

## Memories of Ajay Desai (24.7.1957 – 20.11.2020)

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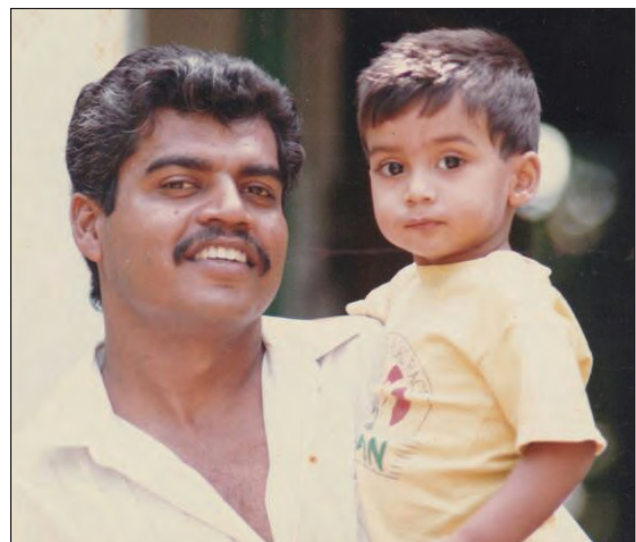
Many conservationists in India and almost all Asian elephant experts are paying glorious tributes to Ajay Desai, who was gathered to Heaven in the wee hours of 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

It was in the year 1982 that I met Ajay Desai for the first time, when he had come to the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) to appear for an interview, hoping to get selected as a research fellow in the BNHS Elephant Project funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. I had been appointed to help select and train two researchers for this important project. The late Mr. J.C. Daniel, former Chairman of the IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG), was the overall in-charge of the project. Ajay was a post-graduate in marine biology from Karnataka University. He was exceedingly handsome, with dark hair (which in later years turned completely grey) and a finely trimmed black moustache with a fit physique – as he was a sprinter and football player and had represented Karnataka University in the inter-university meets. Ajay was knowledgeable and articulate and so he was the first to be selected for the project, along with N. Sivaganesan (Siva), who had done his Master's in Wildlife Biology from AVC College, Tamil Nadu. Siva was also a sprinter.

After returning from the Conservation Research Center, Smithsonian Institution, Front Royal in November 1981, and before moving to the Wildlife Institute of India in March 1985, I was living in Palayankottai with my wife and two sons. So I started the elephant project in the Mundanthurai Plateau, part of present-day Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR), as there were four captive free-ranging elephants, a cow and three tuskers. The distance between Mundanthurai and Palayankottai is 60 km, both are in the Tirunelveli District, and so it

was convenient for me to travel to and fro. The elephants had been brought to Mundanthurai from the Anamalai Wildlife Sanctuary to drag and pile the timber that had been felled in the area where the Servalar Reservoir has been built. At that time, I had with me about 70 scientific papers on elephants, and we (Ajay, Siva and I) spent time reading and discussing the papers and observing the elephants. With the help of V. Chelladurai, a reputed local botanist, we recorded and identified the plants in the habitat where the elephants were ranging, with special attention to the species on which the elephants had fed and avoided. Once, while carrying out vegetation studies on the hill in front of Mundanthurai Forest Rest House, I saw Ajay abruptly leap 2 feet up in the air. The reason was, he was about to step on a 3-foot long Russell's viper.

We went on several excellent treks in the southern Western Ghats, looking for and observing elephants, other animals and studying the flora. One night, we slept on the terrace of an unfinished building in Thalayanai in the Kalakad Range, part of present-day KMTR. That day, we spent a lot of time looking for a group of elephants, which were in the vicinity, as indicated by dung and



feeding signs, but we failed to locate the group. That night, the moon was full, and around 11 pm, we heard some heavy animals walking over the dry leaf litter. When we peeped over the short sidewall of the building, we saw a group of 10 elephants, followed by a tusker, walking along the trail close to the building. The tusks of the bull were gleaming in the moonlight. Although there was no wind and we were silent, the elephants, known for their enormous capabilities, sensed our presence, stood still for some time, and then walked towards the forest boundary.

The next morning, we tracked the elephants and found them feeding on the fronds of some palmyrah (*Borassus flabellifer*) trees which they had pushed down at night. On such occasions of tracking elephants on foot, I made it a point to brief Ajay and Siva of the importance of silence in walking, the wind direction, and the direction of the sun. With the wind on the face and the sun behind, a person if silent and using suitable cover, can approach a solitary elephant very close. This may not work while approaching a group of feeding elephants, as the group would often be dispersed. It would be much safer to approach elephants in broken terrain, as the steep slopes would give an opportunity to the observer to escape, if he/she was chased.

Ajay took note of all that I said very seriously and later became an expert in tracking elephants on foot. When I warned both Ajay and Siva that one should never give an opportunity to a wild elephant to chase them, Ajay said with a laugh “I am a sprinter, when chased by an elephant I will run faster than Carl Lewis and escape the elephant.” It is to be remembered that Carl Lewis is an American track-and-field athlete who won nine Olympic gold medals during the 1980s and 1990s. My dictum in the elephant jungle was to see the elephants before they saw us and hear them before they heard us. This is possible as elephants often make some sort of sound, either while feeding or by rumbling or flapping their ears in hot weather.

One of our memorable treks was in April 1983 in the Thirukurungudi Range, the southern-most range of KMTR and the southern-most habitat

of elephant, tiger and Nilgiri tahr in the Western Ghats. We spent two nights in Narai kadu (3000 feet), a property of Dhonavur Missionaries (to reach this place, one has to walk 9 km from the foothills, ca. 250 feet) and spent the third night below a large rock atop Kottangathatti (5000 feet) and the fourth night in a ‘cave’ known to Jothi, our 60+ year old local guide. Besides Jothi, three more had accompanied us: a local assistant to carry our provisions; Gurusamy, a famous volleyball player, my college mate in St. Xavier’s College, Palayankottai (we both had played for the college team); and Sridhar who was practicing karate. Both Gurusamy and Sridhar were working in the State Bank of India and Sridhar had joined us on the trip seeking ‘adventure’. The ‘cave’ at an altitude of 3600 feet was only a slanting rock facing east and, in the shelter of the slanting rock, about 10 persons can sleep on the ground.

Dusk was setting in and heavy mist was descending as we reached the ‘cave’. As soon as I entered the ‘cave’, I noticed a pair of old leather sandals, a walking stick and a string pouch with some pesticide in it. When I walked to the edge of the ‘cave’ and looked down, I saw a skeleton and it immediately occurred to me that these objects could be the remains of a leopard that had been killed. In summer cattle were taken to the hills in the past for grazing where poisoning of the predators (tiger, leopard and dhole) was common. But when I went closer and observed the object carefully I found that it was an intact bleached human skeleton. It was the size of the skull that I had seen first that had given me the initial impression that the skeleton might be of a leopard.



Everyone came and saw the skeleton. Sridhar, on seeing the skeleton, started crying and pleaded with Jothi to take us to some other place for the night. But Jothi firmly told everyone that there was no other place to go to in the gathering darkness. Soon, a good amount of grass was cut and placed on the uneven ground to be used as a bed. The local assistant went down to the nallah below and brought water and firewood. Chapathi and some sabji were cooked and after our frugal supper, the question arose as to who would sleep at the end where the skeleton was lying. Brave Jothi told us that as he was old and was not going to lose anything at this age, would not mind sleeping closest to the skeleton.

Now, we had to decide who would sleep at the other end. Ajay had a sleeping bag and I had a long loose bag made of silk cloth, which could be used like a sleeping bag. So, I told Ajay that since he had the sleeping bag, he could sleep at the other end. Before I could finish saying this, he promptly threw his sleeping bag towards me and said that as I was older than him, I could sleep at the other end while he would happily sleep next to me on the inner side. Gurusamy gave Sridhar some gin to drink and encouraged him to sleep in the middle, where, he was told, he would be totally safe. After that, there was no further discussion about who will sleep where. The long walks during the last three days in the mountainous terrain had made everybody tired and we all slept peacefully.

In November 1983, we once climbed Perungundru (5600 feet) in the Anamalai Wildlife Sanctuary and saw about 40 Nilgiri tahr. In the same month, Ajay and I trekked along the Vengoli Ridge (3675 feet) in the Parambikum Wildlife Sanctuary and saw 12 tahr at the end of the ridge. Now tahr are seldom seen in the Vengoli Ridge. One of our favourite places to stay in Parambikulam was the Thunakadavu Forest Rest House, right on the south-eastern shore of the Thunakadavu Reservoir. Our great attraction there was the abundant blue-finned mahseer in the reservoir. Ajay was extremely fond of playing tricks on others and he was awfully good at it. One day while staying in Thunakadavu, he went out with my fishing rod and beaming, brought a 4-kg



mahseer and told everybody that he had caught the fish with the rod. When the fish was checked, we found that it had already been killed by an otter, which had chewed its head and left the remains on the shore – an inexplicable behaviour of otters.

Our major study site was Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and the place of stay for the research team (Ajay, Siva and the famous Elephant Doctor Krishnamoorthy), was a building renovated by the BNHS, with permission from the Forest Department. This was in Upper Kargudi, where elephant and gaur often walked through the area. Sloth bears were also frequent visitors and in fact before renovation the building was often used by sloth bears as their den. That's why the building was called Karadi (sloth bear) bungalow. I may be correct that there were five rooms. The central room was used as a hall to receive visitors and served as the dining room. A kitchen, bathroom and toilet were behind the main building. Siva's room was at one end and Ajay's room was at the other end.

As I said earlier, Ajay was fond of playing tricks on others. He did not spare even elderly Dr. Krishnamoorthy, a chain smoker. Ajay would take out tobacco from Dr.'s cigarettes and fill them with elephant dung. Later while smoking Dr. would say "Ajay, the flavour of this cigarette is different". Eventually Dr. came to know about this but being a good-natured man he with a sense of humour accepted it light-heartedly. Dr. was an excellent cook and to assist him there was Bomma, a kuruba tribal, 4 feet tall. Some times Bomma would go with us to the field. Like all tribal assistants, for our safety in the elephant jungle he would go in front and while going



through tall grass often only his unkempt hair would be visible.

One night after Siva went to sleep, Ajay covered himself with a dark woollen blanket, went out of the building and scratched the glass window close to Siva's bed. Siva got up and saw a black form outside. Then Ajay growled and Siva thought it was a bear and so he screamed and ran to Ajay's room to tell him about the angry bear that was just outside his window. When he found that Ajay was not on his bed and his blanket was also missing, it dawned on him that Ajay had played a trick. This became a joke to talk and laugh about for several months to come. There was great fun in the field station.

Ajay's work in Mudumalai involved studying the behaviour of elephants and finding out their ranging patterns and habitat use. For this he even radio-collared some elephants. One radio-collared female known as Wendy and her group even crossed the traffic-high Kallar corridor, which is on the Mettupalyam-Ooty Highway (NH 181). This capability of Wendy to range ca. 90 km from the place of capture came to light only because of radio-collaring. Ajay has written about crucial elephant corridors and human-elephant conflict in South India and has studied the dispersal of elephants into Andhra Pradesh from Tamil Nadu.

One major threat which came to the elephant and tiger habitat in the lower Nilgiris in 2008–2009 was the plan to establish an India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) in a man-made 2 km deep tunnel in the 2400 m Glenmorgan mountain, a potential Nilgiri tahr reintroduction site. The project and associated developments would have caused enormous disturbances to the elephant and tiger habitat. Ajay helped a lot in stalling the project by speaking about it and giving a useful report to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, which then was headed by Hon'ble Jairam Ramesh.

Another extremely valuable contribution by Ajay and his WWF India colleagues was the report against the proposed railway track from Sathyamangalam (Tamil Nadu) to Chamaraja



Nagar (Karnataka), which would have contributed to the fragmentation of prime elephant and tiger area in the Lower Nilgiris. Ajay was a guru, friend and advisor to Krupakar-Senani, Mysore based great friends, who have made the internationally famous film 'Wild Dog Diaries'.

The Mudumalai landscape continued to be the main study area of Ajay. But he also visited other elephant areas in India, and over the years, his knowledge of elephants grew so much that he had the distinction to be Co-Chair of the AsESG and a member of several other important committees in India related to elephant conservation. Apart from India, he also worked on elephant and other large mammal conservation and conducted training of field officers in a range of countries – Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia. Christy Williams, then working with WWF-International, facilitated most of Ajay's visits abroad.

As Ajay was knowledgeable, good-natured, humorous, and dedicated to conservation, he was immensely respected and liked by most of his colleagues, although some were put off by his overbearing and argumentative nature. He had developed a special rapport with the Kuruba tribals in Mudumalai who have an excellent knowledge of the forests and its denizens. Particularly he was very friendly with the tribal elephant mahouts and they had immense love and respect for Ajay. Taking immense time and effort, he trained many students from AVC College, Mayuram, Tamil Nadu, in various aspects related to elephant research and – as rightly pointed out by MD Madhusudan, a good friend of Ajay –

this was remarkable as these students were from a rural background and poor in basic knowledge of wildlife and in spoken and written English.

While working in Mudumalai, he had applied for a faculty position at the Wildlife Institute of India. He was selected for the 'C' position and he did not join as he possibly rightly thought that he deserved the 'D' position. Interestingly, in 1994, I had signed all five copies of his thesis on the 'Ecology and Behaviour of Elephants in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary' and had asked him to submit the thesis in Saurashtra University, where he had registered under my guidance. Soon after signing, I left for Vietnam for three months and for reasons only known to Ajay, he failed to submit his thesis.

His recent assignment was as a part of the three-member committee (the other two were Justice K. Venkatraman, former judge, Madras High Court, and Praveen Bhargav, Trustee, Wildlife First) appointed by the Supreme Court of India to help the Government of Tamil Nadu to establish the Sigur (Singara) Corridor, a crucial elephant pathway in the Mudumalai landscape. Ajay went with the committee to the corridor area on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and this was the only field visit Ajay had made, during the entire covid-19 period. In the corridor area, they had all climbed the Vibhuti hillock, from which one can get a good view of the corridor, and they also went to



Ooty. According to Praveen, Ajay did not show any sign of discomfort either while climbing the hillock or while walking around in Ooty, which is at an altitude of ca. 7500 feet, about 4500 feet higher than the corridor landscape. Ajay was very dedicated to the establishment of this corridor and most likely this may have given him the extra energy for the field trip, suppressing his health problems, about which he kept silent and were not known to others.

Ajay suffered from gout and yet he was fond of non-vegetarian food including red meat. This combined with lack of exercise during the covid period and day and night hard work related to conservation, possibly gradually had taken a toll on his health, which he, being who he was, was not willing to talk to anyone. Ajay was a non-smoker and avoided drinks too, but he was a foodie. He loved all kinds of food from exotic to the plainest. A simple dal just boiled and eaten with plain rice was his favourite. This aggravated the gout he suffered from. His wife Shanti told me that ultimately it was the heavy work, going on day and night without much sleep, that took a toll on his health. Ajay suffered a massive heart attack in the wee hours of 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and passed away in his sleep.

On the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020, I came to know about the extremely painful news of Ajay's death and I was unable to control my tears. I requested my friend K. Ravi Kumar, a talented plant taxonomist and a good friend of Ajay, to come and stay with me for the night. We both had supper, and talked and talked about Ajay and then around 11:30 pm, I went to sleep. Ravi stayed awake, checking messages in his mobile. I woke up around 3:00 am and the first thought that came to my mind was that Ajay was no longer alive. Warm tears streamed down my cheeks and I wished and prayed that it was only a horrible dream but that was not to be. Ajay has left an immense void in the life of many who knew him well, and has gone forever. Only time will slowly fill that enormous emptiness.

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