

INCIDENT OF INFANT FALLING IN HOOLOCK GIBBON

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INTRODUCTION

The Hoolock Gibbon, *Hylobates hoolock*, is the only living Ape found in India. The studies on their ecology and behaviour in the wild have been carried out by Alfred and Sati, 1985; 1990 a, b, 1991, 1994; in press; and Sati and Alfred, in press. The incident of infant falling (during locomotion) was noticed only once during the 5 years of field study by the authors. Carpenter (1940) and Chivers (1974) have also reported incidents of infant falling on few occasions in the Lar Gibbon and Siamang respectively. The incident of infant falling and the related behavioural aspects in the Hoolock Gibbon have been discussed here.

OBSERVATIONS

On 20th February 1985 while collecting data every minute on the minute on the ecology and behaviour of the Hoolock Gibbon, using focal animal sampling method (Altmann, 1974), on one of the three study groups, in West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, the incident of infant falling was recorded. Since awakening (04 30 hrs) till 09 45 hrs activities like foraging, feeding, locomotion, social behaviour, territorial call etc. observed in the group were normal as usual. All members of the group after finishing their feeding bout of about 35 minutes (on *Ficus*), jumped over to the adjacent three one after another except the infant (about one and a half years of age). As usual, the group members took a short break and gradually involved in social activities like, grooming and social play. The adult female (mother) was self grooming and though seemed as not interested in her surrounding was seen keeping a continuous watch on the infant that was left behind and once in a way made deep-throated calls directed towards the infant. At 09 50 hrs the infant climbed up to the branch from where the other members jumped over to the next tree. It sat, watched the other group members and apparently judged the distance of the over hanging branches between the two adjacent trees. The infant realized that the distance between the trees was beyond its reach and made low-pitched vocalizations (cuon – cuon...) probably conveying its inability to cross over an asking for help. Till 10 44 hrs the infant was behaving stereotypically *i.e.*, moving up and down on the tree, making a low-pitched cry, watching group members, partial feeding etc., and other behaviour of attracting attention from the group members, specially the mother.

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At 10 45 hrs, when the infant realized that no help was forth coming, it went up to the tip of the branch from where the members crossed and jumped to catch hold of the branch of the adjacent tree (where the other group members were present). Unfortunately it did not succeed. The distance between the two branches of the adjacent trees was almost 20-25 feet. The infant fell and was coming crashing to the ground, which was nearly 100-120 feet below.

As the infant was about to crash to the ground among the dense cane thickets, the mother in a flash of a second reached the place where the infant was falling and placing her right hand below the infant caught hold of the infant, and bringing it towards her ventrum, in the same momentum reached the tree from where the infant fell. The juvenile and adult male of the group jumped back to the tree. The juvenile joined the female, while the male was seen sitting separately, and keeping a continuous watch towards the other group members to possibly inform about the danger in the form of deep-throated growls.

The mother sat on the top branches of the tree and examined the body of the infant thoroughly. During this process the infant was quiet and was breast-fed by the female. The juvenile then came and consoled the infant, by grooming, playing and possibly consoling. At 10 55 hrs, about ten minutes later, the male too joined the group and consoled the infant for 2-3 minutes in the same fashion as the other members did. In fact the consolation was so human that they placed their hand over the shoulder of the infant and possibly telling the little fellow that this is part of life and that he has to learn to survive in such a jungle. Till 11 05 hrs all the group members were with the infant, but at 11 06 hrs all group members again crossed over to the adjacent trees, leaving the infant behind. When the infant found himself alone again, it started behaving stereotypically, as it did before falling. The infant once again made several attempts to cross over but did not want to take any risk. Ultimately at 11 25 hrs (18 minutes later) the watching female probably realizing that the infant was unable to jump over, she jumped back to the tree where the infant was, took the infant up her ventrum and crossed over to the next tree.

ANALYSIS AND REMARKS

In this communication an attempt has been made to analyze the co-ordination and co-operation among the group members as part of the social behaviour in gibbons. This was the first ever incidence of infant falling, observed in the hoolock gibbon during a five year study period on these animals. The co-ordination between the group members, and the manner in which the infant was rescued with in no time, was remarkable. All the group members showed their concern and consoled the infant one by one by grooming, playing etc.

As the gibbons are highly arboreal, and the young ones are also given training to adapt according to the environment and the conditions of the habitat in which they have to live supports the observations

on the Lar Gibbon and Siamang (Carpenter 1940 and Chivers 1974). In this case also the group members might have left behind the infant intentionally to encourage the infant to attempt another jump, to follow them, and to learn the process to jumping, brachiating and leaping.

Repeating the same behaviour again by the group members, seems to be a learning process for the infant. When the infant was unable to cross over the second time it was helped once again by its mother, which not only showed the motherly instinct but also the fact that the infant was still too young to understand distances and hence the concept of jumping from one tree to other.

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