

**ON THE FIRST RECORD OF INFANTICIDE IN THE HOOLOCK
GIBBON — *HYLOBATES HOOLOCK* IN THE WILD.**

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A detailed study on the socio-eco-behavioural aspects of the hoolock gibbon was undertaken in the Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, N.E. India. Data was collected every minute on the minute in three family groups of gibbons, using focal, instantaneous and scan sampling methods (Altmann, 1974).

Observations made on one of the family groups of gibbons which comprised of an adult male, an adult female and a sub-adult male is presented here. During the course of the study, coitus was observed and thereafter the adult female became pregnant. After the completion of the gestation period this female gibbon was due anytime. As per earlier records on gestation period in gibbons, we reached the site well in time to record the birth of a gibbon, in the wild.

On 16th October 1985 everything was normal, the usual territorial calls made, the feeding and locomotion done, except that the adult pregnant female rested more than usual. It was still another week for the baby to be born.

As was the practice, the next day quite early in the morning, long before sunrise we approached the roosting tree of the night before to begin our data collection for the day. To our great surprise we saw that the baby had already been born and the adult female was carrying it in its ventrum. That day the awakening time was recorded as 0540 hrs — when the family moved to the fruiting tree for its first feeding bout.

After the feeding, they joined together in their chorus call. Response was heard from the neighbouring family groups. Once the morning call was over the adult male started to move towards a single solitary adult female which had moved into the buffer zone of the territory only a day before. She had always been keeping a distance from the members of this family group.

The adult male brachiated, swung and leaped for nearly 200 m. to reach this solitary female. All the other members of the family were passive in the same tree from where the first call of the day was made.

Soon after reaching the tree where the single female was sitting, the adult male started to self groom, self play, and do things in a way that looked like he was

attracting the attention of the female. She, however, was oblivious to all this and at one time showed her disinterest by moving to the next tree. After spending nearly 40 minutes, the adult male returned to his own group — when the family joined together in a second chorus call, which lasted for a very short period.

All this time the new born infant was with the mothers She was taking care of, suckling the baby and grooming it. The infant was always in the ventro-ventrum position grasping its mother.

At 0814 hrs, the sub-adult approached the mother and the infant, and took the infant from the mother. She gave it willingly. The sub-adult also held the baby in its ventrum and started to groom the little one sitting next to the mother in the same tree.

Around this time, the adult male once again left the group and moved towards the single female (which did not belong to the family group) which was sitting passively. When the adult male approached her this time, she did not show any antagonism but in fact joined in play behaviour-though no contact play was observed. After nearly half an hour the adult male returned to its own family group.

The whole family then moved towards where *Bauhinia purpurea* was and the second feeding bout of the day was observed, which lasted for nearly 15 min. Thereafter, all the members became passive and this resting phase lasted for a little over half an hour. Both during this feeding and resting the new born infant was with the sub-adult.

At 1010 hrs a third chorus cell was made by the group which lasted for about 15 min. Around this time, the single solitary female started moving away from the territory — all the while being keenly watched by the adult male of the group.

At 1030 hrs the new born infant made crying sounds “cuon-cuon” as though it was hungry or in pain. Neither the adult female (mother) nor the adult male (father) responded to this cry. Both were sitting on different branches of the same tree and were either passive or self-grooming. The infant went on crying incessantly for nearly an hour, the parents not being bothered at all.

At 1127 hrs the adult male moved and approached the tree where the subadult was sitting with the infant. The adult female was still passive. At 1131 hrs the adult male snatched the infant from the subadult and started to manipulate the infant quite roughly. He carried the infant by its feet, dangling the little body and sometimes holding it with one hand by its neck. The male also made deep throated growls towards the infant and once in a while towards the adult female (mother) and the subadult. The infant's cry increased and it was in pain as though injured. At 1145 hrs the infant still crying, the adult male snapped at it and nipped the baby on its body. Then dangling the infant in one of its hands, the adult male moved away from the other members of the group.

After reaching a tree 150 m away the adult male held the baby in its feet and pulled at the little ones hands and then suddenly started biting the infant near its naval. The infant's cry reached a peak when it was dropped to the ground. The infant came crashing down to lie at the foot of the tree on which the adult male was sitting. It was at this time, that the adult female gave a deep throated growl first at the infant and then at the adult male.

All this while the subadult was keenly observing the sequence of events. After a couple of minutes the sub-adult moved down halfway and looked at the infant but showed no indication of retrieving it. The infant was rolling on the ground, crying in pain, and except for watching/observing no other movement was made by the adult pair.

At 1305 hrs. the adult male made the first movement and brachiated towards a feeding tree and started feeding on the figs there. The adult female and sub-adult were in the same tree as before looking down at the infant once in a while.

At 1347 hrs the sub-adult, and at 1450 hrs. the adult female moved towards the feeding tree where the adult male was feeding. Soon after reaching the fig tree the sub-adult started feeding while the adult female started to feed only at 1509 hrs. This fig tree was nearly 200 m away from the infant. Finally the group stopped feeding at 1525 hrs and moved towards the resting tree after traversing for over 250-300 m, where they settled for the night.

Once all movement had stopped we waited for nearly 15 minutes, before we moved towards the infant. The infant was unconscious. There were 3-4 major and 5-6 minor wounds on its body. The abdominal muscles and part of the intestines were hanging out. Most of the minor wounds were covered with clotted blood. We confirmed that the infant was a male.

We took all measures to save the infant's life but due to inadequate hospital/medical facilities in the remote area that we were, the infant breathed his last at 2330 hrs. The body is preserved and kept in the museum of the Eastern Regional Station, Zoological Survey of India at Shillong, Meghalaya.

In this volume there is an excellent review article on 'Infanticide in Animals and Man : Comparative assessment in evolutioning context with a new theory by Dr. M.L. Roonwal. Here it has pointed out that no examples exist, and no cases of infanticide are known in the Family Hylobatidae. We were not able to send our finding to Dr. Roonwal before he passed away.

We, therefore, dedicate this article in his memory.

SUMMARY

Infanticide is reported for the first time in gibbons. A newly born male of *Hylobates hoolock* was snatched by the father (adult male) and after inflicting fatal injuries, threw the baby to the ground resulting in its death. No cannibalism was observed.

REFERENCES

- Altmann, J. 1974. Observational study of behaviour : sampling methods. *Behaviour*, **49** : 227-267.