

Rec. zool. Surv. India : 108(Part-4) : 121-123, 2008

Short Communication

A NOTE ON HOOLOCK GIBBON (*BUNOPITHECUS HOOLOCK*) IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The Hoolock gibbon (*Bunopithecus hoolock*) also known as white-browed gibbon, is arboreal, brachiates, frugivorous, diurnal, monogamous, territorial lesser ape and is found in the rain and moist deciduous forest of northeast India, Bangladesh, western part of Myanmar and southern China. Their activity is mainly restricted to middle and upper canopy of the forests.

The geographical range of distribution of this ape extends from south of Brahmaputra river in northeast India to west of Chindwin river in Myanmar, which covers northeast India, Bangladesh and western part of Myanmar. In the past Hoolock gibbon was widely distributed in this entire geographical range but due to decrease in quality habitat, increase in canopy gaps and hunting, the species is now localised in fragmented and isolated areas in most parts of its present range of distribution and is fighting for survival. Recent surveys indicate that gibbon populations are more in outside the protected areas, National Parks and reserved forests (Sinha, 2005).

In northeast India, the gibbons are restricted to natural rain forests with close canopy, so the loss of habitat has direct bearing on their survival. In the past, the species was common in all the seven states. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura of northeast India. The excessive jhuming (shifting cultivation) in many areas of these states, the good and viable hoolock gibbon habitats have been lost and turned into barren lands or hills.

Based on the information available and the field studies carried out by the authors, the present fragmented distribution of hoolock gibbon in northeast India is shown in Fig. 1. At present they have occupied an area of about 800 km² in India and Bangladesh. It is predicted that they are losing 3-4% of their habitat every year and their population declining by 1-2% in a year (Anonymous, 2003). There is very little information available about the distribution and status of this ape in Nagaland. In Arunachal Pradesh the gibbons are found east of Dibong river in Dibong Valley, Lohit, Chaglang and part of Tirap districts. The good and viable gibbon population occurs in this region. Viable gibbon populations were recorded in the forests of Namdhapa, Miao and Kamlang Nagar (Mukherjee *et al.*, 1988). Till 1974-75 the gibbons were also reported from Subansiri

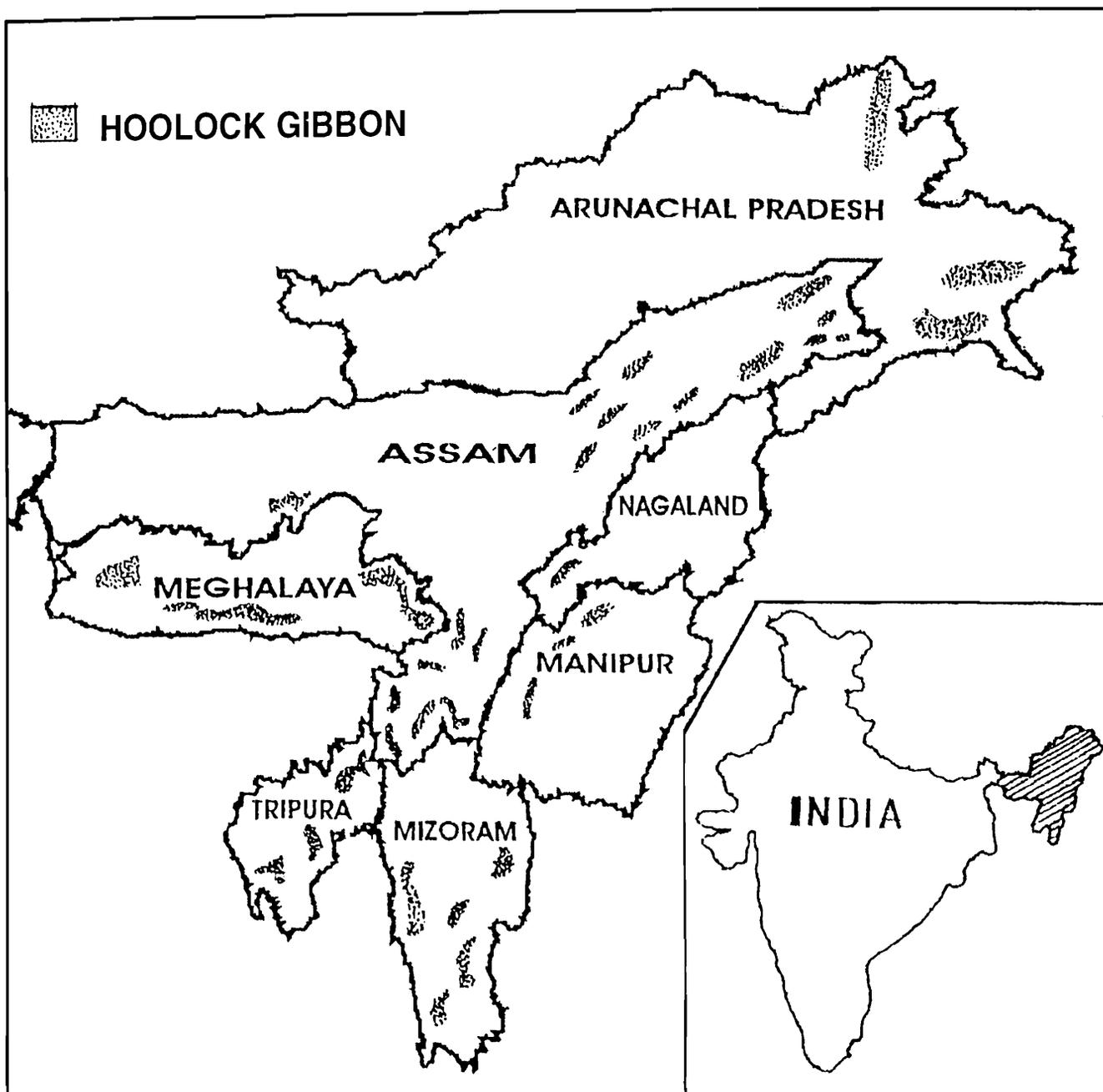


Fig. 1. : Distribution of Hoolock gibbon in northeast India.

district (Borang and Thapliyal, 1993) and even in 1978 they were recorded from the forests of Banderdewa, a place close to Itanagar (Saha personal communication). However, they are now confined to east and south banks of Dibang-Brahmaputra river system.

Gibbons are common in the forests of Garo Hills of Meghalaya, but the habitat in this part is also affected by jhum cultivation with the result, gibbons are localized in small fragmented and discontinuous forest patches and their survival remain doubtful. In Tripura, the gibbons are found in the forested areas of south, north and west districts. In Manipur they are confined to the forested areas close to Assam and Nagaland. In Mizoram the gibbons are found in Dampa Tiger Reserve in

the west, Murlen National Park in the east, Phawngpui Wildlife sanctuary and some other isolated areas like Negengpui WLS, Lengteng WLS, Khawnglung WLS, Tawi WLS. In Assam it is found in the forests of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, North Cachar Hills, Cachar, Hilakandi, Karimganj and Karbi Anglong districts and Kaziranga National Park besides small localized populations in some other parts.

Field studies show that barring a few areas the gibbons are under tremendous pressure for survival in their range of distribution in northeast India mainly due to continuous deforestation over the years and now majority of the non-viable populations have restricted in the fragmented areas (Sinha, 2005). The groups are rapidly disappearing from such isolated and segregated forests. By the end of our field studies, which spread over a period of about six years, at Tripura at least six groups—two groups at Longthari range, two groups at Khasi Bari and a group each at Ambassa and Fatikroy disappeared from our study sites (Mukherjee, 1986).

The species is considered as endangered in South Asia and the main threats are selective logging, firewood and timber collection, jhuming, human settlement, roads and dams construction, and extension of railway and power lines. Fragmentation of habitat, soil erosion, hunting for food and use of body parts for traditional medicines, accidental death and poor reproduction lead to further decline of gibbon population.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous, 2003. Status of South Asian Primates. 2003. Conservation Assessment and Management Plan (C.A.M.P) Workshop Report (eds. S. Molur, D.B. Jones, W. Dittus, A. Eudey, A. Kumar, M. Singh, M.M. Feroz, M. Chalise, P. Oriya and S. Wallker). 1-432.
- Borang, A. and Thapliyai, G.S. 1993. Natural distribution and ecological status of Non-human primates in Arunachal Pradesh. *Indian Fores.*, **119**(10) : 834-844.
- Mukherjee, R.P. 1986. The ecology of hoolock gibbon (*Hylobates hoolock*) in Tripura, India. *Prim. Eco. & Cons.* James G. Else and Phyllis C. Lee (eds) pp. 115-124.
- Mukherjee, R.P., Chaudhuri, S. And Murmu, A. 1988. Hoolock gibbon in Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. *Primate Conservation*, **9** : 121-123.
- Sinha, P.R. 2005. Conservation of Hoolock gibbon (*Bunopithecus hoolock*) in Northeastern India. In *Envis Bulletin, Wildlife Protected areas*, Vol. **8**, A.K. Gupta (ed.) Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun.

MUKHERJEE, R.P.*,
CHAUDHURI, S. and MURMU, A.
Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata
*CD-292, Salt Lake, Kolkata-700 064