

Dr Ajith Kumar: The Scientist Who Shaped Minds and Lives

There are some individuals whose influence on our lives extends far beyond the boundaries of professional mentorship. Their guidance becomes a compass, their values become a standard, and their friendship becomes a cherished part of our journey. For me, Dr. Ajith Kumar was one such person. While the world rightly remembers him as one of India's foremost wildlife biologists and primatologists, I remember him as my Guru—a teacher in the truest and most profound sense of the word.

The news of his untimely passing in March 2025, while accompanying a group of students on a field trip, was deeply distressing. Yet, in retrospect, there is poignant symbolism in the manner of his departure. He left this world doing what he loved

most—being in the field, observing nature, sharing knowledge, and inspiring young minds. Few scientists have lived so completely for their chosen calling.

My association with Dr. Ajith Kumar began through the Wildlife Institute of India at a time when I was taking my first tentative steps into wildlife research. Having completed my Post-Graduate Diploma in Wildlife Management from the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun in 1987–88, I had initiated some field observations on my own on the endangered Phayre's Langur in Gumti Wildlife Sanctuary, Tripura – a primate species unique in its appearance and almost confined, in its geographical distribution, to the state of Tripura (there have been some reported sightings

in adjoining areas of Assam).

Those observations were modest and exploratory, but Ajith saw possibilities where I saw limitations.

Ajith examined my work with characteristic honesty and scientific rigour. He neither offered superficial praise nor discouraged my efforts as a young forest officer attempting to find his footing in the world of scientific research. Instead, he challenged me to think deeper, ask better questions, and build a stronger scientific foundation. It was he who encouraged me to transform those preliminary efforts into a full-fledged doctoral research proposal.



Ajith with AK Gupta and Krushnamegh Kunte at NCBS, 2017. © Dr. Atul Kumar Gupta.

Looking back today, I can say with certainty that my eventual Ph.D. -- on the ecology of three primate species and the impacts of shifting cultivation in Tripura -- would not have materialized without his encouragement and guidance.

His mentorship extended beyond advice. He travelled to Gumti Wildlife Sanctuary and spent time in the field with me, discussing research design, ecological processes, animal behaviour, and conservation challenges. He demonstrated that good science begins not with sophisticated tools but with careful observation, intellectual curiosity, and the courage to question one's own assumptions. Those interactions taught me lessons that no textbook could have provided.

I was fortunate to receive his guidance again, during my doctoral work at Cambridge University in England. We shared the privilege of being associated with one of the world's leading primatologists, Dr. D.J. Chivers. Having Ajith's support and counsel during that phase of my academic journey was invaluable. He helped me navigate scientific questions with greater confidence and provided insights that only someone with his depth of field experience, analytical ability and (a rare) generosity of spirit, could offer. Those interactions further strengthened a relationship that had by then evolved from that of teacher and student, to one of enduring friendship and mutual respect.

Among the many gifts that Ajith gave me, perhaps the most significant was helping me overcome my fear of statistics. Like many field biologists of my generation, and especially as someone from a background in administration, I was far more comfortable in forests than with numbers. Statistical analyses appeared intimidating and inaccessible. Ajith had a remarkable ability of demystifying complex quantitative concepts.

With extraordinary patience, he explained not merely how to apply statistical tools but why they mattered. Gradually, I came to appreciate statistics as an indispensable component of scientific

inquiry. Much of my subsequent scientific writing and publications owe a debt to those lessons.

Ajith also profoundly influenced my understanding of the role of science in wildlife conservation. As a career officer in the Indian Forest Service, my responsibilities were primarily managerial and administrative; I superannuated from service as Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Head of the Forest Force (PCCF & HOFF) and Chief Wildlife Warden of Tripura. It would have been easy to regard scientific research as a parallel activity best left to academic institutions. But Ajith never accepted such a separation. He consistently emphasized that effective wildlife management must be informed by sound science and that managers and researchers should work as partners rather than in isolation.

Ajith encouraged me to integrate scientific enquiry into wildlife management decisions and cultivate a culture of evidence-based conservation within the Forest Department. Those discussions reinforced my belief that long-term conservation success depends on the seamless integration of management experience and scientific understanding. Those lessons I learnt from him in the formative years of my career as a forest officer left a lasting impression on me. They motivated me to pursue rigorous scientific research alongside management responsibilities throughout my professional life.

Despite his towering scientific stature, Ajith remained wonderfully approachable and delightfully humorous. One incident remains etched in my memory. During his visit to Gumti Wildlife Sanctuary in Tripura, he travelled from Agartala to the small subdivision town of Jatanbari. Upon reaching my field camp, he cheerfully remarked how pleased he was to discover that even such a small town possessed a "bar". My confusion quickly turned into laughter when he explained that he had seen a signboard reading "Jatanbar". I had to point out that the final letter "i" was missing from his interpretation and that the signboard referred not to a drinking

establishment but to the town of Jatanbari. For years afterwards, “Jatan Bar” became an enduring joke between us and often served as the opening line of our conversations. Such was Ajith’s humour—subtle, spontaneous, intelligent, and unforgettable.

As the years passed, our meetings became less frequent but our friendship remained strong. We met in Tripura, at the Wildlife Institute of India, in Bengaluru, and on several other occasions. My wife Gunjan and I had the pleasure of visiting him at his home, and he graciously visited ours as well. Our conversations gradually expanded beyond science to include family, life, and shared memories. These interactions revealed another side of Ajith: a compassionate, generous, and deeply humane individual whose concern for people was as genuine as his concern for wildlife.

I have been associated with the University of Transdisciplinary Health Sciences and Technology (TDU) in Bengaluru since retirement from the Indian Forest Service; and at TDU, Ajith readily agreed to be visiting professor and help guide doctoral students. This willingness to contribute, mentor, and inspire continued throughout his life. He never stopped being a teacher.

Perhaps this is why I always regarded him not merely as a mentor but as my Guru. Every year, on the 5th of September, India’s Teachers’ Day, I consider it both a privilege and a duty to convey my respects and gratitude to him. Those annual greetings were not a matter of formality; they were an expression of sincere reverence for a person who had profoundly influenced my life and career. Today, when I reflect on his legacy, I see much more than an accomplished scientist. I see a teacher who shaped generations of conservationists, a scholar whose work transformed Indian primatology, a mentor who invested selflessly in the growth of others, and a friend whose warmth enriched the lives of all those who knew him.

Ajith’s scientific contributions will endure through his publications, his students, and the conservation programmes that continue to benefit from his insights. But for many of us, his greatest legacy lies in something less tangible yet far more enduring—the values he embodied: intellectual honesty, scientific rigour, humility, kindness, humour, and an unwavering commitment to learning.

The forests of India have lost one of their finest interpreters. The scientific community has lost an outstanding scholar. His students have lost a teacher. I have lost my Guru. Yet his voice, his lessons, and his example continue to guide me. In that sense, he remains very much present—walking beside me on the forest trail, encouraging me to observe more carefully, think more deeply, and serve Nature with greater wisdom and humility. May his noble soul rest in eternal peace.

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