

Walking: towards, with, and for Ajith

When and where did I first meet Ajith? I jig, jog and pamper my memory-stock, but to no avail.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Memory grows out of the barrel of a gun. 1985 or 86.

As we were turning the bend on the path at the base of Kathumala peak in Eravikulam National Park, my friend Unnikrishnan who was in the front suddenly stopped, turned towards me, and smiled. I remember his cap too well, a green one with a WWF emblem, and he had a satchel on his shoulders like the one we self-proclaimed ‘intellectuals’ adorned in the 1970’s and 1980’s. I stopped in my tracks, and followed his eyes to my left and down below: I saw the barrel of the gun pointed up towards me.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Now I walk back my memory trail from Kathumala in Kerala to Valparai in Tamil Nadu: from Kathumala, down Michel’s valley to Poovar, up Podumala to Konalar, and then onto Akkamalai. I make my way down to Valparai town, to Coimbatore city, and stop at Sally Walker’s seminar hall (Sally “Runner” as my predecessor in Eravikulam, Mohan Alambath, used to describe her). Yes, that’s where I first met Ajith. At the seminar, a serendipitous meeting with some college kids enthusiastic about sighting Nilgiri Tahr in Grasshills paved the way for our ill-prepared walk from Konalar to Eravikulam via Kathumala.

Ajith never made a visit to Eravikulam in the 80’s. Those days, Munnar was *terra incognita* for researchers and academics.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Coimbatore again. Early 1990s.

Sally Walker and team hosted a symposium on Population Viability Analysis, or something of that sort, and the focus was on lion-tailed macaques (LTMs). Obviously, Ajith was the protagonist. We

struck up a rapport not on LTMs, but on smaller mammals; especially the Malabar Civet.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Again, memory flows out of an open gin bottle. In the mid 1990s, Ajith was visiting Periyar Tiger Reserve. He was with Peter Jackson, British conservationist and Chair of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, and Prof John Eisenberg, a prominent mammalogist from Berkeley. Prof Eisenberg, according to Ajith, was the fastest gin drinker on Earth. And he proved it by emptying the bottle while we were on our first drinks.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Mid 2000s, Periyar again. Ajith and his brood of MSc Wildlife students from the National Centre for Biological Sciences. I had organised a talk for the students on ideas of *longue durée* by a famous



Ajith in the field.



Ajith on a trek with the author to Hemkund in 2022. © James Zacharias.



Ajith with the 6th batch of M.Sc. students at Periyar, 2015.

a renewed quest for the Malabar Civet. Ajith was a most unassuming person who always preferred public transport.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Our last walk together was on August 8th 2022. Valley of Flowers and Hemkund, Uttarakhand. I always considered myself to be a reasonably good climber, but Ajith was always far ahead of me. Ajith had always wanted to do the trek from Eravikulam to Valparai in the Anamalais. For various reasons, the trek never happened. In April this year (2026), I did that trek in his memory.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Ajith, undoubtedly one of the best wildlife scientists in the country, was at his best when he was out in the field with his students. I was lucky to have taken part in many of his field trips which involved long hours of walking. What I found fascinating was his love and respect for his dear students.

intellectual specialised in French historian Fernand Braudel's work. The speaker from Trivandrum, in a deeply inebriated state, spoke for hours on empowerment of marginalised communities instead. Though I was directly responsible, Ajith never made a mention of it.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Other instances of my many interactions with Ajith are shrouded in lost memories, emails and WhatsApp chats. Most of our last chats were about the Malabar Civet. He went to the Connemara Museum in Chennai to look at a specimen there. He also visited his early mentor Dr Kurup of the Zoological Survey of India who recovered two skins from Kerala in the 1970s thereby opening up

I will of course miss his wit and contagious laughter. And his knowledge, knowledge that begets humility.

And I grieve.

But, most of his emails had Jelaluddin Rumi at the bottom: Do not grieve. Anything you lose comes around in another form.

James Zacharias

Former Forest Officer (1981 – 2010), Kerala
Senior Advisor, Wildlife Trust of India

Citation: Zacharias, J. (2026). Walking: towards, with, and for Ajith. In *Zoo's Print* 41(8): 12–13.