

Hail to Thee, Blithe Spirit! To Our Very Own Skylark

As we sit down to pen a few thoughts about a unique individual, our dear friend, colleague, collaborator, and mentor—the one and only Ajith Kumar—Percy Bysshe Shelley's *To a Skylark* rings loudly in the skies within us. Has there ever been such a truly spirited and joyful, yet so remarkably unassuming, presence, as Ajith was, in our lives, one whose song was so full of life and light, we wonder?

One of us, Jagdish, first met Ajith in the summer of 1982 in the Forest Department office in Palakkad, Kerala, when I was a schoolboy from Delhi, going to Silent Valley during a summer break and seeking a permit for research. The allure of the lion-tailed macaque and the rainforests brought us together in that chance meeting. Although we

only met again in 2000 – I have had the privilege of becoming, since 2004, a colleague and close friend of his. Fate would have it that I was also with him on that last field trip in Pachmarhi with students and fellow ecologists, when Ajith left us on his solitary walk into his beloved forests, sadly for the last time.

I, Anindya, first met Ajith a decade later, on a warm afternoon, possibly in July 1992, at the Centre for Ecological Sciences in what was then a much quieter Bangalore. I was a fresh doctorate in molecular biology from Bombay, dreaming of being a primatologist – and who could be a more ideal individual to meet and have an inspiring conversation with, than Ajith? We spoke at great length—across that day over many cups of coffee



Ajith and Rana with the first batch of the M.Sc. programme, at the Republic Day celebrations in NCBS, 2005. © 1st Batch of the NCBS MSc Programme.

and across many years over chilled glasses of rum and coke—and over time, we became kindred spirits, he, of course, a rainforest macaque while I remained a more urbane macaque of the city.

We now realise, looking back, that although both of us first met Ajith under rather different circumstances, recognising that he was possibly the right individual to address our varying requirements, he subsequently transcended all imagined barriers and soon became a close friend, with whom we both wanted to work on our respective research programmes.

And as it had been with us, his colleagues, Ajith was always able to establish, in his own unique

style, a deep rapport with his students—not only those who came to work with him for their doctoral degree but also those in every cohort of the Postgraduate Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bengaluru, which he helped set up and guide over many long years. While on the one hand, he emphasised informality and familiarity with each of them, he also kept a formal distance from them at just the adequate levels.

To cite an example, most students would profusely acknowledge the contributions that Ajith, their close ‘friend’, had made to their work, in their acknowledgements but they would always refer to him as ‘Ajith Sir’ – and we know for a fact that Ajith quietly approved of this title!

Interestingly, these unique relationships were not based on a model that most of us, other faculty, could pull off without stumbling and faltering, but Ajith managed to achieve this balancing act rather casually, perhaps because of one other quality that he had: his ability to size up individuals effectively within a brief period of time, through the keen and observant lens of an adept and insightful primatologist that he truly was. This high-performing radar for emotional intelligence gave him adequate signals and information for interventions and conversations that invariably focused on the individual student, whoever they would be, and allowed both compatriots to build up mutual trust and understanding that lasted over years and often withstood difficult tests of time.

However, Ajith’s approach to interactions with students came at a price. He often ended up spending an enormous amount of his time with students and their issues, and that reduced the time he had, to pursue his own personal and professional goals. Not many senior faculty and academics would risk diminishing their individual academic and research contributions the way Ajith did. But, in return, he invested deeply in the legacy of his students and their careers, keeping in touch with them throughout their lives, a friend and mentor they could always depend on. The



Ajith and his troop. © Dipti Humraskar.

collective wellbeing of his students and his fellow faculty thus triumphed over his own academic aspirations – and he never seemed to think twice about this. Ajith, in fact, saw the entire set of field ecologists across India as members of his ‘troop’ and he would always justify why he never lost his faith even in a single one of them. He would strive incessantly to discover and know the work of his students and associates, and find ways to publicise their achievements widely. It is, therefore, no surprise that Ajith founded the IWECC or the Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference—which he had been struggling to establish for years on end—and this became one of his last contributions to maintain and nurture his pan-India troop: the all-inclusive community of wildlife biologists of his beloved India.

At a more personal level, there were, of course, occasionally some odd members of Ajith’s troop, who would not speak to each other for various reasons, but Ajith could, remarkably, get along wonderfully well with virtually all of them. And he would never ever take sides or even more admiringly, never have a harsh word for anyone. He would always justify to himself and to those around him why the actions of certain others—even if criticised from various quarters—could be defended and, in his opinion, rightfully so. He was simply a good man, with the quality that the writer Somerset Maugham would term the rarest of all: “...niceness, sheer niceness”.

Another attribute of Ajith’s was his commendable ability to engage with diverse colleagues and collaborators over long periods of time, blurring the boundaries between friendship, companionship, and the professional. He would keep in touch with all of them, communicating with them as much as he could, raising a glass or two whenever he could, helped to no less extent by his penchant for travel all over the country and occasionally, across other parts of the world. The varying degrees of professional success of his colleagues, and sometimes, even projects or research that would be considered ‘failures’ by other academics, would be met with Ajith’s

empathy and respect. His personal time with colleagues and collaborators—often peppered by Malayali fish curry, which he loved to cook and feed, washed down by rum, of course—was unhesitatingly treasured by us all.

Ajith, as could be guessed by now, was rooted very deeply in his native Malayalam culture, literature, cuisine, and the general sensibilities of Kerala, sometimes much, as far as we could make out, to the envy of those, who were not necessarily rooted anywhere, despite accomplishments in their research endeavours. Enviably, he followed few dietary restrictions, and was adventurous in experimenting and appreciating varied cuisines from across the country. Ajith’s much loved habit of breaking local bread and imbibing indigenous wine with people, irrespective of their status, from diverse regions, won over many hearts and minds. Ajith was also a pragmatic and, in a sense, a frugal gourmand – he did not necessarily care much for fine food, for he had a sense that it took quite a bit of resources and time to prepare such items, and those resources were often out of reach of the proletariat, with whom he closely identified with.

Ajith loved the rainforests as an ecosystem from the depths of his soul, and his beloved lion-tailed macaques could do no wrong, for they were the epitome of all rainforest beings. His attitude towards other ecosystems, especially those subject to human influences and anthropogenic change—and this undoubtedly included some of his long-known lion-tailed macaque groups of Valparai—were sometimes uncharitable, but always in a mischievous and humorous manner, accompanied by his typically fragmented chuckles, interrupted by sharp intakes of breath. He called those ecosystems “screwed up”, much to the discomfiture and mild embarrassment of his students and fellow faculty, whose focus of work was—unfortunately enough, in Ajith’s eyes—these modified ecosystems. And yet his encouragement for their work, and their mutual respect for one another, were never impacted. On the practice of research, especially that conducted in the forests that he loved so much, Ajith was unsparing in his

critique, if the quantity and depth of fieldwork were not up to his standards. He even frowned upon the embellishment of data, using GIS and other approaches, as a way to make up for inadequate time spent on primary data collection.

Looking back, we remember fondly how Ajith would often say to us that academics and scientists would either be remembered for their notable published work, which would nevertheless soon be replaced by new work done by others, or by the students they would have nurtured and mentored over their lifetime. Without any doubt, he chose the living legacy. And that legacy continues to live brightly amongst the many students—and friends like us—he mentored tirelessly, but effortlessly, and who now shine in their own ways, a quiet reflection of all that Ajith gave off to us so liberally, often at some cost to himself.

Each of us felt seen by Ajith. And that is precisely why we miss him, and always will, so deeply.

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Citation: Krishnaswamy, J. & A. Sinha (2026). Hail to Thee, Blithe Spirit! To Our Very Own Skylark. In *Zoo's Print* 41(8): 42–45.