.

My visits to WII became more frequent after 1991. Once, my wife Vinetha and I were ferried by Ajith on his old scooter to Prasad's house for dinner. Ajith and I soon became friends. All this happened not long before Ajith moved to the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History in Coimbatore. At Coimbatore, we had more opportunities to meet and interact.

The transition from a professional association to a trusted friendship with Ajith may have happened in 1995, when Dr Frank Davis Singh's life came to a tragic end. Davis Singh and I were good friends. We shared a common interest, fish. Ajith was apparently too disturbed by the untimely death of his colleague and through a series of correspondence, shared his disillusionment and frustration. In his last handwritten letter, he had explicitly mentioned his plans to move out of Coimbatore.

In the early 2000s, I was the coordinator of the 'Western Ghats Forum' -- many meetings were held in Coimbatore, in which Ajith participated. The Western Ghats Forum was conceived by Dr Kamal Bawa (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment) and Shri Darshan Shankar (Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions); the first discussion about the scope of the Forum took place in Panama where I had the chance to spend a little time with Dr Bawa (and Dr Jagdish Krishnaswamy, now at the Indian Institute

of Human Settlements) on the sidelines of the Association for Tropical Biology Conference in 2002. In 2003, WII published a special issue of the *Wildlife and Protected Areas* titled "Conservation of Rainforests in India". Ajith, who was one of the editors, invited me to contribute an article to the volume, and I wrote "Biodiversity of the Western Ghats: An Overview" for the same.



Ajith with friends and family. © Divya Mudappa & Shankar Raman.

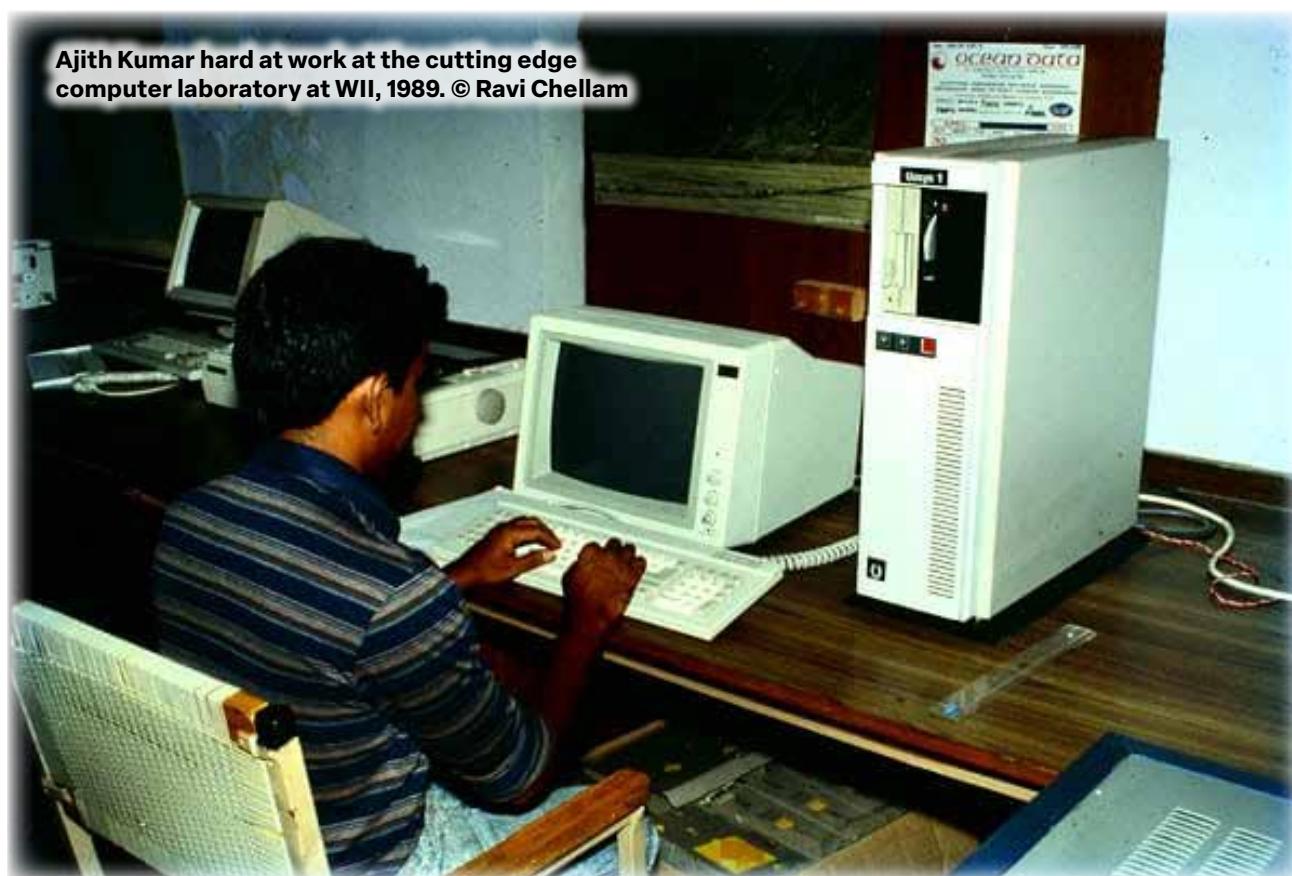
In 2003, I received a letter from Dr Ullas Karanth inviting me to a brainstorming event in Bangalore. This was about the M.Sc. Wildlife Biology course that was being launched at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) with the support of the Wildlife Conservation Society. When I reached the hotel in the outskirts of Bangalore, Ajith was there, and I learnt that he would be the coordinator of the course.

Over the next ten years, although my role was limited to being visiting faculty, Ajith and I worked together at NCBS with scores of young students. We spent long hours chatting at the Canara Bank Layout Guest House (Bangalore), and travelled together with the students to Periyar Tiger Reserve and Topslip in Anamalai Tiger Reserve. During one of my visits to Periyar (Vallakadavu to be precise), I was to take the students out and show them how to sample herpetofauna. The students had already spent more than a week in the field, but had not seen a shield-tail snake, rock pit viper and caecilians. When we walked out of the dormitory,

Ajith told me, “You are not coming back without showing the students at least one of these elusive herps”.

I took the students to a patch of riparian vegetation and explained to them the ‘all-out-search’ method. It did not take long for the students to glean the small patch and pick up two shield-tail snakes and one caecilian. The rock pit viper was still at large. So, we walked through sparse undergrowth and I spotted a young pit viper resting in a low bush. This was from a distance and I waited till all others joined and then showed them the snake. Ajith was overjoyed; the challenge of finding the elusive herps was fully met!

Ajith and I once travelled from Bangalore to Kottayam and to the Periyar Tiger Reserve. We saw Nilgiri Tahr, Lion-tailed macaque and other wildlife. James Zacharias, a mutual friend, was our local guide. But the highlight of the trip was that I had my first glimpse of the lush forests of Megamalai. High Wavys, as the British called them, were very



different from the rest of the Western Ghats that I had known.

In fact, many years ago, Prof. Gadgil had narrated his experience in Megamalai during his first visit to the landscape. Prasad was doing his Ph.D. on bamboo in the late 1970s, and he and Prof. Gadgil had visited Megamalai in search of the climbing bamboo. When I saw a few clumps with Ajith, I was quite excited and nostalgic, vividly recollecting Prof. Gadgil's account of the unique species. Prof. Gadgil had also told me of leeches that parachuted down from the canopy. However, I was fortunate to have had the cover of a vehicle above me during most parts of my travel through the high and wavy landscape.

Ajith and I were once in Baroda, for a workshop organized by the Gujarat Ecological Society. Dr. Ravi Sankaran was also with us. One evening we walked down to the zoo to visit the director at his residence. What we anticipated to have been a 'gory' evening was not that bad after all. I had the company of a Great Dane, a Saluki, two Tibetan cats, two hedgehogs, one canary and a trinket snake. But the best is that the then zoo director's daughter, Shivani Jadeja, was many years later among our students at NCBS, as she chose to pursue her Master's in wildlife biology.

Ajith had a great sense of humour. And to those who may have already heard him narrate some hilarious anecdotes, I can only provide a censored gist. First, is one about the Lion-tailed macaques breeding, unexpectedly yet profusely, in the Delhi

Zoo. When all other factors failed to explain the LTM boom, Ajith said that there seemed to be more evidence in the then zoo director's horoscope!

Another hilarious anecdote Ajith would narrate was how one of his former colleagues bought two underwears in a shop and decided to wear one right there inside the changing room. The fun was in how he reached the counter with just one underwear in hand and a bill that said two!

Ajith was a very caring person. He called on me in Chennai in 2014 after my heart attack and hospitalisation. Whenever I visited NCBS, he paid for my lunch at the canteen. We sometimes cooked together at the Canara Bank Layout Guest House. That was when he narrated how he once cooked prawns at home and seasoned them with his wife Mini's hair oil!

In the last 21 years of his life, Ajith had devoted his life to guiding the students of wildlife biology in Bangalore. He passed on during the last of his field visits, doing what he loved. Let his legacy remain. He will always be remembered by his friends, and all the students he lovingly mentored.

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