

With Dr. Ajith Kumar: a fun walk through the dark woods

For those of us who have been Dr. Ajith Kumar's students, a befitting eulogy is difficult to write. 'Ajith sir', 'Dr. Ajith', or simply 'Ajith' as he was fondly called, holds a juggernaut status among hundreds of students and colleagues. He relished life, loved his work, and somehow managed to be both perpetually busy and perpetually available. His sympathetic ear and unwavering support carried many of us through the trials and tribulations of our careers and life.

Herding a bunch of tenacious individuals through the rigours of a Master's dissertation in Wildlife Biology and Conservation was no easy task. Yet Ajith excelled at it – rounding up one motley bunch of M.Sc. students at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) after another, nudging each one of us to think of a sensible ecological question, defend the question, execute fieldwork, analyse data, and eventually craft a presentable thesis! Ajith was also sharp and attentive to details: he could spot citation errors in our thesis draft in seconds.

But Ajith's vision for students extended beyond their thesis. For him, the true goal was a peer-reviewed scientific publication. Needless to say, this was a daunting prospect for many of us back then. After completing our dissertations, some of us would dodge Ajith in the NCBS corridors or at conferences, hoping to evade that inevitable question, "But what about your paper?" Given his persistence, and the dogged perseverance of the students, scientific papers were eventually published, adding to a body of work that Ajith proudly showcased to visiting faculty and scientists.

Ajith taught his students to live lightly – to find humour in the "burdens of the conservation world" that they had taken on themselves to

address, in ungratifying, emotionally draining, and bureaucratic contexts. Unlike many biologists of his generation who projected an overt or tacit sense of contempt towards those in the government or in research or educational institutions working towards conservation, he always reminded us to reach out and engage, and try to improve those situations. For even if they did not budge, there was ample humour and fun to be had along the way. It only dawned on many of us much later that he was so respected across the board (pun intended) because of how easy he made serious things appear: a hearty laugh and a nostalgic memory or story were enough to get through.

As a primatologist, Ajith was well known for his love of plants and wild fruits. Sometimes, however, the many scientific names of plants would be overwhelming. During a botany field course at Topslip in the Anamalai hills, a visiting faculty and Ajith were rattling away the scientific names of trees and their characteristics to the M.Sc. students. One of us, more interested in animals than plants, saw some civet droppings at the base of a large tree and recorded the observation with the tree's identity. The next morning, Ajith tested the students to observe characters and identify that tree. "*Vitex altissima*" came as a swift response, and Ajith was visibly impressed. Little did he know that the identification was based on animal poop, rather than plant characteristics! Later on, when he learnt the truth, he chuckled in his usual way: a reminder of his ability to laugh at life's many quirks.

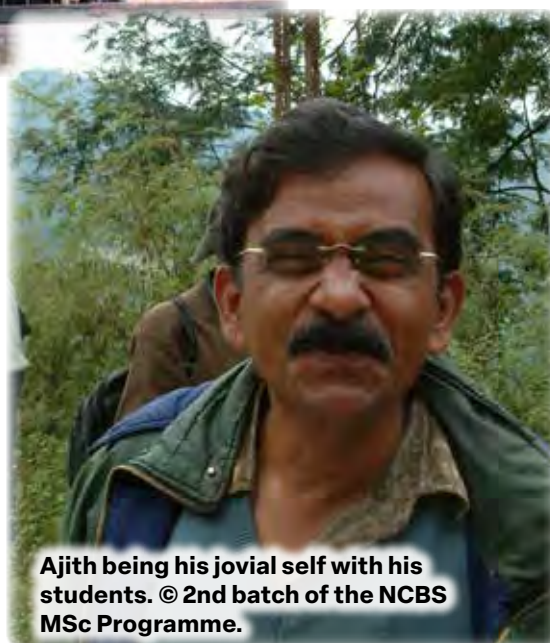
Another time, on a trip along a river a few years ago, Ajith was intent on matching the angling prowess of the late Dr. AJT Johnsingh, another stalwart in Indian wildlife biology. So Ajith sat upfront on the kayak, makeshift rod in hand, and



Ajith with his beloved lion-tailed macaque. © Authors.

used everything from dry fish, banana chips, coconut, biscuits, chocolate, and even pakodas as bait over the next couple of days, and yet he caught nothing! Not one to be easily discouraged -- his childlike enthusiasm still intact -- he set his sights on the crabs scurrying about the beach at the mouth of the river, and proceeded to demonstrate the art of catching crabs safely, only to be pinched promptly by the offended quarry. And for someone who didn't eat fish, drink 'sufficiently', or speak the language fluently, I (Tarun) often got a "What kind of a Malayali are you?", followed by his characteristic chuckle.

Time spent with Ajith was usually full of laughter and learning. And despite the frequent but gentle admonishments for not publishing enough, one always looked forward to catching up with him. He not only entertained and humoured his students, but also their partners and brood, human and animal. More often than not, these meetings involved food, drink, banter, laughter, and stories galore; the stories are too many and too outrageous to share! For someone so seasoned in the field, his eyes always brimmed with curiosity and his mind never ceased to observe. And his dollops of wisdom shaped the careers of many students. Though he may not be walking the



Ajith being his jovial self with his students. © 2nd batch of the NCBS MSc Programme.

woods beside us anymore, Ajith lives on in the forests he loved, in the humour he shared, and in the sagely wisdom he passed on to multiple cohorts of students he mentored.

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